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Amid tropical forests and Black communities. The 19th-century traveler versus the otherness of the Colombian Pacific[1]

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Abstract. This article analyzes the perceptual schemas and the discursive platforms employed by 19th-century foreign travelers when they presented, in their countries of origin and to the local elites, the natural environment and the sociocultural universe of the Black communities that inhabited the Pacific coast of the young Republic of Colombia. We will see that the tropical rainforest was perceived as an inexhaustible storehouse of commodities or as a strategic hub of world trade. At the same time, the cultural legacy and the historical trajectory of the Afro-Pacific groups were disregarded; instead, these groups were viewed as the greatest obstacle to the "progress" of the region but also as a cheap source of labor to serve the capitalist system that emerged after the decline of the Spanish Empire.

Keywords: Travel literature, perception models, tropical rainforest, Afro-Pacific societies, racism, capitalism.

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Introduction

During the 19th century, a host of foreign travelers arrived to the Republic of Colombia.[2] They were interested in charting—through their correspondence, press articles, travelogues, and academic research—the diversity of the natural environments and the incredible array of mineral resources and new species of fauna and flora that proliferated in the mountains, coastline, valleys, and plains of this faraway land. Of course, the travelers also came into contact with the local populations of various regions, documenting the local "customs," the different "dispositions and temperaments," and the various "moral qualities" in their narratives.[3]

Each of these travelers had a great personal interest in venturing into places still unknown or little explored (with special emphasis on Amazonia, the Pacific coast, and the Orinoquia), and with their chronicles they also sought to satisfy their readership's curiosity about the "exotic" and the "wild" that lurked in these and other remote corners of the globe. But each also had their own agenda geared toward satisfying different interests, be they personal, those of their countries of origin, or those of the government and elites in the country they were visiting.

Thus, some travelers combined exploratory endeavors with diplomatic representation, while others came as scientists to enrich the collections of foreign museums, found local academic institutions, or inventory exploitable raw materials for industrial development. Still others received commissions from Bogotá for cartographic or road planning endeavors, and there was no lack of those who arrived in the country as agents of national and international commercial houses or with a desire to establish their own businesses or practice their professional skills.

But the travelers' baggage also contained the cultural universe of their home seats of power, methods of investigation underpinned by modern science and Western thought, as well as value systems, biases, and stereotypes inherited from their social milieus. These found expression from the moment the travelers established relations with the natural other and with the human groups outside their limited field of historical experience.

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2 For ease of understanding, we use the term "Colombia" to refer to the country that went by several different names during the 19th century: Gran Colombia (1819–1831), the Republic of New Granada (1832–1861), the Granadine Confederation (1862–1863), the United States of Colombia (1863–1886) and the Republic of Colombia (1886 to date). Panama, formerly part of this same country, broke away in 1903.

3 To better reflect the intellectual context of the writers, the terms in quotation marks—with the obvious exception of those referring to contemporary academic concepts—are ones that appear repeatedly in the sources consulted.

Specifically, in this article we explore the process of encounter experienced by some foreign travelers during the 19th century, in two specific contexts. One is the geographical/biological process that framed and gave meaning not only to the classification or "discovery" of the "utility" of nature in the Latin American tropics, but to the rhetorical discourses and platforms through which this was rendered intelligible under the lens of individuals who served as agents of a capitalist system that was undergoing intercontinental expansion.

To this end, we focus on one of the natural environments most antithetical to the frameworks of reference of the 19th-century foreign explorer: the warm floodplains and tropical rainforest—adorned with rivers, swamps, mangroves, hills, and estuaries—of the Colombian Pacific, which at that time extended from the Isthmus of Panama to the Mira River bordering present-day Ecuador. The second sphere of analysis centers on the travelers' interactions with an experience of human life diametrically opposed to their own: the diverse groups of "Negroes and their mixes" that lived in this region.

Uprooted from Africa, they were taken as slaves to work the region's gold mines from the second half of the 17th century. By the 19th century—after this coast was abandoned by the slavers following the wars of independence, but especially following general emancipation in 1851—it was clear that Afro-Colombian groups had adapted to all the local ecosystems and, in line with their own dynamics of production and settlement, had made them their own living spaces. At the same time, these groups created societies that were relatively autonomous of the national state—interconnected by the cultural exchange that accompanied early dialogue among different African ethnicities put to work in the mines—and which, over time, were gradually enriched by the know-how of local indigenous populations as well as certain elements of the dominant culture that they gradually reinterpreted in line with their own cosmovision.

Given their intimate relationship with the natural environment and the construction of a sociocultural sphere on the foundations of a particular historical trajectory—that of the African diaspora in the Americas during the colonial and republican periods—we refer here to these inhabitants of the Colombian Pacific as "Afro-Pacific," a modern term that is not anachronistic in that it reflects singular ways of seeing, thinking, feeling, and acting in a world whose formative period traversed the 19th century.

1. Travel literature and its gaze

Before reviewing some of the foreign travelers' representations of the Pacific environment and Afro-Pacific societies, it is necessary to describe some of the

conceptual considerations that oriented our review of the source materials. To begin with, it is worth noting that the importance of travel literature as historical testimony stems, at least in our view, not from any assumed "objectivity" of a perspective that seeks the literal "transcription" of observed in other cultures and places, but rather from the schematic approaches to reality that marked the explorers' steps, and from the discursive constructions through which they interpreted what they were seeing.

From this point of view, travel literature tells us less about the observed than it does about the observer, their life context, and the historical trajectories to which they belong. In his study of the Chorographic Commission of New Granada (1850-1859), led by the Italian general and geographer Agustín Codazzi, Esteban Rozo notes of the expedition members and their relationship with nature:

> […] The traveler has an important function: to make distant and nearby lands visible [...] to bring to light, illuminate [...] all that was ignored and which had to be transformed [....] In this way, the traveler was tasked with confronting the unknown [...] by turning to the categories available in contemporary thought, transposing terms, creating metaphors: wild, uncultured, uncouth were some of the adjectives that were employed to symbolize these spaces. (Rozo, 2001, p. 171)

Thus, we propose the need to explore the fundamental content of travel literature, based not on its format or its attempts at verisimilitude or falsification of reality in the "adventures" it describes but on the "place of enunciation" (Augé, 1998) of those who, located in a seat of power, would rename the world (Villegas, 2013; Arias, 2007). We therefore draw on the "new cultural history" approach proposed by Peter Burke for this type of sources.

> If we can only learn how to use them, travelogues will be among the most eloquent sources for cultural history [...] The point to emphasize is the rhetorical aspect of their descriptions, notably the importance of commonplaces and schemata. The texts are no more completely spontaneous and objective descriptions of new experiences than autobiographies are completely spontaneous and objective records of an individual life. (Burke, 1997, p. 94)

Seen as such, each travelogue is a way of situating oneself in relation to (an)other(s) that exposes, at the same time, the perception of "cultural distance" (Burke, 2006) as an attempt to delimit that distance in a way that is familiar to the author as well as the intended readership. This act of

appropriating the different is not so much a feat of neutral understanding of what is seen (an impossible ideal) as the necessary reduction, obliteration, inclusion, and deliberate combination of elements and meanings from the reality visited.

Thus, at times intentionally, at others unconsciously, many facets of the particular history of the subjects or landscapes scrutinized are "erased." But only in this way is it possible for "otherness" to be incorporated into "sameness," whereby each designation becomes a sort of act of possession and negation of the "other." The observer, self-appointed as the one destined to populate the "solitude" of the visited, sets himself up as the main vector of the process of contact, ordering the framework of interactions. The others are, literally, irrelevant; a point of observation, representation, and action is created in relation to the different, which Santiago Castro-Gómez defines as a "Hybris of point zero" where one must:

> [...] start all over again [...] [This] means having the power to designate the world for the first time; to mark out boundaries to establish which knowledges are legitimate and which are illegitimate, while also defining which behaviors are normal and which are pathological. Therefore, point zero is the absolute epistemological beginning [...] Being located [there] amounts to having the power to found, to represent, to construct a new social and natural vision recognized as legitimate [...]. (Castro-Gómez, 2005, p. 25)

For this exercise of power to be viable, the observer–narrator falls into an unavoidable paradox: he needs, on the one hand, to keep a distance from the other that is observed and narrated so as not to be "contaminated" by its singularity, yet he must also keep it close enough to collect the basic data required to rewrite its history in order to press it into the service not only of personal interest, but also that of the historical project of his society of origin—or else that which he seeks to establish in the places and on the peoples "traveled to." This is a major symbolic act of violence and, as Jorge Urrutia observes with regard to the Western gaze fixed on the heterogeneous universe of the "dark" African continent:

> Based only on [an ideology of domination] the observer is capable of committing an inaugural act as violent as designating the observed, [and so] that which proceeds is the appropriation of it [the observed] through words and the suppression of its own history. But, naturally, the observer, the conqueror, never discloses the conquest as such; he conceals it by citing the need of the observed, of the conquered. (Urrutia, 2000, p. 22)

What emerges here is a variant of Marc Augé's concept of the "immobile journey" in which the traveler may physically move his body, but he remains stationary insofar as he upholds the schema of reality that holds sway in his collective of origin. These are tours that, beyond the fleeting impression of the new, do not transform the explorer in any meaningful way. Thus, the texts we analyze describe journeys that did not bring the travelers closer to the reality visited; therefore, the narratives were the products of trips that were, to a certain extent, futile, because their main points of reference were constructed before the journey even started.

It is clear, then, that this "adventure of exteriority" (Augé, 2006) was highly limited and reduced in many cases to an imaginary

> […] of the journey of discovery—conquest [that] had much to do with certain collective myths, exoticism, the colonial dream, empire [....] The encounter with others, in this sense, has been a relative failure to the extent that, ultimately, conquest has sought to subjugate and reduce the other entirely [....] In this respect, the journey and the work are identified, *are the same*, since he who makes the journey or writes the work is not the same as in his origins, or thinks he is not the same, before and after undertaking the journey. (Augé, 2006, p. 13)

The Afro-Pacific "other" was defined not on the basis of the content of its being but rather on its deficiencies—that is, based on what it purportedly lacked in order to be equal to the visitor. And the exclusionary discourse regarding the inhabitants of those "dispossessed landscapes" (Lucena, 2006)—one of whose earliest and most noted exponents at the start of the 19th century was Alexander von Humboldt[4]—was revisited by subsequent generations of foreign travelers and by the *criollo* elites of the new nation who read their books, public correspondence, or newspaper articles.[5] Indeed, the Prussian naturalist's postulates about the "character" and "spirit" of the others of Spanish America:

> […] functioned as a prescient basis for law that identified the elements of civilization worthy of acquiring citizenship, as well as those that should be excluded from the statutes for not attaining the level of humanity consubstantial with that. In reality this is an artifice, because Humboltian opinion only con-

4 See this debate in full in Lucena (2006) and Peralta (2003).

5 On the influence and harmonization of ideas among foreign expedition members and their Colombian peers (Santiago and Felipe Pérez or Manuel Ancízar) through the Corographic Expedition, see Villegas (2013) and Restrepo (2007).

> firmed a posteriori the dynamic of exclusion, later turned by official propaganda into an act of republican responsibility, of protecting the public interest. (Lucena, 2006, p. 155)

In the 19th century a gap opened up between "modern" and "backward" forms of being and acting among non-hegemonic social groups in the Americas, in which, as Rita Laura Segato has asserted, various colonial assumptions were revived about the illustrious idea of "progress" for peoples, and the "races" capable of bringing "civilization" to all corners of the planet.[6]

> The benchmark for this hierarchy will always be Eurocentric, stemming from the racialization of labor and the reduction of non-White populations to servitude or slavery, made possible only by the imposition of a colonial order [....] The hegemonic and Eurocentric ideology of the "modern" as a paradigm, "modernization" seen as a value [...] [and] its establishment in the collective consciousness and in the goals of science and economics, are also results of this foundational hierarchy [...]. (Segato, 2014, p. 184)

Still, it should be added that the constitutive terms of this matrix of racist representation, with its corresponding discursive and rhetorical constructions, came together in the Colombian context with an exclusionary and segmented social and political order that had changed little since the end of the colonial system. The continent's elites, just like the travelers who came from abroad, were keen to find new raw materials, to tame and connect the wild geographies that harbored fabulous natural riches, and to appropriate local labor to implement their own plans for the "progress" of the Republic.

2. Tropical nature and the "African race"

In order to sketch out the image of the Black "other," an initial field of observation and interpretation centered on laying down the intellectual, emotional, cognitive, and psychological assumptions that defined the "African race" of the Pacific. These assumptions, in keeping with the racism underpinning the travelers' views, were interlinked within a designative macrocategory that distinguished the human condition according to the

6 This perspective also emanated from what Rut Bibiana González calls a new "self-regard" of the civilizing role among the Western powers. "These representations were constructed based on the self-regard that Europe attained from the middle of the 18th century as the cradle of "civilization," and on the basis of which it justified the existence of a linear progress negotiated only by centers of power such as Great Britain, while other societies were read in terms of scarcity, backwardness, and barbarism (González, 2017, p. 321).

natural environment inhabited, which, for our case study, was depicted in the travelogues as a "paradise for the heat."

The forests and waters of the Pacific were, then, the realm of the "scalding," of the "unhealthy," of the "mephitic vapors of putrefaction" and so the area could only be inhabited by "wild beasts" and "poisonous vermin." There, all was crude, savage, indomitable, and primitive, and, as the US engineer John Cresson Trautwine would note when he came to the area in the mid-19th century to explore possible routes for an interoceanic canal in the Atrato River watershed:

> [We were] almost daily exposed alternately to the fierce rays of the tropical sun and the inclemency of the tropical rain, and thorough drenchings of tropical rains [...] literally "cribbed, cabined, confined" in an oven; the heat of which was scarcely endurable, and reeking with that villainous compound of smells which codfish, semi-putrid jerked beef, unearthly cheese, and other odorous abominations of the [Black] crew exhaled day and night [....] (Trautwine, 1854, p. 32)

The human beings that lived there could not prevail over the conditions of this fearful nature, and were thus taken for "races" that were just as savage. To reaffirm these two exclusionary assumptions, a third element of imaginary representation was employed, defining the geographical points where "civilization" could and could not prosper, as well as the human groups capable and incapable of creating and propagating it. "Temperate" Europe, or the parts of the planet with Western seasons (such as the United States), or, in their absence and in the specific case of Colombia, the Andean region, were the areas earmarked to become civilizing epicenters. And foreign "Whites" or "*criollos*" descended from the Spanish were touted as the obvious agents to bring civilization to the Colombian Pacific.

Alfonso Múnera, addressing the influence on local elites of the allocation of meaning that fused the notion of tropical nature and "race" with the construction of civilization, suggests that:

> […] "civilization" increasingly began to be perceived in racial terms. That is, races began to be constructed as separate entities, and civilization as a stage of spiritual and material development that only the most advanced could attain [...]. The 19th-century language of races [was] the ideal way [for local elites] to explain to themselves the historical experience of their nations, especially their failures, as well as the way of reconciling this experience with the European viewpoint, in search of legitimation. (Múnera, 2005, p. 31)

Drawing on these three imaginary constructs, the travelers set about defining the "character" of the Afro-Pacific collectives, though this model of perception and interpretation of reality, inherited from the climatic determinism of the Age of Enlightenment, was embellished in the 19th century with other references—such as the notion of a "prideful attitude" that compelled these groups to resist the civilizing action of those who entered their dominions. The roots of that "insolent attitude" could be traced to a history of slavery and the "resentment" that this had left behind, but it was also a matter of these people being, just like the Pacific habitats, "hot-tempered" and of "fiery spirit."

Their resistance to the "modern" had developed because they did not "reason" like European man or the other "Caucasian races." They existed by "instinct" alone or through the simple "strength of their passions"; therefore, it made no sense to search for "profound or serene ideas" in Afro-Pacific collectivities when one could only expect to find the exaltation of "sensuality," "vain emotiveness," or "voluptuousness" in their behavior and thoughts, and thus the only thing to be encountered in that social sector from an ontological point of view was "immortality," shamelessness," and "all kinds of excesses" in their lifestyle habits.

Hence, the inhabitants of those coastal plains "often give themselves over to bad ways of living, consume large amounts of alcohol [...] It is commonplace to find that when the bottles arrive at the market, they are empty and the only thing the owner receives is an explanation that some Negro drank them along the way" (Gosselman, 1981 [1830], p. 128). Similarly, all these groups –albeit with some moderation in the case of "mulattos" given their measure of "White blood"—were "unruly," "disobedient," and "resist all forms of authority." Carl August Gosselman, a Swedish naval officer and geographer, noted earlier, in 1824:

> […] they have no respect for their superiors, whom they envy for being in command, and the relations they establish with them are those of obstinate individuals. And amongst themselves they neither help nor support one other [....] Of course now, in their status as free men, which they obtained with the triumph of Independence, they have become insolent. (Gosselman, 1981 [1830], p. 128)

This schema of racist perception ventured still further along this route of interpretation. Halfway between the sexual fantasies to which they could not give free rein in their native countries and the fear invoked in them by the supposed sexual "potency" of the "African race," some travelers, such as the French merchant Julien Mellet, wrote that most of the females of

Barbacoas "were beautiful women attired in quasi-agreeable and elegant dresses," while those of Anchicayá "resembled goddesses resplendent with jewels: magnificent necklaces, bracelets, earrings, brooches [...] they dress elegantly and the sparkle of gold and gems accentuates their beauty" (cited in Antei, 1995, p. 32). For others, on the other hand, "all Negresses or mulattas have out-of-proportion and shapeless bodies; they are all obese, or as skinny as skeletons: there is no middle ground. Which of these could be awarded the apple of ugliness? (Reclus, 1881, p. 29). However, on the nature of the inner being that shaped their everydayness, there was no such disparity of criteria. Indeed, in the majority of the texts reviewed, there was a shared regard for the Afro-Pacific peoples as objects of fear and, at the same time, of desire, fluctuating between prudent distance and longed-for proximity.[7] Few authors of the time, among them Agustín Codazzi, would define this ambivalent imaginary:

> The women, born in blazing climes, are equally blazing in temperament. The Negresses are very clean and of interesting physiognomy and lines, but without any grace, without any focus, without any sweetness, and all their charm lies in the lascivious. As to the criollas, that is the colored women, they are indolent, capricious, cunning, but if their interest is awoken they present themselves to you as full of charm, delicate languor, amiability, tenderness, and all possible gallantry to excite a lustful gallantry, which is the only thing they live for and that brings out their affection. (Codazzi, 1975 [1859], p. 325)

But although the women were seen as bearers of "sin" and their boundless "lust" was condemned, the Black man was also imagined a priori as a being of "fiery temperament" who sought only the "satisfaction of his abject desires" (Codazzi, 1975 [1859], p. 325). They also "like to look good and are full of themselves, and they devote themselves mainly to women, to play, and to dance. They are svelte, agile [...] but of such an ardor that they often need someone to rein them in" (p. 325). The French naval engineer Armando Reclus admonished that they were also "cajolers" who thought "with their instincts alone," which led them to seek relations

7 One facet of this rhetoric of distance/proximity revolves around the repeated description of the nudity of the Black bodies. As Leguis Gómez notes with reference to 19th-century illustrations of Caribbean inhabitants: they display "a nudity that does not square, historically speaking, with the uses and customs of a colonized morality [...], but also, this clash represents [...] a temptation that is glimpsed in animosity, an irritation that is not recognized, a liberty that is not possessed and is desired, but which is to be resisted. This explains the insistence in disparaging the other and the space it inhabits" (Gómez, 2019, pp. 76-77).

with women "not to endure but to satisfy immediate pleasure" (Reclus, 1881, p. 116).

Another trait ascribed to Afro-Pacific peoples was "laziness"; a desire to live "*dolce far niete*" (in sweet idleness) in the words of the Italian Codazzi, which was deemed a result of the "torpor" and "lethargy" that came of living in the natural environment of the Pacific. Examples abound of how this constructed notion turned into a recurring imaginary of all "colored people." To cite but one example, the US engineer Trautwine, upon arriving in the Black settlement of Tevadá, located on the banks of the Atrato, noted that:

> The inhabitants apparently have nothing to occupy them; and their most striking characteristic observable was an intense and unmitigated laziness [....] The very dogs were too lazy to bark at us; but silently regarded us "with one auspicious and one drooping eye," as if doubtful whether to expect a bone, or a kick. (Trautwine, 1854, p. 28).

In addition, the "heat" or the "prodigality" of the local environment was thought to leave the inhabitants living only in the moment, so that in this "race that refuses to work now that it is free" there were no "individuals with higher aspirations." As a model of this condition of "indolence," Codazzi cited "the inhabitants of the African race" living in the settlement of Barbacoas, situated alongside the Telembí River on the southern Pacific coast. Under slavery they were forcibly "engaged in the exploitation of [gold] mines," but now:

> […] misusing their recently acquired liberty, they have largely left this work to live in absolute independence, along the banks of the rivers, growing a few banana trees, some corn here and some cane there, whose products, along with the abundant fish in the rivers, and the peccaries that inhabit the non-flooded forests, give them a crude but dependable diet. (Codazzi, 1975 [1859], p. 333)

Still, the travelers did not shirk from pointing out what they considered positive about the human condition of the Afro-Pacific populations, and their imagined meanings were likewise offered up to the civilizing project. Just as Europeans had imagined since the 15th century when they first came into contact with the Black African, the 19th century the explorers of Colombia pursued the idea of this collective's supposed "physical superiority over other races." Despite the difficult conditions of the Pacific's natural environment, the French geographer Elisée Reclus noted that "the dark-skinned people [...] take pleasure in this atmosphere, so pernicious

for individuals of the European race; they laugh at the paludal miasmas, at the terrible, dangerous heat of the solar rays, and the hot steam given off by the soil" (Reclus, 1993, p. 9). Decades earlier, Gaspard Theodore Mollien, a compatriot of Reclus's, contributed to the shared representation of "Blacks, freed and slaves" as having an aptitude for strenuous work, while at the same time excusing "Whites" from the moral burden of slavery and exploitation:

> […] neither Negroes nor mulattos are prone to disease or to lymphatic ailments. Their organs are endowed with an admirable strength and precision; their limbs, while lacking in strength, have great agility, though they do not lend themselves to delicate work that requires mental attention, as in general they are not apt to apply it. (Mollien, 1992 [1824], p. 355)

Moreover, some—such as the Swiss theologist, philosopher, and historian Ernst Röthlisberger—discerned in the mulattos, thanks to their European or Andean inheritance, a "thirst for progress," a "desire to emulate the Whites," a "desire for refinement," and even "a measure of goodness and docility," even if "when they consider themselves scorned or offended," they could be "choleric, impertinent, and ungovernable" (Röthlisberger, 1963 [1898], p. 217). Based on the set of figurative concepts that marked out the supposed human condition of the Afro-Pacific inhabitants, some of their cultural manifestations during the 19th century began to be studied via the same "inventor and invented" approach (Urrutia, 2000).

3. Afro-Pacific cultural traditions

Afro-Pacific cultural traditions were observed not in accordance with the meanings assigned by their creators but through a series of racist rhetorical formulas that contributed to sustaining the idea of a "roughness of customs" or a "coarseness of uses and tastes" on the part of the communities with which the travelers came into contact each day. When it came to dietary habits, and notwithstanding the occasional expression of personal preference for certain types of fish, vegetables, or fruit, almost all the travelers ended up pouring scorn on the local cuisine. On his arrival in Darién and Panama City, the French entomologist and diplomat Auguste Le Moyne, for example, compared his own gastronomic standards with those he observed in this region:

> […] all edibles, with the exception for fish and sea turtles, were detestable. No veal was sold; beef was sold by the pole[8] [...] It

8 Translator's note: a reference to cuts of beef hung from poles.

> was hard work finding a little goat's milk, even though these animals roamed free through the streets along with pigs. Although game of all kinds abounded in the environs, because the people from the country do not like it, we would not have tried it had it not been for the generosity of the English consul [...] Pulses and above all potatoes were in extremely short supply; the poorly refined oil was disgusting. (Le Moyne, 1945 [1880], p. 408)

Likewise, in one way or another the travelers dismissed the public gatherings that were organized. Noting that in this region of the new country "everything was cause for celebration," many perceived only the outward appearance of certain festivities, purposefully disregarding their more profound aspects. Thus, social activities were taken as the mere product of "inertia" or the evident manifestation of the "heat of the climate" in its "exalted spirit," as well as infallible proof of "their fiery temperament" and another revealing sign of an "ignorance" that had kept the Afro-Pacific populations "removed from the most sublime fruits of humanity."

With disdain, the French doctor Charles Saffray wrote in his diaries that "baptisms [...], weddings, and business in El Chocó are grounds for fiestas, in which they dance and drink waywardly" (Saffray, 1988 [1872], p. 334). The British naval captain Charles Stuart Cochrane wrote of the pageants he witnessed in that same area during the first half of the century:

> [...] on Sunday evening [in Nóvita and the San Juan basin] [....] they have violin, flute, and drum; and dance Spanish country-dances and waltzes. Both men and women are particularly plain, indeed ugly, their countenances bearing strong proofs of the ravages of climate. They have no education of manners; consequently, it may be imagined how agreeably I was situated [...]. (Cochrane, 1971 [1825], p. 442)

For his part, the French botanist Édouard André arrived in upper Patía to experience the "bambuco" and "the local dances that we have heard so much about," but was immediately disappointed.

He found that all celebrations were "rough" and "clumsy," and of the music that emanated from the sextets composed of tiples, guitars, maracas, drums, cuños (similar to tambourines), and the still-famous Patía violins, he opined that: "The effect of this half-savage orchestra is from every angle indescribable" (André, 1984 [1877], p. 75).

Similarly, celebrations of Christmas and "the anniversary of Independence" were two of the biggest opportunities for collective congregation, to which the residents of all the settlements—even those, such as the rub-

ber-growing communities of Darién and Atrato, that were very far flung—descended en masse. Once there, "all day was spent playing and drinking, and all night drinking and dancing [...] I will leave at the consideration of all whether it is possible to repose during those feasts" (Reclus, 1881, p. 113). Inevitably, many of the travelers reiterated the point that such events were no more than an excuse for consuming "alcoholic spirits" and, above all, that the atmosphere would always be made oppressive by the heat and because "when one is a Negro[...] [there is] quite abundant cutaneous perspiration" (Reclus, 1993, p. 135).

Another cultural manifestation that was perceived and evaluated in an exclusionary manner was traditional medicine. For the travelers, no knowledge beyond that developed by the West could be cataloged as science, and no person without academic qualifications ought to be considered a medical authority. Thus, all the accumulated knowledge displayed by the Afro-Pacific societies in this field were, at best, a "fortuitous accident" or "widespread superstition" and, to make matters worse, actually "believed."

Nonetheless, they wrote that these social groups had certain medical authorities that administered diagnoses and therapeutic or pharmaceutical treatments. In the words of Codazzi, they were all "black witches" who were required especially for cases of snakebites, as well as the bites and stings of other "poisonous animals."

There were also "herbalists" who centered their knowledge on "plants and potions" that were formulated for all types of "minor illnesses" (dysentery, inflammations, cuts, eczema, parasites, and so on), and certain "artisans" who were experts in mending muscle or joint sprains and even dislocations or fractures through "*sobijos*" (herbal massages) or mechanical traction procedures executed by hand.

All were dubbed "healers" or "black curanderos," and, as an important ethnographic aside, some of the travelers who ruminated on medical matters touched upon the work of midwives, whose medical knowledge and skills they considered the equal of their male equivalents. But few foreign visitors sought out or validated the wisdom of the inhabitants and, at least among the authors consulted, only the French mineralogist Jean Baptiste Boussingault (much more open than many to direct encounters with members of these collectives) submitted himself to their treatment.

After an accident en route to inspecting gold mines in the vicinity of Nóvita, Boussingault was taken to a local doctor, and "when I came round, an old Negress, a 'curandera,' a true doctor, treated the wounds on my legs with certain herbal extracts, and that was how I ended up in a fit state to visit the panning site" (Boussingault, 1985 [1892], p. 228). But the aspect that

triggered most recrimination was the magical/spiritual element ascribed to the illnesses, and the fact that the curative arsenal also contained "secrets," "prayers," "recitations" and other verbal formulations that consecrated the healing power of the word in the vein of the original African practices.

Recounting his brush with this side of Afro-Pacific medicine, Armando Reclus wrote in dismissive terms that:

> […] each settlement has its enchanters and enchantresses who claim to cure snakebites thanks to the virtue they have inherited or acquired by marvelous means [...] Los cautcheros [sic] praise the excellence of the countless antidotes, among which are wonders and marvels; but it is true that they barely resort to any other remedy, when they learn of a bite, than a "little prayer to San José." (Reclus, 1881, pp. 116 and 185)

But however begrudgingly, some products of the Afro-Pacific pharmacopoeia had to be acknowledged. Having witnessed the effectiveness of one local remedy, the US botanist, journalist and Presbyterian minister Isaac Holton noted that: "Here I met with quite a familiar tropical plant for the first time, *Curcus purgans*, called friar's cathartic—purga de fraile. I suspect its spread over the globe as a weed had been aided by its convenience as a purgative [...]" (Holton, 1857, p. 532). Meanwhile, Codazzi reported that these folk doctors frequently prescribed oarsmen a masterful formulation to prevent mosquito bites and muscular injuries during their arduous work navigating the rivers. "The method they use to defend themselves from them is to apply the oil of a kind of palm and rub the joints with bear oil to acquire greater strength" (Codazzi, 1975 [1859], p. 359).

Different aspects related to core beliefs and religious devotion also attracted the attention of the 19th-century foreign chroniclers. The syncretic expression of Afro-Pacific spirituality, in which certain African religious elements were fused with beliefs from Latin American indigenous and popular Christian culture, allowed these groups to develop their own ways of feeling otherworldly existence. To the dismay of the foreign visitors, even events as significant as funereal rituals (the traditional *Alabao* wakes) were marked by singing of "contested responsories," dancing, dice and card playing, and liquor drinking, not only to commemorate the life of the deceased but to facilitate the passage of the soul to the other plane of existence where it would watch over its own as an ancestral protector.

None of this was perceived by the travelers, and the ever-detached Codazzi only ventured to observe that:

> […] the colored people have another peculiarity in burying their dead, and on this day all relatives and friends gather in a

> room contiguous to where the deceased lays. They eat, dance, and drink, while in the room with the body they sing hymns and prayers. This carousal goes on all night and the following day they deliver the coffin to the priests, who accompany it to the grave with the customary prayers. (Codazzi, 1975 [1859], p. 326)

Thus, through their accounts of cultural events and characterizations of a prefigured Afro-Pacific human essence, the 19th-century explorers agreed that in these places the chaos of tropical nature and the disorderly behavior and thoughts of their inhabitants reigned; and therefore, in unison—with little in the way of nuance—they clamored for the arrival, as soon as possible, of the light of "civilization" in these "dismal countries of heat."

4. Social change and dreams of progress

The travelers did not hesitate to make certain recommendations—apparently addressed to the Colombian elites, who would see these texts as sources of inspiration for their own interventionist projects in the Pacific region—so that in a few decades this "forgotten" area could be transformed into an showcase of "progress," symbolized by the "happiness" and "prosperity" of its people.

But before going over some of their proposals, it must be recalled that the particular "other" (the non-Andean, the non-White, the supposedly non-racial, the non-urban, etc.) that emerged in the pages of the travelogues was an other "emptied" of its own historical memory, devoid of its capacity for agency over its present and future destiny, condemned to "inferiority" by its cultural practices and, in turn, incapable of becoming a key actor in the "development" of its region despite having lived there for some time. As Margarita Serge states, these pauperized images of the collectives that made up the "reverse side of the Nation" gave rise to:

> […] an Other reduced to being a recipient of squalor, destitution, and bad blood, rendered mass available for slave labor and servitude; and an other, as vulnerable and innocent as a child, a depository of ancestral knowledge and traditions that represent the idea of the atemporal and magical relationship with the natural and the supernatural [...] In both cases this Other, dehumanized, is seen as an object that must be surrendered to the creation, preservation, or reconstruction of ideal orders. (Serge, 2005, p. 251)

By the same token, one point on which all visions coalesced was the region's great economic potential insofar as it connected the mercantile

basins of the Atlantic and the Pacific. "El Chocó, because of the disposition of its hydrographic system, connects the two seas" and was therefore a "most valuable treasure" (Boussingault, 1985 [1892], p. 195). Thus, as the Argentine diplomat Miguel Cané also noted, this coast and the areas around it, just like old Constantinople, was:

> One of those geographical points that [...] are destined to an importance for the ages. The center-point between two continents, compulsory path for Europe's trade with five or six nations in the Americas, it is natural that it has attracted the attention of the great drilling [to lay the railroads] (Cané, 1992 [1882], p. 232).

The Pacific coast was also rich in botanicals and, therefore, the discourse did not overlook the vast stock of "materials" with which to sustain the development of the great Western powers. There was an abundance of rubber, banana, vegetable ivory, fibers, colorants, natural medicines such as "copaiba oil" and "dragon's blood," and a myriad of raw materials in demand by the growing industrial output of Britain, France, Germany, and the United States. In the case of vegetable ivory alone, Elisée Reclus picked up on its future potential for a range of applications (buttons, combs, cases, etc.).

> Another tree included in the palm family is tague, which has the form of a young coconut tree and grows in abundance on the banks of the Magdalena, Atrato, and Patía. Its voluminous nut, called *cabeza de negro* [Black man's head], shaped like a melon, contains numerous seeds that resist the teeth of peccaries and monkeys; it is the vegetable ivory employed by industry for the fabrication of a thousand small objects. (Reclus, 1993, pp. 116- 117)

Minerals, especially gold and the increasingly coveted platinum but also copper, zinc, magnesium, limestone, and aluminum were all bountiful in the area, and would prove yet more lucrative resources for whoever arrived there to exploit them by way of new mining technologies. After several excursions through Urabá and northern Chocó, the Swiss mineralogist Pedro Nisser confirmed that in the tributaries of the Atrato or closer streams such as Léon or Pavarandó: "Certainly there is no country in the world whose hydrographical riches can compare with this, all of whose water courses are, what is more, auriferous. In some of these rivers one finds gold in nuggets of large size" (Nisser, 1990 [1834], p. 65).

Thus, the planned railroads that would descend from the Andes to the eastern coast, and the roadways from Cali, Popayán, Pasto, and Medellín, were eagerly anticipated for the role they would play in transporting the

Pacific's resources in order to buoy the travelers' home economies. Meanwhile, the writers noted that the river and seaports were gradually increasing their trade flows through the import of manufactured goods and the export of raw materials. Such was the case of port of Buenaventura, which:

> […] is fine, and, I understand, capable of containing a great number of large vessels. Perhaps, ere long, the poor village of Buenaventura may become a commercial town of some consequence, when the communication with the interior is improved. (Hamilton, 1827, p. 158)

But if these visions were to materialize in the near future, there would have to be changes introduced among the human groups who lived there.[9] Whereas the travelers' writings included calls for the disappearance of indigenous communities (a topic worthy of an article in itself)[10] on the grounds that the violence of conquest and the subsequent numerical and "mental" decline of the population during the colonial era was thought to have reduced them to "degenerate" and "stupefied" races—when it came to the Afro-Pacific groups, these voyagers felt differently.

Somewhat at odds with the climatic determinism of the enlightened colonials and also with the eugenic theories in circulation during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the "backward" state of these collectives was thought to be reversible.

Following the Lamarckian idea of "transmission of acquired characteristics," the process of change was indeed possible for those perceived as the "weakest in civilization" (Codazzi, 1975 [1859], p. 328). Assumptions about "races" during this period were not essentialist in terms of climatic influence (Villegas, 2013; Restrepo, 2007) but possibilist, insofar as the Afro-Pacific groups were considered able to acquire the moral, intellectual, and cultural inputs necessary to advance their ontological status and attain

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9 On this interventionist approach, George R. Andrews wrote that "at a time when the burgeoning export trade was tying Latin America ever more closely to Europe and the United States, these international currents of racist thought and practice could not fail to have powerful influences on the region. Scientific racism was immediately embraced by turn-of-the century elites confronting the challenge of how to transform their "backward," underdeveloped nations into modern, "civilized" republics [...] In order to be civilized, Latin America would have to become white" (Andrews, 2007, p. 118).

10 Among other measures, they sought the rapid disappearance of indigenous *resguardos*, and the occupation of their lands by settlers. Some spoke of the need to create "reservations" under military guard in which to confine the indigenous peoples until their eventual "extinction"; remove the traditional authorities away from the region in order to destabilize social cohesion; and initiate acculturation processes through religious schools where the use of native languages and any expression of ancestral culture would be prohibited. In this way, it was envisioned that the indigenous presence in the Pacific could be brought to an end in a few generations.

the standard of mental, psychological, and material development proposed by the colonizer.

Of course, this entailed a racist conceptualization of human diversity whereby the historical yardstick of progress was the "White race" or at least those who aspired to this category, such as national elites (Arias, 2007). Thus, until the arrival of long-deferred equality under a unifying republican citizenship, the Afro-Pacific collectives would have to be placed under their guidance and subordinated to their representatives. The notion that lurked in the travelogues was not so much the "racial pessimism" (Restrepo, 2007) of no possible redemption as a belief in the process of external intervention that could transform the Afro-Pacific groups and lift them from their customary "indolence." And though Eduardo Restrepo writes specifically about Codazzi's thinking, it could apply equally to the majority of the travelers consulted.

> [He] conceives of civilization as a process that not only leads to the emancipation of man from the constraints imposed by the physical world but also results in the gradual disappearance of the differences between peoples or nationalities as "culture grows and is universalized." The difference between these peoples or nationalities is cleansed by the artistry of civilization [...]. (Restrepo, 2007, p. 37)

Along these lines, the first stage of what one might term the "civilizing formula" involved promoting the settlement of the area by migrants belonging to "races" that were more "industrious" and of better "moral conditions." Thus, the desired change would no longer occur via the route of *mestizaje* but through a simple "spirit of emulation" or the "transmission" of good habits" In the words of Miguel Cané:

> […] it will be necessary that the surplus European population first fills the vast regions of the Americas still unpopulated, which attract emigration in the first instance due to climate similarities and ease of transportation, so that the current follows the course to Colombia [...] But if this prospect is remote in the sense of a definitive transformation, it is not with respect to the immediate progress that will move it along. (Cané, 1992 [1882], p. 127)

If the arrival of a "rigorously composed" population such as Europe's was not feasible, then settlement by the inhabitants of the neighboring Andean regions should be promoted. In the northern part of the Pacific coast and thanks to the "influx" from highland Antioquia:

> […] a new era will present itself to Chocó; the mountains will be cultivated and inhabited, the indolent, ever-naked, ever-poor Negroes remaining on the lower banks of the Atrato. It is possible that through contact with active people and that the rapid progress that always occurs in places with mineral riches will make them emerge from their stupidity and the lethargy and neglect in which they live, and seek through work a way of imitating them. (Codazzi, 1975 [1859], p. 328)

In order to introduce an enclave, extractive economy in the Pacific, urgent change was needed in the exploitation methods and the ownership structure of the land occupied by the Afro-Pacific people. Landholding here, like in the indigenous *resguardos*, was collective. Isaac Holton, among many others, saw this system as "inefficient" and noted the need to substitute these "pre-capitalist systems" with a private ownership model. Thus:

> One strange peculiarity [...] is that the lands here are common property. Some man in times past owned all this plain and, of the hills adjoining, a quantity unknown to me [...] When he died it fell to his heirs without division. Some may have sold half their share, and in this way [little by little] there [now] are more than a hundred owners of this property. There are [...] laws to regulate the improvement of the soil and other questions that must arise under this cumbrous co-proprietorship. (Holton, 1857, p. 531)

For the foreign explorers, another incomprehensible practice was the settlement by successive generations of families on the riverbanks, coasts, or forests, and the only requirement to enjoy equal rights of exploitation as everyone else was to prove that you were a "relative" of the initial occupants.

> The land always belongs to the first person to come along: he who finds a plot that for whatever circumstance may be suited to him. He clears it, he works it, he cultivates it and takes advantage, without anyone, whoever it may be, claiming a right, not even a nominal one, to that plot [...] That which a man leaves behind when he dies passes naturally, without anything having been legislated on the matter, to the woman with whom he lives and his children. (Reclus, 1881, p. 158)

And if the costs of this whole "enterprise of civilization" were to prove too onerous, efforts would have to be targeted at the very least on the mulattos given it was they who had the "clearest understandings." Thus, "education and material interests must furnish the mulatto with the necessary resources to steer his progress; he has good enough attributes to acquire knowledge

and prosper that one can be in no doubt as to what the future has in store for him" (Röthlisberger, 1963 [1898], p. 217). Indeed, the other "black- and brown-skinned" strata could not remain outside the Pacific's "happy tomorrow" and ought to take advantage of social roles and activities befitting of their status.

Such was the case of "zambos" (indigenous and Black mestizos), who were so "strong" and "vigorous" that they were ideal recruits for militias or the more risky aspects of gold mining. But they could also be put to work in other areas, as they were deemed to "have the character of oarsmen and are the most indomitable branch of society. They are sailors, pilots, fishermen [...] and laborers, but tend to be and are the laziest and most disobedient of species" (Gosselman, 1981 [1830], p. 334). Ultimately, if these development projects were to be realized, invariably these groups would have to be employed as cheap and available labor—not as landholders—on the bottom rung of the proposed social, political, and economic order.

To assure their permanent subordination, it was necessary to place them under the control of Catholic "missionaries" and a legal system that would penalize their "idleness" and "licentiousness" while forcing them to "be true Colombians."

> For the province [of Chocó] to progress at the pace at which all industrialized countries move forward, it was necessary that the day-laboring class be compelled to work through a well-ordered police law. Otherwise, the country could each day lag behind all the more due to a lack of cultivation, or else stand still, thus enormously damaging the swift development of the public wealth. (Codazzi, 1975 [1859], p. 323)

With these and other control measures, the Afro-Pacific people and their "combinations" could be led to a promising future that afforded a stake in an increasingly globalized capitalism, mapped out for them, without consultation, by the external and internal sectors of power that were already reaping the benefits.

Conclusions

In this article we have shown that 19th century travel literature on the Colombian Pacific is an invaluable source for appreciating the incursions of Western culture and the globally expanding capitalist system into the natural environment, and the effects on the Afro-Pacific people that lived in this part of the young republic. The chroniclers deployed a model of perception and interpretation of what they observed that began to emerge even before they left their countries of origin; and to make sure that the

different elements could be understood by their respective readerships, they drew on a network of meanings that threaded together a racist and neocolonial narrative about the reality they were examining. Thus, besides being perceived as an "oven," this tropical region came to be regarded as little more than a stock of industrial inputs or a hub for regional and international flows of trade and capital. In turn, the Afro-Pacific collectives were depicted as "non-modern"—that is, as the greatest barrier to "progress" in the area. But the chronicles also presented these people as a ready source of labor for commercial exploitation of local raw materials, not least because they exhibited a supposed peerless physical "strength" and survived in places where the "Whites" fell ill.

This and so many other racist postulates were consulted at the time by Colombian elites, who also wished to reach the Pacific as soon as possible to "civilize" it and take advantage of its economic potential. But in the end, these "others" were not passive actors in the destiny that had been envisaged for them, and they have survived to the present day by developing their own responses to challenges that in many senses have diverged from the exclusionary development model that the foreign travel chroniclers of the 19th century helped to build.

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