

**Fed by Any Means Necessary: Omnivorous Negritude
and the Transnational Semiotics of Afro-Colombian
Blackness in the Work of Liliana Angulo**

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Colombia has one of the largest populations of African origin in the Americas: in the General Census of 2005 10.5% of Colombians identified themselves as Afro-descendants (130), while many more likely opted not to due to the country's pervasive stigma of blackness.¹ The largest populations of Afro-Colombians live in the departments on the Atlantic and Pacific coasts where they constitute as much as 80% of the populace² (DANE, *Colombia: una nación multicultural* 35). Nevertheless, as anthropologist Nina de Friedemann argues, Afro-Colombians remain 'invisible' in national public life, their self-affirmation as a group complicated by numerous long-term historical, cultural and geographic factors (25). This *invisibility* also extends to spheres of cultural production and self-representation, where Afro-Colombians have either occupied reified positions or lived an absence as presence in the national cultural imaginary. The recent expansion of drug-trafficking, neoliberal economic development, and armed conflict in regions home to Colombia's Afro populations has charged the quest for public *visibility* with great urgency: for contemporary Afro-Colombians, human rights violations, challenges to agency in national political life and self-representation in the arts converge as a uniform challenge to their very survival. In response, contemporary Afro-Colombian politicians, human rights activists, and artists have launched an innovative series of political initiatives and heterodox cultural practices with aims to historical redemption, economic survival, and identitarian transformation.

In a recent interview Afro-Colombian visual artist Liliana Angulo explained that "la identidad negra ha sido negada durante tanto tiempo por las élites [que ahora] se alimenta de lo que aparece" (personal interview) (black identity has been denied for so long by the elite [that now] it nurtures itself from any available source).³ The need for this type of *omnivorous negritude* is tied to a model of Afro-Colombian identity that develops in what anthropologist Santiago Arboleada Quiñónez explains as the

intersection of “racismo estructural, la indiferencia del Estado-nación y la limpieza étnica o etnocidio a que han sido sometidos [los afrocolombianos] por la máquina de guerra y las afiladas fauces del capitalismo global, que además de sus recursos naturales exige sus vidas” (214) (structural racism, the indifference of the Nation-State and the ethnic cleansing or genocide that Afro-Colombians have been subjected to by the machinery of our armed conflict and the affiliated outlets of global capitalism, which in addition to their natural resources also demand their lives). In this sense, in recent decades Afro-Colombians have gone from being an ‘invisible’ people to participating as protagonists, witnesses, and victims in the violent political and economic transformations of the country itself. On one hand, the first projects of Afro-Colombian political mobilization in the 1970s and the subsequent constitutional reforms of the 1990s have successfully facilitated current Afro-Colombian human and civil rights campaigns and the recuperation of endangered cultural heritage and lost territorial patrimony,⁴ thanks to which Afro-Colombians now play an increasing role in the transformation of political and academic circles of national discourse. On the other hand, the boom of agro-industrial development programs and the dramatic expansion of drug trafficking and armed conflict in regions historically inhabited by Afro-Colombians incorporate these populations into national life with great violence.

These processes have been particularly brutal in the departments of the Pacific coast. While during the 1990s analysts considered this region “un ejemplar paradigma de paz en un país desgarrado por la guerra y la violencia” (Restrepo and Rojas 19) (an exemplary paradigm of peace in a country torn by war and violence), today it is the epicenter of the conflict that entangles Afro-Colombian populations struggling to affirm themselves politically and defend ancestral landholdings, the bloody clashes between state, paramilitary and guerrilla forces, and the licit and illicit processes of globalization and neoliberal development programs. Recent events in the Urabá region⁵ are emblematic of this multi-faceted conflict: following years of formal legal petition, in 2000 the Afro-Colombian communities of Jiguamiandó and Curvaradó won titles to more than 100,000 hectares of their ancestral lands in compliance with the momentous *Law 70* of 1993.⁶ At the same time the Colombian Army initiated *Operación Génesis*, a counterinsurgency campaign facilitated by AUC paramilitary troops whose ostensible goal was to expel FARC forces from the same territory.⁷ The operation realized its military objective, but intentionally or otherwise it also produced the internal displacement of more than 17,000 Afro-Colombian peasants and the death of dozens of others caught in the crossfire. This in turn directly facilitated the illegal encroachment of multi-national African palm⁸ growers in the area who soon established plantations over more than 4,000 hectares in the region, 93% of which belonged to those recently expelled (Norwegian Refugee Council 6–13).

In the past decade, this and many similar episodes have unfolded in the broader context of Afro-Colombian recuperation of collective territories and the expansion of armed conflict and drug trafficking, as well as amidst the state-sponsored initiatives of *Plan Pacífico*,⁹ a group of regional development projects begun in the 1980s which sought to more fully incorporate the Pacific coast region into national political life and to transform its economy and infrastructure as a new point of entry into the global marketplace. *Plan Pacífico* has produced uneven development and little economic gain for most Afro-Colombians, which in combination with the brutality of the armed conflict, internal displacement and narco-trafficking have brought disproportionate suffering upon these populations. Colombia is home to an internally displaced population of nearly 4 million people (the largest in the Americas), and recent studies show that as many as 40% are Afro-Colombians (Lari 3–6). Violence and poverty are particularly pronounced in areas targeted for development by *Plan Pacífico*: in 2007 the Bogotá-based NGO and human rights law firm CODHES documented 382 murders and 171 forced disappearances of Afro-Colombians in the port city of Buenaventura alone (“Afrocolombianos desplazados”). Tragically similar conditions affect blacks throughout Colombia, which when seen in conjunction with the history of their ‘invisibility’ and marginalization, clearly demonstrate that Afro-Colombian rights and notions of *Colombian blackness* are in need of urgent transformation and reconceptualization, particularly in relation to the dominant model of Colombian racial identity, national economic development programs, and international human rights campaigns. As anthropologists Eduardo Restrepo and Axel Rojas contend, “si se puede afirmar que el país ha atestiguado transformaciones significativas ante las cuales debe responder los estudios de la gente negra, más profundos aún han sido los cambios en la teoría social contemporánea y los retos que de esto se desprenden” (18) (if we can affirm that the country has witnessed significant transformations that Colombian black studies must respond to, even more profound are the shifts in contemporary social theory and the challenges that emanate from them).

The first challenge facing the theoretical conceptualization and self-affirmation of Colombian blackness is rooted in the legacy of Colombia believing itself or *making itself believe to be* a homogenized *mestizo* people of mixed European and Indian ancestry. Historian Alfonso Múnera discusses the story of the mestizo racial paradise as “uno de los mitos fundacionales de la identidad colombiana” (21) (one of the foundational myths of Colombian identity). Marco Palacios also comments that in the nineteenth century the governing elite manipulated the myth of Colombian racial democracy in order to consolidate clientele networks and markets (17–8),¹⁰ and sociologist Elisabeth Cunin notes the same as “una problemática nacional que ignora las diferencias en nombre del igualitarismo republicano” (“El negro” 1) (a

national problematic that ignores differences in the name of republican egalitarianism). In her study of race and self-classification in Cartagena, Cunin also discusses what she calls “la competencia mestiza” or the mestizo competency that this ethno-racial paradigm has necessitated, through which Afro-Colombians have developed the ability to euphemize and deploy the cultural and phenotypic signs of blackness in response to immediate social context with a logic that rewards whiteness and punishes blackness (*Identidades a flor de piel* 18). Cunin concludes that despite the plasticity and heterogeneity of the concepts and categories of racial classification in Colombia (*blanco, indio, negro, moreno, mestizo, raizal, mono, trigüeño, etc.*)¹¹ these do not dissolve in racial integration but rather serve to delineate national racial hierarchy (18–9).

A second challenge to Afro-Colombian identity politics stems from a long-term institutional deficit. Since the abolition of slavery in 1852 the great majority of Afro-Colombians have lived in poverty and in regions long-abandoned by the national government with little access to healthcare, education, and transportation. These conditions are particularly severe on the Pacific coast but also affect populations on the Atlantic. In contrast to Colombia’s indigenous groups, Afro-Colombians were never given reservations or communal lands, nor have they had an institutional role in national culture. For example, while indigenous culture is recognized (albeit in a reifying manner) as national patrimony in state institutions such as the Gold Museum in Bogotá or the Colombian Institute of Anthropology, Afro-Colombian culture enjoys no such equivalent (Wade, “The Cultural Politics of Blackness” 346).¹² Afro-Colombian history is largely absent from national public school curriculum,¹³ and until the ratification of the Constitution of 1991 and *Law 70* of 1993 Afro-Colombians had no legal status or protection as a separate ethnic or racial group. While the African presence in the rhythms of Colombian popular and folk music is understood and acknowledged, *vallenato* and *cumbia* are two examples, these have been assimilated as expressions of national mestizo culture to the point of now being ignored by young blacks who look to the transnational black musical forms of rap and reggae as means to articulate and express an independent identity (Wade, “Music and the Formation” 26). The invisibility of Colombian blackness also extends to representation and production in the fine arts. Art historian Beatriz González has explained that Afro-Colombian artists have always had a minimal presence in the country’s museums and galleries, and are often limited to exhibitions that treat them as lesser folkloric artisans or exploit them as exotics and noble savages (Campos López). In terms of Colombian literature, with the noteworthy exceptions of Candelario Obeso, Jorge Artel and Manuel Zapata Olivella, there is relatively little production by Afro-Colombian authors and even less literary scholarship on the works of Black Colombian writers.¹⁴

On the other hand, the political gains of black Colombians in the past three decades have stimulated new Afro-Colombian cultural production, particularly in popular music and the plastic arts. At the same, more recent transnational musical expressions of blackness—such as *champeta*, rap, and reggae—have fertilized the semiotic fields of Afro-Colombian self-affirmation with a transgressive globalized language, and indicate the dynamic circulation of cultural goods and concepts within the greater African Diaspora. The musical phenomenon of *champeta* is of particular interest in this sense: also known as *terapia* or ‘therapy,’ it developed in working-class black neighborhoods of Cartagena in the 1970s as a hybrid of already transnationalized black musical forms including of *soukous* from Zaire, Nigerian *highlife*, Haitian *konpa* and Jamaican reggae. The content and public performance of *champeta* is also explicitly linked to the imaginary of Colombia’s *Palenques* or runaway slave communities and black rebellion in general (Wade, *Music, Race and Nation* 215–6). Today *champeta* is heard in the working class neighborhoods of northern and southern Cartagena, often blasting from the famous *picós* or modified pick-up trucks loaded with enormous sound systems which vigorously reclaim Afro-Colombian public space with volume contests and concerts to celebrate weddings, birthdays and community events. As Elisabeth Cunin explains:

[C]on la *champeta*, la categorización racial es movilizada en la designación del otro: celebrando el cuerpo, la sexualidad, el desorden, esta música invertiría el orden de los valores al situarse del lado del salvaje y no del civilizado, del lado de lo natural y no de lo cultural, del lado ‘negro’ y no del ‘blanco.’ (*Identidades a flor de piel* 272)

([W]ith *champeta*, racial categorization is mobilized in order to designate the other: by celebrating the body, sexuality and disorder this music inverts the order of values by placing itself on the side of the savage and uncivilized, on the side of nature and not culture, on the black side and not the white.)

The work of the internationally recognized visual artist Liliana Angulo operates in this context and opens a significant critical space within the discourse of blackness in Colombia. Her photo portraits, sculptures and installations do so with a provocative visual language void of fundamentalisms. Much like the vanguard Mexican muralists, Angulo uses perspective and space in her installations to interpolate her public and provoke an ethical dialogue with the visual rhetoric of Colombian racism, breaking with what artist Mercedes Angola has called the *reduced imaginary*

of blackness that is always related to “palmeras y cocos” (Rodríguez Dalvard 70–1) (palm trees and coconuts). Importantly, the broader tendencies in Angulo’s work constantly reconfigure Colombian blackness within urban, domestic, and mestizo contexts. In doing so, her work creates a semiotics of tension with the national imaginary of San Basilio de Palenque, the famous runaway slave community known as the first free territory of the Americas and its *Mangombe* creole language. Although the history of rebellion and autonomous Palenque culture of San Basilio have been of great importance in the articulation of black nationalism in Colombia, as often happens with minority cultural discourse the memory and representation of San Basilio and runaway culture are relegated to a plane of static and archaic otherness peripheral to Colombia’s dominant mestizo discourse. The essays and photography in a special edition of the magazine *Cromos* titled *San Basilio de Palenque: Una visión fotográfica de Ana Mercedes Hoyos* (June 2007) are indicative of this tendency. While the volume’s photographs by celebrated artist Ana Mercedes Hoyos and the writings of Manuel Zapata Olivella and Nina de Friedemann duly celebrate the beauty and independence of this community as a UNESCO designated World Heritage site, they do so in an isolating fashion, distancing it from the current geopolitical reality of black Colombia with an over-abundant description of its history and folklore. The text is illustrated almost entirely with beautiful but stereotypical portraits of the community’s straw huts and residents dressed in ‘traditional’ folk attire while dancing, playing, riding horses, carrying bowls of fruit on their heads, etc.

In sharp contrast, the organizing principle in Liliana Angulo’s work is the drive to challenge and defamiliarize the concepts and reified tropes of Colombian blackness and to reinsert these at the center of the problematics of contemporary Colombia, placing them in opposition to the iconography of the official monoculturalism of the past with an aesthetics fueled by the exigencies of the multicultural state that emerged from the Constitution of 1991.

Of particular importance in this regard are the photographic series *Negro Utópico* (2001) and *Mambo Negrita* (2007) which cannibalize the social iconography of blacks in Colombia as mummies, servitude, clowns, folklore, sex objects, and noble savages. Angulo appropriates the visual language of Cuban *teatro bufo* and Vaudeville blackface by painting herself or her models with black make-up and exaggerating the stereotypical elements of black phenotype (afro hairdo, big lips, large breasts, and round buttocks). In both series models are dressed with clothing and accessories that objectify and fuse them with their immediate physical surroundings (props and backdrops) as well as with the represented social and work environments (kitchens, brothels). With great effectiveness Angulo employs a semiotics of ambivalence to undermine the visual codes of racism in Colombia: the contexts and poses of her models pair images of happy,

spontaneous, exotic, and sensual subjects with others more provocative and threatening whose expressions reveal the awareness of being observed objects. In fragment 5 of the series of self-portraits *Negro Utópico* from the exhibit *Viaje sin mapa* (Bogotá 2006) Angulo works to estrange and defamiliarize stereotypes of the black domestic: the artist/model is in blackface, she wears an exaggerated wig made of spun-metal kitchen scrub pads and wears a suit made from the same cloth used for the wallpaper and tablecloth. This semiotics of the domestic is combined with the flattening effect of the repetition of colors, the pattern in the cloth, the lack of depth of focus and an exaggerated pose that suggests dance and blissfully ignorant happiness. At the same time, however, there lies within easy reach a knife known as *una champeta*, the name for which simultaneously signifies the knife used to clean fish by the mostly black fishermen of the Atlantic coast, the stereotypical loud voices and shouting of blacks, and the name of a 'hostile' form of black music listened to at great volume in the most humble neighborhoods of Cartagena.



Negro Utópico (fragment 5)
Color photograph, self-portrait polyptic in 9 images
Artist's Portfolio, 2001

As the semiotic play with the word *champeta* demonstrates, Liliana Angulo's work also seeks to destabilize the linguistic concepts of race and racism in Colombia. According to Angulo, the titles and textual elements from her installation *Négritude* (Bogotá 2007), for example, repeat with bile the sayings and common expressions about blacks which in this instance the artist lifted from everyday conversations and the lyrics of pop songs that describe black men (personal communication, May 2008). The installation consisted of the projection of a series of photographs of subjects in various public spaces in Bogotá wearing enormous afro wigs and other accessories that amplify stereotypical aspects of black men. The images were projected in a room wallpapered with black and white text that endlessly repeated the refrain 'trabaje como un negro' (work like a negro), while subtexts of the images replicated similar expressions from 'everyday' speech.

The linguistic play in *Négritude* also forms a layer within another provocative visual pun in the same series, through which Angulo creates a palimpsest of Colombian mestizo discourse: when seen from a distance the graphic repetition of the refrain "trabaje como un negro" (work like a negro) evokes the colors and patterns of the traditional *caña de flecha* wicker weavings from Colombia's Atlantic coast. Although of indigenous (Zinú) origin, *caña de flecha* wicker is treated today as a symbol of the cultural identity of Caribbean Colombia. It is most commonly seen in the *sombrero vueltiao*, the stereotypical hat of black peasants and the omnipresent accessory for musical groups who play vallenato. As a musical form and cultural phenomena, vallenato is of mixed heritage and possesses what Peter Wade has called "an ambiguous racial identity:" its syncopated rhythms and percussion instruments are of African origin, but its accordion-driven melodic structure and its birth in the inland and predominantly mestizo town of Valledupar, are not. Through the 1980s, however, vallenato was largely consumed by and associated with blacks: it is only since the 1990s that mestizo musicians and urban middle-class audiences began to embrace vallenato that it became a 'national' cultural form (Wade, "Music and the Formation" 21–4). By visually and textually peeling back the layers of these *borrowings* and *blurs* in the cultural consumption practices that constitute racial identity in Colombia, and by placing them in contrast to racist renderings of blackness and reminders of the displaced origins of national cultural forms, Angulo is again able to destabilize the discriminatory logic of 'homogenizing' mestizo discourse.



**“Pobre negrito bembón” (Poor Big-Lipped Negro)
From the installation *Négritude*
Artist’s Portfolio, 2007**

Angulo’s photos and installations also make pseudo-empirical use of the photographic portrait to question the typology of blacks in Colombia. By posing her subjects against one-dimensional monochromatic backgrounds, and in many instances photographing them from various symmetric perspectives and constructing panoramic polyptics, Angulo objectifies them with a self-conscious gaze, evoking with critical distance the *scientific role* of photography in late nineteenth-century eugenics. Just as in Europe as in the Americas, eugenicists utilized the photograph for its “empiricist assumptions and methodological procedures of naturalism” (Green 3) in order to ‘document’ human typology and later justify models of social order based on the concepts of natural selection and racial classification (8). Following the bloody Thousand Days War (1899–1902), inspired Colombian statesmen and scientists employed such a bio-medical model as a means to, as historian Marco Palacios writes, “explicar los síntomas de ‘degeneración física’ y signos ‘psicopatológicos’ como la ‘emotividad, sugestibilidad, impulsividad, inestabilidad’ de la patología nacional” (68) (explain the symptoms of ‘physical degradation’ and the ‘psychopathological’ signs of ‘emotivity, suggestibility, impulsiveness and instability’ of ‘the national pathology’). As was happening throughout the Americas the time, the Colombian state also sought European immigration as a means to whiten the country and reorganize its racial relations according to the needs and imperatives of the newly consolidated national export elite.¹⁵

The portraits in the series *Objetos para deformar* (1999) (Objects for Deforming) invert the logic of these processes by manipulating and

exaggerating the features of the black body with sculptural props that the artist created (a ‘cephalic deformer’ and a ‘lip shaper’ for example) in order to suggest other real historical artifacts that have been used by Colombian blacks to *whiten* their bodies. In the self-portrait “Colonizados” (Colonized), for example, the gold filigree nose piece and blackface make-up serve to broaden her nasal passages and embellish the phenotypic aspects of her blackness. As an object the nose piece imitates well-known indigenous *Muisca* gold filigree, but as Angulo explained, it is also intended to evoke similar plastic objects that Colombian blacks have bought and used in order to “respingar” or *straighten out* their noses (interview with the artist, August 2007). As such the nose piece constitutes a type of archeological anti-artifact in a performance of self-representation that makes visible the dynamics of *mestizo competency* and the corporal and cultural plasticity it demands from Afro-Colombians.



**“Colonizados” from the series *Objetos para deformar*
Photographic color self-portrait with gold filigree nose piece
Artist’s Portfolio, 1999**

The most important national point of reference in her work, however, is the well-known newspaper cartoon *Nieves* or ‘Snow.’ The creation of Consuelo Lago—a white woman from an oligarchic family from the city of Cali—*Nieves* has been published for the past forty years in the daily Cali-based newspaper *El País* and the national *El Espectador*.¹⁶ Modeled after one of Lago’s maids, the character of *Nieves*¹⁷ operates as a blackface

version of Julio Cortázar's Maga or Robert Zemeckis' Forrest Gump: she is simultaneously an idiot savant and the sentimental depository of essentialist values and concepts of national identity. The format of *Nieves* is simple: each caricature consists of one lone drawing in black and white, usually of Nieves but sometimes includes the simpleton Hétor, her hulking and large-lipped black boyfriend. With her face and curvaceous body painted jet black Nieves strikes playful poses and gesticulates simple maxims of supposed transcendence about domestic life, love or national politics: for example, "Después de pensarlo mucho resolví no volver a pensar en eso" (*Nieves: impertinente y coqueta* 32) (After thinking about it a lot I resolved to never think about it again); "Bailo luego soy" (72) (I dance therefore I am); "yo no quiero a Colombia por grande sino por mía" (*La política vista por Nieves* 21) (I don't love Colombia for its greatness but because it is mine); "Decir que Colombia es una 'narcodemocracia' es como decir que los Estados Unidos son una 'drogadictocracia'" (202) (Saying that Colombia is a Narcodemocracy is like saying that the United States is a Drugadictocracy). As such, the character Nieves incarnates the Colombian myth of racial paradise, and her aphorisms articulate an easy nationalism that rarely addresses and never problematizes the country's racial identity. In fact, Lago says of her creation:

Nieves no es una caricatura sino una 'calicatura,' porque es un personaje típico vallecaucano . . . He querido que repita lo que dice la gente . . . que comente sobre política, cocina, asuntos internacionales, amor, universidad, libros, personajes, costumbres; que se contradiga y se equivoque como todo el mundo; que no le tema a los nombres propios. (*La política vista por Nieves* 13)

(Nieves is not a caricature but a *Cali-ature*, she is a typical character from the Cauca valley . . . I have only wanted her to repeat the things people say, for her to comment on politics, food, international issues, love, the university, books, celebrities, customs; for her to contradict herself and make mistakes just like everybody does; for her not be afraid to tell it like it is.)

In the series *Negra Menta* or 'Black Mint' (2000) Angulo appropriates the Nieves character with a representational process that reveals the history of exclusion, discrimination, and exploitation that the original seeks to opaque. Treating the photo shoot as a performance piece, Angulo studied how her model (a thirteen year-old displaced migrant from the Pacific coast working in Bogotá as a servant) manipulated and responded to objects of domestic labor (a broom, a ladle and a shovel) as well as implements of

slavery (handcuffs and shackles). In visual terms *Negra Menta* faithfully emulates the format and colors of the original, in particular by manipulating the density of the black make-up on her face in a manner that decreases the depth of image, imitates the two-dimensional original, and minimizes the visual center of her subjectivity. The result is a series of images generated with an overdetermined process of signification that obliges the viewer to situate *Nieves* in the historical context of slavery as well as in the nucleus of the current conditions of poverty, armed conflict and internal displacement that disproportionately affect Afro-Colombians.



Negra Menta (fragment)
Photographic series in color
Artist's Portfolio, 2007

The critical dialogue that Angulo's work opens with national concepts of blackness also unfolds onto the transnational plane. In his book *The Practice of Diaspora* (2003) Brent Hayes Edwards offers a critical response to canonical models of black Diaspora that emphasize the processes of *flow* and *return* in the cultural production and articulation of identity. In particular Edwards' model challenges the limitations of what Paul Gilroy has called the principle of "purity and invariant sameness" that results from the dispersion of Africans and gives coherence to their diasporic experience (quoted in Gilroy 56). In contrast, Edwards argues that black diasporic discourse—particularly that of black internationalism—is a necessarily

defective process of translation, one filled with “unavoidable misapprehensions and misreadings, persistent blindness and solipsisms, self-defeating and abortive collaborations, a failure to translate even a basic grammar of blackness” (5). Borrowing Stuart Hall’s concept of articulation, Edwards seeks to understand Diaspora as an anti-abstractionist term, one that:

points to difference not only internally (the ways transnational black groupings are fractured by nation, class, gender, sexuality, and language) but also externally . . . we are forced to think not in terms of some closed or autonomous system of African dispersal but explicitly in terms of a complex past of forced migrations and radicalization . . . a ‘history of overlapping diasporas.’ (13)

As Liliana Angulo has explained, she employs an imaginary of blackness that depends a great deal on the African American experience as it resonates strongly with an Afro-Colombian public that lacks an equivalent of its own. As such, her work reveals the palpable presence of the Black Panthers, afros, the aesthetics of Black is Beautiful, jazz, rap, and blackface. However, she also recognizes these as the elements of a neocolonial imposition that poorly translate to her national context. She explained:

[E]s innegable la influencia de Estados Unidos . . . Nosotros consumimos un montón de cine de afroamericanos . . . Uno sabe mucho de la esclavitud allá, como todo el tema de la segregación, de música negra, de música jazz, todo eso es muy importante . . . Muy probablemente un joven afro sabe quién es Malcolm X o Martin Luther King, porque se vuelve una identidad transnacional . . . [sin embargo] no es una cosa que tenga que ver con lo nacional, sino con una problemática que afecta a la diáspora en general. (interview with the artist, August 2007)

([T]he influence of the United States is undeniable . . . we consume lots of Afro-American movies . . . you know lots about slavery there, all about segregation, black music, jazz, all of this is very important . . . it is very likely that a young Afro-Colombian will know who Malcolm X or Martin Luther King are, because this has become a transnational identity . . . [however] this isn’t something that has anything to do with our national context, but is rather a problematic affecting the Diaspora in general.)



Neverland Eden
Photographic series in color
Artist's Portfolio, 2004

Angulo's recent polyptic work *Neverland Eden* (2004) reveals the *unavoidable misapprehensions, persistent blindness* and *solipsisms* of diasporic discourse, and brings us back to the immediate political reality of Afro-Colombians by placing in tension a series of internal and external oppositions that structure the now globalized Afro-Colombian experience. With sardonic bliss, the visual content and play with words in the title simultaneously suggest the *Neverland* of *Peter Pan* as well as Michael Jackson's infamous ranch, and directly link the *edenic* lives of these semi-nude and innocent children with the threat of a transnational pederast who has done everything he can to erase his own blackness. On the other hand, the local articulation of the image makes present the mestizo model of national identity whose dynamics work to darken and send them back to the flattened singular dimension of caricature and blackface. The rhetoric of these images and of Angulo's work in general return us to Edwards' model of African Diaspora that necessarily understands these tensions and misunderstandings as the unstable and combative terrain of contemporary Afro-Colombian identity politics. Through his reading of *Law 70* Peter Wade offers similar parallel criticisms of the monolithic character of both the state model of Afro-Colombian culture as well as the history of Afro-Colombian political organizations. He argues that although this legislation grants important guarantees to cultural recognition and legal protection, it

does so with language that identifies Afro-Colombians as possessing a *static* culture, a *unified identity* and a *defined territory*, aspects which ill describe much of Afro-Colombian culture and necessarily shape and limit present and future political mobilization (“Cultural Politics” 352). Like Edwards, Wade also argues for a model of black identity that resists essentialist concepts and demonstrates its agency in flexible and contextual terms. For both of them, such an understanding of national Diaspora makes it possible to see and negotiate tensions and conflicts internal to both itself and dominant national culture, but it also creates the conditions necessary to articulate and self-determine independently from hegemonic models of transnational blackness. These are doubtlessly the conditions that confront Afro-Colombians and greater Colombia as well. With critical optimism, the work of Liliana Angulo is helping to create a productive and independent semiotics of resistance in this overwhelming context of urgency, blindness, and invisibility.

Notes

1. For reasons of consistency I describe groups of the African Diaspora in Colombia using the most commonly and often interchanged terms (*Afro*, *Afrodescendent*, *Afro-Colombian* and *Black*) used by Afro-Colombians to self-identify.
2. The categories of racial and ethnic classification used by the National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE) combine concepts of ethnicity, cultural heritage and phenotype in an ambiguous and often problematic manner. In doing so they manifest the complexity of identity politics in Colombia and illustrate some of the challenges to racial and ethnic mobilization that confront the diverse groups of the African diaspora in the country. For example, the *Censo General 2005* asks those surveyed to identify in writing their specific *indigenous* or *black* group according to “su cultura, pueblo o rasgos físicos” (their culture, people or physical features) and offers “*Raizal del archipiélago de San Andrés y Providencia, Palenquero de San Basilio, Negro(a), mulato(a), Afrocolombiano(a) o afrodescendiente*” (*Black from the San Andrés and Providencia archipelago, Palenquero from San Basilio, Black, Mulatto, Afro-Colombian or Afrodescendent*) as the subcategories of self-classification (430).
3. All translations following the Spanish are my own; I have excluded the Spanish original where published English translations exist.
4. According to national government statistics (DANE) at the present time the State has ceded titles for 132 *Territorios Colectivos de Comunidades Negras/Collective Territories of Black Communities* which account for 4.3% of arable soils in the country (*Colombia: una nación multicultural* 19).
5. The Urabá region is located in the northwest corner of Colombia between the departments of Antioquia, Chocó and the border with Panama. Historically isolated from the rest of the country and populated by the descendants of freed and runaway slaves, today it is best known as one of the most biodiverse places on the planet and is being rapidly deforested for the production of bananas, lumber and African palm. It is also a center of expansion of the armed conflict and narcotrafficking.

6. Also known as *la ley de las comunidades negras* this legislation has had a fundamental role in the socio-political advancement of Afro-Colombians. For the first time in national history this law recognizes Afro-Colombians as “el conjunto de familias de ascendencia afrocolombiana que poseen una cultura propia, comparten una historia y tienen sus propias tradiciones y costumbres dentro de la relación campo-poblado, que revelan y conservan conciencia de identidad que las distinguen de otros grupos étnicos” (the combined group of families of Afro-Colombian origin who possess their own culture and history, and who have their own traditions and customs circumscribed by a shared populated territory, who consciously reveal and conserve an identity which distinguishes them from other ethnic groups), and concedes their legal right to possess “las zonas baldías, rurales y ribereñas que han venido siendo ocupadas por comunidades negras que tengan prácticas tradicionales de producción en otras zonas del país” (*Ley 70* de 1993, Articles 1–2) (the unpopulated, rural and valley areas which have been occupied by black communities and who have traditional production practices in other parts of the country).
7. For further documentation see recent publications *La Tramoja* or *Somos tierra de esta tierra*.
8. Despite its controversial qualities as a monoculture crop that demands large amounts of water and nitrogen-based fertilizers, in Colombia the African palm is grown exclusively for the production of biodiesel and has been officially embraced as a ‘green alternative’ to illicit coca and poppy production.
9. Initially *Plan Pacífico* consisted of four basic initiatives: the improvement of regional infrastructure and public services, the development of the port of Buenaventura, the completion of the Panamerican Highway and the construction of a new interoceanic canal. The plan is now in its second phase and is funded with budget of 8.8 billion pesos for 2007–10. As part of president Álvaro Uribe Vélez’s *Democratic Security* platform *Plan Pacífico* now also includes counterinsurgency and eradication programs (Presidencia de la República web.presidencia.gov.co/sne/2007/junio/03/10032007.htm).
10. In her review of Afro-Colombian cultural production literary scholar Lucía Ortiz explores the ideological motives behind the late nineteenth-century transformation of the concept of *mestizaje* in national political discourse. Citing a study by Jaime Arrocha, Nina de Friedemann and Alfredo Vanín she explains that the term “empezó a ser aplicado también a afrocolombianos pero con la intención de encubrir las diferencias socio-étnicas y la discriminación hacia indígenas y negros” (14) (it also began to be applied to Afro-Colombians but with the intention of covering up socio-ethnic differences and discrimination as an extension of the official policy of whitening, racial unification and the socio-economic modernization of the country).
11. Most Colombian terms for ethnicity and race have rough English equivalents (blanco/white, indio/Indian, negro/black, moreno/brown), while others such as *trigueño*—literally wheat colored or light brown—are common to many Hispanic contexts but do not translate easily within English and Anglo binary codes of white vs. blackness. Depending on context, the Spanish *negro* can mean black, negro or *nigger*. Other terms are colloquial and Colombia specific (mono/blonde). Of these it is worth noting that the term *raizal*—literally ‘of the roots’—is most often used to describe Black populations of the San Andrés archipelago, but is increasingly used by young Afro-Colombians to defiantly recognize the depth of their African heritage.
12. In the same article Wade affirms that the institutional presence of Afro-Colombians has been so weak that even during the Constitutional Convention of 1990, an event often celebrated as a groundbreaking event in Colombian democracy due to its

- political, economic, gender and racial inclusiveness, the head of the Colombian Institute of Anthropology refused to recognize Afro-Colombians as an ethnic group, identifying them instead as peasants and proletariat (346–7).
13. As a contextual note it is important to acknowledge that many public and private schools serving black Colombians, as well as a number of NGOs and elected officials have embraced and promoted *afroeducación* as a means to transform the memory and role of Afro-Colombian history and culture in public life. *Afroeducación* now has a key role in Afro-Colombian political mobilization, particularly in the Humanitarian Zones of the Pacific coast.
 14. The recent critical anthology on Afro-Colombian literature, *Chambacú la historia la escriben tú* Lucía Ortiz Ed. Madrid: Veuvert, 2007, is indicative of the many challenges to studying Afro-Colombian literature. In large part the valuable essays in this groundbreaking work are limited to the focus on the writings of ‘the big three’ Afro-Colombian authors (Obeso, Artel and Zapata Olivella), they study the representation of blacks and blackness in non-black literature, or work to recuperate long-forgotten authors, unprinted works or out-of-print texts. In each case the gap between the richness of the Afro-Colombian experience and the production, consumption and availability of Afro-Colombian literature is indicative of the challenges to Afro-Colombian culture in general.
 15. In the same text Palacios quotes the *Liberal reformist* president Rafael Uribe Uribe who explained his preference for “Italianos y españoles, porque de chinos y coolies no quiero oír ni hablar” (68) (Italians and Spaniards, because I don’t even want to hear talk about Chinese and Coolies).
 16. Consuelo Lago’s professional webpage proudly reproduces a large number of *Nieves* cartoons. See nieves-consuelolago.com/.
 17. Today the character is known as “Nieves” but for decades she was called “Negra Nieves” or *Snow Black*. Under pressure and protest from the black community Lago changed her name and profession, assimilating her as a ‘typical university student.’ In the introduction to the compilation: *Nieves: impertinente y coqueta*, editor Benjamín Villegas naively explains, “en el año 1997, Nieves se quitó el delantal y entró a la Universidad. Ahora estudia Filosofía y Letras y su indumentaria es la de una moderna universitaria” (9) (in 1997 Nieves took off her apron and entered the University. Now she studies Philosophy and Letters and her wardrobe is that of a modern university student).

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