

ANCESTRAL LAND, TERRITORIAL DISPLACEMENT AND THE NEW IDENTITY
OF “MUJER NEGRA DESPLAZADA” IN BOGOTÁ, COLOMBIA

BY

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THESIS

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have expressed alarm about Human Right Violations against indigenous, black and *mestizo* communities in Colombia. These communities were rural and were previously forcibly displaced in the city of Ciudad Bolivar. Using ethnography and testimonials collected in Bogotá, this project explores the role of displacement in the lives of a group of black displaced women who experienced it firsthand. I incorporate these women's stories prior to their displacement, focusing specifically on their relationships to their land. I examine the radical break from their land and territory, which resulted in a lost sense of identity. This examination of testimonial narrative and memory of black displaced women points out how their life is being impacted by their displacement and why they feel essentially lost and "community-less" in their new surroundings. This paper answers one question: How forced land and territorial displacement disrupts their ability of living as a community, and what is to be a "mujer negra desplazada" or black displaced woman in their "new" home in the city of Bogotá.

To my parents: Agapita and Esteban Barraza

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Preface

“*Tierra... Libertad... Justicia...*”

(Zapata 1911:1-5)

When I started to write this thesis, I began by reflecting on my own interests in the topic. My curiosity about historical displacement began, not surprisingly, when I first arrived to the United States of America in 1995. I became particularly interested in displacement when my mother, a widow, and my siblings were displaced from our village in Mexico to *el Norte*. My mother was from a peasant family—people known as *campesinos* in Mexico, and up until the age of fifteen, I was also considered part of that *campesino* culture. Along with my siblings and myself, my mother overcame a number of personal and political obstacles in Mexico, which tells a story of much larger contemporary implications. These and other experiences have forever changed the way I think about the study of history, displacement, gender, race and class. There were many struggles and obstacles during this period, several of which had to do with my lack of understanding of the political, economic, and social structures of the new society I had entered.

During my college career, I was particularly taken with the writings of historians, anthropologists and with the short stories of Juan Rulfo. These writings helped me realize that my family and I were not displaced to the U.S. solely because my father had died, but because there were larger structural forces at hand, shaping our lives and decisions. We had been displaced precisely because the government in Mexico had failed to meet the demands of the 1917 Constitution, which promised political, social, and economic justice for those who worked the land. We were a landless *campesino* family

who suffered at the hands of the *latifundistas* and this accounted for our displacement to *el Norte*.

It is these past experiences and my desire to seek answers to these academic questions that motivated me to do research on contemporary displacement in Colombia. I was excited about the possibility of contributing to a historically grounded understanding of displacement and revolution through a lens that appreciates the experiences of *campesinos* in general. The community of Colombian *campesinos* became landless *peasants* after their displacement from their homes in the Pacific Coast of Colombia and this motivated me to research and seek historical and contemporary answers.

Introduction

After World War II, the Colombian government set out to transform the national economy, modeling it after “the Western” economic model in order “to catch up” with the living standards of the “developed” world (Escobar 1995 and Asher 2009). As part of this process of transformation, community land was confiscated, bought, and even stolen. In order to carry out the forcible removal of local populations from land targeted for government reclamation, the government made use of military and paramilitary organizations and frequently resorted to threats, disappearances, and murder as strategies for obtaining community acquiescence without risking the disclosure of their clandestine war with armed groups in the region (Asher 2009). These strategies proved, and continue to prove, remarkably effective and resulted, and continue to result, in the removal of entire communities from their ancestral land.¹ While such strategies lend themselves to facile explanations that make use of dated binaries, such as the triumph of modernity over tradition, it is important that we seek to understand “these dynamics beyond the many binaries—tradition versus modernity, progress versus underdevelopment, exploitation versus resistance, local versus global, theory versus practice, identity versus strategy—that plague and limit thinking about Third World development and social movements” (Asher 2009:1).²

According to some scholars, the government-enforced development of the Pacific coast has brought devastating consequences for the local population. For example,

¹ The land in question, located along the Pacific coast of Colombia, “... is a unique rain-forest region, one of the worlds wettest and most diverse. About 60 percent of the region’s 900,000 inhabitants (800,000 Afro-Colombians; about 50,000 Embera, Waunana, and other indigenous people; and another 50,000 mestizo colonists” [These lands] “are defined by the local black and indigenous movement as a region-territory of ethnic groups...[based] on cultural differences and the rights to identity and territory” (Grueso, Rosero, and Escobar 1998:198-197).

² According to Asher (2009), President Alvaro Uribe has made use of U.S. money to fight the “the war on drugs.” This “war,” however, has morphed into another “war on terror,” which has “done little to achieve the goals of ‘peace and security’ or ‘seguridad democrática’ as Uribe calls it” (Asher 2009:157).

Arturo Escobar (1995) has characterized “the Western” economic model of development as a “nightmare” for the Third World and has suggested that it has brought little more than destruction, especially to the rural people of the Pacific coast. As he so eloquently put it,

“[f]or instead of the kingdom of abundance promised by theorists and politicians in the 1950s, the discourse and strategy of development produced its opposite: massive underdevelopment and impoverishment, untold exploitation and oppression. The debt crisis, the Sahelian famine, increasing poverty, malnutrition, and violence are only the most pathetic signs of the failure of forty years of development” (Escobar 1995:4).

Here Escobar critiques the idea of “developing” the Third World and provides a sense of how destructive the entire development process has been, not only for those living in the Pacific coast region of Colombia, but for millions of others, as well (see also Escobar 1997 and 2003; Restrepo 1996; and Martinez-Alier 1995).

In addition to examining governmental strategies through the lens of “development,” scholars of Colombia have increasingly focused on questions of cultural identity (Wade 1993 and 1999); black culture (Whitten 1997); the construction of Afro-Colombian identity and ethnicity in the Pacific lowlands (Asher 1997; Oslender 1999); black women (Camacho 1996); black women and “development” (Lozano 1996); “development” in black communities (Restrepo 1996); and social movements of black women (Rojas 1996). Other scholars, as well as several non-governmental organizations, have focused on collecting testimonies from displaced people as a means of gaining more insight into their experiences (Haymes 2007; ACNUR 2007; and AFRODES 2008). These efforts are very much a part of the broader context of a growing interest in black communities in Colombia, although their focus has been on the experience of “development” rather than on race, as such.

Displacement in the 1990s

The term “displacement” came into widespread usage as recently as the 1990s. Similarly, residents of the Pacific coast of Colombia have also used “displacement,” in reference to the removal of their ancestors from their land in the 1940s, at least since the 1990s, as demonstrated in the narrative testimonies collected by Stephen N. Haymes (2007). While the population of displaced people in Colombia has skyrocketed since the implementation of governmental removal policies, there has not been an accompanying increase in ethnographic investigations of the experience of displacement. Displacement, for instance, is the main factor in the impoverishment of displaced people. In *Understanding Impoverishment: the Consequences of Development-Induced Displacement*, Christopher McDowell explains the mechanisms by which displacement causes poverty (1996). Specifically, he argues that “impoverishment caused by displacement occurs via induced landlessness, joblessness, homelessness, marginalization, increased morbidity, food insecurity, loss of access to common property, and social disarticulation” (McDowell 1996:13).

Given the continuing growth of displaced populations, two necessities are clear: first, the need to promote an understanding of Internally Displaced Populations (IDP), and second, the need to spread awareness of the effects of globalization that the so-called “Western” economic model has brought to these communities. Narrative testimonies reveal that many displaced people do not have the tools necessary to survive in their new “home,” much less know the resources that are available to them. As Walter Fernandes and Enakshi Ganguly Thukral state, “[o]ne important indicator of the continuing powerlessness of the weaker sections [of the population] is their displacement without any participation or share in the benefits of the development project that displaces them”

(1989:3). In an attempt to fill the first necessity listed above, the Asociación Nacional de Afro-Colombianos Desplazados (AFRODES) provides resources for displaced black people, and especially for women.³ The objective of this association is to educate displaced black people about their rights—rights they were awarded after the Colombian Constitution of 1991, which “granted specific rights and recognized blacks as a distinct group within the nation” (Asher 2009:32). Colombia has the second largest black population in Latin America, after Brazil, and the Pacific coast has the largest black presence in Colombia (Asher 2009). However, it was only after the ratification of the Colombian Constitution of 1991 that black communities gained “collective rights to the territories...they [had] traditionally occupied” (Grueso, Rosero, and Escobar 1998:196). In addition to legalizing their claims to their land, the Constitution also introduced multi-ethnic and plural-cultural ideas to black communities (Asher 2009:27).

In the context of Colombia, where both racism and sexism have operated for centuries, the identity of “mujer negra desplazada” has been foisted upon the women I discuss here as a result of their relocation and it carries with it substantial negative repercussions—both in their new neighborhoods and in the city of Bogotá more

³ The following comprises the AFRODES (Asociación Nacional de Afro-Colombianos Desplazados) mission statement: “AFRODES constitutes itself as an organization that offers orientation, support, follow-up, and consultancy. We work to raise awareness and speak in defense of the displaced Afro-Colombian population’s rights and cultural identity. We seek out alternatives to make our affiliates’ lives more dignified, we sensitize Colombian society at large to the realities of the Black population’s situation of displacement, and propose policies for the better management and solution of this problem to the Colombian state. AFRODES seeks to be a model organization for the strengthening of the Afro-Colombian social movement. One that will lead processes that will unite our population, strengthen our cultural identity, and protect and defend the Black communities’ ethnic rights by seeking out solutions to the problems that plague them and by promoting an integral development in them. AFRODES fights for a democratic and peaceful relationship amongst the broader Colombian society, working so that there are equal conditions and opportunities for all within it, and contributing to the construction of a pluriethnic and multicultural society. AFRODES offers and receives support to and from the Afro-descendent social movements that fight for the rights of Black communities across the globe. It is by sharing and learning from others’ positive experiences that we forge global networks and alliances for the vindication of Afro-descendents’ rights. AFRODES values and has faith in the search for negotiated solutions to the problems that affect the displaced population. We also demand that the State comply with the agreements and obligations that it has with our country’s uprooted population” (AFRODES. *Mission*. 13 April 2010, afrodes.org).

generally. Although it is beyond the scope of the current project to detail the history of racism in Colombia, it is worth noting that in Colombia, as in the Americas in general, the legacy of slavery is alive and well. Peter Wade, for example, explains that in Colombia, “racial categories...exist...because the bourgeoisie...created them in order to (a) better dominate a particular fraction of the work force, who are categorized as naturally inferior and good only for manual work and (b) divide the workers into antagonistic racial categories and thus rule them more effectively” (Wade 1997:22).

Wade (1993 and 1997) uses theoretical tools to oppose racism in Colombia and is one of the key scholars to have researched the black population of Colombia. Grounded within Marxist, Foucauldian, and Freudian thinking, Wade’s work highlights the problems of the color-line and blacks’ struggles for recognition in Colombia. He establishes his argument, “[r]ace and ethnicity are not terms that refer in some neutral way to a transparent reality of which social science gives us an ever more accurate picture; instead they are terms embedded in academic, popular and political discourses that are themselves a constitutive part of academic, popular and political relationships and practices” (Wade 1997:5). He based his research on ethnography, writing and teaching on the racial identity and discrimination in the department of Chocó. Wade’s theoretical contributions have motivated scholars to research, observe, analyze, interpret, and write about the history of blacks of Colombia. While different scholars have focused on different aspects of the lives of blacks in Latin America, they have generally tended, like Wade, to attempt to highlight the complexities of black communities (Tannenbaum 1946; Freyre 1986; Skidmore 1993; and Schwartz 1996).

It is worth noting that the identity conveyed by the terms “mujer negra desplazada” is not inherently negative. As Asher (2009) suggests, we need to

“conceptualize local communities beyond ‘victims of development’ or defenders of tradition” (8). In Bogotá, for example, this community of black displaced women must now contend with a “new” identity, namely that of “mujer negra desplazada.” They must attempt to mold and change it into something positive and meaningful, even while enduring the triple burdens of sexism, racism, and displacement in the city of Bogotá. Their new identity involves not only key issues of their new selves, but also those of land, territory, and autonomy. Throughout their interactions and experiences with their “new home,” these women have reinterpreted their identities and, once again, they seem to fit neatly into “Western” categories of gender, race, and class.

The negotiation of their “new” identities demonstrates these women’s agency. Part of this process of cultivating “new” identities in Bogotá entails the realization that, because they are black, they are at a disadvantage compared with other women who are also displaced, but who are not black. This awareness has caused them incredible pain, no doubt the result of racial discrimination, which the community of black displaced women experiences and discusses with frequency. Although I focus more narrowly on the experiences of displacement and racism in this project, I have collected, transcribed, and translated narrative testimonies related to community displacement generally, both in Bogotá and in the Pacific coast of Colombia. In examining narrative testimonies, I have analyzed how black, *campesino* or peasant women remember their lives before their displacement.

The testimonies of the community of Ciudad Bolívar, which is a city within the city of Bogotá, reveal that the concept of “race” for the “mujer negra desplazada” is particularly problematic in Colombia. The women make clear that once they were displaced to the city, they became “mujeres negras y desplazadas”—an ascribed identity

that they had not previously experienced and one whose negative evaluation they experience in ways both subtle and obvious. Though opinions differ, there is a great deal of evidence that suggests that this group of displaced women does experience racism, and that focusing on displacement alone does not account for all of the discrimination they face. In *Blackness and Race Mixture: The Dynamics of Racial Identity in Columbia* Peter Wade (1993) argues that “race” and “ethnicity” are “Western” institutionalized terms; further, he demonstrates that colonial societies acquired a hierarchical racial schema from their European colonizers that places “whiteness” at the top and associates “blackness” with awkwardness and sub-humanity. Despite having a long and extremely problematic legacy with which to contend, the “mujeres negras desplazadas” I describe in this thesis are not without hope. At the very least, by sharing these testimonies, they have given a voice to their experiences and, as I suggest in Chapter 3, they have begun the process of organizing themselves in the city of Bogotá, while embracing this “new” identity of “mujeres negras desplazadas.”

Marurico Solaún and Sidney Kronus (1973) use a class-race analysis in Cartagena in order to understand the complicated dynamics of race in Colombia. According to their analysis, racism exists for all those at the bottom of the class pyramid, which suggests that poor blacks are primarily discriminated against because they are poor. This approach supports the idea that “money whitens” in Colombia. Indeed, these anthropologists argue that “*Cartageneros* are aware of the infused racial system in which they live, with discrimination centered against Blacks, but with the existence of very high levels of miscegenation and the full integration of miscegenated individuals at all levels of the social class structure” (Solaún and Kronus 1973:218). My testimonies, however, demonstrate that this argument is not fully satisfactory and reveal that a “mujer negra

desplazada” is at more of a disadvantage than a *mestiza desplazada* even when both belong to the lower portion of the class pyramid.

In this thesis, I use both ethnography and testimonials collected in Ciudad Bolivar to explore the role of displacement in the lives of a group of women who experienced it firsthand. More specifically, I examine the role of displacement in the structuring of a group of black women’s experiences of racism in the context of Ciudad Bolivar. I argue that black women from the Pacific coast of Colombia no longer consider themselves to be part of a community, precisely because they were removed from their ancestral land and territory. We should take into consideration that other case studies have suggested that community life is not necessarily destroyed when displacement occurs, and have claimed that values are re-structured in displaced communities around the priorities of the dominant society (McDowell 1996). However, my study in Ciudad Bolivar reveals that these women’s lives were destroyed because they were removed from their ancestral land. In Ciudad Bolivar, for example, these women no longer cultivate the land, which was a central feature of community life before displacement. The result is that these women feel essentially lost and “community-less” in their new surroundings. To put it simply, the experience of displacement disrupted these women’s daily lives in profound ways, and it also caused a radical breakdown in their community life, which resulted in a lost sense of identity.

In order to examine the loss of identity and community caused by displacement, it is necessary to establish that these women did, in fact, have a community identity based on their connections to the land prior to their displacement. As such, I also incorporate the women’s stories of their lives prior to their displacement, focusing specifically on their relationships to the land. As will become apparent, their loss of community identity

in Bogotá hinges largely on their inability to perform the harvest rituals and traditions that had helped to create and sustain a sense of community in the Pacific coast, a point also echoed by Gueso, Rosero and Escobar (1998). Ultimately, I explore the significance of the new identity of “mujer negra desplazada” in this context.

Chapter 1

Methodology/The Setting

When I think of Ciudad Bolivar (see figure 1.1 and 1.2), certain ideas, phrases, and facts come to mind, which, when taken together, provide a rough image of my understanding of community life. These include the following: 10-20° Celsius; rainy season; lack of food, lack of education, and unemployment; contradictions, sadness, depression, and confusion; insecurity, pain, silence, the law of silence, and rejection; poverty, unpaved streets, and broken walls; children, godparents, single mothers; displacement, *guerillas*, paramilitaries, *incertados* and militaries; plantains, yucca, bananas, corn, *arepas*, rice, and *agua ardiente*, *Vallenato*; racism, violence, terror, threats, disappearances, murder, and suicide; fraternity and sensibility; history, strength, truth, and memory. While this by no means provides a complete portrait of Ciudad Bolivar and its residents, it does give a sense of the complicated tangle of daily life in a community of displaced persons. That terror and violence coexist alongside strength and fraternity, for instance, is not a contradiction; rather, the common experience of violent displacement (see figure 1.3 and 1.4) shared by community residents has led to a sense of fraternity, however fleeting or incomplete it may prove to be.

Figures 1 – 4: The *barrios* of Ciudad Bolivar



Figure 1.1: Ciudad Bolivar, seen from across *barrio* Caracolí. Photo by the author.



Figure 1.2: Women walking uphill in Ciudad Bolivar. Photo by the author.



Figure: 1.3: Temporary “homes” for the displaced families at the Parque Tercer Milenio. Photo by the author.



Figure 1.4: A temporary “home” for a displaced family at the Parque Tercer Milenio. Photo by the author.

My ethnography centers on the displacement of black communities in the Pacific coast of Colombia to their new “homes” in Ciudad Bolivar, which is located in the southwestern part of the city of Bogotá. Before beginning my analysis of the experience of displacement, it is important to understand something about the physical location in which I conducted my research. I chose Ciudad Bolivar because it is currently home to large numbers of displaced people from the Pacific region of Colombia. In addition to displaced people from this area, a considerable number of *incertados*, or resistance soldiers who have decided to live in society again, resides there as well. Ciudad Bolivar’s isolated, hilltop location—at a substantial remove from the city center—made it cheap enough for displaced people to live there. Most homes in Ciudad Bolivar are auto-constructed using cinderblocks by the families who reside in them, although some homes are available for rent. Although homes in Ciudad Bolivar are modest and built by the residents themselves, they generally have electricity, running water and gas. Most of the displaced people from the Pacific coast arrived in Ciudad Bolivar during the 1990s. Because of Bogotá’s size, its role as the nation’s capital, and the availability of facilities and services unavailable elsewhere, it has emerged as a key destination for internally displaced people in Colombia.

Once I arrived in Bogotá in July of 2009, Bogotáns, or residents of the capital, warned me that Ciudad Bolivar was the city where delinquents, *guerrilleros*, and paramilitaries lived. Some people’s fear of Ciudad Bolivar was such that they recommended I avoid the community altogether, and it was not uncommon for taxi drivers to refuse to drive me all the way up. I was repeatedly warned that it was especially dangerous for me, as a woman, to walk the unpaved streets of Ciudad Bolivar,

along with the people, cars and domestic animals that populate the neighborhood. Police intervention in Ciudad Bolívar is rare, but when the police do intervene, they enter the community heavily armed and intimidate residents.

In Ciudad Bolívar, some people survive by selling fried fish and fried plantains—typical food from the Pacific coast. They sell this food in small, square, wooden booths. Others, especially women, commute for 2 hours to Bogotá and work as maids, where they experience discrimination for three primary reasons: they are women, they are black, and they are displaced. The radical shift in these women's lives after displacement should not be underestimated. In fact, in this thesis, it is important to note that I am focusing only on black women's experiences of displacement and that these women's experiences may not be generalizable to all displaced people in Colombia (or elsewhere for that matter). Although the women I interviewed for this project are singular individuals and their experiences are unique, their stories point to the importance of examining displacement not simply from the point of view of human rights or exclusively in the context of forced relocations; rather, these women's voices reveal that the experience of displacement may destroy a longstanding sense of community and replace it with an imposed identity, with quite pernicious effects.

When I arrived in Bogotá, I already had a plan, but once I stepped foot in Bogotá, my contacts never answered my calls or my emails, and as a result, I had no place to stay. Luckily, I had made friends in Bogotá while in Colombia the previous year, and I was able to contact one of them. This friend generously introduced me to a Colombian family, who, over the course of my time in Bogotá became like my own family. They graciously invited me to live with them in their middle-class apartment, where security

guards provided 24-hour surveillance. I accepted their offer, well aware that the safety of this fortified building contrasted sharply with that of my friends and confidants in Ciudad Bolivar, where residents not only lived without private security, but also routinely went without police assistance.

Once I had settled into their home in the city of Bogotá, I contacted a Mexican friend—who is currently doing research on “Afro-descendant⁴” women in Colombia. She then put me in contact with AFRODES, which proved to be crucial in conducting my research. The legal representatives and members of AFRODES supported my project and welcomed me to their association. I got to know several members of this association who were all displaced from the Pacific coast. Their history in Bogotá began once they entered the city and found themselves alone and seemingly helpless; it was then that they decided to organize themselves to attempt to better their situation and the situation of other similarly displaced people. In addition to sharing their amazing testimonies of survival, they also helped my project by showing me around both Bogotá and Ciudad Bolivar. They introduced me to cheap restaurants where I could find good food; they even taught me to speak Colombian Spanish, so that I would not be seen as a foreigner and perhaps get robbed in downtown Bogotá by taxi drivers or retailers. At the request of AFRODES, I became very active in their center. I helped archive multiple cases of “mujer negra desplazada” and their families as AFRODES was in the process of archiving countless cases to be used in court at a later time.

In addition to participant observation research with members of AFRODES in March 2008, I also observed and participated in community meetings and in meetings

⁴ The use of “Afro-descendant” to describe black women in Colombia is highly problematic for a number of reasons, but it is used by those who wish to highlight the assumed geographical origins of the ancestors of black women.

with other non-governmental organizations in Bogotá. AFRODES meetings were especially useful for my project, as they were packed with men, women, and some children, all of who identified as *negros/negras* (the masculine and feminine Spanish words for “black”). During their meetings, I listened to what they said and I recorded the meetings when given permission. I took endless notes on what I observed, and I paid particular attention to the people who attended meetings. I usually sat in front, so I could listen clearly. Self-identified black women sometimes asked me questions such as, “*Cómo se siente estar en medio de la negrada?*”⁵

My research relied on informal participant observation, as well as on formal interviews. Further, I conducted research at the Biblioteca Luis Ángel Arango. The *alcaldía* of Ciudad Bolívar also provided me with crucial assistance in the form of maps and data on the black population of this city. In Ciudad Bolívar, I collected a total of approximately 550 minutes of videotaped interviews. Twelve women narrated stories of their lives prior to their displacement in the Pacific coast, their experiences of displacement, and their resulting shifts in identity. In conducting this fieldwork, I realized the significance of analyzing these women’s testimonies, writing about them, and interpreting them because their voices reflect their experiences of displacement. They provided critical insight that cannot be gleaned from statistics or generalized accounts of displacement. Of special importance for the current project, these collected narratives reveal the imposition of an identity of “*mujer, negra y desplazada*” and recount the racism experienced as a result of this identity. Although all of the testimonies I collected differ, they are all equally heartbreaking because they reveal the various forms of violence involved in displacement. While some testimonies were full of *humor negro* or

⁵ “How do you feel being in the middle of black[s]?” (author’s translation).

black humor, others were impersonal; some testimonies primarily discussed the women's experiences during the displacement process, while many others focused on their survival once in Bogotá.

The current project is part of a larger project on human rights violations against indigenous and black communities in the Pacific coast Colombia that I began as an undergraduate. During college, I had the opportunity to develop my project as my thesis research in September of 2007. In March 2008, also as an undergraduate, I visited indigenous and black communities in the Colombian department of Chocó, where I helped interview community members of displaced river communities, in the company of La Comisión Ética de Colombia (The Ethics Commission of Colombia). The sample comprised of women, men, and children over 18 years of age, who had experienced displacement. As in the case of the current project, I videotaped the interviews; the video recordings range in length from 60 to 90 minutes. There I was able to observe how these communities lived in the rural areas; because of this earlier research, I have been able to compare the lives of those still in Chocó to the lives of those displaced in urban areas—such as Ciudad Bolívar. I spent several days with the communities that were being displaced and dispersed within Chocó. I was embraced with warmth and treated with great hospitality by the members of the community.

The differences between the urban and rural communities are astounding. In the community of *Pueblo Nuevo*, for example, people used to harvest bananas, rice, coffee, and beans. They now produce the food necessary for their families. The ethics commission and I usually ate three meals a day. In the morning, we drank *tinto* with a piece of homemade bread. Around 1 pm, while we seldom ate fish, we usually ate beans

or brown rice; later, around 7 pm, we ate beans with potatoes or brown rice and water. They were healthy meals, but I was often hungry, which I managed by eating granola bars that I had brought from the United States. When I was visiting these communities, I slept only 4 to 5 hours—not because I could not sleep on the wooden floors without a pillow, but because I thought about the danger that these communities confront every day, since they are in the middle of the conflict zone between the FARC and paramilitary groups and the military.

When we left, some of the community members helped us with our baggage and walked with us for about five to six hours. We crossed large sections of rain forest that had been cleared as a cause of multinationals coming to specifically plant African palm. As we walked, I did not see any military personnel; however, we were stopped and asked several questions by camouflaged Colombian military soldiers. At that moment, I was scared not for myself, but for the community members who trusted us and gave us their personal testimonies. Several videocassettes in my possession revealed the faces of community members who denounced human rights violations committed against them by militaries and paramilitaries. It was there that I saw the tremendous power of the armed forces in this isolated region. Similarly, the interviews I collected in Ciudad Bolívar during the summer of 2009 focus on the experiences of displacement; this time, however, my emphasis is on the impact that displacement has on black women in the city of Bogotá.

Ciudad Bolivar

My first meeting to collect narrative testimonies was on the second Sunday after my arrival in Ciudad Bolivar. Esperanza—a member of the community—took me to Ciudad Bolivar for the first time. We met in downtown Bogotá to take a bus that would take us straight to our destination, *El Barrio Oasis* inside Ciudad Bolivar. The exciting two-hour bus ride became exhausting because it was over-packed with people who usually travel within and outside Ciudad Bolivar.

My first encounter with these women was full of joy. Esperanza, her fourteen-year-old son, her sister, and I walked together through the *barrio*, and people greeted us when she introduced me as a Mexican researcher studying the “*mujer negra desplazada*” in Colombia. She also noted that I was studying at an institution in the United States. As I was walking the unpaved streets of the *barrio*, I listened to loud *Vallenato* music on one side of the street and *Salsa* on the other side. Women and men, together with their children, danced and moved their bodies to the rhythm they liked best. It was like a war between *Vallenato* and *Salsa*. After approximately three hours of sharing the experience with these women and observing how they taught their children to dance, a woman offered me a shot of *Agua Ardiente Antioqueño*, a typical alcoholic beverage in Colombia. I drank it as the women watched me attentively and they laughed as I said, “*Está super fuerte, así como el tequila de mi tierra.*”⁶ After that, I said “goodbye” and arranged the first meeting with three women to give their testimonies about their experiences before, during, and after displacement.

The next meeting was on a Sunday and, as a trained researcher, I was there fifteen

⁶ It is super strong like the tequila of my homeland (author’s fieldnotes 2009).

minutes ahead of time. I left my secure apartment building in Bogotá and headed to Ciudad Bolívar. This time I took a taxi that brought me straight to the *barrio*. However, the three women who were supposed to narrate their testimony for me were not there; as such, my initial excitement about conducting my first interviews dissipated. However, there was another woman there, named Angelica, who agreed to narrate her testimony for me and she invited me to her home. In the beginning, she seemed willing to narrate her testimony, but as soon as I began to ask her specific questions about what she remembered from the day she was displaced, about what had happened to her first husband, and about the feelings she felt living in Ciudad Bolívar, Angelica refused to answer. She asked if it was really necessary for her to answer my questions, I said, “No.” After about seven minutes of the interview, she cut me short by saying, “[t]hat was all I had to say.”⁷ I stopped the interview, thanked her, and left her home.

After I finished interviewing Angelica, I walked the unpaved streets to catch a bus back to the city of Bogotá. On my way home, I thought about how I could interpret Angelica’s silence and other women’s laugh. Was I supposed to interpret their silence and their laugh as a tool to empower themselves? In studying poor black women in a *favela* in Brazil, the anthropologist Donna M. Goldstein employed laughter as a category of analysis and argues, “[w]hile the humor of the poor may not necessarily lead directly to rebellions and political revolutions, it does open up a discursive space within which it becomes possible to speak about matters that are otherwise naturalized, unquestioned, or silenced” (2003:10). If I were to interpret it this way, then laugh unites these women by allowing them to question and cope with their daily lives. Laugh as well as silence are a tool that provides these women a mean of resisting race and class oppression.

⁷ “Eso era todo lo que tenía que decir” (author’s interview 2009).

Other thoughts came into my mind. For example, how did this community of black women view me? With the black women from Ciudad Bolivar, I began to experience the racism they were talking about through their experiences. For example, one day, I shared the bus with them and I observed how urban *mestizos* did not share their seats with my fellow informants, all of whom were black women, some of them with children; instead, they refused to sit beside them, even if there was an empty seat. My informants confirmed my observations and told me that, in fact, *mestizos* would not sit by their side because they believe that blacks steal from *mestizos*. They also said that when blacks board a bus or enter a place that is predominately full of urban *mestizos*, the *mestizos* say things like, “*ya se oscureció*” (author’s fieldnotes 2009).⁸

During my stay, I shared a variety of things with these women. I walked with them and shared meals with them. I also shared food with their children and one time I even bought a *buñuelo* for two of the children, when I was eating one myself. I stopped interviews when my informants’ children cried or needed to be fed. I also shared tissues when these women fell apart as they narrated their heart-breaking stories in front of my camera. I became friends with some of the women—especially with those who work in AFRODES, and occasionally I bought lunch for them, usually when we all went out together.

Overall, I was able to gain the trust of the women of Ciudad Bolivar and I collected videotaped interviews about their experiences of displacement and their lives in the city. In the rest of this thesis, I share and analyze these women’s words and pay particular attention not only to their experiences of displacement itself, but also to the shift in identity caused by the forcible removal of these women from their communities.

⁸ “It just got darker in here” (author’s translation).

As I demonstrate, the pain of displacement does not end once the women have been relocated and settled in new communities. Rather, once in the city, these women find themselves with an imposed identity as “mujeres negras desplazadas,” which carries with it a host of negatively valued stereotypes that cause new kinds of suffering, as I discuss in the following chapters.

Chapter 2

Land-Based Rituals and Identity Formation before Displacement

Violence against women is stripping them of the right to their territory; it's forcing women to leave their territory, threatening us, our culture, our family, intervening in our way of life, subjecting us to rhythms different from those of our culture. It is the discrimination to which we have been subjected since earlier times, and also the racial discrimination to which society subjects us; it is to mistreat us for being displaced and for being black. It is physical abuse, psychological [abuse] at home, by armed groups and society. Violence against women is that they force us to lose our loved ones because of the violence (author's translation).⁹

While displacement has occurred in a variety of places for a variety of reasons, I focus more specifically here on the experiences of black women who were displaced from the Pacific coast to the city of Bogotá. Some of the key questions to be answered in discussing this group of women include “who are ‘black’ women?” and “what is the role of gender in this analysis?” In focusing on these women, I attempt to add new voices to our understanding of the process of displacement; further, I highlight the importance of incorporating individual experiences of displacement into our overall understanding of the phenomenon—rather than relying primarily, or even exclusively, on statistics to tell the “story” of displacement, which has all too frequently been the case.

By drawing on previously published research and on my informants' stories, I provide a portrait of what life was like for these women before they were displaced. More significantly, I demonstrate that their identities were created and maintained

⁹ “La violencia contra la mujer es quitarle el derecho a su territorio; es obligar a las mujeres a salir de su territorio, atentar contra nosotras, nuestra cultura, nuestra familia, incidir en nuestra forma de vida, someternos a ritmos distintos a los de nuestra cultura. Es la discriminación a la cual hemos sido sometidas desde otros tiempos, también la discriminación racial a la cual nos somete la sociedad; es maltratarnos por ser desplazadas y por ser negras. Es el maltrato físico, psicológico en el hogar, por los grupos armados y la sociedad. La violencia contra la mujer es que nos obliguen a perder a los seres queridos a causa de la violencia” (AFRODES 2008:17).

through the practice of a set of land-and-territory-based community rituals—rituals that give life and sense of being to the community. Norman E. Whitten defines ritual as follows: “[i]n time, it becomes increasingly apparent that patterned behavior in a given context remains essentially the same, in contrast to patterned behavior in other contexts. Such patterned, stylized behavior is called *ritual*. The test of ritual behavior may be either ‘secular’ or ‘sacred’” (Whitten 1974:97). Given that these communities no longer, post-displacement, have any means of continuing to practice such rituals, the significance of this loss is difficult to estimate. It is important to remember that although I am focusing only on black women in this thesis, the ways in which they discuss the experience of displacement points to an important, and under-examined, facet of displacement studies. Their voices reveal that displacement may destroy both communities and identities and suggests that, at least in some cases, the deterritorialization of identities, as treated by James Ferguson and Akhil Gupta (2002), may be impossible. In the next chapter, I turn to a detailed account of the mechanisms through which black women from the Pacific coast became “black” in the context of Bogotá.

To make my case, it is necessary, first, to provide a better understanding of the significance of land itself. For example, in the book *Indigenous Traditions and Ecology* edited by John A. Grim, he focuses on the values of homelands of indigenous peoples in general. Pradip Prabhu argues (2001):

Land and territory are the substantial expression of nature, is a central pivot of tribal life. Traditionally, individual rights to land-based resources were embedded in communal systems of access and resource management. Since the concept of private property did not exist, life remained corporate and cooperative. Land circumscribed the individual and the community. Existence was seen as an extension of collective consciousness, incorporating social (belonging to a

community) cultural (link to traditions, ethos and way of life, and political (basis for the power of the elders) significance. Land loss causes alienation, because the individual, or community, is prevented from articulating his consciousness and is progressively pushed into anomie (2001:64).

Prabhu defines land with indigenous peoples in mind, but her discussion is relevant for non-tribal societies, as well. In fact, as the words of one of my informants make clear, they, too, regard their land as sacred:

Land and territory is the connection that we have to Mother Earth. [That is] the value the land has for us...then in the cities we try like Afro-[Colombians] [and] we form territories. It is our patrimony; we must love it... Land is the surface of all that she [Mother Nature] offers – nature, the trees, the air, the oceans, [and] the animals. And the territory is this land, and the people who make up part of this land—and the culture [and] the customs. [This] is what forms these territories. It's difficult to form a territory with a single person; well, territory cannot be formed [with one person] (author's translation).¹⁰

From this testimony, it is clear that their way of life and sense of community is destroyed by displacement.

It is also worth noting that in this testimonial, as in many others, the speaker makes a distinction between “land” and “territory.” This distinction is an important one. Just as “land” is essential for the formation and maintenance of the ways of living for the indigenous community, so, too, is “territory.” Territory, in this case, is not used in an ecological sense—that is, as a place to be protected by a group or species for the purposes of resource maintenance but, rather, as a bounded area historically associated with a self-defined community.¹¹ For example, Antonio, a man from Chocó discussed territory as follows:

¹⁰ “Tierra y territorio es la afinidad que tenemos a la madre tierra. [Eso es] el valor que tiene la tierra para nosotros... Entonces en las ciudades tratamos nosotros como afros [y] formamos territorios. Es patrimonio nuestro, hay que quererlo... La tierra es la superficie con todo lo que ella tiene—la naturaleza, los árboles, el aire, los mares, [y] animales. Y el territorio es esta tierra más las personas que hacen parte de esta tierra—más la cultura, [y] las costumbres. [Esto] es lo que forman estos territorios. Es difícil formar territorio con una sola persona; bueno no se puede conformar territorio” (author's interview 2009).

¹¹ See *Sacred Ecology* by Fikrer Berkes (2008) for an in-depth discussion on ecological and non-ecological definitions.

Ah, good then, let's say that, well, our grandparents always...our customs have always been, well...what has been is to care for our territory, yes? This is the form which, well, one can subsist and one has always cared [for the territory] because, let's say, the family keeps growing and then it grows, well, like, well, one [is] old [and] suddenly is dying, [and] goes to the other side, but here the lands stay for our children. Then, in contrast, not [so with] the *mestizos*. The custom of the *mestizos* is always to better [the land], but then to sell [it]. That is, it's like commerce and, in contrast, one mentions, let's say, us as blacks. This is not the custom; it is to stay and care [for the land]. Uh, for this it's the method, it's the means for us to survive—and our family. And then we...the custom of before was always that when harvest time comes, then we did a *minga*; we got all of the people together—a multitude of people and then the fields were watered, and then the corn was sewn for the harvest...and, then, now, well, [we] have been losing the custom since the displacement (author's translation).¹²

Whitten summarizes the relationships of the people in the Pacific coast, as follows:

“[r]elationships between people in the rural settlement are symmetrical, as in the rural dispersed dwelling niche, and they are also asymmetrical. In the latter type of reciprocity, partners owe one another different sorts of things” (Whitten 1974:87). Land and territory therefore are not simply places where crops are planted. They are also places where identity-creating practices, rituals, and experiences are rooted. Land and territory can be seen as a rural settlement where the culture of the black people is practiced with the natural resources provided to them by the Pacific coast. When displacement occurs, these practices and rituals can no longer be practiced because they are so essentially bound to the community's former land. Therefore, when armed groups

¹² “Ah bueno entonces, digamos que, pues, nuestros abuelos siempre... nuestras costumbres siempre han sido, pues... lo que ha sido es de cuidar nuestro territorio, sí? Es la forma lo cual, pues, puede uno subsistir y siempre se ha cuidado porque, digamos, la familia va creciendo, y entonces va creciendo, pues, uno como, pues, de viejo de pronto va muriendo, se va pa' otro la'o pero aquí las tierras van quedando para nuestros hijos. Entonces, en cambio lo mestizos no. Los mestizos siempre la costumbre de ellos es mejorar, pero luego vender. O sea es como para comercio, y en cambio lo que se menciona, digamos, nosotros como negros; esta no es la costumbre; es permanecer y cuidar. Eh, por eso como es el modo, como es el medio, de nosotros sobrevivir y – y ya nuestra familia. Y entonces nosotros...siempre la costumbre de antes era que cuando se da el tiempo de cosecha, entonces se hacia una minga; se reunía toda la gente, una multitud de gente así, y luego se rozaba el monte, y luego para sembrar el maíz para ser la cosecha... y, entonces, ahora, pues, se ha venido como perdiendo la costumbre después del desplazamiento” (Haymes 2007:36).

remove these people from their land, their traditions and the identities constituted in them are completely destroyed, as my testimonies reveal.

Once displacement occurs, my informants' testimonies reveal that nothing is ever "normal" again. For example, the tradition of sharing the harvest among community members can no longer be practiced, not only because the land and territory itself are no longer available, but also because communities are completely dispersed over the metropolitan area. This is made clear by Rocío, a woman displaced from Nariño in 2000; she discusses how her life was fundamentally altered due to her displacement to Ciudad Bolívar:

Rocío: There [in Tumaco] one has our ranch, [and] our food. In the hills one grows our bananas; the land is hot [and] I miss my culture. Our houses are wooden; they are two-stories, very pretty and we didn't need money there. There were some 300 people, including children [in the community]. [In the city] the customs are not the same. For example, there the customs are the food, the chicken, the fish, and here one eats grain, only grain. Then come the special dates, "the arrullos." [People] get together in one house and sing traditional songs, but here it can't be done. One misses all of that.

NB: Why aren't the same customs [here in the city]?

Rocio: Because here we are dispersed. I'm from Tumaco, and here there are almost no Tumaqueños; there are more Chocoanos. So the songs are sung differently. We are not united in the city; one is separated. Each one leaves for different neighborhoods (author's translation).¹³

Rocío's testimony here compares her rural and urban lives and emphasizes that she is now, in the city, incapable of participating in the kinds of practices through which her

¹³ Rocío: "Uno allá tiene su rancho, [y] su comida. Al monte uno agarra su plátano; la tierra es caliente, la cultura de uno me hace falta.... Nuestras casas son de madera; son de 2 pisos, muy bonitas y ahí no necesitábamos dinero. Éramos unas 300 personas incluyendo niños. Las costumbres no son las mismas. Por ejemplo, allá las costumbres son la comida, la gallina, el pescado, y aquí come uno grano, sólo grano. Ya vienen las fechas especiales, 'los arrullos.' Uno se reúne en una casa y uno canta cantos tradicionales, pero aquí no se pueden hacer. Todo eso le hace a uno falta."

NB: "¿Por qué no son las mismas costumbres?"

Rocio: "Porque aquí estamos desparciados. Yo soy de Tumaco, y aquí no hay tumaqueños casi; hay más chocoanos. Entonces los cantos son cantados diferentes. No somos unidos en la ciudad; uno se desparta. Cada uno se va a diferentes barrios" (author's interview 2009).

community was defined. As Norman E. Whitten states, “[r]itual life in the Pacific Lowlands is dominated by contexts of musical expression ranging from quite African-sounding music... [where] women have direct access to the doors of heaven and use such access to their advantage, while at the time assuring ascent into *el cielo* to children who die before reaching a degree of independence” (Whitten 1974:13 and 124). Women have total power over their traditional songs and this *arrullo* speaks of a much greater “matricentric cell” community where women “dominate everything, summoning saints into the home from heaven, and leading them during a street parade called Belén through their community visiting routes” (Whitten 1974:137). The *currulao* and the marimba, as Whitten (1974) tells us, are central forms of power for the women in that community. He argues that “[d]rummers ‘obey’ women and ‘follow’ their leads; men serve *aguardiente* and coffee as women tell them to do so” (1974:133). The Afro-Hispanic culture as he calls it—the culture of the black people in the wet Pacific littoral of Colombia—is nurtured based on the rituals practiced in the community¹⁴.

Ultimately, Whitten summarizes the importance of women in these rural communities as follows:

Female interaction initiative provides stability through household permanence, and through maneuvers between households in a residential community, which allows for community permanence. Community and residential permanence, in turn, contribute to male mobility by providing bases for dispersed networks. Supra-household and supra-community networks of reciprocating males themselves are necessary for intra-household and intercommunity stability in the boom-bust political economy.... Women stabilize the domain of household and community; men stabilize the domain of kinship and network maintenance. Each domain is activated by maneuvers in the other domain. The specific role complementarily in the household domain leads to apparent complicit during actual separation of spouses, but provides continuity of the household by

¹⁴ Whitten defines culture as follows: “[t]he configuration of events and statuses, whatever the particular relationships between material, social, and mental cultural apparatus, the general sense one gets is of a vibrant society with strong roots in Africa and Europe, but of the New World.” (Whitten 1974:13).

reference to the into-household female prerogative, and male mobility prerogative” (Whitten 1974:172).

Their way of life contains specific roles that identify them as a unique community and when displacement occurs, then, their sense of community is totally destroyed.

Rocío, for example, goes on to discuss another significant difference between Ciudad Bolívar and Tumaco: “I miss my culture. Our houses...[were] very pretty. We didn’t need money there.” This emphasis on not needing money in their natal communities is repeated in testimony after testimony. In fact, women indicated that the need for money in Bogotá was a crucial, but highly negative, difference between Bogotá and their pre-displacement homes. For example, as another woman explained, “in the cities, what we get is frozen, un-tasty and expensive fish, while there [in rural areas], we had fresh fish for free” (author’s translation 2009).¹⁵

These ideas of what their home communities were like before their displacement fundamentally shape their realities in Ciudad Bolívar. As Ferguson and Gupta point out, “[h]omeland’ in this way remains one of the most powerful unifying symbols for mobile and displaced people” (Ferguson and Gupta 2002:69). There is little doubt that displaced populations experience a significant decline in their quality of life; however, as the passages above indicate, displaced people may come to idealize their earlier existences, making their current situations even more intolerable.

Perhaps the most idealized ritual for the people from the Pacific coast in Ciudad Bolívar was the tradition of the *minga*. In fact, it was the most common answer I received when I asked people, “What is the tradition that you can no longer practice in the cities?” While individual answers varied, all of them pointed to the importance of

¹⁵ “En las ciudades, lo que uno agarra está frizado, sin sabor y el pescado es caro, mientras que allá, nosotros teníamos pescado fresco” (author’s interview 2009).

land and the practice of a tradition called the *minga*. Essentially, this was the way their families survived and the means by which they cultivated a community identity. When it was time to plant a crop, such as corn, they practiced this tradition. In brief, everyone came together as a community and watered the newly planted crops, which was a way to give thanks to the land for the future harvest. In Ciudad Bolívar, of course, they no longer are able to plant crops and, therefore, have no way of solidifying community identity through the practice of the *minga*.

Another central community identity ritual of the Pacific coast that the women especially lament not being able to practice in Ciudad Bolívar, is *comparzas*. *Comparzas* are celebrated every year in the department of Chocó, but these women argue that they cannot be practiced in Bogotá because their Chocoano community has been dispersed throughout a variety of metropolitan areas. *Comparzas* are celebrated in the *Fiestas de San Pachito*, affectionally called the church celebration of San Francisco by the Chocoanos. This is the only celebration in which the community comes together and writes lyrics and music and practices a certain kind of choreography; usually the *Comparzas* are performed by young men and women. Black women claim that their ancestors provided the songs they sing at the *comparzas*, and these songs reinforce the bond between Chocoanos and their land.

The women I interviewed explain that the *comparzas* symbolize several different things. For example, they might give thanks to a saint or protest the government's treatment of people. They usually dance around the streets of their *pueblo* and stop in certain places, chosen by community leaders, to give thanks or air grievances. More specifically, if the *comparza* were protesting the government, then the community would

stop in front of the City Hall. All the community members usually follow the *comparza* while it moves throughout the streets making a circle; the circle symbolizes the completeness and indestructibility of the community. Women discuss these *comparzas* with such mourning that they often cry as they remember their Chocoano community. Even though those members of the Chocó community in Ciudad Bolívar still gather to celebrate the Fiestas de San Francisco, they are unable to do so as a Chocoano community and they cannot follow the *comparza* tradition. As one woman recalled, “la gente de Tumaco, ya sea que no sabe las canciones o no quieren cantar nuestras canciones. Ellos quieren hacerlo de la manera que se hacía en Tumaco.”—“The people from Tumaco either do not know the songs or they refuse to sing our songs. They want to do it the Tumaco way” (author’s interview and translation 2009).

One song that is used to solidify community identity that I encountered in Ciudad Bolívar is “*La danza de la canoa*” or “The Dance of the Canoe.” It demonstrates the importance of catching fish together as community and emphasizes the centrality of land in the formation of community identity:

Man: I'm going to fish, this animal.

Woman: What is that? But *negro*!

Man: What happened my *negra*?

Woman: What is that big animal?

Man: Don't you see, my *negra*, that we just fished it out of the river, my *negra*?

Woman: Well, if we can fish these big animals from the river, then let's go fish.

All: Let's go fish. This is the dance of the canoe. Let's go fish. They don't see that this canoe is full of fish. Well, let's go fish... (author's translation).¹⁶

¹⁶ Hombre: Yo me voy a pescar, este animal.

Mujer: Que es eso? Pero negro!

Hombre: Que pasó mi negra?

Mujer: Ese animal tan grande qué es?

Hombre: No estás viendo, mi negra, que lo acabamos de sacar del río mi negra?

Mujer: Pues si en el río se sacan esos animales tan grandes, vamo' a pescar.

Todos: Vamo' a pescar. Esta es la danza de la canoa, vamo' a pescar. No ven que esta canoa está llenitita de pesca'o pues vamos a pescar... (author's interview 2009).

Here the importance of natural resources was transformed into a song in Ciudad Bolívar to celebrate the *Negritud Colombiana*.¹⁷ In Bogotá this song was sung during the month of July when this celebration takes place. It is unclear if they sing this song elsewhere, such as in their *barrios* in Ciudad Bolívar. Traditions such as fishing in the river were, and still are, very important for the communities I visited in the Chocó area in 2008, as well as for other communities on the Pacific coast. According to Whitten, “[a]griculture and hunting go hand in hand, for not only is the rastrojo a good place to find game, particularly agouti and deer, but travel between home and farm allows men to hunt for white lipped peccary, collared peccary and occasional tapir. Hunting is a usual adjunct to farming” (1974: 68). Although it was not intentionally comical, some would laugh while young people performed and sang this song.

The importance of fishing, as reflected in this song, is better understood when considered alongside the other rituals my informants highlighted: the *Minga* and *Comparza*. As a result of displacement none of these rituals and practices continues to be practiced, and as a result, community identity—an identity so heavily rooted in relationship to the land—cannot be maintained. Grueso, Rosero and Escobar are correct, then:

The social movement of the Pacific black communities is endowed with very particular features arising from the historical, cultural, ecological, and economic specificity of the region. The movement continues a complex process of construction of ethnic and cultural identity in relation to novel variables such as territory, biodiversity, and alternative development (Grueso, Rosero and Escobar 1998:205).

¹⁷ According to Kiran Asher (2009), “négritud” or “blackness” is a nationalist ideology, which “takes as positive the power attributed to people identified as ‘black’ and was only adopted by Haiti.” Whitten and Torres note that nationalist ideologist not only develop and depend on symbols of unity (often understood in terms of ‘race,’ blood, or biology) but also of difference (understood in ‘cultural’ terms)” (Asher 2009: 32-33).

Therefore, the case of the women I interviewed in Ciudad Bolívar is not surprising; land, and the rituals surrounding it, constituted not just a “privileged axis of...sources of identity,” but *the* privileged access. Without exaggeration, land-based rituals formed the *sine qua non* of community identity for my informants.

As I have shown, prior to displacement, the residents of the communities on the Pacific coast performed a variety of land-based rituals through which they constituted and maintained their communal identities. The most important of these rituals, according to my informants, included the *comparza* and the *minga*. After displacement, these rituals can no longer be practiced and this results in a loss of identity and a sense of anomie for the displaced people (Prabhu 2001). It is important to note that despite the loss of crucial community rituals, Chocoanos do continue to celebrate some of their holidays. However, these celebrations are insufficient to maintain or reproduce the community identity that existed prior to displacement. The absence of land, along with the scattering of community residents, has made the continuation of their previous Chocoano community identity impossible. Thus, communities that grew and harvested their own food are no longer able to do so and, as such, are no longer able to perform the identity-constituting rituals surrounding it. In one woman’s words: “Nosotros no éramos consumidores, éramos productores—“we were not consumers [in our pre-displacement communities], we were producers” (author’s interview and translation 2009). This woman’s use of the nouns “producers” and “consumers,” rather than a pair of comparable adjectives, further emphasizes that these are identities, not simply characteristics that community members may or may not have shared.

In addition, the black displaced women whose testimonials I collected in Ciudad Bolivar and discuss in detail in Chapter 3 have, as a whole, undergone a profound and painful shift in their identities. Beginning with a shift in governmental policy in 1980, these women and their communities have been removed from their land in the name of natural resource exploitation and greater integration in the global economy. Warring between several factions wishing to exert control over the Pacific coast region has only served to exacerbate the problem of forced relocation. Once these women were removed from their land, they were no longer able to practice the land-based rituals through which their identities were created and maintained; as such, they lost their long-held and familiar social identities in addition to their land. Once in Bogotá, they found themselves living in a hilltop slum called Ciudad Bolivar, where they constructed their own dwellings and began working in the city, often as domestics. It is in Bogotá that these women came to be identified as “mujeres negras desplazadas” and came to experience profound racial discrimination that they reported not having previously encountered. In other words, in becoming disconnected from their land and from the community rituals through which their relationship with the land and territory was established and maintained, these women became different—“mujeres negras desplazadas” in Bogotá. Therefore, when displacement occurs, these practices and rituals can no longer be done because they are so essentially bound to the community’s former land. Therefore, when armed groups remove these communities from their land, the communities’ traditions and the identities constituted from them are completely destroyed, as my testimonies revealed.

Chapter 3

“Mujeres negras desplazadas” Experiences of Displacement and Their “New” Identity in the City of Bogotá

We have been excluded, marginalized and made invisible for being women, black, indigenous, peasants, [and] poor... the black women and the black population in general are seen from a folklorization of their culture. It seems that we were only part of the landscape as *palenqueras*, sellers of *chontaduro* or of fruit, exotic women with big hips, worthy only of a postcard or a souvenir photo. The substantial input of the black population in the construction of the country, the struggles for independence, the arts, the sciences is unknown... (author’s translation).¹⁸

Most of the women I interviewed in Ciudad Bolívar began their narratives with a discussion of their displacement from their rural communities to the metropolitan area of Bogotá. Most of them were displaced from the department of Chocó, while many others came from the departments of Nariño, Antioquia, and El Valle del Cauca; notably, all of these departments are located in the Pacific coastal region of Colombia. All of the women with whom I spoke were displaced between the 1990s to 2006. While most of the women’s testimonies began with a discussion of the events surrounding their displacement, what is most compelling about their stories is what they reveal about the shift in identity caused by displacement.

As I demonstrated in Chapter 2, upon being forcibly removed from their land, these women lost the ability to practice the rituals through which their identities had been constituted. Here I examine their testimonies and argue that their earlier identities were replaced by an imposed, and devalued, identity of “mujeres negras desplazadas” once

¹⁸ “...Nos han excluido, marginado e invisibilizado por ser mujeres, negras, indígenas, campesinas, pobres... las mujeres negras y la población negra en general son vistas a partir de una folclorización de su cultura; parece que hicieramos parte del paisaje como palenqueras, vendedoras de chontaduro o de frutas, mujeres exóticas de caderas grandes, dignas sólo de una postal o una foto de recuerdo. Se desconoce el aporte sustancial de la población negra a la construcción del país, a las luchas de independencia, las artes, a la ciencia” (AFRODES 2008:38).

they arrived in Bogotá. The shift in identity is often discussed indirectly in women's testimonies, although some women, like 34 year-old Esperanza, who was displaced from Chocó in 1999, discussed it directly, as in the following interview excerpt from 2009:

Esperanza: I have to adapt. Here it is very complicated and one of the things that has affected me the most since leaving my state of origin is the racial discrimination that one lives in the cities. When we were on our lands, we did not live racial discrimination. One lives a structured discrimination that is the lack of politics; the state's abandonment of our regions, that is a form of discrimination; but one lives the racial [discrimination] worse in the city. Maybe in our municipalities there isn't potable water or efficient electricity, but we are all equal and we accept ourselves, and we recognize ourselves, and we love ourselves. Here, no; here a barrier is put up [based on] the color of skin.

NB: As a woman, what has been the impact of displacement that you have lived in the city [Bogotá]?

Esperanza: On many occasions when it is my turn to make presentations and they ask me, "what is the impact of displacement?" I always give an example and that example is when one goes into the jungle and one encounters a ferocious animal—a tiger and one begins to flee, to run, to run, to run and then one arrives at another path and then one calms down because one has freed herself from that animal. But it turns out that when you are on that path, one encounters another, even more ferocious animal, and one continues running, running, running, and one doesn't know where to run. One leaves her land displaced, uprooted, displaced (although I don't like the word "displace"), uprooted, one leaves fleeing from the armed groups because the only thing one wants in those moments is to save our life. And we arrive in the big cities—Bogotá, Cali, Medellín, Barranquilla, and one believes that everything is calm, freed from the armed actors, that [our] life is no longer in danger, but it turns out that one encounters *another type of violence, which is racial violence* [emphasis added]. Then one arrives in Bogotá, and there isn't anywhere else to go because we don't have anywhere else to go, and we have to cope with all of these types of situations [racial discrimination] here.

NB: Can you tell me more about that more ferocious animal that you confronted in the city?

Esperanza: Yes. We believe that it is more ferocious because as Martin Luther King said, "The difference between evils does not affect me; what affects me is the indifference of good." So then, when one is in the middle of an armed conflict, we know that these people [armed groups], because of their condition, are violent. We know where we stand with them, and we know that they are bad people. But when one arrives in the cities, looking for that solidarity, from the

good [people], because one supposes that in the cities there isn't an armed war [and] there are good people, one expects to find that solidarity, that aid, that support, that aid, that protection. That is why I say, we encounter a more ferocious animal [in the city]—it's racial discrimination. Because it is on encountering that type of violence that they being to label us on the color of our skin. Then it's more ferocious because we don't expect to encounter this from people who say they are good. Then, that affects us more, and because it is a physical and psychological violence, because they do us this harm. To solve this is not so easy. If they assassinate a person...then, well, people cry...but when it's this type of violence [racial discrimination] that one carries permanently, that not only affects the head of the family, but it is like a chain that affects the whole family, the children and those that come after, and intra-family conflicts arise. So, it [racial discrimination] is much more serious (author's translation).¹⁹

It is telling that, in Esperanza's description of her experience of displacement, it is neither

¹⁹ *Esperanza*: "Me ha tocado adaptarme. Aquí es muy complicado y una de las cosas que más me ha afectado al salir de mi estado de origen es la discriminación racial que se vive en las ciudades. Cuando estábamos en nuestras tierras, no vivimos la discriminación racial; o sea se vive una discriminación estructurada que es la falta de política; el abandono estatal en nuestras regiones, esa es una forma de discriminación, pero ya la racial la vive uno mas grave en la ciudad. Quizá en nuestros municipios no haya agua potable o luz eficiente, pero todo somos iguales y nos aceptamos y nos reconocemos y nos queremos. Acá no, acá le ponen a uno una barrera...por el color de la piel."

NB: "¿Cómo mujer cual ha sido el impacto del desplazamiento que le ha tocado vivir en la ciudad [Bogotá]?"

Esperanza: "En muchas ocasiones cuando me toca hacer presentaciones y me preguntan, cual es el impacto del desplazamiento, yo siempre doy un ejemplo, y ese ejemplo es cuando va uno en una selva, y se encuentra con un animal feroz—un tigre y uno empieza a huir, a correr, a correr, a correr y entonces uno llega a otro camino y entonces uno queda tranquilo porque ya se libró de ese animal. Pero resulta que cuando estás en ese camino, uno se encuentra con otro animal inclusive más feroz, y sigue uno corriendo, corriendo, corriendo y ya no sabe uno a donde correr. Uno sale de su tierra desplazado, desarraigado, desplazado (aunque no me gusta la palabra desplazado), desarraigado uno sale huyendo de los grupos armados, porque lo único que uno quiere en esos momentos es salvar su vida. Y llegamos a las grandes ciudades como Bogotá, Cali, Medellín, Barranquilla y cree uno que ya se está tranquilo, [que] se libró de los actores armados, que la vida ya no está en peligro, pero resulta que uno se encuentra con otro tipo de violencia, que es la violencia racial. Entonces llega uno a Bogotá y ya no hay para donde más subir, porque no tenemos más para donde ir, y nos toca aguantar todo ese tipo de situaciones aquí."

NB: "¿Me puede hablar más de ese animal más feroz que confronta usted en la ciudad que cuando está en la selva?"

Esperanza: "Si creemos que es más feroz porque como dice Martín Luther King: 'no me afecta la diferencia de los malos, me afecta la indiferencia de los buenos.' Entonces cuando uno está en medio del conflicto armado, sabemos que esta gente por su condición son violentos, sabemos a que atenernos con ellos, sabemos que son malos. Pero cuando uno llega a las ciudades, buscando esa solidaridad, de los buenos, porque se supone que en las ciudades no hay guerra armada, hay personas buenas, lo que uno espera...encontrar esa solidaridad, ese amparo, ese apoyo, ese amparo, esa protección. Por eso digo que nos encontramos con un animal mas feroz, y es la discriminación racial. Porque es encontrar ese tipo de violencia que empiezan a generarnos por nuestro color de piel. Entonces es más feroz porque no esperamos encontrar esto de personas que dicen ser buenas. Entonces, eso nos afecta más, y porque es una violencia física y psicológica porque nos hacen ese daño. Que para solucionarlo no es tan fácil. Que si asesinan a una persona.... pues bueno, la gente lo lloró, bueno.... Pero cuando es este tipo de violencia donde eso se lleva permanente que no solamente afecta a la cabeza de familia sino que es como una cadena que va afectando toda la familia, y a los hijos y a los que siguen y surgen conflictos Infra-familiares. Entonces es mucho más grave" (author's interview 2009).

the lack of infrastructure in her home community nor the forcible removal from her home that constitutes the greatest violence she has endured. Rather, it is the violence of the racial discrimination she endures in Bogotá—a violence she faces because, in the city, she is a “mujer negra desplazada.” Asher says, “[a]s displaced Afro-Colombians face new forms of discrimination and invisibility, there is a resurgence in activism against racist discrimination, as well as for socioeconomic and political equality and reparations for indignities suffered in the distant past and in more recent times” (Asher 2009: 155).

The context in which Esperanza understands her “new” identity of “mujer negra desplazada” as being forced upon her is one of profound racial discrimination. In fact, she speaks directly about racial discrimination throughout her narrative testimony.²⁰ Just as Esperanza draws attention to the imposition of a devalued racial identity she has endured in Bogotá, Flor, a 34 year-old woman displaced in 2001 from Antioquia, highlights the imposition of a specifically “black” identity in the city. Also like Esperanza, Flor emphasizes the ways in which being “black” in Bogotá brings great suffering and newfound discrimination—neither of which she faced prior to her displacement. Notably, Flor elucidates the shift in identity in terms of a move from the unmarked category of “people” before the displacement to the marked category of “black” after the displacement. In her words,

Well, already visiting and doing the whole process, we arrived in Bogotá... The community of Bogotá first was not accepting us because we were black. Everyone was terrified of us, everyone went to the windows to see us. We felt like a cockroach because we were something strange. In our culture, we are people. We were always people. And we were always very important, and we were worth a lot (author’s translation).²¹

²⁰ Esperanza’s discussion of racial discrimination in Bogotá is consistent with that of scholars such as Peter Wade (1993) and Brooke Larson (2004).

²¹ Flor: “Bueno ya visitando y haciendo todo el proceso llegamos a Bogotá.... La comunidad de Bogotá primero no nos aceptaban por ser negros. Todos se aterraban, todos salían a las ventanas a vernos.

Flor directs attention to the shift in identity that occurred in Bogotá: from an identity that did not revolve around race to a racial identity that did not exist prior to displacement. Esperanza echoes Flor's experience:

When we arrived in Bogotá is when we began to have [skin] color because we blacks *do not have [skin] color in our region* [emphasis added]. We were all equal. We all saw ourselves as equals. If we are in front of a white person, we see ourselves as white—there is no color in the communities. Whites and blacks, the family is often made up with a black or white spouse. It's normal (author's translation).²²

Here Esperanza makes perfectly clear that it was only after her displacement to Bogotá that she began seeing herself in terms of race: once in the city, she became “black.”

The imposition of a “black” identity engenders extreme discrimination in the city. In fact, just as Flor suggests that she and others in her community changed from “people” to “black” after displacement, Flor stresses that being “black” in Bogotá may disqualify a person from being treated as fully human. As she explains:

But on arriving in Bogotá, they called me “*María Jesus*” or “daughter of the devil,” “*negrita*.” The “*negrita María Jesus*” is a saying that they have for us as black. Then we said, “why?” Or they called us “monkey.” And we said, “why monkey?” Could it be because we were similar to the monkey? Were we a monkey?

That they call us blacks, *morena*, doesn't offend us. Or that they call us “*señora*” like a white woman. We ask for respect. They call a white woman “*señora*.” So why do they call us “*negrita*”? They marginalize us because we are displaced. When they see that I am displaced, they dare to say to me, ‘that is a *guerrillera*.’ I have to defend myself and say, “I am displaced because I care for my life. We could have easily armed ourselves in our home and confronted the armed groups,

Nosotros nos sentíamos como una cucaracha porque éramos algo extraño. En nuestra cultura nosotros somos gente, siempre fuimos personas. Y siempre fuimos muy importantes, valíamos muchísimo” (author's interview 2009).

²² “Cuando llegamos a Bogotá es cuando empezamos a tener color [de piel] porque nosotros los negros no tenemos color [de piel] en nuestra región. Todos somos igual. Todos nos vemos igual. Si estamos en frente de un blanco, nos vemos como blancos—no hay color en las comunidades. Blancos y negros, la familia muchas veces es conformada con una esposa negra o blanca. Es normal” (author's interview 2009).

but we are not violent people” (author’s translation).²³

Flor’s testimony reveals that racial discrimination is perhaps the worst facet of her experience of displacement.²⁴ Although she and the other women with whom I spoke live in a city that lacks basic infrastructure, all struggle financially, and each of these women has lost family and friends because of their displacement, all twelve women I interviewed point to their experiences of racism as the worst part of displacement. This racism does not just occur at the level of rhetoric, but surfaces, too, when the women attempt to secure work in the city, as I discuss in the next section.

Employment

Esperanza and Flor both provide vivid descriptions of their displacement experiences and it is clear from their testimonies that living in Bogotá, where they became “black,” is at least as difficult as undergoing an actual displacement. Given that “blacks” in Bogotá are consistently dehumanized, it is not surprising that these women must struggle to find and maintain the jobs they need to support their families. Esperanza provides a particularly compelling description of her struggles to support herself and her children in Bogotá. Although Esperanza explains that she and other displaced black women in Bogotá arrived with little formal education, she makes it equally clear that, in

²³ “Pero al llegar a Bogotá, me llamaban, ‘María Jesu’ o ‘hija del diablo.’ ‘Negrita.’ ‘La negrita María jesu’ es un dicho que nos tienen a nosotros como negros. Entonces decíamos, ‘¿Por qué?’ O nos llamaban mona. Y nosotros decíamos, ‘¿Por qué mona? ¿Será porque hacíamos similitud al mico? ¿Éramos un mico?’

Que nos digan negros, morena, no nos ofende. O que nos digan señora como a una blanca. Nosotros pedimos respeto. A una mujer blanca le llaman señora. ¿Entonces por qué a nosotros nos llaman, ‘negrita’? Nos marginan porque somos desplazados. Cuando ven que soy desplazada se atrevieron a decirme, ‘esa es *guerrillera*.’ Me toca defenderme y decir, ‘Soy desplazada por cuidar mi vida. Pudimos armarnos en nuestra casa y enfrentarnos, pero no somos personas violentas’” (author’s interview 2009).

²⁴ As used here, “testimonio is not [referring] so much truth from or about the other as the truth of the other. What I mean by this is the recognition not only that the other exists as something outside ourselves, not subject to our will or desires, but also of the other’s sense of what is truth and what is false” (Beverly 2004:7).

her opinion, it is neither her lack of schooling nor her status as a “displaced” person that hinders her economic success. Rather, it is the fact that, once in Bogotá, she became “black” which is a grossly devalued identity category, subject to a great deal of discrimination. To make her point, she compares the experiences of displaced “black” women with those of displaced mestiza women:

Sadly, with all of this violence that has been lived in this country, and as an Afro population, we have been more affected, but as women so much worse because we not only live the discrimination of being a woman, which is a discrimination that has historically been lived by the limitations that history and society have put on women. Not only have we been discriminated against for being Afro-Colombian, for all that I have told you about the color of skin, the intolerance, the xenophobia that there is against black skin. But also for being displaced, but also we black women have lived the armed conflict; we live this triple discrimination—[that of being a] displaced black woman.

Sadly the connotation that there is in Colombian society about the displaced is [that he/she is] paramilitary or *guerrillero*, that he arrives in the cities to steal work, or that he causes problems, or that he has generated the problems of vandalism, drug addiction, protection. That is the mentality towards the displaced (author’s translation).²⁵

Esperanza’s testimony suggest that not all displaced women share the same experiences or see themselves in solidarity with one another. As Asher (2009) explains, “[o]ver the next five years as guerrillas followed the paramilitaries into the region and the two groups battled for control the communities of Vigía del Fuerte and Bellavista were caught in the crossfire. Each side accused local residents, especially community leaders,

²⁵ *Esperanza*: “Tristemente, con toda esta violencia que se ha estado viviendo en el país y como población afro hemos sido más afectadas, pero como mujeres muchísimo peor, porque no solamente vivimos la discriminación de ser mujer, que es una discriminación que históricamente se ha vivido por las limitaciones que la historia y la sociedad ha puesto sobre las mujeres. No solamente hemos sido discriminados por ser Afro-Colombianos por todo lo que te he comentado el color de la piel, la intolerancia, y la xenofobia que hay sobre la piel negra. Si no también por ser desplazados, sino que también, las mujeres negras que hemos vivido el conflicto armado, vivimos esa triple discriminación –“mujer negra desplazada.” Tristemente la connotación que hay de la sociedad colombiana sobre el desplazado es el paramilitar o guerrillero, el que llega a las ciudades a quitar el empleo, o que generan problemas, o que ha generado los problemas de vandalismo drogadicción, protección. Esa es la mentalidad hacia el desplazado” (author’s interview 2009).

of sympathizing with the other” (Asher 2009:163). Mauricio Solaún and Sidney Kronus explain the ways in which “blacks” Latin America experience the brunt of racial discrimination:

In contrast to blacks in Latin America, Indians are mainly differentiated from the rest of the population on ethnic (language and patterns of dress) as opposed to racial (visible physical) characterizes... In effect, if an Indian changes his cultural patterns to conform with the dominant group’s standards, he is defined as mestizo or mixed blood... Thus in Latin America racial discrimination is centered against blacks (1973:3).

The “mujer negra desplazada” do not identify with displaced *mestizas* because their experiences, in Esperanza’s opinion, are markedly different. As she puts it, “if a black woman is looking for work, she might not get the job because she is black. We then have more limitations than a *mestiza*” (author interview and translation 2009).²⁶

A black woman like Flor, with a college degree, encountered nearly insurmountable obstacles to finding employment in Bogotá. Essentially, Flor was told again and again that she did not qualify for a job because she was black. In the following quotation, Flor narrates her experiences of discrimination while seeking work:

The manager told me, "You present yourself very well, but you're black, [so] you're not right for us." You are very pretty, very intelligent.” That I spoke well. “You express yourself very well, but you're black.” Now she did not know that I was displaced, if she had noticed, she would have called security. Because we are displaced, we are either *guerrilla*, collaborators or we are going to arrive with violence. We are *campesinos*, we planted our food, plantains, cassava, bananas. We were not consumers; we were producers. That's what led us to become consumers. I had no right to be here, except to clean toilets.

[At another job], for being black, the boss who was *mestiza*, received me with three stones in her hand. She thought that I could not serve the public. She was so distrusting of me that she would check to see if I was doing my job well. I showed her that I wasn't going to do things wrong because I was black. She sat down and told me, “I'm going to tell you the truth, I thought, ‘I don't want blacks in my office. This girl is only going to mess up everything in here.’” But why, if

²⁶ “Si una negra busca trabajo, ella quizá no encuentre trabajo porque es negra. Entonces nosotras tenemos más limitaciones que una *mestiza*” (author’s interview 2009).

you've never hired blacks? (author's translation).²⁷

Flor's narrative provides a remarkable account of the kinds of barriers faced by displaced women who, once in Bogotá, are identified as black. What is, perhaps, most remarkable about her story is that she was able to prove her worth to her *mestiza* boss and keep her position, despite the prejudice she faced.²⁸

Black Identity and Gender Violence

The imposed identity of “black,” while carrying with it a profoundly problematic stigmatization and an unequal burden for displaced women, is also an identity that many displaced black women have come to embrace. For example, many women have begun to unify themselves by creating organizations, such as AFRODES, which focus exclusively on people who identify themselves as *negros*. However, organizations that center exclusively on race may ignore gender as an axis of oppression. Because they are female, the women I refer to here sometimes suffer rape and domestic violence, as Linda's testimony reveals. During the displacement, many women were threatened and were victims of violent acts committed against their communities, their loved ones, and their bodies. When Linda and I began discussing the horrors she had witnessed, I was so stunned that I had to request clarification. Below is an excerpt of our exchange:

²⁷ Flor: “La manager, me dijo, ‘Te presentas muy bien, pero eres negra, no nos sirves. Eres muy bonita, muy inteligente.’ De que hablaba muy bien. ‘Te expresas muy bien, pero eres negra.’ Ahora ella no sabia que era desplazada si se da cuenta llama a seguridad. Por ser desplazada se es guerrillero, colaborador, o va a llegar con la violencia. Nosotros somos campesinos, sembrábamos nuestra comida, plátano, yuca, banano. Nosotros no éramos consumidores, éramos productores. A eso nos han llevado a ser consumidores. Yo no tenia derecho de estar ahí, sino de trabajar en el aseo.

[En otro trabajo] por ser negra, la jefa que era *mestiza*, me recibió con tres piedras en la mano. Ella pensó que no podía atender al público. Ella fue tan atrevida, que verificaba si yo hacia el trabajo bien. A ella le demostré que no por ser negra iba hacer las cosas mal. Ella se sentó y me dijo, ‘le voy a contar la verdad, pensé:’ “no quiero negros en mi oficina, esta niña va desordenar a todo el mundo.” Pero por qué, si nunca há contratado negros?” (author's interview 2009)

²⁸ According to AFRODES, only about 40% of displaced women are employed. Of these, about 40% do not receive adequate compensation (2008).

NB: Are you telling me that when armed groups come down from the mountains to your community, they order the husbands to loan their wives to the [armed groups'] to give sexual pleasure?

Linda: Yes.

NB: Was your husband ever forced to give you to them? Did they ask you to have sex with a man from the armed groups?

Linda: No, not me, they only ordered my neighbors (author's translation).²⁹

AFRODES, in attempting to respond to testimonies like this one, situates this type of violence against women in a strictly racial context, ignoring the fact that women of all races and colors have been victims of male violence. (It is interesting, too, that men ask men to “give” them women—it is clear here that women are nothing but male-owned property.) For example, one AFRODES publication explains situations like the one witnessed by Linda as follows:

The racist imaginaries that were historically configured during the era of slavery, and that also persist in Colombian society today, produced a set of stereotypes about black women in which judgments about our bodies are present that are still used today as a justification for all kinds of practices and crimes against our sexual and reproductive rights (author's translation).³⁰

Here AFRODES states that racism—not sexism or misogyny—is to blame for sexual violation, even though this excerpt also affirms that it is women, not men, who are the victims of this racism. Although organizations such as AFRODES attempt to assist

²⁹ *NB:* “Usted me está diciendo que cuando grupos armados bajan de las montañas a su comunidad, ellos ordenan a los esposos que les presten sus esposas para dar placer sexual [a los grupos armados]?”

Linda: “Si.”

NB: “A su esposo le ordenaron que les prestara su esposa? Le preguntaron a usted que tuviera sexo con un hombre que pertenecía a los grupos armados?”

Linda: “No, a mí no, solamente a mis vecinas les ordenaron” (author's interview 2009).

³⁰ “Los imaginarios racistas que se configuraron históricamente durante la época de la trata de esclavos, y que también perviven hasta hoy en la sociedad colombiana, produjeron un conjunto de estereotipos sobre la mujer negra en los que están presentes juicios en torno a nuestro cuerpo que siguen siendo usados como justificación en todo tipo de practicas y delitos contra los derechos sexuales y reproductivos” (AFRODES 2008:9).

displaced black women by focusing exclusively on racial discrimination and oppression, they cannot fully respond to these women's needs. The kinds of violence that Linda witnessed were not racially motivated, but were "a specific and atavistic aggression against women...in the context of war...male power [is exercised through] humiliation over the male enemy as well as the affirmation of male over female" (Segura Escobar 2000:116). Until organizations such as AFRODES begin to respond to this type of violence in terms of gender, they will only partially succeed in meeting displaced black women's needs.

Healthcare

Esperanza's and Flor's narratives demonstrate the hardships that "mujeres negras desplazadas" face in the job market in Bogotá; but employment discrimination is most certainly not the only affront to these women's dignity. Instead, as the following narrative, shared at a 2006 national workshop of Afro-Colombian women, demonstrates, racism also shapes the kind of healthcare such women get in Colombia:

I am the maternal head of household with a very serious health problem. I went to the doctor for a uterine scraping; the doctor didn't have to remove my uterus or my ovaries, but he removed them and didn't tell me. Two months ago I went to do an ultrasound and the doctor told me that I did not have a uterus or ovaries. But, in addition to that, it caused an infection that damaged my intestines and they had to remove them. He left me dead inside; I only have a heart. Nobody answers me. I am responsible for two children and my elderly mother and I cannot work because I have to carry a bag for the waste from my intestines (author's translation).³¹

While organizations such as AFRODES are working to change the practice of

³¹ "Soy madre cabeza de hogar con un problema de salud muy grave. Fui a que me hicieran un raspado en la matriz; el medico no tenía por que sacarme la matriz ni los ovarios porque no era necesario pero me los sacó y no me dijo. Hace dos meses me fui a hacer una ecografía y el médico me dijo no tener ni matriz ni ovarios; pero además se me generó una infección que, pudrió los intestinos y tuvieron que sacármelos. Me dejó muerta por dentro; sólo tengo el corazón. Nadie me responde; tengo a cargo 2 hijos y mi mamá que es de la tercera edad y no puedo trabajar porque me toca andar con una bolsa para poder hacer las necesidades intestinales" (AFRODES 2008:27).

medicine in Colombia by helping to write laws, change is extremely slow. Whitten tells us the importance to women of having children—something the women described above can no longer do. In his estimation, “[t]he woman without growing children is probably more lonesome than one without a resident husband. And in fact, except for exceptional economic roles, women without some resident childrearing is extremely rare” (1974: 153). When I asked Esperanza if there was any sort of law that might protect the “mujer negra desplazada” from undergoing unnecessary, and non-consensual, medical procedures, she was quite clear:

Esperanza: Not that protects displaced women. There is a very general law, law 387 of '97 that was created to protect families in situations of displacement; it protects certain rights of the displaced population, but it does not offer any distinct type of protection with regards to gender or ethnicity. It is a very general law (author's translation).³²

It is worth noting here that Esperanza identifies both “ethnicity” AND “gender” as axes along which discrimination occurs.

School

Not only do the “mujeres negras desplazadas” in Bogotá face extreme discrimination in the city, their children may also face racial discrimination—and, like their mothers, often for the first time. Flor, for instance, discussed the issues that her fourteen-year-old daughter, who had allegedly never confronted discrimination in the school in Antioquia, has to deal with in her school in Bogotá:

My daughter tells me that at school they call her “black.” I tell her that you are the most beautiful black girl, an intelligent black girl, and that, in addition, you have

³² *Esperanza:* “No que proteja a las mujeres desplazadas. Existe una ley 387 muy general del '97 que se crea para proteger a las familias en situación de desplazamiento; protege algunos derechos de para la población desplazada, pero no tiene un tipo diferenciada, ni genero, ni étnico. Es una ley muy general” (author's interview 2009).

some very nice things. That there is no difference between a white and a black. She has been marginalized... My children are the only blacks in school. The other students call them “chocolates” and tell them that they are ugly because they are black.

We are educated people, and they [my children] say, "we are educated and why do they treat us so poorly, mom?" They get very sad. My daughter has written that she hates her school because they call her "black." We as adults know that being black is something special, like being white or being *mestizo*. But children who are discriminated against and who other children do not play with because they are black? What do you tell them? (author's translation).³³

Flor explains that all of her children—and not just her teenage daughter—suffer racial discrimination at school. There are three crucial elements in Flor's description of her children's mistreatment in schools in Bogotá. First, it is obvious that racial identities are not only imposed on adults who are displaced to the city; their children are racialized in the same way. Second, and perhaps more interestingly, Flor does not question that she and her children are, in fact, “black.” Rather, she attempts to teach her children to valorize their new identities, to think of themselves as being special because they are black. Lastly, the fact that all three of Flor's children are in school in the first place is remarkable. Many displaced people find themselves focused exclusively on survival in their new surroundings, so luxuries like education often take second place to earning a wage (Segura Escobar 2000).

However, we can observe that Flor's voice reflects political agency; as Victoria Sanford (2003) argues with respect to Maya women in Guatemala, “testimonies...as well

³³ Flor: “Mi hija me dice que en el colegio le dicen ‘negra.’ Yo le digo que tu eres una negra más hermosa, una negra inteligente, y que además que tu tienes unas cosas muy bonitas. Que no hay diferencia entre una blanca y una negra. Ella ha sido marginada... Mis hijos están en un colegio [y] los únicos que son negros. Les dicen ‘chocolates’ y que son feos porque son negros. Nosotros somos educados, y dicen ellos, ‘nosotros somos educados y que porque nos tratan mal mami?’ Ellos llegan muy tristes. Mi hija há escrito que odia su colegio porque le dicen ‘negra.’ Nosotros como adultos sabemos que ser negros es algo especial, como ser blanco o como ser *mestizo*. Pero los niños que son discriminados y que otros niños no jueguen con ellos porque son negros? Entonces que les dices?” (author's interview 2009)

as archival and forensic research, again and again reveal Maya women as ‘agents rather than instruments’ of political mobilization and consternation, which was ‘itself constituted by their participation...’ (53). Like Maya women, the “mujeres negras desplazadas” also “protested peacefully... organized in popular organizations, some joined the guerrillas, some fled into refuge in the mountains and some suffered in isolated silence” (Sanford 2003:53). Therefore, despite contending with a devalued, imposed identity, of the “mujer negra desplazada” is still an agent. Further, Flor’s voice is a testimony that speaks HER truth and this empowers her in the city. According to John Beverley (2004), “people who are marginalized, repressed, and exploited... use something like testimonio for their purposes: that is, as a weapon, a way of fighting back” (Beverly 2004:xvi).

Housing

Displaced people in Colombia suffer from discrimination in terms of housing, as well. Although there is a law in Colombia that aids displaced people with housing and food, it only provides them enough support to pay for three months of rent and food; it does not provide any sort of job training or placement. As such, it is of very limited assistance to most displaced people. As a result, displaced people often have to move from one place to another, in some ways repeating the experience of displacement over and over again. The burden of locating housing is even more onerous for displaced black people, as Esperanza explains:

For example, for one who is black, it is difficult because they don’t rent to us, first because people say we are very noisy, but I believe that it is one of our greatest strengths, that we are happy, that we are lively people, because historically, what we have lived...if we weren’t lively people, well, the situation would be more terrible for us. Another thing is that they [don’t want to] rent to us because we have many children. And that is something that for us, culturally, that the family

represents everything, right?

And there in our lands, because of the large spaces that we have, we have the possibility of procreating to have a lot of children; we can raise our children. It isn't difficult for us. We have big houses, patios; we have everything. But we're coming with these children from the land where it [our community] was eradicate. So one can't leave them abandoned because the house is rented with one or two children. For many other factors they don't rent to us. Then we have to go to more marginalized places because not all places rent to us (author's translation).³⁴

Flor also reveals her frustration with the changes she has been forced to make in order to rent an apartment in Bogotá:

Because we're black, we didn't have access to get an apartment. We had to search a lot. They prohibit us from playing music; we were in silence and we had to adapt to what people wanted. There are city families where the lifestyle is very calm. We come from where rumba, the beach, food, the getting up early, as 7 in the morning and you already have *Vallenato*, *Reguetón*, and Reggae music playing. Arriving here we lost a lot; we didn't get used to it (author's translation).³⁵

As both of these testimonies reveal, negative stereotypes about “blacks” have been used to deny these women housing. The testimonies also reveal that neither Flor nor Esperanza contests that the stereotypes—such as that they are “loud” or have “too many” children—are applicable. Rather, both women accept that they fit the

³⁴ “Por ejemplo para uno que es negro, es difícil porque no le arriendan a uno, primero porque la gente dice que somos muy bullosos, pero esa es una de nuestras mayores fortaleza, que somos alegres, somos gente de ambiente, porque históricamente lo que hemos vivido...si no fuéramos de ambiente, pues la situación sería más terrible para nosotros. Otra cosa es que nos arriendan porque tenemos muchos hijos. Y es algo que para nosotros culturalmente, que la familia representa todo, si?”

Y allá en nuestras tierras por los espacios tan grandes que tenemos, tenemos todas las posibilidades de procrear de tener muchos hijos; podemos crear a nuestros hijos; no se nos dificulta. Tenemos casas grandes, patios; tenemos todo. En las ciudades pues por vivir tan hacinado, pues no puede uno tener muchos hijos. Pero ya viene con esos hijos desde la tierra donde lo desarraigaron. Entonces no puede dejarlos uno abandonados porque en la casa que le arriendan a uno con un hijo o dos. Por muchos otros factores no nos arriendan. Entonces nos toca irnos a los lugares más marginados porque no en todos lugares nos arriendan” (author's interview 2009).

³⁵ “Por ser negros no teníamos acceso a conseguir un apartamento. Teníamos que buscar muchísimo. Nos prohibía colocar música; nosotros éramos en silencio y tocaba acoplarnos a lo que la gente quería. Son familias ciudadinas donde su estilo de vida es muy tranquilo. Nosotros venimos donde rumba, la playa, la comida, de madrugarte, a las 7 de la mañana ya tienes la música encendida con un Vallenato, Reguetón un Regué. Llegar aquí perdimos muchísimo, no nos acostumbrábamos” (author's interview 2009).

stereotypes, but attempt to revalorize their content. Norman E. Whitten (1974) defines the concept of “noise” as them feeling good, “[t]hey work and yell when they feel good. If illness overtakes them, energy is conserved through rest, and rest is normally regarded to be a private affair. Black people in this zone [the West Pacific littoral] quite reasonably believe that to work and exert strength when feeling “weak” is to invite still greater weakness by draining remaining strength.” (Whitten 1974:6). In other words, being “noisy” is equated with being “happy” and having many children is a logical choice in the homeland, not in the city.

Social Places

A final example of the kind of discrimination and mistreatment faced by displaced black women in Bogotá is the shift in identity itself; this change is not only painful because they have lost their former senses of themselves, but also because their identities are now systematically devalued. In addition to facing problems finding housing or employment and facing harassment at school, Esperanza also states that racial segregation operates in places of leisure in Colombian cities:

Esperanza: Once in Cartagena, we were going to an event to celebrate the 150-year anniversary of the abolition of slavery, and we went to a nightclub with some friends and they told us that “you cannot come in” and we said “why? If we have the money to pay.” [He said] “No, here blacks do not enter. Blacks can’t come in here.” We tried to convince the bouncer to let us go in, but he said, “No, blacks do not come in here.”

NB: In what year did that happen?

Esperanza: In 2005. So, then, it seems unbelievable, where one goes to a nightclub, where you’re not going to ask for anything, but to pay; it’s as if money was worthless. Because the business owner is always interested in selling and when people come in and don’t cause problems or difficulties. But it doesn’t seem that blacks’ money is worth anything to these types of business people. They definitely did not allow us to go in and we had to leave. These are the kinds of situations that one says, “what is happening that because of the color of our skin,

we have to live this kind of situation in society? Why do they reject us because of the color of our skin? Why does society reject us based only on the color of our skin?” Then we see that our problem is racial discrimination. If you see in the case of the indigenous people, they have lived things similar to us, but we see that toward them there is more solidarity, because they are the same color as other people, and they have a lot in common. But with us, it’s racial (author’s translation).³⁶

The incident that Esperanza describes did not take place decades ago but, rather, in 2005. Thus, it is apparent that racial discrimination is not limited to one type of endeavor, but is, instead, ubiquitous in Colombian cities from Bogotá to Cartagena.

Throughout the chapter, I have demonstrated that the “mujeres negras desplazadas” face a host of barriers that impede their successful transition to life in Bogotá. Most of these barriers are related neither to their status as “displaced,” nor to their gender.³⁷ Instead, they face racial discrimination in their attempts to secure housing, to gain employment, to educate their children in a cruelty-free environment, and to enjoy themselves in places of leisure which are, supposedly, open to the public. While the testimonies I shared here are compelling, they are by no means unique in recounting stories of mistreatment and prejudice.

³⁶ *Esperanza*: “Una vez en Cartagena, que íbamos a un evento de 150 años de abolición, y nos fuimos con unos compañeros a una discoteca y nos dijeron que no, ‘ustedes no pueden entrar’ y le dijimos ‘por qué? Si tenemos la plata para consumir;’ ‘no, aquí no entran negros. Acá no pueden entrar negros.’ Y tratamos de convencer al vigilante, pero dijo, ‘no, aquí no entran negros.’”

NB: “¿En qué año sucedió esto?”

Esperanza: “En el 2005. Entonces se queda uno así como le parece a uno increíble, donde va uno a una discoteca, donde tu no vas a pedir sino a consumir; es como si uno el dinero no tuviera valides. Porque el dueño del negocio le interesa vender siempre y cuando pues las personas que ingresen no generen desorden, dificultad o problemas. Pero no parece ser que la plata de los negros no les sirve a estos tipos de empresarios. Y definitivamente no nos dejaron entrar nos toco venirnos. Esas son situaciones que uno dice, ‘pero que esta pasando porque nosotros por el color de la piel tenemos que vivir esta clase de situaciones de parte de la sociedad? ¿Por qué nos rechazan por el color de piel?’ Entonces nosotros vemos que el problema nuestro es discriminación racial. Si ves en el caso de los indígenas, que han vivido cosas similares que nosotros, pero vemos que hacia ellos hay más solidaridad, porque son del mismo color de los otros, y tienen similitudes. Pero con lo de nosotros son racial” (author’s interview 2009).

³⁷ I do not wish to suggest that no suffering or discrimination is related to their gender nor to their being displaced; that is not the case. My point here is that most of the discrimination these women discuss facing after their displacement is related primarily, or even exclusively, to race or its perception in Bogotá.

Rather than combat their new racial identities, these women have, by and large, chosen to join organizations that attempt to valorize being “black.” Here, it is significant to note that their resistance to the discriminatory practices they encounter in Bogotá does not seek to question racial categories or, in some cases, even racial stereotypes. In fact, their attempt to re-signify an imposed identity is not unusual, nor is it without flaws. However, for the present project, what is most important is that these women are not passively accepting an identity as “*negras*,” but rather, trying to bend it to their own needs by challenging the values, if not the features, attributed to it.

Conclusions

This thesis project relied on participant-observation, research and testimonials to examine the experiences of displacement and racism of “mujeres negras desplazadas.” More specifically, by examining women’s experiences of displacement, I argued that their identities underwent a profound shift during the displacement process. As noted in the introduction, displacements have been occurring in Colombia since 1990s, when a significant shift took place in governmental policy. Displacement has been particularly pronounced in Colombia’s Pacific coast region, which encompasses several departments such as Chocó, Nariño, Antioquia and El Valle del Cauca. The women whose testimonials I address in this project come from these departments.

Although the reasons for the government’s change in policy are complex, displacement of local populations has occurred for one primary reason: the Colombian government during this period began to take “measures to increase linkages to the global economy,” which included gaining access to natural resources that could be extracted and sold on the world market, including gold, timber, and platinum (Escobar 1995; see also Grueso, Rosero and Escobar 1998). Because these resources are plentiful on the Pacific coast and because the soil is exceptionally rich, the region has been targeted both by agents of the state, and by other parties interested in exploiting the region, including multi-national corporations, the FARC, paramilitaries, and drug-traffickers. As a result, local populations have been forcibly removed from this area at an alarming rate for thirty years. The economic prosperity that the Colombian government has sought through this strategy may be welcomed by some, but for others it is a “nightmare”—not only due to

threats, disappearances, and murders in those communities, but also because of its destruction of local ways of life.

Although my focus in this project was on the imposition of a racial identity and the experiences of racism that it engenders, it is important to keep in mind that these women actually suffered on three counts, not just on one; they are “mujeres negras desplazadas,” or black displaced women. I have already pointed to the horrors of displacement and racism, but sexism and even misogyny are also prominent features in these women’s lives. Furthermore, the “new” identity of “mujer negra desplazada” that displaced women have been forced to adopt in Bogotá, while offering possibilities for collective action, also involves the continued circulation of “black” stereotypes that have been popular in Colombia since colonial times. These predominantly negative stereotypes were, notably, not operative in the women’s communities of origin, where the women reported feeling highly valued.

In order to understand how the women of Ciudad Bolívar experience racism as a result of their newly imposed identities, it was necessary to examine how racism tends to operate in contemporary Colombia. This, in turn, required a brief discussion of the history of racism in Colombia. Racism in Colombia, as in much of Latin America, has been shaped by a history of European colonization and the importation of slave labor from western and central Africa. As George Fredrickson reminds us, the colonizers’ “attitudes of superiority to indigenous populations anticipated the feelings of dominance and entitlement that would characterize the later expansion of Europeans into Asia, Africa, and the Americas” (2002:23). These attitudes of superiority toward those

considered racial “others” by the Spanish colonizers continued well beyond the colonial period and continue to inform the de facto racial hierarchy operative in Colombia today.

Because the identity “mujer negra desplazada” is tied to the racial discrimination that these women experience everyday in Bogotá, it carries a broader significance. Despite their initial discrimination on the basis of sexism and racism, they also suffer additional repercussions from their displacement. The testimonies of these women underscore that their suffering is not the result of isolated incidents of literal or symbolic violence; rather, the cause of their suffering is structural. It is the institutionalization of racism (and sexism, for that matter) that forces us to see beyond the individual encounters each woman describes and, instead, to look to at the consistent pattern of racism.

The “mujer negra desplazada” is dizzyingly complex precisely because it is an identity that has flourished after the massive and violent displacement begun in the early 1990s. Upon analyzing these women’s voices, it is worth noting that their narrative testimonies sometimes romanticize their communities of origin. These women’s voices reveal that once they were no longer able to practice the land-based rituals through which their identities had previously been constituted and maintained, their sense of community identity was lost. In the city of Ciudad Bolívar, the void left when they could no longer maintain their pre-displacement identities was filled with an imposed identity as “black.” As I also demonstrated, being “black” in Bogotá, as well as in other Colombian cities, is not always, or often, easy. Rather, the women I discussed here are discriminated against and mistreated with frequency; as such, I also paid attention to these women’s experiences of racism. Although “black” in Bogotá carries with it a host of stereotypes

and although they are subject to many forms of abuse on the basis of having a “black” identity, these women are locked in an ongoing struggle to revalorize it.

These women, such as Rocío, Flor and Esperanza, tended to primarily view themselves as victims of displacement. The understandings of themselves are closely tied to their past experiences of physical displacement by armed groups, but they are not, however, reducible to them. In their narratives, it is clear that they had begun to embrace their new identities, despite feeling a keen sense of loss. As I noted in Chapter 2, the soil of the Pacific coast is exceptionally fertile; and it is not surprising, then, that community life in the region has, for many years, principally revolved around subsistence agriculture. Given the centrality of crop cultivation in community life, and their community’s dependence on a successful harvest for survival, rituals of the harvest figure prominently in the loss of community identity formation in women’s testimonials. In fact, the women with whom I spoke did not simply consider land-based rituals crucial to their former identities; rather, they believed them to be absolutely essential to nurture their relationships as people.

The narratives of these women are complicated and, at times, contradictory. Their particular experiences give them a distinctive point of view, but these perspectives are also influenced by other discourses about their displacement and their present circumstances with racial discrimination in Bogotá. In order to demonstrate that these displaced black women’s identities have undergone a radical and highly problematic shift, it is necessary to understand how they conceived of themselves prior to displacement. As I have illustrated, prior to being displaced, these women’s identities were constituted and maintained through land-based, community rituals. In fact, to the

displaced black women I discuss here, identity is so inextricably rooted in a particular place that a deterritorialization of identity is impossible; instead, deterritorialization, in the form of displacement, nullifies their pre-existing identities and sense of community. The void left once their previous identity has been stripped away is then filled by an imposed identity of “mujer negra desplazada.” Although the women I discuss in this thesis thought of themselves as “women” prior to abandoning their homelands, it is crucial to understand that they did not think of themselves as “black” (in the context of race in Bogotá) before arriving in Bogotá; indeed, because they lived in a relatively homogeneous community, they tended not to think of themselves in terms of race at all.

In Ciudad Bolívar, it is striking to note the ways in which these women are beginning to valorize and make sense of their new identities. The repression these women are experiencing in the city of Bogotá has proven effective in consolidating their sense of being “black” in the city of Bogotá. Although these groups have yet to meet with significant success in the city, it is worth noting that the imposition of a devalued racial identity does not preclude the development of a critical consciousness on the part of those assigned to the undervalued category. Instead, as their narratives indicate, people may attempt to re-signify and re-value such a category, re-fashioning, in this case, “mujer negra desplazada” into a source of pride and an identity around which to mobilize collective action.

Although I focused exclusively on displaced black women, this project sheds light on a significant gap in current academic studies. By highlighting the qualitative experience of displacement, it is clear that, for at least some displaced populations, the most significant problems—loss of identity and community, racism, discrimination, and

joblessness, to name a few—begin once they have been installed in their new locations. While this project is by no means exhaustive, it points to the particular obstacles faced by those who live in the juncture of three marked identity categories: “mujer negra desplazada.” More specifically, I examined the role of displacement by analyzing a group of black women’s experiences of racism in the context of Ciudad Bolívar.

In the case of the women discussed here, they only became “displaced” and “black” once they were forcibly relocated, as I have demonstrated. Despite the newness of the identity of “black,” the women I interviewed and with whom I spent time did not balk at the categorization, as I have also shown. Despite feeling “lost” and essentially “community-less” in the city, they are beginning to use their imposed black identity as something around which they can organize. Although this is a nascent movement, as it currently operates through organizations such as AFRODES, it tends to focus on black identity and racism to the exclusion of woman-specific forms of violence and discrimination. As such, the movement may prove unsatisfactory in meeting black women’s concerns. The identity of “mujer negra desplazada” is not inherently negative. However, in the context of Colombia, where both racism and sexism have operated for centuries, this identity, foisted upon the women I discuss here as a result of their relocation, carries with it substantial negative repercussions—both in their new neighborhood as well as on a larger scale in the city of Bogotá.

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