



Racial Capitalism, the Free Trade Zone of Pacific Alliance, and Colombian Utopic Spatialities of Antiblackness

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Abstract

The port-city of Buenaventura (in the Colombian Pacific coast) is at the center of national and international geopolitical interest as “the capital of the Pacific Alliance”, a US\$ 3 trillion trade bloc formed by Mexico, Chile, Colombia and Peru to advance regional integration and cross-pacific trade. At the same time, the city is also known for extraordinary levels of gruesome violence, dismembered dead bodies floating in the low-tide area of port-expansion being its most visible aspect. In this article, we ask: How is racial terror tied to such a promising future for capitalist development? How can we theorize the dynamics of capital’s flow, economic expansion and global integration in this Fanonian *zone of nonbeing*? To answer these questions, we first analyze the colonial geography of this predominantly Black port-city as well as its place in the geographic imaginary of Colombia. Then, in dialogue with literature on multiple dimensions of racial capitalism and structural antiblackness such as racialized surplus populations and *social death*, we analyze some spatial dynamics that dialectically produce Buenaventura simultaneously as a dystopic and a value-



producing spatiality that repositions Colombia in the global economy. Finally, borrowing from Rhonda Williams' analysis of racialized dispossession as "accumulation-as-evisceration," we provide some reflection on the racially-driven eviscerating politics of capital-making in this port-city as it relates to current global geopolitics as well as to *lasting* antiblack injustices in Colombia and beyond.

Keywords

antiblackness; racial capitalism; necro(bio)politics; accumulation as evisceration, surplus existence

Introduction

Seen from the bay where modern transoceanic ships touch its shore, the Colombian port city of Buenaventura is capital's paradise. Modernized port engines unload containers of manufactured goods from motorcycles and computers to cars and fertilizers from the US, Europe and Asia in a frantic pace while piles of sugar and coffee beans wait to be taken away in the next available vessel towards Asia. A skyscraper hotel facing the waters houses the high-profile foreign port personnel who, during the evening, may relish a meal in one of the few posh restaurants with international cuisine in the recently redeveloped sidewalks by the shore. This dream world overlaps with an acute and *lasting* antiblack zone of social abandonment that contrasts sharply with lavish spaces of wealth in the ascendant city. While kids play barefoot in the putrefied waters where the shacks are built, beggars desperately search for food in the trashcans by the fancy hotel where some locals work as janitors and maids. Ill-planned two-story buildings, leaking corroded pipes, and potholed and unpaved streets add to an atmosphere of fear and anxiety triggered by the appearance, now and then, of dismembered dead bodies floating in the waters. Body parts disposed in the sea and brought by the shorelines seem to integrate the two distinct and yet mutually dependent geographies. In all possible senses, Buenaventura encapsulates the overlapping extremes that characterize global racial capitalism.

The city is at the center of national geostrategic interests due to its privileged position by the Pacific Ocean. It is the main gateway for Colombian goods into the world economy. Indeed, the port of Buenaventura is the nation's leading port, handling 71% of shipments in the Pacific region and 30% of the nation's imports. In 2017 alone, it handled one million containers (22 million tons) and positioned itself as one of the ten largest ports of Latin America (El País, 2018). The ambition of the Colombian political and economic elite is to turn Buenaventura into the "Capital of the Pacific Alliance", a trade bloc that seeks to advance regional and cross-pacific integration into the Asian market (Dinero, 2013). With a combined GDP of US\$3 trillion and an internal market of 225 million inhabitants, the bloc formed by Mexico, Chile, Colombia and Peru is the world's eighth largest economy (Alianza Pacifico, 2018).

Back in 2014, hoping that this geopolitical move would radically change his country's position in the global economy, then Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos enthusiastically welcomed the summit in the colonial city of Cartagena de Indias, arguing that now "the history of the Pacific is split into two, a region for so long forgotten, an ocean to which we have for centuries turned our back (Cancillería, 2014)." He also promised that the new trade bloc would improve the quality of life and create more job opportunities. To prepare the port-city for the nearing bright future, Santos announced a plan for logistic infrastructure that comprises expanding the highway and the railroad linking the sugar-producing region of Valle del Cauca to the port; dredging the channel to accommodate larger container ships; redeveloping the terminals; and improving the city's poorly equipped infrastructure. In an interview with a regional newspaper on the summit, the president was optimistic: "the engine of development and well-being of Latin America is ignited (El País, 2014)."

At the same time that Buenaventura is at the center of national and international geopolitical interests to expand a scrambling global economy, the city has long been a dystopic geography of racial dispossession and racial violence. It could be regarded, in Fanon's terms, as a colonized "zone of nonbeing" (1967: 8) that leaves no doubt about the places Black people occupy in this to-be paradise of capitalism. As one of the main urban centers in the Pacific coast, it is a city of hope for the internally displaced population caught in the crossfires of a bloody dispute (involving paramilitaries, drug-traffickers, guerrillas and the state) to maintain control over highly profitable international routes for narcotrafficking and to seize Black territories with strategic mineral resources (Figuroa-Carceres-Correa, 2015; Arboleda, 2016). And yet, this is also a geography of despair. The recurring event of patients dying in ambulance while taking the two-hour trip to the hospital in the metropolitan city of Cali and the gruesome "chopping houses" where the bodies of victims are taken to be cut into pieces and disposed in the waters of the low-tide and land-grabbing area of port-expansion are perhaps the most extreme manifestations of an acute and lasting zone of social abandonment (e.g., Nicholls and Sanchez-Garzoli, 2011; CNMH, 2015). How do such forms of urban precarity create conditions for the making of Buenaventura as a value-producing geography of capitalist accumulation? Situating these racial nightmares within this capitalist dream is the core of this article.

In this piece, we unveil how Black social death is central to this promising future. We consider some spatial dynamics that dialectically produce Buenaventura as a dystopic and value-producing spatiality for repositioning Colombia in the global economy. Informed by Cedric Robinson (2000)'s notion of racial capitalism, as well as dialoging with recent interventions on racial surplus populations (e.g., Singh, 2016; Stuart, 2011; Gilmore, 2007), we map out the dynamics of a racially-driven eviscerating politics of capital in Colombia as it relates to global geopolitics. Our consideration of these dynamics, however, is not inattentive of the ways political and libidinal economies come together in socially and ontologically positioning the

Black subject within the world of production and within the realm of humanity (Jung, 2019; Wilderson, 2010; Hartman, 2016; Vargas, 2017). In this article, we bridge these analytically distinct and yet convergent perspectives by showing how the process of capital accumulation in Buenaventura is inextricably linked to the original violence of slavery and contemporary Black social death. The ontological status of Black beings as *expendable life* authorizes deracination, hyper-exploitation and physical elimination. It is within this backdrop that we analyze four interrelated and interlocking dynamics that enable capital accumulation in the city: (i) historical depiction of Black territories as “empty land” and Black people as infra-humans; ii) displacement and deracination of Black people from their land as a strategy of reordering the seized territory for capital accumulation (iii) state production and management of social death by selectively investing in the port economy and abandoning city’s infrastructure and public services; iv) controlling Black means of subsistence though the further precarization of their labor and the criminalization of Black urban life.

The article is based on a two-pronged approach: a content analysis of textual sources (newspapers and official reports on the Colombian economy and on human rights abuses) and unstructured interviews with local residents during intermittent visits from 2014 to 2018. We also build on our ongoing participation in a long-term research cluster analyzing racism and Black protest in the Pacific region of Colombia, as well as participation in public events analyzing the outcomes of the civic strike organized by Black activists.

Colonial Geography

Although a more fulsome discussion of its colonial history is beyond the scope of this article, it is worth briefly highlighting the place Buenaventura occupies in the Colombian racial imaginary, and how it relates to the city’s current racial condition. Over time, the depiction of the Pacific coastal region where Buenaventura is located shifted from “empty” and “uncivilized” land populated by runaway Black slaves and “savage” Indians to an “ecological sanctuary” housing some of the world’s richest biodiversity and then to a region of national interest for developmental projects. Aurora Vergara (2017) argues that this dual depiction of the Pacific region as a national asset and as a backward “empty land” serves the political purpose of deracinating Black and Indigenous people from these territories, erasing their history and facilitating capitalist expansion. In this sense, the Pacific has been a biopolitical “laboratory” for testing development projects for the antiblack nation (see also Quiñonez, 2016; Asher and Ojeda, 2009).

While this process of racial deracination is not unique to Colombia - from Standing Rock to Flint, from Garifuna communities in the Caribbean coast to the Kaiapó people in the Brazilian Amazon, indigenous and Black populations are the prey of predatory capitalism (e.g., Harrison, 2013; Loperena, 2017; Jainchand and Sampaio, 2013). Buenaventura’s unique position as a great facilitator of global capital flow – it is linked to more than three hundred ports around the world - and as

a space historically racialized and abandoned as “tierra de negros [black land]”, makes it a paradigmatic case as well as a “privileged” site that brings into sharp relief continuing spatio-racial imaginaries of national belong and processes underlying global capital accumulation.

In fact, the history of the city and the region where it is located is, in some way, the history of Black Colombia. Scholars have documented how the native population of the “inhospitable land” of humid weather, high temperatures and dense mountain forests of the Cordilleras posed an extraordinary challenge to the colonial enterprise. Spaniards collapsed several times in their attempts to colonize the Pacific region, then inhabited by the native population and later a zone of refuge for runaway enslaved groups. Spain’s relative control was established only later in the 18th century when settlers created a pier in the harbors of present-day Buenaventura but the small port was relatively neglected and remained outside the radar of colonial economic interests until independence (see Pérez-Valbuena, 2008; Aprile-Gnisset, 2002, Díaz Vargas, 2015).

In 1827, soon after independence, the colonial “founding father” Francisco de Paula Santander declared the village a free port zone, giving trade preference to England. Despite the British prohibition of the transatlantic slave trade and Simon Bolívar’s principled opposition to slavery, Buenaventura continued to be a slave-port (even after abolition in 1851) and a vital gateway for Gran Cauca’s agricultural and mining economy. In the backdrop of Colombian sugar and coffee boom, the port attracted European and American investors, competing with the port of Barranquilla to be an important gateway to the international market and helping to consolidate the regional agrarian and mining white elites (Díaz Vargas, 2015; Pérez-Valbuena, 2008). In the dawn of the 20th century, the US-backed secession of Panamá, the establishment of a railway and a road system connecting the city to the metropolitan center of Cali represented a turning point in the modernization of the port infrastructure (Rodríguez and Sanchez, 2002).

Although not exhaustive, this historical backdrop is important to an understanding of how the colonial trajectory of Buenaventura (first as an entry point for colonial Spain, then a place of refuge for maroon communities, and eventually an important port of the independent nation) shapes its current condition as a racialized zone of accumulation and social death. It is also illustrative of the current place of Black people in a *patria mestiza* built on slavery. While the pacific coast is celebrated as a national asset and Blackness is consumed as folklore, Black Colombians bear structural disadvantages in terms of education, housing, access to health, and the right to live (Urrea, Viafara and Viveros, 2014; Alves and Vergara-Figueroa, 2019).

Blackening Space

When one of us first visited the city in 2013, as part of a research team, there was no regular potable water and electricity was intermittent for most of its residents. Fear hung in the air. We were advised by locals to take very strong precautions and

stay closer to the downtown hotel area, as the levels of homicidal violence had reached levels that were extraordinary even for a war-torn country. Between 1990 and 2012, there were 4799 homicides, 475 disappeared persons and 22 massacres in the city. These figures are highly astonishing given that the population of the city does not exceed 390,000 inhabitants (CNMH, 2015). Although public safety has improved in the last couple of years, security continues to be a critical issue in Buenaventura. Of particular concern is the sexual exploitation and killing of poor Black women. While, in official narratives, their killings are rationalized as intimate/private matters, Black feminist scholars have denounced a gendered and sexual “strategy of terror” that seeks to reaffirm a masculine-militaristic spatial order through the targeted killings of black female activists whose labor have been vital to the protection of black communities (see Ramírez Torrez, 2017; Lozano, 2016). Scholar Saidiya Hartman’s claim that the experience of enslavement continues to define black woman’s position in the world today is well-placed for this urban setting. Black women’s liminal condition in the world of labor, Hartman contends, is made manifest in the way that at the same time her greater vulnerability turns her labor cheaper and her condition invisible as exploited or wageless “worker”, she is the one that carries in her back the responsibility to build communities and families destroyed by racial capitalism. As in slavery, Black Colombian women also live under a “regime of racialized sexuality that continues to place black bodies at risk for sexual exploitation and abuse, gratuitous violence, incarceration, poverty, premature death, and state-sanctioned murder (2016, 169).”

Although antiblack racism is not the only force responsible for these violent dynamics, it plays a central role in the ordering of territory and in justifying the incredible abandonment of Buenaventura’s infrastructure. Laura Pulido’s analysis of the water crisis in the predominantly Black city of Flint in the United States offers insights that may shed light on the making of Buenaventura’s Black gendered geography. Pulido shows that, as a Black and poor place, Flint was subjected to drastic financial measures and infrastructure abandonment so that the city could meet its financial obligations to investors. To Pulido, the relation of Flint’s Black population to capital is one of disposability and accumulation, as it performed “unpaid labor for capital” as capital transforms the residents’ abandonment into strategy and opportunity to fiscally discipline place (Pulido, 2016, 10-11). She points out that though fiscal solvency has been one of the key tenets of neoliberal doctrine, cities with bigger African American populations were the ones placed under austerity plans. In response to the argument that the Flint issue is not racial, as white residents of the city are also affected, she asserts that once a space is racialized (and, we add, gendered) as Black, whites and non-Black residents also suffer the “collateral consequences” of sharing Black spaces. In other words, spaces that are racialized as Black are the ones that are predominantly seen as surplus and disposable. Whites living in these areas may be subjected to similar conditions but their experience is accidental, rather than structural (see also Vargas, 2017; Alves 2018).

It is not difficult to see the same logic playing out in the case of Buenaventura, a poverty-stricken Black place where a white-mestizo minority is also vulnerable to violence and social exclusion. Located in the Pacific coast, this is a racialized and gendered urbanity where Black people constitute 73% of the population, whites/mestizos are 26% and indigenous people are 1% of the population (DANE, 2005). It is not a coincidence that these Black geographies (Buenaventura and the Pacific coast) are the ones most abandoned by the Colombian state and where lives are least valued. In Buenaventura 80.3% of the population live in poverty, 61% are unemployed, 17% are illiterate, 40% of the population have no access to sewage systems and at least 50% have been victims of the armed conflict (El País, 2017). The black city - and the Pacific coast for that matter - is so devalued that nonblack inhabitants, as the saying goes, “les toca una vida de negro [have to live a Black life].”

The abandonment of the city's infrastructure is part of an enduring and deliberate institutional practice of producing social death while extracting value from its population and territory. Thus, like Flint, the city is a “testing ground for new forms of neoliberal practices (Pulido, 2016, 2)” that, in this case, advances Colombia's role as a regional economic power. As the main actor in pushing forward this “experiment,” the state energizes spatial dynamics that are fundamental to control the local Black population, to reduce operating costs and to ensure market profitability. The highway from the metropolitan city of Cali that cuts through Buenaventura and goes directly to the port terminals perhaps serves as a spatial metaphor for these dynamics of exclusion/inclusion. The Buga-Lobo Guerrero highway links the port terminals in the island of Cascajal to these regional centers without touching upon the city's marginalized mainland where most of the residents live. Highly protected port areas and securitized hotels in the Cascajal zone are the other side of the geographies of dispossession the city conveys. Quasi-literally, Bonaverenses are denied access to the port, to the city and to the nation. Such spatial dynamics have made Colombia's National Center for Historical Memory (CNMH 2015, 25) characterize the city as “a port without a community.”

Likewise, the ways the state has historically responded to the permanent “crisis” in the city reveals its role in producing unlivable conditions of life. For instance, at the turn of the 20th century, 1/5 of the population was decimated by a cholera outbreak. Back then, the government responded by designing an urban development plan to provide basic services to the local population. The plan never provided a comprehensive urban infrastructure to the Black city. By mid-1900s, a seaquake and fire further worsened the city's crumbling infrastructure (Pérez-Valbuena, 2008, 59). In 1968 president Carlos Lleras Restrepo declared a state of emergency in the city due to its sanitary conditions. In 1992 president Cesar Gaviria responded to a malaria outbreak by announcing another urban development plan that was never implemented (Bonilla, 2014; El Tiempo, 1992). In 2014, President Juan Manuel Santos responded to the humanitarian “crisis” in the city by announcing the provision of potable water, electricity and an improvement in the quality of life of

Bonaverenses. And in 2017, the newest government plan was launched, promising to turn Buenaventura into a special district with economic and political autonomy. So far, nothing has changed substantially. The city continues to be an acute zone of (social) death or a Fanonian “zone of nonbeing” (1967, 8), one that is also highly functional in sustaining the country’s economic growth and in generating tax revenue for the Colombian government.

Accumulation by Evisceration

Strikingly, the “infrastructural violence” (Rodgers & O’Neill, 2012) of the state neglecting basic services such as security, education and access to health has facilitated land grabbing, port expansion and hyper-exploitation of labor. Although these processes of racial dispossession are part of a long history of (colonial) violence, the growth in these violent dispossessions corresponds temporally and causally to the tragic inclusion of the Pacific coast in the nation’s armed conflict. Political geographer Ulrich Oslender (2008) argues that, before the 1990s, the Pacific region of Colombia was considered a “peace heaven” as the bloody armed conflict the country has witnessed since the late 1940s (firstly between the liberals and conservatives, and then the left-wing guerillas and paramilitary forces) had not yet made inroads into the region. The region’s Black population was seen as the “guardians” of the biogenetic assets of the nation. The multicultural policies implemented through the recognition of the nation as multicultural in the new Constitution promulgated in 1991 and the Ley 70 that granted territorial rights to Black communities were meant to protect this “sanctuary” but hope did not last long as national and transnational economic interests “engulfed the entire region in a sea of violence and terror” (2008, 87). Oslender also points out the clearly documented links between powerful economic conglomerates expanding African palm cultivation in the region and paramilitary violence. These companies have established large-scale plantations on territories legally owned by Black communities and resistance mounted by the communities have been dealt with through threats, massacres and forced displacements. These processes have converted the entire Colombian Pacific region into a “geography of terror” in which racialized violence generates fear and deters resistance. Displacement, then, is not merely a byproduct of the armed conflict but also a strategy of reordering territory for capital accumulation (Oslender 2007, 2008).

The same logic of displacing people from their territories in the interests of big businesses operates in Buenaventura too. Although the city has been one of the main urban centers receiving internally displaced population by the armed conflict in the Pacific coast, the displaced from Buenaventura are mostly evicted from the low-tide areas where most of the city was built (over the seabed filled with garbage) in a practice residents call “taking land from the sea” (see CNMH, 2015). Scholars have documented how paramilitary groups had occupied the historically Black areas over the sea since early 2000s. Their terror has proven to be instrumental to the state and international corporations who intend to increase port capacity. In 2005,

paramilitary groups were officially demobilized, only to be replaced since then by so-called Bacrim or drug-trafficking militias whose dispute over international drug routes have fueled waves of violence that supersede previous levels of cruelty (Valencia et. al. 2016; Lozano, 2016; Nicholls and Sanchez-Garzoli, 2011).

Adding to, or facilitated, by state abandonment, drug-traffickers inaugurated new waves of terror, of which the chopping houses (where Black victims are dismembered alive and disposed under the stilts) is the most visible expression. Calling attention to the slow response from the government, Héctor Epalza Quintero, the Catholic bishop of Buenaventura, is quoted in a special report by Human Rights Watch saying “in the middle of the night you can hear the screams of people saying ‘Don’t kill me! Don’t kill me! Don’t be evil!’ These people are basically being chopped up alive” (Human Rights Watch, 2014). Another individual reveals the sinister economy of killing and seizing territory in the port-zone: “They take the homes and become the owners. And who is going to complain? If you complain, they’ll kill you” (ibid). The same report also notes that at least 150 individuals were reported missing in the wave of the Bacrim take-over, adding to the more than 2000 disappeared over the past two decades (Human Rights Watch, 2014). Such strategy has long been denounced by Black activists as “a war without bodies,” to highlight the disappearances of bodies in the waters as the *modus operandi* of this form of violence (Saavedra, 2013).

Although the numbers of “disappeared” people continue to increase, it is said that homicides in Buenaventura have reduced by 68% in the last three years (2015-2018) registering lower rates (4, out of 100,000 persons) than the national average of 24 out of 100, 000 persons (see El País, 2018). This is the same time period in which the government and part of the FARC guerrilla celebrated a peace deal (in 2016), in La Habana (Cuba) to put an end to the armed conflict. While it may be too early to assess the outcomes of the peace deal with the FARC - there are still other rebellious groups as well as a faction of the FARC rebels in armed confrontation, a community organizer explains that there is a “murky violence” imposed by narco-traffickers that is silenced in everyday conversation. This, in turn seriously challenges the government’s efforts to sell the city as a “pacified community”. According to him, there are no bodies on the streets but the city continues to be abandoned by the state and even worse, the criminal bands are establishing their own pact to “peacefully” take over the city’s territory: “Now they have even more control because the militias learned to establish a pact to survive without giving up the control of the territory. They have their own peace deal.” We were also told that the Mexican Sinaloa cartel is already operating in the Pacific region through a supra-national deal with the Bacrim, which has far-reaching consequences for the city and the region. According to Juan, a young Black man displaced from Buenaventura and now living in Cali, the state itself is implicated in these dynamics of violence through corrupt officers: “The police sells one [*vende a uno*]. You go for help to the police and they go and pass your information to the strong men (*duros*). Look, this guy was complaining about you. Then you have to leave.” This view is shared by other

residents who expressed great frustration and distrust in the state force, which is widely seen as “lacking legitimacy” due to their “criminal deals” with Bacrim. In a nutshell, the confluence of paramilitary, drug-trafficking and state violence produces the port city as a profitable geography of Black suffering. The interdependence of “political, economic and ecological” forces, Austin Zeiderman (2016) argues, produces racial precarity, abandonment and profit-making in Buenaventura: paramilitarism reinforces the territorial control of the land and global climate change precipitates new urban restructuring in areas seen as risky for humans to live but good for capital. These forces, Zeiderman argues, make Buenaventura and the low-tide area of port expansion, in particular, “one of the most concentrated zones of black death” in the Americas today (2016, 16).” The disposal of dead Black bodies in the low tide zone is indeed a strategy of spatial control in this highly valued territory but it is far from being the only way capitalism produces value in the city.

A Value-Producing Zone of Death

In Buenaventura, residents told us that there is no job for the Black population in the port. “Now the port is automated, so each time they hire fewer people. And to complicate things, our people are not prepared to take the few positions available due to the education deficit”, says Simon, a young community organizer. Vilma, a Black woman who works in the port, confirms this trend. She works under a temporary contract and has to be at the beck and call of the company. Her employment is far from stable and depends on the cargo movement. “Most of the automated jobs are done by foreigners”, Vilma explains. She also explains that denying education to Black people favors the port economy, as their “unfitness” to work in the new automatized jobs ensures that they can be hired cheaply in jobs in the domestic and service economy. One could say that, in Marx’s terms, Black Bonaverenses constitute a stagnant surplus population, who are incorporated in the world of production as an “active labor army (..) with extremely irregular employment”, which renders them an “inexhaustible reservoir of disposable labour power” (Marx, 1992, 796). Their racial condition, however, renders them always and already an excess, and thus disposable. More than surplus labor, the “surplus existence” (see Hong, 2012) of Bonaverenses is a product of their inhuman status, which is constituted through enduring conditions of racial subjection.

Black youth do work in the port but “white collar jobs are not given to people of Buenaventura [*empleo de botin no se da a la gente de Buenaventura*],” says Vilma. The few Black people that work in the port perform the exhausting work of “*matar muelle*” (un/loading cargos). Like Vilma, they are contract workers in highly precarious conditions of employment. Other options available are to be a moto-ratón (pirate motor-taxi) or work as a small dealer in the drug trafficking economy. As a strategic route for the international drug trade, Buenaventura has the tragically profitable human resources to facilitate it. Black youth are the ones who take small boats loaded with cocaine to the high seas of Central America from where it is transferred to ships towards the US, Europe and Asia (Valencia, 2013; Colombia

Reports, 2018). According to Vilma, “the state has to provide real options for the youth, not piecemeal measures. We are tired of workshops! Dealing and prostitution offer kids the opportunity the city denies them.” Vilma then recalled how some Black young women have survived poverty and desperation by engaging in sex work: “One girl told me that in her body she had the solution for hunger.” Fishermen are also caught into this illegal economy. Back in 2013, an unemployed fisherman told one of us that the maritime routes of drug trade have made his work extremely risky and, like him, most of the fishermen have abandoned their boats. Indeed, at a meeting organized in a local university in 2018, community organizer Javier Torres noted that, while there were 225 fishing boats in Buenaventura in early 2000s, today there are only eighteen.

As the city is abandoned by the state and disputed by i/illegal economic forces, its stigmatization as a “dangerous place” makes the Black labor force expendable and highly profitable. Even in the formal sector, national and international corporations can afford to establish extremely low rates for those lucky enough to get a job in the port. Residents complain that private companies do not hire them, preferring instead to bring workers from other parts of the country. In some cases, residents are offered a salary much lower than the national rate. A woman who has been unemployed for three years was quoted by local media: “They take advantage of the situation we are living in with these high rates of unemployment in the port (Noticias Caracol, 2017).” The disposable surplus population thus enables the multiplication of profits by driving even the wages for skilled labor below the national minimum wage. Another resident complains that “the big companies don’t spend in Buenaventura. Even the paper they bring from other cities (Noticias Caracol, 2017).” In fact, foreigners do not even need to interact with the local population other than in the central hotel, located right in front of the port-terminal, where some Black individuals work as maids and doormen. Strategically placed, the hotel enables foreign workers and business people to jump from vessels to land without interacting with the ‘dangerous’ Black city. Thus, the hyper-exploitation of the local population and the pure extraction of surplus without investing in the local economy go hand in hand.

In all these aspects, what is seen is not a failure of the economy to incorporate the Black population in its expanding dynamics but rather, an eviscerating process of accumulation and expansion of capital enabled by the infrahuman status of Black lives. That is why this process can be better described through what Rhonda Williams (1993, 82) names as “accumulation as evisceration.” The continuous devaluation of people, labor and place, she suggests, is functional to the dynamics of economic growth but one should not reduce this process to economic factors alone. These dynamics are also functional for the work they perform in producing value by eviscerating racialized communities and Black lives. Indeed, as some scholars have shown, be it in California’s carceral landscape, in Brazilian favelas or in post-earthquake Haiti, the process of capitalist production and accumulation works not only by overexploiting workers and turning labor superfluous but also by generating

profit from social and physical death (e.g., Williams, 1993; Gilmore, 2007; Mullings et al, 2010; Vargas, 2014). As in these other anti-Black social formations, in Buenaventura, Black death *produces value*. That is to say, if “labor in capitalism is value-producing”, and if “human-as-waste (...) are embedded in the historically specific social categories that are fundamental to capitalism” (Yates 2011, 1684), in racialized Black geographies such as Buenaventura, capital extracts value through the hyper-exploitation of labor, through racial terror, and through the continuous reproduction of the city as a zone of (Black) nonbeing.

Utopic Spatialities

Its continued projection as a nodal point of the Colombian economy turns Buenaventura into a utopic spatiality. Now, with the Pacific Alliance, the city becomes even more important regionally and even hemispherically. The Alianza Pacifica (or Pacific Alliance) was formed in 2011 with the goal of strengthening economic relationship among Colombia, Peru, Mexico and Chile through the “free circulation of goods, services, capital and people.” The bloc, which now also includes four associate members (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and Singapore) and two states in the process of full membership (Costa Rica and Panamá), share a geostrategic vision of the Pacific coast as an area for global security and as “a fundamental region for the global economy (Alianza, 2018).” According to some market analysts, what makes the Alliance particularly competitive is its effective implementation of trade policies and financial deregulations. Since 2011, the bloc has launched the Latin American Integrated Market (MILA), the largest stock exchange in the region, with 40% of the total foreign investment in Latin America, a market capitalization of USD 1.25 trillion and a portfolio of over 750 companies (Peru Reports, 2018). Economic integration has also been accelerated by lifting tariffs in merchandise trading and further deregulation of capital flow, as well as the removal of visa requirements for citizens of the four member states.

Ideologically the bloc is a geopolitical move to counterbalance attempts for regional integration spearheaded by left wing governments in the region. It is not a coincidence that it was formed by right-wing or centre-right governments with security, the “free market” and “democracy” as their explicit organizing principles. The bloc claims pragmatism with respect to regional integration (in opposition to the protectionist and state-centric efforts such as Mercosur, Unasur and the ALBA led by leftist governments) by focusing on “positive discussions on topics such as trade, investment, and economic integration, while avoiding the more ideological debates that sidetracked other initiatives” (Dade and Meacham, 3013, 3). With Mercosur losing importance under right-wing and market-friendly governments, and as new partners (including China and Japan) are considering joining the block, it gains even more importance. As for Colombia, there is skepticism with the promises to improve the living conditions of the poor, since under the logic of global capitalism, to attract foreign capital and maintain competitiveness, the government must comply with the market’s definition of spending efficiency. Nevertheless, it is in matters of security

that the Pacific Alliance represent an opportunity. The country is expected to develop a “middle power diplomacy” and become a regional leader (Acosta, 2014, 168), adding to its already established military weight, its strong alignment with the United States and its new NATO and OECD memberships.

Despite its association with gruesome violence, Buenaventura is projected as the capital city of this new initiative. Within regional and national investors’ drive to diversify capitalist portfolio in a moment of protectionist retractions in free-trade blocs exemplified by Brexit, Donald Trump’s trade war with China and his threat to revise NAFTA, the upgrade of Colombia’s largest port becomes even more urgent. The fact that the low tide areas grabbed by the port developers are also the ones witnessing the bulk of displacements, disappearances and assassinations in the chopping houses mentioned above, speaks volumes not only of the always-present necropolitical management of Black urban life but also of the vital conditions it opens for the (bio)geopolitical circulation of capital. Thus, while we conceive of the city as the “space of death” or a place of “raw life,” (Mbembe, 2001, 195), we also highlight how death necessitates and energizes life (Foucault, 1990, 81). The fact that the areas plagued by violence of this magnitude are also the ones projected as the gateway to the country’s future.

Buenaventura as Necro(bio)polis

McIntyre and Nash’s (2011) take on the necro(bio)political logic of contemporary capitalism offers us a way to understand this apparently counter-intuitive dynamics of capital. After providing an analytical distinction between the necropolis (the colonial world of production) and the biopolis (the metropolitan world of accumulation), the authors trace the multiple socio-spatial dialectics that have emerged between both of them, leading to spatial formations such as bio(necro)polis and necro(bio)polis. They argue that while the bio(necro)polis refers to “the irruption of the necropolis into the biopolis constituted by those racially devalued bodies long present within the biopolis” (2011, 1482), the necro(bio)polis refers to the “emergence of heightened possibilities of capital accumulation within the necropolis” (2011, 1482).

While these dynamics are neither unique nor exceptional, we argue that Buenaventura is an example of the necro(bio)polis for its capacity to produce value from subjugation and death. As explained earlier, the ontological and material status of Black Buenaventura renders its population at times exploitable and always disposable. They are included in the world of production through the precarious condition of hyper-exploitation, wagelessness, and disposability. McIntyre and Nash (2011, 4) argue that surplus populations have always been tied to “hierarchical regimes of reproduction” in which some racialized populations and racialized geographies are hyper exploited or treated as waste. In a similar vein, Ruth Gilmore’s (2007) study of the expanding prison system during the 1990s in California shows how a shrinking economy found in the prison boom a strategy to address the crisis of accumulation generated by surplus land, surplus labor and surplus technology

created by intense military expansion in the previous decades. As the constant instability of capitalism requires the perpetual production of places and people as disposable, such disposability has a clear political/economic purpose: it creates new conditions of accumulation. If in California people and place are caged to enable the dynamic geography of growth - what Gilmore calls the “spatial fix” - in Buenaventura people and place are pushed to the limits of their capacity to provide natural resources, labor force and human lives to global capitalism.

The ownership and control of the port of Buenaventura unambiguously reveal the city’s global importance and its racial foundation. White-mestizo Colombian and international elite control the port operation. It was a state-owned company until 1992 when the Colombian government implemented a series of structural adjustment policies in the economy, including the port’s privatization (Jimenez and Delgado, 2008). In 1994 the private company Regional Port Society of Buenaventura (SPRBUN S.A.) took control of the port operation. Since then, activists have denounced “the general deterioration of labor conditions and prospects for unionization, generating new labor and human rights abuses,” including firing union members, blocking fishing communities access to the sea, and imposing “grueling conditions” for dockworkers (Nicholls and Sanchez-Garzoli, 2011). Nowadays, the port is controlled mainly by the Spanish-based maritime group TCB, and by the sugar-based agro-industry of the Valle del Cauca department (Bonilla, 2014).

Coherent to its colonial past, the future of the Black city has been tied to the geopolitical interests of global and local elites. As the doorway of Colombia to the world economy, Buenaventura reaffirms its role as a strategic place for racial capitalism once again. If under colonialism it was a key nodal point in the triangular trade that expanded the fortunes of the Spanish empire at the cost of the enslavement of millions of Black individuals, now it is again on the back of its Black population that a trans-Pacific trade agreement to favor capital is sealed. Now again, Black evisceration is capitalism’s paradise. Indeed, even in the worst waves of violence, Buenaventura did not stop being the main source of revenue for Colombia’s promising and dynamic economy. The city is, in the words of political commentators and activists Kelly Nicholls and Gimena Sánchez-Garzoli, “a place where free trade meets mass graves.” Revealingly enough, the port’s productivity has passed from 10 million tons in cargo in 2010 when they made these remarks to 22 million tons in 2017 and is projected to expand its capacity even more in the years to come with the Colombian government’s plan to build seven new port terminals. So far, every year it generates \$1.8 billion in customs revenue (La República, 2010; Gill 2017; Portal Portuario, 2018). The new highway linking the port to the countryside as well as the local free zone twelve kilometers from the port are other megaprojects recently concluded that anticipate the bright future of this promising economy opened up by the Pacific Alliance.

Black Spatial Politics

On May 16, 2017, thousands marched through the streets of Buenaventura to assert autonomy over their lives, and for their right “to live with dignity and peace in their territory,” as stated in the very name of the demonstration (Comite Paro Civico, 2017). They occupied public squares, shut down port activities and blocked the Lobo Guerrero highway that connects the port to the rest of the country. The demonstrators demanded that the government declare a state of social emergency to enable the release of funds to address urgent issues such as the lack of running water, electricity, public hospitals and security in the port city. First, the government responded with indifference. Then, Colombian military was deployed to repress the demonstrations and to unblock the highway as trucks with tons of cargo were held back by the blockage of the highway. The repression ignited the fire. Supermarkets and gas stations were looted, barricades burnt, main streets blocked, and state facilities stormed. The police were confronted with machetes and rockets (El País, 2017; Reuters 2017; Saavedra, 2017).

The mayor, who initially responded to the protest by saying “this people live on *rebusque* [an ambiguous local term that may imply informal job or hustling] so they can’t afford to be on strike too long” (El País, 2017), fled the city when he saw the demonstration growing and becoming an urban riot. His disdain sparked an angry response that resulted in the destruction of his property. According to Simon, a resident of Buenaventura who participated in the strike, “it was instinctive. People are tired with so much abandonment. Then the mayor insulted us saying that we are all hustlers (*rebuscadores*). This was the last straw. Everybody went to the streets. If we are hustlers then let’s hustle.” When the mayor referred to the demonstrators as *rebuscadores*, he was giving an account of the job precarity in the city. At the same time, he was also suggesting that they steal, engage in vagrancy or illegal activities such as selling things on the streets, due to which their strike would be of no impact to the city’s formal economy. In referring to *Bonaverenses* as such, he was evoking a deeply ingrained racial imaginary of Black Colombians as morally inferior subjects who threaten the *purity* of the nation (Castro-Gomez, 2007; Bernal, 2012).

Although the retaliatory violence of furious protestors were exceptional and leaders of the strike dissociated the movement from what the media deemed as “vandalism”, the leaders also understood the “unexpected reaction of an *turba enardecida* [enraged crowd]” (El País, 2017) - looting supermarkets and shopping centers, and setting the mayor’s house on fire - as a desperate act against dismissiveness by state officials and against long-standing infra-structural violence. The government that initially ignored the protests was eventually forced to open a channel of negotiation with the demonstrators when the city’s chamber of commerce and the powerful sugar and coffee business federations expressed concerns with their losses and demanded state intervention (El País, 2017). The surplus disposable population in Buenaventura, by disrupting the flow of goods between the port and the nerve centers of the economy, proved that their precarious position of being

rebuscadores does not prevent them from exerting their spatial agency and challenging the process of capitalist accumulation.

Still, though the protestors inserted themselves in the world of production (even if by interrupting the flow of capital and by forcing the government to intervene), they were met with a violence that calls for a consideration of the ways political and libidinal economy (objectification and abjection, exploitation and alienation, accumulation and fungibility, violence and terror) render Black bodies as *socially dead*, and thus as object of gratuitous violence (Vargas, 2017; Hartman, 2016; and Wilderson, 2010). Protestors demanded their right to live, appealing to their status as humans and thus denouncing the “humanitarian crisis” that hopefully would mobilize mainstream civil society. As Black youth occupied the streets crying out – “Se cansó, Buenaventura se cansó [we are tired, Buenaventura is tired]” and “¡El pueblo no se rinde, carajo! [The people do not accept defeat, damn it!]”, the government responded with repression, arresting and wounding hundreds of Bonaverenses (Defensoria del Pueblo, 2017). If appealing to the status of “consumers,” “workers” or “humans” did not generate empathy, what would then? Beverly Mullings, Marion Werner and Linda Peake’s compelling account of “humanitarian dispossession” in Haiti provide important insights into how the ontological condition of Blacks as infra or not-quite-human shapes the world’s responses to this country’s social, economic and environmental disaster. In the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake, when more than 200,000 were killed, international responses were not of saving human lives but rather of securing and containing Haitian bodies to make sure they did not traverse international waters. For instance, the United States’ campaign of refugee deterrence (discouraging Haitians from escaping by the sea), the so-called international community’s primary concern with the security of NGO personnel and the evangelical crusades to rescue children all adhered unambiguously to an underlying racial common-sense of Haitian people as a threat to Western values, hemispheric security and US economy.

Similarly, Black Bonaverenses’ attempts to reclaim the city was met with indifference and criminalization: the state deliberately abandoned the city’s infrastructure, ignored and even participated in paramilitary violence, and repressed peaceful demonstrations to safeguard business interests. In fact, while hundreds of Bonaverenses showed their wounded bodies, mainstream media demanded forceful responses from the government to stop the bleeding of economic losses. One year after the civic strike, the conditions of the city continue to be unbearable. Residents attribute that to the fact that the government tries to solve a structural condition of abandonment with “*aguas tibias*” (“lukewarm water”), a metaphor that refers to piecemeal measures. “Then it was clear that the government was concerned only with the businesses,” says Victor Hugo, one of the leaders of the general strike. It was clear to the strikers that their lives did not matter as much as the tons of cargo waiting to be unloaded in the port. While the government, business associations and part of civil society saw the strikers as “inflexible” and demanding too much, for Lena, a Black woman displaced from the Pacific coast and living in the outskirts of

Cali, “the problem is that people are treating us as a poor little thing. No, the Pacific doesn’t need your hand. The Pacific needs that you take your foot out of its head. [*El Pacífico no necesita que le regale una mano. El Pacífico necesita que se le quite el pie de la cabeza*].”

To be fair, there has been some slow change in the way the state has treated Buenaventura. After the 2017 general strike, the government finally delivered a fund to support some infrastructure projects to ensure a regular supply of potable water and electricity, two basic utilities any major Colombian city enjoys but not Buenaventura. The fear, residents express, is that this will be just another urban development project that benefits the port at the expense of the residents of the city. In a public event to assess the government plans, Victor Hugo rhetorically asked “how does the country treat the territory that produces millions in revenue every year?” He denounced the persistence of “normalized violence” in the lack of access to potable water, constant interruption in electricity, ill-equipped public schools, widespread unemployment and lack of a “real” public hospital. “For whom and for what is the city?,” he asked. His question remains unanswered. Buenaventura continues to be a dystopic geography of antiblackness while it is also praised as Colombia’s gateway to the future.

Conclusion

The loaded ships that touch the shores of Buenaventura enable global flow of goods and reassert the place of the city in the world economy. Throughout its history, Buenaventura has served as a strategic site for the circulation of capital. During the colonial period, it was the entry-port for the Spanish conquest of the Pacific coast. At the beginning of the 19th century, it was offered by the new nation as a free port zone for English goods in exchange for England’s recognition of Colombia’s independence. Throughout the 20th century, it was the country’s main port in advancing its ambition to play a more prominent role in the global economy. Now with the Pacific Alliance, it is imagined as the Colombian passport to the future. Under this multi-trillion-dollar trade bloc, the city enters the world stage as a strategic geopolitical site for regional integration; even more now with global uncertainties generated by the United States’ protectionist trade policies and the rapidly shifting balance of power and economic integration in troubling Latin America. Will Colombia’s emergence as a global player bring changes in the structural conditions of Black people in places like Buenaventura? Racialized accumulation and dispossession indicate that eviscerating Black lives is a condition of possibility for capital’s profitability, which the Pacific Alliance promises to deliver. Likewise, the always-present ontological violence of antiblackness is pronounced in the foundational and socially accepted disregard for Black lives in the Colombian nation.

In any case, the “promising” future of Black Buenaventura seems to be a stubborn repetition of its past and its present. It is a Black *zone of nonbeing* in which colonial conditions are reinforced through day-to-day subjugation in precarious jobs, lack of

sanitation and public health, homicidal violence, poverty, infra-structural abandonment and so on. To be inclusive, the utopic project that then-president Juan Manuel Santos envisioned as a watershed moment in which “the history of the Pacific is split into two, a region for so long forgotten, an ocean to which we have for centuries turned our back (El País, 2014)”, would require more than more ships in the waterways of the transpacific trade.

Black Buenaventura has forcefully responded to this challenge. During the civic strike that shutdown the city in 2017 protestors refused to accept a fatalist view of Blackness and asserted their spatial agency by disrupting the city’s colonial order. What remains to be seen is if the compromise of the leaders of the Civic Strike to stop the demonstrations and participate in electoral politics (in fact one of the community organizers has been elected for a four-year term as the mayor of Buenaventura), will challenge the living conditions of Bonaverenses. The fact that several leaders of the *Paro Civico* have received death threats and some have been killed, seems to suggest the macabre reiteration of Buenaventura as a Fanonian zone of nonbeing. Still, if the targeted assassination of Black activists – among them Don Temis, a vocal opponent of port development projects in Black territories – reveals the city’s necropolitical order, it also indicates a determination to fight for their right to live a livable life. Thus, while we denounce Black evisceration, we join the voices of Black activists to reaffirming the commitment to keep the struggle alive: *El pueblo no se rinde carajo, La vida se respeta carajo! Por Buenaventura, carajo!* [The people do not surrender, damn it! Life should be respected, damn it! For Buenaventura, damn it!]

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