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“En la cocina se construye, se comparte y se comadrea”

Teófila Betancurt (Guapi, 29 July 2020)

Introduction: Approaching Guapi and Afro-Colombian women

- ¹ In certain geopolitical contexts, the use that women make of herbs and spices to give character and flavor to cuisine may become, instead of a creative act or a routine, a powerful tool for asserting gender and reclaiming personal and collective identity, while at the same time being an economic resource in the maintenance of the autonomy of women and their households, as well as a way to safeguard biodiversity and fight peacefully against violence. Such is the case of the women of Guapi (Cauca)¹ in Colombia, and in particular the women of African descent. The circumstances that have favored demands for socio-economic autonomy, valorization of gender and political-communitarian reclamation, are linked to the so-called Ley 70 of 1993 (a law that was further refined legally over subsequent years), and specifically the section concerning Legislación Étnica, issued in support of the Afro-Colombian population, which was recognized as an “ethnic group” to protect its basic rights. This law activated funds – both from public bodies and elements of national and international civil society – in support of cultural and socio-economic projects organized by communities of African descent, in order to promote their “visibility” and end their marginalization and

“abandonment” by the state (Oslender 1998, p. 253). The impetus for the local people to retrace their own identity trajectory, brought about by Ley 70, should be identified with the context of the Pacific coast around Guapi, an area “under pressure” due to the forced migrations of indigenous and Afro-Colombian populations fleeing the *violencia* generated by armed conflict², and characterized by violence in everyday life, in particular male violence against women. Everything is connected: after 1993, *Ley 70* became a reified subject (as we will shortly see), and a part of the narrative (in a literal sense), leading to reactive and agentive effects for empowerment among Afro-Colombian communities. In the meantime, the social fabric and forest environment were being destroyed at a growing rate, with the latter put at risk by monocropping and mining activities, often illegal, as well as the resurgence of armed conflict. At the same time *Ley 70* generated a form of consciousness that was “reparative” with respect to the violence of the previous few decades, as well as a past characterized by stories of slavery and descent from slaves who had either fled the *cuadrillas* (*cimarronaje*)³ or bought their freedom with the strength of their own labor before the abolition of slavery itself (1851). New narrations of the collective memory of the past are currently directed outside Afro-Colombian communities to break the long silence that has enveloped them, but also to make the voices heard of Afro-Colombians who oppose the “right to indifference” of those who have tried to “integrate” through *blanqueamiento* (whitening) (Mosquera and Barcelos 2007).

- 2 The guiding thread of the story I would like to tell⁴ starts with *azoteas*, a kind of plant nursery filled with fertile earth and a sustainable cultivation technique that had fallen into disuse in spite of its forward-looking and equitable socio-ecological principles (more details in the next paragraph) , and finishes with the Fundación Chiyangua and its founder, Teofila Betancurt, as well as many of her travel companions, protagonists of a collective and wide-ranging process of reclamation that is still underway. I will focus on the centrality of the *azoteas* as they are emblematic of life practices of the Afro-Colombian communities on the Pacific coast of Colombia, and in particular of the women of these communities. The women have guided the construction of the identity project encouraged by *Ley 70*, privileging the links with the area in socio-ecological terms, so that the *azotea* is seen as a source of food but also, and above all, a place for the regeneration of social relations, beginning with those among women; with it comes the promotion of knowledge and the creative force that is “communicated” through culinary preparations as well as through the power of words, above all those expressed in verse, *coplas* or *décimas*, as we will see further below.
- 3 One of the main points of this article is how women of Guapi have participated vigorously in the opportunities offered by *Ley 70*, both in terms of reflecting on their rights and taking stock of gender and Afro identity, and of presenting projects with significant socio-economic impact, after discussing these in groups, cooperatives, and community organizations (cfr. Agudelo 2004). Teofila Betancurt Caicedo and a group of women, her allies and “*comadres*”⁵, have organized one of these high-impact projects: in 1994 they established an organization that promotes the cultivation and commercialization of culinary and medical herbs, which, “after meetings and joint decisions, [was given] the name Fundación Chiyangua. [It is] an organization that was founded to help the communities to sustain themselves while remaining on the land, maintaining the ancestral heritage that links them to life” (Fundación Chiyangua. 2018, p. 12 [all translations are the author’s own]). To accomplish the organization’s aims,

one of the central tenets of the project was the need to reclaim the production of culinary and medical herbs, based on the restoration of: the *azotea*. I consider it important to dwell on certain descriptive aspects of the *azotea*, with the idea that drawing certain fundamental elements of a food system “out of the shadows” (Koenlsler 2019, p. 97) makes explicit, in this case, the long process of reflection undertaken by the Afro-Colombian women of the Foundation, which began with them gaining consciousness of themselves and of the condition of “invisibility” of Afro-descendant women. The planning effort made by the Foundation around the *azotea* has highlighted the union that links representations of gender to social relations, to the modes of production of food and medicine, to specific relational politics between human subjects and between human and non-human subjects, as well as to a collection of actions that involve the transformation of environmental resources, and certain responsibilities borne towards these. In the particular case of the *azoteas*, given their centrality on the path towards these women’s liberation and the construction of Afro-Colombian identity, the practices and techniques of production go hand in hand with their process of symbolization and capitalization. A brief description will clarify what I am suggesting.

The *azoteas*

- 4 The *azotea* is a kind of plant nursery, formed of a rectangular wooden platform with planks lining the entire perimeter; it is raised off the ground to ensure the cultivated soil within it is not reached by high water from the rivers. The platform’s supporting columns are tall enough to keep the plants it contains safe from animals and excessive damp from the rain. The height of the *azoteas* enables women of all ages to work easily, since whoever tends the plants can do so while standing straight. The reclamation of the *azotea* system of cultivation has restored conditions of cooperative work both among women and among women and men, and this restoration has been accomplished without exposing women to too great an increase in chores to undertake during the day. *Azoteas* are usually built in residential zones (in rural areas) or on land on the outskirts of town centers (as in the case of Guapi). Consequently, the *azoteas* do not involve travelling onerous distances from one’s home, and while they do require daily attention, this can be accomplished according to one’s own schedule, often between chats or during the pauses between other activities. Furthermore, the drizzly climate means it is unnecessary to resort to irrigation systems or laborious carrying of water. Indeed, the macro region along the Pacific coast where Guapi is located, is in the Intertropical Convergence Zone: it has high levels of precipitation and humidity and is crossed by a dense network of rivers that run from the Western Cordillera down to the Pacific Ocean. Botanical expertise is another very important aspect that characterizes the *azoteas*, given that over 150 species of plant destined for culinary and medical use (the two often coincide) are cultivated within them, following organic principles and using locally sourced seeds (Camacho 2001). In Guapi the botanical skills related to the *azoteas* fall under women’s sphere of competence and are often concentrated in a wise and knowledgeable woman and then transmitted matrilineally, with the older woman choosing a younger woman within the household as a receptor for her intellectual and experiential heritage. The matrilineal transmission of botanical knowledge and techniques strengthens cohesion between women of different generations within the same residential group, which is often matrifocal, although not to the extent that

households remain closed off from one another. Indeed, it is common practice to exchange seeds and seedlings and share knowledge within one's extended family, whether its members live nearby or are dispersed along the rivers. The women who are responsible for conserving and increasing the botanical knowledge of the entire family group are often also midwives and medicine women, and thus play a central role in the whole community. *Azoteas* are a living part of a family.

- 5 The recovery of the *azotea* system has become again a practice that is nowadays central in the construction of Afro-Colombian gender identity and culture, a source of reference for women empowerment, a tool of social and familial cohesion, a curb on the loss of knowledge, and, not least, a symbol of biodiversity. What is more, the *azotea* mode of production has been a lifeline for those without access to land, such as women forced to migrate because of violence (whether domestic or due to armed conflict). Its structure, which is light and adaptable, can easily be built near residences even when there is little available space, and supplies a number of basic foods for personal consumption or sale, such as herbs and other vegetables, thus serving as an economic resource even in conditions of food crisis. As Camacho claims *azoteas* are “*jardines de cocina y semillero de vida*” (gardens for cooking and seedbed of life) (2001, p. 53). So far as its practical aspects are concerned, as well as the complex socio-cultural process that it sets in motion, the *azotea* is a collective productive space that is prevalently feminine, and yet one that is able to restore balance between genders, given that it in no way excludes male contribution; on the contrary, this is required in certain phases of the construction and maintenance of the structures.

Photo n°1



Doña Teofila Betancourt (in the middle) making *azoteas* together with some family members and close collaborators (2012; Guapi, Dpt. of Cauca, Colombia).

Photo by Flavia G. Cuturi

- 6 In sum, *azoteas* represent an efficient form of social and ecological coexistence in a tropical environment that can often be problematic for horticultural activities, with

land that is flooded by the ocean tides that can rise up river courses as far as twenty kilometers inland. The *azoteas* also stand for matrifocality, botanical expertise, management of biodiversity, cooperation and solidarity, culinary styles, and gustatory preferences. The reasons behind this “localized” identity trajectory, as Oslender defines it (1998, p. 272), which privileges bio-social relations with the territory in a setting that incorporates aquatic and jungle life, is linked to complex issues of collective and private violence, forced mobility, and environmental depletion. All of these have been fought resolutely by women who favor instead a creative vision that looks towards a future founded on peace and an updated and radically redefined pact with the territory, in which this is seen as a source of life and human and non-human relationality, rather than as a place of fear and destruction. Given all the things that *azoteas* represent, they are increasingly the subject of attention in schools, where they accompany the objective of educating young people about the biological sciences and increasing awareness of botany, in particular its use for food production. This is causing reflection about the consumption of foods that are healthy and the outcome of sustainable production using old methods that are at risk of disappearing (Fundación Chiyangua 2017; Beltrán and Aguirre 2019).

Women and herbs

- 7 The story of the empowerment of these women as Afro-Colombian has in many cases relied on the language of the flavors that are planted and grown in the *azoteas* as a way to give character to culinary dishes and “substance” to community life, becoming representative of an entire process of promoting the culture and identity of the Afro-Colombian community along the country’s Pacific coast. The constitutional reform was also an encouragement to recover forms of community solidarity in times of crisis, with cooperative work, between women in particular, necessary as a reaction to private violence and armed conflict, with its devastating effects on land, resources, and the social fabric. The conflict led to continuous migrations of indigenous and Afro-Colombian populations fleeing massacres. These had an impact in particular on the lives of women who were left alone with their children and the elderly, without any land, and forced to move to ever more urbanized places like Guapi, enlarging these towns with effects that were far from positive. The restoration of the *azotea* system has been accompanied by a series of economic opportunities for matrifocal households, damaged or whole, but above all it has created a chance for people to bring to light organizational capacities founded on women’s solidarity, along with entrepreneurial ability and political initiative in defense of the environment. This complex movement of stories of empowerment, all linked together, is anchored in a set of elements considered central for Afro-Colombian women, namely the relation between culinary, alimentary and gustatory elements, together with those regarding cooperation, identity, and gender, as well as socio-economic, environmental, and territorial factors, as mentioned above.
- 8 This intersection of elements has been experienced in other geopolitical contexts around the world, above all in places that are besieged by the rhetoric of “modernity” (Debevec 2014) and portrayed as inferior so that they take no part in it. Part of the seizure of women’s autonomy and the achievement of their demands is taking place, as in the case of Guapi, through the “reconquest” of control over all parts of food

production, and also through cuisine that has been “liberated” from dependence (economic and sensorial) on industrial products (in brief, liberated from *mague/maggi* stock cubes, from canned food, from junk food, and so on), along with the homogenizing, deculturizing and alienating effects these have in eco-territorial terms. This freedom is a legacy that is consciously given to newer generations, and an opportunity for all women who are responsible for households, regardless of whether they have suffered violence or undergone forced migration. Growing attention on “traditional cuisines”, which have entered the processes of cultural heritage capitalization as intangible goods, has actively involved Colombia since 2006.⁶ This has given further support to identity constructions and promotion of the work and culinary knowledge of women, which have become an important subject of public cultural policies aimed at the support and safekeeping of traditional Colombian cooking,⁷ where the importance accorded to Afro-Colombian specialties is increasingly significant (cfr. Ministerio de Cultura 2015).

- 9 Given the favorable climate created by *Ley 70*, cultural public policy, and Colombian civil society, and after a long process of accumulating women’s experiences, in Guapi we find an intricate process underway that involves liberation, conquest, capitalization on heritage, memory, pride, reclamation, and claims of gender and ethnicity, “concentrated” in a handful of herbs used in a number of dishes served both daily and for big occasions. This bunch of herbs has been entrusted with the role of giving a distinctive flavor to the Afro-Colombian cuisine of the Pacific coast, quite different from other Colombian cuisines. This is not intended to be a simplification or a manner of speaking through symbols. Aromatic herbs lie at the core of Afro-Colombian cuisine’s identity: known as *yerbas de azotea* (“*azotea* herbs”), these are “called to the front line” to win the fight against the culture of *mague* stock cubes and the dependence on monetization to feed oneself, and also to contribute re-establishing the food self-sufficiency of even the poorest family groups. Aromatic herbs, with their distinctive flavor, are what legitimize the “right to difference” and territorial rootedness. The principal *azotea* herbs, cultivated along with many others to season dishes and for medical use, are: *poleo* (*Satureia brownei*), oregano (*Origanum vulgare*), guaripeña onions (*Allium fistulosum*), various types of basil, including white (*Ocimum basilicum*) and black, or *chirará* (*Ocimum* sp.) varieties, but above all *chiyangua* or *chillangua* (*Eryngium foetidum*), which is also called *cilantro cimarron*.
- 10 Teofila Betancurt’s foundation takes its very name from one of the *azotea* herbs, *chiyangua*, which, setting aside its somewhat repellent scientific name, is representative of the entire movement of action and gender empowerment. In a recent publication that traces the history of the foundation (Fundación Chiyangua, 2017), *chiyangua* is explained poetically in *coplas*, with the title: *¿Que es la Chiyangua?* Along with the humorous and ironic tone of the names given in contrast to the scientific denomination, the verses proudly demonstrate the ontological identification of the plant with the region’s cuisine, with its aromatic and medicinal qualities, and with the recent processes of identity construction: [...] IV - Pa’ nosotros es Chiyangua / desde Chamón hasta Caimito / y sirve para el tapao / el sudao y el caldito. V- Tiene un olor agradable / que dan ganas de comer / y hasta pa’ curar el cuerpo / tiene un bendito poder. VI - Se cultiva en azoteas / aunque ella es persistente / se sostiene en todas partes / es amiga de la gente. VII - Chiyangua también se llama / un proceso de

hermandad / que entre ríos y veredas / hoy construye vencidad. VIII - Chiyangua lleva el nombre / Fundació por apellido / con mujeres muy valientes. (2017, p. 10)

Photo n° 2



Doña Luisa Cuero in her *azoteas* garden, holds a bunch of freshly picked chiyangua (2012, Sabana locality, Guapi Municipality, Dpt. of Cauca, Colombia).

Photo by Flavia G. Cuturi

- 11 Since the Chiyangua Foundation is an organization created and sustained to unite, just like a bunch of *azotea* herbs, numerous components of private and public experience, I will attempt to explain the history of the Foundation, starting with its route towards the rights claims and the socio-cultural weight it has acquired with the support of *Ley 70*.

Ley 70 as an agentive subject

- 12 According to data from the most recent census (2018), 9.34% of Colombia's total population is recognized as being Afro-Colombian: in other words, a little more than four and a half million people (DANE, 2019). Within these numbers there is a significant difference in the censuses of 2005 and 2018 between estimates and self-identification, due to the difficulty people have in claiming the problematic denomination of Afro-descendent.⁸ This is a sign of the legacy left by the many centuries in which the population of African descent has been discriminated against and hidden, isolated at the margins of the country's political life, and treated as inferior because of racist ideologies. In spite of the efforts of *Ley 70*, the number of people that identified as being Afro-descendent decreased between the 2005 and 2018 censuses. Therefore, if we abide by the self-identification figures reported in the 2018 census, the total Afro-Colombian

population is apparently in decline from 2005, with a total of less than three million people. In the most recent exercise, the census-takers themselves acknowledged the obvious: that the gathered data had to be held up against historically rooted discrimination impeding explicit and conscious ascription, and that the census necessarily had a subjective, relational and situational character that makes identity ascription reliant on dynamic and often contingent factors.

- 13 I begin with these considerations, which form a backdrop to the numerous processes underway in the construction of Afro-Colombian identity, bearing in mind that the largest concentrations of the population of African descent are found in almost inaccessible regions of tropical rainforest with minimal infrastructure, in the Pacific coast departments of Chocó, Cauca, and Nariño, and the northern department of Bolívar. In departments along the Pacific coast as much as 95% of the population is Afro-Colombian. In the municipality of Guapi, 84% of inhabitants self-identify as being of African descent (Ministerio del Interior 2017, p. 13). It should be noted that around 60% of the population here live in the urban area, while the remaining 40% are in rural zones (*ibid.*, p. 36).
- 14 The Pacific coast region has one of the world's highest rates of biodiversity, threatened over the course of history by activities that are often illegal, such as gold mining, deforestation for the sale of exotic woods, and since the 1990s monocropping of the African oil palm (*Elaeis guineensis*) (FAO 2020; cfr. Lizcano 2018)⁹ and coca. The spread of these crops along the Pacific coast of Colombia has had harmful effects connected to networks of capital of obscure provenance that are linked to paramilitaries, and thus an integral part of the armed conflict. The deforestation and the marginalization of native crops (such as cacao, bananas, and the *chontaduro* palm [*bactris gasipaes*], etc.), caused the expropriation of land that has led to the forced migration (*desplazamiento*) of the Afro-descendant population. Forcible migration from violence in these rural areas has involved a quite substantial influx of vulnerable and impoverished women and households into urban areas like Guapi, and they now account for about 10% of the social structure.
- 15 In 1991, Colombia ratified a new Constitution that redefined the country as a participative, multiethnic and multicultural democracy. With the temporary Article 55 – AT55 – which became *Ley 70* in 1993, the Constitution recognized the Afro-descendant communities of the Pacific basin as an ethnic group, with territorial rights, having occupied unpopulated lands in recent decades, and protected their traditional customs of production and culture (see Fundación ACUA, 2014). In particular, *Ley 70* established, among other things, that in the areas dominated by Afro-descendant communities any use of natural resources would have to be subject to prior consultation.¹⁰ *Ley 70* was brought about to rectify inequality, marginalization, and the sidelining of Afro-Colombians from the social, political and economic life of the nation. In effect, it created a political space in which people might reclaim forms of historic “reparation” with regard to the damage of colonialism, slavery, and past and present instances of violence. Also, however, *Ley 70* created the conditions for an “integration” that would take place not through *blanqueamiento*, or some “tri-ethnic” hybridization of culture (white, indigenous, and black), but by reclaiming the right to difference.
- 16 The effects of *Ley 70* constitute an enormous subject, and I am unable to explore them fully here. I propose instead to offer some reflections on the perception of the importance given to *Ley 70* as seen in some of the discourses of reclamation of Afro-

Colombian culture demonstrated through the perspective of the Chiyangua Foundation. Particularly in communications aimed at children of school age (although this happens with adults too), *Ley 70* is put forward as an agentive subject, a political element that historicizes present reality (dividing history into before and after the law), which is identified in everyday life with the “reparative” element that Afro-Colombian intellectuals hope for.

Communicating in verses

- 17 First, though, I must introduce a factor that has hitherto gone untreated, namely communicative genres. Among both women and men of African descent on the coast between Colombia and Ecuador, a distinctive trait of oral communication of important content (whether this be serious or humorous), or exploration of personal or collective experience, in moments of conviviality or sharing, consists in the presentation of verses, *coplas* or *décimas* (texts in verses of four or ten stanzas), which are generally rhymed. These verses are recited or sung, and in the latter case are accompanied by a rhythmic beat performed by listeners with whatever they have at their disposition. Communication in verse can be used to mark a discontinuity from speech that is perceived as being too formal, or contrarily can be used to make speech more formal. As argued by Pedrosa and Vanin, communication in verse allows one “to exceed ordinary possibilities and access a kind of semantics of incantation” (1994, p. 70). I can only confirm this description: in my personal experience, improvised verses provoke empathy (and not just of the emphatic sort) and magical co-participation, creating the conditions for a kind of joint sharing of the contents of the communication. I have noticed that speaking in verse with one’s own terminology ruptures territorial boundaries and is intended as a distinctive oratorical practice with which the Afro-Colombians present their own self-recognition. The three *lideresas*, Teofila Betancurt (from Guapi), Carmen Julia Palacio (from Tumaco), and Daysi Rodríguez (from Esmeralda, Ecuador), who I invited to Naples or a conference on the life of Afro-descendants on the Pacific coast,¹¹ began and ended their talks using rhyming *coplas* as a tool of identity and gender, enabling the audience to have immediate access to the speakers’ intimate Afro Colombian perspective on the subjects they were talking about (see Lozano 2019). This device is used today in written materials intended for pedagogical, informational, celebrative and documentary usage regarding the women’s activities, their knowledge, and their consciousness. I have not been surprised, therefore, that many of the experiences of the Chiyangua Foundation, its founder and her “*comadres*” have been subject of recent publications, accompanied by very appealing images and drawings, which document the story of their successes, struggles, reflections, experiences, and lessons, and make use of prose that alternates with *coplas* and *décimas*. The subjects treated in verse have no thematic restrictions, and for this reason, in an ethno-educational book intended for teaching natural sciences to children in elementary school (Fundación Chiyangua 2017), we find not only a subject with the dense existential and identitarian power of the *azoteas*, but also reference to *Ley 70*, presented as an agentive subject through texts in verse.

I - Aquí donde vivo yo / una ley lo va a enmarcar / el Consejo Comunitario / con título de propiedad.

II - La Ley 70 llegó / a nuestras comunidades / reafirmando nuestra lucha / pa’ poder empoderarnos / trajo cambios que consisten / en la reorganización / vereda

y corregimiento / Esta ley constituyó / los Consejos Comunitarios / que es donde vivo yo /

III - Se unieron ríos y pueblos; / manglares, playas y suelos / todos los ecosistemas / sus seres vivos e inertes / que debíamos cuidarlos / con toda dedicación / como lo cuidó mi abuelo / pa' preservar aquel mar / que reafirma el derecho / una ley va enmarcar

IV - Reunión tras reunión / se unieron líderes fuertes / indígenas y negros juntos / por la lucha de la gente / primero fue el transitorio / luego fue la Ley 70 / 8 capítulos tiene / el esfuerzo voluntario / que reorganiza el territorio / en Consejos Comunitarios

V - Y se dieron los procesos / de todo cuanto habitaban / los negros de mi región / fueron días, noches largas / hasta sin amanecer / de batallas incansables / todo en coletividad / para obtener el derecho / era nuestro el territorio / con título de propiedad" (*ibid.*, p. 10).

- 18 Children in elementary school are thus given an historical, political and legal vision of their territory from a very young age and made participants in the struggle to acquire power and decision-making autonomy over it. These struggles are recognized by a law that "came", one day, to these lands, "bringing with it" organizational changes that promoted on one hand a union between living and non-living things in order to preserve the environment handed down by their ancestors, and on the other a union among marginalized peoples, that is, between indigenous and Afro Colombian. These verses propose an ontological perspective so broad and active that it is able to incorporate a law into the basic aspects that make life possible. In a sort of mutual exchange, law and Afro ontology are allied to obtain those rights that are always denied to Afro-Colombian and indigenous peoples.
- 19 The book's literary compositions bear the signature of Teofila Betancurt, and draw on her personal experiences as a woman who has assumed the role of a *sabedora* (wise woman, expert) on local botany, as well as the experiences she has acquired on the trips she has unstintingly undertaken along the region's rivers to reconnect communities, one meeting after another. The objectives of the book are indeed unique, with materials designed to teach students about natural sciences focusing on the *azoteas*, defining them as an "*embrujo natural*" ("natural magic"). In other words, the book takes a route that is highly "political" and "activist" in an identitarian sense, turning the *azoteas* into a socio-ontological synthesis capable of uniting the environment, sustainable food production, biodiversity conservation, knowledge, culinary practices, and local flavors. We have underlined right from the beginning how enclosed in the bunch of *azotea* herbs is an entire program of reclamation directed against the "loss of cultural practices such as the use of local products, the use of traditional recipes, [which puts] at risk food independence/sovereignty and ancestral inheritance" – the inheritance destined for young children (*ibid.*, p. 5).

La Fundación Chiyangua: from silence to action

- 20 Teofila Betancurt makes no attempt to hide the physical and mental male violence she experienced in a domestic setting, along with the pressures of a racist and chauvinist society, are the dramatic starting point she went through outside Guapi. She tells of the violence suffered because it is by sharing them in a public setting that she becomes conscious of herself as an Afro-Colombian woman; and it was from the occasions in

which she spoke about her experiences that her ever-widening activity as a unifier and organizer began, along with her work on expanding women's rights.

- 21 Teofila successfully won her independence through her abilities as an entrepreneur, selling vegetables in the market in Guapi. In her autobiography (written in the third person; *ib.* 2018, pp. 30-37), and in the stories she has told me, the world of the market was a fundamental place for her to gather observations: the women seemed to her to be crushed by their lack of economic independence, by the need to look after their children on their own at home, by the lack of money to buy food, by their dependence on whatever the market had to offer, and by the absence of resources and land for those who had fled armed conflict. Guapi, too, was severely impacted by the armed conflict,¹² which came on top of the problems with domestic violence: “III - [Guapi] fue un pueblo muy azotado / por la oleada de violencia / la gente se desplazaba / buscando coexistencia / se perdió la tradición / desplazando lo vivido / hasta entró el bendito mague / como diría Paulino / lo contó quien lo vivió / y en Guapi fue que nació / ...” (*ibid.* 2018, p. 8).
- 22 Thinking of her youth, and of her parents' wealth of knowledge, Teofila wondered how to prevent people from leaving a region that was rich in resources and knowledge. How was it possible in such a setting that women often struggled to feed their families, and were forced to rely in part on industrial foods, using up all their meager funds for these, “captured” by the infamous (and symbolic) stock cube broth, *mague*? “Mague: Esto no es más que otra cosa / el mismo maggi o el knorr / quel llegó un día bien vestido / parecía el gran señor. / Se metió a nuestra cocina / y llegó y nos invadió / y don Paulino decía / bendito mague señor / Que lo saquen ya de aquí / yo quiero es al natural / con mis hierbas de azotea / ahí vamos a habla” (from the Glosario in Betancurt et al. 2018, p. 45).
- 23 Together with other allies, Teofila founded a community center where women could leave their children while they were busy with other things. Before her, however, lay a challenge that was much broader and more ambitious. The story of the journey that led to the creation of the Chiyangua Foundation passes through the alliance with her “*comadres*”, each of whom contributed courage, creativity, and specific experience. There was a need to conceive of a type of organization that managed to bring everything together: self-recognition, self-esteem, independence, food security, recovery of lost botanical expertise and forgotten techniques of sustainable production, gender rights, and restoration of male collaboration. In that period it seemed as if everything had been lost – but not women's courage and willpower: “[...] IV - El pancoger se perdió / y los cultivos de azoteas / los derechos vulnerados / los azota y los golpea / las mujeres analizan / el meollo del problema / y surge la resistencia / y la unión de grandes seres / entonces se consolida / un proceso de mujeres. / V - Y fue en ese Municipio / donde inició su proceso / consolidó sus acciones / y toditos sus aciertos / también tuvo sus errores / fue cayendo y levantó / reivindicand derechos / una red aconteció / nació FUNDACIÓN CHIYANGUA / que el Pacífico inviadió” (*ivi.* 2018, p. 9).
- 24 The solution was plain to see, and concerned the life experience many women had acquired as children at a time when families were generally self-sufficient; they had the botanical expertise that ensured they could produce more than enough basic food, and were able to cope with births and the care of mild illnesses. The route they had in mind was aimed at the reclamation of past ways of living and producing, as well as respect for their ancestors' knowledge. Reclamation of the *azotea* and the wealth of life

encapsulated by its herbs was their principal goal, and everything else would follow that.

- 25 Among those herbs, *chiyangua* in itself contained many of the characteristics of the Afro-Colombian women. Indeed, in *El Cuento de la Chiyangua* (Fundación Chiyangua, 2018), a book celebrating the history of the Foundation, “[Chiyangua] is a beautiful woman of African descent [...] She has a sweet aromatic character, and her smile resembles the fragrance of the ripe flavors of the Colombian Pacific. She has thick and shiny hair that is woven so that it takes on the hue of medicinal herbs; her scent, her charisma, her activism, and her struggle make her a truly special woman” (2018, p. 18).
- 26 Teofila is the mother who brought Chiyangua into the world in difficult times; the gestation period was long and complex because she wanted her to be a beautiful woman, “filled with principles of ethnic assertion, of equality, of liberty, of conservation, of opportunity, filled with respect, a woman able to manage development. This is what the mother of Chiyangua wanted: to conceive a woman who was totally free” (2018, p. 19).
- 27 The intentions and final ends were clear, but the difficult thing was to generate a woman/Chiyangua who resembled all these objectives, knew how to dedicate herself to the preservation of the environment, and valued the ecosystem and the expertise of the Afro-descendent people. After having cut across rivers, undertaken many trips, and met with the remotest communities, after thinking, speaking, exchanging ideas, “There came a glorious day that finally announced the conception of Chiyangua. The wise women of the communities announced that she was a woman, and that she would be born in an azotea along with fine medicinal and aromatic herbs, to provide flavor; and, as a symbol of identity in each community, there would be a copy of an azotea to safeguard what they considered to be ‘cultural heritage’” (2018, p. 20).
- 28 This part of the tale finishes with her birth in 1994, and since then “Chiyangua’s cradle”, the *azotea*, has become a fashionable thing to have on one’s patio, just as everyone has wanted its herbs for their cooking. The *azotea* is a bearer of culture and identity, and a bastion in the preservation of culture and the assertion of ethnic and gender rights. To date, around four hundred families have participated in the initiative of reclamation associated with the *azoteas*; these families form part of an even wider regional network around the Caucaño Pacific, *Red Matamba y Guasá*, which has more than 1,600 members. The importance of these numbers should be contextualized with the fact that more than 50% of women are heads of their families, and are often single. Older female members on average have a very high number of children (as many as 16), while younger women seem to be more inclined to control their number of pregnancies. Families (bearing in mind that it is difficult to make a distinction among domestic groups present in a single residential space that is subdivided into various rooms) are in many cases formed of between 5-7 and 11-12 people, belonging to at least three generations. The male component of these households is greatly dispersed.
- 29 There is not space here to outline in detail the further history of the Chiyangua Foundation and the widening system of alliances it has developed with regional networks, first of which is the *Red de Mujeres Negras del Pacífico* (of which the Foundation is co-coordinator), as well as with various national and international organizations (UNHCR-ACNUR; IFAD; CUSO) within the ambiguous world of “development projects”. A key alliance has been that with *Activos Culturales Afro* (ACUA, of Bogotá), an organization involved in programs aimed at rural women of African descent. According to texts

prepared by Teofila and her group, in 2005 it was “love at first sight” between the Foundation and ACUA (2018, p. 28), the latter of which, as well as supporting dozens of rural women from the project, has given greater visibility to the culinary contribution of the *azotea* herbs as part of the promotion of cooking as a messenger of culture, and reminder of the problems faced by Afro-descendants from the Pacific coast (in spite of *Ley 70*) in both national (cfr. Ministerio de Cultura, 2015) and international contexts.

- 30 Among the objectives to reach there was the rebalance of gender relationships, possible only after the conquer of the self-esteem and the knowledge of women’s rights. The consciousness acquired by the women has ensured that in many cases men have become more attentive and respectful; in Teofila’s words, women are increasingly perceived as “an important partner” in resolving family and community issues (Marques 2015, p. 62). “When we began, many of these women would go back home from training courses and they’d be abused. Now men have begun to take part in the organizational process, and other men who didn’t abuse their wives [...] they stay together today with the greatest enthusiasm. Many former abusers are today supporting their wives and allowing them to get training. In the process of the *azotea* this is very common, and the men help the women to prepare the soil and construct the wooden nurseries” (Teofila Betancurt in Marques, p. 62).

Some concluding contextual aspects

- 31 The Colombian Pacific was the subject of intense development policies in the 1980s, under the pretext of reconfiguring the region according to plans of “modern” capitalism, through exploitation of local natural resources and the intervention of big capital (Flórez López and Millán Echeverría 2007, p. 99). These plans lacked social and gender perspectives, not to mention attention on the relationship between humans and non-humans (Motta 1995, p. 29), and ignored any possibility of perspectives that diverged from the development mindset. Nonetheless, women had to be integrated into development policies (Lamus 2008a). The prevailing idea was unsustainable neoliberal resource exploitation, following the low-cost principles with which it was possible to consider the Pacific coast as a place suitable for “development” (Escobar and Pedrosa 1996). In 1992, in keeping with the new constitution of 1991, progress was made in inverting this tendency: the *Departamento Nacional de Planeación* launched the *Plan Pacífico*, reserving the coast for a new development strategy that would favor sustainability and involve local communities as “interlocution agents”. Terms like “traditional culture”, “biological diversity”, “ancestral knowledge”, and recognition of the existence of the Afro-descendant community as an ethnic group that was custodian of expertise that was “useful” for sustainability – all of these things became part of institutional discourse, with *Ley 70* as their cornerstone. A process was put in motion, into which “irrupted” an interest in “biology”, as Escobar has argued (1997, p. 175), which saw the promotion of the “tropical rainforest as a central social fact, and subject of global policies, and, certainly, of representations” (Álvarez 1999, p. 93).
- 32 In the context of the opportunities and reflections offered by *Ley 70*, as we have seen, paths have opened for female leadership, and questions of gender have become central in the rhetoric of development projects, which have found women to be highly “appropriate” representatives, given that they are considered the principal victims of the colonial powers, of armed conflict, and of men in general (irrespective of whether

they are white or black). The women of the Pacific coast are not passive victims but reactive subjects in relation to the safeguarding of the environment, too, since knowledge and management of botanical wealth is a feminine skill that is transmitted matrilineally. In Colombia, the country with the fifth highest rate of biodiversity in the world, it has therefore been entrusting the women with reconfigured role as the “guardians” of Afro ontological legacy against illegal depletion of the land that has now become community territory. My experience with the Afro-Colombian women of the Pacific coast has led me to agree with the scholar Asher, who has underlined how feminist postcolonial criticism, as well as using language that is not very usable by the women it claims to defend, makes the women themselves invisible, along with their discourses of resistance (2004, p. 40). According to Lozano “black of afro-Colombian women belonging to ethnic communities elaborate a new type of feminism which is constructed in relation to the community’s collective actions in demanding their rights” (2010, p. 7).

- 33 Leaders in the Pacific coast, activist or otherwise, have autonomously incorporated a language that goes beyond postcolonial criticism and is now in the midst of the flowering of decolonial feminism (Lozano 2010, 2016b; Castillo 2019). The discursive “tradition” that employs words in verse is in itself a “counter-language” as a “space of resistance” (Oslender 2008, p. 153) or, in my opinion, a counter-hegemonic tool that uses its own language, and a shared semantics and aesthetic, to spread reflections on these problems in a way that is accessible, empathic, and shaped by cultural identity. By speaking in verse women (and men) express their independence and self-esteem. The real problem is that in spite of the many efforts that have been made, women continue to occupy a position that is discriminated.
- 34 In this contradictory context of “development projects”, women like Teofila Betancurt received support, but also political visibility, finding space for common planning to resolve problems and sustain Afro-Colombian ontological visions that not only concerned sustenance but also the re-establishment of their lives along with those of their relatives.
- 35 The context of public confrontations between Afro-Colombian organizations and the new constitution forced Afro-descendants to self-define (rightly or wrongly) in the name of a “strategic essentialism”, as Spivak would say (1996). Women *lideresas* like Teofila began to ask themselves who they were, what they wanted, and where they wanted to go. For many this involved reflections about their own family history, the legacy of previous generations, the conditions of women, and the role they ought to take (see Lamus 2008b). At the same time, it encouraged them to work through experiences of domestic violence and conflict “as a neo conquest and neo colonization of territories, bodies and imaginaries of its inhabitants” (Lozano, 2016a, p. 7). Almost all the stories I listened to in Guapi, during many hours of meetings with women who belonged to cooperatives, organizations, and foundations, were, to say the least, terrifying accounts of physical and mental violence and early pregnancies inflicted by husbands and boyfriends, to which we must add violence (either suffered or witnessed) resulting from armed conflict, which led to forcible *desplazamiento*, and consequently the loss of everything.
- 36 We cannot ignore the role played by the historical, social, and economic context of the Pacific coast, and with this matrifocality, which from a condition of apparent disadvantage may have “equipped” women for their current *liderazgo*¹³, its

organizational leadership, and representation of women who had been suffering and silenced. The responsibilities experienced as head of the family, or *sabedora* and healer, smoothed by various forms of solidarity with family-members and neighbors, may have served as a platform for the exercise of feminine *liderazgo* expressed in an organizational mode that is associative, equitable, respectful of “ancestral” knowledge and care of plants, and aimed at the attainment of collective wellbeing. A lynchpin has been reflection about the advantages of the past when the forms of solidarity between women, now in decline, served as a social shock absorber, as a social safety net for matrifocal families dealing with the mobility of men and their meager economic contributions, male violence, and the state of armed conflict. The decline in the forms of solidarity between women and in the practices of *azoteas* left them alone to face a society that was urbanizing and monetizing, and above all the challenge of “ethnic” recognition of the Afro-Colombian community. The social crisis demonstrates the centrality of the ontological continuity between female solidarity and care for *azoteas* as a care for one's body and the social body (Camacho 2001). The recovery of *azoteas* is helping to rebuild the health of the community's body, through strategies that today turn out to be decolonizing and anticolonial (Rodríguez Castro, 2020).

- 37 These intimately experienced reflections led Teofila, a woman who is simultaneously imposing and delicate and sensitive, to take the responsibility of becoming a *lideresa*, but in a way that is wholly cooperative, putting herself at the service of activities that raise awareness of the community's problems and aim at the collective wellbeing, starting with that of women. She is a *lideresa* who is above all a *mujer rural* (‘rural lady’), as she likes to present herself, and who has taken up what she has been handed down from her relatives as part of an Afro community and historical memory: knowledge about the environment, about food, about health, and what women are able to achieve and create. I really agree with Lozano's point of view on women who, being marginalized and considered passive victims, are now seen (and appreciate) as subjects who have historically deployed an “ontology that claims life” (2019).
- 38 In the last few years, the practices linked to the *azoteas* have been able to “confront” the current phase of the so-called post-conflict era. The substance of life and nutrition that the *azoteas* embody, and what is necessary for this to live – collectivity, links to the land, knowledge, sharing – has been able to offer fundamental elements for a culture of peace as a “culture of life”. In a recent interview, Teofila explained the goals of the Foundation as rotating around the promotion of a sustainable culture of peace, accomplished with justice according to a vision of gender that guarantees women political participation, access to rights, and protective spaces that suit their lives. A culture of peace, however, can be followed only if there is personal and familial wellbeing. Because of this, the principal activity of Teofila and the Foundation today is concentrated on the exchange of knowledge between women and men and its diffusion in schools, taking as its basis “traditional cooking”. The subject links together all the other skills and elements of knowledge from which wellbeing and the peace of the collectivity descend: “Our food and Chiyangua mean a lot to me. They are the utensils and tools that help me to stitch together [shirts]. They are the routes on which I want to leave tracks. They are the invisible allies my family has left to me, which give me strength, and which help me to continue onwards, not as Teofila, but as a woman ”.¹⁴

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NOTES

1. The municipality of Guapi has a total population of 29,722, of whom 119 people are indigenous, while Afro-descendants are 28,920 (in 2015). The municipality is composed of 25 *corregimientos* and 30 *veredas* (political-administrative figures), which are located along the banks of the major rivers. Each of these rivers has a *Consejo Comunitario de Comunidades Negras* (juridic figures that administer collective territories, elected by the community assembly), with their collective title used as a protective mechanism for the territory, as established by *Ley 70* in 1993 (Ministerio del Interior, 2017, p. 12).

2. Colombia's history has been crossed by a violent armed conflict that lasted about 52 years and ended with a peace agreement in 2016, after having caused the death of more than 220,000 people and displaced 5 million people. Data published by the *Red Nacional de Información de la Unidad para las Víctimas* report that in the Department of Cauca between 1985 and 1 July 2017 there were a total of 503,645 victims (Ministerio del Interior 2017, p. 61) <http://gapv.mininterior.gov.co/> - <http://dacn.mininterior.gov.co/>.

3. *Cuadrilla* was a rotating work system that was part of the slave economy. *Cimarronaje* is the phenomenon that indicates all the events that allowed the slaves to escape from the *cuadrillas*.

4. I visited Guapi, Pacific Coast and Palenque in three different periods, between 2010 and 2012 in the role of evaluator for IFAD (UN), of the Fundación ACUA (Activos Culturales Afro, Bogotá) "Programa regional de apoyo a las poblaciones rurales de ascendencia africana de América Latina", directed by Dr. David Soto. While in Guapi I followed various ongoing projects meeting their outstanding leaders to whom I owe most of the teachings that appear in these pages. But beyond that I owe to Teofila Betancurt, Silveria Rodríguez, Carmen Julia Palacio, Daysi Rodríguez and their associates much more in terms of friendship and essential life lessons. Here I wish to thank Dr. David Soto and Ms. Emperatriz Arango who introduced me to the reality of Guapi and several Afro-Colombian women, who have been engaged in other projects in more recent years, so that we are strongly connected still today.

5. *Comadres* here refers to a general spiritual kinship, friendship, partnership, and also to midwives.

6. Following UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Heritage (2003), which Colombia ratified in 2006, the *Ministerio de Cultura* recognized the country's traditional cuisine as intangible cultural heritage in 2009, and from 2012 adopted specific public policies to support traditional cooking and the spread of its knowledge.

7. See "Política para el Conocimiento, la Salvaguardia y el Fomento de la Alimentación y las Cocinas Tradicionales de Colombia", a document from Colombia's Ministry of Culture that outlines the strategy of the country's cultural policies, and which places great emphasis on "traditional cuisine" (Ministerio de Cultura, 2018, p. 162).

8. According to the *Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística* (DANE), the population of African descent that the law refers to is recognized under various denominations: "the Black [*Negra*], Afro-Colombian, *Raizal*, and *Palenquera* population includes three ethnic groups in the country: the *Raizales* of the San Andrés y Providencia Archipelago; the *Palenqueros* of San Basilio; and Blacks [*Negros(as)*], people of mixed race [*mulato(as)*], Afro-descendants, Afro-Colombians" (DANE 2019, p. 10).

9. In Colombia, the greatest concentration of the crop is found in the regions to the north and south of Guapi, in Tumaco (Nariño) and Chocó (see Lizcano, 2018).

10. In Colombia, *Ley N° 70* of 1993, also known as the “*Ley de comunidades negras*”, is considered “the principal and most important tool for the protection of the rights of Afro-descendants in the country [...]”. (Rangel, 2016, p. 19; my own translation).

11. On 31 October 2012, I organized the symposium “*Donne afrodiscendenti di fronte alle sfide politiche e ambientali della Costa Pacifica, Colombia ed Ecuador*”, supported with funds from DISUS, in collaboration with Slow Food – Terra Madre and the Fundación ACUA of Bogotá.

12. Data published by the *Red Nacional de Información de la Unidad para las Víctimas* report that in the Department of Cauca between 1985 and 1 July 2017 there were a total of 503,645 victims (Ministerio del Interior 2017, p. 61) <http://gapv.mininterior.gov.co/> - <http://dacn.mininterior.gov.co/>.

13. On the link between matrifocality and female leadership there is a vast anthropological, sociological, historical, feminist literatures (see Lozano 2010, 2016a, 2016b; Rodriguez Castro 2020).

14. “Interview with Teofila Betancurt by Medina Abad A., 3/11/2020) <https://semanarural.com/web/articulo/la-mujer-que-rescata-el-oficio-ancestral-de-sembrar-en-las-azoteas/1650>

ABSTRACTS

In certain geopolitical contexts, women’s creative act of using aromas and spices to characterize and give flavour to dishes can become a powerful tool for gender claim and identity affirmation, and an economic resource to support women’s autonomy. Like in the case of the Afro-descendant women in Guapi, Colombia. What made it possible was the Law 70 of 1993 issued in favor of the fundamental rights of the Afro-Colombians. This law implemented the claims for autonomy and gender enhancement and for the empowerment of women. It also set in motion a large amount of national and international public funds to promote the visibility of the Afro-descendant world. The Guapi women presented impressive projects, as the one on the “return” of the production of aromatic herbs for cooking based on the forgotten sustainable horticultural technique, *azotea*. “Recovery” projects like this created economic chances for matrifocal families and opportunities for the visibility of the Afro-Colombian culture, also allowing the valorisation of organizational skills based on solidarity between women and on the safeguard of the knowledge of the environmental resources.

Dans certains contextes géopolitiques, l'acte créatif des femmes d'utiliser des arômes et des épices pour caractériser et donner du goût aux plats peut devenir un puissant outil de revendication de genre et d'affirmation identitaire, et une ressource économique pour soutenir l'autonomie des femmes. Comme dans le cas des femmes d'ascendance africaine à Guapi, en Colombie. Ce qui l'a rendu possible, c'est la loi 70 de 1993 promulguée en faveur des droits fondamentaux des Afro-Colombiens. Cette loi a mis en place les revendications pour l'autonomie et l'amélioration du genre et pour l'autonomisation des femmes. Elle a également mis en branle un grand nombre de fonds publics nationaux et internationaux pour promouvoir la visibilité du monde afro-descendant. Les femmes Guapi ont présenté des projets impressionnants, comme

celui sur le « retour » de la production d'herbes aromatiques pour la cuisine basée sur la technique oubliée de l'horticulture durable, *azotea*. Des projets de « récupération » comme celui-ci ont créé des occasions économiques pour les familles matrifocales et des chances de visibilité de la culture afro-colombienne, permettant également la valorisation des compétences organisationnelles basées sur la solidarité entre femmes et la sauvegarde de la connaissance des ressources environnementales.

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Mots-clés: Femmes afro-colombiennes, Guapi, alimentation et autonomisation des femmes, techniques horticoles soutenable, identité culturelle, Lois constitutionnelles en faveur des droits des Afro-Colombiens, histoire de vie

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