

## People, Place, and Plants in the Pacific Coast of Colombia\*

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In Colombia black women's work has been central to place making, to the reconstruction of the social and cultural fabric, and to the transmission of ancestral knowledge in a context of indentured slavery and adaptation to tropical rainforest conditions. Black women have also played an active economic role in supporting their families, and have contributed to community mobilization and ethnic organization for the defense of place and culture. Yet they remain practically invisible to the public eye as a result of masculine leadership within black organizations, academic scholarship, and socioeconomic policy. Increasing violent conflict in their coastal communities has forced Afrocolombian populations to seek refuge in urban centers without guarantee of a safe return to their communities. For ethnic groups, forced displacement means breaking away from two constitutive elements of their identity and historical experience: the collectivity and the territory (Jimeno 2001). The women, who are still the primary caretakers of the children, have lost access to the land and resources that supported their livelihoods, social relations, and identities. Today they face the challenge of making place in new settings where they find themselves not only discriminated against on the basis of race and gender but also in a stigmatized desplazado (displaced) condition. This chapter describes Afrocolombian women's experiences with space and homeplace-making in a context of ethnic reaffirmation and resistance to historical socioeconomic, racial, and gender discrimination.

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I draw primarily on bell hooks' (1990a) discussion of homeplace among African Americans to illustrate the importance of Afrocolombian women's everyday work to the configuration of place in the tropical rainforest and the construction of community with a particular cultural identity and environmental knowledge and practices. hooks notes that in the context of sexist, racist oppression and segregation in the US, black women's conventional homeplace-making role acquired a dimension of political subversion as homes and communities became spaces that enabled blacks to be dignified and valued subjects. hooks argues for the re-politization of home-making and the restoration of value to black feminine identity through a positive reassessment of black domesticity and women's active contribution to the reconstruction and re-membering of fractured identities and subjectivities and communities of solidarity.

My approach to homeplace also draws on recent anthropological and geographical examinations of place as the historical result of cultural and environmental practices, social relations, and power struggles (Low and Lawrence-Zuniga 2003; Raffles 2002; Escobar, Rocheleau, and Kothari 2002; Escobar 2001; McDowell 1999; Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Basso and Feld 1996). My premise is that social and spatial processes are mutually constituted and that homeplace-making in the Colombia Pacific is an example of the spatialization of social and environmental relations, a process in which women have played a central role. In this chapter homeplace is defined as the process of physical and symbolic occupation, appropriation, and transformation of the natural surroundings into a familiar and intimate place for the production and reproduction of Afrocolombian culture. I use ethnographic data gathered among black communities in the coastal Chocó region (Camacho 2000, 1999) to show that for Afrocolombians, the construction and experience of place as a material ecological reality, a network of social relations and practices, and a set of intersecting meanings and memories is

based on their history of deterritorialization, emplacement, and resistance. I also show that the notion of homeplace is not confined to a domestic feminine domain but encompasses a larger socio-spatial reality that is constantly being made by material and cultural practices and social interactions. Homeplace-making can be summarized as the process by which space is made into homeplace.

The first section situates the larger context in which the Afrocolombian mobilization for ethnic and territorial rights has been taking place. The second section describes the gendered relation of Afrocolombians with different spaces or sites in their territory and the role of women in rituals of embodiment, emplacement, and identity construction. I then describe homegarden management as a feminine activity, which exemplifies the spatialization of social and ecological relations beyond the domestic realm. Finally, I briefly note some of the implications of civil war and forced displacement for black women in regards to their livelihoods, social relations, and identity.

#### The Territorialization of Culture: Afrocolombian Struggle To Be in Place<sup>1</sup>

Recent conceptualizations of space and place point to the mutual constitution of social and spatial processes, or the socio-spatial dialectic (Soja 1980). Scholars agree that “space” is not a neutral physical space but is shaped by the social relations, practices, identities, and meanings that occur in a geographical location. Space is not experienced homogeneously either; different social groups can use the same space in differing manners and endow it with varying meanings and values. Space is socially and heterogeneously constructed according to people’s class, gender, ethnicity, age, or ecological experience. Social relations are also expressed in space in the way individuals and collectivities appropriate and define space, its boundaries, and who and what is socially and spatially included or excluded. As noted by Lefebvre (1991:365), “socio-

political contradictions are realized spatially... [and] spatial contradictions ‘express’ conflicts between socio-political interests and forces.” In the Colombian Pacific, perceptions and experiences of space are intimately related to the process of social and cultural reconstitution and ecological adaptation to tropical rainforest environments of Afrocolombians who historically have been socioeconomically and geographically marginalized by Andean white and mestizo<sup>2</sup> powers.

For the past fifteen years Afrocolombian populations of the Pacific coast have been engaged in a systematic process of social organization and political mobilization for the right To Be, or to exist as citizens with full rights. The Afrocolombian social movement emerged and structured its claims in the context of national ethnic and place based political mobilizations that led to the 1991 constitutional recognition of the multiethnic and pluricultural nature of the Colombian nation. Drawing on the historical and political experience of indigenous peoples, and based on the International Labor Organization covenant on minority rights (Wouters 2001), members of the black movement identified themselves as an ethnic minority and posited cultural identity, territory, and autonomy as the pillars of their struggle. Cultural identity was defined on the basis of a shared experience of enslavement and incorporation into colonial socioeconomic structures, a common form of social organization centered on the extended family and kinship networks, a close interaction with nature, and a rich oral and musical tradition. The territory over which they claimed sovereignty was viewed as the concrete material space where their distinct culture and livelihoods were created and recreated for the past 200 years since their arrival from Africa. Although a large segment of Afrocolombians now live in urban areas, the black movement focused primarily on rural populations settled on the Pacific coast - a large swath of

rainforest that extends between Ecuador, Colombia and Panamá, and is one of the world's top 25 biodiversity hot spots.

The Pacific region is complex not only due to its biological and cultural diversity but to the diverse and contradictory socio-economic, political and cultural processes that are taking place as a result of state and private initiatives (Escobar and Pedrosa 1996, Escobar 2001, The Rapoport Center 2007, Flores and Millan 2007). Large-scale development projects are being negotiated, while environmentalist organizations, local social and ethnic movements, and some state agencies claim regional sustainable development initiatives and protection of common lands. Populations of the Pacific coast are already experiencing the social and environmental effects of accelerated land acquisition by outsiders for extensive cattle breeding, agroindustrial projects, tourist ventures, as well as unregulated fishing, timber extraction, mining, and cultivation of proscribed crops such as poppy and coca. More recently the extensive cultivation of oil palm for the production of various industrial goods, at the expense of the destruction of the forest and the radical transformation of local productive systems, has been promoted by the government as a major step towards the area's agricultural and rural development. The area also offers a strategic location for the establishment of corridors where coca and arms circulate between the Pacific Ocean and the interior of the country. Violent conflict among different armed sectors over control of the territory and its natural resources has forced people to leave and abandon their lands. Today, despite having one of the most ethnically diverse legislations in the world, Afrocolombians from the Pacific coast have been disproportionately affected by a degraded dynamics of terror of guerrilla, paramilitary, and the national army against unarmed civilians. The lack of political will and institutional capacity on the part of the state and

government agencies to deal with para-state forces to guarantee basic human rights is evident in the rising numbers of displaced Afrocolombians.

Afrocolombians are the descendants of enslaved Africans brought to Colombia in the VXII century to work in mining and plantations throughout the country after massive indigenous depopulation caused by disease, famine, warfare, and overexploitation. Since slavery was abolished in 1851, freed slaves working in the mining camps in the Pacific lowlands moved in all directions, colonizing rivers and founding coastal villages in a discontinuous settlement pattern. The new settlers developed subsistence economies based on a multiple, flexible, and seasonal exploitation of the different ecosystems (forests, rivers, mangroves, coasts) for hunting, gathering, mining, fishing, and farming. Afrocolombians in this region have been tied to national and international markets in sporadic extractive booms such as rubber, vegetable ivory, timber, mangrove bark, contraband, and more recently tourism, commerce, drug smuggling, and wage labor. Although the natural richness of the Pacific has enabled the accumulation of wealth in national Andean centers of power, the area has remained socio-economically marginal and has one of the highest poverty levels.

The Afrocolombian experience of adaptation, modification and regulation of the complex terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems is illustrative of the transformation of space into place. This is captured in Escobar, Rocheleau, and Kothari's (2002:29) definition of place as "the ensemble of relations and practices between the natural and the social worlds at the level of body, home, habitat, and community. In place we thus find a convergence of nature and culture, women and environment, ethnicity and ecology." Place in the Colombian Pacific is made up of different sites or places whose appropriation, use and management is based on a spatial and gendered division of labor. Sites are not only for productive activities but are also for entertainment, play and ritual.

Place has been summarized by black women activists as “where the social matrix is woven generation after generation” (Grueso and Arroyo 2002).

Historically this area has been designated a national forest reserve although it is home to rural and urban Afrocolombian communities and various indigenous groups and mestizo settlements. In the 1980s, indigenous reserves were established and legalized based on ancestral rights claims and arguments about the harmonious indigenous-environmental relationship but blacks were regarded as uneducated colonizers without culture. The emerging black movement, however, with the support of indigenous leaders and mestizo collaborators, also initiated claims over territorial rights and substantiated them with arguments about the sustainability of their productive practices and rich cultural traditions. In 1993, a very progressive legislative measure granted special cultural and territorial rights to Afrocolombians as an ethnic minority. In a short period, blacks moved from historical invisibility at the margins to the center stage of national ethnic politics.

The black movement’s demands for ethnic and territorial recognition against the interests of the state, private investors, and mestizo colonists have privileged the abstract political concept of territory as the bounded site of ethnic sovereignty. The cultural, geopolitical, and biogeographic conceptualization of territory and territoriality (Wouters 2001), and territory-region (PCN 1996-1998) as the autonomous place for the reproduction of a distinct culture has been instrumental to frame and sustain Afrocolombian demands. The use of the concept of territory, however, often obscures the complex, multiple, affective, and gendered relationship of black communities with home-place. A more comprehensive perspective has been proposed by the women from the Network of Black Women of the Pacific (Grueso and Arroyo 2002:63) who assert that “First we want for all black women to harbor the Pacific in their hearts and minds, that

is for all women to have the political awareness of the ethno-cultural and territorial rights...

Second, we wish for all black women to understand and embrace the problematic and aspirations of the Black Community as a people, and for us to express and mobilize our needs and interests as black women from within the Black Community.”

For Afrocolombians, the construction and experience of homeplace as a material ecological reality, a network of social relations and practices, and a set of intersecting meanings and memories is the result of a history of deterritorialization, emplacement, and resistance. In the following section I examine different aspects of place-making focusing on the gendered dimensions of the spatialization of these processes and practices.

#### Making Homeplace at the Margins

bell hooks (1990a) has argued that homeplace, however fragile, for Afrodescendants has never been politically neutral because homes were places that enabled slaves to become dignified subjects, rather than objects, and where people could return to heal and recover their wholeness and humanity. Homeplaces also enabled the constitution of communities of resistance and solidarity in the midst of a situation of exclusion and domination. In the context of heightened uncertainty, as was the case of Africans in the Americas in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the current situation of rural Afrocolombians, the construction of a secure and safe place is a fundamental part of an ongoing political power struggle (Harvey 1996). As hooks notes, homeplace-making was a central dimension of black women’s everyday domestic labor in the U.S. and had a powerful political meaning vis a vis the hostility of the public world.

In Colombia, black women’s history is inscribed in a context of patriarchal power, colonial domination, violence, and cultural and spatial fragmentation and marginalization. Since their inception as slaves valued for the productive function of their bodies and the reproduction

of free labor for slave owners, black women have been central to the reconstitution of the black family and kinship networks, the recreation of the spiritual and cultural world, and in remembering the social fabric through homeplace-making.<sup>3</sup> Although Afrocolombian social organization and family structure is the result of specific regional developments and social, religious and economic influences, since colonial times women have had a salient role consolidating descent and domestic systems. Scholars explain matrilineal kinship patterns and a positive valuation of a prolific maternity and extended family as the result of the identification of children of slave women through maternal lines due to the fact that women were forced to have multiple sexual partners in slave camps and paternal relations were not encouraged by slave owners (Motta 1993; Gutiérrez 1968; Romero 1995; Zuluaga and Bermúdez 1997). Mothers and grandmothers became the most stable and cohesive social figures, and their multiple unions became a strategy to expand alliances through feminine lines (Losonczy 1997). The high spatial mobility of black men who historically have engaged in various productive activities (mining, fishing, hunting, off-farm wage labor) throughout the year, have contributed to the reproduction of this particular form of social organization. While young Afrocolombian women are also highly mobile, mature women tend to stay in place where their domestic and productive roles are visible and socially recognized. Much of their activism focuses on achieving and maintaining rights to and control over spatial resources that sustain everyday life.

During slavery, home-making in the Colombian Pacific took different forms according to local environmental and socioeconomic conditions. A shared element was the constitution of domestic communities in slave camps and palenques, or refuge sites, established by runaways deep into the forest, which operated as communities of resistance with varying degrees of success. These were occasionally shared with indigenous groups with whom slaves shared

escape and penetration routes. Upon manumission, the home-making process continued with the rapid colonization of marginal and uninhabited or sparsely populated areas along rivers and estuaries. In the Chocó, the dominating settlement pattern was the establishment of indigenous villages in inaccessible riverheads on the mountains and black villages along rivers and coasts. The first black individuals and families that arrived to the northern coasts of Chocó occupied the estuaries where they could easily use the resources offered by coastal, riverine, and mangrove ecosystems. They also cleared patches of land in different areas taking advantage of different topographic and soil conditions in fertile alluvial terraces, dry slopes, and flooding areas. The discontinuity in the settlement pattern is also reflected in the discontinuous productive, recreational, and ritual sites established in the region.

Afrocolombians developed subsistence economies based on a multiple, flexible, and seasonal exploitation of the different ecosystems such as forests, rivers, mangroves, estuaries, and coasts for hunting, gathering, mining, fishing, swidden agriculture, and wage labor. The landscape was appropriated following a clear division of labor: first men cleared or “tamed” the wild primary forest (monte bravo) and then women joined in the planting of staples such as corn, plantain, various tubers, and fruit trees. Traditionally, hunting, fishing, and clearing the forest have been masculine activities, while women are in charge of creating and tending the domestic spaces of the home and surrounding home gardens.

The physical appropriation and transformation of the landscape was matched by the symbolic appropriation of space through place naming. Mountains, valleys, river courses, beaches or settlements, were endowed with a rich and sonorous toponymy of mixed indigenous, Spanish, and African-derived words. Through time the landscape has been transformed into a readable entity embodying people’s particular history, social relations, moral teachings, and

ecological knowledge. The relationship of Afrocolombian men and women with the landscape is reminiscent of the situated intimacy of Amazonian river dwellers described by Raffles (2002), which involves local knowledge of nature rooted in practice, experience, and, most importantly, affect.

In a parallel process, the Andean centers of power designated these marginal lands as empty national lands (Baldíos Nacionales) to be protected under the national forest reserve legislation. Since the term baldío literally means empty, this move explicitly overlooked the existence of black and indigenous communities and their rights to the territories they occupied. By assuming sovereign control of these strategic areas and the resources therein, the state claimed the exclusive right to use and/or grant concessions or property titles to third parties. This legislative measure was disputed in the late 1980s when local communities and organizations initiated their territorial claims on the grounds of an ancestral occupation of the land, and the cultural practices that have enabled the perpetuation of peoples and ecosystems through time.

#### The Obligada: Embodying and Placing Gender Identity

Throughout the material process of place-making and the symbolic and ritual appropriation of the territory and its resources, Afrocolombians have developed an extensive environmental knowledge and have carved out their individual and collective ethnic, and gender identities. Black women play a significant role in life cycle rituals, which reflect a group's particular cosmology and serve to establish a specific relationship with the world and society. At birth midwives and grandmothers in the Pacific perform initiation rituals to welcome the newborn and upon death they sing ritual songs (alabaos) and prayers during the wake to facilitate the transit of the dead into the afterworld. A common practice when a child is born is to bury the placenta and the umbilical cord under a tree to connect the newborn to a specific place. This first literal and

symbolic grounding provides a sense of belonging, and people often identify home as the place where the navel is buried.

Another salient rite of passage in the Pacific known as the ombligada, or navel curing, is performed on the newborn soon after. In this ritual, elements from the environment are incorporated materially and symbolically into a person's body to endow him/her with the attributes and powers of each substance. This propitiatory rite is carried out by mothers, grandmothers or midwives after a child's birth, and consists of placing a series of ground animal, vegetable or mineral substances into the infant's navel. The navel curing is done several times a day until the navel is dry. The body of the child becomes a receptacle for the powers of the local environment and the embodied powers are later expressed in the form of personality traits, behaviors, or attributes for succeeding in life. For instance, the tapir's claw provides strength, the tree bark provides endurance, and earthworms or eels grant protection during fights by making the person's body "slippery". Some of these items are used for both girls and boys for whom physical strength is desirable. Men and women experience great pride and pleasure with a strong, healthy and well-shaped body. Hard labor, economic independence, and spatial mobility are also positively valued among men and women as qualities that will facilitate their survival and success during times of hardship. However, certain elements, like silver or gold, which may work positively to bring luck and fortune to men may cause girls to never settle down but always be on the move, without any stability, and running from the hands of men like money does. Following the same logic, some substances are specifically employed to endow girls with desired feminine qualities and skills or propitiate positive outcomes. This includes items such as wood from a kitchen spoon to be a good cook, wood from a house post to have a home in adulthood, or a medicinal plant to have curing powers. These products are also found in domestic or feminine spaces. Some of the substances

used for boys are only found in the areas where men's activities take place: the sea and the forest. Places, the resources associated with them, and the meanings of those places are thus embodied in the individual.

As Escobar (2001: 143) has noted with respect to the articulation of place, body, and environment, all cultural practices are emplaced and culture is carried into places by bodies. The ombligada is another way to ground people physically and symbolically in place, while reaffirming the gendered nature of space, and reasserting particular gender identities through the use of specific products from the surrounding environment. The burial of the umbilical cord and the placenta, and the curing of the navel connect people with their natural surroundings in concrete embodied and emplaced cultural practices. Nurturing and caring feminine practices like these among blacks in the Colombian Pacific, which foster familiarity and intimacy with the surrounding environment, are reminiscent of hooks' argument about the role of black women in the creation of a much needed sense of belonging, grounding, and identity for marginalized African Americans.

### Gendering Space

Feminist geographers (Rose 1993; McDowell 1999; Pollock 1988) have argued that space is not gender neutral and that social asymmetries are expressed in the way space is organized and segregated for inclusion or exclusion. Although their work is largely focused on the analysis of productive/public and reproductive/private spheres in modern Western societies, they trace this dichotomous separation as a particular development of the historical process of industrial capitalism and urban bourgeois domesticity. They also note that social asymmetries are expressed in the social and economic devaluation of the feminized reproductive/private realm.

The Afrocolombian gendering of space in Chocó is a combination of local concepts of gender and material practices but the sociospatial organization of labor rests on the social, productive, and spatial complementarity of men and women and the positive valuation of each gender's roles. In coastal Chocó the primary unit of social organization and work is the family, and farming is the productive activity around which all other endeavors revolve. At times of labor shortages, cooperative and reciprocal work forms such as minga (collective work) and cambio de mano (reciprocity among individuals) are used. Productive and domestic activities are complementary activities; some are performed collectively by the entire family and others are exclusively masculine and/or feminine. Women take part in agriculture, fishing, markets, and trade in addition to the traditional domestic tasks in spaces around the house. With the exception of the privately owned agricultural lands and village lots, most areas are commons or public lands used interchangeably by men and women. Customary property rights are passed in a bilateral pattern of inheritance and men and women have the same inheritance rights over family possessions. Land rights are also acquired through the investment of labor and purchase.

Personal research (Camacho and Tapia 1997) on the sociospatial organization of labor has identified eight major activity sites: house, village, river, beach, sea, mangrove, wild forest, and tame forest, which have a rough correspondence with local ecosystems and are classified according to social and ecological criteria. The main classificatory criterion is the degree of human intervention, which influences vegetation cover, the presence of wild animals and other nonhuman beings, and the type and intensity of social activity. The activity areas can be arranged in a flexible continuum from wild/masculine/untamed to tame/feminine/domestic. A similar classificatory scheme has also been found among other Afrocolombian populations (Restrepo 1996). Wild or primary forest (monte bravo) is characterized by thick vegetation, and is home to

wild beasts, dangerous and poisonous animals or avichuchos, and nonhuman beings. This is a male area par excellence used for hunting, timber extraction, and gathering of potent medicinal plants, and where women go once men “tame” it by clearing it for agriculture. Taming is possible because men are endowed with the physical strength necessary to undertake the arduous and risky task of clearing a perceived dangerous and wild place.<sup>4</sup> “Men’s work is in the forest, the wild forest must be tamed by men, men belong in the forest, felling the monte bravo is men’s work.” Tame refers to a condition resulting from human intervention, which makes possible the socialization of space through productive labor. When the primary forest becomes a monte amansado (tame forest) it becomes a safe space for women and children, who participate in the planting and harvesting of crops. The river, the beach, the sea, and the mangrove are spaces for work and entertainment for men and women, and whose appropriation involves human presence and work.

The village and the house are at the other end of the spectrum and symbolize the main areas of human intervention and activity. The village is perceived as the place for socialization, wage work and institutional interaction with the various state and private services. According to local inhabitants “The town is for everyone, it is said that men belong in the street because they go out and drink and fight but women also go in the street to chat, run errands and dance. The home however, is mostly female: there is the kitchen, the hearth and the garden”. The home, in turn, is a humanized and feminine space and a center of biological and social reproduction. In the Chocó coast, the home is a space that synthesizes social, ecological, economic, and cultural relationships of Afrocolombians with the larger sites of the territory. The home is where material and energy fluxes converge in the form of crops, foods, plants, and building materials that are brought to the

home from the sea, the river, the mangrove, the forest, and the village to be processed, transformed, consumed or stored.

The home defines women's economic and social roles and identities in the organization and reproduction of the family and the kinship group. The historical value of black women's socioeconomic role, their centrality in social organization and in the transmission of cultural patterns since their introduction as slaves in the seventeenth century, has been widely acknowledged in Afrocolombian scholarship. Some authors even characterize Afrocolombian family and social organization as matrifocal and matrilineal given the historical consolidation of lineages and kinship ties around African women who were forced to have multiple sexual partners to reproduce slave labor and whose children were identified through maternal descent (see Camacho 2004 for an overview). Although the heterogeneity of black social organization and family structure has been increasingly recognized, the importance of women's domestic role is undisputed. In domestic spaces, culture and memories are transmitted orally from elders and mothers to children through teachings and the daily repetition of various tasks. Homes are also places where women sustain life, symbolically and materially, from beginning to end: childbirth, daily processing and preparation of meals, various health and healing practices, and the performance of funerary rituals.

Another domestic feminine task is the cultivation of a wide variety of plants for food and medicine in home gardens. These gardening practices are fundamental to the process of home-making for they not only provide various benefits for local livelihoods and social well-being but because they are means by which the landscape is humanized and transformed in subtle but significant and meaningful ways.

## Home gardens and Zoteas

Home gardens are microenvironments within larger agricultural systems that concentrate diverse species with economic, nutritional, and medicinal functions (Eyzaguirre and Linares 2004). In the Pacific Chocó, home gardens include a wide variety of multipurpose native and introduced trees, shrubs, and herbs in heterogeneous arrangements, which contribute to in situ agrobiodiversity maintenance and household well-being. In the spaces surrounding the home, the front garden, the back patio, and the raised garden, or zotea, women cultivate a wide variety of medicinal, culinary, ornamental, and “power plants” of social, cultural, and biological relevance. Species grown in domestic spaces complement the agricultural crops cultivated in family fields and the wild plants from the primary forest but management practices differ for each. Gardens contain more species diversity but fewer numbers of individual plants, which, according to local women, must be cared for as if they are family. In a socioeconomically marginal place such as the coastal Chocó, this diversity is strategic for broadening the household productive, economic, medicinal, and nutritional range of options. Sound management of this local diversity has enabled local populations to be autonomous and self-sufficient until recent times.

For Afrocolombians, garden management is a feminine task that begins during childhood in the family home and is reinforced when a woman signals her adult status by establishing a family in a separate house with her own garden. An abundant garden is a source of pride and prestige for women and is a vehicle for engaging in a productive network of exchanges, in which plants, seeds, recipes, stories, and a vast knowledge accumulated through oral tradition circulate among family members and neighbors. Plants have cultural and social meanings not only because of their everyday use but because they are identity markers for women and Afrocolombians with a tradition of plant use and plant lore. This knowledge is passed from one

generation to the next through medicinal preparations, recipes, songs, culinary traditions, stories, and jokes. Plants cannot be divorced from the social organization and social networks because in the small villages of the Pacific, if a community member requests a certain plant, it cannot be denied; plants are always given as gifts, only a few herbs, such as green onions, are sold. A woman who does not grow plants or tend a garden is frowned upon because she cannot engage in reciprocal exchange relations. According to local women, an empty garden is like a naked woman.

Chocoan women's home garden cultivation practices are based upon agronomic and cultural principles of soils, water, plant ecology, and the social function of plants. The spatial distribution of the plants around the house is based on plant use and habit. The front garden, which faces the principal communication and circulation avenue (the river or the street), is planted with bushy ornamental or luxury plants as well as those used for protection against evil and for courting good luck. Luxury plants often lack a local term because they are generally obtained from mestizos or brought from the interior of the country to emulate the Andean garden, well known for its exuberant ornamental vegetation. The space behind the house is the patio, where a random combination of herbaceous and brushy plants, as well as fruit and palm trees and a few crops are planted, forming agroecosystems of varying complexities. The patio is an open space surrounding the kitchen, where family members gather to talk while cooking or doing domestic chores. In the patio are the zoteas (elevated gardens) located close to the kitchen for convenience and security. They have two very important functions: they are used to cultivate medicinal, culinary, and aromatic herbs, and they also serve as nurseries to germinate fruit trees that are later transplanted to the agricultural fields, or fincas.

Raised gardens are evidence of local people's accumulated practical knowledge of and experience with various technologies for plant cultivation in tropical rainforests. They are also dynamic miniature agricultural domestic systems, which function as a link in the chain of energy fluxes that circulate through natural and cultural processes across the different spaces of the territory. Zoteas are made with old wooden canoes or wooden structures supported by wood from the forest or mangrove stilts. The plants and seeds are grown in a fertile substratum or compost made of decomposing leaves (hojarasca), rotting wood, sand, ashes, and ant soil from leaf cutting ants found in the forest. The hojarasca is composed of forest leaves that fall in the river and are washed away into the ocean; during high tide they are deposited on the beach, where they are gathered together with sand and small pieces of driftwood. Zoteas are made entirely with recyclable materials. The elevated structure offers protection from domestic animals and floods produced by heavy rainfall and allows for drainage and air circulation. In areas with nutrient-poor soils, the use of fertile substratum is an efficient strategy that takes advantage of local organic resources for cultivation. The substratum is a pH neutral soil rich in potassium and phosphorous, as well as plant-fungi interactions (mycorrhizas), which enhance nutrient assimilation and plant growth. The germination of seeds under these conditions gives a comparative advantage to the plants and fruit trees that are later transplanted to forest areas with low fertility conditions and compact soils. The soils and the surrounding wild vegetation in different habitats are in turn improved by the presence of the mycorrhizas present in the new trees.

In a subtle but very efficient manner, localized home gardening knowledge, experimentation, and women's practices connect the domestic space with the forest and contribute to the enhancement of biodiversity throughout the territory, as more resilient plants

are propagated. Fruit tree planting also reaffirms the cultural appropriation of the territory by different means: unlike plants that self-propagate, such as bananas and plantains or “walking trees”, fruit trees with steady roots have been used as boundary markers between family fields, local Afrocolombian communities, and indigenous lands. Because trees are individually owned and inherited, they are an important part of local customary rights, upon which black communities have based their legal land claims.

Home garden management is thus an aspect of the spatialization of social and environmental relations and knowledge in domestic settings and beyond. Women’s plant cultivation practices are another dimension of homeplace-making defined as the process of physical and symbolic appropriation of the natural surroundings into a familiar and intimate place where Afrocolombian culture has been created and recreated. Contrary to outside notions of the Pacific as a vast empty space, it is an occupied and meaningful place, marked by people’s everyday interactions with each other and with nature. Recently, however, Afrocolombian homeplaces and communities have been disrupted by the forced internal displacements occurring in the Pacific as the result of armed disputes over the control of this geographically strategic and resource rich area by various actors with distinct economic and political interests. This displacement has been termed a “humanitarian catastrophe” (Rosero 2002) because of the dramatic socioeconomic and cultural consequences for the vulnerable ethnic populations caught in the middle of a war in which they do not belong.

#### Deterritorialization and Terror: Displacing Homeplace

“Violence against women is to take away their right to their territory, is to force women to leave their territory, attempt against us, our culture, our territory, our way of life, force us to submit to different rhythms to those of our culture. It is

this discrimination to which we have been subject since times past, also the racial discrimination which society forces on us, is the mistreatment we receive for being displaced and being black”.

Testimony of a displaced Afrocolombian woman (Ilsa 2002)

Henri Lefebvre (1991:365) has noted that “socio-political contradictions are realized spatially... [and] spatial contradictions ‘express’ conflicts between socio-political interests and forces.” In the Colombian Pacific, paradoxically, just as the long process of homeplace-making began to be formalized with the recognition of ethno-territorial rights for Afrocolombians, this spatially, economically, and historically marginalized population began to experience the impact of a brutal war that has forced them to abandon their homelands. Displacement is part of an economic and political strategy on the part of various interest groups. These groups are disputing territorial control over the geopolitically strategic and resource-rich areas (including minerals, timber, biodiversity, marine resources) and the land available for large development projects and agribusiness (mostly African oil palm and coca). For Afrocolombians, the current forced internal displacement is part of a series of systematic and deliberate actions conducive to the war and to the development model, which sees in the forest a vast empty space to be transformed for energy, mining, communication, and recreational projects (Rosero 2002). In the last few years this dispute in the Pacific region has not only grown but has come to involve flagrant violations of human rights by means of intimidation and terror that include homicides, selective deaths, massacres, kidnapping, rape, and forced recruitment, disappearance, and displacement (ILSA 2001).

Some of these violations were long anticipated, but institutional interventions pre and post-conflict have been inefficient, dispersed, weak, and sporadic. There is no neutral space for

civil society. Those who decide to resist in place or to return face restricted mobility, controlled access to food, forced labor and sexual services, theft, rape, and the constant threat of death.

Those who leave find themselves in a state of great economic, nutritional, health, psychological, and social vulnerability (The Rapoport Center 2007). By disrupting and uprooting communities and social networks, displacement creates new notions of home, identity, citizenship, community, knowledge, and rights. Women's frustration and aspiration is summarized in a succinct testimony: "We want to live free, armed actors force us to live without feet to walk, without hands to work, and without mouths to talk" (Ilsa 2002).

According to different sources, displaced population numbers range from 600,000 to three million (Red de Solidaridad Social 2002; CODHES 2006). Despite the lack of complete and reliable statistics, and disaggregation by ethnicity, there is consensus that both indigenous and black communities from the Pacific are among the most affected communities by this chronic crisis. Official reports (RSS 2002), estimate that 17.7% of the total displaced population is Afrocolombian and 47% are women. For ethnic groups, forced displacement means breaking away from two constitutive elements of their identity and historical experience: the collectivity and the territory (Jimeno 2001). Ethnic organizations and social movements are also experiencing political and organizational dispersal, which weakens their ability and strength to mobilize politically for what has been called "the ancestral mandate": defense of the territory, identity, and autonomy. With the dismemberment of the community and the unavailability of refuge areas, the options for cultural reconstitution and territorial thought are no longer available (Vasco 2001). The current loss of physical and symbolic homeplace and social and territorial autonomy has been identified by black leaders as one of the greatest aggressions in a series of violent acts against Afrodescendants in the past 150 years (Rosero 2002). Afrocolombian men

have been targets of violence by armed groups either as direct victims or have been forced to join various armies as soldiers. For women, who migrate alone or with their families, displacement often means becoming the head of a household with all the associated economic and social responsibilities. In urban centers, Afrocolombian women are subject to discrimination on the basis of race and gender and as a desplazado (displaced) person, who is ambiguously perceived as a victim of violence but also a potential threat. In many cases of family migration, women also report increases in intra-household violence (ILSA 2001).

Displaced Afrocolombians are faced with the challenge of reconfiguring fragmented collectivities and identities and restituting their dignity in a new process of homeplace-making at the margins. This requires new social identities, relations, and skills to navigate and survive in unfamiliar hostile settings, which are primarily urban and mestizo. Women have been instrumental to the reconstitution of the black family and kinship networks, the re-creation of the spiritual and cultural world, and in re-membering the social fabric through place-making of home-making. This devastating situation means the loss of those sites of resistance, dignity, and solidarity women have helped to build with their work, their songs, their wisdom, and their memories. The effects of the de-territorialization are not limited to the geographical territory, but include the loss of the homeplace - the space for the creation and re-creation of culture. The loss of familiar social and territorial references involves the reorganization of social and spatial relations in non-places, which are defined by McDowell (1996: 6) as “those locations in the contemporary world where the transactions and interactions that take place are between anonymous individuals often stripped of all symbols of social identity.”

Afrocolombian women, however, are not passive or helpless victims; in the process of inclusion and exclusion in new urban environments, displaced black women resort to a creative

use of knowledge, strengths, and skills to maximize material and symbolic resources to re-appropriate and re-signify new spaces and forge a new sense of place permeated by recent memories of home. In their attempts to carve out new homeplaces and re-member fractured subjectivities and collectivities, new social and environmental relations are spatialized in domestic and public ambits and novel cultural forms and identities emerge. In the midst of tensions and contradictions, women capitalize on ethnic stereotypes of black women's domesticity to find economic opportunities as maids, cooks, street food vendors, and small merchants, thereby establishing family and regional networks and "ethnicizing" the informal economy, the labor market, the cultural composition of cities and neighborhoods, and the tastes and culinary choices of urban communities. Afrocolombian women's practices of everyday resistance continue to focus on the material, spatial, and symbolic resources of their (new) homeplace, in both the public and private domain. Their strength is sustained by a tradition of struggle for the right To Be in place in contexts of social inequities, racial discrimination and exclusion.

#### Notes

\* Afrocolombians are a very diverse population and so are their historical, environmental, socioeconomic, and cultural experiences. I draw primarily on data from fishing and agricultural communities in the northern Pacific coast.

2 Mestizos or mixed blood are people of mixed indigenous and white descent and today constitute the majority of the Colombian population.

3 Elsewhere I have argued that the Colombian literature on Afrocolombian women, mostly written by mestizos and according to white/mestizo notions of femininity, is still incipient,

fragmentary, and riddled by contradictory and essentialist representations that range from the mythical matriarch to the victimized slave (Camacho 2004).

4 Taming does not mean violent confrontation, domination or domestication, but transformation. Afrocolombians do not see their relationship with nature as one of human control over it. By this, however, I do not want to romanticize their environmental relationships nor characterize all their environmental actions as benign or sustainable.

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