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Grievance, Ground, and Grace

"This way. Take a right," Don Alvaro Guerrero said from the back seat.

"Are you sure it's not straight ahead?" asked Don Alvaro Torres, who was sitting next to Don Alvaro Guerrero.

"No, hombre," Don Alvaro Guerrero insisted. "What do you know? Saúl, take a right here. The road's nice and dry."

Saúl looked suspiciously into the rearview mirror of the Hyundai Accent that carried the four of us into the southern sector of the zona. The two Don Alvaros were the longest-serving and most active members of AMBED's board of directors, and Don Alvaro Guerrero, our self-appointed navigator, had grown up and spent much of his life working in the section of the Montelimar plantation where we now found ourselves. Earlier in the drive, when we were still more certain about our bearings, we had passed the small plot, or *parcela*, where he grew corn. The parcela sat adjacent to a large stand of cane and across

the road from a beachfront property rumored to belong to the family of President Daniel Ortega.

It was November, still the rainy season. The plantation roads were rutty and rough in the best of conditions, and we were trying to make our way to the village of Loma Alegre, an isolated hamlet on the edge of a river at the outer limits of Montelimar-controlled land. If we could get there, our plan was to meet a group of residents to alert them to their rights under a recently signed agreement between AMBED and the Montelimar Corporation. Part of that agreement permitted AMBED to "publicize [the] existence and function" of the corporation's internal grievance mechanism, or *mecanismo de quejas*.[1]

With a sigh, Saúl took Don Alvaro Guerrero's suggestion and popped the vehicle into gear, swerving back and forth to stay on the dry red patches of the road. Saúl often told me that he loved to drive, but right now, I wasn't so sure. The Hyundai was registered as a taxi, which meant that using it for trips to the zona took a toll on Saúl's other means of making a living. In order to keep in good standing with his taxi cooperative, he had to have it washed on return and, as he was likely remembering now, repair any damage done. As we rounded the first bend on Don Alvaro Guerrero's chosen route, a massive mud puddle revealed itself in the middle distance.

"Guerrero . . ." Saúl groaned suspiciously, his voice rising.

"It's good, it's shallow," Don Alvaro Guerrero assured him.

"*Guerrero . . .*"

Don Alvaro Torres and I laughed. We had been in similar spots with the Hyundai before. Over the course of the previous few months, the mud and rocks had choked the exhaust, ripped off a rear bumper, and punctured tires, and the heat had fried the air-conditioning. As a result, more than a few of my research dollars ended up going to local repair shops, but out here, we were on our own.

Saúl approached the puddle with caution. The Hyundai's bald tires were already slipping and sliding on its banks. Saúl couldn't slow down too much, I reasoned silently to myself, lest we get mired before we even made it to the water. There was a dryish patch of grass and dirt to the left of the puddle. Perhaps it was just firm enough to carry us around.

"Guerrero . . ." Saúl moaned again as he gunned the engine to enter the sneak route. After a few seconds of revving and swerving, the right front tire dipped into the puddle bank on the right, and we came to a halt.

More laughter ensued, none of it louder than that which came from Don Alvaro Guerrero and Don Alvaro Torres as both men slithered out of the left rear door. I followed Saúl out of the driver's side door, my shoe immediately covered in the molasses-colored muck.

After we looked things over for a while, I was appointed to take the wheel, while the other three pushed from behind. We made it out, and I remember thinking as I lay in bed that night what an adventure this had turned out to be. The comical and unheroic struggle of a couple of paunchy, cautious, fortysomething men from elsewhere (Saúl and me) and a couple of jocular, unfazed fiftysomething locals (the two Don Alvaros) to get from point A to point B made for a good fieldwork anecdote, but I figured it would not be much more than that.

Years later, I realize that moments like this underscore something that was too obvious to the two Don Alvaros to state directly. As lifelong residents of the zona, Don Alvaro Torres and Don Alvaro Guerrero knew something that even Saúl, who had been driving these roads for years now, had trouble fully grasping. They knew what it really meant to be stuck, and we were not really stuck. Hence, the laughter. Our struggle was a parody of the much more serious situation that AMBED was trying to address.

There are dozens of villages located in or around the Montelimar plantation, and many of them are difficult to access. Because these villages are nearly all enveloped in sugarcane, they can seem, and have been depicted, as "islands" in the monoculture. The unforgiving plantation roads are the only transportation corridors available, which means that the prospect of getting stuck can have all kinds of consequences, especially for those who are sick. The material quality of roads matters to the experience of health and disease here, as it does everywhere.[2] We made repeated visits to Loma Alegre, for instance, because the two Don Alvaros were concerned that people with CKDnt who lived there would be less likely to seek treatment if someone did not check in on them now and then.

One thing the two Don Alvaros had in common was a sense of place honed over years working in sugarcane production, and over lifetimes that included stints participating in the popular Sandinista revolution. In the 1970s and 1980s, rural campesinos, urban working-class people, and a disaffected middle class rose up to topple the dictatorship of the Somoza family and remake Nicaragua as a social democracy, only to be thwarted by the anticommunist zeal of the United States, which funded a counterrevolutionary war. As combatants in that war, the two Don Alvaros had developed what the Argentinean doctor and Cuban revolutionary Ernesto "Che" Guevara called in his writings on guerrilla warfare "knowledge of the ground."[3] Guevara's conceptualization of guerrilla tactics emerged in part from his study of the Nicaraguan nationalist Augusto César Sandino, the namesake of the Sandinista movement. Sandino, in turn, had been a student of Nicaraguan and broader global histories of peasant struggle. In the 1920s and 1930s, Sandino led a small rural militia that spearheaded the ouster of occupying US military forces from Nicaragua. The country's history,

particularly in the agricultural corridor of the Pacific coast, can be understood as a series of violent clashes between landed elites, many of them supported by the United States, and Indigenous and peasant groups.[4]

Monique Allewaert, a literary critic and scholar of eighteenth-century plantation life, adapts Guevara's idea of knowledge of the ground to explain how maroon communities and others who escaped colonial bondage survived in the swamps and mires that surrounded rice and sugar plantations. This kind of knowledge was essential to Black Caribbean resistance to the logics of the plantation.[5] Colonial writers saw the plantation zone as a force that pulled bodies apart, one that undermined the colonial and capitalist project of "[turning] bodies into singular yet abstract corpuses."[6] That the plantation had a capacity to pull bodies apart was, of course, fundamental to the colonial economy. Black and brown bodies were not imagined to need to be singular or abstractable in the Enlightenment liberal worldview that was emerging in parallel to the Atlantic plantation economy. As unfree labor, they could be treated, to use the term deployed by Hortense Spillers, as fungible, interchangeable "flesh."[7] Plantation zones, as ecological forms, are the outgrowth of the assumption that the integrity of some bodies matters less than the integrity of others, that liberal citizenship must be protected for some but not for others.

Another thing the two Don Alvaros had in common was a belief that despite the destruction and violence of the plantation, blessings from God could still be witnessed there. The context for this chapter, and for much of my fieldwork, was a multiyear mediated dialogue between AMBED and Montelimar's management. Starting in 2017, I regularly accompanied Saúl and AMBED's leaders on journeys around the zona as they worked to collect various kinds of documents from residents living in its roughly forty villages. I joined them as they filtered these documents through the company's mecanismo de quejas, as well as the circuits of the Nicaraguan legal system and the World Bank's system for ensuring corporate accountability. These documents included official papers such as work and pay records, clinical reports, and land titles. As we will see in later chapters, they also included photographs and videos, recorded on mobile phones, depicting what AMBED understood as the contamination of waterways by the sugarcane mill, aerial spraying of chemical pesticides, and large-scale deforestation. I took some of these photographs and videos, recorded many of the conversations we had, and helped collect the documents. I also used grant money to pay for gasoline, car repairs, food, and equipment. In this way, for a time, my ethnographic project helped give shape to AMBED's advocacy work, and vice versa.[8]

Mediation systems like those that were enacted at Montelimar offer an alternative to a civil court, where a person or group might seek compensation from a company for injuries caused by its activities. Mediations are designed to end, and to end with definitive results. But even as AMBED pushed the corporation to pay more attention to the epidemic, the group was animated by something less definitive than the kinds of concessions and trade-offs one might expect from mediation. As I show in this chapter, AMBED worked betwixt and between the norms of liberal legal accountability and the decidedly less mathematical kind of accountability promoted by another authority, that of the Christian God invoked in the organization's name, the Montelimar Blessing from God Association (Asociación Montelimar Bendición de Dios). The guerrilla generation of knowledge of the ground and the seemingly conservative appeal to blessings from God might at first seem incompatible. But Nicaraguan class and revolutionary politics are entangled with religiosity in ways that are difficult to explain using either Marxist gestures to "false consciousness" or romantic idealizations of the theology of liberation.[9]

On its face, AMBED's origin story, which I recount in this chapter, is one in which plantation residents *were* being treated as people whose integrity—bodily and political—mattered. One version of the story finds a small group of relatively poor rural people gaining a voice before the World Bank, the largest economic development organization on the planet. It can read very much like a tale of marginal people finally being invited as full members into the community of global citizens. Such an invitation came at the cost of illness and injury. It is doubtful that the invitation would have been extended had CKDnt not existed.[10]

Over just a few years, AMBED amassed an array of legal, scholarly, and bureaucratic documents, including clinical records, work records, land titles, corporate complaint forms, and epidemiological surveys. In the clinical and research spaces of global health, documentary practices often double as means of governance, helping render the variable perspectives and experiences of patients, caregivers, and laborers into uniform, legible, translatable data. But documentation is never only a device for extending the legal, bureaucratic, or medical gaze.[11] AMBED's approach to documentation combined a fidelity to the demand that community groups seeking recognition keep paper records with an acknowledgment that social change depended upon knowledge of the ground.[12] Together, documentation and knowledge of the ground formed the basis for a nonsecular approach to environmental and social accountability, in which blessings played a central role.

Assembling Grievances

In 2003, an American undergraduate student I'll call Jane Bernstein came to live with a group of Indigenous Sutiaba farmers in an area called Goyena, located a few miles north of the city of León and adjacent to the sugarcane plantation owned by Nicaragua Sugar Estates Limited (NSEL). Few of the residents of Goyena were directly employed by NSEL. Instead, they operated small farms on land held by the Indigenous council. When Jane first came to Goyena as part of a study abroad and service-learning experience, she befriended Don Silvio, a farmer and local leader who was helping his neighbors amass a documentary archive.

I met Don Silvio years later, in mid-2017. When I visited his house, he showed me a pile of decaying documents, dating back as far as his first meetings with Jane. "I tried to keep everything we collected over the years," he said apologetically, "but the rain and the bugs have taken most of them." Most of the documents that remained were one-page community claim forms, part of NSEL's internal grievance system. None of the claims in Don Silvio's archive mentioned kidney disease. Rather, in varying degrees of detail, they described how farmers' crops—peppers, squash, cucumbers, and plantains—had been damaged or destroyed as a result of NSEL's application of aerial pesticides (figure 1.1). Each claimant put a monetary value on the loss and delineated the precise area of land under cultivation.

The information on these forms was collated into a spreadsheet, with each page stamped and signed by the company's representative, along with representatives from the Nicaraguan Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry and the León departmental authorities. The forms are classic examples of the kind of documentation that, whether in corporate or state contexts, is almost always the pretext for recognition and legitimacy.[13] To create this archive, Don Silvio and other leaders gathered their neighbors in a local community center and, one by one, helped them fill in the claim forms. In a context of stark inequality, in which limits to literacy made it difficult for individuals to lodge complaints that would stick to states or corporations, the act of filling in the grievance documents in a collective, public fashion made a powerful statement. Don Silvio saved the papers not only to preserve a record of each individual case but also to commemorate a moment of Indigenous solidarity. This archive of quasi-bureaucratic forms was, paradoxically, evidence of the decidedly nonliberal ties that his community had to this land.[14]

Around the same time that the Goyena farmers started documenting their problems, a few miles to the north, a small group of men from the town of

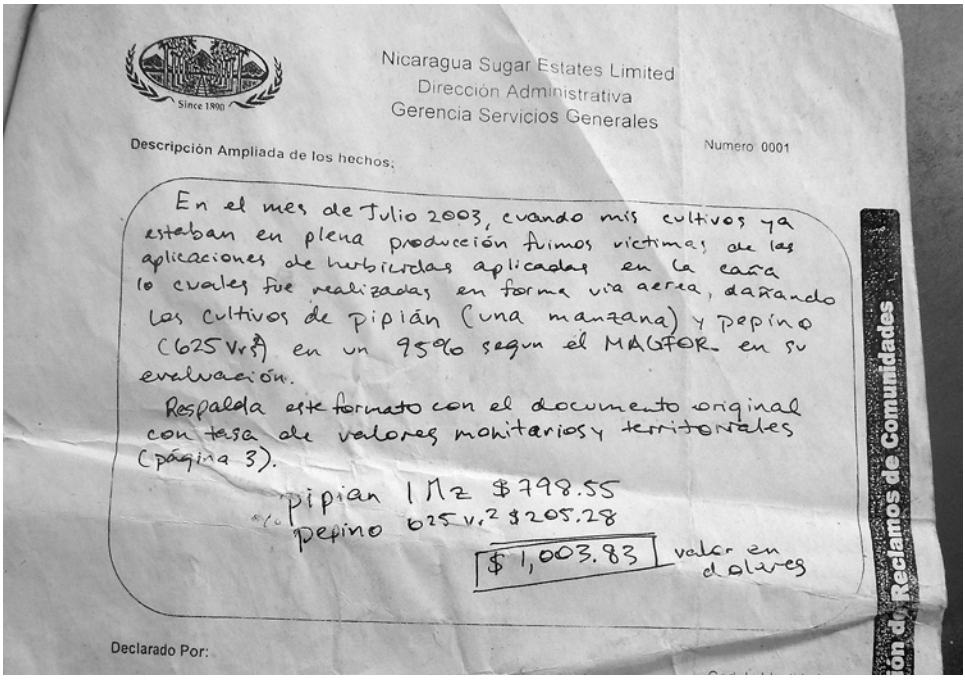

FIGURE 1.1 Community claim form created in Goyena in 2003. Photo by the author.

Chichigalpa had begun to hold a regular vigil outside the gates to NSEL's sugar mill. These men were former cane cutters who were in varying stages of what later became known as CKDnt. Don Silvio encouraged Jane to make the short journey to meet them. The ex-workers told her a story in which key documents were conspicuously absent. Sugarcane plantation labor makes incredible demands on the body. It is so physically demanding, in fact, that even before the CKDnt epidemic started, a yearly medical exam was a prerequisite for plantation employment (see chapters 3 and 5). During these exams, tests on the men's blood turned up biomarkers for early-stage chronic kidney disease. Over the course of the late 1990s and early aughts, hundreds of would-be workers with such biomarkers were dismissed.

When they were dismissed, the workers were not given access to their medical records. Instead, they were advised to go to public or private clinics, get a diagnosis, and then gather the pay stubs and work records they had accumulated over the years so that they could petition the National Institute of Social Security for benefits. But clinical exams were costly, and the visits to the social security office to verify work records revealed a high level of underreporting on the part of

NSEL and its many subcontractors. Many former workers had trouble documenting that they had ever been employed in the sugarcane plantation at all.

The kidney disease was becoming a well-known scourge. Jane spent much of the rest of her first visit to Nicaragua, as she told me later, "just going to funerals." Young people (overwhelmingly men), in the prime of their lives, in their twenties and thirties, were wasting away. Jane's accompaniment of the Goyena farmers and the workers' group to funerals, community meetings, and informal venting sessions continued in subsequent years, as she began work on a graduate degree in environmental studies, and as the workers' organization evolved into an advocacy group, the Chichigalpa Association for Life (ASOCHIVIDA). By 2005, Don Silvio and his neighbors had decided that NSEL's internal mecanismo de quejas was a dead end. Even when they were compiled and submitted en masse, the community complaint forms, in which the word of small farmers was set against that of the company, were proving ineffective. The Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry seemed unwilling or unable to follow up, and the company's response was laconic at best. For their part, ASOCHIVIDA's members had begun to believe that plantation working conditions—pesticides, excessive heat, long hours—were responsible for making them sick.

Both groups felt that they needed more documentation.

Over the next few years, Jane started collecting samples of well water and soil and testing them for the presence of known pesticides. Everyone was convinced that agrochemicals would be the link between the destroyed crops and the destroyed kidneys. But Jane and her collaborators could find no definitive evidence of dangerous levels of either chemical or heavy metal residue. In parallel to the environmental sampling, Jane undertook another kind of documentation. She collected first dozens, then hundreds, of stories about farmers losing a year's worth of crops, about their fear of drinking well water, and about former sugarcane cutters being sent home by their employers to die. Even though the toxicological studies failed to turn up any solid evidence, Jane managed to collect a mass of qualitative material, in the form of testimonials, photos, and films. But it would take the intervention of the world's largest development organization, and the momentum of a global financial push to expand sugarcane production, for that evidence to gain traction.

Transparency Comes to the Sugarcane Zone

While sugarcane has been cultivated at an industrial scale in Nicaragua for well over a century, the industry has expanded at an unprecedented rate in the past two decades, thanks in part to more than $100 million in investment by

the World Bank through the International Finance Corporation (IFC), part of a broader resurgence of international investment in monocrops in the early twenty-first century.[15] As it began this push for investment in monocrops, the World Bank also started to recognize a need to increase the transparency of its activities. The overwhelmingly poor and marginalized people whose lives were being targeted for "development" interventions like the expansion of industrial agriculture needed to have faith that the Bank's loans would actually improve their lives. Such people needed a way to hold the Bank and its corporate partners to account. They needed a way to be recognized as legitimate sources of critique and complaint. To that end, in 1999, the Bank created an entity called the Compliance Advisor Ombudsman (CAO), a body that would respond to "environmental and social concerns and complaints of people directly impacted by IFC . . . projects."[16] Like other corporate or organizational ombudsman offices, the CAO is independent of the IFC, and it reports directly to the World Bank's president. The CAO is also independent of local government authorities.

The CAO refers to itself as "a fair, trusted, and effective independent resource *mechanism*."[17] The term *mechanism* connotes a functional relationship.[18] In both sociology and epidemiology, *mechanism* is a synonym for *cause*. A sociologist might ask what brings a group of sugarcane workers together to sign their names to a grievance directed to an office of the World Bank. For the sociologist, the mechanism might be a shared sense of liberal personhood. An epidemiologist might ask what causes otherwise healthy kidneys to fail. For the epidemiologist, the mechanism might be a chemical or other environmental trigger. Both sociological and epidemiological mechanisms gain their legitimacy through documentation: the compiling of voting records, datasets, randomized controlled trials, toxicological measurements, and clinical reports.[19] But it is notoriously difficult to identify causal mechanisms in environmental health. The effects of toxins can often take years to manifest, and studies of environmental diseases are costly, time-consuming, and frequently contrary to the interests of corporations and the states that support them.[20] There is also ample evidence to suggest that an abstract notion of liberal personhood means less in the actual lives of the rural poor and Indigenous people of Latin America than sociologists and lawyers might assume.[21]

Around the time that the CAO was formed, the Spanish cognate of *mechanism* (*mecanismo*) was becoming a familiar industry term. As corporations like Montelimar and NSEL expanded, they began to embrace corporate social responsibility principles. The presence of community claim forms and mecanismos de quejas on sugarcane plantations reflects a broader sense that an

image of transparency and magnanimity would be good for business.[22] These corporate mecanismos operated only when workers or community members activated them—when they turned their knowledge of the ground into written complaints. As the story of Goyena illustrates, however, mecanismo was not an abstract sociological or epidemiological idea in Nicaragua. It existed not just in written documents themselves but in the process of documentation.

In 2005, as Jane and her US and Nicaraguan colleagues were struggling to draw attention to the kidney disease crisis in the NSEL environs, they contacted the Washington, DC–based Center for International Environmental Law (CIEL). CIEL informed them that the IFC was planning to make a $55 million loan to NSEL. The infusion of cash would allow NSEL to expand its plantations and construct an ethanol plant near Chichigalpa. CIEL saw an opening. The environmental assessments that NSEL carried out for its application to the IFC had examined only the impact of the ethanol plant itself, not health, labor, or environmental conditions in the surrounding villages. Due diligence had not been done to communities like Goyena, and no acknowledgment had been made of the growing kidney disease crisis, even though NSEL's own company doctors had been seeing it spread firsthand. This seemed to CIEL like something the CAO would want to know about.

In 2008, CIEL submitted a grievance to the CAO on behalf of the residents of Goyena and ASOCHIVIDA. The grievance made a disparate set of claims, alleging violations of people's "right to freedom of association, right to safe and healthy working conditions, right to health, and right to water."[23] It accused the IFC of failure "to assure itself that NSEL's community engagement led to broad community support for the project"; failure "to ensure local disclosure of NSEL's social and environmental assessment"; and failure "to conduct the necessary due diligence of NSEL's environmental and social track record."[24] The grievance told about the deaths of farmers' cattle due to contaminated groundwater; about a blockage of paths and roadways connecting villages that limited freedom of association; about poor flood control; about damage to small farms and gardens; about air pollution from pesticides and burning sugar; *and* about suspected kidney disease. It is not clear either from the wording of this document or my subsequent discussions with those involved that the complainants were interested in using the CAO grievance mechanism only to address kidney disease. The section of the grievance that lists "desired remedies" separates the demands of "all complainants" from those of "former NSEL workers." The one conviction that all parties shared was an intimate, historically informed knowledge of the ground: a sense that the damage wrought by sugarcane plantation agriculture had become intolerable.

The 2008 grievance resulted in a CAO-sponsored mediation between the complainants and the company. By the time the mediation began, the people of Goyena, most of whom had never been employed by NSEL but who did claim that their cattle and soil and crops had been damaged by the company's activities, were no longer involved in the process. The circumstances surrounding this are still hotly debated. Some residents I interviewed alleged that bribery and intimidation by the state and NSEL played a role, but I have no concrete evidence of that. What the eventual exclusion of the Goyena complainants does illustrate is a point highlighted elsewhere in anthropological scholarship on agrarian struggles for social recognition, namely, that any nominal citizenship rights that might come with modern democratic statehood are tenuous for groups, particularly Afro-Latinx or Indigenous groups, whose very presence presents a challenge to national narratives of modernity.[25]

By late 2008, ASOCHIVIDA and NSEL had negotiated a plan to appoint a US-based research team to study the kidney disease problem.[26] Both sides scored this a success. The disease eventually known as CKDnt started making national and international headlines. Parallel research in neighboring El Salvador and Costa Rica, as well as India and Sri Lanka, turned up similarly alarming rates of illness. Almost without fail, journalists reported the story as a case of occupational injury. Nonworkers tended to be depicted as grieving widows or children. Reading these stories, it is difficult to discern that the landscape also included groups like the people of Goyena, with deep ancestral ties to this land.

After the mediation process began, ASOCHIVIDA's membership swelled from just a few dozen to over two thousand, thanks in large part to the group's ability to be a convincing producer of documents. ASOCHIVIDA helped potential members gather evidence of employment by NSEL or one of its subcontractors and obtain written evidence of CKDnt diagnosis. Benefits for members include access to subsidized medicine, clothing, and microcredit. By developing a savvy understanding of company, state, and epidemiological documentary practices, ASOCHIVIDA has succeeded beyond most everyone's expectations. That said, ASOCHIVIDA remains a community formed around a narrowly defined pathology, which allows it to make limited claims on the corporation. Nearly all its activities continue to be routed through the figure of the CKDnt patient and ex-worker.

Since 2008, NSEL has helped to fund and promote ASOCHIVIDA's efforts to help CKDnt patients and their families. While it initially disavowed a con-

nection between labor and CKDnt, the company has now made the protection of workers central to its corporate social responsibility platform. This has paid dividends. During the period of my fieldwork, NSEL received more than $18 million from Proparco, the private lending arm of the French international development agency, partly because of the company's commitment to "responsible" sugar production.[27] The CAO grievance process seems to have empowered actors like the members of ASOCHIVIDA, even as it has allowed NSEL to establish its bona fides as a good corporate citizen. NSEL portrays its participation in the mediation process as a sign of its commitment to worker welfare. In 2018, the company was certified fair trade.[28] If you buy the fair trade version of its signature product, Flor de Caña rum, in your local shop, you can thank the members of ASOCHIVIDA (and the people of Goyena) for the privilege.

Mechanisms and Blessings

In 2013, the IFC was preparing a second multimillion-dollar loan, this time for the Montelimar Corporation, the smallest of Nicaragua's four sugar companies. The Montelimar loan was announced shortly after the mediation between ASOCHIVIDA and NSEL concluded.[29] Remarkably, given what had happened at NSEL, the section of the IFC's environmental and social review document that deals with the question of "community health, safety and security" states that "Montelimar's operations have limited potential impacts on a sparsely populated area in the vicinity of cane growing and the Montelimar mill." The initial Montelimar loan documents make no mention of community concerns about agrochemical usage, about access to clean and abundant water, or about CKDnt—even though the epidemic had been underway for nearly a decade leading up to the loan's approval, and the loss of these natural resources had been underway for much longer. In fact, in the IFC's initial disclosures regarding its Montelimar loan, the section on broad community support states that "Broad Community Support is not applicable for this project."[30]

When she learned of the IFC's plans, Jane Bernstein traveled to Montelimar. Along with Saúl and the two Don Alvaros, she accompanied workers and community members in meetings and conducted interviews, replicating the work she had done in Goyena and Chichigalpa. After about six months, residents decided to form their own organization, which they called AMBED. AMBED filed its CAO grievance in 2015. As in the 2008 NSEL grievance, this one demanded assistance from the company for CKDnt-affected workers seeking social security benefits and work records, but the grievance went well beyond working conditions. It mentioned damage to soil, air, and water due to

pesticide application and poor management. It demanded that independent water quality studies be conducted. In addition, it requested documentation of ancestral land tenure. Since many residents had lived for generations on land owned by the company or its antecedents (the entity now known as the Montelimar Corporation has only owned the plantation since 2000), they risked summary evictions as the plantation expanded its holdings. Finally, the complaint demanded that the company "recognize that all of us have the right to live a dignified life in a healthy environment."[31]

When I first met her over Skype in 2017, Jane was quick to tell me that "*they* [Jane's Nicaraguan collaborators from AMBED] chose the name." She assured me that even though the name invoked the blessing of a Christian God, AMBED was not church affiliated in any way. She implied with her tone that it was fine with her if I wasn't church affiliated either. I knew what she meant. She was speaking to me in a particular kind of gringa-to-gringo code: a gestural language often adopted by North Americans of a secular humanist stripe who come to places like Nicaragua with aid and solidarity in mind. We had to acknowledge the Christian valence of AMBED's name, it seemed, but we did not need to account for it, much less espouse it, even if we wanted to work with those who united under it. The members of AMBED were not out to convert anyone, least of all the wealthy, white *internacionalistas* who were there to help.[32]

But Nicaragua is what the southern American author Flannery O'Connor would call a "Christ-haunted" country.[33] In everyday conversations, phrases like "La sangre de Cristo!" (The blood of Christ!) stand in for what in English vernacular might simply appear as "Wow!" O'Connor was not herself an activist or even much of a progressive humanitarian. For a start, her misgivings about the civil rights movement in her home state of Georgia and the derogatory descriptions of Black characters in her fiction make her a somewhat displeasing critical interlocutor. Like me, she inherited the racial privilege that trickled down from a southern plantation society. Still, her observation that "the Southerner, who isn't convinced of it, is very much afraid that he may have been formed in the image and likeness of God" rings true as I think about my internal ambivalence about the status and staying power of blessings from God, or what O'Connor would call "grace," in the sugarcane zone.[34] For O'Connor, God's grace was not mechanical but mysterious. That mystery was not something one could unpack; it was the condition of haunting itself.

CKDnt seems plenty complex, plenty mysterious, without having to bring grace into the picture. The edifice of a certain kind of critically engaged scholarship is constructed of neat, discrete categories of acting and being, including a bifurcation between "traditional," "conservative" religious belief and

"progressive" political practices.[35] In describing AMBED, one could craft a believable tale about a poor and injured community rising up against the industry that harmed it, marshaling science and law and the left-wing sympathies of people like Jane and me to its side. The problem is that such a tale would not be the full story. It would not be false per se, but telling it would reinforce a view of the sugarcane industry and the communities that surround it as ecologically and socially separate, and of Christianity as an ethical adjunct to grassroots organization. AMBED's insistence on grounding its grievances in a Christian ethos offers lessons for understanding not just the realities of contemporary sugarcane production but also the planetary crisis in which sugarcane production is implicated.[36] In other words, knowledge of the ground is bound up in the unknowable mysteries of divine blessings, or grace.

The linguistic anthropologist Paul Kockelman offers a useful way of thinking about this in his accounts of landslides in highland Guatemala (where land degradation is being hastened by climate change). He notes that divine agency is present in Q'eqchi' explanations for the causes of environmental degradation, but "grace," including in its Christian valence, is also invoked in Q'eqchi' attempts to mitigate it. For Kockelman, grace is "a kind of ethical and practical caring for those whose lives have been degraded, or who live amongst degradation."[37] The "blessing" in AMBED's name thus points to another side of the story of labor, environment, and health. In the increasingly evangelical Christian-leaning world of the Global South, including Central America, blessings can be material rewards, but they can also be less tangible signs of grace—strengthened family or social ties, opportunities for self-refashioning, or simply moments of recognition.[38]

Assembling AMBED

Javier Cáceres was a devout evangelical Christian and former sugarcane worker. He was, in his own telling, "blessed" to have been rescued by God and brought into the evangelical church, which had helped men like him, Don Alvaro Torres, and Don Alvaro Guerrero give up alcohol and rededicate themselves to their families. Javier was one of dozens of AMBED members whose thoughts kept coming back to the mystery of one particular blessing—the one that came via the World Bank. The World Bank was not an unfamiliar figure in Pacific coastal Nicaragua. Its blue-and-white logo adorned projects that had benefited local communities in many ways. Most anywhere international development programs happened—say, the building of a school or the improvement of a

hospital—that name, Banco Mundial, was likely to be invoked on the day that a mayor or national assembly member cut the ribbon.

What reason would the Bank have for giving a loan to the Montelimar Corporation? Javier asked me and the other men seated outside a small tortilla stand in El 54, a scattered group of houses located around kilometer 54 of the road between San Rafael del Sur and Pochomil. The corporation was already rich—rich enough, in fact, to do its own occasional community-minded deed, like when its engineers had installed communal wells in a few villages some years back, or when it paid for the painting of one of the local schools. These and other corporate social responsibility projects were well advertised when they happened, and images of their completion were circulated in the company's public relations materials and in the Nicaraguan trade magazine *Azúcar*, a publication that contained page after page of testimonials about the blessings that accrued to those who kept the faith with the economic and social potential of industrial sugarcane.

The men sitting in the shade eating tortillas with a salty cottage cheese called *cuajada* and drinking watery, sugary coffee nodded their heads. The only explanation was that the company was *not* in fact blessed. The company must have seized World Bank money that rightly should have gone to the people affected by the CKDnt epidemic. As they waited for that Sunday's AMBED general assembly meeting to begin, Javier and his friends continued to speculate on the nature of international development finance. At the assembly, they would be reminded by AMBED leaders and CAO representatives, not for the first time, that the loan was not ever meant for the community. It was always meant for the company.

AMBED's general assemblies were always held on Sundays. During the planting and harvesting season, Sunday was the one day of the week that sugarcane plantation workers did not go to the fields. It was also the one day each week when people with late-stage CKDnt did not go to Managua to receive hemodialysis treatments. So two Sundays a month, members would pile into the beds of rented pickup trucks and head for El 54. Early in the morning, before the sun and humidity got overwhelming, the setting felt pastoral. The ridge afforded a distant view of the sugarcane fields, stretching on a clear blue morning to the Pacific Ocean.

Assemblies were scheduled to begin at 8:00 a.m., but in typical Nicaraguan fashion, most attendees didn't start arriving until at least half past that hour. Business would not really begin until Doña Iris arrived. Doña Iris was AMBED's elected secretary, and her position made her responsible for taking

attendance and collecting (or attempting to collect) the twenty córdobas each member was asked to contribute to defray the costs of the collective transport and other group activities. When AMBED was founded, twenty córdobas equated to a little over fifty US cents, but even though the figure seemed nominal, more than a few members declined to pay, citing financial hardship. As with the World Bank loan, many others questioned how that money was being spent, and on whom. These financial questions would dog AMBED for the duration of its existence and would lead to the fracture of its leadership on multiple occasions.[39]

When AMBED entered into the grievance process, the group agreed to certain constitutive rules, devised in consultation with representatives of the CAO. Regular meetings were central to establishing AMBED as a bona fide community organization. By October 2015, some seven hundred people had joined, electing a six-member board of directors, including the two Don Alvaros and Doña Iris. Within the space of just over a year, AMBED had become a player in the workings of supranational development finance. After more than a year of assessment and preliminary meetings, in January 2017, the CAO initiated a formal process of mediation between AMBED and the Montelimar Corporation. This mediation, or *mesa de dialogo* (literally, "dialogue table"), would be chaired by an independent international lawyer hired by the CAO, and it would feature a series of regular, closed-door meetings between AMBED's representatives and Montelimar plantation management. In the weeks between official mediation sessions, AMBED was expected to continue holding its biweekly general assemblies (figure 1.2).

This was what made Doña Iris's careful register of attendance so important. Once the dialogue began, AMBED had to repeatedly attest to the CAO, to the Montelimar Corporation, and to itself that its membership was robust, active, and faithful to the mediation process. According to AMBED's bylaws, any person who failed to show up for more than two consecutive meetings would forfeit their membership and, as the leaders consistently reminded those who attended each meeting, they would forfeit their opportunity to reap any benefits wrought from the mediation.

I began my research at Montelimar roughly six months after the mediation began. Though I asked to be allowed to observe the mediation sessions, I was not particularly surprised when my requests were quietly ignored by the CAO and the legal representatives of both AMBED and the Montelimar Corporation. For the duration of my time studying CKDnt in Nicaragua, I would be observing the process from a distance, and after all, the general assembly meetings seemed like a fruitful and appropriate venue for ethnography. What could

FIGURE 1.2 An AMBED general assembly, 2017. Photo by the author.

be more attractive to an anthropologist interested in health and environmental activism than a meeting? At the general assemblies, I could observe what anthropologists call "biological citizenship" emerge in nearly real time, watching as a group of individuals coalesced around a common medical condition![40] Grassroots environmental health activism and robust democratic deliberation seemed right there. Though my hopes were high, they were misguided.

The AMBED general assemblies didn't just start late. They weren't plagued only with the problem of members refusing to pay their twenty-córdoba contribution. While meetings were potentially spaces for integrating poor, marginalized, and chronically ill individuals into the future-oriented, liberal posture of development finance and corporate social responsibility, those same individuals—people like Javier Cáceres and his friends—dealt daily with what Zoë Wool and Julie Livingston call the "unproductive dead ends of a toxic or melancholic present."[41] To be asked to pay even a nominal membership fee in order to reap some small portion of the millions in World Bank loan money seemed to be too much for many. AMBED's leaders spent much of their time

looking for ways to keep members faithful to the idea that a closed-door mediation process orchestrated by a foreign lawyer might lead to more meaningful and lasting blessings, if not for the members, then for their families and communities. Those who attended the assemblies were constantly asking themselves whether it was possible, or desirable, to collectively organize for a better future in a context in which most of the people involved—including nearly every person in the organization's principal leadership—were facing a premature death.

It became apparent over the course of the general assembly meetings I attended that AMBED was anything but a thriving organ of liberal democratic action. Attendance at the assemblies peaked early in the dialogue process, when over three hundred people had gathered to be counted among those affected by the epidemic. In early 2017, AMBED and Montelimar signed an agreement that achieved some important goals. The company agreed to provide funding for some 120 CKDnt-affected former workers to open a textile cooperative. The company also agreed to provide food aid, transportation, and a small stipend to workers with CKDnt who needed dialysis, and logistical and clinical support to those who were awaiting approval for pensions from the national social security scheme. Only patients who had worked for at least two years in the plantation since the Montelimar Corporation purchased it in 2002 were qualified for these benefits.[42] The words *pesticide*, *water*, *land*, *fumigation*, and *dignity* are absent in that 2017 agreement, though it does state that the Montelimar Corporation's corporate social responsibility strategy includes "the Environment" as a "central pillar."[43]

Saúl, Don Alvaro Torres, and Don Alvaro Guerrero were all too aware that even if they attended the assemblies, men like Javier Cáceres still had their doubts about the whole business. AMBED's leaders would take turns at the microphone begging for patience, commitment, and sacrifice from those who had showed up. Much of the assembly's biweekly program involved a litany of AMBED's achievements in the CAO-brokered mediation sessions, but after coming to a few, even I grew weary of recording the same list of benefits and concessions, and I started to sympathize with those who wondered whether this amount of paperwork, registration, and just plain waiting around was worth it.

There is an easy critique of the bureaucratic formalities to which AMBED's leadership subjected itself and its members. In the eyes of a large corporation and of the World Bank, social collectives do not exist without the evidence documented in attendance registers, account books, and minutes. The "social" in "corporate social responsibility" had to be constantly performed and verified,

much as faithful commitment in Christian communities must be performed, if only to preemptively justify the blessings that might later accrue to the sanctified.[44] None of the things that preexisted AMBED—people's deep ties to the land on which they lived, the bonds of kinship that connected individuals across villages, a decades-long history of labor, not to mention shared recognition of the impact of a mass epidemic—seemed to be enough to establish that there was a collective desire for dialogue, or change, or even recognition. The formality of general assemblies was necessary for turning a dispersed array of individuals into a recognizably social entity, an outside to which the corporation could turn its responsible attention. But even if AMBED often acted as a vehicle for funneling development dollars to deserving hands, it faced the greater challenge of constantly demonstrating to its own wavering membership that it was more than just a formalized stakeholder group.

Returning Documents to the Ground

In the work that took place outside the general assemblies, AMBED's leaders used their knowledge of the ground to do something both more ambitious and less legible to the CAO and the international legal watchers who would verify the group's legitimacy. A final element of the 2017 agreement included the invitation to AMBED to "publicize [the] existence and function" of the Montelimar Corporation's internal grievance mechanism.[45] The medium of this grievance mechanism was a standard form that bore an eerie resemblance to those filled out years before by the Sutiaba farmers in Goyena. Each month, Don Alvaro Torres would present these forms to the company, whose representatives would give updates on their efforts at finding resolutions through mediation.

To be clear, the 2017 agreement did not create the internal grievance mechanism. Rather, in the agreement, AMBED committed to making its members aware of the grievance mechanism's existence. For the corporation, this likely meant that AMBED would be testifying to its members that Montelimar was a responsible partner dedicated to resolving community problems. For AMBED, this section of the agreement opened space to expand the range of issues to which the company might respond. It allowed AMBED to work as something more than a conduit for channeling transnational loans into corporate social responsibility projects. That clause, rather innocuous on the page, became an invitation to the two Don Alvaros and Saúl and me to get in the Hyundai and do some fieldwork.

That fieldwork is the basis for most of the next five chapters, but here is an early example of how a visit might proceed. We came to the village of El Popol

in July 2017 to meet a man with a known case of CKDnt. Though the man we sought was not at home, we were invited into the house of one of his neighbors, Doña Patricia, a woman of about thirty who informed us that she had an uncle and a cousin who were also affected. By the end of the day, one CKDnt case had turned into four others. In these visits, Don Alvaro Torres usually was the one who took it upon himself to inform those we met about the internal grievance mechanism. Sure enough, Doña Patricia had her own grievance. She had been visited some months back by a surveyor from the company, who had provided her with a map of her house lot. Everyone in El Popol got one of these. They were told that these documents would allow them to formalize their land tenure.

El Popol, like many other villages we visited, is inhabited by people whose ancestors were initially given land by the company as part of their compensation for plantation work. Their land had never been legally distinguished from plantation land. But when people in El Popol took their new land surveys to the municipal authority, their documents were not recognized. Doña Patricia was told she would have to pay to have a state cadastral surveyor confirm the findings. On the day of our visit, Don Alvaro helped her fill out the small grievance form and arranged a community meeting for the following weekend to document other similar cases. Over the course of several visits to El Popol, AMBED's leaders collected other grievances, about a lack of steady domestic water supply due to the company's extensive well and dam system, field supervisors who withheld wages without cause, and, of course, the abiding problem of aerial pesticide application.

Montelimar's internal grievance mechanism provides space for testimonies and allegations. It does not promise transparent resolutions in all cases. Indeed, the 2017 agreement states that while AMBED may collect complaints from any member of any plantation community, "With regard to the content of the response provided, the [Montelimar Corporation] is only required to provide such information to AMBED for complaints coming from former workers who are members of AMBED, not when complaints are submitted by active workers or members of the community who are not former workers."[46] The internal grievance mechanism is framed here as open to anyone, while transparent resolution of grievances is only guaranteed to those recognized as workers.

Despite this limitation, AMBED continued collecting and submitting complaints from anyone. It seemed to be both abiding by the terms of the agreement (to publicize the grievance mechanism) and pushing beyond its strict, binary labor-management configuration. AMBED did this with good reason. While the company alone was asked to answer for some of the grievances—specifically the pesticide issue—many of them had ramifications

beyond the remit of corporate social responsibility, implicating local and state government agencies from the water utility to the land office to the Ministry of Health and the National Institute of Social Security. For AMBED, the corporate grievance mechanism became a way of asserting rights and demanding accountability from other powerful actors (government deputies, municipal authorities, and, it seems, sympathetic anthropologists), and even of discovering other documentary mechanisms (the cadastral survey, the clinical record, the letter of complaint to an elected representative). The mechanism converted knowledge of the ground into transferable paper form, making it legible but not reducible to the language of bureaucracy. In this way, AMBED's work became a version of what Kregg Hetherington calls "guerrilla auditing." The group actively blurred lines of accountability and expanded the scope and number of problems that might come into public view.[47]

What is noteworthy about this kind of bureaucratic mobilization is the way in which it uses a kind of associative logic to highlight links between problems (and people) that the company, the CAO, and the state might see as categorically different. For example, while Montelimar owned or controlled nearly all the land that surrounded most villages, waterways are public property under Nicaraguan law. One complaint Don Alvaro put in his own name outlines a concern that aerial fumigation was penetrating a municipal reservoir located in the middle of a cane field. This reservoir served the residents of a nearby town center. When AMBED began to investigate, residents in El Popol, which is located between the reservoir and the town center, pointed out that while their houses sat along the route of the potable water pipes, they were not actually served by the municipal water system. Villagers in El Popol instead relied on water from a nearby river, whose quality was the purview of the national environment ministry rather than the municipality. What began as a process of documentation under the corporate grievance process opened up potential avenues of documentation by other routes.

In order to function, the internal grievance mechanism required the kind of groundwork that Jane and her American cohorts, the people of Goyena, and the ASOCHIVIDA members had done years earlier in the NSEL case. The documentation they amassed back then was collected in order to open a case, to jump-start the CAO's more formal global grievance mechanism. For AMBED, the groundwork continued after the CAO mechanism had already been engaged. In a reversal, AMBED was turning local, anecdotal documentary work—work that is supposed to culminate in a global, instrumental, institutional response—into the outcome of that very response. The collection of simple complaint forms permitted AMBED to ask what Nicholas Shapiro,

Nasser Zakariya, and Jody Roberts call "the question before the question," the kind of question that precedes the scientific study or legal adjudication of things like the role of toxic chemicals or other working conditions in causing injury. AMBED was just as dedicated to keeping alive concerns about land tenure and water access and household garden diversity as it was about accounting for people stricken by CKDnt.[48]

There was another reason why AMBED insisted on taking its work beyond the strict labor-management framework and including other community members. Like most evangelical-leaning organizations in Nicaragua, AMBED's leaders believed that grace and blessings from God could come to anyone, regardless of their work history or their connection to a particular corporation. Through a combination of faith and groundwork, they showed how the ostensibly controlled and closed system of CAO-sponsored grievance-making and mediation could actually be treated as an open system. For AMBED, that system had potential for reconfiguration, and for the inclusion of people who might otherwise look like outsiders to the plantation economy.[49]

Nonsecular Accountability

Moving between knowledge of the ground and the documentation demanded in liberal models of grievance and mediated resolution, AMBED developed its own method of what Fortun calls "looping," working back and forth between scales and epistemic forms.[50] Its leaders recognized that these scales and forms only partially include one another. Documentation does not necessarily lead to accountability, and knowledge of the ground does not always need to be codified into documents. Even though they kept adding to the list of things the corporation and the World Bank should recognize, and even though CKDnt remained the galvanizing issue, AMBED's leaders insisted on pulling the conversation away from clean causal explanations and into the murky waters where biofuel, land grabs, pesticides, and water quality mingled with biomarkers, clinics, and pharmaceuticals, all cloaked in the possibility of blessings from God.

The agreements brokered by the CAO between groups like AMBED and corporations like Montelimar reflect what Yusoff calls the "recuperative logic" of growth-oriented development, in which actions for redress are precisely calculated to counterbalance harm. Such logic runs headlong into the altogether less reductive economy of blessings—those favors whose value is indeterminate and difficult to reciprocate. AMBED's name, Bendición de Dios, is not simply an invocation of a higher power but a recognition that some gifts cannot be repaid through the recuperative mechanisms of law or corporate social responsibility.

For Yusoff, these include the perverse gifts of late capitalism: "[ocean] acidification . . . extinction, sterility . . . and toxicity."[51] Figuring out what is owed in return for such gifts required AMBED to take the tools of liberal citizenship and fuse them with knowledge of the ground, moving with a pinch of grace.

The invocation of God's blessing in AMBED's name might be a claim to a kind of self-awareness, a sort of ready-made package for the group, an ethos and a telos rolled into one. But when I went back and started over again to think about it, the name AMBED started to appear more like a question the group posed to itself. The organization started to seem less a community of stakeholders dedicated to pushing discrete shared interests than an unsettled assembly of people who genuinely wondered both what had happened in the past that led them to the CKDnt epidemic and what the future might hold. The thing about blessings and divine grace is that they are mysterious, haunting. It is never certain who will be blessed, or why.[52]

Instead of thinking of AMBED as a group of issue-oriented activists who passively accepted the mechanical logic of liberal accountability, I came to think of it as representing a nonsecular approach to accountability. Nonsecular accountability assumes that what links powerful groups like corporations to marginalized and exploited ones like those who reside in Montelimar's villages are grounded social relationships, rather than the abstract structural positions described in legal documents. Frustratingly for those (including self-appointed solidarity figures like Jane Bernstein and myself) who would have wanted to see a clear, class-based, anticorporate movement spring up in the wake of the CKDnt epidemic, it did not. Rather than accept the sharp distinction between corporation and "community" now so prominent in both ideal imaginaries of the rural peasant activist and corporate social responsibility initiatives, nonsecular accountability works on the assumption that a simple transfer of wealth is not enough to ensure mutual recognition.[53] Any mutual recognition between exploiter and exploited must come along with a recognition of the irrevocable damage to the ground on which they both stand. AMBED's appeal to the possibility of a blessing is thus a quiet refusal of the possibility of a liberal settling of accounts. Like evangelical Christianity itself, nonsecular accountability takes the toxicity of the present as its starting point.[54]

Nonsecular accountability depends on the deliberate effort to establish connections, in AMBED's case, between events like pesticide poisoning and kidney epidemics, and between the productive work of growing sugarcane and the reproductive work of making persons. Nonsecular accountability, then, means not just reliable and loyal attendance at meetings, though it is that. It is not just confidence that with enough documentation, recognition of harm will follow,

though it is that. Nonsecular accountability is a form of pragmatic action in which evidence is always accreting and eroding, materially represented in something like the piles of community claim forms I glimpsed at Don Silvio's house back in Goyena. Nonsecular accountability is also aware of its own fleetingness. AMBED itself was far from stable. Its registered membership steadily eroded, dues were constantly in short supply, and its leadership became mired, both materially and socially, as it attempted to keep the work alive. In point of fact, AMBED never was legally registered as a nongovernmental organization in Nicaragua. The paperwork kept getting bogged down in the offices of National Assembly members and notaries.[55]

Nonsecular accountability is not a model for how to restore life after catastrophe but an invitation to work together to face the uncertainty that persists. It provides a counterpoint to the individualistic and transactional logics of twenty-first-century corporate plantation capitalism; to the narrowly medical versions of therapeutic or biological citizenship elaborated in the anthropology of global health; and, it must be added, to the romantic visions of popular anticapitalist mobilization lauded in much critical scholarship on rural social movements and environmental politics.