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**AFRO-COLOMBIANS AND THE ENCROACHMENT OF PARAMILITARIES
ON THE AFRICAN PALM OIL SECTOR**

BY:

Stacie Hecht

**B.A., ENGLISH, UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA, 2010
B.A., ANTHROPOLOGY, UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA, 2010
M.A., ANTHROPOLOGY, UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO, 2014**

THESIS

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ABSTRACT

The African palm oil industry in Colombia has burgeoned in the last decade, with state-sanctioned promotions and new developmental productions for the expansion of these plantations seeking to provide economic stability for the country. In addition, with the passing of the Free Trade Agreement between the United States and Colombia in 2011, as well as deals with several European countries for the exportation of the product, comes an even greater demand than previously known for the industry. However, the continuation of this endeavor will lead to the devastation of the bio-diverse lands being used for economic gains. Furthermore, palm oil production on the Pacific coast of Colombia comes at the cost of tens of thousands of Afro-Colombians being forcibly displaced from their homes, forcing them to be part of one of the largest groups of internalized refugees in the world. When modernity comes with such grave consequences, what is to be done? In this project, I investigate the forced displacement of Afro-Colombians on the Pacific coast of Colombia due to the encroachment of paramilitaries, who are operating in cooperation with the Colombian government, army, and multinationals in order to expand the production of African palm oil plantations. While conducting ethnographic fieldwork in Bogotá during the summer of 2013, I focused on the following research question: In what ways does the history of racialized discourses against Afro-Colombian communities contribute to human rights violations in Colombia? Academic literature regarding minorities in the country remains ambiguous about currently internalized Afro-Colombian refugees as a result of African palm oil production, and the state remains largely silent (Walsh 2004; 2007).

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Figure 1. Current map of Colombia (source: http://www.cja.org/img/original/colombia_map.jpg)

CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

The state no longer protects its own disadvantaged citizens—they are already seen as dead within a transnational economic and political framework. Specific populations now occupy a globalized space of ruthless politics in which the categories of ‘citizen’ and ‘democratic representation,’ once integral to national politics, are no longer recognized (Giroux 2006:182)

The African palm oil¹ industry in Colombia has burgeoned in the last decade, with state-sanctioned promotions and new developmental production for the expansion of African palm oil plantations² that the central government sees as part of providing economic stability for the country. In addition, the passage of the Free Trade Agreement between the United States and Colombia in 2011, as well as deals with several European countries for the exportation of the product, has developed an even greater demand than previously known for the palm oil industry. However, the implementation of this mono-crop as a major export has so far led and will continue to lead, I argue, to an ongoing socio-economic and cultural devastation of the inhabitants of the bio-diverse lands on the Pacific coast and their communities. With the flourishing palm oil industry making hundreds of millions annually, Afro-Colombians living in the Pacific coastal region of Colombia find themselves at a grave disadvantage, and the sacrifice of lands and human rights increasingly endangers the lives of individuals and communities, especially due to paramilitary presence.

¹ Palm oil, as I will discuss in detail, is used in a variety of popular cookies, candies, and crackers. Its uses also include being cheaper alternative to butter, a “cleaner” cooking oil, an ingredient in makeup, a replacement for sunflower oil in soaps, and can be used as a bio-fuel, to name a few. It is used by some of the biggest brands in the America, including Kraft (Cool-Whip and Jell-O), Clorox (Burt’s Bees), and Burger King (Palm Oil Scorecard: Ranking America’s Biggest Brands on Their Commitment to Deforestation-Free Palm Oil (2014).

² After paramilitary groups clear the lands, private U.S. or European companies, in association with private Colombian contractors, come in and establish these plantations. Some of these contractors (i.e. [Coproagrosur](#)) have been indicted for human rights violations and their cooperation with paramilitary forces (Ballvé 2009), but the majority of contractors and privately traded corporations (for example, Acepalma, Corponariño, Cordeagropaz) are thriving (Maughan 2011).

In this project, I investigate the forced displacement of Afro-Colombians on the Pacific coast of Colombia and attribute this to the encroachment of paramilitary forces working in cooperation with the Colombian government, army, and multinationals in order to expand the production of African palm oil plantations. While conducting fieldwork in Bogotá during the summer of 2013, I focused on the following research questions: What are the specific effects of palm oil cultivation on Afro-Colombian communities? As the demand for palm oil increases, how will the detrimental effects on the lands affect the future of these communities? And lastly, in what ways does the history of racialized discourses within Colombia shape human rights violations against Afro-Colombian communities during the palm oil boom?

These questions require a discussion of several large issues in Colombian history and society: the history of race and the formation of minority identities in Colombia, particularly in the wake of the 1991 Constitution; the neoliberal model Colombia has embraced since the 1980s; and, the formation of armed groups, particularly the paramilitaries during the last half of the 20th century, and their effects on rural zones such as the Pacific Coast. In that light, this study builds on existing scholarship, and elaborates scholarly analysis of racial ideologies and the logic of forced displacement on Colombia's Pacific coastal region. While there have been several important ethnographic studies regarding the marginality of Afro-Colombians (see Offen 2003; Wade 1995; 1999; 2004) as well as human rights violations and forced displacement (see Oslender 2002; 2007; Tate 2007), there has been a lack of significant research directly connecting the expansion of African palm oil production to the growing populations of internalized refugees throughout the country.

In this thesis, I will first discuss the history of Afro-descended presence in Colombia, starting from the 1500s with the slave trade, and offer insight into how Afro-Colombians

were made to feel invisible since the 16th century. I will then go into detail about the formation of paramilitary groups, the history of African palm oil's introduction into Colombia and the continually growing demand for this product, and Colombia's plans to continue following the neoliberal model in order to seek economic stability. I will then begin an in-depth discussion of my fieldwork while in Colombia from June through July of 2013.

While in Bogotá, I conducted four interviews that informed my research. I met with an economics professor at the Universidad de los Andes, as well as three United States Embassy officials. I also traveled several times to the Archivo General de la Nación Colombia (national archives) to informally meet with employees and discuss my research. In this time, I gained several new contacts and was able to view records relating to Afro-Colombian history and representation. As I had suspected, the records on Afro-Colombians offered no discussion of African palm oil production. However, this lack of information helped me to confirm that there is little to no discourse concerning the direct relation of Afro-Colombian displacement and African palm oil production on the Pacific coast. I will end my thesis by offering my arguments for the future of this seemingly overlooked issue. What is to be done when hundreds of millions of dollars are at stake, and those directly affected are seen as disposable casualties in the reach for economic expansion and profit?

AFRO-COLOMBIANS: A REVIEW

Afro-Colombians and Afro-Descended groups throughout Latin America have to fight for “a larger democratic project to decentralize the state and open new spheres for popular participation” (Van Cott 2000:257). There must be a shift away from the ideological hegemony Afro-descended groups find themselves inextricably linked to (*see* Valencia 2009), but how?

An important aspect of my research centers on how the identity “Afro-Colombian” has come into being in the last five or six decades. Mobilizations around issues concerning human rights, racial discrimination, the histories of slavery and labor, and the ownership of land have greatly contributed to the formation of Afro-Colombian identity. Institutional space facilitating the creation of this identity occurred in the passage of the 1991 Constitution (Rappaport and Dover 1996; Oslender 2007:341), but as Catherine Walsh notes, Afro-Colombians still often feel forgotten: “Their presence [is] literally and figuratively in the shadow of the indigenous” (2007:202). Calling them *los últimos otros*³, Walsh highlights the anxiety felt by Afro-Colombians, who for centuries did not willingly or comfortably identify with either a phenotypic label (“*negro*”) or with African origin, nor in any way did they receive social acknowledgement as a specific minority group. Their history is still considered by some as being “contrived” or “invented” when compared to that of indigenous peoples, mestizos, and Spanish inhabitants (Walsh 2007). Yet, some sources (Walsh 2007; Oslender 2002) note that Afro-descended populations outnumber those of indigenous populations, and have been living in the country since the 16th century. The government census of 2007 stated that one million Afro-descended peoples live in the Pacific coastal region, the majority in Quibdó, Buenaventura, Tumaco, and Guapi, with around forty percent living in the smaller, more rural areas; around ten million Afro-Colombians live in the country as a whole (Oslender 2007:54). As in other Latin American countries, discourses of minority land rights, which set out to demarcate and collectively title land claims (Offen 2003:43), have been the platform for the organization of Afro-descended

³ “The last others” is in reference to Afro-Colombians’ occupied space in the racialized and hierarchical system in place in Colombia, according to Walsh (2007). The social classification of blackness comes at the bottom of the hierarchical system, which was established during colonization.

communities. In Colombia, the *First Meeting of Black Communities* was held in July 1990, making proposals for rights to be protected under the new constitution (Wade 1995:347). During these meetings, the head of the Colombian Institute of Anthropology declared *los negros* to be peasants and proletarians, not an ethnic group; but at the same time, new laws were put in place to combat discrimination, provide access to credit, and improve education (Wade 1995:349). On an official level, Afro-Colombians were included for the first time on the 1993 census, although only 1.5% of the total population (around 502,000) self-identified as Afro-Colombian; it was actually estimated that in 1993 there were around 20% Afro-descended peoples living in Colombia (Quiñonez 2007:215), so why the lack of identification with the Afro-Colombian ethnonym? Quiñonez suggests the low numbers resulted from the inability of census officials to gather data from the largely isolated rural areas where concentrated numbers of Afro-Colombians live⁴.

Much research done regarding Afro-Colombians seeks to highlight the historical trajectory of land entitlements after Afro-Colombians were officially counted in the census (Wade 1995; Escobar 2008; Yelvington 2001; Browitt 2001) and the insurgencies that occurred after such land entitlements were given, most notably beginning in 1996 (Hristov 2009; Tate 2007; Walsh 2007; Wade 1995; Oslender 2008), which I will discuss shortly. Additionally, the constitution of 1991, which replaced the constitution of 1886, contained clauses recognizing the “multiethnic and pluricultural” character of the nation, which theoretically supports the formation of Afro-Colombian identity in the political arena (Wade 1995; Field 1996; Asher 2007; Oslender 2007). After Afro-Colombians were recognized as

⁴ It should be noted that the estimate has dropped over the past decade, indicating Afro-Colombians make up around 10.6% of the overall population; however, this is a highly problematic estimation, with no verified percentage available. Claims can range anywhere from this 10.6% estimation all the way up to 26%, which I believe is a more accurate approximation. This inconsistency found with approximations of demographics can also be noted with Indigenous populations in Colombia, which vary anywhere from 1% to 3.4%.

an ethnic group (Oslender 2007; 2002; Quiñonez 2007), Transitory Article 55 also recognized collective property rights for Afro-Colombians who had been occupying *tierras baldías* in the rural riverine zones of the Pacific Basin. The article also protected cultural identity and promoted economic and social development (Wade 1995). Furthermore, Law 70 – initiated in August of 1993 – was implemented less than a year after a special commission was created to review Article 55, supposedly cementing the promise to Afro-Colombians for land rights. See below an excerpt from Article 55:

“Dentro de los dos años siguientes a la entrada en vigencia de la presente Constitución, el Congreso expedirá, previo estudio por parte de una comisión especial que el Gobierno creará para tal efecto, una ley que les reconozca a las comunidades negras que han venido ocupando tierras baldías en las zonas rurales ribereñas de los ríos de la Cuenca del Pacífico, de acuerdo con sus prácticas tradicionales de producción, el derecho a la propiedad colectiva sobre las áreas que habrá de demarcar la misma ley”. El artículo además señala que esa “misma ley establecerá mecanismos para la protección de la identidad cultural y los derechos de estas comunidades, y para el fomento de su desarrollo económico y social” (Constitución Política de Colombia 1991)

In addition to research focusing on the history of marginality and the recent purported recognition of Afro-descended peoples in Colombia, there have also been studies that elaborate on displacement as a development strategy. Such studies (see Oslender 2007; 2008; Walsh 2007) remark upon the intended erasure of communities and the lack of support for their protection, which has irreparably altered the lives of displaced Afro-Colombian populations, in particular by disrupting Afro-Colombian communities’ sense of place (Basso 1996; Oslender 2002; Escobar 2008). However, though there has been research on aspects of Afro-Colombian displacement, land entitlements, and the paramilitarization of Colombia (Hristov 2009; Tate 2007; Oslender 2008), there has yet to be significant research that adequately integrates all of these ongoing processes, detailing not only the history of negation associated with these violations (Walsh 2007), but the actual experiences of those

being displaced, the detrimental effects on the environment, and the future of Afro-Colombians inhabiting the Pacific coast.

The Archivo General documents general information about Afro-Colombians, mainly in relation to slavery. Beginning in the early 1500s, African slave labor was applied to cattle raising, transportation, construction, and domestic service (Arocha 1998:73-4), with a later a focus on gold and platinum mining (notably between 1580 and 1640). The scattering of slave concentrations throughout the country contributed to a diffuse and inchoate sense of connection to African heritage and consciousness until the early 1900s, when the rise of industrial-scale sugar production consolidated formerly enslaved Afro-descended populations in the Cauca Valley (Arocha 1998:73). Arocha goes on to note the initial ways in which Afro-Colombians were made invisible, including the Christianization of African slaves, wherein names were altered or replaced to match masters' family names, and the shift towards a new hierarchical caste system that abandoned explicitly racial terminology, instead describing whiteness through a connection to authenticity and "rationality" (1998 *see also* Arocha 1992). The concept of progress, wealth, and power became inextricably tied up with race, with Afro-Colombians at the far low end of the spectrum:

The Spanish created a hierarchical society in which they occupied the top stratum in terms of prestige, wealth, and power; slaves and Indians occupied the bottom. White skin became synonymous with being Spanish and therefore of high status. Offspring of mixed unions fell somewhere in between, adopting the dominant culture if recognized by their Spanish fathers, remaining on the social periphery if not. As the character and value system of the nation were formed, notions of color, class, and culture merged to elevate whites, subjugate blacks and Indians, and allow upward mobility for mulattoes and mestizos who dissociated themselves from the heritage of their nonwhite ancestors in favor of becoming "Spanish" (Hanratty and Meditz 1988)

Peter Wade (1995; 1999; 2004) argues that blackness in Colombia has never been clearly defined. During my fieldwork in Colombia, many individuals I spoke to considered Afro-Colombians to be a "super-group" of marginalized Afro-descended peoples working

together to fight against discrimination, and the materials I read at the Archivo do not necessarily distinguish sub-categories of *blackness* in Colombia⁵. Yet, while Colombia has the second largest black population in Latin America, the term *Afro-Colombiano* was not even used by the government until the late 1980s (Afro-Colombian n.d.). Since the passage of the Constitution of 1991, Afro-Colombian populations have established several organizations at the national level. The *Center for the Investigation and development of Black Culture* (influenced heavily by the Civil Rights Movement mobilized around blackness in the United States) and *Cimarrón* (which seeks to eliminate discrimination and exclusionary practices) are two of the organizations that represent Afro-Colombians (Wade 1995:342 *see also* Asher 2007:20)⁶, but perhaps the most prominent organization mobilized around Afro-Colombian right is the

⁵ It should be considered, however, that the Colombian Department of National Statistics is one of the few sources that has demarcated sub-groups amongst Afro-Colombians. According to a report done by Minority Rights Group International, “The Colombian Department for National Statistics (DANE) has recognized that there are four distinct Afro-Colombian groups in the country and that two of these speak their own native languages. ‘Bande’ is spoken by Afro-Colombian communities who live on the islands of the Archipelago of San Andres, Providencia and Santa Catalina, and ‘Palenquero’, which is spoken by the communities of San Basilio de Palenque, recognized since 1603 as being the first free settlement of the Americas. According to DANE (2005) this first free settlement has also been declared by UNESCO as being an international cultural heritage site” (World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Colombia : Afro-Colombians 2008).

⁶ “The National Movement for the Human Rights of Black Communities in Colombia (Cimarrón), which is modeled after the U.S. Black Panther and Nation of Islam movements, uses pamphlets and bulletins to mobilize smaller groups and organizations throughout the country. The Center for the Investigation and Development of Black Culture (CID), once funded by UNESCO, models its platform on the ideals of the U.S. civil rights movement. Annual seminars for black teachers and the publication of black literature are the organization’s primary activities. Among the smaller, more transient black Colombian organizations reported to be recently active are: Asociacion de Campesinos, Integral del Atrato, Asociacion Juvenil Nortecaucana, Equipo Misionero Medio, Fundacion Civica, Fundacion de Vida, Grupo de Mujeres, Hermanas Compania de Maria, Movimiento Investigativo Sinesio Mena, Organizacion de Barrios Populares, and Organizacion Regional Embera Wawnana. Though the concentration of blacks in the Choco region gives Colombian blacks a strong regional identity and there has been no reported intragroup conflict, the practice of blanqueamiento may have limited the extent to which black Colombians identify as a group” (Minorities at Risk: Assessment for Blacks in Colombia 2006).

Proceso de Comunidades de Negras (PCN)⁷. The emergence of social movements composed of and representing black communities on Colombia's Pacific coast must be placed within the changing political and socioeconomic contexts of new legislation that award collective land rights to rural black communities (Oslender 2002:90). The acceptance of blackness has resonated poorly with some sectors of the Colombian demographic, even among many who identify as black. Since the time of Colombian independence, the official and widely accepted image of Colombia has been that of a mestizo nation (current President Juan Manuel Santos wholeheartedly agrees), with perhaps remnants of “pure” Blacks, Indians, and Whites, often seen as being absorbed into a steadily lightening mestizo majority. This process is known as *blanqueamiento*, or, the social, political, and economic process of achieving whiteness (Blanqueamiento n.d.), and occurs throughout Latin America, as Jorge Larraín notes when discussing national and regional identities placed upon Latin American groups:

This sense of regional identity has been frequently imputed, whether we like it or not...especially from Europe. From the sixteenth century onwards, South America has been spoken of and discursively constructed in Europe as a more or less integrated whole, most of the time endowed with pejorative characteristics...this sense of the Latin American identity also emerges out of the elements shared by the Latin American nations as recognized and imputed to them by the European other. The access to these versions of identity and their internalization by the Latin American people was secured by three centuries of colonial domination (2000:3).

⁷ Proceso de Comunidades de Negras (PCN) is an “Afro descendant collective of more than 100 grassroots organizations, Community Councils and individuals, formed in Colombia in 1993. PCN is dedicated to raise black consciousness, fight racial discrimination, exclusion and social injustice, and develop a legal and political framework to for the recognition and respect of Afro-descendants’ human rights and achievement of self-determination. PCN’s work focuses on strengthening an autonomous process of organization with grassroots Afro-descendant communities, at local, regional and national levels, and promote reciprocal solidarity with the African peoples in the world.” There are many organizations that branch off of PCN, including groups promoting female empowerment (ACWHRD), bio-diversity and land entitlements (*Otro Pazífico Posible*), and the decriminalization of human rights campaigns (*Free Felix*). For more information, visit <http://www.afrocolombianhr.org/aboutpcn.html>.

Organizations such as *Cimarrón* are therefore problematic in a country where elites construct a hegemonic image of the mestizo nation. Wade argues that *Cimarrón* invokes a “community of suffering,” which invites people to connect certain aspects of their phenotype (their physical blackness) to a history of oppression that is national but also continental, and even global; this conflicts with hegemonic mestizaje⁸ (1995:343). We can see this problematic predicament dating back to Franz Boas’ work on race consciousness, and his opposition to what he considered the separation of the “races;” for example, Boas worried that groups such as the NAACP, meant to instill a sense of community, contributed to a segregation of one particular group from the whole of society (Boas 1928). The activities of these organizations conflict with dominant images of the Colombian nation in their efforts to give a lasting voice to Afro-Colombians, and get suppressed by the ongoing racialization processes seen in Colombia, as “race” and “class” reinforce one another (Koopman 2013)⁹. The push for modernity should come with “ethical autonomy and the possibility of self-realization” (Larraín 2000:13), but Colombia rejects this notion in its attempt to steadily erase the freedom of subjectivity amongst minority and indigenous

⁸ The dominant image of *mestizaje* can be found throughout Latin America, which perpetuates systematic racism against Afro-descended groups. A key example of this can be found in Venezuela, where Afro-descended groups face the same pushback as Afro-Colombians: “The denial of a contemporary Afro-Venezuelan population is largely due to the construction of a Venezuelan mestizaje that relies on both the inclusion and the exclusion of Afro-Venezuelans in the formation of the modern nation. Afro-Venezuelans are included in the historic formation of a criollo culture of mestizo citizens as an enslaved labor force largely disappeared through miscegenation, with the exception of a few folkloric retentions and survivals evident in contemporary society. Folkloric contributions are code for “lesser” contributions. Afro-Venezuelan social, economic, and political contributions to contemporary society are denied, safely excluding this population group from the modern nation” (Valencia 2009:119).

⁹ “Racialization in Colombia is shaped by the Andes Mountains, which split into three huge chains that cross the entire country, with two large rivers between them. Historically the difficulty of crossing meant that Colombia became a country of distinct regions, and “race” is often conflated with region. *Antioqueños* (*paisas*, or people who live in a region in the northwest of the country) constructed their regional identity as “white” against a dark “other” on their periphery, in particular Urabá, where the peace community of San José de Apartadó is located” (Koopman 2013).

groups¹⁰. Those pushed to outlying areas of the country are labeled by a space of poverty and ongoing violence, while Bogotá, for instance, is known for economically stable, “white” individuals, who reject the addition of marginalized others due to this stigmatized connection:

Colonial imaginaries of one Colombia that is civilized and “white” defined against those spaces that are “black” and barbaric are spoken less openly today, but continue to shape the nation and shape what violence is done where. Violence has hit Afro-Colombians and indigenous people the hardest, and they form a greatly disproportionate number of the displaced. Their territories, for so long considered undesirable, are now widely seen by outside investors as an “untapped” treasure trove of gold, coal, hardwood lumber, and land and water for oil palm plantations for biodiesel (Koopman 2013).

Unfortunately, with modernity and the free market, comes one type of organization has taken a forceful, stifling hold on Afro-Colombians living on the Pacific coast.

PARAMILITARIES ON THE PACIFIC: A REVIEW

We [paramilitary groups] were born to be informants for the institutions of the state – Salvatore Mancuso, former top leader of the AUC (Hristov 2009:58)

¹⁰ “Modernity is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon, which requires to be studied from a variety of angles. Although the first writings showing an awareness of modernity as something new appear fairly early in the work of Machiavelli, Bacon, Descartes, the idea of modernity was given a decisive formulation in the discourse of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century. The emergence of modernity is thus associated with a particular time (the eighteenth century) and a particular geographical place (Europe). The philosophical discourse of the Enlightenment understood modernity on the basis of key ideas such as freedom, tolerance, science, progress and reason, and in opposition to metaphysics, superstition and religion. The ideas of freedom and individual autonomy at all levels were particularly important. When Kant wanted to define what Enlightenment was about, he asserted that it was basically related to autonomy of thought, ‘to use one’s own understanding without the guidance of another’. For Hegel, too, freedom and subjectivity were the very foundation of modernity and for this reason he could say ‘the principle of the modern world is the freedom of subjectivity’. Freedom appears as the basic and inalienable human right. At the economic level it means the possibility of pursuing one’s own interests within the free market; at the political level it means the possibility for each individual to participate with equal rights in the formation of the political will; in the private sphere it implies ethical autonomy and the possibility of self-realization” (Larraín 2000:12-3).

After their father was fatally beaten by guerilla groups in the 1970s, Fidel, Carlos, and Vicente Castaño—peasants from Amalfi, Antioquia living on a moderately-sized farm—sought revenge and formed the Autodefensas Campensinas de Córdoba y Urabá (ACCU); the ACCU engaged in the “extermination of peasant activists and suspected guerilla sympathizers” (Hristov 2009:68), and would later become the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC), “the umbrella organization of the Colombian armed right-wing, or “*paramilitares*”” (Field 2014).

Paramilitary groups can be found throughout Latin America and the rest of the world, and are largely composed of former military officers (with some former guerillas) who operate in a militarized fashion; they are a major threat to Afro-Colombians in the Pacific region, yet the state¹¹ claims violence on the coast is a non-issue, because it is most likely a product the Colombian civil war and, in connection, illegal groups’ claims to land. The ongoing civil conflict in Colombia is considered the longest civil war in history, with the FARC first rising up against the state in 1964, and continuing to engage in violent conflict ever since. In addition to the FARC, paramilitary groups continue to cause civil unrest, with almost 80% of human rights violations resting on their shoulders (see Field 2014; Hristov 2009)¹²:

¹¹ The *state* should be seen as a process, as Joanne Rappaport address in the epilogue of her work, *Intercultural utopias: public intellectuals, cultural experimentation, and ethnic pluralism in Colombia* (2005), where she notes Philip Abrams’ discussion on the difficulty of studying the state (1988): “...Abrams persuasively argues that social scientists mistakenly idealize the state, treating it as an all-encompassing structural ideal or an autonomous entity instead of grasping how it functions on the ground, where it operates within specific social structures and institutions. That is, scholars, commonly mythify the state, treating it an objective thing that is somehow separate from civil society. As a solution to this difficulty, Abrams suggests, “we should abandon the state as a material object of study whether concrete or abstract while continuing to take the *idea* of the state extremely seriously” (75). Throughout this paper, I will continue referring back to the state, but would like it to be considered within this context.

¹² The state includes the FARC in these claims, but “the AUC has been responsible for the bulk of the human rights atrocities and massacres in the country between 1980 and the present. The United

Over the [last] 50 years, Colombia's low-intensity war has caused more than 250,000 deaths and the displacement of more than 5 million people as rebels from the FARC, ELN, and other leftwing groups clashed with government troops and rightwing paramilitaries. Many of the armed factions finance themselves through kidnappings and drug trafficking (Watts and Brodzinsky 2014).

Unfortunately, President Santos has been campaigning for years that civil unrest will come to an end if the FARC can agree to replace illegal coca production with legal crops like African palm oil: "If we can agree to fight drug trafficking and substitute coca crops for legal crops it will have a big impact on the world because, unfortunately, for forty years we have been the principal supplier of that drug" (Watts and Brodzinsky 2014). What Santos does not highlight is the fact that it is not the FARC, but paramilitary groups who are responsible for the vast amounts of human rights violations committed against mainly Afro-Colombian communities in order to establish and maintain these very palm oil plantations. By purporting the notion of peace as directly connected to the end of narco-trafficking, Santos is silently sanctioning paramilitary violence on the Pacific coast.

Instead of developing strategies for the eradication of violent paramilitary activities, the state only seems to be moving forward with palm oil production on lands that happen to be evacuated. By never acknowledging the actual conditions behind the depopulation of lands formerly inhabited by Afro-Colombian communities, the state is playing a complicit role in their forced displacement. Again, displacement becomes an unfortunate side-effect of development, and without acknowledgement by the players who are ensuring these violations by continuing to produce economic growth in this fashion, the future for Afro-Colombian rights will continue to be a fundamental deprivation necessitated by modernity (*see* Arendt 1966).

Nations specifies that, "80% of all killings in Colombia's civil conflict have been committed by paramilitaries, 12% by leftist guerrillas, and the remaining 8% by government forces" ([Field 2014] Constanza Vicira (August 27, 2008)).

Yet, when others make this claim, they are quickly challenged by government officials and organizations. When journalist and author David Bacon wrote an article for *Dollars & Sense* entitled, “Blood on the palms” (2007), the U.S. Embassy responded¹³, denouncing his claims that “helping planters reach their goal is the US Agency for International Development. In what the agency describes as an effort to resettle rightwing paramilitary militia members who agree to be disarmed, USAID funds projects in which they are given land to cultivate. The land, however, is often located in historically Afro-Colombian areas.”

The Pacific coastal region of Colombia covers ten million hectares, 80% of which is still covered by tropical rainforests. The region is isolated from the rest of the country by the

¹³ Mark Wentworth, Counselor of Public Affairs for the U.S. Embassy in Colombia, stated in a letter written to the editors of Bacon’s article: “Mr. David Bacon's article is an unfortunate mischaracterization of the palm oil industry in Colombia and of the U.S. government's related efforts to promote sustainable, legal economic opportunities in Afro-Colombian communities. The article is correct on many fronts—that paramilitary and guerrilla activity has wreaked havoc on Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities, that the palm oil industry in Colombia has ambitious expansion plans, and that Afro-Colombian communities face development challenges that are unparalleled in the rest of the country. However, Mr. Bacon's assertions that U.S. government resources through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) are being used to displace Afro-Colombians, to destroy cultural ties to the land, and to further the economic interests of the palm industry just for the sake of doing so are simply inaccurate. During the past five years, as part of U.S. government assistance to Plan Colombia, USAID has worked with President Uribe's administration, municipal governments, elected Afro-Colombian councils and representatives, farmer associations, and the private sector to develop models that meet the needs of the communities. Indeed, only one USAID-supported palm-oil investment is in an Afro-Colombian community, and almost all other USAID palm-oil activities are designed as alliances. These alliances are structured whereby large processors are linked to small, privately held or community-held palm farms, and the processors provide seed funding, common infrastructure (roads, bridges, irrigation), social investments, and technical assistance to small farmers and communities. Further, USAID assists the small farmers and communities to become more capable of negotiating competitive forward contracts for their product. Unfortunately, most of Colombia's agricultural sector has had experience with the issues that Mr. Bacon cites as palm-specific, and of course there remains a lot of work to do relating to palm cultivation and Afro-Colombian communities. The Colombian and U.S. governments and the robust private sector in Colombia will continue to be change agents in the agriculture sector, and USAID will continue to assist Afro-Colombian communities to identify opportunities for economic development, to strengthen representative councils and decision-makers with their ability to represent their communities' interests, and to protect their ties to the land and their cultural values in the face of very difficult development challenges” (2007).

Western Andean mountain chain, with only three roads leading into the area; this has perpetuated a sense of physical and economic isolation, as well as marginalization in relation to the interior. Environmental conditions characterizing the region create an almost legendary biodiversity, as it is situated in the Inter-tropical Convergence Zone, the “region that circles the Earth, near the equator, where the trade winds of the Northern and Southern Hemispheres come together” (NASA Earth Observatory 2001; Oslender 2002:90-1).

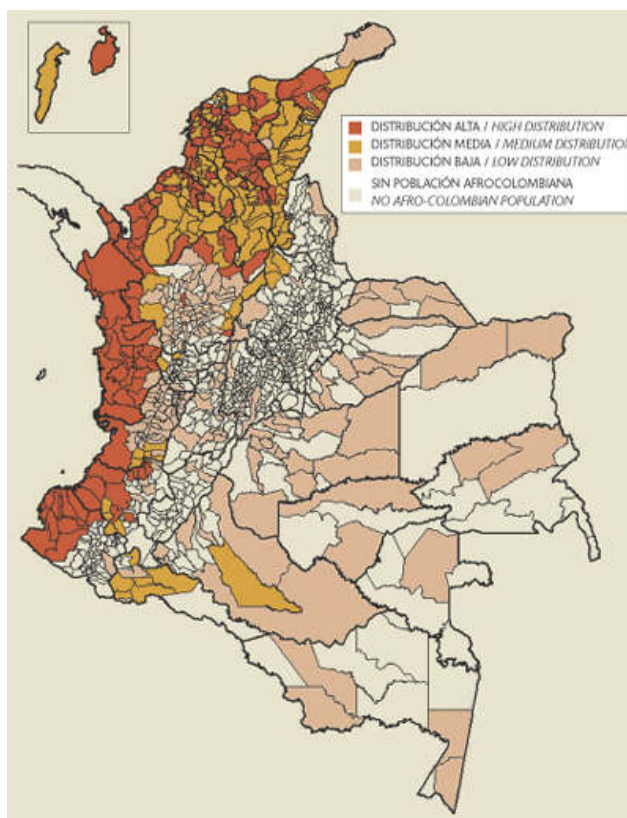


Figure 2. Afro-Colombian population density (source: <http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/colombia/poblacion-afrocolombiana.jpg>)

In the early 1990s, paramilitaries had yet to infiltrate the Pacific coastal region (Asher 2007:13). In fact, the government had considered Afro-Colombians and indigenous groups on the coast to be “guardians” of the rainforests, responsible for protecting their environment (Oslender 2002:95); a place was being defined for Afro-Colombians. Unfortunately, this idea of land integrity and the promotion of strengthening territories for

local communities¹⁴ that seemed prevalent in the 1990s was very quickly replaced by a paramilitary presence pursuing an agenda of “economic logic of exploitation and extraction in the region”¹⁵ (Oslender 2007:758). The massive expansion of African palm plantations starting around the turn of the century represents the apex of this logic; the plantations are established on lands collectively owned by rural Afro-Colombian communities, and such developments are illegal according to Law 70. Afro-Colombians have increasingly organized to resist the spread of African palm, citing the law in their favor. In order for these plantations to be successful, they must usually be run by Afro-Colombians, who provide cheap labor. When local Afro-Colombians refuse to cooperate, paramilitary forces engage in *cleansing*: the strategic removal of groups from the lands where they have historically lived and grown food (Oslender 2002; 2007; Fassin 2009). This process has meant that in the last decade, when Afro-Colombians receive their land entitlements, they have already been

¹⁴ “It must be pointed out that guerrilla and paramilitary activities have significantly extended throughout the Pacific coast recently, and black peasants are increasingly subject to rural collective massacres and forced displacements to the cities. This leads to a changing geography of power and to the constant redrawing of territorialities and boundaries in the Pacific, in that effective territorial control by armed actors prevents local communities from affirming their territorial claims as guaranteed by Law 70, and produces instead the de-territorialization of black communities. Instead of a strengthening of local territorialities and a defense of constructions of place, as aimed by the black movement, completely opposed processes of local de-territorialization and territorial fragmentation are induced as a result of the terror that is spread by paramilitaries, guerrillas, and Colombia's army. In the words of Daniel Pécaut: “It seems to me that terror gradually leads to territorial fragilization, explodes temporal referents, and endangers the ability of subjects to assert themselves within contradictory referents” (Pécaut 1999:3). These processes have not been documented sufficiently for the Pacific coast, but they are an increasingly urgent matter for local communities and social movements and constitute a necessary direction for future research” (Oslender 2002:97-8).

¹⁵ “We have since seen a complete turnaround in economic and political relations in the region, which are pushed through the state and para-state actors, cynically undermining the state's own legislation. In other words, the state and paramilitary forces act at the service of national and transnational capital in the Pacific region, which now becomes fully integrated into the country's cartography of violence. This development can best be seen in the rapid expansion of African Palm plantations since the 1990s” (Oslender 2007:758).

forcibly displaced¹⁶. I will discuss the technical aspects of the establishment and production of a palm oil plantation in a moment, but first, I would like to discuss the initial violent events on the Pacific coast that greatly aided in the surge of palm oil plantations.

On December 20th, 1996, a coordinated offensive led by the Colombian army and the paramilitaries launched an attack on Afro-Colombians in northern Chocó. Heavily armed paramilitaries stormed into Riosucio at dawn, killing hundreds of Afro-Colombians in what they called, *Operation Genesis*. The killing spree was done under the pretext of combating the FARC (Hristov 2009) and in the context of fighting dangerous guerrilla organizations, and was altogether ignored by the media and human rights advocacy groups, due to the difficulty in obtaining images or accurate details of the events as they unfolded (Oslender 2007:755). Aerial bombings also took place, principally aimed at frightening the local population into fleeing, or perhaps simply killing them off. This was a massive operation produced settler colonial-style results, emptying the territory and ensuring the occupation of lands and ease of resource extraction. Over 20,000 Afro-Colombians left their homes between January and February of 1997 as a result of this offense (Oslender 2007:756), and in a particularly brutal round of attacks between February 24th and 27th 1997, paramilitary groups carried out military operations in the rural basins of the Salagüí, Truando, and Cacarica Rivers (located in Chocó):

During one of these operations, Afro-Colombian peasant Marino López was assassinated. Paramilitary groups murdered Marino and then proceeded to chop off his head and play soccer with it in front of the community. This brutal act was done in order to instill fear and to encourage Afro-Colombians to flee their territories. This incident happened while the Colombian Air Force simultaneously bombarded these areas. The human rights abuses committed by the paramilitary groups and members of the Colombian Armed Forces resulted in the forced displacement of hundreds of people, the majority of whom were afro-descendant peasants, including large numbers of women and children. Operation Genesis marked the beginning of the paramilitary groups' takeover of Chocó Department. These abuses committed by the paramilitaries resulted in the forced abandonment of large tracts of

¹⁶ The first collective community council land title had to be given in absentia (2007:758)

territories by local rural inhabitants. The lands were later usurped by outside economic interests for illegal wood harvesting, cultivation of oil palm crops, coca crops, and drug trafficking. These activities have included the deforestation of vast areas of land to raise livestock and grow illegal crops (Sanchez 2014).



Figure 3. Internalized refugees have nowhere to go in the aftermath of *Operation Genesis* (source: <http://www.bluradio.com/52292/corte-idh-condena-colombia-por-operacion-genesis>)

Not until December 2013 did Colombian courts finally acknowledge the responsibility of the state in not preventing this vicious attack. According to the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), the Inter-American court on Human Rights of the Organization of American States (OAS) stated that Colombia did not meet its obligations in guaranteeing “humanitarian assistance and a safe return to the Afro-Colombians who were displaced due to these abuses. As a result, the court order[ed] Colombia to take a series of steps to remedy these injustices” (Court’s Ruling on Operation Genesis a Leap Forward for Justice for Afro-Colombian Victims 2014). Oslender (2007) argues that the banality of displacement acts as a mental barrier to taking up a collective action against dehumanizing conditions. The displaced are included in the inhuman geographies of the ever-changing urban landscapes and become part of (without provoking scandal) the collectively shared imagined geographies of Colombia; they become what he and others call, the inclusion of the excluded (2004; 2007; Wade 2009). The success of palm oil plantations, I agree,

underscores the necessity for displacement in order for free-market capitalism to flourish at least in certain regions of Colombia. Supporters of palm oil-based development look beyond human rights violations in favor of economic development (Leech 2009; Oslender 2007; 2008; Schertow 2007); but how did palm oil become such an important agro-industry in Colombia, and how did the sacrifices of minority populations needed to make palm oil production so profitably successful come to seem acceptable to the majority? It is a process of normalization:

A significant ontological change occurs through such displacement. These people, who have had to leave everything behind in order to save their lives, are no longer peasants, fishers, or rural miners. They become *los desplazados* - the displaced. Not only have their bodies been moved from one place to another, their very being has been changed. They become categorized as ‘internally displaced persons’, or IDPs. And they form part—against their own will, of course—of a standardized vocabulary that includes statistics, expert discourses, and national policies and legislations. In other words, we are witnessing the construction of the category of the ‘displaced’ as a normalized phenomenon in Colombian society. One effect of such a normalization is the heightened degree of acceptability that is generated in the national imagination. The presence of the displaced in the cities becomes accepted as merely another expression of the country’s internal conflict, even if the displaced themselves are not accepted and often suffer discrimination (Oslender 2007:756).

DISPLACEMENT AS A DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

This processes’ outcome depends upon the paramilitary usurping lands as follows: an armed incursion takes place (i.e. *Operation Genesis*), including criminal and massive human rights violations, illegal and violent expropriation of land, forced displacement of owners and occupiers of the lands in question, and finally, planting of African Palm in the newly “conquered” lands, as well as the introduction of newly landless proletariats (i.e. the local displaced Afro-Colombians) as a new source of labor.

These offences are practically encouraged, as new laws are continually established to promote the cultivation of African Palms. For example, in 1994, under former President Gaviria, Law 138 passed, creating a fund for research into the expansion and increased

productivity of palm oil plantations to support palm-planting companies, regulate markets, promote the exportation of the crop, and support price-stabilization mechanisms. The *Federación Nacional de Cultivadores de Palma Aceite* (Fedepalma) and the government have come to a strategic agreement,¹⁷ excerpted below in a quote taken from the Fedepalma website:

Colombia is the second most bio-diverse country in the world. The country's rich biodiversity is found in its national parks and protected state forest reserves. In addition, a large number of palm oil plantations and estates are found in Colombia's natural ecosystems. For this reason, the oil palm sector places great importance on following policies that promote sustainable development.

Palm oil has been promoted as an alternative to illegal coca crops, with substantial funding from *Plan Colombia*¹⁸. Afro-Colombians were completely disregarded in the implementation of *Plan Colombia*'s crop substitution practices, and palm oil production continues to increase: "A history of negation...[has] led to this: racism...[and] serves to justify your colonialism. All of this at the expense of the common Black community: their history, culture, and essence...have been permanently damaged by violent relations..." – José Chala (Walsh 2007:200).

The banality and normalized processes of thinking attributed to the ongoing crisis endangering Afro-Colombian communities in the Pacific region increasingly appears to constitute a program of intentional erasure of these communities that has irreparably altered the lives of growing numbers of displaced Afro-Colombians. Their very sense of place has

¹⁷ An example of this can be seen dating back to 2007, when former President Álvaro Uribe called for the expansion of palm oil production in Tumaco and other areas of Nariño while addressing Fedepalma's national congress (Leech 2009:33).

¹⁸ A strategy in the form of US aid packages used to combat and demobilize increasing violence and drug cartels and to promote peace and prosperity, *Plan Colombia* began under the Clinton administration as early as 2000. The plan itself was conceived around 1998. For more on this, visit <http://www.amnestyusa.org/our-work/countries/americas/colombia/us-policy-in-colombia>. In 2008, it is estimated that at least 80 million dollars for alternative development programs was administered by USAID to support production of coffee, cacao, fruits, and "African" palm oil (U.S. Congress Must Hold Colombia Accountable for Violations Linked to "African" Palm Oil Projects 2008).

been disrupted, shifted, and stolen from them as paramilitaries, in cooperation with the state, help agro-industrial companies produce expanding profits. In anthropological literature, places are not seen as static, but as vital conditions shaping the lives of those inhabiting the lands (Basso 1996; Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Oslender 2002:88). Place is shaped by the personal and social biography of the one who sustains it (Basso 1996:55), and the relationship to a particular place is lived most often in the company of other people. The connection between community and place, once broken, cannot be easily replaced. The displacement of Afro-Colombians, and of families and friends, fragments the foundation of these communities, and almost guarantees the perpetuation of abuse. Even when small amounts of land are returned, the irreparable damages done to Afro-Colombians' lands leaves them almost uninhabitable. Displaced Afro-Colombians experience being ostracized from the majority Colombian population in larger urban areas to which they have fled, such as the capital city of Bogotá, where often, they are forced to work menial jobs, and have great difficulty adjusting due to systematic racialization practices coded as linguistic and cultural differences¹⁹²⁰.

¹⁹ Organizations such as Taller de Vida are dedicated to helping victims of displacement with the process of adjusting to life in Bogotá, where many internalized refugees end up living: "The Center for Development and Psychosocial consulting—Taller de Vida—is a social organization created by the strength of a group of professional and community leading women who were affected by the socio-political violence in different areas of the country. Through their work, they decided to support the transformation of the lives of children, young people, women, families, and communities affected by forced displacement, disappearances and recruitment from the conflict in Colombia. Since 1993, Taller de Vida has fought for human dignity, proposing methodologies of psychosocial intervention and processes of education for peace. Through working with national institutions and international organizations in the design, implementation, monitoring and sharing of a systemic, alternative and human rights framework. We use resilience and artistic expression to bring about social inclusion and the individual, family, and social support of victims of the Colombian conflict." For more information, visit: <http://tallerdevida.org/en/>.

²⁰ "Ethnic people, non-elites, refugees, and working-class immigrants are generally excluded from the cosmopolitan project because of their inability to participate in elite consumption practices or their orientation toward their communities (Werbner, 2006). This brand of cosmopolitanism depends on the presence of people of color and non-elites in urban space but not their full participation. Often

The official views of the Colombian government and the mainstream media seemingly do not admit that anything is wrong with this situation, which has led to the frustration of groups who claim the government gives lands only to take them away again. See below a quote from displacement victims in Quibdó writing an open letter to President Barack Obama regarding the Free Trade Agreement with Colombia:

Our communities are not able to fully exercise the rights we have under the Colombian Constitution, Law 70 of 1993 and other regulations. Law 70 grants us rights to collective land titles for territories we have occupied since ancient times. After nearly 20 years of existence of this law, several of its key chapters have not been regulated (fully implemented). On the contrary, these chapters have been rendered invisible in new legislation. The lands were titled to our communities so that we could improve the quality of life of our communities and guarantee Afro-Colombians' survival in their territories. However, licenses have been granted in these same territories to multinational companies for mining, extensive monocultures, agro fuels and other large-scale economic projects that will only benefit investors. This will also lead to mass displacement of the legitimate owners of these territories. In 2011, the Afro-Colombian community councils of Cocomopoca [Alto Atrato] were granted collective titles to seventy-three thousand hectares of land. At the same time, the authorities granted fifty-five thousand hectares of concessions to mining companies in the same area (Movimiento de Víctimas et al. 2012).

All over Latin America, inequality-generating forces operating nationally leave the rural sectors engulfed in a cycle that prevents them from embarking on a path to equitable development. Promises of land rights, access to credit, and other necessities become lost in the implementation of neoliberalism. Trade liberalization and privatization causes impoverished populations to lose their livelihood (Hristov 2005:92), leaving few economic or political options. The fact that many of those working in the palm oil plantations are the very Afro-Colombians who have been displaced underscores the lack of options and the state's implicit understanding that displacement serves the economic interests of the most powerful. Violence and repression become directed at those *in the way*, with militarization

these groups provide the obligatory elements of cultural and ethnic diversity that make for urban cosmopolitanism but live and work on the periphery of these spaces. The racial dimension of cosmopolitanism is made manifest in this process of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion" (Castro 2013:107)

used to ensure the stability of the neoliberal model: “Their true vocation is power: military, political, and economic...A power that, like an oil stain, keeps spreading over the economy and politics of some regions to the point that today in these places, a leaf would not move without their blessing” – Maria Elvira Samper, Colombian political analyst (Hristov 2009:128).

The monetary gain associated with African palm oil guarantees the influence of paramilitary groups on lands that are technically theirs after ten years of occupation. Law 135 of 1961 created the Instituto Colombiano de Desarrollo Rural (INCORA), which was meant to distribute public lands to those seeking legitimate land entitlements (Colombian Institute for Agrarian Reform (INCORA) 2008). However, political pressures increased private agricultural purchasing, turning over the lands historically owned by Afro-Colombians to paramilitary groups, who, because of the “disappearance” of those once living in the region, now legally own the areas they control, making it possible to develop African palm oil plantations at their discretion. This highlights the cooperation between the paramilitaries and the state. Paramilitaries will sometimes argue that their offences against innocent Afro-Colombians are due to suspicions of guerrilla activity, as was the case in the 1996 *Operation Genesis* attack. There are reports that the paramilitaries, “take the peasants, dress them as guerrillas, and put a rifle on them, so that when the Fiscalía comes, they can tell these were guerrillas...” (former soldier, Oswaldo de Jesús Giraldo Yepes – Hristov 2009:108). However, as Hristov notes, much of the time, paramilitaries do not bother hiding or disguising their victims. Their claims to “protecting” the civilian population against internal enemies are not questioned in the Pacific region, due to fear of the consequences of any such protests. The paramilitaries commit at least 80% of human rights violations against civilian populations that take place in Colombia, compared to about 16% by guerrillas

(Congressional Testimony on Democracy, Human Rights, and US Policy towards Colombia 2007; Hristov 2009:110; Field 2014). The Colombian and U.S. media both turn a blind eye to this, as Oslender suggests they will continue to do (2002; 2007). Major media outlets, especially in the U.S., place a heavy emphasis on the brutal violence of the FARC, making it seem as though paramilitary groups are much less important. With billions of dollars at stake, it would not be in the best interest of media outlets to shine a light on the debilitating effects being caused by African palm plantations.

The Free Trade Agreement between the U.S. and Colombia, signed by President Obama, underscores the economic interest at stake. It would seem that of the most powerful forces in Colombia, the U.S. and in the international arena are working against the interests of marginalized Afro-Colombian populations of the Pacific coast, and because Colombia operates under a U.S. hegemonic model, after each major attack against Afro-Colombians, a statement is not far behind proclaiming the benefits of palm oil production. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak states in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (quoting Michel Foucault), “we never desire against our own interests, because interest always follows and finds itself where desire has placed it” (1988:274). The neoliberal model for economic success leads to large sectors of society being denied basic human rights and dignity, while elites align themselves with transitional companies, growing stronger in their determination to eliminate any remaining barriers to capitalism’s search for resources, cheap labor, and free markets (Hristov 2005:89). This model, detailed by Hristov, is based on the assertion that poverty is best alleviated by opening societies to market-based competition, since the unregulated free-market promotes economic growth and a democratic and just development process (2005:89). This supposedly beneficial process is exactly what we find occurring in Colombia, especially now that the Free Trade Agreement allows for such commodities as African Palm to be openly

traded, without regard to a shifting economic system that “produces poverty, aggravates existing poverty, impedes social development by turning human rights into commodities, and destroys sustainable livelihoods by granting corporations unprecedented rights and freedoms” (2005:90).

Despite well-publicized attempts to demobilize the paramilitaries, Hristov argues that the paramilitaries have instead been incorporated into the Colombian state, institutions, and economy (Hristov 2009:177). The more paramilitaries and the state fuse into a single apparatus, the more it would appear that paramilitarization has ceased to exist. People are told the military power of these groups has been dismantled, with the persistence of violence blamed on the guerrillas or common criminals; if forcibly displaced persons are considered merely the victims of common crimes, it gives the state the excuse to remove itself from any responsibility to provide for or support them in the face of human rights violations (2009:178). The recent passage of the Free Trade Agreement will likely lead to more displacement in the name of promoting economic stability and development.

ESTABLISHING AND MAINTAINING PALM OIL PLANTATIONS



Figure 4. Palm oil plantation in Northwest Colombia (taken by Charlotte Kesl, source: <http://1peaceatime.blogspot.com/2011/08/protecting-their-mother-afro-colombians.html>)

African Palm trees were first introduced to Colombia in or around 1932; the 1950s saw the introduction of commercial-level production, and by 2001, the palm oil industry made a profit in excess of twenty million US dollars²¹ (Oslender 2007:760). There are no plans to slow down production; a development report entitled, *Visión Colombia: Colombia Segundo Centenario*, aims to have six million hectares of land dedicated to African palm oil production by the end of 2019 (Visión Colombia II Centenario: 2019 2005). The conditioning of land that needs to occur to prepare for the mass planting of the African Palm mono-crop requires the cooperation of Afro-Colombians in the Pacific coastal region with national and international agro-industry companies. Law 70, which was supposed to protect Afro-Colombians' land, and in doing so also safeguard the extraordinary biodiversity of the region, has been completely disregarded in order to turn a profit (Oslender 2007:761 *see also* Oslender 2002).

²¹ Estimates for 2007 production were around 300,000 hectares, making Colombia the fourth largest exporter of palm oil in the world, after Malaysia, Indonesia, and Nigeria (Oslender 2007:760).

Because African Palm is only set to expand over the next decade, it is important to note that the implementation of this crop will render the areas where these plantations are established useless after several years. The detrimental effects of this crop on the livelihoods of small farmers living on the coast, and the lands stolen from them are irreversible due to the harsh character of mono-crop cultivation. But how does the actual process of planting and maintaining a palm oil plantation occur?

After lands have been forcibly and illegally cleansed of their extant population, the terrain must be completely cleared of any other crops, and the heavy use of pesticides will drive away almost all animals in the area. Fertilizers must be continually added to African Palm in its early stages to yield more “fruit” (the seeds from which palm oil is extracted), and this must be done until the trees are at least four years old; only after about five or six years will the palm oil be ready to be extracted (U.S. Congress Must Hold Colombia Accountable for Violations Linked to “African” Palm Oil Projects 2008)²². Because this process is so intensive and takes so much time and money, food insecurity is inevitable, as those who have been displaced find themselves without enough money to feed their families, due to low working wages and lack of lands to properly produce any other crops; this is why traditional farming has never included African Palm (Modern Oil Palm Cultivation 2014). But because of its usefulness in a variety of industrially produced items that have been widely

²² “The clearing of land required to grow single crops (monoculture) leaves topsoil exposed to severe weather, which in turn leads to excessive soil erosion and contamination of waterways. Since many communities, especially Afro-Colombian, do not have water aqueducts, their water source is either contaminated or dried up by palm oil production. Furthermore, palm oil is not native to Colombia and as such poses a serious threat to Colombia’s biodiversity. When tropical forests are eliminated to clear lands for palm, the natural habitat of a diverse range of animals is eliminated. The species that do survive become pests for the palm producers. Palm oil companies then use chemical pesticides, which further harm biodiversity, the water supplies and, ultimately, the health of workers and local communities. Palm oil is often promoted as an alternative source of energy to oil yet there are a number of studies showing that extracting biodiesel from new palm plantations may not lessen global warming. When primary forests are burned to plant palm, it is estimated that decades are needed before the benefits from palm oil agro-fuel equal the carbon dioxide that would have been processed if the forest had been left alone.”

commercialized—including cooking oils, crackers, cookies, soaps, and candies—plantations will continue to spread:

The Center for Science in the Public Interest reports that after a 2006 FDA regulation required companies to list the amount of trans-fat (understood to cause heart disease) on labels of food products, many processors switched to other oils that don't contain trans-fat. Palm oil is one such alternative, and major producers such as Keebler, Oreo, Mrs. Fields and Pepperidge Farm use it in their cookies. Palm oil is found increasingly in crackers and cereals, and has long been used in cosmetics. Apart from its uses in food and makeup, and importantly in the context of a growing rhetoric about “greening” our economy, oil palm also produces a biofuel that has been hailed as a cleaner alternative to petroleum (Little 2009).



Figure 5. Some popular grocery store items containing palm oil (photos taken by author)

According to a report from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, each seedling will need to be planted in a small plastic container and kept there for at least five months, with seedlings remaining in a nursery-like environment for one year (Modern Oil Palm Cultivation 2014):

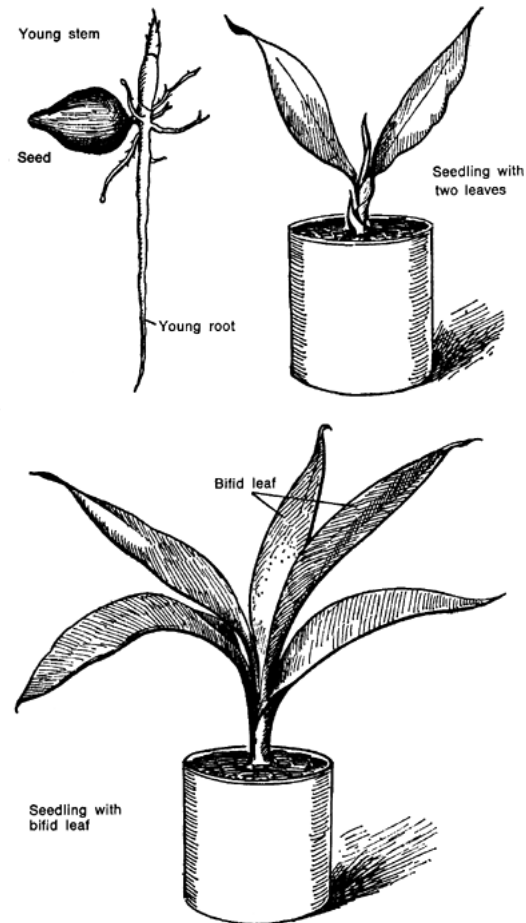


Figure 6. Seedling growth (source: <http://www.fao.org/docrep/006/t0309e/T0309E01.htm>)

After one year, the seedling is moved to the cleared and conditioned palm grove, where it will produce only male flowers for the next several months:

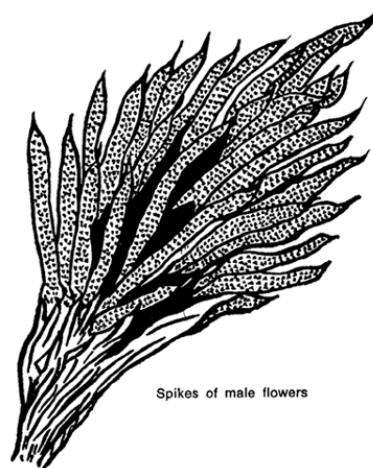


Figure 7. Male palm oil flowers (source: see Figure 6)

Because these male flowers do not yield any oil, the African Palm must be carefully looked after and trimmed, so that eventually the male flowers fertilize female flowers, and the fruit from which oil is extracted begins to form:

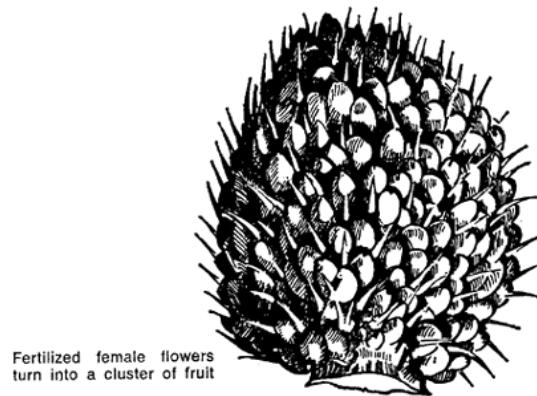


Figure 8. Female flowers with spikelets still attached (source: see Figure 6)

After the spikelets (seen above) have been removed from the cluster of fruit, the fruit itself will be crushed to extract the oil:

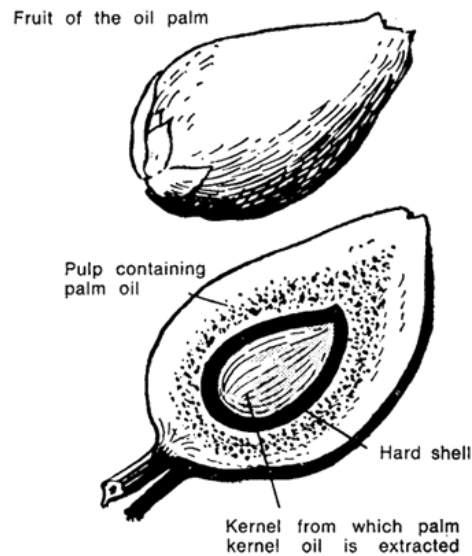


Figure 9. Once the fruit is removed, it will be crushed to extract the palm oil (source: see Figure 6)

This process takes on average six years, and because of the continued use of pesticides, mineral salts, and the constant removal of any encroaching plants, the exposed soil loses its bio-diverse properties. However, because of the purported benefits being promoted by

government officials, this long and environmentally harmful process gets overlooked or distorted to justify the economic profit derived from African palm oil production. Van Cott addresses this process of production occurring throughout Latin America, and how it is justified:

Natural barriers [are] reinforced by political decisions to organize colonial and republican societies for export production, which tends to create pockets of capitalism and modernity where such activities [are] concentrated, leaving areas of feudalism and subsistence-economics where they were not. As Carlos M. Vilas observes, “A weakly integrated territory favors the regional or local persistence of social and political institutions and practices that officially do not exist from the point of view of the central authorities,” presenting severe challenges for the even and nondiscriminatory extension of the rule of law or citizenship rights and the development of uniformly understood democratic values (Vilas 1997:13-4). The legacy of the lack of territorial and social integration, which favor[s] the representation of groups and interests located in the pockets of modernity developed under export-oriented capitalism, is the representation crisis described above. (2000:14)

In my next chapter, I will discuss the fieldwork I conducted during the summer of 2013 in Bogotá in order to address my research questions. My fieldwork included interviews with an economics professor at the Universidad de los Andes, and three employees at the United States Embassy in the Economic, Minority Representation, and Environmental departments, respectively. As will be highlighted, the naturalization of racialization in Colombia perpetuates the systematic silence I have discussed, and pushes development forward under export-oriented neoliberal tactics.

CHAPTER TWO – RESEARCH

My research took place in Colombia from June 17th to July 17th, 2013, with grants from the UNM Anthropology department, the Latin American and Iberian Institute, and the Tinker Foundation. Because I had travelled to the country twice previously for leisure, I knew several people, and stayed with a friend and her family in Bogotá. My approach for this fieldwork utilized both informal and formal interviews, archival research, and casual conversations with archive employees, friends, and members of the family with whom I stayed during my trip. I was able to gain access to the Archivo General de la Nación Colombia because one of my close friends was working at there during the time of my visit; additionally, I set up four interviews—one at the Universidad de los Andes and three at the U.S. Embassy—to aid in my research. I was unfortunately unable to secure an interview with Fedepalma, Colombia's national palm oil organization supposedly dedicated to the improvement of Afro-Colombian livelihoods and the promotion of African palm oil as a positive response to phasing out illegal coca production²³.

My first interview took place on July 2nd at the Universidad de Los Andes with the Economics professor, and my other three interviews were consolidated and took place at the U.S. Embassy on July 15th; this interview included department heads of the Economics,

²³ “The Colombian Government and USAID are promoting palm oil as an alternative to coca cultivation for Colombia’s farmers. While preferable to coca cultivation, palm oil is not a viable alternative, and in some cases coca is grown alongside palm oil. Furthermore, coca is grown on small fields owned by small farmers, while palm oil is grown on plantations owned by large companies that do not benefit small farmers. While coca is a fast-growing crop that can be harvested several times a year, APO is most productive after 6 years. Coca can be easily processed into coca paste or coca base on small farms and without heavy capital; APO requires a US \$5 million mill to process. There is very little transportation cost associated with selling coca for small farmers; oil palm products need to be transported by trucks to processing mills. Small farmers can earn up to US \$6300 a year for selling coca compared to US \$2400 a year for cultivating APO. When farmers convert coca into base or paste, the profit margin is considerably higher” (U.S. Congress Must Hold Colombia Accountable for Violations Linked to “African” Palm Oil Projects 2008).

Minority Representation, and Environmental sectors of the Embassy²⁴. Before detailing these interviews, I will first address my time at the archives, the information I gained from casual conversations with employees, and what I was able to find while conducting archival research.

CONVERSATIONS AND FINDINGS AT THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES

On my first day at the archives, my friend introduced me to several of her co-workers, many of whom were interested in discussing my project. I gave a general overview of what I was hoping to find, and was immediately met with hesitation by several employees. Initially, I stated that I would be trying to find information about the history of Afro-Colombians, to which several employees responded by offering their insights into Afro-Colombian presence in the country. I was given several contacts that would help me in my continued research, including members of the *Profesional Social en Parques*, the *Lider Comunicado Negro*, and the *Ministerio del Interior*. However, once I added that my project would seek to find the direct correlation between paramilitary presence and African palm oil production to the state, the mood in the room changed. What had been a relaxed environment suddenly turned tense, with shifting eyes and crossed arms. They turned to my friend and—switching to Spanish—expressed their concerns for my safety, and the overall sensitivity of the issue. What follows is a paraphrased account of the conversation we had, which I wrote down after my visit to the archives; I asked my friend to help me translate the Spanish portions of the conversation (C1= Colleague 1; C2=Colleague 2; F=Friend; SH=Stacie Hecht):

C1: That's not okay. She shouldn't be doing this.

C2: No, no, no. Tell her not to do that.

²⁴ I have not included the names of my interviewees.

F: Don't say that!

C1: You need to tell her to stop—it's too dangerous!

F: She cannot just put it aside! It's for her thesis.

They turned back to me after several moments and switched back to English:

C2: Are you sure this is the project you want to do? Can you change the subject?

SH: Not really...I've been working on this for such a long time now, and there isn't anything like this being done.

C2: I don't think you want to continue with something like this—

C1: You're going to...upset a lot of people with something like this.

C2: The problem is...you can't just make accusations about the state and—

SH: But if it's true—

C1: Ahhh, that's a problem. This is very dangerous. People will not want you doing this. You cannot just dig around, you see?

C2: It's just not a very good thing to try and do. You would, how do you, "piss off" a lot of people, yes? It's tough because palm oil is considered a good thing. Here, why don't you look at this book?

I was then given a ten-page brochure about Afro-Colombians living on the Pacific coast:

SH: Does this talk about palm oil?

C2: No, no. See, you won't really find that here, if that's what you're looking for. It's not easily accessible, the problems.

F: People don't really want to talk about it because it's so controversial, you know?

C1: (laughs) You really should change it before you get in trouble. I wouldn't just tell people about it while you're here.

F: No, no, she hasn't. But like, [name removed], told you (she turned to me), you know, that it's not happening (laughs) when obviously it is. That's just how it is.

SH: And obviously there is still stigma associated with Afro-Colombians—

C1: Oh yes, yes, for sure. It's still a major issue here, and like, you don't really see Afro-Colombians in the city, you know?

F: Well, like working, you see them.

C1: Yes, but, I mean...like...people don't really...

SH: There's not much integration?

C1: Yes, yes, exactly.

The conversation departed from the subject of my project and turned toward a more lighthearted conversation about places I had already been and places I planned to visit while in Colombia. I decided not to press any further, and continued with my friend on my tour of the archives.

What I gained from this conversation was a glimpse at how locals view the palm oil industry in Colombia; they acknowledged the controversy associated with palm oil and the dangerous nature of studying anything linked to the industry, and they also remarked upon the racialization in Colombia. Perhaps because palm oil *is* such a successful business (with Colombia being the largest exporter of the crop in the Americas), there is a politics of silence surrounding the problematic aspects of production. Both the employees and my friend noted that people simply do not want to discuss what is happening in order to produce palm oil, which relates back to my earlier discussion of the banality of displacement and the naturalization of violence committed against Afro-Colombians. They acknowledge that, yes, it is happening, but what can be done about it besides stirring up controversy and risking one's personal safety to pursue information not easily uncovered? Furthermore, because of deeply embedded and naturalized racial hierarchies in Colombia, development pushes forward in spite of this acknowledgement of violations, creating "a fragmented, uneven modernity" (Van Cott 2000:14). Van Cott goes on to note that a lack of territorial and social integration, which represents "groups and interests located in the pockets of modernity developed under export-oriented capitalism" (2000:14 – *see the full quote on pg. 31*) throughout

Latin America leads to the crisis of modernity, which is highlighted in the structural inequality discussed above.

Over the course of my time at the archives, I focused on finding information about the history of the country and Afro-Colombians, while saving my specific questions about palm oil and Afro-Colombians for my interviews. The general archive is mainly dedicated to protecting and highlighting the history of Afro-descended populations in Colombia beginning in the 16th century; the archives have made strides in promoting this history as a means to recognize Afro-descended people as a legitimate ethnic group. Over the last several years, this focus has centered on San Basilio de Palenque, an historic 17th century runaway slave community, located about an hour outside Cartagena. In 2014, state sponsored efforts to promote historical tourism began to commercialize an official version of Afro-Colombian heritage, with San Basilio de Palenque at the forefront²⁵. However, the archives do not appear to possess documents regarding links between Afro-Colombians and African palm oil production; as the employees were quick to tell me, this type of information would not be found here. In fact, the archives do not contain any literature on African Palm, palm oil, or palm oil production, even though African Palm has been in the country for over eighty years. There are no links to this industry in the historical portrayal of Afro-descended groups, which in its absence comes to represent what Tiya Miles calls, “a strategic

²⁵ “Our memory is our identity, our past, present and future,” said Rodolfo Palomino, director of Collective Communications for San Basilio de Palenque, during a speech announcing new documents, images, and previously missing historical volumes to be added to the Archivo General de la Nación Colombia (Palenque trabaja de la mano del Gobierno Nacional por la recuperación y protección de su memoria 2014).

representation” (2005:208); attempting to discover these histories can contribute to the “construction of narratives with a particular public aim” (2005:211)²⁶.



Figure 10. Picture from the Afro-Colombian heritage archives at the Archivo General de la Nación Colombia (source: <http://www.archivogeneral.gov.co/consulte/negros-y-esclavos>)

INTERVIEWS

I arrived at the Universidad de Los Andes the afternoon of the 2nd, and was warmly welcomed by my interviewee and offered something to drink while we had our interview. The environment was relaxed and I felt at ease during the entirety of our discussion. These details may seem trivial, but starkly contrast with my time at the Embassy. As will become clear, the interview at the Universidad de Los Andes was a open and honest discussion of my research and the questions I had brought with me. Below are both my interview questions and the responses I was given; the interview was conducted in English, and I typed our conversation on my personal computer while the interview took place. I have kept the full interview to show the amount of information I was given in contrast to my interview

²⁶ Miles notes to great difficulties faced when trying to trace Afro-Cherokee history by performing archival research, which she found to be incomplete and skewed to favor a white male perspective. These difficulties can be directly applied to my archival research.

at the Embassy, which highlights the sensitivity of the issue I was researching, and the different ways in which my interviewees approached my questions:

What is your opinion regarding the current situation for Afro-Colombians, as far as human rights, representation, and economic access? How do you compare the situation for Afro-Colombians with that of indigenous groups in Colombia?

As far as representations, indigenous groups are much more organized than Afro-Colombian communities²⁷. In the 1991 constitution, they managed to get reserved seating in the parliament. Since then, I don't remember how many, but Afro-Colombians and indigenous groups both have two seats, which is funny because the indigenous population is around 3.6%. Whereas Afro-Colombians are about 10% to 12%, but there is a lot of disagreement on that. They have been unable to organize themselves, unfortunately. There are only three political parties in the indigenous movement, but they always managed to get elected. There are many more groups with Afro-Colombians, however, it is hard to get organized. It seems as if there is a lot of corruption [according the news]. *Guarros indígenas* [collective land titling, for example]. In the 1991 constitution, the indigenous leaders brought to the table the idea that Afro-Colombian communities could be subject to collective land titling as well. It was driven, however, by indigenous populations...however this is contested, Afro-Colombians will say it was their idea on the matter...[they] managed to pass the law in 1993. There is a stark difference between the titling that I get and the titling that Afro-Colombians get – money transferred from the mayor of municipality to run their titling—so they can function. Whereas the Afro-Colombians don't get a dime. They're "organized," but they don't really have the means to do anything. Not even millions, just peanuts to do stuff.

Why is it good for Afro-Colombians [land entitlements]? They have the first right to extractive activities—but they have to purchase a mining title to get this going. But let's say it's worth \$5000 per year, and the communities don't have that type of money, so they have to go negotiate with big name miners...that lack of money

²⁷ "What we find in Latin America is the development of three distinct patterns of rights distribution between Afro-descendants and indigenous groups. In the first set of cases, Afro-descendants and indigenous groups are both considered national minorities, and as a result, they have gained the same kinds of collective rights to land and culture. This is the pattern that has emerged in Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua. In a second set of countries, indigenous groups have been considered national minorities, while Afro-descendants are not recognized as either national minorities or racial groups. In these cases, indigenous groups have gained collective rights to land and culture but Afro-descendants have not, and Afro-descendants also have not achieved specific rights to overcome racial discrimination. This is the situation in Venezuela and Mexico. Finally, in a third set of cases, indigenous groups have been considered national minorities, while Afro-descendants have been seen as such but to a far lesser extent; meanwhile, Afro-descendants have also been considered disadvantaged racial groups. In these countries, indigenous groups have gained greater collective rights to land and culture than Afro-descendants, but Afro-descendants have also achieved special collective rights to redress racial discrimination. This has been the case in Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru" (Hooker 2009:80).

difference between indigenous and Afro-Colombians is huge then in terms of extraction.

Indigenous groups are much better organized—many different groups living in different parts of country, but I feel that they have a different objective in mind. They don't pursue the white man's dream, in a way, you know?

They're still always being compared, though, indigenous groups and Afro-Colombians?

Many of them [indigenous groups] want to maintain tradition, whereas I feel black communities – again there's a lot of differences and dispersion but they are more keen to pursue the white man's dreams of attaining assets – Indigenous [groups] are much more affective whereas Afro-Colombians are worse off.

With the burgeoning African palm oil industry only set to expand in the coming years, what do you think will be the lasting effects on Afro-Colombian communities living on the Pacific coast?

I have no idea...but it looks bad...do you think it really is set to expand?

That's the plan, definitely.

I don't know whether—so, Choco is a very remote area, the only way out there is through rivers and—it is increasingly hard to get out—but when you start going further into the forest—I would guess there is a limited—and it's very hard to bring machinery there. Even though it *can* expand further, I think it will only on the river side.

What about palm oil being considered a mono-crop?

I'm not sure it has the potential to become a mono-crop.

Ahh, ok. I still haven't been there yet.

I've been there, but the rivers, the trees you see are really thin there, everything has been chopped—is there a shortage of wood? No, it's in there! But it's crazy what they're talking about. With the situation it—I don't see how it can expand—also fishing and mining are profitable as well. Is the whole going to be palm oil? I don't think so...

African palm oil is grown throughout the country, but the major plantations are not necessarily being established on the Pacific coast (i.e. the largest plantations are in Meta). Do you think this is one reason why the Pacific coast does not get much attention regarding the mono-crop?

I don't know, but what I told you a minute ago.

Do you think the recent agreement regarding land reform between the government and FARC will affect recently displaced Afro-Colombians?

First, I think that the land reform will take a while before it has any sizeable effects on anybody. The government has to know for sure that people were displaced and lands were taken. In terms of the Pacific coast, a lot of land has been allocated in [communities], but I am not sure that this land reform is going to affect recently displaced [persons]. It's going to take a while...there is help needed by NGOs and activists, so they stand a chance of being repaired.

Paramilitary groups operating on the Pacific coast are said to be in opposition to FARC groups; does this factor affect, in your opinion, how land reform agreements will be carried out on the Pacific coastal region?

I do not agree that paramilitaries are in opposition to FARC groups. I think they are both entrepreneurs of drug trafficking and crimes. Sometimes, their interests go against each other, but I don't think either group—there is any philosophy for the people—just organized crime...maybe in the early days, but right now they are just armed men protecting their routes...I have no idea, but I don't think they are in opposition. Sometimes they collaborate. Sometimes, they fight.

In your view, does current political discourse about Afro-Colombians relate their situation to the development of the palm oil industry?

I don't know—there was this very famous case on the news about massacres and displacement on the Pacific coast, and this was very visible a few years back, but other than that, many other scandals have been generated, such as drugs and mining – I think it's much more heightened with that than with palm oil, you know? But I don't know much about the mining industry, honestly.

I don't know either, really.

Has there been significant change in this discourse over the past decade, especially from 1996 onward?

I don't know about the discourse, but most certainly collective titling has given rise to a new generation of leaders stealing the spotlight from old leaders...disputes that arise within Afro-Colombian communities.

Why have land entitlements been so overlooked until recently? Why is it that there is still minimal attention placed on this issue?

I have no idea. We, my coauthors and myself, we've been working on this paper for five years, they just don't gather the data on the Pacific coast. [It's] complete and utter invisibility...[it's] this "arts and crafts" work of gathering data, but it takes forever. We are concerned with land entitlements and so on, and some of my colleagues have been contributing in different ways, studying land entitlements of the Pacific coast...trying to generate some information. Now, with the reparation, and the possibility of a peace agreement with FARC, it's more important in the news now and will be in the future

Is there a popular discourse concerning palm oil production in the country? Fedepalma promotes the benefits of the mono-crop, but what does the public have to say?

After the...experience with paramilitaries...I'm very suspicious of African palm plantations, but I guess that's not fair...should we scrap it? I'm very suspicious of palm—I don't think—it may be a good idea to promote in terms of big plantations, but I don't think it trickles down at all to the surrounding areas – it takes 20 years for the palms to be ripe, a good idea for big companies but not for communities.

After trying for years to gather data for this research, there is still so much more to be done, because acquiring knowledge is so difficult to accomplish in a tense environment. Even with the attempts made by new leaders who are organizing in order to pursue positive changes for Afro-Colombian communities' control over land, and the possibility for productive livelihoods, the steps are slow to gain ground, and seem to move forward only to be pushed back again.

From this interview, it is clear that the fragmentation of Afro-Colombian groups is detrimental to attempts at progress for communities seeking to counter the growing palm oil industry. This speaks to my discussion earlier about Afro-Colombians' sense of place being disrupted, creating foundational fractures that impede social movements' attempts to organize and gain credibility, and the issue of assumed political and racial solidarity amongst Afro-Colombians, not recognizing the many different Afro-descended groups in Colombia. Hannah Arendt notes that certain populations' very humanity is represented as something that one becomes or achieves, that one must *earn* because it cannot just be (1966:301); the right to have rights gets denied in the reach for modernity, and humanity becomes a product of privilege; the "right to culture" (Hooker 2009:80) is taken away, with blame placed on the very fragmentation caused by this denial.

This problem then ties in directly with the concerns about land entitlements my interviewee noted, when discussing the issue of dispersed Afro-Colombian groups: "In terms of the Pacific coast, a lot of land has been allocated in [communities], but I am not sure that

this land reform is going to affect recently displaced [persons].” Tatiana Avendaño has written on this very issue, stating:

The recognition of land ownership was given when the [Afro-descendant] communities were in a state of a displacement. Upon returning, they found that their land had been swept clean for the growing of palm trees, and nearly the entirety of their towns and villages had disappeared due to palm oil, abandonment, destruction of their dwellings, and the disappearance of their trails and roads, thus making communication between communities all but impossible. As a result, the social fabric has collapsed. Consequently, the communities have begun a lengthy judicial process of denouncement to recover their territory, which has been characterized by gross irregularities in favor of the palm tree agroindustry (2007).

Because Afro-Colombians are viewed as fragmented groups who cannot fully organize themselves, or as naturalized victims of developmental practices, they become lost in the darker side of modernity, and an economy that encourages “outlaw procedures in order to increase economic gains” (Mignolo 2011:67).

Based on the information gained from my first interview, I was eager to conduct my interviews with the U.S. Embassy officials to see if their answers mirrored any of the statements made by my first interviewee. Even though my interviews at the U.S. Embassy were consolidated, I was still confident that I would be able to gain the relevant information. Then I was informed that my meeting date would be shifted to July 15th, two days before I would leave the country. The abbreviated meeting time I had been allotted—one hour instead of two—was accompanied by the fact that I would now be attempting to gather information from three different people at once. I arrived the morning of the 15th to the Embassy and was told to wait outside until someone could come vouch for me. One of my interviewees arrived half an hour later to collect me, and we approached the first security checkpoint. It was here I was informed that I would have to turn over all of my electronics, including my cellphone and computer, which I had planned to use during my interview. While the seizure of electronics is, as I found out, typical Embassy procedure, there were

continuous obstacles throughout my time there, whether it was something simple like not meeting in an actual office, or more significant moments, such as the officials not signing my consent forms, refusing to look at my questions, cutting my interview down to only twenty minutes, and never going too in-depth when information was given. At the archives, the employees expressed concern for my safety; at the Embassy, it seemed to be a liability to discuss in great detail displacement as it correlates to palm oil production

Once we made it through all the checkpoints, I was told the interview would not be held in an office, but rather outside at a small café on the grounds. I grew anxious as we waited for the two other officials to arrive, and rain began to fall steadily. I wondered why we could not go inside, but did not ask. After some time, the officials arrived and sat down. They apologized for being late, and let me know that even though twenty minutes of our meeting was affected, they could not stay any later than originally planned. I grew slightly nervous, unsure if I would be able to ask all of my questions in time, so I quickly began passing out my consent forms, trying to make up for the lost time, when I was told by the Minority Representation official that the three of them would not be signing the forms, even though the Economics official had a pen in his hand and clearly looked to be ready to sign my form. He looked to her, clearly perplexed, and she repeated herself, this time watching him put the pen down on the table and hand back my unsigned document. I was confused, due to the fact that during our email correspondence, each interviewee was asked if they would be willing to sign a consent form, and agreed to do so. In addition to not signing the forms, the officials also stated that I would not be allowed to ask the specific questions I had brought with me. Once again, the officials had known ahead of time that I would be asking them specific questions related to Afro-Colombian displacement and its correlation to palm oil production on the coast. Instead of my project-specific questions, the woman told me I

would have to stick to general questions; I would also not be allowed to distinguish who said what during the interview. Below is the paraphrased account composed of my handwritten notes from the interview with the three officials:

Are you sure I can't ask just a couple of questions from my list?

Why don't you just ask us the more general questions? If you've been working on this for over two years, you probably know more about this stuff than we do at this point.

The mood was even more intense after this statement was made. I looked at each official, clearly shocked by what was just said. They stared back at me with mixed emotions: the Minority Representation official looking painfully annoyed, the Economics official looking extremely uncomfortable and refusing to make eye contact, and the Environmental official looking somewhat apologetic, but unwilling to speak up. It was clear to me that the Minority Representation official would be running this interview. She crossed her arms, but not before looking down at her watch. We had only been sitting there for about five minutes, but she seemed eager to leave:

I doubt that's possible—

Why don't you put your questions away, we really don't need to look at them.

They would not continue until I had put all of my documents in a folder and set them aside.

I took a shallow breath in and continued on:

Ok—

You want to know about Afro-Colombians, and I can tell you that Afro-Colombian issues are quite complex.

There really are a significant amount of groups represented, but everyone thinks there is solidarity amongst all Afro-Colombians. There is this idea of singular representation.

So, how do you represent Afro-Colombians without being too broad?

Well, Colombia has a lot of challenges.

Afro-Colombian and Indigenous representation looks like it has progressive laws on the books, but it is generational progress...mindsets changing, education, and so on...

Representation in politics is limited though—

—Yeah, it is.

I mean, there is no representation where it matters: not in the military, cabinet ministers, the government, you know?

Could you elaborate on that? Do you think it is because of this lack of solidarity amongst Afro-Colombians?

It's complicated...

Ok...the U.S. Embassy stated in the last census that only 10% of the population was recorded as Afro-Colombian, why is this the case?

Well, it is known to be closer to 20% or even 30%.

Yes, but why, in your opinion, is this the case?

People self-identifying know the stigma attached...it's not consistent though, not reflective of Afro-Colombians.

Next time, it will be higher.

And after 1991, it was a lot more inclusive, you know? Minorities were included, women's equality was discussed more...

Yes, and Santos has made an effort to hire people, I think...yes, a high advisor is Afro-Colombian.

What do you mean by "high advisor"?

Let's move on.

So, your research claims that Afro-Colombians are concentrated on the coast and they are historically neglected?

Yes, that is widely known, but—

NGO's hands may be tied, though, because of illegal military presence.

Yeah, it's not very well controlled there—

It's off the grid, so that is why these are prime areas for illegal groups; it's staging ground for narcotics trafficking.

Yes, we can confirm of course that illegal groups are present, but I'm not talking about illegal drugs. What about African palm oil? Can you confirm that illegal armed forces are present on the coast specifically because of palm oil production?

Well, we don't know why groups are there, we just know they are.

Even with reports beginning in 1996 regarding attacks against Afro-Colombians?

Yes, once again, this is probably largely due to narcotics trafficking.

It was clear I was not going to get anywhere with pressing the issue of paramilitary groups in relation to palm oil production, so I tried to ask about organizations I knew the Embassy supported:

Ok, can we discuss the palm oil industry? Can we talk about Fedepalma?

Of course, yes, Fedepalma is very developed.

Several years ago the organization promoted agro development and self-sufficient—

—It can make one of the highest required blends of diesel [bio-diesel]. This gave a big push for the industry.

It's very profitable.

Let's be clear: production in Nariño/Tumaco created employment.

Yes, but what about three years ago? 90% of the trees were struck by a fungus and it was a big blow to the region²⁸.

Was this widely known?

²⁸ From, "Land Grab and Oil Palm in Colombia" (Maughan 2011): "To worsen matters, the onslaught of bud rot on the oil palm has rendered many of the plantations completely unprofitable. Sadly, few can recognize any viable alternatives despite the crisis. The palms are fruitless; from Tumaco all the way to Alto y Bajo Mira many of the multinational corporations have abandoned their cultivations whilst no profit can be made and a supposed „solution“ to the epidemic is found. The scale of the impact made by this particular plague has been biblical: according to the local Government of Nariño 60-70% of all oil palms in the region are infected with bud rot" (2011:6). Because of this bud rot, privately held companies were able to buy out almost all the affected lands owned by Afro-Colombians, further expanding the private market for palm oil production.

No.

It's [the palm oil industry] still very well funded. They are looking at creating resilient strains of palm to resist fungus better. It is all very pro bio-engineering GMO research.

Palm oil in Choco/Antioquia though...because of intense disputes between campesinos and development of lands it is complicated.

Can we talk about those disputes?

In some cases, NGOs were sponsored by companies because of land.

No, there is not much controversy, just concerns about the uses of land.

But isn't that in itself controversial?

Well, U.S. Aid used to be in promotion of palm oil, because there were no specific concerns; the main issue is related to the land.

So, there are no concerns about palm oil being a mono-crop then?

No, you see, with Tumaco, palm oil is used in place of coca crops.

Under Uribe, there was a big push to increase palm oil and sugar cane production to create employment over illegal production of coca crops.

What about labor requirements and regulations?

Well, that is another issue, using outside contractors to hire police instead of Afro-Colombians.

Police?

Yes, like sugar cane productions hiring people, but not Afro-Colombians. When you are hired, there are benefits, retirement plans. But a contractor can get away with cheaper labor.

Back to your questions about it being a mono-crop: yes, it destroys everything to survive, and it's only expanding.

[It's] Getting in the way of cattle ranching...inefficient land usage.

What about attempts at land reform?

Well, now that is a slow process. Very long-term.

There's no agreement until full agreement there.

Ok, so—

I was cut off from asking another question, as the Minority Representation official looked down at her watch—for the third time in twenty minutes—and, clearly irritated, exclaimed:

Ahh, we need to be heading back. I think you've probably got enough, right? We'll escort you out.

Only twenty minutes of my allotted hour-long interview had passed, but the three of them quickly rose from their seats, and I did not have any choice but to follow suit. I was quickly escorted off the premises with only the scrambled notes recorded you see above. However, the information I was given, the hesitancy of my interviewees, and the overall tense nature of my interview confirmed for me the gravity of the situation. The claim that a graduate student from the U.S. researching her thesis knows more about what is currently happening in relation to Afro-Colombians and African palm oil production than the department heads for Environmental affairs, Minority Representation, and Economic Development of the U.S. Embassy seems contrived, at best.

My interviewees would not discuss any specific information related to my project, would not speak about the paramilitary presence, would not confirm the reasons behind the displacement of thousands of Afro-Colombians, and would not go into detail about land entitlements and reform. Even if they had not been informed about particulars associated with Afro-Colombian displacement and African palm oil production, they would not speak to even highly publicized incidents concerning my project. I cannot know if the officials were simply unaware of the gravity of the situation, or if they strategically chose not to hold themselves accountable by getting involved in the specifics of my research, but if the questions I wanted to ask were based upon erroneous information, why would Embassy

officials not want to clear up the misinformation? If paramilitary presence truly is *not* due to sanctioned violence and displacement strategies in order to establish and maintain palm oil plantations, then why would officials not want to let me know I was wrong about my years of research? And that other scholars, activists, and human rights violations victims are wrong about what they have seen, read, and heard? And, most importantly, why would they refuse to even look at my questions, in order to let me know what is actually happening on the Pacific coast?

My interviews confirmed for me that racialized discourses against Afro-Colombian communities contribute to human rights violations becoming normalized through development. I cannot make a full assessment of the U.S. Embassy's involvement in palm oil production based on this one interview, but I can acknowledge that throughout my time in the country, the overall view of Afro-Colombians is that of a fragmented, disorganized, unfortunate result of modernity.

CHAPTER THREE – CONCLUSIONS

African palm oil production is not going to slow down; the country is promoting this product as a way to reject the globalized stigma Colombia bears through its association with illegal drug trafficking. Due to the promotion of palm oil in this light by the state, with President Santos at the forefront, a clear line has been drawn. Displacement becomes an unfortunate side effect of economic success. Afro-Colombian lands are essential to the continuation and spread of palm oil production, and with the state turning away from its obligations to help victims of human rights violations, it would seem that the outlook for Afro-Colombian communities and their rights to land and life is increasingly grave. Because Colombia is run by a “highly exclusionary and authoritarian model of governance, characterized by astounding levels of political and structural violence, extreme social inequality, and an ever-narrowing space for political debate” (Beck 2007:i), the problems associated with palm oil production appear almost impossible to overcome. Marshall Beck goes on to note:

Policies of recent years have only exacerbated the situation, by reducing the role of the state in the provision of services, and by opening the economy further to the forces of the market—forces that inevitably favor the economically most advantaged—and to penetration by transnational companies, without establishing a regulatory framework adequate to safeguard local economies, communities, and ecosystems (2007:ii).

Systematic racism is continually directed against the most vulnerable communities and ethnic groups in Colombia, and until there is a paradigm shift, these violations will likely only continue to get worse. With the United States supporting Colombian palm oil production, and the endless possibilities for the utilization and exportation of the product, palm oil is being viewed as a positive means to achieving economic and political gains. The state has taken a backseat, distancing itself from the expansion of African palm plantations, at least in part to avoid taking responsibility for the actions of paramilitary groups. A

supposed lack of interference by the state in the illegalities of the profit-making process serves to enhance the state's power to locate, monitor, and control the people, while undermining potential sources for political opposition (Hristov 2005:100). This leads to the continuation and naturalization of paramilitary forces and, as previously mentioned, the banality of displacement (Oslender 2007). Paramilitary groups exercise a stifling hold upon Afro-Colombian communities, impeding the possibilities for alternative solutions.

While African palm oil production is clearly detrimental to the wellbeing and improvement of Afro-Colombian communities, its continued expansion may be in and of itself an unsustainable economic endeavor. Within the next twenty years, the lands being used for production will have to be abandoned, and by this time displaced Afro-Colombians will be permanently internalized, living on the periphery of their own country. There is a lack of acknowledgement of the destructive environmental effects this mono-crop will inevitably have. Because of its use as an alternative to illegal coca production, outsider perspectives appear to view African palm oil as a profitable export that both aids in the development of a country and undermines the illicit economy. With powerhouses like the United States purporting the beneficial nature of this product, as well as other resources being extracted at the cost of minority and indigenous groups, how then, when the outlook is so daunting, can there be any possibility for change? U.S. military presence, paramilitary influence, the lack of support from the state—these dimensions of African palm oil developments manifest as waves of terror, repression, and violence directed against those who challenge these structural inequalities and injustices. In the last two decades, those who oppose this form of development in Colombia have been identified as an “internal enemy” (Hristov 2005:106).

When the development model being followed promotes short-term unsustainable economic success over the protection of basic human rights, is there a chance for reform?

Speaking at the Centre for Research on Latin American and the Caribbean (CERLAC) conference in December 2007, Luís Evelis Andrade, an Embera Indigenous rights leader, stressed the necessity for an alternative:

It is important to note that the pursuit of peace requires more than a focus on the paramilitary and the insurgent groups. It takes more than demobilization and dis-armament to achieve peace. The achievement of peace requires us to take responsibility for, and to overcome, the injustices of the past that persist into the present, so that we can move our country in a new direction as the historical agents we are. Indigenous, Afro-descended, and peasant communities are promoting an alternative vision for our society, in which difference and pluralism are celebrated, in which our ethnocentric political paradigm—where one region is developed at the expense of another, where some are enriched while other are further impoverished and made targets of violence—is overcome. (2007:17-8).

Andrade's pleas for peace seem to be increasingly irrelevant to the activities of the state, agro-industrial corporations, and the U.S. Paramilitary groups now guarantee access to outside contractors seeking to establish more plantations. As Les Field recently noted, almost as soon as paramilitary groups claim to have pacified FARC-heavy zones—an ongoing tactic used to commit atrocities against Afro-Colombian communities on the coast— export-oriented, resource extractive industrial development swings into production: “Peace’ is therefore not a cynical ploy—peace is in the true interest of the Colombian oligarchy and their multinational partners” (2014). President Santos has made it quite clear that he thinks African palm oil production will promote “peace” for these ravaged communities: economic stability, job creation, decreases in violent attacks, relief of poverty-stricken zones.

Yet, Jorge Rojas of the Colombian NGO Consultancy on Human Rights and Displacement (CODHES) has made clear: “70% of internally displaced people in Colombia do not flee areas of great poverty; they flee from areas that are very rich in natural resources” (Beck 2007:28). What Santos fails to mention in his talk of peace are the direct consequences of being marginalized *and* occupying lands targeted for resource extraction, especially for

indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, in which a “narrow nationalist vision of Colombian national identity, [eliminates] subversives through the armed might of both the military and the paramilitaries” (Field 2014). Perhaps peace will come, but it will be disguised, its structural violence made opaque, while laws are broken or pushed under the table, and hundreds of millions of dollars are made from industries such as African palm oil that Afro-Colombian communities will never see, unless there is recognition and the development of an alternative that seeks to acknowledge the consequences of modernity:

To the extent that individuals are members of the same political community, their actions have unavoidable consequences on the lives of all those who share it with them, and they are thus enmeshed in relations of mutual obligation. It is thus possible to envision the development of an alternative conception of political obligation grounded in shared structural conditions that force individuals to see their fates as inextricably linked in important ways and which can lead them to develop contingent solidarities that are not dependent on mutual identification. This kind of political solidarity, which is capable of encompassing persons who are strangers to one another, has more normative appeal than a conception of solidarity based on a politics of commonality whose premise is that we are only able to envision others as having claims on us to the extent that we think of them as being “like us.” Solidarity premised on homogeneity is, by definition, limited and particularistic. As such, it is highly unsuitable for political communities in which diversity is a fundamental social fact and an inescapable political reality (Hooker 2009:169).

Until the racialization and stigmatization of Afro-Colombians comes to an end, human rights violations will continue. Modernity is inevitable, but how it is implemented can be changed. Until there is responsibility taken by the state, economic, social, and cultural rights will continue to be violated as a means of moving forward with neoliberal trade tactics. As previously mentioned, displacement becomes an unfortunate side-effect of development, and without acknowledgement by the players who are ensuring these violations by continuing to produce economic growth in this fashion, the future for Afro-Colombian rights will continue to be a fundamental deprivation necessitated by modernity.

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