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BLACK BOGOTÁ: THE POLITICS AND EVERYDAY EXPERIENCE OF RACE IN
POST-CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM COLOMBIA

by

Fatimah E. Williams

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Dissertation Director:
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This dissertation is an ethnographic examination of the lived experience of multicultural constitutional reform and juridical recognition among black populations in Colombia. The Constitutional Reform of 1991 and subsequent Law 70 of 1993 – also called the Law of Black Communities – made Colombia one of the first countries in Latin America to recognize black people as a distinct cultural group and grant them rights to collective territories, political representation, and cultural protections. However, my research reveals that Colombian blackness is enshrined in the new constitution as “black communities” (*comunidades negras*), an ethnic identity and political subjectivity limited to the rural Colombian Pacific region, subsistence practices, and cultural traditions. Grounded in anthropological theory and methods, *Black Bogotá* compares collective and individual experiences of race in post-recognition Colombia among two distinct sets of black actors-- activists and capital city residents.

Among black activists, I found that the law’s focus on ethnicity and culture neutralized urban antiracist activism as it bolstered rural, grassroots movements that

could couch their claims in cultural difference, ethnic identity, and territory. These rural movements found greater traction within legal discourses on blackness, and later among transnational activist communities when they mobilized around the state's failure to protect their legal rights. Meanwhile, my interviews and participant observation with black residents of Bogotá reveal that they creatively conceptualize black identity, citizenship, and race from their positions as professionals, partners in interracial relationships, internal migrants to the capital, and parents rearing black children in a predominately Euro-Andean city, with much resistance to grassroots movement and legal constructions of Colombian blackness and black social issues. This project explores blackness as a cultural and a legal phenomenon, showing how race operates in daily social life outside of sites of predominately black populations, at the margins of state politics and law, and in conjunction with global discourses of rights and black identity. This research contributes to Latin American scholarship on race, ethnographic studies of transnational activism, and recent anthropological debates on the extent to which law can address social difference and inequality.

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Chapter 1
Latin American Multicultural Constitutionalisms: A Theoretical Framework

In the middle of dinner, a grey haired white man with a warm smile, turned to me and asked, “What do you do here in Bogotá?” There I was seated at a beautifully arranged formal dining table sandwiched between my Afro-Colombian dinner party hosts and several of their friends, an eclectic bunch of middle aged white and black Colombians. We were celebrating the return of my host’s best friend to Bogotá after a long stay in Italy with a savory Chocó style *sancocho*, a typical mixed meat stew with carrots, *ahuyama*, yucca, and hard smoked cheese. In this intimate setting among people I had just met I was nervous to introduce the topic of race and Colombian blackness so I briefly replied, “I research the Afro-Colombian social movement and state recognition of black identity and black rights.” Discontented with my response he hastily rattled off a series of questions, “What black movement? Who are Afro-Colombians? There are no blacks here because everyone is mixed.” By this point all conversations at the table ceased and everyone’s attention turned to us. I explained that with the 1991 reform of the Colombian constitution Afro-Colombian organizations began to organize around issues of land rights, social exclusion, and political participation.

Red-faced he sniped, “There may be other forms of discrimination... against Jews, gays, and women perhaps, but there’s no *racial* discrimination. Here we treat everyone the same. This is not the United States!” The other guests fidgeted uncomfortably in their seats as tension increasingly filled the room. While a number of them chimed in to agree with the man, the Afro-Colombian guests largely remained silent. As a black woman from the United States researching this topic in Latin America I

had grown accustomed to this type of response; still, it never ceased to take me off guard and leave me speechless. I was so glad when David, my friend who had invited me to this party at his mother-in-law's house, weighed in. He had grown up with diehard Afro-Caucano Marxist activists for parents and spent his late teens coming of age in New York City when groups like Public Enemy and N.W.A. provided the soundtrack of urban black life. He unabashedly explained that this was the very reason why an Afro-Colombian movement was necessary, to show Colombians how they perpetuate racism with comments and attitudes that deny Afro-Colombians their blackness and ignore black experiences of racial discrimination. Once again a lovely social outing turned into a heated debate about the black experience and the existence of racism in Colombia.

This experience had a profound impact on the way I would think about my research and what it means to be black in Bogotá and in Colombia more generally. I had been living in Bogotá for about eight months researching the Afro-Colombian social movement and post-constitutional reform multicultural politics. It had been nearly two decades since the ratification of a pathbreaking law (Law 70 of 1993) which made Colombia one of few countries in the region to recognize blacks as an ethnic group and to grant them a series of cultural, ethnic and territorial rights. Since 2005 I had observed social movement leaders of Asociación de Afrocolombianos Desplazados (Association of Displaced Afro-Colombians, AFRODES), Cimarron Nacional, Organización de Barrios Populares (Organization of Popular Neighborhoods, OBAPO) and Proceso de Comunidades Negras (Process of Black Communities, PCN) organize across Colombia and in the United States, particularly in Washington, DC and New York City, concerning black social issues and the implementation of black rights outlined in Law 70.

Witnessing this time- and resource- intensive organizing process, I saw the extent to which activists work to break through hegemonic state policies, practices and discourses that deny Afro-Colombians full citizenship and inclusion. Day after day these activists work long days and nights on restricted budgets often from small, understaffed, cold offices in Bogotá to identify issues affecting black communities, document human rights violations, organize local organizational chapters across the country, retool their message in response to opposition, and build transnational advocacy networks with supporters in the US, Canada and Europe. Despite the great lengths Afro-Colombians activists work to cultivate ethno-racial social change in Colombia, discourses of racial equality, anti-racism, and black rights do not circulate throughout society nor are they embraced as a broad social concern. Instead, these issues remain under the purview of the state, interest groups and political institutions. Similarly, Gianpaolo Baiocchi (2005: 9-10) observes that in Brazil “the majority of the country’s citizens experience a disjuncture between formal democracy and actual, lived democracy.” In the case of Colombia, this claim can also be made about the disjuncture between the official espousal of multicultural politics and Afro-Colombian experiences of inclusion (and exclusion) in their everyday lives.

So I was left asking, what is the meaning of legal recognition and political mobilization, and what impact do they have on everyday life? What is the scope of political and legislative processes and of social movements on social change? Reflecting upon the dinner party, other personal encounters with racism, and the countless stories my Afro-Colombian friends and research participants would tell me about being black in Bogotá and Colombia more broadly, I was compelled to broaden my research question to consider Law 70 and Afro-Colombian political mobilization *alongside* the daily social

life of blacks residing in Bogotá. A study of political and legal reform cannot be divorced from the investigation of how these phenomena circulate in daily life and impact the human experience and dialogically how people engage, manipulate, subvert, and even dismiss them. It was not necessary for me to dig very deep to observe or gather narratives about race, blackness, and racism in everyday life – they were already present in my conversations and interviews with black *bogotanos* (residents of Bogotá) including activists, students, artists, restaurateurs, development workers, teachers, workers, mothers and fathers. Broadening the focus of my research allowed me to freely explore questions that emerged from my ethnographic research like, Does the recent political shift toward multiculturalism and black recognition have an effect on the daily lives of blacks in Bogotá? How do Afro-Colombians explain, understand, and manage the unpredictability of racism and others' interpellation of them as racial subjects? How do they navigate their tenuous racial-social position between social acceptance and discrimination, recognition and misrecognition, invisibility and visibility, inclusion and exclusion? How might ethnography help me theorize the disjuncture between formal politics and everyday social life? This manuscript is an attempt to explore these questions, linking official politics to everyday life.

1991 Colombian Constitutional Reform

By the 1990s most Latin American countries drafted new constitutions or substantially reformed existing ones to include the recognition of the cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity within the nation, hence departing from homogeneous conceptions of mestizo national identity and citizenship. Constitutional reform is both a political and

legal process that has consequences for nation building. These inclusive constitutions drafted with the broad participation of diverse social sectors and political groups provide a new participatory democratic model for state and nation building. In Colombia, the 1991 Constitution ushered in an era of multicultural politics, whereby a nation of mestizos became a multiethnic and pluricultural nation that “recognizes and protects the nation’s ethnic and cultural diversity” (Article 7, Colombian Constitution). For the first time the national charter recognized blacks as a distinct group with rights to cultural difference. Just two years after the reform of the national charter, Law 70 of 1993 legislated these new national ideals for Colombian blacks. The law concedes a range of cultural and civil rights to so called “black communities” (*comunidades negras*), which include collective land ownership, ethno-education, support for black economic and social development, the protection of black cultural identity and rights, and two seats in Congress for black representatives. In effect, this reform provided the political opening for Afro-Colombians to advance their activism, and along with Law 70, facilitated the making and consolidation of black social movements across Colombia. These important mechanisms of multicultural politics provided the legal and social discourses upon which Afro-Colombians could base their claims for citizenship, rights, and personhood.

Prior to this wave of “multicultural constitutionalism” (Bonilla Maldonado 2006; Van Cott 2000a), states in the region did not espouse a stated ethnic, cultural, or racial politics. This political opening in the form of multicultural politics came in stark contrast to longstanding ideologies of mestizo national identity, the invisibility of black people, and historical denial of racial difference and racism. In the wake of independence from Spain, new Latin American polities and their elites faced a crisis of national consolidation

and identity formation. Spain rejected Latin American born descendants of Spanish settlers for their racial and social distance from European-ness. *Criollos*, as these colony born offspring were called, were of mixed Spanish and indian or African parentage. Colombian criollos and elites could not fully assert themselves or the Colombia nation as racially pure and fully European. Hence, the elite opted to structure the nascent post-independence Colombian national identity around ideologies of race mixture (*mestizaje*) as opposed to racial segregation found in North America and Western Europe at the time.

Throughout the nineteenth century the close association of *mestizaje* (race mixture) and ‘equality’ gave the notion of ‘liberty’ a peculiar meaning in Colombia. “When the indigenous peoples were made ‘equals’, for example, they lost their protected status and with it the communal reserves that the Spanish Crown had recognized in order to prevent their total annihilation” (de Friedemann and Arocha 1995:64). Enslaved Africans and afro-descendants played a major role in fighting for Spanish colonies in the independence wars, however their military service was not compensated with immediate and complete emancipation (Lasso 2007). Instead, gradual emancipation was established through the Free Womb laws, whereby “children of slave mothers were born free as *libertos* or *manumisos* (manumitted ones)” (Andrews 2004:64). In Colombia, the Free Womb law did not go into effect until the end of the independence war in 1821 as incentive for slaves to continue fighting through the end of the war.

Republican era elites upheld the ideology of *mestizaje* as the vehicle for constructing a homogeneous society out of a diverse nation of criollos, mestizos (persons racially mixed with white and indigenous ancestry), indigenous people, and afro-descendants. Race mixture among Spanish, Africans and indians would erase so-called

degenerate elements from society that hinder new nations' approximation to modernity and progress, as exemplified by European and American nation-states of the time. Indians and blacks were a stain upon Latin America's ascension to power, intellectual progress, and cultural sophistication. In contradistinction to North American racial segregation, Latin American nations like Colombia relied on *mestizaje* as a nation-building project to create a mixed-race citizenry whereby races would become indistinguishable.

Accordingly, "distinctive cultural traits and identities existing in colonial Latin American had been integrated into a new hybrid type through miscegenation and assimilation" (Van Cott 2000a:43). This ideology was reflected in the former Colombian constitution of 1886 which "glorified as the goal of progress the conversion of Colombians into a single 'race', speaking one language and believing in a single God" (de Friedemann and Arocha 1995:65).

On the surface this approach to nation building appears to unify a society of diverse ethnic and cultural groups, however it failed to account for the persistent social significance of cultural difference and the uneven valuation some racial and cultural mixtures over others (Harrison 1995:55). Social inequalities and racial hierarchies existed alongside the construction of the *mestizo* nation and society's denial of racism (de la Cadena 2000b; Wade 1993a:19). "Society remained characterised [sic] by sharp racial, ethnic and class discrimination, yet the hegemonic discourse was of universal and undifferentiated citizenship, shared national identity and equality before the law" (Sieder 2002:4-5). This contradiction was further compounded by the spread of North American and European scientific racism and social Darwinism to Latin America. Latin American elite came into increased contact with North Americans and Europeans at the end of the

1800s to early 1900s when they began to increase their domestic exports overseas. There was an overwhelming desire on the part of these elite to whiten (*blanquear*) Latin American populations. To establish its place among other civilized, modern nations, new republics like Colombia advanced whitening projects that would rid the nation of its “backwardness” and underdevelopment. Scientific racism supported the beliefs that non-whites (indians, mulattos, mestizos, and blacks) were inferior to whites and were to blame for holding back the nation from progress and modernity. The republican elite and political leaders advanced various projects aimed at racially, culturally and aesthetically whitening the Colombian population and landscape. The whitening (*blanqueamiento*) projects included the promotion of European immigration, urbanization that mimicked European architecture and infrastructure, and eliminating racial categories from official records. To promote the whitening of the Colombian population the government passed immigration laws encouraging European immigration to Colombia (Law 114 of 1922).¹

Over time indigenous and black people became increasingly discontent with the myth of racial harmony and persistent practices of discrimination and economic and political exclusion. In some circles, mestizaje has been celebrated for rendering obsolete racial distinction and, by association, racialized discrimination, but the persistence of the myth of racial democracy demonstrates that the Colombian nation-state has not been able to reconcile its concomitant espousal of white supremacy with this ideal (Twine 1998). As such, the persistent belief in Latin American nation-states as racial democracies has undermined black political organizing and denied the existence of racialized inequalities (Andrews 1991; Winant 1994; Wright 1990)-- ideologies which scholars argue produced

¹ Colombian efforts to attract European immigrants were largely unsuccessful, despite promises of tax breaks and 20-year exemption from military service (Andrews 2004:136).

the “invisibility” of blacks in Latin American national identity, society and politics (Friedemann and Arocha 1984; MRG 1995). While some scholars argue that ideologies of racial democracy produce racial hegemony and thwart black mobilization (Hanchard 1994), others like Alejandro de la Fuente (1999) and Peter Fry (2000) suggest that racial democracy may provide Latin American societies and black social movements with a standard by which to evaluate progress toward racial equality and racial harmony. This lack of political and social discourse recognizing black citizenship and belonging had largely foreclosed the possibility for Afro-Colombians to articulate and make claims against their experiences of social and political exclusion, racial discrimination and second-class citizenship.² The incorporation of black people into the nation-state is often limited to the state’s adoption of black cultural expressions like dance and religion into the national identity. However, this process of folklorization tends to decontextualize black cultural forms by erasing their historical, cultural, and racial significance (Godreau 2002). So by the 1970s indigenous (and to a lesser extent black) campaigns for the recognition of cultural and ethnic difference, increased political participation and territorial rights were gaining in prominence across Latin America. Constitutional reforms of the late 1980s - early 1990s marked the re-definition of various Latin American states as multicultural and pluriethnic, however I join a league of scholars who question the extent to which “what is being advanced, is at least potentially, a radically new politico-legal order and conception of citizenship” (Sieder 2002:5).³

² Among justification, displacement of responsibility, and outright denial, Latin American elites and governments often deploy the belief that all Latin Americans are racially mixed to refute the existence of racism and racial discrimination in the region (Dulitzky 2005).

³ See also (Comaroff 2003; Hale 2002; Hale 2005; Povinelli 2002; Speed and Sierra 2005).

Scholars agree that the expansion of citizenship, rights, and political participation to previously marginalized groups was not the primary impetus behind constitutional reforms in Latin America (Arocha 1998; Van Cott 2000b; Wade 1995). They contend that Colombia and other Latin American states primarily endorsed multicultural reform to prove to the international community their commitment to democratic values like broadened political participation, increased government transparency, and expanded notions of citizenship and national identity, in light of their prior authoritarian, exclusionary and dictatorial regimes of governance (Van Cott 2000b; 2005; Yashar 1999). “These reforms are attributable to the interest in reforming the state to adjust to new global conditions, more than out of the will to accept ethnic and cultural diversity as a sign of modernity” (Iturralde, as cited in Van Cott 2000:51). Most states throughout the region were under pressure to make deep adjustments to their institutions. Powerful executive branches overshadowed the authority of weak judicial systems, military rule lingered on in state institutions and government operations, and despotism and cronyism plagued many Latin American states. “In many cases, political elites, international experts and common citizens perceived states to be over-centralized and inefficient; in others, a persistent institutional stalemate between branches of government required constitutional adjustment” (Van Cott 2000:51). Global political trends toward the recognition of indigenous rights, human rights, and anti-discrimination were important factors in Latin American constitutional reforms. Add to this trend the increased momentum in indigenous mobilizations (constituted from former peasant and agrarian movements of the 1970s) and the shift in international law and conventions to frame indigenous rights as human rights (Seider 2005), and the regional turn from mestizo

nationalism to multicultural politics had begun to take effect. Instruments like International Labour Organization Convention 169, multilateral development banks like Inter-American Development Bank and the World Bank, and international meetings like the 2001 World Conference Against Racism and its preparatory meetings all had a hand in bringing issues of discrimination, citizenship, and ethnic rights to the forefront of national politics in Latin America. Constitutional reform and multicultural politics in Latin America were, in large part, born out of pressure for states to conform to this paradigm shift in international political standards and culture as well as to remedy weak institutions of state governance.

The political mobilization and participation of previously marginalized groups in the reform process is a unique feature of this wave of constitutional reforms (Segura 2005; Van Cott 2000b; Van Cott 2005). Once-excluded groups participated in formal political structures for the redefinition and implementation of new rights, which helped to legitimize this wave of constitutional reforms. This participation was particularly important in Colombia where two major parties- Liberal and Conservative- historically monopolized state power since independence. The two parties signed a power sharing agreement known as the Frente Nacional (National Front) to last between 1958 and 1974, in which state control would alternate between the two parties for a period of 16 years. By the end of the 16-year period, two Liberal candidates and two Conservative candidates would have been elected to the presidency on a rotating basis. The goal of this pact was to end the period of La Violencia (1946-1957) that had ravaged Colombian politics and families, as brothers fought brothers under the strictly divided political landscape of Conservatives and Liberals. The vicious period of La Violencia may have

ended in 1957, but only to be replaced by other forms of political violence once the National Front began. The bipartisan power-sharing pact resulted in the exclusion of third parties, the criminalization of opposition, the rise in extralegal guerilla groups and civil unrest, and the further weakening of civil society.

Despite the agreement, three presidential candidates were assassinated during the National Front. There are at least two explanations for Colombian constitutional reform: one says that the administration promised constitutional reform to demobilizing guerilla groups as part of a negotiated peace process and the other emphasizes a student movement which led campaigns to instate the popularly elected National Constituent Assembly (ANC, by its Spanish acronym). Elected in December 1990, the ANC consisted of traditional political parties in addition to what political scientist Renata Segura (2005) calls “previously excluded groups,” which includes members of indigenous movements, the demobilized left wing guerilla group turned political party M-19, the leftist former guerilla group Unión Patriótica-Partido Comunista (Patriotic Union-Communist Party), and an evangelical Christian group Unión Cristiana. Despite the broad range of groups represented in the ANC, no Afro-Colombian representatives or organizations were elected to the popularly elected body. Afro-Colombian candidates, representing different sectors of the Afro-Colombian social movement, ran for seats on the ANC but none were elected (Arocha 1998; Restrepo 1997). Afro-Colombian issues narrowly made it into the reformed constitution, brought by an indigenous representative in the absence of an Afro-Colombian representative, and established in a Transitory Article (AT55) which would later be developed into the much-celebrated Law 70 of

1993.⁴ Between February 1991 and July 1991, when the new constitution was signed, the ANC drafted substantial reforms that redefined Colombian national identity and politics.

Transitory Article 55 of 1991 and Law 70 of 1993

Law 70 holds great prominence among scholars and the international community for its recognition of the existence of black people and black culture in Colombia. In a region that has been historically characterized by its denial of racial difference and racism, this legislation stands out as a (potentially) significant shift in state racial politics and the terms of citizenship and belonging. Law 70 goes further, however, to also grant a series of material rights to so-called “black communities” (*comunidades negras*). This extensive law consisting of eight chapters and 68 articles builds upon Transitory Article 55 (AT55) which appears in the reformed Colombian Constitution of 1991. AT55 acts as a placeholder in the constitution, mandating that a special commission, including black community leaders, draft a law within two years of the article’s ratification that would expand the central tenets of the article. Law 70 proposes to recognize collective land rights, protect cultural identity, and promote social and economic development among Colombia’s black communities. Its purported aim is to foster “real equal opportunity” for black communities among the whole of Colombian society. My aim is not to conduct an exhaustive review of Law 70, rather to discuss the purpose and scope of the law and how scholars have researched the law. Below is the text of Article 1 of Law 70, which outlines the purpose and scope of the law:

⁴ In a subsequent chapter I will discuss Afro-Colombian participation in the pre-Assembly election process and why they were not formally part of the ANC.

ARTICLE 1. The object of the present law is to recognize the right to collective property to black communities that have lived in unoccupied or unused lands (*tierras baldías*) of the rural, riverine zones along the Pacific Basin in accordance with their traditional production practices, as specified in the following articles. Also, the purpose of this law is to establish mechanisms for the protection of the cultural identity and the rights of black communities in Colombia as an ethnic group and to foster their economic and social development with the aim of guaranteeing that these communities obtain real conditions of equal opportunity before the rest of Colombian society.

According to the stipulations in Paragraph 1 of Transitory Article 55 of the Political Constitution, this law also applies to the unoccupied or unused, rural, and riverine zones occupied by black communities who practice traditional production practices in other areas of the country and abide by the requirements established in this law. (*author's translation*)

The remaining 67 articles of Law 70 establish the following for Colombia's black communities: communal or collective land rights; environmental protections on those lands; economic development rights, including funding and programs to support this development; and Afro-Colombian representation and participation in various levels of governance (from *consejos comunitarios* that administrate black collective lands to quotas for black representatives in the Colombian Congress.)⁵ With the region's turn to multicultural politics through the constitutional reform process, Colombia was the first country in the region to recognize Afro-Colombians as a "distinct cultural community" (Van Cott 2000a:49).⁶ "Of the fifteen Latin American countries that have implemented some type of multicultural citizenship reform, only Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua extend (some) collective rights to Afro- Latinos" (Hooker 2005:286).

⁵ See (Rapoport Center 2007) for a detailed discussion on the legal rights afforded to black communities and the challenges to the implementation of the law.

⁶ Ecuador is the second country to recognize black people as a distinct cultural community with the nation's Political Constitution.

Despite the range of rights promulgated in Law 70, most scholarly, public and social movement attention has been paid to one section of the law that grants “collective territorial rights to black communities that have inhabited the rural river basin zones of the Pacific Coast”. In particular, much attention has been paid to territoriality and black collective land rights (Ng’weno 2007b), internal displacement (Oslender 2007; Segura Escobar 2000), and economic development in the sites of black collective lands (Asher 2009; Escobar 2008). Recent research by Arturo Escobar and Kiran Asher has helped us understand the relationship between identity, nature and political economy as well as the relationship between state and grassroots approaches to development. The materiality of land and the right to land propels the Pacific region and issues related to territoriality onto the forefront of scholarship on Afro-Colombia and 1991 Colombian Constitutional Reform. This focus is well understood given the dispossession, extralegal violence, encroachment of large-scale agro-business, and general insecurity in the sites of “black communities” located in the Colombian Pacific region beginning in the mid-1990s. These issues are real and palpable, however I argue that this focus leaves other Afro-Colombian experiences largely underrepresented in discourse on black identity and black rights in Colombia.

In addition, scholarly focus on black collective lands limits our understanding of Colombian blackness and black social issues and political economy to the rural, riverine zones of the Pacific region. This focus reinforces the racist popular belief that black people belong solely to those isolated regions of the country where Afro-Colombians number in the majority and hold collective land titles, hence contributing to the spatial and social marginalization of black people in Colombia. If ethnographic study of black

Colombia (social movements, identity, and rights) is limited to the rural Pacific and to regional areas where there is minimal interracial contact we are left with a partial view of race and black experiences with citizenship, state politics, and inter-racial social relationships.

Few works have critiqued the terms of such constitutional recognition of black people in Latin America. While some scholars extol the symbolic significance of constitutions (Segura 2005; Van Cott 2005:830), other scholars are more skeptical of the type of recognition and citizenship extended to certain members of these previously marginalized groups. Hooker (2005) analyzes the distinction between indigenous and black collective rights within the framework of constitutional reform and multicultural citizenship in Latin America. She argues that indians have been more successful in gaining recognition and collective rights than Afro-Latinos because the multicultural citizenship regime is amenable to culture and ethnic based rights than for rights claims based on race and social exclusion. Afro-Latin Americans are limited in their ability to make claims to a distinctive cultural or ethnic group identity. One reason for this is the willingness on the part of Latin American publics and white elites to accept culture and ethnicity as basis for rights, and recalcitrance to confront issues of race, historical exclusion and racism. As such afrodescendant rights tend to be successful when they model indigenous claims to rights, and less so when they frame rights in terms of retribution for historical racial inequalities. In fact, it is those Afro-Latin American groups like the Garifuna of Honduras and Belize that claim autochthonous identity in addition to black identity who fair better in obtaining official recognition and rights (Anderson 2007). Ng'weno (2007a) offers a comparative analysis of Colombian

Constitutional Court's rulings on two cases involving black rights— in one case judges reject the racial framing for the defense of Afro-Colombian rights and in the other they accept this approach claiming that according to the law Afro-Colombians are not a racial group but an ethnic group. This inconsistent treatment of black racial identity and black rights in Colombia is an indication of the newness of this topic in the Colombian public and legislative spheres, unlike for indigenous populations. Throughout colonial and post-independence Latin America Indians have been treated as groups with distinct cultural and group identities. At certain historical moments Indians were considered a racial group and other times an ethnic group, but they have always been deemed different from the mestizo population and, due to the indigenismo movement, in need of state protection (De la Peña 2005). Although these constructions of Indianness were racist and patriarchal, they could most seamlessly be re-worked into new multicultural notions of citizenship based on cultural and ethnic difference. Prevailing ideologies of race and nation purport that Afro-Latin Americans have assimilated into mestizo culture and since abolition have enjoyed citizenship. However, this citizenship can best be described as “second-class citizenship” (Wade 1997:25-39) wherein black people were restricted from political participation, higher levels of education, and prestigious sectors of the Armed Forces (i.e., Navy), and deemed inferior to their white counterparts. Political scientist Juliet Hooker concludes that “while the goal of multicultural reform may have been the promotion of democratic legitimacy by remedying social exclusion, the criteria used to determine the appropriate subjects of collective rights have not been racial discrimination or socio-economic and political marginalization” (Hooker 2005:291) – thus leading to indigenous inclusion and black exclusion in new multicultural Latin American states.

Where it formerly had not existed, AT55 and Law 70 created space for public and state discourse on blackness and black rights. Scholars have shown how the constitutional reform process and the path from AT55 to Law 70 produced a new set of black political actors, including the Afro-Colombian social movement (Agudelo 2005; Castillo 2007; Wade 1995). Not only did this process produce a new set of political actors but it also gave way to new approaches to black identity, particularly the link between black identity and land, and led to a revival of black historical memory. Though the legislation is laudable for its paradigmatic shift from ignoring racial difference to the embrace of cultural and ethnic distinction, attention must be paid to the terms of recognition. The law narrowly defines black communities, therefore excluding whole segments of black populations in Colombia. The limited scope of “black communities” does not represent the diversity of Colombian blackness. Law becomes a hegemonic site for defining group identity because it codifies cultural production, practices and change into a static form.

There is also a spatial dimension to Law 70. The law links Colombian blackness to the Pacific region and to any other area where black people practice traditional production practices. Afro-Colombians who reside in other parts of Colombia (outside of the Pacific and Caribbean regions) and in urban areas (the antithesis of rural, riverine areas) are always evaluated in relationship to authentic spaces and practices of blackness such as those outlined in Law 70.

I argue that this juridical recognition ethnicizes Colombian blackness or, as Peter Wade describes it, “indigenizes” Colombian blackness (1995). Law 70 defines black people in Colombia as an ethnic group and as a community whose identity is tied to

tradition, land, and historical (subsistence) production practices. Law 70 links Colombian blackness to tradition and to notions of cultural authenticity that resemble indigenous identity claims. Rooting Colombian blackness and Afro-Colombian rights in ethnic identity and culture neutralizes Afro-Colombian claims to black racial identity and renders obsolete anti-*racist* black activism. This framing undermines black people's experiences of racial discrimination and demands for reparation of historical exclusion and slavery. Instead black people have the burden of proving their cultural distinction and group identity to be recognized as viable subjects of multicultural rights.

For the above reasons, the law falls short in ameliorating black social exclusion or creating “real equal opportunity” for black people in Colombia because it fails to represent the range of Colombian blackness. The law fails to encompass the everyday racial experiences of most Afro-Colombians, particularly those who live outside of the predominately black region of the Colombian Pacific and do not have a stake in black collective lands.

In an effort to examine the range of Afro-Colombian experiences with multicultural citizenship, I focus on those everyday experiences of black inclusion and exclusion that occur outside of the Colombian Pacific and outside the scope of rural black communities as defined in Law 70. This approach should not be misconstrued as undermining the important conversations and activism that surround issues of territoriality, insecurity, or political violence in Colombia. Rather, it should be understood as an extension of our investigation into the range of Afro-Latin American experiences with multicultural constitutional reform, particularly as they develop outside the mainstream sites of multicultural politics, law and activism. We have to look beyond

overt multicultural politics and law to understand experiences of multicultural citizenship.

Law in Everyday Life

I take the 1991 Constitution and Law 70 as the launching point to investigate how Afro-Colombians live and experience multicultural constitutional reform nearly twenty years after its establishment in Colombia. I define multiculturalism as a contemporary nation-building project of modern liberal democracies that purports to expand national identity and the basis of citizenship to previously marginalized groups through the recognition of the nation-state's ethnic, racial, and cultural groups and their related practices. While my aim is not to conduct a socio-legal analysis of the Constitution or Law 70, my goal is to examine the promise of multiculturalism as well as its impact and limits on bringing forth the political and social transformations necessary to establish full citizenship *and* personhood to Afro-Colombians. In doing so, I question the popular expectations of law and state politics to level social and racial inequity-- what some scholars have called "the fetishism of the law" (Comaroff 2003:457). Throughout this manuscript, I challenge the hegemony of politics and law as arenas of acceptable difference which subordinate alternative narratives of difference, social organization, and racial identification. How is blackness taken up in a post-reform society? How does blackness circulate in a post-multicultural reform society? And perhaps most importantly, what happens to the newfound visibility of and ruptures in silence concerning blackness in the decline of state endorsed multiculturalism? One significant way that I accomplish this analysis is by incorporating deep ethnographic data of conversations, oral histories, and participant observations conducted on the margins of

acceptability – where social movements act outside the limits of multicultural politics and Afro-Colombians produce creative flexible identities that do not conform to official recognized blackness.

Over 16 months of ethnographic and historic research in Bogotá, Colombia revealed that nearly twenty years after the establishment of multicultural politics, multiculturalism is limited in its ability to level racial inequality in daily social life. First, official discourses of racial equality, anti-racism, and ethno-racial rights do not circulate throughout society nor are they embraced as a broad social concern; rather, they remain under the purview of the state, social movements, and political institutions. Second, black “invisibility” remains a salient issue in certain social spaces and geographic places in Colombia and less so in others. This continued silence is due, in part, to the legal delimitation of blackness to finite places, and resounds in post-reform scholarship which overwhelmingly focuses on “black authenticity” (Restrepo 2004); black territories, nature, and development (Asher 2009; Escobar 2008; Ng'weno 2007b); and black social movements (Oslender 2004)- almost exclusively the *Proceso de Comunidades Negras*, or *Black Communities' Process*.⁷ Multiculturalism's uneven recognition of black citizenship, and most importantly black personhood, facilitates everyday practices of social, political, and economic exclusion for Afro-Colombians living in racially heterogeneous urban places like Bogotá, as well as for blacks residing in regions like the Colombian Pacific where blacks are the majority.

⁷ Research by Colombian scholar Claudia Mosquera (Mosquera, et al. 2002; Mosquera Rosero 1998; Mosquera Rosero Labbe and Barcelos 2007) is a notable exception to this rule, for its attempts to look beyond the traditional physical and social sites of Colombian blackness to examine contemporary black life and politics.

Similarly, the very law (Law 70) that recognizes blacks as an ethnic group with cultural and territorial rights limits these rights and recognition to so called “black communities” (*comunidades negras*) located in the rural, river basin zones of the Colombian Pacific that maintain traditional practices of production and communal social life. I argue that the legal mechanism aimed at broadening black rights and establishing multicultural citizenship, in fact, spatially and socially binds Afro-Colombians and their cultures to the rural Pacific region and to “invented traditions” of land use and conservation. Recent demographic studies have shown that while blacks make up over 90 percent of Pacific region inhabitants, over 50 percent of Colombia’s black population lives outside of these rural, jungle, river basin zones and primarily in cities (2005 National Census). In this manuscript, I show that Afro-Colombians live blackness in broader terms than what is delineated by Law 70 and articulated in commonsense notions of Colombian racial geographies; as such, this research contributes to the investigation of Colombian blackness and the uncovering of multiple Afro-Colombian experiences of blackness and black recognition.

The problem of multicultural constitutional reform is that it is not simply a neutral nation-building or legislative project but a political project that demarcates and sanctions arenas of acceptable difference, and in doing so privileges the state and law in the recognition of peoples’ ways of being, living, organizing and identifying as a condition for citizenship. Meanwhile there are expressions of difference that fall out of the purview of the state, and this lack of state recognition in turn delegitimizes the people, cultures, practices and identities that it fails to acknowledge. One of the principal goals of multiculturalism is to empower previously marginalized groups, particularly by extending

citizenship to them, but research has repeatedly shown how this politics actually empowers and legitimizes the state. For multicultural politics to work, for incommensurable politics of universality and pluralism to co-exist, the state (and law) must step in as both the mediator and guarantor of rights (Comaroff 2003; Hale 2005; Povinelli 2002). To be clear, my critique of multiculturalism is not meant to encourage further expansion of the state or of expanded modes of state recognition, but to point out the hegemony of the state, law, and politics. I argue, then, that the state and law alone cannot remedy the social or racial inequities of today's diverse nations, and that in fact "power produces rights, not rights power; the law itself is a product of the political, not a prime mover in constructing social worlds" (Comaroff 2003:458).

Afro-Latin Americans are acutely aware of the limits of multiculturalism. Anthropologist Charles Hale posits that in Latin America multiculturalism replaces *mestizaje*, a "hegemonic idiom of nation building", with a "politics of 'cultural recognition'" (Hale 2005:12). This claim holds if we examine *mestizaje* strictly as a political ideology and practice, but if we expand our analysis of *mestizaje* to consider how it functions in everyday social life and produces racial social hierarchies we might conclude that "these older [classic liberal] models of citizenship continue to inform state function, public discourse, and individual feelings about what is right and wrong to demand from the state and its normative publics" (Povinelli 1998:582). The disjuncture between the politics of recognition and the experience of social difference is never more prominent than for Afro-Colombian activists and citizens who envision alternative ways of production, social organization, identification, and lifestyle that do not always resonate with mainstream politics.

“Chasing Blackness”: Research Methodologies and Project Design

At the time of my field research, it seemed that the proverbial dam had broken. Everything that I had learned about Latin American states’ and societies’ iron-clad silence concerning the mere mention of blackness or racial-social difference was challenged by what I saw as I began ethnographic research of Afro-Colombian transnational activism in Washington, DC and of black politics and social life in Bogotá. No longer was blackness a silenced, taboo topic (and experience) taken up by only “radical” Afro-Colombians; instead, the Colombian government, courts, local institutions, and civil society had begun to openly engage in discourses of blackness, black rights, and social inequality. Across Latin America the 1990s were marked as the departure from ideologies of the mestizo nation; in fact “this model was increasingly denounced as discriminatory and unacceptable” (Sieder 2002:5). Anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff description of a similar multicultural, or in their terms “policultural”, turn in post-colonial South Africa resonates with the Colombian case wherein “the received notion of politics based on cultural homogeneity and a sense of horizontal fraternity, real or fictive, is rapidly giving way to imagined communities of difference, of multiculturalism, of ID-ology” (Comaroff 2003:454).

Constitutional reform and Law 70 created a burst of new possibilities for social and state discourse on black identity and black rights in Colombia. In designing this project, I needed to identify the appropriate set of research methods that would allow me to trace the impacts of multicultural politics on black social life and black mobilization,

particularly as these sites of analysis were located both nationally and transnationally. When I embarked upon fieldwork in September 2007 I had anticipated that the research would take time to get off the ground since I had not been to Bogotá in over a year during which time I maintained contact with research contacts and friends by phone and email. During the first two weeks of my arrival in Bogotá I reached out to my contacts and friends, primarily Afro-Colombian activists, to remind them of my research goals and to schedule times to discuss how I could observe their organizations at work. Much to my surprise in those weeks I received so many invitations that I began to record them in an Event Log, so I could later identify patterns among and map the groups, places, and social spaces that were active in black issues. A variety of institutions and organizations sponsored these political, cultural, and social events - news media, international organizations like USAID and the UN, Afro-Colombian social movements, neighborhood associations, folkloric dance troops, youth activists, the District Mayor's office, local universities, society clubs, and a combination of these.

At public events I took extensive notes on the nature of the event, participants, representations and discourses of blackness, gathered any documentation circulated at these events (pamphlets, fliers, promotional literature, programs), and sometimes photographed and digitally recorded the event. To add depth to my understanding of the discussions about or portrayals of black culture, black identity, and black politics at these events, I conducted post-event interviews with participants, audience members, and organizers. In addition to attending events, I periodically visited the offices of three important grassroots organizations of the Afro-Colombian movement spending hours each day, Proceso de Comunidades Negras (Process of Black Communities, PCN),

Cimarron Nacional and the Asociación de los Afrodesplazados (Association of Internally Displaced Afro-Colombians, AFRODES). These led to interviews, observations, or field trips. Similarly, I observed working group sessions and organizational meetings, and followed movement leaders to nearby communities in which they work. I maintained informed about events through a number of sources: social movement leaders, local journalists, NGO and IO workers, university students, and an invite-only listserv for Afro-Colombian organizations.

Administrative Map of Bogotá



Administrative map of Bogotá. Source: Google.com. This map of Bogotá depicts the city's 20 localities. Starred localities are ones that I most frequented during my field research. See Appendix A for this map with corresponding names of each locality.

Some days I attended multiple events, traveling the length of the city from north to south depending on the sponsor or activity. Events sponsored by state institutions and international organizations tended to take place in the north of Bogotá and at historical sites in the city's center where federal government offices, courts, and offices and

national theaters, museums, and auditoriums are concentrated, while all other activities were dispersed across the city. In any given day, I could spend hours on the bus traversing the city to get from one event to the next, sometimes stopping by my apartment in the center of town to refresh myself, collect more consent forms, and change into appropriate attire for the next event- business attire for offices, courts, and formal meetings and informal clothes that would fit in at any community meeting or recreational event. It was not unusual for me to leave my apartment as early as 7 AM and return around midnight, to miss meals between events for the sake of punctuality, or to receive an invitation to an event while it was in progress and have to rush out to make it, all in an effort to attend all relevant activities. I was chasing blackness.

Of course I could not attend *all* events organized around black identity and black politics held in the city of Bogotá, but my goal was to honor as many invitations as possible and to maintain a visible presence in the black community and among black activists. Regular observation of a wide range of groups, people, and activities engaging blackness was particularly challenging in the context of the capital city, especially a city with a population of nearly seven million people spread out across 685 sq miles (excluding neighboring municipalities). The hustle and bustle of everyday life in an urban metropolis keeps people on the move and leaves them little time to “hang out”, and Afro-Colombian activism extends beyond the borders of Bogotá throughout the region and hemisphere. The trouble with conducting ethnographic fieldwork in an urban metropolis is that your unit of analysis is not limited to a seemingly bounded community or village, as typical with traditional fieldwork and community studies. Instead, the researcher’s unit (or population) of analysis may appear across a vast spatial area and

often in contexts that at first glance have little or no bearing on the focus of the research. This absence of a clearly demarcated fieldsite combined with a studying “amorphous and heterogeneous populations of large cities” can be disconcerting for anthropologists (Foster and Kemper 1996: 138) – “even the most conscientious researchers may come to question whether they are doing a good job and whether they are in fact true anthropologists” (139). However, Bogotá proved to be a dynamic place where blacks and whites interacted, law and order were practiced, and resistance waged.

Similarly, transnational research poses additional challenges for the ethnographic method. In recent years, anthropologists have had to contend with conducting ethnography in a world that is more connected and transient than ever, where flexible capitalism and intensified globalization condition social, political and economic life. Some scholars have opted for “multi-site ethnography” (Marcus 1995) and research methodologies that emphasize “translocal linkages” as a way of mapping the landscape upon which cultural logics are produced in multiple locations (Hannerz 2007: 362). Anthropologist Louisa Schein (2002: 231) builds upon this approach in what she calls “itinerant ethnography”, which “is in spirit *siteless*, a recognition of the deterritorialized character of the cultural politics that are under examination.” While this approach allows the researcher to track unexpected and ephemeral encounters and map the connections between them, it downplays the importance of place in the production and circulation of cultural products and discourse. A growing body of ethnographic research can be described as “anthropology in the middle,” to use Bruce Knauft’s term, which “relinquishes both sweeping global views and particularistic local ones in favor of mid-level connections between them” (2006: 417). However, Dorothy Hodgson’s “nodal

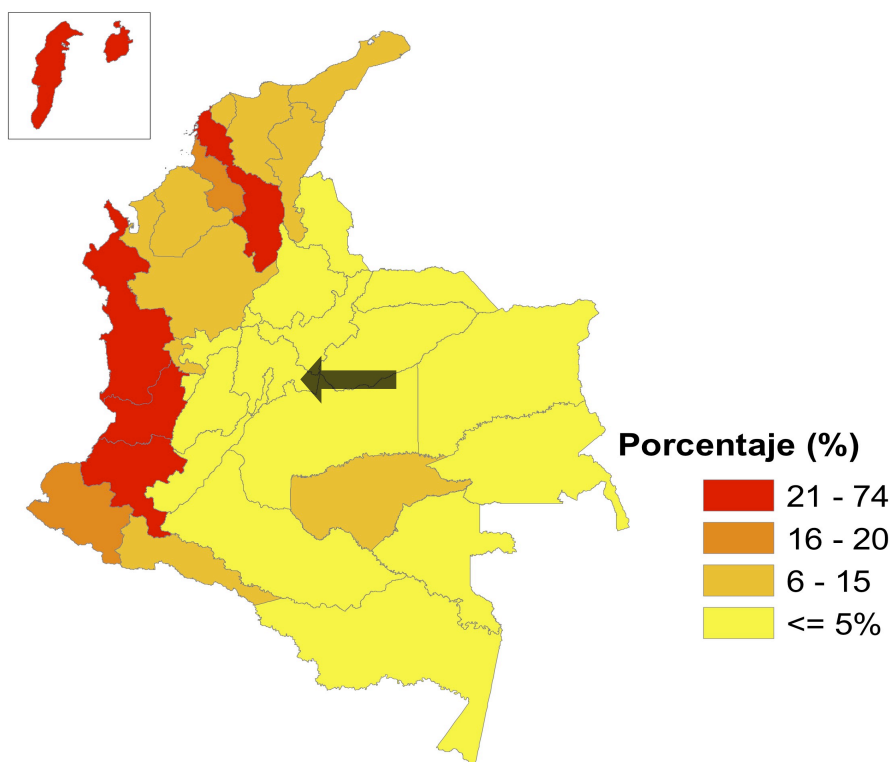
ethnography” (2011) best describes the tools necessary to reconcile the depth that localized ethnographic research is so good at providing with the transnational sites, actors, and politics that are also important to the examination of the unit of analysis in question. This approach also accounts for “major” and “minor” nodes – “groups, institutions, people, places and so forth” – and the linkages between them, by observing major actors and sites alongside in-depth ethnographic study of selected minor nodes. I engaged in this skillful tacking back and forth among key institutions, places, and sites and Afro-Colombian political actors, activists and residents in Bogotá and with key Afro-Colombian activists in Washington, DC as they developed advocacy networks there.

Seeing the Nation through the Capital

Throughout the course of my fieldwork, I constantly fielded questions about why I chose Bogotá as the site of ethnographic research on blackness and the Afro-Colombian movement. People would ask, “have you been to the Chocó?” and “why not study in Buenaventura, Cali or Palenque?” In fact, up to this point the most notable studies of Afro-Colombian identity (Wade 1993a), social organization (de Friedemann and Arocha 1986), social movements (Escobar 2008), and historiography (Helg 2004; Leal 2004) have been situated in regions that signify blackness, with only a few exceptions (Díaz Díaz 2001; Mosquera Rosero 1998). These and similar areas have an important legacy as historic sites of Colombian slave trade, African and black labor, and black settlement. Similarly, the most recent national census data shows that the top five states with the highest population of Afro-Colombians – Chocó, San Andres, Bolivar, Valle de Cauca, and Cauca, respectively – are home to 50 percent of Colombia’s total black population

(2005 National Census). The map above taken from the 2005 National Census shows that Afro-Colombians make up less than five percent of the total population of the central state of Cundinamarca where the District Capital, Bogotá, is located (denoted by an arrow in the map below). These factors combined, in the national imaginary these cities, towns, and states have become synonymous with black identity, black bodies, black culture and perhaps most importantly, with “where blacks belong”, so to speak. Because of socio-spatial associations with region and race, it is difficult for Colombian society to perceive of blacks as *being from* or *belonging to* a region of the country other than those where blacks comprise the majority of the local populations, namely the Colombian Pacific and Caribbean regions.

**PARTICIPACIÓN DE AFROCOLOMBIANOS,
RESPECTO A LA POBLACIÓN TOTAL DEPARTAMENTAL**



Percentage of Afro-Colombian population by department. Source: National Census 2005.

There is a difference in how Afro-Colombians understand these predominately black spaces and regions – locally called *las regiones* – and how the nation and whites characterize *las regiones*. They can be both a source of pride and a source for social exclusion. For Afro-Colombians, *las regiones* function as a kind of homeland or place of origin where black cultures and peoples originate and are rooted, especially for black internal migrants to other parts of the country and their offspring born outside of *las regiones*. As such these regions signify black solidarity and authenticity, a place where blacks set the cultural norms and can live with minimal daily pressure to conform to white social norms and values. There blacks occupy positions of authority and decision making like public officials, professionals, and business owners, although since colonial period there have been a small contingent of white colonizers who control some much of the local commerce, agricultural sector, and mining, to name a few areas. Still, Afro-Colombians often take pride in this independence, autonomy, and majority status.

On the other hand, Afro-Colombians living outside of *las regiones* are often treated as foreigners in their own country, when on a daily basis they are subjected to the question “¿de dónde eres?” (where are you from?) from both whites and other blacks. However, according to the 2005 National Census, an estimated 1.49 percent of Afro-Colombians live in Bogotá – a conservative estimate of about 100,000 people.⁸ Even those Afro-Colombians who are born, raised, and established for generations in places outside *las regiones* are never fully of those places. Elites often blame Afro-Colombians,

⁸ This number is a conservative estimate based on the Census data’s count that 10.6 percent of the total population of Colombia is Afro-Colombian. Demographic researchers and social movements estimate that Afro-Colombians make up 26 percent of the population. Also, the black population is likely much higher given underreporting among internally displaced people.

and Afro-Colombian internal migrants in particular, for the deterioration of social norms based on what they characterize as black nonconformity to white, urban social practices, values, and culture and blacks' incommensurability with urban sophistication and lifestyles. According to this belief, *las regiones*, and the people who inhabit them or are imagined to come from them, signify provinciality and backwardness and are the shame of the modernizing nation. They are characterized as poverty-ridden, underdeveloped, and isolated places, although there is a growing critique from Colombian society, Afro-Colombian social movements, and scholars of the region about the state's incessant neglect for improving the region's infrastructure (i.e., roads, aqueduct and sewage systems, electricity, health facilities and so on.)

British anthropologist Peter Wade (1993a:51-56) builds from Michael Taussig's (1987; 1980) theory of "moral topography" to show how historical factors produced the intimate relationship between race and region in Colombia, whereby racialized bodies are associated with either urban or rural spaces in distinct regions, values are attached to region and the people who occupy them, and region and race determine individuals' belonging to the nation. Historically nineteenth century Colombian colonizers "mapped racial hierarchy onto an emerging national geography composed of distinct localities and regions. They elaborated a racialized discourse of regional differentiation that assigned greater morality and progress to certain regions— and to certain localities within regions— that they marked as 'white.' Meanwhile, those places identified as 'black' and 'Indian' were associated with disorder, backwardness, and danger" (Appelbaum 2003:3-4). This trend continues in present day Colombia, and throughout the hemisphere as noted by Jean Rahier on Ecuador where "different ethnic groups (indigenous people, blacks, mestizos,

white mestizos, and whites) traditionally reside in specific places or regions (with particular histories), enjoy different concentrations of economic and political power, and occupy different positions on the national social ladder and in the racial order” (1998:422). These embedded, value laden beliefs about the spatiality and regionalization of race complicate the everyday lives of blacks who live in the capital city of Bogotá – the quintessential symbol of the nation’s modernity, cosmopolitanism, wealth and above all whiteness.

As the capital city, Bogotá occupies a unique social role in Colombian nation building. It has become the barometer by which to measure Colombia’s progress with internationalization, modernization, and cosmopolitanism. Bogotá is located in the interior of the country flush against the north-west portion of the Andean mountain chain. Historical travel literature and colonial writings describe the interior and highlands areas of Andean countries as the home of “whites, light-skinned mestizos, and the more easily assimilable Indians, whereas tropical lowlands were inhabited by politically excitable blacks, zambos, and mulattos, along with barbaric Indians” (Appelbaum 2003:17). Before it grew to the principal city it is today, Santafé de Bogotá was characterized as a backwater, resistant to development and travel because of its frequent torrential rains and flooding, frigid temperatures, and rough mountainous terrain (Safford and Palacios 2002)- all predictable conditions of highland region situated over 8,600 feet above sea level. “Bogotá has become a large city only in the last fifty years; in 1938, it had only 300,000 or so inhabitants” (Gilbert 1996:242) but in 2005 that number has exponentially grown to 7 million. “In the process it [Bogotá] added to its existing status as the national capital by becoming the country’s major financial center, the largest industrial city, and

the center of culture” (Gilbert and Dávila 2002: 29). This sign of “progress” was apparent during my fieldwork in Bogotá. The city is home to a host of major museums, universities, theatres, and independent art and film venues. Nightclubs often host DJs from the United States and Europe and concerts feature high profile entertainers like salsa sensations Marc Anthony and Gilberto Santa Rosa from across Latin America and the Caribbean. Throughout my year of fieldwork Bogotá hosted an annual marathon, book fair, gastronomy exposé, and theatre festival, all citywide events that drew millions of local and international performers, participants and tourists – some from as far as South Africa, Belgium and Japan.

As the legislative and administrative center of the country, Bogotá sits center stage in national governance. Governing and lawmaking bodies like the Congress, Senate, Constitutional Court, Supreme Court, and executive branch offices are located in the capital. Similarly, major state institutions, international and multilateral organizations, and national and international non-governmental organizations maintain their headquarters in Bogotá. The capital is the site for political power and *incidencia política* (lobbying or political organizing), and national and international delegates of community leaders and activists visit Bogotá to lobby governing bodies or the courts on behalf of their issues in demonstrations, marches, and public hearings.

Colombians from all over the country view Bogotá as the ultimate site of urban sophistication and independent living symbolizing the possibility of upward social and economic mobility. As such, internal migrants relocate to Bogotá for greater educational and labor opportunities; “in 1988, 43 per cent of all students in higher education were studying in Bogotá” (Gilbert 1996: 245). Limited capital investment and job

development in the secondary cities and rural areas across the country make Bogotá and other major cities like Medellín and Cali desirable places to search for economic and labor stability. Other internal migrants, principally afro-descendants and indigenous peoples, settle in the capital after being forced out of their regions because of armed violence and insecurity.⁹ Gilbert and Dávila show that this tenuous relationship between internal migrants and local bogotanos dates back to the 1950s when migration from rural areas increased dramatically: “Local elites sometimes blamed the migrants for the city’s poverty, its poor housing and the increasing number of street workers” (2002: 29). Intruders upon this way of life – like internal migrants from rural areas to the city, indigenous peoples, blacks, and violent actors – are a stain on this process of upward mobility and modernity and a reminder of the fragility of Bogotá’s status and the nation’s modernity, tensions which often play out in racialized ways.

I argue that whites and elites have an investment in upholding the modernity of the nation to affirm their whiteness and the nation’s progress and stability, especially as the state and district government court foreign investment and the image of a safe, democratic nation. I would argue that Bogotá, and to a lesser extent the international tourist destination Cartagena, distract attention from the pervasive image of Colombia as a violent, unstable nation-state where armed actors and narco-traffickers rule. Given these stakes, Bogotá is a site for the performance of nation building ideals, and the encounter –and potential clash– between these ideals and everyday practices. Although billed as a counterintuitive place to study blackness, Bogotá in fact serves as a point of departure to see the nation.

⁹ For more on Afro-Colombian migration and displacement to Bogotá see the following two socio-demographic studies (Mosquera Rosero 1998) and (Arocha 2002).

Chapter organization

The next chapter traces the historical trajectory of the Afro-Colombian social movement from the decades prior to constitutional reform to the present. The chapter provides brief snapshots of the major black groups that comprise the Afro-Colombian social movement to show how the shift in racial state politics rendered certain approaches to black activism nearly obsolete at the same time that it produced space for alternate approaches to black activism to exist. After Colombian constitutional reform early black organizations that promoted discourses of Afro-Colombian identity, black consciousness and racial discrimination lost traction. Instead, a new type of black organizing launched under the rubric of ethnic identity and ethnic rights. These new groups consolidated disparate organizations from predominately black regions of Colombia in the definition of black ethnic identity and collective land rights and in subsequent campaigns concerning the protection of those land rights. Colombian society's trenchant resistance to issues of race and racism coupled with the urgency of political violence in black territories displaced black consciousness, anti-racist organizing and propelled a new set of black activists and black social issues to the center stage of national politics. In this chapter I argue that constitutional reform recognized black identity and black rights as it simultaneously neutralized diverse approaches to black organizing and only recognized limited black identifications. In delineating the terms of Colombian blackness and black rights, the law limited the possibilities for a range of black organizing. Earlier types of black organizing still exist but have been crowded out by the issues of contention in Law 70 and the new black political actors that represent these issues.

The third chapter explores how afro-descendants in Colombia develop creative approaches to defining black identity that often do not coincide with the terms of legal recognition, public discourse, or black social movement claims about black identity or public approaches to black vindication. In particular, I analyze the processes by which two Afro-Colombian female Bogotá residents – one Bogotá born and raised and the other a migrant to Bogotá from the black coast of Barranquilla – discover themselves as “black” and understand themselves as racialized subjects. This chapter focuses on women’s narratives of black self-identification that take into account their personal life trajectories and social positions as either internal migrants, mothers raising children in a predominately white city, professionals or partners in interracial relationships. Their considerations about race and blackness are informed, in part, by the recent shifts in Colombian public thought, official discourse and black social movement campaigns regarding black racial awareness, ethnic rights, and legal recognition. In addition, their perceptions of black racial formation in the United States and the racial-spatial implications of their residence in Bogotá are important factors in their conceptualizations of race and black identity. Here, Bogotá is not simply a physical, geographic location but one endowed with social meanings about race, class, cosmopolitanism and belonging, in which blacks’ encounters with black subjectivity and racism force them to produce new interpretations of racial identity and creative discourses of black consciousness. Throughout the chapter I show that these women make sense of blackness in ways that resonate with the nuances of their home, work, and social lives, approaches that do not conform to social movement, state and legal discourses of Colombian blackness.

An important feature of this ethnographic study is its location in the predominately white urban city of Bogotá, rather than in the rural or coastal “black regions” as are most studies of Afro-Colombia. While the latter approach has helped us understand the impact of economic development, political economy and slave trade on black populations in the Colombian Pacific and Caribbean regions, it fails to account for how the black experience and conceptions of race are spatially constituted and develop distinctly within racially heterogeneous places. Chapter four explores how Afro-Colombian residents in Bogotá encounter the unpredictability of when their blackness will be a factor in their exclusion or inclusion in urban space. Through ethnographic analysis of six black youth attempting to enter nightclubs in the Zona Rosa district of Bogotá, I show how complex convergence of time, space and race govern urban practices of racial discrimination. I argue that such practices conflict with national multicultural politics and national branding of Bogotá as a diverse, cosmopolitan city.

Chapter five shows how Afro-Colombian articulations of black identity and race become important even as they attempt to build transnational alliances. Law 70’s definition of Colombian blackness and Afro-Colombian cultural and territorial rights increased international awareness of black issues in Colombia. So the sudden increase in political violence between state, guerilla, and paramilitary armed forces in the Colombian Pacific around the mid-1990s raised suspicions about the state’s commitment to black land rights and autonomy and to the security of afro-descendant peoples who inhabited these collective lands. As such the new wave of black social movements moved to internationalize the movement, developing transnational alliances with organizations and activists in the US and beyond. The fifth chapter examines Afro-Colombian testimonies

of black life in the post-constitutional reform era as told within the context of a transnational advocacy building delegation. These testimonies provide a glimpse into the lived experiences and political struggles of black people trying to access rights granted to them in Law 70. However, these testimonies between Afro-Colombian activists and their African American partners also reveal that each black diasporic group holds divergent conceptions of blackness and the role of race in political mobilization. This chapter explores this and other issues as common barriers to the development and maintenance of transnational alliances. Chapter five deepens theoretical discussion of transnational activism to show the complexity of developing transnational solidarity, bringing ethnographic evidence to bear on theory and praxis concerning the development and maintenance of transnational alliances.

Chapter 2
***From Rise to Decline: Black Organizations Chart the Shift from
 Black Invisibility to Multicultural Politics***

Prior to the 1991 Constitutional Reform and Law 70, the homogenizing official ideology of mestizaje and the society-wide denial of race and racism historically had foreclosed the possibility of black politics, whereby Afro-Colombians could collectively mobilize under the rubric of black identity to make demands of the state. Drawing from claims that all people are mixed-race, Latin American officials adamantly denied that their societies draw racial distinctions among groups and boast that mestizaje promotes harmony among all peoples of the nation despite their skin color. Public officials and citizens deployed a number of explanations to support the claim that race nor racism exist in Latin America: they displaced racism to countries with a history of racial violence like the US, South Africa, and Bosnia; they explained that discrimination is based on class not race; they asserted that acts of discrimination are just isolated incidents; or they pointed to the absence of legal segregation and physical racial violence (Dulitzky 2005). In Colombia, the reformed Constitution of 1991 and subsequent federal Law 70 of 1993 (*Ley de Negritudes*, or Law of Black Communities) provided the legal and social discourses upon which Afro-Colombians could base their rights claims. These legal and political instruments rendered visible, consolidated, and politicized blackness in Colombia. By establishing a set of identity-based rights and recognizing black identity and culture, these instruments created the political opening for public discourse on blackness, racial difference, racism and afro-descendant claims to black identity and black rights. In addition, this 1990s reform gave rise to Afro-Colombian social

movements, and along with related black activism fostered the production of new political subjectivities from black identity. Some scholars contend that legal reform in conjunction with social movement activism is required for Latin American societies and states to recognize and address racism (Hernandez 2002).

Based on my ethnographic research on the Afro-Colombian social movement, I argue that black visibility and counterhegemonic claims are vulnerable to shifts in state politics and state imposed limits on acceptable forms of difference. Although blackness was consolidated in this legal and political moment, the compression of blackness leaves out expressions and manifestations of black identity as well as certain black social movements that do not fall into the parameters set out by the law and official political structures. This chapter traces the rise and fall of some of the most prominent groups that comprise the contemporary Afro-Colombian social movement to illustrate the shift in public discourse on blackness and the acceptable forms of black identity in the public sphere. This analysis provides scholars and activists with tools to re-think the position and possibilities of social movements in creating social change and to consider where and how political mobilization, race and state politics intersect.

The organizations I describe in this chapter represent different major sectors of the Afro-Colombian social movement, particularly for their distinct understandings of black identity and how it should be deployed politically. Early black organizations like Center for the Study of Black Culture and Soweto Study Group, both addressed in this chapter, were concerned with defining Colombian blackness, raising black consciousness, and promoting racial group formation. However, more recent organizations like Cimarron Nacional, Proceso de Comunidades Negras (PCN), and Association for

Displaced Afro-Colombians (Asociación de Afrocolombianos Desplazados, AFRODES), also discussed at length in this chapter, mobilize issues such as collective land rights, affirmative action, reparations, and access to justice from the Afro-Colombian perspective. Each of these groups give us a glimpse into different ways of conceptualizing Afro-Colombian-ness, that is, what it means to be black in Colombia, and of approaching Afro-Colombian political thought and black politics. Understanding the historical moment in which each of these groups emerged, and in some cases became defunct, provides an indication of the official stance toward black identity and black people in Colombia.

The aim of this chapter is not to review the Afro-Colombian social movement or to provide an exhaustive analysis of the organizations described. Instead, my goal is to chart the politics and discourse of blackness over time, in this case from the 1970s to about 2010. I examine these organizations comparatively, revealing the paradigm shift in black identity and black organizing in Colombia – from disparate race neutral issue- and sector- based groups to identity-based groups that prioritize making demands on the state in the name of black people and for the promotion of black rights. Scholarly investigation on black politics and the black social movement in Colombia has overwhelmingly focused on one organization, Proceso de Comunidades Negras and the Colombian Pacific region (Asher 2009; Escobar 2008; Oslender 2004; Wade 1995; Wade 2002), leaving a profound gap in our understanding of the landscape of Afro-Colombian organizing and political thought. In part this focus is due to PCN's national and international prominence and PCN's leadership and activism concerning Law 70 and black collective land rights. This chapter situates PCN within a broader context of black organizing in

Colombia, and serves as an initial attempt to understand what these organizations can tell us about public discourse on Colombian blackness. In a 2008 report, the Bureau of Ethnic Affairs in the Colombian Ministry of the Interior and Justice listed approximately 1,045 state recognized Afro-Colombian organizations (*“organizaciones de comunidades negras”*) operating across the country. I chose the five groups featured here based on the following characteristics: headquarter office based in Bogotá, national membership, international recognition, and prominence among Afro-Colombian population (i.e., was the group integral to Afro-Colombian narratives of black organizing and black consciousness, was there a historical memory of the group in question.)

Defining “the Afro-Colombian Social Movement”

Before I can describe the rise and fall of organizations that comprise the Afro-Colombian social movement, I must first define “the Afro-Colombian social movement.” Scholars have problematized the concept of social movements and its application as a unit of analysis. As an ethnographer who has spent over four years observing and tracing the shifts and contours of Afro-Colombian activism, I am acutely aware of the frustrations of engaging ethnographic research on today’s social movements. First, day-to-day observations of social movement activists and their activities reveal what I call “the immateriality of the practice of politics”. By this I mean, the daily, managerial and often mundane tasks that social movement leaders and members undertake to sustain the movement, activities that are not direct engagements with claims making or activism. These tasks are largely invisible to outsiders and can almost look like “busy work” or “paper pushing”. Even when these activities can be readily observed their ends are not

always apparent to the researcher or to those involved. Students of social movements may expect ethnographic research of a social movement to be full of “contentious activities” and constant engagement with politics (Tilly and Tarrow 2007: 125), but in fact, much of the day-to-day work of social movements is in building, maintaining and growing the base; seeking new partnerships and alliances and nurturing existing ones; applying for funding; remaining informed of relevant current events and politics; and documenting activities, meetings, and issues affecting their constituents.

Second, today’s social movements operate transnationally as well as nationally (Pudrovska and Feree 2004). It is often difficult to observe the scope and scale of social movement activities because of their constant travel and communication outside of the movement’s local context, especially when a major site of these activities is the virtual world (i.e., email, conference calls, Skype, and so on). During my longest stretch of research in Bogotá, activists would travel for short periods to the rural regions, often on very short notice upon receiving word from their constituents in the area that it was safe for outsiders to visit.¹ Similarly, activists were frequently called to travel to Washington, DC and other parts of the US to speak to interest groups and advocates, often for short trips that would last a few days or longer trips that included multi-city tours zigzagging across the entire country.

Third, it is often unclear to scholars who or what constitutes the group (Escobar and Alvarez 1992: 6). The discursive practice of naming collective action a “social movement” sets the expectation of sustained activity, shared ideology, and a coordinated

¹ Safety is usually determined by the presence of illegal armed actors in the community and the types of activities these actors engage while there. For example, in villages where guerilla groups sustain a presence they may, for the most part, live peacefully alongside community members, but there are times when their presence becomes more belligerent or outsiders come under greater suspicion.

approach to activism, but these are the very factors that challenge the making of social movements. Differences in ideology and approach are often difficult to overcome in the initial stages of mobilization, making it difficult to consolidate as a collective and to build momentum as a movement. It is not uncommon for factions and deep fissures to characterize a social movement. The trouble here is that “social movement” serves as a discursive tool to organize, order and describe disparate activities that are coordinated around some common feature like identity, place, or issue for example. For researchers “social movement” is also a heuristic tool that defines the unit of analysis for the study of collective action. Ethnographers can use this terminology to describe and analyze loosely coordinated activities that appear to have a relationship. While useful to determine the parameters of the unit of analysis, this approach does not provide a way to deal with the internal complexity of social movements. As such the social movement concept often fails to hold up when we closely examine the disparate people and activities that supposedly constitute the unit.

Related to this issue, and finally, the boundaries of the social movement are not always apparent or they are fluid. This issue occurs in the practice of politics as well as in research on politics. Marc Edelman argues that the confusion over what constitutes a social movement often arises with researchers’ slippery use of the categories of civil society, networks, and social movements (2005). Ethnographically, people’s daily activities do not always seamlessly correspond to the social movement unit as defined by the researcher. In her book on territorial rights and citizenship among Afro-Colombians in state of Cauca, Colombia, Ng’weno (2007b) expresses her surprise when learning that some members of one local organization petitioning for land titles might also participate

actively in a similar organization located in a nearby village. During my fieldwork, Colombians talked about “the Afro-Colombian social movement” in everyday discourse or in political forums as a way to describe the mobilization of afro-descendant Colombians on behalf of black social, political, economic and cultural issues. At other times, particular organizations like Cimarron or Proceso de Comunidades Negras were described as social movements in and of themselves. The use of the label “the Afro-Colombian social movement” encompasses the heterogeneity of the characteristics, ideologies, strategies, claims, and political persuasions of the organizations discursively lumped together by this term. The common feature is that all this activity occurs under the rubric of black identity or Afro-Colombia. Yet, the researcher and others are left with a slippery concept that leaves room for critiques of black organizations and “the movement” in general.

Social movement members and outside observers such as defected members, advocates, and affiliated institutions often expressed frustrations over what they deemed the lack of coordination among black organizations and black people’s inability to work together on specific projects or to develop a concerted response on any single issue area affecting the Afro-Colombian population. State representatives and the public too engage a similar critique about the lack of unity and singularity of voice among Afro-Colombians. Sometimes these critiques take racist overtones when the explanation of the so-called lack of coordination is couched in terms of the pathological incapability of black people to be organized or to follow the standards of democratic political participation. Critics often contrast the Afro-Colombian movement to the indigenous movement, which the public describes as coordinated and skilled at speaking with one

voice, especially when making demands of the state. This critique hits close to home given that the much-celebrated Law 70 was taken to the Constituent Assembly by an indigenous representative. As scholars and black social movement leaders describe it, factions among Afro-Colombian groups about the terms of the law nearly prevented the draft of the law from being included in the reformed constitution. In addition, no black representatives were elected to the National Constituent Assembly, the entity charged with re-writing the Colombian constitution. Despite the trouble with social movements as an analytical category, I am not ready to discard the category. From my research with Afro-Colombian social movements that struggle to survive against oppositional political power, the category of social movement becomes useful to characterize and examine resistance, however fledgling, to hegemonic power. This chapter is an attempt to show the distinction between organizations and social movements, how social movements are made, their challenges to sustaining themselves, and how they become defunct, particularly alongside a significant shift in political climates – in this case, from racial homogeneity and exclusivity to multiculturalism and legal pluralism.

Building Black Consciousness in Urban Colombia

*Negritúd: Center for the Investigation of Black Culture, 1970s-early 1980s*²

The 1970s stand out as a period of growing interest to define Afro-Colombian identity and culture and to explore Afro-Colombian connections to the rest of the black world. There is no indication that there was an Afro-Colombian social movement per se during this period since black organizations were not engaged in “sustained campaign[s] of claim making, using repeated performances that advertise the claim, based on

² In Spanish, Negritúd: Organo del Centro para la Investigación de la Cultura Negra.

organizations, networks, traditions and solidarities that sustain these activities” (Tilly and Tarrow 2007:8). Black organizations did not concentrate on making organized demands of the state or policy, yet their political mission was part of everyday social life.

Organizations of this period largely focused on Afro-Colombian identity, culture and history; visibility and inclusion; and recognition as (cultural) citizens of the Colombian nation. Prominent examples of these early black organizations in Bogotá range from folkloric groups to research centers to black publications. Afro-Colombian intellectuals like Sancy Mosquera and Manuel Zapata Olivella founded organizations to investigate the contours of black identity, culture and history in Colombia and to define a particular Colombian brand of blackness (Castillo 2007: 179). These organizations were informed, in part, by other black experiences throughout the hemisphere as confirmed by the name of Mosquera’s group, the Frantz Fanon Research Center (Centro de Estudios Frantz Fanon). Anthropologist, writer, and medical doctor Olivella began the Colombian Foundation for Folkloric Research (The Fundación Colombiana de Investigaciones Folclóricas) and the Center for Afro-Colombian Studies. His writings and theories on Colombian blackness were greatly influenced by his time spent in Harlem, New York in 1946 and his friendship with African American poet Langston Hughes. In the 2007 documentary film “Manuel Zapata Olivella, Abridor de Caminos,” Olivella describes his time spent there as a revival or renaissance (*renacimiento*) (López 2007).³

Some of my research participants, and local historians alike, vaguely recalled hearing about Black Panthers from the U.S. visiting Popayan and young men from

³ So marked by this experience Olivella would even name one of his daughters Harlem.

Buenaventura as members of the Black Panthers around the 1970s and 1980s.⁴ Although I could not find any written record to confirm my informants' vague memory of these encounters with the Black Panthers, the very memory of such encounters is part of a racial imaginary that informants find important to recounting early black mobilization in Colombia.

During my chance meeting with Geiler Romaña in downtown Bogotá, the leader of the Association of Displaced Afro-Colombians, recalled his arrival to Bogotá from the Chocó in the 1980s. He reminisced about how few blacks there were in the city at that time compared to now: "Back then any time you saw a black person on the street you would speak to them or at least acknowledge them with eye contact and a nod, but people have lost the importance of that...with so many of us here, I suppose." Geiler continued his story, telling me about a man named Amir who had either briefly lived in the US or had family that had migrated there. He would see black people in the streets and call out "Hey brother!" in English, rather than using *hermano*, the Spanish word for brother. Recalling Amir's energy and conviction for black pride and unity, Geiler suggested that Amir suffered inner torment and frustration with the lack of solidarity, brotherhood, and black self-identification among Colombian blacks. Geiler told me that Amir used to

⁴ Unauthorized migration to the United States is a common phenomenon in Buenaventura, particularly among young black men. Some scholars have called this particular look toward and identification with the U.S., "norteñismo" (Castillo 2007). Buenaventura's position as Colombia's principal port facilitates this migration of people. People will hide in containers on large cargo ships with hopes of reaching US shores, a trip that can take days or weeks depending on the ship's travel routes. In Buenaventura, urban legends abound about *polizones* (people hidden in ships) who have been thrown overboard or in more optimistic cases offered food when discovered by crew members. This migration of young black men from Buenaventura to the U.S. put them in contact with black America, its political struggles and urban aesthetic and culture. These migrants share the stories and messages of iconic black figures and struggles like the Black Power and Civil Rights movements and Malcolm X, Nelson Mandela, Stephen Biko, and Martin Luther King, Jr. with family members and friends living in Buenaventura—they send videos, books, posters, and music or share stories upon their return.

carry around a publication of some sort—a newsletter or journal, he wasn't sure—with writings about blackness and a vision for blacks in Colombia. I left our conversation curious to learn more about this person, Amir, his message and publication, and where they fit into Bogotá's social landscape of that time (the late 1970s-early 1980s).

Amir Smith Córdoba was an integral member of the Center for the Investigation of Black Culture (Centro para la Investigación de la Cultura Negra), which produced a publication titled *Presencia Negra* (Wade 1995), mostly likely the journal that Geiler remembered from his encounters with Amir. *Presencia Negra* received funding from UNESCO and ran bimonthly from 1980 to 1984. However, the Center for the Investigation of Black Culture sponsored an earlier publication of the same type entitled *Negritud* that paved the way for *Presencia Negra*. These are the most well-documented and widely available sources on black organizing prior to the 1990s when Law 70 became a critical factor for Afro-Colombian organizing. Three editions of *Negritud* were published sporadically from August 1977 to May-July 1978. Each edition was roughly 30 pages in length and featured articles written by men and women mainly in Spanish about racism, black identity, and Afro-Colombian art and culture.

In light of the precariousness of black social acceptance and inclusion into Colombian society, the breadth of advertisements by national corporations in *Negritud* is unexpected. The relative silence in public discourse concerning black people and presumptions of racialized social difference render black people invisible as members of Colombian society. The idea abounds that black people have assimilated into Colombian society by racial or cultural mixtures; hence, Afro-Colombians are not a distinct sector of society, racial group, or ethnic group nor do they represent particular social issues. Given

this presumption of black assimilation and the small black population in Bogotá during this period, one might conclude that some Colombians judged this publication as divisive, unnecessary and even racist. Any social movement, organization or individual that calls attention to racialized inequality, discrimination and mistreatment is often branded as racist. I argue that Colombian society calls these people and organizations racist because the recognition of racial difference and differential life experiences among its racial groups run counter to dominant narratives of mestizaje and racial harmony. Despite conventional thinking, large corporations and small businesses purchased advertisement space in each of the journal's editions. National banks like Banco Cafetero and Caja Agraria advertised home loans and other general financial services while national airlines and bus transportation companies announced regular flights from major cities in the Pacific region to Bogotá. Local restaurants, regional lottery chains and Colombian alcoholic beverage companies like Poker and Aguardiente solicited *Negritud* readers to patronize their businesses and make use of their services. So how might we understand the investment of corporate advertising dollars in a publication with a predominately black readership? Even if Colombian society may have hesitated to view Afro-Colombians as a social group with interests and legitimate political claims, these companies saw Afro-Colombians as a consumers and perhaps even as an untapped consumer base.

In addition, the journal articles covered international news, particularly when they involved influential black figures and important black political events around the world. Headlines such as “The Vexations of Apartheid” (Los vejámenes del apartheid), “The Black Culture Movement with Muhammad Ali” (El Movimiento de cultura negra con

[Muhammad] Ali), “The Role of Voodoo in Haiti’s Independence” (El papel del vaudou en la independencia de Haití), and “Jamaican Prime Minister in Colombia” (Primer Ministro de Jamaica en Colombia) illustrate the Center’s concern with black peoples, issues and struggles beyond the borders of Colombia. Letters to the editor poured in to *Negritúd* from across the hemisphere— from then *New York Times* correspondent to Brazil, University of Guyana faculty members, and the journal’s board members residing in the United States, Venezuela, Jamaica and various Colombian cities. The broad dispersal shows that *Negritúd* not only reached a broad national and international audience but also brought disparate black peoples in contact with each other making them aware of each other’s social issues and political struggles. At a time when black people, culture, and identity were largely invisible on the social landscape of Bogotá and the nation, *Negritúd* played a major role in educating Afro-Colombians about themselves as black people and racialized subjects, building black consciousness and political subjectivity among Afro-Colombians, and linking Afro-Colombians to the broader African diaspora.

Advancing a Grassroots Theory of Colombian Blackness

*Soweto Study Group (mid-1970s – early 1980s) and National Cimarron Movement (1982- present)*⁵

In the mid-1970s, young black men and women arrived in Pereira, a city located in the Colombian interior region west of the Andean mountain chain in the state of Risaralda, to matriculate in the local universities. Confounded by the low number of blacks in the city and the taunts and jeers endured at the hands of their white-mestizo

⁵ In Spanish, Círculo de Estudios Soweto and Movimiento Nacional Cimarron, respectively

peers, the students grew frustrated with the lack of tools to form an “educated, creative” response to this new situation. In their hometowns of Tumaco, Buenaventura, Chocó, Cartagena and San Andres, where blacks comprise the overwhelming majority of the population, it is rare for blacks to encounter interpersonal discrimination or racism. One of Soweto’s early members recounted to me on a sunny afternoon over lunch the isolation and frustration he experienced as a student in Pereira. “This was the first time that I realized I was different from the people around me. When we first began we didn’t know how to describe the difference we felt, why our classmates treated us differently and made jokes about us. Through Soweto, our readings and discussions, we would learn that this difference was because of our race and skin color, because of racism and discrimination.” These encounters prompted the students to processes of self-discovery, black consciousness, and politicization. In 1976, the Soweto Study Group was born.

The students began this self-driven initiative as a way to understand themselves as members of the Colombian nation, a people with a history, and members of a broader community of “African peoples” which extends beyond the borders of the Colombian nation-state. The early organizational history, recorded in the National Cimarron Movement Manual, describes how the young men and women began to ponder why their parents had not prepared them to “understand their racial and ethnicity diversity and beauty,” why they were ignorant of concepts of racism and racial discrimination, and how little they knew about black history in Colombia and the world (Manual p. 1) Out of their quest arose questions like “What does it mean to be Colombian? As African peoples, why hadn’t we been taught the history and cultural construction of Afro-Colombians within the nation? Why does the mestizo population believe they are white

and treat us as if we were not compatriots? Do we Afro-Colombians have a history distinct from the history of the rest of the nation? Why isn't that history taught in the country's elementary and high schools?" (ibid.)

Soweto members interrogated official discourses of mestizo national identity and critiqued the ideology of mestizaje for privileging whiteness. Across Latin America, official deployments of mestizaje describe this process of race mixture as one in which over time blackness and indigeneity disappears, creating a homogeneous "cosmic" race. Hence, blackness and indigenosity are devalued in the making of the modern Colombian national identity. Soweto critiqued this ideology for establishing citizenship on the basis of skin color and, in the Colombian case, region. "In the bodies and lives of every Colombian three races -African, Indigenous, and Hispanic- are present and so are the components of Colombian nationality, regardless if we have very fair skin, which makes many believe that person to be white European, or if we have very dark skin, or if we were born in the Chocó or Tunja" (Manual p. 4). Soweto questioned the basis of Colombian whiteness: if all Colombians embody all three races as the ideology of mestizaje goes, then why do "very fair skin" people and mestizos get to identify as "white," be mistaken for "white European," and ultimately enjoy the privileges of whiteness?

By way of response, Soweto members introduced creative racial vocabularies to overcome the stigma of blackness and to restore the personhood of black people in Colombia. One organizational goal was to "detoxify the nation of the Spanish mentality...characterized by white ethnocentrism, whitening, racism, and exclusionary and discriminatory conduct..., which plagues the Afro-Colombian population in every

sphere of national society” (Manual p. 5). Suggesting the erasure of “dehumanizing, racist linguistics,” Soweto rejected *negro* as a term to describe Afro-Colombians and instead embraced terms such as “Africans, Afro-descendants, African Colombians, Afro-Colombians, *personas afros* (afros or black people)” (Manual p. 6). Since the enslavement of Africans in Colombia “negro” has been synonymous with “slave and beast, talking animal, savage, inferior being” (ibid.) In an interview with Soweto founder and current Cimarron leader Juan de Dios Mosquera Mosquera during a 2007 research trip to Bogotá, Mosquera explained that “negro” is a holdover from slavery and colonialism. In Spanish “negro” functions as both a noun and adjective, black as in the color and black as in a black person. Using “negro” as a noun rather than as an adjective to describe black people fuels societal and state trends of denying the humanity of black people. As a corrective, Mosquera suggests “*gente negra*,” or black people, in an attempt to highlight the personhood of Colombian blacks, a distinction that left an imprint on Colombian black thought and subsequent black political mobilization.

Preoccupations with the lack of historical memory concerning the black experience in Colombia, Soweto members linked Afro-Colombian history with “Africa.” Their aim was to cultivate historical memory, restore “African cultural identity”, and promote widespread consciousness of Afro-Colombianness. They describe enslaved Africans to the Americas as “people possessing dignity and cultural identity, possessing cultures, technologies, values, sentiments, cosmovisions, and ways of seeing and living life in society” (Manual p. 5). Describing black Colombians as “African peoples” serves as an origin story for present day blacks in Colombia, unified Colombian blacks to each other without regard to color or regional distinctions, and linked Afro-Colombians to

black beyond the nation's borders. Their perception of enslaved Africans is one of triumph and dignity, depicting Africans and blacks as a people with history, knowledge, and intellect.

It was not until the disbanding of Soweto and its reincarnation as the National Cimarron Movement in 1982 that this group began to articulate a political agenda which included making demands of the state. Cimarron takes its name from *cimarronaje* or *cimarronismo*, the historical self-liberation process common throughout the Americas and the Caribbean wherein enslaved Africans resisted slavery and fled to remote regions to build their own autonomous communities (Whitten and Torres 1998b). Proposing modern day cimarronismo, Cimarron encourages Afro-Colombians to be informed of their history and to embrace their identity as African people complete with virtues, talents, values, and responsibilities. The goal is not separatism in the strictest sense, but this modern form of cimarronismo asks Afro-Colombians to reject ideologies of mestizo identity and the notion that blacks have assimilated into mainstream white Colombia and to acknowledge their ethnic, cultural, and social difference.

Distinct from the knowledge building and black consciousness raising initiatives of the Soweto Study Group, Cimarron espouses an "ethnico-political agenda," which includes the real integration of Afro-Colombians into national society, more inclusive representation in state politics, and *diferenciación positiva* (positive differentiation) in labor and education sectors for example. However, Cimarron's ethno-political agenda can only be understood when contextualized historically. Multicultural legislation in the form of federal Law 70 provided a political opening for social movements like Cimarron to articulate a more aggressive political program. Law 70 recognized Afro-Colombian

citizenship and guaranteed (ethnic group) rights in unprecedented ways, thus expanding the basis upon which black social movements could stake their claims for inclusion, recognition, and representation. As such, Cimarron currently develops its programs, activities, and political activism in the following areas: ethno-education, youth leadership development, labor equality, and access to justice and higher education.



Cimarron ICETEX demonstration. Photo taken by author.

Of the black social movements I observed in Bogotá between 2007 and 2008, Cimarron was the only one to utilize the traditional collective action techniques of marches and demonstrations as part of their organizing and protest strategies. Descending the hill from the University of the Andes on a crisp, sunny weekday

afternoon, I happened upon a small group of about ten black university students, a few middle aged Afro-Colombians well known for their outspokenness on black social issues, and Juan de Dios, gathered outside of the towering ICETEX building. The Colombian Institute for Educational Credits and Technical Studies in the Exterior (ICETEX), the government entity responsible for financial and technical assistance for students to access higher education in Colombia and abroad, had recently reneged on its commitment to provide scholarships for Afro-Colombian university students. The special fund called “Fondo Especial Afrocolombiano de Creditos Educativos Condonables” is one step in the state’s legal commitment to foster the social and economic development of black communities, as outlined in Law 70 and developed in subsequent presidential decrees. A few students held a 5’ x 2’ foot banner featuring a picture of Nelson Mandela and a slogan reading, “Let’s make Colombia a more beautiful and distinguished country without racism or racial exclusion.” Cimarron employs the language of race, racism and racial exclusion despite legal discourse of culture and ethnicity, as denoted in Latin American multicultural politics and Colombia’s Law 70 in particular. State legislation, public policy, public officials, and the broader Colombian society eschew discourses of race and racial discrimination, and instead recognize social and economic disparities in terms of ethnic lines. Meanwhile they chanted in call and response fashion, “*¡Por admisión especial en las universidades públicas!* Preferential admission in public universities!”; “*¡Sin educación de calidad...solo pobreza, racism y exclusión racial!* Without quality education...only poverty, racism and racial exclusion!”; and “*¡Exigimos el finaciamiento del fondo afrocolombiano de créditos educativos!* We demand financing for the Afro-Colombian educational credits fund!” Although the fund had not been

dissolved, the government had not allocated funds in a way that Cimarron members thought consistent with the institution's nor the state's stated commitments to Afro-Colombian development and inclusion.

In addition, Cimarron is savvy at incorporating federal legislation and international human rights declarations designed to define and protect the rights of ethnic and minority groups. The Centro de Justicia y Acción Contra el Racismo (Center for Justice and Action against Racism) is a two-year term program (2006-2008) funded by the European Union, which operates out of the Bogotá national office and the two regional offices in Cali and Cartagena. The centers gather *denuncias* (denunciations) from the public about personal or familial experiences with racial discrimination with the goal of systematically collecting, studying, and making visible ethno-racial human rights violations. To file their denunciations, complainants fill out a form that asks them demographic questions and requires them to describe the experience and identify the effects of the act of discrimination. This project considers complainants to be victims of discrimination if because of their ethnic identity they experienced “threats, insults, or jokes by a person, group, institution, or media; violent acts or acts that lead to violence; or denial or restriction from access to education, employment, health, housing, services, and public places” (Intake form, CRIS 2006/132-527). However, the success of this effort requires people to be familiar with the concept of ethnic or racial discrimination, to be willing to report it, and to choose to report with Cimarron as opposed to some other entity.

With only one month to end of the project, the Cartagena office had collected only a scant number of denuncias. One potentially high profile complaint involved a

young woman from Cartagena whose application to the Navy was rejected on the basis of her physical appearance. After spending nearly 5 million pesos (approximately US\$2,500) for application fees, psychological and physical exams, and a host of other costs associated with applying to the most prestigious branch of the Colombian military, the woman was turned away for having “*la dentura abierta*,” or gaps in her teeth. In our interview, she made it very clear that the Navy’s reason for rejecting her was bogus and traded on a racial stereotype of black physical aesthetics, but she was determined not to give up her dream of becoming a naval officer. Handing me the headshot she submitted with her original application, she explained that the braces she now wore and newly lightened hair color were an attempt to eliminate any similar variables that might give the Navy reason to reject her second application. At first glance, it may appear that she acquiesced to dominate aesthetic values by dramatically lightening her hair and applying braces all with the purpose of conforming to the Navy’s aesthetic of presentable appearance (*buena apariencia*), but her complaint to Cimarron exemplifies another approach at pushing back against this act of racial discrimination.

During my weeklong visit to the Cartagena office in February 2008, I was taken aback by the slow pace of activity at the Center. The project was nearing its end so Cimarron would soon have to present the results of its three-city study to the European Union and the public. With only a month to spare, the Cartagena office was organizing a street campaign to collect denuncias in a few small communities in Cartagena and its metropolitan area. It was never clear to me how an operation staffed by just two people, a seven-month pregnant Afro-Colombian woman with extensive organizing experience in the department of Sucre and a mestiza woman inexperienced in community-based

activism, were to accomplish this huge task on such a tight schedule, but I was left with the impression that they were under external pressure to produce results. Cimarron continues its efforts primarily from the national office in Bogotá and its regional office in Cali with support from and collaborations with state institutions, international organizations and regional black and indigenous grassroots movements.

Consolidation of a Black Grassroots Network

National Coordinator of Black Communities (late 1980s) and Process of Black Communities (1990- present)⁶

Unlike the previously discussed black social movements, Proceso de Comunidades Negras (Process of Black Communities, PCN) emerged in direct relation to shifts in state politics and legislative opportunity. With the reform of Colombia's political constitution, there was a sense of urgency within civil society to attend to the nation's social cleavages and broaden citizenship beyond the country's political and economic elites. The reform process was a prime opportunity to put black issues on the national platform, and Afro-Colombians and their sympathizers wanted to be sure that such issues would be represented in this democratic enterprise. The most favorable avenue to inserting black perspectives into the constitutional process would be to elect Afro-Colombian representatives to the National Constituent Assembly (Asamblea Nacional Constituyente, ANC), the popularly elected body charged with drafting the revised national charter. To do so, however, would require coordination among various sectors of black Colombia from across the country. PCN and its predecessor the National Coordinator of Black Communities (Coordinador Nacional de Comunidades Negras,

⁶ In Spanish, Coordinador Nacional de Comunidades Negras and Proceso de Comunidades Negras, respectively.

CNCN) are an example of the struggle to gather and coordinate disparate people, movements, and organizations and to synthesize their ideas on and approaches to black rights.

In 1990 the Preconstituent Conference of Black Communities gathered diverse individuals, community groups, and organizations with experience working in black communities to determine a strategy for bringing black issues to the fore in the early stages of the constitutional reform process (Grueso, et al. 1998: 199). The participants represented a wide range of sectors, including the Catholic Church, the leftist movement, peasant and urban groups, traditional political parties, non-governmental organizations, state institutions, and black cultural organizations. Though most of these organizations consisted primarily of Afro-Colombians, in practice they were not organized around blackness, but around specific issues and sectors like feminism, labor equality, and peasant issues. Blackness alone would not be a sufficient element to sustain this group; instead, sector loyalties, regional specificity, political party affiliation, and lack of confidence in state politics weakened the consolidation of this group (Castillo 2007). What was left after the conference was a smaller contingent that became known as the CNCN. The CNCN's main accomplishments were maintaining the coordination of these disparate groups, however loose and fragile this coordination may have been, and nominating a candidate to the ANC. Carlos Rosero, anthropologist and activist from the Pacific, did not win the seat to the ANC, but became the most visible leader of the CNCN and its offshoot PCN. Cimarrón leader Juan de Dios Mosquera also sought candidacy to the ANC and many blacks voted along party lines (as they were accustomed) rather than for any of the black candidates. Lack of experience with electoral politics, minimal

financial resources, a brief campaign period, fractions among black organizations, lack of consensus for a black agenda and weak identity as blacks would cost Afro-Colombians their seat to the ANC (Castillo 2007:194-204).

The constitutional process brought out black organizing in unprecedented ways. Across the country Afro-Colombian people and organizations refused to keep quiet about racial discrimination, denouncing the subtle but rampant ways they experience racism and demanding the new constitution recognize them as citizens without forcing them to assimilate (Arocha 1992). Never before in Colombian history had Afro-Colombians mobilized a concerted, nationwide effort around recognition and rights for black people. PCN was not the only organization to take part in this process, but from the constitutional reform process to post-Law 70 it has sustained its involvement in national politics concerning black rights. In 1993 just two years after the new 1991 Constitution, Law 70 granted collective territorial rights to “black communities” living along the river basins of the Pacific region. Despite the controversy among Afro-Colombians about the law – it only represented rural blacks, it likened black people to indigenous peoples, it only recognized blacks residing in the Pacific, and so on, PCN took the lead on informing people in the Pacific of their rights according to Law 70 and how to petition for collective land titles. Members made arduous journeys to the remote, dense forests of the Pacific by bus, canoe and on foot to hold brief informational sessions they dubbed “*encuentros de rios*” (Castillo 2007).

Since those early days of mobilizing, PCN has taken on a rural character as an organization focused on black peasant issues and collective land rights. PCN owes this characterization to several factors: its role in the development of Law 70, its mobilization

of the *encuentros de rios*, its post-Law 70 activism in defense of territorial rights, and its emphasis on ethnic rights grounded in a relationship to land. As a guiding principle, PCN articulates an intimate relationship between ethnic identity and culture on one hand and territory and autonomy on the other. Large scale modernization and economic development projects, and the related violence (Oslender 2007), like the planned inter-oceanic highway to link Colombia's Atlantic and Pacific regions, shrimp farming, African palm cultivation, gold mining, and other natural resources extraction have threatened the integrity of black communities' ability to occupy and manage their collective territories (Asher 2009; Castillo 2007; Escobar 2008). So PCN primarily organizes both nationally and transnationally to bring awareness to threats to black communities and their leaders, assassinations, massacres, encroachment by legal and illegal armed groups, and violations to the communities right to *consulta previa* (prior consultation) on the state's plans for use of their lands. In an interview, founding member Libia Grueso lamented that PCN has not been to break free from what she deems a narrow characterization of the movement. No doubt, PCN's early alliances with the environmental movement are in large part responsible for the organization's emphasis on territory, "traditional" land use practices, ethno-development and sustainability. The movement also works in defense of black representation so that community members have a role in policymaking process as it affects Afro-Colombians broadly, from national development plans to land use decisions to representatives in political offices.

PCN rejects capitalism, neoliberalism, globalization, and dominant approaches to development, which PCN member Elizabeth Carillo described to me as forms of *neo-esclavización*, or neo-slavery. This emphasis resonates in the movement's slogan

“Liberty, Dignity and Autonomy” and its staunch commitment to “*no negociar los derechos*” (not compromise their rights). One example is PCN’s visible campaign against the potential U.S.-Colombia trade agreement that was introduced under the George W. Bush administration. While other black social movements have entertained endorsing the agreement on the condition that it features clauses that protect black laborers and black territories, PCN announced to the Colombian government and the international community that it would not consider any version of the bilateral trade agreement favorable to black communities. A Pacifica Radio broadcast aired in 2007 where Carlos Rosero described the then Cauca sugar cane workers strike as a manifestation of the threats to autonomy, land, and dignified work, that Afro-Colombians would endure under the intensified production model necessitated by a bilateral free trade agreement (2008). Such intensified economic opening would lead to further exploitation of the land, encroachment on natural resource-rich black territories, replacement of rural labor with sophisticated technologies, and gross imbalance between wealthy landowners and peasants and workers. Furthermore, the trade agreement would privilege capital accumulation rather than cultural and territorial autonomy for black and indigenous communities.

Political organizing of the late 1980s for black representation in the constitutional reform process, of 1991 to 1993 between the constitutionally established Transitory Article 55 and the ratification of Law 70, and of the immediate period following Law 70 when black communities began to seek land titles supplied PCN with its *raison d’être*. Those three intense periods of possibility and transformation fueled the early stages of PCN’s activism, and the movement’s identity is very intimately tied to the formation of

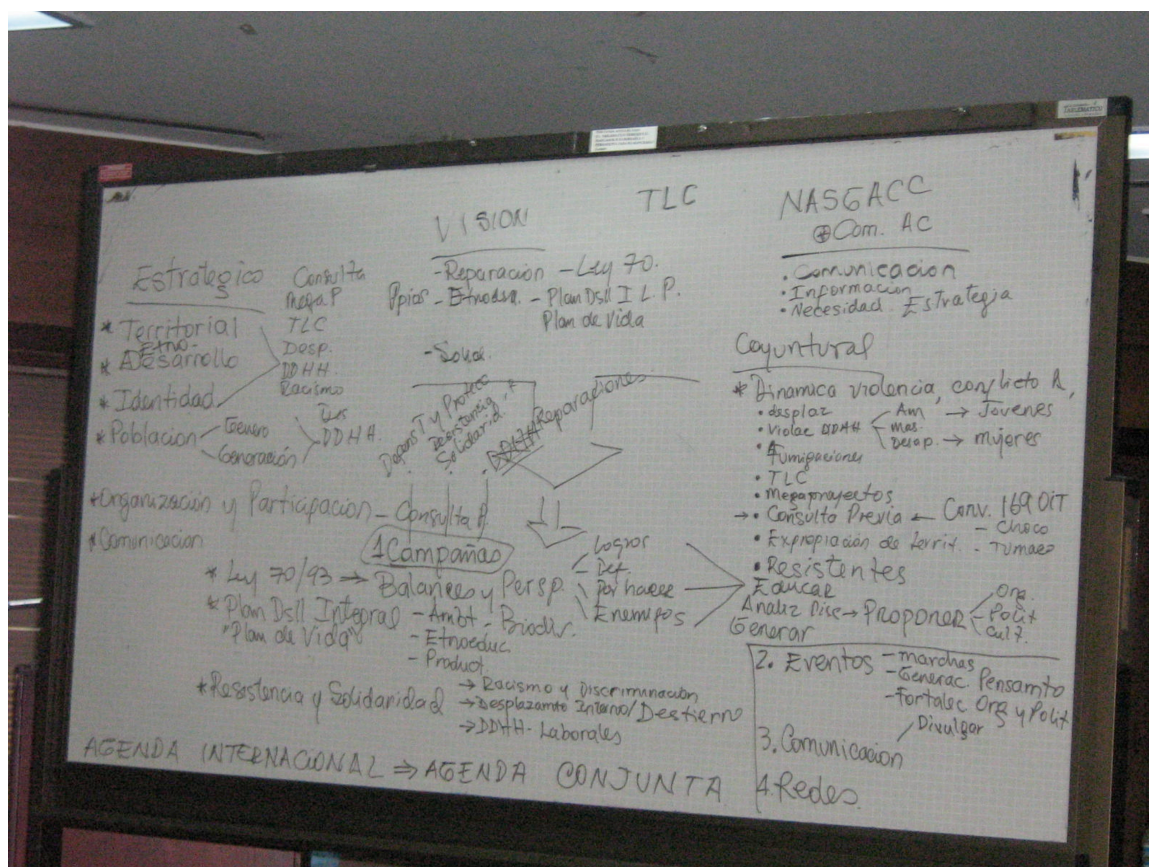
Law 70 and collective land rights. For this same reason, PCN has recently been under attack for its relevance and efficacy in a post-Law 70 era. Early in my research I spoke with an Afro-Colombian woman who had been involved with black grassroots organizing during the reform period but now works for one of the largest, most prestigious programs funded by USAID. Somewhat frustrated she sounded off, “What more does the movement want? They protest about land rights and displacement, but nearly all of the hectares guaranteed to *comunidades negras* has already been titled. And most of the people leaving the rural regions are not being forcefully displaced, but they are leaving for lack of opportunities and inadequate infrastructure in their regions.” While not speaking as an institutional representative, her sentiments echoed many of the complaints I would hear throughout my fieldwork about black social movements in general: that the basis for resistance was waning, especially since the rights for which the movement fought have been for the most part been granted.

This aid worker’s comments are hard to refute if analyzed superficially. However, PCN’s current activism is less directed toward demanding that black rights be established, but that the existing rights be implemented and defended by the state. According to INCODER, as of 2004, 132 collective territories had been titled to black communities in the amount of 4,717,269 hectares, or 4.13 percent of Colombia’s national territory. There is a gross disparity between the ethnic group population and number of collectively titled territories for black and indigenous Colombians. While Afro-Colombians account for 26 percent of the national population – 10% according to conservative estimates – and hold 4.13 percent (roughly 4.7 million hectares) of national territory in collective land titles, indigenous groups comprise about 3.4 percent of the

national population yet hold an astounding 29.8 percent (34 million hectares) of national territory. To say that the rights have been granted presents some epistemological issues. The rights are codified in law and *reglementado* (made operational) in decrees and national public policies. However, these rights often are not protected by the state, and are in jeopardy due to lack of political will, forced displacement, and limited resources and funds. Also, my interviews with seminal leaders of PCN reveal that Law 70 was not in fact constructed in strict accordance with Afro-Colombians' views of themselves as a people and diverse group. Political scientist and ethnographer Kiran Asher (2009: 1-56) illustrates how different sectors of Afro-Colombia weighed in on the creation of a law for black rights, citing the vastly divergent approaches and viewpoints expressed. At the level of PCN, one leader communicated how they consulted with Manuel Zapata Olivella and other Afro-Colombian intellectuals for support on how to define black identity in Colombia and how to frame black civil rights appropriate for the Colombian context. The intellectuals were not able to provide the help these leaders so desperately sought, resulting in the absence of a scientific, academic counterpoint from *black* intellectuals about how to recognize the peoplehood and rights of Afro-Colombians.

A laundry list of obstacles stand in the way of this realization: the pending bilateral U.S-Colombia trade agreement; the integrity of the land titles; autonomy in the territories; encroachment by state and international corporations and mega-projects; isolation of the rural base from the PCN's core; the base's lack of knowledge about their rights; no renewal of organizational leadership (the absence of leaders among its young members); funding support for comunidades negras and their organizing (the state recognizes the autonomy of indigenous peoples and includes funds in national budget

administered directly to them, rather than the municipalities they live in as with “black communities”); and violent armed actors in black territories.



Brainstorming session, PCN National Assembly in Cali, Colombia, December 2007. Photo taken by author.

Articulating a racial dimension to forced displacement

Association of (Internally) Displaced Afro-Colombians, 1999-present⁷

The Association of (Internally) Displaced Afro-Colombians was formally established in 1999 after a series of violent tragedies affecting rural landowning black communities in the Colombian Pacific. December 13, 1996 marks the day that a paramilitary invasion with the cooperation of the Colombian Army’s 17th Brigade

⁷ In Spanish, Asociación de Afrocolombianos Desplazados

destroyed a Riosucio community and claimed the lives of many of its residents. As the first black community to gain land title to collectively owned territory in the Pacific under federal Law 70, Riosucio stands out as a successful, yet particularly tragic case. It is reported that community leaders and their families were forced from their homes at dawn and paraded through the streets where they were accused of being members of or assisting the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerilla group. Anyone who resisted was murdered. Community leaders and peasant farmers who resisted intimidation from paramilitary groups (which often includes threats of violence to them and their families if they do not give up their land) were accused of being members of or collaborators with the FARC. This excuse is often to justify brutal attacks on these communities—in public opinion it is acceptable to murder guerilla rebels not peasant farmers and peaceful community organizers. Such attacks clear communities of its residents or intimidate them into cooperation allowing major corporations to exploit fertile lands that are also rich in natural resources like wood, gold, and platinum. Hours later on that same December morning an aerial attack ensued as Colombian military planes bombed and fired at the nearby swamp, where survivors of the land attacks had managed to hide for hours and eventually days. Forced out of hiding by cramps, hunger, and fear, those who managed to make it out of the swamp alive fled to nearby rural communities by sneaking through their town or by river. Marino Cordoba, Riosucio community leader and survivor of the December 13th raid, took refuge in Bogotá where he went on to found the Association of Displaced Afro-Colombians three years later in August 1999.

Cordoba had been active in debates concerning the content and scope of what would become Law 70 and the diffusion of the law's provisions to rural black communities in the Pacific region, especially in the Chocó state. When he arrived in Bogotá as an internally displaced person he connected with the black movement there to make the atrocities against blacks and their lands visible to the nation and the international community. During the 1990s, he worked in the office of the first Afro-Colombian congresswoman Zulia Mena, also from the Chocó and participated in the Consultiva Distrital de Comunidades Negras, a district-level consultant board of blacks representing Afro-Colombian community interests before local government in Bogotá. Meanwhile, Cordoba extensively toured the United States visiting churches, universities, and advocacy groups across the country to raise awareness about the threats to black land owning collectives in the Colombian Pacific and to share his personal experience with forced displacement.

Unique from other Colombian organizations assisting internally displaced persons (IDPs), AFRODES upholds as a central tenet the ethno-racial dimension of displacement in Colombia. Their goal is to shed light on the unique challenges that Afro-Colombians face with displacement and settlement. Racial discrimination is chief among the obstacles that displaced Afro-Colombians endure as they try to access government services for IDPs, search for jobs and housing in the nation's cities, and begin their lives in unfamiliar areas of the country. In a June 2008 group interview with AFRODES leaders in Bogotá, Luz Marina Becerra, the organization's General Secretary and a survivor of forced displacement, lamented that Afro-Colombians encounter "triple discrimination" in displacement because they are poor, rural and black. Their rural

lifestyles and labor skills are strikingly incompatible with urban lifeways of primary settlement cities such as Bogota, Cali, and Cartagena. Their frustration at the government and institutional neglect for the particularities of the black experience with displacement was a major impetus for forming AFRODES, which further marginalizes a group of vulnerable and invisibilized people. As such, AFRODES advocates for displaced Afro-Colombians before the Constitutional Court, Congress, Ministry of the Interior, Procuraduría (Attorney General's office), and Acción Social, a presidential agency that manages social programs for "vulnerable populations affected by poverty, narcotrafficking, and violence" (www.accionsocial.gov.co).

Their emphasis on the racial dimensions of displacement does not stop at these activities which Luz Marina describes as "*incidencia política*" (political action or lobbying) on the national level with the government and state institutions. Both annoyed and frustrated she tells me of one of the organization's biggest challenges working with displaced Afro-Colombians, "Black people think that they are just like everyone else, that they experience displacement just like everyone else." Although not formally included in the group interview, a woman recently displaced from the Pacific visiting the office took her opportunity to chime in, "*Nos tocó aprender*. We had to learn who we are and that we too have rights." For many Afro-Colombians from majority black regions like the Pacific and the Caribbean⁸, they first encounter their blackness and recognize that they are

⁸ From my brief research trip to San Andres and interviews with San Andresanos living in Bogotá, I make an exception to this claim. They tend to be politicized about black identity and black politics in a way that continental Afro-Colombians are not. This racial consciousness and politicization is, in large part, due to their relationship to the English-speaking Caribbean and the United States through music, family ties, and cultural influence. Also, the archipelago of San Andres, Providencia and Santa Catalina has a distinct history of colonization, regional identity formation, and race relations. The archipelago was colonized by the British. Islanders today

racialized subjects when they live outside of these predominately black homelands where they rarely encounter non-blacks. AFRODES assisted in her discovery of her racial-social position in Bogotá and in becoming a citizen, given its emphasis on the nexus of race, displacement and rights.

AFRODES underscores the link between violence and forced displacement from bio-diverse, resource-rich black territories as another central tenet of the organization. AFRODES leaders saw a curious pattern in the circumstances leading to the forced displacement of Afro-Colombians. Like many Afro-Colombian activists and their supporters in the international community, AFRODES members speculate that armed conflict and political violence began to spike in the Pacific at the same that Afro-Colombians were titled collective territories as stipulated by Law 70. When asked to name the organization's foundational principles, Jattan explained that AFRODES aims to teach displaced Afro-Colombians about their rights and how to realize them and, as Geiler added, "to convert vulnerable people into full citizens". To accomplish this process of *empoderamiento político* (political empowerment), as Jattan described it, AFRODES coordinates *charlas* (informal talks), *encuentros* (meetings) and *foros* (forums) on "legislation and international conventions, declarations, and agreements like the UN Convention against Racism, the Durban Declaration, and the International Labor Organization Convention 169." In addition, they also educate members on "internal legislation and their regulatory statutes," particularly Law 70 (1993) which grants Afro-Colombians collective territories among other cultural and material rights, Law 387 (1997) guaranteeing the rights of internally displaced Colombians, and Constitutional

_____ speak English and a Caribbean patois as their first languages and Spanish as a second language. They practice Protestant religions rather than Catholicism.

Sentence T-025 (2004) mandating the state to reform its policies toward victims of forced displacement. In these interviews, AFRODES leaders emphasize return to the areas from which they were displaced as a right (Sanchez-Garzoli 2003), which has been coined in the organization's slogan "Territory, Culture, Autonomy and Life."

AFRODES' commitment to political empowerment extends to social, cultural and economic life of displaced persons. According to Jatan, AFRODES aims to "maintain, promote and foster Afro-Colombian culture because this is the first thing people lose when they get displaced to the cities." They do this through sports, recreation, dance and folkloric troupes, the Centro Cultural Artesanal (Cultural Craft Center) and a library of Afro-Colombian literature, of which the latter two are maintained in popular neighborhoods on the outskirts of Bogotá. In addition, the organization encourages its members to find creative ways to translate their cultural knowledge and rural labor skills into income generating activities. Through *capacitaciones* (training sessions) and *talleres* (workshops) members are taught skills for various sectors such as restaurant, supermarket, confection and baking, radio technology, and handicrafts. On a 2005 delegation to Afro-Colombian community organizations operating across the country, I had the opportunity to talk with several women who participated in these programs in Cartagena. AFRODES members meet in a three-story cinderblock building located in a residential neighborhood on the outskirts of Cartagena. Climbing the narrow staircase of the colorfully painted building, the center director Manuel leads me to the second floor where women are gathered in small group stringing beads to make necklaces, bracelets and earrings. In our conversation, the women tell me how difficult it is for them to sell their handicrafts and homemade sweets as ambulatory vendors. The most vocal of all the

women piped up, “This city is saturated with *gente desplazada* (displaced people) and all of the displaced women sell whatever they can, fresh fruit, candies and other sweets, and jewelry made from painted seeds and nuts. All we are asking for is *trabajo digno* (respectable employment) so we can have a decent place to live and be able to send our children to school.” The local tourist market creates a niche area for these women in the informal labor market, providing an alternative to work in local hotels as chambermaids and cooks or in private residences as nannies and domestic workers (Streicker 1995).

A similarly bleak situation occurs in the municipality of Soacha located on the periphery of Bogotá. In June 2005 AFRODES leader Geiler led an African American delegation through the windy, rocky paths of the irregularly settled community. This Soacha neighborhood lacks basic public services like running water, sewage, and electricity (residents pirate the latter from power lines on nearby principal streets) and is home to many destitute, displaced families. Careful to take our group only where we would not encounter guerrilla rebels who recently had begun to establish their presence within the community, Geiler took us on a tour of the Cultural Craft Center, which functions as a community center, and introduced us to displaced families in the neighborhood. We stopped at one red cinderblock home where sheets of cardboard and heavy black plastic functioned as doors and windows to protect residents from the cold temperatures and sporadic rainstorms characteristic of the Colombian highlands. There Geiler introduced us to one of the sweets vendors who prepares and sells *encocados* (sweets made of shaved coconut and carmelized sugar) on the streets of the capital city. When we stopped by she had just finished preparing her treats which were left out to harden in their dank, dark two-room home. In the next home our delegation sat in the

main room on the concrete floor, the one living room sofa, and turned over buckets as we ate a home-cooked meal of *sancocho* (mixed meat stew) and shared stories of U.S. black life with our hosts. Meanwhile, the mother of the home began to set up her crafts for display atop a rickety ironing board in the corner of the main room. She hoped that in the group of delegates someone might commission her handicrafts in bulk for sale in the U.S. While the delegates admired her entrepreneurial spirit, they could not imagine a market for jewelry of this aesthetic.



Soacha women showcase their handicrafts. Photo taken by author.

AFRODES utilizes a multi-level approach that incorporates community-based, national and international activities, including political mobilization, economic development, and cultural retention. Such diverse activities and approaches do not fit squarely into the categories that describe AFRODES, as gathered from my interviews with organization leaders and analysis of the organization's human rights reports, pamphlets, and manuals. The organization defines itself as both a collective of displaced families and a grassroots organization (*organización de base*). In 2005 AFRODES counted 1,300 families among its membership, (as gathered from their July application to the Permanent Council of the Organization of American States for permission to participate in OAS activities as a civil society organization). This number rose to 2,340

by 2007 (AFRODES and Rights 2007). Elsewhere leaders describe AFRODES as a grassroots organization in their efforts to emphasize the participatory nature of the organization. In other words, the content and nature of the organization's activities are developed collectively with the people these activities are meant to represent and advocate, also called the base. AFRODES is not alone in this assertion; PCN also emphatically defends its character as a grassroots organization. In recent years this description has become increasingly important as a way for longstanding black social movements and organizations to assert their intimate, experiential knowledge of Afro-Colombian political mobilization and social issues, particularly given the recent explosion of organizations and black political elites that claim to represent black issues. Cimarron leader Juan de Dios Mosquera has often expressed his frustration with *organizaciones de papel*, organizations that exist in name only, because they drain limited resources from legitimate Afro-Colombian organizations and distract from the issues at stake for Afro-Colombian communities. AFRODES, PCN, and Cimarron leaders believe their ability to mobilize a base, history with black organizing, and personal experience with issues like displacement better equips them to serve as interlocutors with state institutions and international organizations on the topic of Afro-Colombian rights and social issues.

AFRODES and PCN do not at all times operate as grassroots organizations; they often also function as think tanks and NGOs. AFRODES' organizational structure provides insight into how the organization operates. AFRODES has a main office in Bogotá, regional organizations in Cartagena, Buenaventura, Quibdó and Soacha (on the outskirts of Bogotá), and an international operation in Washington, DC. The Bogotá

office functions much like a headquarters. The national officers Geiler Romaña, Luz Marina Becerra, Jatan Mazzot, and Eusebio Mosquera work out of this office, where they manage the organization's relationships with state institutions, the Colombian government, and international and multilateral organizations; plan and execute lobbying efforts, major community-based activities, and transnational political outreach; secure funding from national and international donors; and produce human rights reports and organizational documents. They have collaborated with myriad national and international advocates and donors: from the U.S., Congressional Black Caucus, Global rights, Public Citizen, Witness for Peace, Chicagoans for a Peaceful Colombia, the U.S. Embassy Political Section Human Rights Department; international organizations, Project Counseling Services (European-Canadian funding agency), Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Netherlands Interchurch Organization for Development Cooperation (ICCO); from Colombia, Consultancy on Human Rights and Displacement (CODHES), Acción Social, and district-level (Bogotá) government offices.

The regional groups function like community-based organizations with a community center, focusing on local level issues of Afro-Colombian (and other) displaced people like food, housing, employment, and recreation. Marino Cordoba, the founder of AFRODES, continues to be a strong advocate for displaced Afro-Colombians while living in exile in Washington, DC. Several attempts were made on Marino's life while he was living in displacement in Bogotá after the Riosucio tragedy, one of which left a permanent gunshot wound to one of his legs. In 2001 the Organization of American States Human Rights Commission appealed to the Colombian government to

protect the lives of Cordoba and his family members, and when it became clear that this request would not be honored Cordoba sought refuge in the United States where he would later receive political asylum in 2002. Only then could his *compañera* (life partner) and five children living internally displaced in Bogotá join him. Due to the amount of requests for speaking engagements, AFRODES' alliances with U.S. advocacy groups, and continued mass violations against human and IDP rights in Colombia, Cordoba institutionalized AFRODES in the United States under the name AFRODES-USA. Assistance from the Washington Office on Latin America, TransAfrica Forum, churches, university professors, and other advocacy groups was integral to this institutionalization. Currently, Maria Mina Rojas, Colombian national residing in the US for just under two decades, joins Cordoba in the day to day work that keeps AFRODES-USA current, responsive and visible.

Current Challenges to Black Politics and Black Organizing

In this chapter I have traced the contours of Afro-Colombian organizing and their deployments of black identity from the 1970s to the present, to show how Afro-Colombian's abilities to make identity-based claims for citizenship and rights transform in connection with trends in state racial politics. The possibility of black politics, wherein Afro-Colombians could collectively mobilize to make demands of the state, were largely foreclosed by the homogenizing official politics of mestizo national identity and the society-wide denial of race and racism. The Colombian Constitutional Reform of 1991 and subsequent Law 70, two related processes that were greatly facilitated by global politics concerning democracy, anti-racism, and pluralism, provided the political and

social discourse upon which Afro-Colombians could base their rights claims. Earlier black organizations like Negritud and Soweto primarily focused on black identity and culture and related social ideals like visibility, belonging, and inclusion, while post-1990 black organizing is defined by its deliberate mobilization of black identity in social movements that focus on social issues such as land rights, affirmative action, economic development, and access to justice. I do not mean to suggest that the earlier organizations like Negritud and Soweto were apolitical, rather that they did not make formal, legally grounded demands of the state on behalf of Afro-Colombians. In fact, these early groups live on in the collective imagination of many Afro-Colombians for their contribution to the development of black political thought and black racial consciousness in Colombia.

Drawing upon ethnographic, historical, and comparative methods I showed how some black organizations were able to take advantage of this political opening to consolidate and strengthen their collective action and visibility, and how currently these social movements face the challenges of activism after nearly twenty years of multicultural politics in Colombia. This chapter is an analysis of what happens to social movements in the emergence and decline of supposed victories like multicultural politics, providing scholars and activists with tools to re-think social movement strategies and the relationship of collective action to state politics and political power more generally. The rise of Afro-Colombian social movements and the consolidation of collective black identity coincided with the advent of multicultural politics in Colombia, namely constitutional reform and Law 70. As this politics loses its momentum due to lack of political will and the onslaught of neoliberal projects and the state grows fatigued with

petitions made in the name of Afro-Colombian rights, the black social movement is suffering, and the avenues to make identity-based rights claims and expand the scope of existing legal rights is narrowing.

Afro-Colombian groups face enormous challenges to sustaining themselves for a number of reasons. First, particular rights that have been granted are now in jeopardy, thus fueling PCN's struggle for state protection of black communities' rights to collective territory and safety from armed conflict; AFRODES's organizing against forced displacement from those titled lands; and Cimarron's activism around educational benefits toward black students. In these cases, formal rights or policies have not always resulted in (consistent) implementation.

Second, large-scale, economic and political interests threaten the advancement of Afro-Colombian rights and movements representing this group are fighting an uphill battle, often out-resourced and understaffed. During my seven-hour translation of an interview between Carlos Rosero of PCN and an African American activist and university professor Tukufo Zuberi, Rosero expressed his frustration with the overwhelming onslaughts: "We're fighting against everyone. It's just like when we first started and we were everywhere, in the rural regions, in the cities, in the public organizing to make Law 70 a possibility. It calmed down for a while but now we're at it again. We haven't had a chance to rest since then. Now it's the threat of a trade agreement, threats and violence against black communities in *los territorios*... Many of us have been doing this non-stop for over twenty years and we're tired." He continued, citing the need for new leadership among Afro-Colombian youth who can carry on activism they had begun.

In addition, the rise of a black political elite has become one of the greatest challenges to social movement claims making. Recently, the Colombian government has sought out a select group of conservative Afro-Colombian elite as allies and representatives of black people, black rights, and black social issues, displacing the traditional grassroots social movements and their role as interlocutors with the state around Afro-Colombian issues. In my observations of Afro-Colombian activism, social movement leaders often lament being behind the curve, so to speak, that is, reactionary against state politics and state retrenchment on black rights, rather than creative of their own agendas and activism independent of political power and state influence. Perhaps, this is a central moment to understand the dubious nature of multicultural politics on race, rights, and collective action. These politics allow for counterhegemonic claims at the same time that they foreclose the possibilities of sustaining activism on issues that are not recognized by the state. To maintain their role as interlocutors with the state social movement campaigns are largely confined to existing political frameworks and issues.

Fourth, the loose connection between social movement leaders and their base, which in the case of Afro-Colombian social movements like Cimarron, AFRODES, and PCN include cities, towns, and villages across the country, including the archipelago of San Andres, Providencia, and Santa Catalina, makes it difficult to coordinate mass mobilizations and organization-wide meetings. Travel between these regions is costly and time consuming, often requiring multiple modes of transportation to reach some of these destinations. The scattered base often is not involved in the daily activities of the social movement, leaving lobbying activities, *incidencia política* as AFRODES leader Luz Marina calls it, to a reduced number of members and leaders living in the principal

sites of the social movement, primarily Bogotá and a few major cities like Cartagena, Buenaventura, Quibdó, and Cali depending on the particular group.

While this list of challenges is not exhaustive it provides a basis to begin analyzing the limits, and simultaneous hegemony, of state politics on counter claims. What Charles Hale describes about indigenous movements in post-multicultural reform Guatemala resonate with the failures of neoliberal multiculturalism for Afro-Colombians: “The nightmare settles in as indigenous organizations win important battles of cultural rights only to find themselves mired in the painstaking, technical, administrative, and highly inequitable negotiations for resources and political power that follow” (Hale 2005:13). Hence, we understand that social movements are temporal and dynamic. They must sustain themselves in political climates that have the appearance of political opening, possibility, and opportunity. They do so by retooling their messages, reaching out to transnational advocates, re-energizing their base and seeking new strategies for activism, although these efforts are not always successful or effective. This chapter contributes to scholarship on social movements by considering what happens to movements after notable political successes, and provides a critique of the limits of recognition and legal rights (Law 70).

Chapter 3
Still Under Construction:
Exploring Narratives of Black “Self-Discovery”

I was curious about Emma’s recent awareness of anti-black stereotypes and racism. As a clearly identifiably black person, or so I thought, had she not heard these things before? I found it hard to believe that a 20-something black woman who grew up in “white-mestizo Bogotá” had never experienced racial discrimination or encountered racist stereotypes before these interviews. In her research on racial identity formation and belonging among urban Latino and Latin American immigrant youth, Ana Ramos-Zayas (2007) reminds us that there are “contextual and subjective qualities that contribute to racial marking.” Region of origin, accent, skin color, education, racial identity of family members or romantic partners, and location play a significant role in marking racial identity. Race and color designations for any one person can differ widely within a given nation as well as in transnational context. So although I identified Emma as black does not guarantee that she would do the same. I had been living in Bogotá for just a few months and already had heard so many stories from other blacks about their encounters with racism, not to mention my personal experiences with it. However, my conversation with Emma was not unique; through the course of my fieldwork, I heard a number of elite Afro-Colombians describe experiences that made them aware of anti-black racism and provoked their “discovery” and self-identification as “black.” While it has been established that “processes of self-discovery and social recognition are linked to the formation of active social and political subjectivities” (Caldwell 2007: 1), Emma’s encounter exemplifies how black self-identification and racial consciousness are not

limited to sites of formal political participation and activism. Rather, just as racism crops up in everyday life, often unexpectedly, so also racial consciousness often develops through everyday encounters.

Fieldnotes Entry: January 2008

Sitting on the terrace at the expansive Luis Ángel Arango Library, Emma and I waited for our book orders to be processed. I asked her about her research assistantship at the recently launched anti-discrimination working group at a private university in Bogotá— an exclusive institution with only a handful of black affiliates. She had been with the research team for almost a year, and I was interested in her experiences as an Afro-Colombian interviewing and gathering data on racial attitudes and practices in Colombia. As a trained sociologist, Emma was experienced at survey and interview design, but she was not prepared for the impact the data would have on her personal outlook and daily life. ‘I used to be fine before I came to this job. I was happy. But in my interviews, many mestizos tell me that they think black people are different [from them] and that they smell bad. I don’t know what black people they’ve come in contact with. I mean, no one I know fits that description, but yet it keeps coming up as an interview response.’ She paused with a heavy sigh, clearly troubled by these stereotypes. Nervously chuckling, she continued, ‘I’ve become so self-conscious, Fatimah, that I started carrying around deodorant and perfume with me everyday. And I am constantly checking myself,’ as she pulled the armpit of her blouse close to her nose. We laughed at the absurdity of her concern, but her laugh quickly dissipated and with a heavy countenance she looked me straight in the eye, ‘Sometimes I wish I didn’t know.’ ‘You wish you didn’t know what?’ I probed. ‘I never used to see myself as different. I didn’t know that white people thought so poorly of me. People always told me that *no soy tan negra* (I am not fully/ really black), and I saw myself as *Colombiana*. But now I see it everywhere, even when I don’t want to. You can’t walk around like that all the time, constantly aware of racism, but I know there’s no going back now.’

The concept of discovery appears frequently in scholarship on Afro-Latin Americans, but has been under-theorized to describe the process by which afro-descendants develop racial consciousness and come to identify as “black.” It is both a political and cultural awakening that begins with newfound awareness of society’s fraught racial dynamics, experiences of racial discrimination and discriminatory attitudes, recognition of racial social hierarchies, participation in identity-based social movements, exposure to black rights struggles elsewhere, and so on. Afro-Latin Americans have

access to discovery by “mediation”, that is “*through* the impact on social life” of these factors (Hall 2003 [1990]: 241, emphasis in original). The possibility that individuals’ discovery and self-identification as black might necessarily be related to their acknowledgment of or personal encounters with anti-black racism raises a number of questions: How and when do Afro-Colombians come to discover themselves as black? How do they navigate and manage that awareness, especially in everyday encounters with racism? What makes some blacks aware of racism while others are not? Must black racial awareness be linked to racism? To address these questions, this chapter draws on interviews with two Afro-Colombian women living in Bogotá to consider the circumstances under which blacks are forced to reflect on what it means to be black in Colombia and to confront structures of racism in their everyday lives.

While Afro-Colombian social movements have largely been responsible for providing language for and shaping public discourse on the black experience in Colombia over the last two decades, this chapter shows how contemporary Colombians encounter and make sense of themselves as racialized subjects and create structures of meaning about these experiences in their daily lives in an era of black recognition and multiculturalism in Colombia. In Latin America, unlike the United States, it has hitherto been uncommon to read daily social situations through a racial lens¹; instead, class and culture operate as dominant modes of analysis to explain social difference and inequalities and to deny the social realities of racism and racial discrimination in Latin America (Dulitzky 2005). Ideologies of *mestizaje* and racial democracy have been so

¹ See John Jackson Jr. (2008) for a discussion about the tensions between public and private discourses of race and racism and U.S. society’s preoccupation with racial political correctness. See also Goldstein (2003: 103-107) for a comparison of U.S. and Brazilian approaches to racial categorization and social identification.

deeply engrained in the social fabric that many Latin Americans (black and non-black) downplay the impact that race and color hierarchies have on the social lives of indigenous peoples and blacks. The encounters described in the fieldnote excerpts cited throughout this chapter illustrate Afro-Colombians' diverse experiences with navigating black identity, black subjectivity, racial consciousness, and racism in contemporary Colombia— a time in which the Colombian government's embrace of multiculturalism is ironically challenging the mestizaje ideal and triggering Afro-Colombians like Emma to “discover” their blackness or to self identify as racialized subjects.

While this moment might trigger greater racial consciousness, the process of identifying oneself is by no means smooth or lacking in contradiction. Brazilian scholar Peter Fry theorizes race as an individual rather than collective identity, wherein “ ‘races’ were not so much sociological realities as somehow present in various degrees of cultural and biological combination in each *individual*, where they are fused” (2000: 90). Throughout this chapter, I hold in tension Fry's idea that race is determined according to individual social position along with the common approach to race and racial identification as a collective process (Banton 1988; Winant 1999), to explore how contemporary Afro-Colombians might move in and out of racial consciousness and to explain why Afro-Colombians--like Emma-- might identify as “black” while not seeing themselves as members of a racialized group.

Emma “Discovers” her Blackness

In her interviews with whites about racial attitudes, practices, and perceptions, Emma came face-to-face with anti-black racism. White-mestizo interviewees freely

shared stereotypes about blacks saying they “smell bad”² and are “different”--presumably from whites since whiteness operates as the social norm in Colombia. Emma, whose friends often describe her as “*no tan negra*” (not really or completely black), could not avoid personalizing the racist beliefs her research participants divulged. Despite her ability to pass,³ these encounters with anti-black racism were demoralizing and vexing for Emma: in our conversation she talks of being happy *before* taking the research assistantship and becoming self-conscious about possible offensive body odor, to the point of carrying deodorant and perfume in her purse and checking herself throughout the day. The significance of Emma’s experience rests on the description that she is “not so black” or “not really or fully black.” This description creates a structure of exception whereby Emma is largely excluded from the racialized social category of “black.” By identifying her as *no tan negra*, friends treated Emma as if she was an

² There are other works on Afro-Latin Americans that reveal the same stereotype that blacks have a foul odor (see Caldwell 2007). In Colombia, this common stereotype may derive from blacks’ relationship to the national seafood and fishing industry and their practices of subsistence fishing. The Colombian Pacific, where over 50 percent of the nation’s black population resides, houses the majority of the nation’s fishing industry (for domestic and international consumption) and is a location where fishing is incorporated into daily life, commerce, and subsistence practices. In cities like Bogotá, white-owned seafood restaurants often hire only Afro-Colombian cooks and waiters, trading on local stereotypes that Afro-Colombians possess an intimate knowledge of seafood selection, seasoning and preparation. A seafood restaurant staffed by Afro-Colombian waiters and cooks confirms the authenticity of the meals on the menu. This stereotype is linked to the idea that most Afro-Colombians are from coastal regions or rural, riverine areas, especially in the Caribbean and Pacific regions where most of the local diet is based on seafood and local people participate in the fishing industry. Black peoples are not the owners of the cities’ upscale seafood restaurants, just the inexpensive lunch time or after party locations where a seafood meal can be purchased for as little as 7,000 pesos (about US\$3.55 at the time of my research).

³ In the US, particularly during slavery and post-Emancipation, some blacks were able to self-identify as white because of their light skin and other white-associated phenotypic features. Those blacks who attempted to pass as whites did so primarily to escape the violent apartheid and racism of that time. In Latin America, however, “passing” explains how miscegenation whitens blacks which distances them from black racial identity on the black-white color continuum. The logic behind Latin American passing is not to identify blacks as white, per se, but to alleviate African descendants of the social category black (*negro*). Instead, society categorizes these blacks as mixed race or “brown” (*moreno*).

exceptional black person, that is, unlike the nameless, faceless blacks of society's stereotypes. Claims of her exceptionalism created social distance between Emma, on one hand, and other blacks and the social category of black, on the other. These claims fostered Emma's disavowal of herself as a racial subject, so it is only when she is confronted with whites' beliefs that blacks smell bad that Emma begins to see herself as identified with the fisherman and seafood restaurant cooks of the black regions from which this stereotype most likely derives.

The designation "*no tan negra*" signifies the range of intermediate color categories between bipolar black-white identity categories, and functions as a description of identity. Through Emma we see the slippery use of the phrase "*no tan negra*" (and "black") to signify color, race, or group label in different instances just like in Brazil where "color terms are...complicated and elided with words used to refer to 'racial identities' " (Goldstein 2003: 106). Numerous color-cum-racial categories emerged out of Latin America's extensive racial and cultural mixture among its white, black and indigenous peoples. Unlike the system of racial classification by hypo-descent, which exists in the US as the "one drop rule", mixed race blacks, or *morenos* (browns) as they are sometimes described, are categorized in an extensive color and race terminology distinguishing identity by skin tone, hair texture, nose shape, and other phenotypic features. Moreover, "*no tan negra*" harkens back to Colombia's legacy as a mestizo nation and the official endorsement of *mestizaje* (race mixture) designed to homogenize a tri-racial nation, minimize the significance of race, and resolve the nation's race problem.⁴ After independence the new Colombian state and its elite on a quest to

⁴ See Marixa Lasso (2007) for more on blacks in the republican era and how their participation in independence wars ushered in a new era of nation building project of "racial harmony".

establish national identity crafted the concept of the mestizo nation. They had to contend with scientific theories that asserted non-whites and disabled persons were a threat to modernity and national identity. The U.S. and Europe, which practiced racial segregation, were thriving examples to prove this as the route to modernity.

Heterogeneous Latin American nations like Colombia (with Spanish elites, criollos, natives, and Africans and blacks) engineered a national identity that embraced this racial and ethnic diversity. Investigation of the Latin American nation and social relations shows that this official discourse of the mestizo nation exists alongside the overvaluation of whiteness (and whitening) within mestizaje. Reminiscent of Carl Degler's (1971) theory of the "mulatto escape hatch," being *no tan negra* allows mixed race (and mixed culture) blacks to avoid *fully* identifying as black (racially) and with blacks (as a group), and thus sidestep the negative associations of blackness.⁵ In Degler's comparison of US and Brazilian racial dynamics, he asserts that Brazil, unlike the US, had been able to avoid racial polarity because it does not classify blacks and mulattoes (light skinned, mixed raced blacks) as one group. Instead, mulattoes occupy their own identity category and experience greater opportunity for upward social and class mobility; this is known as the "mulatto escape hatch". According to this pivotal study, Brazilian race problems would be resolved with the increased economic mobility of blacks (as it had happened for mulattoes.) Hence, Brazilian society could point to the social and economic success of mixed race blacks as proof that racial discrimination does not exist – if "browns" could fair well and even be on par with whites then so could unambiguous, or "pure", blacks. Emma's encounter with white racist beliefs, however,

⁵ The ability of "browns" to avoid black identification severely hinders the consolidation and strengthening of robust black social movements in Latin America.

illustrates how even mixed race, mixed culture Afro-Latin Americans cannot escape racialization as black. Linguistic anthropologist Robin Sheriff explains that Brazilians of color use numerous intermediary race-color terms not to categorize themselves racially but to describe color or “as polite euphemisms that avoid stigmatizing references to blackness” (2003:88).

Besides phenotypic features like skin color and hair texture, Colombian blackness depends on region of birth, residence, and the cultural capital one possesses. Based on differing scales of valuation, one recognized by mainstream white society and the other by Afro-Colombians, Emma possesses embodied and institutionalized forms of cultural capital that signify whiteness, while she lacks “authentic” Colombian blackness that is typically transmitted through family and environment (Bourdieu 1986). Emma’s ability to pass relies on symbolic signs of cultural mixture that she exhibits like her bogotano accent (coded as a white characteristic) and because she is not from a predominantly black, rural region. Her display of “adequate behavior” and “proper” cultural capital largely permits Emma to avoid racism. Bogotá-born, she is not associated with “authentic” blackness— an identity that derives from being born and raised in one of Colombia’s historically predominantly black regions—the Colombian Pacific and Caribbean regions.

This racial demographic distribution is a holdover from Colombia’s participation in the transatlantic slave trade and a representation of historic escaped slave community settlements also called *palenques*. Enslaved Africans were primarily brought to Cartagena, on the Caribbean coast, where some remained and others were distributed to

mines and plantations in regions like the Chocó and Cauca.⁶ Today these regions, locally called *las regiones*, continue to function as trope of blackness within the national imaginary: “authentic” black culture and customs are said to originate from there and black bodies to belong there. This common belief makes it difficult for people to accept that blacks live outside of these regions and could actually be born in major cities and regions of the country’s interior, despite demographic shifts. In the national imaginary, the country’s interior is the domain of white-mestizos. For blacks living in Bogotá, for example, it is not uncommon to be asked their region of origin or their surnames upon first meeting a new acquaintance (so as to identify their regional background). Although blacks and non-blacks participate in this practice, blacks use it to identify paisanos, people from their region. Recent multicultural federal legislation (Law 70) recognizing the existence of “black communities” and granting land titles to black collectives in the Colombian Pacific reinforces and naturalizes this relationship between blacks and these regions (see Wade 1995). About 90 percent of Colombia’s black population lives in these regions, although recent demographic studies have shown that blacks are migrating to the interior of the country in increasing numbers, particularly to major cities like Bogotá.⁷ Up until the 1990s there had been no mass migration of blacks out of these regions (Arocha 2002; Mosquera Rosero 1998).

⁶ The Caribbean archipelago of San Andres, Providencia and Santa Catalina are an exception to this history, as its population development is distinct from that of Colombian continental slave trade. At the time of Colombia’s participation in the African slave trade, the archipelago had not yet been annexed by Colombia.

⁷ There are a few main factors for black internal migration. Increased economic and development megaprojects that encroach upon collectively black-owned territories, the relocation of narco-production sites in and trafficking routes through their cities and rural areas, and the fierce violence among authorized and illegal armed actors are responsible for forced displacement of blacks from their regions to large cities like Cali, Bogotá, and Medellin (Oslender 2008). Besides these factors, people like Emma’s parents migrate to the cities for labor and educational

In addition to being born and raised in Bogotá, Emma draws from a wealth of cultural capital that whitens her. She is a sociologist educated at one of the most prestigious public universities in Colombia.⁸ In her leisure time, Emma frequents nightclubs and bars that cater to white-mestizos and young European travelers, unlike most black internal migrants to Bogotá who primarily patronize black-owned, regionally identified establishments. Similarly, the way she carries herself acts as a sign, revealing details about her social origins and acquired cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984). Since race, place, and culture are inextricably linked in Colombia's social landscape (Escobar 2008; Wade 1993a: chapter 3), someone like Emma, who is not intimately familiar with the customs, lifestyle or colloquialisms of *las regiones*, lacks common signifiers of Colombian blackness. At times this absence of "authentic" blackness distances Emma from being categorized as fully "black" and marks what I call her "cultural mixture." As she shared in our conversation, Emma had thought of herself simply as *Colombiana*, not *negra*, before her job researching racial discrimination. It is not uncommon for Afro-Latin Americans, regardless of color,⁹ to assume an identity based on nationality rather than region or race. In this case, "Colombian" is deployed to function as a race-blind category of identification. However, this deployment reinforces the hegemony of mestizo national identity and obscures racial hierarchies within the nation.

opportunities. For instance, urban studies scholars conclude that "in 1988, 43 per cent of all students in higher education were studying in Bogotá" (Gilbert 1996: 245) – a finding that gives us a glimpse into the panorama of educational migration to Bogotá.

⁸ Marisol de la Cadena (2000a) advances an argument about Andean racial formation that considers how culture and education whiten their otherwise racialized subjects.

⁹ Afro-Latin Americans living in the U.S. are often misrecognized and labeled as black according to the U.S. logic of racial categorization. It is not uncommon for blacks who do not assume black racial identity to assert their nationality in place of racial identity.

Despite her lack of so-called black authenticity and her status as not fully black, Emma nevertheless feels implicated in the stereotypes about blacks that her research participants invoke. Her interviewees shared generalized stereotypes about blacks, but Emma took them as personal affronts: “I didn’t know white people thought so poorly of *me*.” In taking offense to these comments, Emma no longer understands herself solely as an individual or an exception but recognizes herself as a racialized subject who occupies the social category “black,” which society imbues with racial meaning. This act of recognition aligns her with other blacks. While her interviewees clearly do not direct their racist comments to her, ironically, it is the very moment that Emma is not a direct object of racism that she is most aware of her blackness and appears to embrace it. Her interviewees divulge their depreciatory beliefs about blacks rather objectively, as if Emma would have no personal stake in them. Rather than maintain distance, she perceives herself as the object of these stereotypes and by doing so envisions herself as part of a collective— that is, black people as a group.

Why does one’s recognition of oneself as black come at the heels of some powerful, jolting experience of racism? Had she not encountered racial discrimination before? If so, what was it about this event that brought Emma to see herself within racist stereotypes? As my friendship with Emma grew, I would later learn that despite her surprise at white racism in her research, this was not her first encounter with racism. The child of parents who migrated to Bogotá from Cartagena and Chocó (locally dubbed “Africa in Colombia”) before significant waves of black internal migrants to the capital, Emma was often the only black student in her elementary and secondary school classes. There, classmates ridiculed her for her skin color and hair texture: students would taunt

her with names like *pelo esponga* (spongy hair) or joke that when she walks into a room the lights go out. So her research interviews on racial beliefs were not her first encounters with anti-black racism nor did this lone experience develop the basis for her self-discovery and awareness of racism.

Under the Latin America ideal of racial democracy, society rarely interpellated afro-descendents as “black” because customarily there has been little talk about or acknowledgment of racialized difference (Althusser 1971). On the rare occasion that Afro-Colombians were hailed as racialized subjects, it typically manifested in racist stereotypes and in practices of racial discrimination. But in the multicultural moment it is more common for public discourse on blackness to circulate, albeit in a clumsy, cautious mannerr as Colombians negotiate new spaces of acceptable talk about blackness and black people, establishing their own version of racial political correctness. The ideologies of race and racism, however, are present at all times, even when these ideologies go unarticulated or when Afro-Colombians do not recognize themselves as racialized subjects. Emma’s repeated unexpected confrontations with anti-black racism demonstrate that the space to manipulate or escape black identification erodes before the hegemonic, interpellative power of racism. These encounters broke down her sense of individuality and her belief in herself as exceptional, revealing a link between encounters with racism and assuming one’s blackness. As one Chocó-born, Cali-raised migrant to Bogotá put it in one of our interviews: “*Los negros de Bogotá le toca asumir su raza no porque quieren*” (blacks from Bogotá are forced to assume their blackness; they don’t do so because they want to). The Spanish verb *assumirse*, used in this way, suggests that one adopts or embraces black identity with recognition of its politicized implications.

Each encounter with racism brings Emma, and other similarly positioned blacks, face-to-face with the ideology of race and calls them to re-evaluate their relationships to blackness. As such, recognition and discovery are momentary or episodic processes for most Afro-Colombians, particularly those blacks who exhibit clear signs of racial or cultural mixture.

Emma's discovery, however, becomes more of a burden than a source of pride or empowerment. She confided in me that she wished she had not been attuned to white racism toward blacks. Ethnographic research on discovery and self-identification show that Afro-Latin Americans often opt not to openly discuss race and racial subordination for the emotional toll it exerts over them and because they are convinced that such public denouncements fall on deaf ears (Caldwell 2007: 86, 125; see also Sheriff 2001). Donna M. Goldstein (2003) analyzes how poor, urban Afro-Brazilian women use grotesque humor as a form of resistance from their powerlessness against violence and race, class and gender discrimination. After Emma's research interviews, she began to read daily events through a racial lens and identify racism in seemingly insignificant exchanges with white people. This burden of racial consciousness brings a myriad of new situations for blacks to negotiate. First, when blacks recognize a situation as racist they are then forced to manage the implications of that knowledge. Confronted with the knowledge of someone's depreciative perceptions of blacks, blacks become the inferior Other before a dominant perpetrator, even if the perpetrator did not intend to be racist and activate this power asymmetry. Polite racism describes the non-confrontational and seemingly subtle ways that racism operates in Latin America against blacks and other people of color (Golash-Boza 2010; Twine 1998). Latin Americans will often claim that their societies

are not racist because racism is usually associated with the physical violence and white terror of Jim Crow United States or Nazi Germany. Scholars employ this term as a reminder that despite the cloak of politeness and subtly that racism exists and is practiced regularly in Latin America. Despite scholars' analysis of these forms of racism, I question if use of the terms "subtle" or "polite" do not continue to privilege the perspective of the perpetrator of racism rather than the target of racism. For those black people who experience racism, the veneer of politeness only masks the racist act. Black people are forced to decipher the intentions of the perpetrator to determine if and how to respond: did they intend to snub me because I am black or did they do so because they are just plain rude (*maleducados*)?

Some informants explained the general lack of *cultura ciudadana* (a culture of citizenship and good neighborliness), particularly among Bogotanos, as a possible reason for the rudeness they frequently encountered. Colombians use "citizenship culture" to describe everything from curbing your dog and abstaining from littering to following public transportation and pedestrian etiquette. During his tenure (1996-1996, 2001-2003), Bogotá mayor Antanas Mokus established popular programs to cultivate *cultura ciudadana* among the capital's residents; this included using street theatre, mimes and clowns to teach the rules and principles of urban citizenship culture (Gilbert and Dávila 2002: 51-54; Hoskin 1998). For one young Afro-Colombian man I interviewed named Hector, he confronted this question about racism and citizenship culture frequently in his work as a professional and development specialist. Many of the government and international organization meetings he attended for his work at a USAID-sponsored program were held in the city's historic downtown area, La Candelaria. In contemporary

travel guides, state tourism literature, and local folklore the architecture of the Spanish colonial buildings, cathedrals, and narrow windy streets give this bustling metropolis Old World charm. But Hector's account of La Candelaria was much different from these idyllic descriptions:

“You know how narrow the sidewalks are in La Candelaria. Well, groups of three or four friends will walk side by side and won't share the sidewalk. They expect you to move out of their path. I've decided that I'm tired of stepping into the street. Why do we always have to move to let them pass (*ceder el paso*)? They want to pretend not to see me until they run into me, then they recognize me.

Despite Hector's lanky 6'2" frame, his experience on the streets of Bogotá is one of invisibility. For him walking down the street is fraught with conflict and constant negotiation, an experience that belies notions of subtle and polite racism.



Narrow sidewalks of La Candelaria. Photo taken by Yadira Perez and author.

The co-existence of subtle racism and a lack of citizenship culture in a bustling, crowded city like Bogotá makes it difficult for blacks to determine when less than courteous behavior is racially motivated or not. Despite these ambiguities, Afro-Colombian informants felt that these explanations, however plausible, provide excuses for whites to continue racist behavior without identifying it as such, “facilitate the denial of racism and conceal the inner works of the social system” (Mullings 2005: 679). Another informant, Patricia, a 25-year-old young professional from the Pacific coast living and working in Bogotá for several years, feels the responsibility to stand up for herself and by proxy, all blacks. In her view, confronting racism calls attention to otherwise normalized behavior and makes unknowing perpetrators aware of their actions.

¿Será que cambiará? Will things ever change? There are days when I wake up happy to face the day but the moment I have to interact with people on the bus, in the street, and in stores, I have to fight. If I don't say anything *la gente* (they) will keep treating us like that. Will they continue pretending that we are invisible (*invisibilizandonos*)?

The catch here is that she also feels fearful about confronting racism—“what do I say, what if I'm wrong, do I need to say something every time I'm discriminated against”—and ultimately, she feels emotionally worn down by the constant confrontation with racism and the responsibility and burden to respond to it. According to her, if she chooses not to respond when confronted with racism, she feels that she has compromised her racial consciousness, awareness of racism, and, ultimately, her dignity.

My conversation with Emma not only gives us insight into black encounters with racism and self-identification but also allows us to learn about how whiteness operates in contemporary Colombia. Although I cannot speculate about the interviewees' personal ease with sharing these racist beliefs, their responses do not demonstrate fear of being

perceived as racist or politically incorrect. White research participants openly expressed to Emma, an Afro-Colombian woman, their prejudices toward blacks. They did not hide their sentiments from her. This response is quite different from what linguistic anthropologist Robin Sheriff found in her interviews with middle class white Brazilians about racism: her informants constantly avoided or refocused her questions about the role and importance of race and color to social life pointing to poverty and class as responsible for social difference (2001:150-184). It may well be that Emma's interviewees were open with her about their racist stereotypes because they did not perceive her as black or at least not the same "black" as the subject of their stereotypes; but no matter the reason, their frankness about race is remarkable, especially in contrast to the Brazilian case. Perhaps their responses also confirm the finding that whiteness operates as the unspoken social standard, so much so that whites are unaware of the racial dynamics of the social world they inhabit. In other conversations with Emma she told me that interviewing whites was overall more straightforward than interviewing blacks—whites quickly and effortlessly answered her questions with little or no emotion, but for black interviewees these questions were thought provoking and often brought up pain, anger, and frustration. Since whites do not have the same experiences of race or racism, they do not have to be attuned to how racism operates in everyday life and relationships. Thus they are even distanced from the fact that they play a role in (re)producing structures of racism. Whereas Emma's case raises the question of how she could have avoided noticing she was black, the next case suggests that there might be a denial of racial subjectivity in the very embrace of black identity.

Auto-Discriminación, Self-Esteem, and Quiet Racial Struggle

The story and viewpoint of Racquel, a veteran model turned television actress from Colombia's Caribbean coast, provides a counterpoint for Emma's experience with racial "discovery" and black self-identification. While Emma demonstrated how recognition replaced denial, this case illustrates how recognition of blackness might co-exist with the disavowal of blackness. Racquel exemplifies how many Afro-Colombians understand and negotiate black identity and black subjectivity in Colombia. Her position is more common, say, than one that embraces an unwavering black identity based on political activism and militant black consciousness. Racquel, who at some points in our talks identifies as *negra* and other times as *mestiza*, a term usually designated for whites to explain European and indigenous lineage, illustrates a common juggling act that Afro-Colombians experience as they constantly negotiate their place in Colombian society. They negotiate how they see themselves, how society perceives them and hegemonic structures of race and racism. As established earlier, overt practices of racial discrimination and public talk of race are largely absent in Colombian society such that Afro-Colombians are inconsistently interpellated as racialized subjects. Afro-Colombians' recognition of themselves as "black" expands and contracts, further demonstrating that the ideology of racism is always present even if racial identity is temporal, spatial and situational. Here we turn to the 34-year-old B-list actress as an important figure to explore the tensions and complexities of identifying and living as black in Colombia.

Fieldnotes Entry: March 21, 2008

I took Marisol, my thirteen-year-old niece from Buenaventura, to meet Racquel. She was so excited to meet a television and movie star, and couldn't wait to take pictures with Racquel that she could later show her classmates. After the initial

introductions and chit chat, Racquel gave Marisol advice on how to strive for her goals, something she “likes to do with all black girls who are around Marisol’s age.” “Don’t let anyone tell you that you cannot reach your goals. There are usually only one or two voices that tell you, ‘yes, you can,’ and then countless others that say, it’s impossible or too hard so why try. Stay close to people like your aunt and uncle who drown out those negative voices.”

The conversation turned to my presentation at a conference on race, ethnicity and reparations at the National University that week. The theme of reparations became the center of our conversation, as Racquel’s husband, a white man from Ecuador, joined our conversation. I explained that Colombian scholars and activists are promoting reparations and affirmative action policies as a way to level the nation’s historic debt to Afro-Colombians and other marginalized ethnic groups. Racquel chimed in to agree that government support of such programs is important, but quickly added that “the main problem of blacks in Colombia is *auto-discriminación* (self-segregation or self-marginalization). Black people in Colombia don’t have self-esteem. I learned that I am beautiful just the way I am from a dear friend of mine from Chile. I used to feel beautiful only when I’d straighten my hair or do my makeup to make my nose look thinner, but he taught me to appreciate my natural beauty and my black features.

People in my neighborhood would say ‘who told you that you are pretty enough to be a model?’ They are the kind of people who won’t support you. If you’re taking a class to better yourself and need help paying for transportation they won’t loan you one peso for your bus ride. I think they do this because if you accomplish something good then they have to ask themselves why they didn’t try anything new or accomplish anything out of the ordinary. It shows them that achieving difficult goals is possible and makes them self-conscious about being stuck in the same rut. Take my cousin, for example. He and I have the same education, grew up in the same type of neighborhood, but he still lives in the same neighborhood working as a trash collector and I’m here [in Bogotá].”

“We always hear ‘look at this ugly nose and hair I have’,” as she tugged on her curly afro. And mothers tell their children to marry white so they can mejorar la raza (improve the race). People need to see us [Afro-Colombians] highly educated, in leadership positions, as tv stars and important artists. It’s a shame that symbols of beauty in *nuestros barrios* (our neighborhoods) are ...” She named a few people I didn’t recognize as my niece nodded enthusiastically in agreement. “Who?,” I interrupted. “Ten feet tall blondes,” she exaggerated. “People don’t look at Belky Arizala, Vanessa Mendoza, or Indhira Serrano [black model, first black Miss Colombia (2001), and a black tv and movie actress, respectively] as beauty symbols or icons.”

Over the course of this conversation, Racquel exemplifies the competing thoughts many Afro-Colombians have about black identity, social acceptance, responsibility and blame. Racquel recognizes that blacks in Colombia experience inequality and negative differential treatment. After all, she agrees that there are reasons for the Colombian government to support programs that level black inequality and access to opportunities. This acknowledgement is significant given widespread denial in Colombia, and Latin America in general, that inequality can be attributed to racial difference, not just class status. She is frustrated that blacks do not enjoy social acceptance in the way that whites do, however she largely places the onus of these disparities on blacks-- their practices of self-segregation (*auto-discriminación*), lack of self-esteem, and internalization of racism. Her cousin, a black man who grew up in a similar neighborhood as Racquel with the same education and economic status never left their hometown but settled for a manual labor job in trash collection. She expressed disdain that someone with her same qualifications, economic background, and racial identity would take himself out of the running for potential opportunities for a better career, home, lifestyle and respect, all because of his failure to try. A practice that Colombians often refer to as *auto-discriminación*; that is, when blacks opt out of participating in certain social and institutional structures for fear of rejection and in anticipation of racism, elitism, regionalism, or color discrimination. This term applies to anything from how blacks choose where to live, shop, work, and play (especially restaurants, nightclubs, bars and gymnasiums) to the friendships, love interests, and careers they pursue. According to the logic of *auto-discriminación*, Racquel's cousin lacked the self-esteem to believe that a

black man from a working class family and poor city could be recognized as capable and achieve something out of the ordinary.

Racquel's individual-centric approach to explaining black social inequality, racial hierarchy, and disparities in black-white success ignores the hegemony of racism.

According to her, all it took was a little effort and gumption to obtain all that she has: the title of international model turned regional television and film actor, residence in the cosmopolitan capital city, and a condo in a well-appointed Bogotá neighborhood. For blacks to gain social acceptance, she suggests they reach high level positions in professional careers and education: "People need to see us [Afro-Colombians] highly educated, in leadership positions, as tv stars and important artists." Although it remains unarticulated, Racquel's prescription calls on the dominant group, whites, to sanction black social acceptance, respectability and inclusion. Her assessment also downplays structural and institutional racism and the inevitable discrimination blacks encounter and endure on this unpredictable, narrow road to material success.

For a moment Racquel recognizes structural factors in Colombian society that devalue blackness, but just as quickly she points to black self-loathing and low self-esteem for prohibiting blacks from occupying higher social positions. Racquel appeared annoyed and frustrated that in her field and in Colombian society in general, 10-foot tall blondes are the sole image of feminine beauty in Colombia. However, she was particularly disappointed that black models, beauty queens, and actresses, all rare finds in Colombia, are not even idolized in "*nuestros barrios*," our own (non-white) neighborhoods. Her expectations of solidarity among blacks go largely unfulfilled, the root of which she traces, in part, to blacks' lack of self-esteem. It may well be that her

frustration is with blacks' inability to see a reflection of themselves in the first and only black Miss Colombia or in the images of black models and television/film actors. Instead, people in *nuestros barrios* idolize people who do not look like them and whose standard of beauty they can never achieve. For Racquel, mothers who teach their children to marry white partners reinforce society's valuation of whiteness over blackness. Their actions play into the belief that social and racial whitening (*blanqueamiento*), often achieved through miscegenation, is the key to blacks' upward social and racial mobility. Even when blacks and whites find these messages racist, they may still internalize or participate in the reproduction of these social hierarchies and valuations, perhaps, as evidenced by Racquel's self-valorization only after encouragement from her white Chilean friend.

A fellow black television soap opera (*telenovela*) actress approached Racquel about joining a black actors' guild she hoped to establish. The guild would be a space for Afro-Colombian actors to form a consolidated response to television and film producers concerning the limited roles for black actors and the static representations of blacks in Colombian media. Racquel immediately refused, almost shocked that she would be asked to participate in such an effort, "Why would I unnecessarily make things difficult? I'd rather continue to get work and just deal with these things slowly in my own way. Like when I decided to stop straightening my hair on one of my soap operas. I wore my hair natural in a big afro."¹⁰ She is quite aware that adjustments need to be made for popular media and society at large to recognize blacks beyond exaggerated caricatures

¹⁰ For black women, wearing their hair natural signifies that they do not alter it with hair extensions, heat or chemical technologies such as blow drying, flat ironing or chemical straightening. See Kia Lily Caldwell (2003) for an analysis of processes of racialization and body politics, including hair, for Brazilian women.

and false stereotypes, and her idea for the pathway to such success, social acceptance and respectability is a quiet one.

So how do we understand Racquel's response? At the same time that she acknowledges black inequality and identifies as black, she is hesitant to make herself vulnerable by being vocal about blacks' position in popular media. Rather than jeopardize her fragile gains, she opts to protect her position and preserve her relationship with industry executives. Might Racquel's case be what one male Afro-Colombian informant had in mind when he said that, "oftentimes to arrive in these positions, blacks must lower their heads and pretend to be deaf" (*le toca agachar la cabeza y jugarse sordos*)? While "deafness" may explain how Racquel has navigated her blackness in an industry with limited roles for and images of blacks, it may well be that she espouses a "cartography of racial democracy" that "considers active, public denunciations of racist practices...to be pointless, unproductive or even unacceptable" (Ramos-Zayas 2009: 514). According to Ramos-Zayas, Latin American and Spanish-speaking Caribbean youth in Newark, NJ create new "cartographies of racial democracy" in which they articulate social and racialized difference within the constraints of urban neoliberalism. They opt not to publically denounce racism because they lack trust in the society and government to attend to "racism and racial subordination." Instead, their intimate relationships are where these beliefs in racial difference play out.

It would be overly simplistic to conclude that Racquel lacks racial consciousness simply because she does not denounce racism and racial subordination in an overt manner. Rather, Racquel's case introduces us to a contradictory, and all so common, form of racial consciousness that goes against the male informant's position on overt,

public, confrontational racial struggle— a sort of visible black politics which is most often endorsed by members of Colombia’s black social movements. Even though she never explicitly states this, perhaps Racquel recognizes her tenuous position as a black actress who has caught the eye of the industry and receives constant job offers. Despite all her personal and professional achievements, she is still on the margins of the industry. Consequently, she takes a pragmatic and emotionally guarded approach to racial struggle – she opts to deal with these issues slowly, on an individual rather than collective basis.

To some extent, this option is open to Racquel because, like Emma, she too enjoys the privileges of being *no tan negra*. Racial and cultural mixture determines her social identity. However, beauty also operates a kind of embodied cultural capital providing Racquel the currency to largely escape racism (Bourdieu 1986). Although beauty is culturally and contextually specific, Racquel possesses the characteristics and qualities that resonate with Colombian standards of beauty. Racquel is brown-skinned, a color that is not typically associated with Latin American beauty, but her 5’10” slender frame, silky-curly hair texture, delicate features and the way she carries herself situate her as beautiful by Colombian standards and, thus, distance her from blackness. Also, the case can be made that the idea of beauty has morphed to allow for multiple “types” to be considered attractive. Racquel is black (by her own self-identification and by others’ categorization of her), but her phenotypic features confer beauty on her and allow her to escape being labeled as *negra-negra*, a designation reserved for blacks with no obvious phenotypic signs of race mixture.

Although both men and women are evaluated according to phenotype, the determination of racial identity is gendered and recent research has shown that black

women endure an additional level of scrutiny. Women's bodies present challenges and opportunities that men's bodies do not. For example, poor urban Afro-Brazilian women look to their bodies and social perceptions of the sensual mulata to gain social (and, ultimately, racial) mobility, achieved through marriage or union with wealthy white men (Goldstein 2003: chapter three). Hair texture (wavy, curly, kinky, or nappy) and body shape (including roundness of their behinds, curviness/slenderness, and breast-waist-hip proportions) play a major role not only in determining black women's femininity, sexuality, beauty and desirability, but also their racial social position (Caldwell 2007; see also Candelario 2007: chapter five; Ramos-Zayas 2009). Joining the black actor's guild would force Racquel to trade her individualism and exceptionalism for racialized subjectivity, call into question her beauty, and demote her in Colombia's gendered race-color hierarchy. In contrast to Racquel, her actress colleague, who can be described as *negra-negra*, does not have access to this type of flexibility.

Still Under Construction?

Racquel is a complex, but quite representative, figure by which to analyze the intersections of blackness and racial consciousness: she straddles between the acceptance and disavowal of blackness and between collective and individual strategies for racial struggle. This delicate balance begs the following question: Is there a way of being racially conscious while avoiding, downplaying or even rejecting racial labels? Racquel recognizes herself as a black person and is aware of anti-black racism, but she refuses to accept the burden of blackness. Unlike Emma, Racquel's black self-identification does not include taking on or identifying with the negative associations with blackness. She

works hard to distance herself from blackness even while she maintains some level of racial awareness.

Racquel enjoys being a role model for Afro-Colombian women as evidenced in her silent protest of wearing her hair natural, or in the advice she offered my 13-year-old niece about achieving her dreams despite obstacles such as racism and poverty, or in her enthusiastic reception of a fan whose 10-year-old daughter had gained confidence in her own black beauty after watching Racquel sport her natural hair on television. She knows that as a black person, a woman, and someone from humble beginnings, she has accomplished something rare in Colombia; but this does not encourage her to recognize the social, structural and institutional obstacles she overcame to reach her goals.

British social anthropologist Michael Banton (1988: 8) describes racial consciousness as a collective process wherein “an individual’s interpretation of how his or her life is affected by the way others assign him or her to a racial category”. Accordingly, the acknowledgment of a group aspect to one’s racial categorization and social position is critical in determining whether or not one possesses racial consciousness. In Racquel’s case, however, I believe that she rejects categorization and the label of “black” because it confines her to the social constraints and prejudices put on this group. This rejection of racialized group identity resonates with her avoidance of prescribed collective approach to resisting racial subordination; instead, she chooses to work individually, on her own, in her own way. Remembering that “black” is clumsily used as both a physical description and a racial identity, as we saw earlier with Emma, Racquel can be black but avoid black racial identification and thus alignment with other blacks in a social group or under a group label.

Most interestingly, Racquel sees Latin American racial identification and perhaps, more specifically, her own racial identification as existing in flux. She recognizes a shift in Colombian practices of racial identification when she notes that “until recently it was an insult to call someone negro.” Something has happened to increase black self-identification among Afro-Colombians and, on a more public level, the visibility of blackness in Colombia. Although she does not explain why this change has occurred, we can safely point to a few factors, factors that might even explain why it is that someone like Emma discovers her blackness at this historical conjuncture: the consolidation, spread and increased national visibility of the Afro-Colombian movement, the ratification and implementation of ethno-racial civil rights, and the proliferation of national and international dialogues about racism and racial discrimination. These changes and discourses largely take place in the national and international political sphere (among activists, governments, advocates, and governmental and non-governmental organizations, to name a few), but with time and circulation, they seep into and are transformed in everyday experiences and social discourses of the nation. So while Racquel does not participate in the Afro-Colombian social movement or black politics in Colombia, she knows that changes are afoot. She attempts to explain mestizo identity, race mixture, and racial identification in Colombia, and when faced with making sense of these norms, she gives up and exclaims, “We are still under construction!”

One July afternoon my visit with Racquel took an unexpected turn as she recounted a conversation she had earlier that day with a longtime friend of hers, an African American male. It became clear that although she sees racial identification in

Colombia, and Latin American in general, as still under construction, that she believes that this is not a process that should be completed, so to speak.

“He sees everything through race,” she exclaimed. “I tried to tell him that that doesn’t work in every context, especially not here in Latin America. Here we are all mixed so we don’t stick so closely to one race or the other.” Visibly disturbed and upset by her friend’s stubborn insistence, Racquel continued, “I don’t go around thinking that everything bad that happens to me, happens because I’m black. I understand the way you were brought up,” as she turns to me, “you had to identify as black.” She sounded almost annoyed as she continued, “He feels so much pride in being black. So I asked him why he takes so much pride in a label that was forced on you by whites.”

Racquel’s understanding of Latin American racial formation and identification exists in contradistinction to her perception of similar processes in the U.S. where black identity and practices of racial cataloguing are fixed, commonsensical and uncontroversial, articulating an explicit racial logic. Historian Thomas Skidmore (1993) writes that the U.S. practices of racial categorization may actually look more like South America given increasing multiracialism in the US. Other scholars have suggested that earlier studies focused too narrowly on particular U.S. regions, which lead to an overstatement of the difference between these two racial systems. The process of black identification in Latin America, then, is inconsistent, ambiguous, and constantly in question— especially when contrasted with the African-American case. While Racquel’s observations resonate with those of other Afro-Colombians I interviewed, her agitated response to her African American friend’s insistence on black identification reveals contrasts in approaches to black identification. For her, being “under construction” is a permanent state, not one that should be completed in that way that she imagines U.S. blackness to be.

Racquel appears annoyed with her African American friend’s unwavering affinity to a “label” and group that society holds in such low regard, and she resists such practices

in her own life. Yet, interestingly, many of my other Afro-Colombian research participants, most of whom are activists in black social movements, expressed a desire for the overt, clear black-white racial categories *and* racism that they believe are found in the U.S. For instance, as one of my respondents stated, “In the U.S. at least you know the enemy, you know what people think of you as a black person, but in Colombia you are never quite sure of your place. In the U.S. there’s a way to be black...I mean being black is a category and it has value. Society does not try to convince you that racism does not exist or that you are just like them in values, culture, and traditions. There you have a right to be black.” This statement by an Afro-Colombian epidemiologist from Cali echoes Patricia who feels the need to stand up for herself in unassuming racial situations as well as others’ frustrations with lack of clarity when deciphering between racism and a lack of *cultura ciudadana*. According to the viewpoint of Racquel’s African American friend, if you look “black” then you are black,¹¹ and being black requires identifying as part of a social group, even if widespread belief is that the social group is inferior. “Black” as a social category and identity cannot be divorced from the “black” that is the object of racism. The epidemiologist is aware that anti-black racism exists in the U.S., but appreciates that there is a place for and value in blackness. For Racquel, however, to accept blackness is to relinquish the sense of herself as an individual and someone who, on her own, has accomplished success.

The Afro-Colombian subject’s self-recognition as “black” brings with it benefits as well as obstacles. Each of the interviewees in this chapter sites different gains and losses in recognizing blackness, assuming black identity, and embracing racial

¹¹ In his article on race and nature, Peter Wade (1993b) asserts that biological characteristics like hair and noses have been assigned meaning, in particular, racial meaning; therefore phenotype is just as cultural as it is biological or natural.

consciousness: some reported feeling like they had gained a sense of belonging and a framework to analyze the social world and structures of social difference, while others revealed that self-recognition was a personal hindrance to social mobility. By analyzing some of the everyday encounters through which Afro-Colombians recognize, discover, assume, or resist “blackness,” we gain insight into how-- at a time when the state’s adoption of a politics of multiculturalism ironically makes blackness visible-- Afro-Colombians create discourses of black identity and approaches to self-identification as racialized subjects.

Chapter 4
Afro-Colombians and the Cosmopolitan City:
Negotiations of Race and Space in Bogotá, Colombia

It was a crisp April night as we stood outside of a *discoteca* (nightclub) in the Zona Rosa district in Bogotá, Colombia. Music and colorful bright lights poured out of nightclub doors all along the strip and restaurants buzzed with raucous chatter and laughter. On this side of town in the north of Bogotá, bar drink menus list beverages almost exclusively in English, nightclub admission charges exceed the cost of a meal at local *corrientes* (restaurants), and international djs and local celebrities regularly provide entertainment. Five of my Afro-Colombian friends and I were going out that night in the Zona Rosa, a racial space, to see if a group of six black people would be allowed into area nightclubs. At different scales, urban developers, city planners, city officials, state tourism and commerce agencies, and the Colombian public construct Bogotá as a cosmopolitan city and the Zona Rosa a cosmopolitan space within the city. Our group set out that night to see what this notion of cosmopolitanism actually means for black people living in Bogotá. This exercise was part of a larger socio-legal study concerned with racial discrimination practices in public establishments in Bogotá. I was asked to join the group of Afro-Colombians going out that night because I am an African American woman and for my research interests in everyday experiences of race in the capital city.

As a new city resident and black person- a sort of ethnographic outsider, I was in the process of learning the city and the social meanings embedded in urban space. I had been to the Zona Rosa on previous occasions— a few times alone for lunch and once in the evening with a white Colombian-American woman and black man from Cartagena. I

would usually have lunch at Zona Rosa restaurants after conducting research interviews in the north of the city at the Pan American Foundation or the UN office, for example. Dressed in business attire and alone, I could easily be read as an Afro-Colombian professional or a foreigner, particularly given that many U.S. Foreign Service Officers are assigned to housing in the residential section of this neighborhood. In a previous encounter, I recall the anxiety I felt when my two friends and I filed into the queue outside of the club. We were a group of three, with two black people and one white person. Salsa Camará, a Caribbean style salsa club, boasts a bohemian, counterculture style and is a misfit amidst the global chic style of most nightclubs in the area, as perhaps evidenced by its location on the periphery of the Zona Rosa on Carrera 14 at Calle 82. Would Anna's whiteness be sufficient to validate our group as acceptable in this social space? As a light brown skinned man, would Javier's blackness tip the racial scales of our group closer to white (admissible) or black (inadmissible)? Was the bohemian identity of Salsa Camará enough to sustain the presence of black patrons like Javier and I? As the six of us set out that night, I wondered how the Zona Rosa would respond to a large group comprised exclusively of black people seeking admission to the area's nightclubs.

The six of us – three men and three women – walked toward Gavanna Bar a nightclub located on Calle 85 at Carrera 12 and demarcated by its prominent bright red exterior. When it was our turn to enter, the bouncer wearing a shiny black security jacket and black workpants lowered the velvet cord to block our advancement in the line. Emma, an expert informant who had come to be a good friend, inquired with the bouncer about the nightclub entry fee, “*¿Cuánto cuesta el cover?*” He immediately responded that Gavanna was hosting a private party that night and that we would need to show

invitations to get in. “But we didn’t see you ask the people ahead of us for invitations,” said one of the group members. Hector, known in Afro-Colombian activist circles as a budding *afro-lider* (black leader), asked the bouncer to show him a copy of the invitation or invite list, perhaps to confirm that the nightclub was hosting an invite-only party. The bouncer hesitantly informed us that he could not show us an invitation then quickly tried to corral us out of the line.

Seemingly stunned by this impasse Patricia, a black woman born in Buenaventura and educated in a private university in Bogotá, rhetorically asked, “You’re not letting us in because we’re black?” Then I turned to one of the group members saying in English, “As a US citizen, I should denounce this incident to the US Embassy.” The group of bouncers looked with surprise and began to radio on their walkie-talkies. Just moments later, a thirty-something young white man with slick black hair wearing neat wool slacks and a cashmere sweater came over to us. He introduced himself as the nightclub *gerente* (manager) saying, “The cover charge for tonight is 10,000 pesos (US\$6) per person.” Someone in our group piped up, “Well is this a private party or is there a cover charge for admission? Why change the story now? We are not going to pay to get in after being embarrassed in front of all these people.” With a dual sense of defeat and defiance, the seven of us removed ourselves from the line, but hung around nearby humiliated and upset as we decided where to go next.

Racial discrimination in the Zona Rosa conflicts with the national branding of Bogotá as a cosmopolitan city and Colombia as a diverse, multicultural nation, yet it simultaneously enables the production of a white, elite cosmopolitanism. The capital city serves as the symbol of Colombia’s modernity, stability, and global status, and plays a

significant role in countering the nation's pervasive image as a violent country run by narco-traffickers, mafiosos, and armed groups. However the brand of cosmopolitanism promoted in Bogotá and the Zona Rosa – white elite cosmopolitanism – depends on simultaneous practices of inclusion and exclusion and on complex convergences of space, time and race. White Colombians help reinforce existing racial hierarchies and inscribe them into urban space through practices of spatial distancing, which I define as locating racism and racial discrimination outside of their immediate social space. Practices of racial discrimination and spatial distancing impact the ways city residents interact with urban space and other city residents, maintain racialized cosmopolitanisms, and produce an everyday common sense about race and belonging embedded in urban space.

Discussion and Analysis of Cosmopolitanism

Cosmopolitanism can describe a worldview, political project, social condition and competence or practice (Vertovec and Cohen 2002) rooted within values of human egalitarianism. Some scholars understand cosmopolitanism as merely the tolerance of social difference, while others go further to explain cosmopolitanism as the engagement with difference (Hollinger 2002 :231). This view resonates with Hannerz' explanation of cosmopolitanism as “an intellectual and aesthetic stance toward divergent cultural experiences, a search for contrasts, rather than uniformity” (1996:103) or what Anthony Appiah calls “universalism plus difference” (2001). Unlike universalism which seeks to forge these differences into a common identity, cosmopolitanism implies respect for and appreciation of human diversity, an openness and willingness to engage with cultural difference. While this approach to cosmopolitanism espouses lofty values of tolerance

and acceptance, attention must be drawn to its everyday implications. A critical approach to cosmopolitanism must include “validation...of the equitable (re)distribution of resources and privileges, of the recognition of others’ freedoms, of (comm)unity in diversity, or very simply, of the unqualified practice of fairness, kindness, and generosity” (Dharwadker 2001:7). Following this definition, I argue that cosmopolitanism should not be a lofty ideal or global worldview, but a commitment that has real implications in everyday life, social interactions, and governance.

If asked to geographically locate cosmopolitanism scholars would point to cities (Binnie, et al. 2006; Featherstone 2002) and particular sections of cities associated with multicultural diversity (Bodaar 2006). Cities are where diverse people, commodities, technologies, and cultures from around the globe meet. Geographer Brenda Yeoh (2004:2432), borrowing from Mary Louise Pratt, states that cities are a kind of “contact zone”, where people previously separated by geography and history encounter and interact with one another. However, to examine difference and equality in cities we must ask *how* differently positioned people encounter each other in urban space. Ethnographic study can help us investigate how cosmopolitanism is actualized in everyday life and urban space, and how race (not just class) plays an important role in the production of “the cosmopolitan city.”

There are two salient critiques of cosmopolitanism that are applicable to this investigation of the cosmopolitan city. First, the cosmopolitan city is not simply a place of intercultural encounter, but also a site constructed and produced within neoliberal political and economic projects. Cities become cosmopolitan through processes of urban development, facilitated by developers, city planners and real estate agents who design,

brand, market and sell cosmopolitanism as a modern aesthetic and global lifestyle (Young, et al. 2006). Second, scholars highlight how this type of neoliberal and development driven cosmopolitanism are only accessible to professionals, intellectuals, artists and other elites. Participation in the cosmopolitan city involves certain “knowledge, cultural capital and education: [as] being worldly, being able to navigate between and within different cultures, requires confidence, skill and money” (Binnie, et al. 2006:8). Most often, ethnic people, non-elites, refugees and working class transmigrants are excluded from the cosmopolitan project because of their inability to participate in elite consumption practices or for their presumed orientation toward their communities (Werbner 2006). This brand of cosmopolitanism depends on the presence of people of color and non-elites in urban space, not their full participation. Often these groups provide the obligatory elements cultural and ethnic diversity that make for urban cosmopolitanism, yet they live and work in the periphery of these spaces. The racial dimension of cosmopolitanism is made manifest in such dual process of inclusion and exclusion.

When examined closely we find that this type of cosmopolitanism depends upon these simultaneous inclusions and exclusions, at various levels from the national to the city to places within cities. For Colombia to lay claim to global status there must exist spaces within the nation where cosmopolitanism is performed; these spaces of cosmopolitanism tend to be cities. Moreover, for cities to take on cosmopolitan identity and global city status, there must be places within the city where this cosmopolitanism is visible much like the Zona Rosa. Cosmopolitanism is produced when selected spaces and experiences are highlighted while others are erased. In the case of Colombia, Bogotá

serves as a critical resource in the nation's mission to improve its image abroad. Hence urban spaces like the Zona Rosa are high stakes elements of the national image-making project, and become the site of tension between elitism and consumption on one hand and diversity and the engagement of difference on the other.

Bogotá: "A City as Diverse as the Entire Country"

Historically, travel writers and settlers described Bogotá as a mountainous backwater that was difficult to colonize and develop due to its cold temperatures, rough terrain, and flash floods and hail storms (Safford and Palacios 2002). For its location along the northwest portion of the Colombian Andes and with a high elevation of 8,530 feet (2,600 meters) above seal level, Bogotá continues to have a varied and often inhospitable climate. Urban studies research of the late 1990s shows that "Bogotá has become a large city only in the last fifty years; in 1938, it had only 300,000 or so inhabitants" (Gilbert 1996:242). The capital city population grew exponentially to an astounding 7 million by 2005, the time of the latest national census. "In the process, it [Bogotá] added to its existing status as the national capital by becoming the country's major financial center, the largest industrial city, and the center of culture" (Gilbert and Dávila 2002:29). By most accounts, Bogotá is on the fast track to become a "megacity".¹

Bogotá symbolizes the nation's modernity, wealth and stability. The image of Bogotá as a cosmopolitan city holds profound economic and political significance as the national government courts foreign investment, develops the tourism sector, and brands Colombia as a safe, democratic nation. Whereas issues of violence, drugs, and war plague

¹ Anthropologist Austin Zeiderman (2008:135) challenges the notion of the megacity, stating that this discursive category enables projects which reinforce the powerless of Global South cities while upholding the logic of "Euro-American modernity and imperialism."

Colombia's image around the globe, Bogotá has been described as "an island in a land at war" (*The Washington Post*, September 6, 2002). Since 2005, the Colombian government has spearheaded an intensive image building campaign called "Colombia is Passion" (*Colombia es Pasión*). The national re-branding of Colombia from its bellicose image to a safe, welcoming destination is best summed up in the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Tourism's new slogan: "Colombia, the only risk is wanting to stay" (*Colombia, el riesgo es que te quieras quedar*). Recently, *New York Times* editors named Colombia on its list of "The 31 Places to Go in 2010" (January 10, 2010), devoting most of the entry to Bogotá, "a role model of urban reinvention", for its extensive bicycle paths, museums, outdoor cafes, international restaurants, and modern public transportation system. The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Tourism promotes this sort of global urban image of Bogotá by highlighting the city's diversity as a marker of cosmopolitanism. According to the tourism authority, Bogotá is a "city as diverse as the entire country" because people from each of Colombia's ethnically and culturally distinct regions live alongside each other there.² Of all Colombian cities, Bogotá receives the most internal migrants (Gilbert 1996), contributing to popular notions around the country of Bogotá as the quintessential urban space and site of Colombian diversity.

Signs of the capital's global urbanism and urban development were visible during my fieldwork period in Bogotá (2007-2008). In 2007 *Semana* magazine hosted a forum "Bogotá 2.038: Foro Constructor de la Ciudad Global" (Bogotá 2038: Forum on Building a Global City) to discuss topics ranging from how to attract foreign investment, develop infrastructure and promote social development. International scholars, Colombian

² <http://www.colombia.travel/en/international-tourist/vacations-holidays-where-to-go/bogota-travel-guide/>.

government officials, and private investors who spoke at this conference debated the necessary steps to securing Bogotá's position as a "global city" by its 500th anniversary in year 2038. The city held its annual marathon, book fair, gastronomy exposé, and theatre and arts festivals, all citywide events that draw millions of local and international performers, participants and tourists – some from as far as South Africa, Poland and Japan. City concerts have also featured high profile entertainers like international salsa sensation Marc Anthony and rockers Coldplay and Aerosmith. Together these tourism and economic development campaigns and the public imaginary of Bogotá as a city of migrants contribute to the production and characterization of Bogotá as cosmopolitan. The city is marketed as democratic and multicultural on one hand and as a manifestation of global status and urbanism on the other. However, this notion of cosmopolitanism, which depends on the contact between diverse people in urban space, does not require sustained, egalitarian interaction among the city's residents. There are few spaces in the city like city sidewalks and public buses where black and white, well-to-do and poor come into regular contact, and less so in so-called cosmopolitan spaces like the Zona Rosa. Ethnographic analysis of everyday life in the city shows that the very sites marketed as cosmopolitan like the Zona Rosa operate as sites of inclusion and exclusion within complex time-space particularities.

In order to have a cosmopolitan city there must to be spaces within the city that exemplify cosmopolitanism. Building on the concept of the cosmopolitan city, urban studies scholar Annemarie Bodaar (2006:174) explains that only certain places in the city become associated with cosmopolitanism. I take this further to show how the process of highlighting such places and their "ideal" users, while excluding those places and people

that do not conform to the image of cosmopolitanism being sold, is part of the production of cosmopolitan space. In Bogotá, the Zona Rosa exemplifies such a site. The Zona Rosa, where this study takes place, is a nightlife and shopping district located in the north of Bogotá within Carreras 11 to 15 and Calles 79 to 86. Its image as a cosmopolitan space thrives on the juxtaposition of informality, public space and remnants of colonial architecture alongside modern elements and global urban aesthetic. A variety of international restaurants, specialty grocers, designer boutiques, high-rise shopping centers, nightclubs, and outdoor cafes line the streets of this commercial district, often servicing the surrounding residential neighborhoods.



Ambulatory vendors and BMW SUVs in the Zona Rosa. Photo taken by Pablo Guerra and Diana Ojeada.

Public spaces like promenades and *plazoletas* (small plazas) can also be found throughout the Zona Rosa. In studies on the Latin American city public space symbolizes the democratization of urban space because of their role as sites of grassroots protest and

demonstration (Irazábal 2008; Kaplan 2004). However, these public spaces are also sites of consumption, where informal, ambulatory vending is organized in planned outdoor markets. In the Zona Rosa plazuelas local artisans and vendors sell their wares, adding a touch of bohemian flair to an otherwise upscale area and supplying sanctioned symbols of cultural and economic diversity.

This presence of old and new, local and global, bohemian and modern do not reflect the interconnectedness of these concepts (Hawkins 2010), hence city residents and other observers mostly associate the Zona Rosa with wealth, exclusivity and elite consumption. These characteristics are almost entirely conferred to elite whites (and foreign residents and tourists), hence making them the ideal and most common users of the cosmopolitan city. In everyday life it is the very lack of interconnection among these seemingly dichotomous elements and practices of racial exclusion that produces the image of the Zona Rosa as white, elite space. This is further exacerbated by the noticeable lack of ethnic and racial diversity on Zona Rosa streets. In many global cities around the world working class or poor people of color, often international migrants, disproportionately perform service duties as nannies, domestic workers, landscapers and restaurant workers (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2007; Sharman and Sharman 2008), however the presence of black and brown bodies is nearly non-existent in the Zona Rosa.

Race and the Cosmopolitan City

In the last decade, demographers and social scientists have attempted to count the capital city's black residents of Bogotá, otherwise known as Afro-Bogotanos, and profile their lives, networks, and the social conditions in which they live. There are significant

disparities in the estimated number of black people residing in Bogotá due, in part, to the scope of studies undertaken, research methods employed to count the population, and the population's high mobility. The 1993 National Census estimated a meager 1801 black capital city residents out of a total population of roughly 5.5 million. The National University Centro de Estudios Sociales (Center for Social Science Research, or CES) conducted a socio-demographic study between 2000 and 2001 which estimated 129,000 Afro-Bogotanos, or about 2 percent of the city's total population at the time (Arocha 2002). However this number seems quite low in comparison to a study published just a few years later in 2003 that estimates the population of Afro-Bogotanos to be as high as 533,739 residents, or 8.9 percent of the capital city's population (Rodríguez Echeverry and Jiménez 2006). Still, Afro-Colombian social movements and organizations insist that these official counts are too low; the Consultivo Distrital, a body of Afro-Colombian community leaders that represents Afro-Bogotano issues before the city government, conducted a census in 1999 that estimated the city's black population at 800,000. Despite the broad range of population estimates, general consensus is that there has been a significant and visible increase of Afro-Colombians to the capital city beginning around the early 1990s (Mosquera Rosero 1998). Many scholars owe this demographic shift to the armed conflict in and forced displacement from the Colombian Pacific and other rural, resource rich regions (Oslender 2008; Santos Caicedo 2004).

Prior to this period, there is little historical evidence of a significant black population residing in Bogotá or the surrounding state of Cundinamarca, besides research on urban slavery in Bogotá during the 1700s (Díaz Díaz 2001). In Latin America, indigenous people and white mestizo settlers have historically inhabited the Andean

highland and interior regions, while black populations lived in tropical lowland and coastal regions (Appelbaum 2003:17; Wade 1993a). Colombian historian Ortega Ricaurte (2002:248) states that some migration of blacks to the capital began as early as 1938 with the new possibilities in transportation, including a new airline and improved bus and train services. In addition, military service and higher education have been two salient factors in black migration to Bogotá. The contemporary phenomenon of black migration to the interior creates new patterns of movement outside of the Colombian Caribbean and Pacific regions, where the majority of black Colombians historically have been concentrated, and produces new social encounters and unprecedented negotiations around space and race.

Urban studies scholars have found extreme economic segregation across Bogotá localities where “most suburbs are socially homogeneous and are clearly recognizable as the territory of a particular income group” (Gilbert 1996:251). This deep stratification of economic resources is so fixed that the Departamento Nacional de Planeación (National Planning Department, or DNP) categorizes residential neighborhoods by stratification numbers from one (lowest income) to six (highest income) to calculate public service subsidies to less wealthy neighborhoods.³ This segregation of urban space has a racial component as well as an economic one, a topic of investigation that has only recently been taken up by a handful of scholars and city and state authorities. The black population lives dispersed among majority-white city residents in all of the city’s 19

³ Residential properties and neighborhoods are labeled from stratum one to six. Stratum one is officially classified as *bajo-bajo* (low-low) and six as *alto* (high). Stratification numbers correspond to the number of official minimum wage salaries residents of the property earn, so stratum two, where the majority of Bogotanos live (42.7 percent), houses residents who earn the equivalent of one to three minimum wage salaries per annum. Only 1.7 percent of Bogotanos reside in stratum six residences, earning the equivalent of more than 16 minimum wage salaries yearly. In a single neighborhood, it is possible to find residences of diverse strata.

sectors (*localidades*), primarily in poor and working class neighborhoods. The CES found that Bogotá's black residents live mostly in sectors with the two lowest strata designations, namely Bosa, Kennedy and Ciudad Bolívar (Arocha 2002; see also Ortega Ricaurte 2002:260), located far from the elite residential and entertainment areas like the Zona Rosa where we were that night (see Appendix A for map of Bogotá with localities).

Private Parties and Urban, Racial Common Sense

The six of us approached Scirocco, an upscale club with a chic entryway of black granite tile and frosted glass door, located on Carrera 13 at Calle 83 in the Zona Rosa district. There was no line so we went right up to the front door where a bouncer with a smirk on his face watched us approach. He did not greet us, but waited until someone in our group asked if we could enter. In a matter-of-fact tone, the bouncer said that there was a private party so we would not be allowed in. "Normally, the cover is 15,000 pesos per person, but tonight a woman paid 2 million pesos (approx. US\$1150) to rent out the entire place," the bouncer informed us. Hector asked to see the invitation, but the bouncer could not produce one. Instead he showed us a guest list titled with the name of the birthday girl. As we departed from Scirocco and contemplated our next steps, my friends expressed relief that we had not been prohibited from entering the discoteca on the basis of race. Representatives at Gavanna, the first discoteca we visited that night, also claimed to be hosting a private party, and when they could not produce a guest list they claimed the venue was full to capacity. While the first encounter was legible to my Afro-Colombian friends as a blatant incident of racial discrimination, our experience at Scirocco appeared not to be racially related. There was proof that Scirocco was hosting a

private event so my friends concluded that we had not been barred from entering because we are black but because we were not invited to the party.

But when our group approached the discoteca the bouncer did not request our names so that he could crosscheck them on the guest list. Instead, he assumed that we were not invited to this Zona Rosa private party. Perhaps, his familiarity with the cosmopolitan nightlife district and its predominately white elite patrons, the bouncer's "common sense" assessment may have been that it was highly unlikely that my Afro-Colombian friends and me were guests at an exclusive party in this neighborhood, let alone the guest of the presumed white party hostess. The racial homogeneity of the Zona Rosa district would support such an assessment. While residents and government officials describe the Zona Rosa as cosmopolitan, cosmopolitanism here signifies whiteness. The racial exclusivity of the Zona Rosa district conflict with the view of cosmopolitanism as the engagement with social difference and search for unity among diversity, undermining state and popular claims about the Zona Rosa and Bogotá as cosmopolitan spaces.

Later that week I recounted the story of these rejections to a few of my white university colleagues to learn that they too had visited Scirocco that night. However, unlike my Afro-Colombian friends and me, they had been allowed to enter the discoteca. The bouncer informed them that there was a private party, but that they could pay the normal cover charge and enter. It may well be that the discoteca was hosting a private party and the bouncer allowed my white colleagues to enter in order to make a few extra pesos for himself. This was not a viable option for my friends and I as it would have been impossible for black people, let alone a large group of six, to slip into this party

unnoticed. It may never be clear if we were prohibited from entering Scirocco based on an act of racial exclusion or not; however, there is little doubt that black people could not seamlessly blend into the party as potentially invited guests because of the stark division of black and white social spaces (and social networks) in Bogotá.

In both Gavanna and Scirocco the bouncers invoked the notion of privacy as a justification for prohibiting the entry of my Afro-Colombian counterparts and me. We could not be allowed in because the nightclubs were hosting “private parties.” Here, private acts as a qualifier that constructs racial barriers, situating black people outside of the social and physical space of the Zona Rosa nightclubs. *Nightclubs* are nighttime spaces, spaces of intimate contact. Sharing such nighttime spaces requires black and white partygoers and the nightclubs that host them to break cultural and racial barriers and codes of intimacy. Such expectations of intimacy and encounter with racial barriers less pronounced in daytime cosmopolitan spaces like the Zona Rosa restaurants I had frequented for lunch on previous occasions. This duality of exclusion and inclusion, private space and public space reveal the space-time-race complexity of urban cosmopolitanism.

The capital city’s young white elite and foreign tourists are the target patrons of the Zona Rosa district and its trendy shopping centers, cafes, and discotecas. Despite our elite status as university graduates, professionals, and world travelers, black people like my Afro-Colombian friends and I do not conform to the image of ideal users of the Zona Rosa. In Colombia, and other Latin American countries with significant black population, black people have been associated with thievery, laziness, and backwardness (Wade 1997) – an image that has only recently begun to change with recent global anti-

discrimination politics and the visibility of Afro-Latin Americans within these campaigns. In her research on class distinctions among residents of a black Chicago neighborhood, sociologist Mary Patillo explains that “hard facts” such as a person’s income and education cannot be known at first glance, hence people rely on “soft facts” like dress, language, and mannerisms to express and determine class (2007:12). Given the long history of mestizaje in Latin America, I add skin color to this list of symbols, as it too is a salient signifier of belonging and status (Lancaster 1991; Sheriff 2001). I argue that these meanings and their stakes are heightened in purported cosmopolitan cities like Bogotá where racial groups encounter each other in spaces and places that were previously the domain of (elite) whites. Practices of racial exclusion like barring black people from Zona Rosa discotecas lead to the reproduction of longstanding racial hierarchies with whites at the apex and blacks at the bottom (Whitten and Torres 1998a). In turn these social differences become inscribed onto urban space and specific locations within the city, which dictate (and are dictated by) how people encounter, traverse, and access the cosmopolitan city. This incident in the Zona Rosa illustrates how racial hierarchies play out in urban space, making certain places and spaces virtually off limits to black people.

Locating Racism: The Practice of Spatial Distancing

After leaving Scirocco, my friends and I decided that Genoeva nightclub in the same Zona Rosa district would be our last stop. This discoteca is a little more casual and draws a younger crowd than the others we had visited. We herded ourselves to the front door where three bouncers patted down a few kids and checked their identification cards.

We were next in the line but before we could advance a bouncer swooped from behind the people just ahead of us in line, creating a human barrier between us and the rest of the line, saying, “the cover charge is 30,000 pesos” (about US\$19). The absurdity of the price was a clear sign that our presence was not welcome as discotecas in the area charge between a 5,000 and 15,000-peso admission fee. Emotionally exhausted by the rejections we experienced, we did not protest but walked away from the nightclub to a nearby street corner to discuss how we would salvage a wasted weekend night.

As my friends and I stood on the corner talking, the two young white women who were classmates of one of the Afro-Colombian women in my group rushed over to us yelling, “We were right behind you guys in line. They let us in, and they didn’t even charge us! The bouncers only asked to see our ID cards!” Hector jokingly quipped, “Well, they charged us extra because they know that black people have more money than whites.” Hector’s quip was a comedic attempt to highlight the disparity between Genoeva’s admission policy for blacks and whites, while trading on the glaring truth that on average Afro-Colombians do not earn more than whites. In Colombia there are no official wage statistics disaggregated by race or ethnicity. However, indicators of hunger gathered in the 2005 National Census may stand in proxy of missing wage statistics. Nearly 15 percent of Afro-Colombians had gone without food one or more times during the week prior to the census due to a lack of money, whereas only six percent of whites reported the same. Despite this lamentable truth, the joke served as a great tension reliever helping all of us release bottled up stress and anger from the night’s events, much like how anthropologist Donna Goldstein (2003) describes the role of humor and jokes as

a kind of “weapon of the weak” to manage and resist glaring social inequities that poor Afro-Brazilian shanty dwellers are otherwise powerless to dismantle.



Gnoveva nightclub during the day. Photo taken by Pablo Guerra and Diana Ojeada.

Elizabeth, one of the white Colombian women, expressed her disbelief and shock that racial discrimination happens in Colombia much less in Bogotá. As she put it, “Maybe this type of things occurs in other parts of the country but not in Bogotá.” Elizabeth’s comment echoes the national image of Bogotá as a modern, sophisticated global city where diverse people from across the country and the world live alongside each other. The discrimination my Afro-Colombian friends and I experienced that night belies this notion of Bogotá as the quintessential cosmopolitan “contact zone” (Pratt 1992:7), where people previously separated by geography and history encounter and interact with one another. Moreover, Elizabeth, and others like her who locate racism in distant places carried out by nameless, faceless perpetrators engage in an act of “spatial

distancing” (Twine 1998). In effect this spatial distancing situates racism outside of Elizabeth’s social world and relieves her from the burden of considering how she might participate in or be complicit with processes of racial exclusion – all of which reinforces whiteness and elite privilege.

White Colombians who frequent these areas are not exempt from the production and reproduction of racial exclusion in urban space, even if they are not the actors responsible for denying admittance to non-white patrons as did the Zona Rosa discoteca bouncers and managers described earlier. In my follow-up interview with Elizabeth days after that night at Genoeva, she denounced the absurdity and backwardness of racism. She described herself as “friendly with all people regardless of color” at the same time that she admitted that she rarely encounters black people in the course of her daily life, not at university, in her family and friend networks, or at places of recreation like the Zona Rosa. Well-meaning whites like Elizabeth often deny the importance of race and the existence of racism in Colombia (Dulitzky 2005), yet fail to take stock of how their everyday actions and places and spaces frequented within the city are implicated in processes of racial discrimination. For Elizabeth it was only upon witnessing the differential treatment extended to her friends and to mine that she began to reflect on the places she frequents and the racial makeup of those areas.

On separate occasions in the following week, I recounted the evening’s events to a couple of working class Afro-Colombian residents of Bogotá, one a 25-year-old waitress and single mother from Cali and another a 30-year-old office manager-turned-homemaker originally from the Chocó, and they responded with nearly identical reactions. One laughed, almost mocking me for making an issue of the situation.

According to both of the women, my friends should have known better than to go to the Zona Rosa and we should not have been surprised by the treatment we received. In their eyes, the six of us had ignored a clear, yet unspoken rule about the racial/spatial boundaries of white cosmopolitan areas like the Zona Rosa, which we should have been aware of and heeded. For these women the Zona Rosa is so fixed in its racial character that there was no space for challenging social norms: after all the six of us knew what we would find, so why even go. However, in our conscious interaction with racial-spatial boundaries we treated the Zona Rosa as a space that needed to be examined and tested, hence revealing how space solidifies power and existing inequality.

Race and class mark place and space, making Gavanna, Scirocco, Genoeva and similar discotecas in this wealthy enclave virtually off limits to blacks. Such socio-spatial norms are not legally enforced; instead de facto practices of exclusion which depend upon ideologies of race, class and belonging, establish white spaces and places as inhospitable to black people. These ideologies and intangible boundaries are reinforced, in part, by nightclubs' practice of turning away potential black customers unless they are recognizable national celebrities or public figures.⁴ These boundaries are also reinforced by Afro-Colombians' tacit knowledge of the city's socio-spatial landscape and of local racialized ideologies of place, which guides how they traverse the cityscape and make choices about where they will work, live, and socialize. Ample urban studies research has found that neoliberal urban development projects marginalize city residents who cannot fully participate in the revitalized city, but Young et al (2006:1690) draw attention

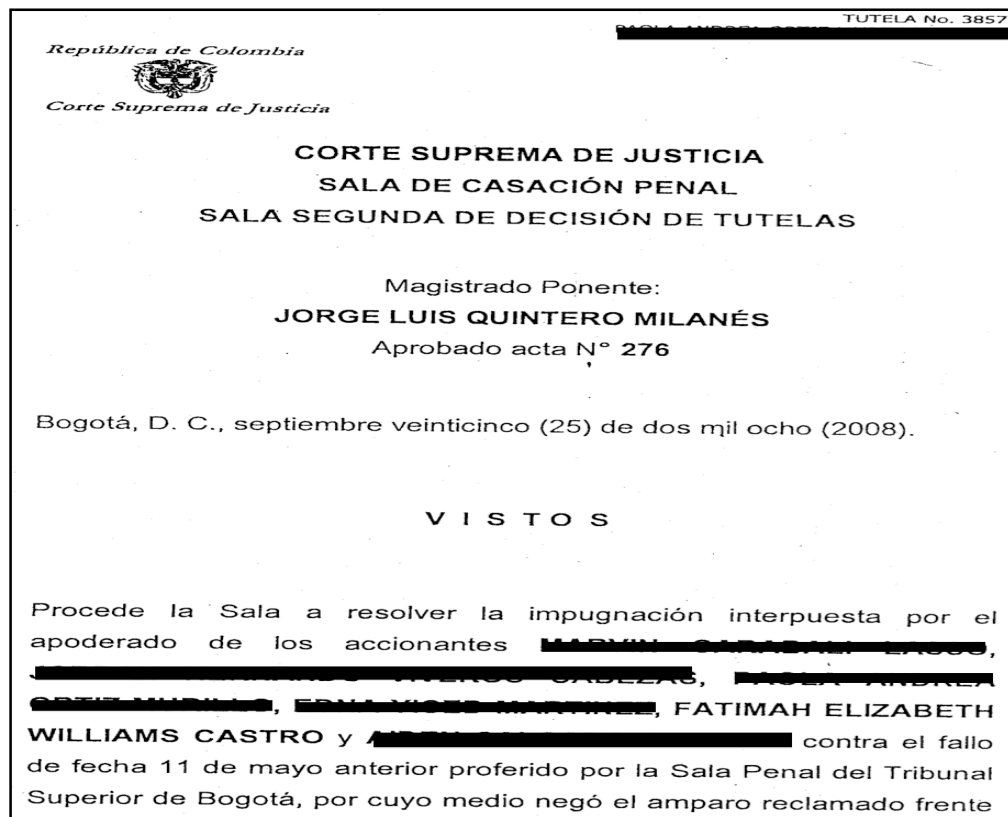
⁴ However, Belky Arizala, a young Afro-Colombian celebrity model from the state of Cauca, was denied entry into a Bogotá nightclub in 2007. The formal complaint was filed in the Personería Distrital, although it is not clear if Ms. Arizala or a male friend who accompanied her that night filed the complaint. This incident drew its fair share of media attention in Colombia with articles in *El Pais* and *El Tiempo*.

to how “feelings of cultural exclusion” developed from this marginalization help reinforce social exclusion and marginalization. In other words, through experiences with and expectations of racism in urban space black people learn the spaces and places of the cosmopolitan city where they do and do not belong and use this knowledge to move around the city, even avoiding certain areas of the city. Together with white patrons’ practice of spatial distancing, these factors facilitate the reproduction of longstanding racist social hierarchies, thereby inscribing social difference onto urban space.

From Everyday Practices of Racial Exclusion to Legal Action

Race is so imprinted in urban space, and embedded in everyday life and “common sense” notions of belonging, that it becomes difficult to challenge racial/spatial norms. Race is so imprinted in urban space and embedded in everyday life and “common sense” notions of belonging that these incidents of black exclusion and people’s understandings of it is not exceptional but part of the production of space-race-time norms. Race is not a negligible factor in how black people in Bogotá interact with the city and with their fellow capital city residents. In the weeks that followed this April night, lawyers of DeJusticia and the Observatorio de Discriminación Racial at the University of the Andes collaborated to present a *tutela* (writ of protection) arguing that our fundamental rights had been violated on the basis of racial discrimination. There has been one similar *tutela* that denounced practices of racial discrimination in Cartagena discotecas, however that case stopped at seeking indemnification for the *accionantes* (plaintiffs). Our *tutela* was unique in that it not only named the nightclubs as responsible for racial discrimination but also named the then Mayor of Bogotá Samuel Moreno and President of Colombia Alvaro

Uribe for not protecting the rights of afro-descendants from such discriminatory practices. The goal of adding these public figures (and the offices they represent) was to force the creation of public policy or legislation that would systematically recognize, address, and penalize practices of racial discrimination in Bogotá and Colombia more broadly. Five months after the original incident and one round of appeals the Colombian Supreme Court ruled in our favor, and concluded that the named parties had violated our fundamental rights to equality, honor, human dignity and “free and full development of one’s personality” (*libre desarrollo de la personalidad*). The language of the Court draws from international human rights discourse as it confirms the social reality that many across Colombia choose to ignore— race and racism define everyday life in Bogotá and Colombia more generally.



Colombian Supreme Court decision on tutela. Author's personal document.

The use of legal recourse for redress against racial discrimination is significant in a multicultural era where race and difference matters of law. Colombia is signatory to the International Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (ICERD). Article 4 of ICERD requires that signatory states prohibit and penalize acts of racial discrimination. During my fieldwork three anti-discrimination bills were presented to the Colombian Congress. Senator Gina Parody and Congressmen Armando Benedetti's bill (Bill 040 of 2007) received much attention in the Colombian media, Afro-Colombian community, and human rights and legal communities for its broad recognition of various points of discrimination. However, the major critique is that the bill outlines discrimination in broad terms, race, sex, color, gender, and religion. Afro-Colombian activists and movement supporters were dissatisfied with what they saw as a watered down bill. Afro-Colombian Congresswoman Maria Isabel Urrutia (Bill 041 of 2006)⁵ also drafted an anti-discrimination bill, which unlike Parody's bill focused solely on racial discrimination. The argument was that the Colombian state and society had to recognize the particularities of racial discrimination and its historical roots, which are unique from other forms of discrimination. Major criticism about this bill (even from Afro-Colombians who supported the spirit of the bill) was the lack of rigor and legal sophistication in defining "racial discrimination" and establishing penalties for institutions and individuals found guilty of racial discrimination. The bill included incarceration and fines for perpetrators, but the questions remained, how do you find someone guilty when they are unaware of the concept of "racial discrimination" and is there room for reconciliation instead of punishment? The underlying idea is that racial

⁵ For early news coverage of Urrutia's bill, see www.eltiempo.com/archivo/documento/CMS-3228596, Accessed September 4, 2006.

discrimination is generally a new concept in Colombia, although practices and behaviors defined as racist are deeply engrained in Colombian social norms. There has to be time to educate people about racial discrimination before criminalizing racial discrimination, some argued. Others considered Urrutia's bill too vindictive, while some considered Parody's bill too general. The Defensoría del Pueblo, a state institution charged with protecting human rights, presented the third bill (Bill 068 of 2007). The Colombian Congress and government have yet to approve anti-racial discrimination legislation, raising questions about the Colombian government's political will to operationalize its agreement to ICERD and to combat racial discrimination.⁶

⁶ For more discussion on Colombian legislation against racial discrimination and Afro-Colombians in the judicial system see *Racial Discrimination and Human Rights in Colombia: A Report on the Situation of Afro-Colombian Rights* (Rodríguez-Garavito, et al. 2008:59-69).

Chapter 5
***“We’ve Told These Stories Before”: Afro-Colombian Testimonies and
 Challenges to Building Transnational Solidarity***

Over the past decade the international community has been abuzz with campaigns for state implementation and protection of Afro-Colombian lives and land rights. The Colombian Constitutional Reform and Law 70 launched a new state politics toward the nation’s afro-descendant population. The reformed Constitution recognizes and protects the nation’s ethnic and cultural diversity and for the first time in Colombian history the national charter recognized black people as a distinct ethnic group with rights to cultural difference. Law 70 goes further to outline a set of material and cultural rights that include Congressional quotas, black history education in public schools, and collective land rights. The most celebrated of these rights is the right of rural black communities to own collectively titled lands. The international community describes Colombia’s Law 70 as one of the most significant gains of any black population in the Americas and afro-descendant groups in the region extol it as a model of reparations for African enslavement. In various research interviews, US-based African American supporters of Afro-Colombian issues described Law 70’s provisions as a form of racial reparations. During my fieldwork in Bogotá (2007-2008), Proceso de Comunidades Negras had teamed up with scholar Claudia Mosquera to debate if Law 70 qualifies as a form of state reparations for the atrocities of slavery and historical racism or if some additional concessions should be made to Afro-Colombian populations.¹ So in the late 1990s when

¹ Claudia Mosquera Rosero Labbe and Luiz Claudio Barcelos (2007) seminal volume *Afro-Reparaciones: Memorias de la esclavitud y justicia reparativa para negros, afrocolombianos y raizales* is a dense 794-page manuscript situates afro-descendants in diverse national contexts as subjects of reparations, while positing a program for “ethno-racial” reparations in Colombia.

surges in political violence threatened black collective land titles and forcefully displaced massive groups of Afro-Colombians from their lands, Afro-Colombian activists began to seek alliances with international organizations and activists who could help them raise international awareness concerning rights violations and pressure the Colombian government to protect their rights.

The “externalization” of domestic issues allows southern activists to gain traction before their national government, particularly in cases where the state is violating or failing to protect citizen or group rights (Tarrow 2005:36). Activists may choose to publicize issues of rights violations among the international community in order to expose the failures of the state and to garner support from international allies who in turn use their influence to put pressure on the state in question – a process that political scientists Keck and Sikkink call the “boomerang pattern” (Keck and Sikkink 1998:12-13; Keck and Sikkink 1999:93). Southern activists participate in international speaking tours and host international fact-finding delegations as part of this process. These activists also produce and circulate human rights literature and visual culture from autobiographies, email updates, and reports to documentaries and film in order to inform publics and persuade them to take action (McLagan 2006; Stephen and Tula 1994).

This chapter focuses on Afro-Colombian attempts to build transnational solidarity with a group of US citizens. These encounters take place in July 2005 during a short-term delegation of African Americans traveling from the US to Colombia to gather information and build solidarity among Afro-Colombian activists and community organizations. Examining the testimonies that Afro-Colombians share with their African American visitors and the interactions between the two groups, I show the process by

which solidarity is constructed across geographically and socially distant groups.

Testimonies – also called “human rights testimonies” (McLagan 2006), “transnational testimonies” (Gregory 2006), “trauma stories” (Kleinman and Kleinman 1997), “humanitarian testimony” (Fassin 2008), “testimonials” and “confessional technologies” (Nguyen 2010) - carry significant weight in the international human rights milieu as the necessary “evidence” to garner international attention, persuade publics, and attract donor funds in support of a cause or marginalized group (Nguyen 2010: 35-60). Keck and Sikkink (1998:16) describe this process as “information politics,” wherein southern actors communicate personal experiences of human rights violations to northern audiences who hear these testimonies, translate them into “useable information,” and ultimately take political action. While the authors acknowledge that information exchange implies a process of cultural translation, they fail to develop an analysis of how and when northern and southern partners encounter and manage these challenges.

Scholarship on transnational networks and transnational social movements has brought to our attention that social hierarchies such as nationality, race, gender, language, and ability to travel internationally can weaken the transnational solidarities between southern activists and their northern supporters (Gill 2009; Stephen and Tula 1994). Visual anthropologist McLagan (2003) describes testimonies as a type of “intercultural technology” that “bring together people across boundaries of difference, putting them into relationship with one another in such a way that obligations are put into play and communities of solidarity are formed” (193). My work extends this research by showing when and how these hierarchies arise in the solidarity building process, and the strategies groups use to overcome these tensions in order to build effective transnational

mobilization. I also show that this informational exchange is a dialectic, not linear process, wherein both testifier and audience participate to create “information” and in turn subvert normative conceptualizations of testimonies and of testifier-audience roles.

Furthermore, race comes into play as a significant factor in transnational solidarity building between diasporic groups such as those at hand, Afro-Colombians and African Americans. Black diaspora studies has been successful at exploring the points of intersection between black peoples across the globe and how diaspora serves as a relationship that can unite groups across nations to advocate for black rights (Edwards 2001; Edwards 2003; Gilroy 1991; Hall 2003 [1990]). However, my research follows a shift in diaspora studies to investigate the ruptures and disjunctures between black diasporic groups, revealing how groups have different meanings for, memories of and access to the concept of diaspora (Brown 2005; Campt 2002; Stephens 2005). My contribution to the study of diaspora is the examination of the extent to which race and diaspora become important to northern and southern groups, and how these groups confront their often divergent and contradictory understandings of race and the centrality of race to political mobilization. We will see how expectations of racial solidarity reconfigure the concept of solidarity, and how diasporic groups confront social hierarchies when in the process of transnational solidarity building. Through ethnographic analysis I argue that black identity and diaspora are but entry points to transnational solidarity building. Participating diasporic groups must espouse additional political commitments to cultivate transnational political mobilization. This line of investigation illuminates how transnational alliances are established and maintained, and thus has significance for social movement studies and transnational activism.

Background on the African American - Afro-Colombian Delegation

In July 2005, I joined a group of seven other African Americans on a trip to Colombia, South America to meet black activists and community organizations and learn about their political mobilization. Our two-week delegation, titled “African American – Afro-Colombian Delegation,” was the brainchild of a long time African American labor organizer from North Carolina with sponsorship from Witness for Peace. The goal of the delegation was to increase African American awareness of and advocacy concerning issues affecting black people in Colombia. Witness For Peace delegations are usually organized around a thematic focus such as labor, trade, or globalization as relevant to the country; however, our delegation was the first of its kind to organize around the racial identity of both the foreign delegates and local hosts. Our itinerary consisted of visits to Afro-Colombian activists in three distinct cities: first, Bogotá, the capital of Colombia; second, Cartagena and the nearby escaped slave community Palenque de San Basilio; and third, Quibdó the capital city of the state of Chocó, which is also known as “Africa in Colombia” because black residents comprise over 95 percent of the state’s total population. The other delegates and I were to learn about forced displacement, threats to collective land titles, and the general effects of the Colombian conflict on newfound Afro-Colombian constitutional rights. Our delegation was part of a broader strategy to create a critical mass of activism and mobilization for the protection of Afro-Colombians’ historic legal gain of collective territories.

A few of the African American delegation members had been involved with activism around Afro-Colombian issues, but for others of us this would be our

introduction to these issues. The eight delegates represented a broad range of ages, occupations, experiences with activism, and Spanish-language abilities. What united us was our self-identification as African Americans, our US citizenship, and our interest in Afro-Colombia. The first delegate was a fifty something university professor and seasoned activist who had participated in black struggles from the South African anti-apartheid and post-independence Kenya to the US black power movement. Two other members of our delegation had prior advocacy experience with Afro-Colombia: one was a North Carolina woman in her late thirties who had organized in the US and Central America protesting the North American and Central American Free Trade Agreements and the other, a “community-based lawyer” from the California Bay Area who used his legal expertise to lobby key members of the US Congress. I had read about Colombian politics and history, US-Colombian relations, and Colombian constitutional reform as part of my doctoral research, and this visit was one part of my preliminary doctoral research that summer. I had hoped that the WFP delegation would provide me an introduction to Afro-Colombian activists in different parts of the country.

A middle-aged husband and wife couple also participated in the delegation. The husband, a Spanish literature professor, had studied and lived in Colombia with his wife for a brief period following his doctoral studies, and this trip was a way for him and his wife to reacquaint themselves with present day Colombia. The seventh delegate, and shyest among us all, did not have an activist background but as a veteran North Carolina factory worker she well understood the importance of globalization and foreign policy on local industries and livelihoods. A similar reason brought the final delegate to Colombia. Nate, a middle-aged youth advocate from Richmond, Virginia, explained how the recent

influx of illegal narcotics into his community had begun to affect the lives of black youth so travel to Colombia was his way to understand how US drug policy and policing also impacts Afro- Colombians.



AFRODES welcomes US delegates. Photo taken by author.

The delegation schedule began with a few days of training in Miami, followed by our travel to Bogotá, San Basilio de Palenque, Cartagena and Quibdó. Our travel to these Colombian cities took a physical toll on the group. We began in the cold, rainy city of Bogotá, where flashfloods are imminent and short term visitors often suffer from high altitude sickness because of the city's elevation over 8000 feet above sea level. After only a few days in the capital city we traveled to the coastal cities of Quibdó and

Cartagena, both characterized by intense humidity and tropical heat with temperatures exceeding 100 degrees Fahrenheit. This intense change of climate and elevation from the interior highlands to the lowland and coastal regions was no small feat, and the health of some of the delegates came into question.

Our days were packed with multiple back-to-back informational sessions. To keep up with the delegation's pace, the North American delegates had to remain mentally nimble, distinguishing the myriad places, events, actors, and laws that were at the heart of each testimony our Afro-Colombian hosts shared. The interactions among the African American delegates, Afro-Colombian hosts and the white WFP interpreters, two young women in their twenties, involved complex negotiations concerning race, language ability, age, nationality, and political awareness. These issues became vectors of friction that eventually cropped up, complicating the awareness- and advocacy- building work that was to be developed in the delegation. During each session we met with a panel of Afro-Colombian community members and activist groups organized around a specific issue such as labor unions or land rights. They would give their testimonies of intimate experiences with these issues and often discuss their organization's activism concerning rights violations, displacement, and social and political exclusion. Told in Spanish and interpreted into English by WFP team leaders the testimonies were overwhelming. These testimonies were a crash course in Colombian geography, politics, armed conflict, political economy, black rights legislation, and black activism. With few breaks between sessions or time to independently process these stories, our group grew exhausted and somewhat irritable at times.

What follows is an analysis of the first testimony our group heard upon our arrival to Bogotá. This women's testimony gives us a glimpse into the dynamic, intertwined issues, actors, and locations that are implicated in the Colombian conflict, and how black and indigenous people encounter this complex web of issues and actors.

Complex Testimonies, and the Challenge of "Experience Translation"

After a few grueling days of lengthy training and informational sessions in Miami, the delegation flew to a chilly, overcast Bogotá on July 14, 2005. The delegation hit the ground running. Our itinerary gave us a brief thirty minutes to check into the hostel before beginning our first meeting with an Afro-Colombian community organizer. The meeting was held at a large three-story red brick church, affectionately called *la iglesia Menonita* (the Menonite church), located on a busy street corner in the residential neighborhood of Teusaquillo. Seated at the head of a long conference table when we arrived was a round brown skin woman of average height with weary eyes and a cautious smile. She wore a simple outfit of jeans, layers of tee shirts and thermals, a warm up jacket, and a crochet beanie cap in red, yellow and green yarn covering the natural hair peeking out from under it. She introduced herself as Maria Ramirez from Cali and a member of UNIFEM, the Organización de Mujeres Negras (Organization of Black Women) and Red Comunitaria (Community Network) as well as a consultant to the Colombian National Human Rights Ombudsman's Office.

She began her testimony highlighting a theme that would become central to all other testimonies we would hear during our two week delegation: access to and control over land. This included land rights, land seizures, displacement from legally titled

lands, and illicit crop cultivation on black collective lands. Land was at the heart of the political violence that black communities of the Pacific region experience on a daily basis. These communities reside in and hold collective land in regions that international scientists and development specialists have identified as “biodiversity hotspots” (see Asher 2009; Escobar 2008). Black communities struggle to maintain possession of their collectively titled lands, fending off the encroachment of large-scale agro-business, mining corporations, and armed groups including military, guerilla and paramilitary forces. Often with support from international human rights organizations, Afro-Colombians expose and organize to stop threats, torture, and social cleansing.

“Along with sixty women from regions all over Colombia, we are organizing for the recuperation of land—in Chocó, Tumaco, Nariño, Valle de Cauca, Cauca and the Caribbean coastal region. The paramilitary are responsible for displacement. In César, the process of social cleansing (*limpieza*)² has left many deaths. They arbitrarily detain leaders, like the president of El Chancleta Neighborhood Association. Only some of the men have been returned, and not without having been tortured. In Sucre, black families search for lost family members, especially in the mass graves. People who speak out are being forced from their homes and communities,” she said listing a number of men and women from around the country who had been threatened and displaced from their homes. “Interfaith [Interfaith Summer Institute, ISI] and other human rights organizations have been helpful with advocating for legislation against these detentions and disappearings. In the Caribbean, the paramilitary control the Social Solidarity Network (*Red de Solidaridad*). They work in the mayor’s office and they punish the communities with food blockades if its members do not comply. The paramilitary threaten to seize money and goods from those displaced people who are fortunate enough to receive aid from the Red de Solidaridad. Their reach is so deep that the people, especially black women, fear seeking help or denouncing these aggressions before public institutions. Fortunately, UNIFEM has helped to relocate women from dangerous areas.”

This account of the human rights situation in the Caribbean departments of César and Sucre paints a picture of paramilitary terror and rule that reaches from daily life to local

² For an ethnographic account of social cleansing practices in Colombia, see Michael Taussig (2003). Also see Friedemann and Arocha (1995:67) for a brief discussion of social cleansing as a type of violent racial discrimination.

political institutions like the mayor's office and aid organizations. Add to that a weak state that has little authority to combat extralegal armed groups or a state that is unwilling to protect citizen rights and safety, depending on which side of this rigorously debated topic you align yourself,³ Maria's testimony depicts a complex terrain of overlapping aggressions on black people in the Pacific and Caribbean regions.

As Maria's testimony continued the list of perpetrators against black rights and security grew. Paramilitary and guerrilla armed groups and growing US and foreign economic expansion into the region are responsible for the tenuous security in regions predominately inhabited by black people. A complex set of harm plagues black and indigenous peoples and their lands and livelihoods. Maria's testimony reveals the parallels between the issues that both indigenous and black people face due to their residence in resource-rich and geographically strategic lands. Harm to the body is experienced as physical torture and constant threats, as guerilla and paramilitary groups force communities to vacate their lands, join or at least comply with armed group efforts in the area, or cultivate illicit crops like coca or mono-crops like African palm. Often these communities are caught in the crossfire as state military forces battle illegal armed groups for control over these isolated pockets of national territory (Oslender 2007). The conflict in these regions spreads out to other parts of the country, displacing inhabitants from their lands into primary and secondary urban cities across Colombia (Bello 2004). This conflict also precipitates environmental exploitation, mega-infrastructural and

³ Some Colombian activists and international human rights organizations argue that the Colombian government is responsible for some of these violations or for failing to protect communities' rights, to the extent that they claim the state willfully turns a blind eye to these atrocities in order to facilitate the actions of armed groups. In areas of the country where the state has little authority and paramilitary or guerilla authority reigns, it is difficult to determine if the state has the power to protect citizens.

development projects and natural resource extraction, which threaten the very terms upon which black and indigenous collective lands were granted.

“Carbona is a large coal company that wants land from the Wayuu. The company has offered *los indígenas* (the indigenous people) money for the land, but they refuse to sell. In *departamentos* (states) like César and the Chocó, palm cultivation has replaced small-scale agriculture. But Law 70, especially Articles 52, 53, and 54, regulates the conditions of land use in black collective territories. These lands cannot be used for industrial purposes or for mono-agriculture. However, the paramilitary force landowners to plant coca while the guerilla force others to plant palm and coca. The paramilitary have forced some communities to sign over their land titles, and then they claim that the lands were sold to them in legitimate transactions. After signing, some have been killed.

The US has access to the biodiversity of the Pacific, and we fear that the US is approaching. The Chocó is the second most humid place in the world. Anything can grow there and some of the flora and fauna found there cannot be found anywhere else in the world. Megaprojects like the interoceanic canal connecting Venezuela, Panama and Colombia have been proposed as a way to extend the reach of the US into the region and to have easy routes for the extraction and exportation of our natural resources. Panama has already bargained away some of its resources to the US in order to reduce its national debt. With just the possibility of a trade agreement the people experience constant violation of their land rights so if the *tratado de libre comercio* (referring to the bilateral US-Colombia free trade agreement) is passed this situation will only intensify.

The organizers from the Pacific are the strongest. They are fighting these forces with the law and with human rights rhetoric. PCN and AFRODES are organizations with money. We need more help from them but it does not feel like they represent *los negros del campo* (blacks from the rural areas). There are not enough campaigns against neoliberalism.”

For Afro-Colombian activists concerned with collective land titles, Law 70 functions as a powerful tool to demand the protection of their land rights and the sanctioned use of that land. Marta ended her story assuring us that Afro-Colombians are organizing against these repressive measures and that they hope to be able to influence the highly debated Justice and Peace law in favor of displaced people. However, her testimony also reveals intra-movement tensions as she draws attention to division between urban black issues and rural black issues and distinctions between well-known black organizations like PCN

and AFRODES and smaller ones like hers. Interestingly, Maria describes AFRODES and PCN in contradistinction to *los negros del campo*, although the broad base of these organizations are in the rural Pacific and coastal Caribbean areas. AFRODES and PCN headquarter offices are located in Bogotá, but these organizations emphasize their grassroots character and democratic representation of black people from the rural regions where displacement and violence most occurs. Testimonies like this one illustrate the diverse approaches to Afro-Colombian organizing, and competition among Afro-Colombian activists and rights organizations for the limited (and coveted) position of interlocutor on behalf of black people and black issues. These limitations squeeze out diverse approaches and actors from “campaigning against neoliberalism,” as Maria put it. According to her, the most successful black organizations are those that have been able to mobilize human rights discourse and legal frameworks. This raises a question about how the region’s turn to human rights and law challenges the efficacy of grassroots efforts and “struggle” and requires that southern activists professionalize in human rights law and discourse or associate their campaigns with international actors who can translate their demands into these frameworks.

Scholarship on human right testimonies grossly underestimates the process of translation that northern audiences undertake to make sense of southern activists’ testimonies and the deep political problems and extraordinary violence they expose. Testimonies involve all types of cultural translation whereby cultural practices of political activism, storytelling, and building support may look dramatically different cross-culturally. However, what I describe as “experience translation” goes beyond the translation of the cultural practices of framing, telling, and receiving testimonies. Instead,

experience translation involves the ability to communicate the raw occurrences, encounters, and contexts of tragic, spectacular abuses, suffering, and corruption. These occurrences and issues in and of themselves are not cultural, but situational and contextual. They are produced within specific historical and political contexts of the place in question, in this case Colombia. Northern audiences often have little point of reference for imagining the levels of political violence, state and corporate corruption, dispossession and suffering that southern activists describe. For those uninitiated in Colombian (or Latin American) politics and history, the stories that Colombian activists told seemed almost incredible.

In addition, northerners are called upon to decipher the multiple, interrelated actors, factors, and sites implicated in the human rights situation among vulnerable people and their communities. Keck and Sikkink's theory of information politics places the onus of preparing and sharing "useable" information on southern activists (1999). According to this theory, if the information that southern activists provide is useable then that information can be mobilized in northern advocates' long distance campaigns. This theory fails to account for the complexity of the stories that southern activists communicate, and for how northern activists receive and understand these testimonies. Maria's testimony, like many of the others we heard during our two-week delegation, illustrates a complex set of national and international corporate, state, and para-state actors that operate in black collective territories to create complex "geographies of terror" (Oslender 2008). Her testimony also reveals multiple factors that make for unrest and land rights abuses in collective black and indigenous territories from the Colombian state,

multinational corporations, illegal armed groups, corruption in state aid institutions, and US economic and international development policies.

To follow Maria's testimony, the African American audience members had to make sense of an extensive geography of conflict and terror that spans from the Caribbean coast in northern Colombia to the western portion of the country, from north Pacific state of Chocó to the southern states of Nariño and Cauca. The audience had difficulty grasping the landscape and scale of vulnerability and violence that activists like Maria described, undoubtedly a critical step in communicating information and encouraging transnational activism among socially and geographically distant audiences. Many of the delegates in this group explained that they knew little about Colombia, counting this delegation as their first visit to Colombia and their first encounter with the region, its people and its politics. The absence of maps, images and other visual aids did not help the situation. In this case, simply being in Colombia and hearing these first hand accounts was not enough to bridge the gap in translating Afro-Colombian experiences to a North American audience. This issue of experience translation poses a significant barrier to transnational testimony communication and reception, awareness building, and advocate recruitment, and thus proves of import to the development of social movement theory and transnational coalitions.

Refusal to testify and demands for accountability

Gathered back at the Mennonite church the following day, the delegates awaited the arrival of members of Bogotá's black community council and Afro-Colombian members of the local teacher's union. The WFP interpreters introduced us to three

women, one a woman named Nancy who appeared to be in her 60s and two younger women, one of whom was Nancy's daughter. Nancy's bold personality dominated the meeting within the first few minutes of their arrival. As the Witness for Peace interpreter introduced her as a *lider afro-colombiana* (Afro-Colombian leader), Nancy interrupted explaining that she does not embrace the term "Afro-Colombian". She said, "I have always been *negra* (or black), but only recently have they recognized me as *Colombiana* so please address me as *negra*." Here Nancy makes a statement about race and the Colombian nation. The state has recently recognized black people however her self-identification and black identity precedes the state's terms of recognition, with its construction of "Afro-Colombian" and "black communities" (*comunidades negras*). Using the term *negra*, Nancy rejects the state's recognition and highlights how only with the recent constitutional reform and Law 70 have black people officially become part of Colombia. This tone continued throughout the meeting. The delegates then introduced ourselves stating our organizational affiliations so our Afro-Colombian hosts could get to know us. After introductions, the WFP interpreter opened the floor for Nancy and the other teachers to give their presentation to our group. Rather than begin her testimony Nancy shifted the focus of interrogatives, saying: "Some of you have been here before. I remember you. Tell us what you've done since the last time we talked to you."

The group was taken aback and unsure of how to respond. Two or three of the African American delegates had participated in a similar Witness for Peace delegation in previous years, and now they were being asked to account for their advocacy. Nancy grew visibly upset, as she continued: "We've told these stories before, but it's always the same thing. We never know what happens to our stories or how they are working on our

behalf in the US. Why should we keep doing this?” Nancy had presented to previous delegations but those delegates had not followed up with her or extended requests for further transnational collaborations. She had extended herself to strangers but never knew if or how they communicated her story in the exterior. Our delegation would never hear the women’s testimonies that day; instead, Nancy proposed an activity of a different kind. With pen and paper in hand she suggested we create *un documento*, that is, a collaboratively written document that would outline our commitments to and specific strategies for combating issues that her union mobilizes. The WFP interpreters tried to re-focus the course of the meeting away from the lengthy document writing process to Nancy’s testimony. The document never came to fruition nor did Nancy’s testimony. Instead, Nancy picked up the tone of the meeting by teaching the delegates and WFP interpreters a popular resistance song. Much like the African American musical tradition of lining, Nancy lead us in verse, but only after she made us all stand up and join hands.

This scenario exemplifies the expectations and tensions implied within transnational activism that rarely become the subject of social movement inquiry. Southern activists share their testimonies with northern audiences with the expectation that some action will be taken, that northern advocates will use their positionality and influence to advance campaigns on their behalf. However, this exchange reveals a common breakdown in solidarity-building initiatives: southern activists are not guaranteed cooperation from supposed advocates. Southern activists remain vulnerable as they share intimate stories of human rights abuses with socially distant North American or European audiences, whom they look to for political solidarity. Anthropologist Lesley Gill interviewed a Coca-Cola labor organizer, who like Nancy,

expressed doubts about northern audiences' "openness" to support Colombian labor rights after hearing his testimony (2009: 674). Despite the worker's skepticism, he continued to participate in international speaking tours to rally support for Colombian labor organizers, but Nancy took a different tact: she refused to testify.

Perhaps by refusing to testify Nancy shifted the power asymmetries that so often plague transnational networks. She refused our consumption of her life experience and avoided making herself vulnerable to us, by declining to share a testimony for which she was not guaranteed reciprocity. Refusing to have her testimony consumed, Nancy did not allow her personal experience with labor rights violations, racism, and discrimination to be "made over into trauma stories" and used as "currency in the political economy of transnational humanitarianism" and activism (Kleinman and Kleinman 1997:9-10). In the case of this delegation, Nancy refused to enter this lopsided system of exchange, where southern actors reveal intimate experiences of violations, are rendered "victims", and see their stories commodified, all in exchange for potential advocacy. Previous African American delegates had failed to fulfill their prescribed role as advocates, a role that southern activists are invested in them fulfilling. Scholarship on transnational alliances assumes that northerners listen to southern activists' testimonies to become political advocates for them; however, such alliances often remain one-sided, or at best, lop-sided exchanges, evidenced in previous delegates' unaccountability and Nancy's refusal to testify.

The unique point about this delegation is that the race of the Afro-Colombian and African American participants and the supposed mutual commitment to black struggle were assumed to be sufficient motivators to link these groups into transnational solidarity

and action. However, unfulfilled expectations of Nancy as a southern testifier and the African American delegates as advocates become paramount to the success of this group to establish solidarity. There is no question about the importance of black identity for Nancy or for the African American delegates, but the question becomes if, how, and for whom black identity is important in transnational activism.

“In the US we fight just as hard”: Testimonies as dialectic exchange

The next encounter I will analyze took place just a few days later in a two-story wooden community center in the hot and humid city Quibdó. Ethnographic analysis will show how African American and Afro-Colombian participants misrecognize each other's understandings of race and black identity. Such encounters raise an analytical question about the extent to which race and blackness are sufficient to establish and sustain transnational solidarity. An Afro-Colombian woman shared with us the impact of narcotrafficking and US drug policy on her rural community, saying, “Colombians are not the authors of this situation. We are not the consumers of these drugs, however we pay the price of narcotrafficking.” (*Los Colombianos no son los autores de esta situación. Nosotros no somos los consumidores pero sí pagamos el precio del narcotráfico.*) She followed her statement with an impassioned soliloquy about how American consumers create a demand for cocaine, which in turn fuels the international narcotics industry, local conflicts over territorial control and increased militarization in the region. According to her, Americans' thoughtless illegal drug consumption was to blame for Afro-Colombian deaths and for jeopardizing black land rights. She peered at us, her audience of African Americans, as if we were personally responsible for these

atrocities. Although North Americans number among the world's largest consumers of illicit narcotics, US policies to curtail narcotics focus primarily on the sites of cultivation as evidenced by the 7.5 billion dollar US Plan Colombia. She explained that Plan Colombia, which began in 2000, emphasizes aerial fumigation and militarization as primary strategies for the eradication of coca crops and narcotrafficking.

Environmentalists contend that the chemical herbicide used in aerial spraying harms livestock, damages subsistence crops, and causes illness among those who come in contact with it. In addition, rural communities are often caught in the crossfire of military exercises aimed at extinguishing rebel guerilla groups that infiltrate these communities and force local peasants to cultivate coca. In her testimony, the Afro-Colombian woman stressed how US anti-narcotics policy has deep consequences for daily life in Colombia, and that most Americans are ignorant of these stakes.

Another significant humanitarian impact of the narcotics industry in the Pacific has been the recent increase in disputes between armed actors for control over the region's waterways and productive land. Black communities which are situated in the riverine zone of the Colombian Pacific, as outlined in Law 70, live along the major rivers and tributaries that become the fluvial routes for narcotraffickers to transport coca and processed cocaine from the jungle to the coast in preparation for (illegal) international export. While guerilla, paramilitary and state armed forces fight for control over the region, Afro-Colombians are caught in the crossfire, particularly if they choose not to flee their collective territories, an act they understand as relinquishing their land to these groups. In my conversations with PCN leader Carlos Rosero during one of his speaking tours in New York City, he explained that some black communities have vowed to stay

put on their lands despite the violence as a way to resist forced displacement and deterritorialization. He viewed this approach as admirable but also dangerous, so PCN was working with local communities in the Pacific to strengthen their networks in times of heightened violence and threats of violence. As an alternative he proposed temporary vacation of territories followed by return and reterritorialization in days after armed conflict so as not to risk the lives of more black community members and leaders.

Afro-Colombians in these riverine areas also occupy a tenuous position because paramilitary and state military groups identify them as guerilla sympathizers or guerilla members. In many remote areas of the country where state control is weak or virtually non-existent, guerilla groups have been a long-term presence and sole authority. Guerilla groups use these dense, jungle regions to hide from state authorities and to cultivate and process coca and poppy crops into illicit drugs. Inhabitants of these rural zones oftentimes live in cooperation with these guerilla groups, or these groups have coerced them into cooperation, waging threats and violence against area residents to force their participation in the narcotics industry. During my fieldwork, I attended Process of Black Communities' 2007 National Meeting where many rural Afro-Colombians recounted stories of coercion to plant, cultivate, process or transport illicit crops and drugs. Some meeting participants explained that coercion was hard to resist when this was one of the only labor opportunity in their communities. Despite the complexity of black communities' relationship with guerilla groups, black people and black territories are the targets of paramilitary social cleansing efforts and military exercises to re-established state control like the experience that AFRODES founder Marino Cordoba endured in Riosucio, Chocó. In the early 2000s it was not uncommon to hear stories of tortured and

disappeared people, much like what Maria describes above.⁴ Some Afro-Colombian activists classify the increased deaths of black people of the Pacific, especially young black men, as genocide.

The aim here is not to debate US Plan Colombia or aerial fumigation; instead, I focus on the reactions that this testimony elicited from the African American audience members. One of the delegates, Nate, the Richmond, VA youth advocate in his late 40s, interjected, visibly trying to contain his frustrations:

“They need to know that in the U.S. we fight just as hard. I’m starting to see how especially when it comes to the issue of drugs, be it production or consumption, *we* are tied in this together. My goal in coming here was not particularly to support any organization right off the bat. I came to learn. Before I heard about this group, I didn’t even know there were black folks in Colombia! My priority is to take this message home and tell the young brothers on the street about their brothers and sisters in Colombia, and how their illicit activities matter beyond the streets of Richmond.”

When we all introduced ourselves in the first days of the delegation, Nate had expressed concern about the expansion of “hard drugs” like crack into his neighborhood. Watching his community change before his eyes and African American youth get caught in the middle moved this man to emotion and to action. Furthermore he was concerned about young black men’s involvement in this growing illegal market. Though initially skeptical about joining the delegation, Nate ultimately decided to participate because of his curiosity about black Colombia and the relationship between black social issues in the US and Colombia.

His curt response to the Afro-Colombian woman’s testimony tempers the depiction of US delegates as detached and privileged northerners. Nate explains that the illegal narcotics industry also has detrimental impacts on US communities and African

⁴ See New York Times, Simon Romero, May 22, 2007, “Cocaine Wars Make Port Colombia’s Deadliest City.”

Americans in particular. By responding in this way, Nate broke with two conventions of scholarly thinking about transnational advocacy. First, he showed that northerners are not always socially distant and unaffected publics, somehow exempt from vulnerability, suffering, or rights violations. Nate seemed to want to “set the record straight” so to speak, and explain that Afro-Colombians are not the only ones who suffer from the illegal drug industry and US policing. He wants to highlight that the black experience in America is different from the mainstream American experience. He makes a distinction about black citizenship by showing that African American communities bear the brunt of US anti-narcotics policing, much unlike white America. Second, Nate talked back. Research on transnational testimonies assumes a linear speaker-audience interaction in which southern activists dutifully lend their stories of suffering for the consumption of northern audiences who, in turn, listen attentively as they consider how they will advocate for southern activists and their communities. However, there are indications that northern audiences may be hesitant to act upon the information heard in testimonials and that political mobilization is the exceptional, rather than normative, response to witnessing the atrocities and suffering of others (Cohen 2001). Nate’s response illustrates that northerners may reject the role of contemplative audience member, and contribute their perspectives and personal testimonies regarding the topic at hand. This exchange produces a dialectic testimonial process wherein both audience and testifier participate. Unlike the static representation of testimonies as a simple information exchange from southern activists to northern audiences, my ethnographic research with this delegation reveals the complex negotiation of perspectives, approaches, and strategies. This dialectic exchange may promote mutual understanding among northern

and southern participation, but it can also provoke tensions and dredge up latent social hierarchies.

There are various reasons why northern audience members may openly object to the stories that southern activists tell and attempt to reshape these testimonies to include their own perspectives. Southern testimonies like the one detailed above may implicate northern audiences as contributors to deteriorating local conditions, consumers of conflict resources, or uninformed global citizens with an unfulfilled duty to advocate for vulnerable peoples. Northerners might feel singled out by these testimonies, disagree with the accuracy of the testimony, or resist confronting their privilege. Whatever the reason, the exchange between southern testifiers and northern audiences can create tension in solidarity building initiatives, and even thwart the political mobilization process.

This tension however is heightened in the context of supposed horizontal relationships like the one staged with this transnational black delegation. Gill recommends that southern activists focus their transnational solidarity-building initiatives on immigrants, people of color and working class people, instead of college students or elites (Gill 2009). In a similar example, anthropologist Lynn Stephen develops a feminist approach to transnational solidarity in the process of co-authoring a testimonial with a female Salvadoran revolutionary, grassroots activist, and civil war survivor (1994). The women's collaboration in shaping the testimonial narrative, the ethnographic interview methodology and the shared writing process are three primary features that characterize Stephen's feminist approach to transnational solidarity. These types of alliances are considered "horizontal" in that they aim to unite northern and southern actors who live in

similar social positions in their respective countries. According to this theory, such alliances are one step in leveling the hierarchies and social distance that often develop into vectors of friction and complicate transnational solidarity building. Yet my ethnography of this black transnational delegation raises questions about the notion of horizontality –in this case black identity– and the extent to which it can inspire and sustain solidarity among northern and southern participants.

The delegation organizer, the black labor rights activist from North Carolina, designed this delegation to cultivate African Americans' awareness of the situation of blacks in Colombia, to establish a relationship between afro-descendants of the US and Colombia, and to encourage US-based activism concerning Afro-Colombian social issues. At the outset of this delegation it appeared to the organizers and participants that black identity/blackness and diaspora were common ties that would link African Americans and Afro-Colombians, and hopefully lead to relationships of transnational solidarity and political mobilization. In many instances throughout our delegation this assumption held true as Afro-Colombian hosts greeted us as *hermanos* (brothers) – a term that denotes brotherhood and racial solidarity among afro-descendant people – or expressed an interest in learning about contemporary African American social issues and political mobilization strategies. You may also recall Nate's statement, "when it comes to the issue of drugs, be it production or consumption, *we* are tied in this together." I highlight Nate's use of the pronoun "we" because it served as a discursive tool to establish horizontality between Afro-Colombian and African American encounters with the illegal narcotics industry. The importance and power of diaspora as a political force and unifying tool cannot be overstated. African American Studies scholar Percy Hintzen

states that, “Diasporic identity connects persons of African descent in a global web of racial intimacy. It occupies the sentimental center in black transnational political alliances employed so successfully in the various nationalist struggles against colonialism and racial segregation” (Hintzen 2006:110). Similarly in his work on US black and Brazilian grassroots transnational alliances concerning state policing in black urban communities, cultural anthropologist Joao Costa Vargas makes a case for these alliances as “alternative modes of political intervention derived from a diasporic praxis of racial solidarity” that allow black diasporic groups to couch rights claims, discourse and social movements in powerful tropes of black struggle that would not otherwise be available to them (2003:36).

However, my ethnography of this transnational black delegation exposes the nuances of horizontality – in this case black identity and diasporic identity – as an approach to building transnational solidarity. Afro-Colombians and African Americans may be committed to black self-identification but espouse differing ideas about how race should be mobilized. The exchange between Nate and the Afro-Colombian woman from Quibdó shows that northern and southern participants may have divergent priorities for participating in solidarity building initiatives and distinct commitments to diasporic identity or other potential points of horizontality. For example, Nate was convinced that black people in the US and in Colombia are not only similarly victimized by narcotrafficking but also similarly racialized, yet he rejects the role of advocate by reminding the group that he traveled to Colombia “to learn” and “not to support any one organization right off the bat.” The African American delegate prioritized solidarities to his Richmond community and to the concept of diaspora, but he does not translate this

into a commitment to the *practice* of diaspora (see Edwards 2003). In contrast, at no point in the Afro-Colombian woman's testimony did she express a conviction for diaspora or for drawing commonalities between Afro-Colombian and African American experiences with the illegal drug industry or related state policing. It is no small point that the Richmond delegate's inclination to draw diasporic commonalities contrasts the Afro-Colombian woman's blanket depiction of apathetic Americans. Recent research on black diasporic peoples has established that "diasporic relations are anything but simple, universal, or egalitarian" (Campt 2002:97). Anthropologist Jacqueline Nassy Brown expands this point stating, "Despite invitations to universal identification, not everyone partakes in the privileges of membership in the diasporic community with impunity" (1998:298; see also Patterson and Kelley 2000). The Afro-Colombian woman saw US drug policy and narcotrafficking through a local lens, not through the transnational lens of diaspora. In her testimony, she drew a distinction between political solidarity and racial solidarity. For her, political solidarity among black people does not necessarily imply a commitment to diaspora, transnational blackness or racial solidarity.

Re-envisioning Transnational Solidarity and Testifier-Audience Roles

Through Afro-Colombian and African American testimonies and analysis of interactions in this transnational delegation, I have shown how hierarchies and tensions arise in the process of transnational solidarity building. Social movement scholars have been instrumental in identifying social hierarchies and tensions as a staple feature of transnational alliances. Some even offer recommendations for neutralizing these eruptions-- black diaspora scholars suggest that a commitment to racial struggle and

affect among afro-descendant peoples will facilitate transnational solidarity, other scholars suggests a feminist approach, and others emphasizes horizontality. My ethnographic research however sheds light on the complexity of transnational solidarity building and the mechanisms like testimony and delegations to accomplish this goal. This transnational solidarity building delegation may best be characterized by the series of misrecognitions that take place between African American delegates and Afro-Colombian hosts. Each group holds distinct ideas about what constitutes political solidarity and about the importance of race and diaspora to building solidarity. Contradictions in their priorities about race and political mobilization threaten to halt the solidarity building initiative and subsequent transnational collaborations. In many instances the Afro-Colombian hosts challenged the African American delegates to take concrete steps toward solidarity, through creating a *documento*, pledging financial and other resources, and demonstrating accountability for previous testimonies told. People like Nancy and the Afro-Colombian woman from Quibdó drew a distinction between racial solidarity and political solidarity, and called upon their African American visitors to demonstrate their commitment to Afro-Colombian struggles. In other words, if participants are more interested in consuming testimonies, finding commonalities, or appealing to diasporic “structures of feeling,” the efficacy of transnational solidarity and transnational black alliances are compromised.

On the other hand, a consistent feature of the delegation was African Americans’ rejection of the category of the privileged, socially distant northerner. The delegates took various approaches to tempering Afro-Colombian perceptions of them as American. In other words, the African Americans wanted to show that black experiences with

citizenship were distinct from those of white America. They resisted being lumped in with the same America that was the focus of Afro-Colombians' critiques. This insistence produced a new testifier-audience dynamic in which northerners shared their personal experiences with racial struggle and vulnerability, rather than simply absorbing the testimonies of their Afro-Colombian hosts. Nate, the Richmond delegate, was one example of this in his discussion of narcotics in his local community. He attempted to show the Afro-Colombian delegate how black people in the US confront the challenges and fears of the illegal narcotics industry and US anti-drug policies. Yet this issue cropped up in other ways during our delegation. In our travels to Quibdó and Cartagena, the delegation took a turn as Afro-Colombian groups unabashedly solicited money and other material resources from the African American delegates. As delegates gathered alone at the end of the day to recap the days' events, many of us explained that we felt caught unawares by these solicitations. In other cases, the delegates were upset that the Afro-Colombians would see them as being able to afford to freely give money or that they should be expected to do so. The solicitations made the African Americans very uncomfortable, but they also brought to the surface the presumption of American privilege and wealth.

The shy middle-aged North Carolina woman shared with the other delegates that she was in no position to give. With tears in her eyes and humiliation in her voice, she explained to us that she was in jeopardy of losing her long held job at the local manufacturing plant simply for daring to take her two-week vacation. In addition, she had had to fund raise in order to pay the WFP delegation fee of over \$2000. Her testimony shed light on the tenuous financial and labor situation that is typical for so

many working class Americans, and especially people of color. In an effort to show our hosts the complexity of the US black experience and black citizenship, the Bay Area community lawyer joined in the Richmond delegate's response to explain how US drug laws and policing disproportionately affect poor blacks and Latinos. The lawyer offered sharp statistics concerning the dramatic difference in incarceration rates and sentences for cocaine and crack possession, and its deleterious effects on black and Latino women, families and their urban communities. For the rest of our trip, delegate members would share these and similar stories with Afro-Colombians as a way to deepen the understanding of contemporary black life in the US and to level the exchange between both groups.

The African American delegates defied the category of audience in the static testifier-audience roles, interjecting their experiences and perspectives on issues raised in southern activists' testimonials. Delegates found this dialectic approach to information exchange important to minimizing the social distance between them and their Afro-Colombian hosts. The African American delegates aimed to build cross-group understanding and to be considered more fully, not just as a link in the global chain of information sharing and advocacy or as privileged, socially distant northerners. During our visit to the municipality of Soacha on the outskirts of Bogotá, the wife of the Spanish professor shared the headline story of that week's *Jet* magazine with our Afro-Colombian hosts. *Jet*, an African American weekly magazine established in the early 1950s, has significance in today's black community for carrying stories concerning black social issues, entertainment news, and politics that are largely absent from mainstream media. The delegate had haphazardly tossed the magazine into her suitcase before leaving home,

unaware that its headline article would serve as a point of connection with our Afro-Colombian hosts concerning US and Colombian struggles for black rights and racial justice. The June 2004 issue featured an article on the federal government's reopening of the case of the torture and murder of 14-year old Chicago youth Emmet Till in 1955. The white men accused of killing Till stood trial for murder that same year, but were acquitted on account that the severely beaten and decomposed body could not be identified as that of Emmet Till. The 2004 *Jet* article confirmed that the exhumed body was that of Emmet Till, and explored how this discovery might bring to trial the remaining murder suspects. The delegate explained the story of Till's murder as a pivotal moment in the birth of the US Black Civil Rights Movement, showing how this recent discovery as a signal of the long road to justice. Sharing this story gave our Afro-Colombian hosts the opportunity to see African Americans more fully, and provided a point of comparison to their struggle for revision of Colombia's Justice and Peace Law (*Ley de Justicia y Paz*, Decree 128 of 2003) to focus on truth, justice and reparations for victims.⁵ When participants' expectations for solidarity are not reconciled, the path to transnational political mobilization is at stake.

⁵ This law outlines the demobilization of Colombia's illegal armed groups and has been critiqued by Colombian and international rights organizations for the lenience and impunity it extends to violent actors at the expense of truth, transparency, reconciliation, and victim reparations.

Conclusion

Black Bogotá explores how multicultural constitutional reform and recognition impacts Afro-Latin American citizenship, belonging, and rights, and examines the everyday experiences of blackness in post-reform Colombia. Scholarship on multicultural politics in Latin America has shown that indigenous people have fared better than afro-descendants in gaining recognition and collective territorial rights (Hooker 2005). Concepts of “culture” and “ethnicity” form the basis for the state’s recognition of rights and cultural difference within the framework of multiculturalism. However, Colombian society and Colombian anthropology most readily associate these two concepts with indigenous peoples rather than black people, who they perceive as assimilated into mainstream Colombian society. Afro-descendant rights tend to be successful when they model indigenous claims to rights, and less so when they frame rights in terms of race and recognition of historical racial inequalities (Anderson 2007). Throughout *Black Bogotá* I show that Law 70, Colombia’s multicultural legislation toward Afro-Colombians, recognizes limited terms of Colombian blackness based on region, production practices, and traditional cultural practices. Those black people who cannot lay claim to these state-sanctioned features of blackness are neither recognizable as subjects of multicultural citizenship nor can they access this new regime of rights and recognition.

Chapter two examines the shift in Afro-Colombian social movements that are able to gain traction among black people and with the state prior to and after the ratification of Law 70. Prior to constitutional reform and Law 70 urban black movements were building consolidating and building momentum concerning black identity, race, anti-

racism, and Afro-Colombians as members of the African Diaspora. After Law 70, black movements that could connect with Law 70's vision of the predominately black Colombian Pacific, rural black culture and production practices, and territoriality displaced urban black movements as interlocutors with the state and international community on behalf of Afro-Colombians. The tangibility of land and legal rights to land support this shift, as does the lack of broad support among Afro-Colombians for race-based black identity and black activism.

Chapter three continues the same theme of the limitations of Law 70 to encompass the diversity of Colombian blackness and guarantee appropriate rights for this heterogeneous population. My interviews and participant observation with black residents of Bogotá reveal that Afro-Colombians creatively conceptualize black identity, citizenship, and race from their positions as professionals, partners in interracial relationships, internal migrants to the capital, and parents rearing black children in a predominately Euro-Andean city. Their definitions of blackness resist grassroots movements' and state constructions of Colombian blackness and black social issues. While Law 70 follows a cultural and legal logic that parallels global notions of indigeneity, black capital city residents frame their conceptions of Colombian blackness in relation to North American discourses of blackness and to their relationship to socially recognized regions of black authenticity such as the Colombian Pacific and Caribbean regions.

Even though Law 70 best suits the claims and rights of rural black communities, the arrival of civil war and hyper-capitalist development to the Pacific region challenges the efficacy and will of the state to protect black territorial and cultural rights. As

discussed in Chapter five, black residents and activists cultivate solidarity-building relationships with northern advocates, in this case African Americans, in order to bring attention to rights violations. The aim of transnational initiatives such as the delegation described in Chapter five becomes complex when Colombian and African American participants espouse different conceptions of blackness and of the primacy of race in political struggle.

Although scholars have extensively studied indigenous identity and rights under this new multicultural politics, less research has been undertaken to examine the experience of afro-descendant peoples across the region. The most notable research on contemporary Afro-Colombia after constitutional reform and Law 70 focuses on land rights, displacement, and economic development in the Colombian Pacific region (Asher 2009; Escobar 2008). While this research has furthered our understanding of the intersection among nature, economic development and identity, it situates Colombian blackness and Afro-Colombia within a particular political economy based on place and on natural resources and biodiversity. To broaden our understanding of Afro-Colombian experiences of juridical recognition and legal rights, as outlined in the reformed constitution and Law 70, my work focuses on black people who reside outside of this region, particularly urban blacks and blacks who live in a city that is not predominately black (as is the Pacific region). My research on blacks living in the urban mestizo capital Bogotá, Colombia addresses these questions. This area of research provides insight into the complexity of blackness, as it is informed by place, political economy, and everyday encounters with non-blacks.

My work joins research that critically investigates the meanings and experiences of blackness among Afro-Latin American populations during this era of multicultural politics (Anderson 2007; Goett 2006; Greene 2007; Hooker 2005; Ng'weno 2007a; Ng'weno 2007b; Rahier 2008). I expand this body of research by considering how black people experience and define race outside of the official state-sanctioned sites and meanings of Colombian blackness and black rights. Through ethnographic exploration of urban life, activism, and personal narratives among Afro-Colombian activists, artists, parents, university students, and professionals, this manuscript shows how Afro-Colombians articulate, deploy, and refashion official politics of race and recognition. Afro-Colombian women we met in the earlier chapter are an example of everyday, experiential approaches to defining black identity, which often may not coincide with official terms of recognition and blackness. Although they are aware of recent multicultural reforms, these women's ideas about blackness are informed by their region of origin, their social status as professionals and educated women, conceptions of beauty, and their residence in the predominately white, cosmopolitan capital Bogotá. Afro-Colombian activists, too, engage constitutional reform and legal recognition. The rise and fall of organizations that make up the Afro-Colombian social movement signals the national shift in acceptable discourses of black identity, black history and the terms of black activism. But it also shows how certain black social movements seized the opportunity of this political opening to make claims for recognition and rights, often creating and mobilizing meanings of blackness that expanded or provided alternatives to legal definitions. Even in their black diasporic transnational political outreach, Afro-

Colombians are called upon to articulate their concepts about black identity and its relationship to activism and claims making.

Multiculturalism's uneven recognition of black citizenship enables society to overlook and misrecognize the black experience in Colombia and facilitates everyday practices of black exclusion. This impact is particularly salient for Afro-Colombians living in racially heterogeneous urban places like Bogotá, as opposed to blacks residing in rural regions of the country where blacks are the majority.

This manuscript explores blackness as a cultural and a legal phenomenon, showing how race operates in daily social life outside of sites of predominately black populations, at the margins of state politics and law, and in conjunction with global discourses of rights and black identity. Some Afro-Colombians are concerned with the lived experience of blackness while others are concerned with blackness as a legal issue and a foundation for juridical rights. Yet these two parallel processes intersect at points revealing the contradictions in state recognition and social reality and the divergent discourses of blackness that sectors of Afro-Colombians engage to claim belonging and citizenship.

Future research might further explore the disjuncture between legal recognition and everyday black experiences of this recognition by investigating the new actors and interlocutors that crop up as a result of this emerging multicultural politics. New public policies and new state institutions that had been and continue to be created under the multicultural politics regime opened up employment opportunities and vacant positions that needed to be filled by black people. Toward the end of my fieldwork I saw Afro-Colombian political elites emerge displacing black grassroots activism at the same that

Afro-Colombian grassroots activists engage transnational political outreach to US blacks in order to strengthen their claims for rights, dignity and black identity. These black actors were a combination of the following: professionals and university-educated people with no former relationship to black grassroots or to public office, former grassroots activists with the Afro-Colombian social movement, and public officials. They have become the state's preferred interlocutors on black issues, rather than the grassroots activists (also university educated) who were active in creating the legislation that is now Law 70 and in demanding state implementation of these rights. This shift in the state's preferred spokespersons for black communities urges us to consider the scope of law and state politics to ameliorate racial inequalities, the role of elite and grassroots actors in social change efforts, and practices of state corporatism -or cooptation- in seemingly progressive politics.

Appendix A
Administrative Map of Bogotá with Localities



Source: Google.com

Localities (Localidades)

1	Usaquen	11	Suba
2	Chapinero	12	Barrios Unidos
3	Santa Fé	13	Teusaquillo
4	San Cristeobal	14	Los Mártires
5	Usme	15	Antonio Nariño
6	Tunjuelito	16	Puente Aranda
7	Bosa	17	La Candelaria
8	Kennedy (Cuidad Kennedy)	18	Rafel Uribe Uribe
9	Fontibon	19	Ciudad Bolivar
10	Engativá	20	Sumapaz

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2008 Cities of the Future? Megacities and the Space/Time of Urban Modernity. *Critical Planning*.

Curriculum Vita

FATIMAH E. WILLIAMS

Education

- 2011 Ph.D. in Anthropology, Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, New Brunswick, NJ.
- 2007 M.A. in Anthropology, Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, New Brunswick, NJ.
- 2002 B.A. in Foreign Affairs, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA.
B.A. in African and African American Studies, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA.

Publications

“Afro-Colombian Struggles over Development, Territory, Nature, and the Right to be Black”, forthcoming. *Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology*. Book review. **Invited**.

“Afro-Colombians and the Cosmopolitan City: New Negotiations of Race and Space in Bogotá, Colombia”, forthcoming. *Latin American Perspectives*, Special Issue: Latin American Urbanization, Inequality, and Social Struggles in the 21st Century.” **Accepted**.

“Creative Violence: How Marginal People Make News in Bolivia,” *Journal of Latin American Anthropology*, November 2006 11(2): 378-405. Co-authored with Daniel M. Goldstein.

Principal Occupations

- | | |
|------------------------|---|
| Fall 2010, Spring 2011 | Teaching Assistant, Introduction to Cultural Anthropology, 070:101 Department of Anthropology, Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey New Brunswick, NJ |
| May - August 2010 | Research consultant, University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey-Robert Wood Johnson Medical School Somerset, NJ
Study: Patterns of Emergency Department Use for Primary Care |

June - July 2010	Research consultant, University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey-Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, Somerset,NJ Study: Cardiovascular Disease Care and Electronic Medical Record Use in Community-Based Primary Care Practices
2009 – 2010	Graduate Assistant, Center for Race and Ethnicity Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey New Brunswick, NJ
January – May 2009	Instructor, Center for Latin American Studies 01:590:367 The Afro-Latin American Experience Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey New Brunswick, NJ
2008 – 2009	Graduate Assistant, Center for Race and Ethnicity Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey New Brunswick, NJ
2005 – 2006	Research Assistant, Daniel M. Goldstein, Ph.D., Department of Anthropology Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey New Brunswick, NJ