



**A University of Sussex PhD thesis**

Available online via Sussex Research Online:

<http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/>

This thesis is protected by copyright which belongs to the author.

This thesis cannot be reproduced or quoted extensively from without first obtaining permission in writing from the Author

The content must not be changed in any way or sold commercially in any format or medium without the formal permission of the Author

When referring to this work, full bibliographic details including the author, title, awarding institution and date of the thesis must be given

Please visit Sussex Research Online for more information and further details

**The Ghost of the Plantation:**  
Race, Class, Gender and Popular Culture in Venezuela

Nadia Mosquera Muriel  
Doctoral Thesis

**Submitted for Doctor of Philosophy in International  
Development**

University of Sussex  
November 2018

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been, and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

**Signature:** Nadia Mosquera Muriel

UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX

NADIA MOSQUERA MURIEL  
PHD IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

“THE GHOST OF THE PLANTATION”:  
RACE, CLASS, GENDER AND POPULAR CULTURE IN VENEZUELA

### **Abstract**

In the age of #BlackLivesMatter in the United States and *Reaja ou Será Mortx* (React or Die) in Brazil, black political mobilisations across the globe seek to confront racial injustice and structural discrimination against people of African descent or Afro-descendants. A recent wave of North American, European, and Latin American scholars has begun to look at Afro-Latin American social movements in more innovative ways. However, English-language scholarship on Afro-Latin America rarely explores Afro-descendants in Venezuela. This thesis helps fill this gap by providing an ethnographic account of what anti-racist black politics in Venezuela looks like in the post-Hugo Chávez era. Since the colonial era to the present day, race has always been assembled along class lines in Venezuela. Nonetheless, since the instigation of the anti-capitalist agenda known as “Socialism of the 21st century” by late President Chávez and current President Nicolás Maduro, political polarisation around race has increasingly surfaced in the country. Using the cases of Osma and Todasana -two villages which were former plantations and whose residents are the descendants of Africans who were subjected to slavery until 1854- this thesis illustrates how black activists and “culture-making” or cultural producers from these villages raise questions regarding race, class and gendered inequalities in Venezuela. I explore how activists in Osma and Todasana do this by showing how they problematise their identities using autochthonous resources in the local popular culture. Based on 13 months of fieldwork, this thesis draws on ethnographic methods, including interviews, life stories and participant observation with Afro-descendant activists, cultural producers and residents of these rural villages mostly inhabited by Afro-descendants. In doing so, this study explores what black politics looks like at the dawn of Venezuela's current economic crisis.

This ethnography offers a portrait of the ambivalences, tensions, and contradictions through which black Venezuelan politics is articulated within an overtly socialist state. In this research, I shift the focus away from conventional practices of social movements such as mass protests, or civil disobedience to argue that popular culture is a battlefield for Afro-descendants in Venezuela. Exploring popular culture is significant because it broadens our understanding of what political mobilisation means and which resources Afro-Latin American movements draw on to achieve social justice while contesting complex ideologies of *mestizaje* (racial mixture), which simultaneously celebrates and masks racism. This study thus shows that anti-racist mobilisation by autochthonous popular culture is a system of political mobilisation within Afro-descendants' struggle for social change.

# Table of Contents

Abstract .....	3
Table of figures .....	8
Acknowledgements .....	9
Note on terminologies .....	10
Chapter 1: The ghost of the plantation .....	12
1.1. The Problem .....	12
1.2. The Fieldsite .....	15
1.3. The Ghost of the Plantation: Overview .....	17
1.3.1. Land and race .....	18
1.3.2 Race, class and gender in Osma .....	20
1.3.3. The contestation .....	21
1.4. Political polarisation and race in the Chávez and Post- Chávez Venezuela .....	22
1.4.1. Chávez and the Bolivarian Revolution (1999-present) .....	22
1.4.2. Venezuela's political polarisation .....	24
1.4.3. Contemporary Racism and Political Polarisation in the Post- Chávez period .....	28
1.5. Methodology: constructing the field: Osma and Todasana .....	32
1.5.1. Committed Ethnography .....	33
1.5.2. Ethics, researching race and methods .....	34
1.5.3. Access and informants .....	35
1.5.4. Positionality: The 'insider-outsider' within .....	37
1.6. Structure of the thesis .....	39
Chapter 2: Popular culture as a battlefield .....	42
2.1. Introduction .....	42
2.1.1. Locating contestations in public spaces .....	42
2.2. Race, class and gender .....	45
2.2.1. Race and structural racism .....	45
2.2.2. Debates on the links between race and class .....	47
2.2.3. Orthodox Marxism .....	48
2.2.4. Intersectionality .....	52
2.3. The Anti-black state .....	53
2.3.1. Blackness, Anti-blackness and mestizaje .....	54
2.3.2. Mestizaje and racial democracy .....	55
2.3.3. Racial mixture through rose tinted glasses .....	57
2.3.4. Busting the myth of racial democracy .....	58

2.3.5. White supremacy .....	58
2.3.6. Blanqueamiento as White supremacy.....	61
2.4. What is the political? Race, blackness and popular culture .....	62
2.4.1. Social movements definition.....	63
2.4.2. On black popular culture.....	64
2.4.3. Black social movements reload.....	65
2.5. Conclusion .....	67
Chapter 3: Contesting <i>Mestizaje</i> .....	68
3.1. Introduction.....	68
3.2. Who contests <i>mestizaje</i> ?.....	70
3.2.1. The ‘culturalists’ .....	71
3.2.2. The ‘rebels’ .....	72
Labels of racial identity .....	75
3.2.3. Contesting mestizaje through public holidays .....	75
3.3. Ideas of Race and Nation.....	76
3.3.1. Double consciousness: how Afro-Venezuelans feel left out by the narrative of mestizaje .....	76
3.3.2. The complex relationship between racial identity and African heritage .....	80
3.4. Challenging discourses of racialisation through <i>Décimas</i> .....	82
3.4.1. Blanqueamiento and how it manifests in the Parroquia Caruao .....	82
3.4.2. Contestations against the ideology of <i>blanqueamiento</i> .....	84
3.4.3. The family, friends and discourses of racial mixing .....	86
3.4.4. Discourses of racialisation and hair.....	88
3.5. Conclusions.....	91
Chapter 4: Should you resist an ally? .....	95
4.1. Introduction.....	95
4.2. State bureaucracy: between counter-hegemony and hegemony .....	98
4.2.1. Counter-hegemony and popular power .....	98
4.2.2. Central government .....	99
4.2.3. Local Governments .....	100
4.2.4. Late Hugo Chávez and political loyalties in Parroquia Caruao .....	101
4.3. State power, social movements and popular culture <i>Parroquia Caruao</i> .....	103
4.3.1. Colectivos: Black Social Movements and co-optation in Parroquia Caruao .....	103
4.3.2. Colectivo Young Voices Politics and <i>La Casa Guipuzcoana</i> .....	106
4.4. Contestations for political identity and use of cultural programs in Osma and Todasana.....	110
4.4.1. State-sponsored cultural programs in Osma and Todasana .....	110

4.4.2. <i>Toques de Tambor</i> : Traditional cultural contestations amongst Afro-Venezuelans .....	113
4.4.3. Oliver .....	115
4.4.4. Andrés .....	117
4.5. State-society relationships and political clientelism .....	121
4.5.1. Negro Primero .....	122
4.5.2. Negro Primero and elections in Osma .....	123
4.6. Conclusions.....	127
Chapter 5: Challenging <i>San Juan Bautista</i> .....	130
5.1. Introduction.....	130
5.2. Background: Catholicism and White Supremacy .....	132
5.2.1. Race and Catholic Iconography in Venezuela .....	134
5.3. The embrace of Catholic iconography in Afro-Venezuelan festivals .....	135
5.3.1. Racial discourses and Catholic images in Osma .....	136
5.3.2. ‘Race’ and the celebration of San Juan Bautista and San Benito.....	139
5.3.3. Expressing whiteness and blackness in San Juan Bautista Fiestas .....	141
5.4. Arrival of San Juan Congo to Osma.....	143
5.4.1. Background of San Juan Congo .....	143
5.4.2. New versions of San Juan Congo in Curiepe.....	145
5.4.3. The ‘rebels’ reject San Juan Bautista and search for San Juan Congo .....	147
5.4.4. The Black San Juan Congo in Osma .....	147
5.5. Conclusion .....	151
Chapter 6: The Feast of the Fools and <i>El gobierno de las mujeres</i> .....	153
6.1. Introduction.....	153
6.1.1. Historical background of <i>Día de los Santos Inocentes</i> .....	154
6.1.2. Limitations and organisation of the chapter.....	155
6.2. Cultural performances and gendered constructions in Osma .....	156
6.2.1. A brief history of women’s position in Osma .....	156
6.2.2. Modernisation in Venezuela and inclusion of women in the labour market .....	158
6.2.3. <i>El Gobierno de las Mujeres</i> in Osma .....	161
6.2.4. Implications of Día de los Inocentes in public spaces.....	165
6.3. Cultural performances and spaces for women’s collective organisation .....	167
6.3.1. The blackout in Osma .....	167
6.4. Spaces of contradictions between culture and politics for women in Osma .....	170
6.4.1. The mock battle .....	170
6.4.2. Cultural norms that support intimate partner violence in Osma .....	172
6.4.3. Gender and dominance of men in political spaces in Osma .....	175

6.5. Conclusions.....	177
Chapter 7: Dismantling the plantation .....	181
7.1. Introduction.....	181
7.2. Lessons and limitations .....	182
7.3. Different constructions of blackness in Venezuela .....	183
7.3.1. Understanding a heterogeneous blackness.....	183
7.3.2. Old ‘traditionalists’ vs. new ‘rebels’ .....	184
7.3.3. Blackness: depends on the circumstance .....	186
7.3.4. Mestizaje and contesting anti-blackness.....	189
7.4. Contesting white supremacy.....	191
7.5. Racial democracy and intersectional contestations .....	194
7.6. Theoretical implications for interpreting cultural performances as forms of black social movements mobilisations .....	196
7.6.1. Afrodescendiente Identity and Socialism of the 21 <sup>st</sup> century in Venezuela	197
References .....	201



## Table of figures

Figure 1.1. Map of Vargas State.....	16
Figure 1.2. Location of <i>Parroquia Caruao</i> and villages.....	32
Figure 5.1. <i>San Benito de Palermo</i> in Osma .....	137
Figure 5.2. <i>San Juan Bautista</i> in Osma.....	140
Figure 5.3. <i>San Juan Congo</i> in Osma .....	148
Figure 6.1. Young Girls dressed as hunters and a <i>Correo</i> in Osma .....	163
Figure 6.2. <i>Tranca</i> In Osma's main road.....	168
Figure 6.3. Car Hijacked in a protest by the women in Osma .....	168

# Acknowledgements

Special thanks to my supervisors, Dr. Lara Coleman for her support and guidance and Dr. Peter Luetchford for his intellectual generosity, patience, unconditional support and guidance in the making of this thesis.

Many thanks to my colleagues and friends in the University of Sussex, Lorena Guzmán, Valerio Colossio, Andrea Laplane, Paloma Bernal, Yasamin Alkhansa, Althea-María Rivas and Santiago Ripoll and in London to Huddha Khaireh and Mezheker Guide for their friendship. Special thanks to Hanna Stepanik for her friendship, for helping me to see my own ideas in a different way and giving advice about writing. Many thanks to Bob Hamlett and Natasha Gordon-Chipembere for proofreading and sound advice on writing. Infinite thanks to my second family: James Doyle and Jamie Gunn. Your support, generosity and love in the hardest moments of these years helped to make this thesis possible.

Gracias a Luisaira, Belyaira Yurden y Yajaira Corro por abrirme las puertas de su humilde hogar en Osma. Mil gracias a Alí Rivas, Morocha, Chinito y Regina, Elicer Riera, Ranyelis, Adalberto Cardona, Zoraida y Alexis Valera y especialmente a José Romero y Cristian Viscochea. Mil gracias en Todasana a la familia Romero Guzmán: Natividad Guzmán, Odila, Elizabeth, y especialmente a Yekerima Guzmán y José Romero por su cariño y recibirme con los brazos abiertos en Todasana y Urama. Gracias a Papelón y a Toño por su gran amistad y empeño en mantener viva la lucha Afrodescendiente en la Parroquia Caruao. Gracias infinitas a mis hermanas María de los Ángeles y Maribel, y mis padres, Libia y Guillermo por todo su amor y apoyo incondicional. Sin ustedes yo no estuviera aquí.

## Note on terminologies

The question of who is or is not ‘black’ in Latin America is not straightforward. Choosing to talk about people who have various degrees of black or African ancestry while overlooking the importance of skin colour and facial features of so-called ‘racial’ groups is complicated in Latin America.

Most Latin American societies hold a long and complex history of *Mestizaje* (racial and cultural mixture) which is also an ideology that has created a, “hierarchy of worth” or an exceptional system in which racial mixture and racism coexists with one another. The Venezuelan system of ‘racial’ categories uses multiple overlapping terms which cannot be precisely translated into English. The most common categories of racial mixture with people who have various visible degrees of black ancestry that you will find in this thesis includes *Pardo/a* (racially mixed), *Trigueño/a* (literally wheat coloured referred to light brown), *Moreno/a* (brown), *Mulato/a* (*mulattos*) and *Negro/a* (black) (Gulbas, 2008:90). This is why this study encompasses all these categories as Afro-descendant peoples.

Counter to the case of the U.S. rules of hypodescent<sup>1</sup> and its influence in shaping unambiguous black identity, racial mixture in Venezuela –and most countries in Latin America– created slippery identifications. In many cases, these slippages complicate the understanding of how Afro-descendants may assert his/her racial identity. The common term ‘*moreno/a*’ is tricky but has two main meanings. *Moreno/a* is commonly used in Venezuela to describe people with medium to dark skin with wavy and straight hair (Gulbas, 2013:329). Therefore, is used to refer to a non-white mixed-race person with or without black ancestry. But *moreno/a* is also widely used as a euphemism to refer to Afro-descendants, especially *negros/as*. The word ‘*negro/a*’ (black) can be used in four different ways in Venezuela. First, is mainly used to describe those who are located either in intermediate or, in the end extreme of the colour palette of Afro-descendants and have tightly curled hair (Gulbas, 2013:329). In this sense it is used as a racial category. Second, *negro/a*, as in many countries in the region, can be used in contexts of intimacy as an endearment term regardless of descent (Lancaster, 1992:218). Third, *negro/a* can also be

---

<sup>1</sup> This is part of the racial constructions of race in the U.S. in which “one drop of black blood” means that anyone with a single drop of black ancestry is rendered as a black person (Davis, 1991).

used as a form of racist abuse (Wade, 2017b). This is because of the negative connotations attached to blackness in connection with slavery in Latin America (Godreau, 2008:9). Predictably, some in the category '*negro/a*' may negotiate in some contexts his/her identity by self-identifying as '*moreno/a*'<sup>2</sup> as a euphemism of *negro/a*. Four, *negro/a* is also a point of self-identification and collective identity linked to political action<sup>3</sup> amongst Afro-descendant populations.

Moreover, my use of the term *Blackness* in this thesis is based on the concept of *Négritude* introduced by the Martinican poet Aimé Césaire (1969) in his work *Return to My Native Land* (1969). He uses this concept which denotes the positive values of African culture in order to overcome myriad structures of domination to forge a common black identity among the African diaspora (Whitten and Torres, 1998). This notion is embraced in the social and political imaginary of the Afro-descendant activism explored in this study. I also use the word '*enslaved*' in English in an effort to translate the meaning of '*Esclavizado*' in Spanish, rather than slave (*esclavo*). Enslaved is increasingly used by black activists and scholars in Venezuela such as Jesús García (García, 2013), to refer to people who were uprooted against their will from Africa and subjected to inhuman exploitation in the Americas, while mitigating the lack of agency that the term 'slave' conveys. Finally, I use the terms Afro-Latinos, Afro-Venezuelans, and *Afro-descendientes* (Afro-descendants), although they are not part of Venezuela's everyday discourse. I use Afro-Latinos to refer to the wider group of Afro-descendants in Latin America and Afro-Venezuelans to refer to those in the country. I also use the term *Afro-descendientes*<sup>4</sup> in this study. Although it is becoming increasingly used, *Afro-descendientes* has a political connotation in Latin America that started in the early 2000s. Afro-Venezuelan leaders encourage the use of *Afro-descendientes*, which is part of their efforts to promote a unified political identity<sup>5</sup> among the Afro-descendant population, as I will expand in this study.

---

<sup>3</sup> This has been the case of the *Unión de Mujeres Negras* (Black Women Organisation) in Venezuela, who started in the early 1990s.

<sup>4</sup> *Afro-descendientes* is a term that emerged for the first time in a regional meeting of black social movements at Santiago de Chile in the 2000. This meeting marked the transition from the term *negro* to a broader racial political identity, "we entered as *negros* and came out *Afro-descendientes*" (Lao-Montes, 2017:151).

# Chapter 1: The ghost of the plantation

## 1.1. The Problem

This study focuses on how Afro-Venezuelans mobilise against systemic structural racism using cultural performances and political activism. Any study of the relatively recent emergence of Afro-Venezuelan social movements must try to address the interplay between culture and politics. This is a politics that galvanised around the *UN World Conference against Racism* celebrated in Durban in 2001, an international event that influenced the framework of Afro-descendant politics at the global level. Two of the most significant impacts of this conference, which are crucial for understanding the intertwined relationship between politics and culture in this thesis, were, first, to encourage states to acknowledge the persistence of structural racial discrimination and commit to promote policies to uproot it; and second, to make an important transition from the use of racial terminologies such as *negro/a* (black) to a more comprehensive and politicised *Afro-descendiente* (Afro-descendant) identity. This international event overlapped with the political and nation-building process taking place in Venezuela since 1999, known as the Bolivarian Revolution. This process later prompted Socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century<sup>6</sup>. During the Bolivarian Revolution, the state created an impetus for highlighting a national identity that tried to distance itself from colonialism and imperialism, but also emphasised the cultural production of marginalised populations, more broadly understood in the country as popular culture.

Using the example of Latin America, Argentinian anthropologist Néstor García Canclini (1995) recognises that popular culture is a system of production of meanings that enable marginalised practitioners to articulate contestations through cultural performances against systems of power based on the cultural mixture of Indigenous, Spanish and Afro-

---

<sup>6</sup> While it is not clear what late President Hugo Chávez exactly meant, when he began to talk about Socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century for the first time in Venezuela since 2005, this type of socialism refers to an anti-capitalist alternative of three components. First, transform relations of material production, meaning that workers take control of the means of production. Second, to seek distance from market-based logics, which are attentive to horizontal experiences of organizations in Afro-descendants and Indigenous peoples while supporting solidarity. Third distance governance from elite, private interests (see Wilpert, 2006b; Azzellini, 2016:55).

descendant populations. Cultural performances are inclusive of events such as dances, recitations, or festivals, amongst other practices, underpinned by an artistic, celebratory nature. Once these cultural practices are relocated to a particular socio-political context, they can properly be understood as cultural performances (Singer, 1959:xiii). This notion of cultural performances is entrenched in the social, political and cultural landscape of Latin America. To understand this landscape, it is necessary to first break down the two-fold way within which ‘the popular’ is understood in Latin America.

The first meaning of ‘the popular’ is believed to be the pre-modern, the pre-literate, rural, and equated with folklore. It is considered that cultural performances, festive traditions and folklore largely constitute the domain of popular culture (Guss, 2000). Yet, the category of folklore waters down the agency, meanings and contestational potential that cultural practices have for marginalised populations. Afro-Venezuelan scholar Jesús García (2000) calls for the “de-folklorisation of traditional culture” (86), so cultural producers can reclaim and incorporate their political agency into their cultural production. This ‘de-folklorisation’ can be more broadly understood here as the contestation against the ways within which blackness and African heritage have been symbolically included as –and reduced to– ‘folkloric’ identities (Godreau, 2002), whilst marginalised socially, politically and economically. The second meaning of the ‘popular’ is also connected to marginalisation, but this time takes on the entangled relationship between class and politics.

Popular classes or ‘the people’ (*el pueblo*) is a state construction in Latin American Spanish speaking countries associated with “the common and the poor” (Ciccariello-Maher, 2013:8). They are defined as a mass that is largely comprised –but not limited to– racially mixed and dark-skinned populations. Enrique Dussel observes for the Latin American case, *el pueblo* is an imagined collective that stands “in opposition to the elites, to the oligarchs, to the ruling classes of a political order” (Dussel, 2008:75). In practice, the elites exploited *el pueblo* as their support base in political rallies whilst excluding them from the domains of power, including the political system (Dussel, 2007; Ciccariello-Maher, 2013). The importance of ‘the popular’ in both a cultural and political sense has been paramount to the state in maintaining social, political and racial hegemony in the region. The reason for this is because popular culture is the domain par excellence through which states in Latin America have constructed a homogeneous national identity.

Since the 1940s, Venezuelan governments have recognised the centrality that popular culture or ‘the popular’ has over both the maintenance of social/racial cohesion, democratic legitimacy and mobilisation of voters and political supporters (Liscano, 1946). In particular, the state can both sponsor and limit the ability of cultural practitioners to control the potential of their cultural performances and use them to mobilise voters and consumers (Guss, 2000). In this sense, politics and popular culture are entangled in one another in Venezuela. In the period of the Bolivarian Revolution, culture started to be used in Venezuela as a means through which the state sought to rebuild its relationships with the most marginalised sectors by focusing on the outpouring of cultural performances, primarily produced by the working class, the poor, or the dark skinned. This group of cultural practitioners were recognized as *cultores populares* (Barreto, 2014:31; Kozak Rovero, 2015).

The aim of this research is thus to explore ethnographically how popular culture and autochthonous<sup>7</sup> cultural performances are sites for constructing black identity. I focus on the cultural performances created by *cultores populares* (cultural makers) and by social movements in north central Venezuela that mobilises both blackness and an Afro-descendant or in Spanish *Afro-descendiente* identity to actively challenge internal contradictions within hegemonic ideas of racial mixture or *mestizaje*. To explore local *cultores populares*, I look at their cultural performances and political activism as intersecting arenas whereby Afro-Venezuelans seek to contest intertwined exclusions rooted in race, class and gender dynamics. Therefore, this thesis brings together explicitly the relationship between popular culture by making a contribution to the scholarship on identity-based social movements by Afro-descendants in Latin America (Anderson, 2009; Escobar, Alvarez and Dagnino, 1998; Ng’Weno, 2007; Paschel, 2016; Wade, 1995).

Contemporary studies on black social movements pay far greater attention to formally constituted organisations and their engagement with the state, and far less attention to how Afro-descendants, whether members of social movements or not, become politicised

---

<sup>7</sup> I draw on the meaning of autochthonous having in mind the Comaroffs, as I am referring to material and moral connections based on cultural rootedness (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2005:128), of the Afro-descendant populations I explore in this thesis, to the villages they were born.

and articulate different constructions of blackness, drawing on everyday life experiences and using cultural performances as a political arena. Works that have focused on the reconceptualisation of Afro-Latinos popular music as a form of political mobilisations such as *Music, race and nation* (Wade, 2000); *Cuba represent!* (Fernandes, 2006); *The new Afro-Cuban cultural movement and the debate on race in contemporary Cuba* (De la Fuente, 2008) and *Remixing Reggaetón: The Cultural Politics of Race in Puerto Rico* (Rivera-Rideau, 2015), draw on scholarly approaches that have influenced me to look beyond political movements that are already incorporated into state bureaucracies or that belong to formal organisations and consider how cultural spaces enable black populations to negotiate politicised constructions of blackness and denounce racism.

Therefore, this thesis sets out to challenge the narrow view confined to formal political organisations in order to contribute to the scholarship on black social movements, by providing an ethnographic understanding of the ways in which cultural production is seen in itself as a valuable space to articulate constructions of blackness and denunciations of racism by Afro-descendant populations.

## 1.2. The Fieldsite

In order to examine these relationships between culture and politicised social movements, I use the examples of Osma and Todasana. These two villages are in Venezuela's north-central coastal region known as *Parroquia Caruao* (Caruao Parish), whose Spanish name I use throughout this thesis. *Parroquia* is a territorial division in Venezuela, derived from the Roman Catholic church administration which preserves a comparable meaning to a civil parish in the British context: a form of local territory smaller than a county. The *Parroquia Caruao* is a small territorial entity and one of the 11 *Parroquias* that belongs to Vargas State as shown in Fig.1.1. *Parroquia Caruao* is comprised of 6 different villages<sup>8</sup> and rural hamlets, which has a total population of 5.925 inhabitants (INE, 2011).

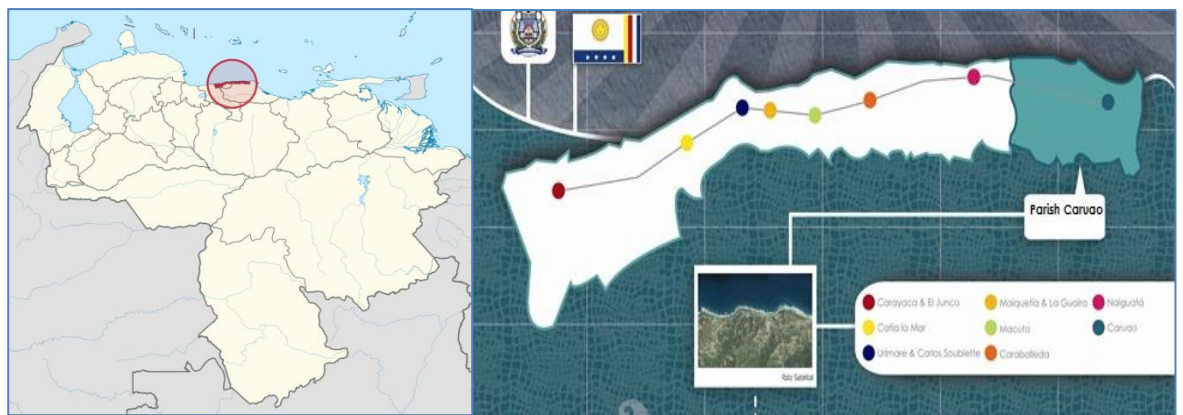
---

<sup>8</sup> The Villages are Osma, Oritapo, Todasana, La Sabana, Caruao and Chuspa. These villages are surrounded by scattered populated hamlets such as Las Vegas de Osma, Urama, San Jorge, San Rafael, La Virginia, Santa Cruz, Santa Clara and La Consolación



The population of *Parroquia Caruao* is primarily of African descent. This is a coastal area that is comprised of thirteen former plantations (*haciendas*<sup>9</sup>), dedicated to cocoa extraction between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (Altez, 1999:54). Osma and Todasana were chosen as my fieldsite for three reasons: its colonial past, race, and how its livelihood opportunities are often overlooked in *Parroquia Caruao*. Also, Osma is one of the few exceptional cases in which an Afro-Venezuelan population has engaged in a long-term struggle for land. In this process, they have developed consciousness about their exclusion.

Figure 1.1. Map of Vargas State



Counter to the argument I develop in this thesis, there is a body of anthropological research in the *Parroquia Caruao* conducted by anthropologist Yara Altez from the 1980s. This body of work highlights how local Afro-Venezuelans reject their African heritage. The theoretical foundation of Altez's work draws heavily on the hermeneutic tradition of Martin Heidegger<sup>10</sup> (1953). By applying Heidegger's framework to the

<sup>9</sup> Caruao Parish was during the colony an enclave of slavery and land litigations between landowners, to expand their capital. The lands in the Parish were at the 17<sup>th</sup> century divided into valleys known as Los Caracas, El Botuco, Osma, Uritapo, Tuasana Urama and Tuyre. They are later on divided, in some cases purchased and other cases inherited amongst Spanish and Venezuelan elites of Spanish descent. By 1810 the lands of these valleys had 13 haciendas: Hacienda Uritapo, Hacienda Tuasana, Hacienda San Faustino, Hacienda Santa Clara, Hacienda del Blanco, Hacienda San Joaquín, Hacienda La Concepción, Hacienda Santa Ana, Hacienda Bajarano, Hacienda Carrasquel, Hacienda del Sitio, Hacienda del Rosario, Hacienda de Don Francisco Sinsa. (See more in Altez, 1999:54).

<sup>10</sup> The central concept of Heidegger's work *Being and Time* (1962) is the ontological interpretation of the meaning of human existence as well as constructions of the 'self' and the 'other'. To Heidegger, one constructs the *Dasein* (the self) or image of oneself by being in relationship with other humans (Heidegger, 1962, [1953]). But Heidegger's construction of the *Dasein* is deeply influenced by his anti-Semitic views and militancy in the Nazi Party (Faye and Rockmore, 2009). Heidegger suggests that the *Dasein* recognises itself as universal and fully human (white/male), and distinguishes himself from the 'das Man', 'the they/the others' who are conceived as inferior<sup>10</sup> from the *Dasein* (Heidegger, 1962:164). These concepts

population of *Parroquia Caruao*, Altez asserts, that the black population has a negative construction of themselves, while tending to regard the white population or the “*otredad blanca*” (white otherness) (Altez, 2000:442) in positive terms. This is a situation Altez’s defines as *mismidad conflictuada* (conflicted selves). Nonetheless, the central argument that Altez has advanced in three decades of research is that local Afro-Venezuelans have developed a collective sense of ‘we’ that excludes their African heritage. Altez terms this dynamic as ‘dis-memory’, a process through which Afro-Venezuelans reject their African heritage, connections with slavery, or being *Afro-descendientes* (Altez, 2006:393; 2008:277). However, although not always made explicit, this argument proposes that ‘dis-memory’ is a way for populations to ‘whiten’ themselves discursively by removing themselves from their African origins. While this body of work is exhaustive and from a descriptive point of view helps us to understand that Afro-descendant identities are fraught with contradictions and a history of denials due to the ways people negotiate identities through the narratives of racial mixture, the shortcoming of this work is that it totalises how the local black population is represented. Altez ignores the influence of racial mixture or *mestizaje* within the local cultural practices of African origins and the nuanced constructions of blackness that converge in their cultural performances. She also fails to assess the relationship between new grassroots movements in the area that have embraced an *Afro-descendiente* identity and how these politicised movements articulated alongside *cultores populares* and, through local cultural expressions, challenge a unified view of what it means to be black in Venezuela. In what follows, I explain the rationale of this research and the reasons behind the title of this thesis. As this suggests, *The Ghost of the Plantation* is a metaphor I use to highlight how memories of the plantation in the area persist, structuring Afro-descendant people’s everyday life experiences in Osma and Todasana.

### 1.3. The Ghost of the Plantation: Overview

I became interested in Osma for three interconnected reasons. First, there is the historical relationship between race and land ownership in the village. Second, I am interested in the ways race, class and gender structure labour opportunities in the area. And third, I wish to understand the diverse means through which Osma’s populations contest the two

---

foregrounds Altez’s work to explore constructions of subjectivity of the Afro-descendant population of the *Parroquia Caruao*.

former dynamics. In what follows, I provide the background history of land issues that links to the structure of the local labour force. For the reasons discussed below, it became clear to me that a colonial pattern still lingers in Osma.

### ***1.3.1. Land and race***

Firstly, Osma's Afro-descendant coastal population is connected to a colonial history of land evictions and land dispossession. As I write, its population still lives in a territory legally known as *Hacienda Osma*. *Haciendas* were small-scale agricultural estates that mushroomed in 17<sup>th</sup> century colonial Venezuela. They were ruled by a slaveholder/landlord and their labour force was primarily comprised of African enslaved and to a lesser degree by Indigenous peoples. Many *haciendas* thrived because they were strategically located in coastal regions which allowed slaveholders to trade by sea the crops produced by their slave workforce (Beckford, 1972). This explains why most contemporary Afro-Venezuelan rural villages are located along the coastal region. While more than a century and a half has passed since the Venezuelan state abolished slavery in 1854, this abolition did not mean that Afro-descendants inevitably disconnected from *haciendas*. On the contrary, Afro-descendants were forced by Venezuelan state laws<sup>11</sup> and constrained by their lack of economic means to own lands to remain bound to the territory of the *haciendas*.

Although the newly free Afro-descendants were able to change their status from enslaved to 'free labourers', they were absorbed by a system called in Venezuela *medianería* (see Brito Figueroa, 1985; Lombardi, 1967). That translates into English as sharecropping. By paying attention to what sharecropping is, we can fully grasp how race, class and land ownership are entangled in Osma. In the sharecropping system, the landowner would allow *medianeros*, *peones*, and *pisatarios*, all umbrella terms to refer to the peasant

---

<sup>11</sup> Venezuelan elites initiated a long period of 'gradual' emancipation of enslaved, issuing free-womb laws which declared that all children of enslaved born after 1821, were legally born free or *manumisos*. These laws were combined with apprenticeship contracts in which *manumisos* children were 'educated' doing practical jobs to prepare their incorporation into the social relations of production once slavery finished. The apprentices were controlled by the state through local institutions across the territory called *Juntas de Manumisión* (Meetings of manumission). They later ensured that *manumisos* received training and education from his/her mother and the enslaved surrounded him/her until they turned 21 years old. Once the contract finished, *manumisos* were subjected to strict police codes which helped slave-owners control their behaviour and forced them to remain working in the *haciendas* where they had their apprenticeship contract. For more on the Venezuelan legislation to force Afro-Venezuelans to remain as *Hacienda* wage workers see Lombardi (1967).

proletariat, to live and cultivate crops on small plots of land close to the *hacienda* for their own consumption, with the condition these workers shared half of their production with the landlord. Although no information is available confirming the specific status of the forebears of the contemporary Afro-descendant population from Osma that I focus on in this research, their forebears were primarily of African descent and it is safe to infer they were sharecroppers.

The people from Osma –or Osmeños– are the descendants of generations of enslaved and sharecroppers from a *hacienda* called ‘*Los Caracas*’. They lived in *Hacienda Los Caracas* subsisting by harvesting coffee until 1948, when president Rómulo Betancourt (1945-1948) evicted them from the lands. Betancourt did this in order to transform the ‘*Hacienda Los Caracas*’ into a *Leprocomio*, a health centre to isolate leprosy patients. This plan changed and in 1955, the next government built a holiday complex for the exclusive use of state employees now called *Ciudad Vacacional Los Caracas*. The population evicted by Betancourt from *Hacienda Los Caracas*, were 48 black families who relocated themselves and made their homes 8 miles away from *Hacienda Los Caracas* within a deserted –yet privately owned– estate of 300 hectares called *Hacienda Osma* in 1948 (Altez, 2013). In 1956, the private owner of *Hacienda Osma* sold these lands. The ownership of *Hacienda Osma* went to the hands of an oligopoly of luxury tourist companies clustered in a larger corporation called *Green Tree*<sup>12</sup>. The capital of this corporation is owned by Venezuelan and Argentinian families of European descent whose current tourist services targets a pool of upper-middle class, professionals and international customers. Osma is in a geographical space of pristine beaches, rivers, mountains and agricultural and mineral resources, largely developed by Green Tree.

When Green Tree purchased *Hacienda Osma*, the Afro-descendant population had already occupied the lands and was recognised as sharecroppers. Strikingly, the legal status of the Osmeños from 1956 to this very day is that of *pisatarios* (sharecroppers) of the *Hacienda Osma* (Tomo 2, Trimestre 4, 1956, Registro Subalterno del estado Vargas, cited in Altez, 2013:388). As we can see, the present-day land situation in Osma is wrapped up in the continuity of a racial and colonial legacy in a clearly structured manner. In this scenario, there is a narrative of mass land eviction, displacement and land

---

<sup>12</sup> Pseudonym

dispossession that prevents Afro-descendants from owning lands without the mediation of the deeds<sup>13</sup> issued by Green Tree, which in turn leads me to briefly describe another reason why economic life is structured in the area through a colonial legacy.

### ***1.3.2 Race, class and gender in Osma***

The second motivation that furthered my interest in Osma was how its *hacienda* past evolved into a plantation-like<sup>14</sup> dynamic because of Green Tree in the area. I only realised this connection while doing fieldwork. The dominance and ownership of Green Tree in Osma has rendered unambiguously visible processes of marginalisation intertwined in class, race and gender. These constitute the intersections I explore through cultural productions in chapter 5.

In 2006, Green Tree built in Osma a luxurious complex of eco-lodges in a lush rainforest area, with rustic cabins overlooking pristine beaches. This resort is the primary source of employment for Osma residents, especially for local women. Encouraged by testimonies of informants from Osma who largely oppose this company, I visited the Green Tree site. I observed amongst female workers, that labour was markedly structured around skin tone and other physical cues. Women within the spectrum of mahogany-like complexions or visibly *negras*, and those with stockier physiques, worked in the kitchens and laundrettes, or worked as janitors, out of sight from customers. In contrast, young, wavy haired, slender and tawny-like *trigueñas* (wheat coloured) and light, russet brown *morenas* were mostly employed in desk-based jobs in the reception, or as waitress or as massage therapists. In contrast, managerial posts were filled by white upper-class men. While undoubtedly this stratification around bodily distinctions may –or may not– be perceived as deliberate, it reflects a more systemic problem. Racial stratification, despite Venezuela’s racial mixture, is an evident pattern in the labour organisation in Green Tree.

The logic behind Green Tree’s stratification around the ways in which bodily traits, gender and labour status intersect for Osma’s Afro-descendant women resembles what

---

<sup>13</sup> Deeds are legal titles that ensure that Green Tree retains the right over the land but recognises people’s rights as homeowners.

<sup>14</sup> The difference between haciendas and plantations is that the former had one landlord and a small subordinate work force, while plantations were operated by several owners organized around a corporation, the owners invested extensive capital oriented to generate larger profits and had a larger work force (Mintz and Wolf, 1957).

sociologist and economist Gunnar Myrdal (1944) had in mind when explaining how in colonial plantations light-skinned or racially mixed Afro-descendants were preferred by masters to perform labour in the master's house, while darker African enslaved were field hands. If we replace, in the case of Osma, labour inside the master's house with the labour that can be seen by the customers, while field labour is out of sight, it becomes clear how a plantation-like logic, continues to structure life chances and local economic life. Besides Green Tree labour arrangements, there are clear levels of poverty and marginalisation in Osma. The latter is coupled with a historically disadvantaged status, be it accessing employment, poor transportation, lack of sewage system, and poor health-care services. These circumstances made Osma a compelling site in which to conduct an ethnography on structural racism and contestations against oppressions.

### ***1.3.3. The contestation***

While I have indicated how structures of racism operate in the area, this does not mean that Osmeños lack agency and have passively accepted Green Tree's conditions. Since 1956, Osma's population has engaged in civil disobedience such as protests or squatting on Green Tree's lands as the population grew, in order to elicit state intervention. This strategy aimed to get the state to declare the lands they had built their homes on as 'idle', and via this recourse, encourage the state to grant land ownership. I do not assess in this thesis the feasibility of this strategy, instead I focus on how Osma's population has established a restorative narrative to challenge the system that has historically bound blackness to landlessness. Borrowing from Sylvia Wynter's essay, *Novel and history, plot and plantation* (1971), Africans were 'planted' from Africa to America's plantations, not as humans but as properties to boost plantation economies, and they are still not fully rooted to land in ways in which Indigenous peoples can claim prior to the colonisation of the Americas.

The third reason I was drawn to Osma was the emergence of a youth social movement called 'Young Voices' that energised even more land claims against Green Tree from 2006. Although this group dissolved in 2012, their members still come together and partner up with other political and cultural organisations in the *Parroquia Caruao*. Young Voices were never formally an institutionalised political organisation. Instead, they were a small grassroots group of mostly Afro-descendant men who were linked by living and

growing up together in Osma. These friendships were reinforced by training in politics and social work together in Cuba in 2005, sponsored by the Venezuelan government. They were strongly influenced by the Bolivarian Revolution and the rhetoric on race and class asserted by the late president Hugo Chávez (discussed in the next section). Young Voices began to deploy a rhetoric of race-based politicised labels such as *Afro-descendientes*, *Cimarrones* (emancipated enslaved/maroons) or appropriating the word *Cumbe*, which were settlements horizontally organised by self-emancipated peoples from the slavery system (Price, 1979), as a signifier to describe the geographical territory of Osma and other villages of the *Parroquia Caruao*.

Recall Altez's (2006) core argument introduced earlier, and the studies she carried out over several years along the six different villages of the Parroquia Caruao during the 1990s. As I have explained, she found a 'dis-memory' in the oral histories of the eldest generations, in that they did not view themselves as the descendants of Africans. Her further and most recent studies (Altez, 2013, 2014, 2017), do not explain abrupt and short changes within a decade like the one mobilised by Young Voices. She does not explore in depth why Osma's younger generations began to call themselves *Afro-descendientes*, embracing a politicised African origin and rewriting their subject formation around 'race' in the light of the political process that started in Venezuela from 1999 with the figure of Hugo Chávez.

## **1.4. Political polarisation and race in the Chávez and Post-Chávez Venezuela**

### ***1.4.1. Chávez and the Bolivarian Revolution (1999-present)***

In order to understand the ways in which grassroots movements and political activism contest issues of anti-black racism in my fieldsite one must begin with a deep understanding of the Bolivarian Revolution, which set the contemporary context of Venezuela's political landscape. More importantly, we need to understand the political polarisation that unfolded towards and against the figure of the late Hugo Chávez (1999-2013), and representations of race in his political discourse. Before examining the Bolivarian Revolution, it is necessary to first consider the centrality of Hugo Chávez.

Unlike previous Venezuelan presidents, Chávez was the first working-class, non-white president in the country.

Hugo Chávez entered Venezuelan politics as an outsider. He was a self-identified Afro-Indigenous man, the second of six sons of two poor primary school teachers from the town of Sabaneta in Barinas state (Strønen, 2016). Sports, music or a military career were the common possibilities through which non-white men had traditionally achieved upward social mobility in Venezuela, and Chávez found a place in the military academy. He became acquainted in his youth with Marxism through his older brother Adán, who was a Marxist university lecturer. Later Chávez became a key figure within secret left-wing activism in the armed forces during the 1980s, while he eventually became Lieutenant Colonel (Strønen, 2016). After a failed coup he led in 1992 against the government of Carlos Andrés Pérez (1989-1993), who marked Venezuela's neoliberal era, Chávez was jailed for two years. While Chávez did not return to the military, he entered politics in 1997. In December 1998, he won Venezuela's presidency mainly through his ability to expand and strengthen the frustration of much of the population – the poor and excluded – against neoliberalism and the traditional oligarchy.

Once in power, Chávez fashioned a left-wing political, and post-neoliberal alternative branded as the “Bolivarian Revolution” in 1999, inspired by the national hero, Simón Bolívar. Chávez's Bolivarian Revolution instigated a state reform rooting out control by traditional market and state institutions. Chávez developed a radical discourse on redistribution of lands as well as state oil wealth, aiming to benefit *el pueblo* with social programmes for poverty reduction. Under Chávez's presidency (1999-2013), such policy measures were actively funded by a windfall of oil wealth that came from the national oil industry, mostly experienced during the 2000s. This scenario sustained not only Chávez's popularity in the ballot-box, but also active participation by the citizenry and grassroots movements in (re)making the state (Ciccariello-Maher, 2013; Valencia, 2015).

The nation-building process of widening citizen participation and appealing to *el pueblo* by the Bolivarian Revolution, produced deep resistance from the former ruling class. When Chávez became president, power changed hands and –somewhat– changed its colour. In Venezuela, the hegemony of the State was historically held by the elites (upper



and middle class), two traditional political parties (AD and COPEI<sup>15</sup>), the private media, the Catholic Church, high-ranked military, and large national and transnational companies. In contrast to the white-majority of the elite group, the traditionally oppressed working class or *el pueblo* had been overwhelmingly comprised of multi-racial peoples mostly of darker skin. After 14 years in power and a short struggle with cancer, Chávez's passing was publicly announced on 5<sup>th</sup> March 2013. Even after death, Chávez became a mythic, quasi-religious figure still present in the everyday life of Venezuelans (Michelutti, 2017). In particular, the effect of late president Hugo Chávez in politics made visible how racial discrimination overtly surfaced through the language of politics. It is critical to illustrate how previously covert attitudes on race and class in Venezuela began to surface during the 19-years of the Bolivarian Revolution through national political polarisation.

#### ***1.4.2. Venezuela's political polarisation***

Historically, Venezuela was defined by its own elite as a homogenous, racially-mixed society, free of racial prejudice; a phenomenon whereby racism and classism became buried by the metaphor "*café con leche*" (coffee with milk) (Wright, 1990). Nonetheless, political polarisation in the country undermined this metaphor. This erosion can be best understood under three dynamics. First, conflicts between former political groups and the new hegemony of the Bolivarian revolution, second, media constructions, and third, the Bolivarian Revolution's political agenda set the landscape for what constitutes Venezuela's political polarisation around categories of race and class.

In 2002, an alliance of economic and political anti-Chávez elites attempted a coup d'état that removed Chávez from the presidency for 48 hours. Chávez was restored back to power by popular pressure and by his loyal group of high-ranking military officials. However, prior to the coup, race was not an issue he explicitly addressed in his political discourse. Only after the coup did Chávez begin publicly manifesting pride in his Indigenous and African ancestry, recognising himself as a victim of racism due to the events that unseated him briefly from power. Chávez declared that, "hate [from the opposition] against me has a lot to do with racism. Because of my big mouth and curly

---

<sup>15</sup> These parties were the center leaning *Acción Democrática AD* (Democratic Action) and the conservative *Partido Social Cristiano COPEI* (Social Christian Party COPEI).

hair, and I'm so proud to have this mouth and this hair, because it is African" (Democracy Now, 2005). Addressing the complex ways in which racism overlapped with classism through Venezuelan politics was a new situation that had not been openly confronted before since Venezuela became a stable democracy in 1958.

Chávez's political opposition often argued that he exploited racial and class issues for political gain. However, Chávez's most radical opponents used racist language against him by calling him "monkey," "thick-lipped," "rabble" and *mico-mandante* a pun that came to mean "monkey in charge." As a response, Chávez would constantly deploy strategies of personal appeals. He would identify himself in political discourses as "*Indio*" (Indian), "*negro*" (black), or would embrace the *mestizaje* rhetoric by saying "*Soy blanco, negro e Indio*," (I am white, black and Indian) "Like the majority of Venezuelans" (Anderson, 2001). Chávez made his first public assertion of his racial identity as '*Afro-descendiente*'<sup>16</sup> on 11<sup>th</sup> January 2004 in his Sunday television programme called '*Aló Presidente*' (Hello President) (García, 2013).

Private media had a key role in homogenising images of who was for and against the Chávez government, drawing on the interplay between class and race (Gottberg, 2004). These racialised and classed-based media constructions were achieved by class discourses foregrounded by racialisation specific to the Venezuelan context. For example, anti-Chávez opposition rallies usually occurred in economically affluent urban areas and were habitually comprised by –but not restricted to– a mass of middle and upper-class professionals who tended to be light-skinned. On the other hand, Pro-Chávez marches and political rallies, occurred in working class areas, and were usually comprised of –but not limited to– *el pueblo*, a base also reified as the "popular classes," meaning mixed race and dark-skinned supporters from working-class and poor areas.

---

<sup>16</sup> In this *Aló Presidente*, Chávez's affirmation of politics was produced in the town of Palmarejo, Veroes Municipality in Yaracuy state with the inauguration of a cultural center named after an influential Afro-descendant hero called Andrésote. In this occasion, Venezuela's government invited to this inauguration the Afro-American grassroots movement called African Forum and other Venezuela Afro-descendant organizations. An Afro-Venezuelan leader affirmed: It was high time a president took us [Afro-descendants] into account, to what Chávez replied: "Yes, with your struggle. Well. Our struggle, I include myself there, as *Afrodescendiente*, we [Chávez government] will progress towards [granting] the rights of Afro-Venezuelan peoples" (García, 2013).

Anti-Chávez private media as well as Chávez's political opponents who covered and commented on pro-Chávez marches, stated they were comprised of *pata en el suelo* (hoof on the floor, barefoot) and *tierrúos/as* (soiled feet) (Gottberg, 2011; Strønen, 2017:96). Both are old-fashioned terms that alluded to residents from poor areas with unpaved roads, whose class status was then recognisable by the soil on their feet. Other terms to depict Chávez supporters were *chusma* (scum), "*resentidos/as*" (resentful), rabble (low class), *malandros/as* (thugs), monkeys, lumpen (vulgar) and *turbas* (hordes). All these terms allude to non-whiteness, dark skin and poverty.

In contrast, Chávez and his supporters also hurled back fiery rhetoric against his political opponents. In Chávez's heated rhetoric, his most vocal opponents, such as wealthy business groups, were rendered as "vampires," bishops of the Catholic church described as "perverts" (Carroll, 2013), while the former political elites, members and allies of opposition parties such as AD and COPEI were *cúpulas podridas* (fetid leadership) (Reyes Díaz and Monroy García, 2013:127). Anti-Chávez marches were depicted by Chávez himself as comprised of *pity-Yankees* (those who idealise US/European lifestyle), imperialists, *escuálidos/as* (squalid), *fascistas* (right-wing, fascists) *oligarquía rancia* (rancid oligarchs), and *sifrino/as* (spoiled brats). All of these are disparaging terms to conflate upper-class status, privilege, and right-wing political identity.

Representation and symbolisation within which race came to be read were also involved in the ways in which Chávez sought to fashion the agenda of the Bolivarian Revolution and his political persona after the figure of Simón Bolívar. Chávez said, "They look down their noses at everyone else, as if the rest of us were mere rabble. Yes, we are the same rabble that followed [Simón] Bolívar" (Herrera Salas, 2005:86). During Chávez's government the figure of Bolívar, a white-skinned man of Spanish descent, became re-imagined as a dark-skinned man. While Bolívar was canonically depicted as fair skinned, during the latter period of Chávez presidency, Bolívar's portraits began to show a browner Bolívar with racially mixed features. Such political strategies became significant for the groups and *cultores populares* in this thesis, because it expanded their capacity to contest the historically ingrained ethnic/racial shame and internalised racism amongst the black, Indigenous, non-white and economically marginalised populations. Nonetheless, political polarisation continues to run deeper, even after Chávez's death in 2013.

A *Chavista* elite formed under Chávez's government has cemented its power under Nicolás Maduro, his successor since April 2013. Like Chávez, Maduro is from a working-class background<sup>17</sup>. However, unlike Chávez, Maduro's government is substantially disapproved of by the population due to socio-economic reasons. Venezuela has fallen into an economic spiral that the Maduro calls "*Guerra económica*" (economic warfare). Nonetheless, it is substantially an effect of the complex overreliance the country has on oil wealth<sup>18</sup>. Maduro claims that the *guerra económica* is a political/economic strategy from opposition business groups to impoverish the population, by inducing hyperinflation, shortages of essential food products, medicines and necessities in order to replicate a mass social upheaval to unseat him from power. Throughout that year I spent in Venezuela, no staple foods or toiletries were on display on the shelves of convenience shops or supermarkets in the villages or in the urban centres. There were shortages of rice, milk, sugar, coffee, toiletries, diapers, toilet paper, proteins such as meat or chicken and essential medicines. The system in which people survived was solidarity based, by either informing each other when the rationed products would arrive to supermarkets (if they were able to afford them<sup>19</sup>) or by exchanging their spare food essentials. Nonetheless, this economic and political crisis has forced an exodus of Venezuelans to migrate out of the country in search of better life conditions (John, 2018).

The combination of these elements has provoked national rage and scenarios of mass protest, to which Maduro's government used state forces to suppress opposition. However, some opposition violent groups have also been emboldened by the deep crisis to vent violence and racism. In what follows, I briefly move on to discuss the complex and

---

<sup>17</sup> Unlike Chávez who had a bachelor's degree in military science and a master's degree in political sciences, Nicolás Maduro began as a public bus driver who did not complete high-school. However, he became a seasoned trade union leader and later occupied key posts such as president of the National Assembly of Venezuela (2005-2006) and Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2006-2013) during the Chávez presidency.

<sup>18</sup> Venezuela is a country where 95% of its income comes from oil revenues. Favourable prices in oil markets have favoured periods of economic bonanza, the latest being in mid 2000s. The influx of foreign currency –mainly dollars– in times of bonanza created a condition since the 1970s which made it cheaper for the country to import goods and food from abroad than to produce them nationally (Wilpert, 2006a). This unwavering influx from oil revenues stalled the diversification of the national economy and neglected sectors such as manufacturing or agriculture. As a result, Venezuela lacks the agricultural labour force to reduce its dependency of food imports as only 11,2% of Venezuela's total population lives in rural areas (INE, 2011). This scenario partially explains the reason of national food shortages, because the country imports 85% of the food it consumes (Kappeler, 2013).

<sup>19</sup> The population in my fieldsite is of working class and most earned minimum wages. In May 2015, the minimum wage *per month* was the equivalent of USD\$10, which rose in July to \$13,60 per month (note the emphasis on *month*, not hours or working days).

contingent ways in which race and class continue to seep into Venezuelan political discourse during the Bolivarian Revolution at the present time.

#### ***1.4.3. Contemporary Racism and Political Polarisation in the Post- Chávez period***

During Nicolás Maduro's presidency, race and class continue to be ingredients in political polarisation. For example, while I was on fieldwork, Maduro appointed Luis Salas Rodríguez, a non-white man as the Minister of Economics in January 2016. Salas stepped down after a month in the post. Substantial resistance to Salas' appointment was because Maduro appointed a sociologist whose unconventional ideas on the political economy were divisive even within the national left. Salas outrightly rejected basic tenets of the theory of supply and demand and asserted that, "inflation did not exist" (Salas Rodríguez, 2015:7-8). However, discontent at Salas's economic philosophy was largely expressed in racial terms, and against his racially mixed appearance. Racial epithets such as "monkey," *mal bañado* (unwashed), *cara de crimen* (thug) and *Guajiro*<sup>20</sup> were levelled against him in social media, due to his dark skin and racially mixed, visibly Indigenous heritage and working-class origins (Pineda, 2016). But these forms of racism in politics have taken more vitriolic forms, manifesting itself during Venezuela's crisis under Maduro's rule.

Episodes of racially motivated murders have been committed under the assumption that dark skin belongs to the class that usually supported Chávez and now Maduro's government (Gilbert, 2017). The heinous murder of a black youth in an opposition march on 20 May 2017 illustrates this point. Orlando Figuera, a 21-year old black man was lynched in Altamira, an affluent area of Caracas while trying to walk through an anti-government rally. What stands out is the way his physical appearance was read when he was approached by the violent crowd. The attack on Orlando was recorded on phones and the testimony showcased on television, which his father reproduced. Orlando was told: "hey *negro* [black guy], are you *chavista* or opposition?" When he did not distance himself from supporting the government, some in the crowd said they would show him "what happens to *Chavistas*" (TeleSUR English, 2017). The youth was stabbed, doused with gasoline and set alight by a violent group of anti-Maduro protestors. Because Orlando was black, the protestors assumed that he would somehow be a supporter of

---

<sup>20</sup> Indigenous person from the Guajira peninsula located between northern Colombia and north-western Venezuela.

Chávez and thus Maduro, which in this case he was. Orlando died two weeks after the incident. Other Afro-Venezuelan men such as Danny Subero, Carlos Ramírez and Pedro Josué Carrillo (see Gilbert, 2017; Koerner, 2017) were murdered in similar circumstances in opposition marches that targeted men's black skin as it was assumed to be a visible signifier of government support.

These cases show how political confrontations in Venezuela unleash racially motivated attacks, even though most of the population, as I will explain in Chapter 2, is racially mixed. However, this is not solely about race. It is about how race, class, gender and political affiliation come together in complex ways to mutually constitute one another within Venezuela's political conflict. As I will show in this thesis, cultural producers, activists, and residents in my fieldsite, contest forms of structural racism, that are problematized by and draw on Venezuela's politically polarised landscape.

Having established the broader context through which political polarisation became the platform whereby sharp binary constructions of Venezuela's population in terms of race and class began to constitute one another through the language of politics, I will now move onto discuss the relationship between the politics of culture and the state during the 19-years of the Bolivarian Revolution. This period has a major influence in the organisation of identity-based Afro-Venezuelan social movements in the country. It contextualises the politicisation of racial mixture, national identity and popular culture during the Bolivarian Revolution.

Since 2007, when "Socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century" came into force in Venezuela, there has been an emphasis on the creation of a '*new cultural hegemony*'. This is a cultural policy pursued under the Bolivarian Revolution, in which the government sought to emphasise a patriotic, nationalist fervour through "popular culture" as associated with the notion of *el pueblo*. The cultural strategy pursued the consolidation of a cohesive national identity, infused with de-colonial values. Here I move on to situate more broadly the relationship between state politics and cultural politics.

Long before recent de-colonial movements such as South Africa's “#Rhodes Must Fall”<sup>21</sup> (2015), Venezuela became an avant-garde in the removal of symbols of colonialism. Grassroots movements supporting Chávez, removed on the 12<sup>th</sup> October 2004, the statue of Cristopher Columbus in Caracas. They were emboldened by Chávez rhetoric. Chávez's government replaced the formerly known “Discovery of America” celebrated every October 12<sup>th</sup> and renamed it as “Day of Indigenous Resistance” in 2004. Before 2004, the “Discovery of America” was a day that was dedicated to celebrating Columbus' “discovery” while acknowledging Spain as Venezuela's “motherland.” To Chávez, America's conquest “was a genocide” and he highlighted that Venezuela's elites “taught us to admire Christopher Columbus” which began a way in which politics ignited in the public a critical rejection to the celebration of colonialism in the country. By 2009, all Columbus' statues in the country were taken down. To replace the rest of Columbus statues all over the country, the government erected instead statues of the Indigenous Chief Guaicaipuro, an important symbol of Indigenous resistance in the country (Urooba, 2017). Indeed, Indigenous recognition become an important narrative to recognise marginalised groups and endorse an identity-based politics in the country.

The ways in which politics became a space to reconstruct pride over marginalised populations has legal foundations. Venezuela's new constitution, passed in 1999, reconceptualised the country as a “multi-ethnic and pluri-cultural” nation. The constitution explicitly emphasised in the first lines of its preamble that Venezuela is a *pueblo*, forged by “the historical example of our Liberator Simón Bolívar, and the heroic sacrifice of our aboriginals forebears” (CRBV, 1999:1). Furthermore, Venezuela passed the most comprehensive set of constitutional rights granted to Indigenous peoples in Latin America (Van Cott, 2003). Venezuela's 1999 constitution secures Indigenous political representation with 3 seats in the National Assembly, protection of their customary laws, land rights, rights to bilingual education and protection of official languages. These were political and cultural strategies through which the Bolivarian Revolution vindicated the historical role played by Indigenous populations in Venezuela. But it also serves as a motivation for the Afro-descendant cultural producers and activists I explore in Chapter 3, who contest how the “Day of Indigenous Resistance” and lack of formal legal

---

<sup>21</sup> This is a student-led social movement that removed the statue of Apartheid symbol Cecil Rhodes in the University of Cape Town in South Africa.

recognition in the national constitution, fails to acknowledge the presence and the role that Afro-Venezuelans have played in the country since colonial times.

Afro-Venezuelans under the Bolivarian Revolution have experienced limited inclusion, addressed through the politicisation of culture. For example, Chávez's government recognised May 10th, 2005, as the 'Day of the Afro-Venezuelaness' and May has become ever since a month devoted to celebrating the Afro-Venezuelan cultural contribution, in a way that is equivalent to the "Black History Month" in the UK or the USA. Also, inclusion of Afro-Venezuelan history within the primary school curricula as well as an anti-racial discrimination law was passed in 2011. Recently, in March 2018 the Venezuelan government signed the UN International Decade for People of African Descent Act, a declaration that encourages states to address structural racial discrimination in their countries. In 2018, the government that represents the Bolivarian Revolution also celebrated a state sponsored international conference in Caracas on Afro-descendant reparations. However, despite this rhetoric to include Afro-Venezuelans, the situation of this group has not substantially improved.

As a result, multiculturalism and de-coloniality remain incomplete in Venezuela. Afro-Venezuelans have not achieved comparable levels of recognition to Venezuelan Indigenous peoples. The Afro-Venezuelan movement has been constantly side-lined by the Bolivarian Revolution. By the Afro-Venezuelan movement I refer to an umbrella of different cultural and political organisations that lead the anti-racist struggle and focus on building a positive black/Afro-descendant identity in Venezuela. Despite the Afro-Venezuelan movement has lobbied throughout the Bolivarian Revolution since 1999, has forged alliances with the Bolivarian Revolution and has struggled for the acknowledgement and recognition of their Afro-descendant heritage as one part of the "pluri-cultural and multicultural" character of the country, their demands for legal inclusion have been overlooked in 1999, 2007<sup>22</sup> and 2017<sup>23</sup>.

---

<sup>22</sup> In 2007, Chávez sought to introduce an amendment to 1999 constitution with several new articles to legally expand his presidential powers, that included a possibility to recognise Afro-Venezuelans. The new set of reforms included an article to recognise the African heritage and cultural contribution in Venezuela. However, this article was accompanied by the main reform, which was a clause to enable Chávez to eliminate term limits in office, which would have enabled him to have an unlimited chance to be re-elected in the presidency.

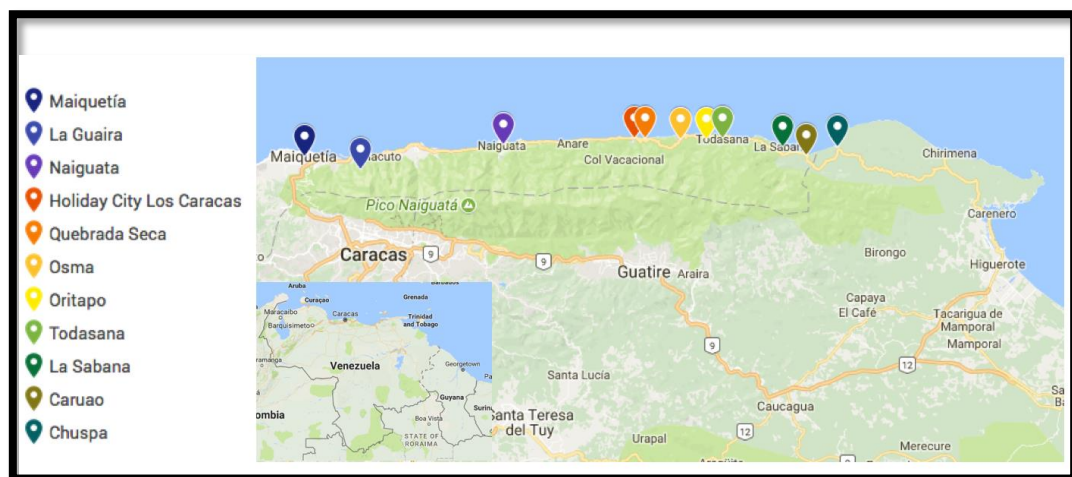
<sup>23</sup> In 2017, Nicolás Maduro's government established a constituent assembly body that rewrote the constitution, to delay the presidential elections and to strip the National Assembly from its powers. The reason was that in this branch of the state, Maduro's political opponents became a majority in the National



## 1.5. Methodology: constructing the field: Osma and Todasana

My fieldwork took place between February 2015 and March 2016, mostly in Osma and to a lesser extent in Todasana. This study can therefore be considered multi-sited. One of the challenges that ethnographers face while conducting research is to remain restricted to a small and closely bound site. From the outset, I intended to focus on Osma. However, as identified by Marcus (1995) I had to deal with a ‘fuzzy field’. That is, as my research unfolded, I found myself tracing potential informants and connections beyond and across different spaces of the *Parroquia Caruao* that became important in order to pursue my research agenda. Therefore, delineating the ethnographic field required me to expand my observations outside Osma to include Todasana.

Figure 1.2. Location of Parroquia Caruao and villages



Source: google maps and own elaboration

Osma and Todasana are villages where there was unapologetic political activism by youth and residents embracing the *Afro-descendientes* discourse. Nonetheless, they are separated by another village, called Oritapo. Though they are not close to each other, Osma and Todasana have the most politically active groups in *Parroquia Caruao*. When this dilemma arose, it was a simple choice to conduct observations capturing the point of

---

Assembly since 2015, as Bolivarian Revolution politicians lost in national elections. Maduro replaced the opposition filled National Assembly, by calling via decree a Constituent Assembly to rewrite the constitution, create a new National Assembly filled with only Bolivarian Revolution politicians that would enable him to legally expand his powers. This was another political opportunity in which Afro-Venezuelans organisations lobbied for their inclusion in the constitution and were once overlooked to become part of the law.

view of organised groups of cultural and political activists spelling out a clear politics of blackness between these two locations. Despite 6,2 miles of mountainous road that divided Osma and Todasana, I established these sites as the main contours of my fieldsite. While I remained living in Osma, due to its proximity to Todasana, I was able to commute a few times a week or stay for short periods in Todasana, especially on the weekends, while I openly engaged with local cultural and political activities that developed a positive black identity in both sites.

### *1.5.1. Committed Ethnography*

As a black Venezuelan woman sympathetic to the political and cultural activities developing in Osma and Todasana, I practiced “committed ethnography.” This approach is informed by methodologies that demonstrate that the ethnographer’s political involvement with research participants opens up room for thorough theoretical insight as well as more robust accounts of the field (Costa Vargas, 2004; Gordon 1998; Hale, 1994). Therefore, I used a methodology that rejects the premise of “neutral observer.” For this latter approach, it is desirable that the researcher remains detached from participants to provide unbiased scientific observations as advocated by the philosophy of positivism (Ayer, 1959; Maxwell and Delaney, 2004; Popper, 1959; Schrag, 1992;). I deem this method problematic for two reasons. First, ‘neutrality’ is a criterion that conceals forms of power and domination, particularly while researching marginalised populations with a history of colonialism. ‘Neutrality’ is a way of obtaining and representing knowledge that assumes a ‘positional superiority’ (Said, 1979) in which the researcher imposes a dimension of the participant as an ‘object’ (not participant) while remaining distant and in turn configures a highly extractivist form of research (Smith, 1999). Second, the corporeal dimension of the researcher is neither a ‘raceless’ or ‘abstract’ entity that is dislocated from the social environment and the cultural constructions by which the body is coded, privileged or not, and hierarchically involved –whether the researcher is cognisant or not– both in the field and everyday life (Costa Vargas, 2004; Suárez-Krabbe, 2015). Thus, I suggest that ethnographic ‘neutrality’ is unrealistic.

I believe that an ethnography that captures the range of perspectives of cultural and political groups, due to the diversity of their activism, contradictory political stances, and gender and age differences, provides texture and richness for a deeper knowledge of black

politics in Venezuela. However, I was concerned with ensuring a diversity of points of view. As I recognised how the colonial matrix influences our ways of engaging in knowledge exchanges with research participants, I realised there were similarities between my own approach and Participatory Action Research (PAR). Colombian sociologist, Orlando Fals Borda (1987), advocates for PAR as an ideal way of stimulating the de-colonisation of knowledge. In this sense, PAR's approach is praised because of its focus on knowledge co-production between the community and researchers. However, like Burdick (1998), I noted that PAR can gloss over issues of power inequalities that are inherent to the social and cultural context. In particular, while trying to identify, "who truly represents the community" because it is reduced to similar range of views from a small group. As Burdick (1998) notes, using a PAR approach falls into the trap of providing an idealised account of local leadership, while side-lining others who may not share their views (Burdick, 1998). Thus, PAR provides a partial view of the problem that the research is trying to grapple with. Therefore, I undertook a 'committed ethnography', enriched by living in Osma, and engaging with residents, who although they were not political activists, allowed me to triangulate ways in which ideas of 'race' and hegemonic ideologies of *mestizaje* were communicated across politicised and non-politicised residents to counteract the shortcomings posed by PAR. This strategy intended to minimise the complexity identified by feminist anthropologist Henrietta Moore (1988), around trying to "write *about*" my research participants while minimising a "tendency speak *for* them" (p.191-192).

### ***1.5.2. Ethics, researching race and methods***

I was aware of issues in conducting an ethnographic study where race is the focus. I circumvented the thorny issues (Becker, 2000) that emerge while researching 'race' by drawing attention to discourses of descent, skin colour labels, ideologies of racial mixture, asking questions about oral history, media, culture, politics, cuisine, beauty standards and informant's experiences in contact with others, including non-blacks inside and outside of *Parroquia Caruao*. Another ethical issue that emerged in the context of my research was the use of written consent forms. In the Venezuelan context, this is culturally viewed with suspicion. First, because the participant feels apprehensive about the implications of what they are signing, even when it is only a document as part of completing a university degree. Second, the desire of the participant to communicate information

where their anonymity is protected, is in contradiction with signing a written form that they feel would record in some way who they are. Instead, I introduced myself, the purpose of my research, and asked for verbal consent, as suggested by the American Anthropological Association (AAA, 1998:3) to mitigate this shortcoming. All conversations and interviews were carried out in Spanish and all the direct quotes are my translations. I deployed methods that proved less intrusive for data collection. I used a Dictaphone for interviews, recalled conversations, and collected life histories and personal narratives. Following anthropological guidelines, I use pseudonyms (explained in the tables in the next page) to protect the identity of my informants.

### *1.5.3. Access and informants*

A substantial amount of the material for this thesis is based on conversations; informal interviews with a small network of informants engaged in political and cultural activism. I conducted my ethnography following methods of participant observation, using semi-structured informal interviews and life histories as the primary data gathering techniques. I employed a combination of methods to record data to make it less intrusive, interchanging between using a Dictaphone and taking notes, or recalling conversations as best I could the same day. In the latter case, I would spend more time asking further questions to clarify a matter, or spend long hours in conversation, making sure I reflected in my writings exactly the meaning the participant tried to convey in order to avoid speaking *for* them. My data is based on attention to micro-interactions and focuses on participant observation in cultural performances, as well as life stories and personal accounts through conversations and semi-structured interviews. By using these methods, I pursued my research agenda, which was to document a range of practices, viewpoints and analysis of people's lives. Lancaster (1992) observed while doing fieldwork in Nicaragua, that ethnographic works, whether admitted or not, rely on small, closely knitted primary sources of information, comprised of those with whom participants and researchers feel at ease. In the tables below, I expand on the informants (Table 1.1), cultural organisations (Table 1.2) and political organisations (Table 1.3) I studied in Osma and Todasana:

Table.1.1 Informants in Osma and Todasana

Key informants in Osma	Key informants in Todasana
Antonio Varela and his family: Antonio, 32 (political leader) Fulton, 54 (cultural leader of Bululu negro-Antonio's uncle) Emilia, 26 (cultural leader, Antonio's partner) Darío, 31 (Antonio's cousin) Zoraida, 58 (Antonio's mother-elder) Jacinta (Fulton's mother and Antonio's grandmother) Karina (Fulton's daughter)	Family Rangel - García Chucho (school teacher and political leader born in Chuspa, moved to Todasana) Keyla (Chucho's wife from Todasana, primary school teacher)
Beatriz Ramos and her family (my household) Beatriz, 32 (Yolanda's eldest daughter, primary school teacher) Yolanda, 54 (head of the household, single mother) Clara, 26 (Beatriz youngest sister) Manuel, 30 (Yolanda's son)	Family Blanco Laura (primary school teacher) Oliver (Laura's cousin, cultural activist)
Eriberto Hernandez and his family: Eriberto 34 (political leader) Pedro, 30 (political leader – Eriberto's cousin) Gustavo (Eriberto's cousin, singer of <i>Melaza y Tambor</i> ) Xavier Rodríguez (close family friend of the Hernandez family)	
Andrés Roa and his family Andrés, 70 years old, leader of <i>Melaza y Tambor</i> Petra (Andrés' daughter and singer of <i>Melaza y Tambor</i> )	
Fulvio (Morela's husband) Morela (Fulvio's wife) Martha Sergio Nancy	
Crisaida Ramírez, 43 years old.	

Table 1.2. Cultural organisations in Osma and Todasana

Cultural organisations in Osma	Cultural organisations in Todasana
<b>Melaza y Tambor</b> (led by Andrés Roa, 70 years old. His group has over 30 musicians	<b>Afro-Caribe</b> Oliver, Gabo, Remi, Ángel.
<b>Cacao Negro</b> (Led by Fulton and Antonio. Eriberto, Darío, etc.)	<b>Movimiento El Almendrón</b> (Led by Leyla Ríos, Lander Bolívar and Rosendo)

Table 1.3. Political organisations in Osma and Todasana

Political organisations in Osma	Political organisations in Todasana
Young Voices [2006-2012] (Pedro, Antonio, Eriberto and Xavier)	<i>El Kilombo</i> (Chucho, Keyla, Laura, Freddy)
<i>Communal council “Cimarrones de Osma”</i> (Eriberto principal spokesperson) [15 residents consistently assisted to the meetings]	

#### 1.5.4. Positionality: The ‘insider-outsider’ within

During my fieldwork, I embodied an insider-outsider position. Feminists theorist Patricia Hill Collins (2000) refers to the reflexive method of “outsider within.” Through this concept, she draws attention to the ways in which black researchers can use their own life trajectories as points of departure to understand interlocking modes of oppression. This framework is highly useful to develop through theoretical points, my experience in the field and how this stance is important for illustrating the ways in which my positionality factored into the field.

However, parts of my positionality were highly contextual and shifting in the field. My ‘insider’ status may refer to what Penny Rhodes, a white British sociologist had in mind when suggesting that black researchers find it easier conducting research within black

populations. According to Rhodes, black researchers can understand the complexities inherent to black life experiences that may be invisible to a white interviewer/investigator. Due to positions of whiteness, she/he may lack the cultural knowledge and the language to understand the embodied experience of blackness (Rhodes, 1994:549). This can be true to an extent when understanding and been attuned to the nuances encoded in micro-aggressions or ‘everyday racisms’ (Sue *et al.*, 2007). But this is an intricate issue. In my case, ‘race’ or ‘gender’ alone were not something I could always rely on to create an immediate affinity with research participants, since there were only a handful of politicised black women in this highly patriarchal and conservative context, which I explore in Chapter 6.

Traditional gendered norms in my site restrict how women and men engage in the public sphere. It is also noticeable that women in the area take pride in saying, “*yo no salgo de mi casa*” (I stay at home) to avoid gossip. These are local forms of gendered control that jeopardise women’s respectability. My status as a black, single, middle-class, unmarried woman interested in identity politics created obstacles and distrust with a few of the partners of the men I studied in the beginning. While I did develop excellent rapport and relationships of trust with a few of them over time, overall, I found it difficult to develop strong links with women of my age group in Osma and Todasana and I could not do much to circumvent this barrier. Thus, my status required different ways of protecting my respectability and safety, while navigating with care and genuine commitment the political activities and engagement with the young politicised men that I engaged with. Therefore, my positionality despite my ‘insider’ racial status mirrored what British scholar of West African descent, Josephine Beoku-Betts (1994) experienced while researching black women in the U.S. Her relationship as an insider was based on a, “process of negotiations rather than granted immediately on the basis of ascribed status” (1994: 417).

As an outsider, I was initially “othered” by the men of the political group I set out to do research with. Prior to interactions with me, I was perceived as a “black *gringa*” because of my hair. The first time I arranged to meet a group of my research participants and they heard that my Spanish was standard Venezuelan, one of them told me, “you don’t have an (U.S. American) accent, I thought you were a *gringa*.” When I asked why he thought that he replied, “because of your hair.” At the time of fieldwork between 2015 and 2016,

I had short “natural” or un-straightened hair cut into a small afro which was unusual amongst the local young black women. As noted by (Gilliam and Gilliam, 1999:68), hair is a symbolic site that codes “race” for black women. Due to my life experiences, I was intuitively acquainted with the fact that hair texture can be a site of production of racial identities (Candelario, 2000). Hair straightening practices, blow dries, weaves or hair extensions are means through which non-white women are forced to comply with the Eurocentric dominant beauty standard of femininity in Venezuela (Nichols, 2013). Thus, an arbitrary bodily trait such as hair made me unambiguously *negra*. By understanding the way in which this trait is negatively valued (see Caldwell, 2004, 2007), I encountered every now and then what Essed (1991) calls everyday racism. By this, I mean how racial discrimination is reproduced in micro-interactions; being called *negra* instead of my name by black and non-black strangers, being asked to comb my hair, strangers suggesting I wear hair extensions while growing my hair out or being followed by security guards while buying food in supermarkets in Caracas. As we see, hair texture is locally perceived as a site to gauge, negotiate and construct racial locations in Venezuela. But also, it is a site to unleash anti-blackness which is a motivation to engage in racial mixture that I explore in more depth in Chapter 3. These were episodes that I experienced less when I had longer, straightened hair while living in Venezuela during the 2000s or having short, Afro-textured hair when living in the UK. As noted by U.S. sociologist France Winddance Twine, “the national context can alter one’s ascribed racial or ethnic position” (2000:19). Being exposed to different transnational experiences of what it means to be black prompted me to sharpen the complexities around how blackness and subject formation operate in Venezuela. As Delmos Jones observes, “most of the few black anthropologists [...] are looking for something new, questioning old assumptions about social processes, and exploding old myths, and in the process developing new ones” (1982:478). While I do not claim that the value of my positionality in the field was free of tensions by being a black researcher conducting research within a black population in her home country, it was indeed a “different” one that asked me to engage as “insider-outsider within” on the ground.

## 1.6. Structure of the thesis

In what follows (**Chapter 2**), I review the literature on popular culture and political mobilisations of Afro-descendants. In this chapter, I contend that theoretical intersections



between popular culture and its political use by marginalised populations call for recognition of how power flows between the state and Afro-descendant movements. I propose that the relationship between these politicised mobilisations and the influence the state wields over them can be best understood by bringing together Gramscian concepts that shed light on the relationship between popular culture and intersectionality.

In **Chapter 3**, I use the example of *décimas*, which are forms of oral poetry of Spanish origin used by *cultores populares* as a vehicle to preserve oral memories. However, *décimas* are also used by *cultores populares* to speak about the slippery conversations on race, racial mixture, blackness and having African origins. The aim of this chapter is to explore the relationship between ‘race’, racial identity and cultural production in Osma and Todasana. I suggest in this chapter that cultural productions emerge as sites of contention against negative racialisation and to revalorise blackness.

**Chapter 4** introduces us to the everyday political-cultural relationships between the state and *Afro-descendientes* social movements in the *Parroquia Caruao*. To open the understanding of culture and politics, I explore the case of drum ensembles which are cultural performances that helps us understand the relationship between Afro-descendant populations and an important actor, the state. The argument that I advance here is that the boundary separating the state and social movements is thin and blurry. Relationships between the state and social movements develop within two contradictory processes of co-optation and patronage. As a result, the local contestations against racial discrimination struggle to achieve their full potential due to state co-optation in state-sponsored cultural spaces in the *Parroquia Caruao*.

In **Chapter 5**, I explore the *San Juan* Festival which has its origin in the Catholic church festivity to celebrate the birth of the prophet St. John the Baptist’s feast, which overlaps with the summer solstice. However, in the case of coastal Afro-Venezuelan populations, the celebration of *San Juan* (St. John the Baptist), is the religious festival par excellence in which blackness is celebrated in Venezuela. The aim of this chapter is to explore how Afro-Venezuelans in Osma and Todasana confront, through this religious festival, the topic of race. I explore how the Catholic church during slavery removed black iconography that was part of the celebration of former enslaved populations. A group of *cultores populares* began to reimagine the formerly forbidden black iconography, a

politicised vehicle to articulate their concerns about marginalisation and racial oppression. I contend that retrieving black icons has allowed Afro-descendant populations to contest racial exclusion, re-imagine themselves and to reclaim through visual resources visible representations of the black body in a positive light.

In **Chapter 6**, I show how Afro-Venezuelan women use cultural performances to challenge gender inequalities. I use the example of the *Día de los inocentes* (Feast of the Holy Innocents) to open and explore the ways in which Afro-Venezuelan women subvert gendered hierarchies and protest the dominant role men have in my fieldsite. This celebration involves cross-dressing and gender performances, whereby men dress and act as women and women dress as men and assume the authority of the village for a day. This celebration opens a reflection about how ‘race’ and class are lived by Afro-descendant women, while it has allowed local women to carve out sites of collective action.

In **Chapter 7**, the conclusion, I demonstrate how the study of cultural performances can incorporate fresh perspectives to understand Afro-Venezuelan political mobilizations. I highlight how class, gender, race and nations are categories that are encompassed and articulated through cultural performances that actively contest the myth of racial democracy, by encouraging audiences and cultural and political activists to put forth constructions that celebrate blackness, by carving out spaces through which identity politics can celebrate the diversity of the country.

# Chapter 2: Popular culture as a battlefield

*Anthropological intersections in the study of  
Afro-descendant movements*

## 2.1. Introduction

This chapter introduces the conceptual groundwork for understanding Afro-descendants' use of popular culture to contest marginalisation based on race, class and gender in Venezuela. Here, I present a literature review on race, class, intersectionality and popular culture. I bridge connections between classic and newly formulated scholarly work on Critical Race Theory, Orthodox Marxism and Black Marxism to offer a conceptualisation on the racialisation of class and gender in Venezuela. This conceptual analysis will allow me to ask later, whether and how popular culture can be considered a form of political mobilisation to contest racial, class and gendered exclusions faced by Afro-Venezuelan populations. My objective is to show the conceptual possibilities to examine the use of popular culture to contest experiences of exploitation, while been attentive to understanding of the ways in which power and domination operates in Venezuela. Later, I will propose a fuller understanding of popular culture as a form of political mobilisation by drawing on conceptual underpinnings informed by overlaps in the literature on race, class, intersectionality, popular culture and black social movements. This conceptual combination provides a vantage point on the depth and contested nature of popular culture, and how Afro-Venezuelans deploy counter-narratives against oppressions of race, class and gender through cultural expressions.

### 2.1.1. *Locating contestations in public spaces*

I begin by drawing on an observation during my fieldwork in Venezuela (2015-2016), to contextualise Afro-Venezuelan political organising within the Bolivarian Revolution and Socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The purpose of the excerpt is to illustrate how in this political leftist project as an alternative to neoliberalism that began in 2007, Venezuelan black movements struggled to be recognised as political and social actors. From the 22<sup>nd</sup> until the 24<sup>th</sup> April 2015, I took part in a two-day conference in Caracas called "Second International Congress of African, Caribbean and Diasporic Knowledges," held in the

Centre of Latin American Studies Rómulo Gallegos (*Centro de Estudios Latino-Americanos Rómulo Gallegos - CELARG*). The Congress was financed by the government, and therefore had a wide participation by leftist scholars. For example, European scholars such as the Afro-French activist Mireille Fanon, Spanish leftist intellectuals who besides being involved with the state also teach in public Venezuelan universities, Ambassadors from African countries in Venezuela, and senior bureaucrats from the Venezuelan government. The Congress was divided into different panels in which a variety of researchers presented papers on race, cultural diversity, indigeneity, gender, security and international relations. There was a controversial presentation called: “Explanation for anti-blackness in Venezuela” (*El porqué del racismo anti-negro en Venezuela*). The presenter was José Antonio Ejido, a Spanish scholar who was the only person who debated whiteness, anti-blackness and questions of race in relation to socialism in Venezuela.

Ejido stated that hierarchies of whiteness and anti-black racism are indeed present in Venezuelan society. Yet, his point was that both whiteness and anti-black racism in the country resulted from years of government by the Venezuelan right-wing bourgeoisie. “When we all have the same class status, anti-blackness in Venezuela will cease to exist” said Ejido. He made his point by saying that, “only class-conscious societies have been able to eradicate racism, and the most successful example in the region is Cuba. The Cuban revolution eliminated the problem of racism.” After he finished, I heard people murmuring amongst themselves. The audience, composed of a fair number of black activists from different organisations and state workers, had mixed reactions to Ejido’s latter affirmation. One member of the audience was Diógenes Díaz, an Afro-Venezuelan anthropologist who had presented earlier in the Congress and who is also one of the leaders of the national Afro-Venezuelan movement. Díaz challenged Ejido’s affirmation about the lack of racial discrimination in Cuba. I include an excerpt of their heated debate:

Díaz: "Despite socialism, Cuba has not resolved it [racism] which is alive and well. In my travels to Cuba, I have not seen one black Cuban in a senior position in the government or black workers in their tourist industry which everyone knows only hire white Cubans. So what country free of racism are you talking about?

Ejido: Cuba and the ex URSS have no problem of racism. These are the sort of claims that María Corina Machado [wealthy right-wing opposition leader] would make in this space to divide. Don’t be like María Corina. Stop bringing

these claims here! That is counterrevolutionary. Read Marx! I recommend to all of you too to read Marx!'.

This tense exchange helps us to grasp in broad terms how Afro-Venezuelan social movements engage with the state. The social movement comprised of Afro-Venezuelans is considered by some in the Bolivarian left to be a divisive, unimportant small minority within the gamut of grassroots movements that support the Bolivarian Revolution (Valencia, 2009:120). From the example above, Díaz is aligned with leftist black grassroots movements which do not antagonise the Venezuelan government. He is one of the main leaders of the *Movimiento Afro-Revolucionario Juan Ramón Lugo* (Afro-revolutionary movement Juan Ramón Lugo), the largest grassroots movement of Afro-Venezuelans. However, Díaz's observations on racism were shut down with a combination of emasculation, colour-blindness and reduction of the problem to class-consciousness. This is a practice that is common among some *Chavistas* and opposition alike, as observed by Valencia (2015:182). To Díaz, racism is a system that is present regardless of the political orientation of the government, whether it is capitalism or socialism. In contrast, we see Ejido, a scholarly supporter of the Venezuelan government, asserting his contradictory personal view on orthodox Marxism. This view is narrowed to class, while downplays race, which is opposed to his intention in the conference. He prescribed his own solution against racism as a simple monolithic remedy: Socialism. With the latter, racism would dissolve along with class differences, as if by magic.

This exchange kept replaying for a long time at the back of my mind. Haunting me with the question of whether other fellow leftist activist supporters of socialism in the Venezuelan government, who also share similar views on Marxism as the ones expressed by Ejido were ready to acknowledge and committed to addressing racial inequalities in Venezuela. Why in an anti-racism conference in a socialist country, amongst a seemingly leftist audience, was a denunciation of racism shut down and deemed divisive? What other ways have other Afro-Venezuelans found outside these spaces to articulate the existence of anti-black discrimination in the country? In what follows, I try to understand how the state has tried to dislocate colonial legacies by surveying conceptual observations that link race, class and gender. These conceptual insights will allow us to further our understanding of these intersections, before we interrogate racial relations in Latin America, in Venezuela and my fieldsite.

## 2.2. Race, class and gender

The breadth and volume of the literature that conceptualises race and class is vast. My intention is not to review this enormous body of work. Rather, I will focus this thesis to discuss the theoretical divisions between Marxism on the one hand, and Critical Race theory on the other, while approaching issues of race in Venezuela. It is the divisions in these debates that analytically situates the exchange between Díaz and Ejido which best illuminates the concerns of this thesis to understand the nexus between race, class and gender as I see it. In order to grasp these connections, I will first explore what I mean by ‘race’ and racism in this research. I then move to the analytical relationship between race and class, and then explore the intersections between race, class and gender.

### 2.2.1. *Race and structural racism*

By “race,<sup>24</sup>” I mean a category empty of biological meaning, but which is socially constructed to create hierarchies rooted in ideologies of social differentiation. I understand race as a socially constructed, living and politicised experience. Race, “is an unstable and decentred complex of social meanings constantly transformed by political struggle. It signifies and symbolises social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies” (Omi and Winant, [1986] 2015:110). The complex and often contradictory nature of race is accompanied by the corporeal dimension that complements its representation. For example, skin colour, body shape, hair texture, shape of the nose, colour of the eyes, are corporeal signals that narrate the meanings of what we have learnt to perceive as race, because bodies are read through socially constructed symbolic associations (Omi and Winnat, 2015). But race is not only about skin colour. It is also about metaphoric representations, attached narratives, and material consequences that this notion has in the organisation of society. These narratives of what we see are (re)produced by interactions, contestations, negotiations and challenges (Channa, 2017). What appears in a person as ‘race’ can be manipulated through social exchanges that seek to reproduce hierarchies (Channa, 2017).

---

<sup>24</sup> While much of the scholarly literature on race in Latin America has focused on the ethno-cultural features of Afro-descendants, the approach of race in this study will attempt to understand how race is conceptualized among this group. This research does not focus on ethnicity because it mainly refers to cultural differences. The word ethnicity has been widely deployed to talk about groups that were biological groupings, to avoid the use of the word race. (Wade, 1997).

In this thesis, race cannot be viewed in isolation from racism. Sociological scholarship has dominated the understanding of racism. The theory of racial formations by Omi and Winant (1986) has been one of the most influential as it focuses first on the construction of race in order to understand racism. In contrast to Omi and Winant (1986), Feagin and Elias (2012) propose that we are ready to understand the meaning of race only when we have already understood the broader dimensions of racial oppression. In turn, I understand racism as a “dual pressure” that stems both from “below” and “above.” According to Bakan and Dua (2014), racism is a system that comprises a philosophy and forms of knowledge that produce and reinforce the idea of difference through the meanings inscribed on the body, while it is sustained through social, political and economic constructions (Bakan and Dua, 2014:6). As we can see, racism is not only ‘personal’ or individual prejudice that is manifested from ‘below’. Racism is also produced and sustained in structures ‘from above’.

As Frantz Fanon identifies, “race and racism are not ‘natural’ or biological factors but products of specific social relations” (Hudis, 2015:4). For example, early ways of illustrating racism as a structural phenomenon in the U.S. called attention to high infant mortality rates amongst black children and the overrepresentation of black families in slums, as noted in *Black Power* (1967) by black activists Stokely Carmichael<sup>25</sup> and Charles Hamilton (Golash-Boza, 2016). Having in mind the limitations of racial formation theory<sup>26</sup> (Omi and Winant, 1986) to properly grasp what had already been noted decades earlier by Carmichael and Hamilton (1967), sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (1997) puts forward a structural theory of racism that moves the conversation of racism beyond the arena of ideology (Jung, 2015). Bonilla-Silva’s conceptualisation allows us to view racism as a structural matter, “mechanisms, practices behaviours, styles, cultural affectations, traditions, and organizational procedures at the social, economic, ideological, and political levels responsible for the reproduction of racial domination” (2015:75). Therefore, racism is a set of practices foregrounded in structures of racial domination and racial ideologies. It is useful to have this lens in mind throughout the

---

<sup>25</sup> Later, Carmichael changed his name to Kwame Toure.

<sup>26</sup> The strength and also limitation of Omi and Winant’s theory of racial formations (1986), is its highly centred attention to social formations and cultural representations of race (Golash-Boza, 2016:136)

empirical chapters, as it clarifies what I mean by Afro-Venezuelans in Osma and Todasana contesting issues of structural racism.

### ***2.2.2. Debates on the links between race and class***

In Venezuela, race has traditionally been downplayed by class. Early studies in Venezuela attempting to appraise the manifestation of racism, not surprisingly, ended up underemphasising the idea that race is not a factor in the structure of class divisions. For example, Angelina Pollak-Eltz, in her work *Hay o no racismo en Venezuela?* (Is there racism or not in Venezuela?) failed to acknowledge explicitly the racialised distinctions in the conformations of class structures in the country. While Pollak-Eltz noted that racism is visible in spaces such as, “the private sphere and family [where] there is ‘some’ racial prejudice” (1993: 285), the issue of class and race was not brought together in her analysis. She asserted that waves of European migrants, mostly from Spain and Portugal who entered Venezuela during the 1940s and 1950s, rapidly acquired a high level of social mobility and began to comprise the professional middle class. The reason for these migrations will be expanded in section 2.3.6. Similarly, she found that the upper class is predominantly white (1993: 273). However, Pollak-Eltz’s study acknowledged that popular classes are comprised of non-whites, as she identified, “greater number of *negroides* (black) racial features amongst the poor class” (1993: 273). Amongst the non-white rural proletariat, popular classes or *el pueblo*, she found that class consciousness is expressed in the binary, “you the rich and us the poor” (Pollak-Eltz, 1993:284). But these popular classes never assert themselves as “black *campesinos*”<sup>27</sup>, black working-class or the marginalised black” (1993:284, *my translation*). In Venezuela, a small body of work led by Pollak-Eltz highlighted the existence of class consciousness, while denying the existence of racism in the country (Pollak-Eltz, 1993, 1994; Bermudez and Suárez, 1995). Whereas other scholarship provided evidence of the existence of racism in the country (Montañez, 1987; Montañez, 1993; Montañez, Sánchez and Salinas, 2002; Ishibashi, 2003). However, more recent academic attention that has focused on the Bolivarian Revolution has increasingly made closer connections between class and race in the context of national politics.

---

<sup>27</sup> This term is the equivalent in English of the term peasant. However, *campesino/a* does not carry the same stigmatizing meaning as peasant. Instead, *campesino* is term re-appropriated and with political connotations in rural struggles that seek food sovereignty and land redistribution such as La Vía Campesina (The *campesino* way) For more, see Torrez (2011).



In the last two decades, there has been a small but growing body of scholarly work on Venezuela that has acknowledged the connections between race and class, especially in the context of political polarisation (Herrera Salas, 2005; Ciccariello-Maher, 2007, 2013; Ishibashi, 2007; Valencia, 2009, 2018). Some other scholarly positions, while recognising the role of race, still argue that, “class is the defining fissure of current Venezuelan politics” (Cannon, 2008: 732). While others, who have focused on the study of poor, non-white populations and contestations of oppression through cultural performances, hold a more nuanced view that the relationship between race and class in the country is not straightforward (Guss, 2000). However, these different scholarly positions reveal the need for a flexible theoretical framework through which we can properly articulate the connections between race and class to understand the cases of Osma and Todasana, and, more broadly, how power and domination in Venezuela have produced a racialised class. In what follows, I address this concern through conceptual insights from Marxism and Critical Race Theory.

### **2.2.3. *Orthodox Marxism***

Marxists scholars Abigail Bakan and Enakshi Dua (2014) note the tense division that exists between the approaches used by Marxists scholars and Critical Race Theory scholars while engaging with the theorisation of race and class. To Bakan and Dua (2014), Marxism takes as its starting point the relationships between material distribution and relations of production as conditions that constitute the connection between race and class. On the other hand, Critical Race scholars observe that the understanding of race as an ideology that has a clear impact in constituting class is watered-down by Marxists’ focus on economics (Bakan and Dua, 2014). For example, orthodox Marxism, such as that promulgated by Antonio Ejido in the earlier section, is still considered relevant to understanding some viewpoints in the Bolivarian Revolution. A classic position is adopted by Marxist Trinidadian-American sociologist Oliver Cox (1948) in *Caste, class and race*. Cox recognises that slavery and racism marked the emergence of global capitalism, arguing that, “race relations are labour-capital-profits relationships” (336). This means that racism is a bourgeois creation. Cox also tells us that, “racial antagonism is essentially political-class conflict” (332), which means that bringing up the issue of race erodes the united front and multi-racial cohesion amongst the working-class in the struggle against class differences (Cox, 1948). Thus, we can now see when Afro-

Venezuelan activist Diógenes Díaz demands that race be taken more seriously by the Bolivarian Revolution, he was met with resistance by Ejido. Ejido espouses a Western Marxist position that gives greater weight to class consciousness, which illustrates what sociologist Charles Mills calls “white Marxism”<sup>28</sup> (Mills, 2003).

However, this does not mean that there are not more nuanced positions regarding race and class within Marxism. The Black Radical Tradition (Marable, 1983; Robinson, 1983; James, 1989; Wilderson III, 2003; Barret, 2013; Johnson, 2013; Baptist, 2014; Shermerhorn, 2015) challenges more profoundly the epistemological limitations posed by reducing the role of race in the class struggle. Black Radical Marxism, through sophisticated concepts such as ‘racial capitalism’ (Robinson, 1983), challenges orthodox Marxism when analysing the radical struggles of workers of colour outside Europe, as well as the struggles of Afro-descendants during slavery. The tradition of Black Marxism critiques the epistemological foundations of Western Marxism by showing how analysis of these struggles collapse when assuming that Marx’s worker categories can be universally applicable (Kelley, 2017). Black Marxism notes the ontological/historical distinction in which enslaved Africans were not workers. Instead, they had a non-human status as property who did not sell their labour power (Wilderson, 2003). This distinction between ‘worker’ and ‘property’ shaped distinctions and legacies in the relationships of production (Johnson, 2017). Thus, Black Marxism conceptually addresses how slavery, race and racism has historically shaped differential access to capital. De-colonial scholar Anibal Quijano (2000b) argues that the ‘coloniality of power’ allows us to frame historically the central role of racialisation in consolidating a, “structure for the control of labour” through slavery, which was essential to the emergence of the earliest form of global capitalism. As I explained in the introduction of the thesis, after slavery ended in Venezuela in 1854, peonage, *medianería* or sharecropping, and forced paid labour within former *haciendas*, were ways in which Afro-descendants began to be included in the economic relationships of production (Brito Figueroa, 1985). Therefore, the “structures for the control of labour” (Quijano, 2000:535) that controlled Afro-Venezuelans did not produce dramatic changes to the labour they performed under conditions of slavery, thus,

---

<sup>28</sup> Note here that it is not my intention to conflate Oliver Cox, who was himself a Black Marxist, with the more orthodox Western tradition espoused by Marx himself. I use Cox arguments to illustrate the overarching features of the ways in which ‘race’ began to be both dealt and downplayed by a strand of Marxism, which is not uncommon to find amongst some academics who have embraced Western Marxism in Venezuela.

consolidating a society, “structured in racial dominance” (Hall, 1996:305). As a result, it preserved racialised distinctions through labour that favoured the development of an overwhelmingly non-white working class. Therefore, in the end, it produced an unequal distribution of wealth and resources that manifested itself through structural racism in Venezuela.

More recent positions acknowledge ‘race’ is a paradox that needs to be addressed in order to understand the fragmentations within the composition of the working class. The issue is that societies that have been created under racial dominance cannot fully address the complexities attached to the racialisations of class. Narayan (2017) observes that, “Even with the disappearance of the perceived privileges of the wages of whiteness [...] the politics of race would continue to inform inter-class relations” (2488) which needs to realise the fact that structural racism shapes the paths through which non-white workers are paid less. Lapon (2013) observes the complex relationship around racism, white skin privilege and hierarchies embedded in the proletariat. He argues that, “white workers gain relative advantage on the job—they’re more likely to get promotions, less likely to be fired, etc. [...] which encourages white workers to accept racism and even embrace it” (Lapon, 2013 cited in Allahar, 2014:440). This expands upon what Critical Race theorist, Mills (2003) brings to our attention, race is a readily detectable reality, which does not have the ability to be disguised as class distinctions do. By drawing on Linda Alcoff’s (1999) point regarding the link between ‘race’ and the body, Mills (2003) tell us, “we can escape the workplace, we can come home from the factories; but our bodies are always with us.” (2003:168). But these theoretical conversations in which Marxism and Critical Race theory speak to each other on approaches to structural racism have been less developed in Latin America. Wade (2017) rightfully explains that structural racism receives less attention in Latin America because it involves challenging conversations that are not dealt with in-depth, such as the role of white privilege in structuring class (Wade, 2017: 30). Instead, it is watered-down by proposing ‘racial discrimination’ is the way to approach issues of racism (Wade, 2017: 30). However, under the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela, we can observe two lines of debates around questions of race and class that take into consideration the history of the country.

The socialism espoused by the Bolivarian Revolution draws on the Marxism of Peruvian philosopher José Carlos Mariátegui (Luciani, 2016: 33). Mariátegui envisioned an, “Indo-

American socialism” tailored to Latin American realities, as he recognised Indigenous people’s traditions around land and territoriality as the foundations of socialism. This is radically different from what is envisioned by Western socialism (Luciani, 2016: 33). But even in Latin America these issues are contentious. A Marxism suited to *Indigenismo* (that is the defence of Indigenous traditions) even when trying to encompass unity along the lines of race and class, can still hold racist ideas. Mariátegui himself shows this contradiction, by being pro-Indigenous, while purporting profound anti-black<sup>29</sup> sentiments.

In turn, Afro-Venezuelan activists have conceptualised a socialism that draws heavily on the idea of *Cumbe*. Understanding what a *Cumbe* is demands a socio-historical context of slavery. In colonial Venezuela, *cimarrones* were enslaved people who fled *haciendas* and often liberated themselves through revolts and rebellions. They often ran in groups and lived in enclaves which have different names throughout Latin America: *quilombos*, *palenques*, *cumbes*, *mocambos*, *ladeiras* and *mambises* (Price, 1979:1). These are all African derived words to mean camp/shelter and freedom. Life in a *cumbe* in many cases lasted between a few months and up to 3 years, or until the *cimarrones* were recaptured by masters. This idea of *cumbe*, as we will see throughout this thesis, is taken by Afro-Venezuelan activists and foregrounds a more comprehensive view of socialism and racial mixture. *Cumbes* were horizontally organised free camps set up by *cimarrones*, alongside Indigenous and poor whites and also racially mixed non-whites such as *mulatos/as* (white and black ancestry) and *zambos/as* (Indigenous and black ancestry) (García, 2005). This opens other conceptual ways through which class and race can be brought together in a manner that is attentive to the historical formation of class in the country. While race and class are central to this thesis, a third element of difference is gender. In what follows expands upon the need to bring gender into understanding the lives of the populations of Osma and Todasana, through conceptual possibilities offered by the framework of intersectionality.

---

<sup>29</sup> In Mariátegui’s work *Seven Interpretative Essays on Peruvian Reality* (1928), it had profound racist views against the black population in Peru: “The contribution of the *Negro*, who came as a slave, almost as merchandise, appears to be even more worthless and negative. The *Negro* brought his sensualism, his superstition, and his primitivism. His condition not only did not permit him to help create culture, but the crude, vivid example of his barbarism was more likely to hamper such creation (Mariátegui, [1928]1971: essay seven Literature on Trial).

#### 2.2.4. Intersectionality

One of the questions that emerged while trying to make sense of my data in conceptual terms, was why in the Afro-Venezuelan villages of Osma and Todasana men more often find themselves unemployed than women. A substantial number of men and women tend to work for the local tourist industry. However, men's labour power is highly dependent on the –occasional– development infrastructure in the area, whereas women tend to work in more domestic related jobs in the tourist industry. However, local families articulate around sharply gendered divisions of labour. This concern generated in me similar questions to that posed by Michael Hanchard, can we define class dynamics separately from gender and racial formations? (Hanchard: 2010:515). I don't think so. To address these concerns, I draw on theories of intersectionality. Intersectionality is an analytical tool which brings race, class and gender together to understand how they structure life experiences, and configure intertwined system of oppression (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989; Davis, 1981; hooks, 1981).

In 1989, Kimberle Crenshaw first coined the term *intersectionality* to shed light on the construction of gender and race in U.S. law which erased black women. These constructions defined gender by implying correspondence with white women and defining blackness through African American men. Crenshaw, therefore, used intersectionality to make visible and theorise this gap that left black women's subjectivity outside the domain of gender and race. Since then, a burgeoning feminist scholarship introduced by scholars of colour have proposed through intersectionality that systems of power, besides being racialized, are gendered (Brewer, 1999; Collins, 1998, 2000; Davis, 1981; hooks, 1981; Spillers, 1987). They have further demonstrated the ways race and gender work together and are embedded in one another.

The strength of intersectionality as Patricia Hill Collins encourages us to see, is to focus attention on power relations, the conditions through which power is produced and how it shapes social inequalities (2015:3). Using the example of black family structural organisation, Collins rejects the idea that class and race are static categories that have no influence on the ways in which black families are organised. She advocates bringing together the relationships between capitalist development and the growth of female-headed households, by understanding the historical patterns since slavery, in how black

female labour and black male labour are organised (Collins, 1998:30). Understandings of the organisation of the black family in my fieldsite will emerge as I focus on life experiences and the voices of my research participants to show the extent through which race, class and gender shape everyday life in Osma and Todasana.

I highlight this approach because intersectionality allows us to centre our analysis on the living experiences of women of colour whose multiple identities occupy marginalised social locations, attentive to their historical experiences traced back to colonial times. There is extensive analysis that demonstrates how the mutually constitutive relationship between sexuality, slavery and colonisation shapes black women and women of colour under contemporary conditions (Davis, 1981; González, 1987; Spillers, 1987; Hartman, 1997, 2016; Lugones, 2008). Accordingly, intersectionality will shed light in this study on how race, class and gender when located in marginal positions, constitute a marker of social differentiation which works in and through each other. Similarly, through intersectionality I will show how African gendered elements persist in cultural performances and individual and collective politics amongst Afro-descendant women (Wynter, 1970, 1971; Spooner, 1996; Pravaz, 2003). Therefore, intersectionality will help us to see more than one way in which a person can face oppression when these variables overlap. Let me now explain the specific ways in which the conceptual discussion around race, class and gender has been a stepping stone towards understanding the relationship between these categories. This is relevant to understanding ideologies of state formation, racial identity, domination and popular culture that I discuss in what follows.

### **2.3. The Anti-black state**

In this section, I set out the conceptual ground that will enable us to understand the relationship between race, state formation and anti-blackness in Venezuela. In this thesis, the state is an important unit of analysis. I understand the state as an entity produced by everyday practices, languages and places that are imagined by its citizens (Blom Hansen and Stepputat, 2001; Das and Poole, 2004). I follow the idea that the state is an entity bounded by an institutional apparatus and its practices to legitimize domination, but which is also ‘imagined’ by ordinary citizens (Abrams, 1988). I draw on this anthropological approach that distances itself from classical Weberian understandings about territorial sovereignty, bureaucracy and the legitimate use of the force. But we

should not miss the key point about the state in this thesis: the state is a site of “symbolic and cultural production” (Gupta, 2012:43). These ideas of the state are relevant to understand the centrality of race in this thesis.

Essential to understanding ‘race’ and state formation in Venezuela, is the notion of *mestizaje*. This is the process of cultural and racial mixture that Latin America underwent during colonial times. *Mestizaje* began with the sexual exploitation of Indigenous and African women by European male settlers in the 15<sup>th</sup> century during the colonisation of the Americas in order to locally increase the size of the slave population (Appelbaum, Macpherson and Roseblatt, 2003). Therefore, *mestizaje* refers to the blending between Europeans, Indigenous people and Africans, and their subsequent intermixtures, which led to a racial and cultural fusion. In what follows, I will situate the case of Venezuela within the literature on race in Latin America, although I will describe broad similarities of constructions of race in Latin America. In this way I will explain how Venezuela has historically operationalised forms of domination through the ideology of racial mixture. But before I do that, I briefly introduce the ways in which anti-blackness is operationalised in processes of state formation. The key point of this contextualisation of anti-blackness is that it will help us to see more broadly how racial domination and racial mixture coexists in Venezuela.

### ***2.3.1. Blackness, Anti-blackness and mestizaje***

Blackness as a concept refers to the positive value of African culture and African-derived traits which are also used to forge a black identity amongst the African Diaspora (Whitten and Torres, 1998). In contrast, its antithesis is anti-blackness. This is the ideology that reinforces ways in which black and African appearances and cultural traits become racialised and negatively valued (Gordon, 1997:76). *Mestizaje* or racial mixture, was strongly encouraged in Venezuela as elsewhere in the region, due to antiblackness. Recent Critical Race scholarship that has revised *mestizaje* and anti-blackness together has prompted diverse theoretical insights, to enquire whether *mestizaje* can be considered a form of ethnocide. One persuasive evaluation is put forth by Jared Sexton (2008) who argued in favour of recognising *mestizaje* as a mechanism that envisioned a violence-free form of, “sterilisation of the black population” (Sexton, 2008:200). In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the notion of *mestizaje* was theorised in Darwinist terms as an aesthetic process

of, “ethnic improvement” to generate new “racial” types. Sexton (2008) observes that a core theorisation for understanding the centrality of anti-blackness within *mestizaje* as a state ideology is the essay *The cosmic race* (1925) by Mexican philosopher José Vasconcelos (200). He conjured up an interpretation of Darwin’s doctrine of natural selection extended to Latin America’s black populations:

The lower types of the species [Indigenous and black populations] will be absorbed by the superior type [Caucasian]. In this manner, for example, the black could be redeemed, and step by step, by voluntary extinction, the uglier stocks will give way to the more handsome. Inferior races, upon being educated, would become less prolific, and the better specimens would go on ascending a scale of ethnic improvement. [...] And in few decades of aesthetic improvement the black may disappear... (Vasconcelos, 1997:32-33).

In Vasconcelo’s essay, encouraging human reproduction through interracial sexual unions was a eugenic practice that pursued aesthetic ends. For him, racial mixture sought to improve the genetic quality of the population in a way in which racial ‘Others’ such as black populations (as well as Indigenous peoples), would gradually disappear by voluntarily engaging in interracial mixture as a process of human beautification. Consequently, as we can see, Vasconcelo’s process of human beautification is underpinned by the ideology of *blanqueamiento*, which means the valorisation of whiteness over blackness in physical, moral and cultural traits (Skidmore, 1993). In what follows, I will explain how racial mixture led to ideologies of domination while in appearance celebrated mixture, concealing anti-blackness through the ideologies of *mestizaje* and racial democracy.

### **2.3.2. *Mestizaje and racial democracy***

#### *Mestizaje*

Like Venezuela, most Latin American states made use of *mestizaje* to produce in the 20<sup>th</sup> century new social landscapes to maintain racial domination whilst forging racially homogeneous identities. *Mestizaje* translates into English as the idea of nations that claim all their citizenry is racially mixed, which is embraced by the single ethos of being ‘*Mestizo/a*’. Thus, everyone, regardless of origin and ancestry can claim ‘*we are all mestizos*’ due to the intense racial mixture that has taken place since colonial times. In



Venezuela, the *mestizo* discourse has been locally adapted with the motto ‘We are all *café con leche*’ (Coffee with milk) (e.g. Wright, 1990) as the defining feature of Venezuelan identity. It portrays the population as one homogeneous, mixed-race social body, neither white nor black. But, as idyllic as this *café con leche* discourse may sound, *mestizaje* involves the maintenance of racial hierarchies, enforced against Indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples. It might be confusing that official claims to racial homogeneity live alongside racial hierarchies, but Latin American societies are racialised societies that for a long time denied racial discrimination based on the hegemonic discourse of *mestizaje* (Hanchard, 1994). This dynamic of domination and denial constituted a racial system that cunningly made racism and racial mixture coexist and held them in tension with one another. As Wade (1993) illustrates using the example of Colombia, “the possibility of seeing in nationalist discourse about race mixture both a celebration of mixture and a discrimination against black and Indians are a characteristic of the contradictory coexistence of *mestizaje* and discrimination” (19). This means that while racial purity was not advocated in discourses around identity and nation, racial discrimination existed on the ground.

### *Racial democracy*

How to define what is the ideology of racial democracy or *democracia racial* forces us to return to the conceptual racial and cultural triad of Indigenous people, Africans and Europeans in the notion of *mestizaje*. The reason is that understandings of *democracia racial* were decided by the political stance of who defined *mestizaje*, and in this case it was exclusively defined by elites. Racial democracy is both an ideology and a discourse that became the glue in which elites discursively bound together a homogenous image of Latin America’s racially and culturally mixed populations. This ideology primarily used to mean that in Latin American societies, diverse groups coexist in racial harmony. But, the scholarly literature on race in Latin America has been built upon two conflicting readings of what racial democracy is. The first, is the archetypal view produced by elites of European descent and other scholars that denied the existence of racial hegemony in the region. The second is the nuanced scholarship that made it possible to demonstrate the hegemonic side of the first version.

### 2.3.3. *Racial mixture through rose tinted glasses*

Early notions of racial democracy saw Latin America through rose tinted glasses, picturing them as racially harmonious societies and therefore, racial paradises. In this view, the absence of racial boundaries in regulating sexual and cultural mixture across groups, meant ‘race’ was irrelevant (Goldstein, 1999; Wade, 2009). The origins of the concept of *democracia racial*, although never explicitly used as such, began during the 1920s and 1930s in Brazil, and later in Puerto Rico (1940s-1950s). Initially, the term was a global metaphor that provided visibility to an alleged absence of racial divisions in Brazil. After World War II, as a reaction against Nazism and the holocaust, new global efforts were made to promote human rights and confront racism (Alberto, 2011:151). In this light, Brazil’s approach to race relations through ‘racial democracy’ came to be – uncritically– considered globally an example of a nation that had overcome racial tensions.

The term racial democracy began to be strongly associated with Brazil and equated to the works of Gilberto Freyre and Frank Tannenbaum (Alberto and Garskoff, 2018: 264-271). It came to illustrate the underlying arguments of “interracial fraternity” articulated by Freyre (1933) in *Casa-grande e senzala*. Freyre portrayed Brazil as a society free of racial divisions for two linked reasons – ‘less hostile’ slavery and racial mixture. To the supporters of racial democracy, slavery in Brazil was ‘gentle’ (Tannenbaum, 1946; Freyre, 1986). This historical dynamic was perceived in the Americas to be a counter example to ‘race’ in the U.S. Similarly, for these authors, the absence of racial barriers while choosing a partner, and high proportion of racial mixture, became an ideology and then a widespread myth to render Latin America as an example of *democracia racial* whereby racism was made to appear non-existent. But, it is often forgotten that Gilberto Freyre did not coin the term *racial democracy* (Alberto and Hoffnung-Garskof, 2018: 271). The term had been widely used before by black public figures and scholars and became explicitly articulated in Brazil in 1950 by black Brazilian sociologist Alberto Guerreiro Ramos with the purpose of emphasising racial fraternity, a move that was latter regretted and considered naïve by black intellectuals in Brazil (Alberto, 2011:152). Yet, later, racial democracy became a term used by black scholars to make more critical claims for inclusion and citizenship.

#### 2.3.4. *Busting the myth of racial democracy*

A second reading is critical and dominant in current scholarship. It is based on a critical assessment that dismantles the first reading. By showing the realities on the ground, critical reading demonstrated and continues to show that Latin American societies are not racial democracies (Costa Vargas, 2004; Hanchard, 1994; Roth-Gordon, 2017; Sheriff, 2001; Wade, 1997; Wright, 1990) . The façade of *democracia racial* sustained the post-racial discourse ‘*we are all mestizos.*’ Through this discourse, the state appears to celebrate a mode of ‘racelessness’ based upon racial mixture and blending of cultural differences. Racelessness is a concept that explains how the state predicates principles of universality and colour-blindness to exclude and downplay the idea of ‘race,’ while the latter is still an organising principle that arranges societies in racial hierarchies and maintains white hegemony (Goldberg, 2002). In what follows, I will explain how mestizaje and racial democracy were ideologies that allowed complex forms of racial domination while preserving notions of racial mixture.

#### 2.3.5. *White supremacy*

*Mestizaje* created and supported constructions of ‘race’ through knotty, socio-historical processes of racialisation embedded in white supremacy. I use white supremacy<sup>30</sup> as a concept that refers to the ideological set of deep seated practices that support the dominance of whiteness (Christian, 2018). It refers to an ideological structure that encompasses the historical, cultural, social, economic, and political values which laid the foundation for European settlers to create power through exploitation of Indigenous and black groups (Martinot, 2010). In Venezuela, Spanish elites and *blancos criollos* (creole whites or later *Criollo* elite), who were the descendants of Spanish settlers born in Venezuela, were elite groups who ruled the country, and who adapted ideas of ‘race’ and social status to reproduce their dominance. This group made and dealt with ‘race’ via

---

<sup>30</sup> While there is no standard definition of what White supremacy is, this is a concept that can generate confusion when not properly put into context. Images of Nazis in Germany or the Ku Klux Klan horse-riders in the U.S. come first to mind when talking about white supremacy. The term is commonly used in connection to hate groups which advocate racist ideologies of white racial purity based on an alleged biological superiority of Caucasian people. These groups are only a manifestation of white supremacy ideology in a racialised social system. In my view, it is not limited to or exclusively referring to white biological purity.

strategic concessions that enabled them to maintain their dominance and hegemony by making ‘race’ a negotiable category, to an extent. As Wade (1993) observes, “only one thing was certain: to be black or Indian was bad, to be white was good” (9). Thus, all non-white groups, namely Indigenous peoples, black peoples and racially mixed peoples were subjugated by the white elites. I propose in this thesis that white supremacy allows us to conceptually identify the ways in which in Venezuela people of European descent or those who ‘look’ white(r) have maintained hegemony in the social, economic, cultural or political structures without ever enforcing a racialized system through the law, as in the U.S. But white supremacy is complicated by the way through which the social construction of ‘race’ became understood as a fluid concept and how racial mixture was dealt with.

Children of parents of two different groups were not considered to belong to the same groups as their parents. Instead, they belonged to an intermediate category. Take for example, the child of a black parent and a white parent. In Latin America’s colonial understanding, racially mixed children were not considered white nor black. For a reader acquainted with the U.S. notion of hypodescent or the ‘one drop rule’, it may seem incomprehensible that in such cases racially mixed children were not conceptualised as belonging to the group of the non-white parent. In the case of Venezuela, racial mixture was an intense process, which identified much of its non-white population within a myriad of categories to distinguish their mixture. For example, by the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Venezuela, 62% of the total population was comprised of racially mixed non-white population that had African ancestry (Wright, 1990:13). This group alone in Venezuela was comprised of 53 different terminologies and more than 103 different skin tone variations, while mocking and dehumanising<sup>31</sup>, functioned as racial categories that still influence how people tend to self-identify today (Ramírez, 2009:110).

---

<sup>31</sup> These categories in Venezuela involved the assessment and variations of physical traits such as hair texture, nose shape, lip shape, eye colour and the racial origin of the parents. For example, a child born from a Spanish father and Indigenous mother would be called *Mestizo*. But if a *Mestizo* man married an Indigenous woman, their child would be called *Coyote*. The term *Coyote* is defined by the Dictionary of the Real Academy of Spanish (DRAE, 2017) as a carnivorous mammal, smaller than a wolf and of yellowish colour. The term *Zambo* (Indigenous + Black), means knock-kneed, whereas the term *Mulato/a* is a ‘hybrid, derived from Mule’. The list of terms is large and varies and contains mocking and degrading meanings which continue to be normalised today when talking about someone’s physical appearance and conversations of race at present day.

But racial formations in Venezuela were complicated by the existence of symbolic mechanisms to grant a limited set of privilege for non-white populations in late 18<sup>th</sup> century. These mechanisms were solutions envisioned by *criollo* elite's due to the diverse mounting racial pressures that threatened white hegemony. There was the latent fear around the sheer number of Venezuela's non-white population which could potentially reproduce in Venezuela a similar scenario to the Haitian Revolution, which led to mass-killings of whites (1781-1804) (Ciccariello-Maher, 2013:148). There was thought of that the eventual uprising of non-whites in power could lead to a *mulatto* republic or a Pardocracy<sup>32</sup> (*Pardocracia*). Thus, the sheer number of non-white populations made white elites open small windows through which non-white, marginalised social status and phenotypes could be slightly mitigated.

Early mechanisms of *blanqueamiento* were tied to the notion of purity of blood (*limpieza de sangre*). This meant that applicants needed to be able to prove traceable white blood with no racial mixture within two generations, in order to be able to obtain legally certified whiteness (Twinnam, 1999; Wade, 2009: 69). Yet, further royal decrees offered flexibility to overlook non-white status. For economic purposes the Spanish crown in Venezuela issued a lucrative royal decree in 1795 called *cédula* of '*gracias al sacar*' (thanks for the exclusion), to obtain money from the exploited non-white population (Martens Ramírez, 2004: 58). Through this mechanism the Crown sought to absolve the non-white racial status of brown, racially mixed and black applicants by allowing them to be accepted as 'whiter'. This *cédula* allowed them to move away from their negatively perceived non-white ancestry. Purchasing the *cédula* of '*gracias al sacar*', gave small privileges to the marginalised non-white population, and granted negligible, symbolic concessions otherwise enjoyed only by whites, which in a material sense allowed some social mobility to non-whites. But the number of non-whites who petitioned and benefited from this *cédula* was very small<sup>33</sup>. As we will see in what follows, these practices of granting prerogatives to racially mixed populations helped to maintain white supremacy.

---

<sup>32</sup> A hypothetical slave uprising or an eventual race war had elites in the numeric disadvantage. This could originate in a '*Pardocracia*'. Note that Pardocracia combines the 'Pardo', a multiracial category that included men of black, mulatto, mestizo, and Indian ancestry. And *cracy* which means 'power' if we break down the meaning of the word democracy.

<sup>33</sup> Racism, poverty and rigid caste structures during the 18<sup>th</sup> century were major obstacles that prevented the free brown and black population from applying for the *cédula* of '*gracias al sacar*'. Archival research reports that only 21 non-white individuals, out of 1.7 million non-whites applied for this decree (Andrews, 2018: 60).

The complexities created by the mechanisms explored above, lie in the shifting ways in which what elements of ancestry someone may assert, became unpredictable, circumstantial and negotiable. Having this dynamic in mind is essential to understand the explorations of race in Chapter 3. I now turn to outline whiteness and early mechanisms of whitening or *blanqueamiento* in Venezuela.

### **2.3.6. *Blanqueamiento as White supremacy***

Venezuela historian Tomás Straka (2006), observed that the *Criollo* elite created for themselves an identity as Europeans and desired to be perceived, “as second Europeans building a young Europe in America” (23). Once Venezuela obtained its independence in 1811, the *criollo* elite sought to modernise the country in a way that resembled Europe, drawing on ideas of European Enlightenment (Straka, 2006). During the processes of nation-building and modernisation in early 20<sup>th</sup> century, racial questions were fundamental for the transformation of the state. Most of the *criollo* intellectuals in the country envisioned that racial mixture would facilitate the process of state-modernisation by blending many black, Indigenous and racially mixed *mestizo* groups with more Caucasian blood. Much of the *criollo* elites’ thoughts were influenced by theories of scientific racism.

Openly racist statements to eliminate black populations via racial mixture were not rare in the post-colonial history of Venezuela. For example, Venezuelan historian, and former Nobel Prize nominee, Rufino Blanco Fombona purported in 1912 that, “Venezuela has no salvation unless it resolves how it will become a Caucasian country. This is key to the future”(cited in Wright, 1990:72). Venezuelan philosopher Arturo Uslar Pietri also entertained the idea that European migration was crucial to alter the black, Indigenous and highly non-white composition of the country by arguing that:

The appearance of the *negro* in America is due to [the] incapacity [ineptitude] of the Indian. The *negro*, for his part, makes no worthwhile contribution to the race. The resultant mixing has not superseded the original components. What we might call the Venezuelan race of today, is- in general- as completely devoid of a modern (and dynamic) concept of work and progress, as were its ancestors. That means that if we don’t drastically change the ethnic composition of our population, it will be almost impossible to change the course of our history and transform our country into a modern state.” (Uslar Pietri, 1937:6943)

Here, as we can grasp from the quotes, elites' contempt for black, Indigenous and racially mixed populations in Venezuela, put forth *blanqueamiento* as an imperative mechanism to construct the idea of nation and progress. While purity is not advocated, racial mixture takes on *blanqueamiento*, through which the idea of progress comes to be gauged by the proximity of the national racial make-up, to the European phenotype. Therefore, intergenerational *blanqueamiento* becomes the means through which nations could claim whiteness (Hernández, 2002). Therefore, is possible to see that what enabled the operation of racial democracy discourses in the country was the ambivalent coexistence between a marginal cultural inclusion and discourses that urged the black population to 'improve the race' (*mejorar la raza*) that I explore in Chapter 3. Having these dynamics in mind in how racial mixture has been historically constructed and how embracing whiteness made the country lean towards "whitened" identities by shaping ideas of status and racial mixture, can help us to understand in Chapter 3, how socially-derived and negotiable the concept of race is in Venezuela.

So far, I have proposed the groundwork that allows us to see how the political and economic are hard to separate from the meanings attached to race through the body in this thesis. The subtle mechanisms that influence the 'mind' through ideologies and common sense nurtured by the dominant groups is evident in the economic distributions of resources. However, I will show with the case of Afro-Venezuelans in Osma that there is room for contestations against these forms of domination. Donna Haraway (1988) remind us that, "we need the power of modern critical theories of how meanings and bodies get made not in order to deny meanings and bodies, but in order to build meanings and bodies that have a chance for life" (580). Drawing on these convergences I will briefly define, how those who are contesting meanings attached to race, become 'politicised' and are galvanised into social movements.

## **2.4. What is the political? Race, blackness and popular culture**

Within this thesis, there are terms such as 'politicised racial identities'. By defining politicisation, I drawn on Eduardo Bonilla-Silva 'racial contestation' which refers to the struggles of racial groups for systemic changes regarding their position at one or more levels (Bonilla-Silva, 1997:473). Earlier I mentioned that in Venezuela, black physical

traits were devalued. Similarly, black culture was also shunned. Wright (1990) observes that in the cultural triad of Venezuela's culture comprised of Spanish, Indigenous and Africans, African contributions were barely promoted. There was little incorporation of blackness, where African contributions were circumscribed to folklore, music and religious practices, and it was spatially limited to isolated geographic rural spaces along the coastal region or in *barrios*, which are enclaves of urban poverty in the cities. Amid economic, social and cultural marginalisation, black populations have carved out powerful spaces for contestations. Through their 'politicisation', black groups are seeking to subvert systemic racism. This politicisation of black populations in the Americas has received attention within the scholarship on social movements.

#### ***2.4.1. Social movements definition***

The literature on social movements is vast and diverse. Due to the breath of the concept of social movements, I use the definition put forth by McCarty and Zald (1977), who consider social movements as a, "set of opinions and beliefs in a population which represents preferences for changing some elements of the social structure and/or reward distribution of a society" (1217-1218). Classic theories of social movements can be succinctly summarised into two meta-theoretical strands that conceptually divides "strategies" from "identities." Following Tilly's (1978) as well as Tarrow and Tollefson's (1994) resource mobilisations theory, they grapple with questions that involve strategies, meaning motivations, political goals, access to and use of resources available. The second theory is the, "new social movements approach" which deals with enquiries concerned with identity formation processes and their further manifestation in collective identities (Escobar and Alvarez, 1992). However, an intersection of these theories has been used in the last two decades to build a body of knowledge to think about how black social movements in the American continent emerged. While the resource mobilisation theory takes the U.S. Civil Rights Movement as one of the examples par excellence, the, "new social movements approach" has been used as a framework for understanding ethnic/race-based struggles in Latin America. In what follows, I will flesh out the contestatory potential of popular culture as used by politicised Afro-descendant groups in Osma and Todasana.



### 2.4.2. *On black popular culture*

In this thesis, the work of British cultural theorist Stuart Hall, *What is black in popular culture?* (1992) and Argentinian theorist Néstor García Canclini, *Hybrid cultures: strategies for living and entering modernity* (1995) have helped me to think about Afro-Venezuelan popular culture. This combination has provided me with tools to understand Venezuelan black popular culture without neglecting the diversity of blackness intertwined in ideologies of *mestizaje* and nationhood.

To Hall and García Canclini, popular culture is an idea tied to the field of power and cultural hegemony. Hall (1992) argues that black culture is the expression of the African heritage within the musicality, orality and traditions of Africa and its diaspora. Hall also sees black popular culture as an heterogeneous and contradictory space of contestation (1992:108). By meaning both the space and the resources, through Hall's definition we can understand how Afro-descendants engage in cultural struggles whereby white racial hegemony is challenged through the politics of culture. In García Canclini theorisations of popular culture, ideas of nation and *mestizaje* are central. He suggests that projects of modernisation and national identity (early 20<sup>th</sup> century) prompted the state to appropriate 'traditional' or 'pre-modern' cultures. García Canclini makes the distinction between high culture pertaining to the elite while "popular" culture refers to that of the subaltern. This category involves the poor, *mestizo/a*, Indigenous peoples and black populations. While Hall illuminated definitions of popular culture drawing on cultural heritage rooted in Africa used to contests racial marginalisation, García Canclini understood a popular culture that is attentive to *mestizaje* within which a homogenous idea of nationhood and cultural unity coalesce. The intersections of these two lines of thought informed by popular culture and *mestizaje* are identifiable features in the case of the black rural communities I focus on in this thesis.

In the case of Venezuela, popular culture has been a site for homogenising ideas of nationhood. That means that the idea of 'racial democracy' operates by incorporating black popular culture of African origin, into the ethos of being Venezuelan or *criollo*. In Venezuela the term *criollo/a* is analogous to *mestizo/a* (racially mixed), which produces a shared connotation of having a Venezuelan identity. *Criollo/a* is an ideological construction by the Spanish descendant elites in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to 'imagine' a culture

where there is no longer pure or separate cultures (Pérez and Perozo, 2003:138). *Criollo/a* also carries with it class and racial connotations linked strongly to Indigenous and Afro-descendants. Within the term *criollo/a*, African heritage is included, only through a restricted folkloric form, which does not overshadow the central ‘whiter’ features of the national culture. This imagined homogeneity held together the diverse cultural mixtures and socio-economic inequality without ever hindering the hegemony of the white(r) elites and Spanish culture.

I see this knotty interplay of national identity and the ambiguous inclusion of cultural traditions of subjugated groups conceptually addressed in García Canclini’s work. He foregrounds as ‘hybrid’ cultures what I identify as the *criollo* Venezuelan identity. The cultural traditions of Afro-Venezuelans, despite being recognisable as black culture as identified by Hall’s definition, are also certainly mixed with Indigenous and Spanish traits. Therefore, when I use the term black popular culture in this thesis, I am referring to the marginalised cultural production of Afro-descendants, in orality, music and religious festivals traditions. This use has enabled a battlefield of contestations whereby these autochthonous resources communicate a broad range of issues such as racial, historical, national, and gender marginalisation. Let me now turn to the most recent scholarship that has enable me to see popular culture as a form of political mobilisation, by drawing on other experiences of Afro-descendant social movements in the Americas.

#### **2.4.3. Black social movements reload**

A newer niche in the scholarship of Afro-Latin American mobilisations bridges the connections between popular culture and activism. This niche looks into re-conceptualisations of blackness, diaspora and denunciations of race and racism through cultural production (De la Fuente, 2008; Fernandes, 2006; Perry, 2016; Rivera-Rideau, 2015; Smith, 2016; Wade, 1995). This is an emerging niche that draws on theoretical influence from constructions of African Diaspora found in Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* and *One nation under a Groove*. These studies examine ways in which Afro-descendants through their cultural production carve spaces to undo and resist, “the oppressive power of racial capitalism” (Gilroy, 1996:365). There are recent examples that illustrate politicisation through popular culture. Fresh anti-racist mobilisation that grasps our attention is the #BlackLivesMatter (BLM) movement in the U.S. This movement has

energised social mobilisations against anti-black police brutality in the U.S., which has led to spontaneous mass demonstration. #BlackLivesMatter started and has relied on digitally driven forms of mass connectivity through social media that was created by queer Black women<sup>34</sup> and began with the outrage at the killings of unarmed African American teenager Trayvon Martin and later Michael Brown –to name a few– by white police officers. BLM presents us now with a view to understand deep reflections about structural racism. It has led to mobilisations which have grown into a social movement.

Other recent black social mobilisations such as *Reaja our sera mortx!* (React or Die) in Brazil illustrates the politicisation of popular culture. *Reaja our sera mortx!* began with the links between local hip-hop artists and the *Grupo de Teatro Choque Cultural*, a theatre movement from Salvador, Bahia which together developed street theatre performances as an innovative response against anti-black police brutality in Brazil. *Reaja our sera mortx!* was created in 2005, which later led to sustained collective protests in Brazilian streets (Smith, 2016). I use the examples of movements such as the #BlackLivesMatter through social media or street theatre and *Reaja our sera mortx!* to think about the diversity of resources from popular culture through which Afro-descendants use as a system to politicise themselves. They expose lived experiences of social inequalities and present their concerns to move towards social justice.

The increasing need for interdisciplinary approaches has enabled newer scholarly trends to investigate popular culture, which is perceived as a less conventional aspect of Afro-Latin American political mobilisation. It has been only recently, that popular culture began to be considered as a form of political mobilisation amongst Afro-Latinos. As Tianna Paschel (2018) identifies, popular culture was not considered to be a form of political mobilisation (223). The reason for this neglect varies. On the one hand, not all political mobilisations arise to seize power from the state (Alvarez *et al.*, 2017:7). While on the other hand, the production of some artists was not seen itself as political, but has been demonstrated otherwise (Wade, 1999, 2000; De la Fuente, 2008; Fernandes, 2011; Rivera-Rideau, 2015; Perry, 2016). Thus, they were overlooked because cultural producers, artists and cultural activists went unnoticed as a form of oppositional politics

---

<sup>34</sup> #BlackLivesMatter was created by U.S. black queer activists Alicia Garza, Patrice Cullors and Opal Tometi after unarmed Trayvon Martin was murdered, while the man who killed him, George Zimmerman was not charged (Garza, 2016:23).

to the state, or they were ignored because they were outside structures of civil society participation, clustered in organisations (as most black movements are). However, recent scholarship favours the exploration of forms of popular culture as a form of black politics (Fernandes, 2006; Rivera-Rideau, 2015). These are innovative areas that broadens our understanding by re-thinking how Afro-Latinos social movements emerge, whilst explicitly situating popular culture as a form of political mobilisation. According to Gilroy (1996), African diasporic music heritage is one of the vehicles through which Afro-descendant populations express counter-narratives of oppression while rendering visible the, “experience of slavery” (363) as well as, “recovered and rendered vivid and immediate” (363). Therefore, slavery becomes a grammar that is retrieved to communicate contemporary forms of racial inequality. Drawing on these conceptual grounds, in the reminder of the chapters we will see how cultural performances illustrate in depth the complexities of *mestizaje* and racial democracy in my field site. The analysis of the data in this thesis, thus will illustrate what Alvarez *et al.*, (2017) note when suggesting that cultural activism can interrupt our understanding of “politics as usual.” (21).

## 2.5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I presented the conceptual alternatives through which I think about how Afro-descendants use cultural resources whilst they pursue a political objective of contesting their marginalisation. I started by presenting the analytical ways to understand racialisation of class and gender. I did so by putting into conversation debates within orthodox Marxism, the Black Radical Tradition of Marxism, Critical Race theory and Intersectionality to show the relevance of these debates while understanding racialisations of class and gender in Venezuela. Then, I used the concepts of racial democracy, *mestizaje*, white supremacy, blackness and anti-blackness while contextualising modes of dominations of black populations. I argued for the relevance of popular culture as a lens to explain how Afro-descendants politically organise and engage within understandings of popular culture and cultural traditions, which I set out through theoretical combinations for understanding the relationship between blackness and popular culture drawing on Hall (1992) and García Canclini (1995). In my view, popular culture provides a battlefield to Afro-Venezuelans to produce political mobilisations that seek social justice.

# Chapter 3: Contesting *Mestizaje*

*Ideas of race and nation in Osma and Todasana*

Come close, *negro*  
Come closer,  
Listen to the drums  
So, you can understand  
They want to eliminate the African drums  
Why does racism exist?  
I can't explain it myself.

Acércate *negro*,  
Acércate más,  
Escucha los tambores  
Pa' que los puedas interpretar  
A los tambores africanos los quieren  
eliminar  
¿Por qué existe el racismo?  
No me acabo de explicar.

*Song: Acércate negro (come close negro)*  
Fulton, 54 years old

## 3.1. Introduction

In Osma and Todasana, several small groups comprised of *cultores populares* –meaning musicians and activists– contest, confront and challenge racial stereotyping through their cultural production. In February 2015 I met Fulton, the composer of the song above. He was a black man born in Osma. He moved to Caracas, the capital city and lived there between the 1970s and 1990s to improve his economic situation due to the lack of jobs in his village. While in Caracas, Fulton worked in a low-paid job in an air conditioning company in the wealthy part of the city known as ‘The East’ (*El Este*). As a black man in *El Este*, Fulton received regular harassment by the police. “If you did not carry ID, the *libreta militar* (military service record) and a letter of employment, the police would give you ‘*palo*’ (beat with batons) and tell you to get in the *patrulla* (police car)” said Fulton. Failing to make ends meet, Fulton turned to popular culture to make extra income. While he lived in Caracas in the working-class barrio *Los Frailes de Catia*, Fulton joined the ‘*Grupo Semillas*’ in 1985. This was a drumming group comprised of Afro-Venezuelan musicians from Chuspa who also lived in Caracas. While in the *Grupo Semillas*, Fulton composed ‘*acércate negro*’, the song that introduces this chapter, inspired by his own experience. He sought to shed light on the denigration of blackness.

As ‘race’ and class are visibly intersecting in Venezuela’s social structure, these are subjects communicated through cultural performances in Osma and Todasana. The social construction of ‘race’ is fused together with two powerful ideologies of ‘race’ and nation

that support one another: *mestizaje* (racial mixing) and *democracia racial* (racial democracy).

Patterns of structural racial discrimination are difficult to detect in the country. The reason is that the national census, since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, purportedly eliminated racial categories to reinforce the ideology of *mestizaje* and ‘racial equality’ (García, 2007). Since 1999, the state acknowledged the pluricultural<sup>35</sup> character of Venezuelan society, yet it has been a slow process. Only by 2011 did the Venezuelan government include racial categories<sup>36</sup> in a national household survey. However, the number of Venezuelans who identify in categories of blackness is low. The reason for this is how the population reproduces dominant ideologies of race. Out of a population of 27 million, only 2.7% identified themselves as *negros* (Blacks) and 0.7% *Afrodescendientes* (Afro-descendants), whereas 52% identified with the term *Moreno/Morena* (Brown) (INE, 2012). This is noteworthy if we consider that Venezuela is said to have the third largest percentage of Afro-Latinos in South America, only superseded by Brazil and Colombia (Bello and Rangel, 2000). As we will see in this chapter, those who use cultural production to question *mestizaje* advocate for self-identification with blackness. This is a two-fold strategy. First, *cultores populares* attempt to reach more Afro-descendants into identifying unambiguously with blackness. Second is a wider strategy to call the attention of the state to implement policies that target Afro-Venezuelans to improve their economic well-being (discussed in Chapter 4).

In this chapter, I explore this strategy of reaching out to black Venezuelans through oral cultural productions. One of them is a poetic form of Spanish origin known as a *décima*, created and recited on the spot. Usually, a *décima* is a ten-verse piece with a theme that recounts a personal experience. The piece conveys a message. I suggest that cultural productions emerge as sites of contentions against negative racialisation and to revalorise blackness. I illustrate how cultural productions allow us to see a range of issues connected to construction and contestations of black identity.

---

<sup>35</sup> Pluriculturalism is a concept that is commonly applied in the context of Latin America. Walsh (2008) notes that pluriculturalism captures the dynamics of both racial mixture and cultural coexistence amongst black populations, Indigenous peoples and white-*mestizo* populations within the same space.

<sup>36</sup> The racial categories included were: black (negro); Afro-descendant (Afrodescendiente); Brown (Moreno), White (Blanco), Indigenous and Other.

This chapter is divided into three sections. In the first section, I explore who are the *cultores populares* in my fieldsite and what their rationale is to do what they do. It is only after understanding the shifting nature of their contestations and their agendas that it is easier to understand the significance of the range of issues they contest. In the second section, I also explore a *décima* that reflects upon ideas of ‘race’ and nation related to the ambivalent space in which Afro-Venezuelans are positioned within the narrative of *mestizaje*. In the third section, I explore how a *décima* challenges the relationship between racism and racial mixing, while also allows exploring construction of racial categories through bodily features such as hair.

Since the main argument that I make in my thesis is that culture is a battlefield used by Afro-Venezuelans to voice different forms of marginalisation, the objective of this chapter is to offer a detailed view on what this battlefield looks like. Drawing on these different elements, I show how cultural productions contest the ideology of *mestizaje*, and how these contestations give us a way into how people in my fieldsite make constructions of racial categories, racial identity and interpretations of bodily features.

### **3.2. Who contests *mestizaje*?**

In this section, I explore how *mestizaje* is contested through various strategies that critique the exclusion of Afro-descendants from its narrative. The *cultores populares* can be understood by dividing their activism into two different groups. The first is a small group comprised of elderly *cultores populares*, which I will call ‘the culturalists’. The second is a group I call ‘the rebels’. This group is comprised of young *cultores populares* and political activists who are concerned with how to politically mobilise the valorisation of blackness with a politicised view. Then, I briefly describe the goals and strategies of their activism. The objective of this section is to provide an overview that contextualises the cultural contestations that I later explore in sections 3.3 and 3.4.

### 3.2.1. The ‘culturalists’

The ‘culturalists’ is a group comprised of *cultores* who focus on protecting drum rhythms and songs that are characteristic of the local black culture. Their advocacy against racial discrimination involves the strengthening of a black identity rooted in the defence of local traditions which focus on the youth. Their purpose is to emphasise a positive identity as black (*negros*) Venezuelans. They pass down the culture they learned from their forebears or *ancestros* to the younger generations, in spaces such as local primary schools or cultural groups in the villages. The ‘culturalists’ main concern is retaining a pristine local culture that is valorised by the local Afro-Venezuelan youth. I will refer to three of the most identifiable ‘culturalist’ leaders in Osma and Todasana: Leila, Lander and Andrés. There is no overlap in the teachings or performances of their cultural production. The key similarity between these ‘culturalists’ is that their advocacy is not overtly politicised; rather it is focused on strengthening a black identity rooted in the defence of local traditions.

One of the ‘culturalists’ is Leila from Todasana. She is a black woman in her late 50s who is a *cultora popular*. She comes from a family of *cultores*. She lives with her husband, Lander, who is a percussionist and a *decimista* (composer of *décima* poetry). They were both born and raised in Todasana and are descendants of local *popular cultores* born in neighbouring villages in the Parish of Caruao (*Parroquia Caruao*). They were well-known traditional singers. Leila and Lander call their immediate forebears *ancestros*, meaning parents, grandparents, great-grandparents. This couple maintained the traditions they learnt from their *ancestros* in their drumming groups called *Movimiento El Almendrón* and the children’s group *Tierra Sanita*. In these groups, Leila and Lander teach young people and children to sing, dance and play the drums. Leila said, “Our job is to maintain our traditions so that children know their roots and feel proud of them.”

Another influential culturalist in the *Parroquia Caruao* is Andrés from Osma. His advocacy focuses on preserving local songs and retrieving a black identity through Afrocentric aesthetics in his cultural production. Andrés has his own folklore group called *Melaza y Tambor* (Molasses and Drum). This is Osma’s main drumming group. He founded it on October 12<sup>th</sup>, 1976. When I met Andrés in February 2015, he was a 61-



year-old musician with 45 years of experience teaching the local culture to children and young people in Osma. Andrés explicitly draws on African aesthetic inspiration in *Melaza y Tambor*'s performances. Andrés makes the drums played by his group, made of hollow wood with their exteriors carved with figures of animals (frogs, king vultures, etc.). Although Andrés learnt these forms of decoration from his *ancestros*, he has only found out through his own research that they are of African origin, as he was previously unaware of this fact. Also, since the 2010s, the musicians of his group *Melaza y Tambor* began to wear *dashikis* to perform. These are loose-fitting, bright-coloured short tunics common in West Africa. Now this clothing is increasingly worn by musicians, drummers and political activists across the *Parroquia Caruao*. Andrés belongs to a strand of 'culturalists' to whom aesthetics have an important political significance for developing a black identity. Andrés said, "We are not taught to love ourselves, to love our blackness or that black is beautiful. That is why I focus on teaching children to adore our culture."

These strategies of the 'culturalists', differ from a diverse group of *cultores* and political activists to whom views of social justice are deployed to challenge the underprivileged socio-economic positions of Afro-Venezuelans in the country. These cases will be expanded below when we look at the 'rebels'.

### 3.2.2. The 'rebels'

'The rebels' is a larger group that involves *cultores populares*, musicians, schoolteachers and political activists from Osma and Todasana. They are younger and older generations that grew up with influences of 'culturalists'. A common feature of 'rebels' in Osma and Todasana is that when they refer to *ancestros*, they mean both their local forebears, and the African peoples forced into slavery in Venezuela. The reason for this layered meaning is that this group has been politicised. The political activism of the 'rebels' is due to their connections with national Afro-Venezuelan movements. Some other 'rebels', besides being members of Afro-Venezuelan movements, are also state workers.

The first 'rebel' is Fulton, whom I introduced earlier in the chapter. Fulton began his own music group called *Cacao Negro* in 2009, after being a member of the group *Melaza y Tambor*, as well as *Grupo Semillas*. Fulton's advocacy is mostly through valorising blackness and composing songs that draw attention to issues of police harassment and the

socio-economic disadvantages of Afro-Venezuelans, as explained in the introduction of this chapter. As well as being a musician, Fulton makes a living as a sculptor. Like Andrés, Fulton makes use of Afrocentric elements. Fulton records experiences of slavery to preserve collective memories that can retrieve a positive black identity. He has brought African inspired chants and drumming into *Cacao Negro* performances. He has also introduced African-derived images, which he carves, into the performances. These performances will be expanded further in Chapter 5.

There are other ‘rebels’ who belong to an overtly political strand defending black identity. They explicitly challenge local issues of race and marginality in the *Parroquia Caruaio* through culture and politics. In Osma, this group is comprised of Eriberto, Antonio, Pedro and Xavier who by the time I met them were political activists in their late 20s and early 30s. They were the only remaining members of an extinct political group that began in 2006 called ‘Young Voices’. Young Voices was then an informal black grassroots movement. Its members were linked by friendship – growing up together in the same village, going to the same primary school and high-school – and by the social work they did in the *Parroquia Caruaio*, until they dissolved in 2012. At present, they occasionally get together although no longer as a movement.

I will briefly describe Young Voices’ four main leaders. Eriberto was linked from his childhood to the group *Melaza y Tambor*, where he was one of the singers. Later, in his early 20s, he became the main leader of the Young Voices. Close to Eriberto were Xavier and Pedro, who at present are still political activists. Pedro was a former drummer in *Melaza y Tambor* when he was a child. Later, he became involved in Young Voices. Once the group dissolved, Pedro became linked to the Afro-Venezuelan national grassroots movement in Caracas. As we have seen Eriberto and Pedro are activists who were former members of the group *Melaza y Tambor*, although they have clashes with Andrés due to the political closeness of these young men to the ideology purported by the Bolivarian Revolution.

In the case of Xavier and Antonio, they were both lawyers. Xavier had a short militant period in the Communist Party in Venezuela, although he left the party and began to associate with Afro-Venezuelan grassroots movements. The last member of Young Voices was Antonio. He split up with Eriberto, Pedro and Xavier due to political

differences in 2012. When I met Antonio in Osma he was deeply involved in music and media activities. Antonio was initiated into music by his uncle Fulton who taught him to play the drums. Later, Antonio became one of the musicians of *Cacao Negro* in Osma. Antonio also created alongside his ex-wife Emilia, a small grassroots media organisation in Osma called *Brigada Comunicacional Omacuao* (BCO), which had a close collaboration with activists in Todasana. Before Young Voices dissolved, they and BCO used community media to raise the consciousness of the black population about their African heritage. They counteracted the lack of visibility of Afro-Venezuelans in private media channels by showcasing black-Venezuelan themed film-screenings. Also, by being attentive to the strong oral tradition of their villages, Young Voices tackled the exclusion of Afro-descendant's history and the low level of awareness that the local population had about their own African history by presenting educational, slavery-themed videos. Their main method of presenting all this was the cinema-forum. They hosted free of charge, open-air film screenings of Afro-descendant-themed films, followed by a debate between activists and audiences – the residents of the villages. This opened conversations about slavery and Venezuela's links with Africa. Nonetheless, from 2012, these media activities were no longer frequent in Osma.

In Todasana, the 'rebels' are clustered in a political group called '*El Kilombo*'. *El Kilombo* began as a small community media group that began informally in 2011 with four people. The first three, Chucho, his wife Keyla and Laura, are all school teachers in Todasana's primary school. *El Kilombo* also involved Freddy, an unemployed 26-year-old father of two, who was interested in politics. These 'rebels' in Todasana had a close collaboration with other community media leaders such as Antonio and Emilia from Osma. The main strategy they used to discuss issues of race and positive black identity for the 'rebels' in Todasana was through cinema-forums. Like Young Voices, *El Kilombo* screened short films produced in Venezuela that touched upon the history of slavery, while later it expanded to black-themed movies. In Todasana, media advocacy became the strongest in the *Parroquia Caruao* due to its regularity. At present, *El Kilombo* still run the cinema-forum every week.

### ***Labels of racial identity***

An important feature of the advocacy of the ‘rebels’ is the emphasis on racial labels to create a collective identity. By listening to speeches of the ‘rebels’ in public discourse, cinema-forums or cultural spaces, there is plentiful use of labels such as *Afrodescendientes*, *Afro-Venezolanos*, or simply the shortened version, *Afro*. Another form of identification is the label ‘*Cimarrón/Cimarrona*’. This is a word that in Venezuela is used to talk about domestic animals that become wild by roaming free in backwoods (feral). *Cimarrones* were enslaved Africans who escaped and founded their own free camps in inhospitable areas hard for the masters to reach, known as *cumbes*. Yet *cimarrones* is a badge increasingly used amongst the ‘rebels’ due to its connections with Africans and their descendants who fled slavery in Venezuela. The ‘rebels’ make explicit in their speeches that slavery denied personal wholeness of black bodies in captivity, and colonial racial labels allowed such exploitation. For the ‘rebels’ to call themselves *Afro-Venezolanos* instead of *Negros* is a practice they call ‘*desaprender*’ or to unlearn colonial forms of racial identity. The rebels advocate the suffix *Afro* to re-write identity. I held long conversations with Antonio to understand the emphasis on labels to create cohesion around a politicised identity. In one of the conversations Antonio said, “We say that we are *Afros* because our ancestors were uprooted from Africa. We are not *negros*. *Afro* is an identity whereas *negro* is a colour; *negro* was a derogatory term that Europeans used to depersonalise us.” The most important clash between ‘culturalists’ and ‘rebels’ is this: the ‘culturalists’ prefer to identify themselves only as *Negros*, while they reject any other politicised labels of racial identity such as *Afro*, *Afro-Venezolano/a*, or *Afro-descendiente* espoused by the ‘rebels’.

### ***3.2.3. Contesting mestizaje through public holidays***

One symbolic strategy amongst activists in my fieldsite to situate Afro-descendants in the narrative of *mestizaje* has been changing the name of October 12<sup>th</sup>, in references to the change experienced from ‘Day of the Discovery of America’ (*Día del descubrimiento de América*) to *Día de la Resistencia Indígena* (The Day of the Indigenous Resistance) as explained in Chapter 1. I saw on 12<sup>th</sup> October 2015 Osma’s primary school teachers changing the name of the *Día de la Resistencia Indígena* to Day of the Afro-Indigenous Resistance ‘*Día de la Resistencia Afro-Indígena*’. Their purpose was to make an explicit

reversal of the state omission of Afro-descendants. That day, I was invited by one of the teachers of the school to observe the celebration. The children made a speech that highlighted the meaning of the day. Other children participated in a play where the local Afro-descendant children dressed up as indigenous peoples, while a few of the non-black children dressed as Conquerors. However, even after the end of my fieldwork there were changes to the name *Día de la Resistencia Afro-Indígena*. In order to focus on both *mestizaje* and celebrations of blackness ‘rebels’ such as Chucho and Eriberto changed it to ‘Day of the Meeting of the Black People’ (*Día del Encuentro de los Negros*).

I learned about this rebranding of the name of the public holiday because I returned shortly to Venezuela between September and November 2017. I stayed in contact with participants of my research with whom I maintained friendships. In Todasana I met Chucho. He mentioned that for the celebration of the 12<sup>th</sup> October 2017, he organised a small public cultural presentation in Todasana’s main square. The celebration involved a handful of ‘rebels’ and ‘culturalists’, which included, *decimistas*, *cultores populares* and political activists from Osma and Todasana. The audience was mostly residents. The act aimed to celebrate blackness and showcase the richness of the local culture. These types of occasions are traditionally recorded by *El Kilombo*, as the footage is then preserved and screened in cinema-forums as explained earlier. Chucho, shared the footage of the video with me. This video, alongside others shared by *El Kilombo* and BCO are key, as I use them to tease out several themes that I analyse in what follows.

### 3.3. Ideas of Race and Nation

#### 3.3.1. *Double consciousness: how Afro-Venezuelans feel left out by the narrative of mestizaje*

Here, I explore the diverse ways the black population situate themselves between ideas of race and nation. I briefly introduce a cultural contestation, which allows a discussion about an awareness of African origins and its tension with the narrative of *mestizaje*. There are cultural strategies that provide critical views of *mestizaje*. *El Kilombo* and BCO have recorded local cultural productions especially that of *decimistas*. Chucho and Antonio gave me a small number of videos on separate occasions that featured Rosendo, an elderly *cultor popular* from Todasana. Rosendo led a small cultural space -now disappeared- called ‘the *decimistas* school’ (*escuela de decimistas*) teaching children to

practise this oral tradition. In Rosendo's cultural production, race is a salient topic. One of his *décima* called *Saludo* (greetings), problematizes national identity and race, as illustrated below. *Saludo* shows how *mestizaje* simultaneously includes and excludes black populations. At the core of Rosendo's cultural performance is a polite greeting to a gathering where he is trying to introduce himself. He says that he comes from a distant place and he was not invited. Yet he shows up but is aware that his presence will be objected to. Here is an excerpt:

### *Saludo (Greetings)*

<i>Principio por saludar con decencia</i>	I begin by greeting you all with decency
<i>A toda la concurrencia y a los dueños del hogar</i>	To the congregation and to the homeowners
<i>Aunque acabo de llegar de un lugar muy distanciado</i>	Although I've just come from a distant place
<i>Los saludo nuevamente para después presentarme</i>	I greet you again, to then present myself.
<i>Pero sabrán perdonarme porque no soy invitado</i>	But I beg your pardon because I was uninvited,
<i>Yo soy un desconocido en este acompañamiento</i>	I am a stranger in this get-together.
<i>Pero les daré en el momento</i>	But I will give you
<i>Mi nombre con mi apellido</i>	My name and my surname.
<i>De muy lejos he venido como ya lo he anunciado</i>	I come from a place far away as I have already announced,
<i>A este lugar he llegado a darles las buenas noches</i>	To this place, I have arrived to wish you all a good evening,
<i>Aunque espero su reproche porque no soy invitado.</i>	Although I expect your disapproval because I am uninvited.

In this *décima* Rosendo is alluding to Afro-Venezuelan historical experience. The language of otherness in his *décima* is conveyed, it is true, in an ambiguous and general way. It can be applied to any context where there is lack of acquaintance or common ground. Nevertheless, by building on the ambiguity conveyed in this *décima*, it allows us to create connections between ideas of *mestizaje*, racial consciousness and national identity. Let me highlight this connection with the population of African origin in Venezuela.

In this *décima*, Rosendo shows a hybrid and diasporic condition when he mentions that he comes from afar and was uninvited. The first Africans forced into Venezuela, arrived in 1570. They came from unspecified groups of people from Cape Verde and Guinea

(Pollak-Eltz, 2012:2). Rosendo also mentioned that he would give his full name and surname, although he never does. His absence of identification can also be historicised due to the elimination of African names and surnames through slavery. Names and surnames of enslaved were changed through forced acculturation; they had to adopt the names given by their slave owners. However, there are few systematic records that fully trace the real names and the ethnicity of enslaved in Venezuela. But it is possible to find examples in small areas and plantations. For example, a document from 1729 referred to by Pollack-Eltz (2012) records that out of 114 enslaved at least 51 came from different ethnicities (2). In the case of the labour force in the *Hacienda del Valle de Tuasana* in Todasana, out of 19 Africans enslaved 7 were of different ethnicities<sup>37</sup> (see Altez and Rivas, 2002:39-41). Contrary to the idea that enslaved African were a homogeneous group, we can see different constructions of blackness through the uniqueness produced by the mingling and cultural mixture between dozens of African ethnicities in the same space, as well their racial and cultural mixture with Europeans and Indigenous peoples. Despite the mixture, it still does not prevent us from recognising cultural elements that have a high African influence.

I use this historical information because Rosendo is touching upon ‘double consciousness’. This is a useful analytical tool to understand issues of assimilation and racial mixture through *décima* as shown by Rosendo, whereby he is positioning himself as being Venezuelan and having African ancestry. In this seminal work *The souls of the black folk* [(1903) 1961], African American sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois theorised a somewhat similar predicament of reconciling both being ‘American’ and a ‘Negro’ by coining the now famous concept: double-consciousness. That means that African-Americans gained and defined consciousness of their selves through interactions with the white dominated society. Thus, elaborating on how black identity is constructed, Du Bois described, “[this] peculiar sensation [...] this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” (12) to encapsulate how his sense of self is constructed and internalised upon an external gaze that denigrates blackness. Du Bois’ description also builds upon the dilemma of having more than one personal and social identity – especially one constructed against the backdrop of racial oppression.<sup>38</sup> Rosendo’s *décima Saludo* is

---

<sup>37</sup> The ethnicities identified were: Tari, Mina, Congo, Cachia, Luango, Ochó and Bayona.

<sup>38</sup> “One ever feels his two-ness, —an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn

reminiscent of Du Bois' idea of having "two selves" in one body or as he describes, "two unreconciled strivings" (Du Bois, [1903] 1961:12), as Rosendo states that he expects the disapproval of the gathering. This disapproval relates to the denigration of Africa and blackness in Venezuela.

While on fieldwork, I found that double consciousness of Africa has no patterns. It is an issue only decided by the political stance of who one asks. On April 29<sup>th</sup>, 2015 I interviewed Oliver, a 'rebel' who is a drummer from Todasana. He was a 35-year-old black man who identified himself as *Negro*. We broached the subject of the African presence in Venezuela. He said his parents taught him little about Africa or African culture because "that was too many generations before them." Oliver mentioned that he had spoken openly about African heritage with other friends and family members in the village, yet they consider African-ness as foreign and not part of the national identity. Oliver said, "when I speak about these things [racial identity] in *mi pueblo* (my village) I feel prejudice." He continued, "When I identify myself by saying: *I am Afro-Venezolano*, then I hear: No! you are not African, you are Venezuelan."

On the other hand, a consciousness of having Afro-descendant culture and rejecting Africa can coexist. For example, Andrés the 'culturalist' from Osma also self-identifies as *Negro*. Andrés dislikes politicised labels such as *Afro-Venezolano* or *Afrodescendiente*. "To me those are fancy words from the politicians." He is confident that new labels of racial identification do not solve structural problems. "I am *negro*," he continued, "and that word does not need to change. What needs to stop is racism." While he also acknowledges that *mestizaje* is a feature of the local population, Andrés said, "There are no *Negros puros* (unmixed blacks), we are all *enrazados* (mixed race)." Despite recognising the African heritage in his cultural production with the uses of African references as explained earlier, Andrés is sharply ambivalent about how he positions himself as a descendant of Africans. He disengages from Africa for a political reason. He said, "Not many know that slavery started because there were *Negros* selling *Negros* to Europeans. Why they did do that?" It upsets him that Africans had some responsibility for the slave trade.

---

asunder. [...] In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. (Du Bois, 1903: 12) (emphasis mine)



### 3.3.2. *The complex relationship between racial identity and African heritage*

In Todasana and Osma some people reproduce and subscribe to dominant discourses of *mestizaje* when asked about their ancestry. One of the ways some informants subscribe to the dominant ideology of *mestizaje* is by suppressing African origins. In conversations with older generation Afro-descendants, one realises how deeply entrenched this ideology is. These issues are entangled with one another. There are at least three salient issues: omission, lack of awareness of African roots, and emphasis on having European forebears. I found in my field site non-politically mobilised residents who are active participants and audiences in local cultural displays but to whom the idea of Africa was either distant or unknown to them. For example, in February 2015, I interviewed an elderly woman who ascribed little importance to her African ancestry. In Osma, I visited a small working-class home whose owner was Doña Jacinta. She came to Osma as a girl in 1948 and is one of the few remaining of the first generation of Afro-descendants who moved to this area. Growing up, Doña Jacinta did not hear much about being a descendant of Africans at school. Venezuelan history and that of Afro-Venezuelans was not touched on in the lessons. This is an excerpt of the interview:

N. When you were at school, did the teachers talk about peoples from Africa who were brought to Venezuela?

J: No, I don't remember that. At least one was sent to school.

N. Have you heard the word *Afrodescendiente*?

J. I do not know. What word is that? That is an absurd word! I tell you, I have no knowledge of that [word].

N. Have you heard the word *Cimarrón*?

J. I do not know what that word is. Explain to me. What it is?

N. The *cimarrones* were runaway enslaved who found freedom by setting up free camps called *cumbes*.

J. I have heard that, but *no le paro* - I don't pay attention-. All that is modern. It is only with this *gobiernito* [little government/Bolivarian Revolution] that one hears those things.

As I questioned Doña Jacinta further on her identity, she grew increasingly uncomfortable. I asked her about how she identified herself in the census on ethnic identity in 2011, – referred to in the introduction – and she replied that she did not remember her answer. One of her granddaughters, Karina, a woman in her 30s, joined the conversation. She said she identified herself in the census as ‘*negra*’, while Doña Jacinta stressed, ‘I am not ‘*negra*’. Karina, to dissipate the tension of the conversation politely denied the blackness of her grandmother by saying, “No, you are *chocolate*.” While in the interview, Karina maintained that she was not sure about having African origins. Karina said that only when she was in her 20s did she begin to hear about the history of race relations and identity in the country. Race was a topic omitted at school and in everyday conversations, though its profile was raised during Hugo Chávez’s presidency. Karina said. “Before [Chávez], racism was spoken about, but nobody said what ‘race’ was, or how we arrived here. Whether one was *Afrodescendiente* or not, it was Chávez who began with all that about *Afrodescendientes*... we didn’t know that we were *Afrodescendientes* and that we came from Africa.”

I also found politically mobilised ‘culturalists’ who reproduce dominant ideologies of *mestizaje* when they are asked about their ancestry, by only valorising having European ancestry. Leila the *cultora popular* from Todasana I introduced earlier, mentioned that her grandparents were traditional *cultores populares*. Yet, when I asked her about the descent of her forebears, Leila mentioned that they were of English origin which was apparent because of their speech patterns. “My great-grandparents were English because they talked in a way that was jumbled up” (*‘ique eran ingleses porque hablaban enredao’*) said Leila. Although *mestizaje* with Europeans is an undeniable feature in the physical appearance of the local population, there is no information that can confirm a history of any English presence in the *Parroquia Caruao*. What is known is that during the 18<sup>th</sup>-century escaped enslaves from the Caribbean islands especially from Curaçao, settled in the areas which are now in the states of Miranda and Vargas. These Caribbeans who liberated themselves from slavery were called in Venezuela *Loangos* and seemed to have difficulty mastering the Spanish language (Pardo 1956:30 cited in Megenney, 1989:54), which may explain what Leila referred as the ‘jumbled up’ speech of her forebears. There is anthropological data collected in Osma in 2002 that noted elderly Afro-descendant women emphasising their European white forebears, even when the interviewees did not know these forebears (Altez, 2006).

Up to this point I have presented these contrasting examples to show diverse ways in which blackness is constructed. Some contest *mestizaje* by using cultural production while others do this by subscribing to politicised views on blackness. On the other hand, some others subscribe to dominant ideologies of *mestizaje*. Amid these dynamics, the cultural production of *décimas* offer a platform where *cultores populares* wrestle with the contested nature of national identity and African heritage. In the next section, I continue to explore how discourses of racialisation that involve the coexistence of racial mixing and racial discrimination are publicly addressed through popular culture.

### **3.4. Challenging discourses of racialisation through *Décimas***

The key point of this section is to explore how local popular culture challenges discourses of racialisation enforced through racial mixing in my fieldsite. I briefly provide an account of the national and the individual meanings that comprise the ideology of whitening (*blanqueamiento*). The purpose is to contextualise how *blanqueamiento* in my fieldsite connects to broader dynamics. Then I will show how this ideology is contested through popular culture. I will illustrate through a *décima* from Todasana, how a perception of racial mixing reflects on several issues about the construction of racial categories. These issues range from discourses of *blanqueamiento* to constructions of blackness. This context will introduce a deeper examination of discourses of racialisation through bodily features in my fieldsite.

#### **3.4.1. *Blanqueamiento* and how it manifests in the *Parroquia Caruao***

*Blanqueamiento* is a eugenic ideology that involves the belief in the superiority of Caucasian blood. This ideology has two interpretations. The first is national, while the second is individual (Hernández, 2013). The national meaning of *blanqueamiento* is linked to state-sponsored policies to ‘whiten’ the image of the nation by increasing the size of the Caucasian population. Through the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Venezuelan white elites were outnumbered by non-whites – Indigenous and black populations. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century Venezuela enacted policies of selective migration. Between 1946 and 1952, the travel costs of European workers were subsidised to encourage them to settle in Venezuela.

Between 1929 and 1966, non-whites and black migrants were refused entry<sup>39</sup> (Rout, 1976:258). The elites linked non-white populations to backwardness (Wright, 1990). At the same time, the elites believed that more Caucasian blood would facilitate the process of state modernisation (Wright, 1990). While these plans increased the presence of Caucasian migrants in the country, they were eugenic in their purpose. Racial mixture in Venezuela took up a national project to encourage non-white groups to be part of the nation as long as they mixed themselves to “disappear” their blackness or indigeneity through intergenerational mixture. These policies to support white supremacy in Latin America encouraged racial mixture. They offer a new perspective to understand that white supremacy and racism can be implemented with ideologies of selective racial mixture. Thus, white supremacy and racial mixture are ideologies that are not incompatible. Recognising these perspectives in the Venezuelan case allow us to recognise, that racial purity and vilification of racial mixture –as previously enforced in the U.S. as noted by Ferber (1998)– is not the only system of racial domination through which racism and white supremacy support one another.

*Blanqueamiento* is also an individual ideological practice through interracial romantic unions and marriage. It reinforces the progression towards whiteness. Individual *blanqueamiento* is circulated in the private and intimate circles such as family and friends through the desire for white/light skinned romantic partners to have children with light-skinned complexions via interracial marriage. This individual practice explains how non-white groups are said to move towards whiteness and racial homogeneity ideologically circulated in the national level.

In my fieldsite ‘*mejorar la raza*’ (improve the race), is an everyday expression that signifies the individual ideology of *blanqueamiento* in Venezuela. It is generally understood as a heteronormative, gendered ideology that involves black women and light skinned men (discussed in section 3.4.3). Acknowledging this gendered pattern allows us a better understanding about how power and intersections of gender, race and class are

---

<sup>39</sup>During the 1930s, there was a history of migration of black Caribbean workers from Venezuela’s neighbouring Anglo-Caribbean islands who laboured in Venezuela’s emerging oil economic sector. However, their presence in Venezuela was branded by white elites as labour coming from “culturally inferior” people (Wright, 1990:100). Alberto Adriani who was the Minister of the Treasury (1936-1941) authorised this ban on the entry of non-white labor. Adriani argued that ‘the face of the nation could be dramatically changed if Europeans were brought and *Negroids* kept out’ (Rout, 1976:258).

used to interact in my fieldsite. White male class privilege intermingled with forms of commodification of black women's bodies which I examine in section 3.4.2. Discourse around *mejorar la raza* began, according to testimonies of my informants, from the 1980s, with the increasing presence of non-black male tourists from the urban centres in the *Parroquia Caruao* that initiated romantic relationships and had children with women from the parish. Similarly, there were other circumstances<sup>40</sup> that were not determined by this gendered pattern but also led to *mestizaje*. One of them was the migration of men and women from the *Parroquia Caruao* to urban centres, where they married and had families with non-blacks. In other cases, some of them moved back to the *Parroquia Caruao* with their non-black spouses and families, which increased the number of the non-black population in the *Parroquia Caruao*. Another factor that led to *mestizaje* in the *Parroquia Caruao* was the re-population of entire villages and hamlets by *mestizos* who formed families with the local black population. These dynamics furthered the cultural and racial *mestizaje* in my fieldsite.

### 3.4.2. Contestations against the ideology of *blanqueamiento*

Today, contestations against *blanqueamiento* are part of the ways activists in my fieldsite engage their audiences and compel them to reflect on anti-racist topics. To challenge the ideology of *blanqueamiento* through cultural spaces, the 'rebels' and 'culturalists' have taken ideologies of racial mixing usually discussed in private, into the public realm. Recall the video of the *Encuentro de los Negros*, introduced in the first section. Eriberto explained to the audience in the video how racial discourses influence personal choices while choosing a partner in a rural area. He says, "The girl or woman who is *Negra* or *Afrodescendiente* has to find a partner who is light skinned or white in order to supposedly make their children come out better [lighter skinned], and so to *mejorar la raza*. That is false. It has been scientifically proven that there is no such thing as 'race'. *Mejorar la raza* is the product of racism." These cultural strategies contest how blackness is devalued.

---

<sup>40</sup> This is the case of the village of Oritapo, which used to be mostly populated by Afro-descendants but after a widespread outbreak of yellow fever that forced the survivors to move to other villages, Oritapo was repopulated by a population of non-blacks of working class, *campesino* origin. Similar cases of a non-black majority in the *Parroquia Caruao* are visible in the hamlets Urama (close to Todasana) and La Virginia (hamlet close to La Sabana).

In the case of the *cultores populares*, part of their activism is precisely to valorise blackness. To do so they include personal poignant reflections as part of their activism. Andrés said, “People still think that *negros* are bad people, that we are criminals, or we have to be feared. That affects you as a human being.” While on the topic of *blanqueamiento* Andrés added, “I do not mind when people decide to *enrazarse* (mix) genuinely, the problem is when they do so because they want to whiten themselves, because we are not taught to like ourselves.” Recall Xavier, a ‘rebel’ introduced in the first section. He also expanded on the topic of internalised racism and racial mixing. Xavier explained that while growing up he disliked his deep dark, onyx-like complexion, and full facial features. He questioned his mother on her marriage choices. Xavier said, “I hated myself. I wondered why my mom hadn’t chosen a light-skinned partner, so I would have ‘*rasgos mas finos*’ (finer features) and look less African.” This reflection is a result of how he internalised experiences of anti-blackness enforced by society at large. “The more African you look, the darker your skin, the more racial discrimination you suffer,” he said.

Commonplace practices of *blanqueamiento* in the arena of love and dating are thus examined and challenged through cultural strategies such as *décimas*. One section of the video by *Encuentro de los Negros* features Lander from Todasana, performing a *décima* called *Ya basta de negro en casa* (enough blacks at home).<sup>41</sup> The *décima* spells out a story of black love between a woman and a man, who at the start of their romance reciprocate each other’s love. But the woman’s mother forbids the black man from continuing to court her daughter. She prefers her daughter to date a white man. The mother is pleased when her daughter starts dating a white man and gets pregnant, although the relationship ends before the child is born. Here is an excerpt:

*Ya basta de negro en casa* (Enough blacks at home)

Años enamorando a Carmen  
pero su mama no quiso

Years wooing Carmen  
But her mum disapproved it  
Even if I am a *Negro Castizo*\*

---

<sup>41</sup> Before performing the *décima*, Lander said “I’m going to say something that will make you think.” He was touching on a controversial subject, not to demonise racial mixing or to enforce a sectarian discourse that encourages the audience to marry within their group. It was to bring to the attention of the audience the racist narrative embedded in pressures from family and friends in the arena of courting based on ‘*mejorar la raza*’.

aunque sea un negro castizo (negro castizo quiere decir de calidad)	(negro castizo means quality negro)
ella no quiso aceptarme	She did not want to accept me
lo que hacía era reprocharme	All she did was to reprove me
siempre hablándome de raza	Always talking to me about race
señora usted me rechaza	Madam you reject me
siente gran desprecio por mi	And feel resentment for me
y me dijo,	And she said yes,
Si, ya basta de negro en casa.	Enough blacks at home.
Después de unos cuantos meses	After a few months
todo se me fue pasando	I started to forget about it
a otro lado fui mirando	I looked somewhere else
algún día se les rece!	Someday things will turn around!
en eso se le aparece	And then appears
un blanco que la embaraza	A white [man] who got her pregnant
y su mama me dijo con guasa	And her mom had the nerve to tell me
mis nietos serán pan, aunque sea fiao!*	My grandchildren will be
Negro de caldero tizado	A bit like bread [colour] even if passing
ya basta de negro en casa	[Not like you] <i>Negro</i> , sooty vessel
	Enough blacks at home!

The *décima*, *Ya basta de negro en casa* shows how *cultores populares* forcefully critique racial discourses in the arena of intimacy and courtship. Through this *décima* I want to call your attention to two key issues that were most salient in my fieldsite. First, the internalised ideology of *blanqueamiento* through pressures from familial networks. Although skin colour alone was not a criterion for choosing a romantic partner, relatives influence preferences for interracial romance in the villages. The reason was to enable the children of such a union to leave the category of blackness. In the *décima*, the mother of Lander's love interest stated that her grandchild – despite having black ancestry – would have lighter skin. Thus, the child is thought to be able to pass into the category *Moreno*. Second, it shows how Afro-descendant populations negotiate locations within the broad spectrum of blackness. In the *décima*, Lander stressed that he was a '*negro castizo*'. He explained that by being *castizo* he was a '*negro de calidad*' due to his facial features. These differentiations within blackness, illustrate the significance of skin tone and other bodily features such as hair texture in locating oneself and others in racial categories. Therefore, the influence of intimate circles and the significance of skin tone and hair texture are issues that I tease out below.

### 3.4.3. *The family, friends and discourses of racial mixing*

The family is a primary agent in the perpetuation of racializing discourses that encourage racial mixing. I had conversations with three women who self-identified as *negras*, about

what *mejorar la raza* meant to them. Their views were diverse. A common pattern these women shared was that during their teenage years they were encouraged by their mothers or by other female relatives to avoid marrying local black men, as Lander showed in the *décima*. While I am not implying that all black women in my fieldsite were dating or actively pursuing relationships with non-blacks, I highlight how these discourses were produced in a larger social context. The discouragement of intra-racial marriage responds to constructions of ‘race’ and how having children of a lighter skin tone are thought to have greater social acceptance.

I interviewed Laura from Todasana, a ‘rebel’ schoolteacher. She said that her grandmother used to reject any black suitor Laura had while she was growing up. When I prompted Laura to discuss her grandmother’s views, she recalled what her grandmother used to say, “Never bring a *negro* (boyfriend) to my house. *Negro pa’ rodapié.*”<sup>42</sup> Laura told me that for her, this was a contradictory message. Her grandmother, who was a woman Laura described as “*Indian* mixed with white” was married to a man she described as African-like. “*Negro Congo,*” Laura said – meaning her grandfather was an unmixed black man with very deep brown skin. Laura recalled that her grandmother’s attitude of disapproval towards black suitors influenced her while choosing a romantic partner. Laura said, “You know what I did? I mixed *mi raza* (my race). That was a pattern that I got from home.” There are other examples of peer pressure that shape perceptions about dating men with similar dark skin tone. I interviewed Martha, a 31-year-old woman from Osma, who shared her views on *mejorar la raza* and dating. I asked Martha if skin tone was a factor that she considered when dating, to which she replied that she did, because she had been self-conscious about comments from others regarding her romantic choices. She said, “[Skin colour] is not important. But I don’t know... *negro* with *negra*? [People] will believe you are dating a cousin. People say, ‘*Hay que mejorar la raza!*’ (We need to improve the race).”

Racial mixture is a strategy based on the negotiation of racial hierarchies through skin tone. In the view of Keyla, another ‘rebel’ from Todasana who discussed this topic,

---

<sup>42</sup> *Negro pa’ rodapie* means black only needed in the house’s baseboard. This is a reference to a former tradition of home decoration in the area where walls were painted with black baseboards. In this case, Laura’s grandmother indicated to her that the only blackness she would tolerate was the one part of the home decoration.



“Light-skin is like a passport. People treat you better.” However, although Keyla made these observations, she mentioned that she stopped giving in to the enforced values of *mejorar la raza*. Keyla said, “While growing up I did not like *negros*. Nearly all my boyfriends were *blanquitos*, but then you search for different things. Now I’m married to a *negro*.” Keyla is married to Chucho another ‘rebel’. Keyla offers an example in which her own political stance in terms of black identity also changed who she found attractive.

Nonetheless, racial mixing and attraction besides personal preferences, are fluid and diverse in the field, especially amongst those who are engaged in the valorisation of blackness. And some discursive contestations are based on notions of masculinity. Although I introduced the example of Laura, Martha and Keyla who are married to men with lighter-skin than themselves, this does not mean that their cases were abundant. In Todasana and Osma it was far more common to see couples in which a *negro* man was married to a woman who was either lighter than himself or non-black, even amongst the partners of the ‘rebels’. I spoke to Oliver, a *cultor* and ‘rebel’ from Todasana, who I introduced in the previous section. Oliver mentioned that he married a non-black woman but was offended when he was approached by friends who accused him of pursuing *blanqueamiento*. “Look,” Oliver said, “There are people who have told me, you married a white woman because you wanted to *mejorar la raza*. I always say no. I am *claro*,<sup>43</sup> I have nothing to improve on. If anything, she is the one strengthening hers.” As Oliver shows in the discourse of *mejorar la raza*, new discourses of racial mixture are recasting in a new light what was usually understood as *blanqueamiento*, now as darkening and ‘strengthening’. Although in his case, it is masculinity that enables that discursive contestation around the interpretation of racial mixing. To continue exploring further discourses about racialisation and contestations, below, I explain the role of bodily features such as hair in the negative racialisation of black populations.

#### **3.4.4. Discourses of racialisation and hair**

Hair is key feature that produces discourses of negative racialisation in my fieldsite. Simultaneously, it can be also a space of political contestations. Here, I explore how hair

---

<sup>43</sup> *Estar claro* is a Venezuelan slang used to say ‘I am aware’. In this context Oliver uses it to emphasise that he is proud of his blackness.

texture is a physical feature whereby ‘race’ and blackness are negotiated and challenged in Osma and Todasana.

Hair texture amongst residents in my fieldsite is treated with a binary distinction: ‘*pelo bueno*’ (good hair) and ‘*pelo malo*’ (bad hair). Men and women in the *Parroquia Caruao* define as *pelo bueno* the type of hair that is loose, soft, does not shrink and does not resist the comb or fingers, in other words: straight or soft wavy hair. It is valued positively. In contrast, *pelo malo* – also called ‘*pelo pegao*’ (fixed hair) or ‘*pelo quieto*’ (still hair) – is valued negatively. *Pelo malo* is defined as the kind of hair that is cloudy, thick, tightly curled or with coarse coils, most typical of black, African ancestry. To avoid the stigmatisation of blackness in the children, hair texture is one of the motives to engage in racial mixing. Martha, from Osma said:

“You have to marry a *blanquito*<sup>44</sup> with straight hair so the hair of the children comes out *enrolladito*<sup>45</sup> and you won’t have to use too much *desriz*<sup>46</sup>. Imagine with a *negro* [the baby] will come out very *negro*, and with ‘*pelos pegaos*.’<sup>47</sup> In that case it is better to have a boy, so he can shave off his hair. That’s part of the racism.”

Since hair is a key physical trait that is entangled in discourses about ‘race’ and blackness, it is also entangled with gender. In Osma and Todasana, it was common to see young women with Afro-descendant textured hair who used blowers and hot flat irons, and maintained their hair covered with fabric swimming caps to protect it from sweat, and only left their hair out in the evenings when it was cooler, or during the weekends. Therefore, *pelo malo* in the *Parroquia Caruao* is a trait that must be concealed through straightening practices and hair extensions. There are two main reasons. The first is that changing a natural wavy texture of the hair is the ability to negotiate racial perceptions. Those with softer, wavier hair textures may not be readily positioned in the category as *negras*, by others despite being of visible African ancestry. They may be positioned in the category *Morenas*. As one Afro-descendant woman told me, “I am whiter than you, because I don’t have *pelo malo* like you.” The second reason is that Eurocentric notions

---

<sup>44</sup> White man

<sup>45</sup> Curly hair

<sup>46</sup> Hair straightener

<sup>47</sup> Tightly curled hair of African heritage that is perceived negatively in the village because it is cloudy, does not move or fall down.

of beauty are strongly culturally enforced on black women through racial markers such as hair, to the point where they feel compelled to disguise those racial markers.

I approached the topic of hair with Keyla, who considered that the local population devotes a considerable amount of attention to hair texture. She was more attuned to these discourses because by the time I met her in April 2015 she and Chucho were expecting their first child. “The first thing people [in Todasana] seem to notice in the babies, is the hair,” she said. According to Keyla, “Some friends and neighbours keep making comments about what the hair of the baby would look like. Even ourselves, we offend each other about our hair without meaning it.” She said that in Todasana Afro-textured hair is stigmatised. “Having ‘*pelo pegao*’ is like an offense. You have to straighten it or keep it in *moñitos* (braids) so people aren’t offended by it.” When a young black woman with afro-textured hair decides to stop using straighteners, it can have violent consequences. While in the field, I learned about episodes of verbal racist abuse and physical violence initiated by pupils of the local high school against a young girl who began to wear her hair ‘natural’ (un-straightened Afro-textured hair). The violation of her freedom to do as she pleased intended to force her to alter her Afro back to straightened hair. However, she did not reverse her natural hair to chemically straightened. This episode opened in the parish a conversation about whether this was a case of racial discrimination. The teachers in the high-school dismissed it as just bullying, not as a case related to ‘race’, because most students were of African descent.

Aesthetic hair practices have a political significance for the valorisation of blackness. For example, Laura stated that by refusing to straighten her hair she eliminated the possible ambiguities opened by racial mixing and hair texture in negotiating racial categories. Laura has short, naturally afro-textured hair. She recalled that when she came to accept her hair, she began to develop a critical consciousness as *Negra*. Laura said, “Growing up I didn’t like to straighten my hair, and I used to wear it short or combed with braids. It was not easy to be accepted. I faced taunts and rejection because not everyone accepted my blackness. It was a painful process but accepting my hair was the first step of fully accepting myself as *negra*.”

Oliver is another *cultor popular* who uses his own hairstyle as a way of showing his political consciousness. Oliver wears back-length locs, which he says is a statement of

his advocacy and strong black identity. “We need to value our hair and our skin colour,” he said. He considers that the chemical alteration of their hair is a way in which the black people reject themselves. “It makes me sad to see so many kids in Todasana crying because they want to have straight hair.” Oliver has two daughters who he described as *mulatas*; they have lighter skin shades and tightly coiled curly hair. Oliver explained that they asked him to straighten their hair for a special occasion and they did. Oliver is a firm believer that hair straightening practices may detach his daughters from identifying with their Afro-descendant heritage. “I want them [his daughters] to grow up embracing their true selves, not growing up trying to look white.” However, Oliver was caught in an in-between position, trying to find a way to respect his daughters’ self-determination with their hair whilst also reinforcing in his daughters a sense of being proud of their Afro-descendant heritage. “I felt bad they straightened it,” he said. “I can’t force them to look the way I want, I don’t have taboos about it. But what I want is that they do not abandon their culture.” As I have emphasised, hair is a feature that is bound up with larger racial, gendered and cultural discourses about bodily features and racial mixing. But is also a site of contestations against larger discourses about the black body.

In this section, I have illustrated how popular culture introduces the possibility of publicly contesting ideologies that are otherwise kept in the private domain. Thus, it shows a how local black culture is translated into activist practice. I have illustrated that the *décima* ‘*Ya basta de negro en casa*’ is a counter-hegemonic contestation made in cultural spaces to dominant discourses of *blanqueamiento*. We also saw how cultural contestations such as *décimas* contain topics that are key in the ways racial mixing and the racialisation of the body allows people to reinforce, negotiate and contest racializing practices. This is particularly evident through observation of bodily traits such as hair.

### 3.5. Conclusions

In this chapter, I introduced two key subjects. The first is how ‘race’ is articulated through popular culture. The second, how ‘race’ and blackness are conceptualised within the multifaceted notion of *mestizaje* in Venezuela. The aim of this chapter was to understand the relationship between ‘race’, racial identity and cultural production in Osma and

Todasana. This will allow me to develop other strands of contestations brought about by Afro-Venezuelans through popular culture in the following chapters.

Drawing on *cultores populares*' contestations, I have two conclusions. The first is that popular culture has the potential to subvert homogenizing narratives of 'race' and nation. I was interested in exploring the strategies used by *cultores populares* as their cultural production is traditionally drawn from their own life experiences. Racial identity matters to *cultores populares* because it has historically normalised racial inequalities in the country. I suggested their cultural production is the battlefield on which these politically mobilised Afro-descendants struggle for economic justice and valorisation of blackness. The second conclusion is that some subscribe to dominant ideas of race while others contest them. I showed these shifting practices of racialisation I found in Osma and Todasana amongst residents and *cultores populares*. *Cultores populares* questioned the ideology of *mejorar la raza* and confronted it as problematic, due to the ulterior motive of *blanqueamiento*. Anti-blackness was an important concern for *cultores populares*, which they publicly discuss through *décimas* to create a collective racial identity. While discussing black popular culture, Stuart Hall (1992) writes, "Within culture, marginality, though it remains peripheral to the broader mainstream, has never been such a productive space as it is now" (106). Thus, what is important here is how Hall emphasises that culture is a privileged field within which concerns to reverse oppressive structures is used creatively by racialized populations to mobilise their concerns.

In this chapter I drew attention to how *cultores populares* address the politics of race and blackness in Venezuela. The political/cultural activism in Osma and Todasana conveyed how racial identity was embraced, and how practices of racialisation were contested. We saw how some 'rebels' called for mobilisation through labels such as *Afrodescendiente*, *Afro-Venezolano(a)* or *Cimarrón(a)*. We also saw how this context allowed some activists to historicise their origins and trace connections with Africa. Yet, I found the coexistence of three contested views about Africa. On the one hand, some *cultores populares* embrace an idea of Africa as an ancestral home. It makes sense to them to retrieve a racial identity that highlights this origin. These people use terms such as *Afro-Venezolano* or *Afrodescendiente* in order to assert their identity and struggle against racial discrimination. On the other hand, a lack of historical perspective caused the rejection of African ancestry. I found cases in which a lack of awareness of African origins lead some

to disengage from the idea that their blackness is a result of having African origins. While for others, who are both aware of their blackness and Africa's role in the Transatlantic Slave trade, for political reasons, only identify as *negros* and Venezuelans.

These distinctions then raise the question, by whom and for whom is blackness defined? Although this question does not have a straightforward answer, there are paradoxes. Blackness, as we have seen, is embraced as a form of identity politics. Yet, blackness is also transformed by *mestizaje*, as the racial mixture in some cases was practiced with the ultimate purpose of the ideology of *blanqueamiento*. The perennial question is how to achieve a valorisation of blackness without the need to resort to a racist understanding of blackness. I do not offer immediate answers as Afro-Venezuelan identity and social constructions of 'race' do not have homogeneous understandings. These dynamics further complicate how *cultores populares* bring residents into identifying with blackness.

Let me conclude by suggesting how these findings might present a small contribution to the literature on popular culture and Afro-Latino/-as struggles for self-affirmation of racial identity. The ethnographic evidence I have shown here illustrates how racial identity, *mestizaje* and blackness are subjects examined by Afro-Venezuelans and how the diversity of their identities informs our understanding of the African diaspora. This chapter also illustrated that Afro-Venezuelan identity is complex due to the ways some subscribe to dominant racial ideologies. I have shown that activists have difficulties in mobilising a collective understanding that moves away from dominant ideologies of race and confronts the marginalised economic status of Afro-Venezuelans. These are challenges that Brazilian scholar João Costa Vargas (2004) identified as, "hyperconsciousness and negation of race" (443). The latter means that Afro-descendants are highly aware of racialization and racializing practices of anti-blackness, but there is a tendency to minimize the recognition of the category of 'race' in everyday life. However, *Decimistas* like Rosendo, have appropriated the Spanish *décima* to articulate how Afro-descendants like himself feel at the interface between ideas of 'race' and nation. And *cultores* like Lander illustrate how 'race' matters in dating and marriage. I tried to draw attention to the ways Afro-Venezuelans like these *cultores populares* make use of popular culture as a medium to articulate ideas of 'race' and blackness. Their views prompt us to think harder about how Afro-descendant populations use culture to expose anti-blackness in public and intimate spaces.

With the evidence presented in this chapter, I hope to contribute to three strands of debate. Theories of black popular culture prompt us to be attentive to the diversity of black experience rather than reproduce homogenization (Hall, 1992). My account on Afro-Venezuelans can help us to understand the growing mobilization of Afro-Latinos and their cultural politics to challenge systems of power (Wade, 1995; Burdick, 1998; Paschel, 2016). Yet this chapter is also an addition to the small area of scholarship that has explored the role of these Afro-descendant's mobilizations by using popular culture (Guss, 2000; Rahier, 2014). My findings further present new insights into the scholarship of the African diaspora as I suggested that some Afro-Venezuelans are exploring a double consciousness (explored in section 3.3) that aims to form a connection with Africa, while Afro-Venezuelan struggles and their identities are understood as outside of the dominant notion of the African diaspora (Altez, 2003:184, 2013:400; Valencia, 2009:126). These dynamic interplays of black identity connect with the main argument I make in this thesis, which is that culture is an uneven, contested terrain in which subordinate subjectivities voice a marginalisation that was silenced historically by homogenising narratives of *mestizaje*. In the next chapter, I will explore how *cultores populares* and activists in Osma and Todasana engage with the state.

# Chapter 4: Should you resist an ally?

*Afrodescendientes, culture and the state*

## 4.1. Introduction

This chapter introduces us to the everyday political-cultural relationships between the state and *Afrodescendientes*' social movements in Vargas state. Vargas state is a coastal territory in northern Venezuela which used to be a municipality dependent on the Federal District (Caracas). In 1998 it became an independent state, with only one municipality *Municipio Vargas*. It is divided into 11 *parroquias* (parishes), where my fieldsite *Parroquia Caruao* is located. The latter is one of the smallest *parroquias* of Vargas state with a population of 5,925 (INE, 2011), which is 1.7% of Vargas' state population. *Parroquia Caruao* is inhabited by mostly poor, Afro-Venezuelan citizens. Usually, rural black populations reside in the coastal areas of Venezuela, where the concentration of socio-economic opportunities and access to political power is weak. Yet *Parroquia Caruao*'s social movements make use of their historical and cultural resources in their politicized struggles for the improvement of their conditions. One of the cultural resources I analyse in this chapter are *toques de tambor* (drumming ensembles). I will explore through *toques de tambor* how the state and social movements engage in the terrain of popular culture. I draw from Hall (1992) an understanding of popular culture as the terrain whereby power relations between the state and the society unfold, yet, local cultural traditions are the vehicle used by black social movements to contest hegemonic relations.

This chapter is divided into three sections. In the first section, I will contextualise how in Venezuela, the state holds in tension two contradictory processes, hegemony and counter-hegemony, which I briefly explain here. Political theorist Antonio Gramsci in his seminal work *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (1999) developed a theory on power cognisant about the way power works which does not necessarily involve violence. Instead, domination and oppression can be expressed through class divisions and the power formation through which one class dominates the other one, which is what he calls hegemony<sup>48</sup> (Gramsci, 1999).

---

<sup>48</sup> It is worth showing in the following quote which explains what Gramsci meant by hegemony:



While Gramsci never provided an overt definition of hegemony, it became visible by the way he theorised it. Hegemony is the form of dominance exercised with a combination of ‘consent’ and ‘coercion’ whereby the dominant class applies coercion when consent cannot be sustained (Crehan, 2002:138). To Gramsci, a total hegemony is achieved when the dominant class controls the superstructure (state institutions and civil society) and the structure (economic and private). To obtain such dominance, culture is pivotal. The dominant class spread ideas through a belief system, philosophy and forms of knowledge that constitute ‘ideologies’ or forms of consciousness. Thus, a full cognitive acceptance of the dominant ideologies that reflect the interest of the dominant class amongst the dominated, become the natural, unquestioned worldview ‘common sense’ for the latter. Nonetheless, ‘counter-hegemonic’ or emancipatory forms of resisting hegemony can emerge from the dominated. What Gramsci calls, “counter-hegemony” is the process within which consciousness to resist any hegemonic formation emerge from the civil society (dominated) (Kurtz, 1996:109). In the context of this chapter, hegemony and counter-hegemony are relevant to understand the relationships between an ambivalent state –that has both features of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic– and the counter -- hegemonic strategies developed by *cultores populares* and activists in Osma and Todasana. This chapter will more broadly expand what was observed by Valencia (Valencia, 2015:17) where he argued that during the Bolivarian Revolution, the state became the primary site whereby notions of hegemony and counter-hegemony unfolded with one another in Venezuela.

In the second section I will describe that the state is not a unitary body, but one that is layered, whereby through its bureaucracy, it engages with citizens of the *Parroquia Caruao*. The aim of this section is to give a sense of how state hegemony operates at the national, local and community level. In this second section, I will contextualise how social movements in my fieldsite, comprising a cadre of youth who support the government and

---

“What we can do, for the moment, is to fix two major super-structural levels: the one that can be called ‘civil society’ that is the ensemble of organisms commonly called the ‘private’, and that of ‘political society’ or ‘the State’. These two levels correspond on the one hand to the function of ‘hegemony’ which the dominant group exercises throughout society and on the other hand to that of direct domination or command exercised through the state or juridical government the [...]. These comprise: 1. the spontaneous consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is ‘historically’ caused by the prestige [...] which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production. 2. The apparatus of State coercive power which ‘legally’ enforces discipline on those groups; who do not consent either actively or passively”. (Gramsci, 1999:145)

who also created local *colectivos* (collectives), became embroiled in the local state bureaucracy. Through key politicised figures, I will show the complexities through which residents encounter the state. These figures are key bridges between politics and culture. In the third section, I explore the entanglement between state cultural policies, funding, and political clientelism as modes of engagement between local cultural producers – *cultores populares*– and the state. Here I flesh out how partisan politics overlaps with the ways the state enacts cultural relationships with Afro-Venezuelan groups. I will show another dimension related to the ways in which the state reinforces patronage politics, while it also had a detrimental effect by preventing *cultores populares* to expand they contestations on structural racism beyond the borders of Osma and Todasana.

The aim of this chapter is to explore different modes of engagement between the state and *Afrodescendientes* social movements. The argument that I advance is that patronage<sup>49</sup> politics and co-optation are two ways through which consent is maintained, which makes the boundary separating the state and social movements thin and blurry. Relationships between the state and local *cultores populares* and political activists develop within two contradictory processes of co-optation and patronage politics. This is a pervasive power relationship whereby poor people use patronage politics as a problem-solving strategy to receive resources from the state, while in return the state expects political loyalty (Auyero, 2000). I will show how patronage politics and co-optation are forms through which the state maintains its hegemony by obtaining consent in Osma and Todasana through some *cultores populares* and political activists. Thus, we will see how activists from *Parroquia Caruao* either become part of the state, or in order to continue their cultural contestation, continue in patronage politics.

This chapter ties to the larger argument of this thesis in which I explain that culture is a contested terrain used by Afro-Venezuelan political activists and cultural producers. A key aim of this chapter is to explore *how* the state through its bureaucracy engages with key politicised Afro-descendants in my fieldsite. Although the state has implemented cultural counter-hegemonic policies to relate to its most excluded populations, the

---

<sup>49</sup> I refer to patronage politics and political clientelism in interchangeable ways as advanced by Lapegna (2013:843). I do this as they have been situated as analogous concepts in the latest literature on clientelism.

internal contradictions of the Bolivarian Revolution through its bureaucracy and patronage politics, reinforce relationships of subordination with Afro-Venezuelans.

## **4.2. State bureaucracy: between counter-hegemony and hegemony**

In this section, I will give a sense of what the bureaucracy of the state in Venezuela looks like. I will show how the state is comprised of a cluster of agencies, and a set of everyday practices that produce the ways through which both parties, state and society interact. This will be contextualised through a Gramscian lenses to show the interplay between hegemony and counter-hegemony enforced by the state bureaucracy in its national and local forms. My aim is to describe how the state asserts its hegemony in order to distinguish later in section 4.3 the intersecting ways in which power manifests in my fieldsite.

### ***4.2.1. Counter-hegemony and popular power***

Recent research identifies Venezuela's model of democracy as counter-hegemonic (Ciccariello-Maher, 2013, 2017; Gürcan, 2013; Maia and Santoro, 2013; Valencia, 2015). This is right to an extent. What is called the Bolivarian Revolution that began in Venezuela in 1999, is located within a process that attempted to decentralize the idea of the power that stems from the state. This process in Venezuela was called 'participatory democracy'. The latter is a conception of democracy through the inclusion of disenfranchised populations in both the state's decision-making process and its policy-making (Hawkins, 2010). This model of democracy in Venezuela also reaches out into a domain called 'popular power' (*poder popular*). This refers to the spaces opened by the state executive branch to enable the participation of Venezuela's citizens in state processes, with special emphasis on 'the people' (*el pueblo*) (Ciccariello-Maher, 2013). As a result, *el pueblo* participates directly in two self-governance political spaces called communal councils (*consejos comunales*) and communes (*comunas*). Both provide the grammar to understand the politicized meaning of community (*comunidad*) in Venezuela.

The first unit are *Consejos Comunales*. They were created by the state in 2006 and are neighborhood assemblies across the country, formed of 50 to 100 households in rural

areas and up to 400 families in major cities. The second unit of self-governance it is the *Comuna*. The *Comuna* brings together a network of *Consejos Comunales* thus connecting to wider ideas of popular participation and territory. These larger bodies decide on local development projects and create *empresas de producción social* (social production enterprises). These are managed and staffed by the residents to supply local economic needs. Therefore, groups of families across the country politically organized themselves into neighborhood-based elected councils that decide on self-governance projects in their areas of residence.

Both *Consejos Comunales* and *Comunas* are spaces where state power manifests at the micro-level, in the everyday lives of the residents of the *Parrroquia Caruao*. The biggest tension they experience is how they navigate through an ambiguous sense of self-governance while they depend on funds from the central government. In 2006 alone, the state transferred through its funding bodies, over US\$1 billion directly to the *Consejos Comunales* (López Maya and Lander, 2011:74). The main funding organization is the Foundation for the Development and Promotion of Communal Power (*Fundación para el Desarrollo y Poder Comunal - FUNDACOMUNAL*). This organization belongs to the executive power which controls the resource allocation and decides whom to fund. These funding decisions are also tightly connected to partisan politics, hence the notion of the state handing power over to the people is contested. However, by paying attention to the importance of funding exerted by the state, I now show that describing Venezuela as a wholly counter-hegemony (Ciccariello-Maher, 2013, 2017; Gürcan, 2013; Maia and Santoro, 2013; Valencia, 2015), is misleading. There are more nuanced processes at play, whereby the state holds in tension the above described counter-hegemony based on the political inclusion of the disenfranchised majority, with a combination of hegemony that is enforced through the state bureaucracy at the macro-level.

#### **4.2.2. Central government**

The power of the state bureaucracy in Venezuela is highly concentrated in the hands of the President, who represents the executive branch (Brewer-Carías, 2004). The president in Venezuela is both the head of state and head of the government. An important group of agencies that branch out from the executive power is the state Cabinet. This is a body of agencies known in Venezuela as Ministries, which are policy-making bodies with their

own funding. The state bureaucracy in Venezuela is saturated by these institutions. There is a total of thirty-one Ministries. The President appoints the upper ranks of men and women who become senior bureaucrats and the heads of Ministries. A large part of these senior bureaucrats<sup>50</sup> belong to the party in power, the United Socialist Party of Venezuela - PSUV (*Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela*). This party was founded in 2007 by the late President Hugo Chávez, when he ended his previous party *Movimiento Quinta República -MVR* (Fifth Republic Movement). Organizations, institutions, politicians and supporters outside the MVR, which clustered around support to Hugo Chávez and self-identified as *Chavistas* supporters merged into the PSUV. Also, they bundle around *Chavismo*, meaning a political loyalty towards the figure of late Hugo Chávez. So far, we can see a tight connection between state bureaucracy and party politics.

#### 4.2.3. Local Governments

To recognize the link between the central government bureaucracy and my fieldsite, I briefly outline the local modes of governance in the country. Venezuela is a federation, meaning a decentralized territorial division of twenty-three autonomous states and a capital district, Caracas. A local manifestation of both state power and bureaucracy are local state government institutions called governorships (*gobernaciones*) in each state. The *gobernaciones* are ruled by a governor (*gobernador*). The *gobernaciones* are also subsequently subdivided in the form of municipalities (*municipios*<sup>51</sup>) which are ruled by a Mayor (*Alcade/Alcadesa*). *Municipios* are also subdivided into parishes (*parroquias*) whose territorial administration and state service provision depend on the *Municipios*.

Since Vargas state was created in 1998, *Chavismo*<sup>52</sup> has ruled Vargas state. The two previous governors and mayors were late President Chávez political allies. Current Vargas state governor C.C. Venegas<sup>53</sup>, like late President Chávez, is of a military background as well as a representative from the PSUV. He has ruled Vargas state since

---

<sup>50</sup> The tenure of these Ministries in post is short-lived and of high rotation. At least during the first decade of the Bolivarian Revolution, the country has had more than 125 ministers and a number of them have been changed from one ministry to another one (Paullier, 2011).

<sup>51</sup> Each *municipio* is equivalent to a local council and there are 355 across the country, and at the time of my research, 210 municipalities were managed by PSUV mayors (Domínguez, 2013).

<sup>52</sup> By the time I conducted fieldwork in Venezuela –between 2015 and 2016– at least 20 states' *gobernaciones* out of 23 were managed by politicians who represent the government and the political party PSUV.

<sup>53</sup> Pseudonym

2008 through 3 continued re-elections<sup>54</sup> and he will reach 13 years of continued rule. By noticing the hegemony of the central government exerted through the PSUV in local governments, we are better able to grasp how state power in Vargas state and *Parroquia Caruao* is tightly connected to partisan politics around Chávez's figure.

#### **4.2.4. Late Hugo Chávez and political loyalties in *Parroquia Caruao***

The *Parroquia Caruao* is mainly inhabited by Afro-Venezuelans. Despite its small population the constituency (voting population) of the *Parroquia Caruao* is a *Chavista* stronghold. According to what I was told by local communal leaders between 70 and 80 percent of this *Parroquia* voters do so for the government party PSUV in times of elections. The ways that "race" has become salient in the Venezuelan political polarisation between opposition vs. government plays a part in this political loyalty in the *Parroquia Caruao* towards *Chavismo*. This support is complex and nuanced in my fieldsite. Although the correspondence between skin colour and socio-economic status is a feature of the organisation of Venezuela's social structures, its connections to partisan politics became more readily observable during the period of the Bolivarian Revolution. This was due to the loss of the state hegemony held by the traditional elites, a group comprised by the European descendant population.

Before Hugo Chávez, all the presidents in the country had been fair skinned, of European ancestry, and – apart from Rómulo Betancourt<sup>55</sup> – downplayed ideas of race. Chávez was blamed for being the source of the socio-political divisions in the country. It was stated that, "His [Chávez's] very image has shaken up the beehive of social harmony. His image upsets the wealthy women of Caurimare,<sup>56</sup>" and "his image has polarized perceptions."

---

<sup>54</sup> First term 2008-2012; second term 2013-2017; third term 2017-2021.

<sup>55</sup> Rómulo Betancourt's public assertions on race managed to distort of the interpretation of immigration policies of *blanqueamiento* (1931-1966) in Venezuela to make it seem a more palatable process for political purposes. Betancourt publicly addressed the immigration of Europeans to Venezuela. He sought to 'acriollar' and opposed interpretation of the process of promoting whiter mestizos in Venezuela's population. According to Betancourt immigration's primary purpose was to assimilate European migrants into the Venezuelan community by forcing them to live with mixed race and mestizo's communities to enhance natural processes of racial mixture (Betancourt, Rómulo. 1969. *Venezuela, política y petróleo*. Caracas: Editorial Senderos).

<sup>56</sup> This is a wealthy neighborhood located in the Eastern zone of Caracas dominated by the presence of white middle-class residents. For a deeper ethnographic understanding of the unequal and racialised distribution of the urban landscape of Caracas, in which the Eastern part of the city constitutes a space of whiteness and upper-middle class, while the West part of the city as a place of racialised poverty see the works of (Ciccariello-Maher, 2007) and (Strønen, 2017b)

(Márquez, 2003:31). Thus, Chávez was not considered fit to be president by the previous elites who used to govern the country. In this way, race became entangled in the political polarization of the country. As mentioned in the introduction, Chávez himself denounced how his political opponents instigated hate speeches against him and his followers, through which Chávez responded asserting his racial identification as being both *Afrodescendiente* and Indigenous.

Recognising that race and class became a salient category within the country's politics forces us to pay attention to political loyalties based on racial identifications. This is another important feature in the *Parroquia Caruao*. We should examine how the Afro-descendant residents see themselves in relationship to late president Chávez and the opposition. A common example of this reasoning in Osma's residents, was summarised by Yamilet, a black woman from Osma who considered Hugo Chávez a figure easy to relate to in terms of race, class and discourses on equality, "He grew up in poverty like us. Chávez truly wanted to eradicate racism and wanted equality for everyone." Another feature of the uniqueness of this positioning is how the political polarisation is not colour-blind. Some residents in the parish tend to reduce racism as practices that come from the traditional elites that used to rule the country, and who tend to be homogenised as the political opponents of the Bolivarian Revolution. For example, Pedro who is a communal council leader from Osma told me, "You can't be *negro/a* or Indigenous and be an *escuálido*<sup>57</sup>, that is to be in contradiction with yourself." Thus, supporting the opposition is perceived to be against the interests of Afro-Venezuelans and Indigenous peoples. I was also told that the electoral support towards Chávez's successor, Nicolás Maduro and his administration was because Chávez handpicked Maduro before he passed away. "We support Maduro only because he is Chávez heir" said Pedro from Osma. The reason is that Chávez even after passing away is regarded as a mythical figure (Angosto-Ferrández, 2016; Michelutti, 2017). However, the picture is more complex. I came across an increasing number of residents who rejected the government. Also, there was another group that rejected Maduro's government, refrained from voting, yet still clung onto admiration for Chávez in everyday conversation. However, the communal leaders of the *Parroquia Caruao* I met on the ground were not grassroots activists who openly 'resisted' the government, even when they had criticism.

---

<sup>57</sup> Emaciated. This is a label used within Venezuelan's political jargon, mostly by Bolivarian Revolution supporters in a derogative way to call those who are political opponents of the Bolivarian Revolution.

### **4.3. State power, social movements and popular culture *Parroquia Caruao***

In this section, I flesh out the central tenet of this chapter's argument: *how* the line between the state and grassroots movements becomes blurry through partisan politics. In order to show how state power becomes entrenched in the everyday lives of the residents of the *Parroquia Caruao*, I first outline the actors who comprised the main grassroots movements known as *colectivos* in my fieldsite area. I will reconstruct the making of these politicised figures in the area which occurred between mid-2000s and early-2010s to show how they were co-opted by the state. I relied on informal conversations and interviews with residents and key activists from Osma and Todasana, which will also allow us to grasp, *how* and through *whom* the state relates to the residents of the *Parroquia Caruao*. Although these events occurred years before my fieldwork, they are key to understanding further the relationships between *colectivos* and the state I develop in sections 4.3.1 and 4.3.2. of this chapter.

#### ***4.3.1. Colectivos: Black Social Movements and co-optation in Parroquia Caruao***

In Venezuela, a *colectivo* (collective) is a grassroots group that is part of a movement in charge of developing consciousness-raising political activities associated to the working-class. While in the earlier sections, I mentioned that *comunas* and *consejos comunales*, are neighbourhood-based forms of organisation that emerge within the bounds of the state, *colectivos* function in an independent fashion. They arise 'organically' from civil society. However, we should not miss a key point here that can generate confusion. Venezuela's political polarisation has shaped the language within which political groups that emerge outside the state identify themselves. Scholars such as Fernandes (2010:118), Gottberg (2011) and Strønen, (2017a: 96) call to our attention that "civil society groups" is a label appropriated by middle and upper class political opposition groups. In contrast, the label "grassroots" in Venezuela is an umbrella term that include *colectivos*, and other social movements that emerge outside but not in opposition to the state, and thus the Bolivarian Revolution. And due to the characteristics of Venezuela's political field, *consejos comunales*, *comunas* and *colectivos* members become "nested" into one another. In the *Parroquia Caruao*, the *colectivos* who were contesting socio-economic exclusion and structural racism began to appear roughly in 2006. There were *colectivos* of fisher



peoples, moped drivers, the PSUV young cadres (*juventud del PSUV*), musicians and drummers (*tamboreros*), communal media led by primary school teachers, *Consejos Comunales* and *Comunas*. They were part of a vibrant gamut of different grassroots political organisers who were embroiled in complex relationships with the state. These complexities rest in the unique way leaders of these movements embody in themselves the shifting coexistence of performing conflicting roles, for the state and for their communities.

Two of the main *colectivos* in the *Parroquia Caruao* were a small cadre of Afro-descendant youth supporters of the Bolivarian Revolution organised in two different villages. The *colectivo Young Voices (CYV)* in Osma and another youth formed a *colectivo* in the village of Chuspa, the *colectivo Radio Chuspa (RC)*, both from villages that make up part of the *Parroquia Caruao*. The one whose members belonged to anti-racist activities and participated in this research were the youth from *CYV*, which was a *colectivo* that started in 2006 and dissolved in 2012, due to the ideological differences of their members.<sup>58</sup> *CYV*'s main political activists were Eriberto, Pedro, Xavier and Antonio, who in the context of this discussion I distinguish them as organic intellectuals. This is another Gramscian concept useful to understand *CYV* political trajectory. To Antonio Gramsci, organic intellectuals emerge from the dominated class and intellectualise their experiences of exploitation by criticising any hegemonic formation (Gramsci, [1971] 1989:113), which in their case of *CYV* role of organic intellectual was to challenge the long-held myth of racial democracy by galvanising a collective awareness of the condition of Venezuela's structural racism.

The main feature of *CYV* was that its main leaders, four black young men began explicitly to develop political activities under the banner of *Afrodescendientes*' racial identity. Their politicisation occurred in a context that began in 2005 with late President Hugo Chávez forging alliances with black Venezuelan grassroots movements, as well as Chávez racially self-identifying in public and in political discourses as *Afrodescendiente*. The *CYV* mobilised their identity as *Afrodescendientes* and heightened contestations around the unequal situation of land tenure in Osma between 2008 and 2010 (addressed in the introduction). This *colectivo* also made strong criticism against Venegas –Vargas's state

---

<sup>58</sup> What engendered frictions between these four leaders were issues related to Osma's communal council and the political position of this communal council in the local land struggles.

governor— through a weekly show in the local communal radio, *Radio Chuspa*. This is a communal radio station whose audience are mostly inhabitants of the villages of *Parroquia Caruao*, but whose signal does not reach Osma, where *CYV* was based. In *Radio Chuspa* *CYV* actively engaged and had friendships with the members of *colectivo RC* who controlled *Radio Chuspa*. *CYV* relied heavily on the use of the communal *Radio Chuspa* for their cultural contestations. For example, *CYV* had a weekly show on *Radio Chuspa* focused on identity politics. Their discussions ranged from discussing the biography of black Venezuelan historical heroes to debates around whether residents should call themselves *negros/as* or *Afrodescendientes*. Thus, community media was vital for the activism of local *colectivos* by using cultural politics.

Locally produced community media gained ascendancy during Chávez government, because communal media helped to counteract what Chávez termed as the ‘media warfare’ (*guerra mediática*) against his government. This media warfare refers to the influence of privately-owned television networks in the country which belonged to Chávez’s political opponents. Private media represented *chavistas* as a racialised mass as I explained in Chapter 1. In contrast, *Radio Chuspa* illustrates that grassroots struggles have a long trajectory prior to the Chávez government, yet they were revived through the model of participatory democracy. Although created in 1988, ‘*Radio Chuspa* as a grassroots movement and communal radio, became vital during mid-2000s because it developed alternative ways of communication for the locals, which counterbalanced the stereotypical, insulting and negative representation of the non-white, poor population in Venezuela’s mainstream media. Contrary to mainstream representations, *Radio Chuspa* used to report on communal sports games such as the baseball games played by the young talent of the *Parroquia Caruao*. This radio also made visible the struggles of the local *colectivos*, and critically discussed in political debates where the Bolivarian Revolution was failing or airing criticisms against the *gobernador* in charge when he was not doing the job properly. Thus, *Radio Chuspa* was a vehicle for *colectivos* to report by themselves the vibrant cultural life in the *Parroquia Caruao*. In what follows, I will give a sense of what the *CYV* politics looks like, which was the collective I set out to trace in this research.

#### 4.3.2. *Colectivo Young Voices Politics and La Casa Guipuzcoana*

CYV was a grassroots movement that began in 2006, that while sympathetic to the Bolivarian Revolution, was not operating with any state bureaucracy. Most of its activities as explained, developed in their radio programme in *Radio Chuspa*, were a celebration of cine-forums with discussions of slavery/black-themed movies, sport activities, etc. that developed outside the boundaries of patronage politics. As Antonio recalls, “we never said [to any participant in Osma] look *chamo/a* (mate) go and vote for *fulano/a* [John/Jane Doe]. For us the important thing was the [Bolivarian] Revolution not who was in power.” These were activities that aimed to build counter-hegemonic possibilities via the awakening of the *Parroquia Caruao* residents on the interplay between race and class. These activities gained notoriety and called the attention of the local government of the *gobernador* C.C. Venegas who assumed office in 2008 as explained.

One of the most radical acts of contesting structures of race and class by CYV was after they were invited by the political team of C.C. Venegas, to participate either as speakers or performers in a celebration of the 156 years of the anniversary of the abolition of slavery in Venezuela. According to Antonio, this celebration CYV participated in was held on the 24<sup>th</sup> March 2009 in the urban city of Maiquetía. The public in the ceremony was comprised of a *Chavista* audience and state workers from this area of Vargas state. The celebration was held across the road from the colonial *Casa Guipuzcoana*, in Maiquetía.

The symbolic meaning of the *Casa Guipuzcoana*<sup>59</sup> is that is the reminder of a former colonial past. This was when Spanish and *criollo* elites exerted their social, racial and economic hegemony from 1728 over the Indigenous and black enslaved populations (Ramos Guédez, 2005:158). The *Casa Guipuzcoana* had the monopoly of the agricultural labour produced by the enslaved populations from cocoa *haciendas* from Vargas state and Caracas during the 18<sup>th</sup> century and participated in the slave trade (Ramos Guédez,

---

<sup>59</sup> In this interview with Antonio, he and other members of CYV, that in the context of the lack of explicit records that confirm the nexus between former haciendas in *Parroquia Caruao*, and the *Casa Guipuzcoana*, they inferred that the *Casa Guipuzcoana* had the monopoly of enslaved produced in the former haciendas of *Parroquia Caruao*, such as Hacienda Tuasana, Hacienda Osma was also traded in the *Casa Guipuzcoana*. Venezuelan historian Marcial Ramos Guedez provides historic evidence to reach similar conclusions (Ramos Guédez, 2005:158) as well as confirmation that slave trade of Africans, was also another activity developed by *Casa Guipuzcoana* (Ramos Guédez, 2018:64).

2005:158). What is left at present of the *Casa Guipuzcoana* is the colonial building which is now the office of C.C. Venegas, *gobernador* of Vargas state. To commemorate the occasion *CYV*, noticing these colonial connections, gave a speech taking aim against the figure of Simón Bolívar, Venezuela's hero and symbol of freedom appropriated by the Bolivarian Revolution. The reason of critiquing Venezuela's national symbol was to encapsulate a critique against colonialism and racism from the past, that still shapes Afro-Venezuelans present. Antonio said:

We gave [outside Osma] our first political speech in *La Casa Guipuzcoana*, a place our *ancestros* used to be on sale. In one part of the speech, Eriberto – the most vocal of us – said with rage: Look at the history! Simón Bolívar did not abolish the slavery! He did not liberate us [*negros/as*]! Why did we have to wait 24 years after Bolívar died [1830], to see the end of slavery in Venezuela [1854]? Why did our ancestors had to pay the master once they were freed? The crowd roared with euphoria, because these [Bolívar irresolute efforts towards ending slavery] were aspects of history that they [the audience] perhaps heard for the first time. After the speech, Eriberto collapsed in tears. We thought: finally, people grasped what is *el peo*! [slang for problem, in this case legacies of racism]. But also, after that, the *gobernador* [C.C. Venegas] began to perceive us as 'radicals' because of the ways we spoke.

This radical speech clearly brought attention to the connections between slavery and economic disenfranchisement amongst Afro-Venezuelans by pointing out that were enslaved the ones who had to pay the master to purchase their freedom. Ironically, after slavery was abolished, the masters were the ones who received compensations (Brito Figueroa, 1967:355) and not the slave after been exploited for life. Then those who were freed, were absorbed into *medianeria* (sharecropping) to work in conditions of semi-bondage (Brito Figueroa, 1967:355), as I explained in the introduction. Antonio mentioned that enabling these sorts of political and counterhegemonic critiques in the public, is in line and supported by state discourses under the Bolivarian Revolution. However, it is this sort of radical leaders that the state wants to absorb into its ranks. Antonio mentioned his own reflection about this dynamic, as he was the first to disengage from *CYV* in 2012. Antonio continued:

It seems that our political work frustrated the government [C.C. Venegas administration], because it was not his people doing it. They [C.C. Venegas administration] felt that we were taking over things that they should be doing, because there always has to be a *protagonista* (main character), and that has

to be the state. Our leaders, when they become notorious, the state comes and absorbs them. They go out there to tell our messages, but then when they arrive in the job [with the state] they are told to follow the guidelines. The state wants you to support it [with votes] and to be registered in the PSUV. They (the local political cadre) is then used by the state, which and rotates and recycles them: Oh, you were not useful here [in a state post], let me put you there [in another state post (*ah ya no servistes aquí, te ven y te jalo para otra cosa*). This situation roots them out from the political work they do and then there is no one who takes on that.

What Antonio is calling to our attention with this quote, is the challenge faced by leaders who were calling out structural racism and became de-mobilised. This means that by being busy with state jobs, their role as organic intellectuals was ‘tamed’. On the other hand, these leaders secured participation in state structures, which is then conditioned to support the Bolivarian Revolution. These cases became more acute when the *gobernación* also co-opted *Radio Chuspa* in the early 2010s. It began when C.C. Venegas began giving the main leaders of *colectivo RC* positions in the local bureaucracy. It also gave funding to improve *Radio Chuspa*’s infrastructure and a broadcasting licence in 2013. Thus, co-opting *Radio Chuspa* was a way of removing opposition. Thereafter, *Radio Chuspa* began to struggle with autonomy, self-censorship and distancing from its original vision to reflect communal life. Later, *Radio Chuspa* became a *gobernación* machine dedicated to highlighting the political activities of the *gobernador* or the central government. Once the members of *colectivo RC* entered the local state bureaucracy and began to occupy visible positions, *colectivos*’ *CYV* activism waned as well as their use of *Radio Chuspa*. Therefore, activists of *RC* became the main political brokers in the *Parroquia Caruao*, while Venegas became their political patron.

Three of the leaders of *RC* entered the *gobernación* bureaucracy and developed careers in politics. It began with the rise in politics of Pacho. He was a local young black man from Chuspa, and one of the organic leaders of *Radio Chuspa*. He later became the PSUV councilman (*concejal*) of the *Parroquia Caruao*. As Pacho became *concejal*, Wilmer who was also deeply engaged with *colectivo Radio Chuspa*, became the director of this communal radio, and became part of the *gobernador* political team. Wilmer ran for councilman in the municipal elections, but as he did not win the governor appointed him as spokesman for the Committee of Popular Communication of Vargas State, the agency that runs the different communal radios and communal televisions in this state. Tony from *colectivo Radio Chuspa*, who began as spokesperson or *vocero* of the *consejo comunal*

of his village, became part of the political team of the *gobernador*, as spokesperson of the Federal Council of Vargas state.

Remi, another young black man from Chuspa who was deeply associated with *Radio Chuspa*, was not engaged with visible positions in the *gobernación* but became a key cultural broker in the *Parroquia Caruao*. By ‘cultural broker’ I mean a key figure that links the local state distribution of state funding for the local cultural activities of the *Parroquia Caruao*. He was also a broker or authorised link between the *Parroquia Caruao* and the Ministry of Culture and the cultural cabinet of the *gobernación*. These are key activists to understand and direct the material and the symbolic trajectory of state resource distribution for the residents of the *Parroquia Caruao*. They are insiders in the circle of the *gobernación*, and they are part of the state themselves. This group of activists began to bridge the space between the *gobernación* bureaucracy and at the same time remain close to the local *Consejos Comunales* in the villages where they live. As I have shown throughout the discussion in this section, local leaders involved in contestations against structural racism, became embroiled in a highly personalised dynamic of obtaining state resources for the *Parroquia Caruao*.

The key point I have advanced in this section is that the boundaries between the state and *colectivos* were far from clear-cut. Relationships with the state are not reducible to a binary of interactions between state elites (dominant class) and residents of the *Parroquia Caruao* (the dominated class). Instead, these men who were involved in struggles that rebelled against racism and were born in and lived in the village, were co-opted by the state. These paradoxical ways in which these leaders have been co-opted by a seemingly counter-hegemonic state that supports grassroots movements, occurs against the backdrop of instrumental and hierarchical rationalities of bureaucrats and state agencies in Venezuela (Fernandes, 2010:27-28). In what follows, I will explore how the state engages via cultural policies and funding with another sector of cultural activists institutionalized under the Bolivarian Revolution as ‘culture makers’ (*cultores populares*).

#### 4.4. Contestations for political identity and use of cultural programs in Osma and Todasana

The way the state engages with residents of the *Parroquia Caruao* is both through ideological and material means. Here, I explore the centrality of material distribution, in the form of state-funded social programmes. The cultural policies conceived during the Bolivarian Revolution are situated in a counter-hegemonic cultural ideology that draws heavily on Antonio's Gramsci thought, as most of the socio-political processes of the Bolivarian Revolution purport to do. This cultural model was called by Venezuela's government "New Cultural Hegemony" (*Nueva Hegemonía Cultural*), the purpose of which was to produce an alternative to the social and symbolic cultural values engendered in capitalistic societies. It was to root out values ingrained in Venezuela's cultural fabric of imperial Western culture as superior to the national culture. To undermine these values, the government enacted *Misión Cultura*, a social program whose mission was to strengthen national identity and bolster the national culture.

##### 4.4.1. State-sponsored cultural programs in Osma and Todasana

The Ministry of Culture in 2008 created a programme called *Misión Cultura Corazón Adentro* (Cultural Mission with a Heart) or *Misión Cultura*, to bring culture to the residents of the lowest socio-economic strata by giving economic support to *cultores populares* and to promote their cultural production. *Misión Cultura* is part of the "social missions" (*misiones sociales*) which are state funded poverty-reduction welfare programmes that began in 2003. They were envisioned by the state within a policy of redistributing the nation's oil wealth into the poorest sectors of society. *Misión Cultura* oversaw free workshops for *cultores populares* in political/ideological subject areas such as decolonisation, sovereignty and community culture, to prepare them to be socio-cultural brokers with an ideology that is distanced from imperialist/ Eurocentric views on culture (Minci, 2014<sup>60</sup>).

---

<sup>60</sup> Misión Cultura Corazón Adentro avanza en la construcción de la sociedad de iguales <http://minci.gob.ve/2014/01/mision-cultura-corazon-adentro-avanza-en-la-construccion-de-la-sociedad-de-iguales/>

Venezuela's government invested a small percentage of its expenditures to the cultural sector. Through *Misión Cultura*, the state spent 0.53% of its GDP to support the national culture (Guzmán Cárdenas, 2013). This money provided by the national oil wealth helped to bridge the relationship between the state and *cultores populares* through another form of redistribution to stimulate pride for local cultural manifestations. *Misión Cultura* was also articulated through a system that renders *cultores* and their cultural practices 'legible' in Scott's terms (2000), through the *Sistema Nacional de Culturas Populares* (National System of Popular Cultures - SNCP). SNCP is a registry database created in 2011 which systematizes: who are the *cultores populares*, what their cultural activity is, their artistic forms, events, and performances. It also helped the *Misión Cultura* provide support to the *cultores populares* with training in a specific area. Alternatively, the SNCP was also a trust fund to expand *cultores populares*' access to state resources. This fund was created with \$US 69.7 million to allow those who "make" culture to receive state funds to stimulate the creation of cultural activity,<sup>61</sup> or provide them with economic support in cases of hardships or illnesses. This fund was created to bolster the possibilities in which state resources went directly into the hands of cultural producers without the state bureaucracy getting involved. It was envisioned that the funds were directly distributed by the Cultural Cabinets of each of the Venezuelan states, and in the case of Vargas state, by its *gobernación*. Paradoxically, in 2014 both *Misión Cultura* and the SNCP were merged into one agency that depends on the central government through the Venezuelan Ministry of Culture. The funds of these agencies, therefore, began to be disbursed through bureaucratic regulations, to attract their target population: *cultores populares*.

But who is a *cultor/ra popular*? There are four categories of *cultores populares* in Venezuela (Alonso, 2017; Kozak Rovero, 2015). These cultural producers range from those who engage in oral tradition and safeguard cultural manifestations and traditions in their *parroquias*, authors, and artists from the national film industry. The first type is the one I explore in this section. They are musicians, *tamboreros* (drummers), dancers or artists such as theater performers who belong to groups who create and maintain cultural traditions within their areas of residence. They come together in either public or private associations, cultural groups or networks created in the 17<sup>th</sup> century called *cofradías*, which still survive to the present day and implement traditional festive performances. The

---

<sup>61</sup> The SNCP was not involved with funding logistics such as transportation or food involved in the process of producing culture.



second type of *cultores populares* are those who belong to the ‘popular power’ and are organized in Voluntary Committees of Popular Power (*Comités Voluntarios del Poder Popular*) within their *consejos comunales* and *comunas*. The third type are those clustered in the production of literary, publishable work such as novelists, poets or writers. The fourth type of *cultores populares* are those located in the mass media sector such as filmmakers. All these diverse groups have been validated during the Bolivarian Revolution under the catch-all category *cultores populares* (culture makers). However, there is a substantial core element that links them all. The participation and material benefits from state-sponsorship in cultural programs are more likely to be allocated towards government supporters.

*Cultores populares* from Osma and Todasana became involved in a complex system of partisan politics and clientelist practices while engaging with the state. For example, the guidelines contained in the 2015 *Fondos Concursables* or applications for funding grants explicitly stated (MPPC, 2015:1), that candidates had to support the government development program, which paves the way to socialism in the country, called *Plan Nacional Simón Bolívar* (the National Project Simón Bolívar 2013-2019).<sup>62</sup> Also, there was a political activist from Chuspa who was employed in the local *gobernación* and became the local representation of *Misión Cultura* and the SNCP in the parish. In what follows, I will explore the complexities through which the state began to establish modes of engagement through material relationships with *cultores populares* and how these relationships affected the traditional forms that sought to strengthen national identity and bolster contestations against racism. One of these traditional manifestations of national identity, which is explained below are *toques de tambor* (drumming ensembles).

---

<sup>62</sup> The *Plan Nacional Simón Bolívar 2013-2019* also known as the Plan of the Fatherland, is an anti-neoliberal plan that paves the path to the Socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which comprises different themes of guidelines such as Venezuela’s international relations and cooperation with other countries, environmental protection, food security, poverty reduction initiatives such as building schools, hospitals, affordable housing for the poor. It also addresses identity politics such as Indigenous and LGBT rights and cultural politics such as consciousness-raising activities, building funding of cultural activities that strengthen the national identity through a Bolivarian ideology and a new cultural hegemony (See Pearson, 2012).

#### 4.4.2. *Toques de Tambor: Traditional cultural contestations amongst Afro-Venezuelans*

In any of the villages of the *Parroquia Caruao*, there are times throughout the year when you can hear *toques the tambor* (drumming ensembles). This is a rhythmic cultural activity that reflects par excellence the Afro-descendant heritage preserved since the forced arrival of Africans in the 15<sup>th</sup> century to Venezuela. *Toques de tambor* expressed feelings of joy, to show romantic intentions and courtship or to alleviate the suffering accumulated in slavery as enslaved performed their dances a few times a year when allowed by their slave masters. These occasions – which I develop in Chapters 5 and 6 – were also used by enslaved to plan revolts against slave masters. Therefore, *Toques de tambor* bridge the connection between local past traditions from slavery times to the present.

Today, in the *Parroquia Caruao*, you can hear the rousing drumming produced by hand-made, hollowed out wooden drums played by several men simultaneously. These are *tamboreros* (drummers). The sound of the drum is accompanied by singing, that is performed by both men or women as well as chanting in unison. Everywhere there is the vibrant sound of the drum, a group forms spontaneously with spectators, who also interact by dancing. Besides men and women, it also involves children, young adults and even the elderly. The *toques de tambor* encompass fast-paced twisting and turning with gracious hip movements, which were traditional dances of courtship between men and women. There are usually couples who take their turn to dance in the middle of the circle, one couple at a time, followed by another one. While interpretations of the dances involved in the *toques de tambor* have historically reinforced racialisation and racist stereotypes of un-civilised, savagery, sexual licence and sensuality to black populations (see Yáñez, 2011), the importance of *toques de tambor* is that it is one of the cultural tools used by *cultores populares* from the *Parroquia Caruao* to foster positive black consciousness and strengthen a politicised local black identity. They are the ones who in each village fight hard to protect what has been passed down from one generation to generation.

*Toques de tambor* in the *Parroquia Caruao* are performed as vehicles to contest racism. Specifically, songs are used to articulate complex issues of anti-blackness. They are used to undermine *endorracismo* (self-discrimination) as it manifests amongst some Afro-Venezuelans who distance themselves from their black cultural heritage. Many of the

songs that are performed in the present day contain historical traces, and past experiences, passed down orally from one generation to the next. *Toques de tambor* have a strong communicative potential that is used as a tool of resistance to share competing messages about racial heritage, challenging the hegemonic notion of racial democracy in the country. They are a denunciation of the removal of Afro-American identity (see Chapter 3).

Cultural groups from Osma and Todasana who performed outside their villages used these occasions to pass down the histories of their communities, and to investigate further the traditional culture of the places they visited. Across Afro-Venezuelan villages, where drums are used, not all drums look the same and no village has the same drumming sound. Thus, cultural exchanges were opportunities to delve further into these differences and to generate mutual cultural exchanges between *cultores populares*. While *toques de tambor* were activities normally performed spontaneously and without funding, the cultural exchanges of groups outside their villages used to be sponsored with small funds disbursed by a state's cultural agency, created in 1975, called *Consejo Nacional de la Cultura* (National Council of Culture - CONAC) to promote traditional culture across the country. Most of these funds tied cultural producers to clientelists exchanges by compelling them to support the political party of the government in power (Guss, 2000). CONAC was abolished in 2005 and replaced by the Ministry of Culture. While *toques de tambor* activities, at least in Osma and Todasana, used to be performed every weekend, the regularity of *toques de tambor* and drums interchanges began to decline during the early 2010s. As I will explore below, state funding that was disbursed by the Ministry of Culture through *Misión Cultura* and the SNCP to stimulate the creativity of the *cultores populares*, was unequally distributed amongst them in two villages of the *Parroquia Caruaao*. Therefore, the funding distributed to drum players (*tamboreros*) became a source of tension and conflict to the point that as a sign of protest, many stopped playing what they protected, undermining the cultural potential of *toques de tambor* to strengthen the local identity in Osma and Todasana.

While in the beginning, the Bolivarian government stimulated the production of popular culture through funding, we will see below how some local *cultores populares* overlap in their opinion that *toques de tambor* began to decline due to state material intervention in the area. In what follows, I will explore the cases of two *cultores populares*, one from

Osma and the other one from Todasana. Both had a tradition of playing drums (*tambores*) in their villages.

#### 4.4.3. Oliver

While in Osma I met Oliver. He, despite being a supporter of the Bolivarian Revolution, insisted that the state involvement to promote the local culture was detrimental in Todasana. Oliver was a young black *tamborero* man, father of two, born and raised in Todasana who also made a living as a bus driver of the school in his village. His father, grandfathers and his uncles, were all *tamboreros* too. I met Oliver on the day he dropped off a group of children from Todasana's primary school for an inter-school cultural activity organised in Osma. Oliver was part of a *colectivo* of four *tamboreros* and two young women from Todasana called *Afro-Caribe*. This *colectivo Afro-Caribe* began to organise in 2011 due to the desire of its members to take pride in blackness and protect and pass on Todasana's folkloric roots. This *colectivo* was born within the wider background in which the state backed the thriving emergence of grassroots organising and sought to promote cultural practices by distributing funds to marginalised populations, with workshops about traditional forms through *Misión Cultura* and material funds through the SNCP. This was purported by the Minister of Culture, Farruco Sesto, as a progressive cultural policy whose broader goal was to disburse national wealth "directly to *cultores populares* without mediators" (MPPC, 2011) while *cultores populares* helped to unleash a renewal of traditional forms that strengthened the national identity through the protection of the traditional culture. I was told while on fieldwork in Todasana, that at that time in 2011, a *cultor popular* received a small stipend of 5.000 Bs.F<sup>63</sup>. This was perceived in Todasana as a reward for performing *toques de tambor*, provided that the *cultores populares* from the village complied with the rigid paperwork procedures to demonstrate their tradition as culture makers.

One of the members of the music *colectivo Afro-Caribe* discussed by Oliver, was Remi. Recall the local cultural broker from Chuspa I discussed earlier in section 4.3.2 about *colectivos* and co-optation, who used to be part of the *Colectivo Radio Chuspa* and became a state worker for the *gobernación* in the Vargas's state cultural cabinet. Remi

---

<sup>63</sup> Equivalent to £521 pounds at the official rate in Venezuela by the 28 of April 2015 when I conducted this interview.

moved to Todasana, and although not full time, he was one of the *tamboreros*, the main spokesperson of *Afro-Caribe* as well as the link between the state funds and this *colectivo*. However, later Remi got into disputes with some members of *Afro-Caribe* due to funding controversies. These controversies were clarified by Oliver who was a member of *colectivo Afro-Caribe* with Remi in Todasana. Oliver mentioned that not only *Afro-Caribe*, but other folkloric groups stopped playing drums due to the unequal distribution of funding amongst *cultores populares* in which Remi became the mediator. Oliver explained that any money disbursed through *Misión Cultura* and the SNCP to stimulate the creativity of *cultores populares* in Todasana produced a radically different effect. Funding was primarily perceived in the village as a wage. Those *cultores populares* who did not receive a wage became reluctant to perform *toques de tambor*. Their discontent grew like a snowball being rolled amongst the rest of Todasana's *cultores populares*. Allegedly, according to Oliver, Remi had some level of involvement in the unequal distribution of funding in the *colectivo Afro-Caribe*, to the point that *cultores populares* like himself refused to play drums in Todasana for a few years. This is an excerpt of the interview with Oliver in which he explains his discontent:

O: Imagine that you were a *cultora popular* and the money needs to go to you. But it does not reach you. It only reaches me. Although I am not a *cultor popular*, I am [politically promoting] more or less around you [as broker]. But as you do not receive any money, you start diminishing your *toques de tambor*. You start to say: why is it that guy who is not a *cultor popular* gets money, and I am the one doing culture and don't get any money? What's going on? The government was giving money to two people and gave nothing to the rest [*cultores populares*] when we found out we said: Ermm.... Let them [the brokers] play. For me [funding] it was a bad idea because our culture had always worked without money. Is not the money in itself. It's how it changes things because *cultores populares* were not getting any money and the ones who got it [the brokers], got money as a symbol that they were doing our job. Do you know what I mean? That can't be possible! That is how the culture finished in my village [Todasana]. This did not happen in all cases, obviously. But the drum in *mi pueblo* did not need money to be played, what it needed is that the government went away and let us alone playing for pleasure like before. The [activity of playing] drums inspires many people to identify with our unique identity. We should not have let money become involved in our culture.

What is clear here, entangled in the underlying issues of funding, is how Oliver provides a telling example of how the state engages with citizens. Opportunities to secure funding for performances outside the village or any other resources given by the state was

mediated by Remi. Now, this is a key complexity. Citizens in the *Parroquia Caruaó* encounter the state in their everyday lives by engaging with activists who live in the village and are insiders of the local state bureaucracy. Amongst *colectivos* in the *Parroquia Caruaó*, the same activist performs different roles. Remi shows us how key actors encounter the state or enable other residents to encounter the state through the role they perform in relationship to the state. Remi is a state employee and a broker from the *gobernación*, an activist who was part of *colectivo RC* and now *colectivo Afro-Caribe* and –apparently– a *cultor popular*. While it was hard for me to confirm the veracity of Remi’s involvement in corruption, it is precisely how Oliver’s testimony about Remi shows us the tensions and shifting contradictions embedded in the hazy separation between the state and the local grassroots. This example also makes visible the contradictory effect that state funding had. *Toques de tambor*, which are powerful contestations against racism, declined and thus dissemination of the local black culture in Todasana, due to material interventions.

There are other opposite experiences of *cultores populares* in Osma, which benefited from state funding in the past to help them disseminate critical messages before audiences about black resistance and positive black consciousness. Yet, the national economic and political crisis made funding increasingly harder to obtain. These challenges accentuated knotty relationships of political clientelism to obtain funding. It was harder for *cultores populares* who had developed by themselves direct relationships with the state before the Bolivarian Revolution, which leads me to the story of Andrés. His case is useful to understand more critically the connection between political clientelism and how the state used the promotion of black culture in a way which keeps the population in “its place,” despite the progressive cultural politics enacted in the country.

#### **4.4.4. Andrés**

I met Andrés in Osma, shortly after the beginning of my fieldwork in February 2015. He was a black man in his sixties with big silver Afro-hair that he kept covered with his distinctive Rastafarian beany hat. His cultural advocacy comprised of the dissemination in the drumming ensembles of his group, messages to reclaim pride in blackness and against internalised racism. He was a long established *cultor popular* and the leader of Osma’s folkloric group *Melaza y Tambor*, created in 1976 (see Chapter 3) with 30

musicians. Andrés used to obtain funding for presentations of his group outside Osma through the CONAC (National Commission of Culture), which disappeared in 2005 and became the Ministry of Culture as mentioned earlier.

However, for Andrés, his encounters with Ministry of Culture around paperwork were one the biggest hurdles that his group *Melaza y Tambor* faced. Andrés explained that state bureaucracy developed by the Ministry of Culture through the SNCP reinforced a feeling of marginalisation as he said, “I don’t understand why if they [SNCP] are more organised, they are blocking us [*cultores populares*]. Their duty is to keep us [*cultores populares*] alive.” Andrés mentioned that gathering the complicated documentation required, as well as the large amounts of paperwork to submit proposals, was a challenging situation for elderly *cultores populares* from rural areas like himself. He had no IT skills and no training in the submission of grant proposals. The state also had its own ways of erasing cultural difference through its bureaucracy. For example, open calls for project proposals made between July-August 2015 by the Ministry of Culture, specifically limited funds to popular music, academic, traditional and indigenous music (MPPC, 2015:5). Afro-Venezuelan music was not explicitly funded and depending on the interpretation of the reviewer, it may fit into either popular or traditional music. Creativity was also stifled. *Cultores populares* who submitted proposals had to tailor their cultural production to the guidelines contained on the government program *Plan Nacional Simón Bolívar*. In the proposals *cultores populares* had to specify their objectives, schedule, budget, activities and how these were going to be achieved. The presentation of the project had to be presented with specific character size and font. Also, none of these calls for proposals explicitly specified the funds involved in the grants, thus it was a subjective decision of the reviewer on how much money the Ministry would disburse to a project. Andrés also referred to the structural issues in the transportation that involves travelling from Osma to hand in paperwork in Caracas, having to sit in a waiting room while being ignored by state workers of the Ministry of Culture for long hours. He was already deterred by having done this process seven times and being left in the dark. The state effort to make popular culture more ‘legible’ involved a yearning for structure and registration. However, paperwork reinforced forms of marginalisation amongst rural *cultores* like Andrés, who to receive funding to had learn to negotiate these hurdles through relationships of political clientelism.

He said that the former CONAC bureaucracy that his folkloric group used to go through was manageable. Although heavily marred by partisan loyalties, CONAC provided easier access to small state-funded stipends according to Andrés. This allowed the group *Melaza y Tambor* to build a network of *cultores populares* within which the orality of the black popular culture from Osma, was nourished through cultural interchanges with the rest of the 22 states in Venezuela. Thereby, it was possible to learn more about other populations' local culture. *Melaza y Tambor* not only danced and played songs that talked about their past in the village. They also preserved those stories passed down through working songs while in slave plantations,<sup>64</sup> passed down from the generation who moved to the village in 1948. This folkloric group also played songs that had a deeper meaning in line with their anti-racist agenda. *Melaza y Tambor's* songs for *toques de tambor* articulate how the black population is part of one of the most economically disenfranchised groups and how, even after the abolition of slavery, is still socio-economically located at the margins of mainstream society. They also have songs that are a call for unity and black consciousness. This is addressed compellingly in their song "*Himno al Negro*" (Hymn of the Negro): "It's because racism/ beat us without compassion/ Black people let's unite/ For our liberation."<sup>65</sup> Andrés mentioned that when funded by CONAC, *Melaza y Tambor* had more performances outside Osma to communicate these messages about building meaningful socio-political inclusion and to forging deeper links with other black villages:

We used to have a bigger cultural impact in other black villages, because always after our *toques de tambor* we used to discuss and open a debate on issues about racism. That was with the purpose of creating a positive black consciousness with other sister villages.

For this reason, during informal conversations with Andrés about his views on state material support, he mentioned that state support was vital to keep the local black culture alive. Unlike Oliver, who rejected the involvement of state funds due to its detrimental effect to the culture in Todasana, Andrés had a different opinion. He said, "The duty of the state is to [economically] support us [*cultores populares*]. We are a cultural patrimony." This rationale from Andrés, who stresses that the state is responsible for

---

<sup>64</sup> One of the songs said: "*To o to/ mache/ aqui esta tu calabozo*" which is a song that talks about a common tool used by enslaved in plantations. This is the cane knife similar to a machete called in Osma '*calabozo*' (dungeon) used for harvesting cane styled vegetation.

<sup>65</sup> In Spanish: "*Es por que tanto racismo/ Nos golpea sin compasión/ unidos todos los negros/ lucharemos por nuestra liberación*".



providing economic support to its citizens is deeply entrenched in Venezuela. It is a consequence of the perception and expectations of oil's distribution by the state amongst the citizenry, which has had cultural, social and political effects in Venezuela (Coronil, 1997). Andrés is part of the *cultores populares* who –according to him– stopped receiving state support through the state bureaucracy of the SNCP in 2010s. The reason according to Andrés is that his cultural/political advocacy was not attractive to state funding:

The ways the government's [cultural presenters], talk about racism is in a vague way. The way I talked [about racism] after our performances on stages was disliked by them [government]. Because I openly talk about it and does not sit well with them [government], our presentations out of Osma and the funding that we used to apply for stopped. Now the government has the mentality 'they [*cultores populares*] have to play what I want to see' and that creates a relationship of serfdom.

Andrés narrative shows a nuanced contradiction between the notion of 'race' within political domains as explored in section 4.1 and its use in cultural spaces. When Andrés used to receive invitations for cultural activities sponsored by the government during the Bolivarian Revolution, his talks about racial discrimination were unwelcomed. The reason is the entrenched view of homogeneity and the colour-blind narrative of *mestizaje* historically supported by the state (Valencia, 2009:119; 2015:164; Luciani, 2016). Andrés also mentioned that receiving material support for the consciousness activities of *cultores populares* like himself means adapting their cultural content to what the state wants to promote. The few who obtain state resources – in Andrés' opinion – do so through clientelistic exchanges and knocking on the right doors of insiders in the state bureaucracy.

Andrés mentioned that obtaining funding became increasingly hard as applications tended to be overlooked unless money was directly requested from a high-level government politician. Therefore, creating relationships with political patrons became the way to receive funds. Andrés said that a high-level state bureaucrat born in the neighbouring village of Naiguatá, and whom Andrés knows personally, is the way through which *Melaza y Tambor* occasionally secures state resources. This person Andrés knows is the PSUV politician, Nelson Merentes, the Chief executive of the Central bank of Venezuela, which is the state agency in charge of planning the monetary policies of the country. Although unrelated to the cultural policies, the Central Bank of Venezuela, became the reliable source of funding for cultural events in the *Parroquia Caruao*, when the local

government or the Ministry of Culture failed to disburse stipends. “The only one who helps us [with funding] is Nelson Merentes (Chief Executive of Venezuela’s Central Bank),” said Andrés. Therefore, Andrés shows us how pulling the right strings works. Success is achieved through clientelistic relationships which deepen hierarchical forms of dependency and political exploitation for *cultores populares*, as we will see below.

Black culture is commonly used in political rallies when politicians want to publicly assert that they are going to distribute oil resources and work for the betterment of their constituency, the popular masses. It is in the political marches where politicians have made use of popular culture for their own political gains. Political leaders need to be in contact with the ‘*el pueblo*’ (the popular masses), who are the bulk of the supporters of the Bolivarian Revolution. So, it is not strange that *tamboreros* are invited to play in rallies and marches in support of the Bolivarian Revolution. In one of the early political campaigns back in 1998, *Melaza y Tambor* performed in one of the processions of late President Chávez, one of many walk-about when he was accompanied by his entourage and followers in *barrios* in Vargas state and Caracas. “I used to vote for Chávez and I thought that things would improve in my village [Osma],” said Andrés. Marches and rallies are political opportunities in which these contacts between politicians and their constituencies are made. This helps to mobilise an electoral base. *Melaza y Tambor* was equally invited in 2013 in Nicolás Maduro’s electoral campaign after Chávez’s death, to play in one of his processions in Vargas state. On this occasion, Andrés declined to participate. Andrés said, “When it is a political thing, they want us to play drums, but when we are asking for funding to continue disseminating our culture of resistance to other parts of the country, they do not give any money.” This illustrates cases in which black culture has been co-opted for political purposes. In the following, I will explore how cultural policies are the grounds to make visible relationships of subordination and political clientelism.

#### **4.5. State-society relationships and political clientelism**

The key point of this section is to examine the links between political clientelism and wider cultural policies. I show another dimension of the relationships between the state and Afro-Venezuelan populations which have cultural policies as a background. A cultural policy that branched out from the “New Cultural Hegemony” is the policy known

as the cultural “re-ideologization of the country.” This supports nationalistic values with an emphasis on the renaissance of Amerindian and black culture. It also values identities such as the Afro-Venezuelan one, which was historically eschewed in the process of creating a national identity, yet during the Bolivarian Revolution began to be exalted. It is precisely contradictions around these state-endorsed cultural policies, which recognise historical Afro-Venezuelan figures whose existence was sanitised from most official textbooks, that I will contextualise below.

#### ***4.5.1. Negro Primero***

On 25<sup>th</sup> June 2015, a ceremony was held to honour the remains of Pedro Camejo, commonly known as *Negro Primero*. He was an Afro-Venezuelan military man who was born in slavery. After his death, he became a symbol of black power amongst the poor through the circulation of popular religions in Venezuela (see Pollak-Eltz, 1998). *Negro Primero* fought during the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the independence wars against Spanish colonialism and was the only black man who achieved high military rank in the army led by Simón Bolívar.<sup>66</sup> While in Osma, I watched the televised ceremony, led in 2015 by President Nicolás Maduro, to induct *Negro Primero* into the Hall of Heroes of the National Mausoleum in Caracas. The ceremony was considered by Maduro an overdue homage to the participation of Afro-Venezuelans in the official history from which they had been previously eliminated. During his speech, Maduro emphasised that *Negro Primero*’s inclusion sealed a debt with the Afro-Venezuelan population. The previous lack of explicit recognition of *Negro Primero* in the Hall of Heroes, and thus in Venezuela’s historiography, was due to “historic racism.” Maduro reflected on the lack of recognition for *Negro Primero* as well as other Afro-Venezuelan men and women who had taken active roles in anti-colonial struggles.

While Maduro highlighted the importance of recognising the culture and the historical value of Afro-Venezuelans, there was an absence from his discourse of the possibility for allocating resources and political rights to them. This is a key demand amongst politicised Afro-Venezuelan grassroots movements. Instead, the initiative of taking *Negro Primero*’s symbolic remains was paired with a call from the government to Afro-descendant cultural

---

<sup>66</sup> Simón Bolívar is a towering figure in South America and was Venezuela’s Liberator. He is both symbol of national identity and of the Bolivarian Revolution.

and music groups to celebrate this inclusion with *toques de tambor*. There were strong rejections in local online newspapers coming from visible Afro-Venezuelan activists linked to the state. One of these came from Diógenes Díaz, a political activist from Caracas in charge of the international relations for the national Afro-Venezuelan movement. The Bolivarian Revolution still reduces Afro-descendants to, “drum playing and bottom shaking” (Díaz, 2015) as he referred to *toques de tambor* performances. According to Díaz, although *Negro Primero* was an important inclusion, the state still failed to address structural racism by failing to acknowledge the UN’s Declaration of the 2015 - 2025 International Decade for People of African Descent.<sup>67</sup> Although in the surface it was welcomed, part of *Negro Primero*’s cultural recognition was perceived as cynical. The reason is due to the ways in which ‘race’ is entangled in hierarchical relationships of clientelism that are made to appeal and mobilise a voting base in times of elections in Venezuela.

#### **4.5.2. *Negro Primero* and elections in Osma**

This context of *Negro Primero* and state relations with Afro-Venezuelans is not disconnected from political events in Osma. A few days after *Negro Primero* was admitted in the National Mausoleum on June 28<sup>th</sup>, 2015 there were primary elections for the PSUV. This was a national election of the government party, the PSUV, for its militants to choose the PSUV candidates for MP’s in the National Assembly for the December 2015 elections.<sup>68</sup> The PSUV strategy for unity in times of elections is a top-down strategy that narrows the diversity of their candidates. High-ranking leaders of the PSUV appoint a group of candidates, who are then chosen by the party members in public elections. There are some candidates, who although not born in the *Parroquia Caruao*, come to represent the interests of this constituency. In the primary elections on 28<sup>th</sup> June 2015, one of the handpicked candidates of the PSUV in Vargas state was the wife of Vargas’ governor C.C. Venegas. According to Antonio, a political leader from Osma, these candidates are not usually seen in the area, whereas local leaders with social work and understanding of the needs of these local communities are not included or overlooked

---

<sup>67</sup> This is a set of UN initiatives contained in the UN Resolution 68/237 which encourage states to create policies that target the elimination of racial discrimination and the reduction of poverty of this group. Further documents call for tackling lack of collective territories, recognition of their culture, legal recognition of Afro-descendant peoples living in the country and affirmative action policies (see UN, 2013).

<sup>68</sup> In the December elections, the PSUV lost most MP seats in the National Assembly to the opposition.

when hand-picking candidates. Thus, local leaders have less opportunity to represent the interests of the parish.

On the Sunday of the PSUV elections Eriberto, another political activist from Osma, was in charge of mobilising the vote in the village. Eriberto is the *vocero principal* of Osma's communal council, and a state broker, who works for a Foundation that belongs to a Ministry, but whose work functions sometimes overlap with the *gobernación* of Vargas state. Eriberto gathered a small number of villagers who had their PSUV party membership cards to vote in these elections. This participation seemed already shaped by the distribution of a few goods linked to the national government *Misión Alimentación* (Mission Food), distributed by the *gobernación* few days before. Previously, I found out through my landlady that Eriberto had already handed out resources on June 23<sup>rd</sup> to a few residents he handpicked in Osma. There were a small number of Chinese smartphones and plasma TVs that could be purchased at prices fixed by the state, therefore substantially below the mainstream market price. My landlady was bitter because she and her family were excluded from accessing these goods because they are not government supporters. She said, "Eriberto only gives things to the *Chavistas* around him." These exchanges illustrate a facet of political clientelism, or as sociologist Javier Auyero (2012) defines as, "[the] transaction, the direct exchange of a citizen's vote in return for direct payments or continuing access to employment, goods, and services" (97), which in Osma occur near election time.

By mid-day on the day of the PSUV primary elections, I had been talking to Eriberto in the square at the heart of Osma and asked him if I could join them. I travelled from Osma to Todasana with Eriberto and six voters in the jeep that belonged to the *comuna* in the *Parroquia Caruao*. The small voting *Chavista* population in Osma was clearly discontent with the long queues and the government's response to tackling the growing shortages of food and necessities. Yet, government supporters were not passive dupes. Voters had their own strategies to show discontent. Although the vote is secret, a couple of Osma's voters openly discussed that they voted for other candidates, not the wife of the governor, to resist the top-down approach of the local PSUV.<sup>69</sup> Eriberto bought them all beers and snacks after they voted. Despite participating and mobilising a few voters for the

---

<sup>69</sup> Due to these hierarchical ways in which the PSUV was relating to the grassroots, this discontent further showed when most PSUV candidates lost to the opposition in the December 2015 elections.

elections, Eriberto spoke to me about his dissatisfaction with the government about the inclusion of *Negro Primero* in the National Mausoleum. “What else do we get besides invitations for *toques de tambor*?” said Eriberto. He further elaborated:

Besides the memorial what happens? Why is that his [*Negro Primero*’s] memory is not honoured instead with public policies that target those who descend from him? Although this is the government that has done the most for our *comunidades Afro* (Afro-Venezuelan peoples), we need to stop playing the role of ‘drum dancers’ and push harder for the implementation of policies for us.

What is important to highlight here are the complexities of Eriberto’s position. While he makes criticisms about how the state fails to address structural issues, he is also divided by loyalty to the government. In his view, his allegiance to the PSUV party is because it represents the only government that has ever made an explicit (but symbolic) inclusion of Afro-Venezuelans. This sheds light on another dimension that generates a high degree of loyalty that is harnessed through the political side of the interplay between race and class, and political indebtedness in times of elections. This is especially seen since ‘race’ profoundly interacts with class, and in turn has been more greatly mobilised in the terrain of politics (B.Cannon, 2008:731-32). Equally important is how Eriberto’s critique illustrates how the state maintains Afro-descendants “in their place” by naturalising their participation in the *Negro Primero* ceremony as drum dancers. While the poorest segments (largely comprised of Afro-descendants) have received economic support through social missions (Strønen, 2017a) such as *Misión Cultura* amongst other social programmes in the area, the state still fails to recognise Afro-descendants as a category of political subjects organised in the interest of getting the state to pass specific policies that can undermine their socio-economic exclusion. While they have a subjective incentive to vote for the PSUV, the relationship of the state with the Afro-descendants grassroots, as we have seen, is tainted by political exploitation. These events overall show how interactions and everyday practices between the state and Afro-Venezuelans through its brokers and political leaders, develop through complex relationships in Osma.

It may be useful to draw out the implications of the observations explored in this section, to understand what they tell us about the relationships between the state and Afro-Venezuelans. First what Eriberto did as a state broker, activist and as a resident of the village, is not an exceptional situation. Instead, it tells us about the thinly drawn

boundaries between the state and grassroots movements, articulated by co-optation and patronage politics. This insight helps us to understand how these forms of patronage politics are features of Venezuela's post-colonial state. It is common that, "most contemporary societies remain governed by yesterday's administrative systems and procedures" (Hansen and Stepputat, 2001:29). This means that this is not an anomaly or a feature whose location is a sole feature of the Bolivarian Revolution. This is located in a broader system of lingering patronage politics in Venezuela through which the state had traditionally related to its most excluded populations. Dynamics of clientelism and patronage are cultural variants and evolutions that still linger in Venezuela from post-colonial *caudillismo*. This was a form of power domination exercised by military strongmen who controlled the state in the post-colonial period (1811-1958). Through these forms of power, patron-client networks were cemented in the country. As these forms of power are not widely used to explain Europe's liberal democracies, it then collapses when we try to look at Venezuela's case through a Western understanding expecting a sharp separation between 'the state' and 'the civil society'. Rather, in Venezuela these are "blurry" configurations, to use Gupta's term (2006), and are usually found in post-colonial contexts. Instead of being symptoms of an anomalous state, these ways in which state power operates through everyday practices are historically situated.

Second, patronage politics and clientelism have been primary vehicles through which the Afro-descendant population of the *Parroquia Caruao* have been able to obtain a small amount of resources and social mobility, and some ability to navigate through poverty and the systematic exclusion previously prevalent in the area (Altez, 2000, 2007). What is now salient is how patronage politics mingles with the mobilisation of 'race' for political purposes through cultural policies. Although it is clearly an instrument of political control, this contradicts the counter-hegemonic nature within which the state was re-founded in 1999. What the state forgets to address with *Negro Primero's* inclusion is how it continues to reproduce power relations that reinforce the subordination of Afro-Venezuelans. Ideas of race, class, gender and nation are embedded in power dynamics, everyday practices, and ideologies that need to be undone through more substantive politics that address both recognition and targeted redistribution. Thus, not much is achieved by purporting to deliver cultural policies that are disconnected from the relationships between economic inequalities and the racialised social system in Venezuela. In this way the state makes a cultural recognition that has undertones that

reinforce images of colonial representations. Although it has been within the period of the Bolivarian Revolution that grassroots movements have openly articulated through politics how the ‘homogenisation’ of the narrative of *mestizaje* made invisible this sector of the population through the official historiography, certain levels of cultural recognition in key periods before elections times have allowed the state to assert its hegemony. Using the figure of *Negro Primero* created a situation in which the government presented itself as a body that represents the interests of Afro-Venezuelans, thus reifying what I heard from a *Chavista* communal leader from the neighbouring village of La Sabana, “The *Parroquia Caruao* is a parish of slaves. The [Bolivarian] Revolution appoints kings while we are the *esclavos* (eslaves) who vote for them.” This summarises a key dimension of the observations explored here that help to explain how Afro-Venezuelans relate to the state, while I have tried to unpack how Afro-descendants resist the power exercised over them by an ‘ally’: the state.

## 4.6. Conclusions

This chapter explored the relationships between the state and political/cultural social movements in the *Parroquia Caruao*. I argued that the margins of separation between the state and Afro-Venezuelan social movements are thinly drawn by unequal power relations. I was interested in drawing attention to how our analytical understanding of everyday state practices and social movements should take into consideration contexts of specific power relationships. The exploration of these relationships in the *Parroquia Caruao* raised several complexities that are fraught with tensions and contradictions. One of these complexities is in the ways in which counter-hegemony and hegemony are held in tension and coexists with one another regarding issues of ‘race’. Specifically, it is seen in how discourses on ‘race’ and cultural policies and recognitions are presented as a counter-hegemonic alternative mobilised by the Bolivarian Revolution, while in practice reinforces patronage politics. I showed how funding was granted through relationships of political clientelism and partisan politics which is the prevailing feature of the relationship between Afro-Venezuelans and the state. Afro-Venezuelans’ political loyalties to the discourses on race are closely connected to the political support towards the government which reflects in the voting behaviour in Osma and Todasana.



Another complexity I highlighted was the fuzzy boundary between the state and the local social movements. Remi and Eriberto were examples that show how key figures play different roles for the state. They are state employees (brokers who work for the local *gobernación* and thus the state bureaucracy), activists (in their *colectivos*), performing their local culture (as *cultores populares*), and are communal leaders (in their *consejos comunales*). These are cases that show how the alliance between *colectivos* and the state is built within an ever-changing politicised context, while key politicised figures embody shifting coexistences between how activists navigate the struggle for the betterment of their communities or represent state's interests. Remi and Eriberto are examples in which Gramscian notions about the state and civil society fall short when trying to explain the separation between state and black grassroots movements in Venezuela. Gramsci alludes to –an unexplained– yet well-defined boundary in which, what is neither the state, nor the market is then the civil society which struggles against the state's hegemony. Yet, the men who struggle against hegemony are members of *colectivos* and *cultores populares* as well as part of the state themselves. They lived and were residents of the *Parroquia Caruao*.

Let me conclude by suggesting how these findings contribute to the literature on black social movements and the state. By examining the links between politics and cultural policies, I explored *how* these relationships unfolded. By initially exploring the ways in which counter-hegemony and hegemony work in the Bolivarian Revolution, I provided a layer that helped to support my argument about the post-colonial context whereby there is a vague division between the state and grassroots movements. To understand how the state relates to the Afro-Venezuelan grassroots, I examined the contradictions located in this political process to show the different layers that comprise power relationships exerted by the state. I explained that the state is not a homogeneous entity, and this helps to explain how the state related to its citizens through its bureaucracy.

Bringing the analysis of state bureaucracy together with explorations of patronage politics and social movements can help us to understand how Afro-Venezuelans politicised movements contest the state's hegemonic relationships. These cases also help us to examine the extent to which Gramscian concepts such as civil society and the state help us to provide a nuanced theoretical ground to understand relationships between politicised Afro-descendants and the state. A common characteristic in the literature of black social

movements in Latin America is that co-option is a primary feature in the way the state engages with social movements (De la Torre and Antón Sánchez, 2012). Another feature is the coexistence of the politics of inclusion and the actual exclusion of Afro-descendant groups (Hooker, 2005; Wade, 2009). While there are successful cases such as in Brazil and Colombia where the state has recognised its Afro-descendant populations (Paschel, 2016), it is also common to find that Afro-descendant movements are behind the levels of recognition achieved by Indigenous social movements (Hooker, 2005; Yashar, 2015). The contribution of this chapter to the literature is to provide empirical evidence of how Afro-Venezuelans have not achieved such levels of recognition due to this ambiguous separation between state and the society, which precludes the Afro-Venezuelans from redressing their material inequalities. In the next chapter, I will explore the fact that religion, another strand of culture, is used as a resource for Afro-Venezuelans in the *Parroquia Caruao* to craft their own representations of their plight to defend against their marginalisation. These strategies seek to develop a project of black self-affirmation, by unearthing black iconography that was forbidden during the colonial period and erased by notions of *mestizo* nationhood. In the next chapter, I explore vibrant contestations articulated by the “rebels” and “traditionalists” about the existence of white supremacy in their cultural heritage and Afro-religious festivals.

# Chapter 5: Challenging *San Juan Bautista*

*Blackness, Popular Catholicism Afro-religiosity in Osma and Todasana*

## 5.1. Introduction

On the 21<sup>st</sup> of June 2015, I went to visit Chucho's house; a 'rebel' from Todasana. We discussed the ceremony of a sports event that featured a representation of the Feast of St. John the Baptist (in Spanish, *Fiestas de San Juan Bautista*). This feast, also known as midsummer eve that is a feature of many pagan celebrations in some European countries, takes place annually in Venezuela –every 24<sup>th</sup> of June– to celebrate the birth of St. John the Baptist (*San Juan Bautista*). Chucho explained the event in detail. During the inauguration ceremony of the South American Beach Games in 2014, a ballet company hired by the regional government performed a dance about the celebration of *Fiestas de San Juan Bautista* on national television. Whilst the ballet company danced, the presenter sent a message that reached a nation-wide audience, “*San Juan*, the white patron saint of the blacks” (*San Juan, el santo blanco patrón de los negros*), travels with his mystic presence through the coasts of our land, sowing peace and hope” (VTV, 2014). *San Juan Bautista* is usually regarded in Venezuela as the “saint of the blacks” (Monasterio Vázquez, 1981:107) without the image being black itself.

After reporting to me the words of the presenter about *San Juan Bautista*, Chucho said that these were not innocent discourses to portray Afro-Venezuelan culture. According to Chucho, this was an example of the cultural domination that former slave populations were subjected to through the imposition of a colonial, Christian legacy that still survives today. *San Juan Bautista* was a prophet and one of the most prominent figures in Christian faith. His image –that of a European white man – was one enforced by Spanish colonists during slavery times to convert Africans to Christianity (Whitten, 1981). The importance of *San Juan Bautista*, as established by the Catholic Church, represented the act of baptism<sup>70</sup> of enslaved and their transition “from savages” (sinner) to “civilised” (absolved Christian) (Whitten, 1981:52). While conversions to Christianity and slavery went hand

---

<sup>70</sup> Christians believe baptism symbolises the washing away of sin and the admission of people in to the community of the Church without which their souls cannot be saved.

in hand, the legacy of the adoration of *San Juan Bautista* continues to the present day. His day is the most important patron saint celebration of the central Caribbean coastal towns of Venezuela, which were former plantations.

Reflecting back on the history behind the imposition of *San Juan Bautista*, Chucho said to me, “Look. Why do we [Afro-descendant populations] still adore *San Juan Bautista* if we don’t look like him?” Recall the ‘culturalists’ and the ‘rebels’, who are *cultores populares* and key political activists I introduced in Chapter 3. Due to a lack of historical perspective, the links between *San Juan Bautista* and slavery in the *Parroquia Caruao* is not common knowledge among inhabitants and ‘culturalists’ *cultores populares* from Todasana and Osma. However, this historical link has grown in awareness and is familiar amongst ‘rebel’ *cultores populares* and key politicised activists like Chucho. This politicisation about the history of colonialism and ‘race’ by the ‘rebels’ in rejection to Catholic iconography is the subject of this chapter.

The aim of this chapter is to explore how Afro-Venezuelans in Osma and Todasana confront through Afro-religious festivals the topic of race and white supremacy. I suggest that Afro-descendants use religious iconography as a politicised vehicle to articulate their concerns about a history of marginalisation and racial oppression. Since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Catholic Church enforced imagery that sustained systemic racism and white supremacy through associations of blackness with sin (Bastide, 1967: 325), which is also reflected in the prevalence of Catholic white symbols which came to be associated with purity (Bastide, 1967: 318). However, there are groups in Osma that have produced challenges against the colonial history that had previously made invisible blackness in iconography. The diversity of contestations explored in this chapter suggest that Afro-descendant populations contest race, re-imagine themselves and reclaim, through visual resources, visible representations of the blackness in a positive light.

This chapter is divided into three sections. It begins by providing in section 5.2 a historical account that illustrates the connections between Catholicism and slavery and describes the survival of colonial ideologies through the local popular religion. This account allows for a better understanding about why Afro-descendants in Osma honour and celebrate a Eurocentric Catholic saint in their culture. Having established these historical connections between racial ideologies and aesthetics in religious iconographies, the section 5.3.

illustrates how patron saint festivals are the space and the main battlefield where there is a simultaneous inclusion and exclusion of blackness through cultural practices and Catholic iconography. Finally, in section 5.4, I explore a tension connected to competing ways of incorporating blackness in the local culture. I illustrate how the retrieval of an Afro-Venezuelan religious symbol from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, created in Osma, shaped contradictions about the ways in which white supremacy can be contested.

While I previously explored in Chapter 4 how Afro-Venezuelans develop relationships with the state to challenge structural racism, here I build a deeper understanding about specific cultural contestations within the field of religion that have become the centre of the political struggle of ‘rebels’ in Osma against structural racism through iconography. The inclusion of a chapter about religion - in a thesis that explores the use of black popular culture as the battlefield through which Afro-Venezuelans struggle against racial discrimination – is due to a specific reason. Most manifestations of Afro-Venezuelan popular culture in my fieldsite are permeated by Christianity. The display of culture also reflects religious affiliations. As seventy per cent of Osma’s residents self-identify as Catholics, religion has become a cultural domain used by local activists to retrieve a black identity and a politicised consciousness about blackness. To better understand why these political struggles within the field of religion emerged, I will hereafter offer some background information on the system of white supremacy in Catholic iconography and its subsequent linkages with Afro-American religions.

## **5.2. Background: Catholicism and White Supremacy**

Before explaining the reason why there are white Catholic figures in the deities honoured by Afro-Latin American religious systems, I will first describe the role of the Catholic iconographic system imposed by the Roman Catholic Church. Catholicism was a key agent in the acculturation of enslaved Africans shipped off to the Americas, as they were forced to adopt the European religious iconographic system. Africans were converted to Christianity, even before leaving Africa.<sup>71</sup> Catholic missionaries and slave owners

---

<sup>71</sup> The conversions of Africans enslaved to Christianity varied. Development of an African Catholic church in West Africa, began at an earlier date than the spread of the slave trade in the continent. It was as a result of European colonialism, enforced first by Portuguese settlers in West Africa. Thus, some Africans –later enslaved– were already familiar with the Christian faith and practiced a syncretic form of African beliefs with Christianity (Thornton, 1988). Later, some other enslaved Africans who were not cognisant of

enforced, through discursive strategies and through violence, the founding of a system that reflected the social and economic dominance of Europeans upon Africans (Bastide, 1967:318). When Africans resisted slavery, their struggle enabled colonisers to use brutal punishments. Forms of brutality applied by slave-owners to the enslaved included abuses such as “starvation, rape, decess, physical exhaustion and slavery in perpetuity to those considered as savages and heathens” (K. Cannon, 2008:130). But the forcible embrace of Catholicism was also paired with white supremacy. This is reflected in the ways in which later Christian traditions supported the ideology of ‘race’ by shaping and normalising racially symbolic associations of whiteness to purity and innocence while blackness was associated to wickedness and death (Hood, 1994).

These constructions were enforced through the system of imagery supported by European Christianity from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. For example, the widespread association of God and mystical Catholic saints to Caucasian features were strategies to consolidate an ideology of racial domination. A key evidence of these strategies was the “Aryanisation” (Bastide, 1967:315), meaning the representation of religious figures such as Jesus Christ, who embodied God in the flesh, with images that reflected a Caucasian man. This is important as archival research suggests that Jesus Christ had Semitic<sup>72</sup> origins, with presumably brown skin. Yet a group of German theologians in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, motivated by racism and Christian anti-Semitism, developed a movement that re-imagined Christianity without links to Judaism and reconstructed Jesus’ aesthetic representations as Aryan (Heschel, 2008). An example that still survives to the present day is the common depiction of Jesus Christ’s complexion with fair skin, brown long hair and blue eyes to represent pureness, goodness and holiness (Bastide, 1967:315).

Racism also thrived by either eliminating the use of dark tones to depict most Catholic saints’ skin in paintings or disseminating racial ideologies that claimed that black skin was a mystical punishment. For example, Saint Benedict the Moor (or known in Spanish as *San Benito de Palermo*), depicted as a black man of sepia skin tone, is an important saint reclaimed by *cultores populares* in Osma. *San Benito de Palermo* or simply *San*

---

Christianity, were either baptised in Africa by Spanish traders right after their purchase, while in other cases they were in the Americas where they were forced to convert to their master’s faith (Thornton, 1988).

<sup>72</sup> Semitic refers to the family of languages spoken by Arabs, Akkadians, Canaanites, some Ethiopians, and Aramaean tribes including Hebrews.

*Benito* was the first black<sup>73</sup> saint born in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and a direct descendant from Africans enslaved<sup>74</sup> in Italy. Although long ignored by the Church, he was canonised in 1807 when Catholic missions expanded alongside the slave trade in Africa (Sharps, 1994). Yet, symbolic representations of *San Benito*'s blackness by the Catholic Church supported skin colour prejudice by associating his skin tone to a mystical punishment (Frost, 1990). For example, a legend circulating in Sicily (Italy) said that he was born white but, in order to resist sexual attraction to the opposite sex, *San Benito* prayed to God to make him unattractive, and therefore God turned his skin black (Bastide, 1967:317). Nonetheless, these racist notions enforced through Catholicism also mingled with a process within which African religious systems survived in the Americas. This process of mixture is called Syncretism; that is, the combination of seemingly contradictory beliefs and religious practices (Shaw and Stewart, 1994). In what follows, I will show what syncretism means in the context of Venezuela.

### ***5.2.1. Race and Catholic Iconography in Venezuela***

While slave owners believed that they were eradicating African beliefs through Christianity, Africans in the Americas reinterpreted their African deities, and transferred them onto the images of Catholic saints to mirror their traditional beliefs. For example, in Venezuela it is believed that *San Benito* is the syncretised image of an African deity called *Ajé*—from Dahomey, current Benin— who represents forests and blue waters (Finol, 2001). Thus, through syncretism, the enslaved populations still clung to their African religiosity without being punished by the Church and slaveholders. Although *San Benito* is a black saint, who is important for understanding the political contestations against racial discrimination in Osma, which I explore in this chapter, there is a white catholic saint whose importance is paramount to black identity and black popular culture in

---

<sup>73</sup> While there are Christian traditions in African countries such as Ethiopia which has numerous black saints, this chapter refers to the limited presence of black male saints in Venezuela's Catholic iconography in which there are only San Benedict the Moor and *San Martin de Porres*.

<sup>74</sup> Saint Benedict the Moor parents were enslaved African of Ethiopian origin, and were enslaved in San Fratello (Italy), although it is believed that San Benito was granted freedom since the time he was born. In the Catholic faith, Saint Benedict has become a powerful symbol. He is the patron saint of the city of Palermo, Italy. But it is also the patron saint of the missions in Africa and the patron saint of African-American populations in the U.S. In Venezuela, both the mestizo population from the Andean regions and the Afro-descendant populations from the south of Maracaibo Lake have embraced a strong devotion for the image of San Benito de Palermo. However, the introduction of San Benito to Osma is significant.

Venezuela - especially in towns mostly populated by Afro-Venezuelans. This saint is St. John the Baptist (*San Juan Bautista*).

It may be striking to an unfamiliar reader that *San Juan Bautista*, a fair skinned white man, is the patron saint of Afro-Venezuelans. However, *San Juan Bautista*'s importance is possibly due to his syncretisation with a Yoruba deity. The French anthropologist Roger Bastide argues that *San Juan Bautista* in Brazil represents the syncretised Yoruba deity *Shangó* (Bastide, 1971). *Shangó* is represented by the colours red and white, like the colours that participants in the *Fiestas de San Juan Bautista* wear, which are associated with water and fire, which are the same colours associated with *San Juan Bautista* in Venezuela. Ancient African tales of *Shangó* mention that this deity falls asleep, which is what prevents him from descending to earth and destroying it (Bastide, 1971:156-159, 1978:274).

Like Yoruba tales of *Shangó*, those oral histories about *San Juan Bautista* that are included in Osma's drumming songs reproduce that the latter falls asleep throughout the year, after getting drunk, and should be awakened through a ritualized African-derived drumming ceremony. Although these are elements that are visible in the celebrations of *Fiestas de San Juan Bautista* in Osma, it is difficult to speak with precision which African deity *San Juan Bautista* syncretised in Venezuela. This is based on the fact that Africans enslaved in Venezuela – although heterogeneous groups – were predominantly of Congo and Bantu ethnic origin (Pollak-Eltz, 2012:5). I will now turn to the ways in which 'race' and religion are entangled in the biggest celebration of black popular culture in Osma, which is tied to issues of representation.

### **5.3. The embrace of Catholic iconography in Afro-Venezuelan festivals**

In this section, I will explore how the topic of race and white supremacy is contested through *Fiestas* (patron saint celebrations) in Osma. I will describe how *Fiestas de San Bautista* provide the battlefield through which white supremacy is challenged, within the boundaries of Catholic celebrations. We will see how Osma's population included *San Benito de Palermo*, a black catholic saint in the absence of the image of *San Juan Bautista*



in the celebration of *San Juan Bautista Fiestas*. The inclusion of *San Benito* is the key point of this section which shows how residents negotiate underlying issues of racial and cultural domination embodied by *San Juan Bautista*. This section will help to further explore tensions and contradictions entangled to challenges against the effects of white supremacy in Osma which I develop in section 5.4.

### **5.3.1. Racial discourses and Catholic images in Osma**

To understand the reverence that residents from Osma have for *San Benito de Palermo*, one needs to acknowledge the significance that residents themselves have placed over the importance of blackness. In a conversation about early *Fiestas de San Juan Bautista* in Osma, Andrés –a ‘culturalist’ and leader of the group *Melaza y Tambor*– told me that the residents used to celebrate the *Fiestas de San Juan Bautista* by only using the image of *San Benito*. Elders in Osma did not have the *San Juan Bautista* image when they moved to the village in 1948. It was Andrés, who, shortly after the foundation of his group, decided to buy the image of *San Juan Bautista* in 1976. However, in the process of acquiring it in La Guaira – the capital city of Vargas state – it transpired that the cost of the image of *San Juan Bautista* exceeded the budget. Andrés said, “I did not have the money the shop-owners asked me for.” Then he stated that he went back to Osma empty-handed and consulted with his father and another respected healer from Osma about what to do.

Andrés recalled that in conversations with the elders in the village, they came up with the alternative idea of purchasing an image of *San Benito*. Silvio, a respected healer in the village, said to him “Bring *San Benito*. He is a saint who is *negro* and likes *tambores* (drums).” Encouraged by the association that Silvio made between *San Benito*, blackness, and drumming, Andrés bought *San Benito*. Through *San Benito* inclusion in 1976, race and white supremacy began to be contested. I had the opportunity to see the image, which Andrés purchased in 1976, during the *Fiestas de San Juan Bautista* I attended in 2015. The image was that of a foot-long figure of a black man. His skin tone was a dark sepia colour, clad with a light blue satin gown and a straw hat. The saint carried a heart in the right hand. Andrés said that from 1976, to celebrate the *Fiestas de San Juan Bautista*, residents used to parade *San Benito* in the streets of the village and take the image to each household, where it was received with *toques de tambor*. For the population in Osma,

*San Benito* was a visible representation of black identity and drumming traditions, which they maintained by celebrating only the image of *San Benito* uninterruptedly for the next 9 years.

**Figure 5.1. San Benito de Palermo in Osma**



(photo by the author)

However, *San Benito*'s tradition in Osma was challenged in 1985. A couple from Caracas, who in 1984 had recently bought a holiday property in Osma, questioned why locals used the image of *San Benito* instead of *San Juan Bautista*. To this couple, Manuel and his wife Amelia, Osma's residents were celebrating an inaccurate image. In Venezuela *San Benito*'s *Fiestas* take place between the 27<sup>th</sup> of December and January 6<sup>th</sup> not on June 24<sup>th</sup> during *San Juan Bautista* day, as Osma's residents celebrated. Thus, in 1985, the couple made changes in the local cultural tradition. By purchasing the image of *San Juan Bautista* and lending it to Osma's residents, the population began to honour the accurate saint on the day of its patron saint festival, yet this act was contested.

Although Amelia was initially reluctant to speak about it, she mentioned that the inclusion of *San Juan Bautista*'s image in 1985 did not have an immediate acceptance from the population. There was a backlash against Amelia's imposed *San Juan Bautista*. The rejection manifested when Osma's residents refused to celebrate the *Fiestas de San Juan*

*Bautista* festival on June 24<sup>th</sup>, 1985. When I enquired about the reasons behind the rejection, Amelia said, “They [Osma’s residents] were not used to the image of *San Juan Bautista*.” As I asked Amelia to delve further into why residents did not celebrate the *San Juan Fiesta* in 1985, when they finally had the image of *San Juan Bautista*, she offered her own reflection, “Through *San Benito* they [the residents] identified with Africa. He was here [in Osma] before *San Juan [Bautista.]*” Through Amelia’s reflection, we can see that the focus of the residents in Osma was not only to display a long-standing celebration of black culture that is the essence of *San Juan Bautista Fiestas*, but also to culturally retrieve an aesthetic representation of blackness by appropriating *San Benito* instead of *San Juan Bautista*’s white image.

However, Amelia explained that she insisted on getting Osma’s residents to accept *San Juan Bautista* in October 1986. She invited a cultural drumming group from Caracas called ‘*Taller experimental Canaima*’ to play in Osma. The group partnered with Andrés to celebrate the anniversary of his group *Melaza y Tambor* on October 12<sup>th</sup>. This celebration included the image of *San Juan Bautista* being shown on public display, on what was back then considered the ‘*día de la raza*’ (Day of the race) - as we explored in Chapter 3. According to Amelia’s reflection, *San Juan Bautista Fiestas* represented the syncretism of Venezuelan religiosity, “In these *fiestas*, the religions [Catholicism and Afro-American religions] embrace each other,” she said. From 1987 onward, to accommodate the image of *San Juan Bautista*, the *Fiestas de San Juan* was rebranded as ‘*Encuentro de los dos Santos*’ (Meeting of the two saints).

I now want to give a sense of what this celebration looks like in Osma in order to illustrate its syncretic value. I will illustrate how ‘race’ unexpectedly manifests in the crowds that attract *San Juan Bautista* and *San Benito*. By paying attention to the different groups involved in the celebration, we can see that *San Juan Bautista* followers are comprised of tourists, non-native residents and *promeseros*<sup>75</sup> and mostly *mestizo* followers. In contrast, visibly black natives and tourists attracted to drum ensembles tend to remain around *San Benito*.

---

<sup>75</sup> People who makes promises to the saint during the year. In many cases, these promises for individual favours - such as health or prosperity - are paid back by touching the image and praying in silence, playing drums or hoisting the image on the top of one’s head while dancing to drums.

### 5.3.2. 'Race' and the celebration of *San Juan Bautista* and *San Benito*

I went to the *Encuentro de los dos Santos* in Osma in the night between the 23<sup>th</sup> and the 24<sup>th</sup> of June 2015. I witnessed that prior to the encounter between *San Juan Bautista* and *San Benito*, both figures are traditionally paraded separately on the evening of the 23<sup>th</sup> of June. This part of the celebration occurs simultaneously between Osma's beach and in the *casco central* –the more urbanized area of the village– which are places separated by a 15-minute walk, and hence it was tricky to capture what happened in each place at the same time. In the early hours of the evening, I attended the celebration on the beach where Amelia kept *San Juan Bautista*. He was placed on an altar made with wild cane shoots, a red satin blanket, and a table with grains and fruits. This celebration was comprised of a small group of 50 people, made up of non-native *mestizo* tourists, and a drumming group from Caracas, who were predominantly *mestizos* and gathered outside Amelia's house. That night, the person who led the Catholic prayers to *San Juan Bautista* was Amelia, as she was also the *promesera*, or the devotee, who asked *San Juan Bautista* for a personal favour and in return looked after him that year. Amelia led three Our Fathers and a Hail Mary, which is the part of the ceremony that has its most Catholic appeal. Once the prayers finished, the leader of the drumming group from Caracas slowly began to play a religious *Bembé* drum (big round drum) whose sound was accompanied by a chorus of local women, who began singing *sangueos*, which are slow ceremonial chants that are of African origin (Lengwinat, 2016). These *sangueos* carried over into a procession where participants waved coloured flags while singing and drumming, while a light brown-skinned woman clad in a white dress took the image of *San Juan Bautista* from its altar and danced with the image on the top of her head towards the beach, where a bonfire was lit with branches.

I then walked up to the *casco central*, where the bulk of the participants were celebrating *San Benito*. When I arrived at the *casco central*, there was a different atmosphere in the celebration. There was a musky smell of cigars, while people were drinking mostly beers, rum and other spirits. There was nearly a thousand people, between tourists and Afro-descendant residents, as it is documented that the *San Benito* procession attracts the highest number of participants in Osma (Pérez Márquez, 2012:21). This image was celebrated in mass in the local church and then taken out of the church in a procession made up of tourists, the local Afro-descendant families and the group *Melaza y Tambor*.

That evening, more than 20 musicians of *Melaza y Tambor*, some of them wearing *Dashikis*,<sup>76</sup> were in the street playing fast-paced drums and indigenous seashell trumpets called *guaruras*. Andrés and his musicians of *Melaza y Tambor* were playing a song called *El poder negro* (the black power), while locals and tourists were singing along. A black woman wearing a white dress danced with the image of *San Benito* on the top of her head.

Figure 5.2. San Juan Bautista in Osma



(photo by the author)

As I have described above, there is an eye-catching element in which ‘race’ subtly becomes salient in the *Fiestas*. The crowd attracted to the site of the celebration, which Amelia organises, is mainly comprised of mostly *mestizos*, who gather around the image of *San Juan Bautista*. Similarly, striking is that visibly black residents tend to remain around *San Benito*. In the description above, we can perceive that black populations from the village remain loyal to *San Benito* for two reasons. The first reason is that *San Benito* is usually celebrated in the urban core or Osma’s *casco central* where the bulk of the *Fiesta* usually occurs. The second reason is that *San Benito* is regarded in high esteem by locals and ‘culturalists’ *culturas populares*, as this was the image introduced by their forebears during the 1970s. While I am by no means implying that there is a sharp, racial separation in these *Fiestas*, due to the diversity of the population in the village, I am suggesting how *San Benito* and *San Juan Bautista* become the metaphor through which black identity and *mestizo* identity come to be expressed separately through preferences

---

<sup>76</sup> African inspired tops.

in the *Fiesta*. I now move onto describing, despite these separations, the aesthetics provided by a syncretism that is framed in Osma via –mostly– African and Spanish elements in the bulk of the *Fiestas*.

### ***5.3.3. Expressing whiteness and blackness in San Juan Bautista Fiestas***

Both figures of *San Juan Bautista* and *San Benito* met in the river of Osma on the 24<sup>th</sup> of June at midnight, which was the moment when the celebration reached its peak. This is the part of the celebration where black popular culture and syncretism is emphasized the most. At 12:00am of the 24<sup>th</sup>, the whole celebration was surrounded by scents of rum, cigars, beers, sweat and saltwater. The two women who held the images of the saints met in the river while dancing. One carried *San Juan Bautista* and the other one *San Benito*'s images contained in lightweight glass boxes on top of their heads. Participants splashed water at each other as it is considered that the water is blessed, because *San Juan Bautista* represents the baptismal waters. I saw devotees of both saints diving into the crowds, stretching out their arms to touch the saints, since being in contact with the divinities is a common devotional practice. This touch allows a sense of immediacy amongst the devotees, to trust that the saints will attend and help to solve their difficulties and personal tribulations or perform miracles.

I saw participants getting into a state of altered consciousness when both images met in the river. I was told that this is how participants experience a continuum of bodily sensations locally known as a *trance*, which range from tingling sensations and smells of pungent caramel scents – as Amelia described to have once experienced – to other more corporeal sensations related to possessions or ‘mounting’ of the body by spirits of dead enslaved.<sup>77</sup> I saw participants crying, yelling, clapping, praying, dancing. I was told that this state was induced by the combination of the practices of smoking cigars, drinking spirits and the sound of the drums played at the peak of the celebrations as the drumming groups involved played their drums relentlessly.

These vivid descriptions seek to emphasise how the *San Juan Bautista Fiesta* is the field to display aesthetic traditions that are strongly influenced by African religious systems

---

<sup>77</sup> For further descriptions of trance states and possessions of the body through syncretic religions, consult Ferrándiz, 2004 and Beliso-De Jesús, 2015.

that had to be syncretised by enslaves. This was one of the sites the enslaves and their descendants contested historical forms of subjugation. The beliefs attached to *San Juan Bautista*'s image is disguised as an African deity with quasi-human qualities, as documented in slave narratives. It was the saint who drunk *aguardiente* (clear spirit) and *parrandeaba* (partied) with the enslaved. As the ancient solstice ritual said, the African deity was able to grant [enslaves] all the favours asked, even give them the strength to run away [from slavery and settle in] to the *cumbe* (free settlements for runaway enslaved) (quoted in Ramos Guédez, 2018:12). I was told by my informant Antonio that, "*San Juan [Bautista]* was important for the Spanish peoples due to his relationship with baptism, but that man [*San Juan Bautista*] was never *parrandero* (partygoer), *tamborero* (drummer) and even less [alcohol] drinker." According to Antonio one of the 'rebels', these elements that *San Juan* is not, and which are distinguishably African and ought to be explicit in his opinion, are subordinated by the unequal narrative of *mestizaje*.

While the white figure of *San Juan Bautista* is regarded as the "saint of the blacks," his blackness can be only understood through the contradictions imposed by *mestizaje* in Venezuela. David Theo Goldberg's (2002) concept of 'racelessness' can be useful here to understand how a white icon is made to stand for blackness. Racelessness is a state discourse that arranges societies in racial hierarchies whilst maintaining white hegemony, though not predicated in an explicit manner. Instead, what is explicitly invoked is universality and colour-blindness (Goldberg, 2002). *San Juan Bautista* incarnates the *mestizaje* state discourse whereby all racial groups are blended into a homogenous nation with no racial categories. However, the colonial legacy behind the history of *San Juan Bautista* reveals the distortion of black cultural histories, via the imposition of a white icon that allowed white supremacy to mask black cultural particularities. By paying attention to the ways in which *mestizaje* discourses forced blackness to be masked via white imagery, we can understand how *San Juan Bautista* comes to represent the myth of an allegedly raceless society in Venezuela, even believed by black populations themselves. As Guss (1993) noted, it is precisely *San Juan Bautista*'s lack of black pigmentation what makes him a powerful symbol of resistance for Afro-Venezuelans. However, his symbolic power shows through his association to the working-class. *San Juan Bautista* is the celebration par excellence of black culture in areas such as former plantations and urban *barrios* inhabited by non-whites, whereby poverty and dark skin visibly correlate. This makes *San Juan Bautista* an interesting site to explore how

structural racism is powerfully rooted in the dominant discourse of *mestizaje*. As Guss (1993) observes, “The fact that *San Juan* is such as a powerful symbol of blackness without actually being black [...] reveals much about the issue of race itself in Venezuela (446).” This explains the complex ways in which structural issues of race and class are tied to one another through the dominant symbols in the Afro-Venezuelan culture. However, in recent years, Antonio and a group of ‘rebels’ in Osma introduced an Africanised figure that came to challenge the invisible blackness of *San Juan Bautista*, while it also contested the Catholic meaning of the black image of *San Benito*. In what follows, I will explore how this process, which abandoned syncretism and produced other types of blackness outside the limits of Catholicism, occurred.

## 5.4. Arrival of San Juan Congo to Osma

In this section, I will contextualise the origins of a patron saint called *San Juan Congo*, whose icon was believed to be visibly black and embody elements of African belief systems. Nonetheless, the image was forbidden in Venezuela by the church in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the memory of its physical appearance vanished over time (Guss, 1993:463). In Osma, a group of ‘rebels’ reimagined the appearance of *San Juan Congo* in 2009 and have since used it to challenge the history behind the colonial imposition of the white religious icon *San Juan Bautista*, who is the centrepiece of the biggest Afro-Venezuelan patron saint festivals. In what follows, I will explore how the ancestral *San Juan Congo* was retrieved from past narratives of slavery and introduced to Osma.

### 5.4.1. Background of San Juan Congo

*San Juan Congo* was a black saint who was celebrated during the 19<sup>th</sup> century in an annual festival in Curiepe, Miranda State, every August 4<sup>th</sup>. This is another Afro-descendant population that was a former cocoa plantation, located 44 miles away from Osma. The current inhabitants of Curiepe are descendants of *negros libres*<sup>78</sup> (free blacks) since the village gained this status in 1721 (Ugueto Ponce, 2013:1). The origins of the arrival of *San Juan Congo* to Curiepe are rooted in histories of resistance that are transmitted in the

---

<sup>78</sup> The appearance of villages of *negros libres* in Venezuela such as the cases of La Sabana and Curiepe were responses to slave resistances: suicides, strikes, uprising and rebellions of runaway *cimarrones* (Ugueto-Ponce, 2015). This context explains why there were few black populations who lived in freedom even during times of slavery.



local oral histories. Venezuelan folklore scholar Juan Pablo Sojo (1986: 168-172) documents the fable of two African princes – sold into slavery – who arrived in Venezuela during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. They were forced to work in the only plantation of Curiepe. One of the princes took his own life, a common practice of resistance amongst Africans who were sold into slavery. The prince who survived, later purchased his own freedom. Afterwards, he organised and helped other Africans to purchase theirs. The surviving prince acquired economic mobility and enlisted a sculptor in Curiepe to make the figure of a black icon that reflected African religious systems: *San Juan Congo*. In refusing to celebrate *San Juan Bautista* imposed by the Spanish colonists, this prince began to celebrate a festival honouring *San Juan Congo* (Sojo, 1986).

It is believed this fable from Curiepe overlaps with verifiable historical facts behind the figure of the Afro-descendant military Juan del Rosario Blanco, who was the son of the white owner of Curiepe's plantation and a black enslaved woman (Ferri, 1989:112). Historically, Juan del Rosario Blanco became the leader of a small liberation movement for Curiepe's black populations during colonial times, The *Compañía de morenos y zambos libres* (Corporation of free browns and *zambos*<sup>79</sup>), which was a free black militia unit comprised by *morenos*, *pardos*<sup>80</sup>, *zambos*<sup>81</sup> and *loangos* (escaped English-speaking enslaved) soldiers (Guss, 1993). Blanco negotiated and obtained permission from colonial powers to found Curiepe, the first town of free Afro-descendants, in 1721. Curiepe's verifiable history and fables intertwine. *San Juan Congo* served as the cultural symbol that Africanised the foundation of Curiepe, by providing a history of pride to a village that was founded by a militia of free Afro-descendants (Guss, 1993).

In Curiepe, the figure of *San Juan Congo* was believed to be the image of a black man, carved of wood, coated in plaster and included a visible carving of his sexual organ (Guss, 1993). The explanation of why the image of *San Juan Congo* had a phallus is linked to its strong connotation with fertility and masculinity in African cultures (Dederen, 2010:30). The original image of *San Juan Congo* represented a *Nkisi*, which is an African ancestral charm used in rituals for magical-religious purposes and are believed to

---

<sup>79</sup> This is a colonial term that in Venezuela signifies the racial mixture between Indigenous and blacks. While is a deprecating term, it does not have the same meaning that this term has in the U.S.

<sup>80</sup> *Pardos* refer to light skinned brown people of mixed Indigenous and white ancestry, with a small degree of African ancestry.

<sup>81</sup> People of mixed parentage between African and Indigenous peoples.

represent spirits that can heal and protect. Nkisis are typical of *Bakongo* groups from the present-day Republic of Congo (García, 2005). According to Jesús García (2005), the *Nkisi* that inspired the representation of *San Juan Congo* in Curiepe was the figure of *Malembe*. The latter was represented by the figure of a man “who has a phallus (penis)” (García, 2005:139), and who protects lands and keeps away bad energies.

However, it is difficult to speak with certainty about the specific way the black figure of *San Juan Congo* disappeared from Curiepe. Although it was celebrated publicly since the foundation of Curiepe, *San Juan Congo* became forbidden and removed from the public eye in 1870 (Guss, 1993). There are two versions documented by anthropologist David Guss (1993) in Venezuela. The first version is based on a story of revenge. In Venezuela, *cuidar al santo* is a tradition that families of *promeseros*, keep the figure of the local patron saint in their home for a year; ‘looking after’ the saint. In this case, *San Juan Congo* was passed down to the family of a local doctor, called Nicomedes Blanco Gil, who was the last person who owned it. Guss explains that one version of that *San Juan Congo*’s occurred after some Curiepe’s residents disrespected the doctor’s wife while she was walking down the street. As a punishment, the doctor stopped passing around the image of *San Juan Congo* to the people of Curiepe. The second version provided by Guss is connected to prohibitions by the Catholic Church. The local church, upset by the phallus in the image, forced Nicomedes Blanco Gil to take it out of the public eye. This version of prohibitions has a connection with more recent versions retold by the historians, *cultores populares*, from Curiepe.

#### **5.4.2. New versions of *San Juan Congo* in Curiepe**

A recent version retold by Augusto Lopez, a *cultor popular* from Curiepe argues that *San Juan Congo* was eradicated because he was not allowed to be taken inside the church (Coutinho, 2016). This is important because, as with most patron saint festivals in Venezuela, residents begin their celebrations in the church and then move the saints onto processions and dances in the streets. When Curiepe built its first Catholic church in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it is possible that some participants in the festival tried to introduce the image of *San Juan Congo* in order to celebrate a mass that is customary for Catholic patron saints. According to Lopez, the festival of *San Juan Congo* used to be celebrated in Curiepe in a location called ‘*La Capilla*’ (the chaplaincy). Nonetheless, the first priest

who arrived in Curiepe, forbade the entry of *San Juan Congo* into the church and (instead) imposed the Spanish figure of *San Juan Bautista*. These are Augusto Lopez words:

Before the foundation of the church here [Curiepe], *San Juan Congo* was celebrated for a long time in *La Capilla*. When the [first] priest arrived, he called everyone to a meeting and decided that the only saint allowed in the church was the *San Juan Bautista* of the Spanish people. (Coutinho, 2016)

I suggest that this newer version, retold by Curiepe's *cultores populares*, also is equally plausible to explain why the black icon of *San Juan Congo* was replaced by *San Juan Bautista*. There are records that the Catholic church forbade the display of *Nkisi* figures in Congo for being "indecent" and "frankly obscene" figures (Volavka, 1972:52) during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Guss (1993) observed that this process of celebrating *San Juan Congo* allowed Curiepe's people to retrieve their African roots. Curiously and despite the retrieval, *San Juan Congo* in current physical appearance is represented through the figure of a light-skinned child, like images of baby Jesus (in Spanish, *Niño Jesús*) with Caucasian features and curly blonde hair (Guss, 1993:465). Nonetheless, the whiteness of *San Juan Congo* was a topic discussed by 'rebel' political activists and *cultores populares* in my field site.

I was told by Antonio that *San Juan Congo* – or *El Conguito* is known to be clad with a dress that covers its phallus, unlike the *Nkisi* which was prohibited with an uncovered phallus in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Yet, *El Conguito* still preserves notions of masculinity and fertility of the *Nkisi* barred two centuries ago, as the image is today associated with agriculture<sup>82</sup> and human fertility. However, these elements are masked by the infancy and whiteness of *El Conguito*. Nonetheless, still reproducing the simultaneous contradiction faced by Afro-Venezuelans to celebrate their heritage in Venezuela's national history. African elements could only be practiced if syncretised. However, earlier I explored in Chapters 3 and 4 that the 'rebels' are a collective that draws on ideas of multi-culturalism and narratives of de-coloniality purported by the Bolivarian Revolution to enact anti-racists contestations. Let me now turn to explain how the 'rebels' retrieve the blackened figure of *San Juan Congo* to restore a visibly black, and de-colonised aesthetics using a re-imagined *San Juan Congo*.

---

<sup>82</sup> The reason is that during colonial times, enslaved populations were given small parcels of land to cultivate for their own consumption, and plentiful crops will ensure food for their survival.

#### **5.4.3. The ‘rebels’ reject *San Juan Bautista* and search for *San Juan Congo***

Recall the earlier section 5.3.1, where I explored that *San Juan Bautista*’s image was introduced in Osma in 1985. By 2009, the image of *San Juan Bautista* was in poor condition due to 25 years of use. Every year, this image attracts crowds of *promeseros* and devotees to Osma, who constantly touch the image. After years of wear, the lightly tanned skin tone of *San Juan Bautista* had signs of tear, leaving chunks of the white plaster underneath visible. The image was sent to Caracas by Andrés for its restoration in January 2009. The restored *San Juan Bautista* that came back to Osma the next month had changed from a tanned white man to a white, porcelain-skinned man. Three *cultores populares*, who are ‘rebels’, rejected the whitening of the image. One of them was Fulton, who explained to me during an interview what triggered this process of rejection against *San Juan Bautista*:

What called my attention in the restoration of *San Juan [Bautista]*, was how it came back whitened [to Osma]. His skin was painted with a lighter colour. Possibly they [the restorers] wanted to freshen it up but did not find the same colour. Or maybe they [the restorers] gave Andrés another saint? We don’t know. Either way, we realised that [*San Juan Bautista*] is a saint that does not look like the majority of us in Osma. We wanted to move away from the white image [*San Juan Bautista*] imposed to us since slavery.

This event of the whitening of *San Juan Bautista* turned into a central contestation against the erasure of blackness within Osma’s black culture. In March 2009, ‘rebels’ such as Fulton and Antonio started a small personal project to learn about their African roots through the history of *San Juan Congo* in Curiepe. Fulton found a non-black image of *San Juan Congo*, to whom the locals refer with other alternative names such as *San Juan Guaricongo* and *El Conguito*, in Curiepe. However, to Fulton, it was time to stop celebrating syncretism and to unravel the central African feature that was removed; that is, the blackness of the saint and his past connected to slavery, which led to the creation of a *San Juan Congo* version in Osma.

#### **5.4.4. The Black *San Juan Congo* in Osma**

On 3<sup>th</sup> June 2009, ‘rebels’ such as Fulton and another of his nephews, Darío, began to carve the image of *San Juan Congo* with the purpose of getting the image ready to display

by the 23<sup>th</sup> of June, the eve of the *San Juan Bautista* festival. To Antonio, this process of carving their own black *San Juan Congo* was part of their search, “we wanted to rescue what the African [ancestors] left to us and had to be syncretised. Those things that matched African cults and their cosmology [ways of knowing],” he said. To Antonio, the introduction of *San Juan Congo* was a step further, “to stop adoring a saint that represented European domination.” I had the opportunity to see the *San Juan Congo* image in Fulton’s living room in February 2015. The finished figure was carved on a dark mahogany-coloured resinous wood. It was a four-foot image and featured a robust, bearded, middle-aged black man of a dark hue, balding in the centre of his head although still having some Afro-textured hair. The man was shirtless, only wearing run-down rolled-up trousers. Its stern facial features – and the affixing of a shackle on his left foot - tried to represent the harrowing feeling of being a slave. As he expanded on the meaning of his sculpture, Fulton mentioned that they wanted to portray *San Juan Congo*, who was black, as a metaphor to represent the legacies of systemic oppression that still survive in Osma:

*San Juan Congo* is not wearing a top because enslaved working in the plantations wore none, neither shoes. The shackles represent that our ancestors were subjected to cruel treatment. Our main task was to carve in those memories and create a black image, different from the imposed *San Juan Bautista*.

Figure 5.3. *San Juan Congo* in Osma



(photo by the author)

The symbolism of black fertility represented in the phallus of *Nkisis* was transformed in the Osma’s *San Juan Congo* image. This *San Juan Congo* had a vertical stick in his right

hand, representing black masculinity, while in his left hand held a ripe cocoa<sup>83</sup> fruit, which was a symbol of black female fertility, according to Fulton. The image was also attentive to notions of *mestizaje*, as Fulton mentioned that he was inspired by the figures of Indigenous people's healers, known as *Chamanes*. Fulton said, "I wanted to make a *San Juan Congo* like a *Chamán* but Africanised." However, this retrieval of a racial and a cultural history through *San Juan Congo* was received with rejection in Osma. For those 'rebels', who were concerned with valorising symbols of blackness that were historically silenced and devalued, introducing an Afro-descendant *San Juan Congo* to an Afro-descendant population did not go uncontested by the 'traditionalists'. The behaviour of the 'rebels' was considered a betrayal to the traditions of Osma's elder generations. It challenged the standard cultural practice in Osma of adoring blackness through the image of *San Benito* by the elders. From then on, those who approved *San Juan Congo* and those who disapproved his image further fragmented Osma into two groups. The reason for the 'traditionalists' rejection was thus based in a contested view between searching for African roots against the standard history of Afro-Catholic tradition in Osma.

*San Juan Congo* was shown publicly for the first time in Osma's *San Juan Bautista* Festival on June 23th, 2009. I had several conversations with Fulton and Antonio to reconstruct why a saint made in Osma, who reflects the African heritage of the population, was received with rejection by Afro-descendant themselves. According to Antonio, 'Culturalists' such as Andrés, musicians of his group *Melaza y Tambor*, and supporters of this cultural group, accused the 'rebels' of disrupting narratives of ancestry. To 'culturalists', *San Benito* is regarded in high esteem because it was the first saint widely celebrated by Osma's first generations. The latter – as explained in Chapter 3 – are regarded as *ancestros* (ancestors). Therefore, *San Juan Congo* challenges a pre-existent legacy of blackness.

In contrast, 'rebels' such as Fulton and his two nephews Antonio and Darío, musicians of Fulton's group *Cacao Negro*, and its followers comprised of tourists and a few politicised residents in Osma, supported the introduction of *San Juan Congo*. These contested views developed a rich process of resistance in Osma. According to Antonio and Fulton, the struggle against *San Juan Congo* was instigated by a group of supporters of *San Benito*.

---

<sup>83</sup> The importance of depicting a cocoa fruit - according to Fulton - is that it was one of the main products in Venezuela's plantations in the coastal areas.

Below, I will reproduce Antonio's version of the events of *San Juan Congo*'s first appearance during *San Juan Bautista Fiesta* in 2009, where there was a clear clash between 'rebels' and 'culturalists' in Osma:

We [*Cacao Negro*] began the ceremony in *Sector Cepeda* around 7pm, with 15 musicians. We began playing *Fulías* (traditional songs), prayers, and drums for *San Juan Congo*. There were approximately 200 people who came to see us, both people from our *barrio* [*Sector Cepeda*] and tourists. There were people taking photos and making videos of *San Juan Congo*. We were doing everything at the same time of the procession of *San Juan Bautista* [at the beach] and *San Benito* [in the *casco central*]. The group *Melaza y Tambor* was leading *San Benito*'s procession and playing their drums in the *casco central*. Our intention was to take *San Juan Congo* to meet *San Benito* and *San Juan Bautista*, and to follow the tradition of the meeting of the saints in the river at 12:00am. We heard the rumours that they [*Melaza y Tambor* musicians] were about thirty [people] and would block the road from our *barrio* (neighbourhood) to deter us from making our way to the river. Andrés did not participate because he is an elder person who does not like confrontations. But in his group, there were violent [people]. Even the *malas lenguas* (gossipers) told us that they [*Melaza y Tambor*] were armed with stones and sticks that they will hurl at us, once we would walk *San Juan Congo* to the river. They indeed blocked the road. But we were playing our drums and the number of tourists and families that were in our group backed us up and forced them [*Melaza y Tambor*] to open the road. We did a quick ritual of salutation to *San Juan Congo* in the road and the people from *Melaza y Tambor* called our ritual *brujería* (witchcraft). Then we forced our way to the river. At 12:00am, *Melaza y Tambor*'s musicians began the revolt. They turned the lights off and hurled stones and sticks and even hit a tourist in the head. When they turned the lights back on, the people [whole audience of the *fiesta*] saw the image of *San Juan Congo* that we baptised for the first time in the river. *San Juan Congo* outgrew the smaller images of *San Benito* and *San Juan Bautista*. The people [audience] saw *San Juan Congo*, that majestic black man decorated with flowers. Look, some people entered into a *trance*: cried, yelled, I don't know what it was. The people thought that it all was a continuation of the ritual performances we were doing earlier and did not realise the attack against *San Juan Congo*. Many kept coming the next day (June 25<sup>th</sup>) to Fulton's house to take pictures of the saint and touch the saint. Since then, *San Juan Congo* carved his own space and has attracted his own followers.

To avoid further conflict with *Melaza y Tambor*, Fulton kept the figure of *San Juan Congo* out of the *San Juan Bautista Fiestas* and out of any public displays between 2010 until 2012, only displaying it at small, private performances. From 2013 onward, *San Juan Congo* began to be displayed in public, although there was no other attempt to include the image in the *Fiestas de San Juan Bautista* since 2009. The reason for this reaction

was because his history had divided the town into two opposing groups. ‘Culturalists’ questioned the entry of *San Juan Congo* when there was already a black saint. ‘Culturalists’ – according to Antonio – were reluctant to embrace the saint because they considered it is an act of the ‘rebels’, who wanted to change their ancestor’s traditions, which had more than 33 years of practice. ‘Rebels’, musicians of *Cacao Negro* and other politicised figures, on the other hand, believed that *San Juan Congo* satisfied a demand to know more about the cultural history of Afro-Venezuelan populations and thoroughly trace what is African in the local culture.

## 5.5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have called your attention on a subject through a reading that has not received scholarly attention in Venezuela which is Afro-Venezuelans overtly contesting white supremacy. I showed how Afro-Venezuelan activists reconstruct visual resources that challenge ideologies of race and white supremacy historically advanced through religion. The aim of this chapter was to illustrate how these activists challenged white supremacy by making blackness visible in Afro-Venezuelan religious festivals, which are key spaces where black popular culture is displayed in Osma. I argued that religious iconography was a channel of resistance against white supremacy, through which a group of *cultores populares* and politicised activists counteract the invisibility of blackness and display visible blackness in Osma’s religious festivals. But also, Osma provided a case study in which in the process of contesting white supremacy, some tensions about the meanings of blackness arise. These tensions and contradictions were illustrated through the competing narratives between *San Benito* and *San Juan Congo*.

Hereafter, I offer a summary of the main points discussed in this chapter. In section 5.1, I discussed early ideological origins of Eurocentric Catholic iconography. This iconography supported through a global system of racial domination, enforced by Europe in colonial times, explain why the aesthetics of the *San Juan Bautista* celebrated in Osma is one of a European man. In sections 5.2 and 5.3, I explored how the figure of *San Benito* was introduced in 1976 to make visible a representation of blackness in the *San Juan Bautista Fiestas*. This early representation of blackness in Osma’s iconography was made possible within the limits of Catholicism. However, changes in the local tradition via the introduction of *San Juan Bautista* in 1985 brought about narratives of *mestizaje* in the



area. In the third section, I discussed the introduction of *San Juan Congo* in 2009 by a group of ‘rebels’ in Osma. In section 5.4, I explored some of the tensions and contradictions within a new introduction of the black iconography of *San Juan Congo*. His image was not embraced by a segment of the Afro-descendant population because he represented a direct threat to the understandings of blackness introduced by the elders in Osma. These are all elements that show the relationship between aesthetics, religion and political activism in order to contest ideas of race and the marginalisation of blackness. I also showed new contestations through the introduction of counter-hegemonic symbols that seek to address the historical invisibility of African derived symbols in religious cultural festivals.

This chapter contributed to the overall argument I make in this thesis by expanding the understanding of the importance of religion: another cultural domain used by Afro-Venezuelans as a weapon in their struggle against racism. While in the previous chapter, I explored how Afro-Venezuelans manoeuvre complex forms of inclusion and exclusion of their identities through engaging in cultural politics with the state, in this chapter I was more interested in understanding how activists attempt to develop an anti-racist black political identity in Venezuela, by making the most prominent expression of black popular culture in Venezuela, that of the *Fiestas de San Juan Bautista*, the centre of their struggle. As explained, this struggle is fraught with tensions that reflect in the ways in which rejections and retrievals compete with one another to provide definitions of blackness. So far, is important to note that contestations located in the development of black consciousness addressed in Chapters 3 and 4 and in this chapter are male dominated. In the next chapter, I will further explore that, even though the struggle against racism and poverty through politics is dominated by men, Afro-descendant women in the *Parroquia Caruaio*, also address concerns pertaining to ‘race’, class and gender through popular culture.

# Chapter 6: The Feast of the Fools and *El gobierno de las Mujeres*

*The government of women*

*Race, Class and Gender in Osma and Todasana*

## 6.1. Introduction

The struggle against racism for Afro-Venezuelans not only involves challenging deep-rooted religious symbols in popular culture, as we witnessed in Chapter 5. As this chapter will show, it also involves challenging gendered hierarchies. The Feast of the Fools (in Spanish, *Día de los Santos Inocentes*) is celebrated in Venezuela on 28<sup>th</sup> December every year; and is a celebration equivalent to April Fool's day. At present, it is a celebration mostly appropriated by the poor, *campesinos*,<sup>84</sup> women, young people and children to mock structures of exploitation. Here, I will illustrate how the streets of Osma become a site to negotiate gendered hierarchies amongst Afro-Venezuelans in a theatrical way. The reason for choosing the Feast of the Fools day is that it is another Catholic-inspired tradition that started in Venezuela during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and continues to be celebrated today. However, in Osma, contrary to what its name suggests, it is not a cultural display of religiosity. The *Día de los Santos Inocentes* involves the participants engaging in crossdressing - men dressing up as women and vice versa. The key aspect of this celebration is precisely how Osma's population uses strategies of crossdressing in cultural performances, to negotiate the gendered hierarchies between men and women.

In this chapter, I will show how Afro-Venezuelan women's use of cultural forms to challenge gender inequalities are located within two competing narratives that coexist with one another. My motivation for including a chapter related to gendered hierarchies in a thesis that explores how Afro-Venezuelans resist racial discrimination through popular culture is based on the need to identify the tensions in the intersections between 'race', gender and class, and how these cultural performances influence collective action. I will show that this cultural performance and women's collective action are linked.

---

<sup>84</sup> The word *campesino* in Spanish has less negative baggage than its translation in English: peasant. *Campesinos* is a word applied to rural workers but has been dignified and has become a source of pride and identity for the poor, to affirm and mobilize themselves in the arena of identity politics in Latin America.

Thus, in this chapter, I will explore how cultural performances are sites of collective action, which reflect how ‘race’ and class are lived by Afro-descendant women. The *Día de los Santos Inocentes* is widely celebrated in the Afro-descendant villages of the central coast of Venezuela. During colonial times, enslaves were allowed by slaveholders to celebrate feasts and dances twice a year. As explained in the previous chapter, *San Juan Fiestas* (from June 23<sup>th</sup> until June 25<sup>th</sup>) was one of them, and the second feast was the *Día de los Santos Inocentes*. Slave holders granted enslaves the 28<sup>th</sup> December as a free day on which they could practice their rituals and celebrate this feast. These celebrations were allowed by slave holders to maintain the status quo in their favor (Brandt, 2007). By allowing the enslaved population to celebrate *Día de los Santos Inocentes* and *San Juan Fiestas*, slave holders sought to maintain dormant the threats of slave’s rebellions, which were threats in ebullition<sup>85</sup> due to the system of slavery (Sojo, 1943).

#### ***6.1.1. Historical background of Día de los Santos Inocentes***

The origins of the ‘Feast of the Fools’ or ‘Day of the Holy Innocents’ are drawn from Catholicism. This celebration is associated with the Biblical passage which refers to the infanticide in Bethlehem ordered by King Herod to avoid the loss of his throne (Matthew 2: 13-15). Although the precise date on which this slaughter occurred is unknown, early priests began to celebrate this day between 1198 and 1216 every 28<sup>th</sup> December by introducing a pagan character to Catholic celebrations to undermine the power of the highest authorities of the Church. In France, the Feast of the Fools featured crossdressing priests, drunken clerics in mass and young clerics as bishops in order to mock power structures within the Church (Harris, 2011).

However, during the time of the colonization of the Americas, European colonizers brought these traditions with them and celebrated them in the Americas (Deroy *et al.*, 2006). The connections between the arrival of these European celebrations also called *Saturnalias*, to Venezuela, have their origin in Spain. Specifically it is referred to the Spanish feast called *Locainas*, which consisted in the participants clustering themselves in groups, wearing masks, playing instruments and poking fun at their neighbors (Pollak-

---

<sup>85</sup> The threats I refer here were the different methods enslaved used as a resistance to slavery mentioned in the Introduction of this thesis: Suicide, Infanticide, use of abortifacients, liberating themselves by escaping to hard to reach areas with other enslaved (*Cumbes*-Maroon Communities), foot dragging and refusal to work and armed resistance. For in-depth discussions see Price, 1979.

Eltz and Fitl, 1985). This feast continued to be celebrated by the Spanish colonizers when they settled in the Americas. A glaring example of this is the survival of the Spanish-derived feast called “*Las Locainas*” celebrated on the 28<sup>th</sup> of December in Venezuela (Pollak-Eltz and Fitl, 1985).

Yet, enslaved took further steps by copying their slaveholders’ celebrations of “*Las Locainas*” and mocking the Catholic authorities while also parodying gendered roles. For enslaved themselves, these celebrations represented forms of resistance to power structures until the final abolition of slavery in Venezuela in 1854. The matrilineal character of the celebration is situated in historical and cultural contexts. The majority of the enslaved brought to Venezuela were from African Congo and Bantu societies, and some ethnic groups within these societies had matrilineal social organisations (e.g. Pollak-Eltz, 2012). Since slavery times, the men enslaved took the role of women and women enslaved performed men’s roles for a day.

#### ***6.1.2. Limitations and organisation of the chapter***

There is little scholarship that has explored the ways in which black popular culture brings issues of gendered hierarchies within the household into the public debate. The literature on black popular culture is largely focused on the experiences of African Americans in the U.S. and how they use cultural products to prevent domestic violence. The emphasis is mostly on gospel music (Maibach and Holtgrave, 1995) and radio (Legette, 1993; Mitchell-Clark, 1999). In the case of Venezuela, there is scholarship that has assessed the role of ‘race’ and ethnicity in the constructions of national identity in cultural performances (Guss, 2000).

Yet, there is limited knowledge about the politics of culture in dismantling gendered hierarchies in Venezuela. The scholarship that explores the role of cultural performances in Afro-Venezuelan small towns focuses on how culture can diminish the gap between the state, social movements and previously marginalised sectors (Marino, 2018). However, there is an absence of scholarship that explores household structures and intimate violence against black women, as well as the economic disenfranchisement of Afro-descendant men. There is little available information about how these dynamics are associated and articulated in cultural performances, particularly regarding how Afro-

Venezuelans contest gendered marginalisation through their own cultural products. This chapter attempts to fill these gaps.

The chapter is divided into three sections. In the first section, I briefly contextualise the ‘Feast of the Fools’, its origins in slavery, and provide a description of this festivity in Osma. In the second section, I explore discourses of femininity and masculinity. I focus on the structure of the household and its tensions regarding ‘race’ and gender inequalities. In the third section, I present the voices of a few female informants in terms of how they have been affected by local gendered inequalities. I present their views to show that there is a tension between the cultural performance and the normative structures which influence the household organisation.

## **6.2. Cultural performances and gendered constructions in Osma**

In this section, I explore how in the cultural celebration of *Día de los Inocentes*, the world “turns up-side down” (Bakhtin, 1984). For a day, men and women engage in cross-dressing acts and thereby shift gendered norms. Before describing how cultural performances reflect on negotiations of gendered roles, I first provide a historical description of the location of Afro-Venezuelan women in the gendered division of labour in Osma in order to reflect how class was lived through the experiences of these women. The purpose of this is to allow a better understanding of how, on the *Día de los Inocentes*, economically disadvantaged Afro-Venezuelans allow the negotiation of gendered roles in the household.

### ***6.2.1. A brief history of women’s position in Osma***

I had conversations with a few black elderly women in Osma who described to me that the organisation of the Afro-descendant *campesino* family in Osma from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century until the 1980s was a patriarchal structure. This structure was not disconnected from patterns arranged during slavery. The authority of men was dominant in both public and family life. The father used to be the breadwinner of the household, which was an obligation carried out via activities such as hunting, fishing and going to the family farm

(called *conuco*<sup>86</sup>) every day. The possession of *conucos* was intimately connected to Osma's *campesino* life. Since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the slaveholder used to allocate *conucos* for the food subsistence of the enslaved. Once slavery was abolished in 1854, the *conuco* became the unit of the sharecropping system, in which the newly freed men and women sustained their families. These women recalled that, still, during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the *conuco* was the space where both men and women continued to overlap in the breadwinning activity to cover the basic needs of their families in Osma. According to Celia, a woman I interviewed in Osma and who was born in the village in the early 1950s, women did not go to the *conuco* as often as men did during the week, although they, "toiled on the land just as hard as men." To explore this hierarchy further, I asked Celia to describe what life looked like when she was growing up.

To Celia, the distribution of housework was unequal. According to her, "keeping up the house, cleaning, cooking all the family meals and taking care of the children were only women's activities." According to Celia, "in that time the woman used to be the slave of the man." During the harvest, it was the duty of the women to take crops from the *conuco* to the house. Celia recalled that women used to carry the harvested crops in large baskets balanced on the top of their heads, while men only carried the tools used in the *conuco*, such as a machete or the *garabato*,<sup>87</sup> in their hands. According to Celia, the duties of women in the *conuco* had to be done, "even if the woman was '*recién parida*' (had just given birth)" and if they had small children, the women would take the children to the *conuco* to look after them and work at the same time. When women were not in the *conuco*, they contributed to covering the needs of the household with other forms of labour. As the households lacked running water, women and girls had the traditional obligation of fetching water from the river and hand-washing their families' clothes. Women's role of catering to the needs of their husbands and children was considered their natural obligation. These dynamics comprised local discursive patterns known as '*atender al marido*' (looking after the husband), which summarises the ways in which women were subjects dominated by their husbands. While this gendered hierarchy manifested itself in the distribution of housework, these Afro-descendant women had an

---

<sup>86</sup>That is the local name given to small extensions of lands for growing a variety of crops such as fruits, and root crops such as vegetables and beans.

<sup>87</sup> *Garabato* is a wooden agricultural tool with a hook in its top, used for grasping fruits from trees.

active economic role in the household. As we will see, they were not fully bound to the domestic space.

I was also told by Celia, that women in these villages provided labour for the economy of the household, which depended on all its members. It was common in these coastal villages to make *trueques* (barter system) with merchant ships that visited the shores of the *Parroquia Caruao*. Celia said that she, as a young girl, helped her mother and other women from the village to prepare *casabe*<sup>88</sup> for the merchants. The ships would exchange items such as bars of soap, hats or *alpargatas* (Espadrilles/flat canvas shoes) in return for *casabe* and sacks of vegetables grown in the villages, which they then sold elsewhere. The position of these Afro-descendant women within both the division of labour and the structure of the family was in between that of worker and of a subordinate of the husband in the household.

### **6.2.2. Modernisation in Venezuela and inclusion of women in the labour market**

Changes in Venezuela's economic structures brought new variations in the structure of the family and the household. The years following the end of World War II overlapped with Venezuela's period of modernisation; that is, the transition from a rural society to a capitalistic one based on an oil economy. This was also a period of state-sponsored subsidy of European labour to Venezuela, which I described in the Introduction chapter. This period overlapped with '*blanqueamiento*' (whitening) migration policies enforced in the country. I was told by a few elders in Osma, European labour participated in public building work in the neighbouring *Ciudad Vacacional Los Caracas*,<sup>89</sup> which – as we explored in the Introduction – was the place of origin of Osma's residents who were forcibly displaced by the state in 1948. In Osma, the building of the main highway in 1962 represented important changes that allowed the connection with urban centres, and the penetration of tourism and visitors to the villages. Rosa, another of my informants from Osma said that the opening of the highway allowed residents of the parish to participate in the labour market.

---

<sup>88</sup>Casabe is a flat bread of circular shape made of yucca, which is part of the staple diet of Venezuelans.

<sup>89</sup> As explained in the Introduction, this is the place the population from Osma was originally displaced from, when it was called *Hacienda Los Caracas*.

Now, men and women from Osma can walk everyday along the highway, in a journey that used to take 5 hours each day, to reach the nearest regular paid work, located in *Los Caracas*, 20 miles away from Osma. For women, the highway opened their freedom to find employment –mostly in domestic related jobs– and become part of a wage-earning group. With the highway, women began to work by washing clothes and cooking meals for the European workers of the holiday city *Los Caracas* in order to contribute to the family economy. This was therefore a role which coexisted with their role as homemakers. Rosa revealed that during her childhood, she used to work with her mother, cooking and washing clothes for the men who were employed in the construction of the *Ciudad Vacacional Los Caracas*, while her father was employed as a builder in *Los Caracas*. According to Rosa, there was a de-facto division of labour according to ‘race’ and gender in *Los Caracas*, which was manifested in the arrangement of the use of public spaces. Rosa said, “the man could not be in the same space as the woman” (*el hombre no podía estar en el mismo lugar que la mujer*). According to her, when men gathered, “they did so with other men.” Rosa mentioned that the European builders hired in *Los Caracas* were mostly Portuguese men who had their own *comedor* (eatery). On the other hand, men such as Rosa’s father had their own *comedor* and women from Osma ate apart in another space. These divisions did not create tensions, even though a legal system of racial/gendered segregation was never formally enforced following the end of slavery in Venezuela. For Rosa, these divisions were due to gender.

As I have shown, while the opening of the highway meant the inclusion of Osma’s women as wage-earners, it also opened dynamics for other young Afro-descendant women to become a supply of unpaid domestic labour. I heard of countless examples of families throughout the *Parroquia Caruao* who sent their children – from a young age– to the urban cities of Caracas and La Guaira to work as ‘domestics’ and caretakers in the house of their *padrinos* (godparents) in exchange for education. These young women were promised free schooling on the condition they provided domestic labour in return for their studies. A further effect of the highway was that middle-class tourists -mainly from Caracas- started visiting the village after 1962. I was told by Pablo, a 46-year-old man from Todasana, that his father, like many elders in the village, used to address any white man foreign to the village as ‘doctor’. The frequency of tourist visits and their contact with local people reflected other ways in which class and ‘race’ intertwined with gender. Pablo mentioned that families in Osma and Todasana used to forge friendships with



regular white tourists through *compadrazgo*. Parents preferred non-blacks to be their children's *padrinos* (godparents). The reason was based on the hope that these informal networks mediated by white privilege could provide locals with an opportunity for their children to move away from the lack of economic opportunities in their villages, go to school, improve their academic education, and obtain social mobility.

I found out about these cases in conversations with women and men in Osma who were cognisant about these experiences during the 1980s or knew someone who had been taken to Caracas to do domestic work. One of them was my informant Laura, from Todasana, who mentioned she used live with an upper middle-class family whose head of the household was an Italian man who married a mestiza Venezuelan woman. Laura's relationship with them began because they had a daughter of a similar age to Laura, who she became friends with when they spent holidays in Todasana. It was common for many '*padrinos*' to receive free labour provided by their godchildren. However, tensions between intimacy of friendship and subjugation in the household developed in a context tainted by a colonial past. Some women told me that they were treated as part of the host family; however, in most cases, their education was not completed. These relationships developed in a context of power relationships, in which these Afro-descendant women were domestic servants and were not given the educational opportunities that could improve their chances for social mobility.

This is important because it gives a way into differentiating gendered intersections of 'race' and class. Up to this point I have described the lives of these women to give a sense of what the "racialisation of gender and class" (Higgibotham, 1992:54) looked like in Osma. I have described how poverty becomes racialised through the division of labour and its intersection with race and gender. During slavery, black women had a subordinate status. After abolition, they continued to hold a subordinate status embedded in internal class logics, illustrated in how domestic labour was the main option available for the women in my fieldsite. While these insights deepen our understanding about what the subjugation of Afro-descendant women in Osma looked like in their everyday lives, there are occasions in which power relations between men and women from Osma are unsettled and negotiated. Below, we will explore how men and women use the cultural production of *fiestas* such as *Día de los Inocentes* to negotiate and unsettle these gendered hierarchies.

### 6.2.3. *El Gobierno de las Mujeres in Osma*

The *Día de los Inocentes* celebration in Osma takes place on December 28<sup>th</sup>, yet the organisation starts on December 27<sup>th</sup> in the morning. The participants in these celebrations are Osma's residents and *cultores populares*, whereas the audiences are comprised of tourists who visit Osma and this village's residents. In Osma, the participants prepare themselves to celebrate by reading a symbolic law that participants call 'decree'<sup>90</sup>. In this decree, the village divides itself into two camps. The group of the women is called *El Gobierno* (The Government) and the group of the men is called *La Revolución* (The Revolution). The beginning of the decree starts with name changes, in which, for example, a woman called Joan would change her name to the masculine version, John. This decree calls for the establishment of Osma as a country where a woman uses a masculine version of her name and takes the position of the President of the Republic of Osma. From now on Osma becomes a republic for a day. As a state, it has its own budget which is produced by asking for donations from tourists and visitors, which will be spent on drinks, root vegetables, or even poultry which will then be used in the *sancocho*, a hearty stew which residents and participants cook and share at the end of the celebration. As a state, the police in Osma also loses its authority and it is the participants themselves who rule and punish those who do not participate. Moreover, in the decree, there is a set of legislations through which one can observe how Osma produces symbolic political meanings of an imagined community that is organised around a matriarchal structure (González, 1991).

In the decree, the President (a woman) establishes '*El gobierno de las mujeres*' (the government of women) that indicates that women –who become men for a day– will rule the village for the next 24 hours. Then the celebration starts on the 28<sup>th</sup> of December from 6:00am. The most visible manifestation of its start is the crossdressing. Women dress up as men and men dress up as women. Women paint moustaches and beards on their faces, dress like men who are in positions of authority, such as politicians, or as men engaging

---

<sup>90</sup> While on fieldwork, I did not have access to the decree produced in 2015. However, the decree I cite here is credited to Enrique Alí González Ordosgoitti who also conducted an anthropological study of the celebration of the *Día de los Inocentes* in Osma in 1988. The documentation of the decree number is: 3130 from 27 December 1988 González (1991:60). For more information on the celebration of the Holy Innocents in Osma, see González (1991:60-65)

in a task that women were not allowed to perform, such as hunting. On the other hand, men assume the housework that is attributed to women in the private domain. Men change the pitches of their voices to sound like women. Some others come out of their houses wearing wigs, hats, loincloths and straw skirts. In the decree, women include themselves in the celebrations by performing roles of authority which they were excluded from, and assume symbolic, theatrical responsibilities in the public arena. Below, I will refer to the 7 articles drafted on the 27<sup>th</sup> of December 1988, which are then enforced the next day for the celebration of the *Día de los Inocentes*. These articles allow us to understand the features of this celebration.

Art. 1. From 00:00, men will be considered women, and thus will be loved, cherished and provided for.

Art. 2. From 00:00, women will be considered men, and thus, will be respected and obeyed.

Art 3. The police have no authority during the *Día de los Inocentes*, only this *Gobierno* of the Republic of Osma.

Art.4. The highest authority in the village is the *Correo Mayor*, who is the figure who will protect the flag of the *Gobierno* and collect the funds for the state budget.

Art. 5. The *Correos* are authorised to confiscate all domestic animals (that can be eaten) which are roaming free in the public road and which will then be considered property of the *Gobierno*.

Art. 6. We choose Mrs. H. S. as the Ambassador from Osma to Naiguatá, Mrs. H. H., as the Ambassadors of Osma to La Sabana and Ms. D. C., Ambassador from Osma to Caracas.

Art. 7. All citizens who do not comply with the laws enforced by the *Correos* will be fined with the following punishments:

- a) Have to smell the perfume of MIAO-RANCIO<sup>91</sup> of 5 days aging.
- b) Will be tied up to a lamppost in the public road.
- c) Will be detained in the station of the *gobierno* and released at the end of the *Día de los Inocentes*.

---

<sup>91</sup> Aged urine.

However, this is a tradition that has recently experienced changes. For example, the punishments are less severe. Nobody is forced to smell body fluids or is secluded in poultry cages as used to happen during the 1980s. At present, the celebration in Osma has been impacted by two external circumstances that are accelerating its decline, and which influence the visibility of crossdressing. The first circumstance is the economic climate of shortages in Venezuela in 2015. During the year of my research stay in Osma (2015-2016), I was told that cultural celebrations did not have a substantial turnout of tourists as had traditionally occurred in past years. In this village, the more tourists visit, the more the village reaps the economic benefits. Thus, more residents feel motivated to engage in cultural celebrations. However, the economic crisis in Venezuela provoked the opposite effect. For example, during the *San Juan Festival* in June 2015, which is traditionally the most visited celebration, the turnout of tourists and visitors to the village was low. By December 2015, residents - discouraged by the *San Juan Fiestas* turnout - felt less motivated to participate in the *Día de los Inocentes*, except for a group of musicians from *Melaza y Tambor*, as well as activists and a few encouraged residents that still refused to let these traditions disappear as the picture below shows.

Figure 6.1. Young girls dressed as hunters and a *correo* in Osma



(photo by the author)

Second, these are traditions that are passed on from generation to generation and many elders in the village had either passed away or are less inclined to participate due to age, in particular women. However, is key to clarify that women do participate in numbers,

but do not dress up as much as men do. In the celebration I participated in 2015, less women dressed up as men partake in the celebration due to the absence of elder women who participate in maintaining the tradition. Most have passed away, while some other elders prefer to stay at home. This absence is noticeable; during my research stay I only saw two teenage girls dressed up as hunters in Osma. Most women who participated wore their everyday clothes. These women's participation was primarily in the *parrandas*, which are gatherings of men and women who sing, accompanied by drums, spontaneous dances, and *cuatros*, which are local string instruments. They also helped the *correos* (described earlier in the decree) to collect donations given by visitors driving in Osma's street during the celebrations.

Most men who participated in 2015 were *correos*. They came out of their houses wearing fancy costumes made with old clothes, wigs, and loincloths, and carried wild-cane spikes and changed the pitch of their voices to 'sound' like women. Similarly, these men used body paint with white and other light colours. When I asked some villagers about their preference for painting themselves, the colour of the paint did not bear a particular meaning<sup>92</sup> for them and was merely part of their tradition. In Osma, I saw men like Andrés, who was the *Correo Mayor*, using white body paint and holding rakes. As I introduced in Chapter 3, Andrés is a 'culturalist' who keeps the customs and traditions of Osma's Afro-descendant ancestors alive. Men also wore anklets made from dried plantain leaves and hats made from dried *caña brava* (wild cane) leaves, called '*sombrero pelo e' guama*', which are hats that carry the symbolic meaning of nationality; that is, being *criollo* or Venezuelan. In the past, these hats were associated with *campesinos*.

Up to this point, we have seen how shifts in gendered representations are performed in the *Día de los Inocentes*. These shifts highly contrast with the hierarchies between men and women described earlier in sections 6.2.1 and 6.2.2. In what follows, I will describe the broader meaning that women attached to this celebration, and how this celebration mirrored practices that helped women to subvert their historical marginalization in the public space; that is, the everyday life outside the household.

---

<sup>92</sup> One cannot help but recognise the similarities between these men in Osma wearing straw skirts and body paint and the Mbuti peoples (located in the now Democratic Republic of the Congo), who use similar attires and white paste made of clay in their bodies in ceremony rituals such as *nkumbi* (Turnbull, 1961).

#### 6.2.4. *Implications of Día de los Inocentes in public spaces*

Some celebrations of the *Día de los Inocentes* are used to disguise political meanings. From early celebrations, the poor expressed consciousness of their exclusion from broader political issues. For example, early celebrations of the *Día de los Inocentes* in Naiguatá, an urbanised town located 19 miles away from Osma, represented a theatrical caricature of the ideological clash between notions of dictatorship (*Gobierno*) and democracy (*Revolución*) through performances in which the *Revolución* wins. It was salient how in Naiguatá during the 1920s, the celebration was a vehicle for protesting the dictatorship of Juan Vicente Gómez (1908-1935). But the poor are not a homogeneous group, and within it, poor women also reflected on the gendered division of labour and their invisibility in high-ranking political roles. This is observable in the decree described in the previous section, where women created an ‘independent’ republic of Osma and some women were appointed as ‘Ambassadors’ to other villages and to perform other managerial jobs that were associated with men’s authority. But the decree also referred to the exclusion of women from their right to vote. It was only in 1947 that excluded groups such as the women and the illiterate could vote in Venezuela. To Egnia Hernández, an elder *cultora popular* from Naiguatá, the cultural celebration of the *Día de los Inocentes* was the only way in which women - through parody - challenged both the traditional sexual division of labour and their exclusion from citizenship during the first part of the twentieth century:

It began as a mockery, because we [women] were home bound. Nobody thought that we could hold high-ranking political positions, or even vote. It [*Día de los Inocentes*] became a form of protest to say, in a veiled way, things that we were not allowed to say. (Quoted in Noriega, 2015)<sup>93</sup>

These cultural celebrations mirror the later inclusion of working-class women in public life. In Osma, for example, there were two Afro-descendant women who became key figures in their village during the 1980s and 1990s, as both were appointed as *Comisarias*; a role usually performed by men. This was a common figure in rural villages, who represented the official spokesperson and mediated the relationships between the state

---

<sup>93</sup> Information on the celebration of the *Día de los Inocentes* in Naiguatá appeared in the local newspaper *El Pitazo* December 27, 2015, online edition.

and the residents of the area. Nowadays, this role has legally disappeared in Venezuela.<sup>94</sup> These women were appointed by the residents of the village and, according to Nancy, a middle-aged woman from Osma, one of the former *Comisarias*' administration had a progressive impact on the collective welfare in the village. Nancy recalled:

When Viviana was the *Comisaria*, we used to keep up with things. For example, if there was a lamppost with a bulb missing, we would call the electricity company for them to replace it. We planned and built Osma's community library, there were at least two police officers in the village... now we are '*a la deriva*' (going downhill).

When Nancy states that Osma is '*a la deriva*' she means the rather gloomy picture of what everyday life presently looks like in the village due to state neglect. The waste collection system is poor, as lorries can miss up to 52 consecutive days of waste collection. There is a poorly designed and unreliable transport system that forces villagers to rise as early as 4 a.m. to be able to be at their jobs outside the *Parroquia Caruao* before 7a.m. Failing to get on the early bus means that residents must wait until a bus shows up, which can take 3 hours or more. Law enforcement is absent as the local police unit was closed in the early 2000s. These experiences are satirised in the *Día de los Inocentes*, enabling the participants to show dissent against state neglect in a cultural celebration.

One of the most common practices of disapproval during the *Día de los Inocentes* celebrations is when participants use their *parrandas* in the middle of the celebrations to express their dissatisfaction against politicians and the deficiencies in the national government administration. In the *parrandas* that are led by women, they sing verses (in a similar fashion that men do with *décimas*, see Chapter 3) that reflect the difficulty of the poor's everyday survival. The state neglect in Osma and the ways women interpret and respond to this neglect are some of the reasons why it is known as a village where the men themselves reproduce the discourse that in Osma "*mandan las mujeres*" (women rule). In what follows, I will refer to an event, which illustrates how dissent against the state is culturally manifested and led by women. This cultural dissent is also manifested in episodes of collective organisation in the everyday life in the village, which emboldened women to organise and become political subjects.

---

<sup>94</sup> This figure has been replaced by wider citizen participation mechanisms such as the Communal Council. The role of the *Comisario* can be like the role of *voceros principales* (main spokespeople) in the Communal Council.

### 6.3. Cultural performances and spaces for women's collective organisation

Hereafter, I will develop the view that cultural performances of the *Día de los Inocentes* enable women to erode the traditional gendered divide of social spaces in Osma. This divide refers to the ways in which public life was associated with men while domestic life was associated with women. My purpose here is to illustrate the links between cultural celebrations and concrete examples that show the collective responses of women in the village. I will illustrate how women actively step into the public life of the village when its welfare is affected by the service deprivation from the state.

#### 6.3.1. *The blackout in Osma*

For a few months, Osma - as in many other areas in the country - experienced power outages that had been enforced by the government since April 2015. However, on the 25<sup>th</sup> of July, an unplanned power cut lasted for several days, causing severe hardship<sup>95</sup> in the village. These difficulties were experienced during a time when acute food shortages in Venezuela hit economically deprived households the most. While I conducted my fieldwork, I experienced just like the residents in the village, queues that lasted long hours to be able to buy necessities. These included state-subsidised necessities like toiletries or staple foods like bread, rice or milk because they were the most affordable to the working-class. It also transpired in my conversations with residents in Osma, that most earn minimum wages and rely heavily on state-subsidised products to feed themselves.

In Osma, women traditionally shopped for household necessities. Many of them were breadwinners who missed work to be able to queue to buy food for their families. My housemates, all women supporting dependents, used to leave the village by 3 a.m., hoping to be first in the queues outside supermarkets in Maiquetía, –the capital city of Vargas state, where I did my fieldwork– before they opened. Sometimes they waited up to 7 hours hoping that a) supermarkets had the subsidised products and b) supermarkets had enough products for everyone in the queue. The main frustration that triggered collective anger in Osma in July was the food waste as a result of the blackout. This was due to the lack of domestic appliances to keep food refrigerated and the scorching heat that

---

<sup>95</sup> Among the problems was a lack of fans to cope with the high temperatures and the mosquitoes during the night.



accelerated the spoiling of essential food. In particular, the essential proteins that the residents call '*el salado*' (chicken, fish and beef). This food waste triggered a collective anger in Osma, due to the high prices of such products and the complications the residents faced in order to feed their families.

On the morning of Wednesday, the 28<sup>th</sup> July 2015, a significant number of Osma's residents blocked the main road in a collective protest against the electricity blackout. This was a substantial group of mostly women who gathered in the early morning. The women made a *tranca*, a roadblock, with rubbish bags that had been piling up in the village for weeks. This blockage disrupted the normal flow of transit from the *Parroquia Caruao* to the urban cities and vice versa. After setting the *tranca*, a group of women in Osma organised and phoned the electricity company. This method of protest caught the attention of state authorities, who eventually sent the electricity company. When the electricity technicians arrived, they assured residents that it would take them between two to three days to detect the source of the electricity failure. There were hours and hours of conversations between the villagers and the technicians. Due to the growing discontent and the loss of groceries to feed their families, the women rejected the promises of the technicians. A group of women forced them to solve the problem on the same day before 3p.m. The women hijacked one of the technicians' vehicles and threatened to burn it. Unsurprisingly, the technicians then fixed the problem within three hours. The women had taken a bold step in their collective action and were willing to potentially destroy state property. They secured the attention of the company, which consequently met the demands of the village.

**Figure 6.2. Tranca in Osma's main road**



(photo by the author)

**Figure 6.3. Car hijacked in a protest by the women in Osma**



(photo by the author)

But within the protest, there was a gendered division of concerns. Men were clustered on one side of the road, trying to negotiate with the electricity company workers and avoiding conflict. At some point I overheard one of the electricity workers saying that his group, “did not want to talk with *esas negras* (those black women).” His disparaging comment originated because the women from Osma adopted an assertive and aggressive position of refusing to accept one more day without electricity in the village. In contrast, men from Osma participated in the protest, although their approach focused on mediation. They were less affected as they were not the ones who made complaints –as the women in the protest did– about long hours queuing for grocery shopping and cooking the meals for their families. Thus, these local men gathered together on one side of the road talking to the electricity technicians, only a few hours before the women hijacked the vehicle of the electricity workers. While it was hard to gauge the reasons behind the avoidance of conflict by Osma’s men against the other men from the electricity company, a few days later I understood through a conversation with Sergio, a man from Osma, that it was not passivity. It was a calculated assessment to avoid gun violence.

In Osma, local men have their own ways to dissuade each other from violence (against other men). Sergio, said to me in conversation, “If you pick a fight here, you know what [kind of men] you have here, you show a *machete* and that’s it. You know the men. But when it involves men from outside you don’t know if they have a gun.” This is a response located in a wider context of endemic violence in Venezuela, in which men are more likely to both enforce and become victims of inter-personal armed violence (Hanson *et al.*, 2017). While I am not implying that women are exempt from violence, the context of the protest allowed women to present themselves in political ways. Coming together and organising to take pressing concerns of the household to the street via their roles as mothers and wives positioned them in a light which was not available for men. This is what Schirmer (1989:4) refers to as “motherists” groups in which women transform their subordination to confront situations when the state fails to address systemic inequalities. While women negotiate and carve out spaces to participate as political subjects in public matters that benefit the collective, their participation is simultaneously fraught with limitations. In what follows, I will return to the example of the *Día de los Inocentes* to show how the cultural life aims for gendered equality, while political spaces in the village ignore how women are subdued by hierarchies of gender at the same.

## 6.4. Spaces of contradictions between culture and politics for women in Osma

In this section, I will explore how cultural possibilities and political limitations coexist and are in tension with each other. First, I describe the example of the mock battle in the *Día de los Inocentes*, which is a ritual through which participants symbolically abolish gendered hierarchies. It is performed by men and women who quarrel over the ownership of a flag that is used as a symbol of masculinity in the celebration. Although concerns about physical violence are satirised by women through Osma's mock battle, the threat of gendered hierarchies in the domestic space continues to be silenced by men. Conversely, shame and structural limitations related to male dominance in political spaces prevent women from discussing experiences of domestic abuse in these very political spaces. Here, my core objective is to make sense of these contradictions by drawing on the experiences of Osma's women.

### 6.4.1. The mock battle

By 5p.m. of the 28<sup>th</sup> December on the *Día de los Inocentes* in Osma, the gendered struggle begins. The group of women who represent *El Gobierno* waves a red flag.<sup>96</sup> For the participants, the red flag symbolises that those who wave it are the group who rules in Osma. The flag is an object that men must regain in order to end the rule of women during the celebration. In this part of the celebration, the women who represent *El Gobierno* outnumber the men, who one by one take turns to regain the flag in the name of the group of '*La Revolución*'. Afterwards, disputing the flag involves a gendered struggle that is represented through the mock battle.

In this part of the celebration, the group of *El Gobierno* (women) becomes more active, fierce, and symbolically put themselves in a position to challenge men. The women come together in a group that walks up and down Osma's main street to challenge men by chanting: where are the men who are women today? (*donde están los hombres que hoy son mujeres?*). They chant as they wave the flag and chase away and hit any man who

---

<sup>96</sup> The importance of the flag in the celebration has its origins in slavery. In colonial Venezuela, wealthy slaveholder families used flags to distinguish themselves from other families of similar status (Deroy *et al.*, 2006). This is a tradition that enslaved incorporated into their celebrations and they used their own flags in the celebrations to distinguish themselves from enslaved from another plantations (Deroy *et al.*, 2006).

steps in to try to steal the flag with wild cane branches. At times, the celebration becomes tense due to the physical clash. The man who tries to steal and the woman who holds the flag struggle with each other and even knock each other down to the ground, while the rest of the women in the group eagerly hit the man who wants to steal the flag with the branches. These acts, despite the fierce physical encounter, do not raise animosities. Rather, they enhance feelings of solidarity and reaffirm the unity of the participants to weaken the hierarchies of gender through this parody. Carlos, a man who participated in the celebration, mentioned, “because we [men] are the strong gender, we must come out beaten.” This is an important discursive gender strategy in which, for men, pain is a way to reaffirm a maleness that is chastised by women.

The mock battle is the climax of the celebration that provides opportunities for participants to convey and produce meanings that reflect on gender. Martha, a black woman from Osma, who held the flag that day and resisted the advances of men who tried to steal it from her, said, “We [need to] struggle together... This is the day the women become men and men become women.” Similarly, Carlos believed this celebration endorses the position of women as the stronghold of the village, which links to their collective action we explored earlier. To Carlos, even though men regain the flag, “women are the ones who rule the town” (*las mujeres son las que mandan*). Women end the celebration of the *Día de los Inocentes* with chants such as, “Hurray for the women who are men today! Hurray for the men who are women today! Hurray for the *Día de los Inocentes!*”

Overall, the main cultural feature of the mock battle in celebration of the *Día de los Inocentes* is its theatrical emphasis on a reversal of inequalities that reinforce gender norms the rest of the year. It is interesting how women express dissent and symbolically undermine a culture of *machismo*; a dynamic of power and control, that mediates the hierarchies between men, women and children (Lancaster, 1992). In what follows, I explore the contrast between the cultural life and the everyday to show how women experience *machismo* in their lives through two different life stories.

#### ***6.4.2. Cultural norms that support intimate partner violence in Osma***

Although I did not personally witness domestic abuse in Osma, I became aware of experiences connected to violence against women even though it was not the primary focus of my research. Domestic abuse was neither a feature of my fieldwork nor was it a topic that many women would speak about casually in a conversation. Nevertheless, perhaps the most disturbing case that I learned of was a femicide in La Sabana, a village located 13 miles away. In May 2015, I heard about the death of a 20-year-old woman who was shot by a man who was her previous partner.

I interviewed two Afro-descendant women, who were born and raised in Osma. These women guided me through their life stories to understand how violence against women in Osma was tied to relationships, community and societal factors. A few years before I interviewed them, these women experienced violence from partners. Both were living in the urban city, where they sought support from extended families and state-led social service agencies. Once they ended their relationships with their abusive partners, they moved back to Osma. What I will offer here is a mixture of their life experiences and their personal views on *machismo* and intimate partner violence in Osma.

The first woman is Crisaida. She referred to relationship factors, such as having multiple partners and societal norms of manhood, such as tolerance for aggression, as norms embedded in the subordination she experienced. Crisaida had lived most of her adult life in the city of La Guaira but returned to Osma in 2012 to start a new life after she experienced domestic abuse by her previous husband. She reported having low self-esteem while her children performed poorly in school. Crisaida received state support and advocacy training as a *promotora* in a state institution called INAMUJER, which protects women's rights. Crisaida and her children then moved into the house she and her ex-husband had as a second residence in Osma, which she transformed into a *posada* (bed and breakfast):

My ex-husband was a man who used to hit me, cheat on me, be jealous of other men and used to lock me up in the house. I was in that situation for years to keep my family together, but it affected me and my children, who were not performing well in school. Then I sought support at INAMUJER where I ended up doing small social work as a *promotora* (anti-domestic violence advocate).

The main reason of gendered hierarchies in Osma, according to Crisaida, are unequal gendered social norms that regulate how men assert power over women on the local level. “Men here are *machistas*,” she said. She explained that one of the ways *machismo* manifests itself is through definitions of manhood that are linked to aggression, sexual prowess and polygamy (having more than one partner at a time). These were traits that Crisaida had observed in Osma, “Men feel entitled to have as many women as they want.” “How do you know that?” I asked Crisaida. “Look” she said, “there is a man here in Osma who has children with 3 sisters of the same family.”

While I was not concerned with the verity of this gossip communicated by Crisaida, I was concerned with understanding how this information communicated how *machismo* manifested in Osma. It presents itself in the way men shape their masculinity through culturally tolerated behaviours such as being unfaithful to their partners. I recognised this tolerance when, during a conversation with an older married couple I became friendly with, the man, Fulvio, took pride in saying - in the presence of his wife Morela- that he was unfaithful only once and has a child who was born out of that affair. He made this remark to clarify that promiscuity and having several children with different women was a common occurrence in his generation of the villages. In contrast, to Crisaida, these were examples of gendered inequalities based on the widely held cultural beliefs that support traits of male promiscuity and emotional violence.<sup>97</sup> But there are additional structural concerns that were illuminated by my second informant.

The second woman is Beatriz, who was my housemate at the time of the research. She described individual factors related to awareness and broader societal factors, such as a weak presence of social services in the village, which perpetuate inequality against women. There is neither law enforcement nor social services to report abuse to in this rural setting. Beatriz was divorced with a child, but a few years later started a new relationship with an abusive partner. She lived in a domestic partnership with this man for three years and had another child with him but left when his physical violence against her began to escalate. She lived in *El Tigriillo* –a small urbanised area 21 miles away from Osma– raising a family without the safety net of her family and friends. Beatriz explained

---

<sup>97</sup> I define emotional violence to the psychological degradation, fear, and humiliation or as identified by Walker (1984) as emotional abuse

that lack of awareness was part of her experience of domestic abuse. She further mentioned that she had scant knowledge about setting boundaries with her partner due to the normalisation of discourses of masculinity. Although she had the education to understand the problems of domestic abuse, she lacked individual awareness that would have helped her to identify the situation as abuse. In Beatriz's view, the normalisation of *machismo* in the local culture made it difficult for her to recognise domestic abuse for what it was. Beatriz recalled:

For example, this man [her previous partner] comes and yells at me, yells at me in public and then locks me in the house, shoves the food, nudges my children, and then you ask yourself, is it true? Am I a victim of violence? Because the problem is that here it is normal that a man behaves like that. That is an acceptable behaviour, it becomes a routine.

Besides culturally held social norms that define how men assert power, there is another structural issue that perpetuates domestic abuse. The isolation of the village is a deterrent to women who may wish to seek the support of state services. For Beatriz, it is unlikely that women in Osma promptly notify the police about having been a victim of domestic violence. Because there is no police or social services in Osma, according to Beatriz, many women do not seek support, "Women fear asking for help and they get abused time and time again." She explained that an individual barrier that deters women from escaping this abusive cycle is connected to fear. "In these villages, women are paralysed by fear. They even fear getting out of Osma because many do not even know the streets of La Guaira (the urban city) very well." In Beatriz's view, the state should provide the infrastructure and support its social services to reach out to the villages in order to help women to identify what they have been victims of:

You have to have that person telling you what domestic violence looks like and what to do to cut it off. When you are a victim of domestic violence and someone talks to you about it, you identify it. I think there should be attention [in Osma] to women. The attention should be individual, that these people come [to Osma] and provide help for women, they should come here often. Someone that looks at you and tells you "look, that bruise, what is it, what happened? What's going on at home?" If there was a steady support from lawyers and people who can talk to women and ask them and tell them what to do, many women in the village could open their eyes and manage the situation."

Beatriz talked about the need for women in the parish to be in contact with professionals and awareness raising campaigns. In her case, a combination of individual lack of awareness and broader societal factors of state neglect in the villages were aspects that she identified for having tolerated abuse by her previous partner. As we saw in the previous section, women are empowered by cultural practices and can become political subjects. But here it is noticeable that intimate partner violence in the household is an important concern that is still neglected. Why did women not set up a group addressing these issues, even when cultural spaces have allowed them to collectively carve out gendered interventions in the public life of the village? To help answer that question in the next section, I will analyse the significance of race and contestations amongst Osma's women. I will explore the tensions around different concerns between men and women that are articulated in political spaces.

#### ***6.4.3. Gender and dominance of men in political spaces in Osma***

At present, the dominance of men in formal political spaces in the village is a salient feature in Osma. Osma's Communal Council (CC) is the neighbourhood-based council that brings residents together through neighbourhood assemblies to discuss and solve collective problems. It is also the space that links the state and the residents. Yet, it is a male dominated arena. A few key 'rebels' lead the council and, as I have explained in previous chapters, they are mostly male activists, although few of them are state brokers (meaning those who work for the state and channel state resources into the village). The CC meets once a week to discuss visible issues and projects that concern the collective welfare of the residents. In Osma's CC, the issues prioritized were problems associated with exclusion and male unemployment, which in turn were reflected in actions associated with Osma's male youth, namely drugs, criminality and petty thefts. There are several concerns that attract a higher participation of women from the village in the CC. These concerns are related to the solutions of problems in the family life, such as housing rights, the difficulties faced by local children in accessing free public transportation to high schools outside the *Parroquia Caruao*, or the purchase of state-subsidised food products to sustain their families.

Nonetheless, there are other issues that are kept in the less visible sphere. One of them is the violence women experience in the household. In the past, there were attempts to bring



gendered concerns to public debate. Crisaida intended to address experiences of domestic abuse through the CC:

After I moved to Osma I got involved in the CC to link up my work as a *promotora* in this organisation. I wanted to conduct workshops on awareness about how to break the cycle of domestic violence. But people talk about other things in the CC.

What is important to note in this space is that during discussions around the marginalisation of the black population (through the exclusion of black young men), the conversation about the marginalisation of black women by men is side-lined. For Crisaida, it is problematic that the dominance of men in political spaces deters abused women from collectively addressing their concerns. Crisaida is an advocate against domestic abuse, to whom this form of abuse is a public concern that needs to be addressed at the public level. However, this public discussion is unwelcomed in Osma. Crisaida mentioned that she was discouraged by her lone position as an advocate to end domestic violence. Taking her initiative further in the CC would involve publicly challenging one of the men who actively participates in activities that aim to foster positive black consciousness but who, in Crisaida's words, is a man who batters his wife. She refers to a man who – although he does not belong to the group I refer to as the 'rebels' - actively participates in discussions around the impact of structural racism against young men in the village. Therefore, practices of giving priorities to certain concerns while excluding others silence concerns that seek to erode how men enforce power over women in the area. And these silences serve to maintain male dominance that remains unchallenged in the private domain. Exclusions of topics related to gender-based violence by men leaves them unaddressed in local political spaces.

Women get valuable support from state offices in the city, with the help of trained staff and confidential spaces in social services. But there is little support from the residents to seek ways in which social services can reach out to this village. In Crisaida's view, the CC's lack of will to engage with gendered violence was reinforced by shame amongst women to articulate their concerns. Crisaida stated, "I thought I could find women in the CC to share these experiences with, because that CC is the space in which the problems of the *comunidad* (resident's area) are supposed to be solved. But this is a problem in the *comunidad* that nobody talks about in public." The women thus also face individual

obstacles in order to fully advance their agendas in a male-dominated political space. Alternatively, as a response to these exclusions, the tradition of the *Día de los Inocentes* continues to be the vehicle to allow women to challenge their subjugation in a satirical way. To Eginia Hernández, who I introduced earlier, “the tradition continues because we can say things that without fancy costumes and *parrandas* we would not say.” Overall, then, culture offers possibilities, on the one hand, that allow women to carve out spaces in public life. On the other hand, structural limitations and silence in actual political spaces prevent women from articulating experiences of violence that are known to them.

## 6.5. Conclusions

This chapter has examined how Afro-Venezuelans challenge gendered hierarchies through popular culture. The main point I have advanced is that gender inequalities, which Afro-Venezuelan women face, are located within two competing forces that coexist with one another.

Here, I offer a brief summary of the main themes developed in this chapter. In the first section, we explored how women were historically subjugated in the organisation of the household and how some continued to be dominated by their partners in the domestic space. These subjugations were tied to the divisions of labour within the household. I showed that women of colour had an ambivalent position in the household. Afro-Venezuelan women were both homemakers and subordinate workers for their husbands in the system of sharecropping or *conucos* that contributed to the economy of the household. In the second section, we explored the *Día de los Inocentes* celebration and its influences on women’s collective action. In the third section, I illustrated that male dominance in political spaces is the main reason why women’s concerns on intimate partner violence are side-lined from public discussions. I illustrated that there were attempts to bring the ways women are marginalised by men into the public conversation, but individual factors such as shame, community factors such as male dominance in political affairs, and structural considerations related to the lack of social services in this isolated village makes it difficult for women to harness positions of equality in ways that they have been able to do on the *Día de los Inocentes*. I have insisted that all these interactions enable us to see that cultural practices, collective action, and gendered

inequality do not occur in isolation in Osma. My observations have prompted me to ask: to what extent do these cultural performances foster a practice of gender equality?

Overall, I have insisted that popular culture is the first force that allows women to negotiate hierarchies between men and women. The way the *Día de los Inocentes* is celebrated, emphasising practices of crossdressing and shifts in gendered roles, enables women to overthrow hierarchies between men and women, and through mockery establish a new hierarchy in place: women lead the village for a day. This cultural celebration influences how women become political actors in real life, who collectively challenge some of their historical exclusions from the public life.

The second force is in the area of politics. Domination of women in the household through domestic violence does not tend to be articulated in public, which complicates our understanding about the position women already gain and sustain; both through culture and as a collective in the village. I was interested in exploring the celebration of the *Día de los Inocentes* to illustrate how cultural life is in stark contradiction with everyday life. By bringing out these contradictions, the broader goal of this chapter was to further our understanding about intersections of ‘race’, class and gender in my fieldsite.

Let me conclude by suggesting how these findings tie into debates on the role of popular culture, gender and the distribution of power amongst Afro-Latin American populations. Festivals emerge as a reaction against the conventional social order, and festive behaviours become a system within which participants unsettle hierarchies and social norms (Bakhtin, 1984); and upsetting hierarchies and norms include undoing those of ‘race’ and gender. These festive behaviours have been widely appropriated by enslaved and post-enslaved societies in the Americas, where festivals tend to reflect on political processes that produce cultural resistance (Wynter, 1970). In the case of a dance festival called *Jonkonnu* in Jamaica, which involves mockery to challenge the systems of inequalities imposed by slavery, this performance is closely connected to the participation of black women in acts of rebellions and collective action (Wynter, 1970).

These insights allow us to bridge the connections between popular culture and collective action with broader processes in the formation of hierarchies regarding gender and ‘race’. For example, the brutality of slavery strengthened the position of black women as

matriarchs. However, there are views that say the rigours of slavery did not involve gendered differentiation of labour, as –generally– both enslaved men and women were ‘field hands’ (Davis, 1981). It is also argued that in slavery, black women were ‘de-gendered’ and displaced from the social construction of femininity that is bound to white women (Spillers, 1987). However, slavery was indeed gendered. Women and men worked the fields but were subjected to different types of labour as well and different roles on the plantation and enslaves’ masters house. Once slavery was legally abolished, it was not difficult for black women in my fieldsite –as the testimonies of my elder informants confirms– to find employment<sup>98</sup> and economically contribute to their households in ways that were forbidden for white women.<sup>99</sup> However, a culture of gendered inequality in the household regarding definitions of femininity and expectations in the household, shapes how black women, white women, white men and black men engage with each other and the roles that are deemed appropriate for each other. I illustrated these dynamics regarding domestic employment for black women (see discussion in section 6.2.2) and in the electricity protest (see discussion in section 6.3.1).

What do these insights mean for our understanding of the position of women in Osma? As I showed, there are two competing narratives. Firstly, women in my fieldsite have been empowered by historical and cultural modes of resisting. This empowerment is visible in the ways they contribute to their households, families and the collective in Osma. Secondly, the ways gendered inequalities are enforced makes it difficult for women to carve out spaces for themselves to collectively address the ways in which they are being oppressed. These dynamics prompt the question: what does gender equality mean in this context? In analysing the gendered politics of cultural traditions, I demonstrated that even though performances embolden women to have a more assertive role in the collective affairs of the village, and indeed challenge gendered hierarchies, there are concerns that remain unanswered. There is a visible contradiction, at times women resist collectively, and at times women do not resist collectively. There are factors that allow them to resist as a collective, tied to the idea of the public sphere when there

---

<sup>98</sup> For a thorough theoretical discussion about Black women’s inclusion in the labour market, and their labour limited to domestic work see Hill-Collins (1994).

<sup>99</sup> For a revision of a historical perspective referred through the production of the white family structure, that is the ways in which white masculinity is built upon their role as breadwinners and white femininity is built upon motherhood and the domestic sphere, see Parsons and Bales (1955).

are direct threats to the collective and the survival of the family. In contrast, women sometimes feel unsure about how to resist together when inequalities within the private space are suffered and are expected to be addressed individually. The latter is a situation that increases the implicit separations between the public and the private, even when there are spaces provided by the state such as the community council (CC), that are meant to enable the articulation of issues that are a priority in the community. In the final chapter, I turn to the conclusions and some reflections on my journey conducting research in Osma and Todasana.

# Chapter 7: Dismantling the plantation

*“We [Afro-Venezuelans] are not an ethnic minority*

*We are the majority without the power”<sup>100</sup>*

## 7.1. Introduction

Old colonial paths still find a way to seep into and shape our present. But in the Afro-Venezuelan villages of Osma and Todasana the ‘rebels’, the ‘traditionalists’ and their residents have found a way to contest the haunting past of the plantation by drawing on their cultural performances mostly learned from their forebears. Therefore, this study ends in the way it began: exploring the vibrant politicisation of cultural performances and its potential to contest structural racism as used by Afro-Venezuelan collective actors. I set out to explore how Afro-Venezuelan’s everyday life conditions are creatively contested through an engagement with politics. I have argued in this thesis, that popular culture is the battlefield through which Afro-Venezuelans challenge racial, class and gendered inequalities intertwined with one another as they manifest in their everyday lives. What I learned in this journey of conducting research in Osma and Todasana is that we need to pay more sustained attention to the potential of cultural production in understanding the resources that politicised race-based movements draw on. This attention became a valuable analytical point to grasp in this thesis how Afro-Venezuelans open a fluid dialogue between politics and their own local culture.

This concluding chapter is structured as follows: In section 7.2, I will outline the lessons and limitations of this research, next in section 7.3, I will discuss the first objective of my research which was to explore the different constructions of blackness. Then in sections 7.4 and 7.5, I will reflect on the role of cultural productions in contesting the myth of racial democracy. Finally, in section 7.6, I discuss the importance of what the analysis of popular culture both means and brings to the table while expanding our understanding of black populations outside ‘formal’ politics.

---

<sup>100</sup> Rosalba (pseudonym). Political Activist of the Afro-Venezuelan movement in Caracas. From conversation we had the 11/2/16 during a meeting called by the Afro-Venezuelan social movement.

## 7.2. Lessons and limitations

The value of this ethnography was to understand what Javier Auyero (2012:122) identifies as the “nitty-gritty” aspects of politicized mobilizations. Ethnography allowed me to zoom in, to provide a rich detailed account of collective actors and draw on empirical evidence that provides a textured account of the ways in which Osma’s and Todasana’s collective actors act the way they do, the context within which they act the way they do, and how the everyday lives of Afro-descendants are resources within which these mobilizations are energised. The evidence presented in this study calls our attention to how anti-racism and new racial politics are in dialogue with each other. While part of this activism focuses on subject formation around alternative forms of blackness, they also simultaneously reflect on structural discrimination. Thus, the evidence presented here provides a fuller reading of the conflated relationship between identity centered constructions of blackness and anti-racism.

While writing up this thesis, I devoted substantial attention to cultural practices. This approach on culture although highly valuable, was far from perfect. The main pitfall is that this approach can be read as a reductive interpretation of, “everyday forms of resistance” (Scott, 1985) and reifying cultural practices as the only system needed to produce a social movement (Burdick, 1995). To avoid this risk, my efforts to sustain empirical attention on the heterogeneity of collective actors, as encouraged by Burdick (1998) provided me with a multi-faceted exploration to understand how the politics of blackness operates, to challenge a simplistic reading of the anti-racist politics developed in Osma and Todasana. This approach centred on cultural practices was also an invitation to rethink what the ‘political’ is. But through committed ethnography from the position of a black woman sympathetic of the political struggles of the peoples in Osma and Todasana, I focused on those spaces where people try to contest through creative resources, the legacies of slavery in the area, in ways that have not previously been documented. This made me realize the value of committed ethnography in understanding how Afro-descendants engage in this process, which is best articulated by bell hooks in *Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness* (1989):

There is an effort to remember that is expressive of the need to create spaces where one is able to redeem and reclaim the past, legacies of pain, suffering, and triumph in ways that transform present reality. (17)

The past still has some ways of manifesting itself in the present, yet in Osma and Todasana there are peoples committed to dismantling the ghost of the plantation. Let me now turn to discuss the findings of this thesis.

### **7.3. Different constructions of blackness in Venezuela**

The example of the *Parroquia Caruao*, and its populations of Osma and Todasana show us that Afro-Venezuelans have different constructions of blackness. In this thesis, I have identified the politicisation of blackness as one-stepping stone through which residents and collective actors incorporate understandings of everyday life conditions into cultural performances. This in turn opens two different strands. First, the ways in which collective politicised actors speak with different voices and put forth different constructions of blackness. And second, how non-politicised residents negotiate their identity. Therefore, in this subsection, I discuss the different ethnographic examples, that takes us through the local constructions of blackness, which will then be useful in Section 3, to understand what cultural performances tell us about how *cultores populares* and political activists challenge the myth of racial democracy.

#### **7.3.1. Understanding a heterogeneous blackness**

Before delving into the discussion of my findings, I want to briefly recall, as explained in the Introduction, how Afro-Venezuelans from the *Parroquia Caruao* are portrayed by the dominant anthropological body of literature in Venezuela. The central argument in this body of knowledge is that these populations disengage from their African descent ancestral heritage (Altez, 2017:78). To amalgamate these dynamics of denials of African heritage, Altez (2006) coined the concept of *des-memoria* (dis-memory) to explain that the populations of the villages of *Parroquia Caruao* reject identifying themselves as African descendants or descendants of enslaved (2006, 2008). In this vein, self-hatred is



also suggested.<sup>101</sup> Therefore, this literature warns against representing populations of *Parroquia Caruao* as, “bulwarks of a culture of resistance” (Altez, 2000:434) and calling these populations as having, “an Afro identity” (2000:435). This is a conclusion that has been reached through methods such as the recompilation of oral memories via interviews, archaeological registries, ethno-histories and archival research. Counter to this body of knowledge, my ethnographic work and everyday interaction in Osma and Todasana during 13 months of fieldwork, with politicised and non-politicised residents, attempted to reflect the experiences of complex peoples, whose views cannot be simply summarised as the rejection of their ancestry or their African origins, especially while they contest what life looks like while fighting against the ghost of the plantation.

Regarding local politicised groups, and *cultores populares* from Osma and Todasana we observed in this thesis that they do not present themselves with the same voice or as having a monolithic identity (see Chapter 3). They organise and put forth different constructions of blackness, which is approached differently via political and cultural productions. I distinguished the heterogeneity of these collective actors in two different meta-strands of activism in my fieldsite. I made the distinctions between ‘the rebels’ and ‘the traditionalists’, although this is not a sharp division. The negotiation of personal identity in relation to blackness is highly contextual, but three overarching differences are identifiable. When talking about constructions of blackness, we find overarching political orientations, second, skin colour discourses, and third, ideas about heritage and African origins which are deployed in shifting ways. These are present in discourses amongst traditionalists, rebels, and non-politicised residents. Let me briefly sum up how I developed this view.

### 7.3.2. *Old ‘traditionalists’ vs. new ‘rebels’*

I called ‘the rebels’ those who belong to a group of politicised and cultural activists who call themselves *negros/as* but are also open to using politicised labels that reflect past resistance by enslaved in colonial times, such as *cimarrones* (self-emancipated, former enslaved), or the newer politicised label *Afro-descendientes*. While most ‘rebels’ assert

---

<sup>101</sup> “We believe these communities have historically recreated a negative image of themselves, [yet] they have constructed a positive [white] other upon which they [local black population] maintain subordinate relationships in the social, political, economic and cultural [spaces]” (Altez, 2000:443)

their blackness by using the label *negro/as* to identify themselves in everyday conversation, they also acknowledge that *negro/a* is a term whereby blackness has been constructed upon negative and disparaging qualities in everyday speech. Therefore, ‘rebels’ distinguish themselves by advocating the label ‘*Afro-descendiente*’ which is a political label that aims to be more comprehensive, and to challenge the porosity that *negro/a* has, for both asserting racial identity, skin colour (and even affection<sup>102</sup>), but which is simultaneously –depending on the context and the intention in which the word is deployed– used in disparaging ways in Spanish speaking countries. However, it must be recognised that although *Afro-descendiente* is a politicised identity, this term is infrequently used in everyday parlance, and its meaning is not widespread amongst a substantial part of non-politicised residents.

However, there is also a more ‘traditionalist’ group. They are comprised of a conservative older generation which favours the use of the word *negros/as*, while rejecting the label *Afro-descendiente*. In Chapter 3, we met Andrés who is an example of a traditionalist who rejects connections with Africa and the use of the *Afro-descendiente* badge. One important reason for rejecting connections with Africa is political. It is due to the role that Africans themselves had in the slave trade by selling fellow Africans. Interestingly, Andrés sees himself as descendant of peoples who were enslaved. This is an evidence that challenges the Afrocentric notion of Molefi Asante (1990), which proposes that populations of African descent outside of Africa draw on the continent as the source of their origin, which is a notion that Andrés clearly contradicts. On the other hand, there is another strand of peoples to whom calling themselves *negros/as* involves recognising their African heritage. However, this view of African ancestry is linked to how it has been culturally/politically mobilised in the political terrain and within the context of Venezuela’s political polarisation. Younger generations began acknowledging the history of African heritage in Venezuela, which gained currency in the racial/class polarisation within the context of the Bolivarian Revolution. Their identification with blackness involves calling themselves both *negros/as* and *Afro-descendientes* as we explored through the cases of Oliver and Karina in Chapter 3. Therefore, there are distinctions in the ways the populations of Osma and Todasana position themselves in relation to having African ancestry. These distinctions are, as we have seen, malleable, heterogeneous and

---

<sup>102</sup> See Roger Lancaster (1992) “The *Negro* of the Family” in *Life is Hard: Machismo, Danger, and the Intimacy of Power in Nicaragua*.

in constant transformation, and are attested by the embrace or rejection of the *Afro-descendiente* label.

These tensions can be mapped as ‘old’ versus ‘new’. Here the findings can be clarified with what Hall (1991) discusses as “old and new identities, old and new ethnicities.” Hall is writing about Britain, where ‘old ethnicities and identities’ refers to how whiteness and Englishness are positioned as conservative notions. By contrast, ‘new ethnicities and identities’ refer to the politicisation of the black label in ways that acknowledge changes in Britain due to multiculturalism. But an alternative interpretation of Hall’s use of the ‘old’ versus the ‘new’ can help us to discern competing views on blackness, one that frames itself as purely Venezuelan but does not leave room for accepting African ancestry. Whereas the other one, or a ‘new’ identity encompasses a blackness that draws on the ethos of being *Afro-descendiente*.

### 7.3.3. *Blackness: depends on the circumstance*

However, another layer of positioning in relation to blackness is complicated by how negotiations on identity get in the way. This is highly context-driven and becomes more intricate due to the wide range of racial terminologies and forms of talking about ‘race’ that adds to the complexity of identity. There is no direct relation between a person’s identity and their circumstances. The slippery distinction between racial identity and colour identity and politicised racial stances become confusing, as explored in Chapter 3. Take the case of Leyla, a politicised *cultora popular* from Todasana who, when talking about her ancestry, suggested that she possibly had English forebears. Yet, a historical assessment of the history in the area does not confirm a British presence in *Parroquia Caruaó*. However, Leyla is the founder of a ‘traditionalist’ group in Todasana that advocates for the preservation of the black culture she learnt from her forebears in Todasana. Another attention-grabbing case is Gonzalo a member of *Melaza y Tambor* who I met while on fieldwork. Gonzalo does not identify himself as *negro*. He considers that his skin colour is not dark enough to call himself *negro* and prefers the catch-all label *Moreno*,<sup>103</sup> which in this case he uses to describe his light russet brown skin tone. Yet,

---

<sup>103</sup>The label ‘moreno’ is tricky, imprecise and has multiple meanings. Is mostly used as a euphemism to refer to a person of African descent regardless of his/her skin tone. However, it is also widely used to refer to a non-white person with light skin colour regardless of descent or can be even used as a colour label to describe person of white ancestry when is tanned.

Gonzalo is one of the singers in a ‘traditionalist’ cultural drum ensemble in Osma that vindicates blackness. As we can notice, Leyla and Gonzalo are both members of cultural groups that explicitly espouse pride in a politico-ideological view of blackness. How do we make sense of this? To what extent do Leyla and Gonzalo reject blackness? I don’t think the answers are straightforward.

While for some, Gonzalo and Leyla may be engaging in the discourse of ‘whitening’ there are many issues at stake here. These are attached to how scholars can do better work while studying Afro-Latino populations, to render more ‘legible’ (following James Scott’s concept) knotty complexities and unpredictable patterns between colour labels and racial identity on the ground. For the purposes of public policy, we need to describe in a clear manner, the intertwined ways in which systemic racism operates by shaping life chances and inequalities rooted in race, class, and gender. Checking more political categories such as *Negro/a*, *Indígena* or *Afro-descendiente* in the census of national identity could be a first step in this task. But in a context of *mestizaje*, cases such as Gonzalo and Leyla show us that reality on the ground is more nuanced, incohesive and disrupts what we expect: ‘neat’ black identities. It is unrealistic to expect monolithic identities. Because both Leyla and Gonzalo have made a choice to bolster their connections with blackness through their active participation in their local black cultural heritage, it would be hard to argue that they lack pride in blackness or that they are engaging in a cultural ‘whitening’. Instead, we must recognise how *mestizaje* introduces complexities that we must consider around the ambiguities brought about by the shifting negotiations of identity, which I suggest is best captured through ethnographic work.

Surveys in Venezuela (see INE, 2011) indicate that only 2.9% of Venezuela’s populations identify with the less ambiguous identities of *negros/as* and 0.7% as *Afro-descendientes*, whereas 49.9% identify with the label *Morenos/as*, which indicates racial mixture and remains ambiguous. It is striking that in 2011, Venezuela became the only country in Latin America that included the category *Moreno/a* in a census to measure its ethno-racial composition. In Venezuela –as in many Latin American countries– *Moreno/a* is a widely-used ambiguous term to refer to non-whiteness. Its ambiguity lies precisely in the ways in which it makes it hard to draw a line –in phenotypical terms– that indicates where blackness and its mixtures end and where non-white *mestizos* and their mixtures start. Due to its hazy meaning, *Moreno/a* has been a category absent from surveys on racial

self-identification in the region. While it has been documented that in the case of Venezuela the use of *Moreno/a* can be perceived as a form of ‘whitening’ amongst people of African ancestry (Wright, 1990), it has been also documented elsewhere in the region that the term *Moreno/a* is part of a complex discourse on skin colour and racial etiquette which operates in ways which do not necessarily indicate ‘race’, or disavows blackness (Sheriff, 2003: 88). The definition of who is *Moreno/a* provided in 2011 by the Venezuelan National Institute of Statistics (INE), had a meaning located within the bounds of blackness, as well as being a euphemism for blackness. According to the INE (2011) “*Moreno/a*” is an individual “whose phenotypical characteristics are less marked or pronounced than the people defined as *negro/a*. It is a term that in some contexts can be used to soften the discriminatory implications involved in being *Negro/a*”.

Why the INE chose to include the term *Moreno/a* in the national census is unclear. Initially, *Moreno/a* was left out of the early pilot census. Mexican-American anthropologist Cristóbal Valencia (2015) who participated in 2008 as an ethnographer in pilot surveys in Caracas *barrios*, noted that other every-day terms used to refer to specific racial mixtures of blackness in Venezuela were prevalent. These were noted in INE pilot surveys as recommended by Afro-Venezuelan movements. Listing terms such as *Trigueño/ Negro/ Bachaco/ Afrodescendiente/ Afro-Venezolano* registered higher rates of people identifying with blackness (Valencia, 2015: 175). Given these terms, at least 76% of the surveyed in pilot surveys identified with everyday terms that allowed to assert different degrees of blackness (Valencia, 2015: 175). Yet, during the design of the census, there were clashes between two competing agendas<sup>104</sup>. Nevertheless, the final ethno-racial categories listed in the official INE census were limited to four<sup>105</sup> terms: *Blanco/a* (white); *Moreno/a* (brown); *Negro/a* (black); *Afrodescendiente* (Afro-descendant); *Otro/a* (other). As mentioned before, the INE final results identified that 49.9% of Venezuela’s population self-identified as *Morenos*. These results certainly reinforced the homogenizing narrative of ‘*café con leche*’ or ‘we are all mixed’ by making it difficult to

---

<sup>104</sup> On the one hand, *Afro-Venezuelans* organized in grassroots movements aimed to attract more people into identifying with blackness whilst making a more accurate representation of the Afro-descendant population with the aforementioned terms. On the other hand, scholars and state workers sought to undermine the grassroots agenda. According to Valencia (2015) Afro-Venezuelan grassroots experienced sabotage on the hands of –those who Valencia identified as white– state officials during different exercises and meetings during the census design. Forms of sabotage included “disrespect, disruptive behavior and refusing to acknowledge previously agreed terms” (180).

<sup>105</sup> In the case of *Indígena* (Indigenous) identification, although not listed as an option, it was mapped out through a separate question in the census.

tease out through quantitative data more complex relationships regarding how ideas of race, gender, class, and skin colour operate. Still, this is a highly contested issue, decided by the context, and by who does the appraisal of what happens on the ground.

In a measure to grapple with the aforementioned complexities, Afro-Venezuelan activists of the national movement now tend to refer to the total size of the Afro-Venezuelan population as 53.5%, comprised of *Morenos/as* (49.9%) *Negros/as* (2.9%) and *Afro-descendientes* (0.7%). The key point I advance, which is raised above by the particular cases of Leyla and Gonzalo, is that a commonly perceived rejection of blackness lies in the slippage between skin colour discourses (Godreau, 2008) and racial identity (Sheriff, 2003). In other words, people emphasise different sides of their racial heritage and negotiate what they want to emphasise depending on the circumstance. And as Hall (1992) reminds us, black popular culture, “can be a contradictory” space (108). Yet, amid these complexities with respect to positioning blackness, I found how that residents in Osma contest ways in which blackness is negatively perceived.

#### **7.3.4. *Mestizaje and contesting anti-blackness***

One common thread that runs throughout the empirical findings of this thesis, is that despite the diversity of positions adopted by politicised actors, cultural practices are the privileged space within which they galvanise social mobilisations. Through culture, collective actors confront in public debate, questions about the marginalised space blackness is located within discourses of *mestizaje*. Cultural resources of Spanish origins which became part of local Afro-descendant poetry, such as *décimas*, problematise, first, questions about the position of blackness within *mestizaje*, and second, hegemonic ideas of *mestizaje* and racial mixture that influence romantic preferences in my fieldwork site.

I demonstrated how *décimas* carve out spaces in which the ideology of anti-blackness operates within *mestizaje*. I achieved this by firstly, showing that *décimas* bring to the fore manifestations of belonging entangled in blackness and nationality, reflecting a “double consciousness” (invoking Du Bois’ concept). That is, being culturally Venezuelan but having African ancestry, expressed by being conscious of the marginal place within which a racial blackness and African ancestry are socially devalued in Venezuela. Then I showed how *décimas* in Todasana problematize ideologies of racial

mixture and romantic choices. A case in point was the *décima* “*ya basta de negro en casa,*” which showed that *cultores populares* challenge in-group biases in the local population by exposing preferences towards having light-skinned partners in order to have light(er) skinned children.

Another significant point that I raised in this thesis, was the connections between the celebration of cultural performances and state funding. Osma and Todasana’s political activists and *cultores populares* pursue a politics of culture that aims to make non-politicised residents aware of issues about systemic racial disparities that keep their villages disenfranchised. I stressed that this awareness is energised through state funding in Chapter 4. A substantial number of political activists and *cultores populares* are employed by the state and tend to rely on state funding to carve out cultural spaces to contest *mestizaje*. Due to employment in state bureaucracy and dependence on state funding, these activists find themselves struggling with how to disseminate messages about structural inequalities to wider audiences. The political rhetoric of the Bolivarian Revolution towards supporting *cultores populares* is fraught with tensions and political exploitation. I showed that a counter-hegemonic project in which popular culture is mobilised by the state becomes problematic when there are ideological, material and political means mediating the ways Afro-descendants use the support of the state to mobilise reflections that contest the powerful myth of racial democracy. These knotty relationships prompted me to interrogate to what extent the concept of the organic intellectual can tell us about how local activist contest, while simultaneously contributing to, the maintenance of hegemonic relationships. Hence, relationships between grassroots movements and the state are fraught with complexities and ambiguities.

My findings closely mirror what Jean Muteba Rahier (2014), calls *negro permitido*<sup>106</sup> (the permissible black). This term illuminates the ways in which progressive governments that have embraced multi-culturalism in Latin America have begun to elicit forms of identity politics whilst maintaining political exploitation. Or as Rahier (2014) notes, “a populist manipulation of blackness for political gain” (146). The *negro permitido* illustrates a

---

<sup>106</sup> Rahier draws on Charles Hale’s “*Indio permitido*” (permissible Indian) (Hale, 2005:24) which is the notion which refers to one of the characteristics of neoliberal multi-culturalism to shape the ways in which Indigenous subjects must present themselves to be recognised by the state: as a pliable and submissive subject that does not threaten the state agenda.

simultaneous dilemma. On the one hand, the *negro pemitido* must act according to racial stereotypes attached to the local practices of drum ensembles to celebrate the multicultural idea of *mestizaje*, as illustrated with the case of political rallies in Venezuela in Chapter 4. On the other hand, when black political contestations use the spaces provided by the state to defy the supremacy of the whitened *mestizaje* explicitly before an audience to open black consciousness, places for black participation are undone by the state. I exemplified this through the denial of funding. The ways in which these ambiguities produced by political domination operates is two-fold. That is, politics and the contestational potential of cultural struggles in my fieldsite wrestle with one another to at times maintain, while at other times to erode, the status quo of *mestizaje*. The promotion of popular culture by the state stimulates grassroots movements to organise. But also, the myth of racial democracy is not fully eroded due to the contradictions created by state intervention. During these simultaneous dynamics, my purpose was to provide an analysis of the heterogeneities within which the Bolivarian Revolution and Afro-descendant populations engage with each other.

#### **7.4. Contesting white supremacy**

Another key point that I reflect on in this research is how an ethnographic approach can help us to provide a renewed reading that sheds light on contestations that had no previous scholarly attention in the case of Afro-Venezuelans who overtly confront white supremacy.

I suggested in this thesis that any discussion engaging with Afro-Venezuelan populations about how structural racism is contested (or not), must be attentive to the importance of religious iconography. This approach can help us to understand how white supremacy is attached to the narrative of *mestizaje*. Venezuela's national culture has been a mixture of Indigenous, Spanish and African elements since colonial times, yet the Spanish element is highly dominant. This explains why most Afro-Venezuelan cultural expressions are strongly rooted in Catholicism. Afro-Venezuelan culture preserved the Spanish influence by being forced to syncretise their beliefs. That is, African populations were forced to 'disguise' their spiritual and religious beliefs in African deities, using the enforced white European iconography to avoid the whip and the punishment of masters and Catholic priests. Having this dynamic in mind can help us to direct our focus on racial discourses



linked to religious iconography and how race is critiqued by activists and *cultores populares*. While this may go against looking into more privileged sites in social sciences such as surveys on identities, or direct questions about racial discrimination for Afro-descendant populations, examinations of religion within the field of popular culture can provide rich data on how this marginalised population subscribes, negotiates or rejects the myth of racial democracy.

A salient contestation against structural racism in Osma is tied to representation, as I explored in Chapter 5. The latter is a site wherein it is questioned how iconographic blackness was erased from their cultural traditions; a question introduced by *cultores populares* and political activists. They primarily do so, through critical examination of history, racial discourses, and visual representations in the iconography associated with Afro-Venezuelan culture. While there has been little, but more sustained attention to the cultural importance of *San Juan Bautista* as a representation of a symbol of resistance and source of identity for Afro-Venezuelan populations (Brandt, 2007; Guss, 1993; Ishibashi, 2002; Ugueto Ponce, 2013), issues of race are hardly ever reflected upon, with one exception (Guss, 1993). But to my knowledge, no scholarly attention has been given to how in the 21<sup>st</sup> century an Afro-Venezuelan population reimagined and incorporated a black symbol dating from colonial times, that was prohibited by the Catholic church in Venezuela during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

One of the ways in which white supremacy seeped into cultural productions was through the Catholic iconography that is used in the *San Juan Fiestas* in Osma. In this place, three strands in which race was brought to the public debate through contestations involving symbols of Christianity became salient. Through the historical traditions of Osma, as I demonstrated in Chapter 5, two Catholic icons were traditionally honoured to make visible blackness in the population: the traditional figure of the European *San Juan Bautista* and the Italian black saint *San Benito de Palermo*. A later incorporation was *San Juan Congo*, a Venezuelan black saint of African origins, celebrated by enslaved but prohibited by the Catholic Church in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

I stressed that a reclamation of visual blackness was a struggle shared by ‘traditionalists’ and ‘rebels’ alike. However, I teased out noticeable tensions that emerged when articulating what is an acceptable blackness. First, to one group of residents, the image of

a European man, is a symbol that holds together Afro-Venezuelan culture. To them, having a white saint representing a black population is evidence of *mestizaje* and absence of racial tensions in Venezuela, therefore, subscribing to the mainstream view attached to the discourse of racial democracy. Second, another group of ‘traditionalists’ rejected the history of white supremacy but not Christianity. This group replaced the image of *San Juan Bautista* with that of a black saint, *San Benito de Palermo*. And third, there is a group of ‘rebels’ who rejected both Christianity and white supremacy. They retrieved and incorporated the figure of *San Juan Congo*, a black saint prohibited by the church in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the absence of images that confirmed its appearance, *San Juan Congo* was reimagined by the ‘rebels’. The ways in which he was depicted with shackles attempted to provide a metaphor for the ways in which the past of slavery continues to shape the present disenfranchisement of Afro-Venezuelan populations. Yet, its incorporation was met with resistance by mainstream and traditionalist groups. *San Juan Congo* was criticised under the argument that it is a symbol that represents sorcery, like the discourses promulgated by the Catholic church towards African images. These are examples that show how some local groups struggle against white supremacy, while others negotiate black racial representations within the bounds of Catholicism, while others subscribe to the dominant view of whitened *mestizaje* in the local culture.

The relationship between iconography, cultural struggles and politicised consciousness of blackness have been a key part in political struggles of Afro-Latino populations. A case in point is the symbol of the *Escrava Anastácia*<sup>107</sup> (Anastácia, the enslaved), a Brazilian martyr whose visual representation is of a blue-eyed, black woman wearing a metallic muzzle face-mask. Some observe as problematic that her ascribed beauty is signified by being depicted with blue eyes, and thus her blackness is tempered with European aesthetics. Nonetheless, *Anastácia* has been retrieved as the saint of the poor through popular Catholicism and Afro-diasporic religions such as *Umbanda* and *Candomblé*, largely practiced by –but not limited to– the Afro-Brazilian population. Like

---

<sup>107</sup> The oral history about the origin of Anastacia, dates from the 19<sup>th</sup> century and has different versions. While one version suggest that she was an African princess (Wood, 2011:111), another version suggest that she had African origins but was born in Brazil. Her story is the one of a black woman of striking beauty, that refused to be raped by the master and a punishment she was forced to wear an iron muzzle. Although she forgave her master, she died as a result of infections produced by being muzzled. Noticeably, the martyrdom of Anastacia is emphasised first, in her representation. She is depicted with the imaged of a black, dark-skinned woman with blue eyes. And second, in the notion that she forgave her master, which is a notion strongly attached to Christianity despite the punishments inflicted after she refused to be raped (for more information see Burdick, 1998; Wood, 2011; Soares, 2012).

*San Juan Congo*, the symbol of *Escrava Anastácia* is often met with resistance by the established Church and some followers (Burdick, 1998). But her figure has also mixed reactions amongst Afro-Brazilian political activists. While as Soares (2012) notices, some Afro-Brazilian activists reject *Anastácia*'s due to her association of Catholicism and forgiveness to her slave-owners (10). For others, as observed by Burdick (1998) and Handler and Hayes (2009) *Anastácia* offers a symbol of black consciousness and resistance (26).

The emergence of *San Juan Congo* in Osma, when the population already had the presence of *San Benito*, raises the question, why now *San Juan Congo*? The context of political polarisation in Venezuela and the multicultural policies enacted in the last two decades favoured the creation of cultural spaces for the celebration of black de-colonial iconography amongst Afro-Venezuelan populations. My findings provide ethnographic evidence that expands on the case of emergent cultural brotherhoods that honour *San Juan Congo* in the context of the multicultural turn in Venezuela, as documented in historical observations by anthropologist Meyby Ugueto-Ponce (2015) in the village of Curiepe, in Miranda state. The implications of contestations against the traditional *San Juan Bautista* case point us in two directions. First, popular culture is used to contest how white supremacy operates through the narrative of *mestizaje*. The second direction is to provide reflections about marginalisation of blackness; reflections of poverty take a more visual representation when introducing black iconography that attempts to remind us how slavery in the area continues to shape life chances today. But while contestations against white supremacy and disenfranchisement unfold through iconography, there are other cultural performances that take importance when providing an intersectional understanding of the experiences of Afro-Venezuelan women through cultural performances.

## **7.5. Racial democracy and intersectional contestations**

In this thesis, I presented ethnographic insights that bring together the intertwined mutually constitutive relationship between 'race', class, and gender. Issues of gender and 'race' with a focus on Afro-Venezuelan women have been topics that have been little explored, though with some exceptions (Fernandes, 2007; Lalander, 2016; Schiller, 2017). These analyses are mostly drawn from experiences of urban women of colour and

deeply connected to their participation in neighbourhood based *consejos comunales* (communal councils) which are modes of grassroots participation opened by the Bolivarian Revolution. However, the evidence presented here explores in more detail what the lives of Afro-Venezuelan women look like in the context of the Bolivarian Revolution in relation to cultural practices and the effect of the deep economic crisis or the so-called *guerra económica* on the life of local women.

My account of the ways in which gender is mobilised by Afro-Venezuelan women is an example. In Chapter 6, I explored the ways in which gender inequalities and intersectional collective action in Osma are inspired by the local cultural performance *Día de los Santos Inocentes*. In this festival, gendered roles between men and women are swapped, or as Bakhtin (1984) argues, “the hierarchy turn[s] upside down” (309). The reversal of the roles of men and women opens deeper conversations about the ways in which colonialism shaped gender for colonised men and women. In this chapter, I stressed how women’s collective action and current contestations towards gendered inequalities find their seeds in cultural performances drawn from the culture they learned from their forebears. However, women at times resist while at other times are subverted and maintain themselves at the margin of challenging systems of power. These contradictions remind us of what anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughood (1990) warns against romanticising resistance from a gendered perspective. The contradiction of the cases of Afro-Venezuelan women rests in the ways in which mobilisation and collective action occurred in a context within which cultural practices have already enabled women to come together and struggle for their villages, but at other times they also refrain from altering the status quo.

Other findings of Chapter 6 challenge an argument put forth by U.S. scholar Angela Davies (1982) regarding the historical ‘genderless’ position of black women during slavery. She argues that performing the same forms of labour as enslaved men endowed black women with a position of equality vis-à-vis black men. Davies considers that this ‘genderless’ division of labour, explains why Afro-descendant populations tend to have a matriarchal structure. My findings contradict Davies’ scholarly position. One can infer that women of African descent from my fieldsite were field hands, due to the history of *haciendas* in the area, and once slavery was abolished, they became sharecroppers (Altez, 1999). Yet, these women have been historically subjected to forms of patriarchy enforced

by black men. I showed that they were confined to a space in-between: in public life as sharecroppers subjugated by their husbands and overseers, and in the private sphere, raising their families, with little involvement of men, in the domestic space. Traces of these patterns, although less accentuated due to the end of the sharecropping, still survive in the area. Therefore, in the case of Osma, these gendered inequalities established by patriarchy that I reconstructed through testimonies are issues addressed by local cultural contestations, which are performed before an audience during *Día de los Inocentes*.

Overall, the significance of this empirical evidence points us towards turning our attention to two different forms of marginalisation manifest in everyday life, and how these are contested. First, collective actors put forth cultural strategies that articulate marginalisation at work. Second, the politicisation of culture in Osma and Todasana potentially challenges negative views on blackness. These arguments support observations in the field of racial and cultural studies of Afro-descendant populations in Latin America in regards to the value of popular culture as a form of political mobilisation (De la Fuente, 2008; Fernandes, 2006, 2011; Perry, 2016; Rivera-Rideau, 2015; Wade, 1995). The contribution of this study rests on the empirical observations of heterogeneities and ways in which politics and culture are collapsed into and constitute each other. In the next section, I reveal the broader significance of exploring culture as a form of social mobilization for understanding Afro-descendant populations.

## **7.6. Theoretical implications for interpreting cultural performances as forms of black social movements mobilisations**

Following the call of Afro-Venezuelan scholar/activist Jesús García (2000) for the, “de-folklorisation of traditional culture” (86) of Afro-descendant populations, this thesis explored the politicised content that cultural resources have for the political mobilisation of black populations in Venezuela. In this thesis, we learned that black populations assert their blackness through different cultural and politicised strategic processes. Although early literature made salient that Afro-Latinos ‘whiten’ themselves (Degler, 1971), contemporary attention has shifted attention to how political/cultural strategies lead to asserting blackness in the region (De la Fuente, 2008; Fernandes, 2011; Paschel, 2013, 2016; Rivera-Rideau, 2013; Wade, 2000). Therefore, I developed my research interest in

mapping out how different constructions of blackness operate, articulate everyday life experiences in cultural production, and find an influence from the political environment in Venezuela and multiculturalism within 21<sup>st</sup>-century socialism. In what follows, I discuss the broader significance of studying Afro-Venezuelans and how the empirical evidence of this thesis broadens our understanding of black social movements in the region.

In this study, I stressed the importance of historicising struggles of Afro-descendant populations (Gordon, 1998; Andrews, 2004), as demonstrated with the reconstructions of gendered resistance in Chapter 6. In particular, past Afro-descendant cultural and political resistance from colonial times tended to be reshaped and relocated in present political struggles in Venezuela (Valencia, 2009). As observed by Tianna Paschel (2018), “The combination of historic forms of black mobilization and politicized cultural production has created new forms of mobilization that are arguably more grassroots than their previous incarnations” (254). Therefore, it is undeniable that historicizing is vital to trace the nexus between the present-day resources used in politicized struggles for equality as they take inspiration from past resistance from colonial times. Understanding black politics in Latin America involves paying close attention to the spaces in which the presence of blackness is articulated. It is no longer feasible to understand Afro-Latin American mobilization using the backdrop of U.S. black mobilizations as the point of departure to analyse the strategies of Afro-Latinos movements (Hanchard, 1994). Rather, it is about understanding racial politics within their own particular contexts (Laó Montes, 2017; Paschel, 2018). This involves thinking about spaces such as popular culture that were not previously conceived to be politicized across Afro-Latino populations. Let me briefly turn to explain the singularity of Venezuela’s case within the context of socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. My purpose is to draw attention to the ways in which socialism alone is still not the answer to the end of racial inequality in the region. 21<sup>st</sup> Century Socialism in Venezuela still fails to implement meaningful measures to address racial inequalities that can favor the Afro-Venezuelan population.

### ***7.6.1. Afrodescendiente Identity and Socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Venezuela***

Fresh theoretical suggestions in the scholarship on black movements advocates that socialism should be part of the black anti-racist movements agenda (Taylor, 2016).

African American studies scholar Kenyatta-Yamatha Taylor, while analysing movements such as #BlackLivesMatter in the U.S. in which structural racism is manifest through state violence, proposes that these struggles are also intertwined in struggles against capitalism, as the latter is deeply intertwined with racism (Taylor, 2016). However, this thesis provides an ethnographic account of the example of how black movements mobilise within a socialist state.

Venezuela's case provides an opportunity to understand the ways in which counter-hegemony and identity-based movements are energised by interactions between the state and the grassroots movements in the last two decades. My attention to cultural productions enabled me to assess mobilisations that have attracted little attention in the English-speaking scholarship on social movements: that of Afro-Venezuelans during the Bolivarian Revolution. On the one hand, a narrative that vindicated the role of the poor, Indigenous people and Afro-descendant populations in the history of the country, were a key influence for the ways in which the black grassroots movements from the *Parroquia Caruao* I engaged with in this research galvanised and put 'race' into public debate in their territories. However, as I have explained through the different empirical examples, the sharp intersection between politics and culture has been the path through which local grassroots movements have found a voice to articulate an anti-racist politics that is attentive to the complex forms of marginalisation these populations experience in my fieldsite.

As demonstrated, the Venezuelan government does not police or discourage Afro-Venezuelans organising along racial lines. In the context of political polarisation, the denunciation of racial discrimination gained currency, and the state began to support class-based movements in poor areas comprised of Afro-descendants. And thus, these movements became state allies. But the state does 'indirectly' eliminate some spaces by co-opting leaders or removing funding, as explained in Chapter 4. However, in the literature, the space that has been privileged in analysing how Afro-Venezuelans contest the myth of racial democracy has been direct observations of formal political organizations around the black national movement and relationships with the state and its multi-culturalism (Ciccariello-Maher, 2013; Corrales, 2016; Ruelle Orihuela, 2014; Ruelle Orihuela and Caballero Arias, 2017; Valencia, 2009), or analyzing race and gender as politicized articulations that emerge within *barrio*-based *consejos comunales*

(Fernandes, 2007, 2010; Lalander, 2016). ). The example of socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Venezuela also complicates our understanding of how a socialist state approaches anti-racist politics. This means that there is a context of ambiguity. Some Afro-descendant organisations have gained some political leverage vis-à-vis the government, which has included their leadership within government bureaucracy (Ruelle Orihuela and Caballero Arias, 2017), while Afro-Venezuelans are still legally invisible (García, 2007; Ishibashi, 2007). Additionally, Afro-descendant subjectivities were only implicitly referred in laws through understandings of ‘popular culture’, while ignoring the political content of their subjectivities (Ishibashi, 2007). Thus ‘popular culture’ still hides in complex ways the subjectivities of Afro-descendants in the context of the Bolivarian Revolution.

At least in explorations of Afro-Venezuelan hip-hop, the politicization of cultural Afro-Venezuelan’s ancestral practices has been explored (Falconi, 2017), as well as the defense of blackness through cultural practices (Fernández Díaz, 1999). Hip-hop, which has become a politicized anti-racist movement amongst Afro-Cuban youth (De la Fuente, 2008; Fernandes, 2011), does not appear to be a space to strongly express blackness and racial consciousness in the case of Venezuelan urban *barrios*. Instead, spaces of popular culture articulate around consumerism (Fernandes, 2012) and at best reflect on life chances shaped by violence and class exclusion (Fernandes, 2012; González, 2018).

However, this research reflects on the space of cultural productions, to bringing ‘race’ to the center as a category of analysis, while remaining attentive to *mestizaje*. As previously argued, one-way Afro-Venezuelans politically mobilise has been through the politicisation of culture, pride over the past resistance of African enslaved and defence of cultural expressions that have been articulated regarding their struggles against racial discrimination. These are struggles that have an explicit agenda that seek social change. And it is pushing the state to open broader understandings of multiculturalism, which have been incomplete under the socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century as discussed in the Introduction. Afro-Venezuelans continue to challenge the previous discourse of homogenization of *mestizaje* and they are demanding their inclusion in the preamble of the constitution, seeking recognition of the historical contributions of African ancestors and protesting structures of power that keep Afro-descendant populations disenfranchised. Nonetheless, the Venezuelan state still leaves unaddressed fundamental measures which would involve the legal recognition of Afro-descendants and ensure a



greater participation of all its citizenry. As reflected by Rosalba in the quote that introduced this final chapter, Afro-Venezuelans from Osma and Todasana, are not a minority, yet they are disenfranchised in their own land by the workings of power.

## References

- AAA (1998) 'Code of Ethics of the American Anthropological Association', American Anthropological Association, pp. 1–6.
- Abrams, P. (1988) 'Notes on the difficulty of studying the state', *Journal of historical sociology*, 1(1), pp. 58–89.
- Abu-Lughood, L. (1990) 'The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power Through Bedouin', *American Ethnologist*, 17(1), pp. 41–55.
- Alberto, P. (2011) 'Terms of Inclusion': Black Intellectuals in Twentieth-Century Brazil. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Alberto, P. and Hoffnung-Garskof, J. (2018) "Racial Democracy" and Racial Inclusion: Hemispheric Histories, in De la Fuente, A. and Andrews, G. (eds) *Afro-Latin American Studies: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 264–316.
- Alcoff, L. (1999) 'Towards a phenomenology of racial embodiment', *Radical Philosophy*, 95, pp. 15–26.
- Allahar, A. L. (2014) 'Marxist or not? Oliver Cromwell Cox on capitalism and class versus "race"', *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*. Routledge, 39(3), pp. 420–444.
- Alonso, I. (2017) 'Diplomacia cultural en la Venezuela del Chavismo: pinceladas desde la politización', *Comillas Journal of International Relations*, 8, pp. 1–10.
- Altez, Y. (1999) *Todasana: El trayecto de su singular historia*. Caracas: Consejo de Desarrollo Científico y Humanístico.
- Altez, Y. (2000) 'Clientelismo y Mismidad Conflictuada de una Comunidad Negro-Venezolana en un Fin de Siglo', *Fermentum*, 10(29), pp. 433–444.
- Altez, Y. (2003) 'Los fantasmas de una Afro-identidad', *Tharsis*, 4(1), pp. 177–189.
- Altez, Y. (2006) 'Historia e identidad cultural en comunidades Afrodescendientes en Venezuela', *Boletín Antropológico*, 24(68), pp. 381–396.
- Altez, Y. (2007) *La participación popular y la reproducción de la desigualdad*. Caracas: Editorial Torino.
- Altez, Y. (2008) 'El patrimonio del olvido y la investigación antropológica', *Boletín Antropológico*, 26(74), pp. 233–263.
- Altez, Y. (2013) 'Tierra y Pasado en las comunidades afrodescendientes de la Costa Central venezolana: el caso de Osma', in Banko, C. and Eggers, M. A. (eds) *Las ciencias sociales: perspectivas actuales y nuevos paradigmas*. Caracas: Universidad Central de Venezuela. FACES, pp. 388–404.
- Altez, Y. (2014) 'Aproximación a la construcción histórica de identidades Afrodescendientes: La Parroquia Caruao', *Revista Venezolana de Economía y Ciencias Sociales*, 20(1), pp. 179–194.
- Altez, Y. (2017) 'Afrodescendencia, tierra y olvido', *Estudios sobre las culturas contemporáneas*, XXIII (46), pp. 55–80.
- Alvarez, S. e. et al. (2017) 'Introduction: Interrogating the civil society agenda, reassessing uncivic political activism', in Alvarez, S. e. et al. (eds) *Beyond civil society*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, pp. 1–24.
- Anderson, J. L. (2001) *The Revolutionary: The President of Venezuela has a vision, and Washington has a headache*, *The New Yorker*. Available at: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2001/09/10/the-revolutionary> (Accessed: 17 October 2018).

- Anderson, M. (2009) *Black and Indigenous: Garifuna activism and consumer culture in Honduras*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Andrews, G. R. (2004) *Afro-Latin America: 1800-2000*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Andrews, G.R. (2018). Inequality: Race, Class, Gender, in De la Fuente, A. and Andrews, G. (eds) *Afro-Latin American Studies: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 52-91.
- Angosto-Ferrández, L. F. (2016) 'The afterlives of Hugo Chávez as political symbol', *Anthropology Today*, 32(5), pp. 8–12.
- Appelbaum, N. P., Macpherson, A. S. and Roseblatt, K. A. (2003) *Race and nation in modern Latin America*. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press.
- Asante, M. (1990) *Kemet, Afrocentricity and Knowledge*. New Jersey: Africa World Press.
- Auyero, J. (2000) 'The Logic of Clientelism in Argentina: An Ethnographic Account', *Latin American Research Review*, 35(3), pp. 55–81.
- Auyero, J. (2012) 'Poor people's lives and politics: The things a political ethnographer knows (and doesn't know) after 15 years of fieldwork', *New Perspectives on Turkey*, 46, pp. 95–127.
- Ayer, A. J. (1959) *Logical positivism*. New York: The Free Press.
- Azzellini, D. (2016) *Communes and Workers' Control in Venezuela: Building 21st Century Socialism from Below*. Leiden: Brill.
- Bakan, A. and Dua, E. (2014) 'Introducing the questions, reframing the dialogue', in Bakan, A. and Dua, E. (eds) *Theorizing Anti-Racism: Linkages in Marxism and Critical Race Theories*. Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, pp. 6–13.
- Bakhtin, M. (1984) *Rabelais and His World*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Baptist, E. (2014) *The half has never been told: Slavery and the making of America*. York: Basic books.
- Barret, L. (2013) *Racial Blackness and the discontinuity of Western Modernity*. Edited by J. Joyce, J. D. McBride, and J. C. Rowe. Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: University of Illinois Press.
- Barreto, E. (2014) 'Turismo y fiestas populares de Naiguatá', *Kalpana*, 12, pp. 22–31.
- Bastide, R. (1967) 'Colour, Racism and Christianity', *Daedalus*, 96(2), pp. 312–327.
- Bastide, R. (1971) *African Civilizations in the New World*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Bastide, R. (1978) *The African Religions of Brazil: Toward a Sociology of the Interpenetration of Civilizations*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Becker, H. (2000) 'Racism and the research process', in Twine, F. W. and Warren, J. (eds) *Racing research, researching race: Methodological dilemmas in critical race studies*. New York and London: New York University Press, pp. 247–254.
- Beckford, G. L. (1972) *Persistent poverty: underdevelopment in plantation economies of the third world*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Beliso-De Jesús, A. (2015) *Electric Santería: Racial and Sexual Assemblages of Transnational Religion*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Beokou-Betts, J. (1994) 'When Black Is Not Enough: Doing Field Research among Gullah Women', *NWSA Journal*, 6(3), pp. 413–433.
- Bermudez, E. and Suárez, M. M. S. (1995) 'Venezuela', in *No longer invisible: Afrolatin Americans Today*. Minority Rights Group Publications, pp. 243–269.

- Blom Hansen, T. and Stepputat, F. (2001) 'Introduction: States of Imagination', in *States of Imagination: Ethnographic Explorations of the Postcolonial State*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Bonilla-Silva, E. (1997) 'Rethinking Racism: Toward a Structural Interpretation', *American Sociological Review*, 62(3), pp. 465–480.
- Brandt, M. (2007) 'Drumming for San Juan in Barlovento and beyond: African-Venezuelan percussion ensembles', in Kuss, M. (ed.) *Music in Latin America and the Caribbean Vol. 2 Performing the Caribbean Experience*. Austin: University of Texas Press, pp. 463–472.
- Brewer-Carías, A. (2004) 'Centralized Federalism in Venezuela', *Duquesne Law Review*, 43(4), pp. 629–644.
- Brewer, R. M. (1999) 'Theorizing race, class and gender: The new scholarship of Black Feminist Intellectuals and Black Women's labor', *Race, Gender & Class*, 6(2), pp. 29–47.
- Brito Figueroa, F. (1967) 'La población y la estructura social de Venezuela en las primeras décadas del siglo XIX', *Bulletin Hispanique*, 69(3–4), pp. 347–364.
- Brito Figueroa, F. (1985) *El Problema de la Tierra y Esclavos en la Historia de Venezuela*. Caracas: Universidad Central de Venezuela.
- Burdick, J. (1995) 'Uniting Theory and Practice in the ethnography of Social Movements: Notes Toward a Hopeful Realism', *Dialectical Anthropology*, 20, pp. 361–385.
- Burdick, J. (1998) *Blessed Anastacia: Women race and popular Christianity in Brazil*. New York: Routledge.
- Caldwell, K. L. (2004) "'Look at her hair": The body politics of black womanhood in Brazil', *Transforming Anthropology*, 11(2), pp. 18–29.
- Caldwell, K. L. (2007) *Negras in Brazil: Re-envisioning Black Women, Citizenship, and the Politics of Identity*. New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press.
- Candelario, G. (2000) 'Hair race-ing Dominican beauty culture and identity production', *Meridians*, 1(1), pp. 128–156.
- Cannon, B. (2008) 'Class/race polarisation in Venezuela and the electoral success of Hugo Chávez: a break with the past or the song remains the same?', *Third World Quarterly*, 29(4), pp. 731–748.
- Cannon, K. (2008) 'Christian Imperialism and The Transatlantic Slave Trade.', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* (Indiana University Press), 24(1), pp. 127–134.
- Carmichael, S. and Hamilton, C. (1967) *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Carroll, R. (2013) *Comandante: Inside Hugo Chávez's Venezuela*. Edinburgh and London: Canongate.
- Césaire, A. (1969) *Return to my native land*. Brooklyn: Archipelago books.
- Channa, S. (2017) 'Selves and contemporary bodies', in Coleman, S., Hyatt, S., and Kingsolver, A. (eds) *The Routledge companion to contemporary anthropology*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Christian, M. (2018) 'A Global Critical Race and Racism Framework: Racial Entanglements and Deep and Malleable Whiteness', *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, pp. 1–17.
- Ciccariello-Maher, G. (2007) 'Toward a racial geography of Caracas: Neoliberal Urbanism and the fear of penetration', *Qui Parle*, 16(2), pp. 39–71.
- Ciccariello-Maher, G. (2013) *We Created Chávez*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

- Ciccariello-Maher, G. (2017) *Decolonising Dialectics*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Collins, P. H. (1994) 'Shifting the Center: Race, Class, and Feminist Theorizing about Motherhood', in Glenn, E., Chang, G., and Forcey, L. (eds) *Mothering: Ideology, Experience, and Agency*. New York: Routledge, pp. 45–66.
- Collins, P. H. (1998) 'Intersections of Race, Class, Gender, and Nation: Some Implications for Black Family Studies', *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 29(1), pp. 27–36.
- Collins, P. H. (2000) *Black Feminist Thought*. Second, Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of empowerment. Second Edition. New York and London: Routledge.
- Collins, P. H. (2000) 'Gender, Black Feminism, and Black Political Economy', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 568(1), pp. 41–53.
- Collins, P. H. (2015) 'Intersectionality's Definitional Dilemmas', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 41(1), pp. 1–20.
- Comaroff, J. and Comaroff, J. L. (2005) 'Naturing the Nation: Aliens, Apocalypse, and the Postcolonial State', in Blom Hansen, T. and Stepputat, F. (eds) *Sovereign Bodies: Citizens, Migrants, and States in the Postcolonial World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 120–147.
- Coronil, F. (1997) *The Magical State: Nature, Money, and Modernity in Venezuela*. Chicago: University of Chicago.
- Corrales, Y. (2016) *Más allá de darle al Pilón: Avances, tensiones y límites del movimiento social Afrovenezolano durante el proceso político Bolivariano (2000- 2011)*. Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar.
- Costa Vargas, J. (2004) 'Hyperconsciousness of race and its negation: The dialectic of white supremacy in Brazil', *Identities*, 11(4), pp. 443–470.
- Coutinho, L. (2016) 'San Juan: The Legacy of Curiepe'. Venezuela: El Nacional. Available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UuBM2nG\\_sGU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UuBM2nG_sGU) (Accessed: 15 May 2017)
- CRBV (1999) *Constitución de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela*. Venezuela. Available at: [https://www.oas.org/dil/esp/constitucion\\_venezuela.pdf](https://www.oas.org/dil/esp/constitucion_venezuela.pdf) (Accessed: 2 January 2018)
- Crehan, K. (2002) *Gramsci, Culture and Anthropology*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: Pluto Press.
- Crenshaw, K. (1989) 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics', *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), pp. 139–167.
- Das, V. and Poole, D. (eds) (2004) *Anthropology in the Margins of the State*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Davis, A. (1981) *Women, Race & Class*. New York: Random House.
- Davis, J. (1991) *Who is black? One nation's definition*. Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Dederen, J. (2010) 'Women's Power, 1000 A D.: Figurine Art and Gender Politics in Prehistoric Southern Africa', *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, 19(1), pp. 23–42.
- Degler, C. (1971) *Neither Black nor White: Slavery and Race relations in Brazil and the United States*. Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press.

- Democracy Now! (2005). President Hugo Chávez, proud to have some African features (2005). YouTube. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c3cforZoJWA> (Accessed 3 August 2017)
- Deroy, M. E. et al. (2006) *Análisis antropológico de la parranda de los Boleros de Caucagua*. Caracas: Universidad Metropolitana.
- Díaz, D. (2015) *Afrodescendientes: Maduro, Tambores y Negro Primero*. Aporrea. Available at: <https://www.aporrea.org/actualidad/a209288.html> (Accessed: 16 June 2015)
- Domínguez, F. (2013) Venezuelan elections see clear victory for the PSUV led by Nicolás Maduro and their allies, *Venezuela Analysis*. Available at: <https://venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/10240> (Accessed 23 January 2017)
- Du Bois, W. E. B. (1961) *The Souls of the Black Folk*. New York: Fawcett.
- Dussel, E. (2008) *Twenty theses on politics*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Escobar, A. and Alvarez, S. E. (1992) 'Introduction The making of social movements in Latin America', in Escobar, A. and Alvarez, S. E. (eds) *The Making of Social Movements in Latin America: Identity, strategy and democracy*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Escobar, A., Alvarez, S. E. and Dagnino, E. (1998) *Cultures of Politics Politics of Cultures: Re-Visioning Latin American Social Movements*. Colorado: Westview Press.
- Essed, P. (1991) *Understanding Everyday Racism: An Interdisciplinary Theory*. Newbury Park, London and New Delhi: SAGE Publications.
- Falconi, M. (2017) 'Entre varas, machetes y canastos: cultura material asociada a la cosecha de cacao en una comunidad Afrodescendiente del centro-norte de Venezuela', *Estudios sobre las culturas contemporáneas*, XXIII (46), pp. 9–26.
- Fals Borda, O. (1987) 'The application of participatory action research in Latin America', *International Sociology*, 2(4), pp. 329–347.
- Faye, E. and Rockmore, T. (2009) *Heidegger, the Introduction of Nazism into Philosophy in Light of the Unpublished Seminars of 1933-1935*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Feagin, J. and Elias, S. (2012) 'Rethinking racial formation theory: a systemic racism critique', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 36(6), pp. 931–960.
- Ferber, A. (1998) *White Man Falling: Race, Gender, and White Supremacy*. New York: Rowman and LittleWeld.
- Fernandes, S. (2006) *Cuba Represent!* Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Fernandes, S. (2007) 'Barrio women and popular politics in Chávez Venezuela', *Latin American Politics and Society*, 49(3), pp. 97–127.
- Fernandes, S. (2010) *Who can stop the drums? Urban social movements in Chávez's Venezuela*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Fernandes, S. (2011) *Close to the Edge: In Search of the Global Hip Hop Generation*. London and New York: Verso.
- Fernandes, S. (2012) 'Malandreo Negro: Gangsta Rap and the Politics of Exclusion in Venezuela', in Dixon, K. and Burdick, J. (eds) *Comparative perspectives on Afro-Latin America*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, pp. 72–92.
- Fernández Díaz, J. J. (1999) 'Negritud y criollismo en una comunidad Afrovenezolana: metalenguajes y supranacionalismos', *Revista Española de Antropología Americana*, 29, pp. 261–281.
- Ferrándiz, F. (2004) 'The Body as Wound', 24(2), pp. 107–133.
- Ferry, R. (1989) *The Colonial Elite of Early Caracas: Formation and Crisis 1567-1767*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press.

- Finol, J.E. (2001) Socio-Semiotic of music: African Drums in a Venezuelan Fiesta. *European Journal for Semiotic Studies*, 13(1-2), pp.179-190.
- Freyre, G. (1986) *Casa-grande e senzala*: The masters and the slaves. A study in the development of Brazilian civilisation. Second Edition. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press.
- García, J. (2000) *Afroamericano soy: La diáspora del retorno*. Second Edition. Caracas: Fundación Afroamérica.
- García, J. (2005) 'Presencia Africana En Venezuela', in Ramos, N. (ed.) *Resonancias de la Africanidad*. Caracas: Fondo Editorial IPASME, pp. 125–142.
- García, J. (2005) *Afrovenezolanidad e inclusión en el proceso Bolivariano Venezolano*. Caracas: Ministerio de Comunicación e Información.
- García, J. (2007) 'La deuda del Estado Venezolano y los Afrodescendientes', *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology*, 12(1), pp. 223–232.
- García, J. (2013) *Afrodescendientes en América Latina y el Caribe*. Caracas: Fundación Afroamérica.
- García Canclini, N. (1995) *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for entering and leaving modernity*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Garza, A. (2016) 'A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement', in Hobson, J. (ed.) *Are All the Women Still White? Rethinking Race, Expanding Feminisms*. Albany: State University of New York Press, pp. 23–28.
- Gilbert, C. (2017) *Strange Fruit: Venezuela has an Opposition that Nobody Should Support*, *VenezuelaAnalysis*. Available at: <https://venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/13270> (Accessed: 10 August 2017).
- Gilliam, A. and Gilliam, O. (1999) 'Odyssey: Negotiating the Subjectivity of Mulata Identity in Brazil', *Latin American Perspectives*, 26(3), pp. 60–84.
- Gilroy, P. (1996) 'One Nation Under a Groove: The Cultural Politics of "Race" and Racism in Britain', in Eley, G. and Suny, R. G. (eds) *Becoming National: A Reader*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 352–370.
- Godreau, I. (2002) 'Changing space, making race: Distance, nostalgia, and the folklorization of blackness in Puerto Rico', *Identities*, 9(3), pp. 281–304.
- Godreau, I. P. (2008) 'Slippery semantics: Race talk and everyday uses of racial terminology in Puerto Rico', *Centro Journal*, XX (2), pp.5-33.
- Golash-Boza, T. (2016) 'A Critical and Comprehensive Sociological Theory of Race and Racism', *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, 2(2), pp. 129–141.
- Goldberg, D. T. (2002) *The racial state*. Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell.
- Goldstein, D. (1999) "'Interracial" Sex and Racial Democracy in Brazil: Twin Concepts?', *American Anthropologist*, 101(3), pp. 563–578.
- González, E. A. (1991) 'La festividad de los santos inocentes en Osma', *Anuario FUNDEF (Fundación de Etnomusicología y Folklore)*, (2), pp. 60–65.
- González, L. (1987) 'Por un feminismo Afrolatinoamericano', *ISIS International*, 9 (June), pp. 133–141.
- González, S. (2018) 'Todxs en posición de hip-hop: un análisis comparado de Brasil y Venezuela', *Revista política Latinoamericana*, 6 (Enero-Junio), pp. 1–13.
- Gordon, E. T. (1998) *Disparate diasporas: identity and politics in an African Nicaraguan community*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Gordon, L. R. (1997) *Her majesty's other children: Sketches of racism from a neo-colonial age*. Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield publishers.
- Gottberg, L. D. (2004) 'Mob outrages: reflections on the media construction of the masses in Venezuela (April 2000–January 2003)', *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, 13(1), pp. 115–135.

- Gottberg, L. D. (2011) 'The color of mobs: Racial politics, ethnopopulism, and representation in the Chávez Era', in *Venezuela's Bolivarian Democracy: Participation, Politics, and Culture under Chávez*. Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 271–297.
- Gramsci, A. (1989) 'The Intellectuals, the formation of the intellectuals', in Gottlieb, R. (ed.) *An Anthology of Western Marxism. From Lukasc and Gramsci to Socialist-Feminism*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 112–119.
- Gramsci, A. (1999) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Edited by Q. Hoare and G. N. Smith. New York: International Publishers.
- Gulbas, L. (2008) *Cosmetic surgery and the politics of race, class, and gender in Caracas, Venezuela*. Ph.D. diss., Southern Methodist University. Available from ProQuest Dissertations database (AAT no. 3337349).
- Gulbas, L. E. (2013) 'Embodying Racism', *Qualitative Health Research*, 23(3), pp. 326–335.
- Gupta, A. (2006) 'Blurred boundaries: the discourse of corruption, the culture of politics and the imagined state', in Gupta, A. and Sharma, A. (eds) *The Anthropology of the state: a reader*. Malden, Oxford and Victoria: Blackwell Publishing.
- Gupta, A. (2012) *Red tape: bureaucracy, structural violence, and poverty in India*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Gürçan, E. C. (2013) 'Hugo Chávez's unwritten testament: National-democratic struggle and contradictions of socialism', *Dialectical Anthropology*, 37(3–4), pp. 341–356.
- Guss, D. (2000) *The Festive State: Race, Ethnicity and Nationalism as cultural performance*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press.
- Guss, D. M. (1993) 'The Selling of San Juan: The Performance of History in an Afro-Venezuelan Community', *American Ethnologist*, 20(3), pp. 451–473.
- Hale, C. R. (1994) *Resistance and Contradiction: Miskitu Indians and the Nicaraguan State 1894-1987*. California: Stanford University Press.
- Hall, S. (1992) '¿What is this "black" in black popular culture?', *Black Popular Culture*, 20(1), pp. 21–33.
- Hall, S. (1996) 'Race, articulations, and societies structured in dominance', in Baker, H. J., Diawara, M., and Lindeborg, R. (eds) *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, pp. 16–60.
- Hanchard, M. (1994) *Orpheus and Power: The Movimento Negro of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, Brazil, 1945–1988*. Princeton and New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Handler, J. S. and Hayes, K. E. (2009) 'Escrava Anastácia: The iconographic history of a Brazilian popular saint', *African Diaspora*, 2(1), pp. 25–51.
- Hanson, R. et al. (2017) 'Protecting the Right to Life in Venezuela', *NACLA Report on the Americas*, 49(3), pp. 309–314.
- Haraway, D. (1988) 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), pp. 575–599.
- Harris, M. (2011) *Sacred Folly: A New History of the Feast of Fools*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.
- Hartman, S. (1997) *Scenes of subjection: terror, slavery and self-making in nineteenth-century America*. New York Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hartman, S. (2016) 'The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women's Labors', *Souls*, 18(1), pp. 166–173.



- Hawkins, K. A. (2010) 'Who Mobilizes? Participatory Democracy in Chávez's Bolivarian Revolution', *Latin American Politics and Society*, 52(3), pp. 31–66.
- Heidegger, M. (1962) *Being and Time*, Media. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hernández, T. K. (2002) 'Multiracial matrix: The role of race ideology in the enforcement of anti-discrimination laws, a United States-Latin America comparison', *Cornell Law Review*, 87 (5), pp. 1093-1174.
- Herrera Salas, J. M. (2005) 'Ethnicity and Revolution: The political economy of racism in Venezuela', *Latin American Perspectives*, 32(2), pp. 72–91.
- Heschel, S. (2008) *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Higginbotham, E. B. (1992) 'African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 12(21), pp. 251–274.
- Hood, R. E. (1994) *Begrimed and Black: Christian Traditions on Blacks and Blackness*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Hooker, J. (2005) 'Indigenous Inclusion/Black Exclusion: Race, Ethnicity and Multicultural Citizenship in Latin America', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 37(2), pp. 285–310.
- hooks, b. (1981) *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. Boston: Southend.
- hooks, b. (1989) 'Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness', *Yearnings: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*, 36(36), pp. 203–209.
- INE (2011) *XIV Censo Nacional de Población y Vivienda: Resultados por entidad federal y municipio del Estado Vargas*.
- Ishibashi, J. (2002) 'Transformación de una imagen del santo: Religiosidad popular en torno al culto de San Juan', *Revista Artesanías de América*, 53, pp. 33–54.
- Ishibashi, J. (2003) 'Hacia una apertura del debate sobre el racismo en Venezuela: exclusión e inclusión estereotipada de personas "negras" en los medios de comunicación', in Mato, D. (ed.) *Políticas de identidades y diferencias sociales en tiempos de globalización*. Caracas: FACES-UCV, pp. 33–61.
- Ishibashi, J. (2007) 'Multiculturalismo y racismo en la época de Chávez: Etnogénesis Afrovenezolana en el proceso bolivariano', *Humania del Sur*, No 3(Año 2), pp. 1–18.
- James, C. L. R. (1989) *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*. New York: Vintage Books.
- John, M. (2018) 'Venezuelan economic crisis: crossing Latin American and Caribbean borders', *Migration and Development*. Routledge, 0(0), pp. 1–11.
- Johnson, W. (2013) *River of dark dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom*. London: Harvard University Press.
- Johnson, W. (2017) *To Remake the World: Slavery, Racial Capitalism, and Justice*, Boston Review. Available at: <http://bostonreview.net/forum/walter-johnson-to-remake-the-world> (Accessed: 17 February 2017)
- Jones, D. (1982) 'Towards a native anthropology', in Cole, J. (ed.) *Anthropology for the Eighties: Introductory Readings*. New York: Free Press, pp. 471–482.
- Jung, M. K. (2015) *Beneath the Surface of White Supremacy: Denaturalizing US Racisms Past and Present*. California: Stanford University Press.
- Kappeler, A. (2013) 'Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue Perils of Peasant Populism: Why Redistributive Land Reform and "Food Sovereignty" Can't Feed Venezuela', in *International Conference on Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue*. Program in Agrarian Studies, New Haven: Yale University, pp. 1-22.

- Kelley, R. (2017) What Did Cedric Robinson Mean by Racial Capitalism?, Boston Review. Available at: <http://bostonreview.net/race/robin-d-g-kelley-what-did-cedric-robinson-mean-racial-capitalism> (Accessed: 19 January 2017).
- Koerner, L. (2017) Venezuela Violence: Alleged Chavista Set on Fire as Death Toll Hits 55, Venezuela Analysis. Available at: <https://venezuelanalysis.com/news/13141> (Accessed: 22 May 2017).
- Kozak Rovero, G. (2015) 'Revolución Bolivariana: políticas culturales en la Venezuela Socialista de Hugo Chávez (1999-2013)', Cuadernos de Literatura, 19(37), p. 38.
- Kurtz, D. V (1996) 'Hegemony and Anthropology', Critique of Anthropology, 16(2), pp. 103–135.
- De la Fuente, A. (2008) 'The new Afro-Cuban cultural movement and the debate on race in contemporary Cuba', Journal of Latin American Studies, 40(4), pp. 697–720.
- De la Torre, C. and Antón Sánchez, J. (2012) 'The Afro-Ecuadorian social movement: Between empowerment and co-optation', in Muteba, J. (ed.) Black Social Movements in Latin America: From monocultural mestizaje to multiculturalism, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, pp. 135–150.
- Lalander, R. (2016) 'Gendering Popular Participation: Identity-Politics and Radical Democracy in Bolivarian Venezuela', Multidisciplinary Latin American Studies: Festschrift in Honor of Martti Pärssinen, (2011), pp. 149–173.
- Lancaster, R. (1992) Life is Hard: Machismo, Danger, and the Intimacy of Power in Nicaragua. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Laó-Montes, A. (2017) 'Cartografías del campo político afrodescendiente en América Latina y el Caribe', in Septien, R. and Bidaseca, K. (eds) Más allá del decenio de los pueblos Afrodescendientes. Buenos Aires: CLACSO, pp. 139–165.
- Laó Montes, A. (2017) 'Mapping the field of Afro-Latin American Politics: In and out of the civil society', in Álvarez, S. et al. (eds) Beyond civil society. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Lapegna, P. (2013) 'Social Movements and Patronage Politics: Processes of Demobilization and Dual Pressure', Sociological Forum, 28(4), pp. 842–863.
- Lapon, G. (2013) Racism, capitalism and contradictions, Socialist Worker.org. Available at: <http://socialistworker.org/2013/11/25/racism-capitalism-and-contradictions> (Accessed: 15 June 2018).
- Legette, C. (1993) 'Marketing to African Americans', Business and Economic Review, (39), pp. 3–7.
- Lengwinat, K. (2016) "'Ahorita estamos en lo nuestro" ("Now We Are Ourselves")': Afro-Venezuelan Music Rituals for Health and Community Wellbeing', Legon Journal of the Humanities, 27(2), pp. 73–95.
- Lombardi, J. V (1967) 'Los esclavos en la legislación venezolana', Fundación John Boulton: Boletín histórico, 5(13), pp. 3–28.
- López Maya, M. and Lander, E. (2011) 'Participatory democracy in Venezuela: Origins, ideas, and implementation', in Smilde, D. and Hellinger, D. (eds) Venezuela's Bolivarian Democracy: Participation, Politics, and Culture under Chávez. Durham and London: Duke University Press, pp. 58–79.
- Luciani, J. A. K. (2016) About anti-*mestizaje*. Curitiba: Cultura e Barbárie.
- Lugones, M. (2008) 'The Coloniality of Gender', Worlds & Knowledges Otherwise, (Spring), pp. 1–17.
- Maia, J. M. and Santoro, M. (2013) 'Democracy and counter-hegemony in Latin America: The cases of Bolivia and Venezuela', in Morozov, V. (ed.) Decentring

- the West: The Idea of Democracy and the Struggle for Hegemony. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 101–118.
- Maibach, E. and Holtgrave, D. R. (1995) ‘Advances in public health communication’, *Review of Public Health*, (16), pp. 35–41.
- Marable, M. (1983) *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America: Problems in Race, Political Economy and society*. London: Pluto Press.
- Marcus, G. (1995) ‘Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography’, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24, pp. 95–117.
- Mariátegui, J. C. (1971) *Seven Interpretive Essays on Peruvian Reality*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Marino, A. (2018) *Populism and Performance in the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela*. Illinois: Northwestern University Press.
- Márquez, P. (2003) “‘Vacas flacas y odios gordos: la polarización en Venezuela’”, in Márquez, P. and Piñango, R. (eds) *En esta Venezuela: Realidades y nuevos caminos*. Caracas: Instituto de Estudios Superiores de la Administración (IESA).
- Martens Ramírez, R. (2004) ‘Matrimonio, etnia y clase social en Mérida-Venezuela (siglos XVIII-XIX)’, *Presente y Pasado. Revista de Historia*, 9(17), pp. 54–76.
- Martinot, S. (2010) *The Machinery of Whiteness: studies in the structure of racialisation*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Maxwell, S. E. and Delaney, H. D. (2004) *Designing experiment and analyzing data*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- McCarthy, J. and Zald, M. (1977) ‘Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory’, *American Journal of Sociology*, 86(6), pp. 1212–1241.
- Megenney, W. (1989) ‘Black rural speech in Venezuela’, *Neophilologus*, 73, pp. 52–61.
- Michelutti, L. (2017) “‘We are all Chávez’: Charisma as an embodied experience.’”, *Latin American Perspectives*, 44(1), pp. 232–250.
- Mills, C. (2003) *From Class to Race: Essays in White Marxism and Black Radicalism*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield publishers.
- Mintz, S. W. and Wolf, E. R. (1957) ‘Haciendas and Plantations in Middle America and the Antilles’, *Source: Social and Economic Studies*, 6(3), pp. 380–412.
- Mitchell-Clark, K. (1999) ‘It’s your business: A popular culture radio campaign and community mobilisation project’, in *Domestic violence across the lifespan of African Americans: Traditional Strategies and Contemporary Practices- Exploring the Possibilities of Popular Culture Interventions*. Washington: U.S. Department of Health and Human services, pp. 79–90.
- Monasterio Vásquez, D. C. (1981) *Curiepe: Teatro y Danzas en Barlovento*. Universidad de la Habana.
- Montañéz, L. (1993) *El racismo oculto de una sociedad no racista*. Caracas: Fondo Editorial Tropykos.
- Montañéz, L. (1987) ‘La Discriminación Racial’, *Revista SIC* 1, 500, pp. 445–449.
- Montañéz, L., Sánchez, L. and Salinas, J. F. (2002) ‘Proyecto “Imagen del Negro en la Venezuela de Hoy”: una reflexión metodológica’, *Revista Interamericana de Psicología*, 37(1), pp. 31–49.
- Moore, H. (1988) *Feminism and anthropology*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- MPPC (2011) *Abierta convocatoria para inscribirse en el Sistema Nacional de las Culturas Populares, AlbaCiudad*. Available at: <http://albaciudad.org/2011/05/abierta-convocatoria-para-inscribirse-en-el-sistema-nacional-de-las-culturas-populares/> (Accessed: 5 July 2018).
- MPPC (2015) ‘Fondos Concursables’. Ministerio del Poder Popular para la Cultura, pp. 1– 11. Available at: <http://www.cenal.gob.ve/wp->

- content/uploads/2015/08/CONVOCATORIA-2015-FINAL.pdf (Accessed: 10 August 2015).
- Myrdal, G. (1944) *An American Dilemma*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Narayan, J. (2017) 'The wages of whiteness in the absence of wages: racial capitalism, reactionary intercommunalism and the rise of Trumpism', *Third World Quarterly*. Routledge, 38(11), pp. 2482–2500.
- Ng'Weno, B. (2007) 'Can ethnicity replace race? Afro-Colombians, indigeneity and the Colombian multicultural state', *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology*, 12(1), pp. 414–440.
- Nichols, E. G. (2013) 'Decent girls with good hair': Beauty, morality and race in Venezuela.', *Feminist Theory*, 14(2), pp. 171–185.
- Omi, M. and Winant, H. (2015 [1986]) *Racial Formation in the United States*. Third Edition. New York and London: Routledge.
- Parsons, T. and Bales, R. (1955) *Family, Socialization, and the Interaction Process*. Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press.
- Paschel, T. (2013) "'The Beautiful Faces of my Black People": race, ethnicity and the politics of Colombia's 2005 census', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. Taylor & Francis, 36(10), pp. 1544–1563.
- Paschel, T. (2016) *Becoming Black Political Subjects Movements and Ethno-Racial Rights in Colombia and Brazil*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Paschel, T. (2018) 'Rethinking Black Mobilization in Latin America', in De la Fuente, A. and Andrews, G. R. (eds) *Afro-Latin American Studies: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Paullier, J. (2011) 'Venezuela: un problema, un ministerio', BBC. Available at: [https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2011/06/110622\\_venezuela\\_burocracia\\_creacion\\_ministerios\\_jp.shtml](https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2011/06/110622_venezuela_burocracia_creacion_ministerios_jp.shtml) (Accessed: 12 August 2017)
- Pearson, T. (2012) *Planning the Next 6 Years of Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution*, Venezuela Analysis. Available at: <https://venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/7091> (Accessed: 17 August 2018).
- Pérez, B. E. and Perozo, A. A. (2003) 'Prospects of Mestizaje and Pluricultural democracy: The Venezuelan case of an imagined and a real Venezuelan society', *Anuario Antropológico*, 100/101, pp. 119–146.
- Pérez Márquez, B. (2012) *San Juan te lo dá: Lengua y Política en una comunidad Afro-Venezolana*. Masters diss., Universidad Complutense de Madrid.
- Perry, M. (2016) *Negro Soy Yo: Hip-Hop and raced citizenship in Cuba*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Pineda, E. (2016) *El discreto encanto del racismo Venezolano*, Contrapunto. Available at: <http://contrapunto.com/noticia/el-discreto-encanto-del-racismo-venezolano-58578/?platform=hootsuite> (Accessed: 30 January 2016).
- Pollak-Eltz, A. (1993) '¿ Hay o no hay racismo en Venezuela?', *Iberoamericana Editorial Vervuert*, 19(3), pp. 271–289.
- Pollak-Eltz, A. (1994) *Black culture and society in Venezuela (La negritud en Venezuela)*. First edit. Caracas: Lagoven booklets.
- Pollak-Eltz, A. (1998) 'La religiosidad popular en Venezuela', in Alemán, C. E. and Suárez, M. M. (eds) *I Simposio sobre cultura popular. Venezuela: Tradición en la modernidad*. Caracas: Fundación Bigott - Equinoccio, pp. 245–260.
- Pollak-Eltz, A. (2012) 'Procedencia de los esclavos negros traídos a Venezuela', in *Vestigios Africanos en la cultura del pueblo Venezolano*. Biblioteca Nacional de Venezuela, pp. 1–9.

- Pollak-Eltz, A. and Fitl, R. (1985) 'La Locaina en Venezuela y sus orígenes en el Medio Oriente y en Europa', *Montalbán*, (16), pp. 71–104.
- Popper, K. R. (1959) *The logic of scientific discovery*. New York: Routledge.
- Pravaz, N. (2003) 'Brazilian Mulatice: Performing Race, Gender and the Nation', *Journal of Latin American Anthropology*, 8(1), pp. 116–147.
- Price, R. (1979) *Maroon Societies*. Second. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Quijano, A. (2000) 'Coloniality of Power and Eurocentrism in Latin America', *International Sociology*, 15(2), pp. 215–32.
- Rahier, J. M. (2014) *Blackness in the Andes: Ethnographic Vignettes of Cultural Politics in the Time of Multiculturalism*. New York and Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ramírez, L. (2009) '¿De dónde venimos? El sistema de castas del imperio español', *Mundo Universitario*, 30, pp. 108–111.
- Ramos Guédez, J. M. (2005) 'Mano de obra esclava en el eje Barlovento-Valles del Tuy durante el siglo XVIII', *Mañongo*, 24(24), pp. 155–167.
- Ramos Guédez, J. M. (2018) *Contribución a la historia de las culturas negras en la Venezuela colonial Vol. II*. Caracas: Fundación Editorial El perro y la rana.
- Reyes Díaz, M. E. and Monroy García, J. (2013) 'La revolución bolivariana en Venezuela', *Contribuciones desde Coatepec*, XII (24), pp. 121–130.
- Rhodes, P. J. (1994) 'Race-of-interviewer effects: A brief comment.', *Sociology*, 28(2), pp. 547–558.
- Rivera-Rideau, P. (2015) *Remixing Reggaetón: The Cultural Politics of Race in Puerto Rico*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Rivera-Rideau, P. R. (2013) "'Cocolos Modernos': Salsa, Reggaetón, and Puerto Rico's Cultural Politics of Blackness', *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies*, 8(1), pp. 1–19.
- Robinson, C. J. (1983) *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Roth-Gordon, J. (2017) *Race and the Brazilian Body: Blackness, Whiteness, and Everyday Language in Rio de Janeiro*. California: University of California Press.
- Rout, L. J. (1976) *The African experience in Spanish America, 1502 to the present day*. London and New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Ruette Orihuela, K. (2014) '"Somos Afro-Socialistas: Marcos de acción colectiva y etno-racialización del movimiento rural Afroyaracuyano en Veroes-Venezuela', *Tabula Rasa*, 21, pp. 351–368.
- Ruette Orihuela, K. and Caballero Arias, H. (2017) "'Cimarronaje Institucional: Ethno-racial Legal Status and the Subversive Institutionalization of Afrodescendant Organizations in Bolivarian Venezuela', *Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology*, 22(2), pp. 320–338.
- Said, E. W. (1979) *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Salas Rodríguez, L. (2015) *22 Claves para entender y combatir la guerra económica*. Caracas: Fundación Editorial El perro y la rana.
- Schiller, N. (2017) 'Mediating women: Gender, power and community television', *Agenda*, 22(77), pp. 69–80.
- Schirmer, J. G. (1989) "'Those Who Die for Life Cannot Be Called Dead: Women and Human Rights Protest in Latin America A', *Feminist Review*, 32(32), pp. 3–29.
- Schrag, T. A. (1992) 'In defense of research paradigms', *Educational Researcher*, 21(5), pp. 5–8.

- Scott, J. C. (1985) *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday forms of peasant resistance*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Scott, J. C. (1998) *Seeing Like a State: How certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Sexton, J. (2008) *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiracism and the critique of multiracialism*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Sharps, R. L. (1994) 'Black Catholics in the United States: A historical chronology', *U. S. Catholic Historian*, 12(1), pp. 119–141.
- Shaw, R. and Stewart, C. (1994) *Syncretism/anti-syncretism: the politics of religious synthesis*. Routledge, 2003. London: Routledge.
- Sheriff, R. E. (2001) *Dreaming equality: Color, race and racism in urban Brazil*. New Brunswick, Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press.
- Sheriff, R. E. (2003) 'Embracing Race: Deconstructing Mestiagem in Rio de Janeiro', *Journal of Latin American Anthropology*, 8(1), pp. 86–115.
- Shermerhorn, C. (2015) *The business of slavery and the rise of American Capitalism 1815-1860*. London: Yale University Press.
- Singer, M. (1959) *Traditional India: Structure and Change*. Philadelphia: Publications of the American Folklore Society.
- Skidmore, T. (1993) *Black into White: Race and Nationality in Brazilian Thought*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, C. A. (2016) *Afro-Paradise: Blackness, Violence, and Performance in Brazil*. Springfield: University of Illinois.
- Smith, L. T. (1999) *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London and New York: Zed Books.
- Snyman, G. F. (2008) "Is it not Sufficient to Be a Human Being?" Memory, Christianity and White Identity in Africa', *Religion and Theology*, 15(3), pp. 395 – 426.
- Soares, M. A. D. S. (2012) 'Look, blackness in Brazil! Disrupting the grotesquerie of racial representation in Brazilian visual culture', *Cultural Dynamics*, 24(1), pp. 75–101.
- Sojo, J. P. (1943) *Temas y Apuntes Afro-Venezolanos*. Caracas: La Nación.
- Sojo, J. P. (1986) *Estudios del folklore venezolano*. Caracas: Instituto Autónomo Biblioteca Nacional y de Servicios de Biblioteca.
- Spillers, H. (1987) 'Mama's baby, papa's maybe: An American grammar book', *Diacritics*, 17(2), pp. 65–81.
- Spooner, R. (1996) 'Contested Representations: Black women and the St Paul's Carnival', *Gender, Place & Culture: A journal of feminist geography*, 3(2), pp. 187–204.
- Straka, T. (2006) 'La tradición de ser modernos. Hipótesis sobre el pensamiento criollo', in *La tradición de lo moderno: Venezuela en diez enfoques*. Caracas, pp. 3–41.
- Strønen, I. Å. (2016) 'A Civil-Military Alliance': The Venezuelan Armed Forces before and during the Chávez era. Working Paper 4. Bergen: Chr. Michelsen Institute/University of Bergen, pp.1-30.
- Strønen, I. Å. (2017a) *Grassroots politics and oil culture in Venezuela: The Revolutionary petro-state*, *Grassroots Politics and Oil Culture in Venezuela: The Revolutionary Petro-State*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Strønen, I. Å. (2017b) 'The politics of space, race and class', in *Grassroots Politics and Oil Culture in Venezuela: The Revolutionary Petro-State*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 85–109.

- Suárez-Krabbe, J. (2015) *Race, Rights and Rebels: Alternatives to Human Rights and Development from the Global South*. London and New York: Rowman & Littlefield International.
- Sue, D. W. et al. (2007) 'Racial microaggressions in everyday life: Implications for clinical practice', *American Psychologist*, 62(4), pp. 271–286.
- Tannenbaum, F. (1946) 'Slave and Citizen: The Negro in the Americas', in. New York: Random House.
- Tarrow, S. and Tollefson, J. (1994) *Power in Movement: Social Movements, Collective Action and Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Taylor, K. Y. (2016) *From #BlackLivesMatter to black liberation*. Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket books.
- TeleSUR English (2017) 'Burned Alive: the Parents of Orlando Jose Figuera Speak Out'. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iZUyTQ6w3nE&t=10s> (Accessed: 24 May 2017).
- Telles, E. (2012) 'The overlapping concepts of race and colour in Latin America', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 35(7), pp. 1163–1168.
- Tilly, C. (1978) *From Mobilization to Revolution*. Reading: Addison-Wesley.
- Torrez, F. (2011) 'La Via Campesina: Peasant-led agrarian reform and food sovereignty', *Development*, 54(1), pp. 49–54.
- Turnbull, C. (1961) *The Forest People*. New York: Touchstone.
- Twinam, A. (1999). *Public lives, private secrets: gender, honor, sexuality and illegitimacy in colonial Spanish America*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press)
- Twine, F. W. (2000) 'Racial Ideologies and Racial Methodologies', in Twine, F. W. and Warren, J. (eds) *Racing research, researching race: Methodological dilemmas in critical race studies*. New York and London: New York University Press, pp. 1–34.
- Ugueto-Ponce, M. S. (2015) 'Mecanismos de Inserción Sociopolítica en Curiepe, Estado Miranda, Venezuela', *Revista CS*, (16), p. 39.
- Ugueto Ponce, M. (2013) *Actualidad de la condición 'Negros Libres' y la religión: Mecanismos de inserción sociopolítica en Curiepe-Estado Miranda - Venezuela*. LASA Washington, pp. 1-23.
- UN (2013) General Assembly Resolution 68/237, Proclamation of the International Decade for People of African Descent. Available at: <http://undocs.org/A/RES/68/237>.
- Urooba, J. (2017) *The Chavistas Who Toppled Columbus: Venezuela's Fight Against Colonialism*, TeleSUR. Available at: <https://www.telesurenglish.net/english/news/The-Chavistas-who-Toppled-Columbus-Venezuelas-Fight-Against-Colonialism-20171011-0036.html> (Accessed: 15 October 2017).
- Uslar Pietri, A. (1937) "'Venezuela necesita inmigración'", *Boletín de la Cámara de Comercio de Caracas* 284. Caracas.
- Valencia, C. (2009) 'Active Marooning: Confronting Mi Negra and the Bolivarian Revolution', *Radical History Review*, 2009(103), pp. 117–130.
- Valencia, C. (2015) *We Are the State! Barrio Activism in Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Valencia, C. (2018) 'Ethnographies of Energy: Race, Space, and State Formation on the Paria Peninsula', *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology*, 0(0), pp. 1–22.

- Van Cott, D. L. (2003) 'Andean indigenous movements and constitutional transformation: Venezuela in comparative perspective', *Latin American Perspectives*, 30(1), pp. 49–69.
- Vasconcelos, J. (1997) *The Cosmic Race/La raza cósmica: A Bilingual Edition*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Volavka, Z. (1972) 'Nkisi Figures of the Lower Congo', *African Arts*, 5(2), pp. 52–59, 84.
- VTV (2014) 'Tambores de San Juan retumbaron ante Suramérica en juegos de Playa Vargas 2014'. Venezuela: Multimedio Venezolana de Televisión. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FO3YELhBeWA>.
- Wade, P. (1995) 'The Cultural Politics of Blackness in Colombia', *American Ethnologist*, 22(2), pp. 341–357.
- Wade, P. (1997) *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America*. London and Virginia: Pluto Press.
- Wade, P. (1999) 'Working Culture: Making cultural identities in Cali, Colombia', *Current Anthropology*, 40(4), pp. 449–472.
- Wade, P. (2000) *Music, Race, and Nation: Música Tropical in Colombia*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Wade, P. (2009) *Race and Sex in Latin America*. London and New York: Pluto Press.
- Wade, P. (2017a) 'Estudios Afrodescendientes en Latinoamérica', *Tabula Rasa*, (27), pp. 23–44.
- Wade, P. (2017b) *Racism in Football*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7WNxPQRA6BU> (Accessed: 5 April 2018).
- Walker, L. E. (1984) *The Battered Woman Syndrome*. New York: Springer Publishing Co.
- Whitten, N. E. (1981) *Cultural transformations and ethnicity in modern Ecuador*. Illinois: University of Illinois Press.
- Whitten, N. E. and Torres, A. (1998) *Blackness in Latin America and the Caribbean: Social Dynamics and Cultural Transformations*, Vol. 1. Edited by N. E. Whitten and A. Torres. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Wilderson III, F. (2003) 'Gramsci's Black Marx: Whiter the slave in civil society?', *Social Identities*, 9(2), pp. 225–240.
- Wilpert, G. (2006a) *Land for People Not for Profit in Venezuela, Promised Land: Competing Visions of Agrarian Reform*. Available at: <http://www.foodfirst.org/node/1587%5Cn/home/napoletano/Dropbox/sndref/alpha/W/Wilpert2006.pdf> (Accessed: 10 June 2016).
- Wilpert, G. (2006b) *The Meaning of 21st Century Socialism for Venezuela, Venezuela Analysis*. Available at: <https://venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/1834> (Accessed: 11 October 2018).
- Wood, M. (2011) 'The Museu do Negro in Rio and the Cult of Anastácia as a New Model for the Memory of Slavery', *Representations*, 113(1), pp. 111–149.
- Wright, W. R. (1990) *Café con leche. Race, Class, and National Image in Venezuela*. First. University of Texas Press.
- Wynter, S. (1970) 'Jonkonnu in Jamaica: Towards the Interpretation of the Folk Dance as a Cultural Process', *Jamaica Journal*, 4(2), pp. 34–48.
- Wynter, S. (1971) 'Novel and History, Plot and Plantation', *Savacou*, 5(1), pp. 95–102.
- Yáñez, A. (2011) 'Pobre Negro: El discurso equívoco de las máscaras sociales', *Revista de Literatura Hispanoamericana*, Enero-Junio (62), pp. 109–126.
- Yashar, D. (2015) 'Does Race Matter in Latin America: how racial and ethnic identities shape the Region's Politics', *Foreign Affairs*, 1(33).