reach middle-age and often find themselves with no substantial savings and no future means of support.

Finally, in the particular case of the Bribri the ambiguous nature of land tenure on the Talamanca Reservation prevents them from leaving their inherited plots unattended for extended periods of time for fear of losing them to squatters. This has been exacerbated since 1978 when the road from the provincial capital (Limon) to the plantation was completed and thousands of landless Latin laborers began entering the region in search of employment. Many of these would-be laborers settled directly on the Reservation or on the uncultivated lands in its periphery.

4.2.2. Ethnic Hierarchy at the National Level

A final factor which contributes to dissuading the Bribri from seeking employment on the nearby banana plantation is the ethnic discrimination to which they are subjected. Although not openly ridiculed and degraded to the same extent as the Guaymi in Panama (see 9.2), the Bribri are at the losing end of the Costa Rican ethnic hierarchy. Latins in the Highlands insist that Costa Ricans are a "White people" and they deny or minimize the existence of Amerindians in their country. For example, a Costa Rican beauty queen announced to the press upon returning from a visit to Japan: "In Japan they know very little about Costa Rica. Imagine! They even thought that we were pure Indians. I told them about our democracy and that there was no such thing as pure Indians here (La Prensa Libre, Nov. 9, 1983:3)."

In this racist context, Amerindians employed on the plantation can
expect their ethnicity to be the butt of derogatory jokes and comments. They will, for example be nicknamed "cholo" (or "cholita" if they are female). Social life on the plantation is not comfortable for most Bribri. The mode of interaction prevailing among Latin banana workers is louder, rougher, and more "machistico" than what a resident of the Talamanca Reservation is accustomed to.

The Bribri have internalized their inferior position in the national ethnic hierarchy. This cripples them in their effectiveness as wage workers in the larger society. They display the classic symptoms of a dominated ethnic group. For example, Bribri fathers with upwardly mobile aspirations for their children forbid them from learning the Bribri language and chastize them when they lapse into accented Spanish. Similarly, in the presence of a non-Amerindians groups of young Bribri will speak Spanish to one another even when it is halting and heavily accented. For many Bribri this internalized self-deprecation inhibits their ability to deal with outsiders, rendering them more susceptible to intimidation and abuse by Company supervisors, and making them less effective in asserting their labor rights or in qualifying for a promotion.

4.2.3. Ethnic/Class Hierarchy on the Reservation

The ethnic domination that the Bribri encounter in the context of the national ethnic hierarchy outside the Reservation is reflected within the Bribri Reservation in what I have called the local "class/ethnic hierarchy" (see 1.2.1). The more prosperous communities in the Talamanca valley located along the roads where the railway lines of the Company formerly lay are dominated economically by non-Amerindians (Vargas
1980:49). Latins (and to a lesser extent the phenotypically Black Bribri population) control local commerce and operate the larger, more prosperous farms.

This class/ethnic hierarchy emerged historically following the Company's retreat from Talamanca in the early 1930s when non-Amerindian merchants, government employees, and former Company laborers settled in the valley, staking claims to the territory closer to the transport infrastructure. Perhaps the best description of this process (albeit tinged with poetic license) is provided, once again, by Fallas (1978:75-76) who supervised the elections in Talamanca in the 1930s on behalf of the Communist Party:

...Even after the Yankees of the Fruit Company had left [Talamanca], the creole authorities stayed behind. They remained to become a permanent malediction, and like voracious vultures they carefully scoured the mountains, ready to gorge themselves on the rotting carcase of the conquered race. What a juicy feast for the vultures! It was still possible to make a fortune in Talamanca.

The Indian was sighing for a rifle to make hunting a little easier; he didn't have any money, but he did have a few domesticated animals. A crony of the police agent granted his wish via a generous deal, and for the price of one cow, two pigs and a bunch of chickens, the Indian became the owner of a rifle. A couple of days later, the police agent descended on the Indian's miserable ranch and confiscated his rifle, carrying away the rest of the poor Indian's animals in payment for the fine of having a rifle without the corresponding papers. And then another deal with another Indian with another trick to it, and so forth.

Little by little the Indians lost everything, until they were reduced to their present condition: 80 percent do not have absolutely anything. They desperately scratch the sides of the mountains to obtain a handful of coffee, another of corn and a few bananas; then they bend double beneath their bundles like beasts of burden, to bring these products to their huts.

And hopefully the Indian won't think of trying to plant anything to sell it. Women and children loaded like mules help the Indian farmer transport the heavy loads to the
distant Riverside. Then he paddles tiredly in his little dugout for hours and hours, dodging the rapids until reaching Chase. And there, they take what he brings for a pittance. But whatever he buys he pays for in its weight in gold: Sugar is gold in powder to the Indian; salt as well.

Exhausted, beaten, the poor Indian raises his oar once again and slowly mounts the river, he climbs back up into the mountains and once again collapses into his miserable ranch, to continue to stuff corn and boiled bananas down his throat until he dies annihilated by cough, diarrhoea, malaria or snake bite.

In addition to economic exploitation, Fallas' account includes a description of the ideological oppression of the Bribri:

That's how the Indians live and die, like broken animals forgotten by God and the State. Only during electoral periods do they regain their condition of human beings and citizens vis a vis the government; when votes are needed... they get them drunk and they give them a little tobacco to calm them down and fool them. And to top it all off, they leave them as payment for their votes the stupor of alcohol in their souls, the sourness of tobacco in their throats, and their women pregnant in their huts (Fallas 1978:76-77).

To make his point even more poignant, Fallas records the conversations of Latin merchants and government officials bragging about the Bribri women they had raped (Fallas 1978:66-67).

The extreme portrait of economic exploitation and ideological oppression in the 1930s presented by Fallas is no longer applicable to the Talamanca Reservation. Although the region continues to be characterized by the highest illiteracy rate, highest level of infant mortality, the lowest income, and the lowest level of provision of basic services in the country (OFIPLAN 1981, INSA 1980:23); and although non-Amerindians still dominate commerce; the Bribri (at least those living in the flat lands of the Talamanca valley) have managed to incorporate themselves into the cash economy relatively "successfully" as small farmers. In fact, those living near the transport arteries in
Talamanca are so much a part of the market economy that they purchase rice and corn for consumption in order to devote all their land and energy to cash crop production (Vargas 1980:49).

Perhaps most importantly, the Bribri are no longer at the very bottom of the local class/ethnic hierarchy. The poorest residents on the plantation are recently arrived landless Latin immigrants (see 13.1.1). In fact, I frequently encountered relatively prosperous Bribri farmers who employed Latin laborers, primarily Guanacastecans and Nicaraguans.

4.2.4. Struggling for the Land

Land and regular access to markets have been the crucial factors enabling the Bribri to establish themselves as independent peasants in the modern period. Formally, according to a presidential decree in 1976 (5904) the Bribri (in conjunction with the Cabecar) were granted a 56,829 hectare Reservation, encompassing almost all of the Company's former holdings in the Talamanca valley. Officially non-Amerindians are not allowed to settle within the Reservation and land cannot be bought and sold legally within its confines. In practice, however, Reservation land is openly commercialized and increasing numbers of Latin immigrants have been settling amongst the Bribri (Vargas 1980). Nevertheless, the Reservation does provide the Bribri, at least symbolically, with a degree of long term security and legal territorial—if not political—autonomy. Perhaps most importantly, it has also reduced the legitimacy of the Transnational's continued claims to ownership of land within Bribri territory.

The ease with which the Talamanqueno population (whether Bribri,
Latin or West Indian) reappropriated the Company's abandoned farms should not be overemphasized. Company files reveal that from 1919 to the present there have been repeated confrontations in Talamanca with "parasites and squatters." Similarly documents from the legal files of the Institute for Agrarian Development [IDA] contain numerous references to "land invasions" by "indigenous families" in the early 1930s (IDALF #540: "Conflicts Over Precarious Land Occupation of PAIS SA"). Land takeovers were so prevalent in the 1930s, that the Company paid a North American supervisor to collect rent from anyone establishing a farm on its property (BDA: Farm Overseer to Kelley, Oct. 20, 1942). The Company charged rent in order to retain formal legal claim to the territory in case it decided to redevelop the valley in the future.

By 1960, however, the Company's 14,000 hectares in the Talamanca valley had been abandoned for so long that the territory's legal status had become ambiguous. A Company lawyer reported to his superior, "The people who have invaded these lands [Suretka] do not know exactly if the lands belong to the state or the Chiriqui Land Company (BDA: Ruiz to Songora, Nov. 29, 1960)." This confusion prompted the Company to donate the Talamanca lands to the government in an attempt to extract from them at the very least, a final political and public relations benefit. Before donating the lands the Manager arranged that,

...an agreement be obtained from the Government that they would, in return for the lands donated, agree to assist us in effecting the removal of squatters from our other Costa Rican holdings. (BDA: King to Holcombe, Dec 30, 1963).

The Company, however, did not renounce claims to all of its former lands in Talamanca. In 1975 when the Costa Rican side of the Bocas Division was transferred to PAIS, (see chapter 2 fn. 3) claims on the
community of Volio, located on the border of the Reservation were resurrected (see Map 4). In the late 1970s, PAIS began bulldozing the farms around Volio and demanded the eviction of the primarily Amerindian population from the abandoned barracks the Company had built in the early 1910s.

The local population of Volio, however, succeeded in preventing the Company from appropriating their farms and houses. They formed an "indigenous committee," contracted lawyers, and even petitioned directly to the "Most excellent President of the Republic" (IDALF #540: "Conflicts Over Precarious Land Occupations of PAIS SA"). The IDA files reveal that the Bribri (together with the local Latin and Black residents) were able to mobilize the government bureaucracy against the Transnational's attempt to seize their untitled holdings (Ibid). They even managed to sue the Company for the damages caused by the bulldozing of their fields (IDALF: Mendez to Castro, Sept. 5, 1977).

The confrontation climaxed on Central American Independence Day, (September 15) in 1980 when the Rural Guard accompanied by Company officials, arrived in force at Volio and attempted to evict physically the local residents (IDALF: Report by Ching, Oct. 10, 1980). I was told that the Latin and Black population of the surrounding region rallied in defense of the inhabitants of Volio. Ironically the date the authorities chose for the eviction happened to be the country's independence day. Not only was nationalist spirit at a peak, but the entire community was also conveniently mobilized in anticipation of a commemorative parade by the local school children. When the rural guardsmen entered the first house at the entrance to the community and began throwing out the
furniture, the parading school children ran to the second house in line
and stretched their parade flag across the doorway. At this point, the
largest store owner in Talamanca, a Latin who was not personally
affected by the eviction since his lawyers had already arranged legal
titles to his property several years previously confronted the PAIS
representatives and the Rural Guard commander. He accused them of
"...satisfying the whims of a couple of foreigners on this sacred day of
Central American independence;" and appealed to their nationalist
pride. He invoked the defeat of William Walker, and admonished them
to "behave like Costa Ricans."

The Transnational persisted in its claims on Volio's land. In
February of 1982, the Company's land warden [guardabosque] attempted to
remove the community's water tank. The warden, who was a retired
colonel from the Costa Rican government's security forces arrived at
midday hoping (according to his aide) to perform the operation without
obstruction since all the men of the community at that hour were at work
in their fields. To his surprise, however, when he approached the water
tank he was surrounded by an irate crowd of women who chased him out of
the community. That evening, apparently still in a rage at the personal
affront of the Volio women, the Colonel died of a heart attack.
Following this incident, the Company made no further attempts to press
its claim over Volio. Ironically, several Bribri pointed to the
Colonel's sudden death as further proof of the power of their ysekras in
protecting their territory.

Aside from being an amusing anecdote, the Volio population's success
in the late 1970s in preventing the usurpation of its lands illustrates
well the degree to which the Bribri have evolved since the turn of the century. Not only have they gained sufficient economic independence to be able to shun wage labor employment, but they are also able to mobilize political pressure (in coalitions with non-Amerinds) to defend their interests. In fact, as the aborted Independence Day eviction demonstrates, they were even able to manipulate Costa Rican nationalist discourse for their own political and economic advantage.

NOTES

1 An elderly West Indian who worked in Talamanca in the 1910s provided me with an apt description of the limited level of the Bribri's precapitalist needs: "...They don't use sugar like we; they don't use salt like we; you can't eat what they cook."

2 In the United States, Simon Mayorga would have been considered Black; in Talamanca, however, he was unambiguously Amerindian. In fact, he was respected as an elder in the movement to preserve Bribri rights.

3 During my fieldwork the Cabecar Amerindians who worked in the Standard Fruit Company's Estrella Division just north of Talamanca maintained a similarly marginal social integration with the rest of the labor force (see Map 3). They descend from the nearby mountains to work periodically on the plantation but they do not live in company provided housing. Instead they construct temporary shelters in the jungle surrounding the plantation. This renders it more difficult to incorporate them into labor struggles or to persuade them to join the union.

4 Once again, the Cabecar today living on the Chirripo Reservation (see Map 3) during my fieldwork period behaved in a somewhat analogous fashion as the Bribri in the 1930s. They work intermittently on the cacao orchards of neighbouring Black farmers but they refuse employment with Latin farmers (Murillo and Hernandez 1981:148). They are only incipiently integrated into the money economy; their cash needs are limited and erratic. They cannot commit themselves to a rigid--let alone permanent--schedule of wage employment as they require flexibility in order to be able to return to their farms to tend to their families and crops. The Black cacao producers in the Matina area allow for this kind of flexibility since their farms are smaller, older, less technified, more diversified, and less rigidly capitalist than those of the Latins (Murillo and Hernandez 1981:136). Another factor which
probably encourages the Cabecar to work exclusively for Black farmers is the fact that the Latins are relative newcomers to the region and are not as familiar with the local style of interpersonal relations and inter-ethnic discourse. In fact, many of the Black farmers in the region, probably have Amerindian half brothers or cousins. The Latins, on the other hand, are awkward and more racist than the Blacks in their dealings with the Amerindians.

5 It could be argued that the Bribri have a lower level of cash needs than the average Latin Costa Rican. Having been raised in one of the most isolated areas of the country, they do not acquire the same commodity needs as most Costa Ricans. This is largely true as well for other poor peasants in the region regardless of their ethnicity. Most banana workers consider the standard of living maintained by the average Bribri farmer in Talamanca to be unsatisfactory.

6 This description of the successful "peasantization" of the Bribri only applies to that portion of the Amerindian population which resides in the area of former influence of the United Fruit Company in the flatlands of the Talamanca valley near the arteries of road and river transport. In the highlands of the Reservation the Amerindian population still participates only marginally in the external economy. This is especially true for the Cabecar, many of whom live in regions which can only be reached by ten or more days of hiking through the jungle. Furthermore, even in the relatively accessible portions of the plantation certain aspects of the "traditional" relations of production such as the reciprocal labor exchange arrangements co-exist with more formal wage labor relations.

7 The superior nutritional status of the banana worker children is probably due, in large part, to the potable water provided by the Company and to the availability of free medical care on the plantation.

8 Cholo is a derogatory expression for Amerindian.

9 The Bribri, are not as intimidated by Blacks as they are by Latins. In fact on several occasions I heard Bribri men make racist statements about Blacks, claiming they were "passive," and "never progress". I never, however, heard an Amerindian downgrade a Latin ethnically.

10 Some literary critics and anthropologists (Duncan nd.;3; Purcell 1982:81) have noted that Fallas reproduces racist stereotypes against Blacks and Amerindians in his book on Talamanca. This is certainly true, especially with respect to Blacks (cf. Fallas 1978:134). Considering that he was writing in the 1930s without the benefit of intellectual scrutiny, however (Fallas was from a poor family and had no formal education), his book, is remarkably sensitive to the issue of ethnic oppression, especially with respect to the Bribri, but also, to a lesser extent towards the Black population (cf. 1978:26).

11 Increasingly Talamanquenos are planting marihuana which is a more remunerative alternative cash crop than cacao or plantains. Because it is illegal and involves large sums of money, the marihuana industry attracts professional narcotic smugglers and violence. In fact, during my fieldwork, there were several marihuana and cocaine related
assasinations in Talamanca.

This North American rent collector also used to treat snake bite victims. Apparently, he would demand payment of ten dollars or five chickens in advance from his patients before administering the snake bite serum even when they were on the verge of dying.

William Walker was a North American filibuster who invaded Central America in 1855. He was attempting to establish a personal empire and reinstitute slavery. He managed to seize the presidency of Nicaragua but was repulsed militarily by an army formed by a coalition of Central American nations in which Costa Rica played an important role.

The success of the Volio population in preventing their forcible eviction in September of 1980 contrasts dramatically with the Company's removal, only a few days earlier, of all the Latin squatters who had occupied the community of Margarita less than 15 kilometers south of Volio. The Margarita squatters were recent arrivals to the region, and were members of a militant peasant union, FENAC. The surrounding population in Talamanca and Sixaola accuses the newcomers in Margarita of being, "communists, land speculators," and "violent drunkards of a lower cultural level" with "no respect for private property." The FENAC-organized squatters, consequently, received no solidarity from the surrounding populace and were carted away to the Highlands in trucks and buses without any local protest.
PART III  BLACKS OF WEST INDIAN DESCENT

CHAPTER 5: ORIGINS OF THE BANANA INDUSTRY AND THE LABOR MOVEMENT

CHAPTER 6: UPWARD MOBILITY

CHAPTER 7: IDEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE BLACK EXPERIENCE
CHAPTER 5: ORIGINS OF THE BANANA INDUSTRY AND THE LABOR MOVEMENT

This next section on Blacks in the Bocas Division labor force is the longest in the thesis since their relationship with the Transnational has spanned more years than that of any other ethnic group. In fact, Black culture in Bocas del Toro and Limón has had a special relationship with the United Fruit Company and also with all of the United States based corporations which have operated along the Atlantic Coast of Central America since the mid 1800s. In the late 1800s, the massive labor demand of these burgeoning transnationals was satisfied primarily by the Caribbean nations whose populations served as a "...global labor reserve available and unable to resist being shunted hither and thither throughout...[the region]... wherever the demands of capital beckoned..." (Petras 1981:5)." The constant booms and busts of local subsidiaries in the Caribbean region, sent West Indian migrant laborers scrambling throughout coastal Central and South America in search of stable employment; hence the following complaint filed by a United Fruit Company official to his superiors in 1924:

Our great trouble since 1919 has been a shortage of labor. During 1920, a large number of the best men went to Cuba where high wages prevailed in the sugar industry. Later more of them left for Honduras and other new developments. During the latter part of last year and the first of this year, a large number left here and went to the San Blas Coast (where a rival banana Company was initiating operations).

With every rumour of new developments or high wages some leave. Since the war period a large number of West Indians have gone to the United States where they find easier employment than in Tropical Agriculture. These largely comprise the young and able bodied. (BDA: Bocas Division Official to Blair, June 13, 1924).

Black culture in Bocas del Toro, consequently, is the product of
repeated migrations of West Indians; it is part of a larger social
formation spanning the entire Central American Caribbean and even
beyond: "...a feeling of kinship relationship and community of
interest... stretches from Belice and Kingston to Bocas del Toro and
Colon (Parsons 1954:13)." (See Map 2.) During the first half of the
twentieth century, Blacks frantically crisscrossed from country to
country, company to company, boom to bust. This historical pattern of
geographical mobility has obliged me to extend my discussion of Blacks
beyond the immediate confines of the plantation in Bocas; often the same
individual who planted bananas in Bocas del Toro, previously shovelld
dirt on the Panama Canal, and later went on to harvest cacao in Limon,
only to end up ultimately emigrating to New York to work as an orderly
in a hospital.

The first of the three chapters in this section on Blacks confines
itself to the early years of Black integration into the Bocas Division
labor force. It begins by setting the context for the United Fruit
Company's labor recruitment strategy and offers a reinterpretation of
early Black participation in the labor movement. It ends with a
discussion of management's strategy for controlling labor in the face of
burgeoning unrest among its West Indian laborers in the 1910s and 1920s.
The second chapter traces the structural transformation of the Black
population: their conversion into small farmers, their upward mobility,
and ultimately their emigration to the Canal Zone and/or the United
States. The third and final chapter discusses the ideological
implications of this upward mobility, concentrating as well on the issue
of ethnic discrimination.
5.1 THE SEARCH FOR A LABOR FORCE

5.1.1 the Problem

In the late 1800s the transnational corporations operating along the Atlantic littoral of Central America faced serious labor shortages. This was especially true for the United Fruit Company in Bocas del Toro and in Limon (or rather the precursor companies that were later merged into the banana monopoly) in the 1880s. Banana exports to the United States had suddenly become a lucrative business and the Bocas/Talamanca region was ideally suited ecologically and climatically for banana cultivation. This swampy jungle climate, however, was also a haven for yellow fever, malaria, poisonous snakes etc., and no one wanted to work there.

Prior to the twentieth century, the local Amerindian populations of Bocas and Talamanca were not sufficiently integrated into the cash economy to perform wage labor. The only other regional source of labor for the Bocas Division would have been the Latin population in the Highlands of Costa Rica, but they were unwilling to convert themselves into full-time wage laborers in the lowlands since they had economic alternatives in their home communities (see 11.1.1). Furthermore, the living and working conditions imposed by the United Fruit Company were exceptionally strenuous and dangerous, even by the Costa Rican and Panamanian standards of the time. This was especially true for the initial years when the jungle was cleared and the basic infrastructure built (see 2.2.1, 9.1.7). In the 1880s and 1890s even the most minimal facilities for living and working were unavailable in Bocas: there was no housing, transport, or potable water; the swamps had not yet been

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drained; and the area was rife with mosquitoes, pestilent diseases, and poisonous snakes.

Labor scarcity under these kinds of working conditions was not a problem limited to the United Fruit Company; all the firms (most of which were North American) operating in the Isthmus faced this problem. In fact, the same was true for local banana growers, as the following petition to the Costa Rican Congress from the period illustrates:

We are struggling with a lack of labor power because the demand for labor which the companies operating in Limon have occasioned, exceeds the supply of natives who have emigrated to this locale; and the workers who come from... various other places, in addition to being too few, only with great difficulty can be persuaded to remain for a long time on our haciendas and they refuse to settle permanently because we do not have here the facilities which it is only natural would attract them back to their home nations. Frequently we suffer considerable losses due to a lack of workers...(ANCH #3893, May 23, 1892).

During the second half of the nineteenth century, consequently, in order to avoid paying high wages and building expensive infrastructure, the firms operating in the Atlantic lowlands of Central America began searching for laborers willing to work for subsistence wages under substandard conditions. Thousands of people from all over the world were imported to the region in a process of trial and error. In the words of a Panamanian sociologist:

The Americans thought that various nationalities differed in their capacity to endure physical labor in the tropics, and by expanding the area of recruitment, they hoped to find the best nationality for the job. This belief was consistent with the Social Darwinism and racist theories of the time (Davis 1980:75).

For example, during the first two years of his concession for building the Costa Rican Atlantic railroad, Minor Keith obtained six separate
contracts from the Costa Rican government for importing foreign laborers, including "...one thousand healthy, robust Chinese of good customs and addicted to work as well as being from a cold climate..."

(ANCH #1055: April 6, 1872; Rodriguez and Borge 1976:193)." By the 1890s, however, both Panama and Costa Rica had passed laws forbidding further Chinese immigration. In an attempt to find laborers acceptable to the racial standards of the Costa Rican Congress, Minor Keith imported 1,500 Italians whom he promoted as:

...good, humble, thrifty workers free from the vice of liquor and who almost all know how to read and write. Furthermore, they are of a superior race which will do the country good as they mix in with the rest of the natives (ANCH #1131, Feb. 23, 1888:3).

Within one year, however, the Italians went on strike and marched to the capital demanding repatriation and back pay (Fallas Monge 1983:220-231; Stewart 1964). In this manner, Minor Keith "experimented" unsuccessfully with dozens of other national and ethnic groups including Canadians, Dutch, Swedes, Black North Americans, Carib Afro-Amerindians, Syrians, Turks, East Indians, Egyptians and Cape Verdians (Wilson 1947:52, 61, Rodriguez and Borge 1976:227).

Disease, was one of the biggest problems faced by the firms operating along the Atlantic Litoral of Central America. For example, although Limón province contained only 15 percent of Costa Rica's total population, it accounted for 40 percent of all yellow fever deaths; from 1906 to 1925 it had the highest death rate of any province in the country: 30.6 per thousand instead of the national average of 24 (Kepner 1936:118). Managers as well as common laborers "...withered like cut plants in the sun (Mcullough 1977:33)." For example, out of 17 French
engineers contracted to work on the Panama Canal in 1888, 16 had died within a month; of 33 Italian workers brought over in 1885, 27 were dead within three weeks (Ibid: 171). It is claimed that during the construction of the first 25 miles of the Costa Rican railroad, 4,000 Jamaicans died (Wilson 1947:52). Minor Keith justified to the Costa Rican Congress the delay in the progress of his railroad construction on the grounds that high disease rates were killing off his workers (Gaceta Official, Dec. 11, 1872). The death rate on the Panama Canal was equally excessive: in 1883 alone, 1,300 laborers perished and the following year, an American naval officer reported that an average of 200 laborers died per month out of a labor force of approximately 19,200 (McCullough 1977:161). A New York Tribune correspondent (Aug 22, 1886 cited in McCullough 1977:173) reported seeing Black workers buried beneath piles of rubble and cited a local official as saying:

   It was the same every day--bury, bury, bury, running two, three and four trains a day with dead Jamaican niggers all the time.

3.1.2 The Solution: West Indians

These trial and error searches for suitable workers finally ceased by the 1890s when it was recognized that West Indians were the most exploitable. The Panama railroad in the 1850s was the first major company to employ West Indians on a large scale; 1,200 of the 1,590 workers were Black (McCullough 1977:37). By 1884 on the Panama Canal project 16,249 out of 19,243 workers were West Indians, and in 1885 alone, 24,301 Jamaicans arrived in Panama to work on the digging of the Canal (Bryce-Laporte with Purcell 1982:223). (See Figure 13).

In Costa Rica the first group of West Indians contracted for work on
the railroad arrived in 1872 with tens of thousands more arriving
through 1920 (Duncan and Melendez 1981: 70-73). Between 1881 and 1891,
for example, Keith imported 10,000 Blacks from Jamaica (Rodriguez and
Borge 1976:229). Again, between 1911 and 1912, 11,000 Jamaicans left for
Central America (Petras 1981:419). In 1904, of the 5,600 workers on the
United Fruit Company’s Limon Division, 4,000 were Jamaicans (Limon
Weekly News, Oct. 1, 1904:4 cited in Casey 1979:113). By 1927 there were
19,136 Jamaicans in Costa Rica, almost all in Limon province (Olien

In Bocas the largest single influx of West Indians occurred in 1888
when the French company digging the Panama Canal went bankrupt and
thousands of suddenly unemployed laborers migrated north to work on
Minor Keith’s new railroad construction projects. Again in 1914, upon
the completion of the Panama Canal, 5,000 of the 10,000 Black laborers
who were laid off by the Canal authorities were absorbed by the United
Fruit Company’s Bocas and Limon divisions (Lewis 1980:97). As early as
1894 Keith already had 1,500 West Indians harvesting bananas on his
recently established plantations along the Chiriqui Lagoon (BFO: 288,
vol. 45, p. 357 cited in Heckadon 1980: 11-12). (See Map 4). The first
official employment statistic that I was able to obtain for the Bocas
Division (which was formed by the merger of all the farms bought or
planted by Minor Keith in Bocas del Toro province) was 2,120 West
Indians in 1899 (Medical Department 1912:54).

A veritable depopulation of able bodied laborers occurred in the West
Indiansd (cf. Newton 1984). Most dramatically from 1900 to 1910, 40
percent of all adult males left Barbados in search of employment,
primarily on the Panama Canal (McCullough 1977:476). A newspaper reporter in Barbados at the turn of the century described thousands of Barbadian women "wailing at the top of their voices," as a ship of contracted laborers lifted anchor for Central America (Edwards 1913:29 cited in McCullough 1977:476). Although the British colonial government by the late 1800s had forbidden direct recruitment from Jamaica, Jamaican laborers continued to emigrate on a massive scale through their own means. Most went to cut sugar in Cuba or to dig the Panama Canal but a significant number ended up on the United Fruit Company plantations in Limon and Bocas.

As Elizabeth Petras (1981:417) has noted, North American transnationals at the turn of the century were able to obtain top quality agricultural laborers from the West Indies at below the cost of their reproduction. Most emigrant laborers were raised on subsistence oriented family farms. They did not offer themselves for employment until they had reached their peak age for hard labor. Furthermore, most of the West Indians who worked in the banana industry, actually paid for the cost of their transport to the site where the Transnational most needed them at that particular moment. Those who were recruited, were examined by Company doctors who selected only the very strongest. Velma Newton's (1983:15) citation of an eyewitness description of this screening process provides an indication of the "quality" of labor the transnationals were obtaining in the West Indies at the turn of the century:

Several Policemen kept the crowd in order and sent them up into the recruiting station.... As the men came up, they were formed in a line around the wall. First, all those who looked too old, or too young, or too weakly, were picked out and sent away. Then [the doctor] went over the whole line
again for trachoma, rolling back their eyelids and looking for inflammation. Seven or eight fell at this test. Then, he made them strip, and went over them round after round for tuberculosis, heart trouble and rupture. A few fell out at each test... about twenty of one hundred were left in the end.

3.1.3 Why the West Indians?

As has been noted just above, a disproportionate number of these healthy, strong young immigrant laborers were to meet premature deaths in Central America. Although the prevalence of deadly diseases in Bocas del Toro at the turn of the century, may not have been as dramatic as during the construction of the Panama Canal in the early 1880s, conditions remained difficult. In fact, the plantation in Bocas del Toro had one of the worst health indexes of any of the United Fruit Company's divisions. From 1927 to 1929 it had the highest death rate of any of the Transnational's eight divisions in Latin America (Kepner 1936:117). A report by the United Fruit Company's Medical Department on the first years of the Bocas Division is quite frank in this respect:

Malaria has always been prevalent in the [Bocas] district, and is worse in a new area being opened to cultivation...

...the sanitary conditions at Rio Caño, Robalo, Chiriquicito, and Cricamola [the original farms of the Bocas Division] were very bad. Little was known then of proper sanitary methods, and malaria and yellow fever were rampant. The first two years proved the worst in the history of the Company, with a death-rate of five per cent per annum among white people treated. As there were no hospital accommodations for colored people, a record of their death-rate was impossible (Medical Department 1912:53-54).

Why were the West Indians willing to tolerate these kinds of working conditions more than other population groups? The answer lies in the economic conditions prevailing in the Antilles during this period. The Caribbean Black peasantry and agricultural proletariat had only just
emerged from slavery when the sugar economy plunged into a deep depression exacerbated in 1874 by the removal of protective sugar tariffs by Great Britain. British capital, which dominated the region’s economy was undergoing a serious retrenchment. Hunger and unemployment abounded. Young men were desperate to obtain work of any sort as wages were below subsistence throughout the West Indies. For example, in Barbados, a day’s wage was 20 cents at the turn of the century, whereas the United Fruit Company labor contractors were offering to pay the same amount per hour. The unemployed were so desperate that riots erupted outside the recruiting stations of the Panama Canal Company in Barbados (McCullough 1977:170).

In addition to this background of abject poverty, West Indian laborers were tolerant of exceptionally rigid plantation labor discipline because of the legacy of their particularly brutal history of slavery. Most of the grandparents and parents of the migrant laborers on the United Fruit Company subsidiaries had been slaves. Consequently, the forms of labor control and discipline considered intolerable by Latin Costa Ricans, Italians or other Europeans, were seen as “normal” by Jamaicans or Barbadians. West Indians were also familiar with plantation relations of production. Most had been raised in their home countries as semi-proletarianized peasants who supplemented their income from farm produce (including banana cultivation) with wage labor on large sugar estates. Sudden immersion into intensive plantation wagework did not cause them profound cultural dislocation as it did to most other population groups from more independent peasant backgrounds.

A subtler, but no less important factor facilitating the exploitation
of West Indians by the United Fruit Company was the history of ideological domination of the Black population in the British West Indies. British colonial society was profoundly racist. A rigid hierarchy was constructed on skin color; the omnipotence of the White plantation owner and colonial authority figures was deeply ingrained in the population's consciousness (see Lowenthal 1968). Unlike Central American Latinos, Cape Verdians, or Europeans—to whom the racism of North American managers against all darker skinned peoples, regardless of color tone was unpalatable—Black West Indians were familiar with these kinds of racist social relations. They were prepared to endure inferior treatment, housing, and pay because of their skin color. Accounts by North Americans from the period repeatedly praise the West Indians for their exceptional "courtesy":

There was nothing even faintly resembling insolence, for these were all British West Indians without a corrupting "States nigger," among them (Franck 1913:37-38, 43).

3.2 West Indian Resistance

3.2.1 Were the West Indians Docile?

Company reports and newspaper articles from the turn of the century abound with praise for the West Indian laborers in Central America:

The Black Jamaicans employed in Limón are an admirable collection of men and are very well behaved (Gaceta Oficial, April 11, 1874:3 cited in Melendez and Duncan 1981:75). The Blacks are good workers and in general are docile (Diario el Comercio, April 7, 1887:2 cited in Melendez and Duncan 1981:78).

...The Jamaicans are among the most tranquil peace loving people in existence (El Correo del Atlántico, Feb. 18, 1915:1 cited in Casey 1979:125).

Scholars have cited this documentation to prove that West Indians were
docile workers who did not engage in strikes or work stoppages. Most historical accounts of the construction of the Costa Rican inter-oceanic railroad, for example, report that when Minor Keith (the contractor) ran out of financing in 1874, several hundred Jamaicans continued to work for him for eight months without receiving their pay (cf. Duncan and Melendez 1981:104; and Fallas Monge 1983:218). This is usually attributed to an ideological complex peculiar to West Indians rendering them susceptible to Keith’s charisma. For example,

...they identified themselves spiritually with their contractor, Mr. Keith in his effort to finish the project. ...the Blacks from Jamaica tolerated the crisis with passivity and cooperated in order to finish constructing the railroad (Duncan and Melendez 1981:77).

Keith had the total support of the Black population because he was able to pass for British. Such was their loyalty to him.... They believed in him, in his word of honor. They were demonstrating the power of the Empire, its capacity... (Melendez and Duncan 1981:104).

Especially the Jamaicans repeatedly showed a great loyalty to the Company and especially to the contractor Minor C. Keith, with whom they fully identified themselves. The good will, patience and spirit of cooperation of these workers was truly exemplary and they supported in silence many of the economic problems that arose during the construction of the railroad (Fallas Monge 1983:218).

Today, the descendants of the West Indian laboring population have internalized this historical perception of their ancestors as passive and obedient to authority:

We have always been a peaceful people...; we never got involved in labor troubles...; Jamaicans don’t understand those kinds of things...; first time [in the old days] we never know about no sindicatos [unions]. No no no.

Black passivity has emerged as a racist stereotype among Latins in Limón and in Bocas:

Blacks are conformist; they’ll work for peanuts [trabajo]
por cualquier cochinada. They've always been docile (han sido mansitos todo la vida). They're pussies by nature. They bend with the breeze (Son pendelos; bailen el son que le tocan).

There is no popular consciousness of Blacks having been combative workers. Even the Costa Rican Communist Party and the militant tendency within the labor union movement subscribe to this passive interpretation of the Black workers' participation in the labor movement. Rank and file union members as well as intellectual Communist Party militants usually cite as the legacy for the contemporary union movement two major strikes: the 1934 banana strike which was composed primarily of Latinos, and the 1887 work stoppage made by the Italian railroad builders. They claim that Black workers were never involved in labor disturbances. Even the Costa Rican Communist Party's publications which purposefully emphasize the historical legacy of proletarian struggles among banana workers fail to document labor strife among the early West Indian immigrants.

Closer scrutiny of the available primary source material, as well as interviews with elderly West Indian laborers from the period, however, refute the myth that Blacks were passive. Even a cursory examination of historical archives uncovers a plethora of violent strikes, labor disturbances, and attempts at union organizing among the West Indian labor force in the 1910s and 1920s. Unfortunately, few published sources deal systematically with the resistance of Black laborers to exploitation in Limon and Bocas del Toro at the turn of the century. The most detailed account is a mimeographed article by Vladimir de la Cruz (1979) based on newspaper reports from the period. Although there are occasional references to Black combative, no open debate exists in
the literature. Instead, one merely finds diametrically opposed
statements of fact. For example,

...Jamaicans had proven to be the most problematic of the
laborers, the leaders of most of the early aggressions
(Bryce-Laporte n.d.: 23).

The most significant characteristic of the banana
industry’s labor force was its almost total lack of a labor
organization or disturbances.... The few labor disturbances
that did arise, originated among those of Hispanic
extraction and not among the numerous Jamaicans who
dominated the labor force (Casey 1979:119).

To a certain extent these contradictory interpretations are due to
the inconsistency of the primary source material and to the ideological
systification which has accompanied the upward economic mobility of the
West Indian immigrants since the 1930s (see 7.3). Consequently,
depending upon which time period one prefers to emphasize, or which
newspaper one chooses to believe, one can present Black immigrant
laborers as being either combative or passive. Another problem is that
the most frequently cited primary source material was generated
primarily by company reports and pro-management local newspapers which
purposefully emphasized the passivity of the Black laborers. Both Costa
Rica and Panama were resisting attempts to import large numbers of Black
laborers into their countries. Company officials, consequently,
strategically exaggerated the qualities of the workers they were trying
to persuade their host countries to allow them to import.

3.2.2 The First Documented Strikes

The earliest recorded confrontation between Black workers and
management (that I was able to find) occurred on the Costa Rican
railroad in 1879 (Gaceta Official, March 1879 cited in Fallas Monge
The level of tension among Black workers during this period, is illustrated by an account of a violent conflict on the railroad in 1887:

Some of the Black workers tried to chop up two foremen of the White race with their machetes; the attacked men were forced to use their revolvers.... Two Blacks were wounded and there was a riot... (Diario El Comercio, April 7, 1887:2 cited in Melendez and Duncan 1981:78).

Indeed, given the poor working conditions it is only logical that the logistics of railroad construction and of banana production in a plantation setting should have been proved conducive to labor unrest. Already by the early 1890s, the banana farms in Bocas and Limon (which were later merged into the United Fruit Company's monopoly in 1899) were veritable "factories in the field," assaying literally thousands of laborers into a concentrated locale.

Two major waves of labor unrest swept the Company's Bocas and Limon divisions immediately before and after World War I (1909-1913 and 1919-1921). Nineteen ten marked the height of banana production in the Limon Division and was heralded by the formation of an "Artisans and Labourers Union" composed almost exclusively of West Indians (The Jamaica Times, 1910 March 12:1). In response, the Company began firing all the Black foremen who were members of the union. A general strike was declared in Limon, and a violent confrontation erupted when the Company imported 700 strike breakers from St Kitts. The police fired into the crowd wounding 48 strikers (de la Cruz 1979:42; El Tiempo, Nov. 22 through 29, 1910; The Times, March 1, 1910:1; and The Jamaica Times, March 12, 1910:1, July 30, 1910:22, Aug. 27, 1910:13, Dec. 10, 1910).

De la Cruz claims that the Limon labor movement was infused with a
distinctly political, anti-imperialist tenor. He cites a 1910 demonstration in Port Limon in solidarity with Nicaragua which had just been occupied by U.S. marines the previous year, and he mentions another "anti-imperialist incident" whereby the dock workers protested the hoisting of the North American flag on a United Fruit Company ship at dock (de la Cruz 1979:39,42). It is probable, however, that these events were led by Nicaraguan Latinas rather than by West Indians. Nicaraguans were just beginning to enter the banana region at this time and they had previously had negative experiences with the occupation of their home country by U.S. marines. De la Cruz (1979:41) also notes that a "Worker's Party" was founded in Limon at this time, but it was short lived.

Whatever their formal political content, the work stoppages figure prominently in the local press throughout the early 1910s. Almost all these strikes resulted in casualties due to police repression (de la Cruz 1979:43-44; The Times, April 21, 1911:1, June 13, 1913). The most violent strike occurred in March, 1913 in the Sixaola and Talamanca districts of the Bocas Division. A riot erupted when the Company attempted to break the strike by importing two hundred Nicaraguan Latin laborers (La Informacion, March 25, 26, and 29, 1913:5,3,2). The Costa Rican government sent troops to protect the strike breakers but when the first group of 150 soldiers were disembarking from the Company boats transporting them to the plantation, a mass of angry West Indian workers stormed the docks. At the Company’s request, 50 Panamanian soldiers were also mobilized along the border on the Panamanian side of the Division to prevent the strike from extending to the rest of the Division (El Heraldo del Atlantico, March 31, 1913:2). By the end of the
strike (one and a half months later) one West Indian had been killed, two had been wounded, and dozens beaten. The leaders of the strike, including all the machinists and wagoneers in the Railroad Department were fired (La Información, March 30, 1913:3; and de la Cruz 1979:49).

These conflict-ridden years were characterized by high levels of banana production; several major new districts were opened up to banana cultivation, including the Talamanca District of the Bocas Division and the Estrella District of the Limon Division (The Times, May 12, 1913:2). As has been mentioned earlier (2.2.1), these initial periods when virgin jungle is cleared and planted are always the most problematic; since basic infrastructure has not yet been constructed, insects and snakes abound, and the work itself (clearing jungle and draining swamps) is especially strenuous. These conditions must have appeared especially bad to those laborers who were transferred to work on these new farms from the older districts in the Limon Division where they had been formerly employed under stable conditions on well established farms.

The second wave of strikes following World War I was provoked by the rapid increase in the prices of basic necessities and the failure of wages to follow suit. Labor militancy following World War I was an international phenomenon among Black workers throughout the diaspora. Black soldiers returning from fighting in Europe were increasingly resistant to racial discrimination and economic exploitation (cf. UNIA documents cited in Hill 1983:6, 332; Foner 1981:144-157; BDA: Unidentified Company informant to Blair, April 16, 1920). Both the Limon and Bocas divisions were racked by major bloody strikes during this period. As in the case of the pre-World War I disturbances, local
newspapers from these years abound with stories of work stoppages. In fact, press coverage in the English language press during this period in both Costa Rica and Panama was generally openly critical of the Transnational, attacking it for having "...made big profits while the world wide war was going on (El Pais, Oct. 6, 1919:4).

Once again, the largest, and most violent strike occurred in the Sixaola District of the Bocas Division. It began on December 2, 1918 and lasted for three months. Company correspondence reveals that the manager had anticipated a serious labor disturbance due to the depressed living conditions:

...I am afraid if we do not [increase wages] we will have trouble.... As a matter of fact, I consider that they [the workers] are just as much entitled to an increase...
(BOA:Kyes to Chittenden, Aug 30 1918).

The central demand of the workers during the 1918-1919 Sixaola strike, was a wage hike from 10 to 25 cents per hour. The British colonial officer sent to examine the situation wrote an angry letter to the manager when asked to assist the Company in expelling two West Indian "labor agitators" from the region:

...the cost of living in January 1919 was, at a fairly moderate estimate, over 100% higher than was the case in August 1914. This means that your coloured employees had to live half as well in the beginning of this year as they could afford to live in 1914. I think you will agree that this is a pretty bad proposition for any man and the facts are that your labourers found it quite impossible to provide for themselves and their families in anything like an adequate degree. The conditions with which some of the men had to put up (and I am going solely by what men, who were indicated to me by your officials as being the most trustworthy and loyal indicated to me) were little short of tragic. There can be no doubt, therefore, that the wages at the time of the strike were a long way below subsistence level.

I am positive that low wages and high prices constitute
the whole problem. So long as such conditions endure your agitators have splendid material with which to work and we are almost powerless to help you (BFO #371-3856-2850: Murray to McFarland, May 16, 1919).

Nevertheless, the Company refused to negotiate with the strikers; instead, Latin strike breakers were imported and police protection was requested from the Costa Rican and Panamanian governments. Not only were strikers arrested en masse and ejected from Company housing, but even those workers who fled into the jungle and constructed shelters on government land contiguous to Company property were searched out and arrested or had their huts burned. In most cases the victims were unable to evacuate their possessions and a long list of lost valuables was presented to a British consular commission which was sent to investigate (BCO #318-350-2976, Murray to Mallett Feb. 23, 1919:8). In fact the Company, even went so far as to "root up and burn" the plots of vegetables and fruits that most of the workers had planted in order to supplement their meager wages during the war period (Ibid). Faced with this kind of repression 90 percent of the workers (according to an estimate by the Division manager) "...were driven to take refuge in the foothills or bush where they suffered privations (BCO #318-350-2946: Murray to Mallett, Feb. 3, 1919:9)." One hundred fifteen year old Mr. Bettel survived this strike and described to me how he fled through the jungle in terror. He claims that men died of hunger while "hiding in the bush." Another elderly West Indian veteran of this strike told of how he was held in jail with 68 other strikers by the Panamanian authorities on Boca Island. The British legation investigating the complaints of the West Indians noted that the workers had been "...arrested wholesale with but little discrimination (BCO #318-350-2946: Murray to Mallett, Feb. 3, 1919:10)." They forwarded to
the Colonial Office testimony from 168 cases of abuses and arrests (BCO #318-350-2946: Mallet to Lord Curzon of Kedleston, April 22, 1919). At the end of the testimonies, the British Legation provided the following summary:

...British Labourers on the fruit farms were driven to work at the point of the bayonet and with revolvers,... two British subjects were murdered by a Police Official and an Overseer,... many West Indians were wrongfully imprisoned,... West Indian labourers were ejected without proper notice from their camps for which they had paid rent in advance, and lastly,... many West Indians had their personal property including money, destroyed and burned by the ruthless and repressive actions of the Company's employees and Costa Rican police officials (BCO #318-350-2946: Murray to Governor of Jamaica, May 29, 1919:1).

They reported that the physical abuse of the workers by the Costa Rican police was

...amply borne out by the marks the men carried on their bodies, and which were shown to the Commission during the enquiry (BCO #318-350-2946: McAdam to Murray, June 5, 1919).

Violence was not limited to police repression. The strikers frequently initiated confrontations when the Company imported strikebreakers. The following description by a West Indian Company informant to the Bocas Division manager portrays well the desperation of the strikers and the level of sabotage and violence involved. The first part of his report is a description of a strike-leader's speech:

[He advocated] ...with unabated fury... the shooting of white men with buck shot from guns from behind, the beating of foremen, the chopping down of the Company's young cacao trees, the burning down of the Commissary and camp, the opening of railroad switches, etc. etc.

...a large number of these soi-disant [so called] strikers... armed with sticks marched down to the Company's machine shop, and violently introduced themselves therein, they at once started to throw water on the different engines... and also attacking the few men who did not join
them and were at work. Later on the same day, about 9 A M a
dense crowd, about 400 men again armed with sticks and
stones was formed in the railroad track... and they were
determined not to allow any Company's vehicles to pass
through. An attempt at wrenching the rails was made, and it
was right there that the Panama Police made the first
arrests. About 40 men were taken up... [sic] (BDA:
unidentified informant to Blair, April 16, 1920).

This level of violence was confirmed by Mr. Bettel who described to
me--as if it were the most natural, logical thing to have done--how they
used to shoot and beat up strike breakers:

    If you don't strike, the man them that strike would shot
    ya.... Or you can lick them good though--lash them. Get a
    stick and lash them. You lash them with a stick and throw
    your fist at them--a brutal fight.

Two strikers were killed during the 1918-1919 Sixaola District
strike, dozens were wounded and the entire leadership was imprisoned.
Nevertheless, under pressure from the British Colonial Office, the
Company raised wages by 15 percent and agreed to transfer both the
Division manager and the superintendent of agriculture to another
country. Except for a handful of leaders who were blacklisted, all the
striking laborers who had been fired (90 percent of the work force) were
hired back.

Interviews with elderly Black survivors from the post World War I
period indicate that there were numerous additional violent work
stoppages following the 1918-1919 Sixaola District strike which have
gone undocumented. According to Mr. Bettel repression was markedly
increased following the events in Sixaola. These periodic labor
confrontations occurred in an atmosphere of veritable terror:

    1919, 1920 and 1921... It was hell over there [Bocas
    Division] I tell you... you could get killed just talking
    about a strike.... The Government went in favor of the
    Company.
Significantly, all the eyewitness survivors from the labor disturbances of these years in the Bocas Division (three different elderly West Indians), agreed that the strikes were failures because they had lacked a union:

How you gonna strike good? You don’t have no house, no money. Don’t have nothing to eat. It wasn’t the whole nation on strike. The Company bring in new men and pay 20 cents 30 cents.... The men that strike can’t get nothing to eat. Some of them go back to work all the same.... But when you have a sindicato [union] in the country the sindicato man paying his people...you want sugar you get it...cigarette whatever you want. There is money for you weekly; you pay rent. You don’t have to worry about nothing because it’s a sindicato ban. And [the sindicato] feed its own people.

5.3 DIVIDE AND CONQUER

5.3.1 Latin Strike Breakers

Faced with escalating labor unrest among its West Indian workers, the Transnational systematized an ethnically based "divide and conquer" strategy. When the West Indians struck, Latin strike breakers were imported. In fact by the 1920s, wages in the coffee orchards in the Highlands of Costa Rica were dropping relative to those paid in the banana industry and it became easier for the Transnational to recruit Latins on more permanent basis. Consequently, the ethnicity of the labor force began to change. Don Simon, one of the few Bribri Amerindians who worked for the Company in Talamanca during this period (see 4.1.2) told me specifically that the Company began hiring Latins (castellanos) in increasing numbers in the Bocas Division to counteract the mounting labor unrest of the West Indians in the early 1920s. This altered the correlation of forces between labor and management:

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We had to shut up 'cause anyone that went on strike would lose his job. The pay was miserable. Before that when just the Blacks were around huh! They were really tough about things like that. They would stop work over any old issue and nothing would move. Even the overseer wasn't allowed to enter the farm.

The deep seated racial animosity between Latin and Blacks prevented a solidarity from developing between the two groups; they did not even speak the same language. Reports from the period all confirm this profound antagonism between "Whites" and Blacks. For example, Fallas (1978b:197), the previously cited (4.2.3) labor leader and literati addressed this issue in a speech he gave to a group of striking banana workers in the 1950s:

The Company, to reduce the possibility of serious rebellions, fanned the hatred of Whites against Blacks and Blacks against Whites. And with great success. More than once when the exasperated Black workers in Limon, would rebel White workers willfully offered themselves to break the strike; of course the Black workers responded in kind when it was the Whites who were protesting working conditions. The Company meanwhile was calmly exploiting both groups indiscriminately. ...[it was] a stupid antagonism which benefited only the Company.

Similarly, Manuel Mora (formerly secretary general of the Communist Party of Costa Rica and also a veteran banana worker organizer from the 1920s and 1930s) has underscored this same problem in his speeches on the labor movement:

The Company used to manipulate as well in order to maintain discord in the zone [Limon] and would dominate through this discord--racial prejudice. The Company tried to maintain a permanent antagonism between the White workers and the workers of color, so that each would focus on racism and not realize that their biggest problem was the Company's exploitation of them and the government's collusion with the Company (1980:718-719).

The following letter from a Communist Party leader to local cadre in Limon illustrates that the Company's divide and conquer strategy was a
serious problem to union organizers at the time:

The Company has been fomenting division between Blacks and Whites because when the workers are divided they are weaker and they are not able to struggle against the Company. Try to move forward and win over with care each day more Blacks to our ranks; struggle against the ignorance and the lack of comprehension of many of them.... Remember management is skillfully manipulating this situation with the Blacks to make the Whites think that Blacks are the enemy (Letter of Manuel More to Octavio Bustos Ramal del Bosque cited in Diario de Costa Rica, Sept. 23, 1934:7).

Nevertheless, the Communist Party was largely unsuccessful in attracting Black support. In fact, this Black/Latin schism was so deeply rooted, that it was referred to as an inherent characteristic of "tropical peoples" by British officials in their reports to the Colonial Office:

[There is a] ...wide gulf between West Indians in general and the native [Latin] of the Central American Republics. There appears to be a mutual distrust between them and apparently neither will take the trouble to understand the other...(BCO: McAdam to Murray, April 1919:11).

Another advantage to the Company of this deep seated Latin/Black antipathy was that governmental repression could be mobilized more easily against Blacks. The police forces of both Panama and Costa Rica were primarily composed of Latins who had little compunction in violently exerting their authority over West Indian laborers. Once again, the British colonial officers (in a report on the 1918-19 Sixaola strike) described the violent repression of strikers in almost theoretical terms:

The police behaved with that indiscretion that is usual in Spanish American countries. The advent of the police was on each occasion accompanied by the usual roughness and brutality in which the West Indians usually had the worst of it (BCO #318-350-2946, Murray to Mallet, Feb. 3, 1919).

Conversely Black laborers had to be selective in the violence they
directed against Latin strike breakers for fear of arousing the nationalist ire of the local authorities and risking fierce retaliatory repression. As Mr. Bettel explains "You can't shoot the Spaniard. If you gonna shoot the Spaniards then, you gonna get the government against you.... You can lick them though--lash them good [chuckle]."

5.3.2 A Crippled Labor Movement

This ethnically based divide and conquer strategy involved more than merely the physical introduction of strike breakers of different ethnic or regional identities. Ethnic antagonisms also limited the development of the solidarity indispensable for an effective labor movement during periods of tranquility. This was noted by an observer who toured United Fruit Company plantations in the 1920s:

> With a sense of national unity prevailing, labor solidarity is more easily achieved than is the case when workers are divided into mutually exclusive groups of nationals and foreigners, whites and Blacks (Kepner and Soothill 1936:195).

Fifty years later, the Panamanian author, Jose Beleno (1970:53) restated this problem in a novel about United Fruit Company workers:

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> The chobos and the Panamanians suffer from the same [economic] problems. But the chobos think they are gringos or wish they were, and the Panamanians think they are superior. We are a divided people a balkanized, fragmented people. No unions can survive.

Documents from the turn of the century suggest that management was aware of the importance of ethnic diversity in weakening the labor movement. For example, a chief engineer with the Panama Canal Company stated:

> My notion is that we should not attempt to prosecute this work without the introduction of at least three separate nationalities... so that none of them will get the idea that they are the only source of supply on the earth (PCCF
The reports of the British Colonial Office provide the best documentation of the extent to which inter-ethnic animosities impeded the development of a worker's movement. For example, when North American labor organizers attempted to found a union among West Indian workers on the Panama Canal, the British authorities noted:

...they have not met with the enthusiasm that might have been expected. In his heart the negro probably realizes that he cannot hope to be treated like a white man, and the methods of the American Union representatives have not been sufficiently flamboyant to rouse any excitement. Moreover, the negro never quite believes or trusts the white man (BCO #318-350-2946: unidentified colonial officer to Curzon, May 15, 1910). (See also Davis 1982.)

Distrust of White union organizers by Blacks had an objective basis. For example, in 1910 representatives sent to organize United Fruit Company railroad workers in Cuba reported at a union convention:

We did not organize any of the engineers in Cuba for what we considered the most excellent of reasons: that we were unable to distinguish the nigger from the white man. Our color perception was not sensitive enough to draw a line. I do not believe the condition will improve in a year from now or in 10 years from now or in any other time, unless you stock the island of Cuba with a new race, entirely getting rid of the old.... I hope the time will never come when this organization will have to join hands with the negro or a man with a fractional part of a negro in him (Stevenson 1954:232 cited in Foner 1981:107).

The Limon Division in Costa Rica made strides to transcend racist antagonisms in 1920 when a cross-ethnic, class-based alliance between organized labor on a national level was founded. In 1921 the Federation of Limon Workers (primarily composed of Black West Indian banana workers) signed a pact with the all-Latin General Confederation of Labor in San Jose. The goal was to promote the "unity of the two races and
mutual self help (cited in de la Cruz 1983:115)." That same year, however, the unity floundered. The Limon workers declared a general strike to protest the United Fruit Company's mass firings of affiliated members, and to demand a 30 percent wage hike (Ibid). The San Jose based General Confederation of Labor initially supported the strike and sent economic aid. Despite police repression, and additional firings, the strike movement was maintained for over a month. It eventually disintegrated, however, when a border war erupted between Panama and Costa Rica in early 1921. The San Jose based national union confederation "...called on the strikers to abandon the movement in order to channel all their efforts into the conflict with Panama (de la Cruz 1983:117)." Ironically, Blacks had been denied citizenship by discriminatory laws in both Costa Rica and Panama, and obviously had little stake in the outcome of the war. In other words, West Indian workers, were told by their Latin allies to abandon a class-based struggle in order to rally behind nationalism for a country which had refused them citizenship.

Twenty years later in the Bocas Division, Black and Latin workers were still unable to cooperate in local labor stoppages. For example, a Company official wrote in 1942,

...the Latin laborers stopped work and refused to continue unless we gave them an increase in the contract price for harvesting. Approximately half of the harvesters on Davao Farm are colored and these men continued working in a half-hearted manner for the rest of the day. However, the following morning they, too, refused to go out, claiming that the Latin laborers had threatened them bodily harm if they did continue to work (BDA: Atwood to Kelley, Dec. 16, 1942).

Informants who worked in the Bocas Division during World War II, confirm
that relations between Blacks and Latins (who had suddenly become a
majority of the labor force) were strained. I was frequently told of
massive drunken brawls between Black and "White" laborers. For
example, one of these mini race riots erupted when a Black bartender
insisted on serving Black customers before Latins at a Saturday night
dance. By the time the fighting had been stopped, two people had been
killed and 60 arrested.

5.3.3 Black Versus Black

Ethnic/nationalist tensions were not limited to a Black versus Latin
antagonism; they extended to the internal differentiations among the
West Indian laborers themselves. In the Bocas and Lison divisions most
of the workers were from Jamaica but significant numbers came from
Barbados, Trinidad, the Leeward Islands (St Kitts-Nevis, St Lucia, and
Grenada), and the French speaking colonies of Martinique and
Guadeloupe. There existed a clearly defined stratification: Creoles, the
descendants of the original African slaves intermixed with their
European owners were at the apex. They had populated the region before
the advent of the Transnational. The Trinidadians, who were few in
number and tended to be better educated were just below the Creoles.
Jamaicans were the most numerous group and--by all accounts--considered
themselves to be the most "cultured" (cf. Bryce-Laporte with Purcell
1982:228). The Barbadians ranked lower in the scale. This hierarchy was
noted by the Costa Rican press which warned its Latin readership that
all Blacks were not equal: 1

...those Barbadians bring thievery and pillage, they are
much inferior in conduct to the Jamaicans who are always so
respectful (Le Prensa Libre, Aug. 8, 1910:3).
The Blacks from St. Kitts are distinguishable from the Jamaicans by their clothing, they are barefoot and covered in rags. The depth of their misery and sadness is etched in their eyes and movements... they're an unhappy people... (Le Informacion, Nov. 27, 1910:3).

French-speaking immigrants, especially the Martinicans, occupied the lowest rung in the West Indian national/regional hierarchy. According to Quince Duncan (n.d.:13) (himself a Costa Rican of Jamaican descent) at the turn of the century, the Jamaicans in Puerto Limon constructed a separate school in a poorer neighbourhood so that their children would not have to mix with those from Martinique, St. Kitts, Barbados, and St. Lucia. Even at the time of my fieldwork in the Company's port town of Almirante, the progeny of these "lower class" Martinicans were still relegated to a distinctly lower prestige neighbourhood known as "Patois town" or "barrio Frances." According to a North American who resided in this neighbourhood in the 1960s:

...the poorest part of town... known as 'Patois Town,' harbors the people who are looked down upon by the Fruit Company personnel, politicians, and the most prosperous citizens of Almirante alike as the scum of the entire low class society (McCarthy 1976:72).

Although the extent of the antagonism within the Black population was not as profound as the cleavage between Blacks and Latins, it played a significant role in impeding the development of labor solidarity. The Company occasionally imported West Indians from different islands to undermine labor movements. The most notable example was the previously cited importation of 700 workers in 1910 from St. Kitts which provoked a riot. In fact, during the months prior to the arrival of the St. Kitts workers, as the union was building strength, the Transnational intimidated its labor force by leaking stories to the local newspapers of the imminent arrival of Latins to "replace the Blacks who are members
of the Union," and also of its intent to import 5,000 Barbadians along with "...Haitians and Americans to replace the striking Jamaicans (La Informacion, Aug. 6, 1910:2, Aug. 4, 1910:3; La Prensa Libre, Aug. 8, 1910:3)." In the particular case of the St Kitts workers, the Company's divide and conquer strategy failed because the newly arrived laborers refused to accept the work conditions they encountered in Limon, and demanded their repatriation (El Tiempo, Nov. 27, 1910). In fact, in desperation, in the midst of the riots provoked by the arrival of the St Kitts workers, the Company imported yet another shipment of West Indians from Martinique (La Informacion, Nov. 27, 1910:3).

The Company also took advantage of minor internal differentiations of a purely localistic, community-based nature. This was especially true, for example, among the stevedores in Almirante who frequently staged work stoppages. The logistical nature of dockwork makes it a natural bottleneck capable of halting exports from the entire Division. Work slowdowns on the docks by a relatively small number of individuals can cause significant losses to the Transnational. In response to this, the Company diversified the pool of laborers from which it recruited stevedores, selecting them from among the half dozen communities scattered along the mainland and on the small islands in Chiriqui Lagoon. Most of these dockworkers were also small farmers and were only employed on a casual basis depending on the Company's continually changing shipping schedules (BDA: Adams to Blair, June 17, 1924; Munch to Moore, March 6, 1954). When labor crises erupted on the docks, consequently, the Company would juggle the various communities within the Lagoon one against the other. For example, in 1933 the superintendent in charge of loading in Almirante reported to his
superior his plans for undermining an impending work stoppage:

Aguilar and his companions held a meeting on [the] night of April 5th at which they decided to strike for increased rates or not allow us to load any more boats. These agitators live in their own huts across Cedar Creek in the area known as Chinatown. We plan to weed this gang out and will bring a larger gang from Bocas [Island] to load and hire only such Almirante men as we know to be loyal and quiet (BDA: Mikkell to Marsh, April 7, 1933).

The localistic, community attachments which segmented the dockworkers were rooted in objective, economic differences between the various communities surrounding Almirante:

We employ 125 men from Bocas who come from the town of Bocas, Old Bank, Nancy’s Cay [small island] and Careening Cay, 50% of whom grow fruit and sell it to the company.

We employ from 75 to 100 men from the Lagoon who come to Almirante each week on the launches of the company that gather up their fruit which the company has purchased from them. 90% of these men grow and sell fruit to the company.

We employ 150 men from Almirante and One Mile who, when not working on the dock, are employed in the Streets & Parks Department and in the Cacao Drying Plant. About 15% of these men grow and sell fruit to the company (BDA: Adams to Blair, June 17, 1924).

5.3.4 Differential Labor Quality

The cleavages and hierarchies within the Black workforce corresponded to differences in labor quality, and exploitability. As one might expect, the Trinidadians, who did not come from as desperately poor a background and who tended to have higher levels of education were considered the "laziest" workers; they were concentrated in the "soft" jobs that required literacy skills such as, for example, warehouse foremen or dispatchers in the Materials and Supplies Department. Similarly, the Creoles "...after having been taught in the English schools with Jamaican teachers, were able to hold important jobs as
clerks, book-keepers etc... (Reid n.d.:7)." Barbadians and Jamaicans, on the other hand, were reknowned for being hard working manual laborers. Ironically the "French" were "too vice ridden to make good workers." Indeed, the Martinicans and Guadeloupans represented an incipient lumpenproletariat. They lacked the language skills and the cultural savvy of the Anglo-Saxon, Caribbean colonial style, which North American supervisors expected from West Indians. Elderly informants insist that Martinicans and Guadeloupans had "bad characters" and chose to "fish and thieve" instead of work honestly for the Transnational.

The "worst" of all the Black workers were the Black North Americans. They had a reputation for unruliness and a precondition for organizing labor unions. Mr. Bettel, himself a Bahamian, recalls, "Black Americans huh! the Company couldn't manage them." They shot you and don't give a damn. They don't stand for nothing.... The Company couldn't rob them. In fact management considered the influence of U.S. Blacks in the Bocas Division to be so nefarious that ship captains were warned that they should,

\[ \text{Quit signing on negro crew at Bocas and bringing them to Mobile [Alabama] or permitting crews from...[your] ship to be signed off at Bocas.... They... [have been] causing unrest among our laborers at Bocas, by reason of injecting labor unionism into their heads by discharging negroes from Mobile... at Bocas (BDA: Ellis to Dixon, Dec. 2, 1919)} \]

North American Blacks were accustomed to superior working conditions and had more experience in organizing in defense of their economic interests:

\[ \text{The continual visiting of... negroes in Mobile fills them with exalted ideas, and they return here and spread the news of the excellent conditions under which labor works around Mobile, and the usual labor agitator propaganda simply increase our difficulties which are already quite enough (BDA: Blair to Ellis, Nov. 21, 1919)} \]
Similarly, West Indians who had worked in the Canal Zone where wages were higher and conditions less rigorous were unsatisfactory laborers by United Fruit Company standards:

I can say very little for the laborers we get from the Canal Zone. We got several hundred of them over here in the last two months.... They simply will not work, and those who do try get sick and have to be sent to the hospital (BDA: Blair to Chittenden, Aug. 8, 1922).

...(Canal workers) have proved absolutely useless, being hangers-on who will do nothing... (BDA: Blair to Cutter, March 22, 1922).

These statements are especially significant as they were made during the period immediately following World War II when there were thousands of desperately unemployed West Indians in the Canal Zone. Instead of hiring from this large pool of unemployed Canal workers (many of whom were ultimately repatriated) the Company made plans to send a labor contractor to Jamaica to recruit peasants directly from the countryside:

I am therefore asking your permission and authority to proceed to Jamaica where I am sure I can do twice as much work, in getting a better selection of hard-working men, within the reach of pay (BDA: Coombs to Kyes, April 28, 1919).

A few years later (in the mid-1920s) when the Company was expanding banana and cacao plantings in the Estrella District in the Limon Division (see Map 3), the Company, once again hired laborers directly from Jamaica despite the fact that there were large numbers of unemployed Jamaicans already in the region. Jamaicans with several years of experience in plantation work would not accept the wages and working conditions the Transnational was offering (Koch 1975:267). Jamaican immigrants had begun a process of upward mobility in Central America, but that is the subject of the following chapter.
NOTES

1 In the mid-1800s before bananas had even been discovered as a cash crop, the problem of finding a labor force to develop the Bocas/Limon region was noted by a North American explorer and geologist who was performing a survey of potential mineral deposits on a contract with Minor C. Keith (who was later to found the United Fruit Company):

In the spacious lowlands around the banks of the Telire [Sixaola river] there are thousands of acres of good land perfect for the cultivation of sugar but which today is only occupied by some 200 people... the paramount problem is finding labor power. There are few Indians and they are not accustomed to hard labor... (Gabb 1981:102-103).

2 When Minor Keith inaugurated his railroad and banana operations in Limon province just north of Bocas province in the 1870s and 1880s, he was prevented by the large coffee estate owners of Costa Rica from offering competitive wages that would threaten their access to labor during the coffee harvest season. In fact, in order to obtain permission to import foreign workers, Keith promised to release his workers

...in time for the 1875 coffee harvest... [thereby] irrespective of the advance of the railroad [in order to make] 14,000 to 15,000 of the best class of workers... [available] without distraction... [for] agricultural [labor] (Gaceta Official, April 11, 1874:3).

3 The Chinese who were brought over as indentured workers revolted on several occasions. Their working conditions were akin to slavery; they were bought and sold on the open market; whipped when they misbehaved; and in some cases actually executed (eg. Casey 1975:163, Fallas Monge 1983:208-215, Zaida 1979:45). In fact, they proved to "...have a decided inclination to suicide... (Gaceta Official, June 19, 1875:2 cited in Duncan and Melendez 1981:81)." In Panama the Chinese were also employed in railroad construction

...scores of Chinese workers were so stricken by 'melancolia' an after effect of malaria, that they committed suicide by hanging, drowning or impaling themselves on sharpened bamboo poles (McCullough 1977:37).

Unfortunately space constraints do not permit a full analysis of the Chinese who continue to have a small but significant presence in Bocas del Toro and Limon. Throughout the late 1800s and early 1900s, despite the immigration prohibitions, they entered the region illegally. They were sometimes delivered as merchandise hiding inside barrels. Apparently many drowned while attempting to swim ashore at night from ships which were contracted to smuggle them. Most of those who survived became vegetable farmers and later retail merchants. Today, throughout the Atlantic Coast of Central America (and indeed much of South America)
Chinese shopkeepers abound even in the most isolated communities. They have maintained a closed society with strong internal ethnic solidarity, establishing self-help savings and loan associations. Every major urban center on the Atlantic Coast of Central America has a "Chinese Association," and most of the region's cemeteries have a section reserved for the "Chinese colony." The Chinese behave in an almost caste-like manner, minimizing their social contact with non-Chinese, and speaking exclusively Chinese in the home. In fact, many Chinese men import their spouses (sight unseen) directly from Taiwan or Hong Kong. It is not uncommon in Bocas to see newly arrived, young, monolingual Chinese women staffing their husband's shop. Offspring from Chinese who have married other ethnic groups are not accepted by the Chinese community.

Keith petitioned the Costa Rican Congress to reimburse his expenses for importing the Italian laborers on the grounds that he was "betering the racial stock" of the country. He cited as precedent the government subsidies on imports of highbred cattle to improve local racial stock (ANCH #1131: Feb. 23, 1888:3).

Three of Minor Keith's brothers and uncles also died while supervising the construction of the first 25 miles of the Costa Rican trans-Atlantic railroad (Wilson 1947:52; 59).

A minority of Blacks probably had a resistance to malaria, yellow fever, and black water fever since between 10 and 20 percent of all people of African descent have a sickle cell trait in their hemoglobin providing them with resistance to those diseases (Livingstone 1958:540 and charts). Nevertheless, Blacks died in higher proportions than Whites in the tropical lowlands because of their inferior living conditions and the segregated access to health care. For example, in 1906 President Roosevelt noted that the death rate for Blacks on the Panama Canal was 59 per thousand compared to 17 per thousand for Whites (Roosevelt 1906 cited in McCullough 1977:501).

Racist discourse justifies the historical use of Black labor in unhealthy working conditions on the grounds that they have a natural resistance to tropical diseases: "Blacks are good at drinking bad water [...] son buenos para beber agua negra." Ironically, simultaneously, one of the justifications for Latin opposition to the immigration of Blacks to the Highlands of Costa Rica at the turn of the century was that they were more susceptible to yellow fever and malaria (Olken 1967:104).

Malaria was by far the biggest cause of sickness. For example in 1920, 7,156 cases of malaria were treated in the Bocas Division, followed by 776 cases of gonorrhea and 453 of syphilis (BDA: Monthly Clinical Report, Year 1920, Medical Department, Panama Division).

There is considerable documentation of West Indian labor organizing on the Panama Canal. See for example, Franco 1979, Gandasegui A. n.d., Davis 1980, Conniff 1983, Newton 1983.

Passing references to labor disturbances by Black immigrant laborers in the late 1800s can also be found in de la Cruz (1983:94, 105-121),
The Company imported the St. Kitts strike breakers into Limon illegally by registering them as merchandise to local customs officials (de la Cruz 1979:42).

The baptist minister who was the main leader of the 1918-1919 Sixaola strike was “invited” by the governor of Limon to the capital of the province to “give testimony in court.” Upon his arrival, however he was jailed (BCO #318-350-2946: McAdam to Murray, April 28, 1919).

The Company did not limit the use of ethnic-based divide and conquer tactics to its operations in Bocas and Limon. For example, in Colombia where the labor force was predominantly Latin, it requested permission from the government to import 10,000 West Indian workers following a major strike on its plantation in 1928 (New York Times, April 6, 1929 cited in Kepner 1936:200). The Transnational’s arch rival (the then fledgling Standard Fruit Company) resorted to the same strategy when it imported Jamaicans to Puerto Cabezas on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua in the early 1930s to break a strike of primarily Latin workers (Gutierrez 1977:60).

The most spectacular example in Costa Rica of a foreign company manipulating Black/Latin antagonisms is the case of the Abangares gold mines (in which Minor Keith the founder of the United Fruit Company also had financial interests) in the province of Guanacaste (Garcia 1984:17). In 1911 Black West Indians were brought in as foremen to supervise the largely Latin work force; in fact all 50 foremen at the mines were Black and Black ditch diggers were paid more than Latinos (Ibid 1984:57-62). One of the tasks of the foreman was to strip search workers suspected of stealing gold from the mines at the end of the day as they were leaving the pits. In 1911 this provoked a race riot. Fourteen Blacks were brutally killed by a mob of incensed workers (Ibid:57-62). Although the mines were occupied by the workers and a strike was declared, their anger was vented against their immediate supervisors who were Blacks rather than against the North American owners of the mines. Despite a protest from the Queen of England, no workers were prosecuted for the massacre and the President of Costa Rica even publicly blamed the “foreigners” (i.e., West Indian Blacks) for having provoked the workers into killing them. The Costa Rican author, Jose Leon Sanchez (1971:107-108) describes the massacre vividly in his chronicle of the life of a mineworker:

The mineworkers all left the mine. They assembled together.... And then with rocks and rifles for hunting tigers they went out hunting Blacks.

...they set fire to... the foremen’s barracks... and as the Blacks came running out one by one they shot them.

...a point blank shot split open the head of one of them. The rifle had been loaded with lead for killing tigers.

Three hours later there were only five Blacks left...
hiding in the surrounding underbrush. The miners started to comb through the jungle until they found them.

Amongst these was one special Black man... the head of all of them, who always went around sharply dressed. They tied this Black man to a bridge sitting him on a box holding 50 sticks of dynamite. Then they attached... a slow burning wick... [lasting five minutes].

Of course the miners meanwhile shouted insults at the Black man who was wounded and bloody, furious he glared out without watching the burning wick.

Well, of the bridge and of the Black man there was nothing left.

The Communist Party newspaper addressed the issue of racism in its editorials in 1934:

The bourgeoisie has a hidden agenda: to make the national workers think that their terrible situation is due, not to the capitalist system, but rather to competition from the workers of color.... They are trying to deviate the workers struggle from its real objectives and substitute the class struggle which they are so afraid of with a stupid and suicidal racial struggle (Trabajo, Dec. 16, 1934).

*Chombo* is a Spanish distortion for Jamaican and has a derogatory connotation. Ironically, therefore, although Beleno condemns ethnic divisiveness, he utilizes racist language.

These labor organizers from the United Brotherhood of Maintenance-of-Way Employees and Shop Labourers managed to affiliate 80 percent of the West Indian labor force in their union by 1920. In February they staged a strike in which all 17,000 laborers participated. The strike was broken, however, and the American Federation of Labor expelled the Brotherhood for having encouraged the strike. According to historian Michael Conniff (1983:8-9), “This left a 30-year legacy of distrust towards U.S. unions.” 1919.

Racism against Blacks and other minorities has been well documented in the United States labor movement both historically and in the contemporary period. See for example Foner (1981), Hill (1974), Saxton (1971), and Allen (1983), just to name a few. In fact, ethnic antagonisms within a diverse labor force is one of the most commonly cited reasons for why a more powerful worker’s movement never developed in the United States.

In Costa Rica Latinas are referred to as “Whites.”

On the Panama Canal during World War II relations between Black and Latin workers were so strained that two separate unions for each ethnic group were established (Conniff 1983:10). Racial tension was so deepseated that even dark-skinned Panamanians were refused membership in the Latin union (Ibid). When Blacks and Latinas finally joined forces in a non-segregated union later in the decade, the Governor of the Canal
Zone confidently predicted its imminent downfall:

...[It is composed of] two essentially incompatible elements--Latin Americans and West Indian Negroes--and I believe that if it is allowed to go its way unmolested it will soon begin to lose strength and eventually perhaps fall apart (PCCF#:2-P-71 Mehaffey to Wood, Oct. 25, 1946 cited in Conniff 1981:7).

19

The diversity of the Bocas labor force was so great in 1913, that the Catholic bishop was obliged to deliver his sermon in three languages, (English, French and Spanish) when he visited Almirante (Reports of the Catholic Bishops 1899-1916:313).

20

A United Fruit Company foreman from the late 1920s noted,

The Negro from the United States has no use for the British subjects. The Jamaican has no regard for the Black from Belize or Barbados, and still less for the French-speaking Negroes and the Blacks from the United States (cited in Kepner 1936:169).

On the Panama Canal these internal Black differentiations were even more pronounced. In fact, sociologist, Raymond Davis (1982:115-116) found references in the Panama Canal Commission Files to Canal Zone Police reports of infiltrators in the Colon labor union successfully pitting the different islanders against one another in 1915. After documenting the successful importation of Fortune Islanders to break a railroad strike on the Canal, Davis (1980:80) concludes, "...cheap West Indian labor could be replaced by yet cheaper Black labor."

21

In the United Fruit Company's Guatemalan subsidiary an overseer in the 1920s noted,

...the whites could bank on the support of the American Negroes, and these same Negroes often played the part of spies and forewarned the whites of any Jamaican plots (Kepner 1936:170).

While this particular "stool pigeon" role may have been unique to the particular individuals employed in the Guatemala Division, it does provide a good index of how divided the various groups of Black laborers were one from another.

22

In 1925 a U.S. union newspaper wrote of the problems faced by maritime workers in the Americas:

Whenever a strike has been declared or there has been a lack of workers through any circumstances, the company has always recurred to Jamaica, which seems to have an inexhaustible source of cheap help, to get them out of any troubles (Solidaridad, April 4, 1925).
CHAPTER 6: UPWARD MOBILITY

This second chapter on Blacks in the Bocas Division labor force traces their upward class mobility from the 1920s to my fieldwork period. There are three patterns—or rather processes—of Black upward mobility: 1) land acquisition; 2) emigration; and 3) preferential employment with the Company and in the local service sector. Most Blacks engaged in all three of these processes at some point in their life, depending upon external political economic constraints as well as the phases of maturity in their own life cycle. The trend has been for young Blacks to leave agricultural wage work by emigrating and/or obtaining preferential employment. Middle-aged Blacks acquire prime cacao or banana lands and convert themselves into small, "independent" farmers selling bananas and/or cacao to the Transnational. During periods of economic duress these small farmers continued to perform occasional wage work for the Company to supplement their incomes. Their children (if they do not emigrate) usually acquire better jobs within the local occupational hierarchy and then take over their parents' farm when they reach middle-age. Regardless of the specific pattern followed, the end result has been the emergence of an ethnic occupational hierarchy which contrasts markedly with the pattern prevalent in the rest of the world: "...the Atlantic Zone [is] one of the few places in the world where bourgeois Blacks exploit an underprivileged white minority (Koch 1975:378)."

6.1 THE RECONSTITUTION OF THE BLACK PEASANTRY

6.1.1 Panama Disease and Soil Exhaustion
The first step in the dramatic transformation of the class composition of the original West Indian immigrants was their reconstitution into small farmers on the margin of the plantations in both Bocas and Limón. To a certain extent, this trend was forced on them by the constant local booms and busts in the banana and cacao industry, and by the disruptions in local production patterns due to world wide economic crises and international commodity price fluctuations (see 2.2.2). As was noted in The Setting ecological factors also contributed to the banana industry's instability. This was particularly true for the Bocas Division which from 1903 onward was the region hardest hit by the devastating root fungus, appropriately nicknamed "Panama disease."

The Company leased its depleted, infected lands to former workers and then purchased the bananas or cacao these newly reconstituted peasants were able to squeeze out of the formerly productive farms. Ironically, therefore, disease and the depletion of soil fertility promoted the small farmer. The statistics show that prior to the 1960s, the older banana plantations had higher proportions of purchased bananas to Company produced ones (Kepner and Soothill 1935:272-273). A Company official in Limón wrote in the 1930s:

When a territory begins to produce larger quantities of poor quality fruit and the total exports begin to decline, the company is delighted to purchase rather than produce most of the fruit exported from that field; but is very very careful not to show its delight (cited in Kepner and Soothill 1935:272).

This was the case, for example, with the Talamanca and Sixaola districts during the late 1920s through the mid 1930s. In fact, even while the Company was opening up the Talamanca District, it manoeuvred to encourage "independent" farmers to establish farms on the less fertile
portions of the valley:

There is some land between Chase and Suretka from which we might get fruit in small quantities if we allowed squatters to settle on it (BDA: Blair to Chittenden, Sept. 30, 1919).

Significantly, by 1929, 71 percent of all the bananas exported from the Bocas Division were purchased from small Black farmers who were concentrated in the Talamanca and Sixaola valleys, as well as along the Chiriqui Lagoon (Kepner and Soothill 1935:273).

The Transnational's strategy of substituting cacao for bananas on depleted, infected soils also promoted the small farm economy since cacao was only marginally profitable due to dramatic world price fluctuations, and the Company often preferred to commercialize it rather than produce it (see 2.2.1). It was only worthwhile to the Company to maintain direct control over the production of cacao in those regions where soils were optimal. In Talamanca, for example, the Company contented itself with commercializing the crop, whereas in the Sixaola District, control over the production process was maintained until 1957.

The West Indian migrant laborers, who managed to "gain independence" from the Transnational by establishing themselves as small cacao and banana farmers in the 1910s and 1920s remained, however, highly dependent upon the Company. Only the very largest growers (most of whom were either Europeans or upper class Latins from the Highlands of Costa Rica) had legal contracts with the Company which guaranteed them minimum prices and delivery quotas. This was especially a problem with bananas, since the Company would increase the proportion of bananas it
rejected on the grounds that they were of poor quality when world market prices were low (cf. Nunez 1976) Furthermore, the Company’s success in ousting all competitors from both Bocas and Limon eliminated alternative channels for commercializing bananas and cacao. Several historians have qualified the Black banana farmers of the first half of the 1900s as “privileged salaried workers” who had the “formal trappings” of independence but in practice were proletarians disguised as peasants (Facio 1978:56-57). These “independent” farmers imposed higher levels of self-exploitation upon themselves and their families than the Company was able to impose on its own workers. Wage earners who chafe under the direct labor discipline of a plantation foreman will often be willing to superexploit themselves when provided with access to land and the illusion of independence. Of course there was a concrete economic incentive to acquire land as well. On the basis of United States Consular Reports from the turn of the century, anthropologist Charles Koch calculates that small farmers could earn 31 cents for every 8 cents paid to a common laborer (United States Consular Reports #294: 1905:59-61 cited in Koch 1975:273).

6.1.2 Private Plots Subsidize Wages

Another dynamic encouraging the conversion of the West Indians into peasants was the fact that most Black farmers continued to work part-time on the plantation. From management’s perspective this was a profitable arrangement. The overall wage rate could be lowered since a large proportion of the labor force was supplementing its wage income with peasant production (both subsistence and commodity). In fact the majority of the West Indian banana workers at the turn of the century
were obliged to be semi-proletarians in order to survive. They had to maintain one foot in the peasant subsistence/commodity economy and the other in the wage labor capitalist sector. As was noted in the Introduction (see fn.2) this kind of exploitative relationship whereby the parallel peasant economy subsidizes wage rates in the capitalist sector is classic in the Third World. In fact, Minor Keith took advantage of this in Limón as early as 1878 when he temporarily suspended the construction of the Costa Rican inter-oceanic railroad due to financial difficulties. He kept his labor force from starving and/or emigrating by arranging for the Costa Rican government to provide his unemployed construction workers with land upon which to cultivate subsistence crops (Koch 1975:80).

Koch (1975:123) argues that it was these unemployed West Indian railroad construction workers who originated the banana industry in Costa Rica. They began growing bananas for sale to the merchant ships docking in Limón which were just beginning to experiment with banana commercialization. The same was true in Bocas during the 1880s and 1890s when significant numbers of West Indians migrated to the Chiriqui Lagoon area after the completion of the Panamanian inter-oceanic railroad in the 1950s and after the bankruptcy of the French canal project in the 1880s. In fact during this period more bananas were exported from Bocas del Toro than from Limón (Koch 1975:123). It was not until 1904 that the United Fruit Company managed to assert its monopoly control over the private companies that purchased fruit from these small West Indian producers in Chiriqui Lagoon (see 2.3.1).

Even as the Transnational expanded its operations and increased its
direct control over the production process in Bocas del Toro at the turn of the century, it continued to allow its laborers to maintain small plots of subsistence crops (yams, cassava, nampi). A significant proportion of the workers also sold bananas and cacao to the Company in their spare time. This considerably reduced pressures for higher wages. In fact, the Bocas manager in 1919 countered the complaint of the British consul that wages were too low on the plantation by noting:

As none of our laborers work full time they have plenty of leisure to devote to a garden... without in any way diminishing their earnings in money. They probably average two-thirds of their time at work (BFO #371-3856-2850: Blair to Murray, June 11, 1919).

Significantly, 38 years later in 1956 the manager of the same Division responded to the identical complaint from an inspector of the Ministry of Labor with the same rationale:

The complaint that the workers on the cacao farms are not earning the minimum salary is a regular one as you know. This labor does not as a rule work a full day.... A number of the workers are women who break cacao and work only a few hours a day at this task. A number of the laborers work their own patches (plots)... part time and work part time for the Company (BDA: Hunch to Hamer, Jan. 3, 1956).

In addition to underwriting the maintenance costs of a laborer, these private "patches" also increased the stability of the labor force. For example, in an analysis of the factors contributing to labor quality, the superintendent of Agriculture of the Bocas Division specifically noted,

The best class of workers are those that have steady employment and reside on a little farm on which they produce fruit to sell to the company (BDA: Adams to Blair, June 17, 1924).

Workers with private farms tended to be older and to be the heads of
larger households. They had more economic and logistical responsibilities and—above all—were more cautious in their actions; they could not afford to lose their source of supplemental income should there be a strike or should the Company fire them.

At times, however, subsistence production has represented a threat to the Transnational’s ability to control its labor force. For example, in 1924 when there was a labor shortage in Lison due to the expansion of operations in the Estrella Division, the Company adopted a hard line against its former laborers squatting on abandoned land. It began charging back rents and pressuring the government to evict them (Koch 1975:165). The evicted peasants, of course, swelled the labor pool available to Estrella District. Similarly, according to elderly informants, at the height of expansion in the Talasance and Sixaola districts (1910s–1920s) the Company allowed its workers to plant food crops but not cash crops on their private plots. In this manner, the Company insured that its laborers fed themselves without becoming so economically self-sufficient as to be able to withdraw from the labor market. More dramatically, in periods of extreme labor the Company actually forbade its workers from cultivating their subsistence plots. For example, during the 1918–1919 Sixaola District strike (5.2.2), the Company went so far as to “root up and burn” the subsistence plots of vegetables and fruits of the workers (BCO #319-350-2976: Murray to Mallet, Feb. 23, 1919). The Company’s goal according to survivors from this strike, was to starve the workers into submission.

6.1.3 Avoiding Retirement Pensions

Another cost that was subsidized by the semi-proletarian nature of
the labor force was retirement payments to elderly workers. By the 
1940s, there was a large superannuated population in the Bocas Division.
From the mid-1930s through the 1950s, Company correspondence abounds 
with references to its "old and feeble" workers (BDA: Miskell to 
Chittenden, Jan. 22, 1935). By the 1950s, Panamanian labor law obliged 
the Transnational to provide retired workers a token pension of $15 per 
month. Most of the elderly in the region, however did not qualify for 
even these minimal pensions. They had alternated between peasant 
commodity production and wage work due to the instability of the banana 
industry; consequently, they had "incomplete service records."

The case of Mr Broadbell is illustrative of this dynamic. His 
dilemma bears the pathos of the original generation of West Indies 
immigrants: after a lifetime of hard labor on the plantations in Central 
America, he was left with nothing—not even a homeland:

Mr. Broadbell left St. Kitts in 1910 for Costa Rica and 
from that country was contracted to work for the Company in 
Panama in 1912. He finished working for the Company in 1952.

As he claims that he was contracted by the Company to 
work in Central America, Mr Broadbell would like to be sent 
back to his home by the Company as soon as possible (BDA: 

Two years after Mr. Broadbell's repatriation, the Company received a 
letter from a reverend in St. Kitts:

[Mr. Broadbell]... was recruited to work in Panama from 
St. Kitts as a youth and it would appear that the United 
Fruit Company and its successor might consider a more 
generous remuneration for his very long years of service. 
He is now old and increasingly infirm, all his family has 
died out and he tries to feed himself making baskets. If 
the $150 which he received is the bonus paid by the Company 
I would make a plea that some further ex gratia payment 
might be made to so old an employee or a small pension be 
granted. His need is very genuine and I would urge the 
Company to show compassion in this case (BDA: Walker to
The Company, however, responded negatively on the grounds that,

...the broken service record of Mr. Broadbell did not entitle him to the pension stipulated by law. Mr. Broadbell was repatriated to St. Kitts at his own request.... It is regretted, under the circumstances, that we are unable to assist him further (BDA: King to Walker, July 22, 1963).

Ironically, Mr. Broadbell was probably one of the 700 St Kitts men imported by the Company to undermine the incipient "Artisans and Labourers Union" in 1910 (See 5.2.2). He was evidently recruited from Lison to work in the Bocas Division when the Transnational began to open the Sixaola and Talamanca districts in the early 1910s. Subsequently when the Talamanca District was abandoned in the late 1920s, he probably established himself as a squatter, growing cacao and bananas on a small plot while intermittently performing wage work for the Company during periods of economic crisis. Once he was too old to work, the best solution from the Transnational's perspective was to repatriate him.

Broadbell's case is but one of hundreds (if not thousands) which are typical for turn of the century West Indian immigrant laborers. The Company files are full of the rejections of retirement benefits for former West Indian laborers with "broken service records." A few of the doctor's reports cited here at random are indicative of the human suffering involved:

...Benjamin Johnson 63 years old, Jamaican laborer at R.F.C. 2, is unable to perform heavy manual labor because of hypertension and heart failure. Repatriation... is recommended... (BDA: Engler to Chase, June 24, 1953).

Adolphus Goodridge, 70 years, Barbados... suffers from general weakness, senility, advanced perception deafness and is permanently incapacitated (BDA: Engler to Alvarado, Nov. 10, 1956).
6.1.4 The Struggle to Become a Peasant

Although in many respects, land acquisition by Blacks was, (as I have emphasized just above) beneficial to the interests of the Transnational, the process was also fraught with struggle and contradiction; it should not be viewed in strictly functional terms. For the most part, land acquisition represented a desperate attempt by underpaid workers to obtain security and independence from the Transnational. There was also a life cycle component to it. Since there was no social security or pension plan, the only way for banana workers to provide for old age was to carve out a private plot from the jungle before their stamina and strength waned. A field researcher from the 1930s, specifically noted that middle-aged banana workers invested their wage earnings in clearing private farms (Shouse 1938 cited in Bryce Laporte 1968:127).

In general, anthropologists and historians have exaggerated the facility with which Blacks obtained land in the Bocas/Limon region prior to World War II (cf. Murillo and Hernandez 1981, and Koch 1975). Partially this is because second generation, upwardly mobile Black landowners have mystified the ease with which their parents acquired their farms in order to distinguish themselves from the low prestige, landless Latin laborers who have been entering the region in recent years to appropriate uncultivated land (see chapter 4 fn.15). An examination of the written documentation and archival sources, however reveals that bitter land struggles took place from the early 1900s through the 1950s. Local newspapers and the Costa Rican congressional record from the 1910s, for example are replete with accounts of land disputes (cf. The Times, June 13, 1912:3; ANCH #11466: "Delegation of
Guacimo to Deputies of Congress," July 28, 1915:1). In the case of the Bocas Division the files entitled "Sixaola Squatters" contain hundreds of pages. As early as 1913 there were violent confrontations between the Company and Black land invaders; in 1918, for example, the Costa Rican police were called into the lower Sixaola valley to eject squatters (BDA: Loose papers, "Sixaola Squatters File").

As I noted in the discussion of Bribri resistance to the Transnational's appropriation of their land (3.3.1), the West Indian settlers led the struggle for Amerindian land rights. For example, almost all the names on a 1920 list of 188 squatters in the Sixaola and Talemanca districts, are British, indicating that by that date most conflicts were with West Indians rather than with Amerindians (BDA: assistant manager to Cutter, Feb. 18, 1920). In fact the Division manager complained about this to his superior: "The people who are giving us trouble here are nearly all Jamaicans and outsiders who have located on our land (BDA: Blair to Chittenden, Feb., 19, 1920)."

In other words, contrary to contemporary stereotypes, Black banana workers struggled to obtain their land. Land acquisition was both an economic necessity and a political movement on the part of West Indian laborers. There is a parallel between the myth of the Black farmer who peacefully obtained land and the Black laborer who was "inherently passive and respectful of authority." Ironically, as will be shown in the final chapter on the Black population, ultimately land acquisition demobilized Blacks politically (see 7.3).

6.2 EMERGENCE OF A NEW OCCUPATIONAL HIERARCHY
6.2.1 Higher Pay—Better Work

Although many Blacks became farmers out of desperation (old age, starvation wages, instability of the local banana industry, etc.) the overall effect of acquiring land was to provide them with an alternative source of income. This enabled them to shun the lower prestige tasks on the plantation. Ironically, therefore, the same dynamic which lowered wages by providing a subsistence subsidy to the labor force (see 6.1.2) also enabled Blacks to leave agricultural day labor employment. Veteran Black banana workers with access to land, no longer had to accept the same levels of exploitation that starving landless laborers were obliged to tolerate. There was nothing to force them to perform the hardest tasks on the plantation once they had a plot of land available that would feed them and—depending upon the rhythms of the international export economy—sometimes provide them with an income superior to what they could earn as wage laborers. Latinas, on the other hand were increasingly willing to emigrate to the lowlands as wages on the coffee haciendas dropped relative to those in the banana industry. Those that chose to come to Limon were desperate, especially the Nicaraguans and the Guanacaste /es /es who were fleeing unemployment and land usurpation by cattle ranchers in their home communities (see 13.1.1).

Consequently, as early as the 1920s a new class/ethnic hierarchy began to emerge in Bocas and Limon. Already by the 1920s, Blacks would not work for the wages that newly arrived landless Latin immigrants accepted (Koch 1975:276). As early as 1912, a North American visitor reported that Black stevedores on the banana loading dock in Limon received 15 cents per hour compared to 12.5 paid to Latinas, and that
they also dominated the less strenuous tasks in the loading process (Putnam 1914:170 cited in Koch 1975:324). Since West Indians were the first population group to arrive on the plantation at the turn of the century, they had the first pick of the better menial jobs. By the time Latins began entering the plantation labor force in large numbers, Blacks had already had time to obtain experience and build up local contacts. This enabled them to leverage for better jobs and provided them with an awareness of their economic alternatives.

Already by the 1920s, according to elderly informants a rigid ethnically based division of labor had emerged. Most notably, the task of clearing virgin jungle and heavy overgrowth in the cacao groves had become “Latin work.” The more technical tasks which required experience and were less strenuous, such as harvesting and pruning cacao or bananas were “Black work”:

the Blacks never never worked in the hard jobs. They worked--yes--especially some of the very young ones but more in either harvesting bananas or harvesting cacao. They were always looking for their independence... to have their very own little farm...their little plot of yams and sugar cane. The most they did was harvest cacao.

Since most West Indians had developed expertise from years of practice at these tasks, they were usually paid on a piece-rate basis and could earn considerably higher wages than the inexperienced new Latin immigrants. Elderly West Indians claim that management had good reason to promote Blacks to the more technified tasks:

There was a certain class of work the Spaniards didn’t understand. Spaniards didn’t know to cut bananas. They break the... [large] bunches. Most of the Jamaicans learn from their parents. Most have bananas at home. The Jamaicans in all the nations that come to Costa Rica they ahead in cultivations because they learn from home. That’s why Minor Keith bring the Jamaicans. No trouble with them.
This occupational hierarchy was increasingly defined in the 1930s and 1940s as larger numbers of impoverished Latinas migrated to the lowlands while more and more Blacks abandoned direct Company employment in favor of private farming. Informants provided me with minute details on the kinds of tasks which were "for Whites" versus those "for Blacks." Even marginal differences in job category were reflected in the local ranking system. For example, Blacks dominated the construction crew for new housing as this was considerably "softer" than work in the fields.

Ironically, the economic decline of both the Bocas and the Limon divisions (in the 1930s and 1920s respectively) accelerated Black upward mobility in the local occupational hierarchy because the Transnational began replacing North Americans with Blacks in the middle-level skilled tasks. Blacks, of course, could be paid considerably lower wages than White North Americans. The first such replacement occurred in the Railroad Department where there had been repeated strikes and labor disturbances by the North American "booze fighting Tropical Tramps" who traditionally had been the conductors and enginemen on United Fruit Company plantations (BDA: Marsh to Chittenden, June 17, 1918). By the mid-1940s, therefore, almost all the Bocas Division's train engineers, conductors, stokers, mechanics, and bridge repairmen etc. were Black. In the Limon Division there was a larger percentage of Latinas working in the Railroad Department, but according to calculations made by Koch (1975:317-320,331 citing files of the Northern Railroad Company), Blacks in the 1920s averaged higher wages than Latinas, and also occupied the more prestigious positions. Repeatedly elderly Latinas told me with marked resentment that "in the old days all the machinery was run by
Blacks."

In addition to the skilled blue collar tasks, the Company also relegated the low prestige white collar jobs to Blacks. For example, all the workers in the Materials and Supplies Department and the Commissary Department (which maintained a network of stores on all the farms operated by the Transnational) were Black. Even low-level management positions were given preferentially to Blacks; for example, in 1948 all 12 of the foremen on the Six Roads cacao farms were West Indians.

In addition to speaking English, Blacks also had significantly higher levels of literacy than the immigrant Latins. For example, as early as 1883 the illiteracy rate in Limon province was only 21.3 percent compared to 41.3 for the rest of Costa Rica (Vargas and Requeyra 1983:68). Davis (1982:152,77) has pointed out that there was a "cultural factor" as well in the favouritism North American supervisors showed for Black laborers who had grown up in plantation society:

The British and American cultural attributes of the second generation gave them an adaptive capacity which exceeded that of the Spanish-speaking Panamanians.

Black Anglo-Saxons had greater cultural compatibility with the Americans.

As will be discussed in the following chapter on ethnic discrimination, West Indians had "learned how to act" around their White bosses. An elderly, Black former commissarian explained this to me: "The American knew how far he could push the colored man... but the Spaniards they!!! They are very treacherous. When you least expect it they cut your head off." Blacks, consequently were assigned in disproportional numbers to the "soft," office and domestic positions that required
extensive personal contact with management. Finally, as was noted just above, Blacks by the 1920s and 1930s were considerably more stable than the young, Latin immigrants, many of whom were working as wage laborers for the first time in their lives. An elderly Latin from Limon confided to me with embarrassment, "You have to understand we must have looked like savages to the Blacks. We had a lower cultural level. Most of us were young and looking for adventure. We'd be drinking and carrying on whenever we wanted to."

The best documentation of the pervasiveness of the ethnic occupational hierarchy in these early years is provided by the numerous racist petitions (from the mid-1920s through World War II) which protested the "discrimination" of the United Fruit Company against "Whites" in favor of Blacks:

...For forty long years we Costa Ricans were displaced from the best jobs of the Atlantic Zone by Negroes. They were warehouse supervisors, chiefs of commissaries, clerks and forams. ...They think that they are superior to us because they are of pure blood. They look down upon our language... [sic] (La Tribuna, Jan. 8, 1941 cited in Koch 1975:305).

There exists a system of definite inferiority for the white race to which we belong and of privilege favoring that race [Blacks] (ANCH #16753, 1933:83 cited in Fernandez 1973:172).

In a less polemically racist tone, North American favouritism for Blacks was corroborated by the following 1923 British consular report:

The West Indians are... not popular with the Panamanians. the principal reason being that they are selected by employers for most kinds of labour in preference to the Panamanians themselves (BFO #371-9580, "Annual Report of Panama and the Canal Zone 1923").

6.2.2 Successful Cacao Farmers
The bulk of the Black population eventually left plantation employment to become full-time cacao farmers. With the rise in cacao prices on the world market in the mid-1950s, formerly struggling small Black farmer/squatters were converted into comfortable landowners. Since they were the first settlers in the region they generally occupied the choicest lands closest to the transport infrastructure. The increasingly large population of landless Latin immigrants provided them with a plentiful supply of inexpensive agricultural day labor. Koch (1975:344) refers to Blacks in Limon as a "Kulak class." Indeed, anthropologists who have performed fieldwork in rural communities in Limon report that Blacks own the superior, flat, alluvial lands devoted to cacao, while the more recently settled Latinas occupy the more marginal (steeper and less fertile) soils planted in basic grains on crop/fallow rotation cycles (Koch 1975:378,196, Bryce-Laporte 1962:127).

The dominance of West Indians among the peasantry selling cacao to the Company is well illustrated by the fact that in 1952 on a list of 88 names of "lessors of Company land receiving payment for cacao deliveries," 83 were identifiable British--indicating West Indian descent.

This phenomenon of the successful Black cacao farmer living side by side with impoverished Latin semi-proletarians was most pronounced from the late 1950s through the mid 1970s. It expressed itself as a rigidly defined occupational hierarchy throughout the Bocas/Limon region. Once again, anthropologists who have performed fieldwork in the area (cf. Bryce-Laporte 1962, Koch 1975, Mennerick 1964, Hoock 1972, Murillo and Hernandez 1981, Olien 1967, 1977, Purcell 1982), unanimously report that Blacks shun agricultural wage labor:
The category of Black peon is almost an empty one.... It is only in extremely rare cases that one finds a Black rural dweller who does not have access to some land, whether his own bought land or land inherited from a close kin. Most unskilled agricultural jobs are filled by Hispanics (Purcell 1982:145).

In fact, one fieldworker in a small village in Limon in 1968 reported "The only three negroes who did work as peons were considered mentally defective and were treated as isolates by the entire community (Moock 1972:9)." In this same community, the most powerful individuals (the three cacao merchants) were Blacks (Ibid:10). During my fieldwork, it was not uncommon to see young Black cacao farmers in their early 20s supervising middle-aged Latin laborers underbrushing their orchards.

Although for the most part comfortable economically, Blacks never emerged as the upper crust of the rural elite in the Bocas/Limon region. Even at the height of their involvement in the cacao industry in the 1960s, Black farms were not large-scale, efficiently administered agro-industrial complexes oriented towards accumulating capital. The largest landholdings and the more profitable rural enterprises have always been owned by Latin or North American absentee landlords. Black farmers, therefore, represent a middle level local elite operating small or medium-sized farms. Of course, at the local level this translates into real political power. For example, Koch (1975:44) noted in the early 1970s, "...Negroes were over-represented in provincial and municipal political posts."

An ideological legitimation has emerged around the occupational hierarchy prevalent in Bocas and Limon. It is said, for example, that Latins are naturally inclined to heavy physical labor: "Whites like to
chop bush." Black landowners employing Latin migrant laborers ascribe
to the same racist constructs typical of landowners anywhere in the
world who employ landless day laborers of a different ethnic group. On
several occasions I was explained that "Whites are treacherous, lazy,
shiftless drunkards" with "nomadic tendencies." I was even told that
"Whites smell bad," and I was warned that they had "cooties [piojos]" in
their hair. In a more patronizing tone a Black cacao farmer explained
to me that he was careful never to pay his White workers on Saturday
evening lest they spend all their money on liquor before Sunday
morning.

Even Blacks who work side by side with Latins as day laborers, "...in
very explicit terms, regarded themselves as superior to
Hispanics... (Purcell 1982:76)." For example, a young man who worked in a
packing plant in the Bocas Division confided to me, "Perhaps what I am
going to say is very bad and false, but it seems to me that the
Guanacastecos are less civilized." He then proceeded to describe how
violent they are, how they beat their wives, and how they get drunk and
shout in the middle of the night. In a somewhat more poetic vein,
Purcell (1982:79) quotes the racist description provided by a Black
woman of her impression of Latin immigrant workers:

Day looks to me laik day were barberians, laik day wud
kil en’ iit piiple, datz di way day looks. Deze piiple wur
illiterate en ignorant en wii wuz ahlweys afreeid av dem.
If yu goin along de strit en yu ai dem yu waak en di odder
se’id. Day always kier di dier kutlas wid dem.

6.2.3 Emigration

Emigration has played a key role in accentuating the visibility of
Black upward mobility. Historically the poorest working class cohort of
the West Indian labor force has migrated out of the Bocas/Limon region during periods of economic crisis. According to Koch (1975:378,385) the racist immigration laws and the restrictions on Black employment outside of the Atlantic lowlands (see 7.1.4) acted as a "one way valve" during the boom and bust cycles of the banana industry and "...pumped working class Negroes out of the region... [leaving behind a] rump of well-to-do peasants and old people concentrated in the best cacao districts." Those Blacks who stayed behind during the economic crises when employment on the plantation was no longer available squatted on uncultivated lands and established themselves as subsistence farmers. During subsequent economic booms, Blacks seeking wage employment were not permitted to re-enter the region because of both Panama and Costa Rica's discriminatory immigration laws (Executive Decree [Costa Rica] #4, April 26, 1942 cited in Beirut 1977:153-154; La Tribuna, April 10, 1934 cited in Purcell 1982:89). Those who remained behind, however were able to convert their subsistence plots into cash earning enterprises (cacao or banana farms) once the economy improved.

Nevertheless, the transition to permanent cash crop farming for those Blacks who stayed in Bocas and Limon during the economic crises was not an easy one. They suffered abject poverty. This was poignantly described by Fallas (1978:27,134) in his account of a trip through the Sixaola District in 1940:

They [local Blacks] brought us water and green plantains in old tin cans... While I chewed my piece of plantain my eyes pondered the sadness and desolation of this place: miserable shacks that appeared to shiver in the dawn's grey rainy cold; obscure swampy groves of cacao with dark shadows surrounding all around, and a few bedraggled Blacks, their legs wrapped in filthy rags, dragging themselves through these shadows.
We saw them hunched over in the swamps working like beasts with their legs wrapped in rags to protect themselves from sharp roots. They would bring their miserable food to work in a tin can: cassava, yams, yuca, nampi, and bananas... If it rained they ate it cold, covering themselves with banana leaves to keep out the water.

Not surprisingly, most Blacks fled this economic depression. For example, between 1927 and 1950, according to national census tabulations the Costa Rican Black population fell from 18,003 to 13,749 (cited in Casey 1979:239). In earlier years as well, there had been massive relocations of Black workers fleeing economic depression. For example, as early as 1913 when the Company reduced operations in the Guapiles District (see Map 3) due to soil exhaustion (Koch 1975:243), newspapers ran headlines on the phenomenal rates of outmigration:

> Over 200 labourers have left and are leaving this place [Guapiles] to try their luck somewhere else, several homes have been left with mothers only, until the breadwinner is heard from (The Times, June 14, 1913).

Although also propelled by poverty, emigration from the Limon and Bocas divisions during World War II was more directly upwardly mobile. Most Blacks left for the Panama Canal where wages were two to three times higher than in Bocas or Limon (BDA: Munch to Chittenden, July 16, 1941). From 1940 through mid-1941 alone, 4,399 people left Bocas del Toro for the Canal Zone (BDA: Kelley to Munch, July 17, 1941). Company files from 1940 through 1941 are replete with complaints over the dramatic exodus of laborers: "All our best carpenters, all our best common railway labor and practically all our good farm laborers have gone (BDA: Kelly to Munch, July 17, 1941)."

The most upwardly mobile jump a Black banana worker could make during World War II was to emigrate all the way to the United States. The same
factors which enabled West Indians to obtain preferential employment with the transnationals (ability to speak English, accommodation to North American racism, and extensive personal networks) also helped them reach the United States. Many Central American Blacks joined the U.S. Army in order to obtain North American citizenship. Some of these emigrants eventually returned to Bocas or Limón, investing their dollars in land, a house, or even a business. The vast majority, however left permanently, sometimes sending back remittances to elderly family members who remained behind. Emigration to the United States was so commonplace in the 1940s through the 1960s that today it is virtually impossible to find a Black Central American who does not have close family members living in the United States.

6.2.4 Blacks Leave Agriculture

By the mid 1970s, the tendency for the younger generation of Blacks in the Bocas/Limón region to emigrate dramatically changed the rural class structure. The "rump of well-to-do" Black cacao farmers noted by Koch in the early 1970s was disappearing during my fieldwork. During the 1960s, cacao farmers were able to send their children to high school and even to college. Most of this new generation of educated Blacks (many of whom are now professionals), chose not to return to the agricultural way of life. Cacao farming is not considered a satisfactory lifestyle to college graduates, no matter how successful it may appear by local rural standards. Young Blacks, consequently have been leaving their parents' farms and going to Panama City, San José, Port Limón or even New York city where they find better opportunities for economic advancement. Indeed the reason one sees so few Blacks
performing heavy agricultural labor in the Bocas/Limon region today is that most Blacks in their prime age for hard labor have emigrated.

Significantly the cacao farmers themselves encourage their children to leave the agricultural sector. Black parents, even those of the humblest class backgrounds, infuse their children with upwardly mobile aspirations. The emphasis is not only on getting out of wage work, but also out of agriculture per se and into the big cities (cf. Purcell 1982:122, Moock 1972:26). Farming is associated with low status. "It is considered ungentlemanly to chop bush" even on one's own farm.

Upwardly mobile aspirations which denigrate agriculture existed amongst the Black population even in the 1920s. The following statement by an elderly Black who successfully made the transition out of the agricultural sector and became the biggest merchant in the Sixaola valley provides a good example of this attitude:

My mother was the real sparkplug in the family. One night I had a dream that my brother was promoted to commissarion. And my mother said 'Well God will help you my son that your dream will be true because there is no future for a young man here in this little town except turning in the bushes (agricultural labor). Once you put your head in the bushes who is going to know you boys to help you.' So said so done. My brother was promoted.....

Today, differences in occupational ambitions between Latins and Blacks are easily discernable. Anthropologist Trevor Purcell (1982:122) reports that most Black parents in Limon told him that they wanted "something better than agriculture" for their children, whereas Latin parents said they hoped their children would follow them into agriculture. Similarly in the late 1960s, most Black children answered a questionnaire on career goals with the statement that they hoped to
"get ahead," whereas most Latins responded that they wanted to "defend themselves" (Noock 1972:26).

One of the results of the flight of young Blacks from the rural sector has been the decay of Black-owned cacao orchards. The Costa Rican anthropologist, Carmen Murillo and Omar Hernandez (1981:151), who studied cacao producers in Limon during 1980 note that Black-owned farms on the average were older, smaller, received fewer inputs, and were more diversified than Latin-owned holdings. Black farmers tended to be elderly and physically on the decline. Over the past fifteen years the pattern has been for Black rural dwellers to sell their holdings to Latin immigrants and to either emigrate or "die out" (Duncan and Melendez 1981:244-245).

The reduction in Black participation in the cacao industry has been accelerated in recent years by a devastating fungus known as moniliasis which has destroyed approximately two-thirds of the harvest since late 1978 (Murillo and Hernandez 1981:75). Some of the Blacks who have been unable to emigrate have been forced back into agricultural wage work. Nevertheless Blacks continue to enjoy an above average economic status, superior to that of most Latins in the countryside. For example, the most successful rural cooperative operating in Talamanca on the edge of the plantation is dominated by middle-sized Black farmers and has successfully diversified its production following the debacle of cacao. In fact, this cooperative reproduces the local ethnic occupational patterns: all the menial laborers in the cooperative's packing plants are Latins while the highest administrative officers are Blacks.

Nevertheless, in the urban centers closest to the plantation (Port
Limon and Almirante) where there are high levels of unemployment (23 percent in Limon in 1981), Blacks continue to occupy a slightly higher socio-economic niche than the average Latin (Vargas and Requeyra 1983:43). According to a 1980 survey 30.5 percent of Black workers occupied white collar jobs in Port Limon compared to 21.1 percent of Latins (Ibid:113). Although some anthropologists have claimed that the upward mobility of Blacks in Limon has been exaggerated (Purcell 1982:242), during my fieldwork Blacks shunned the low prestige jobs. For example, although there is a significant sector of working class and lumpenproletarian Blacks in both Puerto Limon and Almirante, the street sweepers, the construction workers, and the shoe shine men are almost invariably Latin rather than Black. Blacks have been able to manipulate to their advantage a local patron-client brokerage system which affords them access to preferential employment, especially in the public sector. When one enters a government office in Limon, for example, the orderly sweeping the floor and emptying the garbage will almost always be a dark complexioned Latin; the xerox clerk (an especially ‘soft’ task) will be held by a young Black; the secretarial and middle-level desk positions will be occupied by both Blacks and Latins; but the top level administrator will, of course, be a light skinned Latin from San Jose.

The younger Blacks who chose to remain in the rural villages usually hire Latins to work in their own cacao groves while they attend to more profitable commercial alternatives such as lobster fishing, administering bars, selling marihuana to tourists, working for the government, or living off of remittances from kin in the United States. Government jobs in the rural sector are even more conspicuously
dominated by Blacks. For example, six out of the eleven rural policemen (equivalent to sheriff in the United States) in the Sixaola District were Black as was the local representative of the Ministry of Immigration at the Sixaola bridge. Similarly, on the Panamanian side of the Sixaola bridge, four out of seven of the border officials were Blacks; both of the Ministry of Labor's representatives to the region were Black, and the head of the office was of Black/Latin descent. Most notably, the owner of almost all the liquor patents in the Sixaola valley, one of the richest men in the plantation region is also of West Indian descent.

6.2.5 Blacks on the plantation

Those Blacks who have remained on the plantation generally work in semi-skilled jobs, as low level supervisors, or in the 'softer' unskilled tasks. Latins have nicknamed Blacks "la rocfa" [the groove of the screw] because they are so "tight with management." This is clearly visible in the overrepresentation of Blacks in the "better" jobs. They are most heavily concentrated in the Electricity Department, the Transport Department, the Materials and Supplies Department, the Engineering Department, the Railroad Department, the Maintenance and Engineering Department, and the paymasters crews. For example, during my fieldwork, although the head of the Engineering Department was a Latin from the capital, the next three in the hierarchy were Blacks. Five out of eight of the mechanics who repaired the machines that hauled banana stems from the farms were Black. The supervisor of the bridge repair crews was Black while almost all his workers were Guayas. There were few Blacks working on the five privately owned banana farms where
wages are lower, and none of them held unskilled positions—four tractor drivers, and one labor relations administrator. Similarly none of the Blacks employed in the cardboard box factory worked in production. They were all either mechanics, supervisors or watchmen.

Nevertheless, there is a significant minority of Blacks working as common laborers, especially on the Costa Rican side of the Bocas Division. Many young Black plantation workers told me they had been forced into wage work due to the ravages of monilia on their parents’ cacao orchards. These Black agricultural laborers, however, often had exceptional backgrounds. For example one young packing plant worker had only recently been divorced from his wife and was forbidden access to her cacao orchard; another was a recent immigrant from Jamaica and did not speak Spanish fluently. Finally, a disproportional number of Blacks working in the menial tasks are women who have fewer alternative sources of income and cannot not emigrate as easily as men.

Nevertheless, during my fieldwork, these Black laborers represented less than five percent of the unskilled labor force, and they worked in the packing plants rather than in the fields under the rain and the sun. Furthermore, they were concentrated in the more centrally located packing plants, nearer to the stores and services of the local municipal capital in Chiquinquirá (see Map 4).

The largest single concentration of Black workers is in the port of Almirante among the dockworkers and stevedores. Dockwork is strenuous, but it is better paid than farm work. It has the advantage (as a young Black worker explained to me) of being “out of the rain and sun” and “away from the snakes and mud.” A close examination of the distribution
of jobs among the dockworkers, reveals that, once again, the "softer" tasks are dominated by Blacks, especially elderly Blacks. This is true, for example, of the task of "curving" (curver) which involves standing at a curve point along the loading machine to make sure that no boxes of bananas fall as they are advanced on the rollers. Similarly, the worker who sits next to the power switch in order to shut off the electricity in case of an emergency, is almost invariably Black.

Access to alternative sources of income is at the root of Black underrepresentation in the menial tasks on the plantation. Although I was unable to obtain hard census data to prove it, I would estimate that Blacks shun agricultural wage work only slightly more than their Latin equivalents who are born in the plantation vicinity and who also have access to land and/or preferential employment through seniority and contacts. In fact, through life history interviews I found that many young Blacks had experimented with menial Company work but found the conditions unsatisfactory compared to their alternatives. The only difference between Blacks and other local residents (Bribri and Latin) is that they express their distaste for plantation wage work more vocally. They justify their rejection of day labor in specifically ethnic terms: "I'm nobody's slave anymore. Let the Spaniards do that class of work. It's their turn now." Blacks also exaggerate how few of their ethnic group work on the plantation. For example, on several occasions when I explained my research topic to Black informants, they would warn me not to "write in my book" that Blacks worked in bananas: "You may think you see Blacks working for the Company but they're not Black Blacks they're Guanacastecos." Similarly, several times Blacks in low level supervisory positions pointed out phenotypically dark skinned - 168 -
individuals performing menial tasks and whispered in my ear that those people were not really Blacks: "He's of Black color but not of Black race [Es de color negro pero no de raza]."

The closest thing to an "ethnic explanation" for why Blacks avoid wage work in the unskilled categories on the plantation is that they are frequently subjected to racism by Latin supervisors. On numerous occasions I was told by Black informants that they had left Company employment after fighting with a supervisor for calling them by a derogatory name. This issue of racism, however, deserves more detailed attention is analysed in the following chapter.

NOTES

1. The most systematic and well documented analysis of Black upward mobility in Limón is provided by Charles Koch 1975).

2. I use the term "reconstitution" purposefully since the majority of the West Indian immigrant workers came from peasant families.

3. Peasant cultivation techniques retard the spread of Panama disease since peasants farm smaller extensions, space their banana plants at greater distances, inter-crop with diverse cultivations, and provide intensive care to what they grow (Koch 1975:163).

4. Another factor which contributed to the Company's early retreat from cacao production in Talamanca was the repeated land invasions by the local Black and Bribri population. This was also the case for much of the Limón Division, which was more subject to land invasions due to its greater geographical accessibility to the rest of Costa Rica. Squatters obliged the Company to accept a larger role as commercializer rather than producer in the Limón Division at an early date. By contrast, the inaccessibility of the Bocas Division (especially the Sixaola District) enabled the Company to maintain direct control over the cacao production process until the late 1950s.

5. As early as the 1950s, anthropologists defined this subsistence/wage labor relationship as a typical characteristic of the traditional hacienda:

...the provision of a subsistence plot and other perquisites has an important function in maintaining the
hacienda financially solvent and in keeping its system intact during periods when the market undergoes a severe decline. Since the labour force is able to fill a substantial part of its own consumption requirements... it can maintain itself in a state of 'suspended animation' until market trends are reversed (Wolf and Mintz 1957:390).

6

In the United States married workers with families tend to be stabler and more cautious in their organizational affiliations. For example, the vice-president of a food processing transnational (McCormick Company) identified young, single, male workers as the most susceptible to strike movements and union organizing drives. He explained that workers with families are not willing to risk their job for the sake of establishing a union or promoting a strike (personal communication).

7

The technique of assuming West Indian descent from a British surname has been used by several anthropologists and historians studying Limon (cf. Koch 1975:378). It underestimates the actual number of West Indians, since a significant number have adopted Spanish surnames. In this particular list (Sixsola squatters), however, the technique probably overstates the number of West Indians since many Bribri have British last names.

8

An 82 year old Jamaican explained to me,

In my boy days the Spaniards in the country... you find they are more dumb. Lots of them can't even sign their name. You see a little Spanish boy carrying a big machete following his father to the bush and when his father die he take his place and he can't even sign his name. Those days aback you don't find much school. The most schools you find is the English school. I never meet a Jamaican that cannot sign his name.

9

In Costa Rica, Latinas are referred to as "Whites."

10

Once again, the most poignant description of the human cost of the massive emigration which took place in the first years of World War II, is provided by Fallas (1978:26) who hiked all one night through the mountains of Talamanca with a caravan of Blacks attempting to cross into Panama illegally:

...we walked in silence, poised against danger. ...the bodies of the men with their arms over their heads were hunched over beneath the weight of their big bulky bags. It was an impressive, macabre march of phantom-like fugitives.

Where did these people come from? Where were they heading? They dragged through the centuries the heavy albatross of their Black burnt skin? Where were they to find their promised land?

They had fled the slave catchers through the African jungle; they stained with their blood the chains of the deep bellies of the slave ships; they groaned beneath the whip of the slave driver...; they fled through the tropical
underbrush pursued by their master's hunting dogs. It is as if the wheel of history does not stop for Blacks: for them there was no French Revolution, Lincoln did not exist.... And now the poor Costa Rican Blacks, after having enriched with their blood the great banana magnates, were forced to flee in the night through the jungle, dragging their little children along with them. The slave catcher's dogs were no longer chasing them: their persecutor was the phantom of misery. What was waiting for them on the other side of the border? Where were they going to lay down their bones?

11
These massive relocations of thousands of able bodied laborers across large distances represent a cost of production that the United Fruit Company and the other transnational corporations in need of labor were able, to pass on to the subsistence sector.

An old watchman in Bocas who had not succeeded in acquiring a plot of land complained to me:

Just look at me... I'm an old bag of skin and bones... like a flea ridden dog I've dragged myself all over the world, even through the swamps of Colombia following this son of a bitch Company faithfully. And all I ever got were kicks in the rear.

12
It is impossible to obtain exact figures on remittances from the United States, but they have been important to the economies of Limon and Bocas.

13
By coincidence, the nurse who attended me in New York city where I was forced to return during my fieldwork due to hepatitis, was Panamanian of West Indian descent, born and raised in Bocas del Toro.

14
Education has played a crucial role in Black upward mobility, and is part of the West Indian immigrant tradition. Today Blacks still maintain scholastic superiority over Latinos. In 1983, while 55.4 percent of Latinos did not finish primary school in Limon, the same was true for only 38.5 percent of Blacks (Ibid:44). Once again, this advantage over Latinos has been confined to the middle level echelons of the hierarchy i.e., primary school and high school rather than college. Until the 1960s few Blacks reached the university level. In 1964, for example, out of the entire Limon Black population (over 10,000) there were only four Black lawyers, one civil engineer and five professors (Kennerick 1964:50). By the 1970s, with the extended boom in the cacao economy, the children of successful cacao farmers have entered the professional occupations in disproportionate numbers; today, there are so many Black professionals dispersed throughout Costa Rica, that it would be impossible to calculate their number.

15
In the case of Panama, as an exception to the rule that Latinos dominate the highest echelons in the occupational hierarchy, the Minister of Labor was of West Indian descent during my fieldwork.

16
This man began his career as a commissar with the Company in the 1930s. In 1957 because of his good relations with his superiors, he was leased the entire network of stores operated on the Costa Rican side of
the Bocas Division. He eventually bought all the Company's liquor
patents and since alcohol sales are by far the most profitable
commercial venture in the region, this former commissioner rapidly built
himself a sizable personal fortune.

17 Unfortunately, the technique for quantifying ethnicity by
occupational task based on the first number of the identity card of each
worker listed on the February, 1983 payroll (see 1.2.4) does not work in
the case of Blacks. Although most Blacks are from Bocas and hence have
identity numbers which began with "1," there are also many Latinos from
Bocas with the same first number.

18 I was told by a young Black man that "8,000 colones a month is good
money for a woman."

19 The most frequent racist epithet directed against Blacks in Bocas
is "crow." The terms chumece and chombo (derivative of the Spanish
pronunciation of Jamaican) are also frequently used in a derogatory
fashion.
CHAPTER 7: IDEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE BLACK EXPERIENCE

In this final chapter on Blacks in the Bocas del Toro labor force, I begin with a discussion of the discrimination they have been subjected to historically. As was noted in the Introduction, ideological domination is, in practice, inseparable from class exploitation. The two conflate with one another to create the experience of oppression. Nevertheless I have chosen to isolate discrimination in this discussion in order to provide it with an emphasis that it fails to receive in most class analyses. In the second half of this chapter I discuss the political and organizational responses by the Black population to upward mobility and to ethnic discrimination. Once again, I have somewhat arbitrarily separated the analysis of the ideological implications of discrimination from that of the ramifications of upward class mobility. Of course, in fact, class and ideology are inextricably intertwined; for the sake of emphasis, however, I discuss the two dimensions separately.

7.1 ETHNIC DISCRIMINATION

7.1.1 Company Discrimination in the Social Sphere

The inferiority of non-Whites was taken for granted by the North American United Fruit Company officers during the early years of operations in "the Tropics." The racism of the corporate officials was set in the upper class context of Boston's white Anglo-Saxon protestant society. Their letters, consequently, are only infrequently punctuated by the more crass expressions of racist terminology typical of popular discourse during that period. Language such as, "...they are renegade niggers... and naturally bad characters (BDA: Kyes to Chittenden, Dec.
9, 1916)," is the exception rather than the rule, and it is more frequently encountered at the lower managerial levels. Executives couched their racism in pseudo-scientific, patronizing terms, more acceptable to North American aristocratic circles:

The history of the negro as a laborer is ancient and simple—perhaps more so than that of any other race or people. With a few notable exceptions, the negro labourer has little initiative—he is an imitator. Experience has proved over and over again that only with rare exceptions has the negro been able to pursue theoretical studies with any degree of success (BDA: Chittenden to Murray, June 11, 1919).

Laborers in the United States are better equipped mentally than those in the Tropics (BDA: unidentified to Blair, June 13, 1924).

I doubt very much that this [health insurance] plan would have the slightest appeal to the lower grades of colored and native labor but am sure it would be accepted by the more intelligent classes and the more steady ones such as Foremen, Mechanics, Clerks and, of course, all grades of White employees (BDA: Superintendent of the Medical Department to Blair, June 7, 1924).

On the plantations themselves, social relations were formally segregated through the 1930s. According to a former United Fruit Company farm foreman from the 1920s,

To avoid complications, therefore, a strict color line is drawn. All persons of color must always give the right of way to whites, and remove their hats while talking. A rule also forbids any laborer from entering the front yard of any white man's residence.

As a direct result of this sharp color line, various whites have been slain, and also (though the company officials may not be aware of it) many Blacks have been ruthlessly made away with... (cited in Kepner 1936:170).

In imitation of the Panama Canal operations, the Company instituted a "Jim Crow" system under the euphemism of "gold roll" and "silver roll." Special privileges were reserved for workers who earned enough money to
qualify for the gold roll status which, of course, was composed exclusively of Whites since the salaries for Blacks were too low to qualify. Mess halls, stores, dormitories, hospital facilities, and even cemeteries were segregated. On the Company ships Blacks could not eat in the same dining room as Whites even if they paid for a first class ticket. In his unpublished memoirs, Charles Reid (1983:8), an elderly Bocotoran, recollects how he and his father were forbidden from fishing in front of management's exclusive housing complex:

Maccaw Hill...was what you would call a 'restricted area' a white people's zone... [with] beautifully painted little cottages along the shore. All the big shots lived there. As fries [small fish] abounded there, the fishermen dared not intrude catching them. On one occasion my father and me, not knowing that it was prohibited to throw our nets there, were ordered away by one of the house-wives to 'get the hell away from here, just leave those fries alone; I want them for my ducks.'

Nevertheless, segregation in the Bocas Division was mild in comparison to the more rigidly racist organization of the Panama Canal zone, where according to a resident in 1912:

Caste lines are as sharply drawn as in India.... The Brahmins are the 'gold' employees, white American citizens with all the advantages and privileges thereto appertaining. But --and herein we out-Hindu the Hindus---caste itself is divided and subdivided into infinitesimal gradations. Every rank and shade of man has a different salary, and exactly in accordance with that salary is he housed, furnished, and treated down to the least item--number of electric lights, candle-power, style of bed, size of bookcase (Franck 1913:219).

Similarly, the level of polarization of ethnic relations in the southern United States where segregation was legally institutionalized by the Jim Crow laws, and where lynchings of Blacks was common during this period, make the United Fruit Company plantations of the turn of the century appear almost enlightened.
Officially institutionalized segregation began breaking down in the Bocas Division as early as the 1920s. An elderly West Indian who was a clerk in the commissary in Almirante during this period told me that a group of wives of top level managers actively opposed the Jim Crow policies of the Company and supported him when he began to serve Blacks in the "gold roll" commissary. Nevertheless, some of the legally sanctioned forms of racism persisted through the 1950s, such as the segregated wards in the Company hospital. On a de facto level segregation did not diminish. Antagonisms between Black and Latin workers were as intense as those between White managers and Black and Latin laborers. For example in the 1950s in the Sixaola District, some of the farms were primarily composed of Black workers while others were staffed almost exclusively by Latins. Elderly Black informants refer to a "...complex between the Spaniards and the Jamaicans," that prevented the two groups from "amalgamating."

Separate housing facilities were provided for Blacks and Latins through the end of World War II. Several elderly Black informants reminisced with pleasure of the days when housing was segregated. They cursed the "latinization" of the management level employees who they blamed for breaking down the barriers between Blacks and Latins. They claim that it has only been since "the Spaniards took over" that "colored people" have been "made to live with Spaniards." Several perfectly bi-lingual Black workers born in Bocas in the early 1920s, allege that they did not learn how to speak Spanish until after World War II; prior to that date, they claim they had no use for Spanish which they refer to as the "bird language (cf, Koch 1975:278)."
Today, segregation is officially frowned upon by management. During my fieldwork, however, in practice it persisted as strongly as ever. In private conversations, the North American and high level Latin managers frequently indulge in virulently racist remarks against Blacks. Among working class Latins, of course, the level of racism against Blacks is just as pronounced. In fact, the stereotypes are often primitive—if not hallucinatory. For example, I was told that Blacks have a tail bone on their rear, and that they bathe with a sponge in vinegar so as not to get wet.

Although there is no longer a formal rule prohibiting Blacks from frequenting the residential complex reserved for high level management (which was still called the "White Zone") in practice it is off limits to Blacks, Amerindians and even to dark complexioned Latins. I never saw a Black, or an Amerindian in the club except in service positions. I was told that there was one Black family that qualified to live in the "White Zone." The children of the managers attend a special Company funded "American School" whose teachers are mono-lingual North Americans. The only non-White children in this school at the time of my fieldwork, were light complexioned Latins and one Kuna Amerindian child.

7.1.2 Company Discrimination in the Labor Process

In the organization of the labor process, as well, the Company systematically discriminated against Blacks through the 1950s. All the high level administrative jobs—and even some of the low level ones—were held by Whites, either North American or European. Through World War II, although an increasing number of the timekeepers were
lats, most of the farm administrators and even some of the foremen were still North Americans. The Company had a rule prohibiting the promotion of Blacks above the position of timekeeper.

Company records reveal that the dual structure of wages for White and "colored" engineers and mechanics was most rigid on the railroad (cf. BDA: Marsh to Chittenden, June 17, 1918). On several occasions Black railroad workers walked off the job, demanding equal pay for equal work (El País, Nov. 10, 1919:6). Ironically, as was noted earlier it was the Company's unwillingness to raise wages which resulted in the destruction of this two-tiered wage system (6.2.1). The North American conductors and machinists left the Bocas and Limon divisions because the Company refused to raise their wages, hiring cheaper Black workers instead:

My conductors have left me until now all my pickup trains are in charge of negroes, and I only have enough white conductors left to operate the main line, and am very much afraid I will lose some of those (BDA: Kyes to Chittenden, Aug. 12, 1918).

As in the case of segregation in the social sphere, discrimination in the labor process on the United Fruit Company's banana plantations was relatively mild compared to the dual-tiered wage system prevalent during this same period in the United States and on the Panama Canal (Davis 1982:18, Hudson 1972:23, McCullough 1977:561,562). Workers from the Talamanca region (both Black and Latin) report that most work gangs were segregated, but there does not appear to have been a fixed rule. In fact, this segregation may have been due to the imposition of a 1925 executive order by the President of Costa Rica rather than a conscious strategy by management (La Voz del Atlántico, Sept. 18, 1934 cited in Koch 1975:327).
7.1.3 Discrimination in the Society Surrounding the Plantation

During the 1920s and 1930s, the society surrounding the United Fruit Company's operations in Panama and Costa Rica was also racist. In Port Limon, Blacks were not allowed into White hotels, and the movie theatres had segregated seating arrangements (Palmer 1977:142; La Voz del Atlantico, April 6, 1935:6). Similarly, Blacks were excluded from the newly completed municipal swimming pool in Limon in 1936 (La Voz del Atlantico, May 10, 1934:11 cited in Casey 1979:131). In the 1930s, when the worldwide depression rendered it especially politically attractive for politicians to adopt anti-Black platforms, congressional representatives in Costa Rica gave virulent speeches advocating the exclusion of Blacks from the Highlands and the Pacific Coast of the country:

The people of color of the Atlantic are going to invade the Pacific with grave consequences ... which we must confront. For me there is only one fatherland: Costa Rica, a fatherland which I will defend forever... We must not permit the doors of the Pacific Zone to be opened to an avalanche of the races of color. I detest them.... They reproduce two to three times as fast as the White race (La Tribuna, Dec. 8, 1934:4-7 cited in Beirute 1977:148-150).

In Panama ethnic relations were no less antagonistic; in the early 1930s there were violent demonstrations in the cities protesting the presence of unemployed Blacks (Panama Tribune, July 19, 1931; August 21, 1932; July 9, 1933, Oct. 29, 1933, cited in Conniff 1983:11).

Several authors have correlated these peaks of racist conflict in both Panama and Costa Rica to the economic situation (cf. Casey 1979:128-132; Koch 1975: 281). A careful reading of newspapers and of the congressional archives, reveals that the publication of racist
editorials, books and congressional petitions against Blacks coincided with the busts in the cycles of the Company's operations, as well as with the down trends in the international economy. There were three major waves of hostility: 1) the mid-1920s when banana exports from Limon declined to 40 percent of what they had been in 1913 (Casey 1979:128); 2) the mid 1930s during the height of the Great Depression; and 3) World War II which caused widespread economic dislocation, especially in Limon. During these economic crises, Latin workers viewed Black West Indians as competitors for scarce jobs.

These periodic waves of racist sentiment resulted in the codification of a series of restrictive anti-Black laws in both Costa Rica and Panama. In Costa Rica, for example an executive order in 1942 prohibited the entrance of Blacks into the country (Beirut 1977:153-154); previous to that date, Black tourists were regularly denied visas to enter the country (La Tribuna, April 10, 1934 cited in Purcell 1982:89). Panama passed a law in 1926 forbidding

The immigration into the territory of the Republic of Chinese, Japanese, Syrians, Turks, East Indians, Hindu-Arians, Dravidians, and Negroes of the Antilles and the Guianas whose original language is not Spanish... (Ministry of Foreign Relations 1927).

At even earlier dates, restrictions were placed on the right of Blacks to travel freely within their host countries, and on their access to employment outside the Atlantic Coast lowlands. In fact, as early as 1890, in Costa Rica, a law was passed prohibiting "Blacks and Asiatics" from working on the Pacific Coast section of the railroad (Beirute 1977: 124-125). Elderly workers from the Limon Division's Railroad Department in the 1910s and 1920s remember having to stop in Peralta, (a small town
about half way between San Jose and Limon) in order for a Latin to replace them. Scholars have been unable to find official documentation proving that Blacks were prohibited from migrating to the Highlands of Costa Rica (cf. Duncan and Melendez 1981:88, Koch 1975:310). Nevertheless, I was repeatedly told by Costa Ricans that through World War II, Blacks had been forbidden from visiting the rest of the country. The prevalence of this belief in Costa Rica, demonstrates that even if the restriction against Blacks visiting the capital was never codified into law, there was, indeed a great deal of hostility to Blacks outside of Limon. Another restrictive law which did profoundly affect Blacks in Costa Rica and which was rigidly enforced, was the prohibition against hiring Blacks on the new plantations the Transnational was opening up on the Pacific Coast in the mid-1930s (Oficial 1935). Similarly in Panama, when the Company obtained permission to establish new farms on the Pacific Coast in the province of Chiriqui in 1927, restrictions were placed on the employment of Blacks (BDA: Memorandum to Panama Divisions from Baggett, Jan. 22, 1935).

7.1.3 Third Country Nationals

Much of the anti-Black legislation and public outcry which characterized the 1925-1945 period was couched in nationalist language. The foreigner status of the West Indians exacerbated their tenuous position in the Latin-dominated countries of the Isthmus. Blacks were foreigners, employed by a foreign company, hosted in a foreign nation. Historian Michael Conniff (1983) has aptly coined the phrase "third country national" to refer to the structurally vulnerable position faced by West Indian workers on North American Transnationals in Panama.
During moments of economic crisis, the host countries viewed the West Indians as unwelcome foreigners taking jobs away from legitimate citizens. The Company, for its part, viewed Blacks as beasts of burden who could be exploited without government intervention free from the danger of provoking an explosive popular nationalist outcry if excessive abuses were committed.

For politicians the Black foreigners represented a politically attractive scapegoat which they could invoke during times of crisis to draw popular attention away from substantive economic and political issues by fanning a chauvinistic appeal to nationalist purity. These nationalist, anti-foreigner outcries followed the same pattern as the waves of racism noted earlier. The opportunistic nature of these anti-foreigner/anti-Black campaigns is well illustrated by a confidential letter from the president of Panama to the Division manager in Bocas:

He [the president] felt that by doing this... (denouncing foreigners) it would somewhat relieve the pressure which is being exerted on his Government by the unemployed (BDA: Holcombe to Munch, March 11, 1954).

In fact on several occasions (i.e., at the height of the Great Depression) the Company responded to anti-foreigner press and government campaigns by firing its most visibly located West Indian employees. For example, a Company lawyer advised a Division manager to: "...increase your number of nationals especially at locations where they are more visible such as on the dock and around the shops (BDA: Jacome to Blair, Dec. 16, 1931)." The obvious phenotypical differentiation between Blacks and Latins prevented Blacks from being able to "pass" as nationals. Even second and third generation Blacks were still considered foreigners.
by local authorities. Foreign Latins, on the other hand, became nationals in both Costa Rica and Panama within a generation of their arrival. The progeny of Nicaraguans or Hondurans rapidly blended into the local population. Indeed Costa Rica and Panama's "nationalist" laws were enforced selectively against Blacks rather than against foreign Latins. For example, at the same time that the Panamanian press and the president were complaining about the excessive number of Jamaicans on the United Fruit Company plantation in Chiriqui province, the Company was allowed to "encourage labor to come in from other places, particularly Costa Rica and Nicaragua" on condition that they were "...not, of course, on the restricted immigration list (BDA: Blair to Chittenden, April 12, 1932)." Blacks, of course, were on the restricted immigration list. Similarly in Costa Rica, in the late 1930s, at the same time that Nicaraguans were being imported to work on the newly opened Pacific Coast divisions, the newspapers in the Atlantic Coast were publishing threatening headlines such as "All Jamaicans in Costa Rica Who Find Themselves in Difficult Situation Will be Repatriated (Voz del Atlantico, Feb. 14, 1933 cited in Koch 1975:281,331)."

In later years, this racist nationalism resulted in the denial of any nationality status whatsoever to Blacks of West Indian descent. In 1926 a Panamanian law declared "undesirables" all "Negroes whose native language is not Spanish." The citizenship of the children of "undesirables" was withheld until their 21rst birthday (PCCF:#79-F-5 and #80-F-9, BFO:#371-12015 and #371-12785 cited in Conniff 1983:11). Most dramatically, however, in 1941 president Arnulfo Arias a staunch enemy of the Black population at the time worded the new constitution so as to deny citizenship to "undesirables" (i.e., Blacks) and barred
their naturalization. In one fell swoop he stripped some 20,000 Black Panamanians of their citizenship (Conniff 1983:11). The Division manager in Bocas during World War II complained that Blacks legitimately born in Panama "...seem to be blocked in getting cedulas [citizenship papers] (BDA: Munch to Chittenden, July 16, 1941)." Panamanian born Blacks were subject to deportation from their natal homeland when they were apprehended by local authorities who made "...regular raids on labor gangs arresting all men who could not show cedulas (BDA: Ibid.)." As Conniff (1983:4) explains, "West Indians [in Panama] were a people without a homeland, caught in a limbo." The same was true for Costa Rican Blacks. Duncan, himself a Black of West Indian descent explains:

They're not Costa Rican; nor Jamaican. Great Britain does not recognize them as citizens because they are Blacks, the sons of Jamaicans. The Blacks of the second generation are for a long time a people without a homeland, with no recognized identity. They subsist in a country which all of a sudden has become hostile to them, restricting their movement (Melendez and Duncan 1981:134).

7.2 IDEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF ETHNIC DISCRIMINATION

7.2.1 Increased Labor Control

Racism, third country national status, and ambiguous nationality, augmented the Transnational's level of labor control over the Black working population. Blacks depended on the Company, not only for their jobs, but also for mediation against the hostile state. There were few economic and social alternatives (except for becoming a small farmer or emigrating) to Company employment in the Latin-dominated societies hosting the Transnational. Management took advantage of this situation as the following report by a Company official sent to evaluate the Bocas Division during World War II documents:
...the Division has not been living up to the laws as regards accident pay, severance pay, and other social privileges to which laborers are entitled by law. Apparently these payments were not made... mostly on the assumption that the Company wished to save money and was safe in not making these payments, as most of the negroes around Almirante do not have cedulas [nationality identity cards] and cannot bring action against us in the courts (BDA: Hamer to Pollan, Feb. 1, 1943, emphasis added).

Repeatedly the Company invoked the threat of deportation as a "damocles sword" whenever a labor crisis erupted among its Black labor force. For example, during a strike which paralysed the Limon Division in 1934, the local English language newspaper published (presumably under Company sponsorship) warnings to the West Indians lest they should become involved in the movement:

How stupid, therefore, would it be for us, as foreigners, to meddle in any uprising of this nature! ... [The] government is quite alive to the seriousness of the situation and is determined to cope with it, by throwing all foreigners out of the country, who attempt to meddle; and even to rescind naturalization papers granted to those who have become Citizens of Costa Rica THEREFORE BE WARNED (The Atlantic Voice, Sept. 1, 1934:7, emphasis in original).

In the same vein, during the 1918-1919 Sixaola District strike (see 5.2.2) the Panamanian and Costa Rican authorities "...suddenly took to enforcing strictly the immigration regulations that had hitherto been disregarded in the district (BCO #318-350-2946: Murray to Mallet, Feb. 3, 1919:9)." This occurred just as readily 25 years later during World War II. Set in hostile host nations, therefore, Blacks could not afford to take risks and assume leadership positions in the labor movement for fear of losing not only their jobs, but also their right of residence in their country of birth. Indeed, a middle aged Black explained to me that he had not been active in strikes in his youth because, "As a foreigner you can't participate in politics. You have to walk behind
the law; always behind the law."

On a deeper, more subtle level, Black dependency on the goodwill of Company officials for employment and for protection against deportation by racist national authorities, engendered a transformation in Black attitudes towards the Transnational. This will be elaborated on in the following section on the ideological implications of upward mobility, but the crux of the argument is that Black political conceptions were profoundly affected by their vulnerability to their hostile host societies. During the high points in the racist/nationalist hysterias that periodically swept the Isthmus, Black workers were forced to seek protection and help from Company officials. On several occasions management pressured government officials in order to prevent its labor force from being deported. For example, in 1926, the United Fruit Company lobbied to rescind the immigration restrictions on Blacks (Westerman 1950:13). During World War II in the Bocas Division, Company supervisors resorted to extra-economic manoeuvres to circumvent the nationalist/racist laws which denied citizenship to Panamanian born Blacks and which prevented Costa Rican Blacks from entering the country. Black workers from the World War II period recounted with humour how their North American bosses used to rush to the fields in order to warn them of the arrival of labor inspectors. An elderly Costa Rican Black who had been apprehended on one of these occasions by a Panamanian labor inspector on the Abaca farms, told me how he was saved from deportation by his North American superior who publically berated the labor inspector for being a "pro-German nazi" and for "impeding the war effort." (Abaca, of course was being grown on contract during this period for the U.S. Army.) I was also told stories of U.S. soldiers
lending their uniforms to Black workers so that the Panamanian authorities would mistake them for North Americans and not request their identity papers. Another common arrangement, was for farm administrators to obtain residency papers for their workers by bribing local officials. This last favor, however, was only done for "good workers."

Even the Black farmers who had managed to establish themselves as cacao and banana producers were highly vulnerable and dependent upon the Company for their welfare (see 6.1.1). The Transnational purchased their crops, leased them their land (or grudgingly tolerated their squatting on it). Consequently, even the supposedly independent Black farmers were reluctant to antagonize Company officials.

The British Empire

Faced with an ambiguous nationality status and a hostile host population, one of the defense mechanisms of the Black laborers was to insist upon the superiority of their West Indian identity and to reaffirm at every opportunity their loyalty to the British crown. Black immigrants in Limon and Bocas did not want their progeny to be brought up as "Spaniards." Typically, Jamaican mothers on the Isthmus registered their children as if they had been born in Jamaica. Middle aged Blacks in Limon today recall how their parents used to hide them under the bed when the Ministry of Education inspector visited their homes for the yearly census of school age children.

Most historians have presented this phenomenon as a psychological ethnic quirk on the part of stubborn Jamaican emigrants. In fact,
however, West Indians had little choice in the matter. Latin society discriminated against them, and rather than being forced onto the margin of a hostile Latin culture, they rejected it in favor of their own cultural heritage. As Conniff (1983:13) suggest,

Panamanian rejection of the West Indians and their descendants produced a slow and flawed integration. The West Indian immigrants felt insecure in Panama, they banded together in self-defense, reducing interaction with the natives. The Immigrants taught their children to avoid contact with the Panamanians, for whom many used the derogatory term 'Panas.' West Indians of means preferred to send their children to private English school or even to Jamaica for their education.

Further evidence that the militant adherence to a colonial West Indian identity was a reaction to discrimination is provided by the fact that in Costa Rica, when the discriminatory laws denying citizenship to Blacks were revoked in the late 1940s Blacks registered en masse to become Costa Ricans (Olien 1977:148).

It is often suggested that there was something inherently reactionary in the West Indian attachment to their status as "British colonial subjects." Duncan (Duncan and Melendez 1981:101) writes:

To belong to the British Empire represented not only membership in a multinational and 'superdeveloped' state... but also, an idea of the imperial which in and of itself became a sort of religion and developed within the individual a powerful concept of loyalty to the crown and to the values of England... faithfulness to the interests of the Empire.

In an unpublished manuscript, the Catholic bishop of Bocas del Toro, writes (in an almost perplexed tone) that in moments of social unrest during the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Black population would hang the British flag from their houses to indicate that they were neutral third parties:
In more than one occasion, at the outbreak of local political disturbances, one could see flying from Bocas balconies the flag with the cross of St. George of 'the loyal subjects of his majesty (Gamuza 1979:63).

In more racist language, elderly Latin workers frequently complained to me that in the old days Blacks used to refuse to participate in strikes saying "I can't... I can't... me Chamaikini... Chamaikini... me no understand... me Chamaikini."

In fact, however, Blacks had practical reasons for wanting to remain "British colonial subjects." British intervention during moments of crisis was the only external source of support available to them. A careful examination of historical documents reveals that the British Colonial Office was summoned repeatedly to investigate the mistreatment (killings, beatings and robberies) of "British subjects" on the part of Panamanian and Costa Rican authorities. For example, the documentation cited in the discussion of the 1918-1919 Sixaola District strike (5.2.2) was produced by British colonial representatives sent to investigate the mistreatment of West Indian workers. Survivors from the labor unrest of the 1910s and 1920s told me numerous other tales of intervention on their behalf by British officials. For example, an elderly Jamaican in Limon described how he and 54 other striking Jamaicans were freed after 15 days of imprisonment, by "the British consul who came to help us with his flag and sword." Supposedly the consul berated the Judge "...you should be ashamed... these men haven't broken any laws...." and arranged for the immediate release of all of them except for two who were Panamanian nationals. The consul allegedly went so far as to oblige the Panamanian authorities to provide the prisoners with a final meal before their transport (free of charge) back to the plantation.
other words the practical benefit of maintaining West Indian nationality in this case was not only freedom from jail after 15 days of imprisonment, and decent treatment at the hands of usually abusive Latin authorities, but also a somewhat humorous revenge. In this context, statements concerning the "pathetic obsequiousness" of Blacks to Colonial authorities can be seen instead as rational—if not calculated—responses to their structural vulnerability.

Of course, in the contemporary period, West Indian descendants have, to a large extent, mystified the help their ancestors received from British authorities. Blacks in the Bocas/Limon region have retained only positive memories of British colonial history. They commemorate their "Anglo-Saxon" rather than their African heritage, since that is what has been useful to them. In 1964, for example, the Limon population celebrated the coronation of Queen Elizabeth with a parade (Mennerick 1964:51).

7.2.3 Internalized Racism

The subtlest, but perhaps the most important, result of discrimination has been its internalization by the Black population. Once again, the notion of conjugated oppression (defined in the Introduction, 1.2.3) is helpful for understanding the complicated dynamic involved. Discrimination against Blacks (especially in the 1900s through 1930s) occurred in the context of a rigid class/ethnic hierarchy, whereby class exploitation conflated with the ideological oppression of racism. The Black population was at the bottom of this class/ethnic hierarchy and partially internalized the structure of oppression weighing upon them.
As was discussed earlier (see 3.1.3) Black banana workers were predisposed to a deprecative self-perception of their history and ethnic background because of the particularly powerful legacy of slavery and racism under British colonialism. Indeed, this may have been why North American managers favored West Indian laborers (cf. Davis 1980:77), Purcell 1982:239). Historically West Indian Blacks have dominated the tasks (i.e., chauffeurs, store clerks, and messengers) which involve the most intensive personal contact with Whites. The North American managers probably felt more comfortable with the heavily socialized West Indians than with the Latin immigrants who were unaccustomed to being treated as racially inferior. In fact, based on my interviews with elderly Black office workers it appears that West Indians conspicuously belittled themselves in front of their White supervisors as a strategy to insure their promotion to better jobs. Former office workers whom I interviewed were more obsequious to white supremacy ideology than former day laborers. The success of their former careers had depended upon their ability to accept and behave appropriately in rigidly hierarchized White/Black relations.

I repeatedly questioned former office workers about the history of ethnic discrimination in the Company. Although their responses were all distinct as to the specifics, certain patterns emerged: they showed extreme deference in their references to managers, doctors, and other high level Company administrators for whom they had performed personal services. They repeated with special relish the compliments they had received from their former bosses, going so far as to describe their facial expressions and to imitate their North American accents. They
also specifically made it clear that they tolerated racism. For example, one former office worker described how in the 1920s his newly arrived North American supervisor made the mistake, of inviting him into a mess hall reserved for Whites. The result was a public scene and admonishment. Immediately after telling me this story, instead of condemning the racism he had been subjected to, the Black ex-office worker used it as an opportunity to reassure me that he was not a "trouble maker":

I don't like to embarrass...if you don't appreciate me good...If you don't want me around you won't have any trouble with me.

Similarly, a former commissarian inspector told me a parable-like tale of how on his first day of work, his boss scolded him and made a rude racist remark. The way in which he had built up the beginning of the story, I assumed that he was about to make a poignant criticism of management's racism, or that he was going to relate proudly how he had punched the man in the nose. Instead, he told me that he had remained quiet, accepted the insult, and avoided "making a scene." He then went on to claim that this restraint on his part proved to be one of the smartest "moves of his career." He managed subsequently to gain the confidence of this particularly racist supervisor who took him on as his protege, promoting him from assistant clerk to commissarian and then to commissarian inspector. This same former commissarian defended the Costa Rican president Leon Cortes who authored the anti-Black laws of the 1930s and 1940s. In fact he displayed to me a portrait of president Cortes hanging on his wall, claiming Cortes had been the best president ever. He explained that Cortes had not disliked Blacks, but rather "young men who do not like to work." This prompted a long tirade against
lazy young Black men. He claimed that Blacks who complained about racism were merely making excuses for being lazy.

Significantly, those elderly Blacks who remained as common laborers throughout their employment history, tend not to be as openly obsequious towards Whites. In fact, on the contrary, instead of reminiscing about the compliments they had received from their White foremen, they delight in tales of the combativity of their strikes. Nevertheless even working class Blacks (especially the elderly) also suffer from internalized racism.

The popular definitions of beauty and human aesthetics prevalent in Central America are perhaps the best measure of white supremacist internalization. A dark complexion is considered "ugly;" curly hair is "bad;" straight hair and an aquiline nose are "good." I overheard an elderly Black woman who was having an argument with a light-skinned woman saying something to the effect that "...I know my hair is bad and my skin is ugly but I've always lived a proper life." On another occasion, an elderly Black woman selling fruit juice on the plantation explained to me: "you White people are so beautiful. It's because you originated near the land of Jesus Christ. You were born where Christ was born."

A more subtle but also profoundly revealing manifestation of Black deference to North American plantation officials, are the recurring local legends about the construction of the major bridges throughout the banana region at the turn of the century. These legends assign supernatural powers to the White engineers in charge of the construction projects. West Indian day laborers mystified the technological gap
between the sophisticated engineering techniques at the disposal of the Transnational and the hand held agricultural tools they wielded in their everyday tasks. For example the Sixaola bridge which was built in 1908 to connect the Costa Rican and Panamanian sides of the Bocas Division (see Map 4), was alleged to have been completed in one night by three North American engineers who "...were spiritual mechanics (Palmer 1981:10)." In these legends there is an implication of awe, resignation and even helplessness, before the not-necessarily-christian omnipotence of the White Company official.

7.2.4 Marcus Garvey and the UNIA

The ideological domination of ethnic discrimination is not always demobilizing. In fact, on the contrary, the conjugated nature of Black oppression during the 1910s and 1920s infused the West Indian banana workers with an explosive potential. In moments of crisis, resistance to ethnic oppression became a forum for inter-group solidarity for Black workers. The most dramatic example of how the energy latent in Black conjugated oppression was channelled into an explosive movement is the phenomenal popularity of Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (hereafter UNIA). The UNIA movement swept through virtually the entire Black diaspora in the early twentieth century. The organization's goal and central function was framed strictly in ethnic terms: the promotion of Black dignity and unity throughout the world.

The acute form of class/ethnic oppression weighing upon West Indian banana workers in the 1910s and 1920s rendered them particularly fertile for Marcus Garvey’s message. He offered Black laborers the opportunity of a spiritual metamorphosis. They could go from being the lowest, most
 despised self-hating peons, to become the exalted leaders of a noble race equal—if not superior—to that of their White oppressors. Indeed, an examination of Garvey’s speeches in Central America reveals that he had a charismatic genius for specifically addressing the profound psychological oppression of Blacks in the diaspora. He exorcised the debilitating trauma of internalized racism in an apocalyptic, messianic manner. For example he is reported to have exhorted a Panamanian audience in 1921 with the following harangue:

I [Marcus Garvey] prefer to die, and every negro to die rather than to live and think that God created me as inferior to the white man.

Right here Mr. Garvey with arms outstretched and looking heavenwards most earnestly and fervently said: 'O God!—if thou created me inferior I do not want the life thou gavest me. I prefer to die now.'

Continuing, he said: ...I will only compromise with God. He speaks to me. He says: 'Go on because I lead.' A glorious day await[s] us when we shall throw away color prejudice. We shall have liberty and democracy... (MBPF: Starr and the Herald, May 4, 1921).

In this manner, the UNIA infused Black laborers with hope and dignity.

Company files reveal that management viewed Marcus Garvey’s UNIA movement as a grave danger to banana operations in Latin America. The UNIA message contradicted the ideological structure legitimizing the exploitation of Black labor. It inspired the workers to reject the psychological complex of low self-esteem which for so many decades had contributed to their docility. Furthermore, the very notion of unity of action amongst the work force (as promoted articulately by UNIA leaders) was profoundly threatening to the Transnational. The United Fruit Company, consequently, orchestrated a campaign against the UNIA. The Company headquarters in Boston regularly issued circulars warning "All