

Constructions of Cultural Identity in the Poetry of the Afro-Colombian Angela Castro Garcés, *Ramillete pacífico* (2013)

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“Cultural identity... is a matter of becoming as well as of being. It belongs to the future as much as to the past.... identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by and position ourselves within the narratives of the past” (Stuart Hall 98).

The preceding excerpt advances a critical aspect of Stuart Hall’s characterization of cultural identity. Implied in his exemplification is the centrality of individual agency and participation in the construction of the cultural identity of communities, its grounding in past and present experiences and how it serves to indicate future developments of these communities. This expression or assertion of cultural identity suggests that it is dynamic, subjective and provides an interesting frame within which to locate and analyse Angela Castro Garcés’ poems in the collection *Ramillete pacífico* (2013).

The discussions will reveal that in this debut collection, Castro Garcés explores her history and various aspects of her distinctive cultural heritage to firmly construct and preserve what she embraces as her own unique cultural identity. Tellingly, the introduction to the book, is the striking visual image on the cover that intimates that Castro Garcés has intentionally set out to create a portrait of difference. She pulls our focus away from “lo regular”, to a remarkable and unique representation of a black woman’s head with natural negroid hair, groomed in locks/plaits that are made up of words drawn from the lexicon of an Afro-Colombian dialect and intricately intertwined. With reference to this captivating image, Castro Garcés explains:

“...quería reflejar en la portada el contenido del libro, entonces tuve suerte de tener en una de mis clases de escritura a un estudiante con formación en diseño gráfico. Le conté a Luis Edwin de mi libro y le compartí los poemas y su significado, al igual que algunas fotografías de mi familia y amigos afro-descendientes. Él se fascinó por el léxico y por toda la historia detrás del poemario y me trajo esta fascinante propuesta. Significa y representa una mujer afro. Igual que la cantora y su hija, con su cabello y peinado característicos, quien además teje sus ideas con palabras propias de la región pacífica” (Personal interview, 2015).

Undoubtedly, this book functions as Garcés’ invitation into her exploration of her Afro-Colombian cultural heritage and identity. Readers are given an introduction to Afro-Colombian words by the locks of hair which seem to be springing firmly and defiantly from the woman’s head and pronouncing words such as *papiao*—someone who has just eaten; *conuno*—a musical instrument; *piangua*—mollusk prepared in coconut milk, *papachina*—a delicious tuber cooked with fish; *viche*—alcoholic drink made from sugarcane; *colirío*—the planting of bananas; *potrillo*—a small canoe steered by oars, among others. We are even drawn into an intriguing game of “find a word,” as we attempt to decipher distinct words among the intertwined strands of hair/words. As we turn this intriguing cover page, we anticipate more of this bold exhibition of something that is inherently African-centric and culturally distinctive.

Moreover, the large number of unfamiliar words in this cover image indicates that Garcés is interested in educating her audience/reader about the unique linguistic aspect of her culture. The inimitable Afro-Colombian vocabulary forcefully draws attention to itself—a specific and distinctive Afro-derived cultural heritage. The difference created by these unique words underline her interest in demonstrating that her cultural identity is singular, important and defining for her and her community.

Personal Formation and Maturation

Angela Yicely Castro Garcés is an Afro-Colombian woman from the town of Noanamito on the Pacific Coast of Columbia. Her personal position is that Afro-Colombians of the Pacific Coast need to and can be empowered through their Afro-derived cultural heritage – with its richness, its creativity and distinguishing force. This, she feels is necessary, as Colombia still has a long way to go in advancing the causes of minority groups. Her declaration is that she has written because her

region abounds with a wealth of cultural forms and materials which inspired her to write. She expressly states: “esta riqueza familiar y regional me encaminó a seguir una carrera de letras. Quería hacer una autobiografía en verso para exaltar mi región pacífica” (Personal Interview, 2015). Indeed, Castro Garcés uses verses in the collection to bring an area or aspects of Colombian life and reality into focus. There are areas of which she is proud and she presents them in lively and well-articulated poems that bring their lifestyle and customs—typical foods, dances, celebrations and natural spaces and landscape into centre stage.

Upon reading the Dedication, we further witness the attempt to recall a personal history of formation within a particular cultural context:

“A mis padres, Herminio y Margoth,
por enseñarme a perseverar y por darme
el mejor regalo – la educación”(5).

Castro Garcés’ affectionate inscription in honour of her parents, foregrounds a number of key elements in consideration of her cultural identity and heritage as she recalls her parents’ role in her development. Without question, it is difficult to present any ideas of our upbringing without drawing on the memory of the people and experiences from our past. By invoking the memory of her parents, Castro Garcés squarely places her formation within a specific community and simultaneously disrupts the silence about the culture and way of life of that community. In an interview with Castro Garcés, she explains: “Mi abuela paterna, Doña Angelina Ángulo de Castro me enseñó mis primeras poesías; mi padre, Hermino Castro, docente y amante de la lectura y la escritura, ha sido un modelo de seguir por su hermoso manejo del discurso” (Personal Interview, 2015).

We immediately begin to appreciate that for Castro Garcés the personal self that she has constructed is central to the Afro-Colombian heritage and ancestral values.

Defence of the Regional Dialect

Furthermore, Castro Garcés’ academic background and training as a linguist, aids in justifying her choice in presenting a cover such as the one previously discussed in this essay, which not only brings her racial identity and cultural difference into focus, but also her distinctive linguistic identity, evident through the unique vocabulary included. Indeed, Garcés has undertaken considerable study of the dialect that is widely spoken in her community on the Pacific Coast. In one particular study entitled, “The Spanish Dialect Spoken in Noanamito - Colombia”, Castro Garcés analyses the lexical and phonological patterns that distinguish the dialect of Noanamito from the Spanish that is spoken in the wider Colombia. Many of the words she studies in this academic essay are among the same ones included in the word-locks on the cover of *Ramillette pacífico*. She explains these as lexical variants or:

...words that vary in the community due to a) its geographical position (on the border of Micay river and close to the Pacific Ocean), and b) its employment of specific vocabulary, such as farming or fishing terms. Some of these words are: *potrillo* (to refer to a canoe) or *papiao* (to refer to someone who has just eaten) (Castro Garcés 30).

This insight into her academic background helps us to comprehend even more her decision to draw from this distinctive dialect to enrich her poetry and make it culturally outstanding, relevant, and specific. In fact, the idea that the inclusion of the unique lexical features of her Afro-Colombian dialect in her poetry as a critical aspect of her construction of cultural identity is strengthened by her own admission or revelation of the attitude of other Colombians to both the people of Noanamito and the dialect:

Many factors such as education, race, and socioeconomic status make the inhabitants and their dialect stigmatised in other parts of Colombia...The individuals who speak this dialect are perceived as rural and less civilized, this is why it is difficult for this dialect to have prestige (Castro Garcés 28).

Castro Garcés then, rejects all negative attitudes towards her dialect, in what may be regarded as an act of linguistic marronage as she brings her language into mainstream, and confronts us as we seek to enter into her poetry, with a piling up of words from this dialect on the very cover of the book. This overt identification with her Afro-Colombian tongue, while also writing in standard Colombian Spanish reveals her rejection of what Glissant characterized as the “arrogant imperialism of monolingualism” (249).

In the analyses and dissection of the individual poems, we note that the concentration of culture-bound diction is further enhanced and fortified by frequent *enjambment*, pointed rhetorical questions, hyperbole, forceful assonantic effects and a confident first person voice. All work together to unequivocally establish that the language of a marginalised group can contribute to the expression of the meanings that are important to the community’s understanding of self and establishment of its own independent identity. Indeed, the aspects of the dialect that are integrated with Spanish shows that she wants to emphasize her uneasiness, but at the same time her integration into the wider Colombian society.

The Black Presence in Colombia

There is no monolithic black presence in Colombia, but rather, there are several different groups of persons of African descent in the country including groups on the Caribbean coast and the islands of San Andrés, Providencia and Catalina, as well as several communities in the Department of Chocó

on the Pacific Coast. The black population is larger than many realise, but largely comprises descendants of Africans who were brought against their will to Colombia:

Colombia's Black minority comprises 36-40% of the national population, but is officially recognized at 26%. This means our population is about 11 million of the 42 million people in Colombia. This is the second largest population of African descent in Latin America, after Brazil. African slavery in Colombia began in the first decade of the sixteenth century. By the 1520's, Africans were steadily imported into Colombia to replace the rapidly declining Native American population. Africans were forced to work in gold mines, on sugar plantations, cattle ranches, and large *haciendas*. African labor has been, and continues to be, essential in all regions of Colombia. African workers pioneered the extraction of alluvial gold deposits and the growing of sugar cane in the states of Choco, Antioquia, Cauca, Valle and Narino in western Colombia... Some historians view the Chocó as a very big *palenque* with a large population of *cimarrones*... (Murillo Oratia, 2).

Castro Garcés explains that the title, *Ramillete pacífico* (2013) was carefully chosen to reflect the central thrusts of the poems, as well as to fully locate her people in a place with which they identify on the Pacific Coast: "El título es un espejo de los poemas. Es aquella identidad que distingue al habitante de la región pacífica colombiana. El adjetivo 'pacífico', es una manera de mostrar la paz que se siente al volver a la tierra, una fuerza pacífica" (Personal Interview, 2015).

The deliberate choice of *pacífico* may also be regarded at the outset as a decisive and deliberate subversion of stereotypical constructions of Afro-derived persons as violent or naturally belligerent or pugnacious to counter this with a more positive representation of her community. It is her attempt to re-image the Afro-Colombian in a manner that belies common assumptions and expectations.

Celebrating the Land of her Birth

In celebrating her birthplace and the richness of the land, the poet simultaneously highlights different aspects and attributes of her native region. Inherent in the poetic depictions and characterizations is a deep sense of the writer's connection to the land and a strong personal conviction that this land is central to her existence, history and understanding of herself as Afro-Colombian and specifically a resident of the Pacific coastal region. The ubiquitous presence of the land in the poet's life is evident. This truth, evoked from remembrances, is reinforced by the consideration that this all-encompassing environment is a timeless *zeitgeist* whose spirit possesses and prepossesses the life of its inhabitants, forging and leaving indelible imprints of a strong identity intricately woven in the land.

Garcés celebrates the idea that identity is linked to places and spaces. In "Cuna fecunda" written in a section entitled *Identidad pacífica* she gives homage to her native land. A strong sense of nationalism is conveyed in acclaiming her homeland and categorizing it by its inherently dominant characteristic: fertility. The metaphoric ascription in the title, "Cuna fecunda" unearths a hidden truth: the land is a womb of life – it issues forth life and gives entry into life or existence. It also imbues the land with life and the human quality of child bearing. The land is imaged as a perpetual life-giving source, birth is not cyclical for the land, but is incessantly generating. The opening lines seem to convey this idea:

Tus recuerdos me engrandecen
siempre me han de acompañar,
eres pasado y futuro
y en mi mente estás hoy
(“Cuna fecunda,” 52)

The land furthermore, is depicted as the source and sustainer of life: seemingly nestling and nurturing a child as a mother does. A visual image is presented of a mother's active role from inception through the formative stage of life guiding the child's development. This depiction of the land may be supported by the firm assertion of Glissant that the land must be shown to be actually involved in man's existence. He asserts: "Describing the landscape is not enough. The individual, the community, the land are inextricable in the process of creating history. Landscape is a character in this process" (Glissant xxxvii). The poetic voice seems to suggest that Afro-Colombians are a replica of the land where full genetic transference occurs in both the material and spiritual being. It is clear that the core essence of the poet's life is deeply entrenched in the land as well as transcending it. Further, Castro Garcés reiterates through the poem. The crucial role that the land plays in human existence from conception throughout the natural span of life. This idea is suggested in the following stanzas:

Has marcado mi vida
has guiado mi existir
eres el principio
de mi vivir

Eres tierra bendita
que me vio crecer
que forjó en mi futuro
un nuevo amanecer
(“Cuna fecunda,” 52)

The land is seen as a divine endowment, a blessing in the life of the poetic persona, conveyed in the reverential address "eres tierra bendita." In buttressing the concept "cuna fecunda", and elevating the land as originator of life, Castro Garcés asserts that the land is the foundation

of society, first in hierarchy, essential to its construction of cultural identity and integral to the overall process of becoming and self-definition:

La tierra hace al hombre
también la sociedad
después de la familia
el más grande pilar
(“Cuna fecunda,” 52)

It is tacit that the human element is the first unit, followed by the family and from the family evolves the society. The family, therefore, is considered the greatest pillar in building the society up to a nation. However, Castro Garcés deconstructs this order as fundamental to creation and posits that the land which has been omitted, excluded and not given due consideration before, is preeminent to all others. “Cuna fecunda” is a veritable symphony that reinstates and establishes the land to its rightful position. As the womb and cradle of life: a land whose fecundity abounds in many forms, it’s most priceless and prized products are beautiful people. Expressions of practice and swelling pride reveal an undeniable proof of nationalism and portrayal of the people of the land being the grateful progeny of it:

Una tierra tan fértil
otra cosa no ha de dar
sino gente bonita
que la sepa apreciar.
(“Cuna fecunda,” 52)

The poetic voice seems to suggest that patriotism is non-existent if a people forget its motherland, or if there is no love and allegiance to their homeland, the land of their birth. Castro Garcés projects herself as a proud, grateful product of the land and aggrandizes the land of her birth as a noteworthy progenitor in her life:

Por eso no te olvido
y te he de recordar,
eres cuna fecunda
eres mi patria y mi hogar
(“Cuna fecunda,” 52)

The land represents her origin and her roots, her homeland and her home. Her deep love and fidelity are emissions of an identity forged and rooted in her motherland. Her eulogy is a memorial banner of exaltation, raised and flowing high across the endless passage of time. The poem creates an overall assertion of the agency of the land and of the relationship between land or environment and the shaping of self. This treatment of the land, without doubt, becomes a rejection of Colonial/European understanding of the land as a place to be dominated by man, rather than one which shows a relationship between the two.

Afro-Colombian Cultural Identity, Regionalism and Nationalism

The importance of land, place and region to identity has been underlined by post-colonialists as follows:

... a major feature of post-colonial literatures is the concern with either developing or recovering an appropriate identifying relationship between self and place because it is precisely within the parameters of place and its separateness that the process of subjectivity can be conducted (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 346).

Castro Garcés deftly encapsulates different aspects of her Afro-Colombian cultural identity within the canopy of nationalism and regionalism. She explores the issue of social and racial classification based on skin colour, and the celebration of Africanness within the context of racial marginalisation and regional separation in Colombian society. In “¿De dónde es que sos?” Castro Garcés’ poetic voice seems to be undergirded by a desire to concretise her identity as she dexterously interweaves individual identity into the tapestry of nationalism and regionalism. In other words, a specific region within a nation is recognised as being responsible for the cultural formation of the Afro-Colombian persona. Through the use of a free form interview style, Castro Garcés unequivocally settles the question of identity with such *panache* as she situates her Afro-Colombian origin within the Pacific region:

¿De dónde es que sos?
Soy de Noanamito
¿Y de dónde queda?
¡Es puro Pacífico!
(“¿De dónde es que sos?” 53)

Castro Garcés asserts strong affiliation to the Pacific coastal region and the pivotal role it plays in forming the character of its dwellers. Against the backdrop of the transculturation of this Afro-Colombian coastal region, Castro Garcés suggests that identity is embedded in origin and origin is inherently linked to the Pacific region. In other words, she firmly proclaims her national identity as one that is rooted in the Pacific coastal Colombian region, where the Afro-Colombian ‘Noanamito’ descendants have appropriated for themselves a homeland. Regionalism is boldly celebrated as the place where cultural identity is forged/concretised through Pacific alignment and imprint: “¡Es puro Pacífico!”

Castro Garcés herself has written elsewhere about the isolation of the region from the rest of Colombia stating:

This is a very isolated area in the country that has been forgotten by the central government in many respects. Since there are no roads to this area and the only way

to access the community is by the sea, its people are in little contact with the rest of the country and not many people from other places visit this zone (Castro Garcés 28).

It seems that in this context of isolation and lacking modernization, members of the community have been brought close and have depended on the environment to create their own identity. Place as an environment demarcated and embodied by the Pacific Ocean is centralised in progressive stanzas which enthusiastically flow through *enjambment*:

Pa' llegar allá
hay que atravesar
esteros y ríos
tras pasar el mar.

¡No puedo creerlo!
¿Y no hay carretera?
¿Eso es una isla
o es zona costera?

No es una isla
Si es zona costera
vive mucha gente
y no hay carretera.

(“¿De dónde es que sos?” 53)

Regionalism is advertised by placement of the land entity within its geographical context on the Pacific Coast which bestows on the region an aura of uniqueness by virtue of its isolation and seclusion. However, reference to regional exclusivity also alludes to social exclusion, racial isolation, and marginalisation. Furthermore, the remoteness of the region determines and affects economic viability and the availability or scarcity of products. In shipping or marine commerce, multiple traversing of waters becomes a crucial factor for trade and consequently, costliness defines and underscores the lives of these Afro-Colombian coastal dwellers. This connection between distance and trade is captured by the strong assonance in the line endings of stanza five:

La comida es cara
por la lejanía,
pero sobre todo
por la travesía...

(“¿De dónde es que sos?” 53)

Notwithstanding the economic state of Noanamito, in closing this stanza, Castro Garcés superimposes the true wealth of her homeland—the quality of community solidarity championed by the spirit of diligence and alacrity which characterise the community and its cultural identity:

[...]
la gente allá vive
en comunidad,
son bastante alegres
y aman trabajar.

(“¿De dónde es que sos?” 53)

A strong sense of *amour propre* is evident in the poet's epithet for her people. The art of defining her national identity is synonymous with identifying with her people and the characteristics that delineate them. Their strength and resilience seem resident in their vivacity, regardless of life's circumstances. Moreover, their ability to survive, lies in this exuberant energy for work and perpetual state of contentment. In answering the titular question posed, “¿De dónde es que sos?” Castro Garcés, in the final stanza, eulogises her people and aligns herself with the proof of national origin and regional cultural identity – festivities, their successes and the very people themselves:

Se gozan las fiestas
saben disfrutar
lo que les da el medio
para progresar.
¡Eso es mi pueblo!
Y hoy lo enalzo
hoy lo idolatro
lo llevo en lo alto
porque soy costeña
Soy Noanamiteña
llegué a este pueblo
siendo muy pequeña

(“¿De dónde es que sos?” 53)

Indubitably, the cultural legacy of conviviality resonates in their festive lifestyle, celebrating life in every form. Festivals transcend platitudes to become cohesive and unifying bonds, and motivating forces for life and daily existence. There is open admiration and exuberant praises, even veneration for her Afro-Colombian people in all spheres. The persona is proud to be an inhabitant of Noanamito, proud to align herself with the Pacific coastal region and proud of her Afro-Colombian cultural heritage. Profound and burgeoning pride to belong, to originate, to claim racial entrenchment with such an exceptional set of people ricochets with preponderant force as the curtain closes in this poem. The Noanametian flagship has raised its Pacific coastal banner to break barriers and announce itself on the international arena. Castro Garcés' exaltation and idolization of her people exudes pride in her place of birth and nurturing and pride in being an inhabitant of Noanamito, proud to align herself with the Pacific coastal region, proud of her Afro-Colombian heritage and culture, proud of her racial ethnicity and proud to identify herself with a great people. A cynical view of what may be considered as an over idealised depiction may well be advanced, but hyperbole seems acceptable in a context of deep gratification and pride.

Departure from the Land

Arguably, Castro Garcés resolves a concern with the departure from the land as a shift that is regarded as undesirable and disruptive to the norm in her coastal homeland. Disdain for traditional agricultural or subsistence farming in the younger generation seems to be a major cause for concern as the disregard for what is of value pervades community living. Implicit in the fifth stanza, is the concern for a general abandonment of the land and culture. Thus, emergent from this forsaking of the land is a rootless generation characterised as aimless ruminants. Recognition of this reality and truth generates an atmosphere of mounting trepidation that neglect of the land will give way to the loss of essential elements of Afro-Colombian culture.

The poem “El pan coger,” is a powerful commentary on this departure from the land as a traditional source of livelihood. It typifies acculturation within the agricultural working sector. As a prelude, Castro Garcés both acknowledges and draws attention to the fertile state and resourcefulness of the land:

Nuestra tierra es fértil
no lo voy a negar
siempre se ha sembrado
mucho variedad
(“El pan coger,” 17)

The land is presented as the hub of productivity, the mainstay of livelihood, a vision highlighted by crisp and concise syntactic arrangements. Its usefulness and significance to the daily sustenance of the inhabitants is evident:

Se siembra la caña
también el colino,
y mucho maíz
para el molino

De allí se preparan
distintos productos,
birimbí, maramorra,
casabe y envuelto
para nombrar algunos.
(“El pan coger,” 17)

Castro Garcés paints an expansive picture of the products of the land which have been traditionally enjoyed by the inhabitants of her Afro-Colombian community from their primary stage to the end products. The reader gets a depiction of typical foods in the region that form part of their dietary constitution. However, while the poet expresses a certain depth of appreciation of the land’s richness and fruition, there is an implicit lamentation of the unrealised potential of this land. This is evident in the contrast drawn between the former state and utilisation of the land with the current state:

Pero hay algo más
y debo contarlo,
hoy en día la gente
no quiere sembrarlo

Ya se han dedicado
a otros menesteres
que son bien modernos
y dan más placeres.
(“El pan coger,” 17)

Modernisation has obviously given way to displacement and replacement of the traditional way of earning bread. There is a loss and lack of interest among blacks of the region to grow their food or work the land. Agriculture is now a dying phenomenon. The gravitation towards modern and manufactured products, presumably imported, becomes predominant in this labour and production shift that has resulted in traditional jobs becoming obsolete. Consequently, the land wastes away because of abandonment and neglect. The change in the face of the labour frontier is more than a removal from tradition; it is symbolic of a vanishing or threatened culture, which the poet alludes to here in “El pan coger”:

Entonces la siembra
bien tradicional,
ha quedado resegada
y debe esperar.
Mientras tanto la tierra
nos pide gritando
vuelvan a sembrarme,
estoy esperando.
(“El pan coger,” 17)

The persona laments the fatally inflicted blow dealt to the land which has been revered and recoded as pivotal to life and existence, history and culture by the older generation of this Afro-Colombian region. The land lies in a state of oblivion, vacuity, and non-productivity. Castro Garcés illustrates the need to save a dying culture in the vociferous clarion call of the land, a call that resonates and arrests our attention. The employment of the personification in the desperate cry of the land reinforces the concept that the land is intrinsically alive, having human vitality and the right to existence and continuity that have always been acknowledged by its Afro-Colombian predecessors. Revivification is therefore necessary. We may assert then, that the centrality of land in maintaining cultural identity is advanced as a strong anti-colonial position and one that Plumwood promotes when he rejects writing in which nature is presented as inessential and massively denied as the unconsidered background to technological society (305).

Affirmation of Blackness

In the poem, “Cierta que yo soy marrón?” (49), the question of blackness is simultaneously challenged and celebrated as Castro Garcés shows that racism and colour prejudice formed in the formative years of infancy can be confronted, dismantled, and deconstructed. As a precursor to embracing her racial identity, the poetic persona uses her daughter’s guileless learning experience about race and colour to expose issues of racism in Colombian society.

The problematic of colour and racial construction meant to give rise to the emergence of racial division based on the colour of one’s skin is challenged, debunked, and disclaimed by the kaleidoscopic representation of life in its myriad forms. Life and nature are presented as colourful and filled with varying hues of colours. Colours can never be viewed from an underground tunnel, but must be panoramic. Garcés unveils a hidden truth: the colour of life is not homogeneous, but heterogeneous. The uniqueness and uniformity of difference is conveyed in the harmonious cadence of the lines in the following excerpt:

De colores está hecho
 Todo nuestro universo
 de color azul el cielo
 Y de color son mis versos

Está mi hija aprendiendo
 que todo tiene color
 que no sólo es el árbol
 Sino su fruto y su flor.

(“Cierta que soy marrón,” 49)

There is a shift in linear time. This is presented in the arrangements of the fourth and fifth stanzas to draw a parallel between the time of uncovering and discovering the body to the time of self-discovery:

Ya es hora del baño
 y en la batea la he sentado,
 se toca por todas partes
 y tararear sin cesar

(“Cierta que soy marrón,” 49)

Garcés uses the child’s innocent unassuming acts of self-exploration and self-discovery to broach the issues of identity and ethnicity. Such an act is typical on occasions of bathing and examining one’s images or reflection in the mirror. However, self-awareness is provoked by this child’s experience at school:

De pronto ella me dice
 al ver su lindo color
 mamá hoy me han dicho en la escuela
 que soy de color marrón

(“Cierta que soy marrón,” 49)

The stripping away of all clothing metaphorically represents a removal of all covering, camouflage or pretence to true self. The baring of self allows for self-recognition, self-realization and self-acceptance. Visualizations of self-image in its naked form serve as a pathway of illumination into one’s identity. The wall preceding racial identity has always been the colour of one’s skin. Self-identity, however, is personal and cannot be fully or truly studied through the lens of others, who only possesses limited perceptions. The child seems to simultaneously impose the racism of the European (dominant) subject on the self and struggle to simultaneously assert the self:

Mamá, mamá ¿cierto que yo soy marrón?
 ¿y por qué este color?
 hija mía yo le he dicho
 es un regalo de Dios

(“Cierta que soy marrón,” 49)

In debunking this uncomfortable confrontation of color prejudice faced by her young daughter, a representative of the future generation, the persona offers affirmation of self and identity and obliterates doubt and self-degradation by celebrating negritude as an elevating force. The magnificence of being black is projected as a precious privilege, a gift of God. Blackness is celebrated as beautiful, unique; a heavenly endowment undiluted in strength and richness; and a bulwark of empowerment against racism. This enviable colour in God’s creation is prominent and protuberant making it a prime target for begrudging attacks. However, the persona’s rebuttal, though simple in candour, is sagacious and profound. No other argument or defense is necessary than to direct questions about creation to the Creator. Therefore, as a gift in the human tapestry of God’s creation, it can only be appreciated, celebrated and extolled. It becomes a means of closing the conversation especially for a child who will be sufficiently impressionable to accept the reason given.

History and Memory in the Presentation of Cultural Identity

The significance of history and memory in preserving cultural identity both seem to drive the thematic construction of the poem “Cuénteme señora,” which employs a conversational style to provide a social commentary on the erosion of culture, or the regression from fundamental elements that form and cement the Afro-Colombian cultural identity. The centrality of collective memory and reflection on everyday life is foregrounded by the suggestion that the *Señora*, who is being addressed, is from a different generation and needs to recall the distinctive way of life so as to pass it on. She is reminiscent of the black grandmother, so frequently portrayed in Caribbean

and other diasporic writing – the custodian of a community’s traditions and values. The conversation is therefore instrumental in forging a bridge between the past and the present or history and current issues of day-to-day life. The exuberant dialogue in “Cuénteme señora”, communicates the change in the cadence of Pacific coastal life, as depicted in the representation of two generations, the older and the younger. They engage in an oral discourse that resonates with a provocative and probing inquiry into the problematic of cultural dissolution and its impact on coastal and community life.

The poetic voice advances a crucial stance regarding the centrality of one’s history or past in fostering and preserving the legacy of culture passed on by ancestors. The *Señora*’s knowledge of the community, its history and values is indispensable to exposing how the group has maintained its cultural identity:

¿Qué tal mi señora,
cómo me le va?
Muy bien mi señorita
¿Y usted, cómo está?
Yo estoy muy bien
Vine a contemplar
cómo vive la gente
en su comunidad

(“Cuénteme señora” 15)

Here Garcés skillfully creates what on the surface appears to be a simple conversation to create what is really an instrument of ethnographic research, the interview which generates a document of lived experiences. The technique brings to the fore Glissant’s views on the treatment of lived experiences among Caribbean writers: “It is not the literary side of things that has caused me anguish, as one would have expected of any writer concerned with devoting his attention to self-expression; it is rather the historical side, in the excessive or inadequate reflection on lived reality, with which like any man today... I can’t help feeling involved. History... and Literature form part of the same problematics: the account, or the frame of reference, of the collective relationships of men with their environment, in a space that keeps changing and in a time that is constantly being altered” (Glissant 69-70).

The oral exchange acquires a rhythmic tempo between the lines of the opening stanza where the requisite introduction and exchanges of courtesy set the stage to delve into and discuss more pressing matters affecting Pacific coastal life, the community or group and its understanding of its values and privileges. In this context, the poem becomes an informal investigation into the effect of modernisation on key components of the environment: the river, coastal life, traditional sources or means of livelihood based on the land. The dialectic of culture and cultural evolution through the trajectory from past to present is captured in the alignment of the first three stanzas with the last three of the poem:

Cuénteme del río
y del pan coger,
cuénteme historia
de hoy de ayer
hoy las cosas han cambiado
al pasar del tiempo
hoy en día a la gente
le cuesta el sustento

Se han enajenado
olvidado la tierra
andan sin rumbo
no se acuerdan de ella.
Ahora si veamos
por donde empezar

le hablaré del río
en primer lugar...

(“Cuénteme señora” 15)

It becomes evident that the progression of time has transformed the arena of traditional life on the Pacific coastal homeland of the poet. There is a tangible shift from the traditional way of life, and the synchronisation of change with time, paradoxically reveals an antithesis that changing times unravel change in times. Evidently, in this coastal community, the price of modernisation and its challenge to the formation of Afro-Colombian cultural identity is prevalent. Inhabitants are no longer dependent on the land for sustenance or to make a living. There is a marked departure from the utility of the land as the chief and primary source of livelihood and the general proclivity is now towards manufactured products in this move from ‘earning a bread’ through working the land to ‘buying the bread’, presumably through costly importations.

The centrality of history to the contribution of self and cultural identity is foregrounded by the investment of the importance of the knowledge that has been carried by the “*Señora*” in her memory. There is a distinct suggestion that this history is needed for the poetic persona and those in her age to continue to thrive and live. The poem functions as a unique way of promoting the value of the elderly in highlighting what has been lost from the cultural heritage to imply how this cultural identity can be restored or preserved. Indeed, it gives substantiation to the powerful views of Glissant that “history as consciousness at work and history as lived experiences are not the business of historians exclusively” (65). In other words, writers must also point to history, record history and lament the loss of history.

In the forceful poem, “*Cultura ausente*,” we also witness this self-reflexive practice as the poetic persona recalls the past with remorse, especially in relation to young Afro-Colombians, who have abandoned their unique cultural identity. The poetic voice laments the loss of certain cultural forms, many of which are named in the word plaits/locks of the cover of the book. The younger generation is projected as neglecting their obligation

to preserve important aspects of their cultural heritage to the detriment of the community spirit and to the preservation of their identity. The repetition of the phrase “todo ha cambiado” forcefully emphasises the contrast in the attitude toward the ancestral values in the past – ‘ante’ and “hoy en día.” The sense that the values and practices have been infiltrated and even corrupted by outside influences is lamented. The conclusion is that their cultural identity and sense of self can only be concretised through the ancestral values and guidelines for conduct which are to be found in the “old ways”:

“Cultura ausente”

Ahora otra cosa
voy a comentarle,
sobre las costumbres
que han sido ancestrales.

La música, el baile
ya todo ha cambiado,
no tocan cununo
ni bailan currulao.

Antes se bailaba
con bombo y guazá
la gente unida amanecía
bailando y tomando
viche regional.

Pero hoy en día
nuestra juventud,
ya no toca bombo
ni reza a Jesús.

Todo lo ha cambiado
por bailes extraños,
de otro lado
han sido apañados.

La herencia se pierde
falta la enseñanza,
¿O falta conciencia?
¿O sobra ignorancia?

Yo no sé m'hijita
que es lo que ha pasado,
pero lo moderno
nos tiene azotados.

Se hace necesario
Volver a enseñar,
a la juventud
lo de tiempo atrás.

(“Cultura ausente,” 19)

Both “Cuénteme Señora” and “Cultura ausente” seem to give credence to Assmann’s (1995) view that: “cultural identity must be practiced to be passed on to different generations for it to be preserved; it is not passed on in the genes or by natural processes.” Indeed, the poems, “Vamos a celebrar” and “La uramba” further suggest a sense of duty/obligation on the part of the persona to own her cultural heritage, to ensure that its centrality to the formation of the Afro-Colombian way of life and cultural identity continues to be intact. The intimation is that several authentic aspects of the heritage that lend it its uniqueness need to be maintained to concretise culture, as suggested by the many typical musical instruments, dances and foods that are named. The persona promotes the idea that community unity will also result from this celebration of cultural traditions. Once again we witness the incorporation of some of the typical words used in the image on the cover, to underline their centrality in identifying or challenging the Afro-Colombian culture.

Al son del cununo
Bombo, marimba y guasá,
se prende la rumba
en mi litoral.

Busque su pareja
vamos a bailar,
juga o currulao
para celebrar.

Es nuestra patrona
fiesta regional,
saquen aguardiente
que sea de acá.

.....

Seguimos cantando
hay que celebrar
estos nueve días
de fiesta patronal
Así el pueblo es todo
solidaridad,
rezan y agradecen
a la deidad.

(“Vamos a celebrar,” 32)

The concretisation of cultural identity is further forcefully foregrounded in: “La uramba” in which the seemingly simple preparation of a meal is a time for friends to gather and share in the recall of the recipe and the contribution of the ingredients. There is a spirit of sharing that is characteristic of the Afro-Colombian community which helps to unite it around its unique cuisine:

Me reúno con mis amigos
y prendemos el fogón,
vamos a hacer una uramba
¿Y qué cocinamos hoy?

Voy a pedirle a mamá
un poquitico de arroz,
vos traé una papa grande
de tu casa y un tazón.

Para hacer una limonada
bajemos limón del palo,
pedimos un poquito de azúcar
y cocinamos banano.

Esta es la uramba que me gusta
también llamada bodita,
que en el patio de la casa
preparan las amiguitas.
("La uramba," 33)

The ritual of preparing the meal which will be shared gives attention to the bonds of community and *camaraderie* which are highly valued among those who have continued to embrace their culture. The high currency placed on family relations and bonds that are formed by a specific cultural influence, is also forcefully underlined in this poem.

It is clear that for Garcés the cultural identity of the Afro-Colombian is deeply rooted in ancestral values which are also hinged on the connection to land as an embodiment of African ancestral roots. I maintain that her bold focus on this Afro-Colombian culture is intended to undo the neglect to which it has hitherto been subjected. This neglect is synonymous with erasure and silencing with which her own community and the wider pacific region have been met by mainstream Colombia, despite being part of the everyday culture of a group of people on Colombia's Pacific Coast. We may assert that Castro Garcés engages in a consistent project of constructing her cultural identity, especially for those outside of her culture, but also for those who are forgetting or departing from their own culture.

Additionally, Castro Garcés underscores the fact that memory such as that carried by the older generation, is critical for preserving culture and must be supported by active reflection, sharing and transmission to younger generations. This also means that younger members of the community must consciously engage with their culture and seek to preserve and concretise it so as to resist annihilation. Garcés' presentations do not focus on the impecunious conditions in which these Colombian blacks of the Pacific Coast reside, but emphasize instead the wealth of their culture and the beauty, richness and vitality of the lands on the Pacific Coast and of how the construction of their identity is shaped by their connections to these lands. Indeed, she seems to be writing for a wide readership/audience, but also and mainly for the people about whom she has written. She has expressly stated:

Deseo que mis poemas sean leídos por gente de la
región pacífica que vive allá para que se reconozcan en

estos, por aquellos que han salido de la región para que recuerden la belleza de nuestro litoral y también por foráneos para que, a través de este poemario, viajen a la región y conozcan su gente, su cultura y su dialecto (Personal Interview, 2015).

Without doubt, Castro Garcés succeeds in celebrating her region and heritage and in creating her own discourse—one that gives visibility to the region she proudly claims as home and to which she owes her heritage, as she seeks to rescue her cultural heritage from oblivion, and promote an understanding of her African-centric Colombian cultural identity.

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