

Note on Words, Names, and Places

This book, like all ethnographic works, is about real people and places, and events that happened not too long ago. One common convention in such works is to give pseudonyms to the people, and sometimes the places, described. Some of the reasons for this are ethical. Almost no one ever asks to be the subject of an anthropological study; the issues at play remain politically fraught; and revealing precise identities and locations could put innocent people at unnecessary risk. Other reasons are intellectual. In anthropological scholarship, as opposed to journalism or historiography, what matters are the things that can be generalized from specific contexts, which means that often, the specifics can be less important than the big takeaways.

With the exception of public officeholders or scientists who are regularly quoted or publicly profiled in the press, I have chosen to provide pseudonyms or otherwise obscure the identities of the individuals whose stories constitute this book. And although the names I give to villages and communities in the book are drawn from those of actual places in Nicaragua and within the environs of the Montelimar plantation, I have altered them to protect the identities of the people I describe. The majority of the direct quotations drawn from interviews or conversations were either recorded with participants' informed oral consent or reproduced from written notes I took at the time, also with the oral consent of those present. When I attended public events, I recorded when permission was granted by the organizers but otherwise took handwritten notes. Since nearly all these events, conversations, and interviews were originally in Spanish, and since I was the only person with access to the notes and recordings, any errors in translation or transcription are mine.

The names of Nicaraguan sugarcane plantations, and of the community organizations that raised questions about environmental and labor conditions

on them, are real. One reason for this is that when it comes to the social movements I describe in the book, many of the facts, names, and even points of dispute were already part of publicly accessible records, news accounts, or peer-reviewed scientific articles before I began my research. Another is that the corporations themselves have, since the start of my research, embraced an industry-wide move toward transparency in addressing the uncertain health effects of sugarcane production. In the case of the Montelimar Corporation, whose workers and former workers are the main subjects of this book, managers were informed of my presence on company land and in meetings of community organizations about the conditions there. I am grateful for the corporation's willingness to be so accommodating, and even though I know that some readers may not agree with every conclusion I make, I have tried to represent both the company and the people in the surrounding community fairly and accurately in these pages. Again, any factual errors are my own.

From the beginning of this project, I felt I had no choice but to position myself alongside rural Nicaraguans living in the sugarcane zone as an engaged observer, rather than as a detached or neutral one. The stories I tell in this book, then, come with a definite point of view. Even though this is primarily a book about the community that surrounds a sugarcane operation and not any particular sugar corporation's managerial or organizational structure, I believe there are lessons in what follows not just for anthropologists or health scholars but also for those, including the corporations named herein, who are interested in ensuring the welfare of those who continue to make a living in and through the sugarcane industry.