"The Logic of the River": A Spatial Approach to Ethnic-Territorial Mobilization in the Colombian Pacific Region

resumen
Este artículo sostiene que planteamientos espaciales no han recibido suficiente atención en las teorías establecidas sobre movimientos sociales y la construcción de identidades. A partir de la Constitución de 1991, la movilización entre comunidades negras en la región de la costa Pacífica colombiana ha tendido hacia formas de organizaciones étnico-territoriales que defienden sus derechos a una diferencia cultural como intrínsecamente vinculados a un control territorial en esta región. Un aspecto importante en este desarrollo es el "espacio acuático" en las tierras bajas del Pacífico como un conjunto particular de relaciones sociales espacializadas a lo largo de las cuencas ribereñas que ha sido importante en las estructuras organizativas de las comunidades negras rurales. Este estudio de la región de la costa Pacífica ejemplifica estos procesos y examina cómo los intereses capitalistas y del Estado los median, creándose así interacciones complejas entre movimientos étnicos, el Estado, y el capital.

Río Guapi
Desde las cumbres viajas altanero, pero esclavo en el riel de tus orillas, descientes hasta el mar de ondas sencillas a tributar tu arroyo placentero.

Cuando estoy lejos, tierno yo te quiero, con todo el potosí de aguas tranquilas; con tu fauna de sábalos y anguilas y con tus noches plenas de luceros.

–Guillermo Portocarrero, Sonetos en el puerto

Introduction: The “Concreteness of Space” and the Search by Social Movements for “Counter-Spaces”

Over the last decade, there has been an increasing interest throughout the social sciences in debates about spatiality. Spatial conceptualizations are seen as fundamental to all forms of social theorizing and of core importance to
social science in general (Escobar 2001; Massey 1999; Werlen 1993). With the “reassertion of space in critical social theory” (Soja 1989) an entire spatial language has emerged for comprehending contemporary social reality (Smith and Katz 1993). However, geographers still deplore the lack of an analytical understanding of the concept of “space” and the fact that references to “space” and “place” seem to assume too often that their meanings are clear and uncontested (Massey 1993, 1994). An unprecedented proliferation of spatial metaphors in social theory—globalization, de- and re-territorialization, exclusion, time-space compression, locality, glocality, transnationalism, to mention just a few—has certainly not helped critical reflection on these issues. As Agnew comments:

Spatial metaphors are used for categorizing and containing observations without much attention to their impact on the selection and ordering of the “concrete particulars” themselves. Modern social science suffers from a sort of “agnosia” (or disorder of perception) in which representations of space set boundaries for non-spatial processes rather than provide an understanding of space and society as inextricably intertwined. [Agnew 1994:261]

This problematic has also been increasingly recognized by anthropologists, in particular those concerned with the cultural politics of identities (Escobar 2001; Moore 1997 1998; Wade 1997a:84-100). At the same time, an increasing cross-fertilization of ideas and concepts can be observed, in particular between the disciplines of anthropology and human geography, that will hopefully attend to what Moore considers the weak points of both disciplines:

Anthropological contributions have been strongest on ethnographically detailed evocations of the sensibilities of place, yet largely ignore the rich histories of debates articulated by geographers. Geography, in contrast,
has tended to be ethnographically thin, resulting in impoverished representations of the cultural meanings of spatial practice. [Moore 1998:347]

Contributing to such an interdisciplinary debate, Escobar has argued in a recent essay (in a geographical journal) for a “repatriation of place into anthropology,” and against “globalocentrism” and the frequent, uncritical application of the notions of “placelessness” and “erasure of place”:

Place has dropped out of sight in the “globalization craze” of recent years, and this erasure of place has profound consequences for our understanding of culture, knowledge, nature, and economy. It is perhaps time to reverse some of this asymmetry by focusing anew...on the continued vitality of place and place-making. [Escobar 2001:141; emphasis added]

It is not quite clear for who “place has dropped out of sight.” Certainly for geographers the subjective aspects of place and the sense of place have continued to be an important angle of analysis. To state that “from an anthropological perspective, it is important to highlight the emplacement of all cultural practices” (Escobar 2001:143) seems a rather obvious claim. Nevertheless, stressing the “vitality of place” is a useful approach to the subjective nature of place, which frequently finds articulation in identity struggles constructed around the defense of place. Places are thereby not seen as static, inert, and fixed backdrops for these struggles, but as the vital preconditions as well as the product of those contestations. We can consider these places as the “soils” out of which identity struggles emerge and to which they are intimately related, while at the same time they are transformed in the process of social action.

Recognizing that place, society, and action are meaningfully related and mutually constituted, social movements have been identified as providing a privileged field of research to observe these interactions in practice (Jelin 1987; Pile and Keith 1997; Slater 1998). However, many social movement theorists and researchers still neglect the concrete constitutive part that space and place play in the conceptualization and practice of resistance. There is a growing interest in new ways of conceptualizing global resistances (Castells 1997) that at the same time runs the risk of understating the local specificity of many struggles. Clearly, the specific geographies within which resistance develops and the ways by which resistance is mobilized through space have not received sufficient attention. This imbalance has been addressed recently by geographers who seek to conceptualize the “spatializing of resistance” or a “spatiality of resistance” (Oslender 2000; Routledge 1997). To examine resistance as a spatial practice is to contest dominant meanings of space, to open up embattled “terrains of resistance” (Routledge 1993) to new readings, and to articulate and imagine an alternative production of space—a project that social movements frequently embark upon. Such an understanding also helps to break down the often proclaimed but faulty epistemological separation of
place and space that equates space with the abstract and place with the concrete. Space is not merely this abstract “thing” produced by the dominant mode of production (or circulation or consumption). Lefebvre’s (1991) spatial triad clearly stresses the roles of “spatial practices” and “representational space” in the overall production of space and the function of both as catalysts in an alternative production of space, or in the search for a “counter-space.” In fact, the “defense of constructions of place” (Escobar 2001) by social movements represents this concrete search for a “counter-space.” It is this concreteness of space that enables us to contest its meaning, to imagine alternatives and to change its form through social action.

In this paper I will examine these theoretical claims—and attend to Moore’s critique of geography’s ethnographically thin representations—by offering a detailed, empirically grounded account and “thick description” of the spatialities of the social movement of black communities on Colombia’s Pacific coast. In particular, I will show how the spatial configurations of everyday life patterns of black communities have informed the current processes of political organization in the region. I will argue that the concept of “aquatic space” (Oslender 1999) as a particular set of spatialized social relationships has been instrumental in the organizing structures of rural black communities, which have formed community councils along river basins. I will also examine how these processes of community representation have been mediated by external capital and government institutions, both of which have vested interests in them. I caution against a fetishizing of resistance and an overly rapid categorization of Latin American black movements as “black-based ethnic-bloc formations” that “will use the ideology of nègritude and, in so doing, will be perceived as a threat to nationalist sovereignty and nationalist territoriality,” as claimed by the editors of an important recent two-volume collection of essays titled Blackness in Latin America and the Caribbean (Whitten and Torres 1998:8). Instead of pointing to the seemingly irreconcilable, and in many texts often generalized and almost “naturalized” opposition between ethnic group interests and a nationalist political, socio-economic and cultural project, the researcher should analyze the changing nature of contemporary interactions between ethnic groups and the state. These interactions are increasingly characterized by a discursive inclusion of ethnic groups (often accompanied by territorial and cultural rights that formally recognize ethnic difference within the nation-state), and a continuing “real” exclusion from socioeconomic, political, and cultural processes (often accompanied and reinforced by processes of whitening, or blanqueamiento). Such is the nature of contemporary developments in many Latin American countries that include their respective ethnic minorities in a new constitutional discourse of “multiculturality” and “plurinationality,” as, for example, in the Colombian constitution of 1991.4
The emergence of the social movement of black communities on Colombia’s Pacific coast must be placed within the changing political and socioeconomic contexts of new legislation that award collective land rights to rural black communities, on the one hand, and increasing penetration of the region by external capital, on the other (Escobar and Pedrosa 1996). The Pacific region has furthermore attracted international interest due to its almost legendary biodiversity. Therefore, while local in character, the organizing processes of black communities are of international significance at the same time, for they correspond with global trends of empowering local communities in fragile ecosystems, such as tropical rainforests, and of ascribing them to the role of “guardians” responsible for the conservation of these environments (Escobar 1996; O’Connor 1993). By examining these interactions, a complex field of both personal and collective negotiations emerges that defies the simplistic binary division of “ethnic-bloc formation” versus nationalistic project.

In the first part of this paper, I will examine in detail the concept of “aquatic space” among black communities on the Colombian Pacific coast as the underlying spatial ordering logic of everyday social interactions. The second part draws on this concept to show how current organizing processes are informed by this logic in a new political context. The third part contextualizes these developments within a changing geography of power, and examines the impact that capital and the state have on local organizing processes. In the conclusion I will tease out the significance of such a spatial approach to social movement theories and the implications for researching social movements in Latin America. The analysis presented here is derived from a number of fieldwork stays of various lengths in the Colombian Pacific since 1995, the last taking place in July 2000. Particular reference will be made to the coastal area of the department of Cauca in the southern part of the Pacific; however, the general trends discussed here can be observed throughout the Pacific region.

“Yo Soy Guapireño”: Black Communities and the “Aquatic Space”

In his pioneering work *The Pacific Lowlands of Colombia* (1957), North American geographer Robert West portrayed the area in the following words:

> Seen from the air the canopy formed by the giant trees resembles a sea of green, overlapping umbrellas, broken only by streams and occasional clearings. Hundreds of rivers, often in flood, run through the forest from hill and mountain slope to sea. They are the pathways for human travel and their banks are the main sites of human habitation. [West 1957:3]
More than 40 years later, and in spite of increasing deforestation rates of currently 53,000 hectares per annum (DNP 1998), this is still the impression that a bird’s eye view gives of the Pacific Lowlands, a region considered to contain one of the highest levels of biodiversity in the world, although only an estimated 50 percent of its plant species are known and identified to date. It covers an area of around ten million hectares, some 6.2 percent of Colombia’s total land surface, and extends from the Western Andean slopes and the border with Ecuador in the south to the Darien gap on the Panamanian border in the north. The region is situated within the Intertropical Convergence Zone, a low pressure belt of weak converging air masses loaded with humidity and responsible for some of the world’s highest levels of precipitation, reaching annual averages of over 10,000 millimeters in some areas of the Chocó department. The region is characterized by an extensive network of rivers, which originate on the western slopes of the Western Andean range and crisscross in east-westerly direction toward the Pacific Ocean. These rivers are subject to frequent flooding, especially during and immediately after periods of high precipitation. Furthermore, they are joined along the way by countless tributaries, thus creating a number of vast river basins, such as the Patía delta in the southwestern department of Nariño that extends over 3,000 square kilometers (del Valle 1996). Extensive and labyrinthine mangrove swamps characterize the southern half of the 1,300-kilometer Pacific coastline. Here we also find tidal ranges of up to four meters that still have an impact some 20 kilometers upstream when the width of the river channels increases diurnally in response to the tide. Access to the region has always been difficult, which was one of the reasons why the Spanish never effectively colonized this part of South America (Aprile-Gniset 1993; Romero 1995). Still today there are only three main roads leading into the region from the interior of the country.

Today the region’s population of some 1.3 million inhabitants (DANE 1993) is around 90 percent Afro-Colombian, an estimated five percent indigenous population of various ethnic groups, and about five percent are mestizos who mostly have come from the interior of the country. Today’s Afro-Colombians are the descendants of African slaves who were brought into the country from the 16th century onwards to work the gold mines in Zaragoza, Antioquia, and later in the Colombian Pacific region, or to work in agriculture and urban services, for example, along the Caribbean coast (Colmenares 1976; del Castillo 1982; Maya 1998; Sharp 1976). Resistance formed part of the slavery system from its beginning, and long before the abolition of slavery in 1851, cimarrones (runaway slaves) began to settle independently and freely along the river banks or formed palenques, fortified villages of free blacks. On the Pacific coast, however, it was more common for slaves to buy their freedom in gold which they had accumulated working on Sundays, their “day
This process is known as *automanumisión*, and, according to Romero, "this seems to have been the most common way for the slaves on the Pacific to obtain their freedom. There, escapes were relatively infrequent" (1993:28). The free blacks settled around the gold mines and continued to mine as well as work in agriculture and fishing (Friedemann and Espinosa 1993:564). This led to a pattern of cohabitation, in which the *libres* (free people) existed side by side with the slavery system. It was only after the abolition of slavery in 1851 that black settlement patterns spread significantly along the river banks, usually in a longitudinal and discontinuous pattern (Aprile-Gniset 1993; Romero 1995). As West argued in 1957, there are very practical reasons for these "outstanding features of riverine distribution of the Pacific lowland population":

> Along the lower courses of streams natural levees afford the highest land, the best soils for cultivation. Similar advantages are found on alluvial terraces along the middle and upper courses of rivers. Even for non-farmers the river banks are attractive by reason of the usual abundant supply of fish, fresh-water crustaceans and mollusks, and a variety of aquatic and amphibious mammals. Moreover, rivers are the highways in this forested land where interfluves, because of their swampy or rugged nature, are hard to traverse. [West 1957:87]

Rural black identities have thus become intimately linked to the experience of the aquatic, to a close *convivencia*, or living together, with what I have termed the "aquatic space" (Oslender 1999). By this term, I mean the specific ways in which aquatic elements such as high levels of precipitation, large tidal ranges, intricate river networks, mangrove swamps and frequent inundations have strongly influenced and shaped everyday human life patterns in the region. These patterns are visible, for example, in the construction of houses on stilts along river banks and in swampy areas to prevent flooding. The tidal rhythms in particular have strongly influenced everyday life patterns. For example, the women known as *concheras*, who travel into mangrove areas to collect *conchas* (shellfish) that live in the mud, do so at low tide with the retreating waters. This helps them to travel faster downstream in their dugout canoes and on arrival the low tide has exposed the mud flats for them to pick the shellfish (Arocha 1999). Since all transport in the region is river-based, tidal action facilitates or hinders traveling in dugout canoes, the traditional means of transport. At low tide, for example, it is considerably more difficult to travel upstream than at high tide when the rising water gives a helping hand. In fact, at low tide the channels of the extensive mangrove areas virtually dry up, and even small canoes cannot pass through, let alone motor driven speedboats. Referring to the everyday working schedules of tree-cutters in the
southern Pacific, Restrepo notes that the effect of the tides “not only determines the appropriate time to set off for work, but also for returning from work, so that the working days get either shorter or longer. This fact, among others, determines that the working day in the Pacific has a variable effective duration” (Restrepo 1996b:366).

Traveling schedules, therefore, have to be adapted to the tidal rhythm and depend on water availability in the river channels. It is not uncommon for an embarkation to get stuck in the mud, and all one can do is wait until the tide rises and sets the boat free again. Furthermore, many locations upstream can only be reached at high tide, since otherwise the river bed is not deep enough for even a small dugout canoe to pass. The tidal rhythm is also taken into account by locals who cut trees in the forests to supply sawmills that at times can be ten to 15 kilometers away from the felling site. The felled tree is normally pulled over the forest floor to a nearby water channel or river; these waterways constitute the fundamental infrastructure of the timber extraction processes on the Pacific coast. There, depending on the channel’s width, various logs are tied together using natural fibers, and when felling is completed, these rafts float downstream until they reach the sawmill. The people who cut the trees usually travel on the rafts to direct, steer, and protect them, a journey that can take hours and even days depending on the distance to be covered and the tidal impact. Again, at low tide the raft travels faster downstream than at high tide, when it would be going against the flow. Locals are usually well prepared for these trips and carry cooking utensils and foodstuffs such as plantains with them. Fish can be caught in the river, but occasionally have already been prepared before departure.

The river is furthermore the *space of social interaction* for black communities on the Pacific coast (Friedemann 1974, 1985; Vanín 1993; Velásquez 1960; Whitten 1986), where people wash themselves, women wash clothes and fetch water, and children play. These activities are of an almost ritual nature, accompanied by laughter, storytelling, and gossiping. This becomes most evident on market days, which attract locals from surrounding villages and hamlets not only to sell their products and stock up necessary food items and general merchandise, but also to exchange information and stories. The market, usually held on the river banks, is for many of the inhabitants from more isolated communities the most important and often the only source of information and means of communication. Far more than just of practical importance, the river becomes a social space of everyday human interactions. Furthermore, it is the symbolic referent of identity for the individuals and groups that have settled along its banks, for the river flows through the imaginations of black communities and their specific ways of referring to nature and their world. The “aquatic,” and in particular the river, are central points
of reference in identity formation and in the everyday discursive practices of black communities (Restrepo 1995:77-79; Vanfn 1999). The riverine identification and the aquatic space are thus deeply inscribed in the sense of place, the particular feeling that is derived from living in and experiencing a given place. This is visible in the multiple ways that people refer to their lands and rivers. A close and almost intimate relationship between the individual and the river seems to exist and can be observed in very common expressions like “people don’t want to leave their river” or “when I return to my river.” As West observed in 1957, “People living on a given river consider themselves as a single community...Negroes and mixed bloods speak of ‘nuestro río,’ or mention, for example, that ‘somos del Río Guapi,’ or ‘somos Guapiseños’ [sic], indicating their social attachment to a given river” (West 1957:88).

A certain harmony often rings through the narratives of locals when they refer to their rivers, as, for example, in the words of don Agapito Montaño, a local farmer born in a village on the river Guajui but who lived the last 20 years of his life in the town of Guapi. When he talks about the journeys between the rivers Guajui and Guapi that he used to embark on as a young man, and which would have taken him some ten hours in his dugout canoe, he remembers:

Well, we chatted wonderfully when we were traveling—so, one said, “Hey, friend, when are you going to travel?”, because in those days there was no engine, everything was by paddle. “Well, I will be leaving at such time at night, I will be leaving at midnight.” “So tell me, we’ll go together.” So one spoke to the other, and he to another, and so we all went as a crowd, well, that is, we left Guajui for Guapi. And we went chatting, rhyming, talking, well, about life, yes. [Interview held in Guapi, April 23, 1996]

Black communities have thus established a particular set of spatialized social relationships along and between river basins. These relations, conceptualized here in terms of aquatic space, are an expression of what activists of the social movement of black communities have referred to as “the logic of the river”:

In the logic of the river the characteristics of land use are determined by location: in the upper part of the river, emphasis is given to handicraft gold mining, and hunting and gathering activities are carried out in the forest hills; towards the middle part, emphasis is put on agricultural production and selective tree felling, as well as hunting and gathering activities which are undertaken in the forests; towards the lower part, emphasis is given to fishing and gathering of shells, mollusks and crabs together with agricultural activities. Everywhere there exists a continuous relation
between the upper and the lower parts and vice versa and of the middle parts with both, characterized by a mobility that follows the natural course of the river and of nature. Its dynamics strengthen and permit family relations and the exchange of products, with the productive unit in these dynamics being the dispersed family along the river. [PCN 1999:1]

As we will see in the following section, the logic of the river and the particular spatialized social relationships of black communities along and between river basins have played an important part in the context of political organization and mobilization.

Creating Community Councils: The Aquatic Space in a New Political Context

Along the Colombian Pacific coast, black communities have organized themselves since the second half of the 1980s, first tentatively in some areas as peasant struggles for land, and later, following Colombia's new constitution in 1991 and the resulting Law 70 in 1993, as "ethnic-territorial" organizations defending their rights to cultural difference as intrinsically linked to control over their territories. The new constitution of 1991 declared the nation to be multicultural and pluriethnic, recognizing for the first time its black population as an ethnic group. With Transitory Article 55, the new constitution opened the way for legislation that would grant collective land rights to the black communities on the Pacific coast which "have traditionally been living on state-owned lands in the rural riverine zones of the Pacific basin, in agreement with their traditional production practices" This law was finally passed in August 1993 and became known as Law 70. It further states that "in order to receive the awardable lands as collective property, every community will create a community council as a form of internal administration" As an immediate result of this legislation, hundreds of new initiatives sprang up, with some 350 organizations of black communities registered by 1994. This explosion can partly be explained by the model of "political opportunity structures" (Tarrow 1994; see also McAdam et al. 1996) in that the legislation opened up political spaces of participation for black communities and indeed provided funding to support their organizational processes. That this was not a purely philanthropic gesture by the government is clear. Black communities in the Colombian Pacific coast, together with the indigenous populations, are considered the "guardians" of the rain forests, responsible for protecting their environment and the almost legendary "megabiodiversity" of the Pacific coast (DNP 1998; IIAP 1997). Regulating Law 70, Decree 1745 of 1995 prescribes the steps that a rural community has to follow in the creation of a community council "as the highest authority of

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internal administration within the lands of black communities" and in the subsequent application to the Colombian Institute of Agrarian Reform, INCORA (Instituto Colombiano de Reforma Agraria) for a collective land title to be issued. Most communities have decided to take the river basin along which black populations have settled as the organizing spatial unit for their community council—with important exceptions, discussed below. The figure of the river basin's spatial structure has been described by some activists as resembling a fishbone “in which the fundamental life aspects of the Afro-Colombian communities of the Center and South Pacific are articulated. It is starting from this logic that a sense of belonging and territoriality are defined” (PCN 1999:1). The particular set of spatialized social relationships articulated within and around the aquatic space is now reconstituted in a new context of political organization. Understanding the nature of the aquatic space and the logic of the river as the spatial preconditions for political organization, the establishment of community councils along river basins reflects the specific cultural and identity-based referents of black communities. This conceptualization is evident, for example, in the constitution and the naming of community councils, such as the Community Council Río Napi or the Community Council Río San Francisco in the department of Cauca. In both cases the area delimiting the community council's territory comprises the lands around the river basin and includes the headwaters and the mouth of the particular river. However, more than merely in terms of physical location, the river basin must be understood in terms of both its socio-cultural meaning for local communities and the perceptions and sense of belonging that it generates. In the case of the community of La Soledad at the headwaters of the river Guajuí, it becomes evident how a particular sense of place, rather than the objective cartographic location of the community, has informed the spatial organizing structure of the community council.

La Soledad is a village of 575 inhabitants (DANE 1993) that lies at the headwaters of the river Guajuí in the department of Cauca, some 25 kilometers from the river mouth in the Pacific Ocean (Figure 1). However, shallow depths and numerous rapids in the upper reaches of the river prevent navigation for the last five kilometers even for small dugout canoes. The principal route of communication and transport for locals is a trail that connects La Soledad with Belén, a settlement at the headwaters of the neighboring Napi River, which can be reached on foot along this trail in two to three hours. Everything and everybody moves along this trail, so that the inhabitants of La Soledad are in fact connected physically, commercially, and spiritually to the Napi. All merchandise destined for La Soledad is transported via the Napi to Belén, and then on the aforementioned trail to La Soledad. People who need to travel from La Soledad to Guapi also do so by traveling on the Napi. The
Figure 1. Rivers Guapi, Guajui, and Napi in the Cauca Department. Adapted from Instituto Geográfico Agustín Codazzi, Departamentos de Cauca y Narino-Guapi, sheet no. 340, 1994.
physical location of La Soledad on the Guajuf River seems “topographically accidental” in this context, and it has not entered local people’s sense of place as being attached to this river. Instead, the inhabitants of La Soledad have developed a strong sense of belonging to the Napi.

During the formation processes of the community councils, the inhabitants of La Soledad made it clear that they should be part of the community council of the Napi River. This intention was at first rejected by the leaders of the Guajuf River organization Asodergua, who argued on grounds of physical location that La Soledad should belong to their community council. However, Asodergua finally had to give in to the locals’ demand, and today the population of La Soledad forms part of the community council of the Napi River. In fact, the current legal representative of this community council lives in La Soledad. It is clear then that local perceptions and sociocultural references have been more important in the spatial organizing structures of these two community councils than cartographic location. In their spatialized imagination the inhabitants of La Soledad have in fact created their own “imaginative geographies,” or more specifically their own “imaginative river basin,” to which they feel they belong.

Mediating Community Representation: The Impact of Capital and the State on Local Organizing Processes

Clearly the organizing processes of black communities do not take place in a political and economic void, but within a field of shifting power relations. The very constitution of community councils has affected, or is perceived as affecting, a whole range of interests in the region. This is not the place to discuss in great detail the impact of Colombia’s escalating civil war on rural black mobilization, but it must be pointed out here that guerrilla and paramilitary activities have significantly extended throughout the Pacific coast recently, and black peasants are increasingly subject to rural collective massacres and forced displacements to the cities. This leads to a changing geography of power and to the constant redrawing of territorialities and boundaries in the Pacific, in that effective territorial control by armed actors prevents local communities from affirming their territorial claims as guaranteed by Law 70, and produces instead the de-territorialization of black communities. Instead of a strengthening of local territorialities and a defense of constructions of place, as aimed at by the black movements, completely opposed processes of local de-territorialization and territorial fragmentation are induced as a result of the terror that is spread by paramilitaries, guerrillas, and Colombia’s army. In the words of Daniel Pécaut: “It seems to me that the terror gradually leads to territorial fragilization, explodes temporal referents, and endangers the ability of subjects to assert themselves within contradictory referents”
These processes have not been documented sufficiently for the Pacific coast, but they are an increasingly urgent matter for local communities and social movements and constitute a necessary direction for future research.

In the local political arena, community representatives have pointed to the lack of support and even open hostility towards the community councils from some mayors, the most powerful political figures in the region. The legal representative of the Community Council Guapi Abajo explains:

The politicians didn’t want Law 70 to spread as we see it happening today, the local politicians. They feel that Law 70 gets in their way. It won’t let them keep on pushing the people around the way they like to. And this is the problem with the politicians. We even experience this with the mayor now. He doesn’t want to accept that the community council is the people’s highest authority in their territory. Look, as the legal representative of the council, I was one of the mayor’s best friends before he took up office. And I thought that with this mayor in place our community council would benefit more. When now the opposite is true. And he is like this with all the councils...Law 70 is a law for black people. And the mayors being black, why are they not proud of Law 70? This hurts me a lot. I would like to have a space, a media where I can make this public to the world, well, for the world to be aware of this. Because they [the mayors] will have to explain one day to the communities, why they hate Law 70, why they don’t want to understand that in reality Law 70 belongs to the black people. [Interview held in Guapi, February 5, 1999]

Although some legal representatives have had a more positive experience with their respective mayors, it is clearly not necessarily a harmonious relationship. With Law 70 and the constitution of community councils, it is easy to understand that some mayors may see this as curbing their own political influence and power in these areas. Traditional party politics and clientelism are so deeply embedded in the political and social structures in the Pacific coast that the emergence of community councils as new political actors is bound to upset the interests of some mayors and other local politicians who fear seeing their political influence dwindle in the moist heat of the Pacific rivers. Therefore, although “the mayors are black,” as the representative of the Community Council Guapi Abajo has pointed out above, “race” as a category does not necessarily act as a unifying force in the struggle of black communities to attain cultural recognition and territorial rights. And neither does the concept of “black-based ethnic-bloc formation” help to understand these processes. Issues of class, gender, and the complex power relations in the region have to be examined in more detail to account for the relation between
“new” and “old” political identities, their entanglements and the spatial differences in the organizational experiences within black communities. The emerging community councils are political spaces entangled with local traditional political structures, at times challenging them, but at others either cooperating with them, reproducing them, or both. In fact, the community councils themselves emerge as a potential arena of cooptation by traditional party politics, as they are in many ways mediated through the interests of economic and political actors in the region. It is important, therefore, to examine the differential and varied experiences of the community councils in their respective creations and political articulations, which are at the same time the result of complex individual and collective negotiations. In order to exemplify this debate I will now briefly discuss three cases that show the entangled nature of these negotiations between black communities, the state, and capital: (1) the Community Council Unicosta, where the processes of community representation have been mediated by the interests of both capital and government institutions; (2) the communities of the lower Guapi river who rejected the government’s intervention in the creation of their community council; and (3) the joint efforts of various community councils contesting the government’s limited interpretation of the physical extension of collective territories along the Pacific.

The Community Council Unicosta lies in the municipality of Iscuandé in the northwestern part of the department of Nariño and has a population of 1,561.21 The Colombian Institute of Agrarian Reform (INCORA) awarded an area of 16,063 hectares as collective territory to the community council in resolution 158 of February 9, 1998 (IGAC 1999:99).22 Unicosta was the first community council to be awarded a collective territory in the department of Nariño, and this has its reasons. It was actively promoted and financed by a company, ALENPAC (Alimentos Enlatados del Pacífico), which has exploited the palm hearts of the naidí palm tree in the area for over 17 years.23 Before Law 70 of 1993, ALENPAC needed a permit for palm heart exploitation, issued by the regional autonomous development corporation Corponariño. With the new legislation, these proceedings have changed, and Corponariño now gives a permit for exploitation to the community council, which then contracts the company. Aware of this change, the company’s director encouraged and supported the formation of a community council that would administer the lands from which the company extracted palm hearts. He produced handouts, financed workshops in eight communities on issues regarding Law 70, gave operational and logistic support in arranging meetings, and provided all necessary means to elaborate the application for a collective land title to be made to INCORA by the local communities. It is then not surprising that both the current president and the coordinator of the Community
Council Unicosta are contractors of the company, and that an exclusive contract for the exploitation of the naidf palm tree has been granted to the company by the community council.

It is clear in this case how the specific interests of capital in retaining control over a territory for its exploitation have been channeled into processes of mediation and co-optation of local organizations. The formation of the Community Council Unicosta followed less the spatial patterns of the river basin as organizing structure but the specific demands of external capital. This is not an isolated case either, but a tendency that has been welcomed by government institutions. INCORA's regional office in Guapi has valued Unicosta's experience positively in these words:

The Community Council Unicosta is the first of its kind in the municipality of Iscuandé. That's why it has to become a model for the following councils to be created. That's why its communities and leaders have to assume the role of leaders to support and give orientation to neighboring communities in the whole organizing process.” [INCORA 1997:pt. 10; emphasis added]

This “orientation” was indeed given to the local communities living on the lands of a second large area of naidí palm heart extraction. Here, too, ALENPAC provided all necessary financial and logistic support, and as a result El Progreso became the second community council in the department of Nariño to be awarded collective land rights (INCORA resolution 1178, May 12, 1998). In both cases specific capital interests have determined the forms and functions of the community councils as providers of raw materials, namely palm hearts. There are serious implications for such an organizational logic, as the palm hearts extraction process represents an economic activity subject to the boom-and-bust cycles so typical of the region (Whitten 1986). Naidí exploitation is already declining, and there are strong indicators that ALENPAC may soon withdraw from the area altogether. The community councils Unicosta and El Progreso would then lose the material base and the very logic around which they were created. It is doubtful, to say the least, that the Community Council Unicosta, so lauded by INCORA, should be regarded as a model for others to follow.

INCORA's quotation above reveals the government institution's functional interest in the creation of community councils, as it has to comply with the legal requirements of Law 70 and Decree 1745. This partly explains that particular individuals within the institution have pushed for a fast way of organizing community councils without necessarily taking into account local organizing dynamics. The second case under discussion here took place in 1997; the director of INCORA in Bogotá, a woman originating from Guapi, sent a
fellow guapireño in Bogotá to the Cauca coast in order to establish community councils there. When this person arrived in Guapi, he soon realized that locals had already formed a community council, and they resisted his intentions to set up various smaller community councils. As the legal representative of the Community Council Guapi Abajo explains:

When Ernesto Castro [name changed] arrived here to create a community council, we had already formed one...He came to form a community council between Temuey and Sansón, so that the rest of the territory was somehow up in the air. But we had already formed the council from Boca de Napi to Playa de Obregones. So the community told him, “No, we already have our council formed.” And then the guy says that in Bogotá they had given him money for this, and that he has to justify his work. [Interview held in Guapi, February 5, 1999]

The logic of the river and local perceptions of the aquatic space and its implications for the organizing processes resisted this institutionalized intervention. In the end the Community Council Guapi Abajo was created the way the locals proposed, using some of INCORA’s funds to arrange workshops and meetings. Different from the case of Unicosta discussed above, the communities in the Guapi River region had received support and orientation from local activists of the social movement of black communities and had already been meeting and discussing the creation of a community council before INCORA’s intervention. They were thus better able to push through their ideas and demands. INCORA accepted this outcome as well, the initial conflict being the result of a lack of the institution’s awareness of already existing local organizing dynamics rather than of a clash of interests.

A third case, however, shows how INCORA’s attitude towards the land titling process, once the community councils have been established, has been heavily criticized by movement leaders who accuse government officials of deliberately delaying this process. In the case of three community councils on the Cauca coast (Río Alto Guapi, Río San Francisco, and Río Napi), a whole year passed between INCORA’s decision to grant collective land titles and their publication in a local newspaper, which only then made the titles legally binding.24 This only happened after the community councils concerned had threatened to take INCORA to court, an action that shows how community leaders have appropriated the existing legislation as a strategy in the defense of their local constructions of place. It is also clear that the aspirations of the community councils go beyond the mere administrative functions of the collective territories as envisaged by Decree 1745. In fact, they continue to challenge the central government on the very definition of a “collective territory” and on the question of which areas are to be included in or excluded from it.
This confrontation has become most apparent in the still unresolved issue of mangrove areas, which the central government refuses to include in collective land titles. This has so far meant that community councils with a coastline in the Southern Pacific, and therefore with mangrove areas, have not yet been issued with collective land titles. Yet, black communities have insisted that mangrove areas be included in those titles, as they constitute an important zone of ecological productivity in the Pacific (West 1957:70-72) that many economic activities are related to and depend upon (Arocha 1999:73; Whitten 1986). The spatial unit of the river basin as organizing structure has been instrumental in this confrontation. In line with the notion of the logic of the river, stressing the interconnectedness and interdependence of the various parts of the river, mangrove areas form an integral part of the sociocultural system of black communities in the Pacific region and cannot be regarded separately. Current trends indicate that at least in one case an “agreement” has been reached between local communities and INCORA: the Community Council Acapa in the Southern coastal part of the Department of Nariño has received a collective land title in March 2000 that includes mangrove areas as a special concessionary status (Rivas 2001). This, though, grants the government an opt-out clause by which these areas could be excluded again in the future. This particular arrangement is the result of negotiations between representatives of the Community Council Acapa and government representatives, and does not constitute a generally applicable norm. As of March 2001, the Community Councils Río Guajui, Guapi Abajo, and Chanzará in the Department of Cauca had still not received their respective collective land titles.

This last case maybe best demonstrates the conflictual, open-ended, and often ambiguous yet productive relationship between black communities and the government, characterized by intense negotiations. As black communities become increasingly organized and mobilized, they make use of the existing legislation and are better able to contest government interventions and outside capital interests. The logic of the river has been instrumental in informing these struggles, as it expresses the spatial logic of everyday life among rural black communities in the Pacific region.

Conclusions

Resistances and social movements emerge out of specific places at particular times. Their practices are informed by particular historical and spatial experiences, and these make a difference to a movement's specific organizing forms, their spatial articulation, strategies, and projections. Place-specific experience, as captured in the concept of sense of place, is often reflected in the particular forms taken by social movement organizing. This may appear to be an obvious claim; however, it is such a spatial understanding and approach to
social movements that is absent from much social movement research and theorizing (and this does indeed often lead to an ethnographically thin account of these movements). Maybe seduced by the general "globalization craze," most emphasis in social movement research seems to be placed on contemporary trends of social movement networking and anti-globalization resistance practices, particularly as these increasingly make use of the "brand new toy" of information technologies to coordinate their actions. And, of course, globalizing resistance is directed at a "global enemy" (Castells 1997), namely late capitalism in the form of neoliberalism, embodied in global institutions such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which were the targets of recent demonstrations and protests in Seattle, Prague, and Davos. However, globalizing resistance is closely linked to the local, as it constitutes not just a response to the abstract implementation of a neoliberal world order, but a contestation of the concrete, often homogenizing and devastating impact of globalization on places that can result in feelings of "placelessness" (Relph 1976). Prominent on the agenda of globalizing resistance networks such as the People's Global Action (PGA) is, for example, the defense of the construction of place by black communities on the Colombian Pacific coast, as articulated by the PCN and others. Globalizing resistance may then be best thought of as a network building strategy of place-based struggles and movements that respects local specificities and that at the same time contests the wider global structures in which these places are inscribed. The particular place-based struggles must be approached through their own place-specific particularities that help to understand these movements and the places out of which they emerge. Such is the nature of a spatial approach to social movements that I advocate here.

As I have shown for the case of the black communities in the Colombian Pacific, the aquatic space as the concrete place-specific spatial experience of everyday social interactions by black communities has informed their political mobilization processes that have applied the spatial logic of the river to the organization of community councils along river basins. It is clear that this particular spatial expression is an ideal-type, and indeed a myriad of different experiences can be observed, as for example the mediation of these mobilization processes by the state and capital interests, illustrated here in the case of the Community Council Unicosta. However, it is important to stress that in many cases local communities do adhere to this ideal-type of spatial organization along river basins and defend their logic of the river, as demonstrated in the case of the Community Council Guapi Abajo. Furthermore, as black communities become increasingly organized, they are better able to articulate their demands and co-ordinate their strategies, as exemplified here in the struggle with the government over the inclusion of mangrove areas into collective land
titles. It is precisely within these interactions between black communities, capital, and state that a complex web of negotiations has emerged that must be analyzed. Rather than portraying these relations in terms of a clear-cut confrontation between "ethnic-bloc formation" and a nationalist project, critical analysis should be placed on the contemporary developments in many Latin American countries that show a discursive inclusion of ethnic minorities into dominant nationalist discourses and politics. Indeed, the territorial rights granted to black communities on Colombia's Pacific coast fit perfectly well into the overall nationalist territorial politics, in that the former are accompanied by a whole range of legal requirements for black communities to meet. In fact, the category of "race" is only of limited use in explaining the current political mobilization processes of black communities in Colombia, within which considerable differences can be observed at times, an argument illustrated here with the ambiguous and often conflictual relationship that exists between the community councils and other political leaders such as the mayors in the Colombian Pacific region. The black communities should therefore be regarded as a heterogeneous group whose members articulate at times different aspirations, interests, and strategies and engage in complex individual and collective negotiations within their own group, as well as with other actors, notably the state and capital.

In order to account for the differential experiences in the organization processes, I have shown the concept of the aquatic space to be a powerful explanatory tool, although recognizing it not to be the only one, in that it has informed the spatial ordering logic of community councils along river basins. Even where this has not occurred in this ideal-type form, the analytical focus on the somehow broken or interrupted logic of the river highlights the impact that other actors such as the state and capital have had and keep having in the organization processes of black communities. The concept of the aquatic space is thus crucial in understanding the nature of these interactions and their implications for the future development of the community councils. More than "just" an academic concept, the aquatic space can thus be mobilized as a political tool in practice by the social movement of black communities in Colombia to strengthen their political articulations and demands.

Notes

Acknowledgments: This paper was first presented at the conference "Manchester '99: Visions and Voices," October 27–31, 1999, in the panel "Black Populations, Social Movements and Identity in Latin America." It has been revised in the light of a rich intellectual (and social) exchange with, among others, colleagues working at the Colombian Institute of Anthropology and History (ICANH) in Bogotá. A revised version was presented at the IX
Congreso de Antropología en Colombia, Popayán, July 19–22, 2000, in the panel “Movimientos sociales, cultura y Estado.” I would like to thank Peter Wade for his insightful comments on some of the conceptual issues discussed here, and in general for his enthusiasm in seeing this special issue published. I am grateful to Chris Philo and Paul Routledge for their close readings of this article and their suggestions, as well as to the three anonymous referees for their comments. It is with great pleasure that I acknowledge the tremendous support I received from ICANH in Bogotá where María Victoria Uribe and Mauricio Pardo arranged office space and access to ICANH’s resources for me. It was a most stimulating experience to share their research environment. Finally, I acknowledge financial support from the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland, which funded my research in Colombia in 1999, and from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), which currently funds my post as research fellow at the University of Glasgow.

1. Translation by the author of this article.

2. The claim of geography being “ethnographically thin” should be taken with some caution. Especially within early North American cultural geography, very detailed ethnographic accounts were employed to describe and analyze “other” cultures. See, for example, Sauer 1963; and, on Colombia, West 1957

3. There also exists a long tradition in cultural geography that stresses “the emplacement of all cultural practices,” and an emerging body of geographical literature highlights the importance of place specificity in social movement research (see Oslender 2000; Pile and Keith 1997; Routledge 1997). Furthermore, Escobar’s proposal to cross-fertilize the two aspects of “place making” in current scholarship on place (the production of place by capital and the cultural construction of place; 2001:152-153) ignores more convincing geographical approaches to place as anchored in three components (see Agnew 1987): location—the capitalist production of place; locale—the settings and contexts for social relationships; and sense of place—the subjective feelings derived from a place. Escobar’s invitation to a dialogue between geographers and anthropologists is an important and welcome one; however, his calls for a “repatriation of place into anthropology” (2001:142) should be accompanied by a more thorough engagement with already existing geographical literature and conceptualizations of place.

4. See Arocha 1992a, 1992b; Restrepo 1998; Wade 1995 on Colombia’s constitutional changes. See also Friedemann and Arocha 1995 for an analysis of the implications of this constitutional change for Afro-Colombians.

5. Another reason for the “complete failure” of an effective Spanish colonization of the Pacific coast region for more than 200 years was the constant
rebellions by Indian peoples (Valencia 1991; West 1957:98, 229). (I am using the lowercase spelling “Indian” throughout this paper to bring this category in line with the normal use of “black” as an ethnic categorization.)

6. These population figures are generally accepted estimates. Note that there exists no reliable racial information in Colombia’s census data. In the last census, in 1993, the National Statistical Institute DANE tried to quantify Afro-Colombians for the first time; however, due to the ambiguous census question—“Do you belong to an ethnic group, indigenous group, or black community?”—only 502,343 people said they belonged to a “black community” (Bodnar 2000; Ruiz Salgero and Bodnar 1995). This would only be 1.5 percent of Colombia’s national population. A recent report by the Minority Rights Group (1995:xiii) shows oscillations in estimates of Colombia’s black population ranging from 4.9 million to 15 million, or 14 percent and 43 percent respectively of the national population. These considerable differences can partly be explained by the problematic definition of the term “black community” (see, for example, Grueso et al. 1998; Restrepo 1998, and in this volume) and by the complexities of black self-identification in a dominant context of whitening (Strecker 1995; Wade 1993, 1997b).

7. On palenques and cimarrones in the Americas, see Price 1979, and in Colombia, see Escalante 1979; Friedemann 1979, 1998; Friedemann and Páñito Rosselli 1983; Maya 1998; Zuluaga and Bermúdez 1997:38-58. For an autobiographical account of a runaway slave in Cuba, see the dialogue of Esteban Montejo with the Cuban ethnologist and writer Miguel Barnet (Barnet 1968).


9. The notion of “sense of place” must be understood analytically here and not just as a mere spatial metaphor used in passing. It refers to the subjective feelings that a certain place generates with its inhabitants. It is therefore a subjective category that has been used in geography to counter frequent representations of place as merely defined by (objective) location (Agnew 1987; Buttimer 1976; Tuan 1975).

10. These organizations include the Peasant Association of the Atrato river ACIA (Asociación Campesina Integral del Atrato), formed in 1987 and the Peasant Association of the San Juan river ACADESAN (Asociación Campesina del San Juan), formed in 1990. See Villa 1998; Pardo 1998:61-63, and in this volume.

11. Articulo Transitorio 55.

12. On these political and legislative changes, see, in addition to the papers in the present volume, Arocha 1992a, 1992b, 1998; Friedemann and Arocha 1995; Grueso et al. 1998; Restrepo 1998; Wade 1995.
13. Law 70, ch. III, art. 5.
14. The Office for Black Community Affairs (Dirección de Asuntos para las Comunidades Negras), created through Law 70, established a register of black organizations in Colombia (as dictated in Decree 2313 of October 13, 1994, art. 2). However, many of these organizations were short-lived or existed only on paper.

15. This trend to empower local ethnic groups in fragile ecosystems by granting collective land rights and at the same time legally binding them to protect the environment, as prescribed in Law 70, is a global one (O'Connor 1993). It reflects a gradual shift of restructuring global capitalism towards a "postmodern form of capitalization of nature" that ushers in an ecological phase of conservation and sustainable development (Escobar 1996:48). This global trend can be observed in the Colombian Pacific, for example, in the biodiversity conservation program Proyecto Biopacífico (GEF-PNUD 1993; Proyecto Biopacífico 1998).

16. Decree 1745, ch. II, art. 3.
17. Decree 1745, ch. IV, art. 20.

18. Asodergua (Asociación para el Desarrollo del Río Guajui) is a grassroots organization that emerged in 1992 in the wake of Colombia's new constitution.

19. See Pardo this volume; Wouters 2001; Córdoba 2000. See also www.codhes.org.co and, more generally http://www.colombiasupport.net/. On Colombia's internal conflict more generally, see, for example, Leal Buitrago 1995; Leal Buitrago and Zamosc 1991; Pearce 1990.

20. On clientelism in the Pacific region, see Agudelo 1999, 2000, and this volume; Hoffmann 1999; Khittel 1999; and as constitutive of Colombia's political system, see Leal Buitrago and Dávila 1991. See also Álvarez et al. 1998; Auyero 1999 for a discussion of clientelism as a common political practice throughout Latin America.

21. The population data is derived from the census carried out by the local communities, as prescribed in Decree 1745, ch. IV, art. 20(4).

22. INCORA is the government institution responsible for the collective land titling process in the Pacific coast. The first six collective land titles were issued on December 13, 1996, all in the Department of Chocó. By the end of 1998, a total of 23 land titles had been awarded to black communities on the Pacific coast comprising an area of over 1.3 million hectares, with over 30 applications still pending (IGAC 1999:99).

23. In this process locals fell the naidí palm trees, cut out the almost one-meter long palm hearts and deliver them in bulk to one of the storage centers that the company has established in the area, from where the palm hearts are taken to a processing plant in Guapi. There, they are peeled, cooked in a hot steam bath, cut into pieces, and placed in tins or glasses. The finished product...
is then shipped in bulk to Buenaventura and from there to France, the only buyer for ALENPAC in 1998.

24. Resolutions number 1081, 1082, and 1083 assign collective land titles to the community councils of Río San Francisco (26,232 hectares), Río Napi (47,007 hectares), and Río Alto Guapi (103,742 hectares) respectively. INCORA’s director signed them on April 29, 1998, yet they only came into effect when eventually published one year later on April 20, 1999 in the regional newspaper *Costa Caucana* (INCORA 1999:3-8).

25. PCN emerged in October 1993 as a national coordinating organizational strategy of black communities that initially concentrated on the implementation of Law 70 and on the strengthening of community organization (Grueso et al. 1998). More recently PCN has denounced the forced displacements of thousands of peasant farmers as a result of the escalating armed conflict in Colombia. Six of their representatives toured Europe in March and April 2001 on invitation of PGA to raise awareness over their plight and the precarious human rights situation in the Colombian Pacific.

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