AFRO-COLOMBIAN HIP-HOP: GLOBALIZATION, POPULAR MUSIC AND ETHNIC IDENTITIES

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ABSTRACT

As scholars around the globe debate the shortcomings and virtues of economic and cultural globalization, I approach Afro-Colombian hip-hop as a form of testimony to study what young black Colombians – as representatives of a generation at a global crossroads – reveal about the challenges presented by globalization. Evidence indicates that globalization and neoliberal reform have aggravated socio-political ills through intensified warfare, poverty, income inequalities, massive displacement, and violence, among others. These circumstances, in turn, inform much of the Afro-Colombian testimony channeled through hip-hop. I maintain that the content of Afro-Colombian rap, and the circumstances that inspire it, support those who argue that ethnic-racial minorities in the peripheries of the world do not benefit from economic globalization and its anticipated rising tide of wealth and spread of human rights. The dissent and frustration expressed in this music point to youths who are aware that promises of economic distribution, democracy, tolerance, and cultural respect are not and cannot be for everyone.

Globalization has also led to cultural transformations and changing ethnic identities, which are very evident among Afro-Colombian urban youth integrated into processes of economic modernization and cultural modernity. I examine various factors
that currently interpellate Afro-Colombian ethnic identities constructed through music and its practice. These artists use hip-hop as a tool for establishing alliances with local and international communities, for embarking on professional and cultural activities, and for reworking ethnic identities. I specifically demonstrate how this transnational musical practice has been re-signified within the Colombian scenario to highlight the performers’ ethnic-racial identities and the cultural significance of their localities. These performers are strategically appropriating and combining “foreign” elements together with “local” ones to celebrate their cultures, redefine localities and accentuate their “blackness.”

When asking whether this Afro-Colombian hip-hop, with its transcultured forms, leads to an autonomous culture or neocolonial dependence, I argue that it is simply too complex to fit into any sort of categorizations of binary analysis. In the end, we cannot understand Afro-Colombian hip-hop, its ever-changing cultural and musical forms, narrations and discourses, tensions and contradictions, without understanding Afro-Colombian histories and cultures and how they are affected by global processes.
Dedicated to my mother

Sandra Kay Dennis

who has always supported me in every endeavor
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Afro-Colombian cultural production – from literary works to music and dance – has historically been shaped by several factors, including Colombia’s geography and its strong regionalist character. Other significant influences that have had an effect on Afro-Colombian forms of artistic expression include experiences of slavery and racial discrimination, dominant discourses on *mestizaje* (racial mixture), and hegemonic racial perceptions and stereotypes that profoundly inform racial relations in the country. In more recent times, Afro-Colombian cultural production likewise needs to be considered within a context heavily determined by globalized discourses on human rights and multiculturalism, the challenges engendered by neoliberal globalization, and the pervasive influence of mass-mediated racial images from other countries, including the U.S. In this study, I address these influential factors while paying special attention to how they affect Afro-Colombian ethnic identities, and in particular, the manner in which they inform the messages and artistic forms of the popular music produced by urban youth. In this introduction, I specifically examine how the country’s geographic diversity has shaped the life and culture of different Afro-Colombian populations. This historical outline on the socio-cultural development of Afro-Colombian communities from the
colonial period to the present, which has been greatly influenced by regional differences, leads into a consideration of current socio-demographic indicators of Afro-Colombian communities, all of which serve to contextualize the topic at hand.

1.2 Slavery and Regionalization

The African diaspora refers to the movement of peoples from their native lands on the African continent to other regions throughout the world. In general, the “involuntary migration through enslavement by Europeans best explains the formation of the black diaspora and distinguishes it from other diasporas” (Green 12). Although Africans were present during the early stages of conquest and colonization of the Americas, the first Africans typically came by way of Europe. They came as slaves or servants (criados) of the Spanish conquistadors, military and religious men who carried out the conquest of the New World. Accordingly, these were Africans who had already had significant contact and experience with European cultures, particularly those of Portugal and Spain. It was not until the second half of the sixteenth century that European colonizers began to import African slaves to the Americas. Those Africans who were taken to the region that is now Colombia came from a myriad of ethnic groups predominantly from territories of Western Africa between Cape Verde and Angola. During a period of about 300 years, approximately 200,000 slaves were imported to the present-day countries of Colombia, Ecuador and Venezuela (some even circulated as far south as Perú), while the vast majority (around 150,000) remained in Colombia. Actually, the total number of slaves taken to the region was most likely higher given that in addition to the routes of legal entry into the Viceroyalty of New Granada (Colombia), many slaves arrived through
illegal routes. For example, it is estimated that for every 100 slaves that entered Cartagena, La Habana, and Veracruz, 40% were contraband meaning that they were never officially registered with local government officials (Díaz Díaz 16-17).

It was especially during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that slaves were massively imported into New Granada in order to replace the rapidly declining Amerindian populations. The indigenous population that reached 3 to 4 million before the arrival of the Spaniards had been reduced to less than 500,000 by the beginning of the seventeenth century, which caused a labor crisis, particularly in the gold and silver mines, on haciendas and within transportation networks (Jaramillo 32). It should come as no surprise, then, that Afro-Colombians historically have populated lands where Amerindians were either scarce or especially bellicose, specifically the tropical lowlands of the Pacific and Atlantic littorals in addition to the warm valleys of the Magdalena, Cauca, and Patía Rivers. In the end, slavery in Colombia never reached the magnitude that it did in Brazil or other parts of the Caribbean. In fact, it was only an essential element of Colombian society in certain regions, as we shall see. Although many scholars have addressed Colombia’s regional divisions and the different factors that determined the geographic distribution of peoples of African descent (Prescott 2000, Friedemann and Arocha 1986, Wade 1993, Safford and Palacios 2002), it is, nonetheless, important to rehash some of the principal differences between the Atlantic and Pacific littorals with regards to climate, topography, and natural resources, and the impact that these variations had on the uses of slave labor, and hence, the development of Afro-Colombian culture in each region.
The Spanish presence obviously began on the Atlantic coast. Although both the Pacific and Atlantic regions have tropical climates, the temperatures throughout the Atlantic littoral are not as hot and precipitation is not nearly as high. Moreover, unlike the tidal activity common to the Pacific coast, tides on the Atlantic shoreline tend to cause less erosion and environmental change. The more favorable climatic and environmental conditions of the Atlantic littoral, its harbors and militarily strategic location encouraged the early founding of important Spanish settlements that served as commercial centers and valuable port cities. For instance, Colombia’s oldest city, Santa Marta, was settled in 1525, and soon after, Cartagena was founded in 1533. Eventually, accessibility to both European and North American markets, in addition to Africa and the slave trade, would make Colombia’s Caribbean coast a central part of the Atlantic trade network (Prescott 22). In effect, in the seventeenth century, Cartagena de Indias offered a very important strategic location for the defense of the Hispanic Caribbean, provided a stationing point for the galleon fleets partaking in commerce in Central and South America, and was one of the few ports authorized for the entry of African slaves. At one point during the early 1600s, 2,000 to 4,000 slaves were arriving to the Colombian region each year, mostly through Cartagena (Meiklejohn 203).

Advancing inland towards the south, the Spanish encountered vast areas of land that, for the most part, were fit for rearing livestock and provided soil fertile enough for some agriculture. These somewhat favorable environmental factors made the Atlantic littoral fairly attractive, which therefore, helped stimulate a certain degree of economic development in the region. Furthermore, the Magdalena River, Colombia’s most significant traversable waterway flowing from the south and passing through some of the
more heavily populated areas of the region before draining into the Caribbean, facilitated the transportation and trading of commodities and services between the Atlantic littoral and the Andean interior, and between the interior regions of New Granada and Europe (Prescott 22-23). In fact, the Magdalena River provided the most important slave route in New Granada with important ports in Mompox and Puerto Nare from where slaves were distributed towards Antioquia and Chocó. And further south along the river was the port in Honda, from where slaves were distributed towards areas such as Popayán (Díaz Díaz 17).

Even though African slaves were sometimes forced to work in mining activities throughout the Atlantic littoral, for the most part, they were used in rural areas as field hands on sugar plantations, as cattle herders, and domestic servants. In the cities, Afro-Colombians worked as tradesmen, artisans, vendors, machinists, and construction and domestic workers. Furthermore, Afro-Colombians eventually supplanted local Amerindians as boatmen, known as bogas, on the Magdalena and other nearby rivers. In the end, the variety of tasks carried out by slaves in this part of the country permitted greater interaction and social contact among people of different socio-economic classes, and even ethnic groups, which at the same time fostered the development of the region’s economy. Afro-Colombians and Spaniards in the Atlantic region lived in closer proximity, shared certain spaces, and therefore, intermingled more frequently within different contexts than they did in the Andean interior or throughout territories of the Pacific littoral, as we shall see. For this reason, scholars have concluded that relationships between master and slave were sometimes “more relaxed” in the Atlantic, which often translated into less suffering for the slave, and even “manumission for the female slave or
her offspring,” especially “if fathered by the master.” In fact, “concubinage was not uncommon and could gain the female slave special favors or privileges (e.g. food, clothing, status)” (Prescott 27-28).

Therefore, Afro-Colombians – both slaves and *libres* (freemen) – often benefited from the economic and social prosperity typical of the Atlantic littoral. Of all the African slaves in the region during the colonial period, about a third of them resided in Cartagena and its immediate surroundings (Wade, *Blackness* 55), in great part, because they – as well as slaves in other urban centers such as Barranquilla and Santa Marta – typically found more opportunities for gaining freedom through self-purchase than their rural counterparts did, who therefore often sought freedom by escaping into the surrounding areas where they could seek refuge among Amerindian enclaves or in maroon communities known as *palenques*. In fact, at the time of abolition, the number of Afro-Colombians working as slaves in the Atlantic region (2,405) was roughly one fourth of the number of those in the Pacific region (10,621), which seemingly indicates that a greater percentage of Afro-Colombians in the Atlantic coast was composed of *libres* (Stafford and Palacios 182-3). Obviously, these numbers also reflected a higher need for slave labor in mining activities throughout the Pacific region.

In the Pacific littoral, slavery developed differently in great part due to environmental factors and the types of tasks that the African slaves were forced to carry out. Contained by the Pacific Ocean to the west and the central Andean Cordillera to the east, the Pacific littoral possesses great biodiversity and a wealth of natural resources. It is likewise the home to the fertile lands of the Cauca Valley. At the same time, however, the Pacific region contains deep forests and jungles, swamps, abundant precipitation, and
heavy erosion and physical change along the coastline produced by tidal activity. These natural obstacles logically discouraged any large, permanent Spanish settlements or urban centers like those established in other regions of the country. In fact, in great part due to these environmental challenges, the socio-economic and cultural development of the Pacific region historically has fallen behind that of the Atlantic or Andean interior. Moreover, following the abolition of slavery in 1851 and the ensuing emigration of a large number of ex-slaves to the unoccupied territories of the Pacific littoral, the Colombian nation-state was not overly concerned with the socio-economic and cultural development of what had grown to be an overwhelmingly Afro-Colombian territory (Prescott 20).

Although, during the colonial period, African slaves throughout the Pacific littoral were often used as domestic help or in small-scale agriculture, they were mainly used to extract gold from placer mines and riverbeds, an economic undertaking that promoted the use of slaves until the middle of the nineteenth century. In effect, the economy of New Granada was primarily based on mining activities, which necessitated large slave populations to carry out the manual labor. Moreover, African slaves were usually preferred to Amerindian slaves in the gold mines since Africans and their descendants were perceived as more productive and more suited for the severity of this type of work. The mortality rate of Amerindians in the mines was so high that in 1729 a royal edict forbid their employment in this particular activity (Wade, Blackness 55). For these reasons, during the first half of the eighteenth century, African slave importations dramatically increased to meet labor demands in the mines of Chocó, Barbacoas, Cauca
and Antioquia: “[…] a French contractor brought in 4,250 (1703-1714), the British South Sea Company 10,300 (1714-1736), and Spanish contractors 13,000 (1746-1757)” (Safford and Palacios 49).

Slaves in the Pacific region of the country actually formed the majority until the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century when the number of *libres* surpassed the number of people working in bondage (Wade, *Blackness* 55). Due to mistreatment, harsh working conditions in the mines and fewer opportunities for manumission, slaves often escaped into the jungles where they either formed *palenques* or attempted to seek refuge in local indigenous communities. Furthermore, manumitted Afro-Colombians often founded settlements away from the watchful gaze of slave owners and colonial rule. These trends, coupled with the smaller numbers of Spaniards and Spanish settlements in the area, tended to prevent extensive miscegenation between Afro-Colombians and Spaniards in most of the Pacific region. And mixing between Afro-Colombians and local Amerindians occurred on a relatively small scale given that the latter either occupied and cultivated lands in more remote areas or purposely avoided contact with other groups by living in seclusion in the thick forests and jungle areas (Prescott 26).

Although, as already mentioned, the Spanish presence began along the Caribbean coast and important, permanent port cities were established in Cartagena and Santa Marta, there were still many challenges to living in that region of what is now Colombia. For instance, the inhabitants of the region had to contend with the constant harassment by English pirates on their coastal settlements in addition to the presence of rebellious indigenous factions in the surrounding areas. Moreover, they had to endure a hot, tropical climate, an overwhelming presence of mosquitoes, the threat of malaria, and soil that
usually only yielded a single crop each year. For these reasons, large numbers of Spanish conquistadors moved inward towards the Andean interior, where they found the Chibchas (an indigenous group that was subdued with relative ease), a more pleasant climate, and lands that were more fertile and conducive to large-scale agricultural production (Wade, Blackness 55). Historically, the Afro-Colombian presence has been very small in the metropolises of the Andean interior, such as the capital city of Bogotá, where the Spanish and the mestizo populations have formed the overwhelming majority. The few African slaves found in the interior highlands were typically used as domestic servants. In the end, the Afro-Colombian population never formed a presence strong enough to significantly influence the social and cultural identity of what would become the hegemonic, Andean interior. In great part, this explains why the cities and settlements of the interior, mountainous regions have traditionally exhibited the cultural and social imprint of the European settlers coupled with the more integrated mestizo and Amerindian groups. Furthermore, certain trepidations and anxieties about the risks of living and/or working in tropical climates together with the belief that people of African descent were naturally more fit for such inhospitable environments, were not only used by non-blacks as justification for the enslavement of African peoples, but also to encourage this geo-racial “dichotomy of warm-coastal-Negroid lowlands and cool-interior-Caucasion and mestizo highlands” (Prescott 24).

As a result of the demographic pattern outlined above there emerged a certain type of geographical separation or regional segregation of the Afro-Colombian, European and Amerindian populations of the country. This regionalization was strengthened by the country’s rugged, mountainous terrain that obstructed communication between the
regions, which, in turn, helped fragment the Colombian economy into an “agglomeration of loosely integrated and largely autonomous regional economies” (McFarlane 23, cited in Wade, Blackness 56). Although the regions were under the administration of the same viceroyalty and there was a certain degree of interregional trade, these regions were not well integrated and transportation was extremely difficult. For this reason, in colonial Colombia, the three major regions took on distinct economic features very early. In general terms, gold mining – with some agriculture – was of primary importance in the Pacific region; larger-scale agriculture and artisanal manufacturing predominated in the eastern highlands; and the importation of slaves and consumer goods in addition to the exportation of gold and maritime trading were most significant in Cartagena and throughout Caribbean coast (Safford and Palacios 7). These economic differences developed alongside and in accordance with social, racial and cultural differences in each region. In a word, during this “process of Colombian society constituting itself spatially, [...] regions were created and these had very different racial mixes” (Wade Blackness, 57-8). On a very general level, the Andean highlands became a white-*mestizo* region in which the *mestizaje* between Europeans and Amerindians was widespread. The Pacific littoral, however, developed into an overwhelmingly Afro-Colombian region with very little miscegenation. The Atlantic coast emerged as a region with a tri-ethnic mix of African, Amerindian and Spanish elements, although a number of purely Afro-Colombian and Amerindian enclaves have almost always existed, especially among the lower socio-economic classes. And lastly, the Amazon region preserved its overwhelming Amerindian character (58). Although dominance by a primarily Spanish-descended upper class has historically been present in all areas of Colombia, the nature of
social relations has varied in each region. Ultimately, this geo-racial-cultural division coupled with the centralist nature of the Colombian nation-state and the country’s hegemony stemming from the capital, have worked to reinforce prominent racial perceptions and stereotypes of Afro-Colombians, whether from the Atlantic (costeños) or Pacific littorals, as exotic, backward and inferior.

1.3 Contemporary Profiles of Afro-Colombian Populations

Any contemporary socio-demographic consideration of Afro-Colombian populations needs to take into account not only the historic, regional contexts outlined above, but also more recent dynamics of economic modernization and cultural modernity. As suggested, Afro-Colombian populations – as well as the overall national population - often present different demographics and cultural characteristics, in great part, determined by the socio-economic development of each region and especially by certain socio-economic transformations that have taking place during the twentieth century, particularly processes of urbanization.

Until the beginning of the nineteenth century, regions with significant Afro-Colombian populations were typically structured around economies of waterway trading, mining, and hacienda farming. Nonetheless, during the course of the nineteenth century, most mining and farming estates steadily began to break apart, spawning the emergence of a rural Afro-Colombian population. In fact, after the abolition of slavery in 1851, throughout the Pacific and Atlantic littorals, the Afro-Colombian rural populations grew; people of African descent tended to migrate towards regions – mainly in the Pacific littoral – neither economically nor politically controlled by non-black groups. It was
within this isolation that Afro-Colombian communities formed and maintained their own ways of living, different social customs, speech patterns, forms of dress, cultural production and distinct economic pursuits oscillating between subsistence and production, between auto-consumption and dependence on a small degree of trade of a few forest products such as rubber, wood and tagua. This pattern of settlement and livelihood was formed on lands that would later be legally considered tierras baldías, meaning lands belonging to the state.¹ Subsequently, from the end of the nineteenth century and during much of the twentieth century, certain agro-industrial crops were introduced into these regions, such as sugar cane, bananas, and African palm, which, in turn, led to accelerated processes of urbanization and industrialization in certain areas or enclaves, especially throughout the Pacific littoral in places such as Quibdó and Buenaventura. In general, during the nineteenth century, while Cartagena continued to boast the country’s largest concentration of Afro-Colombians, other urban centers with large Afro-Colombian populations emerged, such as Barranquilla in the Atlantic littoral and Quibdó, Cali, Buenaventura and later Tumaco, in the Pacific littoral (Barbary et al. 72).

Since the mid-twentieth century, the Caribbean coast, centered around certain urban centers – specifically Barranquilla, Cartagena, Santa Marta, and to a lesser extent, Valledupar and Montería – has continued to undergo processes of socio-economic integration with the country’s hegemonic interior, while the Pacific region generally has

¹ When certain land reforms and territorial regulations were put in place during the mid-twentieth century, specifically Law 2 of 1959, the lowlands of the Pacific littoral were transformed into tierras baldías or empty spaces belonging to the nation-state (Agudelo 184). In effect, the Colombian government denied Afro-Colombian territorial possession of these lands.
maintained its rural character centered around traditional waterway trading. In a word, within this context of isolation and “underdevelopment” that characterizes the Pacific littoral, mining has continued to be prevalent, in addition to traditional fishing and logging activities. These forms of natural resource exploitation, such as alluvial mining combined with forms of nomadic or mobile agriculture along riverbeds, have led to the preservation and reproduction of Afro-Colombian rural societies in relative seclusion (73). And presently, with only moderate improvements in communication technology and transportation systems, the Pacific littoral continues to display a certain level of socio-economic, cultural and geographic isolation from the rest of the nation.

From the 1950s to the present, Afro-Colombians from the Pacific territories have migrated to different cities (Cali, Medellín, and Bogotá, for example) and other areas of capitalist development (such as to the valley of the Cauca River), taking part in migration flows (from rural areas to urban centers and/or from urban centers to other urban centers) that reflect general migration patterns typical of the Colombian population as a whole. These migration flows need to be considered within the context of capitalist investment, through the introduction and investment of foreign or national capital in a variety of economic activities in the region, such as the cultivation and breeding of shrimp, African palm, tourism, industrial fishing, livestock, and at present, even the cultivation of coca and poppy seed. As a result, in the last forty years, the nature of Afro-Colombian populations has been substantially modified from a rural to a predominantly urban one

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2 This represents a significant development that greatly informed the new Constitution of 1991, and its representation of rural Afro-Colombian communities, which are addressed in the following chapter.
This has obvious implications when considering the influence of U.S. pop culture on Afro-Colombian youth, which is logically stronger in urban centers due to more pervasive market and media influences.

1.4 Contemporary Demographics

The classification of people as negro, indio, blanco, mulato, etc., like all racial categorizations, is subject to variation according to circumstances and context. Furthermore, “[…] in the Colombian context, the institutionalization of race mixture has increased the manipulability inherent in the process of classification and made (racial) categories […] much more problematic” (Wade, Blackness 22). It is no surprise, then, that statistical data on Colombia’s ethnic composition vary significantly according to the source. Variance not only depends on the methods used to carry out any census, but also on how people choose to define their race or ethnicity. In a country where being “black” is still commonly perceived as negative and inferior, it can logically be assumed that many people choose not to define themselves as such. At any rate, some Afro-Colombian organizations and activists claim that the country’s Afro-Colombian population reaches as high as 26% of the total population. According to the CIA – The World Factbook, Colombia has a national population of 43,593,035, of which 14% is mulatto, 4% is black and 3% is mixed black-Amerindian (http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/co.html). In this case, approximately 9 million Colombians, or about 21%, can

3 Accurate and consistent statistics and socio-economic indicators on Afro-Colombian populations are difficult to find. In most cases, I have chosen to use more moderate estimations instead of what may seem to be “inflated” numbers often used by Afro-Colombian activist and organizations. Regardless, even moderate estimations of Afro-Colombian populations and their socio-economic profiles highlight the poverty, marginalization, and “invisibilization” endured by these communities.
claim “some” African ancestry. As indicated by DANE (Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadísticas / The National Administrative Department of Statistics), Afro-Colombians represented 18.6% (7,990,049) of the total Colombian population (43,035,394) in June of 2001. Of the total urban population in Colombia, 18.6% (5,714,339) is Afro-Colombian, while 18.5% (2,275,710) of the overall rural population is Afro-Colombian. And as per the studies and estimates from Olivier Barbary et al., these statistics appear to be reasonably accurate. They claim that the Afro-Colombian population has fluctuated between 20% - 22% of the total population (between 8.6 and 9.5 million people) up through June of 2001. This means that after Brazil (with 75 million people of African descent, or about 50% of the total population), Colombia has the second largest African American population in Latin America (75-6).

The historic, demographic context outlined above is significant given that Afro-Colombian populations continue to be predominantly located in the Pacific littoral, which today consists of the departments of Chocó, Valley of Cauca, Cauca and Nariño (populations of people of African descent actually extend southward across the Colombian border into Esmeraldas, Ecuador), and the Atlantic littoral (including adjacent plains and savannahs), which now includes the departments of Antioquia, Córdoba, Sucre, Bolívar, Atlántico and Magdalena. Those regions with the largest concentrations of Afro-Colombian populations are: the Pacific littoral in general, 83%; the northern part of Cauca, 62%; Cartagena and its environs, 60%; Urabá (Antioquia), and San Andrés and

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4 The region is approximately 100,000 squared kilometers (8% of the nation’s total territory); it is 900 kilometers long with a width that fluctuates between 50 to 180 kilometers. It stretches from Panama in the north to Ecuador in the south (Escobar, “Desplazamientos” 55).
Providencia with 55% in each.⁵ Other regions that have Afro-Colombian populations far above the national average (anywhere between 30% to 50%) are the departments of Córdoba, Sucre, and Magdalena, certain municipalities within the departments of Bolívar, Antioquia and Santander (especially along the river basins of the Cauca and Magdalena Rivers), the metropolitan areas of Barranquilla and Cali, and the northern and central regions of the Valley of Cauca (76).

In summary, Afro-Colombian communities can be found in 800 municipalities, which even include eastern and Amazonian regions. Unlike the rural, Afro-Colombian populations of 40 years ago, today about 71.5% of Afro-Colombians live in urban areas (71.4% of the general Colombian population is urban), and the majority of Afro-Colombians live in urban agglomerations of more than one million inhabitants. Approximately 49% of Afro-Colombians reside in urban centers of more than 700,000 inhabitants, and seven of the country’s thirteen metropolitan areas (Cali, Cartagena, Bogotá, Medellín, Barranquilla, Bucaramanga and Cúcuta) are home to 2.8 million Afro-Colombians. While there are enclaves of Afro-Colombians, often migrants, in most Colombian cities, Cali and Cartagena boast the largest, urban Afro-Colombian populations (approximately 900,000 and 600,000 respectively), followed by Bogotá, Medellín and Barranquilla (with approximately 500,000 in each) (76-7).

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⁵ A population of people called Raizals inhabits the San Andrés, Providencia, and Santa Catalina archipelago: “Raizals are descendants of English Puritan colonists, West African slaves, and Jamaican immigrants, who, over centuries developed a distinct culture characterized by Protestant religion, English language, and customs that combine European, Caribbean, and African traits” (Lee Van Cott 44).
1.5 Socio-Economic Indicators

The prevalence of people of African descent in some of the least desirable conditions in rural areas and urban centers on and outside the African continent points to the relationship between colonial slavery and present-day neoliberal globalization, which are linked by processes of human exploitation and a reliance on involuntary migration. For example, according to a study conducted by the Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo (BID), in 1998 the Afro-Colombian communities of the Pacific littoral showed higher poverty indexes than those of Haiti, which is considered to be the most “underdeveloped” country in the Americas (cited in Angulo 15-16). As mentioned, large regions inhabited by Afro-Colombians along the Pacific littoral isolated from the rest of Colombia have typically been separated from major centers of capitalist development. Not only are many of the connecting roadways impassable, but there are not enough efficient and organized fluvial or maritime systems of transportation either. Many of the people continue to walk great distances and navigate rivers in canoes and rafts. Furthermore, there are too few runways to satisfy the technical demands of air travel. Although the Pacific littoral’s population is predominantly Afro-Colombian (some estimates go as high as 90%), the mestizo or “white” population, which only comprises about 5% of the population, virtually controls all urban commerce and monopolizes the means of production in the region (Mosquera 25). Afro-Colombians in these regions still work in platinum and gold mining, logging, traditional fishing (pesca artesanal) and agriculture; in a word, they continue to hold jobs that during the nineteenth century were exclusively for slaves: cutting cane on plantations, harvest picking and in the construction of public works and buildings. In most areas of Colombia, members of black communities continue to toil
under harsh and difficult conditions, making use of outdated methods and technology. Meanwhile, the Colombian state only takes these populations into consideration when the time comes to turn over large extensions of these traditionally Afro-Colombian regions to foreign mining, petroleum and logging companies, that, with the use of advanced technology, tend to uncontrollably remove the country’s resources and wealth. In many ways the Colombian state acts as an indifferent accomplice while these particular regions have become extensive reserves of foreign and national monopolies (15-16).

In general, there is noticeable disparity between Afro-Colombians and the rest of the country’s population with regards to health care, nutrition and public services. This is reflected in the low number of hospitals, pharmacies and doctors, schools and universities, not to mention the deficient and even impassable roadways, precarious and inadequate living quarters, the lack of drinking water, and the absence of satisfactory sewage and energy systems within Afro-Colombian communities (Mosquera 23-50). It is no surprise, then, that many Afro-Colombians suffer from hunger and illness; children die of malnutrition and adults die of malaria, typhoid and tuberculosis. In fact, mortality rates are much higher among Afro-Colombians than they are among the rest of the population (Mosquera, Claudia et al. 16)

Although during the 1970s, many Afro-Colombians migrated to urban centers in search of new economic and social opportunities, they usually did not find them. Instead, they joined the ranks of the urban poor in cities such as Cali, Medellin, and Bogotá. Afro-Colombians commonly suffer from higher rates of poverty and unemployment given that they tend to live in some of the more impoverished, unstable and violent urban and rural areas in the country. In general, about 20%-25% of the Afro-Colombian population is
The vast majority of Afro-Colombian families live in poverty (averages vary between 76% - 85%) while earning an average annual income of approximately $500 - $600US compared to about $1,500 - $1,700US for non-black Colombians. In effect, about 74% of the Afro-Colombian population earns wages less than the legal minimum. Furthermore, the illiteracy rate among Afro-Colombian populations is far above the national average (anywhere from 22% - 32% for Afro-Colombians compared to 9% - 15% among non-blacks), while women tend to be the ones most affected. In fact, only about 38% of Afro-Colombian teenagers go to high school compared to 66% of non-black adolescents. And only about 2% of all Afro-Colombian youth complete their university degrees (Angulo 15-16, Mosquera 25-50, Murillo http://isla.igc.org/SpecialRpts/SR2murillo.html).

Furthermore, Afro-Colombians are commonly denied positions in public administration as evidenced by their gross misrepresentation in state institutions. At the same time, the ecclesiastical hierarchy has historically excluded blacks from the clergy (Mosquera 16). And in addition to the abovementioned challenges and obstacles, the armed conflict and drug trade – now, in great part, fueled by neoliberal economic globalization - have had devastating effects on Afro-Colombian communities. Many Afro-Colombian activists have denounced the armed conflict and its various armed groups who target and terrorize Afro-Colombian communities, often carrying out massacres, which obviously lead to greater indices of displacement and poverty. In effect, massacres have become very common in places like Chocó and the Pacific region, and of the millions of people displaced by violence in Colombia, a disproportionate number of them are Afro-Colombians. And although they are typically denied access to higher
positions in the country’s military, as soldiers and police officers, Afro-Colombians all too often serve as canon fodder in the armed conflict (16).

1.6 Afro-Colombian Music

In general, most music in Colombia has historically emerged from processes of creolization that has produced a musical gamut ranging from neo-African styles and Euro-African amalgamations to mostly European styles. The different contexts in which music has typically been produced and practiced can obviously influence musical forms and meanings: “religion (African-derived sects, wakes, European-derived sects); diversion (whether everyday dances or those centered on the great carnivals or saints’ days); and labor (for example, work songs)” (Wade, Blackness 273). Additionally, Colombian popular music, such as rock en español and now hip-hop, emerges from a context heavily marked by the workings of the entertainment and recording industries and the different types of popular music associated with systems of mass communication. In all of these cultural and musical milieus, Afro-Colombians have made their musical presence felt to varying degrees.

The marginalization and even isolation in which Afro-Colombian communities have historically lived have fostered the development of particular Afro-Colombian cultures, traditions, and even musical forms. And although Afro-Colombians have been relatively distanced from their African cultural heritage, the musical style and even content of a great deal of Afro-Colombian music can nevertheless be traced to its African roots. Music and dance have been practiced by Afro-Colombian communities not only as forms of recreation, but also as a means of self-expression, communication and
testimony; they have historically used music as a way of managing and even overcoming the suffering and violence associated with slavery, oppression and racial discrimination. And although the transcultural nature of most Afro-Colombian music points to outside, non-African influences, throughout Colombian history, there are many cases in which Afro-Colombians have achieved a kind of musical independence in which their sounds and styles serve as symbols of their cultural identity (273). In a word, from the colonial period to the present-day, music has provided an expressive medium through which Afro-Colombian communities have marked their uniqueness and differences in an effort to create and maintain certain aspects of their ethnic identity.

In many ways, for Afro-Colombian urban youth, rap provides a relatively new musical practice that continues to serve many of these same objectives. Even though, as mentioned, different forms of Afro-Colombian music have almost always evolved through the amalgamation of “outside” influences, the pervasive spread and acceptance of hip-hop and its aesthetics among Afro-Colombian urban youth point to the intensified nature of transnational cultural contact due to certain dynamics of globalization. These recent phenomena necessitate new considerations of how global processes and events are modifying local contexts and thereby influencing local musical forms, its messages and aesthetics, and even ways of experiencing and creating culture.

In this regard, the historic context outlined in this introduction, albeit general, is helpful in understanding the development of Afro-Colombian cultures and music. In other words, in order to better comprehend Afro-Colombian popular music and this hip-hop youth culture, one must bear in mind the socio-cultural transformations that have taken place during the twentieth century such as the widespread urbanization of black
communities that has resulted in Afro-Colombian youth groups now more than ever integrated into processes of economic modernization and cultural modernity. In these metropolitan spaces, Afro-Colombian urban youth are now exposed to U.S. cultural products like never before, an occurrence that has engendered noticeable cultural adaptations and transformations to be addressed in this study.

Furthermore, this Afro-Colombian hip-hop often returns to and addresses much of the history addressed above. In this respect, Afro-Colombian hip-hop can be interpreted as a type of cultural continuum in which music, as a form of oral tradition and social commentary, continues to be an important tool for recovering and maintaining local histories and cultural identities, especially given that people of African descent have historically been denied equal access to education, and hence writing. It shouldn’t be surprising, then, that much of the music addressed in this study reflects – both through style and content – not only these local histories, but also contemporary socio-cultural transformations and present-day challenges facing Afro-Colombian communities. Ultimately, young Afro-Colombian artists, their music and their culture, provide a wonderful medium for studying those spaces where “the traditional” interacts with “the modern.”

1.7 Chapter Synopses

In chapter two, through an analysis of several foundational Colombian texts, I address the historic construction of racial categories in Colombia from the colonial period to the present while paying special attention to the way people of African descent have often been stereotypically defined and categorized. I especially highlight the role of the
nationalist ideology of mestizaje, promoted by the Colombian state (circa 1851), as a discourse that has encouraged certain discriminatory practices in the country. At the same time, it is important to take into account how Afro-Colombian writers, intellectuals and activists have historically countered racist thought and behavior. For this reason, after considering the literary contributions of Afro-Colombian writers such as Candelario Obeso, Jorge Artel, Carlos Truque, Arnoldo Palacios, and Manuel Zapata Olivella, I also address the relatively recent emergence of Afro-Colombian social-ethnic movements and organizations, such as Cimarrón. Lastly, I examine the discursive representations of Afro-Colombians in the new Constitution of 1991, which was written in a way that grants Afro-Colombian communities the right to collective ownership of certain lands within the Pacific littoral and to special cultural considerations. Ultimately, the recent emergence of social movements, the globalization of discourses on multiculturalism and diversity, and this constitutional reform signal great changes concerning ethnic-racial relations in the country. The use of new terminology such as pluri-ethnic, multicultural, and Afro-Colombian, would seem to indicate a country trying to reimagine and redefine the ethnic component of its national culture. If anything, these processes have motivated more public dialogue on Afro-Colombian cultures and led to significant changes with respect to Afro-Colombian identities. Ultimately, historic racial constructs and recent occurrences leading to the growing visibility of Afro-Colombian peoples and the recent proliferation of ethnic-racial discourses all greatly influence the lives, work and identities of Afro-Colombian rappers in this study.

In chapter three, after expanding on the merit and contribution of a study on Afro-Colombian hip-hop, I introduce the various groups included in my research and provide a
general description of their styles and trends. In case of any unfamiliarity readers may have with hip-hop outside the U.S., let alone in Colombia, this chapter presents the needed background information and context in order to better understand and appreciate the work of these young artists. I also address U.S. hip-hop’s arrival to Colombia, which requires a simultaneous consideration of the ways in which globalization and the reach of mass communication systems have greatly aided in the pervasive spread of hip-hop and its aesthetics among Afro-Colombian urban youth. Lastly, I address the methods and challenges that these young artists face with regards to the production and distribution of their music in local music markets.

In chapter four, I take a closer look at many of the challenges and effects that neoliberal globalization has had in Colombia, specifically in regard to Afro-Colombian communities. For this reason, I consider the manner in which Afro-Colombian rappers (re)present and reflect through their music various aspects of globalization and the socio-economic and cultural challenges it has engendered. As economists and scholars around the globe debate the shortcomings and virtues of economic and cultural globalization, I approach this music as a form of testimony and social commentary to study what these young black Colombians – as members of communities that have historically been marginalized and silenced – reveal to us about the effects of globalization as well as its ideological derivative, the pseudo-egalitarian ideology of neo-liberalism. Most evidence indicates that neoliberal globalization, in actuality, has only aggravated socio-political ills in the form of intensified warfare, rising poverty, increased violence, etc., all of which inform Afro-Colombian testimony channeled through music. For instance, the most obvious and perhaps detrimental, local consequence of neoliberal globalization has been
the recent and accelerated revaluation of these territories (*tierras baldías*) that until now were marginalized and only sporadically exploited. These territories, especially those of the Pacific littoral, are now garnering the attention of national and international capital, governments, armed factions and the different social agents interested in these lands, all of which lead to escalating conflicts and more suffering for Afro-Colombian communities.

In the final chapter, I examine some of the more salient factors that currently interpellate Afro-Colombian ethnic identities constructed and expressed through popular music and its practice. Above all, I highlight the ways in which the appropriation and assimilation of U.S. hip-hop has influenced and nourished these youth identities. This approach requires a consideration of the ways in which this transnational musical practice has been re-signified within the Colombian scenario in ways that highlight the performers’ ethnic-racial identities as well as the cultural significance of their localities. In other words, I address how these young performers are strategically appropriating, adapting and combining “foreign” influences and artifacts together with “local” ones to celebrate their cultures, redefine localities and accentuate their “blackness” through music and its practice. Of course, the idea itself of “Afro-Colombian rap” raises concerns with respect to U.S. cultural imperialism and a lack of cultural autonomy in peripheral countries, all of which I address in this chapter.

In the end, I hope this study will help to fill the current vacuum in academic writing on hip-hop and rap around the world, “in which the expression of local identities globally through the vernaculars of rap and hip-hop in foreign contexts has rarely been acknowledged” (Mitchell 2). Furthermore, this study on Afro-Colombian hip-hop sheds
light on some of the effects that globalization and U.S. cultural imperialism can have on ethnic-racial minorities in peripheral countries, especially in one like Colombia, shaken by chronic violence, political instability, and civil war.
CHAPTER 2
THE AFRO-COLOMBIAN RACIAL CONSTRUCT: FROM THE COLONIAL PERIOD TO THE PRESENT

Colombia’s recent attempts at reinventing a more democratic and ethnically diverse image, in many ways influenced by the global spread of discourses on human rights and multiculturalism, have led to significant transformations with respect to the terms and meanings historically used to assign alterity and difference in the country. For instance, within certain circles, *afrocolombiano* (Afro-Colombian) and even *afrodescendiente* (Afro-descendants) now often replace *negro* (black) when referring to people of African descent; the term *cultura* (culture) is used in place of the *biológico* (biological); and instead of *raza* (race), it has become common to hear the word *etnia* (ethnicity) (Cunin, “Formas de construcción” 59). At the same time, alongside vocabulary like *mestizo* and *mestizaje*, historically used in reference to the ethnic-racial mixture that has helped shape national culture, terminology such as *multicultural* or *pluriétnico* are frequently used. Nonetheless, while this new terminology and its meanings are promoted by intellectuals, scholars and certain Afro-Colombian leaders, this new language does not necessarily eradicate all references to *los negros* (blacks) or to
*la raza* (race), terms and concepts still very common among the popular classes that carry particular meanings, and which likewise can influence social behaviors and practices (59).

The continual use of popular terminology to define ethnic-racial differences stems from the fact that social relations in Colombia, and in Latin America in general, were founded on a racial hierarchy inherited from the colonial period. In this study, my understanding of “race” is informed by Peter Wade’s definition in his book, *Music, Race, and Nation: Música Tropical in Colombia* (2000). In a word, race denotes the always-changing categories and discourses invented principally by Europeans resulting from their dealings with and subjugation of non-Europeans – in this case, people of African descent – through processes of colonization and imperialism. These racial categories call attention to prominent, phenotypic differences (most notably darker skin color) that are then assigned “racial” signifiers made to define certain social and cultural meanings organized around hierarchies of labor exploitation, control and power. These “racial” meanings have tended to change throughout space and time, influenced by a variety of factors, “such as economic and demographic structures, the development of scientific understanding of human difference, and political and cultural struggle over the categories and meanings themselves” (14). Due to the fact that racial categories and meanings are based on a degree of inherited phenotypic variance, they have, to a great extent, been naturalized, meaning that cultural differences, supposedly informed by differentiated physical traits, are believed to be founded on an innate essence that is inherited vis-à-vis
procreation. This naturalization process has varied in accordance with “historically changing conceptions of human nature as well as changing structures of social relations, particularly those involving inequality” (14).

Given that the relationship with the “other” has been nourished by a multiplicity of meanings of race in Colombia, contemporary studies must take into consideration these historic efforts to construct, categorize and define alterity, especially since these processes still influence in present-day ethnic-racial representations, discourses, and social and political action. For this reason, in this chapter, through a brief analysis of several foundational Colombian texts from literary, religious, scientific and political fields, I consider some of the dynamic and interactive processes that have assigned status and meanings to ethnic-racial differences and thereby created alterity in distinct socio-cultural and historic circumstances. Of course, any selection of texts will be subjective and incomplete, but I simply want to highlight what have been common definitions of *lo negro* (blackness) along with various ways in which ethnic-racial differences and their meanings have been constructed and adapted differently in distinct contexts throughout history. In the end, although the representations, metaphors and rhetorical tools can change in each text according to the era and the socio-political circumstances, we find that the objective of the evangelizer, colonizer or lettered author has always been the same: discursively appropriate and define the “other,” so that these discursive or iconographic images were internalized by the very subjects of representation. In this manner, the “other” would accept his/her place within the socio-racially hierarchy. The lettered elite defined, dominated, ordered, and molded the social imaginary upon which social, political, economic and religious reality was organized.
Ultimately, my objective is to facilitate a more complete understanding of present day ethnic-racial relations, representations, and discourses from within this history of plurality and ambiguity of meanings and uses. And this not only requires a consideration of dominant culture’s discourses on racial categories and their meanings, but also of different forms of Afro-Colombian contestation. As mentioned in the introduction, Afro-Colombian cultural and artistic forms of expressions have historically been influenced by a variety of factors, ranging from the country’s regionalist nature, slavery and discrimination, racial relations, and hegemonic discourses on *mestizaje* (racial mixture). This chapter provides the necessary context with regards to historic and contemporary Colombian realities that have played a significant role in the development of black cultural expression, and specifically contemporary forms of Afro-Colombian popular culture. Even though ethnic identifications and constructs emerging among Afro-Colombian urban youth are heavily shaped my mass-mediated images and external influences propagated through global communication systems, these identity constructs can only be fully understood when studied in relation to historic ethnic-racial constructs and the way they have evolved over time through negotiations, tensions and struggles between the representations imposed from above and Afro-Colombian efforts for self-representation.

2.1 Representations of Black Subjects during the Colonial Period

After boarding the slave vessels, the African was taken on a journey coined the “middle passage,” and it was almost immediately upon the slave’s importation to the New World that “black” identities began to take shape in the 1500s. Upon disembarking,
the slave was labeled a *bozal*, indicating a lack of experience in the New World, where with time, the *bozal* would become a *ladino*, or a slave who, after going through certain processes of acculturation, was able to speak Spanish and was more familiar with European cultural norms. Eventually, those slaves who managed to achieve freedom through legal means, either by manumission or self-purchase, were called *libres*, *libertos* or *horros*. In fact, during the colonial period and most of the nineteenth century, there never emerged an official “black” identity per se; in general terms, people of African descent commonly defined themselves as either being free or slaves.

However, the more rebellious slaves who refused to tolerate the cruelty of slavery often escaped into the hinterlands in search of freedom far from the slave owner’s gaze. As mentioned in the previous chapter, these Afro-Colombians were commonly labeled as *cimarrones* or *palenqueros*. It can be argued that the Afro-Colombian historical struggle – the collective mobilization of people in the name of material and social advancement or cultural recognition – actually began with these *cimarrones* more than 400 years ago. And struggles to achieve freedom - whether through self-purchase or *cimarronaje* – continued throughout the colonial period and during the struggles for independence.

In general terms, African peoples from different tribes, distinct ethnicities, languages and cultures, were lumped into one category by the European colonizers: *negros*. The Spanish created the categories of “*indios*” and “*negros*” in an effort to define and impose new and often negative identities on the colonized indigenous populations and those of African descent in an effort to erase their diverse ethnic identities, cultural ties and historic origins. Although other terms have been used in reference to people of African descent, such as *prietos*, *pardos*, and *morenos*, they always refer to darker skin
color, which indicates that regardless of the period or context, most terms overwhelmingly evoked images of dark-skinned people. This, of course, calls attention to the most salient phenotypic attribute that would differentiate ethnic-racial groups in Colombia: skin color. And despite the variety and ambiguity of meanings assigned by dominant culture to darker skin color, it has almost always been a sign of socio-cultural and racial inferiority, as this chapter will demonstrate.

One of the first and most symbolic texts with regards to the historic construction of ethnic-racial categorizations in Colombia is De instauranda aethiopum salute: el mundo de la esclavitud negra en América by the Jesuit priest, Alonso de Sandoval, which was written early in the colonial period and appeared for the first time in Seville, Spain in 1627. Sandoval worked in a Jesuit school in Cartagena and among his many obligations he was responsible for educating and tending to the spiritual needs of the white, black and indigenous populations. And interestingly enough, Sandoval would become the main mentor of San Pedro Claver, who eventually was canonized and proclaimed the patron saint of slaves for his role as the “slave of the slaves” (esclavo de los esclavos). This particular text was written during one of the most intense periods of the slave trade. Besides the approximately 5,000 slaves that resided in Cartagena and its environs, there was also a transitory slave population of approximately 2,000 to 4,000 that arrived annually to Cartagena for distribution throughout the colonies (Meiklejohn 203).

1 The citations in this chapter correspond to the following edition: Alonso P. Sandoval, De instauranda aethiopum salute: el mundo de la esclavitud negra en América, (Santafé de Bogotá: Banco de la República, 1956).
Sandoval’s text, which is one of the most significant testimonies to the arrival of slaves to Cartagena and the New World, represents a Christian perspective with regards to Africans and slavery. It is a proto-anthropological, historical, theoretical and theological essay on African slaves, their misfortunes and state of health. Above all, this book was to be used as a type of guide by missionaries in order to identify the different ethnic groups coming from Africa in order to evangelize them more efficiently.

According to Margaret M. Olsen, “It is unique in that it is the only published missionary history that deals exclusively with the Christianization of Africans in early Spanish America. Put simply, De instauranda stands alone as the earliest Spanish American document that seeks to make historical, philosophical and cultural sense of the African/European encounter in a New World context” (Oslen, Slavery 2).

Basing his opinions on both theological studies and on his own research, Sandoval was convinced that slavery was immoral, but he accepted the opinion of the Jesuit Order that the slave masters could buy slaves in good faith. Most notably, he presented the African slave as the “black other” who was culturally and intellectually inferior: “[...] el esclavo tiene solamente medio entendimiento, el amo debe tener

2 Those who defended slavery sustained that the slaves had been purchased from Africans who had captured them in “just wars.” This meant that the African sold as a slave to the Portuguese was considered a pagan warrior, and hence, his/her slavery was considered just punishment. Nevertheless, many of the purchased slaves had been captured during expeditions whose only objective was to obtain human merchandise to sale on the European markets. Human traffickers conveniently accepted the African slave vendors’ word that their slaves had been captured and “saved” in “just war,” under the belief that it was not the purchaser’s obligation to investigate the legitimacy of the slave’s capture. Even when the “just war” doctrine seemed to be losing validity, many argued that slavery was a necessary evil in order to save souls: “Other priest-authors, including Tomás de Mercado, Luis de Molina, and Alonso de Sandoval, questioned or rejected the buena guerra contention in their writings. Particularly after 1640, the major suppliers of slaves to the Spanish Indies were the Dutch, the French, and the English. These powerful states did not even bother to employ ‘prisoners of a just war’ charade, and it eventually lost its serviceability [...] More morally comforting than the Buena Guerra explanation was the argument that slavery was the impost the black was to pay in exchange for his conversion to Christianity” (Rout 33-34). Therefore, the slave masters could buy slaves under the obligation to instruct them in Christian doctrine.
entendimiento y medio: el entero para sí, el medio con que supla la mitad que le falta a su esclavo” (193). Nonetheless, he had to admit that Africans had the spiritual capacity to be Christians. If he agreed that all humanity had descended from the same progenitors created by God, then these supposedly “fallen” Africans could indeed be saved and converted. The blood of Christ, which had been spilled for everyone, would metaphorically clean the stigma of being black and the sin that it implied: “Sea pues esto que aquí escribo, este lienzo sobrado, y sirva para que tomándolo en las manos el celoso imitador de Cristo, no tenga asco de limpiar los pies del mundo, que son los negros; pues ni sus almas son menos preciosas que las de los muy blancos, ni costaron menos que la sangre del Cordero de Dios vertida por todos” (6). The black slaves were the “feet” of the world, the bottom rung, (Olsen, “Alonso de Sandoval” 2), and Sandoval believed that they should accept their inferior position within this *sociedad de castas* (described in more detail below) since this was the life God had chosen for them. According to his preaching, the African slave, often presented as childlike, had to be educated by the church or the slave master who should assume this social and moral responsibility. Sandoval – and other colonizers – thought it was best to be a baptized slave in the Americas than a free, non-baptized pagan in Africa. Therefore, the various representations in his text of the African as inferior justified the church’s efforts at evangelization while the possibility of salvation legitimized slavery and the very condition of Africans as slaves.

For Sandoval, the aspiration of creating an ordered, Christian colony meant the elimination of differences in all that Africa represented. In other words, the goal of Sandoval was to “whiten” the souls of black slaves (who were “ugly” and inferior due to
their dark skin color) and in this manner create a more “beautiful” and “white” colony from which the rest of the New World could be evangelized: “[…] de carbones feos sabe y puede su Majestad, hacer brasas encendidas y que alumbren […] Que como declara el Incógnito, las almas negras por el pecado, las hermosea Dios con la luz y claridad de la gracia” (7). Only by eliminating sin (in this case, synonym for black) could this order be achieved: “no acaban de maravillarse viendo este desorden en el mundo, porque no alcanzaron la causa de ello, que fue el pecado” (191). In the end, for Sandoval, religion served to overcome carnal, physical differences for the better good of spreading the Christian faith. The slave was inferior (signaled by skin color), but s/he could better her/himself through Christianity and the “whitening” of the soul. In this sense, there emerges a type of dichotomy between the soul and the body. The differences among people were found on or within the body, particularly skin color, interpreted as a mark of sin and inferiority that justified slavery. Nonetheless, unity (but not equality) could be achieved – despite these differences in appearance – through faith vis-à-vis the “whitening” of the soul. This is why Sandoval was so concerned with baptizing the slave. In the end, Sandoval’s efforts to achieve his utopian dream served to perpetuate the colonial establishment and its socio-economic, cultural and religious order. In his work, we begin to see how lo negro (that which is ugly, impure and sinful) defined by lettered men, was converted into the main criterion of social stratification in Latin American colonial society.

However, any attempt at constructing this “black/white” dichotomy was complicated by the fact that almost from the beginning of the colonial period an active process of ethnic and cultural mixing never before experienced with such intensity began
to take place in Colombia and in many other parts of Latin America. From this historic context emerged people of African descent who sexually, culturally and ethnically integrated and assumed various elements of the different African ethnic groups that came together in the Americas. At the same time, there was ethnic and cultural mixing among people of European, indigenous and African descent. In other words, in the Spanish colonies, especially in urban centers, the *mestizos*, *negros*, and *indios* shared many of the same spaces and from the mixing of all these groups emerged a type of social stratification determined largely by racial or phenotypic characteristics. This mixing led to the formation of the *sociedad de castas*, simplistically defined as those particular racial unions with little incidence of “white” or European. In a word, different social strata were acknowledged and named, their positions supposedly determined primarily by degrees of racial mixture. For instance, *mulato*, *zambo*, *morisco*, *albarazado*, *lobo*, *cambujo*, *tenten-el-aire* and *no-te-entiendo* are a few examples of the nomenclature created by the elite that were common in all of Latin America.\(^3\) This too points to the ways in which the African was reduced to the color of his skin, racialized and stereotyped during slavery and the colonial period. Again, the African names, histories, cultures, traditions and beliefs were stripped and reduced to *negro* (*el negro, la negra, los negritos, la negrita, el*

negrito), often a synonym for savage and subordinate.⁴ Not only did these categories mark a pyramidal, socio-racial ordering according to phenotypic characteristics, mainly skin color, but most importantly, the Spanish authorities and wealthy Creoles, especially slaveholders, also established this sociedad de castas as a means of justifying and maintaining their own socio-economic and political dominance over the masses.⁵

In Diario de viaje entre los indios y negros de la provincia de Cartagena en el Nuevo Reino de Granada 1787-1788 (1955), the Franciscan Joseph Palacios de la Vega left behind a series of reports on his evangelizing activities in the province of Cartagena, specifically along the riverbeds of the Cauca River. This account was written approximately 170 years after Sandoval’s text – and soon before the struggles for independence –, during a period in which the Spaniards were trying to extend their colonial power beyond urban centers in the Americas. His text, which provides a register of events, anecdotes and situations, reveals how various ethnic-racial groups in the territory were colonized, such as the indios, negros, mulattos and zambos. Palacios de la Vega presents himself as the “Cura Reducttor del Nuebo Pueblo de Sn. Cipriano” (27), the place from which he departed with orders to reunite the parishioners that were dispersed in the region with the intentions to exercise more direct control over them. Palacios de la Vega’s text, therefore, moves beyond urban centers as he carries out his evangelical work exposing the corruption and the contraband that existed in these

⁴ In a similar and equally discriminatory fashion, the men and women of indigenous civilizations (Aztecs, Mayans, Incas, Chibchas, Caribs, and Arawaks, among others) at different stages of development within the Americas were all categorized as “indios.”

territories, while at the same time baptizing entire communities and constructing villages where everyone could live under colonial authority and vigilance. Settling in the villages implied the tacit acceptance of the colonial ideals, morals and laws; fleeing from this control and vigilance implied a rejection of colonial power, a form of resistance considered as a challenge and a threat to colonial authorities. For this reason, those who resisted were pursued as *bandidos* (bandits).

With orders from the Viceroy Archbishop, don Antonio Caballero y Góngora, Palacios de la Vega had the task of evangelizing the Amerindians along the San Jorge River in the southern part of the province of Cartagena. While he carried out his task and with the help of his scribe, he maintained a written account of a panorama of indigenous, negro and zambo communities and cultures while describing the conditions in which they lived and their manner of relating to the Spaniards. In fact, the text illustrates that there were very few “whites” surrounded by “wretched” (*infeliz*) and “barbaric” (*bárbaro*) people (Palacios 66). In this manner, his report reflects the fact that in this region, during this time (as mentioned in the introduction) the high degree of *mestizaje* had produced a great deal of heterogeneity that was becoming more and more visible.

In the “Introducción” to this particular edition, the editor, Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff, affirms that “Su diario de viaje da testimonio de que sus contactos con los indios fueron más íntimos, más comprensivos tal vez que los que se observan en su actitud hacia los negros y mulatos” (16). In this sense, this testimony reflects the colonial policy of privileging certain groups or castes over others. For instance, tributary indian labor in the form of the *encomienda* lasted in some regions until the late colonial period, while slavery existed as a legal category and a real status for Afro-Colombians until
1851. In general, the *mestizos* were recognized as “people of reason,” but *negros, zambos* and *mulatos* were not. In fact, all people of African descent were considered *castas* even if they had mixed blood, given that African origin was considered debilitating. The *negros, mulatos* and *zambos* could not obtain any official civil or religious office and various fields of commerce were also prohibited (Rout 127). And the tension between the *indios* and *negros* was a constant topic of concern for colonial authorities.⁶

These two colonial, religious texts take up the representation of people of African descent in the same region of present-day Colombia at two distinct moments of the colonial era. In the work of Sandoval, the black slave’s sin – signaled by his dark skin color – could be “corrected” through the salvation of the soul, in other words, the “whitening” of the soul: “His is a classic baroque project of creating light where there is dark and making beautiful what is ugly” (Olsen, *Slavery* 90). Although Palacios de la Vega also is concerned with baptizing the various ethnic-racial groups, his representations are more ambivalent due to other motives; besides being an evangelizer, the Franciscan father also enters these territories as a conquistador, a soldier and a traveler; in addition to saving souls, he has to rediscover and reconquer (spiritually, politically and economically) these territories and the people who inhabited them.

⁶ Upon considering this “*sociedad de castas*” based on the notion of the “pureza de sangre”, Rout affirms: “Among these was the concept of ‘purity of blood,’ which maintained that bloodlines were infallible determinants of physical beauty and psychic character. Logically, then, those of ‘unclean’ origins were carriers of biological deficiencies and were unfit to occupy positions of moral and political authority […] In the New World, however, the concept condemned people of mixed blood in general and African ancestry in particular […] These circumstances made miscegenated persons the pariahs of the social system […]” (126-7). Furthermore, the colonizers who at the beginning called themselves Spaniards or Portuguese, began to more frequently identify themselves as “whites” around the ending of the eighteenth century (around the time of Palacios’ work), a time when the “purity of blood” began to refer to pigmentation and the color of the skin and not so much to religious practices in relation to Christianity: “La idea de “raza” venía, probablemente, formándose durante las guerras de ‘Reconquista’ en la península ibérica. En esas guerras los cristianos de la contrarreforma amalgamaron en su percepción las diferencias religiosas con las fenotípicas” (Quijano, “Cultura” 120).
Therefore, while both texts signal the Afro-Colombians’ distance from Christianity, the text of Palacios de la Vega also emphasized their distance from legality and colonial political and economic power. Sandoval reflected on the significance of the Africans’ dark skin and on the morality of slavery, illustrating a concern for incorporating these new peoples into his religion and worldview. His efforts demonstrate a desire to mediate between Africans and Europeans in order to unite them under the Christian faith. These are not questions or concerns addressed in the Palacio de la Vega’s text, in which the heterogeneity doesn’t necessarily represent an intellectual, cultural or epistemological challenge, but instead a political and economic one. For this reason, racial stereotypes and slavery are seen as a necessary evil not in order to save souls, but instead for the survival of the empire and the colonial economy.

In both of these works, while many of the religious and cultural differences can be transformed in order to assimilate the Afro-Colombians, they will never be completely equal due to the different skin color and all that it signifies. Although they can convert people of African descent into Christians and “whiten” their souls, they cannot change their phenotypic characteristics, considered to be marks of inferiority. Furthermore, these writings demonstrate the fact that the religious orders had to establish bureaucratic control of the church along with military domination through force and superior technology. Nonetheless, while these religious men sought resignation and conformism, the report from Palacios de la Vega signals that, despite the oppressive means used by the church and the colonial power, people of African descent did not simply resign or give up. They were not mere victims, but instead made use of a variety of forms of resistance that are obvious in Diario de un viaje. However, although black communities didn’t
disintegrate simply because these religious men (and European colonizers in general) represented them as barbarians and pagans, these representations would assume a fundamental role in establishing hegemonic representations on the black subject that, during centuries, have continued to interpellate subjectivities and inform ethnic-racial perceptions in Colombia. In other words, Colombians have internalized, to an extent, a version of this colonial system of values. As this study will show, even today, Afro-Colombian leaders struggle to eradicate this colonial mentality that not only influenced in the invention of the Colombian nation, but also in present-day prejudices, social attitudes and behaviors of many Colombians, even among Afro-Colombians.

2.2 Francisco José de Caldas and Enlightened Racialism

Colombia’s intelligentsia would inevitably have to address European ideology and scientific thought that viewed Africans and people of African descent as inherently inferior. And the influence of enlightened rationalism and scientific naturalism was exemplified early in the nineteenth century in the work of Francisco José de Caldas, a naturalist considered by many to be the father of Colombian geography. He was a member of the Expedición Botánica and director of the Observatorio Astronómico de Bogotá. He took part in various scientific expeditions in New Granada while accompanying the likes of Celestino Mutis and Alexander von Humboldt. And in 1807, Caldas began the publication of the Seminario de la Nueva Granada, a scientific journal in which many of his writings were put into print. Perhaps his most significant scientific essays were “Estado de Santafé de Bogotá con relación a la economía y al comercio” (1807) and “Del influjo del clima sobre los seres organizados” (1808). Basing his
research and findings on eighteenth century scientific rationalism from Europe, he attempted to explain, using natural laws, the differences between the races. He was especially influenced by the work of various French naturalists: “Buffon, Lacepède, Daubenton […] Estos genios extraordinarios nos dicen que el color de la piel en el hombre es efecto del calor y del frío, y que sigue las leyes invariables de la latitud y del clima” (93).

In her book, Identidades a flor de piel: lo “negro” entre apariencias y pertenencias: categories raciales y mestizaje en Cartagena (2003), Elisabeth Cunin briefly examines the essay, “Del influjo del clima sobre los seres organizados.” Here I hope to expand on her analysis of Caldas’ theories on the ways in which the climate influenced the dependent relationship between the biological and social elements (70). In this particular text, Caldas contended that environmental and climatic conditions not only affected the human body, but also the psychology, intellect and moral fiber of an individual: “He aquí cómo el clima influye sobre la constitución física del hombre, sobre su carácter y sobre su moral: he aquí cómo contribuye a sus virtudes y a sus crímenes” (82). His beliefs reflected some of the principal theories used by proponents of environmental determinism (sometimes called climatic determinism). It was generally thought that certain elements of the environment, principally climate, determined the

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7 Many of the European, enlightened ideas found in Caldas’s work would later be formulated by Hippolyte Adolphe Taine (1828 – 1893), who was one of the main influences of French naturalism, a chief advocate of sociological positivism, and one of the first practitioners of historicist criticism. In order to carry out a contextual study of artistic production, he used a three-pronged methodology, which was based on what he called “race, milieu, and moment.” He believed that the artist or writer was not an isolated being, but instead a product of his/her race, environment, and the circumstances in which that individual lived when his/her artistic and intellectual talents were developing. Ultimately, those features to be analyzed before an individual (artist) could be taken into consideration were race, environment, and time.
psychological disposition of individuals living in specific geographical regions. And the psychological temperament of individuals, in turn, determined certain aspects of their values, attitudes and cultures.

Caldas was indeed convinced that environmental and climatic conditions common to particular geographic regions determined differentiating physical attributes of human groups (i.e. skin color, stature, hair texture, etc.), which, in turn, shaped culture. For example, according to his arguments, warmer or perhaps tropical climates were more conducive to the development of a “black race” of people who portrayed observable physical features intrinsically tied to specific social and cultural attributes. In order to prove his theory, he compared facial angles of the craniums from both Europeans and Africans while claiming that an increase of particular angles demonstrated a proportional growth in intelligence and reason (Cunin, Identidades 71):

> Cuando este ángulo crece, crecen todos los órganos destinados a poner en ejercicio la inteligencia y la razón; cuando disminuye, disminuyen también estas facultades. El europeo tiene 85º y el africano 70º. ¡Qué diferencia entre estas dos razas del género humano! Las artes, las ciencias, la humanidad, el imperio de la tierra son el patrimonio de la primera; la estolidez, la barbarie, la ignorancia, son las dotes de la segunda. El clima que ha formado este ángulo importante, el clima que ha dilatado o comprimido el cráneo, ha también dilatado y comprimido las facultades del alma y la moral [...] y no se dudará del imperio del clima sobre la armazón huesosa de nuestro cuerpo, y de los asombrosos efectos de sus dimensiones sobre la construcción física del hombre, sobre sus virtudes y sus vicios. (Caldas 86)

Caldas explicitly stated that one’s character and intelligence corresponded to the dimensions of his/her cranium, which was likewise determined by the climate. This belief led him to conclude that the environmental and climatic conditions of geographic regions
corresponding to Africans led to certain physical “alterations,” (85) such as smaller craniums, which resulted in a culture teeming with “la estupidez y la barbarie” (86).

In the end, for Caldas, the “black” body represented the object of study that provided the visible markers needed to validate his theories on environmental or climatic determinism. In a word, hot climates typical of African populations produced physical “alterations” in the body typical of “uncivilized,” “barbaric” and “ignorant” people. Therefore, the “black” body attested to this determinism through certain phenotypic differences (skin color, hair texture, facial features, bodily odor, etc.) that served as “racial” signifiers that had been assigned social meanings of inferiority. It is in this way that his theories served to legitimize and naturalize racial stereotypes, which he presented as scientifically observed knowledge (Cunin, Identidades 71). For instance, he describes the African in the following manner:

El africano de la vecindad del ecuador, sano, bien proporcionado, vive desnudo bajo chozas miserables. Simple, sin talentos, solo se ocupa con los objetos de la naturaleza conseguidos sin moderación y sin freno. Lascivo hasta la brutalidad, se entrega sin reserva al comercio de las mujeres. Estas, tal vez más licenciosas, hacen de ramaras sin rubor y sin remordimientos. Ocioso, apenas conoce las comodidades de la vida [...] Aquí idólatras; allí, con una mezcla confusa de prácticas supersticiosas, paganas, del Alcorán, y algunas veces también del Evangelio, pasa sus días en el seno de la pereza y de la ignorancia. Vengativo, cruel, celoso con sus compatriotas, permite al europeo el uso de su mujer y de sus hijas (Caldas 87).

And interestingly enough, when Caldas turns his investigative eye towards New Granada and the ethnic-racial composition of the region, he states:

Este sería el lugar más propio para pintar los usos, las costumbres, las virtudes y los vicios de todos los que habitan los diversos puntos de este inmenso país. Pero este objeto, vasto, difícil y espinoso, nos atraería el odio y la indignación de nuestros compatriotas. Todos gustan de oír las
buenas cualidades de su país y de sus moradores, pero ninguno oye con paciencia la manifestación de sus preocupaciones, sus debilidades y sus vicios. (96)

Caldas claims that his objective is to merely provide a general panorama of the different climates and the people who live in them: “entre el habitante de los climas ardientes y el que vive sobre los Andes” (96). In what follows, he provides a very romantic representation of certain Amerindian groups while never directly addressing the black population. After “scientifically” demonstrating the natural “imperfections” of Africans at the outset of his essay, perhaps calling attention to Colombia’s black population would lead to the “hate” and “indignation” of which he speaks. It can only be assumed that, according to his theories, if Africans were naturally inferior, then calling attention to the country’s African descendents would imply an acknowledgement of what would be perceived as a debilitating element of the overall population. His omission of the Afro-Colombian population would actually become in the future a widely used strategy among the country’s elite; instead of an overt condemnation of Afro-Colombians, it would become all too common to simply ignore and disregard them. Although Caldas does dedicate a paragraph to the mulato (seemingly in reference to a person of indigenous and African heritage), who he describes as very hard (duro) and ferocious (feroz), most notable is the level of superiority that he bestows on the interior Andean regions, its temperate climate and more “cultured” society where the inhabitants are “whiter” and more beautiful: “Las castas todas han cedido a la benigna influencia del clima, y el morador de nuestra cordillera se distingue del que está a sus pies por caracteres brillantes y decididos” (100).
This essay reveals that Caldas believed in fundamental differences and even hierarchies among the races. Through his work he propagated stereotypes – many of which are still pervasive today – of people of African descent as lazy, ignorant, licentious, and superstitious. While colonial Europeans were speaking of naturally inferior races, the work of Caldas shows how enlightened Latin Americans pointed to environmental influences, a strategy that would have a lasting effect in Colombia as evidenced by the socio-racial element assigned to regions of the country; as mentioned, people of African descent have been perceived as more suitable for the country’s hot and tropical areas. Moreover, Caldas converted his objects of study (los negros) into the “other” through a “denial of coevalness” not just in space, but also in time (Fabian 1983). In other words, he articulated the “black other” in hierarchies of both space (warm climates more suitable to people of African descent vs. temperate climates more fitting to Europeans) and time (the barbarism attributed to black people vs. the civilization of “whites”/Europeans).\(^8\) And it was this type of scientific rationality that contributed to the naturalization of ethnic-racial differences and alterity in the country, which would heavily influence fundamental discourses that, over time, helped shape the Colombian national imaginary. In fact, European political and scientific philosophies, especially late

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\(^8\) “[…] nineteenth-century anthropology sanctioned an ideological process by which relations between the West and its Other, between anthropology and its object, were conceived not only as difference, but as distance in space \textit{and} Time. Protoanthropologists of the Renaissance and Enlightenment \textit{philosophes} often accepted the simultaneity or temporal coexistence of savagery and civilization because they were convinced of the cultural, merely conventional nature of the differences they perceived; evolutionary anthropologists made difference “natural,” the inevitable outcome of the operation of natural laws. What was left, after primitive societies had been assigned their slots in the evolutionary schemes, was the abstract, merely physical simultaneity of natural law” (Fabian 147).
nineteenth-century positivism, eventually would achieve common-sense status among intellectual and political elites in much of Latin America, as we shall see.

2.3 Independence and the Invention of Colombia

From the time modern nations began to emerge, political communities have continually tried to produce a sense of belonging and a belief in a common destiny among their subjects. In the nineteenth century, a process began in which the ruling elites attempted to replace loyalties to the monarch with loyalties to the nation among the masses of onetime colonized people. In a word, the nation was transformed into an ethos charged with new meanings and emotions while at the same time nationalism emerged as an ideology centered on a feeling of belonging to a community strongly tied to the notion of prosperity and development. The nation-state constituted itself as a political institution with sovereignty over a defined territory that used a doctrine of nationalism to produce a common culture and a feeling of a shared identity among its inhabitants. In *Imagined Communities: Reflection on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983), Benedict Anderson provides the following definition of the nation: “it is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (6). It is an imagined community because despite the fact that its members will never come to know all the other members within the nation’s borders, in their minds, there exists the image of their bond, a belief in their commonalities. Anderson states, “it is imagined as a community, because […] the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal
comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible [...] for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings” (7).

Much of the religious and the “scientific” rhetoric on race and racial differences in the abovementioned examples were found in texts written soon before the struggle for independence. Although these types of ethnic-racial representations wouldn’t completely disappear, within certain political texts, discourses on race would begin to change alongside the emergence of Colombia as a modern nation-state and the creation of a national identity. Of course, New Granada gained independence with a racially mixed society. And in fact, the efforts on the part of Afro-Colombians to achieve freedom strongly influenced in the struggle for independence and the abolition of slavery. The royalists were first to enlist Amerindians and Afro-Colombians to fight against the republican slaveholders both in Venezuela and then in New Granada. Subsequently, Simón Bolívar soon decided to do the same against his enemies and both sides declared free all the slaves who enlisted. In 1820, Bolívar ordered the recruitment of five thousand slaves, which was later reduced to three thousand, from the gold mines and haciendas of Antioquia, Chocó and the Cauca. Slave enlistment depended heavily on the region of the country, and the impact on slaveholders was also regionalized. In the end, most Afro-Colombians were used as canon fodder in the wars for independence. In fact, Bolívar even argued in favor of using Afro-Colombian soldiers as a way to reduce their population numbers through death in war, an argument that obviously revealed fear of future racial conflict (Safford and Palacios 102-3). Nonetheless, as a result of both slave participation in the fighting and the 1821 legislation freeing children born to slave
mothers, the total number of slaves in Colombia decreased. Furthermore, there was most likely a continuous process of manumission while slavery existed as a legal category and legal status for blacks until emancipation in 1851.

Interestingly enough, unlike in some of the other Latin American and Caribbean countries with large slave populations, in Colombia very little imaginative literature was written on slavery. While there were definitely people who strongly opposed abolition, slavery never motivated significant production of literary texts. In effect, most Colombian literary works dealing with slavery did not appear until after emancipation late in the nineteenth century. Lawrence Prescott explains the absence of an abolitionist literature by the fact that slavery and the cruelty it required took place in more isolated regions of the country, which were far from the major, hegemonic urban centers. This meant that the tragedies of black life in addition to the influence of Afro-Colombian cultures were not visible or of interest to the lettered elite who looked more towards Europe for literary and cultural direction (48).

Regardless, slavery and the slave populations were indeed political topics of interest that had to be taken into account during and after the struggles for independence. For instance, in his speech at the Congress of Angostura, Simón Bolívar, often celebrated as the most heroic figure to promote the abolition of slavery in New Granada, declared: “[…] no se puede ser Libre y Esclavo a la vez sino violando a la vez las Leyes naturales, las Leyes políticas y las Leyes civiles […] yo imploro la confirmación de la libertad absoluta de los Esclavos, como imploraría mi vida, y la vida de la República” (120). However, his position on slavery and the equality of Afro-Colombians was really quite contradictory. More than a proclamation of ethnic-racial equality, many of his texts
reveal how political discourse promoted a national identity that was inevitably based on
the tensions between a desired homogeneity and the existent heterogeneity. In a word, his
texts and letters often expose the ambiguity of the independence movement that had to
manage the tensions between the conservation of the privileges of the ruling elites over
the castes and the supposed aspiration for a nation of mestizos. For example, in the same
speech he states, “[…] no somos Europeos, no somos Indios, sino una especie media
entre los Aborígenes y los Españoles. Americanos por nacimientos y Europeos por
derechos […]” (96). He goes on to elaborate:

Tengamos presente que nuestro pueblo no es el europeo, ni el americano
del norte, que más bien es un compuesto de África y de América, que una
emanación de Europa, pues que hasta España misma, deja de ser Europa
por su sangre africana, por sus instituciones y por su carácter. Es
imposible asignar con propiedad a qué familia humana pertencemos. La
mayor parte del indígena se ha aniquilado, el europeo se ha mezclado con
el americano y con el africano, y éste se ha mezclado con el indio y con el
europeo. Nacidos todos del seno de una misma madre, nuestros padres,
diferentes en origen y en sangre, son extranjeros, y todos difieren
visiblemente en la epidermis; esta desemejanza trae un reato de la mayor
trascendencia. (103)

If they are not “Indian,” “African,” or European,” but instead a mixture of all these ethnic
and racial components, what did this imply for the remaining Amerindians or for the
masses of people of African descent who had experienced little or no mixture with
Europeans? In essence, they were subtly excluded from these discourses on what it would
mean to be ethnically or racially “Colombian.” Therefore, from the beginning of the
formation of the Colombian nation, the myth of mestizaje was making use of a discourse
that simultaneously included and excluded, a discourse that would later be reified by
Colombian elites, as we shall see below.
Obviously, Bolivar’s reflections on the ethnic and cultural makeup of the nation’s people are not thought of in religious or even biological terms, but instead in political ones. Within his texts he almost never calls attention to the racial or cultural differences among the various ethnic groups found in Latin America. Cunin points out that, within many of Bolivar’s discourses, the fundamental genotypic differences among peoples of the region give way to a common political belonging within a homogenizing logic of republican universalism (*Identidades* 73). Bolivar states that “La naturaleza hace a los hombres desiguales, en genio, temperamento, fuerzas y caracteres. Las leyes corrigen esta diferencia porque colocan al individuo en la sociedad para que la educación, la industria, las artes, los servicios, las virtudes, le den una igualdad ficticia, propiamente llamada política social” (104). Therefore, although he concedes a belief in natural inequalities, law and order – written and mandated from above – can alleviate these differences and create a “fictitious” equality among the heterogeneous masses.

Furthermore, Bolivar’s construction of this American identity evinces the origins of the myth of a racial democracy that will permeate Colombian political and social institutions throughout most of the twentieth century: “Estamos autorizados, pues, a creer que todos los hijos de la América española, de cualquier color o condición que sean, se profesan un afecto fraternal recíproco […] las contiendas domésticas de la América nunca se han originado de la diferencia de castas” (“Señor Redactor o Editor de la ‘Gaceta Real de Jamaica’” 1815 89). Cunin demonstrates, however, that Bolivar’s homogenizing discourse neither suppresses all references to color nor dissolves differences. For Bolívar, independence is achieved only because Americans are “white” given that they share the same political virtues with Europeans, and hence, are capable of
successfully running their own governments (*Identidades* 74). In a word, it is the “white” elite that will impose law and order: “De quince a veinte millones de habitantes que se hallan esparcidos en este gran continente de naciones indígenas, africanas, españolas y razas cruzadas, la menor parte es, ciertamente, de blancos; pero también es cierto que ésta posee cualidades intelectuales que le dan una igualdad relativa (con los europeos)” (“Señor Redactor o Editor de la ‘Gaceta Real de Jamaica’” 1815 85-6). Bolívar’s promotion of a strong central government in great part comes from his mistrust in the political capacities and social maturity of popular, “non-white” sectors. Herein lay the ethnic-racial ambiguity and contradictions of the independence movement which supposedly exalted equality, but reaffirmed racial hierarchies at the same time.

Bolívar was not alone in his promotion of this tri-ethnic, *mestizo*, national identity. In fact, the above examples call attention to what would become an official political discourse and strategy used by the ruling elites to consolidate the Colombian nation and a national identity. In Colombia – as in almost all of the Latin American countries – during the latter part of the nineteenth century, the political and intellectual elite composed of white Creoles, and spurred on by merchants, craftsman, and professional soldiers, was faced with the challenge of inventing and solidifying a nation, of laying claim to an “American” identity. The majority of these intellectuals came from a social class of land and cattle owners, slave masters (of both Afro-Colombians and Amerindians), descendents of war veterans and colonels who had fought in the wars for independence against Spain (Friedemann 74). Furthermore, this “white” aristocracy controlled the press of this emerging republic that divulged and reproduced their dominant ideologies through print capitalism, as Anderson argues. However, their
language, as discourse, was not an innocent, transparent tool through which this lettered elite revealed their sincere desire to tell the truth, but instead an instrument for constructing a history and inventing certain realities. Rama’s work informs on the way in which Latin America’s lettered elite, tied to the metropolis and its institutions of power, established, consolidated and maintained their authority by way of their writing (1984).

These men felt the need to create a nation capable of competing in an international market, a nation capable of being modern and progressive according to the liberal, European thought of the day. Anderson sustains that the elite consciously redefined the subordinated masses as “fellow-nationals” (50), although of course, the process was not quite so simple. Once the elite had established the state, it also had to try to impose a certain cultural homogeneity by promoting the configuration of a new ethnicity that inevitably would exclude certain groups or sectors of society given that they tended to promote a national identity according to their own image and for their own benefit. In a word, these men imagined, created (discursively) and consolidated a social and political order hiding or marginalizing the undeniable multiethnic composition of the country, in particular, the participation of Amerindians and especially that of Afro-Colombians. Their discourses, like those of Bolívar, tended to reflect a perspective in which political action negotiated and defined (suppressed) racial differences within a context of national identity affirmation.

Upon debating and consolidating the national identity, therefore, it was inevitable that these elites would have to consider the question of race. These intellectuals and writers, with their ties to a social class of wealthy merchants and landowners, at the moment of promoting this Americanism, had to compromise between two conflicting
aspects: on one hand, the diversity of the Colombian population which consisted of Amerindians and Afro-Colombians who were considered inherently inferior and primitive according to positivist thought, science and European ideology of the time; on the other hand, the Anglo-Saxon notions of progress and modernity (Wade, *Blackness* 11). If national identity normally is constructed in an ethnic sense, which alludes to common ancestry, traditions and language, in Colombia’s case, a compromise was made that ended up affirming a national identity, like that of many other Latin American countries, found in their *mestizaje*, indicating the creation of a new ethnicity. The intellectual, lettered and political elite evoked this common ethnicity in terms of a common cultural identity as a factor of social cohesion that, with respect to nationalism, should produce the idea of belonging. As Peter Wade points out in his book, *Blackness and Race Mixture: The Dynamics of Racial Identity in Colombia* (1993), the models of modernity and progress were not discarded while this racial mixture of Afro-Colombian and indigenous populations was adhered to these models to give a Latin American solution to this dilemma of ethnic-racial heterogeneity (11).

In a word, Colombian national culture was re-invented, adapted to the requirements of European notions of progress, while maintaining its distinctiveness. As Chatterjee argues, postcolonial nationalisms are therefore contradictory in that they are both imitative and hostile to the models they imitate. On one hand, the Colombian elites accepted the value of standards put in place by European culture. On the other hand, there were two rejections: a rejection of European culture as the colonizer/dominator to be imitated and even surpassed and a rejection of certain autochthonous elements — indigenous and especially Afro-Colombian — perceived as obstacles to progress, but
paradoxically revered as marks of a distinct identity (2). Hence, nationalism “is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist” (4). However, nationalisms do need to make use of some pre-existing distinguishing marks. Nationalisms are selective; they have to select what parts of European culture are to be imitated while at the same time selecting from the pre-existing cultures differentiating features of the new, emerging homogenous national culture and identity (4-5).

In the case of Colombia, Afro-Colombians and Amerindians were simply romanticized as a part of a glorified past, while a paternalistic guide was there to lead them towards a future of mestizaje, progress and integration (Wade, Blackness 11); ultimately, the participation of Amerindians and Afro-Colombians was merely envisioned in terms of labor exploitation. In effect, mestizaje inevitably insinuated the eventual elimination of the “black” and Amerindian populations from the nation. Also, it should be stressed that it was much more common to celebrate and privilege indigenous ancestry over the African heritage, which as already pointed out, reflected longstanding preferential treatment dating from the early colonial period. Many of Colombia’s founding elites, paradoxically, found inspiration in the European thought of Rousseau that revolved around the image of the “Indian” – the buen salvaje – as a symbol of American authenticity. Nonetheless, this claim of an indigenous identity was merely literary, exotic and archeological; this indigenous symbol was transformed into an imaginary aboriginal frozen as a concept of antiquity (Friedemann 73-4). At any rate, the

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9 Like Caldas, Colombian elites tended to elude the negative implications of the biological determinist theories coming out of Europe by downplaying biological determinism and emphasizing environmental and education factors.
compromise typically resulted in the coexistence of two variants within the nationalist theme: on one hand, the democratic and inclusive ideology of “we are all mestizos,” and on the other hand, the discriminatory ideology that signaled a preference for the white mestizo (Wade, Blackness 11). In the end, the mestizo utopia invented by the Colombian hegemony was essentially an endorsement for the process of colorism, or the preference for lighter skin color. This obviously meant that the future would eventually bring the “whitening” of the Colombian population through the process of miscegenation. It was in this manner that Afro-Colombians, their cultures, histories and contributions to the nation, were basically excluded from the terminology with which the cultural and demographic world of Colombia was defined.

It is important to note that this seemingly “democratic” discourse on mestizaje does not imply the absence of more overt racists ideologies and discourses; in fact, “democratic” and explicitly racist discourses tended to exist alongside each other. In his essay, “La imagen de la población afrocolombiana en la prensa del siglo XIX”, Leonardo Reales Jiménez analyzes the discursive image of Afro-Colombians in nineteenth century Colombia and demonstrates how some of the men in power of the newly emerging nation continued to use much of the same derogatory terminology and systems of classification that were used by the Spaniards and slave owners during the colonial period. Afro-Colombians (along with Amerindians) were often perceived as a threat to national culture and many feared the possibility of racial mixture with the “inferior” black race. He uses as an example the article “Raza hispano-americana”, published in El Neogranadino in 1850, which summarizes the content of much of the racist journalism and socio-racial discrimination of the period: “El cruzamiento de la raza africana con las americanas
complica la situación de unas i otras, i hace temer serios disturbios en el porvenir, causados por el inhumano i antisocial pensamiento de división de castas, los negros detestarán a los blancos que les han tratando como infames bestias” (cited in Jiménez 427). The author of the article, who signs as R. Gutiérrez, recognizes racial discrimination stemming from the colonial society of castes and promotes the exclusion of black communities, while at the same time highlighting the social and political instability that their inclusion would cause. He actually then goes on to suggest mixing with Germans and people of Anglo-Saxon descent (427).

2.4 Discrimination in the 20th Century: Between “Whitening” and Invisibility

The pseudo-scientific discourses that worked to naturalize ethnic-racial stereotypes and differences in the nineteenth century would have a lasting effect in Colombia. According to Leslie B. Rout, “The philosophical tone and literary style for describing and analyzing the psychological makeup of the Afro-Colombians seems to have been established by European Positivist thinkers, whose influence remained pervasive well into the twentieth century” (243). As an example, she points to a text written by Juvena Mejía Córdoba, who, in 1918, condemned the people of African descent of the Caribbean coast as victims of their biological ancestry. In his opinion, their racial heritage inherently bestowed upon them “the fatuity and conceit which is one of the characteristics of this race” (cited in Rout 24-25). In fact, some Colombians, like Luis López de Mesa, the country’s preeminent psychologist during the first half of the twentieth century, were worried about the assumed moral and biological destitution of the Colombian people due to the influence of the African element, and therefore, urged
European immigration to counteract the deficiencies of the non-white masses. It shouldn’t be surprising that in 1922, the national congress passed a law encouraging immigration from Europe in an effort to improve the genetic component of the country’s population (Prescott 56).

In *Blackness and Race Mixture: The Dynamics of Racial Identity in Colombia*, Peter Wade likewise analyzes various publications, especially newspapers, from the 1940s and 50s, in order to show that even well into the twentieth century there existed the condemnation of Afro-Colombians in addition to the continuation of negative stereotypes. For example, he cites a book published in 1953 on the geography of the Cauca region in which the author, Miguel Antonio Arroyo, states that “the black has not been able to free himself of the moral deficiency of improvidence,” and given that the Amerindian is withdrawn and impartial, he believes that it is of the utmost urgency to promote “a better direction for the mixtures, starting centrally from the white towards red and from white towards black […] so that the descendants remain influenced by the dominant characteristics of the European stock” (104, 110). While encouraging the mixing between white-black, or white-Indian, he condemns any mixing of Amerindian with Afro-Colombians saying they these unions result in “tenacious or insoluble sub-types which retard racial uniformity” and are recalcitrant to “the dominant capacity of the white race” (110-112 cited in Wade, *Blackness* 17).

Although these comments are not representative of an official ideology with respect to Afro-Colombians, it nonetheless reveals the persistence of ideas and theories from previous eras, which characteristically point to the coexistence between miscegenation and discrimination. However, historically it has indeed been more
common to find the celebration of the mixing of races alongside the silence about Afro-Colombians instead of forms of explicit denigration of them (a strategy evident from the earlier independence writings) (17). Popular and widely accepted discourses on the harmonious, tri-ethnic makeup of Colombian populations have always presented the possibility of inclusion through racial mixture but at the same time they have worked to exclude Afro-Colombians (as second class citizens or only as potential Colombians). This discriminatory ideology of a utopian miscegenation (eventual “whitening”) and the silence it has generated about Afro-Colombians has caused and even justified their exclusion, marginalization and racial oppression throughout most of the twentieth century.

Rout likewise demonstrates that even by mid-twentieth century, many of the attitudes that tended to privilege the indigenous populations had not disappeared. She quotes Juan Luis de Lannoy and Gustavo Pérez, who in 1961, described Afro-Colombians as “more sensual” and “more superstitious than the nation’s Indian inhabitants” (25). In general, the images and representations of Afro-Colombians and Amerindians developed in very distinct ways within the representations of Latin American national identities. Although both groups have been victims of various forms of discrimination and exploitation, dating from the colonial period the indigenous identity has been the object of intellectual and institutional consideration, which has not really occurred with black identity. In short, indigenous groups have often assumed the role of the “other” much easier than Afro-Colombians have done; although indigenous groups claim citizen rights, in cultural terms they are often viewed as groups outside of the “nation” in great part due to their different cultures and languages. In fact, indigenous
groups have often claimed the right to maintain these differences within the nation. Furthermore, even within academia, there has been a tendency to study indigenous communities as the “other” more so than Afro-Colombian communities. For example, in “Negros en Colombia: Invisibilidad y presencia”, the late Colombian anthropologist, Nina S. de Friedemann tells how at the beginning of her academic and scholarly career, despite her genuine interest in Afro-Colombian culture, she was told: “estudiar negros no era antropología,” while studying indigenous cultures was strongly encouraged (69). Afro-Colombians, who perhaps lack the uniqueness of other black cultures within the diaspora, severed from their African history and culture by slavery, are often perceived as assimilated Colombian citizens, although they are definitely not seen as “typical” Colombians, representative of national identity.

2.5 The (Lack of) Afro-Colombian Voices

Up to this point, I have predominantly addressed discourses and representations by members of Colombia’s dominant culture used to define, categorize and subordinate Afro-Colombian subjects. Elitist ideas about nation, national identity, and race inform real social hierarchies and real experiences, and therefore, have the power to constitute certain realities or truths. However, these truths can be challenged. Historically, there have been few black intellectuals who have possessed the means or had access to the necessary channels through which they could counter these often negative and oppressive forces. Obviously, this is largely due to impoverished conditions and the lack of education available to Afro-Colombian communities that have worked to deny them both
the cognitive tools needed to understand racial oppression and access to traditional artistic and media outlets in order to combat it.

In actuality, a combination of various factors have hindered not only the emergence of racially assertive Afro-Colombian authors, but also the development of a collective and combative sense of racial identity and a strong need for group solidarity on a national scale. For example, Afro-Colombians at times have been presented with the possibility (albeit limited) of bettering their social and/or economic status through personal relationships, schooling, intermarriage or miscegenation. Furthermore, historically Afro-Colombians have not been subjected to explicit, legal policies of racial discrimination or segregation that could have instigated group action. And perhaps most importantly, Afro-Colombian communities dispersed throughout a relatively large region have been separated from one another by geographical and topographical barriers, different forms of slavery, and varying degrees of miscegenation. For these reasons, many Afro-Colombians have sometimes identified with their local culture, region, socio-economic class, and political affiliation more so than with their ethnic-racial group on a national scale. Lastly, many Afro-Colombians simply tried to assimilate to dominant culture as a way to distance themselves from slavery and the humiliation associated with the institution (Prescottt 46-7). In short, Afro-Colombian “communities in Colombia are far from being homogenous – culturally, historically, or politically […] The communities comprise a vast spectrum of political positions, experiences of mobilization, and conceptions of the struggle that motivate, in turn, continuous tensions, alliances, and realignments of forces, depending on the particular situation” (Grueso et al. 201).
Perhaps, though, it has been the pervasiveness of the dominant and popular, nationalist ideology of mestizaje that has been most responsible for fragmenting efforts at forming black solidarity and weakening any attempt at national, large-scale political mobilization. As mentioned, people of African descent have usually been considered as part of the growing mixed or mestizo population, in which the ideology of Colombia’s tri-ethnic, national identity has been based. The Afro-Colombian is supposedly a citizen like anyone else, albeit a second-class citizen. And indeed Afro-Colombian cultures tend to be highly Hispanicized. In essence, the institutionalization of mestizaje has enhanced the manipulability and fluidity typical of processes of racial classification making categories such as “negro” or “indio” much more ambivalent, unlike in the United States where racial categories have been polarized between “black” and “white” (in great part due to the “one drop of blood” law). Colombians with some African heritage who have lighter skin may be able to elude the black category and the negative connotations attached to it. However, this does not take away from the fact that the central racial hierarchy of “blanco,” “indio” and “negro” continues to configure this ambiguity (Wade, Blackness 22).

The multiple ways of being black in Colombia have often eroded any basis for political solidarity among the Afro-Colombian populations. In fact, the institutionalization of mestizaje, in great part, explains why Afro-Colombian leaders, historically, have not assumed strong, militant stances against racial discrimination in their effort to be more inclusive when addressing equal rights and justice in Colombia. In an interview with one of the founding members of Cimarrón (the longest-running Afro-Colombian organization in the country addressed in greater detail below), Juan de Dios
Mosquera affirmed that when Afro-Colombian political leaders have tried to employ more confrontational, militant discourses, they have been met with great resistance on the part of both Afro-Colombians and mestizos (Personal Interview). In effect, this discourse on mestizaje has been so pervasive that many Afro-Colombian leaders often admit that far too many black Colombians have internalized this myth of racial harmony, and therefore, are unable or unwilling to accept and confront racism. This is why many leaders have found that emphasizing racial discrimination is sometimes less effective than emphasizing cultural identity and difference in an effort to gain the attention or support of Afro-Colombians. Moreover, when Afro-Colombians have in fact denounced racial discrimination, they often have either been accused of “reverse racism” or of harboring some sort of inferiority complex. Therefore, it is still common to find Afro-Colombians who try to downplay race or simply assimilate to dominant culture.

2.6 Candelario Obeso: the Originator of Black Poetry in Colombia

Nonetheless, this does not mean that certain Afro-Colombians have not raised their voices in protest. In fact, Afro-Colombian voices have been present (although marginalized) since the nineteenth century, reflecting a struggle to insert a “black” perspective within the national imaginary. And one of the first Afro-Colombian voices was that of Candelario Obeso (1849-1884). He was born in Mompox, far from the literary, socio-economic, cultural and political centers of Bogotá, Medellín and Cali. He was a professor, poet, translator and playwright. Despite partaking in a variety of social and political activities during his lifetime, he always lived in poverty. Early in his life, he was an interpreter for the bogas (boatmen) on the Magdalena River and for his costeño
culture while serving as the Municipal Treasurer of Magangué. In 1873, he began to collaborate on a regular basis with some of the most important Colombian newspapers and literary magazines in the country’s capital. He translated French, English, German and North American master-works like those of Thomas Moore, François Coppée, Friederich von Schiller and Sully-Prudhomme. He also translated great works by the likes of Shakespeare, Victor Hugo, Byron, Musset, Tenysson, Longfellow and Smiles.

Most importantly, he is known as the originator of “black” poetry in Colombia. In 1877, Candelario Obeso published his book of poems entitled *Cantos populares de mi tierra*. In fact, he was the first black poet to publish in Colombia and through his writings he defiantly responded to those who opposed his ideals. In his poetry and essays, he accentuated the values, traditions and culture of the predominantly Afro-Colombian populations of the Atlantic coast through the incorporation of *lo negro* (blackness) and *lo popular* (the popular) in both content and style. In this sense, he represents the participation of a person of African descent in his claim for a Colombian/Afro-Colombian identity, and therefore, he is often considered the legitimate precursor of Afro-Colombian literature. For example, most of his poetry is stamped with regional, vernacular speech of the mostly black coastal inhabitants and is full of examples in which he makes claims for social equality for all citizens within a framework of a multicultural identity at a time when the ruling elites and the country’s mestizo intelligentsia was studying and reciting poetry in French:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“Canción del pejcaro”</th>
<th>“Canción del pescador”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trite vira é la der probe;</td>
<td>Triste vida es la del pobre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuando er rico goza en pá,</td>
<td>Cuando el rico goza en paz;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Er probe en er monte sura</td>
<td>El pobre en el monte suda,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Cantos populares de mi tierra represents the voices of anonymous Afro-Colombian boatmen, campesinos, and fishermen (like the example above) of the Atlantic littoral. This particular book of poems provides an Afro-Colombian perspective on Colombian society while at the same time pointing to some of the challenges Obeso endured as a humble but intelligent and gifted writer in a racially conscious yet pro-European culture. As part of the first generation of post-abolition, educated Afro-Colombians, Obeso, like many Afro-Colombian writers throughout Colombian history, found himself trapped between two worlds; he desired to assimilate and appropriate the culture of Colombia’s dominant group (or at least the advantages, opportunities and status it offered), but at the same time he felt the need to identify with many of his own cultural traditions associated with black Colombians (Prescott 43-4). Quijano explains this dilemma in terms of “coloniality of power”:

O en la már.

1. Er rico poco se esfuecza,
   Y nunca le farta ná,
   Toro lo tiene onde mora
   Poc remá.

2. El probe no ejcansa nunca
   Para poderse alimentar;
   Hoy carece re pejcao
   Luego é sá.

3. No sé yo la causa re eto,
   Yo no sé sino aguantá
   ¡Eta conrición tan dura
   Y ejgraciá...!

O en la már.

1. El rico poco se esfuerza
   Y nunca le falta nada;
   Todo lo tiene donde mora
   Por demás.

2. El pobre no descansa nunca
   Para poderse alimentar;
   Hoy carece de pescado,
   Luego de sal.

3. No sé yo la causa de esto,
   Y no sé sino aguantar
   ¡Esta condición tan dura
   Y desgraciada...!

(64-67)
En el contexto de la colonialidad de poder, las poblaciones dominadas de todas las nuevas identidades fueron también sometidas a la hegemonía del eurocentrismo como manera de conocer, sobre todo en la medida que algunos de sus sectores pudieron aprender la letra de los dominadores. Así, con el tiempo largo de la colonialidad, que aún no termina, esas poblaciones (‘indio’ y ‘negra’) fueron atrapadas entre el patrón epistemológico aborigen y el patrón eurocéntrico que, además se fue encauzando como racionalidad instrumental o tecnocrática, en particular respecto de las relaciones con el mundo en torno. (“Cultura” 124)

Nonetheless, Obeso’s work shows that he accepted and celebrated his black identity and often debunked the supposed superiority of dominant “white” or mestizo culture. His poetry not only calls attention to the socio-economic inequalities and injustices of the time, but also to ethnic considerations and prevalent racist attitudes that impeded Afro-Colombians from achieving full acceptance in Colombian society. However, in light of dominant racial perceptions that have existed through most of Colombian history, it shouldn’t be surprising that many of Obeso’s friends and critics interpreted his affirmation of “black” identity as evidence of an inferiority complex (Prescott 47).

2.7 Afro-Colombian Literary Voices of the 20th Century

When addressing the lack of Afro-Colombian intellectual, cultural or literary contributions, it is hard to ignore the dispersion of ex-slaves into isolated and poor regions of the Pacific and Atlantic littorals usually without the benefit of schools. As Lawrence Prescott argues:

Generally lacking such resources and the educational opportunities and social connections that would enable them to improve their lot substantially, Afro-Colombians have had to struggle continuously to surmount invisible walls of economic disadvantage, cultural exclusivity, and class bias in order to obtain an education, to gain the power of writing, and thus to puncture the silence to which they would otherwise be condemned. (58)
Furthermore, the underdevelopment of the country’s publishing industry has made it extremely difficult for lower- and middle-class writers to publish, publicize and distribute their literary works. And certain workings of Euro-centric pressure from elitist editors and critics who tend not to publish or promote literary works that reflect black experiences have likewise hindered the work of Afro-Colombian writers. In fact, these obstacles motivated Carlos Arturo Truque to write his essay, “La vocación y el medio: Historia de un escritor” which was published in Colombia in 1975, five years after his death. In this essay, he complains about the newspapers and journals in Colombia that employ censorship and control, which in turn, significantly confine the writer’s freedom and determine which works are published. In an indirect reference to how discriminatory practices affected him as a black author, he writes: “Soy un hombre normal, o al menos lo hubiera sido si la sociedad, tan arbitrariamente construida, me hubiera brindado las oportunidades que siempre perseguí y jamás alcancé” (11). He then goes on to comment on dominant culture’s elitist literary tastes, which likewise restricts artistic freedom and expression:

[...] el artista es tolerado apenas cuando la clase dirigente quiere olvidar por unos minutos la tragedia de los balances y las cotizaciones de la bolsa. Entonces esa clase rectora inepta pone sus condiciones y obliga al artista a hacer una obra alejada de la realidad, con materiales de segunda mano, pero pueden servir si el objetivo de llenar los deseos enfermizos de una casta que ha vivido de los sufrimientos ajenos que no quiere un arte que pueda mostrarle su culpabilidad. (17)

Despite these difficulties to get into print, several Afro-Colombians have succeeded in doing so. During the greater part of the twentieth century, several Afro-Colombian writers – Arnoldo Palacios, Miguel A. Caicedo, Carlos Arturo Truque, Jorge
Artel, Rogerio Velásquez, and Manuel Zapata Olivella, among others – have published a long list of short stories and novels, as well as dramas, essays, and poetry. In effect, these are some of the most well-known and widely read Afro-Colombian authors in the country who have managed to insert a “black” perspective – albeit limited – within literary, social and cultural circles.

These authors are typically recognized as Afro-Colombian writers because they “recognize the importance of their ethnic backgrounds in the development of their literary creations and in the manner in which they relate to Colombian society” (Lewis 2). As “minority” writers who have experienced firsthand certain levels of discrimination and/or alienation, they draw on life experiences that certainly influence their literary styles, themes and presentations. For example, while they do not negate their Colombian heritage and identity, they often question the validity of a Colombian, national identity imposed from above that tends to exclude ethnic-racial minorities. At the same time, these writers have had to address the tensions and desires to write both as representatives of their ethnic group and of the Colombian populace; they cannot realistically detach circumstances of poverty weighing on black communities from those of the poverty-stricken masses, although they often emphasize that the class problem in Colombia is exacerbated by one of color and race (2). And in this regard, similar to contemporary ethnic movements that strive not to be exclusionist, these authors do not limit themselves to the black experience; instead, they tend to include the mestizo and indigenous populations that likewise have historically been oppressed. For this reason, most Afro-Colombian literature is inherently social and as a group, these writers tend to highlight negative aspects of Colombian society and to blame the ruling elite (and its institutions
such as the church, the state and the military) as culprits in the same way that many Afro-
Colombian activists (and even rappers) do. In fact, in much of this literature, the authors’
characters are more worried about survival than with skin color or ethnic origins. As
Marvin Lewis states, “[…] negritud is not much of a unifying concept in their work as is
authenticity” (120). Again, this vague concept of negritude found in Afro-Colombian
literature in many ways can be explained as a result of the several abovementioned
factors that have historically weakened strong ethnic-racial assertions in Colombia.

2.8 The Literary and Cultural Contributions of Manuel Zapata Olivella

Probably the most influential of these writers has been Manuel Zapata Olivella
(1920-2004) whose work deserves special consideration. He “is one of Colombia’s
leading men of letters [and] in addition to being a writer, he is a doctor, anthropologist,
folklorist and professor” (Lewis 85). Besides being the most widely-read Afro-
Colombian writer (in and especially outside of Colombia), he played an important role
within Afro-Colombian communities and political and cultural organizations, as someone
who spoke on behalf of black communities, recovered Afro-Colombian histories,
traditions and customs, and actively promoted equal rights for all oppressed Colombians.
He has been a powerful influence in bringing attention to the country’s black population,
for example through novels such as Chambacú, corral de negros (1963) and Changó, el
gran putas (1983), and by organizing the First Congress of Black Culture in the Americas
(1977) in which he brought together scientific and literary thought from Africa and the
diaspora in the Americas. In addition to the abovementioned novels and a volume of
short stories, his publications include other works such as La tierra mojada (1947), La
calle 10 (1960), Detrás del rostro (1963), En Chimá nace un santo (1964), and El fusilamiento del Diablo (1986). He has also published sociological and autobiographical texts like ¡Levántate mulato! (1990), subtitled, Por mi raza hablará el espíritu. Although his literary works examine different levels and facets of Colombian society, he typically focused on the struggles of the country’s downtrodden: the rural campesinos, and especially, the dispossessed urban blacks. In fact, despite his own tri-ethnic makeup and his efforts to trace various manifestations of mestizaje in Colombia, he predominantly assumed the Afro-American perspective in order to project himself as black sometimes leaving behind or marginalizing his own Spanish and indigenous ancestry.

Perhaps one of his most revealing works, which illustrates how the obstacles to Afro-Colombian progress can be confronted and challenged, are found in his autobiographic piece entitled, ¡Levántate mulato! Besides being autobiographical, it is a book about Colombian history and culture that contributes a type of ethnographic map of the ethnic-racial composition of Colombia and Latin America in general. In this book, Zapata Olivella not only manifests an individual identity, but also an ethnic identity constructed within a racist society, providing a direct and explicit contestation to racist discourses and representations from dominant culture. From an afro-centric perspective, Zapata Olivella demonstrates an intimate, even conflictive, relationship between ethnic identity and national integration, between the defense of culture and the liberation of the oppressed, particularly of ethnic minorities. Like many Afro-Colombian political discourses, Zapata Olivella’s is not separatist; he attempts to elevate the images of “mulat toes” and mestizos, along with those of Afro-Colombians and Amerindians. In other words, he doesn’t promote a new racial hierarchy, but instead suggests that all the
cultural elements and contributions of the various ethnic groups should be appreciated and respected within Colombian society. In this way, he is promoting a social and cultural heterogeneity in which all the ethnic groups have a voice and form an integral part of the national imaginary. Although his ethnic-racial discourse seems to evoke the same type of multiculturalism preached in the U.S., in reality, he promoted a *mestizaje* based on the tri-ethnic constitution of the Colombian population, but a *mestizaje* in which all the ethnic and cultural components are truly valued as equal.

Probably his most significant literary work, *Changó, el gran putas*, was published after more than twenty years of research. The content of this novel covers three continents and six centuries of African and African American history. The plot begins in Africa and then travels to Colombia and other regions of the Americas and finally ends in the U.S. In this sense, the book is not only about Colombia, but the African diaspora in the Americas. Zapata Olivella incorporates seemingly mythical heroes such as Benkos Bioho, François Mackandal, Martin Luther King, Nat Turner and Malcolm X. Within his utopian vision, people of African descent, dispersed in the diaspora, can find common points of interest in their cultural heritage and in their shared experiences of slavery and racial discrimination with the intentions of uniting in the same struggle for liberty and equality. Although he searches for inspiration in his ancestors, Zapata Olivella imagines a struggle carried about mainly by people of African descent, capable of liberating all oppressed people, regardless of color, race or culture. It is a liberation from which a better world of racial harmony, equality and justice would emerge. Oppression and discrimination under which black communities have lived during centuries would serve as the driving forces for a common struggle for freedom for all.
The point I want to make here is that the works of Zapata Olivella tend to offer a multicultural and multiracial imaginary of the nation in which all the members, especially those who experience racial discrimination, have a voice and social agency. Unlike in the works of most Colombian authors, the marginalized ethnic groups in Zapata’s writings tend to be in the center of the action. Within the national imaginary of Zapata Olivella’s works, all of the cultural and racial elements, all of the heritages, all of the colors and the cultural practices are valued as equal. And it is from this “pluri-ethnic” and multicultural country the Zapata Olivella speaks to his readers. Furthermore, the often afro-centric or ethnic-racial perspective in his literature exemplifies his search for a balance between class and race, knowing that the problem of class is worsened by the stigma of race. Ultimately, the work of this writer of African descent, representative of the processes of *mestizaje* in Colombia, was able to (re)present experiences and viewpoints of the majority vis-à-vis a perspective from within the interior of this culture instead of the often outside perspective of the Creole or *mestizo* writer (Jackson 1997, Lewis 1987).

2.9 El *Cimarrón*: A Symbol of Afro-Colombian Identity

It is evident that, from the first days of slavery, Afro-Colombians have not been passive victims to the different forms of oppression and/or racist discourses; they have rebelled and resisted through a variety of strategies and techniques. Indeed, it can be argued that historically only a very vague “black identity” has existed based on ambiguous notion of being “black,” general ideas of a common history and shared experiences of racial discrimination and exploitation (identifications reflected in the corpus of literary works by the Afro-Colombian writers addressed above). Nonetheless,
prior to the 1980s, there did exist certain levels of Afro-Colombian politicization in various parts of the country. Dating back to the 1960s, there have been some small and sporadic urban movements led by black intellectuals with scarce funding often inspired by the civil rights struggle in the U.S., black solidarity movements in the Caribbean, and the independence movements of various African countries. These groups and the “black” image they advanced often borrowed from symbols, images and icons from the U.S., the Caribbean and Africa; for example, they looked towards figures like Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Marcus Garvey and Leopold Senghor, who even to this day continue to be important icons. Wade reminds us, however, that while these images can be powerful in that they provide strong and positive identifications, they obviously suggest black histories and experiences very different from those of Afro-Colombians (“Identidad” 285-6).

Eventually, despite all of the forces and influences working against the efforts at forming a black nationalism, from within these small movements emerged an Afro-Colombian ideology often coined cimarronismo (Mosquera 2000). As an ethnic-racial discourse, cimarronismo uses the image of the cimarrón as a symbol of resistance and of a black identity that – with Latin American nuances – was adapted to the Colombian context. It has officially been promoted by the organization Cimarrón (National Movement for the Human Rights of Black Communities in Colombia), founded in 1982 and considered by most to be an urban intellectual movement. As a discourse that finds its inspiration in the cimarrón and the palenque, particularly in the Palenque de San
Basilio,\(^{10}\) it symbolizes a more Latin American or Caribbean experience. While runaway slave communities were very rare in the U.S., they were quite common in places such as Jamaica, Brazil, and Haiti. It is not surprising, therefore, that similar discourses have emerged among black communities in these regions (Wade, “Identidad” 286-7).

The ideology of *cimarronismo* in Colombia has been directed not only towards those Afro-Colombians who define themselves as “black” but also towards people with African heritage who maybe do not identify as “black” per se. The idea has been to invite these Colombians to recognize their African ancestry and to align themselves with the Afro-Colombian cause. For example, in Juan de Dios Mosquera’s book, *Las comunidades negras de Colombia hacia el siglo XXI: Historia, realidad y organización* (2000), he emphatically writes, “¡Hagamos de América entera un gran palenque y de cada Afroamericano un cimarrón!” (105). In this sense, the objective is to show that all people with African roots share common experiences of slavery, racial discrimination, and a struggle for justice and equality initiated by the *cimarrón*. Obviously, this discourse presents only a limited representation of history given that not all Afro-Colombians were *cimarrones* and there was some coexistence, in the form of trading and negotiation, between colonial powers and the members of the *palamques*. History, Wade argues, has been conveniently revisited as a unifying element to motivate people to mobilize (‘Identidad’ 287). Although this ideology only garnered a small following up until the 1980s, due to the work of the organization, *Cimarrón*, it has ended up having a rather

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10 San Basilio is a settlement established in the seventeenth century by a group of *cimarrones* under the leadership of the heroic figure, Domingo Biohó. This *palamque* has served as a symbol of Afro-Colombian identity and its inhabitants are often revered for their rebellious spirit and ability to conserve their cultural memory and Creole language. It is located in what is now the municipal of Mahates in the department of Bolívar on the Atlantic coast, about 70 kilometers from Cartagena (Friedemann and Patiño 1983).
broad influence. In fact, it now can be stated that over the last 15-20 years, a more solidified ethnic identity among black Colombians has emerged in part owing to the negotiations and encounters between black communities and the Colombian state. During this time period, *Cimarrón* has been one of the most influential and important Afro-Colombian organizations as a source of inspiration and motivation for many black Colombians, especially in urban centers (as my analysis of hip-hop will demonstrate). Besides dealing with concerns of land rights, *Cimarrón* has provided leadership seminars and teachings on black history, culture, and identity.

2.10 The Constitution of 1991: From *Mestizaje* to *Plurietnia*

Up until the mid-1980s, despite *Cimarrón*’s growing national presence, most Afro-Colombian movements were marginal and restricted to small groups of activists comprised of students, intellectuals and professionals. Other forms of organization – civic groups, labor and trade unions that were influenced by leftist groups, certain NGOs, the church, and even the state – developed among particular sectors of the Afro-Colombian population, but these organizations were not necessarily united under race or ethnicity (Agudelo 184). However, Afro-Colombian ethnic-racial identities would undergo significant changes due to processes of constitutional reform that began in the late 1980s, which resulted in direct dialogue between black movements – both new and old – and the state, leading to the more recent representations and discourses on Afro-Colombian identity. Ultimately, the question of whether a black or Afro-Colombian identity even existed would become a national political issue during the 1991 National Constituent Assembly (Asamblea Nacional Constituyente / ANC).
The constitutional reform came about as a result of several factors. For instance, there was a need to improve the efficiency and reliability of the Colombian government – by making it less corrupt - in an effort to effectively crack down on drug cartels that had been wreaking havoc on the country. In the years just prior to the ANC, the drug cartels assassinated Colombia’s justice minister, attorney general, and 120 judges and magistrates for investigating the criminal activity and violent acts of the cartels. The fighting between drug cartels and the state brought to light the corruption and inefficiency of the state and led to rising “public discontent on the bipartisan, clientelist, and exclusive nature of the regime” (Van Cott 48). The constitutional reform also formed part of the “peace process” that had been initiated several years beforehand with the objective of demobilizing the guerrilla groups during a period in which political violence had reached unprecedented levels. Furthermore, the legitimacy of the country’s government was seriously jeopardized by neoliberal economic reform that had worsened income inequalities and increased poverty levels in the country, while at the same time, government expenditures on education, housing, health, and social security had declined (to be discussed in more detail in chapter four). Ultimately, many people saw the country’s crisis in terms of a repressive regime incapable of meeting the needs of a dispersed heterogeneous population. All of these factors led to an opportunity to rewrite the constitution and adjust certain institutions to the country’s realities; the objective was

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11 “[…] every twenty-four minutes a murder (10,488 in the first seven months of 1990); every seven hours a kidnapping; every twelve hours a terrorist act. Murder became the leading cause of death in Colombia. As the crime rate escalated, the justice system’s capacity to apprehend and prosecute criminals appeared to be declining” (Van Cott 48).

12 “At the time of the constituent assembly, approximately 50 percent of Colombians were living in absolute poverty” (Van Cott 49).
to “update” the constitution with regards to contemporary, international and national concerns such as human rights, ethnicity and multiculturalism.

Although the indigenous organizations had much more influence during the constitutional reform, influential Afro-Colombian representatives were also present. Behind the Afro-Colombian presence was a combination of events that had been taking place throughout the Pacific littoral, a region rich in mineral resources and biodiversity that had undergone different forms of exploitation dating back to the colonial period. As outlined in the introduction, the Pacific littoral is an overwhelmingly Afro-Colombian territory; it is a region inhabited by the descendents of slaves who had been used to work in the mines. Moreover, it should be remembered that the Pacific littoral is one of the most impoverished regions of Colombia. Nonetheless, in the late 1980s, as part of neoliberal economic reform, the Colombian state once again turned towards the Pacific littoral with the intention of opening the region to the global market in order to take advantage of the territory’s mineral wealth and economic opportunities. Among many of the proposed projects for the region, there was the plan to finish the Pan-American Highway, the construction of a new international port and the opening of a new inter-oceanic canal. Meanwhile, infrastructure and roadways were being built to facilitate the immigration of “colonos,” “whites” and mestizos from the interior of the country, who have historically maintained a small presence as a way of monopolizing trade and commerce in the region (Wade, “Identidad” 288).

In great part motivated by these events or intrusions, Afro-Colombian populations, especially along the Pacific coast, experienced the emergence of collective identities and their strategic positioning in culture-territory relations in an effort to protect
their communities, rights and lands. Of course, these events have resulted in certain amounts of ethnic tension between Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities in the region. From the time of abolition, Afro-Colombians have been settling in valleys along riverbeds in the Pacific littoral, often pushing out certain indigenous groups. Although there has never been any outright or explicit violence, these relationships are not void of tension. The black communities have historically been more involved in the capitalist economy through their participation in mining and logging activities. And now that the exploitation of natural resources has increased, black populations have entered territories of indigenous communities in search of mineral resources such as wood and gold, which at times engenders more tension and conflict. Meanwhile, indigenous organizations that have been mobilizing since the 1960s have been successful at garnering international support in an effort to receive certain land reservations, some within the Pacific littoral. Given that Afro-Colombian communities previously did not have communal land title rights for the majority of their territories (on tierras baldías of the state), some of these indigenous reservations have been established in areas historically occupied by black populations, which, in turn, has also led to a certain degree of ethnic tension. Nevertheless, in an effort to ease the tension before it reached overtly violent consequences, the church has played in active role in creating peasant, grassroots organizations for both Afro-Colombians and Amerindians (Wade, “Identidad” 288-9).

In anticipation of the constitutional reform, different Afro-Colombian organizations took advantage of this political opportunity to achieve, for the first time, recognition as an ethnic group before the Colombian state. Various groups with experience in Afro-Colombian issues, which included organizations associated with
Christian communities, leftist groups, traditional political parties, certain government initiatives and even NGOs, assembled in the Pre-Constituent Conference of Black Communities in Cali in August 1990 under the pretext of turning out a proposal for action to be presented at the ANC. These various groups and representatives debated and discussed alternative reform proposals and even organized a National Coordinator for Black Communities (*Coordinadora Nacional de Comunidades Negras*), which was to provide a common, Afro-Colombian voice and perspective at the assembly. However, due to diversity and conflicting interests among the members of the various groups, efforts to build a consensus on Afro-Colombian rights ultimately failed. Regardless, as a result of this conference, the focus of Afro-Colombian politics moved away from the traditional equal opportunity agenda towards ethnic and cultural demands very similar to the indigenous movement’s agenda of ethnicity-based collective rights. Instead of continuing with a “negative” identity linked to racial discrimination, Afro-Colombian activists proposed a more positive ethnic identity based on Afro-Colombian cultural practices, traditions, values, and the history of resistance against slavery and racism – very reminiscent of *Cimarrón*’s cultural agenda (Grueso et al. 199, Van Cott 47).

The National Constituent Assembly (ANC) was a seventy-member body responsible for constitutional reform that was popularly elected in December 1990. Unfortunately, no black candidate was elected as a delegate to the ANC, often explained as the result of insufficient financing, the overall weak politicization of blackness, low levels of support from other population sectors and even divisions among the black communities (Agudelo 188, Van Cott 68). In contrast, the indigenous organizations, with more national and international support, in addition to more experience in the formal
political arena, had two delegates elected. One of these delegates, Emberá Francisco Rojas Birry, received a large portion of the black vote given that many Afro-Colombians thought that he would defend their interests better than the less-experienced black candidates. Rojas Birry did in fact speak on behalf of the black communities, as did other people who had been involved or influenced by the work of *Cimarrón*. The Assembly also included the participation of prominent scholars of Afro-Colombian topics such as Jaime Arocha and Nina de Friedemann. Nonetheless, many sectors of the ANC opposed any demands for recognition of territorial and ethnic rights for black communities, arguing that Afro-Colombian communities did not conform to their definition of an “ethnic group”; for example, Afro-Colombians did not speak their own language.

Ultimately, Afro-Colombians were perceived as assimilated and fully integrated citizens who did not suffer racial discrimination (Grueso et al. 199).

In actuality, Afro-Colombian organizations did indeed present weaker collective identities. Furthermore, in great part due to the diversity among Afro-Colombian populations and the absence of an assertive collective identity, the black organizations failed to produce a strong, legitimate proposal with resonance among Afro-Colombian sectors. For this reason, the Afro-Colombian cause garnered very little support or consideration from potential political allies or the media. The only exception was the attention given to the Afro-Colombian occupation of the Haitian Embassy and various government and church offices in Bogotá and major cities in the Chocó on May 22, 1991. These occupations were to provide a national stage for demanding that Afro-Colombians be recognized as an ethnic group and that they be given collective property rights to certain territories throughout the Pacific littoral. These efforts, in tandem with those of
Rojas Birry who spoke on behalf of the Afro-Colombian communities, eventually convinced delegates of the ANC to endorse the Transitory Article 55, with respect to black communal land rights, just before concluding the assembly. Nonetheless, in order for the controversial articles to be approved, “the language was deliberately left vague, with specifics left to statutory legislation” (Van Cott 76-77).

The 1991 Constitution, which was drafted in July of 1991, replaced the 1886 charter that had been imposed by Conservative President, Rafael Núñez, following the military defeat of the Liberal Party. In the end, the new Constitution ended up adhering to several, new international standards and principles that included the explicit acknowledgement of human rights guarantees, political pluralism and even ethnic diversity. For instance, Article 7 states that “El Estado reconoce y protege la diversidad étnica y cultural de la Nación,” while Article 13 protects Colombian citizens from “discriminación por razones de sexo, raza, origen nacional o familiar, lengua, religión, opinión política o filosófica.” And in Article 70, the new Constitution claims that “La cultura en sus diversas manifestaciones es fundamento de la nacionalidad. El Estado reconoce la igualdad y dignidad de todas las que conviven en el país’ (cited in Agudelo 189, complete Constitution available at http://www.presidencia.gov.co/constitu/).

However, despite the efforts of Afro-Colombian representatives before and during the ANC, there was originally no explicit mention of black or Afro-Colombian communities; the Constitution included several articles that indistinguishably referred only to indigenous groups and “other ethnic groups,” once again proving that – for members of Colombia’s dominant culture - the real “others” were the Amerindians:
First, although Indians comprise a tiny proportion of the population, they always have held a distinguished place in the national imagination, and they have enjoyed the most extensive individual and collective rights of any identified group in society. It is widely believed that their protection is a fundamental responsibility of the state. Second, along much of the country’s frontiers indigenous communities represent the only effective human presence […] Third, by the late 1980s, because of the effort of the national and international environmental movements, a sector of Colombian elites perceived Indians to possess valuable specialized knowledge and modes of production compatible with the country’s rich and diverse but increasingly threatened biological diversity (Van Cott 45-6).

Nevertheless, in accordance with the Transitory Article 55, after considerable government delay, President César Gaviria Trujillo’s administration organized a Special Commission for Black Communities to outline a proposed law implementing black constitutional rights on August 11, 1992. There was a long process of negotiation that took place, which brought together representatives from black communities from the Pacific littoral, government officials and scholars. One important result of these meetings and negotiations was the founding of the black organization, the Process of Black Communities (Proceso de Comunidades Negras/PCN), to organize the efforts of 120 grassroots organizations in order to carry out the implementation of black constitutional rights (Van Cott 96). Ultimately, the president signed the Law 70 of 1993 in which black communities were politically recognized as a separate grupo étnico (an ethnic group) and granted communal land title rights in some areas along riverbeds of the Pacific littoral.

The Transitory Article 55 of Law 70/93 ("Law of Black Communities") included direct references to “black communities”:

La presente ley tiene por objeto reconocer 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, de conformidad con lo
In the end, this law was meant to establish mechanisms for the protection of Afro-Colombian cultural identity and community rights in an effort to foment economic and social development.

The law does not permit communal control or ownership over natural resources (with the exception of forests), the subsoil, lands pertaining to national parks, certain military zones or urban centers. It also mandates that traditional practices of production should be carried out in ways that guarantee the conservation of natural resources. The law promotes education in the Pacific littoral that should respond to the specific socio-cultural needs and characteristics of black communities, in addition to technical and professional training, access to credit and the overall well-being of black communities. Furthermore, the law guarantees Afro-Colombian participation and representation within committees in charge of planning development in the region. And lastly, the law promises the election of two Afro-Colombians to the House of Representatives (Wade, “Identidad,” 290).

Ultimately, the Law 70 provides a representation of black identity that differs greatly from that presented by the ethnic-racial discourse of cimarronismo, but which is very similar to that of the indigenous identity, at least when presented before the Colombian state; there is an emphasis on an established and ancestral land in addition to practices of production that date back to antiquity (290). According to Article 2 of the
Law 70, black culture is defined in the following manner: “Es el conjunto de familias de
cascendencia afrocolombiana que poseen una cultura propia, comparten una historia y
tienen sus propias tradiciones y costumbres dentro de la relación campo-poblado, que
revelan y conservan conciencia de identidad que las distinguen de otros grupos étnicos.”
Furthermore, collective occupation is explained as “[...] el asentamiento histórico y
ancestral de comunidades negras en tierras para su uso colectivo, que constituyen su
hábitat, y sobre los cuales desarrollan en la actualidad sus prácticas tradicionales de
producción.” Their traditional practices of production are seen as economic activities
(such as agriculture, mining, logging, fishing, hunting and gathering) that “han utilizado
consuetudinariamente las comunidades negras para garantizar la conservación de la vida
y el desarrollo autosostenible” (Ley 70 de 1993). And all of these characteristics apply to
black communities within the Pacific littoral.

The state did, in fact, make various concessions to Afro-Colombian communities
in some regions of great interest for purposes of economic development. Peter Wade
points out that perhaps for this very reason the state preferred using a model of
negotiation with ethnic-racial minorities already in existence. The church and indigenous
organizations helped maintain this model and certain Afro-Colombian organizations and
representatives involved in this constitutional reform process were willing to take
advantage of the possibilities that this model provided (“Identidad” 291-2). There were,
however, black politicians and elites who opposed any special rights for Afro-Colombian
precisely because they felt that these laws treated them like Amerindians and also
because they were in favor of integration; they preferred to be treated as “regular”
Colombians and not as an “ethnic minority.”

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There have been efforts on the part of the Afro-Colombian organizations to expand the reach of Law 70 beyond regions of the Pacific coast. For example, the Court ruled that black communities in the city of Santa Marta on the Atlantic coast are entitled to the protection granted to ethnic groups within the Constitution while claiming that they have been victims in the past of social marginalization, even though they do not necessarily fit into the narrow, constitutional definition of a “comunidad negra” (Van Cott 117). This ruling seems to expand the scope of the Afro-Colombian communities to be protected under the new Constitution, however, it still is not easy to demonstrate that black communities in different regions of the country share the same characteristics or conditions outlined in the Constitution (Wade, “Identidad” 291-2). In this way, the very limited or restricted definition of comunidades negras in the Constitution can actually work to fragment Afro-Colombian solidarity given that it excludes certain sectors of the black population (to be addressed below). And interestingly enough, black communities of the Pacific littoral are referred to as “invaders” of tierras baldias despite their occupation of some territories for more than a century.

It must be noted that despite the efforts by black Colombians to hold on to their territories, maintain their unique differences and preserve their culture, many Afro-Colombian leaders insist that their communities continue to experience various forms of racism and marginalization. Over the last 10-15 years, Afro-Colombian communities have been victimized by the actions of armed groups that target these communities while defending the interests of politicians, landowners, drug traffickers and entrepreneurs who favor the exploitation of the aforementioned mineral resources in addition to the destruction of biodiversity, the implementation of tourist projects, ports, channels, etc.
(Rosero 1). In fact, as mentioned, black communities in the Pacific littoral are located in one of the world’s most biodiverse regions, which presents great obstacles to the implementation of Afro-Colombian constitutional rights. State and private development interests in the Pacific region have greatly hindered implementation of Transitory Article 55. Many Afro-Colombians have been displaced from their lands, and those displaced typically do not return, which, therefore, has led to mass urbanization of Afro-Colombian populations. And despite the outcry of Afro-Colombian leaders, the tendency of the state when addressing minority protest – if not outright suppression – is to make a few concessions and to create more bureaucracy as a way of absorbing petitions and demands, obviously in an effort to maintain the status quo (Wade, “Identidad” 293) (displacement is later addressed in more detail).

2.11 Afro-Colombian Ethnic Identities in a Postmodern Era

During the constitutional reform, black organizations engaged in dialogue, debate and struggle with the Colombian state and even among themselves in an effort to construct a legal definition of Afro-Colombian identity capable of both representing their particular histories and realities and supporting favorable social, political, and economic reforms for black communities. These debates evinced the great diversity of cultures, histories and experiences among Afro-Colombian communities as representatives from black organizations and scholars close to them struggled to arrive at a consensus on a definition of Afro-Colombian identity/identities. In the end, the struggles and difficulties within this debate on ethnicity and multiculturalism in Colombia, in many ways, reflect contemporary challenges posed by postmodern theories that discard the idea of fixed,
essentialist, homogeneous identities and instead emphasize the multiplicity of identities and differences that individuals can assume. And these postmodern perspectives have indeed made important contributions to social theory and to our understandings of the construction of social identities.\textsuperscript{13} By not approaching identities as fixed or evident, the objective has been to understand how identities are constructed through social practices and discourses (which is basically the same task I’ve tried to accomplish in this chapter).

For example, in Colombia, the ideology of \textit{cimarronismo} and the representations promoted by Article 55 of the new Constitution run the risk of essentializing “black” identity by strictly defining Afro-Colombians either as the rebellious \textit{cimarrón} or as a rural \textit{campesino} in certain riverbeds of the Pacific littoral (Wade, “Identidad” 296). Obviously, recent debates on ethnicity have been heavily influenced by international concerns and discourses on multiculturalism as evidenced by the fact that there is now no mention of race or the biological per se; instead, Afro-Colombians are defined in cultural terms of ethnicity. However, despite present-day attempts to avoid constructing static racial categories, the Constitution still falls into the same trap of describing “black communities” as closed and essential entities that appear to be unchangeable. Although identities portrayed in this manner are often used for political purposes as a means of demanding and receiving group concessions, these constitutional representations still present the possibility of forms of racism without races (Balibar and Wallerstein 21). As Cunin argues, the ethnic-racial discourse – still heavily determined by dominant culture –

\textsuperscript{13} Postmodern theorists, such as Stuart Hall, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe and Slavoj Žižek, have addressed the fragmentation of the subject. And in a word, identity is perceived as a fallacy and an essentialist device controlled by the subject. In a specifically Latin American context, Néstor García Canclini, José Joaquin Brunner, Nelly Richard, and Jesús Martín Barbero have also addressed postmodern concerns in regard to social identities.
has moved away from biological or racial representations towards irreducible cultural differences, which, ironically are treated in such a way that they operate like a natural truth; the supposed discarded biological reference returns in a subtler and perhaps more dangerous way vis-à-vis the naturalization of cultural differences. The principles of multiculturalism or plurietnia, when compared to racism, still end up generating new forms of exclusion. Despite the positive valuation of ethnic-racial differences, these differences are presented as static or fixed. The logic of the discourse on multiculturalism in Colombia – as found in the Constitution – is not to exclude in order to conserve the identity of the dominant group, but instead to conserve the cultural peculiarities of the minority group, which can likewise have negative repercussions (Cunin, “Formas de construcción” 68).

The representation of Afro-Colombian communities in the new Constitution has, in a sense, pigeonholed black identity according to certain cultural traits of particular rural groups and a specific region of the country. Cimarronismo, on one hand, at least has historically pleaded with people to identify with the black cause, with their African heritage and its contribution to the nation and national culture. On the other hand, Law 70 actually excludes the majority of Afro-Colombians, such as those on the Atlantic Coast, the Valley of Cauca, San Andrés and Providencia, not to mention the almost 72% of Afro-Colombians who live in urban centers throughout the country. Furthermore, as these rural regions of the Pacific littoral continue to develop through the spread of global capital, many of these ethnic-cultural traits are inevitably transformed or simply disappear. Therefore, when these predominantly rural, cultural traits no longer remain, in a sense, the Afro-Colombian ethnic group represented in the Constitution likewise
disappears. What law, then, will black communities be able to turn to for political recognition and protection? In the end, Afro-Colombians can now be doubly excluded; once due to discriminatory behaviors that exclude them from democratic equality, and twice from their right to difference given that only certain “black” groups are politically recognized as different. For these reasons, Cunin argues that many of the recent discourses on multiculturalism in Colombia – such as Law 70 – produce forms of alterity based on the search for certain cultural purities, which is a logic very close to that used in older, discredited discourses such as the limpieza de sangre or the mejoramiento de las razas (“Formas de construcción” 69).

These recent occurrences in Colombia, proof of a country trying to come to grips with its multi-ethnic and multi-racial national component, exemplify the difficulty of creating positive, all-encompassing identities; of creating unity within difference and heterogeneity. The above example from the Constitution shows that in most cases, laws written with reference to ethnic-racial minorities tend to be essentialist in their construction of a group of people as a legal category, which inevitably excludes certain individuals. Ultimately, the representation of black communities within the Constitution creates an effect of "allochronicity," a "denial of coevalness" (Fabian 1983) by which the writers (politicians, activists, anthropologists) distance themselves from their objects of representation, whom they deny any such open-ended, evolving or living temporality. In other words, the desire to legitimize Colombia’s transition from a country of one “mixed” race (mestizos) to one of multiple (and separate) cultures continues to lose sight of the fact that ethnic-racial and cultural diversity are as much in transition as the rest of the
country. The neoliberal state is no longer able to legitimize and reproduce its cultural hegemony on cultural diversity, as this study on Afro-Colombian hip-hop will demonstrate.

At the same time, however, it is important to take into account the theoretical challenge that postmodernism presents to minority movements that organize political activity around the representation of collective identities that almost inevitably essentialize subjects. In other words, as postmodern critics point out, essentialist discourses tend to exclude a variety of interests and subject positions of the very people they hope to represent (as evidenced by fragmentation among Afro-Colombian communities prior to and during constitutional reform); in fact, essentialist discourses tend to maintain the dominant ethnocentric discourses by simply inverting positions, for example, between “white/mestizo” and “black”, without questioning them (Wade, “Identidad” 296). Obviously, though, for Afro-Colombians, who have been subjected to centuries of oppression, racial discrimination and marginalization, the necessity to create collective unity for political purposes is in many ways imperative. Of course, this theoretical dilemma may not worry political activists, artists or even the musicians in this study. Nonetheless, this dilemma can and has surfaced when certain sectors of the general Afro-Colombian population feel excluded from debate or from movements that adhere to narrow definitions of Afro-Colombian identity.

As mentioned, Afro-Colombian populations are profoundly regionalized, and each region has a distinct history with regards to slavery, *mestizaje*, socio-political, cultural and economic development, which has fragmented efforts at Afro-Colombian solidarity. Is it possible to foment common elements – to create Afro-Colombian
solidarity – without displacing regional, political, gender, sexual orientation and/or generational differences? It becomes a question of how to formulate a politics that works with and through all the differences among Afro-Colombian communities in order to establish general identification and solidarity, which make unified resistance possible but without excluding the heterogeneity of interests and subjectivities: “How can we organize these huge, randomly varied, and diverse things we call human subjects into positions where they can recognize one another for long enough to act together, and thus to take up a position that one of these days they might live out and act through as an identity. Identity is at the end, not the beginning, of the paradigm” (Hall, “Subjects in History” 291).

I do not want to pretend to have a solution to these postmodern dilemmas; I simply am providing a portrait of the times, so to speak, as a means of demonstrating the difficulties that Afro-Colombians have encountered with regards to the possibility of creating collective identities for the purpose of political action in this postmodern era of globalization. Scholars, such as Spivak, have proposed a sort of “strategic essentialism” that can be used to establish solidarity for the purposes of social and political action (214). The objective is to construct acknowledged essentialist identities in order to establish solidarity and achieve political objectives within a specific socio-historic and political context. Similar to “strategic essentialism,” Peter Wade suggests that a person can be asked to identify with the Afro-Colombian movement or cause since it responds to shared interests in a given moment or social context. In this sense, the Afro-Colombian identification does not necessarily have to materialize because a person discovers or recovers a particular essence, an identity that was always there but somehow buried deep
within; instead, identifications can be something new and created. An individual does not have to identify with a movement or cause simply because s/he is Afro-Colombian, and therefore, possesses a particular “black” essence that s/he is asked to recover. Rather, because this person is Afro-Colombian, s/he has certain common experiences and interests with other similar people. Ultimately, people are asked to make a political identification and not a “natural” one (“Identidad” 297). While these strategies can result in certain concessions granted to minority groups, neither appears to provide identities capable of permanent transformation. For example, “strategic essentialism” cannot remain a permanent form of identification given that any essentialism, by nature, is negative in the long run because it tends to naturalize and dehistorize difference. Furthermore, political identifications likewise tend to be volatile and ephemeral.

Perhaps, in spite of the diversity among different sectors of the black population in Colombia, there is a certain historic continuity within these differences, which could serve as part of an emerging black identity, not as an exclusionary essence but as an element that defines certain interests and sentiments shared by people who define themselves as “black” or Afro-Colombian. As Stuart Hall reminds us, all cultural identities have histories and origins, which are constructed as part of a narrative: “We tell ourselves the stories of the parts of our roots in order to come into contact, creatively with it. So this new kind of ethnicity – the emergent ethnicities – has a relationship to the past, but it is a relationship that is partly through memory, partly through narrative, one that has to be recovered” (“Ethnicity” 348). These identities should not simply remain anchored in the past, but should also point towards the present and the future:
Cultural identity [...] is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialist past, they are subject to the continuous play of history, culture and power. (Hall, “Cultural Identity” 394)

Both the Law 70 and cimarronismo – to certain degrees – discover and defend the past in an effort to construct a black identity, but neither is very forward looking (Wade, “Identidad” 297-8). Ultimately, Stuart Hall proposes new ethnicities constructed through creative processes, which make use of and combine traditional (past) and modern (present-future) elements; these are identities that are built on historic continuities – a common past – but are also capable of permanent transformation and the future assimilation of new cultural elements and productions. In the end, he proposes the construction of hybrid or transcultural identities capable of being both local and transnational, both “traditional” and “modern.”

In great part, due to the work and efforts of Afro-Colombian and indigenous movements, Colombia is now a self-defined multicultural or pluri-ethnic country, which, in theory, means that the nation should heed to the interests not just of particular groups, but also to individuals within and outside of collective groups; a truly democratic and tolerant Colombia should give citizens the option to live out their identities completely and participate in society, whether within frameworks of identity vindication or outside of those frameworks. As problematic as the construction of Afro-Colombian collective identities has been, the achievements and concessions Afro-Colombia movements have

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14 Although Stuart Hall commonly uses the term hybridity, I prefer to use transcultural, for reasons outlined in chapter five.
received, in public and political arenas, work towards establishing this type of social and political milieu that is more open to the construction of these new ethnicities; Afro-Colombian urban youth, for example, now assume changing definitions of “blackness” with the expectation to be treated with equality, not in spite of being “black,” but as citizens with the right to be different. Obviously, what it means to be “black” in Colombia is not self-evident, and this study on Afro-Colombian hip-hop youth will illustrate that it is an ongoing process involving the imposition of identities, self-definition and the belonging to this emerging Afro-Colombian collective.

2.12 New and Old Forms of Racism

Despite its drawbacks, the new Constitution of 1991 and the Law 70 of 1993 represent important progress given that they launched issues concerning Afro-Colombians into the public arena, reduced the invisibility of Afro-Colombians, questioned the myth of racial democracy that is still pervasive, and opened up the debate on national identity and multiculturalism. Black communities now receive more attention from intellectuals and politicians, and black organizations have also grown in scope, which means that they now have more of a voice in the public arena when claiming rights to cultural autonomy. Furthermore, these processes have contributed to the self-esteem among younger generation of Afro-Colombians blacks, which becomes apparent later in this study.

However, in coming full circle, I want to end this chapter by stating that even these more recent and apparently more tolerant discourses on Afro-Colombian identities tend to ignore the continuation of daily forms of discrimination – especially common
among popular sectors – tied to longstanding racial prejudices based on racial stereotypes and perceptions. The Constitution represents only partial improvement with respect to the struggle against racial discrimination. Talking about Afro-Colombian ethnicity or proclaiming to be a multicultural society is not enough to suppress cognitive and social perceptions of the “black other,” which obviously influence in social behavior and the interaction among members of the different ethnic groups. The categories of difference promoted by the Law 70 and recent discourses on multiculturalism do not impede the coexistence of other categories or of other logics of differentiation, which can vary according to context, situations and individuals. Furthermore, as demonstrated, even politically correct discourses that hide racial vocabulary (but not practices) often foster the development of antiracism with a racializing base, sophistication of metaphors and of semantic substitutes (Cunin, “Formas de construcción” 69-70).

Although racism seems to be condemned by almost everyone in Colombia and many people are adamant about not being racists, it is easy to discover racial and even racists elements within discourses, behaviors and social action. Ethnic-cultural discrimination, ethnocentrism, economic exploitation and social inequalities found in all spheres of social life continue to characterize the relations between “white” dominant classes and the other minority groups. In effect, class and race come together as two elements of the same social contradiction, since it is virtually impossible to separate them within an analysis of Colombia’s ethnic and social problems; they are essentially a product of capitalist development and economic exploitation. Aníbal Quijano elaborates on racism and its intimate relationship with capitalism since the colonial period to the present:
The racial classification of the population and the early association of the new racial identities of the colonized with the forms of control of unpaid, unwaged labor developed among the Europeans the singular perception that paid labor was the whites’ privilege. The racial inferiority of the colonized implied that they were not worthy of wages […] It is not difficult to find, to this very day, this attitude spread out among the white property owners of anyplace in the world. Furthermore, the lower wages “inferior races” receive in the present capitalist centers for the same work as done by whites cannot be explained as detached from the racist social classification of the world’s population – in other words, as detached from the global capitalist coloniality of power. (“Coloniality” 7)

Quijano points out that eliminating economic exploitation, poverty, corruption, and violence, is not possible without taking into consideration the racial prejudices and discrimination historically used to justify these forms of oppression. Ultimately, the effects and consequences of centuries of slavery and servitude imposed on Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities have had a bearing on and in many ways still determine many aspects of Colombian society. According to Juan de Dios Mosquera, racial discrimination is a reality that most Colombians recognize in everyday social relations although they may not interpret it as such; class relations created during hundreds of years of slavery created profound contradictions of color and culture, identified generically as contradictions of race, that in a capitalist society continue to repeat, reproduce and develop through time (12-13).

It is understandable (but not acceptable), then, that despite the myth of mestizaje and the new Constitution and its terminology of multiculturalism, the pervasive proliferation of diverse, popular terms to designate phenotypic differences still exist; terms that designate a supposed genetic origin that are used to socially classify individuals (negro, moreno, prieto, canela, trigueño, mono, indio). In a word, these terms continue to construct categories that are ordered in a hierarchical scale in which
phenotypic characteristics are superimposed with signals and attributes of social status, in which, on one extreme “white” usually signifies beauty, rich, pure, and sophistication, while on the other extreme, black denotes ugliness, poor, impure, unsophisticated: “Ideas about the inferiority of blackness were powerful in the colonial era and are not just a thing of the past: the cult of whiteness still exists today. Blacks almost never appear on magazine covers or in television advertisements that manipulate images of conventional beauty: their role is almost always touristic and folkloric.” (Wade, Blackness 240).

In this study it becomes obvious that “blackness” is not a self-evident category but is instead quite negotiable. However, the discourses that construct race are based on noticeable physical differences. Clearly physical markers play a role in “fixing” identity, and for this reason, it is imperative to recognize that these physical markers are themselves historically constructed. In other words, categorizations such as “negro” seem commonsensical since they refer to noticeable biological realities, but this is a very elaborate illusion. Racial denominations represent cognitive categories that, beginning with our perception of visible physical differences, are widely inherited from the history of colonization that has been addressed in this chapter. This brings to mind what Fanon refers to as the black “imago” of the “white” imaginary. In a word, Fanon’s work reminds us of the importance in understanding that the “black other” is perceived on the level of the body in such a way that biological differences are socially assigned various meanings by dominant culture, which profoundly influences behavioral norms and racial relations (Fanon 161-71). And racial ascription is one of the most socially salient features of a person’s identity; “[…] strangers, friends, officials are always aware of it in public and private contexts, always notice it, almost never let it slip from view […] both in intimate
settings and in public space – race is taken by so many more people to be the basis for
treating people differentially” (Appiah 610).

Although the New Constitution of 1991 decreed the country’s multiethnic and
multicultural character and afforded specific rights as much to the indigenous populations
as to the black communities, the full exercise of citizenship and the benefits of belonging
to an “imagined community” called the nation has not been totally achieved by these
populations which continue to be subjected to daily, often subtle and trivial forms of
racism, and so incorporated into interpersonal relationships that it has become almost
unperceivable. It can be a racism that is implicit, embodied in social relations, transmitted
in words and through insipid behaviors. Therefore, racism continues to exist, sometimes
unconsciously by individuals with the best intentions. It is more difficult to observe and
study because it doesn’t fall into the logic of evident and absolute differentiation between
“us” and “them.” It is perhaps more important than ever to continue to question and
challenge the exclusion of Afro-Colombians from existing structures, for example, from
education and media outlets. Beyond simplistic and often stereotyped representations of
Afro-Colombians in educational materials, more of an effort should be made to include
Afro-Colombian studies in school curriculums. Furthermore, more than just wider and
more frequent representation through national media outlets, Afro-Colombian people and
cultures deserve types of representations that counteract common stereotypical
perceptions. At the same time, Afro-Colombian scholars, activists and general supporters
should continue to challenge the discourses and ideologies that have historically led to
discriminatory behaviors and even supported the very structures from which Afro-
Colombians have been excluded. The idea is not just to think about how to include Afro-
Colombians within the already existing nation, but instead how to promote the reimagining of the nation itself, which likewise is a move towards the eradication of ingrained racist thought and behavior among all socio-economic sectors of society. Later in this study, I take a closer look at the contributions being made by Afro-Colombian rappers to this process of reimagining the nation.
3.1 Globalization: New Term or New Occurrence?

The term globalization has generated a great deal of debate and controversy with regards to its meaning(s) and most importantly its consequences around the world. It has definitely become an overused and even misused buzzword, to the point that it often signifies everything and nothing at the same time. For this reason, here I would like to begin with a basic definition of globalization and what I see as some of its principal features that I follow in this study on Afro-Colombian cultures and popular music. All too often the media, politicians and even scholars use globalization to describe intercultural and international contact and economic exchange, which, in that case, would mean that globalization is simply a new term used to define old processes that have a very long history. However, although it should not be completely severed from histories of colonization and modernization, according to the School of Regulation, globalization is defined by a new regime of capital accumulation and a transnational distribution of labor. Globalization, or this new regime of accumulation, is dictated by the interests of a few of the world’s center economies, particularly those of the United States, France,
Germany, Italy, Canada, United Kingdom, and Japan, nations that control the global market while obscuring the demands of the lesser developed countries.

This new regime of accumulation has been described as “flexible accumulation” (Harvey 1989), “post-Fordism” (Amin 1994) and the “network society” (Castells 1996). Although these perspectives may bear differences with respect to certain details, most agree that globalization refers to a restructured capitalism that is no longer founded strictly on the principles of the older industrialized system of mass production and mass consumption, which has become almost obsolete in the more advanced regions of the globalization process. Instead, in the economies of the more powerful nations, this new regime of accumulation is founded on:

[...] flexible accumulation strategies, on segmented markets, on post-Fordist styles of organization, on lifestyles and identity – specific forms of marketing, driven by the market, driven by just-in-time production, driven by the ability to address not the mass audience, or the mass consumers, but penetrating to the very specific smaller groups, to individuals in its appeal. (Hall, “The Local and the Global” 181)

In a word, in order for companies to be competitive and successful under this new regime of accumulation, they must be capable of producing differentiated material and symbolic goods for customers of particular market niches. Globalization enables companies to manufacture and produce a wide range of goods in various countries around the world at the same time. Of course, this is due in great part to the relaxation of border restrictions, which permits the production of goods anywhere outside a particular nation in addition to the immediate flow of finance capital around the world (Green 6).

According to Castells, the emergence of this new regime of accumulation was made possible largely due to the development of new technological systems that have
facilitated the digital and electronic flow of information (finance capital) resulting in an instantly integrated world of finance that was inconceivable a few decades ago (1996). Similar to the way in which industrialization shifted capital away from land and into the factory system, globalization and its information technology have moved investment away from manufacturing and into the production of symbolic goods and global speculation (Green 6). Finance capital now circulates freely among countries through electronic means, and this mobility generates global movements in exchange and interest rates and in the prices of stocks. In sum, competition, production and speculation have become globalized. And it is the circulation of global capital – particularly finance capital – that characterizes the acceleration of the rhythm of social, political and economic change, especially by encouraging profound transformations in behavior as capital tries to maximize profits at the expense of a collective well-being. In other words, the globalized role of money as intrinsic value has led to great social and cultural changes. As we shall see in the next chapter, these economic practices have had significant socio-cultural effects on members of the African diaspora, and in this case, on Afro-Colombians who have had to adapt to a continuously changing economic environment, particularly in the way that they are frequently forced to migrate in search of employment or even flee from lands now targeted by capital.

The supporters of globalization tend to endorse neoliberal economics – as a way to regulate (or actually deregulate) globalization – while claiming that these policies and processes will lead to a more egalitarian distribution of power and a rising tide of wealth around the world, in addition to the spread of democratic ideals and human rights. In other words, the solution for world poverty and the slue of social problems weighing on
“developing” countries around the world are offered in the form of privatization and neoliberalism, often perceived as by-products of globalization. Neoliberalism is based on neoclassic economic theories, which view a free-market system with little to no interference from the state as the definitive development policy. The proponents of neoliberal globalization claim that when capital is allowed to flow freely around the world, all of humanity will reap the benefits in the form of employment, higher wages and access to more consumer products (Robbins 100-1, Trigo, “A Two Sided Coin”). Nonetheless, history has proven that economic policies that seem to be successful in the more economically powerful nations do not necessarily work in the “less-developed” economies of the world. Ultimately, the benefits, mainly in the form of profits, have overwhelmingly flowed to the powerful minority of transnational corporations (of the economically powerful nations) and away from the “underdeveloped” countries and impoverished masses (Hoogvelt 88-89). For this reason, many critics – myself included – see globalization as a euphemism for neo-imperial domination.

While the economic component is essential in our understanding of globalization, we must not overlook the cultural component. Globalization promotes the creation, segmentation and assimilation of new consumer markets and new consumers to the market vis-à-vis the colonization of culture and everyday life, leading to a culture of consumerism (Trigo, “A Two Sided Coin”). Cultural globalization involves the transfer of ideas, information, images, and even people who carry ideas and information with them. Cultural globalization influences people’s values, behaviors and attitudes toward culture, politics, and identity. However, these are behaviors and practices informed by processes of economic globalization, by the spread of symbolic goods and capitalist
consumption. Globalized markets – as well as domestic markets - and investments require consumers who are appropriately socialized and fairly well-informed so that companies can maximize profits. Consumers who are appropriately socialized will be receptive to the most recent consumer products, fashions, trends, and ideas (Green 8). Therefore, both economics and culture are essential to the globalization process; almost out of necessity, individuals create and experience culture in tandem with economic globalization, with the spread of global capital.

Moreover, we cannot ignore that while multinationals compete for their share or control of the global market, the cultural component – the entertainment industry (symbolic goods), fashions and even fast foods – is overwhelmingly U.S. influenced and dominated. Therefore, although the proponents of globalization speak of a limitless and equal exchange of information, products, ideas and technology across borders, globalization, in many ways, is tantamount to a new form of U.S. economic and cultural imperialism (an argument that I believe is substantiated in this study). Globalization has been characterized by:

[…] the emergence of the United States as a world power and, consequently, as the center of global cultural production and circulation. This emergence is both a displacement and a hegemonic shift in the definition of culture – a movement from high culture to American mainstream popular culture and its mass-cultural, image-mediated, technological forms. (Hall, “What is this ‘Black’” 123)

In fact, it is due to the pervasiveness of the U.S. cultural and economic influence around the globe that many critics speak of global homogenization, or even “Americanization.” However, caution should be used when addressing any kind of homogenization theory. While certain similarities can be observed among cultures around the world – particularly
in urban centers – significant differences exist among societies often determined by their position in the world economy and the overall nature of their culture (addressed in chapter five with respect to Afro-Colombian hip-hop culture).

In the end, most agree that globalization has definitely led to a fundamental acceleration of the pace of social, cultural and economic change around the globe, greatly aided by technological advances in communication systems, which permit the instantaneous movement of financial capital in a way that local events are influenced by events that take place at great distances and vice versa. However, throughout this study it will become evident that globalization is often an uneven and contradictory process. As Abril Trigo indicates, it is a two-sided coin, meaning that it is not experienced in the same way by all people in different localities around the globe, and whether globalization is viewed as positive or negative will always depend on one’s circumstances and positionality (“A Two Sided Coin”). Therefore, one of my main objectives in this study is to consider whether and in what ways has globalization been negative, or positive, for Afro-Colombian communities. What challenges and/or benefits has globalization provided and how are they being manifested through Afro-Colombian hip-hop?

3.2 The Merit of a Study on Afro-Colombian Hip-Hop

During the last few decades, Afro-Colombian communities have had to face new challenges and endure great changes resulting not only from the country’s civil strife, but also from processes of economic and cultural globalization. When I began my research in the summer of 2002, my initial objective was to find a new generation of Afro-Colombian writers who were addressing current issues weighing on their communities,
especially with regards to globalization, shifting ethnic identities and cultural transformations taking place among Afro-Colombian urban populations, particularly the young. Nevertheless, within the nation’s panorama of growing poverty and violence, civil war and political struggle, there is little space or time for Culture. Too many Afro-Colombians are completely consumed by their daily struggles for survival. Furthermore, many of the social pressures and constraints mentioned in the previous chapter that have historically worked to hinder the emergence of assertive Afro-Colombian authors and literature are still in place. For instance, access to education continues to be a challenge for Afro-Colombian youth, which obviously translates into a lack of investment in literary and cultural pursuits. And in a personal interview with the late Manuel Zapata Olivella, he made it a point to remind me that when Afro-Colombians attempt to express their perspectives from the margins of society through traditional artistic avenues, even today their voices are too often silenced or ignored.

Nonetheless, my research interests took a somewhat dramatic turn one morning in Bogotá while sitting in Cimarrón prior to a meeting with Juan de Dios Mosquera. The office is always adorned with an array of afro-centric posters, iconography and art, but what caught my attention that morning was one particular poster of several young, Afro-Colombian rappers from the group Ghettos Clan. As someone who grew up in the mid-1980s listening to U.S. rap, I was immediately intrigued. Therefore, I set out to obtain copies of the music and learn more about the hip-hop movement in Colombia. Through a series of contacts, I was eventually put in touch with the rapper, Yahany “Tostao” Valencia, then of the group Mensajeros. We set up an interview and met in downtown Bogotá. Upon meeting him, I could immediately see that Tostoa was an intelligent,
charismatic and alluring young man. We spent the greater part of the day talking about music, the national hip-hop scene, and racism in Colombia. He sold me various CDs of Afro-Colombian rap, and from that day on, I was hooked.

It should come as no surprise that one of the best mediums for studying Afro-Colombian culture is not necessarily literature, but instead music. Again, this is largely due to the fact that access to education and literature has historically been denied or at least complicated by the remnants of slavery, racial discrimination and oppression. From the colonial period to the present, musical expression has been a medium through which Afro-Colombian communities have maintained certain aspects of their cultural and group identity. Besides providing a form of recreation, music and dance have also been a means of self-expression, communication and testimony; a way of coping with the suffering and violence associated with oppression and racial discrimination. While expanding on the importance of music for members of the African diaspora, Stuart Hall states that the black repertoire has historically been “[…] displaced from a logocentric world – where the direct mastery of cultural modes meant the mastery of writing, and hence, both of the criticism of writing (logocentric criticism) and the deconstruction of writing – the people of the black diaspora have, in opposition to all that, found the deep form, the deep structure of their cultural life in music” (Hall, “This ‘Black’” 129).

In many ways, for Afro-Colombian urban youth, rap provides a relatively new musical practice that continues to serve many of these same objectives. Of course different forms of Afro-Colombian music have evolved through processes of

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1 Tostao now jokingly admits that he purposely overcharged me for the CDs. I can’t say that I blame him.
assimilation, adaptation and synthesis of African sounds with local, autochthonous
musical forms and later with other national and transnational influences. Nonetheless, the
extensive spread and overwhelming acceptance of hip-hop and its aesthetics among
certain sectors of Afro-Colombian urban youth indicate that the nature and intensification
of transnational cultural contact has indeed changed due to the dynamics of globalization,
which requires fresh, new considerations of how global occurrences affect local contexts
and influence local musical forms, its messages and aesthetics, and even ways of
experiencing and creating culture.

I came to find that, through rap and its practice, young Afro-Colombian rappers
are indeed addressing many of the present-day challenges facing their communities.
These artists represent a generation of Afro-Colombians who have grown up during the
1980s and 1990s, a period of very significant transformations with regards to Afro-
Colombian culture and identity (as addressed in the previous chapter). In a sense, they are
representatives of a generation that has evolved and matured at a time in which many of
the older racial discourses, concepts and identities inherited from the colonial period
continue to coexist and even enter into conflict not only with postcolonial identities, but
also more recent ethnic-racial discourses propagated by Afro-Colombian organizations
together with discourses and debates spawned by constitutional reform. Furthermore,
they have grown up during a period marked by globalization in which urban youth are
constantly bombarded by mass-mediated, often racialized, imagery and messages of
African-American commodified resistance and rebellion through the U.S. culture
industry. In a word, they have lived at a temporal and cultural crossroads, so to speak, of
Afro-Colombian, Colombian, Caribbean, Latin American, diasporic and Anglo-Saxon
worlds. And all of these forces and influences that converge upon this Afro-Colombian generation of rappers are, in turn, reorganized, re-signified and expressed through music. Moreover, the concept itself of “Afro-Colombian hip-hop” immediately points to globalization and transnational influences that likewise have produced socio-cultural transformations within ethnic-racial minority groups, which likewise affect ethnic identities and the representations thereof. For these reasons, Afro-Colombian hip-hop youth and their music can contribute a great deal to our understanding of recent changes within Afro-Colombian cultures and identities and how they are evolving.

Furthermore, we cannot take lightly the fact that these Afro-Colombian artists are producing their music at a time when postmodern theories, which analyze and even celebrate difference, multiple identities and fragmentation, have emerged in tandem with globalization’s regime of accumulation centered on the diversification of the markets, identities and differences. The workings of globalization, together with postmodern theories, have led to a dramatic shift of the terrain of culture towards the popular, towards everyday practices and local narratives, which, in turn, can lead to the deconstructing of old hierarchies and the meta-narratives. This decentering opens up new spaces of contestation – often from the margins of society – and can actually work to weaken the privilege historically bestowed on high culture (Hall, “This ‘Black’” 122). In a word, this music is evidence of what Stuart Hall sees as a profound cultural revolution that “has come about as a consequence of the margins coming into representation – in art, in painting, in film, in music, in literature, in the modern arts everywhere, in politics, and in the social life generally” (“The Local” 183). And Afro-Colombian hip-hop provides an example of people in the margins of a peripheral society who are struggling for self-
representation, and thus, resisting representations, definitions and categorizations imposed by dominant culture. These artists, as members of a group historically excluded from dominant channels of cultural representation, are acquiring through music – albeit a marginalized musical practice – a way to speak for themselves (183).

At the same time, these events and occurrences have, in a sense, legitimized academic and scholarly inquiry on popular cultural forms. Popular music has recently enjoyed a certain privileged role within scholarly research on popular culture as a visibly transnational cultural production, in great part, precisely because of the ways in which it cuts across “folklore,” media, race, class, gender, performance and cultural identities (Aparicio and Jáquez 2). In other words, musical and dance practices often form an essential part of ethnic-racial, class, gender, national and transnational identifications; ideas about morals, territoriality, nationality, and identity are entwined, reworked and expressed through ways of listening, performing and dancing to music. And hip-hop, in particular, represents a terrific venue for studying today’s global context and all the conflicts and contradictions it presents. Hip-hop’s malleable and fluid nature has facilitated its pervasive transnationalization and resulted not only in local appropriations and transformations, but also in new modes of transculturation. Ultimately, Afro-Colombian hip-hop represents a form of popular culture not only linked to local desires and aspirations, local tragedies and local scenarios, but also to global trends and geopolitical designs.

In what follows, I will first introduce the various groups included in this study. After demonstrating some of the more salient ways in which certain dynamics of globalization have aided in the spread of hip-hop to Colombia, I then will address the
production side of this music. Due to general unfamiliarity with hip-hop outside the U.S.,
let alone in Colombia, the idea of this chapter is to provide readers with the necessary
information in order to fully appreciate these rappers, their art form and socio-political
messages.

3.3 Groups of Study

For those readers unfamiliar with this particular youth culture and its music
practice, generally speaking, hip-hop is thought of as the culture and its discourses, while
rap is the music, considered to be one of the four pillars of hip-hop culture: breakdancing,
DJ'ing, MC'ing (rap), and graffiti (Rose 1994). From a cultural and musical practice that
originated among African American and Hispanic youth in the Bronx, it has become a
global signifying practice providing new parameters of meaning to locally and/or
nationally diverse social groups. In fact, in recent years hip-hop has become a vehicle for
global youth affiliations in Latin America, parts of Europe, Africa and Asia. For
example, in Colombia, for the past seven years, the Instituto Distrital de Cultura y
Turismo has sponsored in Bogotá an annual hip-hop festival called “Rap al Parque” (Rap
in the Park). Each year, rap groups from all over the country are asked to submit resumes
along with samples of their music to a panel of judges consisting of DJs, musicians and
music critics who then select the “best” rappers to perform at this music event. The
magnitude and popularity of this festival indicate that hip-hop has solidified its presence
and popularity among the country’s urban youth. Although in Colombia rap is

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2 For a detailed account of funk, hip-hop, rap and reggae among Afro-Brazilian youths in the favelas of
Brazil, see George Yúdice, The Expediency of Culture: Uses of Culture in the Global Era (Durham: Duke
University Press, 2003). 109-159
predominantly consumed and practiced by mestizos, for the purpose of this study, I am specifically interested in Afro-Colombian hip-hop, the music and its practice.

In addition to two brief research trips to Colombia in the summers of 2002 and 2003, I spent thirteen months conducting fieldwork in the country while on a Fulbright grant (2004-2005). During this time, I observed and worked with eight different rap groups that have demonstrated both longevity and the ability to generate sizable followings among Colombian hip-hop crowds. For example, most of these rappers have at one time or another participated in the “Rap al Parque,” recorded at least one CD – usually in small, private studios – and are currently working on new musical productions. Most, if not all, of the music I address in this study is virtually impossible to obtain outside of local, Colombian markets. And again, I focus on black rappers and their music, although some of these groups do have a mestizo member. The groups include: Zona Marginal (Cali), Artefacto (Cali), Asilo 38 (Cali and Buenaventura), Ghettos Clan (Cali), Flaco Flow y Melanina (Cali and Buenaventura), Choc Quib Town (Quibdó and Condoto in Chocó), Carbono (Quibdó and Bogotá) and Voodoo SoulJahs (Quibdó, Bogotá, Buenaventura, Puerto Tejada). Although the vast majority of these artists come from urban centers along the Pacific littoral, many either permanently live in Bogotá or at least spend a great deal of time in the capital city where they find more opportunities to

3 The term mestizo historically has been used to define people of mixed Spanish and indigenous ancestry. While the degree of noticeable indigenous or European phenotypic characteristics varies among the members of this ethnic group, many mestizos simply refer to themselves as white. In other words, the category “mestizo” is often understood as “white” when put into relation with “Indian” or “Black.” Furthermore, although genotypically mestizo, most of these individuals tend to be ideologically Western, and nowadays, mestizo is often considered more of a social and cultural category than a racial one.
perform and produce music. Among these performers, there is only one female rapper, Gloria “Goyo” Martínez, from Choc Quib Town, although Voodoo SoulJahs does have a female vocalist, Lía Samanta Lozano. The lack of female rappers within these groups does in fact reflect that this music genre tends to be male-dominated and that, in general, the Colombian hip-hop culture rests on and perpetuates Western conceptualizations of masculine norms. These rappers are in their twenties and early thirties, and while most of them come from the lower socio-economic classes, some live or have lived in extreme poverty. Lastly, whereas the majority of these artists have at least completed high school, a few only finished 9th or 10th grade, and as of yet, there are no university graduates although several of them are in the process of finishing their degree.

What little work has been done on Afro-Colombian hip-hop has either focused on one or two groups within particular contexts or tended to address the music and its social and ethnic messages as uniform, as if all the groups within a supposed afro-centric hip-hop movement shared similar objectives and/or common political, social and cultural ideologies (Wade 1999 and Díaz Benítez 2003). Most of these rappers approach hip-hop as a medium for social protest and cultural expression, and therefore, the messages typically serve as perhaps the indispensable, core element of their musical production. Nonetheless, the messages and even the musical forms of their rap often reveal different social, cultural or political perspectives. Furthermore, the groups many times have

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4 In the study, Mi gente en Bogotá: Estudio socioeconómico y cultural de los afrodescendientes que residen en Bogotá (2003), it appears that the vast majority of Afro-Colombians who migrate to Bogotá perceive it as a place of economic and employment opportunities. Afro-Colombians typically migrate to the capital city to escape violence in their regions, in search of work, and/or for education purposes (Arocha 100).

5 This should come as no surprise considering the way in which most contemporary, U.S. hip-hop exported to countries like Colombia “marks the racial community exclusively as a space for heterosexual activity” (Gilroy, Against Race 185).
distinct professional or even artistic objectives. Obviously, these different schools of thought and styles, the aesthetics and lyrical content of the music, usually depend on the regional/local context of each group, each context offering different political players and social contacts and influences. However, any differences or even contradictions that may exist among the groups and their agendas should not be interpreted as a lack of intellectual clarity; in essence, these differences and contradictions are a common characteristic of popular cultural dialogues that always offer a variety of differentiated cultural, social, or political perspectives.

Despite any differences among these groups, it is fair to say that they do not necessarily embody conflictive or opposing political, artistic or professional views. In other words, their perspectives and discourses, for the most part, are dialogical and even compatible. This, in great part, is due to their shared interest and passion for hip-hop, which often unites them under the goal of advancing this music and culture. Furthermore, all of these Afro-Colombian rappers live and experience the same socio-political and economic crisis on a national scale, and for this reason, there are certain elements or themes that surface in the musical and lyrical expressions of almost all the groups, such as the armed conflict, social and political violence, drug use and drug trafficking, rising crime and exploitation, among others (topics addressed in the following chapter). In the end, there is a great deal of communication, interaction and dialogue among these hip-hop artists. Most of the rappers know each other well and despite some of their political or aesthetic differences, they tend to get along and support each other.

At the moment, it is fairly easy to identify two different currents within this music that primarily revolve around the way in which race and ethnicity are treated through
thematic content, forms and musical practice. Obviously, this categorization is not etched in stone, especially as rap continues to gather momentum in Colombia, and the groups and their musical styles continue to evolve.

3.3.1 The Non Afro-Centric Groups

Asilo 38, and two groups from Cali Rap Cartel\(^6\), Zona Marginal and Artefacto. These groups are often more political, meaning that they produce fewer songs dealing with lighthearted forms of recreation and celebration. Through their “hip-hop social” they tend to manifest leftist, anti-capitalist, anti-globalization discourses, along with calls for revolution and radical change. They tend to blame most of Colombia’s societal problems on the capitalist system, economic factors and class struggles, while almost never examining the role of race or racial discrimination, and there is very little, if any, celebration of their Afro-Colombian heritage. This, perhaps, is partly due to the fact that all of these groups have a mestizo member, which can work to temper their racial messages.\(^7\) They historically have incorporated slow, methodic tempos, in addition to heavy, pounding baselines and aggressive tones reminiscent of earlier forms of U.S. rap. Nonetheless, these groups have recently started to blend their rap with other genres, although they usually incorporate more mainstream music such as salsa and vallenato, but not forms of Afro-Colombian autochthonous music. For example, in their latest

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\(^6\) Cali Rap Cartel is an organization comprised of several rap groups from Cali, which was founded in 1996. Their objective is to work together as a collective in an effort to aid in the advancement of hip-hop and rap in Colombia. For example, they often organize and carry out concerts, workshops, and community events.

\(^7\) In chapter five, I address the way racial discrimination is addressed through Afro-Colombian rap and elaborate on the reasons why some groups prefer to emphasize class struggle over racial discrimination.
album entitled *De talla internacional, Zona Marginal*, a group best known for the strong, political and social content of their lyrics and not so much for their musical creativity, displays more musical ingenuity in the form of amalgamations between U.S. rap and *salsa*\(^8\) while at the same time maintaining strong political and social lyrical content. Lastly, these groups often place their social and political agenda above their artistic, economic or professional objectives.

### 3.3.2 The Afro-Centric Groups

_Ghettos Clan, Flaco Flow y Melanina, Choc Quib Town, Voodoo SoulJahs and Carbono_. Until recently, very few Afro-Colombian rappers were focusing on racial concerns through music. Nonetheless, over the last several years, there has been an upsurge in the number of black rappers who are more vocal about these topics, for reasons discussed in detail in chapter five. While these groups also sing about social, economic and political issues, at the same time, they are addressing their Afro-Colombian heritage and even highlighting the role that racial discrimination can play in the lives of Afro-Colombians. Interestingly enough, these artists are experimenting more with the mixing and incorporation into their rap of Afro-Colombian “folklore,” in addition to Latin American and Caribbean sounds such as *salsa* and even reggae. In fact, through their lyrical content and musical experimentation with autochthonous musical forms, they

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\(^8\) These musical amalgamations between rap with *salsa* are not surprising considering that the members of *Zona Marginal* come from Cali, known as the *salsa* capital of Colombia. Furthermore, Colombian rappers now have an international referent thanks to the commercial success of the Cuban rap group, *Orishas*, which gained recognition due to their mixing of rap with Cuban *son* and *salsa*. In 1999, *Orishas* produced an album titled *A lo cubano*, which was released by EMI in Spain and France and includes the track title “537 C.U.B.A.,” a rap version of ‘Chan-chan,” the opening track of the album produced by the internationally renowned *Buena Vista Social Club*. 

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are actively promoting the rights of ethnic minorities and advocating their cultural, musical and racial identity. Lastly, these artists also demonstrate a vested interest in creating “original” styles of “Afro-Colombian rap,” and even in producing more marketable or commercial forms, but without suppressing or omitting their social and political messages.

As mentioned, since most of these hip-hop groups live and work in Bogotá, I was able to conduct most of my work in the capital city. Nonetheless, my research inevitably took me to other cities throughout the Atlantic and Pacific littorals. For instance, it was imperative for me to visit the district of Aguablanca in Cali where the popularity of hip-hop among Afro-Colombians is without a doubt one of the strongest in Colombia. While many of the Afro-Colombians now living in Cali migrated from regions along the Pacific littoral or from the northern part of the department of Cauca, many of them have actually been residents of the city for a long time. The majority of the black population, especially those migrating from other parts of the Pacific littoral, live in the impoverished district of Aguablanca, where in general terms, the population is younger, “blacker”, poorer and most affected by violence (Wade, “Trabajando con la cultura,” 269). This very poor district is where about 62% of the city’s Afro-Colombian population resides and much of the rap from Cali has emerged (Barbary 182). Contributing to this high urban

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9 In this chapter, Barbary comes to the conclusion that, when comparing urban segregation in Cali to that of U.S. cities, there are no “racial ghettos” in Cali since the residential concentration of racial groups in specific neighborhoods is on the average 2.4 times higher in U.S. cities. Nonetheless 75% of the Afro-Colombian population lives in the nine residential areas considered to be of the lower or popular classes compared to 65% of the non-black population. This shows that the large majority of Afro-Colombians in Cali, although not necessarily segregated in large concentrations based on racial hierarchies (since mestizos are dispersed throughout most of the city’s neighborhoods), it does show a large degree of segregation based on socio-economic factors. Nonetheless, when many of the rappers refer to their neighborhoods as ghettos, they do so usually thinking in terms of class, but not all groups completely disregard the racial element.
concentration of Afro-Colombians are the socio-political problems and conflicts throughout Pacific littoral forcing large numbers of Afro-Colombians to migrate to urban centers, particularly to Cali, thanks to proximity and/or family and community ties. In the introduction to the book, Gente Negra, Barbary and Urrea write: “[…] el fenómeno (migración) se agudizó durante las últimas décadas a raíz de varios procesos contemporáneos como son la fragilización de los dispositivos tradicionales de reproducción económica en el Pacífico, su integración progresiva en los mercados de la economía nacional y globalizada y la penetración de su territorio por los actores del conflicto armado y del narcotráfico” (38).

Cali seems to hold a type of privileged position among Afro-Colombian rappers because of its proximity to Buenaventura and hip-hop’s supposed early entrance through this port city (addressed below), and hence, its early arrival to Cali’s urban youth. Furthermore, Cali has garnered a great deal of international attention from NGOs and political organizations due to high levels of poverty, violence, and drug trafficking, which has consequently resulted in more attention given to some of the rappers from the more renown, impoverished barrios, like those of Aguablanca, who are vocal about these social issues. Nevertheless, despite the number of rappers from Cali who have been very visible, rap is essentially just as popular in other Colombian cities (the above introduction to the groups of study points to established and “successful” Afro-Colombian rappers from other urban centers). Furthermore, as mentioned, most rappers feel the need to move to Bogotá where there are more opportunities for the funding of their music, along with larger, paying audiences. For example, a significant challenge for many of these rappers
is the fact that most of their fan base comes from the poorer neighborhoods, fans who simply don’t have the purchasing power to buy new CDs, and hence, tend to burn, trade or simply give them away.

Although there are rappers from other cities throughout Colombia, such as Medellín, Quibdó, Buenaventura, Cartagena and Barranquilla, the vast majority of them are mestizos. It was a challenge to find Afro-Colombian rappers from other areas of the country who have produced CDs and/or managed to create a sizable following among hip-hop crowds. This could be due to a variety of reasons. For example, although hip-hop is very popular among certain lower-class sectors of urban centers, it has not yet garnered the widespread acceptance or respect among members of the general population who associate hip-hop styles with delinquency, violence and gangs. What many rappers see as a “lack of respect” for their art form may push some Afro-Colombian artists or musicians towards other more accepted (or commercially successful) music genres (or, this too can have the reverse effect; counterculture youth, with their disdain for orthodoxy, may actually be attracted to the rebellious and defiant image of hip-hop).

Furthermore, throughout Colombia there are other musical and cultural influences that likewise form part of urban youth’s musical preferences. For instance, on an almost national scale, Afro-Colombian audiences and musicians are heavily drawn to both vallenato and salsa, especially in Cali, known as the “salsa capital” of Colombia. Throughout the Pacific littoral, many young artists are attracted to Afro-Colombian “traditional” music or “folklore” which has recently become more popular and even commercial as a way for members of dominant culture to experience “black culture,” especially during certain music festivals. Along the Atlantic coastal regions there are
other Afro-Caribbean and African influences, such as *champeta*. Originally from Cartagena, *champeta* has become a very popular form of music through which young, black Colombians celebrate their culture and proclaim dignity in their African roots; the symbolic association of *champeta* with *palenques* and Afro-Colombian resistance is very apparent. It is a music genre that combines urban and Latin sounds with music and beats from Zairean *soukous*, Nigerian high-life, Haitian *konpa*, *soca*, and reggae.\footnote{For a more detailed explanation on *champeta* as a black form of music and cultural expression, see Elisabeth Cunin, *Identidades a flor de piel: Lo “negro” entre apariencias y pertenencias: categorías raciales y mestizaje en Cartagena* (Bogotá: ARFO Editores e Impresores Ltda., 2003).} And lastly, throughout all of Colombia, *reggaeton* (or *reguetón*) has become a huge commercial success. *Reggaeton* is dance music thought to have developed in Puerto Rico in the mid-1990s, which has now become very trendy in the United States, the Caribbean and Latin America. *Reggaeton* emerged primarily from the combination of dancehall and hip-hop genres, although other musical influences include electronic, *bomba*, and *plena*.

### 3.6 The Arrival of Hip-Hop and Rap to Afro-Colombian Audiences

Certain dynamics of globalization have greatly advanced the worldwide circulation of hip-hop and rap. Although any inquiry into Colombian hip-hop culture may be hindered by a lack of serious academic research on the subject, the origins of rap in Colombia became clearer to me through formal interviews and informal interactions with these young artists. Although Afro-Colombian rappers, in general, did not begin to organize and actively produce and record music until the mid to late 1990s\footnote{The Afro-Colombian rap group, *Los Generales R&R*, from Buenaventura, produced a CD in the late 1980s, but soon after broke up. Another one of the first and most recognized rap groups was *Gotas de Rap*}, rap was consumed...
and informally practiced in certain parts of Colombia almost immediately upon its emergence in the United States in the early 1980s. In *Las culturas afroamericanas en Iberoamérica: Lo negociable y lo innegociable* (2005), José Jorge de Carvalho suggests, without going into much detail, that rap spread to Colombia in a fashion similar to that of rock music, as a way for the cultural industry to expand a genre of music that had meaning in a specific context (31). However, even before U.S. rap was globally commercialized, it was already being accepted and assimilated by Afro-Colombian youth in certain parts of the country. The most accepted explanation on the arrival of hip-hop to Afro-Colombian communities contends that it actually began to appear in the 1980s primarily due to people from the coastal regions who traveled to the U.S.—either legally or illegally as stowaways on ships—and brought back cassettes, magazines and particular styles and aesthetics associated with hip-hop. For example, in the documentary, *Resistencia: Hip Hop in Colombia* by Tom Feiling, during an interview in Buenaventura on the Pacific coast, the rapper Dr. Ganja of *Asilo 38* is riding along in a small boat in the harbor and explaining when and how rap first arrived to Colombia through Buenaventura by means of *polizones*, or stowaways, who traveled to the U.S. and back to Colombia on maritime vessels. For many decades up through the 1980s, due to both legitimate and illegitimate maritime trading between Buenaventura and the U.S., this port city was a type of mecca for finding and buying U.S. goods, including hip-hop fashions and rap. According to many rappers, the stowaways themselves were responsible for bringing

(with members from Bogotá, Chocó and later Buenaventura), which emerged in the mid 1990s only to enjoy a very short life. It is during the last 5-8 years that Afro-Colombian rap has truly started to surface, especially as more and more CDs are produced and groups are repeatedly requested for local concerts, indicating that they have managed to generate respectable fan bases. Furthermore, within the last 3-5 years, some groups, with the help of international NGOs, have even toured parts of Europe.
back much of the rap – of artists like the Fat Boys and Run DMC – in addition to the urban street styles, hip-hop aesthetics and cultural forms emerging in the early 1980s. According to a study by Teodora Hurtado in which she researched the socio-cultural and economic ramifications of this cultural contact:

[es] en especial la población joven, comprendida entre los cinco y los cuarenta años, en la cual se combinan las relaciones interculturales de la cultura regional de Buenaventura y la cultura norteamericana impuesta por los migrantes “norteños” de retorno y sus redes de comunicación con la ciudad a través de los giros, los artículos electrodomésticos, los videos, las fotografías, la música y todos los demás aspectos que se han introducido en la zona (100) […] La música ha sido una de las expresiones culturales que más cambios ha sufrido en los últimos quince años con el proceso del norteñismo. Los jóvenes han jugado ahí un papel primordial […] se han convertido en los principales impulsores de los estilos musicales y de los cantantes que más auge tienen en los países del norte, encargándose de invadir las calles de la ciudad con los ritmos de los artistas de su preferencia que cantan al son de la música Rap, Reggae, Rock y Tecno, ritmos que de dedican a bailar imitando los pasos que estos artistas ejecutan y que aprenden ensayando durante largo tiempo al pie de un video que algún “norteño” mandó o trajo de arriba. (106)

The music and these hip-hop styles were then easily transported throughout other parts of the Pacific littoral, especially to nearby Cali, which boasts the country’s largest urban, black population and where, as stated, rap has been widely accepted and practiced. Furthermore, although the explanation on the arrival of hip-hop and rap through Buenaventura is one of the most widely accepted histories among Afro-Colombian youth (especially from the Pacific coast), rappers from the Atlantic littoral confirmed that similar processes of cultural contact took place through port cities such as Cartagena and Barranquilla, again resulting in the diffusion of hip-hop styles and rap in their regions of the country, especially through the copying and circulation of cassettes and magazines.
At the same time, older rappers, like Nene U of Ashanty\textsuperscript{12} from the Pacific littoral and Walter Hernández from the Atlantic coast, have also stressed the powerful influence that cinema and television were exerting even in the 1980s through imported U.S. hip-hop movies such as \textit{Breakin'} (1984), \textit{Breakin' 2: Electric Boogaloo} (1984), and \textit{Beat Street} (1984) (Personal Interviews). Nonetheless, it still appears that the initial emergence of hip-hop in Colombia often had less to do with the development of global communication systems and the marketing and exportation of U.S. pop culture, and more to do with a combination of unique processes of migration flows and direct cultural contact. Various rappers also spoke of Colombians from urban centers throughout the country who traveled to the U.S. and sometimes returned with rap and hip-hop styles. These particular migrants tended to come from more affluent socio-economic classes, obviously affording them the opportunity to travel, consume and bring back some of the more difficult-to-access music and attire such as Adidas apparel and Puma sneakers.

It was during the 1990s that the U.S. entertainment industry, cashing in on the growing international success and popularity of rap and aided by the expansion and reach of mass communication systems, began to intensify the promotion and exportation of U.S. hip-hop and rap through music markets, radio, television and cinema:

\textsuperscript{12} A rap group and cultural enterprise in Charco Azul of the district of Aguablanca, Cali. I interviewed Nene U, who in fact continues to be the only active member of the enterprise. Peter Wade worked directly with this group for two months in 1997, and confirms that it began as an informal network of young people from Charco Azul who used to perform various types of community service in their neighborhood. Some of the young members who were interested in music decided to form groups and practice dance (breakdance) and song with makeshift percussion instruments such as boxes and buckets. Several groups emerged practicing \textit{currulao} and new styles of reggae and rap. Eventually, Ashanty formed a rap group with a particular social and political project of “black” identity and protest with regards to the problems they faced in their local settings (Wade, “Trabajando con la cultura” 270-71).
Commercial marketing of rap music represents a complex and contradictory aspect of the nature of popular expression in a corporation-dominated information society. Rap music and hip hop style have become common campaign hooks for McDonald’s, Burger King, Coke, Pepsi, several athletic shoe companies, clothing chain stores, MTV, anti-drug campaigns, and other global corporate efforts ad nauseam. Rap music has grown into a multimillion dollar record, magazine, and video industry with multiplatinum world renowned rappers, disc jockeys, and entertainers. (Rose 17)

These developments coincided with the efforts of the five “major” music labels to establish their control of the international markets (Warner Music, EMI Group, Sony Music, Universal Music Group, BMG) (Ochoa 16). Furthermore, it was during the late 1980s “that CDs were increasingly being assembled at state-of-the-art facilities in various locations around the world […]” likewise facilitating the spread of U.S. pop music (Stokes 300). For this reason, nowadays most CDs are not imported, but instead mass-produced in Colombia by outsourced distribution companies. These developments help explain why Colombian radio stations now broadcast more rap than ever before, and national music vendors such as Prodiscos and Discos La Rumbita, not to mention international chains like Tower Records, sell large quantities of hip-hop and U.S. pop music.

Of course music videos have likewise aided in the widespread proliferation of U.S. hip-hop. Although at first MTV was only available to the more affluent Colombian households with access to U.S. cable programming, in the mid 1990s, MTV Latino arrived to South America and aired *Yo! MTV Raps*, a daily, one-hour-long program.

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13 In Colombia there are about 600 radio stations. Radio continues to have a strong presence in great part due to the fact that in the mid-1990s radio programming became much more diverse with some stations specializing in particular styles in an attempt to appeal to specific market niches (“Evolución de la radio en Colombia” 36). For instance, throughout the country there are examples of radio stations that provide hip-hop shows at different times throughout the week.
dedicated to rap music and videos, and a professed favorite of many of these rappers. Currently, urban youth can watch countless U.S. rap videos frequently aired on Colombian music channels. MTV’s international success has made the reception and marketing of music synonymous with the production of music videos; obviously, the visualization of music results in significant, global effects on popular cultures and music production. There has been a growing emphasis on a performer’s appearance over sound or content and on the need to create an image complementary to one’s music (Rose 9).

Furthermore, according to García Canclini:

MTV is an eloquent example of how flexible global corporations can be in organizing the market in all its regional diversity [...] understanding the limitations of globalization, MTV set up five regional subsidiaries in less than five years, including two in Brazil and Miami, with staff from various countries in the region and spaces for local groups which to a certain extent counterbalance the eternal predominance of North American music. Can the hundreds of millions of teenagers and young people in the industrialized countries and in the Third World who follow MTV really be so easily reduced to and reconciled in this advertising medium of the future [...] where the products advertised (Levis, Coca Cola, Reebok, Nike, Apple, IBM, and Kodak) come from only three countries? (“Cultural Policy” 318)

MTV’s commercial endeavors are representative of general trends within this global entertainment industry. For instance, the “majors” have consolidated their control of the music industry not only through “‘vertical’ (aiming to connect companies further up and down the production-consumption chain)”, but also through “‘horizontal’ (aiming for synergy with related entertainment industries) mergers and acquisitions strategies” (Stokes 300). In other words, these companies combine diverse areas of the entertainment industry in a way that music production is ever more connected to information technologies, such as the internet and satellite communications, and visual media forms,
such as the cinema and television. It is not surprising, therefore, that U.S. hip-hop can likewise be consumed in Latin American countries, like Colombia, through the importation of U.S. produced television shows and cinema productions. Many cable carriers in Colombia provide channels such as Fox, Warner Channel, Sony Entertainment Television, MGM, Universal, E Entertainment, Cinemax, MTV Latino, The History Channel, Discovery, Disney, and Nickelodeon, among others. At the same time, Hollywood films continue to dominate Colombian movie theaters. Furthermore, even the commercialized affiliation between hip-hop and U.S. sports’ stars is exported and consumed in Colombia where Fox Sports, ESPN, and ESPN2 broadcast games from the NFL, MLB, NBA and even the NCAA. One of the most popular programs among Afro-Colombian youth is ESPN’s Street Ball, a program in which predominantly young, urban, black men tour the U.S. demonstrating a flashy and exciting style of basketball associated with urban, street play and hip-hop.

Although many poor, urban Afro-Colombians may not have television or cable access, there are usually a few families and/or community centers within local neighborhoods that have televisions, stereos, computers, legitimate or bootlegged cable

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14 The Discovery package (“TV paga Discovery”) consists of the Discovery Channel, Discovery Kids, People+Arts, Animal Planet, Discovery Health, and Travel & Adventure, which is actually aired in 155 countries in 33 languages (Giraldo S. 3).

15 Cable services in Colombia such as TV Cable, Sky TV, SuperCable, DirecTV, Cablecentro and Superview offer packages that include at least 50 channels while offering other optional services, such as high velocity internet connections (Romero 2).

16 I obtained copies of the International Film Production, Distribution and Exhibition Survey for the years 2000 through 2004 in Colombia. U.S. films tend to comprise 70% to 80% of the films released in the country’s major cinemas.

17 Gilroy addresses the poetic topography of race and place centered on the basketball court in U.S. black popular culture (Against Race 183-191). Although in Colombia there is a much stronger attachment to soccer, it should not be surprising that basketball’s popularity is growing among Afro-Colombian youth.
service, and perhaps a VCR or even a DVD player to watch recorded programming. This, of course, calls attention to all of the technological advances that, in general, have aided in the widespread distribution of U.S. pop culture. For instance, both the internet and CD burners now allow for greater distribution of rap, whether legally or illegally, given that approximately 6 out of every 10 CDs bought in Colombia are bootlegged (“El negocio”). Of course, the “major’s” attempts at vertical integration have been complicated by MP3s and the circulation of prerecorded music on the internet, identified by the International Federation of Phonographic Industries (IFPI) as a form of piracy (Stokes 300). Despite the efforts to control piracy, not only do the bootleggers continue to burn CDs to sell on Colombian city streets, but the urban poor also find ways to download music off the internet, either at an internet café or from someone’s personal computer. Furthermore, many people simply burn their music straight from someone’s store-bought CD, either with a privately owned CD burner, at an internet café or even at an office supply store. In a word, unlike bootlegged cassettes, CD copies and MP3s provide the same sound quality as the original. These new means of reproduction threaten the very structure of the music industry given that significant controls of production and distribution are now

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18 Bootlegging music on a global scale has grown exponentially alongside technological advancements making it easier, more economical and efficient to copy and distribute music around the globe; these are hard to control and relatively inexpensive technologies – such as MP3s, CD-Rs and the internet – that produce and/or circulate large quantities of copies without sacrificing sound quality.

19 The budding black market in Colombia can be seen as a logical response to the pressures of globalization, in particular, uneven income distribution, uneven global divisions of labor, economic reorganization and technological advancements. For instance, the U.S. entertainment industry bombards the world’s urban poor with U.S. pop culture through television programming, cinema, music markets, etc., hence, producing desires to consume rap and hip-hop styles. Nonetheless, the poor masses do not have the purchasing power to partake in formal markets to satisfy these desires. Therefore, bootlegging often benefits local consumers, but at the expense of local musicians. The bootlegging of CDs allows poor urban youth to acquire music that they otherwise would have no way of purchasing, while at the same time leading to a greater proliferation of this genre and its aesthetics. However, the bootlegging of CDs can present challenges to local artists trying to make a living off their music since they receive no dividends from the sale of their bootlegged copies.
transferred not only to the consumers, but also to local music producers. Technological advances in recording equipment – especially digital technology – allow the artists themselves to produce better quality music at home, burn CDs and distribute them (explained in more detail below).

Ultimately, the appropriation of hip-hop among young Afro-Colombians would not be as widespread if it were not for the mass urbanization of Afro-Colombian populations over the last 30-40 years, often encouraged by capital investment and development projects in traditionally Afro-Colombian territories, but especially during the 1990s due to forced internal displacement of black communities along the Pacific littoral. Unlike the Afro-Colombian population of forty years ago, today the majority of Afro-Colombians (71.5%) live in urban areas, meaning that they are now more than ever integrated into the global processes of economic modernization and cultural modernity (Barbary et al. 105-6). Within the context outlined above, it becomes obvious how radio, television, cinema, and information technologies provide new (and old) channels through which pop culture – much of which stems from the U.S. culture industry – constantly and almost immediately interpellates people as national and transnational subjects (while the state has fewer capabilities to control these means).

The growing popularity of hip-hop and rap in Colombia during the 1990s has likewise favored the appearance of numerous hip-hop events for urban youth. For the past seven years, the Instituto Distrital de Cultura y Turismo has sponsored in Bogotá the annual hip-hop festival, “Rap al Parque” (Rap in the Park), mentioned above. There also have been numerous hip-hop events and concerts in other Colombian cities such as Cali, Medellín, Manizales and Barranquilla. Furthermore, various U.S. and Hispanic rappers
have included Colombia on their tour circuits (Onyx in 2004, Afu-Ra in 2003, Main Flow in 2003, The Beatnuts in 2003, Tony Touch in 2003, Orishas in 2006). This growing interest in hip-hop has likewise encouraged the organization of local hip-hop workshops and seminars, for instance, on the four pillars of hip-hop or even on how to use music equipment such as microphones, equalizers, and samplers. Lastly, along with this growing interest in hip-hop, there is a rising demand for urban and hip-hop aesthetics and styles, which has led to the emergence of Colombian urban and hip-hop apparel companies such as Ayara.

3.7 The Production Side of Afro-Colombian Hip-Hop

Although Afro-Colombians were informally practicing hip-hop in the 1980s, it was in the mid-1990s – in tandem with technological advances in production equipment – that rap groups began to produce CDs to sell on the local, nascent hip-hop market. Nonetheless, despite the popularity of several Afro-Colombian rap groups (usually among urban poor with little or no purchasing power), as of yet, no major label – local or international – has signed any of these rappers to record deals. And many of these performers do in fact express a desire to make a living off of their music. Unfortunately, when representatives from different record labels interested in this music have approached various hip-hop artists, at times they have requested that they “soften” the denunciatory nature of their lyrics (perhaps seen as threatening or offensive to members of dominant culture), although recently it has been more common that they ask them to produce a style of music similar to that of reggaeton (or reguetón), which is the popular genre of choice at the moment. For these rappers, this would mean “selling out” insofar
as they would be expected to compromise their own artistic and social principles. Hip-hop (often coined “hip-hop social”) in Colombia is permeated with a discourse of social protest and cultural expression (explored in more detail in the next two chapters) while *reguetón* is practiced and consumed as superficial dance music with lyrics that exalt wanton lifestyles and denigrate women.

Consequently, one of the most formidable challenges for these rap groups has been collecting the necessary funding in order to finance the recording, production and distribution of their music. In the past, members of various groups have worked odd jobs, such as painting or construction, in order to gather the necessary funds to produce their CDs in small, private recording studios. Some groups have looked towards local organizations, churches and government offices for sponsorship and financial contributions. In effect, it is not uncommon for groups to receive funding through either local and/or international NGOs. Lastly, these artists often organize local parties and concerts as types of fundraisers. Any profits made from these events are invested in professional development and/or musical endeavors. As difficult and challenging as it can be, several groups have managed to record at least one CD, and several are in the process of recording a second.

If groups are fortunate enough to produce and record a CD, they then have to finance mass-production and distribution, again, usually made possible with funding from any of the various activities and/or organizations already mentioned. With the help of a graphic designer, they design a CD label and cover made to look as “authentic” as possible (it is common, for example, to see warnings of explicit lyrics in addition to parental advisories similar to those seen on U.S. CDs). Subsequently, they send the
master CD to one of the few CD production companies in Colombia where it is mass-produced along with its label. Within a matter of weeks, they have over a thousand CDs, ready to box up and distribute around the country. Of course, in an effort to cut costs, some groups have even resorted to using personal CD burners. At any rate, after boxing up large quantities of their music, rappers travel to urban centers throughout the country visiting small, local music vendors where they leave copies for sale. Their recordings cannot be found in Tower Records or any of the larger music store chains. If they have the money and means, they also make posters and fliers as a way of promoting their new productions. Once these local stores sell a few CDs, they then contact the respective rappers. Some music stores keep a very small percentage of the sale while others keep nothing in an effort to help these performers get their music careers off the ground.

Lastly, many groups sell their music during music events and concerts. In the end, the efforts of these rap groups reflect a common trend in the 1990s in which music groups record, produce and distribute their own music outside the official circuits of the globalized music markets, in great part thanks to recent technological developments (Ochoa 20).

Although approaches to production often vary, the abovementioned processes describes fairly common production practices among all rap groups. However, it is worthwhile to call attention to the case of Choc Quib Town, a group of Afro-Colombian rappers from Chocó. These artists have managed to assemble their own mini-studio that consists of a computer with audio interface and recording software, a condenser
microphone and a sampler. In order to promote their up-coming CD, they have recorded several songs on their home equipment, burned approximately 700 CDs, made a cardboard slipcover displaying their photograph, and distributed them to their public as a promotional tool. For instance, at local shows in Bogotá, in exchange for paying the cover charge, audience members often receive a copy of their music. Furthermore, the group has just recently constructed a web page (www.chocquibtown.com) where you can actually download the group’s single, “Somos Pacífico.” The group leader, Yahany “Tostao” Valencia also performs with Mojarra Eléctrica, which is a fairly well-known and successful music group that mixes Colombian “folklore” with jazz, and now even hip-hop. Another group member, Gloria “Goyo” Martínez, performs with Sidestepper, a Colombian-based group whose English manager, Richard Blair, at one time worked with Peter Gabriel’s Real World Sound Factory. Sidestepper is a group that combines traditional Colombian sounds (música tropical and cumbia) with electronic music, and now hip-hop. With Sidestepper, Goyo has gained valuable professional experience traveling and performing in the U.S., Mexico, Venezuela, Europe and even Asia. Therefore, through these musical endeavors and with the help of their earnings, these artists have invested in their own professional development and in recording equipment.

I find it worthwhile to mention that on various occasions when I have presented my work on this music to U.S. audiences, they are often taken aback at the quality of sound and even the level of talent of these young artists. I must admit that I too am often

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20 Choc Quib Town was a winner of Colombia’s hip-hop festival 2004, “Rap al Parque,” for which they were awarded funding to record their CD, Somos Pacifico. They are currently recording their CD under the direction of the producers Iván Benavides and Ernesto Santos, two well-known and accomplished Colombian music producers. In fact, Iván Benavides has produced music for the likes of Carlos Vives, one of Latin America’s most celebrated pop singers.
surprised. When I first purchased a few CDs from Tostao in 2002, I was impressed more so with the lyrical content than with the quality of sound, the styles or forms. Personally, I thought the music sounded like bad imitations of older U.S. rap. Nonetheless, these artists have evolved, and with the help of music technology, their sound too has improved. In fact, scholars and students in the U.S. have frequently requested copies of the music. Unfortunately, as mentioned, Afro-Colombian rap is only sold in small, local markets. Furthermore, even the rappers themselves sometimes lose track of their music once their CDs sell out. For instance, one evening while I was in La Candelaria (the old colonial part of downtown Bogotá) to see a show by Flaco Flow y Melanina, several rappers were also in attendance. At one point during a conversation among some of the rappers, they began to tease Dr. Ganja of Asilo 38 for having bought in the streets a bootlegged copy of their CD; he had either sold or given away his last copy. Although Dr. Ganja graciously tolerated everyone’s laughter at his expense, it occurred to me that it was actually quite a compliment that he could even find copies of the group’s music among the smalltime venders in the city streets. For me, it was evidence of their popularity and success among Colombian hip-hop crowds.
CHAPTER 4

THE GLOBALIZATION FACTOR: VOICES OF PROTEST IN AFRO-COLOMBIAN HIP-HOP

In the previous chapter, I examined many of the ways in which globalization has facilitated the transnational circulation of hip-hop vis-à-vis technological innovations in communication and information systems, technological advances in recording equipment that make it easier to (re)produce high quality music, and the efforts of multinational entertainment corporations to control all facets of the culture industry (whether cinema, television or music). Some scholars have addressed the global spread of U.S. pop culture and the influence that U.S. hip-hop has had on ethnic-racial identities of particular Afro-Colombian rap groups (Wade 1999, 2002 and Diaz Benitez 2003), which I too will address in chapter five. However, I believe that it is just as imperative to analyze how economic (spread of global capitalism) and political (neoliberalism) tendencies likewise affect local cultures, and hence, musical forms and content. In a word, instead of only studying the ways in which hip-hop is appropriated and used by ethnic-racial minorities as a tool for social and cultural protest, I purpose a deeper analysis into the conditions and causes that motivate their frustration and dissent in the first place. We cannot disregard the ways in which the dynamics of globalization shape certain local, socio-cultural and political developments that can lead to conditions and circumstances that not
only foster the widespread acceptance and appropriation of hip-hop, but also encourage
the denunciatory nature of the music. In Colombia, evidence indicates that globalization
and the implementation of the neoliberal model (especially in the Pacific coastal regions)
have actually created or at least aggravated many of the social ills facing Afro-Colombian
communities, for example, in the form of an escalating armed conflict, mass
displacement, overwhelming poverty, changing consumer values, growing repression,
drug trafficking, and increased ethnic tension. In my opinion, the mere prevalence of
these themes in Afro-Colombian rap indicates that this music needs to be considered in
relation to and within this context of globalization. Therefore, as economists and scholars
continue to debate the meanings, shortcomings and virtues of economic and cultural
globalization, I approach this particular youth culture and their music as a type of case
study to see what they reveal about globalization and its effects on ethnic-racial
minorities in peripheral or “developing” countries. Although my objective is not to offer
a detailed socio-economic analysis, I hope to highlight some of the more significant ways
in which globalization is changing the socio-cultural, economic and political panorama in
Colombia and how these challenges and problems are represented through Afro-
Colombian rap.

4.1 From Consumption to Production: Discourses on “Authenticity”

I want to preface this chapter by making it clear that part of the reason why we
can study the socio-economic and cultural effects of globalization on Afro-Colombian
communities through hip-hop owes to the social value and denunciatory nature that this
form of expression has assumed within the Colombian context. As Latin American
countries, such as Colombia, open local economies to the global market, multinational corporations not only export material commodities, but also pop culture and symbolic goods, which involves the introduction of new ideas, values and behaviors in local communities. Although these processes often imply the global spread of homogenizing forces to peripheral or “third world” countries, these forces often lead to unique results within different localities. In sum, hip-hop can and has assumed diverse forms, uses, and meanings in distinct localities, often due to the input and influence of local cultures and musical forms. Although this is an aspect of Afro-Colombian hip-hop explored in more detail in the subsequent chapter, I want to stress here that most Colombian hip-hop, regardless of location, region or ethnicity, is infused with counter-hegemonic discourses that criticize the Colombian elites’ political and economic policies and even the influence and scope of U.S. economic and cultural imperialism.

Both Colombian and U.S. hip-hop are infused with discourses on “real hip-hop” (characterized by its social messages) vs. commercial hip-hop (described as superficial). If in the U.S., rap – like most forms of popular music – is permeated by this ideology of “authenticity” and opposition (“real” rappers vs. “sellouts”), this ideological inclination, in many ways, can be more relevant in the peripheries of global capitalism where class, ethnic and generational tensions are intensified under heightened conditions of social inequality, uneven and dependent modernization, and the confrontations and struggles between local and national cultural traditions. Like the North American originators of rap and the more socially conscious, often underground, rappers of present day, these young Afro-Colombians and their mestizo counterparts view hip-hop as a means of transmitting and divulging their truths along with more “authentic” representations of the world in
which they live, a world which they believe is often distorted or marginalized by political bureaucrats, technocrats and/or the mass media. Through this music, they often refer to themselves as poetas callejeros (street poets), appropriating some of hip-hop’s original and present-day underground ideologies of rap as authentic street testimony, as “hip-hop social” (social hip-hop). In a word, for most Colombian rappers, this music’s authenticity and oppositional force is found in its counter-hegemonic discourses (typically, leftist, anti-oligarchic, anti-imperialist, anti-neoliberalism, and anti-globalization); rap is practiced as an alternative, and perhaps more reliable, source of information when addressing social ills in the country.

Colombian hip-hop’s anti-hegemonic discourses may seem surprising when considered alongside the frivolous and often superficial images and messages found in most U.S. commercial rap that is exported worldwide. For instance, Paul Gilroy analyzes the disappearance of what he calls the rhetoric of “freedom” from U.S. rap in the 1990s and its substitution by a culture of abasement and hypermasculinity:

Anyone asserting the continuing marginality of hip-hop should be pressed to say where he or she imagines the center might now be. I prefer to argue that hip-hop’s marginality is now as official and routinized as its overblown defiance, even if the music and its matching life-style are still being presented – marketed – as outlaw forms. The music’s persistent association with transgression is a raciological mystery that aches to be solved. Clues to its longevity may be furnished by delving into uncomfortable issues like hip-hop’s corporate development association with the commercially sponsored subcultures that have been shaped around television, advertising, cartoons and computer games or by interrogating the revolutionary conservatism that constitutes its routine political focus but that is over-simplified, mystified, or more usually, just ignored by its academic celebrants. (Against Race 180)

In fact, many critics have called attention to what they see as hip-hop’s rhetorical conventions and tropes that have become atrophied, clichéd, and repetitive. It seems that
these critics, including Gilroy, are either unaware of or choose to ignore widely popular underground hip-hop that is indeed marginal and defiant. Nonetheless, these arguments and critiques are very useful in calling attention to certain contradictions that emerge within the Colombian hip-hop culture heavily influenced by U.S. hip-hop imagery that are mediated and manipulated by multinational corporations, such as MTV. Afro-Colombian rappers often denounce the materialistic, chauvinistic and superficial features of contemporary U.S. hip-hop, while at the same time, calling attention to and celebrating the denunciatory, social and political aspects of “old school” or “underground” hip-hop.

In Colombia, like in other parts of the world, “Models and idioms derived from the peak period of hip-hop in the USA in the mid- to late 1980s have been combined in these countries with local musical idioms and vernaculars to produce excitingly distinctive syncretic manifestations of African American influences and local indigenous elements” (Mitchell 3). Nevertheless, this is not to say that Colombian hip-hop is devoid of contemporary, U.S. hip-hop influences, as evidenced by the use of certain aesthetics, musical forms, imagery and iconography leading to notable contradictions. For instance, during hip-hop events, rappers often condemn U.S. cultural and economic imperialism while wearing Puma sneakers, South Pole t-shirts and Adidas sweat suits. And of course, it is hard to ignore the fact that they denounce U.S. imperialism while emulating certain U.S. styles of music.

However, as mentioned in the previous chapter, contradictions are typical of all forms of cultural dialogues that offer a variety of differing ethnic, social, or political perspectives. And the contexts for creating and producing hip-hop – in the U.S. or abroad – have never completely been outside or in opposition to capitalism, material well-being.
or commodities; from the beginning, hip-hop expressions have involved struggles over public space, recognition, and even access to commodified goods (I return to these points below when discussing consumerism) (Rose 40). Nonetheless, I believe that many of these contradictions emerge because urban youth often disregard or are unaware of hip-hop’s ties to powerful multinational conglomerates. This masking, so to speak, can be attributed to the way in which hip-hop has been globally advertised to the world’s urban poor as a marketing strategy that promotes this youth culture and its styles as an “outlaw form,” as goods suited for the world’s underdogs, the downtrodden and oppressed. Of course, these meanings are likewise fostered by racialized images of hip-hop, as music produced by defiant African Americans (the non-white minority) pitted against a racists society. In other words, despite rap’s ties to the U.S. culture industry and its powerful multinational companies, in Colombia it is still considered by many as oppositional music somehow disconnected form the U.S. “cultural empire.”

This global, marketing strategy of hip-hop as a genre for the poor and downtrodden, therefore, provides some insight as to why Colombian youth, both mestizo and Afro-Colombian, have appropriated rap as a medium or tool for social protest and denunciation. Obviously, the economic conditions and social ills facing poor, urban youth often motivate different forms of musical expression, as outlets for the release of their frustration and anger. Rap originally emerged as a component of urban ghetto life in the U.S. (and even contemporary rap continues to celebrate – and often glorify – U.S. rappers’ ghettos and localities), and therefore, it is not surprising that this is often reflected in the use of and identification with the term “ghetto” in Colombian hip-hop. However, it should be noted that the term “ghetto” in the Colombian context often loses
its ethnic-racial meaning insofar that it simply refers to impoverished, urban barrios, as evidenced by the song, “Nacidos en el ghetto” by *Ghettos Clan*: “Estamos cansados de ser maltratados por la ley / Exigimos respeto porque somos chicos con conciencia y somos hijos del ghetto / Somos del ghetto, un barrio bajo.” In a word, hip-hop training doesn’t come from books or the classroom, but instead from their everyday experiences in their respective “ghettos” where they endure and overcome a sluie of social ills, which in essence provides this music with its street gist. Therefore, not only is the “authenticity” of Colombian hip-hop determined by its counter-hegemonic and oppositional discourses, but also by questions of socio-economic class and the urban localities from which they emerge. In a similar fashion to what occurs in the U.S., the Colombian hip-hop community does not readily accept a rapper from a middle or upper class neighborhood with a private school education. For this reason, coming from the “ghetto” serves as a unifying element among all hip-hoppers regardless of ethnicity or gender:

“¡Sí!” by *Choc Quib Town*

¿Vos sos raper? ¡Sí!
¿Sos del ghetto? ¡Sí!
¿Te gusta la música que yo interpreto? ¡Sí!

Ok, dime si sos raper y sos del ghetto
Para ante todo expresarte mis respetos
Si te gusta el juepa y el tumba’o
Para decir que estás en la línea del Tostao
La letra que proponga y que se canta bien
Que al babilón le dé un yebleu* (un puño) para que digan, ¿quién?
No me importa tu género ni tampoco tu raza
Sólo quiero saber si estás conmigo en la casa ¡Eh!
Rap colombiano, la metralleta – ¡Taquetetaquetaaaaa! –
Para ver si de una vez por todas nos respetan
As happened with rap in the U.S., these rappers’ emphasis on local posses and their barrios brings the “ghetto,” their marginalized neighborhoods, into public consciousness. In the end, performing rap satisfies their desire to have their localities acknowledged, recognized and celebrated, especially since few Afro-Colombians are given the opportunity to voice their perspectives. Given that their points of view are usually contained within expert testimony, rap provides a channel through which they can voice their truths through their own words (Rose 11).

4.2 Colombia as a “Violent Nation”

When inquiring as to why hip-hop has been so widely appropriated in Colombia – in the periphery of global capitalism –, it is hard to ignore that if the U.S. entertainment industry has commodified “ghetto” lifestyles through hip-hop, the reality of Colombia as a “violent nation,” as the “narcotics capital” of the world, distraught with corruption, criminality and social crisis, in many ways favors the importation and assimilation of hip-hop among the country’s poor, urban youth. Living, and most importantly, prevailing in the “ghettos” or comunas (impoverished neighborhoods) of a “violent nation” demonstrates that these rappers, and their listening public, are duros or verracos (tough, hard guys), and hence hip-hop worthy. In other words, this violent and often dangerous reality in which they live, not only serves as a source of inspiration for their music and its lyrics, but it also earns them a place in the world of “hip-hop real” (real hip-hop); only the poor, marginalized and the tough who have had to struggle in the streets can be raperos de verdad (real rappers) – again, a discourse on the authenticity of U.S. hip-hop that has been commodified and exported.
Warfare, political violence and social strife have marked much of Colombia’s history. It is not surprising, then, that violence is an all-too-common theme found in many forms of cultural production in Colombia reflecting a very unfortunate social reality. And almost all of the lyrical content that I present in this chapter reflects different forms of violence. In this regard, the abovementioned discourses on hip-hop, as a music consumed and performed by urban poor, assumes an interesting dynamic in a country like Colombia with a large, poor urban population. What can be expected when a music genre that often glorifies marginality, violence and even criminality in one context migrates to a country inflicted with these social ills? Obviously, it is the very urgency of this socio-political crisis that often compels these rappers to address these social problems, such as violence, through their artwork. Nonetheless, where does one draw the line between calling attention to and denouncing poverty and violence, on one hand, and marketing and selling it by means of a culture industry that has glamorized the exotic, dangerous, “outlaw form” that seems to be overflowing in a “violent nation” like Colombia, on the other? It does concern me that some rappers simply appropriate and take advantage of this violent image of Colombia as a means of gaining acceptance within a (global) hip-hop imaginary, within a genre of music that has fetishized poverty and violence, and thus propagating the violent image of Colombia that many artists and cultural critics denounce.

Nonetheless, one could argue that much of this Colombian rap actually radicalizes the “deformities” brought by neoliberal globalization in the periphery, brandishing its marginality, its violence, its criminality, its accultured culture, its recycled production, and its differences. Through music, most Afro-Colombian rappers are aware of
Colombia’s international reputation, and although they never deny Colombia’s criminal and violent tendencies – and even flaunt them –, many of them likewise manifest a desire to call attention both to the role that foreign agents play in the country’s socio-political problems and also the positive elements of Colombian society and cultures.

I realize that by highlighting this particular hip-hop social that (re)presents and often denounces violence and criminality, at the same time, I too run the risk of propagating the very image that many rappers and even cultural critics condemn. This is not my intention. Therefore, I ask my readers to keep in mind that while this hip-hop social forms an important part of a discourse on the authenticity and oppositional force of Afro-Colombian hip-hop, it is not the only discourse or objective of this music genre. Colombian hip-hop also serves as a medium for different forms of entertainment and cultural celebration. Furthermore, alongside an acknowledgement of violence and criminality in Colombia, as mentioned, there is often a conscientious effort on the part of many Afro-Colombian rappers to emphasize the positive traditions of Colombian society and cultures otherwise overshadowed by the negative publicity transmitted vis-à-vis global media outlets. For example, in their song “Pueblo Fuerte,” Asilo 38 calls attention to Colombia as a “violent nation,” a country inflicted by criminality and social-ills, but they also pay homage to Colombian people for their tenacity, their resourcefulness and ability to overcome and survive despite these terrible conditions. In other words, they define and celebrate the Colombian identity for its toughness through a genre of music that exalts it. At the same time, they highlight the other side of Colombia, the positive elements for which the country should also be recognized, such as its biodiversity, the art of Botero, good rappers, great athletes, and coffee, among others. Interestingly enough,
the song is composed over a rhythm and melody of *vallenato*, often considered to be most representative of the nation and its people, and a music that at one time served as a source of social commentary for the illiterate.¹

The abovementioned explanations on discourses of authenticity help readers understand why this music is infused with social protest and denunciation. And these discourses on the social value and the denunciatory nature of hip-hop are what allow it to be used as a medium through which we can consider Afro-Colombian youth’s perspectives on the effects of globalization on local communities. However, as “trendy” as it may be to protest through rap, the problems these young men and women face, which are all too real, serve as the true driving forces that motivate these youths to express their frustration and rage through this medium. In other words, these rappers appropriate these denunciatory discourses because they apply so well to their marginalized worlds.

Although I divide the remaining chapter into various segments covering some of the ways in which Afro-Colombian hip-hop reflects the detrimental effects and challenges of globalization in Colombia, all of these discursive manifestations and the various conditions they represent are interrelated and very difficult to extricate from each other. The following presentation has been organized according to reasons of clarity and succinctness.

¹ This *vallenato* sampled in “Pueblo Fuerte” comes from a piece entitled “Cambalache” by Alfredo Gutierrez.
4.3 The Armed Conflict: “El pánico en Colombia ahora es imparable”

As mentioned, violence has been an all too common theme in Colombian history from the times of conquest to the wars for independence, during la violencia of the mid-twentieth century and up until the present with the emergence of “narco-terrorism.” Violence and social conflict have often been explained as a result of the strong, regionalist character of Colombian society that developed due to regional, military, economic and ideological conflicts that hindered the formation of a united political culture after independence. These regional divisions, which have been reinforced by the country’s topography, have also worked to impede the social and cultural unification of the nation’s people (Williams 12-19). Or as Donna Lee Van Cott explains: “The Colombian state never fully penetrated society, and its presence in rural areas has been represented mainly by military and police forces; in their absence (and elsewhere with their collaboration), rural elites maintain order” (40).

For instance, only two years after achieving independence in 1810, Colombia fell into the first of a series of civil wars that would plague public life until the first half of the twentieth century, culminating in la violencia of 1946-1966. In general, Colombia’s post-independence history revolves around three significant events: 1) La Guerra de Mil Días (1899-1902) (The War of a Thousand Days), between the Conservatives and the Liberals; 2) the Banana Workers or Santa Marta Massacre in which hundreds of workers of the banana plantations in Ciénaga were killed by the Colombian military in 1928; and 3) el bogotazo, an uprising provoked by the assassination of the liberal presidential candidate, Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, on April 9th, 1948, which erupted into political violence between
the Liberals and the Conservatives, appropriately called *la violencia*. This fighting, which spread to rural territories and lasted until 1966, claimed an estimated 150,000 to 200,000 lives.

The supposed ideological roots of the present-day guerrilla movement, led primarily by the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) and the ELN (National Liberation Army), can be traced to the political strife of the 1940s between the Conservatives and Liberals, especially since these guerrilla groups justify their fighting as a defensive reaction against the massive violence imposed by the political right on rural peasants. Up until the 1980s, the armed conflict had very little impact on the country’s development given that only those directly involved in the fighting in the rural and more remote areas of Colombia were actually affected. Nonetheless, due to a variety of factors, such as the emergence of drug trafficking in the 1970s coupled with implementation of neoliberal economic policies in the 1980s, the violence and scope of the conflict have grown while the different factions in dispute engage in war to gain control over strategically and economically important resources and territories. This means that the violence engendered by the fighting not only has detrimentally affected poor, rural communities (especially Afro-Colombian communities) who are caught in the crossfire and often displaced from their lands, but its effects are also being felt in Colombian urban centers (Keen 507-8). Although very brief, this synopsis of the Colombian civil wars and conflicts (which in actuality are very complex) is useful in illustrating the difficulty that the Colombian state has had in establishing political and social hegemony in all of the nation’s territories, efforts often hindered by political conflicts, civil wars and finally drug trafficking.
Within this armed conflict, in the past, the main culprits responsible for accosting and even displacing the campesinos (peasants) were the military and the police. Given that the campesinos often lent help to the guerrilla groups, for example, by providing food and needed information, the military and police would force them to flee, which, in turn, made it easier to attack the guerrillas. The guerrillas, as mentioned, considered the campesinos and their plight to be the justification for their fighting and the mobilization of their political agenda (Molano Bravo 44). Nonetheless, the guerrillas, at the same time, often carried out campaigns of limpieza (cleansing) in order to eliminate state informants or those campesinos who were thought to be disloyal to them and their cause.

Historically, the FARC has been the largest guerrilla group with 15,000 to 17,000 members, while the ELN has between 3,000 to 6,000 members (Serafino 10, Witness for Peace 35).

The paramilitary groups now add to this confusing panorama of violence through their efforts to impede any kind of defense of the campesinos while, at the same time, trying to eliminate all forms of protest and insubordination: “La táctica es tan sencilla como brutal: asesinan delante de la comunidad a los líderes más estimados, a sus cabezas visibles, usualmente de manera brutal para ejemplarizar, queman varias casas, asaltan otras y amenazan con regresar a matar a todos lo que son auxiliadores de la guerrilla” (Molano Bravo 45). In effect, the paramilitaries are responsible for the vast majority of the deaths in the armed conflict; the Colombian defense ministry cited these groups for about 56% of the deaths between 1995-2000, while human rights groups have attributed up to 80% of the deaths to the work of the paramilitaries (Serafino 13, Witness for Peace 35). Since their main objective is to sever all ties between the guerrilla groups and the
local communities, the paramilitaries are generally well-received by the large landowners and farmers, entrepreneurs, foreign companies and politicians, making it appear as though they were somehow connected to the authorities.

Given that young, Afro-Colombian rappers view rap as a medium for cultural expression and social protest, and considering the scope and reach of the armed conflict, it is understandable that one of the most recurring themes found in Afro-Colombian rap (and all Colombian rap for that matter) is indeed the armed conflict. Hence, in essence, the escalation and spread of the fighting during the 1990s, a major source of the country’s violence and social strife, have created certain social and political conditions “worthy” of hip-hop’s discourse and wrath. Whether in the city or in the countryside, the effects of the armed conflict have weighed heavily on Colombia’s poor, and especially on Afro-Colombian communities. Without necessarily blaming one particular individual or group (largely because it is impossible to accuse just one single party), these young rappers instead tend to place blame on all of the leaders of the disputing factions who control and dictate the fighting: the guerrillas, the paramilitaries, the government and its security forces (the military and police), the oligarchy (*los politiqueros*), and even the U.S.:

“La Jungla” by *Flaco Flow y Melalina*

[...] Unos combatimos y otros rezan  
Uno es el cazador y otro es la presa  
Combatientes hoy ya no siento el dolor  
Mis heridas se sanaron pero a base de rencor  
Contra el gobierno, la oligarquía  
Porque para ellos no vale nada mi vida  
- ¡Zumba que zumba! - las balas sobre mi cabeza  
Mientras mi madre en casa reza que reza  
Todo los días llora por mí  
Tin-marín-de-do-pingüí  
Hoy mataron a uno, menos mal que yo no fui
Así es como funciona este país
Así es como me tratan a mí

Marchitan rosas en el campo
En la ciudad se escucha el llanto, espanto
Y un ahogante grito de justicia
La soga está en el cuello, aprieta, asfixia
Contaminan con malicia sus milicias – En cualquier parte –
Se aplicará servicia de injusticia
No más, más guerra, no beneficia
Representantes toman sus medidas
Precauciones cuando hay problema
Luego se ocultan en sus madrigueras
Como quien dice “sálvese quien pueda de la hoguera”
Se les hace ajeno el sufrimiento
Que llevas de tu pueblo, es tan profundo
El dolor de una nación
Que es condenada a soportar cual difícil situación
Causada por los mismos hipócritas gobernantes
Egoístas, opresores, traficantes
De la verdad, pronto se avergonzarán
¡Basta ya babilón!

This rap performed by Flaco Flow y Melanina, with an aggressive and angry tone over a booming and defiant baseline, exposes the fact that the common people are those who suffer most from the fighting. They are the ones who actually kill and die, while the leaders of the different factions make strategic decisions and continue to wage war, often placing their political and economic objectives above human value. Very large numbers of non-black peasants are obviously affected, an element justly represented in the music as evidenced by a type of alliance or identification that many Afro-Colombian rappers make with all of those who are victimized by the armed conflict. However, they likewise draw attention to the “black experience” by highlighting the ways in which it is destroying black communities in certain parts of Colombia. For example, in the following
verse, *Melanina* – assuming the perspective of a soldier – condemns the war that is using him as canon fodder. Meanwhile his family has no food and he isn’t even paid for what he calls a suicide mission:

– ¡Carajo! –  
Me están utilizando como carne de cañón  
Llamo a mi familia y no hay nada en el fogón  
Ni siquiera me pagan por esta misión suicida  
Salgo con la libreta y no hay trabajo en la avenida  
Maldita guerra, guerra hijueperra  
Vas a acabar conmigo, vas acabar con mi tierra  
Unos la originan, otros la patrocinan  
El pueblo pone las víctimas y otros la medicina  
Los más perjudicados somos nosotros  
Los pobres que pagamos con lágrimas en el rostro  
Así es como funciona este país  
Así es como me tratan a mí

Most Afro-Colombian rap portrays a war that, instead of leading to peace, is essentially creating killers and merely engendering more violence. Moreover, they don’t necessarily blame the soldiers or guerrillas who have been lured into doing the actual fighting and killing. They instead criticize and denounce those in charge of the warring factions who train and transform these young men and women, usually from Colombia’s lower classes, into trained killers. In fact, several rappers spoke to me about friends or acquaintances who were either enticed or forced into the war by one of the disputing factions. Again, in the same piece by *Flaco Flow y Melanina*, they also highlight the psychological effects and the guilt that this training and the experience of war have on those who are sent to kill:

Han despertado mi instinto de animal  
Han despertado mi instinto de matar  
Me obligaron a tomar las armas  
- ¡Qué karma! -  
Se ha ensuciado mi alma, ¡Oh mi Dios!
He matado seres humanos ¡Oh mi Dios!
He manchado con sangre mis manos
Me felicitan por haber matado a un hombre
Por dejar a un niño sin padre, sin nombre
A una madre sin hijo
A una iglesia sin crucifijo [...]

Through official discourses on “democratic security,” national progress and development, the Colombian leaders justify their efforts in the war against the insurgent groups (now often labeled terrorists in our post 9-11 world). Instead of endorsing the state security forces and these hegemonic discourses, Afro-Colombian rappers are more inclined to question them, especially by calling attention to the fact that the warring factions and interests involved present complex inter and transnational ramifications. Through their music, they often highlight the ways in which globalization and the implementation of neoliberal models tend to manifest itself within the Colombian armed conflict. Their music reflects a war in which the fighting has intensified due to interests that guerrilla groups, paramilitaries, drug cartels, entrepreneurs and the national government have in gaining control over particular lands and territories; interests that revolve around military strategies, mega-projects of development and tourism; interests in lands rich in precious minerals and natural resources, or fertile lands coveted by drug cartels for the cultivation of coca and poppy seed, an aspect that likewise evokes the U.S.’s role in the conflict and especially Plan Colombia. In a word, their music reveals that one of the local consequences of globalization is an aggravated conflict largely due to the recent and accelerated revalorization of lands and territories that previously were marginal and only sporadically exploited.
For example, the global demand for petroleum has become an important factor within the armed conflict. Not only has the FARC controlled 40%-60% of the Colombian territory at certain times during the 1990s, the majority of which is tropical jungle to the south of the Andes, but together the FARC and the ELN have controlled economically strategic areas in regions rich in petroleum deposits (Serafino 9, “Information on Combatants”). For decades the Colombian military has fought to recuperate these regions, often with very little success. In recent years, however, oil has become one of the most strategic and coveted resources in the world, and the Colombian state has handed over many of these regions to U.S., Canadian and British oil companies. Coincidently (or not), the petroleum sector has become a key element in the IMF’s (International Monetary Fund) plan for Colombia.

The guerilla groups have repeatedly sabotaged the pipelines and abducted petroleum company executives in exchange for generous payoffs, and for this reason, oil executives have pressured the U.S. government to extend its anti-narcotics operations (as a part of Plan Colombia – discussed in more detail below) to include protection of their pipelines in the form of more soldiers, contractors, weapons, etc., all of which work to intensify the violence associated with the armed conflict in Colombia (Simon 238). Therefore, by opening its markets and conceding more power to foreign companies in the name of neoliberal reform, the Colombian state does not alone make decisions with

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2 While Venezuela is the primary provider of petroleum to the United States, Colombia is its seventh largest provider. It has been calculated that Colombian deposits have about 2.6 billion untapped barrels and possibly 26 billion barrels in potential oil reserves (Duque G. 48)

3 “Colombia's second-largest crude oil pipeline, the Caño Limón, was attacked 152 times in 2000--a record--which the army blames mostly on the ELN. The attacks forced Occidental Petroleum to halt exports through most of August and September” (http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/crt/2000/2437.htm).
respect to the warring strategies and their outcomes. It is in this way that U.S. executives
and politicians likewise make decisions based on financial gains and benefits that
influence and even worsen the fighting, which signals strategies under neoliberal regimes
that tend to privilege higher profits over peace and a collective well-being: “El dinero es
el principio unificador del sistema global: sujetos, cosas y actividades son reducidas a la
lógica del costo-beneficio, esto es, ganancias y riqueza medidas en términos de dinero”
(Sarmiento Anzola 469).

Given these circumstances, many rap songs make reference to the role that the
U.S. and foreign interests have played in aggravating the armed conflict, especially as the
“war on drugs” too often becomes a war against insurgent groups who finance their war
through the drug trade. In the song “Pueblo Fuerte” by Asilo 38, Dr. Ganja laments that
the armed groups are destroying their lands, despite the resources it has to offer such as
coffee, sugar cane, flowers and emeralds. He states that politicians lie and steal while
Colombian people die of hunger. Most importantly, he condemns corrupt nations that
lend money to Colombia – a reference to Plan Colombia and U.S. intervention - to arm
soldiers and fumigate, leading to more warring and more destruction:

[...] La imagen de mi tierra es bomba, es guerra
Pero en Colombia también hay cosas bellas
Todo no es secuestro ni guerrilla
No es extorsión ni cocaína
Una tierra productora de café y caña
Las mejores flores y esmeraldas
¿Qué es lo que pasa con los grupos de armas?
Que a su tierra colombiana quieren acabarla
Político mintiendo y robando
Sin cero alimentación el pueblo se está acabando
Y de mi tierra Colombia quieren hacer una historia
Prestándole dinero a naciones corruptas
Para armar a los ejércitos y fumigar
The presence of the many armed groups involved in the conflict varies from region to region, whether it’s the leftist guerrillas, right-wing paramilitaries, state security forces or even groups belonging to organized crime. And this panorama of violence and fighting has become even more confusing with the emergence of urban gangs and militias involved in social cleansing, not to mention the violence inflicted by drug cartels also organized and involved in wars of extermination. For this reason, due to the multiplicity of competing interests and the various groups involved, this scenario of violence becomes almost unintelligible and it is almost impossible to comprehend the dynamics of the armed conflict. This violent and confusing landscape obviously engenders mistrust in almost everyone, and this mistrust and fear makes coexistence and common life impossible. The song “Metras” by Mensajeros wonderfully illustrates the violence, panic, mistrust and chaos engendered by this armed conflict that is now multifaceted, rural and urban. Moreover, this song likewise calls attention to the “imperial” motives of U.S. intervention in Colombia’s socio-political crisis:

Metras en los campos, tiros en las ciudades
Mueren guerrilleros, mueren paramilitares
Mueren pandilleros y hasta oficiales
El pánico en Colombia ahora es imparable […]

Se siguen enriqueciendo el pueblo empobreciendo
Cada vez más delincuencia y su imperio sigue creciendo
Un presidente coloca’o, sistema manipula’o
Los yanquis se apoderan y nosotros sus esclavos […]

I have decided to include this song by the group Mensajeros because Tostao, now of Choc Quib Town, was originally a member of this group and he is often still associated with it.
Unos quieren la paz con palabras falsas
Otros quieren lograrlo pero a punta de bala
Llega la guerrilla donde el campesino
Bebe, fuma y come, hizo lo que quiso
Llega paramilitar a maltratarlo
Porque cree que los encubre y hasta es sapo
Ahora se encuentra encerrado en una jaula
Viendo como su corta vida se derrama
Al desplaza’o lo han mata’o
En los campos lo han saquea’o
Nadie ha hecho nada para cambiar este sistema
Que nuestro pueblo, cadena
Pagar una condena sin saber cuál es la pena
Guerra entre parches, guerra con guerrilleros
Guerra políticos, guerra contra los rateros
Viviendo en un mundo que ya es incierto
La gente que se mira son de cuerpos descompuestos
Podridas generaciones han quedado en la inopia
Cuerpos mutilados por las causas de las bombas […]

Of course the conflict, and its consequences, can be understood and explained in multiple ways. Official, government discourses tend to portray it in terms of a threat to the institutions and the establishment, while ignoring or displacing the ethnic perspective of black communities that are directly affected. However, Afro-Colombian rap has served as a space of enunciation that questions the official perspectives and discourses in which the affected communities are summed up in generalized and objectified categories that make it difficult to understand the specific impacts of the conflict, forms of survival and resistance strategies of ethnic minorities (Restrepo and Rojas 20-1). For this reason, it is tremendously important to bring to the forefront these Afro-Colombian voices of protest and resistance, which offer a unique ethnic perspective from a particular sector of the population affected by the armed conflict. Prior to the 1990s, fighting throughout the Pacific littoral was relatively scarce; guerrilla groups had only used these lands as a type of safeguard. However, with the emergence of the Pacific littoral as an economically and
militarily important territory, during most of the 1990s to the present, the fighting has dramatically increased among the various warring factions, which, in turn, has had tragic consequences for Afro-Colombian communities. The increased fighting has led to massive displacement, and perhaps most significantly, they have worked to hinder Afro-Colombian organizational processes for the legalization and administration of collective territories supposedly provided by Law 70 of the new Constitution (Mosquera, Pardo, Hoffmann 39), practically nullifying the constitutional reforms and the guarantees made to Afro-Colombian communities.

4.4 Drug Trafficking: Colombia’s “White Gold”

Towards the end of the 1970s, large scale drug trafficking emerged adding another element to the conflict and the violence within the Colombian scenario. During many years, paramilitaries who were recruited and trained by the drug cartels, often in alliance with the police and the military, assassinated campesino union workers, leftist activists, judges and almost any other person who opposed the activities of the drug cartels. Eventually, however, the Colombian elite felt that the violence and power of the narcotraficantes was beginning to threaten their own economic and political control that they had maintained since independence. And it was the assassination of presidential candidate, Luis Carlos Galán, in 1989, by the drug cartels that provided the country’s leaders with the needed pretext to initiate the “war on drugs” (Keen 514-5).

Due to the anti-narcotic campaigns of the 1970s in Turkey and the Middle East, in addition to high transportation costs, the international cartels searched for resources closer to the consumer markets in the U.S. Colombia not only offered easy access to the
North American coasts, but also cocaine, which was cheaper to process than both heroine and opium were. Eventually, the creation of an efficient distribution system made possible the entrance of drugs from Colombia into the growing U.S. market. It wasn’t long before the cartels had established a well-organized division of labor, which was generating high profits between the producers and exporters of Medellín and Cali, bankers, wholesalers and launderers in both Colombia and the U.S. It has been estimated that the Medellín and Cali cartels made between $4-$6 billion yearly in the trafficking of cocaine and approximately $1.5 billion of these earnings entered the Colombian clandestine markets: “Without this ‘cushion’ for the country’s balance of payments [...] an exchange crisis would have broken out in 1983 or 1984 at the latest” (515). The contribution of narco-capitalism to Colombia’s financial stability and the relationship that the traffickers had with wealthy entrepreneurs, businessmen, politicians, officials and members of the police and military explain the immunity that the drug lords have often enjoyed (515).

In fact, the drug trade is an industry that depends on a corrupt or weakened nation-state in addition to constant violence, both of which exist in Colombia. For example, while considering the impact of drug trafficking on nation-states, Manuel Castells asserts that the weakness of the Colombian state is an important factor facilitating and maintaining Colombian’s privileged status in global drug trafficking:

> It also suggests a broader trend. If large but weak states (such as Colombia) facilitate networks, the power of these criminal centers is likely to overwhelm these states even further. It follows a downward spiral, where ultimately, criminal organizations may control some states […] by combining bribery, intimidation, the financing of politics, and the affirmation of cultural identity with skillful international business management. (201)
At the same time, the situation is complicated due to corruption, the impunity of the Colombian judicial system and a lack of law enforcement. Furthermore, traffickers are legitimate owners of more than 5 million hectares of some of the country’s most fertile lands, acquired largely through illicit and criminal activities. According to Alfredo Molano Bravo, these lands make up “la alcancía del narcotráfico, el capital que han puesto bajo la protección del sagrado derecho a la propiedad. Dado que la ley colombiana está en la obligación de perseguirlos y que la guerrilla es, por sus banderas agraristas, enemiga jurada de la gran propiedad, no les cabe recurso distinto a defenderse por medio de los paramilitares” (47). The drug cartels count on the impunity, or institutional tolerance, on the part of the military. Furthermore, the paramilitaries – with their links to the military and police – provide a channel through which the drug cartels often corrupt these security forces and even take advantage of them for their own benefit (47).

The narcotics industry is demand driven and export oriented, and as mentioned, the original and still most significant market is that of the U.S. In response to the social problems arising from rampant drug consumption in the U.S, Plan Colombia emerged as an initiative to fight narcotics in the Andean region, which was approved by the U.S. Congress on June 13th, 2000. Of the $1.3 billion donated to the region, about 65% ($860 million) was specifically earmarked for Colombia, and the majority of this money has gone to Colombian security forces with some of the worse antecedents of human rights abuses in the hemisphere; furthermore, their ties to the paramilitaries have been well documented (Serafino 1, 15-16). The U.S. government defines Plan Colombia as an integral part of the “war on drugs” and actually hoped to reduce the production of coca and poppy seed by 50% by the year 2005. However, the plan has failed miserably. In fact,
levels of production are actually higher now than what they were before the initiation of Plan Colombia (144,000 hectares compared to 122,500) (Leech “Coca Figures”). Ultimately, Colombia produces about 80% of the world’s cocaine, and even when moderate reductions have been made in territory dedicated to cultivation, agricultural techniques and innovation have more than compensated. According to figures from 2001, Colombia supplies about 90% of the cocaine consumed in the U.S. (Serafino 4).

Further complicating this “war on drugs” is the fact the narcotics industry is fully internationalized, with a very strict division of labor between different locations; out of necessity, it is an extremely flexible industry in the way drug cartels have become adept at relocation and adaptation in order to avoid authorities. It is in great part for this reason that, in spite of repressive measures, Colombia is still the center for the refining and advanced processing of cocaine and for its transportation into the affluent markets (Castells 191-192). Obviously, the ability of drug cartels to make use of new communication technology, particularly mobile phones and portable computers, has likewise allowed them to communicate, manage transactions, and even increase the flexibility of the industry. And one of the most critical components of the entire drugs industry is the money-laundering system, which has created financial flows that even benefit U.S. banks (Simons 11). Lastly, as stated, all transactions within this drug trade rely on enforcement by an extraordinary level of violence in addition to the corruption of state institutions (Castells 195).

As previously addressed, the lines between the anti-narcotics campaign and the armed conflict have been blurred. Given that the armed groups have ties to drug cartels, this “war on drugs” has actually become a war against the insurgent groups. In many of
these songs, such as “Pueblo Fuerte” cited above, Afro-Colombian rappers condemn U.S. intervention, Plan Colombia and fumigation efforts. And in their song, “Buscando por afuera,” they likewise rap about all the countries that line up to get their drugs (“white gold”), a problem these nations themselves cannot control. They speak of gang violence and the mafia that runs a drug trade backed by the guerrillas, all of which give Colombia a bad name. Nevertheless, again we see the need to remind us that Colombia is still beautiful to them:

>[... ] International criminal, así es Colombia
Mandando cocaína para todo lugar
Si nos toca que matar esa es la realidad
Porque la mafia de Colombia lo juega [...]

Buscando por afuera otra manera
One international criminal de la candela
Amarillo, azul y rojo es mi bandera
Sabes que significa ser colombiano hasta que muera [...]

Hasta que muera en esta fucking tierra
Con hectáreas cultivadas marihuana y amapola
Países hagan cola que aquí ya está la coca
Oro blanco que a tu gente la descontrola
Un, dos, tres, grita fuerte la pandilla, esta mafia
Es muy grande y la respalda mi guerrilla
Por esta mala imagen Colombia es muy famosa
Pero para nosotros esta tierra es muy hermosa [...]

Ultimately, the way the illicit drug trade is portrayed in the whole of Colombian rap is very ambivalent; at times it is hard to determine whether certain groups are condemning or actually celebrating the narcotics industry. On one hand, this brings to mind the manner in which U.S. commercial hip-hop glorifies the “gangsta” lifestyle and a pusher’s mentality. It is almost as if Colombia’s position as the “narcotics capital” of the

5 Asilo 38 actually has two particular song, “Mamá, déjame fumar” and “Mango viche,” promoting the use and legalization of marihuana.
world per se has bestowed on Colombian hip-hop a privileged position within the genre and this global youth culture. On the other hand, Castells reminds us of the ambivalent position that drug cartels have historically assumed in Colombian society, in that they have been:

[...] deeply rooted in their cultures, traditions, and regional societies. Not only have they shared their wealth with their cities, and invested a significant amount of their fortune in their country, but they have also revived local cultures, rebuilt rural life, strongly affirmed their religious feelings, and their beliefs in local saints and miracles, supported musical folklore (and were rewarded with laudatory songs from Colombian bards), made Colombian football teams the pride of the nation, and revitalized the dormant economies and social scenes in Medellín and Cali. (199)

In fact, Castells argues that criminal networks in general are probably in advance of multinational corporations in their ability to combine cultural identity and global business. For this reason, the identification that some of these rappers make with drug lords should not be surprising. This music often demonstrates that in a world of social and economic exclusion, and “in the midst of crisis of political legitimacy, the boundary between protest, patterns of immediate gratification, adventure, and crime becomes increasingly blurred” (204-205).

Ultimately, as countries implement neoliberal policies, radically opening up their economies and permitting the free flow of goods across borders, the illegal drug trade around the world has benefited and expanded, a reality perceived to be an unforeseen and unwanted consequence of globalization (typically counteracted with the use of more arms and growing vigilance). Furthermore, the great wealth generated by the illicit sale of narcotics on the global market has also led to intense competition often marked by increased violence, especially as police forces and drug enforcement agencies crack down
on drug production and distribution causing drug traffickers to become more desperate, more creative, more flexible and even more hostile. In the jungles, both paramilitaries and guerrilla groups incite campesinos to cultivate coca, and as mentioned, they likewise engage in more fighting for control of these lands as a way to finance their war. Particularly in Pacific coastal regions, drug trafficking has increased due to all of the waterways and entry points along the Pacific littoral that serve as routes for the exportation of narcotics. The Pacific littoral – owing to its difficult terrain and jungle areas – had become a type of safe haven for participants in the illegal drug trade, and therefore, anti-narcotic operations are now being reinforced in the region.

And not only does violence escalate in Colombian fields and jungles as drug cartels and different armed groups hoping to finance their armies with drug money engage in more fighting to control and possess fertile and strategic lands, but also in Colombian city streets among police forces, sellers, and gangs. In fact, as a result of the potential for high financial rewards, the intense competition and need for violence, the sicariato emerged in the 1980s, defined as a lifestyle in which adolescents hire themselves out as hit men.

Naturally, most Afro-Colombian rap emerging from the country’s cities mirrors the urban social ills engendered by the narcotics industry. For example, it should be noted that although in the past narcotics were primarily exported because of a higher market value abroad, recently many narcotraffickers have also cracked into the local consumer market, taking advantage of what little profitability may exist, an example of capital’s incessant search for new markets in this era of globalization. Many rappers speak out against drug use in their neighborhoods and communities, and on the violence related to
drug trafficking and consumption. Through their music, some rap groups also attempt to explain why urban youth consume drugs, for example, to escape their harsh realities, or to get high before partaking in criminal activity, as evidenced by the song, “Siglo XX” by Ghettos Clan:

[...]

Recent studies have shown that drug consumption among Colombia’s urban youth has been on the rise for some time now (Paredes Rosero, et al., 2004), which actually is parallel to global trends in drug consumption among the world’s youth. And as the above song (and most evidence) indicates, drug consumption and addiction not only lead to the devaluation of human worth, but also to a life of criminality and delinquency. In their song, “Suburbio Latino,” Zona Marginal also makes reference to how feelings of desperation and social exclusion can lead to drug consumption and violence:
[...] La vida da muchas vueltas y no sabemos qué nos espera
Un día tú estás vivo y otro tirado en la acera
Parece que vivir en estos tiempos no tiene sentido
En el mar de la desesperanza muchos han caído [...]

Hay más centros policiales que universidades
No sólo es una canción, son las sufridas realidades
Jovencitas de trece años embarazadas
Sin nada de educación y desempleadas
Jóvenes perdidos en las drogas y el alcohol
Quitándose las vidas por mantener el control
De un territorio x o y o abcd
Muchas veces mueren sin ni siquiera saber por qué [...]

This group’s testimony reaffirms Hopenhayn’s argument that the lack of future possibilities for social integration or occupational mobility is a primary motivation behind drug use: “Under the effects of drugs and alcohol, the subjects experience a symbolic compensation in which they recover, in a substitute and counterproductive way, part of their lost self-esteem” (29). However, frustration, fear and desperation caused by social exclusion and a bleak outlook for any sort of social betterment encourage not only drug and alcohol consumption as a form of symbolic compensation, but also more violence, as these songs suggest. Urban youth attempt to escape from their harsh realities not only through drug consumption, but also by seeking out new ways of inclusion and belonging, for example, to gangs or even organized crime. While addressing the dissemination of fear and violence in Latin American cities, Martín Barbero maintains that “Since we no longer believe in great ideals, and given the integral societal symbols’ loss of value, the only option left is the immediate: the here and now. It is not that we have become unaware that things are going wrong […] but the projects and utopias that oriented change have suffered a collapse. And when they don’t know what to do, people turn to those to whom they feel closest” (“The City” 31-32). Many of Colombia’s
dispossessed urban youth often identify with those closest to them who likewise suffer from forms of social exclusion, and therefore, they may seek immediate security and a sense of belonging within gangs, criminal groups or drug culture. Although the drug cartels in Colombia helped to create the sicario lifestyle, “the proliferation of such murder-for-hire belongs to a subculture of crime where patronage also mitigates exclusion” (Hopenhayn 29).

4.5 Migration Flows and Displacement: “Todos luchando, digo, por sobrevivir”

Drugs aren’t the only things flowing within and across borders. This era of globalization is often characterized for its increase in human mobility as evidenced by the booming tourist industry and the growing number of people around the world who migrate to other countries in search of a “better life” in great part owing to the imbalanced global distribution of wealth and labor as well as an uneven and dependent modernization encumbering “underdeveloped” nations. Although some people simply relocate to urban centers within their own countries, many attempt to migrate to the world’s economic centers either to escape violent or threatening circumstances or in search of a more economically prosperous life. While proponents of globalization like to highlight global, cultural contact and exchange as a result of migration flows and high numbers of travelers around the world, those who are truly free to travel are limited to a group of privileged individuals, especially in “peripheral” countries, due to the high costs of travel and even the financial and political difficulty of obtaining visas. For example, while thousands of affluent Colombians have fled the country in recent decades, leaving behind the social and political turmoil of their homeland, for Colombia’s poor, and
especially for Afro-Colombians who suffer some of the highest rates of poverty and destitution, the possibility of legal travel is slim. Nevertheless, the myth of the “American dream” is still alive, enticing many Afro-Colombians, like those of Buenaventura, who see little if any opportunity in their own country, to migrate as stowaways to the U.S. This has been such a common practice in this particular region, resulting in significant cultural and historic ramifications (Hurtado 1996), that Flaco Flow y Melanina were inspired to compose this song entitled, “Polizones” in dedication to the great number of Afro-Colombian stowaways trying to reach the “promised land”:

[...] Después de tanto tocar puertas sin ninguna está entreabierta
Busco respuestas y nadie se me manifiesta
Me cuesta creer que ya no hay panes en la cesta
El desempleo aumenta y el país está que apesta
Dinero nadie presta, pocos suman, muchos restan
No hay quién se la merezca esta situación grotesca
Vivir como una bestia y el rico haciéndose su fiesta
No valen las protestas, me tildan de molestia
Pero no hay mejor propuesta
Que ir a otro país que en realidad sí me merezca
Mis hijos sepan, crezcan y mi madre esté más fresca
La pesca es que tirar polizontada ahora la gente está resuelta
Tira los dados, saca tu carta que ya está la apuesta
Y al llegar, vencer o en el intento perecer
En mi pensamiento está nunca rendirse, no retroceder
¿Qué más hacer? ¿Qué me puede ofrecer esta nación
Donde los gobernantes son los padres de la corrupción?
Los que viven bien unos cuantos son
Así que allá por él el polizón
 Illegal, pues no tengo plata para comprar
A los que dan la visa o permiso para zarpar
¿Qué más da? ¡Ya! Lo hecho, hecho está

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6 In a study entitled VISA USA: fortunas y extravíos de los emigrantes colombianos en los Estados Unidos, Alejandro Gaviria of the Economics Department at the Universidad de los Andes states, “Al menos en Colombia, la emigración hacia Estados Unidos es una opción de escape para hogares de clase media en dificultades, no para hogares de clase baja en busca de mejores oportunidades” (3). He emphasizes how migration flows “[...] crecieron sin precedentes durante la segunda mitad de los noventa, como consecuencia de la crisis económica y la intensificación del conflicto armado” (7).
In these particular verses, *Melanina* confirms that there is too much unemployment and poverty in a country where the rich simply get richer. Colombia has nothing to offer him, and since he sees protesting as a waste of time, the best thing to do is to take the life-or-death risk and leave the country as a stowaway, especially since he cannot obtain a visa.

More alarming than the number of Colombians who voluntarily abandon the country is the number of those who experience forced internal displacement. On a national level, displacement reached its first high point between 1988-1991 with some 100,000 people displaced annually, and starting in 1996 the numbers dramatically increased each year: 181,000 in 1996, 257,000 in 1997, 308,200 in 1998, 288,000 in 1999, and 317,000 in 2000 (Escobar, “Desplazamientos” 56-7). Statistics show that 412,555 people were displaced in the year 2002, and according to a recent report from CODHES, approximately 207,607 people were displaced in the year 2003, which, despite showing a significant decrease, still points to a disturbing number of people forced from their homes and communities. Furthermore, the same report shows that 287,581 people were displaced in 2004, indicating a 38.5% increase when compared to the figures from 2003. Lastly, according to CODHES, 2005 showed another 8% increase.

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7 “Codhes fue creada en 1992 por un grupo de personas de diferentes disciplinas vinculadas desde la investigación y la academia al tema de los Derechos Humanos y la búsqueda de alternativas de paz para el país. El propósito inicial de este equipo fue facilitar la visibilización y sensibilización de la problemática de la población desplazada ante el Estado, la Sociedad Civil y la Comunidad Internacional [...] La Consultoría para los Derechos Humanos y el Desplazamiento Codhes es una entidad privada sin ánimo de lucro que promueve la defensa de los Derechos Humanos y la consolidación de la paz en Colombia por medio de la construcción de un trabajo en Red sobre el problema del desplazamiento forzado y la construcción de cultura ciudadana a través de una amplia divulgación y difusión del conocimiento generado por la investigación” (http://www.codhes.org/)
in displacement (“De la negación al desafío”). In all, it is estimated that, since 1985, more than 2.2 million people have been displaced (Escobar, “Desplazamientos” 56).

The causes of internal displacement in Colombia are multiple and complex. Obviously many people are forced to flee their lands because of the armed conflict or even from U.S.-directed fumigation of coca and poppy fields, illustrating how Plan Colombia has contributed to the violent process of displacement. Nonetheless, at the center of what has become a humanitarian crisis is the logic of globalization (as a new regime of capital accumulation) and the neoliberal model: the destruction and the rebuilding through the spread of global capital and its thirst for new spheres of exploitation and appropriation. It is this logic that drives the interests that guerrilla groups, paramilitaries, drug cartels, entrepreneurs and the state have in gaining control over particular lands. Furthermore, the neoliberal model demands infrastructure that the country is only recently beginning to construct at uncalculated economic and even socio-cultural costs given that the localization of some of this infrastructure has affected ancestral territories of indigenous and Afro-Colombian cultures. Once capital marks a territory as potentially profitable, the appropriation process begins with the displacement (destruction) of local communities or the elimination of whatever human or legal obstacle that may be present. In fact, evidence has shown that violence is most intense in municipalities where economic speculation – the potential for wealth accumulation – is greatest (Bello y Frade 397-9), driving many human rights advocates to denounce displacement not as unfortunate collateral damage, but an actual strategy of the war; most displaced Colombians come from regions earmarked for development projects generally
related to the massive use of natural resources, pressures tied to the dynamics of
globalization, as the lyrics below reflect:

“País en Guerra” by Zona Marginal

[...] La guerrilla y el ejército sostienen la fuente
De la impunidad de la cultura de la muerte
En ese lugar exterminio, en esa guerra social
Los paramilitares son el actual Klu Klux Klan
Monopolizan las tierras y causan la iniquidad
El ejército se encarga de causar la hostilidad
Cuando cogen a los culpables todos caen en la inopia
Se hacen los inocentes como siempre en nuestra historia
Hemos sido gobernados por estos hijos de perra
Por la mano temblorosa de los dioses de la guerra
Ajusticiando con mano propia es como lo arreglan mi hermano
Ellos son los que tapan el sol con las dos manos
El sistema que se maneja en esta guerra es la explotación
Para conseguir más tierras es la mejor solución
Por eso el mejor negocio para ellos es la guerra
Pues desplazando a la gente se apoderan de más tierras [...]
by the different warring factions for the various reasons mentioned above. It has been
estimated that 38% of the people displaced are from ethnic minorities, and typically about
35% of them are Afro-Colombian (Escobar, “Desplazamientos” 56).

In this light, the armed conflict and the displacement of Afro-Colombian and
indigenous communities greatly contradict the supposed achievements of the
constitutional reform and its promotion of ethnic rights, especially after the state
allegedly recognized communal rights to ancestral lands: “Más que una triste
coincidencia, lo que podríamos estar viendo es el resultado de lo que se ha llamado una
‘contrarrevolución étnica’; una estrategia de negación en la práctica de los derechos
adquiridos en la escena política por las organizaciones sociales étnicas” (Restrepo and
Rojas 21). Furthermore, in tandem with the emergence of the Pacific littoral as a territory
with limitless natural resources in need of development, often seen as a platform for its
integration to the rest of the nation, Afro-Colombian inhabitants one again are either
made invisible or presented as people of a foul or unhealthy nature who are lazy and
backwards, resistant to change or opposed to development. They are, therefore, seen as
people who should be sacrificed on the “altar of progress.” These representations
obviously ignore the biological reality and the socio-cultural dynamic of the region
(Escobar and Pedrosa 19). In a word, within these representations of development, once
again racist discourses emerge in that minority groups are presented as the most
“underdeveloped of the underdeveloped.” As Escobar and Pedrosa argue, on a general
level, the negation of difference implicit in these discourses on development and
modernity has resulted in more exploitation and more suffering. On a larger scale, the
problem of the Pacific is part of a world struggle for difference, “importante para la
construcción de mundos en los cuales las relaciones entre grupos humanos, y entre éstos y la naturaleza, no contribuyó a la colonización de paisajes y vidas” (23).

At the same time, this mass displacement of Afro-Colombian communities has obviously engendered or intensified great cultural transformations, often explained as a symptom of globalization. During hundreds of years, Afro-Colombian communities had established relationships between their communities and their natural habitats, between their communities and the rest of society. Not only do these lands possess important symbolic value for Afro-Colombian communities, but they also represent spaces where culture and social identities are realized, created and recreated. In a word, forced displacement has caused profound fragmentation of social and cultural identities (deterritorialization), led to the loss of customs and traditions, destroyed livelihoods, and severed ties among families and community members. Ultimately, it becomes apparent how processes of economic globalization have determined that human groups with ties to the land are quickly becoming obsolete. Ghettos Clan makes reference to the anguish they all too often see among the displaced in their rap, “¿En dónde están?” Through this song, they call attention to the suffering, pain and even poverty of those who are torn from their lands. They condemn the actions of those who are responsible while at the same time pleading for an end to the fighting:

¿Por qué tanta injusticia y hoy cunde la desolación?
¿En dónde está lo que hemos trabajado con tanto amor?
Son siglos de trabajo – trabajo – generación tras generación
¿En dónde está lo que nos pertenece? Me hace falta hoy
No sólo me han quitado tierra, casa o metal
No sólo es el dinero, no sólo es lo material
Lo que me faltan son las ganas de seguir viviendo
Me han arrancado de mi tierra y como flor me estoy muriendo
Marchitando, de pena moral, de soledad
¿En dónde está mi pueblo? ¿Mi gente dónde está?
La gente honrada, capaz, humilde, trabajadora
Hemos sido desplazados como pájaros sin cola
Han herido, maltratado, nuestra dignidad y orgullo
Fuera de tu nido, sin derecho a reclamar lo tuyo [...]

Unfortunately, the attention given by the state to the problem of displacement and
to those who have been displaced has not been adequate and there have not been any
specific programs in place to respond to the needs of the ethnic communities that are
most affected (Escobar, “Desplazamientos” 59). The Colombian state has only provided
weak programs of assistance in place of protection and prevention, instead of political
programs of restitution that could help victims return to and recover their lands. Due to
massive displacement, many municipalities of the country have undergone social and
demographic revolutions usually marked by significant decreases in rural inhabitants and
dramatic increases in urban populations. In his article, “Globalización y
multiculturalidad: notas para una agenda de investigación”, Jesús Martín Barbero
describes the modern Latin American cities as such:

América Latina vive un desplazamiento del peso poblacional del campo a
la ciudad que no es meramente cuantitativo [...] sino el indicio de la
aparición de una trama cultural urbana heterogénea, esto es, formada por
una densa multiculturalidad que es heterogeneidad de formas de vivir y
pensar, de estructuras del sentir y de narrar, pero muy fuertemente
comunicada [...] Se trata de una multiculturalidad que desafía nuestras
nociones de cultura, de nación y de ciudad, los marcos de referencia y
comprensión forjados sobre la base de identidades nítidas, de arraigos
fuertes y deslindes claros. Pues nuestras ciudades son hoy el ambiguo y
opaco escenario de algo no representable ni desde la diferencia excluyente
y excluida de lo étnico-autóctono, ni desde la inclusión uniformante y
disolvente de lo moderno. (19-20)

These people – overwhelmingly campesinos, fishermen, miners – are transformed into
the desplazados (displaced), ripped from their rural environments and forced into
unknown urban spaces. And upon arriving to the cities, many Afro-Colombians have to contend with the stigma associated with those who have been displaced. The image of Afro-Colombians, young and old, begging at traffic lights in Bogotá is painful testimony to this enraging and dehumanizing situation. At times, the growing presence of Afro-Colombians in urban centers, such as Bogotá, often obliges the rest of the city inhabitants to reconsider national and social identities and even common notions of nation and culture. Colombian cities (at least in the interior regions) are becoming exceptionally heterogeneous spaces, but full of tension and even conflict produced by the very encounter among different ethnic groups and classes, especially as they struggle for limited space and resources. Nonetheless, at the same time, it often seems that the overwhelming presence of the desplazados has simply become another – expected – part of the city landscape; city inhabitants seem to be desensitized to those who are displaced. And the standard vocabulary created with regards to the phenomenon of displacement only seems to objectify the victims vis-à-vis statistics and expert or political discourses (Oslender 39).

Most Afro-Colombian rap criticizes the various groups and processes responsible for mass displacement while, at the same time, voicing the deep mistrust that so many Colombians have in the state and its intentions and/or capacity to prevent displacement and aid the victims. However, in their rap, “Busco personas,” Choc Quib Town examines the struggles and the stigmatization of the displaced who are forced to beg or perform odd jobs for money and food, who tolerate stares and abuses, forms of discrimination and social exclusion:
Ésta es la historia de una gente que casi siempre
La comida queda pendiente
Y tú los ves por todas partes sellando su arte
Pero duermen en un parque
Tienen carita de yo no fui y se preguntan por qué están ahí
Y los ves merodeando por ahí, el trabajo para ellos sí o sí que sí
“¿Están salados?” se preguntan todos los días
Y cuando el sol se asoma, yo busco personas

No meditación, no meditación no
Cada cosa en su mundo tiene una razón
Hoy me toca a mí, mañana a él o a ti
Todos luchando, digo, por sobrevivir [...]

Sufrir de abuso de personas que a veces miran raro
En un juego de azar que trae un clavo
Comiendo de frases alentadoras como un te amo
Nos tocará como jugando tingo-tingo-tango...
[...] Viviendo en un hogar tan grande como la ciudad
Se tiene brazaletes de prueba de inmunidad
Jugando a vivir, mi hermano, pensar en situaciones
Que sacan felicidad de sus corazones
Con artes raras inventando ciencias ocultas
Los que no escriben ni leen, que no tienen la culpa
Pues es un trabajo para no quedarse así
En la calle pidiendo limosna porque de hambre se puede morir [...]

No vamos a llorar por lo que ha pasado
Alegres, por lo aliviado, la actitud nueva que hemos tomado
No hay talla si afuera hace frío o mucho calor
En este rincón está la fuerza del Señor
Que me permite, llueva o truene, continuar
Y las inclemencias de alguna gente soportar
Pasa el día, tengo un balance de lo que logré
24 horas y luego y empieza otra vez [...]

The presence of poor Afro-Colombians roaming city streets often serves as validation for stereotypes of Afro-Colombians as poor, lazy, dirty, etc., which, in turn, leads to new or hardened forms of social exclusion. Concerned with these common perceptions, in this song, Choc Quib Town informs its listeners of the human side of those who are displaced as people who are simply trying to survive like everyone else. In other words, unlike
official discourses that objectify and even dehumanize, this is *Choc Quib Town’s* attempt to re-humanize and dignify those who have been displaced.

4.6 Poverty: “América Latina será sumida en la miseria”

An integral part of present-day globalization has to do with the worldwide promotion of a series of economic reforms under the neoliberal model, which are often encouraged or even imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. These two institutions were created at the conference of Bretton Woods, New Hampshire, shortly after World War II, to finance development projects in poor countries and to stabilize global exchange rates. However, during the last decades, they have assumed much more active roles in the majority of the world’s economies. Up until the 1970s, the World Bank had identified the elimination of poverty as the top priority for “developing” countries, but by the 1980s, high officials began to prioritize the repayment of foreign debt, which would be made possible through the implementation of neoliberal reforms. In brief, the IMF and the World Bank have frequently required “poor” or “developing” countries with high foreign debts to implement neoliberal economic reforms under the promise that these changes would lead to development and prosperity. The series of measures imposed on these nations, which make them more dependent on market mechanisms, are supposed to lead to greater integration to the world economy so as to increase their capacity to repay debts. Ultimately, countries have been forced to implement these economic policies of structural adjustment or else face the possibility of losing future investments and/or loans. According to neoliberal thought, the state should assume a minimalist role with respect to the nation’s economy and governments should
attract foreign investors through the liberalization of commerce and by reducing tariffs and market regulations while at the same time decreasing government expenditures. Furthermore, there is also an emphasis on exports and on the privatization of businesses given that the private sector allegedly represents the path to economic growth.

Like most Latin American countries, Colombia has had to face the challenge of IMF and World Bank mandates and it was in the 1970s that Colombia actually began to implement strong reforms of liberalization and deregulation. Moreover, since the 1980s, processes of decentralization have also been taking place in the country, and in fact, liberalization and decentralization have become the central pieces of profound socioeconomic transformations during the last thirty years. For this reason, upon discussing globalization in Colombia, Luis Mauricio Cuervo comments:

[...] así como la globalización a nivel planetario, la mundialización en el plano nacional se traduce en la aparición de reglas de juego radicalmente diferentes a las prevalecientes en el período anterior, introducidas en medio de contradicciones y ciclos de avance o retroceso. Se modificaron así los parámetros orientadores de las relaciones de la economía nacional con el resto del mundo (apertura), de manejo interno de la economía (liberalización-desregulación), y el sistema de responsabilidades y competencias entre los diferentes niveles territoriales del estado y del gobierno (descentralización). ("Globalización")

Prior to constitutional reform, the legitimacy of the Colombian regime was strongly threatened by this neoliberal model that was actually worsening income inequality and increasing poverty levels at the same time that government expenditures on education, housing, health, and social security declined. The “extreme concentration of wealth, productive resources, and positions of authority in the hands of a small elite” was more noticeable than ever: “The concentration of power and wealth traditionally has been so extreme in Colombia that political positions are monopolized by the same
individuals or families for years, resulting in a near total lack of elite rotation” (Van Cott
49). For a long time, this political elite had maintained power by managing a relatively
stable economy, however, the acute disparities and problems arising from the
implementation of the neoliberal model called into question the elite’s competence, an
image likewise worsened by the revelations of corruption and even dealings with drug
cartels (49).

Then, at the beginning of the 1990s, the Gaviria administration implemented a
series of measures – in great part due to years of pressure from the World Bank –, most
notably, a more radical liberalization and economic opening of the Colombian markets to
the world economy. The effects on the overall standard of living for the general
population were almost immediate: the unequal distribution of wealth, which had been
worsening during the early part of the 1980s, continued to worsen; the quality of
employment deteriorated; and the number of people who abandoned the work force rose
markedly (Sáenz Rover 474). Also during the 1990s and through the first few years of the
new millennium, unemployment has increased, often aided by the IMF-mandated
privatization of dozens of state-run companies, resulting in the massive firing of public
employees and rising costs for consumers. During the 1990s, unemployment reached as
high as 20% for the general population, while for youths aged 18-24, it got as high as
35% (Serafino 5). Meanwhile, although privatizations are imposed by the World Bank
and the IMF to help nations pay foreign debts, in Colombia the foreign debt has
dramatically escalated and only added to the countries socio-political and economic crisis
(Duque G. 58).
In theory, earnings generated from the private sector are supposed to spread to the poorer sectors, a process often coined as the “trickledown effect,” although most statistics in Colombia show that this rarely occurs. According to the United Nations Development Program, the percentage of people living in poverty in Colombia, from 1989 to the year 2000, actually grew from 19% to 56% (cited in Witness for Peace 27), indicating that the earnings generated in the private sector do not necessarily “trickledown.” A 2004 study from the United Nations confirms a continuation of this trend by indicating that poverty in Colombia has remained above 50%; a little more than 22 million people, out of a total population of 44 million, are poor; these numbers are substantiated by the “CIA World Factbook: Colombia,” which also shows poverty at about 50%. In fact, poverty levels have remained above 50% while rural poverty has surpassed 80% despite growth in the GDP, which seems to indicate that the problem is of a structural character (“En Colombia es imposible bajar la pobreza” 12). Studies show that 52% of the poor do not have access to health care; 90% of the working class is not guaranteed pensions (68% of pensions go to the wealthiest sectors of society); and 8 million people in rural areas together with 15 million in Colombian cities live in poverty while one of the most delicate situations is in the department of Chocó where poverty has reached as high as 72% (Vargas Pinzón 3).

In effect, Colombia is just one example of what Chossudovsky refers to as the “globalization of poverty” (1997). Under the current economic system that generates overproduction, multinational corporations and trading companies are only capable of expanding their markets by destroying local, domestic production systems of “developing” countries, for example, by greatly reducing domestic production for the local or national market. Under this system, therefore, the emphasis on exports in
“developing” countries (such as Colombia, given Uribe’s export-oriented growth strategy) implies the reduction of internal purchasing power. As Chossudovky states, “Poverty is an input on the supply side […] the global economic system is thus characterised by two contradictory forces; the consolidation of a global cheap-labour economy on the one hand and the search for new consumer markets on the other. The former undermines the latter” (17). In other words, the expansion of markets for global corporations (wealth) requires the fragmentation and destruction of domestic economies (poverty). And again, within the Colombian context, this destruction and rebuilding process is perhaps most notable in the Pacific littoral.

In the end, global capital feeds itself on extreme kinds of poverty and on the more acute forms of impoverishment and marginalization. As Abril Trigo states, “Never, in the history of humankind has there been such an accumulation of wealth, but never has wealth been so unjustly distributed” (“Two Sided Coin”). In this regard, Colombia exemplifies one of the inevitable consequences of the enormous disparities of wealth and power that characterize the global political economy: on a national level, the rich continue to get richer while the poor continue to get poorer. For instance, wealth and income are concentrated in only 3% of all Colombian families (about 340 families) (Sarmiento Anzola 481). And in 2005, the cost of living rose 21% more for the poor than it did for the rich (Vargas Pinzón 3). Meanwhile, on an international level, the gap between the “rich” countries and the “poor” countries likewise continues to grow.

Therefore, while Colombia’s armed conflict together with the massive numbers of people displaced to urban centers obviously contribute to poverty levels, economic globalization, regulated by neoliberal policies, often provides the driving forces behind
the country’s rising unemployment and poverty. Groups, like Zona Marginal, Artefacto, and Asilo 38, often explain their poverty in terms of class exploitation, in which the wealthy exploit and marginalize the poor masses in order to maintain economic and social hierarchies. They often blame members of a corrupt Colombian oligarchy who place their own economic well-being above the welfare of others. Through music, they also point out that the privileged classes in Colombia benefit from the global expansion of capital and are transmitters of this dependency on the world market, not its victims (Amin 41). In their song, “Apagón,” Zona Marginal, probably the most anti-globalization of all the groups, specifically denounces neo-liberal policies, the World Bank and privatization. Here they invite people to mobilize against privatization, warning that it will result in higher taxes, hence leaving people with insufficient resources to satisfy their basic necessities:

Dow preso man forever my song resists
Soy el fat fish que te dice no
A la política de privatización
Y la canción tiene la misión
De invitar a la población a la movilización
En defensa de lo público
Hoy te declaramos nuestro enemigo público
Pues con tus propuestas y proyectos te apoderas de lo nuestro
¿Cuánta gente se ha quedado sin comer para pagarte los impuestos?
Hoy protestamos y decimos basta a la subasta
De las plantas procesadoras de energía
Pues con el breke en las manos de las grandes multinacionales
América Latina será sumida en la miseria
Cuando llegue la factura, será sumida en la miseria
Luego viene el apagón, será sumida en la miseria
Y luego viene la expropiación, será sumida en miseria
Será sumida en la miseria
Aviso al público de la República
Que los servicios públicos los privatizarán
Así que el público de la República
Sin servicios públicos se quedará
Pues lo que era público, no será público
Por consecuencias de la Banca Mundial
Aviso al público de la República
Que los servicios públicos los privatizarán [...] 

Furthermore, studies have shown that Afro-Colombians, especially in urban centers, are disproportionately poorer than non-blacks are, a reality substantiated by many of these rappers who maintain that behind economic exploitation, they too see racist motives on the part of the ruling elites. In their song, “Nacidos en el ghetto,” *Ghettos Clan* begins by claiming that they are tired of being mistreated by the law and of living in misery among ambitious and racist people. They blame their impoverishment on the state and imperialists, and while one rapper proudly defines his black race as the long bearer of historical resistance, he laments that, as a third class citizen, he cannot go to the university despite his intelligence:

Estamos cansados de ser maltratados por la ley
Exigimos respeto porque somos chicos con conciencia
Y somos hijos del ghetto [...] 
Es *Ghettos Clan* al que vas a escuchar
Tanta pobreza, miseria, hambre, injusticia
Gente inconsciente, ambiciosa, mala y racista
Esto es por culpa del estado y los imperialistas
Que estamos viviendo en condiciones infrahumanas
¡Protesta pueblo! ¡Protesta hermano! ¡Protesta pana!

Sí, ya venimos a protestar
Es *Ghettos Clan* al que vas a escuchar
Te traemos sentimiento que es de puro movimiento
Sólo conciencia te estamos transmitiendo [...] 

Camino por mi ghetto ya pensando que hacer
Yo busco y no hallo trabajo que me des
Sí camino, sí camino, yo camino sin parar
Veo que la renta ya no tengo para pagar
Observo que la vida me oprime más y más
Pero de esta mierda yo me quiero escapar
Ya estoy buscando una salida
Ya no quiero ser más esclavo de esta porquería
Miro la esclavitud, no es física, es mental
Y es que el sistema nos oprime más y más [...]

La maldita policía que nos quiere prohibir
Nuestras propias costumbres y formas de vestir
Si camino con mi pana, nos quieren parar
Pensando que algo nos vamos a robar
Sentimiento, movimiento es que te voy a transmitir
Para que sientas, policía, que no me puedes prohibir
Siempre hostigando, siempre molestando
A la gente de abajo siempre, siempre correteando
Que te pulas y te critiques, nunca me vas a cambiar
Mi cultura y mis raíces convigo van a estar
Este breve sentimiento te lo trae Ghettos Clan
Para que sientas, policía, y te pongas a pensar [...]

Pero mi raza, pero mi raza
Pero mi raza es negra y de buena resistencia
Pero en mi cabeza brilla pura inteligencia
Buena inteligencia que no puedo aprovechar
Por la falta de dinero a la U no voy a llegar
Ciudadanos de tercera en este maldito país
Esas son las cosas que no pueden seguir [...]

Ultimately, globalization and neoliberal reform in Colombia have led to the concentration of income and political and economic power in the hands of a few while simultaneously resulting in record levels of poverty. If economic exploitation is inextricably tied to questions of race, in this era of globalization in which economic disparities are exasperated between the rich and the poor, it therefore means that the economic disparities between blacks and non-blacks will only continue to grow. In other words, global capital thrives on economic disparities (historically structured around socio-racial hierarchies) and it will continue to feed off of cheap labor - from women, children and “people of color” - in the periphery, where most material goods are now produced. Furthermore, certain dynamics of globalization – especially the spread of
foreign capital to the Pacific littoral – have greatly contributed to the displacement and mass urbanization of Afro-Colombian communities, which has likewise been accompanied by rising violence, declining living conditions and more poverty. Ultimately, the constitutional promises of (ethnic) inclusion, of a more egalitarian society, have clashed with the economic realities created by globalization. The excluding nature of the neoliberal model together with its emphasis on cutbacks in public spending seem to contradict the neoliberal promise of integration, which, in turn, makes it almost impossible for the elites to make alliances with other social sectors and/or ethnic-minority groups. In the end, the political inclusion guaranteed by the new Constitution has been obstructed “by the exclusion generated by macroeconomic policies and by the exclusionary manner in which the economic model was adopted and implemented (Van Cott 122).

4.7 Police Brutality and Social Cleansing: “Sufridas realidades de mi barrio”

Interestingly enough, the abovementioned song by Ghettos Clan likewise calls attention to police brutality, which is often racially motivated. Unfortunately, as poverty grows and consequently, violence escalates, it is all too often counteracted with more weapons, mounting repression, more vigilance, additional prisons, added private security, and more spatial segregation as a certain politics of fear spread and take hold of city life (Trigo, “A Two Sided Coin”). These counter-offensive or retaliation methods are all too common in a country like Colombia, where there is a history of social cleansing and police brutality. While doing field research in Charco Azul of the district of Aguablanca, it was common to see truckloads of police officers or soldiers bearing automatic
weapons, driving right through the heart of the neighborhood. It is understandable, then, that within Afro-Colombian rap, there are songs like, “Grave Error”, by *Flow Flow y Melanina*, which represents an encounter between a young black rapper and a police officer who exploits his authority and psychologically and physically abuses the young man in front of his family while accusing him of being a drug dealer and a murderer:

[Police Officer]

[...] Te niegas que eres un bandolero y que lo pegas
Que eres un asesino y con tus víctimas te ciegas
Que eres el encargado en esta zona de la entrega
Siempre andas con más de lo normal
De lo usual, de la dosis personal
No me digas que no porque te vuelvo a golpear [...]  

The rapper, declaring himself innocent to the police officer and admitting only to being a street poet, insists that it’s a case of mistaken identity:

[Rapper]

Yo no soy aquel que piensan que soy
Me confunde señor
Está cometiendo un grave error
Melanina yo soy
El poeta de la calle
Yo soy de aquí, yo soy del Valle
Sólo abusas de la autoridad que te da
Ese uniforme y esa arma, papá ¡Ja!
Sabes que es ilegal y no me puedes golpear
¿Cuál es la orden de arresto?
¿Cuál es tu pretexto?

No tengo la culpa
De que te encuentres molesto [...]  

Nonetheless, towards the end of the song, the rapper and the policeman once again meet later in life, but this time, the rapper takes vengeance upon the officer, to be inferred by the thundering gunshot that ends this musical piece. This song powerfully illustrates the
suffering, and above all, the humiliation that these young men experience as a result of police brutality. Acting out through music this fantasized desire of revenge is a way of exorcizing these demons and healing the wounds:

[Police Officer]

[...] ¡Disculpa! No tuve la culpa, fue un error

[Rapper]

Balbuceas ahora, sí, sientes miedo, gonorrhea
Te meas, te tiemblan las popeas
Me lloras, me imploras, tus lágrimas ajenas
No te sientes muy macho con tu combo de hienas
Estás cagado, sucio en el pecado
Voy a cobrarte todo lo que de mí has abusado
No es nada personal, es cuestión de negocios
Socio no es socio
Tú me diste, yo te doy
Me buscastes, aquí estoy
No sé cómo lo haré, pero me vengaré
Uno a uno los encontraré ¡Eh!
Te lloré, te imploré y no me quisiste escuchar
Grave error
Error fatal
¡PUN!

Furthermore, other groups such as Zona Marginal and Artefacto also draw attention to the “encapuchados,” or hooded men, who act as part of local militias involved in campaigns of social cleansing, who arrive in the middle of the night, preying on urban youth believed to be delinquents or a threat to society:

“Sufridas Realidades” by Zona Marginal

[...] Se oyen varios tiros, varios cortes, varios gritos
¿A quién le habrá tocado haber caído sobre el piso?
¡Cubierto en sangre!
Y su madre está llorando
Mi primo aún no llega y no sé qué está pasando
¿Será que fue atrapado por la limpieza social?
Los capuchos apuntando, otra bala disparar  
Se aguardan los pasos, sonrisas acabadas  
No se comenta nada y otra noche titulada  

Sufridas realidades de mi barrio  
Sufridas realidades vivo a diario  
Sufridas realidades de mi barrio  
Sufridas realidades ves a diario [...]

The neoliberal model in Colombia has led to growing poverty, a rise in labor exploitation and unemployment, and consequently, the social and economic exclusion of the masses. In order to implement these unpopular policies, labor and social rights are eliminated, social discontent is repressed and regimes of control and vigilance are imposed (Sarmiento Anzola 482-3). It should not be surprising, therefore, that “democratic security” translates into the strengthening of security forces through additional police officers and soldiers, more civilian informants, an anti-terrorist statute that facilitates the detention of suspects\(^8\) and a growing number of prisons (485).\(^9\) The apparatuses of justice and repression, like all systems of social control, protect and serve the interests of the upper classes; social protest has been criminalized, fundamental rights

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\(^8\) The central component of democratic security during 2003 was massive and often arbitrary detentions or arrests – with special participation from the security forces –, which were directed towards campesinos, union members, political opposition, civic leaders and defenders of human rights. Between September of 2002 and December of 2003, a total of 6,038 people were detained, of which 4,846 corresponded to massive arrests in which at least 20 people were detained (Colombia: Informe Estadístico de Derechos Humanos 3).

\(^9\) In 2003, overcrowding in Colombian prisons meant that they had surpassed capacity by about 14,075 inmates. In a report in El Tiempo, in August of 2004, that number had reached 18,806 persons. (“Hacinamiento” 1). Although the majority of the prisoners were involved in the illicit drug trade, many of them turned to crime out of the necessity to survive, and for the Colombian state, the solution is to build more prisons. In fact, due to the growing number of prisoners, the Colombian government now plans to construct 46 new penitentiary centers and 11 prisons between 2006 and 2012, in addition to the 4 prisons currently under construction and three that are being expanded. According to the Minister of the Interior, the prison population has increased 33.4% between 1996 and 2004 (“El Gobierno”).
have been taken away, and the armed conflict has intensified, all of which form part of the consolidation of neoliberalism and the imposition of forced development (488).

For instance, thousands of trade union members have been murdered by paramilitaries who protect corporate interests.10 In fact, trade union members, teachers, journalists, human rights workers, and community leaders have been targeted as political opposition and as obstacles to corporate, economic interests: “This is the context in which a national population is repressed, in which the Colombian military collaborates with death squads, in which the decades-long civil war continues, and in which the United States pours arms, training and military personnel into the maelstrom” (Simons 10). In the end, these repressive measures are common in this era of globalization and neoliberal reform. According to Chossudovsky, the implementation of these economic reforms “invariably requires the backing of the military and of the authoritarian state. Structural adjustment promotes bogus institutions and a fake parliamentary democracy which in turn supports the process of economic restructuring” (36).

4.8 Consumption: “La situación del consumo día a día me enloquece”

Although I will later discuss how the consumption of U.S. hip-hop as a cultural export nourishes ethnic identities, here I am most interested in how globalization seeks the expansion of consumer markets leading to a culture of consumerism: “the sustained creation, segmentation and absorption of new consumer markets and new consumers to the market through the intensive colonization of culture and everyday life” (Trigo, “Two

10 During 2003, there were 1,440 victims of 317 massacres and the main culprit was overwhelmingly the paramilitaries, 70% (3% the State Police Force; 27% the guerrillas) (Colombia: Informe Estadístico de Derechos 8-9).
Sided Coin”). Since Colombia began to radically open its markets to the global economy in the late 1980s, U.S. corporations and industries not only export U.S. material goods to Colombia, but also symbolic goods, such as U.S. pop culture (discussed in chapters three and five), which implies a simultaneous spread of U.S. values and behaviors.\footnote{The United States is Colombia’s major trading partner. For instance, U.S. exports to Colombia comprised almost 42% of all Colombian imports in 1997 (Serafino 6).} The spread of global capital and the opening of local markets, along with the reach of mass communication systems through which youth – as primary marketing targets – are bombarded and manipulated by product propaganda, produce desires by encouraging continuous consumption. The problem arises when these young consumers, with very little if any buying power, are essentially excluded from the markets and denied the ability to consume, or in many ways, denied access to this aspired cosmopolitanism.

Although I previously addressed how the consumption of hip-hop and its imagery shape discourses on authenticity and determine the social value of hip-hop as an artistic medium for protest and denunciation, now I would like to touch upon how the exportation of contemporary U.S. rap leads to certain consumer desires and behaviors among Colombian youth. Original hip-hop products, styles, and apparel supposedly represented a more accessible alternative to the consumption and styles of the wealthier classes in New York, which would seem to explain why poor, urban youth have been attracted to hip-hop: “As an alternative means of status formation, hip hop style forges local identities for teenagers who understand their limited access to traditional avenues of social status attainment” (Rose 38). However, due to recent commercialization and commodification of hip-hop (and hence, rising costs of hip-hop styles and apparel), these
identifications established through active participation and consumption, in many ways, have become more and more difficult to obtain. On one hand, I’ve found that most Afro-Colombian rappers, and *mestizo* rappers for that matter, are aware and even critical of the superficial aspect of current, commercialized rap that exalts a wanton lifestyle of riches, women and fame. On the other hand, it is clear that this imagery and these aesthetics do attract listeners and influence, to an extent, in some of the music, behaviors and actions of Colombian hip-hop youth. In fact, it is especially evident in the aesthetic tastes and conduct of younger members of Colombian hip-hop’s listening public, as evidenced by the use of ostentatious jewelry and certain clothing styles and brand names such as South Pole, Adidas, etc. Furthermore, many of the rappers themselves have bought into this imagery and these styles as a way to validate their hip-hop status or even appeal to their Colombian audiences.

In this sense, the “bling-bling” or materialistic lifestyles promoted through contemporary rap present various challenges. While attending hip-hop events and interacting with Colombia’s hip-hop youth, it becomes obvious that the commercialization and exportation of the U.S. “hood” and gangster life, together with the paradoxical endorsement of materialistic gain and misogynist attitudes, are becoming more attractive and alluring to certain sectors of the country’s urban youth. Marginalized adolescents, to whom the cultural industry strategically markets, glorifies and even exoticizes hip-hop, U.S. black culture, ghetto life and poverty, are lured by both the materialistic lifestyles and the aggressive and rebellious behaviors observed and consumed through U.S. hip-hop imagery; as marginalized, poor and oppressed youth, many rap listeners identify with the need to assume violent and aggressive behavior
observed and consumed through U.S. hip-hop as a type of defense mechanism, as a way to feel empowered in a society that negates them any sort of social agency. However, what social and cultural consequences can be expected as a result of commercialized rap that encourages, among some of the world’s most impoverished youth, both aggressive behaviors and at the same time rampant consumption? The growing difficulty in obtaining hip-hop styles and mass mediated forms of hip-hop and rap within this culture that ironically promotes riches among the poor can also lead to feelings of exclusion, frustration and perhaps more aggressive or violent behavior. It shouldn’t be too surprising, then, that at recent hip-hop events there have been incidences of fights and violence, not to mention concerns about growing drug consumption.

The reality that younger, perhaps less-informed, urban youth are lured into this wanton lifestyle and attracted by the imagery propagated through commercialized hip-hop only reflects a small part of a much larger picture of consumer culture. In other words, the hip-hop culture only represents the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the spread of U.S. consumer values and tastes through the importation of the U.S. pop culture.

12 Of course there is an underground hip-hop movement in the U.S. that resists the commercialization and “watering down” of their musical content. While many of my contacts are aware of and celebrate this side of hip-hop and rap that they access through internet, magazines, and migration flows, it seems that the vast majority of youth interested in hip-hop and rap are not as well-informed. Furthermore, it is very difficult to compete with the flashy and “sexy” imagery professionally and masterfully propagated through contemporary, commercialized rap.

13 Hip-hop audiences can nonetheless acquire both bootlegged music and even apparel, which on one hand does in fact permit a form of “democratic” consumption of these cultural goods. However, on the other hand, due to pressure from U.S. multinationals and the U.S. government, Colombian officials and authorities are attempting to crackdown on bootlegging, which, in turn, makes this informal consumption of music and urban styles somewhat more difficult. Furthermore, bootlegging has not eliminated class distinction established through these different forms of consumption. Although an individual can indeed obtain access to most goods through the “black market,” social hierarchies are, nonetheless, maintained through types of consumption. In other words, more prestige is bestowed on those who buy legit CDs, or even for example, the “imports”. And lastly, Popin, the owner of Ayara, a Colombian brand of hip-hop apparel, complains that the youth still prefers buying bootlegged versions of U.S. clothing and styles over “buying Colombian”.

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and symbolic goods in general. Fortunately, the Afro-Colombian rappers and hip-hoppers in this study continue to believe in hip-hop culture and these musical forms as an alternative, as a means of social protest, as a cultural form of expression to be used by society’s downtrodden. Furthermore, it is also seen as a means of raising awareness, of correcting social behaviors thought to be detrimental to members of impoverished communities. Therefore, perhaps there is still a glimmer of hope seeing that most of the Afro-Colombian rappers and groups in this study are harshly critical of the influence and the ill effects produced by this culture of consumerism propagated through systems of mass communication. Whether they can combat and counteract the imagery, messages and influence of U.S. pop culture is doubtful considering the amount of time and money that multinational entertainment corporations invest in marketing their products in international markets. Nonetheless, through their music, several groups attempt to raise awareness among the members of their communities by denouncing consumerism and the narcissistic behaviors it engenders in addition to the violence it likewise has stimulated as people, living in poverty, try to satisfy these desires by any means necessary. For example, the group Zona Marginal dedicates an entire song to the topic, appropriately entitled, “Consumo,” in which young rappers state that this consumer culture literally drives them crazy:14

        [...] La situación del consumo día a día me enloquece
Vino, ropa cara y muchísimas mujeres
Que si quiero ser alguien en esta puta vida
Zapatillas bien planteadas y pura mecha fina

14 The rappers of Zona Marginal do a great deal of community service with young people in their neighborhood, a point on which I expand in the following chapter. Here, I want to mention that in this particular piece, they actually invited some young rappers from their barrio to rap about their beliefs and perspectives on consumption and consumer culture.
Pero mis bolsillos ahora se encuentran en mera bancarrota  
Y a como dé lugar tengo que estar a la moda  
Robar, matar, mi vida importa un pepino  
Pues tengo que lucir como puro niño rico  
El hambre en mi casa, un cero a la izquierda  
Un chico bien plantado, hay que ganar de presencia  
Mi fierro, ahora sólo queda el humo  
Mi dios es el dinero por el maldito consumo

Hablo de los momentos de las comunicaciones  
Especialmente la radio y la televisión  
Por medio de esto se nota la opresión  
Donde no hay derecho a la libre expresión  
Tienes que estar sentado y bien concentrado  
Y tragar la basura que la pantalla te ha dado  
Te ponen a soñar, te ponen a volar  
Te llenan de ilusiones, te alejan de la verdad [...]

Globalization has facilitated the worldwide spread of discourses on democracy, as promises temporarily converted into a symbolic substitute for social mobility. In a sense, social identity is achieved through political participation, communitarian initiatives and certain levels of access to mass media and freedom of expression (for example, through music and new channels of artistic expression). However, faced with a dismal outlook for a future with little or no social mobility, “democracy demotivates the poor” (Hopenhayn 23). This lack of motivation and/or frustration becomes apparent among this Afro-Colombian youth who find it more difficult to obtain an education and/or find employment. Meanwhile, by way of cultural consumption, they are introduced to new and varied products and services – bearing symbols of social mobility – to which they are denied access: “The scarcity of food in impoverished households coexists with the obesity of messages consumed on television” (24). The abovementioned song by Zona Marginal – and even some of the contradictory behaviors observed among Colombian hip-hop youth – inform listeners of this globalization that leads to new forms of violence
as people are “locally excluded between expectations and achievements, between ideological, symbolic and affective allurement into a way of life for which they are economically and socially forbidden. The attraction of goods continuously on display and the ostentatious display of luxury beyond reach generate frustration, anger, and hate” (Jelin, UNESCO 1998, 119-120, quoted in Trigo, “Two Sided Coin).

4.9 Violence: “En los rostros se refleja la violencia”

This study (re)presents more recent forms of violence in Colombia that stem not only from the armed conflict (which obviously has been wreaking havoc in the country for many decades now), but also due to certain dynamics and pressures of globalization: the aggravation of the armed conflict, massive displacement, high levels of poverty, inadequate incomes, unemployment, underemployment, lack of job security (in the multiple forms of labor flexibilization), racial and gendered discrimination, the shortage of any type of social security or assistance, the culture of consumerism, drug trafficking, etc. Most of the themes covered thus far in this chapter deal, in one way or another, with types of violence. And it is worthwhile to note that most homicides in Colombia are no longer attributable to political violence, but instead to economic and social violence, often tied to drug trafficking, poverty and delinquency, especially in urban centers. In the year 2000, for example, Bogotá, Medellín and Cali represented 40-60% of urban homicides (Moser 1-4). Furthermore, urban violence is no longer confined only to the poor neighborhoods (las comunas, los ghettos), but instead experienced by Colombians in all sectors of urban centers. Those most affected by this violence, are usually young men from the lower strata of society, with little or no education. According to statistics
taken from the years 1980-1995 (a period of great neoliberal economic reforms), the national rate of homicides for males between the ages of 15-44 escalated from 29 to 394 homicides for every 100,000 men; for females, the increase was from 23 to 30 for every 100,000 women. Therefore, in urban settings, there are very high proportions of adolescent perpetuators and victims of economic and social violence (4-5). This violence in poor, urban neighborhoods, affecting the lives of these young men and women, is also a very common topic in Afro-Colombian rap. In the song, “País en Guerra”, Zona Marginal vividly represents many of the forms of violence now prevalent in Colombia, which they see as a result of the armed conflict, urban gangs, drug trafficking, and ethnic and class conflicts, all of which, according to them, boils down to economic interests (in land and gold):

[...]

Pero los guerreros de estas guerras han cambiado
Ahora es la insurgencia con las tropas del estado
Pandillas juveniles contra grupos milicianos
La guerra de los narcos, la guerra entre sicarios
La guerra de las razas y entre clases sociales
La del cazador en contra de los animales
Esto es una sociedad largamente hecha de plomo
Donde han reinado las guerras por las tierras y el oro
Guerras tácitas, sordas, nunca declaradas
Donde el resultado es muerte y familias desplazadas
Después de tanto tiempo ya estamos acostumbrados
A vivir tranquilamente en este país armado

Guerra aquí, guerra allá
Y esto, ¿cuándo parará?
Furthermore, in the song appropriately entitled, “Violencia” by Asilo 38, they too attempt to represent the many forms and causes of both urban and rural violence in Colombia, which range from economic exploitation and corruption, international intervention, police brutality, and materialistic desires and needs:

La violencia en esta ciudad
De una forma u otra a todos nos va a acabar
La violencia en este país
De una forma u otra a todos hace sufrir

Caminando por la calle podemos observar
La cruda realidad que a diario se tiene que enfrentar
Explotación, corrupción, desplazamiento, tal descontrol
Disparos en la cabeza para ejercer todo el control
Diariamente levantamientos de tensiones, allanamientos
En la ciudad descontento, en los campos enfrentamientos
El asesino estatal, bajo una ley ilegal
Derramando sangre en la ciudad por interés internacional

Regalando el pan, asesinando por la miga
Muerte para ti, muerte para tu semilla
La vuelta es dura, escarbando en la basura
18 en la esquina para volar de la calentura
La gente con temor
Todos los días hay tensión
El pánico organizado, se mantiene todo el sector
Por el impacto criminal, una bala policial
Crisis social en un sistema demencial […]

En medio de hipocresías, sangre de maldad
Historias las que se viven en esta puta sociedad
Egoísmo, desconfianza, mucha codicia
La raíz de los problemas motivó tanta violencia
El país en el que vivo por entero se ha convertido
En un campo de batalla, de sangre intenso río
El clima no es el mismo, el ambiente es diferente
Y en los rostros se refleja la violencia […]

Through this testimonial rap, these artists do indeed attribute a great deal of the daily violence they must endure, especially in urban centers, not just to political factors,
but also to economic ones. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, the numerous rap songs representing, denouncing and calling attention to violence in Colombia would seem to support those critics of globalization who claim that the inequalities and extreme levels of poverty it has engendered have likewise led to rising incidences of violence around the world. At the same time, it is hard to ignore any correlations that may exist between the spread of consumer culture and growing poverty around the world that too can produce frustration and violent behaviors. At any rate, due to the multiplicity of competing interests and the various groups involved, most of this rap provides a national landscape permeated by violence that becomes almost unintelligible.

A recent report on criminality in Colombia from the police force claims that when comparing statistics from the year 2003 with those from 2004, there was a 2% reduction in criminality. The report goes on to point out that in 2003 there were 310,165 crimes committed compared to 302,697 in 2004; of these 2004 crimes, homicides and forms of personal aggression made up 46% of all the crimes, which allegedly represents a 14% reduction in the form of 3,356 less cases when compared to statistics from 2003 (23,532 compared to 20,157) (Policía Nacional de Colombia 14-15). This report goes on to announce decreases in theft, piracy, kidnapping, terrorism, all of which is attributed to institutional and governmental programs (“democratic security”) that translate into more trust and confidence in the authorities, in addition to progress in social, economic, political and cultural development which has led to an improved well-being for everyone (14-15). A “Fact Sheet” on Colombia compiled by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) mirrors some of the same findings while stating that “the
country's human rights record improved significantly as the national homicide rate fell by 12%, trade unionist murders were reduced by 37%, and kidnappings fell by 42%” (“Colombia Program Description”).

While some of the data indicating reductions in crime and violence may be encouraging, the final numbers are still alarming. Furthermore, the findings from these studies do raise certain questions; are these reductions just part of the administration’s campaign to make citizens feel safer as part of this “democratic security” scheme put in place to improve the international image of Colombia? Are these findings to be used by the U.S. government as a justification for further aid (and intervention) to Colombia? Those who are skeptical about the claims made in the study tend to point out various contradictions: displacement is still high and seems to be increasing once again; drug consumption among urban youth is rising; poverty is overwhelming; prisons are overcrowded; police forces are expanding; but yet violence and crime are decreasing? Perhaps any contradictions between extreme poverty and decreases in crime or violence can be understood not as improvements in the overall socio-economic well-being of Colombian society given that various indicators – especially income disparities – show otherwise. Instead, these contradictions can be interpreted as an administration (regime) that has been very adept at protecting the capital interests of the elites while pleading for (demanding) loyalty from the country’s poor masses in the name of democracy and

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15 The same report from USAID makes clear that many regions “remain prone to violence, illicit crop cultivation, forced displacement and human rights abuses […] Colombia faces severe income disparities, poverty, and inadequate social services […] Improvement in Colombia's social sectors is especially challenging considering that the Uribe Government has tightened fiscal spending. Finally, while Colombia’s illegal armed groups have been weakened, their presence and ability to exert violence against the state and civilians continues” (http://www.state.gov/p/inl/rls/fs/49022.htm).
national security; President Uribe’s discourses on “democratic security” and his ability to appeal to the masses – especially through media outlets – have successfully made Colombians feel safer and more positive about the future, as evinced by his convincing reelection in 2006.

However, my personal perception is that, in general, Afro-Colombian communities, particularly the urban youth with whom I worked so closely, are not so optimistic about the future. Ultimately, the chronic violence that traverses Colombian society – resulting in forced displacements, deaths, and other traumas – particularly victimizes indigenous peoples and Afro-Colombians. Many of the ethnic rights established in the Constitution have become no more than empty promises, nullified by multiple manifestations of violence (Agudelo 179). While forced displacements, threats, assassinations of community leaders, massacres, and other human rights violations continue to take place within Afro-Colombian populations, a good part of these communities that depend on collective property titles have had to abandon their territories fleeing from the violence. It only seems logical that Afro-Colombians, who commonly suffer from higher rates of poverty and unemployment while living in some of the more impoverished, unstable and violent urban and rural areas in the country, would not feel as confident about the future.

4.10 Final Thoughts

In this chapter, I have attempted to demonstrate some of the more significant ways in which globalization manifests itself within Colombia’s socio-political crisis and especially some of its specific effects on Afro-Colombian communities. Beginning in the
1970s, Colombia has been immersed in these transformations, and since the end of the 1980s, the move towards restructuring and economic liberalization has only intensified. In general, globalization indicates the end of an international economic trend that predominated until the mid-1980s when nation-states had more control over their domestic economies and political affairs. Today, many such controls and regulations have evaporated, meaning that now multinationals and foreign investors have more control within this new regime of accumulation. For example, the Colombian state is now much more susceptible to the workings of global capital and the mandates of the IMF and the World Bank that frequently place the interests of the agents of economic liberalization (i.e. payment of foreign debts) above the priorities of the state and/or the general well-being of society (i.e. health care). While certain sectors of Colombia’s elite grow wealthier as a result of economic liberalization, evidence has indicated that economic policies of structural adjustment mandated by these organizations have led to more unemployment, growing poverty and the widening of the gap between the rich and the poor.

Furthermore, despite any social or political gains achieved by the new Constitution, globalization and neoliberal reform, in many ways, have contributed to the worsening of the country’s armed conflict as evidenced by a resurgence of “narco-terrorism,” guerilla warfare and violence. For instance, the neoliberal economic opening of Colombia’s market, in addition to processes of deregulation and decentralization, have enticed foreign and wealthy Colombian investors to “invade” certain territories of the country in search of economic opportunities who, in turn, often come into conflict with the interests of insurgent groups resulting in more tension and violence. In a word,
entrepreneurs and multinationals, which base their decisions on market values and speculation, not only determine or influence military strategies, but also instigate more fighting, as evidenced by Plan Colombia’s “war on drugs” that has become a war against insurgent groups in an effort to protect certain economic interests.

It can also be argued that what was already a “weak” Colombian state has been debilitated even further by the dynamics of globalization and the neoliberal model. Within this almost permanent state of war, the Colombian government – likewise encumbered by the corruption and the violence engendered by the now globalized drug trade – has not been sovereign in all regions of the country; it has unevenly integrated national territories and some regions are even under the control of distinct political forces. Moreover, under the minimalist role of the nation-state promoted by the neoliberal model, and under the guidance of the Washington-based financial institutions, it is now even more difficult for Colombia to develop a national economy: “the internationalisation of macro-economic policy transforms countries into open economic territories and national economies into ‘reserves’ of cheap labour and natural resources” (Chossudovsky 37). Currently, multinational corporations and global capital play a much more central role in the structuring of Colombian territories and populations, its resources and cheap labor supply (especially evident in the Pacific littoral). These new regimes of accumulation “tend to make nation-states merely instruments to record the flows of the commodities, monies, and populations that they set in motion” (Hardt and Negri 31). In the end, the only state institution that apparently has grown in both scope and strength is that of security forces, in other words, institutions needed to repress social discontent that result from the imposition of such an unequal and unjust regime.
If the Colombian state historically has not satisfied the needs of the poor, the marginalized, the indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, what can be expected of a “weaker,” perhaps more corrupt state tightly bound to upper class elites and global capital? It should come as no surprise, therefore, that for these Afro-Colombians rappers, promises and guarantees made by the government are viewed as superficial and empty, and very few of them realistically hope that, if his/her rights are violated, the state will carry out some sort of compensation. The Colombian state does not count on the necessary authority to guarantee the validity of constitutional and legal order to all of its citizens in all of the country’s territories (Naranjo Giraldo 86). This is why many of the messages and much of the rage found in Afro-Colombian rap echo a lack of confidence and distrust in a government that for so long has either been unwilling or unable to protect their communities’ rights supposedly guaranteed by the Constitution. And the situation will not change anytime soon, seeing that President Álvaro Uribe’s government (2002-2006, and now 2006-2010) has further implemented the neoliberal model (promoting strong labor and social security reforms), turned over economic and financial concerns to the IMF and politic concerns to the U.S. Department of the State, while at the same time, leading Colombia – without many reservations – into free trade negotiations with the U.S. (Tratado de Libre Comercio) (Sarmiento Anzola 480).

And all of these processes together have generated the radical acceleration of social and cultural transformations as evidenced by massive displacement (especially of Afro-Colombian communities), the dual process of depopulation and mass urbanization, growing heterogeneity in Colombian cities often accompanied by ethnic tension and conflict, indices of violence, growing poverty and rampant consumption. At the same
time, within Colombia’s growing cities, all sectors of the population are now more than ever integrated into processes of economic modernization and cultural modernity, an occurrence often characterized by the pervasive influence of U.S. pop culture and emergent modes of transculturation, which can be perceived as either positive or negative depending on one’s perspective. Most importantly, these forces and transformations are often beyond the control of the Colombian state that can no longer influence the direction of cultural production or the creation of social identities, much of which is now heavily determined by the deregulated global market and the entrance of symbolic goods (U.S. culture industry) (points explored in more detail in the next chapter).

Why study the effects of globalization and the implementation of the neoliberal model alongside Afro-Colombian hip-hop? Because it illustrates how economic and cultural globalization in conjunction with failed domestic policies produce many of the social ills and challenges weighing on this generation at a global crossroads, a generation that embodies the future of Afro-Colombians. The slue of socio-political ills and cultural transformations engendered by these processes converge on these young artists, informing their music, in both content and form. Globalization, accompanied by the transnational expansion of media networks, has facilitated the exportation of Hollywood iconography and images of violence, especially, with regards to the images often exported through hip-hop. Furthermore, globalization has likewise facilitated the circulation of arms contraband and illicit drugs. And all of these processes have had detrimental effects in Colombia by reinforcing the country’s culture of violence. In the end, poverty, crime, violence, unemployment, lack of educational opportunities,
increased involvement by young people in the illicit drug trade together with mounting vigilance and forms of repression have all led to growing feelings of frustration, rage, and a sense of despair about the future.

It is imperative to listen to these voices from “the periphery of the periphery” as Alfredo Vanin, an Afro-Colombian scholar and poet, would say. Youth, as a vulnerable “subgroup” in most societies around the world, often express their frustration through rebellious ways or channels, such as hip-hop. The frustration and rage in Afro-Colombian rap illustrate that powerlessness, defined as the inability to influence the political and economic decisions that are shaping their lives, is an inherent condition of the globalization process. The implication here is that oppression does not necessarily occur by chance. Instead, it is continually reproduced while serving the economic interests of the ruling elites. And the inability – or unwillingness – of the Colombian state to attend to the needs of these Afro-Colombians almost guarantees that this powerlessness and the struggle for power will continue for future generations.

Similar to their Afro-Colombian literary predecessors, these rappers – as representatives of their ethnic-racial, social and age group – cannot always separate their struggles from those of the masses. However, the examples provided here show that many of these artists feel compelled to bring the ethnic component to the attention of their listeners, realizing that the race issue often complicates the economic one. Furthermore, although many of these themes are addressed throughout the whole of Colombian rap, this Afro-Colombian rap offers unique interpretations of key social events in the country and there are definite ethnic nuances found within this “black perspective.” As members of communities that have historically been marginalized, when
Afro-Colombian rappers pick up a microphone, speak their minds and fill public spaces with testimony, it inevitably evokes issues of ethnicity and power. As Yúdice states in his analysis of funk and hip-hop among Afro-Brazilian youth, “In effect, popular music and dance became opportunities to perform practices of public participation (or citizenship) otherwise left unverbalized” (133).

Instead of partaking in formal party politics, these rappers carry out a critique of everyday life, the social ills and challenges that they face. Through rap, these Afro-Colombian artists carry out a type of negative politics, a kind of politicization in the margins of politics, in other words, a form of anti-politics which works to undermine and destabilize the ideological and institutional apparatuses associated with the nation-state by operating on the political plane, “a mobile, nomadic, ubiquitous dimension that can arise in the interior of any social sphere [...] wherever and whenever social identities based on division, enmity and real or potential confrontation are built” (Arditi 168). This Afro-Colombian rap often serves as a type of barometer, which evaluates and gauges the actions and movements of Colombian hegemonic culture at a global crossroads. Through their music, these Afro-Colombian rappers serve as interrogators of Colombia’s hegemonic elites by constantly questioning and challenging the dominant discourses with regards to democracy, human rights, ethnic tolerance, etc.

Furthermore, the prevalence of these denunciations found in Afro-Colombian rap support those who argue that ethnic-racial minority groups living in the peripheries of the world do no benefit from economic globalization and its anticipated rising tide of wealth and spread of human rights. Their music is infused with protest, frustration, aggressiveness and anger because they are cognizant that, in this age of globalization, the
promises of economic distribution, political democracy, ethnic and sexual tolerance, and
cultural respect are not and cannot be for everybody. Ultimately, Afro-Colombian rap
questions the ruling elite’s efforts at inventing an international image of a more
democratic, receptive and tolerant government. Multiculturality and the celebration of
difference may form part of the postmodern condition, however, it should also be
interpreted “as the locus of an intersection between strategies of political control and the
emergence of multiple identities” (Wade, Music 229).

Besides understanding “how” U.S. hip-hop has traveled, we now start to better understand “why” hip-hop has traveled so well. As mentioned, neoliberal globalization coupled with the intensification of the armed conflict and forced internal displacement have led to the mass urbanization of Afro-Colombian communities. These processes have resulted in a sizable urban population of Afro-Colombian youth who likewise become potential consumers of U.S. cultural products. In this way, neoliberal globalization is largely responsible for producing masses of potential consumers in urban centers while at the same time providing the means to bombard them with U.S. pop culture. And if hip-hop originally emerged from a social context marked by racial and class tensions, it seems logical that this music and its original discourses could spread in similar contexts in the periphery, like Colombia, where those tensions are at times more pronounced than those in the world’s economic centers. Within much of the imagery found in U.S. hip-hop, Afro-Colombian rappers see a reflection of their own conflicts and struggles, which ironically are exacerbated by globalization: heightened social exclusion, poverty and violence. It is in this way that globalization often produces many of the social ills and local socio-cultural developments that serve as catalysts for both the appropriation of hip-
hop and for its oppositional force. For this reason, the socio-political messages (and even the transcultured forms to be addressed in the next chapter) of this Afro-Colombian rap can only be fully appreciated alongside a consideration of global processes and how they modify or influence local, Colombian contexts, at times intensifying class, ethnic and generational tensions. Through a U.S. African American or even transnational musical form, these performers rap about that which is local, but it is a local that is strongly affected by the global. Of course, herein lies an obvious contradiction: Afro-Colombian youth use a transnational form of cultural expression available to them via processes of globalization in order to denounce many of the very processes and ideologies that facilitated the exportation and importation of hip-hop and rap in the first place. In interviews, rappers confirm that they are very aware of this contradiction, but they liken it to a defense mechanism of the “weak,” a cultural strategy in which they appropriate hegemonic culture to resist its imposition (addressed in more detail in the following chapter).
In the previous chapter, I addressed Afro-Colombian hip-hop as a conduit for social protest whose lyrical content (re)presents many of the challenges and social ills engendered by globalization and neoliberal economic reforms. However, Afro-Colombian youth use hip-hop not only as a medium through which they channel their frustration and anger, but also as a tool for establishing alliances with various local and international communities and for embarking on new professional and cultural activities. In this chapter, I am particularly interested in exploring the ways in which Afro-Colombian rappers are reworking ethnic identities through music and hip-hop aesthetics, since music practices, from consumption to performance, can be understood as processes through which identity is not simply reflected, but instead actively imagined and created.

Of course, from a cultural perspective, the appropriation and practice of U.S. hip-hop in itself can be problematic: what does it mean to talk about “Afro-Colombian rap” in a global era, and what exactly makes Afro-Colombian rap truly “Afro-Colombian”? I will respond to these questions by exploring the ways in which this transnational musical practice has been transcultured within the Colombian scenario in ways that highlight the performers’ ethnic-racial identities as well as the cultural significance of their localities.
In other words, I will address how these young performers are strategically appropriating, adapting and combining “foreign” musics and artifacts together with “local” ones to celebrate their cultures, redefine localities and accentuate their “blackness.” As follows, this analytic perspective sheds even more light on the social and cultural effects that globalization and the transnationalization of U.S. pop culture can have on ethnic-racial minorities in peripheral or “developing” countries around the world. Lastly, we must ask if this Afro-Colombian hip-hop with its transcultural forms, creative adaptation and strategic innovation leads to an autonomous culture or is it merely an example of cultural imperialism and its global, homogenizing forces. In the end, I believe this study demonstrates that Afro-Colombian hip-hop is simply too complex to fit comfortably into any sort of categorizations of binary analysis (either/or).

5.1 Racial Discrimination

Any consideration of the various factors that can influence and interpellate Afro-Colombian youth identities – nourished and strengthened through music and its practice – must take racial discrimination into account. The Afro-Colombian ethnic identities of today’s urban youth, first and foremost, are constructed around lived experiences of racial discrimination, especially in urban centers where young black Colombians come into direct contact with dominant culture and racist ideologies and behaviors that still persist in spite of the common, but very erroneous, belief in Colombia’s racial democracy. Especially in a city like Bogotá, where the indigenous population is virtually invisible, Afro-Colombians form a very distinct and apparent minority.
Afro-Colombian contacts and acquaintances often expressed awareness of common racial stereotypes and how they influence in the way dominant culture perceives them. For example, some of the most common stereotypes portray Afro-Colombians as loud and scandalous (*el negro rumbero*), athletic and strong, musically and rhythmically inclined, sexually promiscuous and/or as objects for sexual gratification (*el negro o la negra caliente*), poor and uneducated, criminal and naturally dishonest, and often lazy and uncooperative (signaled by the all too common remark, *negro tenía que ser*).

Moreover, during my interactions and conversations with *mestizos*, many of these same stereotypes often surfaced; in fact, I have heard some *mestizos* say that they cannot bear the sight or even the smell of *los negros* (claiming that Afro-Colombians have a naturally offensive smell).

While these overtly racist remarks, attitudes or beliefs may be the exception, more widespread are the subtle and insipid forms of racism that are more difficult to identify. For example, as mentioned in chapter two, racial perceptions and relations are still largely determined by a racial nomenclature, especially common among the popular classes, that has historically been used to establish and maintain socio-racial hierarchies based on color codes that place positive value on a lighter skin color. In interviews and conversations with “light-skinned” Afro-Colombians, they admitted to often being told, “*pero tú no eres negro.*” In other words, their friends or companions basically bestow on them a certain level of superiority over “real” blacks, or those of a much darker skin complexion. These observations demonstrate how historical discourses on *mestizaje* continue to conceal racism while promoting a type of ethnic “whitening” of Colombian society. My point, therefore, is that racial discrimination – in both its subtle and more
overt forms – is a reality perceived and experienced by Afro-Colombian urban youth who often spoke to me about constantly being caught within the gaze of dominant culture and of having to contend with racial stereotypes and racist attitudes. In *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967), Fanon reminds us of the internalization of the self-as-other, explaining why these Afro-Colombians cannot construct their identities without contending, at least in part, with the way dominant culture defines and views them. In the end, part of the ethnic identity of Afro-Colombian hip-hoppers inevitably emerges from their identification with a group of people – a belonging based on cultural traits and phenotypic features – who are discriminated and treated as the racialized, “black other” of dominant culture.

The ways in which Afro-Colombian rappers decide to address racial discrimination often varies from group to group. For example, as mentioned, there are several “non afro-centric” groups that choose not to rap specifically about race or racism although in interviews they usually admit to personal experiences with racial bigotry. Instead, they choose to emphasize questions of class and economic exploitation, a decision which seemingly reflects the widely accepted argument in Colombia that most blacks are poor due to historical factors and not racism; a poor Afro-Colombian is thought to be in the same position as a poor non-black, and therefore, racial discrimination is not to blame for the low status of Afro-Colombians. Moreover, although most Afro-Colombians in cities like Bogotá, Cali and Medellín have experienced different forms of racial prejudice, their perception of discrimination and the ways they decide to address it vary according to socio-economic factors, origin, location, generation and gender (Agudelo 182). For instance, some rappers, over time, have tempered ethnic
messages and the racially charged, denunciatory nature of their lyrics, especially once they are in Bogotá, in order to attract and appease their now predominantly mestizo audience. In other words, for some groups, market forces and consumer expectations often trump racial vindication.

There also are rappers like Yahany “Tostao” Valencia and Gloria “Goyo” Martínez, from Choc Quib Town, who recognize that racist attitudes and behaviors in Colombia can be attributed to widespread ignorance advanced or even inculcated by dominant culture, in great part, through the marginalization of Afro-Colombian communities and the racial stereotyping of black Colombians through national media outlets. They, therefore, see themselves as cultural ambassadors, traveling from the periphery of the country to its geopolitical epicenter, where they can confront racial discrimination through a type of didactic music. While they acknowledge that there is indeed a time and a place for hard-line, denunciatory lyrics aimed at racist ideologies and practices, they also believe that constantly accusing mestizos of being bigoted alone will not eradicate racist thought or behavior, and in fact, may turn some listeners away from their music and its messages. Hence, they feel that raising awareness among their listeners as to who and what they are, is an equally effective way to combat racial discrimination. This is achieved by advocating their Afro-Colombian culture and identity through both lyrical content and “folkloric fusions” (Personal Interview).

The abovementioned ways in which rappers choose to address (or ignore) discrimination through rap indicate that all of these young artists strategically manage the tensions created by local market demands and consumer expectations, which undoubtedly impose certain pressures and influences on their music, its content and forms. These
demands and consumer expectations, to a great extent, reflect prevalent ideologies in Colombian society, and for this reason, racial messages and denunciations in Afro-Colombian rap need to be considered from within this broader context and in contrast to mainstream attitudes and behaviors regarding racial issues in the country (covered in detail in chapter two). In many ways, these rappers deal with the same dilemmas that their Afro-Colombian literary predecessors have had to face. Some rappers (especially from “non afro-centric” groups) often manifest a desire to represent the perspective of all the oppressed and downtrodden since it is difficult to separate their poverty and oppression from those of the poor masses (who make up the bulk of their listening audiences). In this regard, instead of assuming an assertive or militant stance rooted in ethnic-racial identifications, there is an attempt to be more inclusive with respect to equal rights and justice.

At the same time, it is hard to ignore the influence of the ideology of *mestizaje* as a discourse that promotes Colombia’s racial democracy and sets in motion certain pressures to assimilate and integrate. In fact, due to these assimilationist pressures, Afro-Colombian leaders have often found that gaining support or establishing solidarity among Afro-Colombian populations is usually achieved best by stressing cultural identity and difference more so than discrimination, which has the potential of leading to conflict (similar to the cultural agenda often employed by *Choc Quib Town*). Furthermore, as mentioned in chapter two, Afro-Colombians who do indeed denounce racial discrimination are frequently accused of “reverse racism” or of manifesting an inferiority complex. In the end, due to these pressures, many Afro-Colombians simply prefer to downplay racial discrimination in an attempt to assimilate to dominant culture, as the
words of Jhon “Liri Gun” Boris of *Ghettos Clan* indicate: “Hay negros aquí que se hacen llamar ‘negros finos’ […] Es gente que aún vaga en la ignorancia, que no saben ni de dónde vienen ni para dónde van […] Nacen y de pronto la nariz les salió bien pulidita y los ojitos bien bacancitos y dicen, ‘yo soy un negro fino” (Personal Interview). Jhon Boris’ words especially point to Afro-Colombians who have internalized those discourses that privilege dominant culture definitions of aesthetic beauty: “It is one thing to position a subject or set of peoples as the Other of a dominant discourse. It is quite another thing to subject them to that ‘knowledge’, not only as a matter of imposed will and domination, by the power of inner compulsion and subjective con-formation to the norm” (Hall, “Cultural identity” 395).

Nonetheless, despite tendencies to downplay race or racial discrimination, a growing number of rappers are becoming more vocal about racial issues and even discrimination. Of course, Afro-Colombian rappers produce songs about a plethora of topics, and even “superficial” themes dealing with types of recreation can imply resistance in the shape of Afro-Colombian forms of “black” music and celebration. Song and dance have often served as an escape from suffering and as a way to resist the aforementioned pressures to conform to dominant culture and mainstream tastes. However, this resistance to cultural assimilation and the desire to maintain “black” forms of music do not imply the survival of “pure,” black rural forms. As we will see, for example, music forms change and evolve – especially in the city –, but without necessarily losing or displacing their association with Afro-Colombian culture. The point I want to make here is that, in spite of any pressures to downplay race and assimilate, various rap groups in this study are indeed composing and producing songs in which they
criticize and denounce discriminatory ideologies and practices. For example, in the song “Nacidos en el ghetto,” presented in the previous chapter, Ghettos Clan denounces the fact that they are all too often racially profiled as delinquents, denied certain freedoms and treated as third-class citizens. In their song, “Conciencia Africana,” they likewise denounce discrimination while pleading with their audience to no longer be deceived into believing that racism doesn’t exist:

[...] Somos negros de respeto reclamando la igualdad
Luchemos por los derechos y hagámoslos respetar
Si el pueblo es culpable de nuestra separación
No dejemos de luchar para lograr nuestra unión
Creíste que no es racismo, te dejaste engañar
En pocas palabras te dejas utilizar
Los politiqueros te compran con un fiambre
Mientras nuestros niños pobres se mueren de hambre
Que matan nuestros hermanos, las hermanas son violadas
Nos miramos unos a otros y nadie hace nada y nadie hace nada [...]

Although dominant discourse has always promoted a myth of racial harmony, through these songs there is a rhetorical shift as Ghettos Clan questions and challenges that myth by accusing dominant culture of racist and even separatist attitudes. At the same time, they argue for a type of Afro-Colombian union in their struggle for equality. In essence, this song and others cited throughout this chapter turn the myth of racial democracy on its head.

In light of the socio-political and cultural context in which these young performers are producing their music, I find it encouraging that they are in effect addressing racial discrimination with more frequency. In an interview with Giovanni Córdoba, editor and writer for the magazine, Afro, he spoke about the high rates of illiteracy among Afro-Colombians and the challenges this presents for the magazine as a
means to raise awareness and promote Afro-Colombian solidarity (Personal Interview).
Furthermore, when taking into account that there are very few, if any, young, Afro-
Colombian writers or novelists reaching out to young people on these topics, at the time
being, rap actually seems to be one of the more effective forms of cultural production
through which young musicians are raising awareness and dealing with racial
discrimination, insofar as other forms of popular music, such as rock, salsa, vallenato or
cumbia, do not appeal to these young Afro-Colombians as genres of music suited for
protest or cultural and social expression. Of course, then, it is hard to ignore the ways in
which U.S. rap, marketed to the world’s urban youth as a “black” music genre of cultural
expression and protest, is encouraging racial identifications in addition to these
denunciations against racism, a point I return to later in this chapter.

5.2 Organizational and Institutional Influences

5.2.1 NGOs

In this era of globalization, as nation-states in peripheral countries surrender more
and more responsibilities to private enterprises and the workings of the market,
implement neoliberal economic reforms, privatize public services and attempt to repay
foreign debts, less and less is invested in social programs, i.e. education, health care, local
or national culture. In these public spheres where the state’s presence has dwindled,
NGOs, and in some cases the church, often try to carry out what traditionally was
considered to be the state’s obligations, an occurrence which has prompted some
intellectuals and scholars to champion the work of NGOs as adept institutions responsible
for these social concerns, capable of assisting and satisfying the needs of the
marginalized, impoverished and powerless. And in a country like Colombia, distraught with socio-political crises and equipped with what has historically been a “weak” nation-state, NGOs (both national and international) have become very commonplace, especially in light of Colombia’s biodiversity (attracting environmental NGOs) and atrocious record of human rights abuses.

Based on much of his research in Latin America, and especially Brazil, George Yúdice believes that while the state withdraws its investments in the public sphere, and as communication, transport, and capital networks become transnational, the institutions generating and managing culture are just as likely to be NGOs, global corporations, private foundations, or international aid agencies as they are to be ideological state apparatuses (2003). And indeed, my interest in Afro-Colombian hip-hop culture required me to consider the role that these organizations can play in the lives and cultural production of some of these groups. But before addressing these affiliations, I first want to consider some of the more common perceptions that many Afro-Colombian urban youths have of NGOs and the work they carry out within their communities.

Generally speaking, most of these Afro-Colombian rappers, who have lived in areas where NGOs are very active, denote a certain level of skepticism with regards to the effectiveness of national and local NGOs. The praise that NGOs have received as champions of human rights often works to shield their images from any type of criticism, whether from within or without the organization itself. Soenke Zehle argues that, in great part, because NGOs are typically organized as donation-based membership organizations, many of them enjoy a relative lack of accountability, while the NGOs themselves have been quite slow to build their own means of accountability. Therefore, they should be
more open to criticism, no matter how “dubious the source of such 'criticism' may be” (“On the Eve”). For instance, Afro-Colombian rappers often claim that many of these organizations actually cause more harm than good in that they simply provide what we might refer to as “quick fixes” or “handouts,” and therefore, do not necessarily establish any kind of long-lasting and worthwhile programs to educate and empower the people in their struggles for political/social agency and equal rights. Many rappers and community leaders fear that by simply satisfying immediate needs, these organizations pacify the masses and subside any sort of revolutionary or rebellious behavior that could help ignite movements towards real change. Lastly, some rappers spoke to me about groups of people who manipulate the system by forming local NGOs under certain catchphrases and popular buzzwords, such as “displaced”, “Afro-Colombian” and “indigenous”, solely for the purpose of obtaining funds, which, in turn, is used towards personal and private gain as a type of business enterprise instead of towards any proclaimed social cause.

According to Jhon J of Zona Marginal:

O sea, pienso que las ONGs, se han dedicado, por ejemplo, a vivir de los proyectos para sostener burocracia, para sostener las mismas ONGs, pero no han dejado ningún trabajo de base, no han demostrado trabajos concretos, y allí tenemos una crítica nosotros muy fuerte frente a eso, y desde nuestra misma organización lo hacemos a las otras ONGs, incluso tenemos diferencias con grandes ONGs de aquí frente a eso. (Personal Interview)

At one point, during the initial stages of my field research among rap groups in Cali (where there is a strong local and international NGO presence due to high levels of violence and displacement), I witnessed what perhaps could be interpreted as some of the social and cultural consequences engendered by the work and presence of NGOs, or at least by the very forms of social exclusion that NGOs are supposed to alleviate. The first
time I met some Afro-Colombian rappers in Cali, I was walking through Charco Azul of
the district of Aguablanca with a small entourage of contacts and community members
who were acting as my guides. I originally anticipated stares or a certain level of
uneasiness caused by my presence. Nevertheless, people seemed comfortable and
unfazed. This made more sense when I came to find out that Charco Azul is one of the
more well-known impoverished neighborhoods, and that in fact, it was common for
foreigners, politicians and NGO members to visit the area. News networks have aired
specials on these barrios of Cali, and likewise, various national and international groups
have filmed videos or documentaries depicting the violence of these localities, and even
the life and work of some of the young rappers. I assume, for this reason, as I walked
through the barrio, I overheard some kids scream out, “También soy rapero. ¡Venga a
entrevistarme a mí! ¡También me puede filmar!”

That same day, I met with the three members of Ghettos Clan and we decided to
conduct an interview in a nearby Afro-Colombian barbershop. While conducting the
interview, it became apparent that they were rather well-rehearsed in their answers and
discourses, which in great part comes from their experiences in previous interviews with
NGO members, scholars and other “outsiders” interested in their lives and music; Ghettos
Clan has been one of the most popular groups among NGOs and organizations interested
in both Afro-Colombian topics and the social ills of the district of Aguablanca, especially
since these young musicians have been very outspoken on such issues. In fact, Ghettos
Clan was actually able to produce their first CD in Bogotá due to the funding provided by
the Corporación Colombiana de Teatro and the International Organization for Migration
(IOM), an NGO that addresses the problem of displacement. And interestingly enough,
one of their most quoted songs within certain academic or political circles has been “¿En dónde están?,” in which they denounce forced displacement (presented in chapter four). Furthermore, while in the office of a former Cultural Attaché in the U.S. Embassy in Bogotá, I noticed some postcards depicting the poverty in Charco Azul with the image of an obviously poor and malnourished black child, with a translated quote from a Ghetto Clan’s song, “Identidad perdida,” that read in English, “I didn’t choose to be born in this shit. I didn’t choose to grow up in misery” (the original lyrics read, “Yo no escogí nacer en esta mierda. Yo no escogí criarme en la miseria”). I informed these rappers of my find and instead of feeling pleased, they were somewhat distraught not only by the fact that they were not consulted, but also because they had received no economic benefits; in a sense, they felt taken advantage of.

After our first interview, two of the members asked me if I could provide them with what was really a small amount of cash so as to purchase their bus tickets to Bogotá. I am sure they requested this financial assistance of me because I was a foreigner, and they assumed that I, therefore, had money. However, I believe that this is a reflection, in part, on the impact that the presence of some NGOs and/or international players have had in parts of Colombia most stricken by violence and poverty; in essence, these particular rappers had previous experiences with outside visitors from different organizations and institutions, interested in their music and their discourses, who would provide them with quick money and/or financial assistance in return for their time and information.

Furthermore, and most importantly, I was witnessing a well-rehearsed performance on “ghetto life” and suffering, a type of “spectacle of poverty,” and I am sure that this is what some members of NGOs and other institutions have expected to see.
and hear. Due to the presence of NGOs and others who have visited their environs, some Afro-Colombian rappers are not only used to gifts and (often unfulfilled) promises, but they also have learned how to promote their culture, violence, and poverty in order to garner more attention and perhaps acquire funding and economic assistance. In other words, their poverty and suffering are essentially marketed and sold to these organizations, and identifications with certain aspects of “ghetto life” have, in turn, become key elements of their identities expressed through music. In this particular case, these young men from *Ghettos Clan* merely demonstrated what they thought I wanted and needed to see so that they could maintain my interest and perhaps get something in return (and in fact, we were both wanting something in return). My experiences seem to mirror Yúdice’s worries that cultural practice – such as Afro-Colombian hip-hop – often responds to “performative injunctions that leave little space for experiences that do not fit an NGOized depiction of development, worth and self-esteem (156). In a word, cultural production and distribution may simply become a strategy to keep young Afro-Colombians from causing problems for society (156). And again, at the risk of being repetitive, we cannot forget that U.S. hip-hop marketed abroad commercializes poverty and “ghetto” lifestyles, and in a sense, may work to encourage some, but not all, young Afro-Colombian rappers to simply pattern themselves and their music after this imagery and these messages.

There was a sense of urgency in that they desperately wanted to get out of the “ghetto.” They perceived very little chance for prosperity, commercial or economic success within their surroundings. What I kept hearing, over and over, was how difficult it was to get financial support in Cali in order to fund the recording of their latest CD. All
three members were eager to move to Bogotá where they not only could find more resources and support, but also receive pay in return for concerts and performances in local clubs.\(^1\) It may seem somewhat contradictory that, as self-proclaimed leaders in a struggle for social justice, they denounce the exploitation and marginalization experienced in their communities while at the same time demonstrating an almost desperate urge to leave their surroundings. Nonetheless, they believe that the only way to eventually help the people of their community is by first leaving and achieving some level of success and recognition, which in many ways would empower them with the financial stability and social influence needed in order to call attention to the hardships experienced in their localities. This, of course, begs the question: if they do achieve any level of economic success and commercial notoriety, will they in fact return to their communities and attempt to give back? I was later informed of a few cases in which some musicians and/or hip-hoppers did, in fact, manage to leave the community (some to the U.S.) only to never look back.

It should be clear that I by no means want to invalidate the struggle or hardships that they represent and denounce through their discourses. *Ghettos Clan* produced their first CD, with its racial content and description of their daily lives and suffering before any interest was taken in their music or its imagery. Realizing how their music and its messages can garner special attention, they have learned how to advertise, so to speak, their struggles and their culture. Nonetheless, their poverty and suffering are very real. Furthermore, despite their notoriety and work with several organizations (which have

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\(^1\) During my year of research in Colombia, the three members of *Ghettos Clan* were able to make the move to Bogotá and were doing quite well within the local music scene.
received funding based on the work they do in the name of Afro-Colombian causes, human rights, etc.), they have gained little profit from their musical endeavors. I even learned of international groups and/or outsiders who have visited these young men, recorded and archived their world, while making (financial) promises that never came to fruition. Therefore, within this context, their behavior was understandable. Lastly, I believe that their actions demonstrate how some of these young men and women (not just rappers) have simply developed a survival technique in the way that they have learned to try to take advantage of each situation for immediate financial gain, instead of investing time in a (professional) relationship and building on one’s generosity for future gain, given that so many promises made to them have not been fulfilled. In a word, as mentioned in the last chapter, with little hope in the future, the only option left is to live for the here and now (Martín Barbero, “The City” 32).

However, if one is left asking what there is to the life of these Afro-Colombian youths aside from spectacle and performativity (Yúdice 156), I suggest focusing on the community initiatives carried out by Zona Marginal. Despite their criticism of national/local NGOs, the members of Zona Marginal, also from the district of Aguablanca, spoke in a very favorable manner of the international organizations with which they have worked. With the financial backing of the Swiss NGO, Concali Suiza, Zona Marginal spent about three months touring various parts of Europe as a type of cultural exchange and actually recorded their latest CD, *De Talla Internacional*, while in London. The three members of Zona Marginal are also very active within their local

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2 In an electronic newsletter from Zona Marginal, I received the following: “La invitación al Reino Unido la hace la organización mundial AMNISTIA INTERNACIONAL por cortesía de la Campaña de
community. They try to raise social awareness and strengthen political understanding among the marginalized, urban youth in their communities through two of their own local NGOs – Asociación Centro de Desarrollo Comunitario Arco Iris (ACDCA) and Fundación Casa de la Juventud (FUNCA-DEJC 16) – in addition to their own company, Corporación Cali Rap Cartel. Through workshops and conferences, they not only work with urban youth, but they also promote human rights issues while trying to keep the popular struggle alive. Unlike the racial assertiveness of Afro-Reggae in Brazil (Yúdice 2003), Zona Marginal’s work is not centered on ethnicity or race. As mentioned, they are adamant about producing “hip-hop social” filled with socially and politically charged messages in which they lash out against the state and the oligarchy, exploitation, corruption, neoliberalism, privatization and much more. In fact, when I first met and interviewed them in August of 2004, it was during a political rally of labor unionists and other community groups who came together at the Universidad del Valle in Cali to pay homage to members of their communities and organizations who had either been victims of political violence or had disappeared. While they acknowledge racial discrimination as one of many societal problems in Colombia, they, nonetheless, see capitalism and the greed and self-interest it engenders as the real sources of most social ills. Much of their political and social awareness comes from lived experiences, participation in “diplomados” (types of workshops that are offered to community members on a variety of subjects from human rights, civil law, etc.) in addition to their work with NGOs.

Moreover, all three of the members of the group, along with acquaintances from within Solidaridad con Colombia. Aprovechando esta oportunidad se establecen contactos en Suiza con el Centro Cultural I´ UZINE de Ginebra y en España con la Asociación española de ámbito estatal TIERRA SUR.”
their circle of supporters, have managed to enroll in universities. And interestingly enough, they do not necessarily speak of commercial success or truly believe that hip-hop will lead to substantial financial gains. They simply use their music to arouse awareness and to create politically and socially conscious citizens. They actually want people to copy their music, burn their CDs and distribute it by whatever means possible.

5.2.2 Afro-Colombian Organizations/Movements

A study on Afro-Colombian rappers also requires a parallel consideration of their contact or affiliations with certain Afro-Colombian NGOs and/or social movements given that these relationships can influence ethnic identifications, discourses and representations constructed through music. Afro-Colombian organizations and ethnic movements can and have played a significant role in nourishing “black” identities imagined and expressed through rap, whether through direct contact with these young artists or simply through the widespread proliferation of certain ethnic-racial discourses. In a word, much of this Afro-Colombian hip-hop needs to be understood within a context influenced by processes of black mobilization, pre- and post-constitutional reform, and the rewriting of the Constitution of 1991, given that these occurrences have resulted in more public discussion and dialogue regarding Afro-Colombian cultures and group identities. As mentioned in chapter two, these events have led not only to the advancement of Afro-Colombian ethnic discourses, but also to a growing body of academic research on Afro-Colombian history, culture and politics.

Many of the young Afro-Colombian rappers in this study, who are socially and culturally committed to their communities, either have been involved with black
organizations and ethnic movements or at least greatly influenced by this public dialogue on Afro-Colombian issues, especially in urban centers where debate and discussion often take place. For example, since the 1990s, it is much more common to find academic seminars and conferences on Afro-Colombian topics, which are often of great interests to these young men and women. My research tends to show that these events, in great part, help explain the emergence of afro-centric rap in recent years. For example, *Ghettos Clan* was heavily influenced by the work of *Ashanty* (the cultural enterprise and rap group in Cali), whose leading members had participated in Afro-Colombian workshops and leadership schools organized by *Cimarrón* (again, the longest-running Afro-Colombian organization in the country). In fact, most, if not all, of the Afro-Colombian rappers in this study are very familiar with *Cimarrón*, its teachings and objectives. Furthermore, *Flaco Flow y Melanina*, two rappers who eventually split from *Ghettos Clan* and moved to Bogotá, almost on arrival sought the support of AFRODES (Asociación de Afro-Colombianos Desplazados). According to Melanina:

> Entonces, ahí pues como habían comprado el disco de *Ghettos Clan* antes y sabían el tipo de música que hacíamos nosotros, que era de mensaje social, y que era de protesta, que hablamos ahí [en el disco] también sobre la problemática del desplazamiento. Entonces fuimos y nos afiliamos a esa organización porque igual nosotros también, nosotros veníamos desplazados tanto por la violencia como por el desempleo de Buenaventura y de Cali, ¿no? (Personal Interview)

AFRODES, together with PCS (Consejería en Proyectos)\(^3\) organized and planned a type of cultural exchange through a Swiss NGO called HEKS (Swiss Interchurch Aid), which

\(^3\) Consejería en Proyectos or the Project Counselling Service (PCS) is an international consortium of European and Canadian cooperation agencies created in 1979. It is made up of the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), Action by Churches Together (ACT/NL), Swiss Interchurch Aid (HEKS), and the Canadian agency Inter Pares (IP). In Colombia, PCS works with local counterparts
not only afforded these two young men the opportunity to visit and perform in several
Swiss cities, but also to record their latest CD, *Polizones*.

It should be clear that it is virtually impossible to arrive at any all-inclusive
conclusions on the scope of influence that NGOs or other institutions have on Afro-
Colombian hip-hop, especially since their presence varies from one context to the next.
Furthermore, the groups included in this study have manifested differing opinions and
experiences with regards to the work and contributions of these different entities. For
instance, some groups, such as *Asilo 38, Choc Quib Town, Carbono*, and *Voodoo
SoulJahs*, have had minimal to no contact with NGOs, claiming artistic autonomy and/or
even political differences as their reasoning.

Nonetheless, the abovementioned examples of *Zona Marginal, Ghettos Clan* and
*Flaco Flow y Melanina* demonstrate why my research compelled me to consider the
influence that NGOs, local organizations, institutions and social movements can have on
Afro-Colombian hip-hop youth and their music. When these groups seek the support of
these institutions, they typically have to present proposals or projects in which they
demonstrate certain levels of organization while at the same time stressing their social,
political, or even ethnic agendas, often shared and supported by these organizations.
Therefore, while NGOs and institutions do not directly take part in or influence the
musical production of these groups, neither in content nor in form, these affiliations do
indeed nurture certain group identities and identifications often constructed and
manifested through music. For this reason, *Flaco Flow y Melanina*’s affiliation with

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and grassroots and church organizations to find durable solutions to the problems faced by refugees,
displaced people, and others affected by the socio-political conflict.
AFRODES (and PCS) often encourages them to produce songs on ethnic-racial issues while *Zona Marginal’s* ties to international solidarity groups, such as Amnesty International, likewise encourages more songs addressing human rights, globalization, etc.

Daniel Mato’s research on social production of civil society and social identities in a Latin American context demonstrates how “transnational networks constituted by domestic and global agents […] legitimize representations that play critical roles in shaping the agendas and practices of those local and domestic agents. These representations constitute part of what I have named forms of consciousness of globalization” (“The Transnational Making” 488-489). Even small and local grassroots organizations and service-provider NGOs typically have extensive experience in maintaining transnational relations and developing global strategies (503). It is this type of transnational networking that has connected some of these hip-hop groups with particular international organizations and communities, and therefore, a growing global consciousness.

Both *Zona Marginal* and *Flaco Flow y Melanina* have established a complex network of social and political relations, both in Colombia and abroad, which influence in their identifications and musical representations. Locally, through their music and its practice, they strengthen and actively cultivate identities shared with members of Colombia’s hip-hop culture. At the same time, *Zona Marginal* and *Flaco Flow y Melanina* also manifest and strengthen their identification with local solidarity groups. *Zona Marginal* uses their music as a medium through which they carry out political and social activism with community members and urban youth, often manifesting an
identification with labor unions and the popular classes across racial lines. Interestingly enough, as mentioned, *Zona Marginal* does not emphasize an Afro-Colombian ethnic identity or highlight racial discrimination given that they see class inequalities engendered by a capitalist system as their main target. This aspect of their music is perhaps reflected in that they have no direct or proclaimed affiliation with Afro-Colombian organizations promoting ethnic rights. *Flaco Flow y Melanina*, nonetheless, are indeed affiliated with Afro-Colombian organizations like AFRODES (and at one time they were more involved with *Ashanty* and *Cimarrón*) affiliations that have helped shape and nurture more pronounced identifications with their ethnic group, reflected in the often afro-centric themes and elements of their music. At the same time, the music of both of these groups permits a sense of international, cosmopolitan belonging, first, as participants of a global hip-hop culture shared by urban youth around the world, and second, through their association and tours abroad with international NGOs and certain political communities (made possible by the transnational networking of local NGOs and grassroots organizations). Given that *Zona Marginal* tends to be more political, as evidenced by the denunciatory nature of their lyrical content, they manifest a stronger identification with an international, political community against capitalism, globalization, neoliberalism and U.S. imperialism.

5.3 Mass-mediated Transnational Contact and the Exportation of Black Identities

Although, on one hand, personal experiences with racism and familiarity with Afro-Colombian organizations and prominent ethnic-racial discourses have, to a great extent, nurtured ethnic identities expressed through Afro-Colombian rap, on the other
hand, the globalization of U.S. hip-hop, likewise, has influenced Afro-Colombian identities imagined and actively constructed through music and its practice. The rampant proliferation of U.S. hip-hop and rap, and its subsequent acceptance and appropriation as cultural forms of expression in Colombia, signal an increase in mass-mediated, transnational cultural contact in great part due to new technological advances in communication systems that facilitate the exportation of U.S. pop culture. As the U.S. culture industry exports this music genre and its “black” imagery, Afro-Colombian urban youth now more than ever celebrate and reclaim dignity in their ethnicity, in part, based on their admiration for and identification with hip-hop and rap idols like Public Enemy, Lauryn Hill, Busta Rhymes, 50 Cent, Snoop Doggy Dog, 2Pac, Ice Cube, Jay-Z, etc., in addition to Jamaican, reggae icons such as Bob Marley and Peter Tosh. Furthermore, these identifications with prominent black celebrities go beyond the world of music as evidenced by many artists’ professed admiration for film, political and sport celebrities such as Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Spike Lee, Will Smith, Halle Berry, Michael Jordan, Shaquille O’Neal, etc. This is important to highlight given that these identifications signal the commodification of African American culture by processes of economic and cultural globalization that have intensified the commercialization, exportation, fetishization and consumption of “black” cultural products. Although access to this iconography and these icons is sometimes made possible through the work of

4 African Americans have indeed become more visible than ever before in the U.S. and around the world through media outlets. This visibility, however, can be problematic. On one hand, it has perhaps led to a certain degree of more acceptance and tolerance of black people in the U.S. and in other parts of the world. For many young Afro-Colombians, for example, these black figures indeed serve as sources of inspiration and pride. Nonetheless, on the other hand, as Paul Gilroy points out, the imagery propagated through hip-hop and various media forms often exoticizes, objectifies the black body and likewise leads to the proliferation of certain stereotypes of black people as sex objects, athletes, or musicians, etc, beliefs that have for a long time existed in Colombia, and that now may be validated, to an extent, through this mass-mediated imagery (Against Race 175-206).
Afro-Colombian organizations which have historically used them to instill a sense of pride in black Colombians, young Afro-Colombians are more than ever exposed to these cultural figures and this imagery by means of the advancement of mass communication systems and the reach of the U.S. culture industry.

These processes lead to ethnic group identifications that these artists often manifest through a variety of ways: the sampling in their own music of their favorite U.S. musicians; direct references in their lyrics to certain black icons and political figures; their own personal music and movie collections featuring U.S. black performers; the appropriation of certain attitudes and behaviors associated with hip-hop and Afro-American youth cultures; the assimilation of afro-centric styles and iconography observed in hairstyles, clothing and certain brand names; the incorporation of afro-centric stage props during performances; and the use of posters and pictures of black idols in private and public spaces of cultural expression, for example, in barbershops, restaurants, bars or dance clubs.

The transnationalization of U.S. hip-hop and rap obviously has helped generate this Colombian, hip-hop youth culture that emerges in popular barrios across ethnic and gender lines, growing among the youth from the lower socio-economic classes. In these public spaces, urban youth create and recreate certain gestures and body language (particular greetings and handshakes, and specific tumba’os or struts) often associated with what has become this global hip-hop culture originating in the U.S. In fact, rappers and hip-hoppers can be identified according to clothing styles such as baggy street apparel, hairstyles, the use of baseball hats, bandanas, stocking caps, and certain tennis shoes, almost always privileging U.S. brands and tastes. Like many youth cultures, hip-
hop artists use style as a form of identity formation that plays on class and even ethnic-racial distinctions by using fashion and material goods to declare cultural terrain. And apart from these common forms of iconic paralanguage, many rappers have nicknames that often highlight certain identities, talents or qualities. They also share hip-hop terminology, expressions and phrases in English, Spanish, and “Spanglish.” For example, it is very common for terms such as “brotha” or even controversial terms (in the U.S.) such as “nigga” to surface in conversations. Furthermore, among Afro-Colombian youth, it is common to hear regional jargon associated with Afro-Colombian communities and territories.

In the book, *Global Noise: Rap and Hip-Hop Outside the USA* (2001) (an obvious play on Tricia Rose’s book *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* [1994]) Tony Mitchell states that, “Hip-hop and rap cannot be viewed simply as an expression of African American culture” (1). He then writes that the concept and rhetoric of a “hip-hop nation”, which initially only referred to an African American construct within U.S. confines, “[…] has played an important role in globalizing hip-hop and hence, created a sense of belonging to a global, cosmopolitan culture of breakdancing, graffiti, Mcing, and Djing whose U.S. roots and origins are often, but not always acknowledged” (32-3). Obviously, there is great validity to his assertions, as evidenced by the various nationalities and ethnic groups practicing and performing hip-hop and rap around the globe. And the “multicultural” element of hip-hop has definitely fostered its appropriation and adaptation to the Colombian context by both Afro-Colombians and mestizos.
Furthermore, according to Deborah Pacini Hernández, the fact that many Latin American and Spanish Caribbean musicians have recently been experimenting with music genres not considered to be Latin American, such as U.S. rap, suggests an understanding of how race relations have influenced and fashioned popular music in North America. She claims that rap, unlike rock for example, achieved commercial success with no intervention from white performers, and hence its origins in the black community are unequivocal: “If rap was indebted to any group outside the African American community, it was to Jamaican and Puerto Rican immigrants in New York who participated in the formative development of hip-hop culture in the 1970s, before rap was ever recorded” (Flores cited in Pacini Hernandez 27). For these reasons, she claims that there is a perceived distance between rap and rock, which helps to explain why Latin American musicians “who formerly may have been disinclined to incorporate rock into their music because of its association with U.S. cultural imperialism, felt comfortable incorporating rap.” Despite its U.S. origins, unlike contemporary rock and popular music, rap is still considered by many as “oppositional music associated with marginalized communities of color” (Hernandez 27-8).

As previously stated, in Colombia, hip-hop and rap have indeed been appropriated as counterculture and oppositional music for marginalized youth. However, although this hip-hop culture crosses ethnic lines, in general, there are noticeable differences between Afro-Colombian and mestizo hip-hoppers, which, in many ways, demonstrate that despite the existence of certain globalizing forces, distinctive musical forms and differentiated identities often evolve through hip-hop (and popular culture in general). These differences arise because cultural globalization is not exclusively “dependent upon the
accessibility to high tech, but more importantly, on the relational value that global pop culture and the integration of the world populace to the global imaginary acquire in specific milieus” (Trigo, “A Two Sided Coin”). The way U.S. hip-hop is consumed (reception) and the “relational value” (meanings) that it assumes for Afro-Colombian and mestizo hip-hoppers present significant differences that largely revolve around ethnicity. The “differential” is found in a greater appropriation and use of afro-centric elements, styles and iconography on the part of Afro-Colombians, even by black rappers from the “non afro-centric” groups. Most importantly, for many mestizo rappers, the “black” element of hip-hop culture and rap is often displaced or ignored, while for almost all Afro-Colombian rappers, the perception of rap as a “black” music has important symbolic and cultural significance. Even with the commercial success in the U.S. and abroad of non-black and Hispanic rappers such as the Beastie Boys, Eminem, Bubba Sparxx, Cypress Hill, Kid Frost, etc., Afro-Colombian urban youth continue to view rap as an African American, black form of musical expression.

The perception of a particular music genre as “black” also explains why Afro-Colombian youth not only have accepted and appropriated U.S. rap, but also various elements of reggae and Rastafari culture. In fact, while addressing the African American origins of hip-hop and rap during interviews and interactions with many Afro-Colombian rappers, although they very seldom acknowledged the Hispanic contribution, they nonetheless were quick to touch on the Jamaican and reggae influence. Rastafari culture and reggae became widely known in Jamaica as a way to place positive value on being

5 There are Afro-Colombians who try to strictly adhere to the tenets of Rastafari culture, however, among most Afro-Colombian rappers it is a matter of appropriating certain elements and imagery that appeal most to them.
“black” while promoting respect for the history of Africans who were enslaved in the Americas. In a similar fashion, hip-hop and rap began as cultural and musical forms of ethnic celebration and social protest emerging from predominantly Afro-American ghettos in New York and later in other large cities in the United States. Furthermore, according to many black rappers, before rap emerged in their country, reggae was often the music of choice due to its oppositional and rebellious force. Currently, Afro-Colombian hip-hop and Rasta crowds (and at times, salseros and “folklore” artists) often occupy the same spaces, frequent the same clubs and attend each other’s performances. In fact, it is common to find both rap and reggae performances going on at the same time at large concert venues. There is a great deal of dialogue, crossover and mutual support among these genres and their respective performers.

For example, in the song “Jah Jah” (a term used to refer to god in Rastafari culture), Choc Quib Town raps over a reggae melody in which they ask for strength from god to continue in the struggle to overcome the suffering inflicted on their people and nation:

Jah Jah, dame tu fuerza
Jah Jah, para pelear en esta batalla
Dame tu fuerza fatha
Jah Jah, dame tu fuerza
Jah Jah, para pelear en esta batalla
Dame tu fuerza fatha

¡Listen up! ¡Eh!

El creador del mundo - ¡Oh! - de los seres humanos
Danos tu bendición y es que la necesitamos
La necesitan tus hijos los africanos
Para sobrevivir en esta guerra en la que estamos ¡Ah!
Luz del camino, guía de un mejor destino
Veedor de grandes naciones, mujeres y niños
This type of union among rap, reggae, and even Afro-Colombian “folklore,” therefore, is facilitated by the perceived “black” element shared by these music genres, which I believe reveals the desire on the part of many Afro-Colombian rappers to highlight the “blackness” not only of their music, but also of their own ethnic identity. In a word, these rappers take part in an exercise of musical *bricolage* (Levi-Strauss 1973) by making use of available “local” (“folklore” and/or “Afro-Colombian traditions”) and foreign elements (predominantly from hip-hop, but also from reggae and Rastafari culture) to highlight their “blackness” in a Colombian context (this aspect, along with the “folkloric” elements used in Afro-Colombian hip-hop, are addressed in more detail below). Furthermore, for these rappers, it is their belonging to the African diaspora that confers upon them a special license, so to speak, to appropriate and employ hip-hop, rap or reggae, as forms of “black” music; although there are well-documented differences among black cultures throughout the diaspora, these rappers perceive an alliance or connection to rap and reggae, in great part, based on a professed link, actively constructed through music and its practice, to an imagined, diasporic, “black” community of people of African descent with a common history of slavery, exploitation and racial discrimination. Afro-Colombian rappers are drawn to hip-hop, rap and even reggae because they see similarities between their own histories and experiences of marginalization, racial exploitation and discrimination and those of North American and Caribbean blacks. And despite the cultural and historic differences among black
communities in the diaspora, they do indeed share a common musical language of great importance as a form of communication and cultural expression (Gilroy 1993).

Interestingly enough, Afro-Colombian rappers also tend to call attention to what they see as similarities among black people of different nationalities in attitudes, behaviors and styles, both in music and everyday life, which some explain through essentialist explanations (often telling me that all people of African descent around the world are the same) or by stressing African roots, or residual cultural elements. Furthermore, in a place like Colombia, where there are almost no prominent, “larger-than-life” Afro-Colombian icons, it is understandable that black youths would profess a special attraction to rap as a “black” music with its often proud, and tough African American imaginary. Many young Afro-Colombians not only appropriate music styles, but also aesthetics, styles and behaviors of Afro-American rappers since their strong, defiant and rebellious images, attitudes and music lend themselves well to the socio-political ideals and expressive needs of young performers who often feel exploited and powerless. All of my contacts manifested a sense of pride in the fact that people of their color or race, even if from the U.S. or the Caribbean, have achieved such high levels of success, fame and power. Even members of the “non afro-centric” groups, in interviews, stressed the afro-centric element of reggae, hip-hop and rap as an element that attracted them to these genres and hence, nurtures certain ethnic identifications. In an interview with Melanina, he specifically called special attention to the “black” element of rap as a motivating factor behind their appropriation of this particular music genre: “Nosotros nos identificamos de una forma por eso, porque era un género, un ritmo de gente afro, que hacía gente afro” (Personal Interview).
Music has motivated many of these artists to assume active roles in their communities, work with solidarity groups, and even take university classes. Furthermore, partaking in hip-hop culture and this music practice has encouraged them to engage in private debates and public dialogue with other musicians and community leaders with respect to issues such as globalization, commercialism, authenticity, politics, and especially ethnicity and Afro-Colombian cultures. In this regard, this dialogue, along with all of these experiences and influences, have often inspired many young Afro-Colombians to look towards their local and distant ancestry, to delve deeper into their Afro-Colombian historical roots. In a word, through hip-hop, there is a return to the local. This partly explains why many rappers often profess the need to look towards Africa, in addition to their local and diasporic ancestors, as worthy and respectable cultural elements to be recovered and celebrated through music. In their effort to construct a “black” identity and as a strategy for promoting their culture, they maintain an African or African American referent that acts as a guide for their growing ethnic consciousness.

In the rap of the more afro-centric groups included in this study, Africa is often used as a type of vague referent, but one that nevertheless works as a sort of guide, or a foundation, for the construction of emerging ethnic identities. This allusion to Africa does not refer to present-day Africa, but to an older, somewhat mythical place of origin. From the enslavement of Africans during the colonial period to the present, the African continent has often been portrayed as an aberrant, unhealthy, backward and primitive land of which Afro-Colombians should feel ashamed (as evidenced by Sandoval and Caldas’s texts addressed in chapter two). Through afro-centric rap, a positive value is
often placed on Africa, which serves as a place of origin, a place where a people’s history starts (a common goal also shared by some Afro-Colombian organizations that often look to Africa as a source of symbols for the construction of a collective identity). For example, in “Conciencia Africana” by Ghettos Clan, the concept of Africa, along with references to a “black” consciousness, an “African soul” and “African blood,” all allude to a type of essentialism perhaps hard to endorse in a postmodern age, but nevertheless politically and culturally powerful, especially in Colombia where, as we’ve seen, a national black movement under a unified Afro-Colombian identity continues to be a work in progress. Perhaps, then, these allusions to Africa could form part of a “strategic essentialism” (Spivak 214) used to establish Afro-Colombian solidarity for the purpose of social action at a particular moment:

Mi conciencia es negra, mi alma es africana
Por eso día a día lucho con más ganas [...] 

Quiero unirme de la mano con todos mis hermanos 
Y llevar mi canción hasta mi pueblo africano 
Quiero luchar fuertemente con toda mi gente 
Y que esta lucha perdure ahora y por siempre, ahora y por siempre 

Somos chicos humildes, alegres y decentes 
De sangre africana y de un color ardiente 
Por ser de este color no nos sentimos avergonzados 
En la vida y el amor nos encontramos realizados 
Conocemos nuestro grupo y también nuestro color 
Y por eso día a día, ser negro es lo mejor [...] 

Piensa, piensa, piensa, recapacita 
Que tuvistes un error, no quisistes admitirlo 
Lucho yo mañana para poder corregirlo 
Piensa, piensa, piensa, recapacita... 
Africano es mi origen no renuncio jamás [...] 

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All cultural identities have histories and origins, and as suggested by the above
song, through rap many Afro-Colombian rappers are recovering and reaffirming their
African history and origin; they are recovering a past that was buried by the colonial
experience. This music provides an example of what Stuart Hall describes as new,
emerging ethnicities based on their relationship with the past, which is recovered through
memory and reconstructed through types of narratives, in this case, through rap.
However, while these new ethnicities must know where they come from, they must not
remain anchored in the past; they should also be forward looking.

The song, “Pasado, Presente, Futuro,” orchestrated and performed by Choc Quib
Town, was produced during an Afro-Colombian sound system, a session during which
several black rappers came together to record music. In this song, these artists show that
by recovering and reconstructing their past histories, they are, in effect, building future
identities. For example, the chorus, “Hombre del pasado, que vive en el presente,
caminando en el futuro siempre” illustrates that they are cognizant that past events, such
as slavery, need to be remembered due to their influence on their present and future lives.
For this reason, the first verse, which is rapped by a ragga singer from the now disbanded
group KilimanJAHro, celebrates the Africans’ resistance to slavery, which points to the
influence that the ideology of cimarronismo continues to have on Afro-Colombian
youths:

Llegaron a esta tierra encadenados
Maltratados, pisoteados
Salieron de su barcaza
Con el capataz que representaba una amenaza
Sólo esta gente pensaba en una venganza
Los blancos querían imponer su voluntad
Sólo, sólo pensaban privar la libertad
Esta gente ya no pudo aguantar
Su resistencia no podían controlar
Hasta que se decidieron rebelar y escapar
Y les metieron con sangre, trabajo pesado
Por la vivienda y la comida los tenían amarrados
Fueron tratados como ganado
Los tenían toditicos, toditicos ya marcados

In the second verse, Choc Quib Town highlights the connections between slavery and present-day racial discrimination, illustrating the influence of the past over the present lives and identities of Afro-Colombians. These rappers are aware of how racist ideologies and practices, promoted through media outlets and state institutions, such as the church and the school system, have historically denied Afro-Colombians access not only to their local histories, but also to the cognitive tools needed to understand and denounce racial discrimination, which in effect works to maintain Afro-Colombians in inferior positions within socio-racial hierarchies. In this verse, Tostao proclaims:

Ahora las cosas no son diferentes
El blanco que quiere dominar mi gente siempre
Nos manda dizque a estudiar para aprender su ideología
Para que se aplique en la cultura afro cada día
Mi madre es servidumbre al igual que ha sido mi abuela
Y yo sigo maniatado por la iglesia y la escuela
Por el orden social que dice cómo comportarme
Que me tiene oprimido y no ha dejado superarme
Me hace renegar de la belleza de mi raza
Me vuelve uno solo en esta triste y tonta masa
Que viola a mis mujeres para hacer su mezcolanza
Y aún no ha interrumpido sus acciones de matanza
En el presente todo sigue igual
No hemos salido de esta atadura social

This particular rap suggests a type of a coming into consciousness, a cultural and political self-recognition and acceptance of being black, which also involves an understanding and willingness to acknowledge that racism exists in order to confront it.
Here, as in “Conciencia Africana” by Ghettos Clan, Choc Quib Town argues that Afro-Colombians should no longer be deceived by dominant culture’s endorsement of Colombia’s racial democracy. Again, we find identities constructed around experiences of discrimination. However, this verse takes it a step further by condemning the imposition of dominant culture biases which denigrate people of African descent in an attempt to assimilate them to dominant culture; in a word, Tostao raps of the need to embrace Afro-Colombian cultural traits and to reconstruct ethnic-racial identities based on Afro-Colombian history, difference, cultural values and ideals. Lastly, this piece reveals how many of these performers are looking towards a better future by actively shaping a utopian counter-imaginary, as evidenced by the last verse in which they sing about a “new” Colombia void of racial, gender and class discrimination:

Ahora los tiempos ya no son iguales  
Negros presidentes de men o las guiales* (mujeres)  
Yo digo, ¿qué vale? ¡Si vale! ¡Qué vale!  
Pilotear un avión con rumbos internacionales  
Casa propia, cuenta suiza  
Y en el Chocó, todos en igualdad de condición  
¡Si señor! Ya no somos simples cadetes  
De oficiales, pa’ arriba y a los que no les damos juete  
En ningún lado nos restringen el paso  
Ya hacen caso omiso a que todo lo negro es fracaso  
Soy Choc Quib Town Afro-Colombia Sound System  
El medio para hablar de la igualdad ya existe

As many of the songs cited in this chapter illustrate, much of this afro-centric rap makes references to Africa and African origins, and there is little, if any, indication of a desire to assimilate to dominant culture (“triste tonta masa”). In effect, members of non-black society frequently seem to enter into conflict with Afro-Colombians. Even in songs where these artists promote types of racial harmony, they nonetheless often claim to be
frustrated, angered and hurt by the non-black “other” (“el blanco” in the abovementioned song); in this way, non-blacks are presented as the ones who are to blame for whatever confrontation and/or tension that may exist between Afro-Colombians and non-blacks. And within most Afro-Colombian hip-hop, rappers manifest the desire for both the assertion of “blackness” and for types of democratic integration, equality and tolerance. Although this may seem contradictory (the reaffirmation of difference alongside a desire for integration), in essence, they are simply asking that Afro-Colombians be recognized and included “as blacks” while calling for the dismantling of the socio-racial hierarchy in which Afro-Colombians are only integrated or assimilated through processes of cultural and racial “whitening” (mestizaje).

5.5 Ethnicities: The Old with the New

As previously addressed, these rappers represent a generation of Afro-Colombians who have grown up during the 1980s and 1990s, an age of great change with regards to Afro-Colombian culture and identity. They have lived during a period of time in which older racial concepts, stereotypes and identities enter into dialogue and even conflict with recent discourses, identities and more “sensitive” terminology propagated by Afro-Colombian scholars and leaders. Therefore, it shouldn’t be much of a surprise to find that a mixture of both the new and old identities actually inform Afro-Colombian rap. In fact, in many ways, the old identities, or old ethnicities, still seem to have dominance. This is due, in great part, because although people have various identities, they are always negotiated and they always carry the mark of the “coloniality of power” (Quijano, “Coloniality”).
By this, again, I am referring to the way Afro-Colombians historically have endured maltreatment based on phenotypic and cultural characteristics defined by dominant culture as negative. The negative meanings and identities attached to these differences have determined, from the colonial period to the present, social relations, hierarchies of labor exploitation and power. Given that identities are dialogically constructed, those who bear these differences or characteristics have found them to be an essential part – usually in a negative manner – of their identities. However, today, in great part due to global struggles for ethnic equality and tolerance, it is widely believed and accepted that any maltreatment inflicted in the name of these collective identities was wrong and unfortunate. As a way of healing the wounds, Afro-Colombian youth inevitably have had to return to and address these collective identities (what it has historically meant to be “black” in Colombia) and learn to see them – and the characteristics that inform those identities – as positive, as a vital and honorable part of who they are (Appiah 613-4); this is the reaffirmation of “blackness” addressed in the songs above. Therefore, through their music, they still respond to these old identities by informing their listeners that dominant culture was and is wrong in discriminating against them and their ancestors; they now often respond to and challenge the negative perceptions or stereotypes of old ethnicities by either debunking them or by giving them a positive spin. This process also requires, for example, the refusal to assimilate to dominant cultural norms and behaviors. And as Appiah argues, if one chooses to be “black” in a society where racist behaviors and ideologies still exist, then Afro-Colombians will continue to endure insults and attacks on their dignity. Within this milieu, “insisting on the right to live a dignified life will not be enough. It will not even
be enough to require that one be treated with dignity despite being black” (614). These rappers, like those of Ghettos Clan and Choc Quib Town in the examples above, must insist on being respected precisely because they are black.

This, in great part, explains why it is still common to find songs on Afro-Colombian identities and the African heritage that use “antiquated” terminology and representations that inevitably conjures up older racial hierarchies, identities and perceptions. While we can understand the need to return to these identities, at times, we cannot ignore the risk of perpetuating potentially harmful stereotypes associated with them. For example, in “Mi Puerto”, Flaco Flow y Melanina celebrate their ethnic and cultural heritage, make reference to their African blood, and also call for a type of ethnic-racial unification:

[...] Dedico mi canto a mi gente, raza de bronce
De sangre africana y de un color ardiente
Unamos esas voces que no se sienten
Que pongan salsa y se caliente el ambiente
Abran las puertas para que todos entren
Entremos en calor que es fiesta, hasta que amanezca
Hasta que salga el sol, represent porteño con sabor
A mucho honor toco los cueros del tambor
Porque sin negro no hay guaguancó [...] 

The abovementioned song, and others like it, employ certain adjectives or imagery, often associated with people of African descent, that denote heat and/or a hot climate ("color ardiente," “se caliente el ambiente,” “entremos en calor,” “el sol,” “con sabor”), which can run the risk of representing Afro-Colombians, especially women, as “hot” and erotic sexual objects. For instance, in the song “Somos Pacífico” by Choc Quib Town, there likewise is a reference to “grandes negras con gran tumba’o,” which perhaps is meant to celebrate a “black” aesthetic of beauty or the “sexiness” of Afro-Colombian
women, but again, these erotic representations can be problematic. In *Music, Race, & Nation: Música Tropical in Colombia* (2000), Peter Wade addresses the relationship between race and sexuality and the stereotypes that link them:

At the risk of dehistorizing, it seems that from an early date blacks’ sexuality has been made a seedbed in which nonblacks – particularly men – have cultivated ideas about themselves: ideals of civilization, purity, and control over (human) nature were opposed to black sexuality seen as bestial, primitive, and contaminating; and, by the same token, the fear of alienation from qualities defined as base but also powerful, vital, rooted in nature, potently masculine and seductively feminine was imagined in relation to ‘white civilization’ seen as constrained, over-refined, and impotent […] Of course, those identifying themselves as blacks have been able to appropriate this ambivalence in order to exploit such fears, assert a ‘natural’ superiority in certain spheres, and perhaps […] a questioning of Western values of modernity. (19)

All stereotypes function through these types of ambivalences or ambiguities; they can be positive or negative according to circumstance and perspective. Afro-Colombian rap often demonstrates that this play on stereotypes still persists today, and although in certain circumstances, using imposed stereotypes as a defense mechanism or a form of resistance can indeed be effective, it essentially works to maintain the very stereotypes used to construct socio-racial hierarchies. And until these stereotypes are directly addressed and debunked, Afro-Colombian women, like Gloria “Goyo” Martinez of *Choc Quib Town*, will continue to complain that non-black men often view them as mere sexual objects, as evidenced by all too common comments such as, “*El que no come negra, no va al cielo,*” an obvious reference to the supposed sexual gratification offered by Afro-Colombian women.

The abovementioned song by *Flaco Flow y Melanina* is supposed to highlight the importance of the *fiesta*, dance and music – especially the cultural significance of the
drum – as a form of cultural expression and celebration with which these two young men identify. In this regard, the adjectives and imagery denoting heat are mainly used in reference to the way Afro-Colombians supposedly “liven up” festive atmospheres, although the step from dance to physicality and sexuality is a short one. Here, there is also the danger of promoting and propagating a common stereotype of Afro-Colombians as *rumberos* (partiers), as musicians and dancers – as simple tools of entertainment.

Again, we must consider the ambivalence of these long-established stereotypes. Being a person who knows how to perform music and dance or who knows how to “have a good time,” is not necessarily negative. However, stereotypes of Afro-Colombians as loud and disruptive can and does work against them by limiting access to public spaces, for example, when searching for a new residence; some non-blacks simply will not rent apartments or sale homes to Afro-Colombians believing that they will be too scandalous for the more “civilized” neighbors.

In the end, ethnic identities based merely on these types of representations can reduce a group of people to simplistic, frivolous and even problematic concepts. Nevertheless, music and dance, have in fact been important forms of cultural expression, of escape from hardships and of protest, and despite regional differences among Afro-Colombian communities, it is true that, to a certain extent, music can and has served as a unifying element. Even activists, who worry about these stereotypes and this type of cultural reductionism, also admit to the importance of music and dance to Afro-Colombian identities. It should come as no surprise that since the Law 70 and the emergence of grassroots and urban ethnic movements promoting Afro-Colombian rights, at the same time, there has been a simultaneous growing interest in Afro-Colombian
“folkloric” music and dance as a way of preserving or experiencing “authentic culture”; during the 1990s a number of music festivals emerged (the most renowned being El Festival Petronio Álvarez in Cali) in addition to Afro-Colombian dance/music foundations in Colombian urban centers.6

Nonetheless, in more recent rap, it has become much more common to find the use of terms such as *Afrocolombia*, *etnia*, and *cultura* in music produced by young Afro-Colombians (instead of *negro*, *raza*, etc.). I believe that the use of more contemporary terminology is indicative of the influence that current Afro-Colombian discourses are having on urban youth identities. For example, in the song “Sí” by Choc Quib Town, Miguel “Slow” Martínez proclaims: “Que soy rapero y eso lo saco desde lo profundo, ¡Eh! ¡Ah!/ A mí me gusta ragga, reggae, y el R&B / Y eso lo mezclo con los ritmos de aquí / Porque yo soy rumbero ¡Ah!/ Soy Latinoamérica / soy *Afrocolombia* / Y todo eso con el rap, ¡Ah!” (Emphasis is mine). Interestingly enough, the concept of being “Afro-Colombian” is strongest in urban centers, such as Bogotá, and somewhat more noticeable in other urban centers were there are stronger grassroots movements and organizations working on Afro-Colombian causes. As mentioned, the concept of ethnicity, of belonging to an Afro-Colombian ethnic group, is still relatively new and often misunderstood among many black Colombians. Of course, even this terminology – although more democratic and tolerant – can be problematic, as illustrated in chapter two. Nonetheless,

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6 The mounting interest in Afro-Colombian autochthonous music should be considered alongside the definitions of Afro-Colombians in the Constitution of 1991, which provides images of established, ancestral black communities whose traditions and customs date back to antiquity. It should not be surprising, therefore, that Afro-Colombian “folklore” is now being commodified, sold and consumed in “cultural” festivals as a way for Colombians to experience “authentic culture.” Obviously, this music too can solidify certain stereotypes; if this practice represents “real” or “authentic” Afro-Colombian culture and music, then “real” Afro-Colombian people are poor, rural campesinos.
the growing use of this terminology in Afro-Colombian rap seems to indicate a certain type of transformation taking place within Afro-Colombian identities. Although older ethnicities and identities may still be dominant, this music shows that these rappers are rethinking identities, all of which is often provoked by these artists’ participation in informal and scholarly debates about issues of ethnicity and race. Furthermore, it exhibits the influence that these new discourses on ethnicity in Colombia are having on these artists and their music. Lastly, I too believe that it demonstrates that these rappers are cognizant young men and women who can use music as one of many possible tools, as a didactic instrument, to raise ethnic-racial consciousness and for creating positive identities.

5.6 Cultural and Musical Transculturation

To this point, I have addressed some of the ways in which the identities of Afro-Colombian youth imagined and constructed through the cultural practice of a “foreign”

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7 The term “transculturation” was formulated around 1940 by Fernando Ortiz in his masterwork, Contrapunto cubano del tabaco y el azúcar (Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar). With this term, he attempted to grasp the density of Cuban cultural history while, at the same time, avoiding the use of “acculturation,” which he deemed to be too ideologically charged. Although he used the term to underline degrees of fusion and synthesis, he likewise emphasized a transitive process of consecutive “deculturations” and “acculturations,” marked by conflict and even resistance. During the 1970s, Angel Rama used the term in his book, Transculturation narrativa en América Latina (Narrative Transculturation in Latin America). Rama essentially re-elaborated the concept within a theoretical framework of dependency theory while simultaneously broadening its application to a more general Latin American context. Although it was used by Rama to analyze literary works, transculturation would eventually become one of the most important theories used in Latin American cultural studies as an interdisciplinary approach that successfully intertwined anthropological, sociological, political, and literary studies (Trigo, “Politics” 375). For more detailed information, see Fernando Ortiz, Cuban counterpoint; tobacco and sugar (Trans. Harriet de Oniš. New York: A.A. Knopf, 1947); Renato Ortiz, Mundialização e cultura (São Paulo: Editora Brasiliense, 1994), 155; Angel Rama, Transculturation narrativa en América Latina (México, D.F.: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1982); Abril Trigo, “Shifting Paradigms: From Transculturation to Hybridity: A Theoretical Critique” (Unforeseeable Americas: Questioning Cultural Hybridity in the Americas. Ed. Rita De Grandis and Zilà Bernd. Atlanta: Rodopi, 2000), 85-111.
music imply identities nourished not just by Afro-Colombian/Colombian elements, but also by U.S. and diasporic ones. And as more and more of the world’s youth turn to U.S. forms of pop culture, it frequently awakens fears of cultural homogenization, a process often called “Americanization” (or in this case, perhaps a certain type of “Afro-Americanization”). However, although these global processes do in fact lead to certain similarities and recognizable imagery and cultural traits among urban youth around the globe, as illustrated by the way Afro-Colombian youth appropriate U.S. imported music, styles, aesthetics and behaviors, there are significant differences. What, then, is the “differential,” the “surplus” or “excess” that make peripheral, Afro-Colombian rap “almost the same but not quite,” as Homi Bhabha would put it (1994)? The “differential” arises precisely through a process of symbolic creativity that begins with the uprooting of artifacts, behaviors and forms of knowledge from a determined local context and then its global distribution. Through a type of artistic *bricolage* (Levi-Strauss 1973), individuals take these artifacts, behaviors and practices, in this case from U.S. hip-hop, and combine or juxtapose them with other local or “traditional” elements at their disposal. In this regard, these artists are not mere consumers of U.S. pop music, but also producers by way of selective adoption of U.S. hip-hop and then its transculturation to local heterogeneity; in other words, these rappers redefine and reinterprete U.S. hip-hop through local, creative activities and practices in local contexts resulting in new musical creations with specific narrations of different geographical scenarios and a sense of belonging to specific localities. And through these emergent modes of transculturation, objects that possess one meaning (or no meaning) in the culture of origin are transformed and furnished with new and sometimes even subversive meanings in a new context.

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There have been many ways in which Latin Americanists and Latin American intellectuals have tried to comprehend the cultural, biological, and temporal heterogeneity of Latin American cultures, peoples, and artistic expressions, especially in this era of globalization. For instance, Canclini’s hybridity has recently enjoyed much prestige and popularity as a theoretical paradigm used for understanding current global phenomena. Nonetheless, when considering the heterogeneity engendered in the spaces where the transnational collides with local cultures, I have chosen to use the term transculturation as the theoretical instrument best suited for highlighting and capturing the continuously dual processes – often characterized by conflict and struggle – of transformation and change in which the forces of modernity and modernization modify the traditional, while at the same time, there is an infusion of traditional elements, arts and cultures into spaces of modernity. In a word, I use transculturation to analyze the artistic/musical responses – the production and transformation of the residual – and the possible resolutions to the challenges posited by cultural heterogeneity.

For instance, part of the “surplus” or “differential” in Afro-Colombian hip-hop is characterized by the transformative praxis arising from lived experiences common to these artists. As shown in chapter four, Afro-Colombian performers rap about life within their communities while addressing issues such as the armed conflict, displacement, Plan Colombia, the drug trade, violence, social cleansing, police brutality, U.S. imperialism, neoliberal politics, and much more. In a word, they reflect on lived experiences that, in turn, motivate them to put their unique political, social and cultural narrations into musical form through creative practices. For instance, while rapping about these issues, they often sample political speeches, recordings of political rallies and chants, gunshots,
and explosions into their music. Also, during stage performances, many groups complement their music by acting out and representing violent scenes such as assassinations, slaves in chains or blindfolded prisoners. Ultimately, by organizing and expressing their testimonies through music and performance, these rappers have become critically conscious individuals within their communities and cultures.

In regard to the musical styles, Tony Mitchell states, “In its initial stages, appropriation of rap and hip-hop outside the USA often mimicked U.S. models, but in most countries where rap has taken root, hip-hop scenes have rapidly developed from an adoption to an adaptation of U.S. musical forms and idioms. This has involved an increasingly syncretism and incorporation of local linguistic and musical features” (11). This “adoption and adaptation” has indeed been taking place among Afro-Colombian rappers in recent years, which perhaps leads to the “differential” that most notably distances Afro-Colombian hip-hop from both U.S. and mestizo hip-hop. This “differential” is found within emergent modes of transculturation taking place not only through the appropriation and transformation of a variety of “local”/“peripheral” and “foreign”/“cosmopolitan,” afro-centric, cultural artifacts, behaviors and images, but also through evolving Afro-Colombian musical forms created through the incorporation into their rap of Afro-Colombian “folklore,” along with other forms of Colombian, Latin American and Caribbean musics. The emerging musical styles of Afro-Colombian rap are often labeled as more “pleasant” and perhaps not as rough around the edges. These more “pleasant” musical forms may be perceived as a response to market demands, especially when taking into consideration that, along with the growing interest in Afro-Colombian communities and culture, Afro-Colombian “folklore” has acquired market value. In a
word, for these rappers, “authenticity” can also be understood as a discourse that can serve both political (Afro-Colombian solidarity) and even economic (marketability) purposes.

Furthermore, the interest that some Afro-Colombian rappers have in mixing hip-hop with “folklore” or “traditional” music should be placed within an existing move toward “the commoditization of places and their traditions prompted by processes of globalizing capitalism that are increasingly accelerated and increasingly dependent on the production and circulation of information and images” (Wade, *Music* 226). As mentioned, today’s new regime of accumulation is characterized by the segmentation of consumer markets in order to appeal to specific consumer groups, especially through symbolic goods and cultural products. Capitalists now cater to diverse market niches and to consumers who often seek products that can help them restore lost identities in an era of globalization where deterritorialization has rapidly accelerated (particularly in Colombia due to the neoliberal economic opening of the country’s economy to the global market). This commodification has been most apparent in the entertainment and media industries, which have promoted fusions of traditional and modern elements that the consumers –across the board - have accepted (228). In other words, these Afro-Colombian rappers are not the first to produce amalgamated musical forms and styles. For example, in Colombia, Carlos Vives became famous for “modernizing” *vallenato* vis-à-vis modern technology and the infusion of a pop sound. Furthermore, as Abril Trigo maintains, “Nowadays, under the economics of global ‘world music,’ we are accustomed to exotic sounds and strange rhythms; under the politics of multiculturalism, we are trained to appreciate them” (Trigo, “Politics” 123).
However, although global trends within the music industry have, in a sense, led to certain conditions conducive to the creation of these musical amalgamations, we cannot easily dismiss the fact that, for the longest time, many of these Afro-Colombian rappers have been both consumers of and participants in autochthonous (often ceremonial) music. Moreover, as mentioned, there is a great deal of contact and even crossover between Afro-Colombian rappers and “folkloric” performers. It makes artistic and cultural sense, therefore, that Afro-Colombian youth would eventually combine rap with sounds and rhythms more familiar to them and their local communities. In fact, during interviews and in the music itself, many Afro-Colombian rappers manifest a desire to create a more “authentic,” “Afro-Colombian” musical style of rap, which often implies recovering certain musical traditions, sounds and rhythms common to their own communities (See analysis of “NN” by Choc Quib Town below).

Through the incorporation and mixing of local musical elements, Afro-Colombian groups are appropriating rap as a foreign, cultural good, and consciously, “Afro-Colombianizing” it. Tostao, from Choc Quib Town, often spoke to me about these new musical forms as an indication that Afro-Colombian rappers are searching for a musical identity, which in many ways reflects a broader need for nurturing and strengthening ethnic identities. At the same time, through rap they are also reaffirming the cultural significance of their localities. In other words, these emerging musical forms and the adaptation of local musical features has indeed led some Afro-Colombian groups to reclaim local spaces and localities as sites for the (re)creation of ethnic identities. For instance, in Choc Quib Town’s song, “Somos Pacífico,” made to sound folkloric through the sampling of the marimba (a type of xylophone of African origin associated with Afro-
Colombian music and culture), they celebrate the African legacy of the Pacific coast, which unites Afro-Colombian communities as a “black” territory where one finds Afro-Colombian music genres, cultural foods, religious elements, particular shared idiosyncrasies (in the way of walking, dancing and talking) and even common phenotypic characteristics such as skin color and hair. In a word, the Pacific littoral is (re)constructed through music as a place marked by racial and ethnic differences.

In effect, they evoke a strong sense of place within a national and international scenario, as evidenced by the sampling of “¡Qué viva la música latina!” and the last line that emphatically proclaims that “Colombia es más que coca, marihuana y café.” Not only does Choc Quib Town inform their national and international audience that Colombia is more than stereotypical representations, but they also reaffirm the “Afro-Colombian” component of the nation. By recovering and highlighting their own culture through rap, they insert themselves within both the national imaginary and a larger world of music. For these Afro-Colombians rappers, cultural memory and the recovering of culture play a pivotal role in negotiating the tensions between the reaffirmation of local/ethnic culture and its national and even transnational meanings. They are rethinking and proposing a Colombia not just defined by positive attributes (“more than coca, marihuana and coffee”), but more importantly by its Afro-Colombian attributes. Ultimately, through music, they evoke the “ambivalent margin of the nation-space” and challenge any claims made by dominant culture to supremacy (Bhabha, “Introduction” 4) (I return to questions of national identity below).

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8 This song should obviously be considered within the broader context of the rewriting of the Constitution of 1991 and the political recognition of certain areas of the Pacific littoral as “black” territories.
Similarly, in the song “Currulao”, Flaco Flow y Melanina not only rap over a traditional, Afro-Colombian genre of music from the Pacific coast by the same name as the title of the song, but the lyrics also reflect a celebration of their ethnic identity and heritage:

[...] ¡Yo quiero bailar! ¡Currulao!
¡Yo quiero cantar! ¡Currulao!
¡Lo voy a mezclar! ¡Currulao!
¡Con otro tumba’o! ¡Currulao!
Escucha el mensaje que trae sentimiento
Orgulloso me siento porque represento
Un himno, una raza, una sola bandera
Cuánto más quisiera
Que no hubiese más guerra
Y quedarme en mi tierra
Sin hambre ni miseria
Y así ver crecer los niños en paz y amor
Más tolerancia, más comprensión
Tener derecho a la educación
Respetar y ser respetado
A golpe de currulao vamos a danzar
Como lo hacen mamá y papá
Al compás del guasá, cununo y marimba
Eché pa’allá y pa’ca
Saquen sus pañuelos
Hombres, mujeres, niños y viejos
Y que nunca se olvide lo que sabemos [...]}

Muchos nos desprecian
Otros nos desplazan
Y por nuestras tierras
A muchos nos matan
Pero esto nunca nos podrán quitar
Lo que a mi gente bella la hace soñar
Nuestra identidad, nuestra cultura
Motivo de orgullo pa’ nuestra negrura

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9 According to Peter Wade, currulao “in its various forms is one of the most undiluted and independent black genres […] Nowadays, the term refers exclusively to the Pacific coast genre, and its Africanness is quite apparent […] The currulao involves the marimba, a type of xylophone of African origin, two cununos or conical drums designated male and female, one or two bombos or double-headed drums, guasás or bamboo tube rattles, and a lead male singer with several female vocalists who sing in a call-response fashion” (Blackness 275).
Lo que te canto es de mis ancestros  
Esto es lo nuestro, te lo demuestro  
Lo que nos hace sentirnos vivos  
Tener anhelos y objetivos  
Echar pa’lante así haya sufrido  
Pasar corriendo por los problemas  
Con alegría olvidar las penas  
¡Que nunca muera, currulao, que viva!

This song clearly expresses a deliberate mixing of “Afro-Colombian music” (*currulao*) with another *tumba’o*, which in this case is rap. Even though this song may serve as an example of the scope and reach of U.S. pop culture, it nevertheless illustrates that what ultimately defines these rappers is their Afro-Colombian identity, culture and music. These Afro-Colombian rappers and their music show that, despite a growing global awareness, local particularisms are therefore not merely lost, silenced or hidden – instead they can be highlighted, negotiated and transcultured through new transnational musical forms. However, this music can point to an agonizing recognition of inevitable cultural and musical displacements engendered by the dynamics of globalization, as evinced by the way that *Flaco Flow y Melanina* not only call for justice and equality, but also plead their listeners to protect and conserve those Afro-Colombian traditions past down from previous generations. These traditions, which serve as the foundations for their culture and identity, are obviously threatened in today’s world by the same global pop culture they consume and practice.

Ultimately, these rappers work through a mode of transculturation that clearly functions through the consumption of U.S. pop culture. Afro-Colombian rap is full of global expressions and hip-hop terminology, although there is also a great deal of Afro-Colombian slang such as *janguia’o* (hanging out), *el caché* (showy style), *el yenyeré*
(festive environment), un yeblo (a punch), el bunde (rowdily dancing in group), un pai (a friend), el rintaquetaque (good vibes), to mention a few. These songs are predominantly performed in Spanish; however, it is common to find lyrics in “Spanglish,” in which they mix in English words pronounced with a noticeable Spanish accent. Interestingly enough, in most Afro-Colombian rap songs, typically there is no parodic synthesis through the incorporation of dissimilar components, but instead these groups arrange recycled scraps and musical or lyrical components in a juxtaposed, non-hierarchical, successive manner, which has really always been characteristic of the art of sampling in rap. In a word, like much of contemporary Latin American cultural expressions, this Afro-Colombian hip-hop employs the post-modern aesthetic of pastiche, or “blank parody,” as defined by Frederic Jameson in *The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991). He characterizes the postmodern as playful pastiche, a term he defines in opposition to serious usage of parody: “Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style […] But it is a neutral practice […] without any of parody’s ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of […] any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists” (17). This pastiche is carried out as “as a unique form of participating in an experience (modernity) propelled by the market and by power, by the diffusion of necessity and of consumption (Brunner, *Un Espejo* 197-8), in this case, the consumption of U.S. pop culture.
5.7 Ethnicity within Discourses on Authenticity within Colombian Hip-Hop

It could be argued that if the periphery is already imitating or consuming products made by the center, then products produced in the periphery cannot be considered as expressions of some “real” or “authentic” culture. In this regard, Canclini highlights the antiquated and erroneous aspect of approaching “authenticity” given that “lo auténtico es una invención moderna y transitoria” (Culturas Híbridas 185). For this reason, it is no longer viable to argue that heterogeneous, mixed cultures are somehow “inauthentic.” Canclini argues that political culture should not be reduced to rescuing “authentic” objects and should instead be more interested in the processes through which an object or an artwork acquires socio-cultural representation. Canclini’s arguments, therefore, reveal that there are never “genuine” or more “genuine” representations of music or social identities. Any claim to musical authenticity, which is based on an assumed essential link between music and identity, are informed by a power struggle over the possession of value in which tradition and modernity are key concepts (Wade, Music 25).

Colombian hip-hop, as cultural production, has obviously been molded by non-Colombian influences, including forces stemming from national and international music markets. Nonetheless, I have shown that, for these artists and their audiences, this youth culture and music genre are infused with an ideology of authenticity, which, above all, makes distinctions between hip-hop and mere entertainment. And it is precisely this distinction that makes hip-hop matter so much to them. At the same time, I have also highlighted other forms of hip-hop authenticity in Colombia. For instance, rap is only considered “real” or “authentic” if it addresses socio-cultural and political themes generally dealing with the rappers’ lived experiences as members of the lower socio-
economic classes. However, discourses on the authenticity and oppositional force of Colombian hip-hop often go beyond questions of class and spill over into concerns about musical styles and even ethnicity. For example, in Colombia, paradoxically, there has been a great deal of pressure within the hip-hop community not to stray too far from certain U.S. established musical paradigms, or at least certain musical styles and repertoires closely resembling those from the U.S. During most of the 1990s, Colombian hip-hop styles and melodies reflected monotonous rhythms and slow, pounding baselines, reminiscent of older U.S. rap; in other words, there was imitation with very little experimentation. And there still is great resistance on part of the Colombian hip-hop listening public to any kind of variance from these norms. In fact, when rappers experiment with music styles, they are often met with skepticism and resistance from within the hip-hop community. This leads to an obvious dilemma for those rappers who either want to carry their messages beyond hip-hop audiences or for those who even hope to make a living off of their music: if groups want to professionally or even commercially produce hip-hop in Colombia, how can they stay “true” to the Colombian hip-hop audience (which has tended to demand strict adherence to musical styles and thematic content) and at the same time appeal to a larger listening public? Many of these rappers even complain about the lack of respect that the general Colombian population gives to

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10 This pressure to maintain older U.S. styles of rap, in part, may have something to do with the association Colombian rappers make between “old school” rap styles and its more socially conscious lyrics as somehow being more “authentic,” especially when compared to styles and lyrics of today’s more commercial rap.

11 Interestingly enough, the Colombian hip-hop community has slowly become more accepting of salsa mixed into their rap, but this is because they now have a global referent thanks to the international success of Hispanic rap groups, like Orishas, that have given certain validity to the incorporation of salsa rhythms into hip-hop.
both the artistic and social aspects of their music.\footnote{12} How, then, can they gain the respect of non hip-hop audiences and, at the same time, remain loyal to their fan base?

After several years of producing music with little or no financial gain, several Afro-Colombian rappers have expressed an interest in producing more marketable rap in an effort to perhaps garner the interest of record labels, music producers and/or disc jockeys on local radio stations. As mentioned, to date no record label has wanted to record music with strongly denunciatory lyrics and “rough” musical styles that are only appealing to consumers within certain market niches consisting predominantly of urban poor; furthermore, most mainstream disc jockeys refuse to play Colombian hip-hop. In interviews, various rappers confirmed that in order to make a living off of their music, they will have to negotiate with the power of global capital, meaning that they will have to “soften” lyrics or change music styles; several rappers have expressed a willingness to produce a few marketable songs that are more danceable and pleasant to the ear – music that can be played at social gatherings and on local radio stations. Nonetheless, instead of seeing it as a form of capitulation to global capitalism, they see it as a form of survival. When the “integrity” of their music is questioned, rappers promise that the majority of the songs on their CDs will fall within the definition of “\textit{hip-hop social}” with its messages of social protest. At the end of the day, it is hard to ignore the fact that many of these rappers live in extreme poverty (and even have families to support). For many of

\footnote{12}{This “lack of respect” for hip-hop in Colombia can stem from general perceptions that the non hip-hop audience has of rappers, for example, as delinquents. These perceptions emerge from associations made between hip-hop styles and certain rebellious and aggressive behaviors. Furthermore, the non hip-hop public often complains that this rap is aesthetically unpleasant (and not danceable) and that the lyrics are violent, aggressive and/or too negative.}
them, their options are very limited; they can either make certain concessions in order to make a living off of their artwork or simply search for alternative livelihoods.

As bleak as this may sound, some Afro-Colombian rap groups are showing great astuteness at strategically managing these tensions between the pressures created by the spread of global capital and their desires to maintain social and artistic integrity. Tostao of Choc Quib Town believes that this music genre should offer more than just protest and denunciation; during interviews he expressed concerns not only about rap being pigeonholed as protest music, but also about pressures from within the local hip-hop market that work to restrict musical and lyrical experimentation. In other words, the members of Choc Quib Town (and those of some of the other groups) are starting to feel that they are reproducing a formula that leads to an artistic dead end. This is not to say that Tostao no longer believes in the potential of rap or any music as a medium for awakening social consciousness and engendering social action. However, he manifests a desire to grow artistically and explore new venues through music. Most importantly, he and the group members believe in the need to spread their rap and its messages beyond traditional hip-hop circles, and therefore, want to “dress up” their lyrics in more appealing melodies. Tostao insists on the importance of continuing to produce “hip-hop social,” but as a musician (he has formally studied percussion and even jazz) he expresses an intimate desire to experiment and create new styles of music. During our conversations, he often drew on examples from reggae icons such as Peter Tosh and Bob Marley who produced aesthetically popular music, but with lyrics that evoked thought and consciousness.
However, *Choc Quib Town*’s musical innovations do not come without complications. Recently, the group has had to address criticism that they no longer produce *hip-hop social*, in part, because of their growing success, but also due to their musical experimentation with Afro-Colombian “folklore.” When a group like *Choc Quib Town* strays from the abovementioned established norms with regards to musical style, sound and melody, and then gains recognition for musical experimentation with autochthonous sounds from their own traditions and culture (which incidentally is exactly what has led to their growing appeal beyond the hip-hop community and a certain level of economic success), they are accused of producing something other than “*hip-hop real*” or of “selling out.” Furthermore, criticism aimed at the incorporation into rap of music and styles associated with “black culture” inevitably evoke issues of ethnicity. In other words, ideologies on authenticity and opposition crossover into questions of ethnicity when Afro-Colombians incorporate rhythms, melodies and styles associated with “black” culture and then are criticized for such innovation. Tostao, nonetheless, feels like no one will make “*rap gringo*” better than the “*gringos*,” and therefore, trying to emulate U.S. styles of rap only results in “bad copies.” In order for hip-hop to be “Colombian,” or better yet, “Afro-Colombian,” he believes that it has to be transformed using local elements. For him, and other Afro-Colombian rappers also experimenting with new sounds, the “real sellouts” are those who have been duped into thinking they should imitate the “*gringos*.”

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13 In addition to winning “Rap al Parque 2004” *Choc Quib Town* was asked to perform on a nationally televised music awards show, *Premios Shock.*
Although there have been no overt conflicts or violence between mestizo and Afro-Colombian rappers, there are noticeable differences that may lead to misunderstandings or tensions. It is at times insinuated, for example, that Afro-Colombian rap is superior to mestizo rap, often described as a “bad” imitation of U.S. rap. These opinions are sometimes based on stereotypes of the musically and rhythmically inclined person of African descent, explained either from cultural-historic or essentialist perspectives. Furthermore, these opinions are also influenced by the way U.S. rap is typically exported and marketed as “black” music. Nonetheless, my contacts were very careful not to explicitly make any assertions of superiority given that much of this Colombian hip-hop culture is shared by mestizos and Afro-Colombians alike, and there is a great deal of camaraderie among hip-hoppers across ethnic-racial lines; they support each other in their musical endeavors and share many of the same social and political views. Furthermore, as stated, Colombian hip-hop audiences are predominantly comprised of poor non-blacks. Nonetheless, there are noticeable aesthetic and ideological differences between Afro-Colombian and mestizo rappers and hip-hoppers. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, many mestizo rappers ignore the “black” element of hip-hop culture and rap,\textsuperscript{14} while for many Afro-Colombian rappers the perception of rap as a “black” music carries significant symbolic meaning and value; for them, “authentic” rap is “black” rap. Afro-Colombian rappers appropriate and employ afro-centric elements that are typically either absent in mestizo styles or simply not acknowledged as “black.”

\textsuperscript{14} The irony is quite apparent: although U.S. rap markets and exports a type of “black” culture, upon migrating to Colombia it has assumed different meanings within predominately mestizo hip-hop circles, in that it is conveniently stripped of its “black-only” definition. And within this context, Afro-Colombian rappers are criticized for “blackening” – in their own way – what was already a “black” music form, albeit from another region of the diaspora.
Choc Quib Town, for instance, combines rap with funk, ragga, and a plethora of traditional Afro-Colombian rhythms from the Pacific littoral known as bunde, currulao, abazao, bambazú, levantapolvo and agua-bajo, as well as with other Latin American and Caribbean rhythms such as salsa, songo and guajira. The ingenuity of this rap group is found precisely within its transcultural forms in addition to the incorporation of musical instruments such as the marimba, bombo and congas (typically associated with “black” music and culture). The incorporation of different genres and rhythms into rap is not specific only to Choc Quib Town; Asilo 38 has experimented with vallenato; Zona Marginal with salsa; Flaco Flow y Melanina with currulao and salsa; Carbono with salsa and levantapolvo; and Voodoo SoulJahs with ragga, reggae and other folkloric rhythms from the Pacific region. While almost all of the groups in this study are now consciously incorporating Latin American/Caribbean rhythms into their rap, only a select few are creating transcultural forms with autochthonous, Afro-Colombian music.

Obviously, then, these transcultural musical forms lend themselves to a variety of readings. When these groups incorporate autochthonous music into their rap, the image of this music as rooted in regional, rural, “black” tradition can be negative, for example, for mestizo hip-hoppers. However, at the same time, it may be perceived as positive in that it gives this music a more “authentic” Afro-Colombian/Colombian identity. Also, while some may look favorable upon the “modern” element of these transcultural forms as a sign of progressiveness and prestige, others may construe it as negative in that it implies the loss of “traditional” values or as an example of shallow commercialism. However, we cannot easily dismiss the fact that, recently, absent or declining “folkloric” productions have been revived due to growing demand for “exotic” or “real” culture. In a word, this
apparently contradictory structure shows that, in the realm of cultural production and even taste, pop music and “folklore,” "traditions" and "modernity," mutually need one another.

In the end, these Afro-Colombian artists are generating the inevitable and necessary transculturation of U.S. hip-hop, which I see as the best possible strategy for creating a positive dynamic from the imposition of U.S. pop culture. Their mimicry (which is never simple mimicry) demonstrates that if modernity is imitable, it can be surpassed. In this regard, these Afro-Colombian rappers are trying to overcome what might be perceived as a cultural inferiority complex. For example, in Choc Quib Town’s song, “NN,” or “netamente nuestro,” they explicitly stake claim on rap as something that belongs to them:

Yo rapto de mi música y mi cultura toma
Hip-hop Colombia vive, se siente el aroma
La fluidez del rap nacional
Ningún gringo ni en veinte años la podrá imitar ¡Eh!
Ellos tienen los tarros y nosotros el talento
Pero lo siento, ha llegado nuestro momento […]

Porque es nuestro, netamente nuestro
Venga hasta aquí, yo se lo muestro y se lo muestro
Porque es nuestro, netamente nuestro
¡Oiga! Córrase pa’cá, yo se lo muestro […]

Con este tumba’o ya la hicimos
Par de ingenieros, nos unimos y salimos
Porque esto va mas fuerte
Y sin duda alguna Choc Quib Town
Sonando hasta la luna, ¡Eh Ah! […]

Porque esto es nuestro, netamente nuestro y de verdad
Colombia es mía al mismo tiempo que el hip-hop
Tómala suave, dale sin visaje
Buena imagen pa’todo que esa es la que vale […]

265
Choc Quib Town - ¡Chin Chin! – black kings and queens
Raperos Colombianos pesados como Dream Team
Mira que te damos flow de pura exportación
Escucha muy bien - NN - nuestra canción
¡Cómo no!

Es la verdad que no valoramos lo que tenemos
Seguramente porque aún lo desconocemos
Aunque todos sabemos que ya es tiempo de cambiar
Hacer todo completo y no dejarlo a la mitad
El Choc Quib Town - Chin Chin! - and the black kings
Heavy colombiano like a dream team

Choc Quib Town proclaims that they produce a *rap colombiano* that no *gringo* could ever imitate, specifically due to the wealth of musical tradition at the disposal of Afro-Colombian youth, for example, *chirimía*, which is the Afro-Colombian rhythm used in this particular piece. They acknowledge that perhaps they have not valued the untapped musical and cultural resources at their disposal while too often idolizing U.S. rap styles and performers. However, the time has come to make use of their own musical and cultural elements not to simply imitate, but instead to outdo U.S. rap. In this way, these “black kings and queens” makeup their own “dream team” capable of producing a style of music worthy of exportation for an international audience.

Ultimately, these are some of the major dilemmas that these groups must face. As of date, Choc Quib Town’s musical innovation has, in fact, permitted them to transcend traditional, urban hip-hop spaces in Colombia and appeal to wider audiences from different sectors and socio-economic classes. They are now commonly invited to play at more up-scale bars and nightclubs in Bogotá. Although the group has been rather adept at

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15 This is a reference to the 1992 U.S. Olympic basketball team which, for the first time in history, was composed of professional basketball players such as Magic Johnson and Michael Jordan. They absolutely dominated their competition on their way to winning the gold medal.
holding on to most of its original fan base, their recent success has inevitably instigated some rappers and hip-hop fans to suggest that Choc Quib Town has “sold out.” Nonetheless, the group believes that they must strategically use the market not only to make a living off of their artwork, but also to teach others about Afro-Colombian culture. During their performances, Tostao often uses the stage to manifest the group’s cultural agenda, and especially as a means of teaching others about Afro-Colombian music, culture and heritage. It becomes an event in which non-black audiences not only celebrate and dance, but also learn about new types of music unfamiliar to many people living in the interior regions of the country; at the same time, they are made to (re)think concepts on Afro-Colombian people and culture. Choc Quib Town is working to achieve a danceable form of hip-hop, inspired by Afro-Colombian elements, but beset with global connotations, suggestive of diverse cultural landscapes, and politically committed to current events. It is perhaps in this regard that Tostao and the other group members have become the major contributors to the transculturation of hip-hop in Colombia.

Groups like Choc Quib Town are demonstrating that hip-hop can be both experimental and oppositional. And while they point to ways in which hip-hop can be transcultured into a less dependent mode of cultural production, they likewise evoke the music’s limitations. For instance, despite this innovation and musical transculturation, some critics will argue that this music merely serves as an example of the neocolonial dependency on cultural forms from the “First World” that leads to subordinated artistic and cultural forms, and hence, a lack of autonomy. Nevertheless, for these young artists who have grown up living at the crossroads of Afro-Colombian, Latin American, Caribbean, diasporan and Anglo worlds, their multiple and even contradictory identities
are best expressed through these emerging transcultural musical forms. Furthermore, their attempts at managing and negotiating the contradictions and tensions that materialize as a result of expressing themselves through a transnational musical form demonstrate that they are aware of the impossibility of operating outside global systems of domination. Given that oppressed people rarely can avoid systems of vigilance, control and repression, this music reveals a strategy in which these rappers appropriate the instruments of the dominant groups and then use them either for other means or even as a form of resistance.

For example, the art of sampling certain instruments and music into their rap transforms them from consumers into producers while they tap into their memories as consumers (or even participants) of “traditional” songs that they later reorganize and reproduce in the present using modern technology. In a word, through emergent modes of transculturation they are “modernizing” Afro-Colombian autochthonous music through the use of new technology (Lipsitz 190), while simultaneously transforming U.S. hip-hop, all of which results in a unique and more autonomous music. For instance, Choc Quib Town has produced a hip-hop version of “San Antonio,” which is a traditional song from the Pacific littoral that has been passed down from generation to generation. In its original form, it is known as a bunde, a song – with its own particular rhythm – used during funeral processions to calm and comfort the spirits of deceased children whose souls are beginning their journey to heaven. According to Tostao, “La letra representa una celebración de una ceremonia fúnebre. Simbolizamos el bunde a la música electrónica y le añadimos unos golpes y el rap” (Personal Interview).
Furthermore, rap that incorporates Afro-Colombian “folklore,” such as the abovementioned song, “San Antonio,” often demonstrates a degree of resistance and autonomy, even in the absence of overtly denunciatory or rebellious lyrics, by simply celebrating Afro-Colombian culture and African heritage. Resistance can be found within music forms per se, in their sounds, beats and rhythms, which highlight these rappers’ resolve to resist the temptation to completely assimilate to the aesthetic and ideological models imposed either locally or from abroad. I believe that the words of Paul Gilroy, although made in reference to the cultural significance of drums and rhythms in U.S. rap, apply here to Afro-Colombian rap:

The irrepressible rhythms of the once forbidden drum are often still audible in their work. Its characteristic syncopations still animate the basic desires – to be free and to be oneself- that are revealed in this counterculture’s unique conjunction of body and music. Music, the grudging gift that supposedly compensated slaves not only for their exile from the ambiguous legacies of practical reason but for their complete exclusion from modern political society, has been refined and developed so that it provides an enhanced mode of communication beyond the petty power of words – spoken or written. (Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic* 76)

In the end, these musical appropriations and transformations demonstrate that commercialization can foster international cross-fertilization, which has the potential of opening new opportunities. This music points to the “emancipatory possibilities of new technologies and the readiness of marginalized and oppressed populations to employ them for humane ends – for shedding restricting social identities and embracing new possibilities of a life without hierarchy and exploitation” (Lipsitz 190).
5.8 Hip-Hop as a Symbolic Field for Negotiating Nationhood

With the new Constitution, new spaces have emerged allowing for redefinitions of Colombian nationhood, which are informed not only by international interests in democracy and human rights, but also by global struggles for ethnic-racial tolerance and equality. Therefore, in this light, Colombia’s multicultural nationhood shares a connection with both internal and external identities. One of those spaces of enunciation where Colombian nationhood is being redefined is music. As Martin Stokes argues, “music is socially meaningful not entirely but largely because it provides means by which people recognise identities and places, and boundaries which separate them” (“Introduction” 5). Although music has extensive and profound impact and influence, it has no transparent connection with national identity; musical styles or genres can be made to be representative of national or even regional identities in complex and even contradictory ways. Furthermore, this chapter has illustrated ways in which both national identity and music must be understood in relation to global and transnational process of both economic and cultural exchange.

The abovementioned discourses on authenticity, the pressures to conform to certain designs, and the resistance on the part of certain Afro-Colombian rappers demonstrate that, as a form of cultural and artistic production, Colombian hip-hop often represents a symbolic field of struggle for the representation of national and ethnic identities. To suggest to an Afro-Colombian that he or she is not Colombian would be a grave insult, but the fact of the matter is that many non-blacks or mestizos regard Afro-Colombians as second-class citizens, or as not entirely representative of the Colombian nation. However, Afro-Colombians do not simply withdraw from Colombian nationhood
(Wade, *Blackness* 37). And hip-hop has become one of those new spaces where the nation is being re-imagined, renegotiated and reworked among the “pluri-ethnic” popular sectors of Colombian society. The tension and the negotiations within Colombian hip-hop are a reflection on a country trying to come to terms with the fact that it is a “multicultural” or “pluri-ethnic” society in an increasingly interconnected world. In many ways, Colombian hip-hop represents and reflects some of the tensions and struggles of a country striving to create a “positive” international identity while simultaneously attempting to reconcile major internal conflicts, which traverse ethnic, class, regional and national identities.

Many of these songs, such as *Choc Quib Town*’s “Somos Pacífico,” not only reveal a preoccupation with Colombia’s negative international reputation, but they also demonstrate the importance of national/local identities even within this transnational music genre. In fact, within these processes of cultural consumption and music practice, Colombian hip-hoppers – whether mestizo or Afro-Colombian – actively transculture this particular music genre and use it as a symbol of nationhood and national identity. National identity “is at once an intensely unique and personal experience and, at the same time, a collective entity that is constantly being re-negotiated, contested, re-defined and re-imagined in relation to changing conditions” (Mahtani and Salmon 165). In this regard, this popular music highlights ways in which globalization often destabilizes local identities, but only to later rearticulate them. Through this music and its performance, these musicians strengthen their Colombian identity by celebrating *hip-hop colombiano*, for example, in relation to other nationalities of hip-hop within this global youth culture. And through music, national meanings are defined relationally not only in respect to
other nations, but also to different regions and expressions within the same country. Afro-
Colombian rappers, for example, celebrate their cultures and differences while nurturing
their own ethnic identities in relation to non-black, national or international rappers.
Therefore, while these rappers often defend their music, culture and localities as
legitimate expressions of a national identity, they also mark their difference with respect
to regional and ethnic-racial groups.

In *Nation and Narration*, Homi Bhabha suggests that the nation is not simply
embodied in narrative culture: “If the problematic ‘closure’ of textuality questions the
‘totalization’ of national culture, then its positive value lies in displaying the wide
dissemination through which we construct the field of meanings and symbols associated
with national life” (3). In a word, Bhabha proposes the nation as popular praxis, for
example, through minority discourses that encompass voices and texts constructed from
the sites of irreducible cultural difference and inequality, from the perspective of the
nation’s margin. These texts and voices possess the disruptive capacity to “continually
evolve and erase [the nation’s] totalizing boundaries – both actual and conceptual –,” and
to “disturb those teleological maneuvers through which ‘imagined communities’ are
given essentialist identities” (“DissemiNation” 300). This Afro-Colombian rap, for
example, is evidence of the fact that, nowadays, the association between music genre,
nation and identity is neither evident nor articulated exclusively from within dominant
discourses on nationalism. Afro-Colombian rappers are molding a “new” Colombian
nation, but not in a way of “imagined communities” proposed by Benedict Anderson. In
effect, the desire or need that Afro-Colombian rappers have to re-imagine and renegotiate
social identities through music and its practices signals the incapacity on the part of these
“imagined communities” (especially with regards to Colombia’s “weakened” nation-state, which is now less equipped to manage and direct national identities) to regulate and remedy the contradictions produced by global structures of economic, political and cultural power (Lipsitz 183).

Obviously, these youths are not completely autonomous from basic power inequalities, hegemonic value hierarchies or nationalist projects (meta-narratives) guided by the elites. However, instead of basing their manifestations solely on the master narratives of the nation-state, these Afro-Colombian rappers base their artistic and cultural expressions on their own experiences within local communities (often found within a transnational frame and the fragmentation that it implies for imagined communities), which is evinced by the way in which they underline personal testimonies or even question certain hegemonic discourses, for example, that of racial democracy in Colombia. To put in another way, through this transnational music, Afro-Colombian artists essentially recreate the nation by recuperating and re-elaborating lost cultural memories that emerge from lived experiences and their daily lives. Cultural memory is characterized by the daily representation of identity and its residual, often repressed or lost, of other subaltern memories. The recovery and narration of this lost cultural memory destabilize the instrumental homogeneity of both historical memory (reproduced by ideological apparatuses of the state, and therefore, primarily guided by a nationalist teleology) and pop memory (produced and distributed by systems of mass communication under the logic of capital and merchandise) (Trigo 2003, Barbero 1987).

In the end, within this Colombian youth culture, rap is consumed and performed by both mestizos and Afro-Colombians, often bringing them together at performances,
workshops, and other events. In this way, hip-hop has opened multiethnic and heterogeneous spaces that are emerging within this urban youth culture. Of course, as I have pointed out, within these spaces where this musical practice takes place, tension and conflict have surfaced, largely revolving around discourses on authenticity, which likewise evoke important questions of power, class, commercialism and ethnicity. In this sense, tension and even contradiction may be viewed as necessary evils given that within these conflicts, Colombia’s hip-hop youth are generating dialogue and debate about national and ethnic identities, which often lead to a questioning of assumptions made on race, Colombia’s supposed racial democracy, class and culture. Hip-Hop is bringing communities into being through performance, and it maps out real and imagined relations between people and ethnic groups. Within Colombian hip-hop, differences and similarities are being marked, territories are being redefined, and tolerance is being practiced.

5.9 Final Thoughts

In the end, there really is not one easily defined national “black culture” in Colombia; both Afro-Colombians and non-blacks use cultural (and phenotypic) differences to mark ethnic-racial distinctions in specific contexts; this is an ongoing process in which differences are continually established, claimed and ascribed between mestizos and Afro-Colombians (Wade, Blackness 272). Within urban contexts, several apparatuses and factors interpellate Afro-Colombian subjectivities and lead to the elaboration of differences as a way to maintain “black culture”: 1) personal experiences with racial discrimination (the imposition of and contestation to “old ethnicities,” racial
situations, racial terminology, etc.; 2) the academic arena (especially within the context of the Constitution of 1991 and a rising interest in Afro-Colombian cultures) as a source of scholarly publications, colloquia, seminars, conferences, and research projects on Afro-Colombian topics and issues that leads to more public debate and dialogue; 3) the political arena in which youth establish links to black organizations and are exposed to solidarity movements; 3) the recent emergence of Afro-Colombian “folkloric” and artistic expressions (music, dance, literature), through which youth learn to link ethnic identity with the participation in cultural and artistic practices; and 4) transnational cultural contact made possible by organizational networking and especially by the expansion of communication systems through which “black” culture is consumed that likewise leads to identifications with elements beyond Colombian borders.

All of these factors, therefore, permit a wide range of identifications for the construction of valid and legitimate Afro-Colombian youth identities. For instance, these youths often revindicate and celebrate an ethnic identity in which Africa is the central and historic referent as a political tool; in this sense, Africa is defined as the “mother land,” which unites diverse populations of African descent. Afro-Colombian identities expressed through music are likewise informed by national or “traditional” symbols such the cimarrón and the palenque, in addition to symbolism from “folklore,” music and dance. Furthermore, in this era of globalization, these young men and women likewise take from diverse (and even incongruent) messages and histories; they take from global symbols of “blackness” associated with sports figures, musicians and artists, certain fashions and styles, and even with world movements of ethnic struggle articulated around images of black world leaders such as Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King. Of
course, at the same time, Afro-Colombian identities are tied to cultural and social expressions shared with non-black sectors (i.e. traditional political affiliations, labor interests, affiliations with NGOs, and even the hip-hop movement which crosses ethnic-racial lines).

In the end, we see that this black culture is not constructed from scratch but instead creatively re-imagined and rebuilt from previous forms and through the mixing of these earlier modes (old ethnicities) with new emerging ones, which demonstrates how Afro-Colombians continue to generate new possibilities and expressions of “blackness.” Although they return to and remember the past, their identities are not frozen in that past; their new ethnicities are also forward looking. The restructuring of the worldwide economic system and the global spread of communication systems have facilitated an accelerated deterritorialization, which can make it very difficult to maintain stable identities tied the territory in which one lives and the nation to which one belongs. However, these young men and women illustrate that, on one hand, they have not lost sight of the place from where they speak. On the other hand, their ethnic identities are not contained within that place as an essence given that their music and identities are no longer strictly rooted in one specific place; they show a desire to address a wider variety of experiences beyond particular places or limits. In sum, their stories, their narratives, are informed by “old ethnicities” and by the standards made available to them from their Afro-Colombian and national cultures, but they also tell of how they fit into a transnational frame. As Hardt and Negri inform us, “It is false, in any case, to claim that we can (re)establish local identities that are in some sense outside and protected against the global flows of capital and Empire” (45).
In fact, Afro-Colombian urban youth, like so many of today’s urban youth, are endowed with a certain type of cultural elasticity and they are very adept at adapting to diverse contexts and at understanding the languages of digital media (video, internet, computers). Often victimized by the country’s armed conflict and even police brutality, grossly underrepresented in the Colombian culture industry, historically silenced within the official cultural and political system, young Afro-Colombians are using pop culture and new communication technologies as a way to declare themselves part of a much wider world. As victims of different forms of social exclusion, by using their knowledge as consumers of popular music and digital media, they are skillfully using the “conduits of popular culture to bring their expressive forms (their identities) of their isolated and largely abandoned” territories to a national (and perhaps international) audience (Lipsitz 181). In the end, these young Afro-Colombians evince the multiplicity of mechanisms through which black identities are constructed and reconstructed, their capacity for adaptation, change, and transculturation. Most importantly, they show how the creative use of this variety of elements that constitutes their identities can be enriching and not debilitating.

Lastly, through the consumption and practice of hip-hop, in addition to reggae, and through the assimilation of these youth cultural elements, Afro-Colombian youth are managing a complex web of identifications that help create feelings of being simultaneously local/national and cosmopolitan/international; these identifications work on various planes, and may vary among individual rappers, but I believe they are manifested strongest on the following levels: 1) They manifest a local belonging to the barrio, city, or even region, for example, the Pacific littoral. Hip-hop has historically been
about one’s origins, and depending on audience, a rapper may be “representing” his/her neighborhood to the rest of the city, his/her city or region to the rest of the country, the country to the rest of the world, or even hip-hop to non hip-hop audiences. 2) Through hip-hop they also express a national belonging by means of this Colombian hip-hop culture across ages, genders, regions and ethnic lines. Hence, young urban Afro-Colombians can belong locally to this multi-ethnic youth culture and feel like part of a nation. For instance, there are many references in their music to *hip-hop colombiano* or *rap colombiano* in addition to declarations of patriotism and pride in being Colombian, usually alongside a type of defense against those who only see Colombia as a violent, drug-ridden country. 3) There is a sense of a local belonging to Afro-Colombian culture and ethnicity. By means of appropriating this musical practice, and through performances, they actively create and manifest identities and identifications – a sense of belonging – with their ethnic group. 4) These rappers exhibit an international belonging to this global, urban hip-hop culture. In a word, by partaking in hip-hop, they also feel cosmopolitan and there is a sense of belonging to “something” much bigger than the nation (which can include a sense of belonging to transnational political communities, sometimes strengthened through associations with NGOs). 5) Lastly, there is a sense of belonging to an international black community as members of the African diaspora through identification with black rap and reggae idols (along with other important black figures) expressed and manifested through hip-hop. As Tostao claims in the rap, “Eso es lo que hay,” he is an “internacional nigga nacido en Chocó,” which highlights that ethnicity-race cannot any longer only be considered within a national frame. Instead racial identifications are now more than ever informed by transnational processes.
CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSIONS

6.1 Afro-Colombian Hip-Hop: Globalization, Popular Culture and Ethnic Identities

One of my principal research objectives was to inquire as to why hip-hop and rap have been so widely accepted, appropriated and assimilated by Afro-Colombian urban youth. Time and time again, during my interviews and interactions with these young rappers, they criticized the superficiality and the increasingly atrophied, clichéd, and repetitive rhetorical conventions of contemporary commercial rap while, at the same time, exalting the denunciatory, social and political attributes of “old school” hip-hop. In Colombia, like in other parts of the world, rappers tend to make use of the original discursive models and idioms derived from the peak period of U.S hip-hop in the mid- to late 1980s, in addition to those of contemporary “underground” hip-hop, and combine them with local musical idioms and vernaculars to create music that attends to their own lived experiences and expressive needs. And this desire or need to use rap as a form of protest or cultural expression, in great part, is motivated by feelings of dissatisfaction and frustration that result from class inequalities, ethnic tension and forms of social exclusion that are often more intense in the peripheries of global capitalism than in the world’s economic centers. In fact, I have argued that globalization and the neoliberal model have
only worsened the situation, adding new challenges to what were already dismal socio-economic realities: the aggravation of the armed conflict, an escalation in the displacement of Afro-Colombian communities, an increase in both migration and mass urbanization, extreme poverty, the spread of a culture of consumerism, an increase in both drug trafficking and drug consumption, overwhelming violence, an intensification of class and ethnic conflicts, and a higher index of police brutality and state-endorsed repression, to mention a few. Ultimately, this complex scenario of violence and poverty provides these rappers with more than ample material suited for the denunciatory tools and discursive models provided by hip-hop. In a word, their testimonies support those who argue against globalization and the manner in which it affects ethnic-minority groups in the peripheries of global capitalism.

At the same time, economic and cultural globalization has greatly facilitated the worldwide spread of U.S. hip-hop – and its African American imagery – to urban youth groups through mass communication systems. This points to one of globalization’s greatest contradictions: it often provides the tools, the means (music, television, internet, etc.) and even the discourses used by marginalized and oppressed peoples around the globe to protest and denounce certain socio-economic and political conditions created or at least aggravated by globalization itself. Furthermore, vis-à-vis the transnational spread of U.S. pop culture, cultural globalization has likewise created more demand for this music and its aesthetics around the world; in other words, these Afro-Colombian hip-hop groups can appropriate, produce and perform this music precisely because they now have a wider listening public emerging as a result of Colombia’s importation of U.S. pop culture and the demand that it creates.
Moreover, upon considering hip-hop’s appropriation among young Afro-Colombians, the ethnic element cannot be disregarded. While urban youth around the world from diverse ethnic backgrounds and various nationalities have indeed appropriated hip-hop and rap, often disregarding or displacing its African American origins, in Colombia (within the African diaspora in general), the afro-centric element of this youth culture and its music has greatly facilitated its appropriation and assimilation among Afro-Colombian youth. U.S. hip-hop and rap emerged in contexts in which young black people were discriminated and marginalized – often manifested in the music’s discourses. Therefore, within hip-hop’s African American imagery, Afro-Colombian youth see a reflection of their own lives and the challenges they face in their communities. It is only logical that this music, its aesthetics, images, forms and discourses, would appeal to other people of African descent in peripheral countries who share similar histories and experiences of servitude and racial discrimination.

Lipsitz informs us that the “diasporic conversation within hip-hop, Afro-beat, jazz and many other Black musical forms provides a powerful illustration of the potential for contemporary commercialized leisure to carry images, ideas, and icons of enormous political importance between cultures” (182). And these may serve as “exemplars of post-colonial culture with direct relevance to the rise of new social movements emerging in response to the imperatives of global capital and its attendant austerity and oppression” (182). Nonetheless, we cannot easily disregard the fact that hip-hop circulates as a commodity marketed by highly centralized transnational conglomerates from metropolitan centers of the world’s economic powers. While both Gilroy (1993) and Lipsitz attempt to construct arguments capable of unifying North-South, East-West
“black” perspectives through music, more attention should be paid to the differences in power relations, in a geopolitical sense, among nations of the Atlantic. It is true that, for these young Afro-Colombians, envisioning themselves as part of an international (hip-hop) community – or as members of the black diaspora – can give them confidence and a sense of empowerment. However, even though Harlem is a “black” ghetto of New York, the pop culture generated there is globalized by means of U.S. media circuits, or U.S. entertainment conglomerates, that affect black communities all through the Americas in the same neocolonial ways in which Western, Hollywood culture affects people of all colors throughout the world.¹ In other words, there is an unequal symbolic, cultural exchange that should not be forgotten (Carvalho 2005). In fact, many young Afro-Colombian rappers are very aware of this unevenness and often seem to manifest feelings of frustration and disillusionment at what they perceive as forms of alienation within the diaspora.

In this sense, despite any cultural and/or historic commonalities among black communities within the diaspora, the growing acceptance and assimilation of this music genre and its styles point to the intensified exportation and pervasive consumption of U.S. cultural exports, characteristic of globalization and its new forms of cultural imperialism. And this especially applies to the ways in which the U.S. entertainment industry fetishizes and colonizes the “black” imaginary with which these rappers identify explaining why there is a tendency to privilege those aspects of U.S. African American culture that are commodified in global markets. These processes do lead to a certain

¹ “Since the emergence of Public Enemy and their substantial cross-genre success in the late 1980s, rappers have generally been signed to independent labels (occasionally black owned and sometimes their own labels) and marketed and distributed by one of the six majors companies” (Rose 7).
degree of homogenous, recognizable imagery and cultural elements among urban youth cultures around the world. Therefore, when reflecting on the ways globalization can affect ethnic-racial minorities and cultural production in the periphery, this study also sheds light on the role that pop culture plays in global developments. Although proponents of globalization perceive it as a process in which ideas and behaviors, technology and information are exchanged and disseminated freely among different cultures worldwide, this exchange is by no means equal and fair. Globalization is not experienced the same by all people in different places in the world. I am not insinuating that Afro-Colombian youth should, therefore, abandon and reject hip-hop’s influence in favor of “traditional,” Afro-Colombian and Colombian behaviors and cultural elements. I am simply illustrating through this study that while these Afro-Colombians are challenged to modify and change their customs, tastes, and desires, in the U.S., these challenges – for the majority of U.S. citizens – only amount to what Abril Trigo explains as a “cosmopolitan adventure to the ‘ethnic’ restaurant around the corner and the elites’ acquired taste for expensive wines and flavored coffees” (“Two Sided Coin”). In fact, this is why I am writing about “Afro-Colombian rap” and not “North American currulao.” Ultimately, it is this vision of integration made possible by the communication revolution, market expansion, global interconnectedness, and cultural exchange that help lure Afro-Colombians into hip-hop and its “black” imaginary. However, as mentioned, despite any sense of belonging to the diaspora created through music practice, these young, Afro-Colombian rappers often feel degrees of alienation precisely due to globalization’s uneven and unjust nature leading to growing frustration of expectations for social mobility.
Moreover, while the acceptance and assimilation of U.S. hip-hop and rap depict ways in which globalization can indeed lead to degrees of cultural homogenization and (neocolonial) dependence on U.S. pop culture, globalization can also lead to greater degrees of heterogeneity as evidenced by these new musical forms and transcultural identities, an explosion of differences, of individualisms, that at times produce cultural and social fragmentation. For example, the fragmentation of Afro-Colombian communities has been painfully obvious during attempts at forming a nationwide collective, particularly during the processes of constitutional reform. Additionally, with respect to music and cultural production, while some groups of Afro-Colombians are drawn to, appropriate and practice hip-hop and rap, other Afro-Colombians, in response to the threat of cultural homogenization stemming from the U.S., may prefer to turn inwards, towards their cultural roots and local histories while attempting to discard forms of U.S. pop culture (if not by completely “rejecting” U.S. influences, at least by privileging local forms). In this way, globalization can lead to greater degrees of social fragmentation by heightening conflicts and divisions, for example, between those with more “traditional” perspectives (who want to maintain cultural differences often based on rural, Afro-Colombian characteristics) and those with more “modern” outlooks (who hope to assimilate – through types of cosmopolitanisms – and be treated as “regular” Colombian citizens), between upper-middle class Afro-Colombians and those of the popular classes, or even between older generations and today’s younger generations heavily influenced by U.S. hip-hop and rap; some of the rappers in this study often talked of feeling shunned or misunderstood by certain sectors of the Afro-Colombian community who might frown upon their appropriation and practice of U.S. rap.
Nonetheless, despite all its drawbacks, the globalization of hip-hop and “black” culture has led to some encouraging consequences for Afro-Colombian youth. More than ever integrated into global markets, they are members of a generation accustomed to this mass mediated world of incongruent and often frivolous symbolism and iconography. Afro-Colombian youth seem comfortable managing this complex web of terminology, identifications, symbolism and iconography from home and abroad. These young performers, through their music and performances, work through the tensions and even contradictions that may arise from such amalgamations, or they simply aren’t too concerned with them (which tends to be more of a scholarly or “intellectual” concern”).

Ultimately, through hip-hop and rap, and its transcultural forms of “local” and “foreign,” peripheral and cosmopolitan elements, the urban identity of young Afro-Colombians is evolving; their “blackness” is reworked through transnational forms, which results in new ways of feeling, experiencing and making culture. And beyond any kind of strategy for categorizing and stabilizing diversity, these transcultural forms generate and maintain differences as these Afro-Colombian rappers participate in an exercise of *bricolage* (Levi-Strauss 1973) by making use of whatever seems to help them highlight their “blackness,” whether it is something from their own cultures and traditions or something from abroad, but in a way that marks a “black” identity – in relation to non-black or *mestizo* identities – emerging from the spaces where all of these elements encounter and transform each other. In fact, although Afro-Colombian ethnic identity, as a national and unified movement, is often described as a work in progress, my research indicates that Afro-Colombian youth are indeed strengthening ethnic identity and developing a stronger ethnic-racial consciousness.
And if it is correct to assert that music (along with other art forms and cultural strategies) can be used not only as a tool for creating positive identities, but also for establishing types of social (and even diasporic) solidarity, this form of hip-hop can be included alongside other art forms and even more traditional types of music. Like it or not, hip-hop has without a doubt established a strong presence as a genre that appeals to younger generations that is now widely used as a medium which provides new voices and perspectives addressing the experiences of ethnic-racial minorities growing up and living in this era of globalization. Furthermore, their music offers representations of dynamic and innovative Afro-Colombians that counter other images of Afro-Colombian communities as static and/or antiquated, for example, such as those propagated through the new Constitution or even through Afro-Colombian “folklore.”

In the end, I believe that when faced with the avalanche of symbolism and iconography that are imposed on young Afro-Colombians through transnational media forms mainly from the U.S., the transcultural forms of music and culture addressed in this study have become perhaps the best possible alternative for creating a positive dynamic and for re-appropriating cultural goods imposed on Latin American countries through the culture industry (Carvalho 30). Despite being victims of different forms of social exclusion, by using their knowledge as consumers of popular music they are taking advantage of this medium of cultural expression in order to bring expressive forms of their cultures to a national and international audience. Through hip-hop and rap, politically and socially committed, Afro-Colombian youth, who have historically been ignored and marginalized, can in many ways become fully national by feeling international as members of an international hip-hop nation or community (as
representatives of *hip-hop colombiano*), fully modern by recovering and renewing traditional, popular local culture, and fully committed to rap as a genre by nationalizing (or regionalizing) and politicizing local rap.

And when asking whether this Afro-Colombian hip-hop reflects youth rebellion or capitulation to global capitalism, in the end, this study demonstrates that the hip-hop scene in Colombia, like in other places around the globe, is typically too complex to fit nicely into any sort of categorizations of binary analysis. As shown, this music and culture never represent simple mimicry. With respect to local and international music markets, Martin Stokes reminds us that “the majors have, since the 1980s, been actively involved in promoting ‘local’ musics with a stress on cultural crossovers, and in efforts to refashion or reinvent ‘the local’ in ways that might appeal to metropolitan audiences” (301). Nonetheless, the “transnationals have not been entirely successful in controlling this market or the music produced within it, which continues to be shaped to a significant extent by small independent labels” (301) in different parts of the world, for example, such as the local hip-hop scene in Colombia. He contends that this complicates a discussion in “simple terms about the ‘West’ imposing itself culturally on the ‘third world’, or the ‘center’ imposing itself on the ‘periphery’ (301). And of course, this transcultured or “Afro-Colombianized” hip-hop highlight and often privilege local particularisms. In this sense, Afro-Colombian hip-hop seems to be an example of the increased transculturations of musical and artistic forms around the globe and not “just” of the cannibalistic appetites of “First World” capital.

To participate in popular cultures inevitably means one will have to manage these conflicts and tensions; it is the nature of the beast, so to speak. If these Afro-Colombian
groups choose not to take part in the manipulative process of gaining access to video, recording materials, and performing venues, then they practically guarantee themselves to have a small audience and very limited cultural impact. Furthermore, to partake in and try to negotiate and manage the terms of mass-mediated culture likewise leads to a dilemma: on one hand, it can provide communication outlets within and among marginal groups, while on the other hand, it requires certain levels of compromise “that often affirms the very structures much of rap’s philosophy seems determined to undermine” (Rose 17). Afro-Colombian hip-hop is still very marginal, and for this reason, the thematic content and even the rhythms of this music can be described as counter-hegemonic. In a word, this rap provides an example of popular music that still manages to articulate oppositional social critiques. Nonetheless, local and global markets can and do impose pressures and limitations on thematic content as evinced by the difficulties that these rappers have in producing and marketing their music that is often perceived as offensive to dominant sectors of society. Afro-Colombian rappers likewise have to manage pressures and tensions that emerge from within local discourses on “authenticity” with respect to thematic content, styles and especially ethnicity. Nonetheless, people of African descent within the diaspora historically have had to manage these types of tensions: “Oppositional practices among diasporic populations emerge from painful experiences of labor migration, cultural imperialism, and political subordination. Yet they are distinguished by an ability to work within these systems” (Lipsitz 188).

In the end, this study reveals how global processes have indeed had a significant impact upon the ways in which the local, that which is “Afro-Colombian,” is interpreted, and in turn, produced through musical performances. Although we can conclude that
“economic globalization saturates in an expansive manner practically every instance of cultural production in the periphery,” this study on Afro-Colombian hip-hop also reveals that “precisely because of its ominous omnipresence, the paradigm of globalization cannot give by itself a full account of the complexity of cultural phenomena in the periphery, which can only be adequately understood by paying close attention to local historical circumstances in the global scenario” (Trigo, “The Politics” 140). In a word, we cannot understand this Afro-Colombian hip-hop, these evolving cultural and musical forms, their narrations and discourses, the tensions and contradictions, without understanding Afro-Colombian histories and cultures and how they are affected by global processes, which more precisely explains why and how Afro-Colombian hip-hop is different from *mestizo* hip-hop, or any other form of hip-hop.

All of the Afro-Colombian rappers in this study have promised to be true to their ethnic group, to their political and social causes, but the pressures and contradictions that arise as a result of the spread of global capital and market demands on their music and representations are obviously difficult and tricky to manage. Their transcultural identities, musical amalgamations and anti-hegemonic discourses demonstrate that, on one hand, these rappers do not necessarily advocate or approve of economic globalization and neoliberalism. On the other hand, they are not so attached to national or Afro-Colombian cultural traditions that they completely reject all forms of U.S. pop culture. Their balancing act shows that hip-hop, like other cultural phenomena in Latin America, “represents a contested field of struggle for symbolic reproduction of social reality, disputing and realizing, through cultural means, political hegemony” (Trigo, “The Politics” 117). For this reason, hip-hop does not have any innate social, cultural, political
or ideological worth as such. More accurately, placing any value on hip-hop and rap always will depend on the connection of local, national, and transnational economic, cultural, and political factors and influences. To partake in hip-hop culture and produce rap in Latin America is to position oneself, “either cynically or defiantly, in the center of the ideological and cultural maelstrom of globalization” (117); for these young Afro-Colombians, producing rap can be a difficult, enigmatic, and at times, contradictory undertaking.

6.2 The Future of Afro-Colombian Hip-Hop

Interestingly enough, some hip-hop critics in the U.S. are concerned that while rap and hip-hop continue to gain larger international audiences and as new, non-African American interpreters emerge, there is a risk that it will be appropriated in such a way that its histories will be obscured, and its ethnic-cultural messages replaced by others (Mitchell 5). According to Mitchell, these critics are assuming some sort of Afro-diasporic purity within rap and hip-hop. These concerns illustrate that while, on the one hand, local cultures in peripheral countries may have to tangle with U.S. cultural imperialism and processes of cultural homogenization, on the other hand, there sometimes is a paralleled and oppositional concern in global hegemonic centers about the distortion of cultural elements abroad, in particular on the part of marginalized groups, like North American blacks. The possibility that the history of hip-hop, its origins and cultural significance, could be displaced or disregarded abroad among international performers and listening audiences can be perceived as a threat to people within the U.S. music industry who wish to maintain U.S. dominance of hip-hop on the world market.
Likewise, it can be perceived as a threat to African Americans in the U.S. who perceive this Afro-diasporic purity in rap as an essential element of their cultural identity that they wish to maintain at home and abroad. For this reason, future studies may want to focus on what globalization means for marginalized groups even within hegemonic centers as their culture or cultural elements are commercialized, marketed and consumed around the world.

Nonetheless, at the moment, I do not believe that the appropriation and transformation of rap and its messages abroad, for example in Colombia, can actually be influential enough to displace the “black” cultural, historical and social significance of hip-hop in the United States. My research in Colombia has shown that while hip-hop, as a part of the culture industry, at times is governed as much by local performers and their followers as by the demands of global capitalism and U.S. cultural domination, it’s rather obvious that the flow of consumption of rap music “continues to proceed hegemonically, from the USA to the rest of the world, with little or no flow in the opposite direction” (Mitchell 2). Furthermore, despite the increase of transnational cultural contact, the narrowing of cultural differences and the globalization of local cultures, in actuality only a minute fraction of cultural goods produced outside the U.S. culture industry, considered by transnational media corporations to satisfy "global" standards, truly becomes global.

As Abril Trigo states:

The truth of the matter is that the only truly global culture is the US pop culture spread through the overwhelming power of media networks and the spousal of the cosmopolitan lifestyles and esthetic tastes of mega-stars, globalized by the omnivorous power of transnational corporations and the asymmetrical interdependence of global cultural flows. The single largest export industry for the US is entertainment. Hollywood films grossed more than $30 billion worldwide in 1997 (Titanic alone more than $1.8
more than 80% of the world music markets is controlled by the so-called "Big Six", Sony, Polygram, Warner, BMG, Thorn-EMI, and MCA [Jelin, 1998, 110; García Canclini, UNESCO 1998, 169; Throsby, UNESCO 1998, 195-6]. (cited in “Two Sided Coin”)

With regards to hip-hop and rap, despite foreign developments within the music genre, like in Colombia, they have rarely, if ever, been acknowledged in the growing body of academic commentary on hip-hop in the U.S., and their recordings are almost never released in the parochial U.S. market. And obviously, part of this U.S. insularity is owed to language barriers and the predominance of the English language around the globe.

The transformations of U.S. rap into “light” and “superficial” forms that have enjoyed commercial success in Colombia, and around the world, demonstrate that the consumption of this particular cultural manifestation presents challenges and problems in the way that it becomes a form of Afro-American exoticism which entertains, captivates and becomes familiar. Poverty, violence and race in hip-hop have been exoticized, commercialized on the international market, which often cultivates the demand for these images, for these representations and these identifications, while at the same time solidifying certain racial stereotypes and perceptions. Of course, along with the success of more commercialized rap, my research in Colombia has shown that many members of local counter-culture youth groups, always in search of the most “authentic” and “real,” have researched hip-hop and informed themselves on “old school” rap or even on the more contemporary “underground” hip-hop artists and movements. Nonetheless, mainstream media promotes hip-hop that doesn’t attack the interests of those who are not willing to abandon their positions of power, as indicated by the preference for conservative, “light” rap and even reggaeton in the media. It is not surprising, therefore,
that local hip-hop artists in Colombia who direct their rage towards the Colombian oligarchy, their government and the United States, have until now been ignored by large recording companies and the local media.

For this reason, we should be careful not to be too idealistic with respect to the contestatory possibilities of Afro-Colombian rap. It is true that access to media and the freedom of expression afforded through this music practice have led to the construction of positive social identities, a sense of self-worth and higher levels of ethnic and social awareness among urban youth. Nonetheless, it has been – and will continue to be – difficult for the groups in this study to make a comfortable living off of their music endeavors, which demonstrates how globalization often promises a lot more than it delivers; in a word, the democratic promise of social mobility loses ground to a dismal outlook for a future, which could possibly lead to mounting frustration, and perhaps more violence.

However, the sound and quality of Afro-Colombian rap is evolving in style and content, and meanwhile, interest is growing, at least among local and national listeners, which presents possible artistic and even cultural implications. It may be possible for some groups, such as Choc Quib Town, to succeed in taking advantage of the economic and professional opportunities opened to them by a globalization that thirsts for cultural diversity as a commodity that capitalists hope to exploit. Up to this point, a certain degree of control over the means of production has helped maintain more of a local and ethnic character of Afro-Colombian hip-hop. If these groups do garner the attention of large recording companies, will this result in a lack of control and inevitable neocolonial dependence? Will they be forced to change their music in order to qualify for global
consumption? Like a vicious cycle, globalization – with its alleged equal participation – arrives to these communities and its members see within this situation the opportunity for social ascent, which has historically been denied to them. As a consequence, many abandon their initial discourses, ideologies and struggles in order to replace them with commercial ones, and this study shows that these pressures are in full force. Thus, while music can indeed have great public impact, as I have pointed out, it is always subject to co-optation and trivialization. Many of these young rappers claim that they will not “sell out”, that they will not succumb to these market temptations, but managing these conflicts and tensions without sacrificing artistic and social integrity is difficult and concessions are already being made. Will they be able to resist the chance to become rich and famous through a market that will attempt to move their music and its messages more towards status quo? Only time will tell. And if any of these groups should manage to enter larger music markets, it will be very interesting to see how success will change their music and its messages. History teaches us that counter-culture can and usually does become over-the-counter culture, but this is precisely what encourages more creativity and more innovation. In a word, we can almost be sure that the dual forces of youthful disdain for the conventional and the omnipresent threat of appropriation by the novelty-seeking global entertainment industry practically assure change.


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