



Fronteras de la Historia

ISSN: 2027-4688

ISSN: 2539-4711

Instituto Colombiano de Antropología e Historia

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Fronteras de la Historia, vol. 28, no. 2, 2023, July-December, pp. 76-99

Instituto Colombiano de Antropología e Historia

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22380/20274688.2499>

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Women in the Geographies of Marronage - Territorial Intimacy as a Freedom Strategy¹: The Case of María de Los Santos and Her Bonga²

Mujeres en las geografías de cimarronaje: intimidad territorial como estrategia de libertad: el caso de María de los Santos y su Bonga

DOI: 10.22380/20274688.2499

Received: October 17, 2022 • Approved: February 22, 2023



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Abstract

As a strategy for freedom, marronage has usually been narrated as an initiative of enslaved men who defied colonial power to escape oppression and produce territorialised societies away from slavery. Drawing on historical Maroon studies in Afro-Latin

- 1 This paper was presented at the online seminar, Espacios y Resistencias de Mujeres Afrodescendientes: Pasado y Presente en Colombia y Venezuela (Spaces & Resistance of Afro-descendant Women: Past & Present from Colombia and Venezuela), on 26 November 2020, sponsored by Economy, Development, and Social Justice Research Group – School of Geography – Queen Mary University of London. This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council UK through Grant Reference ES/T007540/1; The University of Sheffield through Grant Reference University Prize Scholarship; The British Academy UK through Grant Reference Application PF20\100040.
- 2 I am deeply grateful to the members of San Basilio de Palenque, Rafael de La Bonguita, and La Pista for sharing and trusting their oral tradition and painful memories of their forced displacement with me. Thank you also for the insightful comments of my mentor, Dr Sam Halvorsen, and Professor Miles Ogborn. This article is dedicated to María de Los Santos for her inspiration and knowledge, which you cannot learn from books.
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America, feminist geography, and communitarian feminist praxis on *territorio cuerpo-tierra* (body-land as territory), this article explores the role of Maroon-descendant women in the making and remaking of territories in the Colombian Caribbean. Records in the General Archive of the Indies, the General National Archive in Bogotá, the Historical Archive of Cartagena de Indias and the oral tradition of Maroon-descendant communities themselves are used to explain the place of women in struggles for territory in the context of violent land dispossession due to Colombia's armed conflict. This article also demonstrates how the reparation process to claim back lost lands is also a women's matter. We can understand this as an intimate and affective, almost invisible process, as in colonial times, by analysing the spatial practices of María de Los Santos, an internally displaced woman from the community of La Bonga in San Basilio de Palenque, a town of descendants of fugitives from slavery. These practices, understood through the work of an anthropologist from this community, Jesús Natividad Pérez Palomino, are intimate yet collective and mobilise both the tangible and intangible legacy of marronage to enable her and her people to endure.

Keywords: Marronage, Territory, Women Maroons, *cuerpo-territorio*, Colombia

Resumen

Como estrategia de libertad, el cimarronaje ha sido narrado como una iniciativa llevada a cabo por hombres esclavizados que, desafiando el poder colonial, escapaban de la opresión y creaban sociedades territorializadas alejadas de sus opresores. Desde el análisis de la historiografía sobre el cimarronaje en Afro-Latinoamérica, la geografía feminista y la práctica feminista comunitaria territorio cuerpo-tierra, este artículo explora el rol de las mujeres descendientes de cimarronas en la construcción y la reconstrucción de territorios en el Caribe colombiano. Se consultaron registros del Archivo General de Indias, del Archivo General de la Nación en Bogotá, del Archivo Histórico de Cartagena de Indias, así como la tradición oral de las comunidades descendientes de cimarrones y cimarronas, para explicar el lugar de la mujer en las luchas por el territorio, en un contexto de desposesión violenta de tierras debido al conflicto armado en Colombia. Este artículo muestra cómo el proceso de restitución de tierras arrebatadas constituye también un asunto de mujeres. Comprender este proceso como íntimo y afectivo, casi invisible, como en tiempos coloniales, es posible desde el análisis de las prácticas espaciales de María de los Santos, una mujer desplazada internamente de la comunidad de La Bonga en San Basilio de Palenque, un pueblo de descendientes de fugitivos de la esclavitud. Estas prácticas, entendidas a partir del trabajo del antropólogo de esta comunidad Jesús Natividad Pérez Palomino, son íntimas y aun colectivas, y movilizan, al mismo tiempo, el legado tangible e intangible del cimarronaje que les permite a María de los Santos y a su pueblo resistir al exterminio y al despojo.

Palabras clave: cimarronaje, territorio, mujeres cimarronas, cuerpo-territorio, Colombia

Introduction

In 2001, in the context of the Colombian armed conflict, the community of La Bonga (L.B.), located in the Montes de María (a hilly area in the north of Colombia in the Caribbean region, Province of Bolívar), was forcibly internally displaced by paramilitary forces, the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC). For more than a century, L.B. was the agricultural reserve for San Basilio de Palenque (SBP), a town of descendants of fugitives from slavery or *cimarrones* (Maroons). In Colombia, *cimarrón* and *cimarrona* describe those who escaped slavery in cities, *haciendas* (large farms), and mines to build their own territorialised societies — *palenques* — during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (McFarlane; Navarrete, *San Basilio de Palenque*; Cassiani).

As a consequence of the forced displacement from L.B., its inhabitants, also known as *bongueros* and *bongueras*, set themselves the task of creating new settlements, La Pista and Rafael de La Bonguita, in the vicinity of their former lands, away from armed violence. Thus, in 2014, the process of re-appropriating the territory of L.B. began under the guidance and care of a Maroon-descendant woman, María de Los Santos, who lived in forced displacement in La Pista.

Literature on feminist geography and historical readings of marronage in Latin America are used to examine María de Los Santos's spatial practices of re-appropriation of L.B.'s territory to take forward the decolonial communitarian feminist praxis of *territorio cuerpo-tierra* (body-land as territory) by developing the idea of territorial intimacy as a Maroon-descendant women's spatial practice of care and land restitution strategy in the broader creation of counter-hegemonic territories (Mançano, "Movimientos socioterritoriales"; Zibechi; Halvorsen *et al.*; Haesbaert, "Do corpo-território"; Zaragocin and Caretta). In the scholarship on counter-hegemonic territories, territory means space appropriated and mobilised by social movements to achieve political goals (Halvorsen; Haesbaert, "Território(s)"). In this article, from Lorena Cabnal's *territorio cuerpo-tierra* praxis, territory is an intimate and intertwined relationship between women's bodies and the land.

Among the different forms of liberation of enslaved people and their descendants in Latin America, from a historical and geographical perspective, marronage implies symbolic and material space-making as a form of resistance. With certain exceptions, this practice has been narrated as a Black struggle in colonial times from a men's perspective (Miki). However, this article opens up a debate about how the modern political mobilisation of its legacy has also been a spatial practice of women: a collective-intimate practice (Pérez, *Lo colectivo*). Such a practice

interweaves with other more visible, priority strategies for defending territory at SBP, mainly conducted by men, such as collective land titling.

In this paper, the notion of *intimidad colectiva* (collective intimacy) is drawn from the work of anthropologist Jesús Natividad Pérez Palomino (“Del arroyo” 18). He developed this concept to analyse his own community, SBP. Pérez expounds upon the idea of intimacy that, unlike in Western Europe, is not private but rather public and collective (Pérez, “Del arroyo”; Pérez, “Lo colectivo”; Valentine; Mountz and Hyndman; Smith).

After a brief methodological section and explanation of the feminist praxis *territorio cuerpo-tierra*, section three examines women’s roles in building clandestine communities of fugitives from slavery in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Section four explores how colonial Maroon spatial practices have been mobilised in a spatially intimate collective manner by a Maroon-descendant woman. The conclusion demonstrates that Maria de Los Santos’s body navigation and construction of collective territorial intimacy-care between distinct lands-spaces (L.B.) and the forcibly displaced community of La Pista provide new lenses for understanding the legacy of marronage. As in colonial times, present marronage is an ethic of delicate spatial balance between opposing spaces that appear mutually exclusive but coexist, allowing María de los Santos’s survival as a woman and as part of a collective.

A Methodology in-between the Archive and the Oral Tradition

This article drew on two sources, the archive and the oral tradition, to critically grasp in a continuum the contribution of Maroon women and their descendants in making and re-making their past and present territories. In the text, I indicate when the data were drawn from the archive. Otherwise, it comes from oral tradition. Archival records were collected from the General Archive of the Indies (AGI) in Seville, the Historical Archive (AH) in Cartagena de Indias, and the National General Archive (AGN) in Bogotá in 2016. The historical documents examined describe SBP’s colonial history from 1694 to 1778. This history includes extermination campaigns against the *palenque* and negotiations with the colonial authorities. After these negotiations, a peace agreement recognised the *palenque*’s territory and anticipated its freedom through its legal transformation into the colonial *población* or town of SBP in 1714. As indicated in the introduction, SBP’s territory covered the community of L.B. and

its agricultural space until 2001. Approaching women's spaces (or non-spaces) in SBP's colonial history enables us to trace the links with their present ones, such as L.B., creating parallels and understanding their discrepancies.

Oral tradition has been understood as fundamental in retelling, in a counter-hegemonic manner, the history of Afro-descendant communities in Colombia (Hernández). It is almost the sole source for understanding the narratives regarding the creation of L.B. in 1900, its forced displacement in 2001, and its members' settling in new areas. During five months in 2016 and 2017, I interviewed twenty-nine people who identified themselves as *cimarrones* and Maroon-descendants from San Basilio de Palenque (eleven women and eighteen men) in different locations. They were former members of L.B. and witnesses to their forced displacement living in 1) SBP, 2) Cartagena de Indias, and 3) the forced displaced communities of La Pista and Rafael de La Bonguita, previously integrated into L.B., as explained before. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in a variety of places in these local spaces, including homes, the *montes* (fields), community places such as the cultural centre, school, trade paths, the creek as a place of collective gathering, and the main square in the town of San Basilio de Palenque. In Cartagena de Indias, the interviews were also conducted in homes in districts mainly populated by *palenquero* people, restaurants, cafes, schools, and universities, mainly following the preferences of the participants⁴.

The semi-structured questions had three main areas of in-depth enquiry: territory, dispossession, and resistance. However, although the interviews were semi-structured with a set of questions about these three themes, they became spaces of horizontal dialogue where the participants also took the role of interviewers, asking me, for instance, what and where home/my *territorio* (territory) was for me. The fact that I was also giving answers about these topics usually affected the answers of the participants positively because it appeared to allow them to be more open around certain contested visions of territory and land reclamation strategies within the community. There was a diverse age range among the participants. Although there were fewer female interviewees, the data obtained in their interviews about the memories surrounding forced displacement were richer. This was particularly so in Cartagena de Indias, because many of the female interviewees were political activists in the Black social movement in Colombia. In the displaced

4 Participants decided to be identified by their real names in this research: "their voices could be heard as belonging to them."

communities, there were fewer interviews, given the similarity of data and the vulnerability and precarity of the living conditions in these settlements.

The importance of these accounts challenges the fact that the history of Afro-descendants has been mostly narrated by white academics, mainly based on information from archives (Lamborghini *et al.*). Afro-descendant scholars have also produced such literature, but with less legitimacy and recognition (De la Fuente and Andrews). However, new literature produced by Black *académicas* (women scholars) on Black women's resistance is progressively disrupting this hegemony (Vergara and Cosme). I contribute to this scholarship as a *Mestiza*, an Argentine-born woman of European and Peruvian-indigenous heritage. Being a *Mestiza* entails stepping in between rival worlds without suppressing them, as explained by Gloria Anzaldúa (*Borderlands*, "La Prieta") and Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui ("Ch'ixinakax Utxiwa", *Un mundo*). It also means producing knowledge in a trans-local manner, as described by Zaragocin, and being conscious of a still-insufficient acknowledgement of the Afro-element in the *Mestizo* world that needs to be addressed. However, the community of San Basilio de Palenque did not take me for a *Mestiza* but for a white person — a *colorada*, due to my red face under the sun — given my white complexion. Likewise, my legal career and education in European institutions were privileges that gave me access to discussions around territory and memory. Discussions on territory were primarily performed by men in the community, as shown in the following sections.

Territorio Cuerpo-Tierra as Lenses into Maroon-Descendant Women's Spaces

The place of women in the struggles for territories has been characterised as a non-space, disputed space, sometimes grudgingly recognised, or as a spot on the margins of those processes (Lastarria-Cornhiel; Radcliffe). In Latin America, feminist geography has shown how in the case of Afro-descendant — but mostly, indigenous — women, their bodies and their territories are intrinsically interconnected and crafted by the same violence on different scales (Jenkins; Paschel; Blidon and Zaragocin; Ulloa; Zaragocin and Caretta; Caretta *et al.*; Vela-Almeida *et al.*): "What is experienced by the body is simultaneously experienced by territory in a co-dependent relationship" (Caretta and Zaragocin 2).

Furthermore, *cuerpo-territorio* (body as territory) describes women's bodies as primary territories. From this, other spaces are built, such as homes and

state-based territorialities (Zaragocin; Vela-Almeida et al.). This approach has also received critiques that highlight the potential risk of the discourse erasing differences among women's experiences. Accordingly, Leinius (215) describes strategic alliances between urban/Mestiza and rural/indigenous feminist groups using *cuero-territorio* to defend life in Peru. She underscores that, despite some benefits for both sides, "different understandings remain" and "the subordination of some worlds by the other and the distances existing between them".

From a feminist communitarian approach, the Guatemalan Maya q'eqchi'-xinka feminist, Lorena Cabnal, describes the indigenous political praxis and cosmovision, *territorio cuerpo-tierra*, to explain that the defence of the land requires the defence of women's bodies as a territory. This understanding of the territory as a women's struggle against multiple oppressions differs from that given by their men comrades. In rural Colombia, where women have historically been marginalized in social movements' fight for lands, Laura Rodríguez Castro describes how *territorio cuerpo-tierra* has been a feminist tool to decolonise their access to the land. This tool emphasises rural women's body-land intimate experiences, showing them as active subjects in those struggles.

In particular, this article advances the discussions of *territorio cuerpo-tierra* by analysing Maroon-descendant women's *collective* intimacy with territories in the context of forced displacement and the fight for their recovery. In Colombia, feminist geography has paid attention to political and social mobilisation and resistance in the Pacific and Caribbean regions enacted by Black women (Asher; Berman-Arévalo and Ojeda). Despite the growing number of these analyses, marronage is still narrated as a men-led process (Miki). This narrative, which renders women invisible, is nourished by the archives, the scarcity of sources, and their silences around gender, but also in specialised literature, even in Latin American countries, such as Brazil, where detailed studies exist on *quilombolas* (Dos Santos Gomes; Miki; Hernández). Likewise, thinking of marronage as a thing of the past has contributed to neglecting its legacy today (Bledsoe), and with it, the current stories of women.

In this gender-blind approach to marronage, the mystique, a mix of glory and tragedy that surrounded it, has mainly captured resistance considered extraordinary and heroic, such as the dangers and risks that came with the escapes and recaptures of fugitives, wars, and agreements with colonial power, in which women are primarily outsiders. Acts of Black resistance, described as mundane, ordinary (Berman-Arévalo and Ojeda), quiet (Quashie), and intimate (Pérez, *Lo colectivo*), with which women are mostly associated, are underestimated in the literature.

However, Katy Jenkins demonstrates fluidity between the categories of extraordinary and ordinary women's acts of resistance, which might not be such under certain circumstances. Jenkins' approach is present in this article's case study.

Nevertheless, historiographical exceptions exist in the masculine construction of marronage and resistance (Miki). These exceptions include studies outside the scope of this article, where, under a broader concept of marronage (*cimarronaje legal* [legal marronage]), Laurent (84) analyses the search of enslaved women for greater autonomy and improvements to the conditions of life *within* slavery, using the colonial legal system in Venezuela from 1770 to 1889. In addition, in Jamaica (1781-1834), Sweeney (198) describes *market marronage* as women running away from enslavement to public markets, where they passed as free people temporarily or permanently.

Within the scope of this article, in Colombia, historian María Cristina Navarrete ("El palenque de Limón") describes the political and spiritual leadership of Queen Leonor, an African woman, at the *palenque* de Limón in the Montes de María (1570-1634). The author explains that, following Queen Leonor's ruling, the *palenque* became more bellicose, developing military tactics under the influence of the arrival in the community of fugitives from Angola and Congo, who reproduced their strategies fighting the Portuguese colonialists.

Furthermore, María del Carmen Borrego Plá narrates the leadership of Polonia in a *palenque* that threatened lodging and trade through the Magdalena River in around 1570. In 1581, the *palenque* fiercely resisted colonial mercenaries with a defence that included 150 female warriors. Almost defeated, the mercenaries negotiated a truce with Polonia. The Maroons would obtain land and freedom if they abandoned their insurgence. The colonialists did not keep their promise and sold the re-captured Maroons, but compensated the surviving Maroon leaders, including Polonia (Guillot; Borrego).

From a geographical perspective, this article is inspired by such studies to learn more about the spaces and spatial practices of women in Maroon-descendant resistance in intimate collective ways. However, in the next section, I will briefly return to past fugitive-led resistance to a better understanding of the present.

Women's Spaces as Non-Spaces in Colonial Marronage

In more than 1,000 pages in the historical colonial records written in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spanish, the voice of the enslaved Africans is mediated by the oppressor. Second-hand records show that interpretations of their actions and omissions prevail in the context of persecution against fugitives, resistance, and negotiation with the *palenque*, where the voices of women are silenced even further.

In the analysis of colonial documents, Kathryn McKnight (“Gendered Declarations” 500; “Elder, Slave”) delved into testimonies given by captured women fugitives from slavery during trials against the Maroons who survived the destruction of the Palenque de Limón in 1634. She describes these testimonies as immersed “in layers of meditation imposed by the colonial scribe” to meet certain ends. Yet, despite the overwhelming power imbalance, women showed agency in shaping their accounts to show their innocence and forced presence in Limón due to their initial kidnapping by the Maroons.

With these limitations in mind, I describe here from a geographic, gender-based perspective the archival account of a moment of territorial rupture in the history of SBP: the peace agreement signed in 1714 between the colonial authorities of the Province of Cartagena de Indias and the leaders of the *palenque* (AGI, SF, 436). This agreement led to the transformation of the territory as a space for fugitives from slavery to a *población* or town within the colonial system, made up of freed enslaves. A freed-Maroon town was a way to stop more escapes, protect white property, and secure military and agricultural provisions for Cartagena de Indias (Zavala Guillen, “Afro-Latin American Geographies”). The community had to leave behind the original political agenda of the Maroon leaders to obtain the freedom of all enslaved people in the province. The *población* also had the legal duty to return new fugitives to those who claimed ownership of them to maintain the town’s *privilege* of anticipated freedom. However, the oral tradition sustains that none were returned to slavery. Therefore, despite a formal alignment with the colonial power in order to survive, SBP maintained its counter-hegemonic character in practice as two sides of a coin, showing that its spatial development was never linear, but pendular, to endure in the context of racial violence (Zavala Guillen, “Afro-Latin American Geographies”).

This change in the configuration of the territory of SBP was an agreement between men who executed colonial power and fugitive men, “heads of families”, who were the only ones permitted to vote for the political leadership of the new

town (AGI, SF, 436). The task of analysing the place of women fugitives is difficult because we are faced with the silences of the archive. Therefore, it is not possible to affirm whether the decision to exclude women from the political power of the new settlement was made by the colonial authorities conforming to the colonial gender system of oppression or the leaders of the *palenque*, or whether they resisted or had to accept it (Quijano; Lugones; Hernández).

What we do know is that the women fugitives were part of these marronage geographies. During the peace treaty, the number of fugitives at the *palenque* — 75 men and 46 women — showed that women also found ways to flee, despite the fact that in some cases the conditions for doing so were more adverse, for example, due to the presence of their children (AGI, SF, 436; Navarrete, *San Basilio de Palenque*). In the historiography of marronage in Brazil, ensuring a better life for their descendants or remaining with them, thereby avoiding their separate removal, were motives for enslaved women to run away (Miki).

For some enslaved women, abortion and infanticide were ways of resistance within the system (Spicker). For others, escaping to precarious freedom in Maroon territories was a form of exercising rights over their bodies and motherhood (Miki). As explained in feminist geography, the body is also a territory that has a continuation in the territory of communities (Vela-Almeida *et al.*). Bentouhami explains that, as women in captivity escaped, they gave themselves back their bodies that were robbed by the slavers for multiple uses, including sexual purposes, as a principle of self-care: “to give themselves back their bodies at the heart of a community of belonging” (Bentouhami 23).

According to the archive, there was a gender balance among the descendants of the fugitives born in the *palenque*: 57 *negros criollos* (men) and 56 *negras criollas* (women) (AGI, SF, 436). As a counter-hegemonic territory, the *palenque* was a place where African women and those of mixed African, European, and indigenous descent found shelter and refuge from other violence; for example, some escaped from their partners (AGI, SF, 212). Hence, the escape of women to the *palenque* was not just that of fleeing slavery as a regime but also interpersonal violence. However, it was also a place where kidnapped women from other towns were taken by the fugitives until a gender balance was reached with the passage of time (Navarrete, *San Basilio de Palenque*; AGI, SF, 213). Censuses undertaken in 1777 and 1778 in the Province of Cartagena de Indias subsequent to the peace treaty show that women were equal in number to men (AGN, SC,10, 8, D. 58, *Censos - Varios Departamentos, 1777 y 1778*).

Therefore, colonial records reveal that women were part of the territorial transformations of their geographies of marronage, enduring the violence of the colonial extermination campaigns and taking part in resistance and survival as people. We also know that gender division was part of the process of marronage, and here we can highlight how it also shaped the spaces and spatial practices of territorial resistance and transformation from a *palenque* to a *poblacion*. On the intimate-collective spatial practices of resistance, the colonial past emerges in oral traditions such as songs. The folkloric-rap band Kombilesa-Mí, from SBP, describes women's hairstyles that encoded secret paths for fugitives to freedom in the Colombian Caribbean (Kombilesa Mí).

The following section addresses this by way of oral tradition: We find María de Los Santos, a woman from L.B. descended from fugitives at the colonial *palenque*, and her work to recover her territory dispossessed by recent violence in the context of the armed conflict in Colombia.

Maroon-Descendant Women's Spaces in Present Times: María de Los Santos and the Return to La Bonga

Bernardino Pérez, a local teacher, explained that in 1899, the armed conflict between liberals and conservatives in Colombia forced the brothers Julián, Manuel, and Marcos Herrera Torres to abandon the built-up area of SBP and search for a place where armed violence would not destroy their crops and cattle. At the entrance to the Montes de María, they found a green space where their wives, partners, children, and other relatives would gradually join them. In the centre of this space, they discovered a Bonga or *ceiba pedranta* (kapok tree), for which the community was named.

One hundred years after the foundation of L.B., the descendants of those *palenqueros* and *palenqueras*, now known as *bongueros* and *bongueras*, would take the same path, but on this occasion in the opposite direction, back to the built-up area of SBP. On 6 April 2001 they escaped direct violence by the AUC, paramilitary forces, leaving behind their cattle and their traditional crops of cassava, groundnut, and rice, which for many years served as subsistence for themselves, for SBP, for Cartagena de Indias, and nearby towns.

In 2000, the assassination of social leaders from the neighbouring communities of Arroyo Hondo, Mapuján, and Tamarindo forced L.B. to leave behind their

lands for a short period. However, the second displacement in 2001 would have long-term effects. With no land amidst an emergency, those who had been displaced built new communities. One group formed a new settlement within the limits of the built-up area of SBP, which they called Rafael de La Bonguita. The chosen name of the community was in honour of a Catholic priest, Rafael Castillo, who helped them these times. Although this settlement is within the boundaries of SBP, the *bongueros* and *bongueras* still feel the uprooting, emotional, and physical distance from their lands. Others constructed houses on land that they bought next to an abandoned runway used to fumigate rice plantations during the 1970s and the 1980s. This runaway is located in San Pablo, approximately ten kilometres distant from SBP, which they called La Pista (literally, The Runway).

A profound sense of loss of their rural lifestyle pervades the oral memory in Rafael de La Bonguita and La Pista, marked by feelings of insecurity about the future in a precarious context, given the violent plundering of their lands. The consequences of forced displacement have been analysed in the literature on the geographies of war (Jiménez) and of terror in the Black Pacific (Oslender, “Fleshing out”; Oslender, “Another History”; Oslender, *The Geographies*), demonstrating how violences transform territories into landscapes of fear. Indeed, after the armed violence ended in L.B. and it appeared possible to break out of the cycle of forced displacement, there was no surge of return to their former homes among the communities of Rafael de La Bonguita and La Pista (Zavala Guillen, “Maroon Socioterritorial Movements”).

The return of forcibly internally displaced people occurs at a slow rate, and the reasons are diverse; for example, the risk of suffering new violence, adaptation to the new settlements, perception of the return as a new displacement, education, work, and housing opportunities in the cities, and traumatic memories of the displacement (Shultz *et al.*; Sliwa and Wiig). In La Pista, where this analysis is focused, the reasons for the non-return centred mainly on the fear of becoming a target of direct violence and the sense of improvements in infrastructure, given access to electricity, safe water, and mobile Internet. Furthermore, in their accounts, one observes an intangible transformation of the territory of L.B. from a place of Maroon-descendant ancestral resistance into territories saturated with the losses of their loved ones at the hands of armed violence.

There are places that I don't want to see again because suddenly one sees that there our friends were killed, our friends were killed. There are places that we cannot go back to because of a religious feeling, an emotion, a fear of going there. If you take this path, you walk but you do not look in that direction ... someone

was buried there; in the other direction, someone else was buried as well. One has these reference points, we know this happened, yes, it happened, and we are scared, you see. (Maestre Simanca)

I was on a bus and I remembered the entrance of La Bonga. I always cried when I saw its entrance. Now I also recalled it but not like before crying. I think, Oh my God! We had a good life in La Bonga, but we had to leave. (Cañete Orozco)

Nonetheless, since 2014 some members of the La Pista community have slowly begun to return to the L.B. On one hand, many men cultivate plots of land there by day, returning to La Pista in the evening, some of them out of fear and others who now say they feel at home in their new spaces. On the other hand, María de Los Santos began to rebuild a space on her old piece of land, seeking to demonstrate to those at La Pista, by way of her intimately remaining at L.B., that the recovery of the Maroon-descendant territories, of which they had been stripped by armed violence, is also a real option. For María de Los Santos, this is better than remaining amid the material precariousness of La Pista, because of its bare subsistence-based economy and extreme poverty. Its inhabitants describe La Pista in opposition to L.B., explaining that L.B. was a place where “la comida no falta” (“where there was no lack of food”) and “se podía criar pelados ... todos revueltos como hermanos” (“where it was possible to raise children ... all together as brothers”) (Los Santos).

In contrast, *bongueros* and *bongueras* living in La Pista now rent pieces of land around San Pablo to crop to assure their livelihood. They cannot trade the surplus in Cartagena de Indias or other towns as they had before. Because of robberies in La Pista, they also struggle to keep small animals, such as chickens and pigs.

María de Los Santos therefore navigates between two spaces that for her are opposed — La Pista and L.B. — to where she speaks of almost having moved. She says that she feels content in L.B. alone, sleeping until morning under her mango tree. The breeze blows and the land is still green despite the scarcity of water due to the lack of rain. She keeps her animals. She does not feel afraid, she repeats, but calm. She admits that unlike the others, she has never stopped returning to L.B. since the displacement took place in 2001 (Los Santos).

In the eyes of some, this makes her “mad”; “What’s she doing there on her own?”, they wonder in La Pista. Meanwhile, she asks herself, “Why are they still there in La Pista? That’s where they are going hungry!” (Los Santos). At the time of the forced displacement in 2001, María de Los Santos was not at L.B. but selling her crops in nearby towns. She maintains that this event categorically changed her

life and economic security, showing me the few Colombian pesos she had left. The hunger that her children, both young adults, experience in her absence drew her back to La Pista. She brings the produce from her crops of yam, corn, and cassava with her from L.B. This is the duty of care exercised by María de los Santos in her contested geography in the Montes de María.

For the study of the so-called ordinary geographies, which analyse everyday violence in the Colombian post-conflict, in opposition to the geographies of terror and direct war, the care assumed by Afro-descendant women from the Colombian Caribbean in their communities is a contributory factor to the continuation of the system's oppression (Oslender, "Fleshing Out"; Oslender, "Another History"; Jiménez; Berman-Arévalo and Ojeda). Berman-Arévalo and Ojeda offer the example of preparing food, providing water, and cleaning — all undertaken by women on the African palm oil plantations on their territories (Castellanos-Navarrete, *et al.*). However, this analysis keeps in mind that care is also a form of resistance, showing the importance of acts to defend life and human dignity in such contexts (Berman-Arévalo y Ojeda).

María de Los Santos, as well as an Afro-descendant woman, is a descendant of fugitives from slavery. Therefore, her practices of care are imbued with the history of marronage, which is an essential part of the geography of the Colombian Caribbean crossed by other identities, such as indigenous people, *campesinos/as*, and *Mestizos* (Navarrete, "Cimarrones y palenques"; Navarrete, "Los cimarrones"). Bentouhami explains that in colonial times, fugitive women left behind the forced demands for care from those who claimed they were their property in order to exercise liberty over their bodies, a form of self-care that could only be so insofar as it was part of a collective effort at construction. Through the study of marronage, we learn that nobody is saved alone. The historical records provide multiple examples of this collective ethic, still present, too, in the spatial practices of María de Los Santos, in this two-way trajectory of care, first inward in the intimacy of L.B., and then outwards at La Pista, where the other collectives to which she also belongs are to be found.

In colonial times, authorities and slavers sought to split such unity, for example, by creating divisions between the fugitives born in Africa and their descendants born in the *palenque*. They never succeeded (AGI, SF, 212). Domingo Criollo, a Maroon leader born in the *palenque*, described Pedro Mina, an African man who led Criollo's military resistance, as his guts. Despite their different political visions on how to resist the colonialists based on their different origins, they were

inseparable. Their strength came from this unbreakable alliance (AGI, *SF*, 212; Navarrete, *San Basilio de Palenque*).

Currently, as a group, the principal defence of the *palenquero* territory (including L.B.) is through a process of collective titling of lands in 2012. That year, the Community Council, Ma Kankamana (the grand *Palenque*), obtained an administrative resolution from the state for the recognition of 3,353 hectares (Ministerio de Agricultura y Desarrollo Rural. Instituto Colombiano de Desarrollo Rural [Incoder]). Oral tradition states that 200,000 ha are part of the ancestral territory. This resolution is still not recorded in the Land Registry and is therefore legally precarious. This means that in the context of extreme material poverty, some members of SBP have been forced to sell their lands to agro-industrial firms or white and white-Mestizo landowners, becoming informal rural workers on their own plots and being obliged to pay rent for their use.

While women admittedly formed part of the discussions around collective titling, the negotiations for SBP were conducted through Ma Kankamana, composed solely of men. Here we find a parallel with the 1714 peace treaty between colonial authorities and the fugitive men who were leaders, as previously explained. Furthermore, a title deed found in the Historical Archive of Cartagena de Indias shows a similar process that took place in 1921 (AHCI, Escritura no. 131, August 24, 1921). Three men, members of SBP — Andrés Beltrán, Pedro Torres, and Juan de Mata Reyes — made a request on behalf of their community to the notary of the Municipality of Carmen de Bolívar to formalise some testimonies given to a municipal judge to prove SBP's right to possession of lands. This strategy restrained the uprooting caused by white landowners (AHCI, Escritura no. 131, August 24, 1921; Cross and Friedemann; Friedemann).

Despite the limited place of women in formal territorial reparation strategies, María de Los Santos's comings and goings between La Pista and L.B. and her solitary stays at the latter have slowly begun to instal in the collective the possibility of returning to the lands lost to armed violence. Her everyday material strategy is an affective one, for moments, extraordinary given the extreme material precarity, through re-appropriating the land. Therefore, some of the men began to follow her, again sowing their crops and rebuilding their houses and community spaces such as the school.

They say that they are not going to live anymore in the *montes* [referring to L.B.] because they are fine here. But, I am not fine here, I am going there. There, I sleep the night in tranquillity [...] I've no fear, if I were afraid, I would not go [...] They

asked me, but what will you do if you take ill? Only God knows [...] If you fall ill, you fall ill, no matter what, anywhere. If we were born to die, we would die anyway, whenever [...] If it is not my turn, God will allow me to reach the *palenque*. (Los Santos)

Fear? For what? We're not afraid. I don't have any fear in going there. Human beings are to be feared, but I do not fear being in my *Bonga*. (Herrera)

As part of a long tradition of women who have been pioneers in reparation processes following extreme violence in Latin America, recovering the territory of L.B. has begun silently, led by a woman and a group of *bongueros* without economic resources but with the determination that the power of the land beneath their feet gives them (Rodríguez; Barrios; Zuriñe and Sánchez; Korol; Rapone and Simpson).

Conclusions

Drawing from historical Maroon studies in Afro-Latin America, feminist geography and feminist communitarian praxis on *territorio cuerpo-tierra*, as in colonial times (Miki), so in the present, gender permeates the legacy of marronage — a concept that I have analysed in this article as an ethic of collective liberation through the non-linear and contested construction of territories of resistance (Martin and Mançano; Mançano, “Acerca de la tipología”; Zibechi; Haesbaert, “Território(s)”). In the case of L.B., the (re)building of Maroon-descendant territories occurs through less visible and affective collective-intimate spatial practices led by María de Los Santos. Maroon-descendant territories are a product of Afro-descendant social movements that, as explained by Asher and Paschel, also navigate, negotiate, align, resist, and are penetrated by patriarchal and capitalist systems. Despite the more radical descriptions in some literature of the autonomy of social movements, they are not islands (Zibechi; Anthias and Radcliffe). Gender inequalities are recreated and reinvented in them, as shown in the article's case study. A gendered spatial division of labour means that more visible, formal, territorial reparation strategies, such as the 2012 collective allocation of titles, are still led by men, as in colonial times.

In specialised literature, marronage has chiefly been described as a rupture, a point of no return between tangible and symbolic spaces, between slavery in cities, large farms, and mines, and the flight to build autonomous communities

in remote geographies (Price, “Maroons”; Price, *First-Time*; Roberts). My research on marronage at SBP seeks to demonstrate that its spatial development is contested and not linear. Its ethics of marronage included delicate spatial balances and pendular movements between opposite spaces and what could be seen as co-optation, strategically designed by men and women to assure survival — in other words, to resist as a clandestine community, negotiating, creating alliances with colonial authorities, and fighting physically but finally agreeing to their inclusion in the colonial space without losing their subversive character. The latter can be seen in their not returning new fugitives who arrived at the freed maroon town despite the obligation to do so enshrined in the treaty, as oral memory holds.

In María de Los Santos’s practices, this spatial balance can also be seen as a legacy of this way of comprehending marronage. It is found in the continuum of her departures from the settlement in displacement, her solitary stays at L.B., and her returns to help and care for her other collectives to survive in the material precariousness of La Pista. We, as women, are different others when we are with *our* others. Her body then becomes a territory that connects with care contested spaces and collectives in symbolic dispute in this new manner of understanding marronage in the present times. She embodies the collective-intimate world (Pérez, *Lo colectivo*) by re-appropriating what it was/is the territory of L.B., making it possible for Maroon-descendant spaces, as in colonial times.

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