

Chambacú as Text and Space in Colombia's (Black) History¹

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“Recuerdas en donde naciste / Te acuerdas / Y la madre que te parió / Eso que tu corazón dice / Lo que eres tu propio yo / Mama Africa te llama / Te llama mama Africa... / Majaná, majaná / Onde jué ugtère tá majaná / Salino pa tiela ugtère / Minino pa tiela mí / Bukeno jende suto / Bukeno gende mí”—Luis Towers “El Rasta,” “Mama Africa”

“Do you remember where you were born / Do you remember the mother that gave birth to you? / That which your heart tells you / that which is your own self / Mother Africa calls you / she calls you, Mother Africa / ... come back to your land / come to my land / search for our people / search for my people.”

To All Champetudos and Palenqueros with Much Gratitude. I Join My Voice to Yours in Solidarity.

Abstract

In the 1990s, constitutional reform marked a shift toward the inclusion of Afrodescendants and their place in the Colombian nation. In spite of strides already made, Colombia is still reluctant to move toward inhabiting its place in the African diaspora, to fully recognize the reach of its African heritage and the contributions of African-descended peoples to the country's race for political and economic modernity. Only by recovering and reconstructing a new history, rooted in the histories of the diaspora, and by recreating an inclusive literary canon, will Colombia's goals of embracing participatory citizenship and national inclusiveness be reached. This paper aims to aid this process by addressing the history of the legendary space of Chambacú, a Black urban settlement that existed from the eighteenth century through the 1980s in Cartagena,

¹ Portions of this paper were presented at the Homenaje mundial a Manuel Zapata Olivella on November 21, 2014, Universidad del Cauca, Popayán, Colombia, and at Cornell University's Colloquium of the Americas on November 8, 2011 in Ithaca, New York. This work is also part of the first chapter of my manuscript *Chambacú: Race and Modernity in the Colombian Caribbean*.

Colombia, and its literary representation, to seal Colombia's place in the African diaspora and to reconstruct a national imaginary long purged of its African roots.

Introduction

Chambacú, a legendary settlement formerly located outside the walls of Cartagena's Old City on the northern coast of Colombia, is a key space in the articulation of the country's place in the Black diaspora. Populated by Blacks and mulattoes, Chambacú was a depository of the memory of the institution of slavery and a testimony of the long lasting and devastating effects of the transatlantic slave trade in the Colombian space. Its legacy also points to the role that slavery and the slave trade played in the country's race for modernity.

Chambacú, corral de negros, a novel written by the Afrodescendant Colombian author Manuel Zapata Olivella, was the first account of Chambacú's existence. In 1989, Jonathan Tittler translated the novel into English under the title *Chambacu, Black Slum*, making it possible for scholars abroad to produce critical works on Zapata Olivella's text. Literary critics took on the reconstruction and inscription of Chambacú's history and its meaning. In the seventies, Manuel Zapata Olivella was included in literary studies on Afro-Hispanic literature (Jackson, 1976, 1979; Lewis, 1987; Prescott, 1996 1997, 2008; Williams, 1991). Book-length studies on Zapata Olivella's various works are scant (Captain-Hidalgo, 1993; Tillis, 2005), while dissertations and scholarly articles on both *Chambacú* and Manuel Zapata Olivella's literary production abound.² Three recent studies contributed new perspectives to the examination of Manuel Zapata Olivella's works, *Chambacú*, fiction, the history of the real space of Chambacú, and of criticism

² See Aldana (2003), Brookshaw (1983), Jackson (1982), Ramirez (2003), Tillis (2000), and Zoggyie (1999). The bulk of the scholarly articles written on works written by Manuel Zapata Olivella and on *Chambacú, corral de negros*, in particular, have been published in the *Afro Hispanic Review*, including a special volume dedicated to the author after his death (*AHR*, volume 25, number 1, Spring 2006).

on the field of Afro-Hispanic literature and culture. For example, Ortiz's (2007) edited anthology included essays by various prominent critics on the previously listed subjects, underlining the presence of Chambacú in popular music.³ In addition, *Chambacú*, a play written by dramatist Régulo Ahumada Zurbarán (2002) and recently reprinted in a critical edition with a prologue by Beatriz Risk, inscribed the cultural specificity of this space and marked the stereotypes imposed on its inhabitants. In the field of literary criticism, no single critical work has been written with an exclusive focus on *Chambacú, corral de negros*.⁴ Perhaps the most illuminating study of Chambacú is that of Gutiérrez Magallanes (2001). A *Chambaculero* himself, Gutiérrez Magallanes offered an autobiographical and ethnographic account of his birth place and included hand-drawn maps of the community, archival materials, and personal photographs, listing the names and abodes of the families who called Chambacú home.

Prior to the emergence of the corpus of fictional texts, Magallanes's autobiographical account, and literary criticism alluding to its existence, Chambacú's name had surfaced in studies on Palanque de San Basilio and Cartagena's urban history (Bossa Herazo, 1981; Escalante, 1979). Most writings on Chambacú appeared in newspapers throughout the twentieth century, covering the controversial plan for the eradication and relocation of the settlement, which finally took place in the last part of the 1980s.⁵ Historian Orlando César Deávila Pertúz's (2008)

³ The title of the anthology was taken from Antonio Peñaloza's cumbia "Chambacú." Ortiz also referenced Totó La Momposina, an internationally renowned *cantadora*, who mentions Chambacú in two of her songs. "Tambores de Chambacú," a song written by Luis Eduardo Bermúdez and immortalized by the legendary musician Lucho Bermúdez, has also helped keep the memory of Chambacú alive.

⁴ See Aldana (in press).

⁵ The eradication and relocation plan was outlined in detail in a 1956 report produced by the Instituto de Crédito Territorial, "Chambacú: Regeneración de una zona de tugurios." The movement of resistance and the controversy surrounding the plan was covered extensively by *Diario de la costa*, *El Fígaro*, and later by *El Universal*, three local newspapers. As tourism became a coveted national product, the Corporación Nacional de Turismo (1972) offered figures to establish the importance of urban development and renovation. See Corporación Nacional de Turismo (1972).

master's thesis from the Universidad de Cartagena is, without a doubt, the most complete contemporary study on Chámbacú and a result of the movement of *Nueva Historia*.⁶

To contribute to the formation of a corpus of works on Chámbacú that can help reconstruct, recover, and interpret its history and relevance in the study of the African diaspora, this essay aims to join history and literary criticism to prevent Chámbacú's eradication from the regional and national imaginaries. Ultimately, my objective is to affirm Chámbacú's and Colombia's undeniable place in the African diaspora.

Chámbacú as Text

The publication of the novel *Chámbacú, corral de negros* brought to light the problematic and complex history of the real space of Chámbacú, highlighting the politics and history of the 1950s in the northern coast of Colombia. Deemed a contaminated mulatto space, the coast was the cradle of innovative literary activity initiated in the 1950s by the Grupo de Barranquilla, whose members saw the need to enter into "the hour of the world" and turned away from traditional and stagnant literary tendencies (Gilard, 1984, p. 908).⁷ It is debatable whether Manuel Zapata Olivella participated in this intellectual nucleus, but his textual production dialogues with the group's goals, aiming to inscribe race onto the sign of *Costeño*, a native of the

⁶ The Department of History at the Universidad de Cartagena spearheaded the project of *Nueva Historia* under the leadership of Professor Alfonso Múnera, the university's Vice Provost of Research. The goal of the program is to produce new history texts and documents that truly tell the stories of the region. To achieve this, every graduate student in the department must complete his/her master's thesis on a topic related to the city of Cartagena and/or its surrounding communities. Orlando César Deávila Pertúz's thesis is an example of this endeavor.

⁷ Gilard (1984) states that "the image of the country had been forged essentially in the Andean region, because of evident geographical reasons, of traditional difficulties of communication and of administrative organization. Nationality—the idea that the high intellectual and political circles had of it—did not coincide with the country's geographical boundaries..., the Coast and his mulatto humanity was unknown or it was disturbing, as an undesired presence of the exotic Antilles and the dark Africa" (p. 908). See Gilard (1976, 1984).

northern coast, to question dominant discourses and narrative strategies that erased issues of racial identity.⁸

Zapata Olivella's novel was published in 1963 and released again in 1967, the same year as *A Hundred Years of Solitude*, a text written by Nobel laureate Gabriel García Márquez, a text that has been defined as "the quintessential Latin American novel of the century and true heir to Antonio Cervantes' *Don Quixote*" (Martin, 1969, p. 8). This premise leaves aside other texts produced by contemporary authors who did not adhere to the magic realist tendencies of the time. For Manuel Zapata Olivella, current, as much as past, events contained the tales he was committed to record. The novel openly narrates spaces and events that define local and national historical legacies, mediated through social realism, to tell the history of a collectivity *sin Historia*, without history. Having been defined as a historical novel, and far from being a historical text that proclaims itself free of fiction, *Chambacú* projects a mimetic effort, resulting from the desire to present the facts as they are. The use of social realism as a stylistic strategy to effect the mimetic operation of the text is an outcome of the text's desire to present the reality of Chambacú in a particular historical moment and through typological characters, in a context in which the collective dimension of the narrative reigns over the individual dimension of the text.

The central story of Zapata Olivella's novel is that of Cotena's family, a single mother-headed group, completely marginalized economically and with no possibilities of reversing its destiny. From this private circle and space, the reader enters the public and collective realms. The family's affairs and the lives of each of the novel's archetypical characters are defined by the most common occupations among Blacks and mulattoes at the time and imbricated with

⁸See Posada Carbó (1996) for a history of the Colombian Caribbean, *la costa*, and a discussion on *Costeño* worldview.

community events and national and even transnational issues, including the Korean War.⁹ Máximo, Cotena's oldest son, is a self-taught intellectual and political leader who pushes the *Chambaculeros* to resist. José Raquel is a sexually impotent drug addict and a professional smuggler who volunteers to participate in the Korean War while all others fight their forced recruitment. Crispulo is a cock fighter, and Kid Medialuna is a boxer. Clotilde, Cotena's only daughter, is a domestic servant and the single mother of Dominguito, her boss's son. Through each of these characters, the novel informs the reader about the limited economic possibilities that existed in Chambacú and the *Chambaculeros*' quality of life amid exploitation, persecution, compartmentalization, and marginality. The novel also reveals the powerful resistance with which some of the family members, and the *Chambaculeros* as a whole, meet these impositions, establishing a clear connection between the *Chambaculeros*' marginalized existence and their African heritage.

After *La Violencia*, urban development occupied an important place in the national agenda, and Cartagena, as an important port and a tourist destination, a face to the rest of the world, received considerable attention on the part of the central government.¹⁰ The space of Chambacú, imprisoned between the modern Cartagena in full development mode and the walls of the Old City and its former slave market, became colonial symbols reinvested with new neocolonial meaning as national cultural capital. Chambacú is, then, a disjunctive space that questions the imaginary flux of the Colombian reality of the 1950s in the space of Cartagena, adding an ethnohistorical dimension to the national equation formulated to produce a Colombian, *mestizo*, modern, productive, and appeased [male] citizen. Thematically, *Chambacú* takes on the

⁹ See Truman Presidential Library and Museum (n.d.) to examine the resolution from June 25, 1950 declaring war on North Korea.

¹⁰ See Abella (1973), Alape (1984), and Fals-Borda (1979) for a detailed history of the phenomenon of *La Violencia*.

saga of enslaved Africans brought to the New World, a history scarcely told in Colombia, addressing the dualism *blancura/negritud*, whiteness and blackness, and radicalizing the national space in the space of the novel.¹¹ In addition, *Chambacú* destabilizes the locus of *Colombianidad* and Latin American identity, defining a regional and national identity based on cultural specificity. In other words, at a time in the literary landscape when Colombian and Latin American writers like Gabriel García Márquez experimented with a search for *lo latinoamericano*, the Latin American experience, and situated it in the rural space, outside the urban space, Zapata Olivella relocated the locus of this search within the urban “modern” space. Because of its in-between position at the edge of Cartagena’s Old City and the modern area of Cartagena, *Chambacú* emerged as a privileged space to reexamine a national narrative that excluded it, and other like-places, on which the nation-state constituted itself to later erase them from the national historiography.

It is important to examine how *Chambacú*, the novel, stands as a response to what Alonso (1990) defines as the essentially rhetorical phenomenon of modernity in Latin America, stating that “[t]his interpretation [the experience of modernity in Latin America] echoes the pejorative connotation that the adjective ‘rhetorical’ has acquired in common parlance: that is to say, a discourse that is fundamentally devoid of referential ground” (p. 22). Although he clarifies that his intention is not to focus on the pejorative use of the adjective “rhetorical,” Alonso still insists on marking the critical and discursive dimension of Latin American writers’ preoccupation with the manner in which they experience “the undecidedbility... of Latin America’s experience and participation in modernity” (p. 23). This ambivalence is questioned and debunked when looking at Zapata Olivella’s inscription of *Chambacú* and its collectivity, for this space serves as a reference to affirm that the experience of the project of modernity in Colombia *decidedly*

¹¹ See de Friedemann and Patiño Rosellini (1993).

transcends the rhetorical, asserting the very intimate relationship that exists between the project of modernity and the transatlantic slave trade, a dynamic that gave way to the establishment of the nation-state.

The simple act of narrating the nation from the space of Chambacú and the worldview of its inhabitants constitutes an act of narrating from the margins of the nation, of the urban space and the literary and historical canons, to inscribe it in the realm of the African diaspora. In these terms, inscribing Chambacú gratifies the core desire of the text to open an inclusive space historically and literarily. This dual effort resonates at different moments in the text, in which the text itself struggles to present the “real” history of Chambacú and its origins, while in other instances it tries to remain within the literary and fictional realms. In both cases, the text experiments with what White (1987) recognizes as a “failure of intention,” when referring to the metadiscursive nature of the historical discourse and the impossibility of not bypassing or sidelining some historical element of what is being recorded, for “[e]very mimetic text can be shown to have left something out of the description of its object or to have put something into it that is inessential to what *some* reader, with more or less authority, will regard as an adequate description” (p. 3). Whether the novel privileges certain elements over others, or whether its stylistic strategies undermine its literary caliber because of the text’s misalignment with the dominant literary currents of the time, *Chambacú, Black Slum* attains the goals of its agenda with the inscription of the history of the *Chambaculero* people and the meaning of the appropriation of their own self-definition as such, in the process of narrating the nation.

The novel makes an effort to inscribe the *Chambaculeros*’ political struggle within a tradition of resistance that goes back to the legendary *cimarrones*, still present in Chambacú through their descendants from Palenque de San Basilio, who would defy the authorities by

making nighttime incursions into the walled city. Máximo, Chambacú's organic intellectual and political leader, along with other *Chambaculeros*, jumped over the city walls and wrote *consignas* against the eradication plan with avocado seeds (Zapata Olivella, 1983, p. 7).¹² Called *subversives* in the context of twentieth-century Cartagena, the *Chambaculeros*' very existence was viewed as what prevented the projection of a coherent, organized urban space that could be used as a mirror of the nation-state. In the process of imagining a national community, both, the city and the nation, need to erase Chambacú because it is a constant affirmation of the legacy of the transatlantic slave trade in the region.

As descendants of enslaved Africans that constitute a social and economic class in the modern context, *Chambaculero* subjectivity was seen as suspect and unable to speak the language of the nation, articulated by the local hegemonic discourse established by the center of the nation. The compartmentalization of Chambacú was the first step in the process of erasing it, for it limited *Chambaculeros*' access to the city-proper and shielded their presence from city dwellers. The conditions in which *Chambaculeros* lived is central in the novel and unveils a subhuman reality in which Chambacú's inhabitants must coexist with rats, dogs, and other animals, circumscribed as in a *corral*, a pig's pen, amid sewer water and the garbage and residues of the city. Clotilde, Máximo's sister, describes the marginal condition that defines Chambacú and the pervasive misery that surrounds it, characterizing Chambacú as "a land of

¹² The Spanish word *cimarrón* "was first used in Hispaniola to refer to the Spaniards' feral cattle, the enslaved Amerindians who escaped to the hills and, by the early 1530s, mainly to the many Africans who were escaping from slavery on the Island. That New World Spanish word—which spawned English *maroon*, as well as French and Dutch *marron* (and English *Seminole*)—actually derives, he [the Cuban philologist José Juan Arrom] now argues, from an Amerindian (Arawakan/Taíno) root, making it one of the earliest linguistic coinages in the post Columbian Americas" (Price, 1996, pp. xi–xii). Also see de Friedemann and Patiño Rosellini (1983). In 1774, governor don Juan de Torrezar Díaz y Pimienta authorized the local authorities to concede to Palenqueros the comunal lands of San Basilio (Escalante, 1979, p. 25). Escalante (1979) mentions 1692 as the initial date of the royal decree that granted Palenqueros the right to autonomy.

death” (Zapata Olivella, 1983, p. 23). Chambacú’s dilapidated houses surrounded the walls of the Old City and were suspended over mangroves that doubled as the city’s sewer system. In this context, Chambacú was an insular space, separated from land, whose difference and isolation rendered it alien to the urban and national bodies.

Chambaculero life took place and evolved within the parameters of the *corral*, and *Chambaculeros*’ perception of their own marginality led Crispulo, Máximo’s younger brother, to recognize that for him, as well as for the other *Chambaculeros*, “Freedom. Nation. Democracy. Are things that they have never known. Not even Máximo himself knows what those words mean. For the *Chambaculeros* there is nothing else but Chambacú. Not even Cartagena” (Zapata Olivella, 1983, p. 37). These powerful and widely cited lines from Zapata Olivella’s novel clearly state the dire situation in which *Chambaculeros* existed and their awareness of their own difference. More than 10,000 families were clumped together in Chambacú, “[t]here were there the downtrodden, Blacks recently arrived from Barú, Palenque, Malagana; those whose homes were destroyed by the police” (Zapata Olivella, 1983, p. 118). Deemed a tomb, a *corral*, and a land of death, Chambacú was far from ideal for the existence and survival of its inhabitants. However, Chambacú was the only space where the community identified as *Chambaculera* found refuge from the persecution of the agents of the state and could have access to jobs, however limited. As a shelter, the *corral* that contains Chambacú took on new meaning, for Chambacú became an urban *palenque*, ruled by its own laws and inhabited by a heterogeneous group of African-descended people.¹³ For the police and the soldiers, Chambacú was dangerous territory, “enemy foxholes under humid rooftops” (Zapata Olivella, 1983, p. 15). Amid the sewer

¹³ In general, *palenques* were places “where groups of maroon slaves sought refuge in the thick, tropical forests, and formed communities where they could keep their original cultures alive” (Price, 1996, p. 74).

water-infested roots of the mangroves, *Chambaculero* people found protection when the police and the army followed them.

In the very first paragraphs of part one, the soldiers' chase toward Chambacú focuses the novel's introductory scenes on the images of the persecution of Máximo and his supporters. This section of the novel is highly cinematic, evoking elements of popular culture regarding the capture, transport, and sale of Africans for their enslavement, as depicted in mainstream films such as Alex Haley's *Roots*, based on the novel of the same title. Creating a textual sound effect, the pounding of military boots, of "shadows, dust, voices [,] [the soldiers] awoke four silent centuries" (Zapata Olivella, 1983, p. 5). The persecution of *Chambaculero* men is a constant theme in the novel and one of the most evident representations of the violent memory of slavery in the text.

As a type of stereotypical violence executed by official actors of the political stage for their own ends, the act of going after *Chambaculero* men functions in different ways in the novel. On the one hand, the constant persecution of *Chambaculero* men denounces the use of violent means to restrict their access to the urban space and to contain them within the space of Chambacú. Constantly chasing *Chambaculero* men back into Chambacú also aggravates the feeling of compartmentalization and alienation felt by Chambacú's inhabitants. The police "would destroy [homes] and expel [people]. They [*Chambaculeros*] would return to erect and build their meager huts" (Zapata Olivella, 1983, p. 24). The forced recruitment of *Chambaculeros* to fight in the Korean War, which in itself involved capturing, incarcerating, forcing them to train for combat, and even torturing them, evokes the violent capture, transport, and sale of enslaved Africans during the transatlantic slave trade. These scenes highlight the importance of the novel as a depository of the testimony of the history of a collectivity still

subject to constant persecution and deterritorialization at the hands of different agents of violence. The persecution of *Chambaculero* men also shows that, at a moment in which Colombia struggled to project itself as a modern and civilized nation, the text offers evidence that the only element that has changed is the agent of persecution, not its object. The representation of the space of Chambacú in the novel as a depository of the memory of slavery also allows it to transcend its status of *arrabal*, slum, assigning it a relevant meaning in the city's, the region's, and the nation's history. In the context of Colombia and the novel, Chambacú becomes a disjunctive space that serves as a testimony of how alienation and marginalization create adverse conditions for individual and collective self-realization.

Hunger and lack of hygiene, schools, recognition of their status as citizens, and juridical representation, as well as the state's inability to recognize *Chambaculeros* as agents of local, regional, and national development, are some of the many elements that mark lack in Chambacú in the novel. *Chambaculeros* are fully aware of their situation and see themselves at the margins of a historical continuum that pushes them aside. For them, "[Chambacú] is the Old Africa transported on the shoulders of their ancestors. More painful when separated from civilization only by a canal of dirty waters" (Zapata Olivella, 1983, p. 99). "Chambacú without its men" (Zapata Olivella, 1983, p. 23), who could fish, box, or fight cocks, is condemned to hunger. Without their men, the women have no choice but "to sell themselves" for survival (Zapata Olivella, 1983, p. 28), as the Rudesindas do—twin prostitutes who work at the local bar.

Máximo experiences his own vulnerability at the hands of the police when he is subjected to torture with a hose, a moment in the text that echoes the violence that enslaved Africans had to endure, still vivid in the collective memory. Captured by the police, Máximo is tortured before his fellow *Chambaculeros* to terrorize them:

“Strip him!”

His hands tied behind his back. His skin bubbled oily drops of sweat. The blade of the yataghan cut into his belt and the buttons of his fly. His chest was a hot oven that breathed through its mouth. The police crudely pulled off his pants and undershorts. His erect, sweat-beaded hairs trembled.... He would fight. The gendarmes could mutilate him but he would not change his mind. They threw him to the floor. The Captain smirked boastfully. He unsheathed his sable and with it traced a cross on his loins. The contact of the cold point on the dangling testicles. The laughter of the policemen. He looked beyond their boots. The wall that divided the headquarter’s courtyard, where the group of his companions from Chambacú watched with bulging eyes. (Zapata Olivella, 1989, p. 29)¹⁴

This horrific scene stresses how, through its agents of control, the nation and its system of domination exert their own modern version of an act of repression derived from a structure that insists on underlining for *Chambaculeros* their lack of power and human dignity. In a way, the novel affirms that “[t]here is no system of domination that does not produce its own routine harvest of insults and injury to human dignity—the appropriation of labor, public humiliations, whippings, rapes, slaps, leers, contempt, ritual denigration, and so on” (Scott, 1990, p. 37). The torture and humiliation to which Máximo is subjected is meant to serve as a warning for the rest of the *Chambaculeros*.

The excess insalubrities, the excess of Blacks, of resistance, of marginal economies, of isolation, of histories, of lack of autonomy, and of land leads the local government to remove *Chambaculeros* and relocate them. Their response unveils the clarity of their resolve to stop the eradication plan:

—The police say that all Blacks have to leave Chambacú.
—They want to take away from us what we have built with sweat and blood.
—They say they are going to build a luxury hotel for tourists here on the island.
That way no one will see so many dirty Blacks! (Zapata Olivella, 1983, p. 117)

¹⁴ This translation is from the novel’s English version because it is a more accurate depiction of this very important scene. In other instances, I translated from the Spanish original myself where some sections were omitted or slightly changed in the published English translation.

The violent displacement of the *Chambaculero* collectivity and its excessive subjectivity is executed on a twice displaced people. Máximo reiterates this fact in his speech to his fellow *Chambaculeros* to protest their imminent expulsion from Chambacú and the eradication of the same: “We did not come here of our own will. We have been thrown out from everywhere and now they want to take away from us the tomb we have built to die” (Zapata Olivella, 1983, p. 118).

Máximo’s exhortations to the “wall of Blacks” (Zapata Olivella, 1983, p. 118), who protest the purge of the space they call home, point to the relationship *Chambaculeros* establish between their Blackness and their socioeconomic status, underlining a convergence of race and class. At this explicit intersection in the novel, “race is the modality in which class is lived” (Gilroy 1991, p. 30). Within this framework, affirms Gilroy (1991), “the positions of dominant and subordinate groups are ascribed by ‘race’” (p. 30). The restricted movements of *Chambaculeros* to and from the city proper allow them to perceive their own difference and disadvantages, characteristics that Máximo himself assigns to *Chambaculeros*, referring to them as poor and Black descendants of enslaved Africans. The materialist focus of the text and its social realist style help create the connection between economic disadvantage and Blackness.

Through the construction of a narrative that operates in multiple layers of meaning, *Chambacú*, as a text, aims to articulate a space defined by its social, economic, and political history. The walls of the Old City of Cartagena de Indias are the limits of Chambacú as much as they are the beginning of a Cartagena now museumized, appropriated, and resignified as regional and national cultural capital.¹⁵ *Chambaculeros’ négritude*, their blackness, and the history Chambacú contains resists museumization, a fact enclosed in the focus of the text: the dire

¹⁵ Price (1996) uses the term “museumize” to refer to the fact that, “in many parts of the Americas today, Maroons—like Amerindians—must fight hard and continually not be objectified and ‘museumized,’ as at once heroic and obsolete” (p. xiii).

circumstances in which *Chambaculeros* are forced to exist and the historical conditions that created that reality.¹⁶

The (Real) Space of Chambacú

The space of the novel, *Chambacú, corral de negros*, was an urban settlement that existed from the nineteenth century through the late 1980s outside the walls of the Old City of Cartagena de Indias. First known as Elba Island, Chambacú was initially settled by disenfranchised Whites and free Blacks, *libertos*, who worked in the Old City and retreated at night to the *arrabal*, the city's surrounding shanty town. Later, displaced residents from Pueblo Nuevo, Pekín, and Boquetillo and fishermen and migrants from Palenque de San Basilio found a home in Chambacú and took advantage of its proximity to the city, where they often found work.

The island's saga began in the sixteenth century, when the Spanish crown adjudicated it to Rodrigo Durán, a royal accountant. In 1539, six years after the foundation of Cartagena de Indias, the San Francisco Bridge connected the island to the walled city. For a long period of time, the bridge was the only way to cross the Matuna Canal and the only access to the city by land. The "Dean" Juan Pérez de Materano (Lemaitre & Palmeth, 2001, p. 9) was the registered owner of the island in 1566, upon his arrival from the Panamá Audience, where he was a priest. According to Deávila Pertúz (2008), property records state that Pérez de Materano gave the island the biblical name of Getsemaní, which may have been connected to the fact that "[d]uring the colonial period, Chambacú was the usual stage where enslaved Blacks practiced their

¹⁶ For information on the *négritude* movement and its impact among Colombia's Black intellectuals, see Cano (1974a, 1974b, 1974c). Also see Janis (2005). On Cambacú resisting museumization, see Zapata Olivella (1974, 1987). Zapata Olivella and his sister Delia also recorded an extensive collection of musical recordings of Black Latin American rhythms.

religious rituals” (p. 32).¹⁷ The construction of a Franciscan convent followed, “the first construction to take place in the *arrabal*, although the materials were very primitive, of lumber and straw, ... founded in 1555 by Fray Pedro de la Iglesia” (Deávila Pertúz, 2008, p. 9).

Various other theories about the island’s ownership would come about as historians began to take notice of the importance of reconstructing its past. Deávila Pertúz (2008) affirms that the island’s original owner was Colombia’s ex-president Rafael Núñez, who left it, upon his death, to his wife Soledad Román, who in turn gave the island to Antonio Golfo, the couple’s coach driver (p. 33). Deávila Pertúz also states that Antonio Golfo sold the island to the Brieva family, who was unable to stop poor displaced families from squatting on their property (p. 33). After a period of time, according to Polo Guerrero, the city, under the leadership of Vicente Martínez Martelo, purchased the island and allowed people to build their homes and live there without restrictions (as cited in Deávila Pertúz, 2008, p. 33). By 1956, Chambacú had a population of 8,687 inhabitants (Deávila Pertrúz, 2008, p. 33), a fact that further confirms its existence, although its name has been shrouded in doubt.

There are many accounts about the name Chambacú and its origins. The ambiguity of the origins of the island’s name has questioned whether a space named as such occupied the whole island or part of it, or whether it ever actually existed and precisely where. Escalante (1979) states that Chambacú is a “region that exist[ed] since its time [the time of San Pedro Claver in Cartagena de Indias in the XVII]... with a clearly African suffix” (p. 9). This suffix, according to Escalante, is proof of the presence of Chamba Africans from the Ashanti territory in the Gold Coast. San Pedro Claver, a Jesuit priest, was canonized for his charitable work, caring for the enslaved Africans when they arrived in slave ships half-dead. In his writings, Claver speaks

¹⁷ Deávila Pertúz (2008) does not offer sources to back these facts, nonetheless his comments are one of the very few assertions that inscribe the relevance of Chambacú in the lives of enslaved Africans transported to and sold in the region.

about his work with Chamba people in Cartagena's port "as his documents state," says Escalante (p. 9). At the linguistic level, the term *chamba* is used in the variant of Spanish spoken on the northern coast of Colombia to refer to a job. It is also used as a verb, *chambear*, that means to work. In my own research, I found archival records at the Archivo Nacional housed at the Palacio de la Inquisición in Cartagena, referencing the Street of Wonders, aka Chambacú, in property transfer records from 1828, as well as the names Callejón de Chambacú in records from 1849 and Chambacú Grande Island in records from 1878. These findings helped establish a trajectory of the name Chambacú and the existence of a space denominated by that name.

Lemaitre and Palmeth (2001) chronicle the story of Getsemaní from a historical perspective, without using the name Chambacú or affirming its existence. In their text, Lemaitre and Palmeth only allude to the name Chambacú in a footnote, stating commentary made by architect Augusto Tono Martínez about plans for the construction of the International Convention Center in the area.¹⁸ After citing Tono Martínez, Lemaitre and Palmeth do not discuss the existence of any other name for Getsemaní. On the contrary, the authors speak of Getsemaní as a coherent space with a well-articulated history and a homogenous community of inhabitants defined by activities: "fishermen, a common occupation, the taylor, the shoemaker, the farmer, ... the pharmacist, the silversmith, the saddler, the butler, the soldier... [these] were all occupations that directed the lifestyle of the *arrabal*, through the Arsenal shipyard's dock where large vessels were repaired (p. 22)." By listing these occupations, Lemaitre and Palmeth offer, thus, an economic analysis of the space, describing in detail the jobs performed by the majority of the people of the area,

¹⁸ Upon the relocation of Getsemaní's market in 1978, in actuality an expulsion for many, a number of powerful *Cartageneros* proposed to use the space for a convention center. There was significant opposition to this project on behalf of well-known architects like Augusto Tono Martínez, who "affirmed that the massive structure would block the aesthetic vision and called the future building anti-aesthetic and anti-urban. [Tono Martínez] proposed as well that it would be better to build a building such as that one on more open land such as Chambacú" (Lemaitre & Palmeth, 2001, p. 62).

privileging Getsemaní's economic reality and failing to establish its ethnic composition. The latter is particularly relevant, given the fact that many of the occupations mentioned in Lemaitre and Palmeth's text were performed by slaves, free Blacks, and their descendants in the nineteenth century.¹⁹

Defining Getsemaní as a marginal urban and illegal space certainly renders it an isolated geographical space solely defined by the economic disadvantage of its inhabitants. To further prove their point, Lemaitre and Palmeth (2001) cite historian José Urueta who, in the sixteenth century, commented on the state of Getsemaní, underlining how many people on the island "were given land..., and do not build on it and allow it to overgrow and that is why the city could not build on that side" (p. 10). Declaring Getsemaní an *arrabal* was common practice and gave way to government decisions that directly impacted the lives of its Black inhabitants. Ironically, data addressing the ethnic make-up of Getsemaní and its population count, which could mark the legitimacy of this space, is already contained in Lemaitre and Palmeth's (2001) text. The authors cite the 1777 census, one the most important censuses until the 1950s and 1960s, stating that "there were [in Getsemaní] 4,072 persons, who were divided into 32 church representatives, 938 *vecinos*, 2,900 free souls [free Blacks] and 202 slaves. Of the total, 408 persons were employed, including church representatives" (p. 21). A careful reading of these figures reveals and affirms a predominant ethnic heritage in the *arrabal*, or at least in an area of it. If the total of *free souls* or *libertos* is added to the number of slaves recorded in the census, the

¹⁹ De Friedeman and Patiño Rosellini (1983) state that "even when manual labor was primordially dedicated and concentrated in mining, The fact that the communities of origin of groups of captive Africans were more developed, made them more desirable for other activities aside from mining. Therefore, many worked in masonry, carpentry, blacksmith work and metallurgy; in sugar cane *ingenios* and as mechanics" (p. 59). Escalante (1979) defines hunting, agriculture, fishing, pottery, and cord making, among other occupations, as traditional activities of Palenqueros, who were part of Chambacú's population (pp. 29–40).

result shows a definitive majority of African and African-descended individuals totaling 3,102.²⁰ This figure, against a total of 4,072 individuals, affirms the presence of a Black community in the area. The numbers are even more accurate if the number of slaves imported through Cartagena's port of entry is brought into this equation. Between 1595 and 1640, a total of 135,000 enslaved Africans were brought to the New World through Cartagena's port, many of whom were destined to work in the area (Blackburn, 1997, p. 143).²¹ According to Blackburn (1997), "The slaves sold to the islands were few now [between 1595 and 1640] compared with the numbers going to Mexico (Veracruz) and Cartagena, a port which supplied slaves to Peru, Venezuela and Columbia (sic).... Cartagena Quito, all had a high proportion of slaves in their populations" (p. 143). Between the information gathered from Blackburn and the census it can be stated that, in the nineteenth century, Getsemaní was, and continued to be until the 1970s, a space inhabited by a collectivity that recognized and defined itself as Black and *Chambaculera*. Fontalvo and Zapata Olivella showed that, even in the 1960s, 95% of Chambacú's population was Black and mulatto (as cited in Deávila Pertúz, 2001, p. 51). A few months after the publication of Lemaitre and Palmeth's chronicle (2001), the Ministry of Culture published *Chambacú, a la tiña, puño y patá*, written by *Chambaculero* author Juan Vicente Gutiérrez

²⁰ Escalante (1979) describes the existing colonial castes in eighteenth-century Cartagena de Indias. According to this (caste) system, "Blacks were divided in free [*libre*(sic)] and slaves, while *criollos* and *bozales* established a difference within the two previous groups" (p. 11). Free Blacks (*libres*) were slaves who had purchased their freedom or were *de vientre libre*. The "neighbors" were defined as gentlemen who lived in the area. Such is the case that Fernández de Oviedo relates to describe incursions made by rebel runaway Blacks into Santo Domingo's *haciendas*: "Let it be known that among those who were there with the Almiral [Diego Colón] was Melchior de Castro, a neighbor of this city, to whose *hacienda* and property they [the runaway slaves] had done the damage I speak of here" (as cited in Escalante, 1979, p. 3). Note: I also include here the Spanish version for linguistic and ideological reasons: "Es de saber que entre los que allí se hallaron con el almirante estaba Melchior de Castro, vecino desta cibdad, al qual avian fecho en su hacienda y estancia el daño que se dixo de suso."

²¹ See the section on Vila Vilar in Blackburn (1997) on page 226.

Magallanes (2001).²² This text offers a rare autobiographical and ethnographic account of life in Chambacú, aimed at indelibly inserting Chambacú into Cartagena's imaginary. In his text, Gutiérrez Magallanes notes that

according to Donaldo Bossa Herazo's *Nomenclator Cartagenero*... when contemporary *cartageneros* say Chambacú, they refer to the ancient island by the same name, thus called because of its proximity to the so many times alluded urban area, which was a relatively small island whose owner, in the past mid-century, D. Antonio B. Gulfo, baptized it Elba Island. Today, Chambacú Island is no longer an island, because old landfills joined it to firm land. (p. 16)

New questions were raised by Bossa Herazo's (1981) words, revealing additional discrepancies regarding the identity of the island's original owners. Regardless of this fact, Gutiérrez Magallanes (2001) affirms Chambacú's right to be named as such and be inserted onto the regional and national urban historical landscape. Published by the same organization that printed Leimatre and Palmeth's (2001) chronicle, Cartagena's District Institute of Culture, *Chambacú, a la tiña, puño y patá* is testimony of what the official historiography erases, offering a personal account of what it was like to belong to a community that no one would recognize, a feeling evident in Gutiérrez Magallanes's words:

We grew up without knowing that that was the Elba Island. We knew that we were in Chambacú with the fear of being stigmatized, but we continued being in the shadows. We did not know that according to historians, the name Chambacú did not belong to us. It was all the same, we were there, sometimes denying ourselves, other times waiting for the new light that shone upon us when the name Chambacú began to be used on the arches of smart buildings and souvenir stores. (p. 21)

²² "A la tiña, puño y patá" is a popular saying from the Colombian Caribbean that refers to an action undertaken against all odds. The use of force—punches and kicks—refers to a popular ideology that regards the use of violence as a necessary and effective instrument to gain what is sought. The saying alludes specifically to interactions among adolescents in the neighborhood, when they must make their way through people who block their path or their view, or obstacles that prevent their access to a desired object. The title of Gutiérrez Magallanes's book affirms the *Chambaculeros*' right as a collectivity and a space to exist and resist, in spite of the multiple strategies devised by Cartagena's officials to eliminate Chambacú from the urban, regional, and national landscapes.

For Gutiérrez Magallanes and for the collectivity to which he belonged, Chambacú's existence was undeniable.

Curiously, Gutiérrez Magallanes (2001) himself disputes the origins of Chambacú's name, citing information intended to prove his point:

Donaldo Bossa's *Nomenclator Cartagenero*, states the following: *Chambacú*. The old name of at least half of Getsemaní, and the island adjacent to it, joined today to firm land by modern landfills, has been the object of much speculation, the name of which some researchers attribute an African origin, and others consider aborigine...

The names *Chambaca*, *Chamboco*, and *Chambacú* figured in *encomiendas* at the end of the sixteenth century, when the transatlantic slave trade through Cartagena's port had just begun, there is reason to believe that these terms are *Catíos* [from the area of Cartagena]. (p. 22)

No final conclusion seems possible in regard to Chambacú's name. What remains true is that, for a significant number of individuals who inhabited a space they knew as Chambacú, this space could be identified as such. Particularly important for this study is the specificity of the ethnic makeup of the majority of Chambacú's inhabitants, since:

[I]legally or clandestinely, Cartagena was the entry port of the ebony merchandise, to the extent that in 1663 in said port fourteen slave ships were counted, each with about 800 to 900 slaves..., something that should not surprise us if we take into account that the city founded by [Pedro de] Heredia was during a long time the center of distribution of Blacks in Spanish America. (Escalante, 1979, p. 9)

At around the same time, "there were about 20,000 slaves in Cartagena and its provinces" (Fals Borda, 1979, p. 1-51-B). In fact:

[by] the seventeenth century, New Granada's economy was unthinkable without the participation of Blacks. The development of mining, agriculture, cattle ranching, arts and crafts, commerce, domestic work and the harvest of pearls in the Caribbean.... In addition, for 350 years [Blacks] gave life to commerce, powering the boats along the River Grande de la Magdalena and other tributaries. (de Friedemann & Patiño Rosellini, 1983, p. 59)

This dynamic continued until the nineteenth century and beyond the abolition of slavery in Colombia in 1851.

For many years, Chambacú was considered a major obstacle in the race “to make Cartagena an emblematic [Colombian] city, a first rate urban enclave at the national and international levels” (Deávila Pertúz, 2008, p. 4). In the 1960s, the majority of the Colombian population had moved to the main urban centers. Almost 100% of Chambacú’s economy was informal with more than one third of the men involved in ambulant sales and more than half of the women employed as domestic servants. Given this panorama, Chambacú’s eradication was inevitable. The initial plan was to relocate all *Chambaculeros* to the neighborhood of Blas de Lezo, an area very far from the city’s center where most of them worked. A national bank purchased 1,401 prefabricated homes from Finland for the displaced families. A myriad of problems and political schemes prevented the start of this operation until August 16, 1971 when the relocation of the first 25 *Chambaculero* families began. This operation lasted a number of years amid controversy, fraud, and popular resistance.²³

Conclusion: “Somos afro”—*Champeta* Music and Afrodescendants Now

Though not everything has changed, much has for Afrodescendants in Colombia since the 1950s, some of it for the better. The implementation of the new Colombian constitution and the Law 70 in 1993 and the presence of African scholars and UN observers have helped Afrodescendants in different areas of the country to proudly assume their identity and place in

²³ Deávila Pertúz (2008) delineates in detail the complex process that accompanied the eradication of Chambacú and the relocation of a good number of its inhabitants. Aside from newspaper articles, his account is the most current and thorough of this event, since official documents pertaining to this moment in Cartagena’s history were sealed due to political rivalry and alleged fraud by local leaders.

the African diaspora, making strides toward full participatory citizenship.²⁴ This is, once again, a critical point in Colombian history and one Afrodescendants have seized to further their cause, making important alliances with indigenous groups to protest human rights abuses and marginalization. In summer 2009 in Cartagena, the International Seminar of Caribbean Studies, which was sponsored by the French Embassy, among others, honored the legacy of the francophone *négritude* movement and the memory of Aimé Césaire, a clear sign of the direction toward which Afrodescendants and their allies are pointing. The *champeta* musical, cultural, and political movement has ties with continental Africa—with Congo, Nigeria, and South Africa.²⁵ Organizations such as The Afro Latin American Research Association continue to nurture the bonds that Afrodescendant intellectuals from Colombia built with U.S. scholars and allies in the 1960s and 1970s. UNESCO, the UN's cultural branch, continues to funnel money to special events designed to create awareness among all sectors of the Colombian population about our African heritage. For example, currently, public school curriculum requires a component on the history of Afro people in Colombia. Ethno-education initiatives, though limited in scope, are geared toward the maintenance of cultural practices and Creole is still spoken in some areas of Colombia. The latest and most significant initiatives have expanded activities to non-Afro communities in small towns and rural areas to foster integration among different sectors of the population. Such was the goal of an event recently held in Chiquinquirá, a small town in the

²⁴ For more information on the changes to the Colombian Constitution, see República de Colombia (1991). To study the trajectory of constitutional change in Colombia, see Pombo and Guerra (1951) and Melo (1989a, 1989b). For the most current version of the Colombian Constitución and recent amendments, see Secretaría General del Senado (n.d.). The Law 70 enforces "[t]he protection of cultural identity, the rights of Black Colombian communities as an ethnic group, and the promotion of their economic and social development to guarantee that these communities may obtain real conditions for equal opportunity alongside the rest of Colombian society." For an analysis of women's grass roots organizations on the Pacific coast of Colombia, see Asher (2004).

²⁵ See Aldana (2008a, 2008b) to examine the trajectory of *champeta* music. Also see Bohórquez Díaz (2000), Mosquera and Provansal (2000), Streicker (1995), and Waxer (1997).

interior of the country, under the slogan “Somos afro”/“We are Afro.” It amounted to a historic undertaking and included performances by Palenquero *champeta* artists and Congolese singers.

In the political arena, Afrodescendants continue to break new ground, participating in local elections. Perhaps the most prominent was the race by Melchor “El Cruel,” a Palenquero *champeta* singer, for “‘jal,” a half position—half of consejal—as assistant to a prospective councilman. Melchor and the councilman did not win the local elections, but their feat tells the story of a battle half won half lost in the saga of Afrodescendants in Colombia, a story that resonates with similar tales throughout the African diaspora.

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