

The Semiotics of land rights, displacements, and cultural cryptography of cultural material

Dajou Cottrell

Special Acknowledgments to the help from: Building 21, Dr. Catherine LeGrand, Dr. John Galaty, and Redpath Museum

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Out of the estimated 16 million Africans kidnapped during slavery sixty percent were brought to the South America. Due to this currently, six percent (about 3 million) of Colombia's population is of African descent. This research project initiated from learning about the resistance tactics used by Afro-Colombians during slavery. In the 16th century Afro Colombians would braid maps into their hair to communicate to each other how to escape the plantation. The project "the semiotics of resistance, land rights, displacement, and cultural cryptography of material"; analysis this resistance tactic as a mesh of geography, cartography, code, and collective cultural symbols. I hypothesis that this hairstyle titled *Deportes*, marks the beginning of cultural identity for Afro-Colombians, and their tradition of fighting for the concept of Buen Vivir (a good life).

Research Question

James S. Scott once wrote about this peasant resistance tactics: "If they are open, they are rarely collective, and if they are collective, they are rarely open" (Scott, 2019). The political weakness of an oppressed group requires secretive and collective resistance tactics. *Deportes* was a code, as well as a culturally fused linguistic system made to hide in plain sight, which then became an instigator of collaboration. My research seeks to analyze this unique form of resistance tactic. While unpacking its main question, *what role does Deportes play in the discovery of Afro-Colombian communal lands and the development of post-slave identity?*

Introduction

This project was introduced from the materials and stories interweaved into my exhibition "A Hair Story" at Redpath Museum. During the research process for this exhibition, I discovered that in the 16th century Afro-Colombian Slaves would use hair braids to depict the way to escape from the plantation. The braids would have a variety of patterns and incorporated multiple people on the plantation who would wear different versions of the hairstyle. The various braids came together to depict the pathway to freedom. The braids were a form of communication, as well as a place to store gold and seeds. These were resources that helped runaway slaves survive the journey.

Theoretical Framework

The symbols/patterns within *Deportes* reflects a post-slave community bonded by a shared identity, heritage and want for freedom. This interpretation relates Victor Turner's "Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society", where symbols initiate a group of people into action. The symbols within the *Deportes* hairstyle are not only a call to action, but a synchronized explanation on how to execute those actions. In addition, this research wrestles with theories such as "creolization model" from Sidney Mintz, and Richard Price; "Objects of Survivance" by Chip Colwell-Chanthaphonh and Lindsay M. Montgomery; as well as the concept of "quilombismo" by Abdias Nascimento.

Methodology

This research is conducted from an ethnographic approach, with a focus on resistance theory, displacement theory, and material culture. I am inspired by the work of the Slave Revolt by Vincent Brown and the Incan bookkeeping method of knotted rope project by Manny Medrano. Much like these projects I rely heavily on the archives and oral histories to understand this history. I analyze archival sources such as newspapers, traditional hair braiding techniques, military records, runaway slave ads, oral histories, songs, 16th – 18th-century maps, and diaries.

Conclusion

In 2016, Colombia had the most internally displaced people in the world due to warfare placed upon the population by guerilla groups, who seek control of the Afro-Colombian land which holds resources such as coca, palm oil and petroleum. Currently Afro-Colombians are subjected to rapes, kidnappings, and massacres. As a result, many within the community have been forced to find refuge in urban cities (immigration and refugee board, 2020). Afro-Colombians have been removed from their homelands, cultural centers and communities. My ambition is that I can help amplify these stories to help preserve the histories and moments of empowerment that live within Afro-Colombian history. In addition to contributing to the origin story of Afro-Colombian's settlement on their communal lands, and a map of Afro-Colombian's migration patterns.

The figures below are representative graphs of the number of internal displaced people in Colombia.



"Colombia". IDMC, 2021, <https://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/colombia>.

