

Deferred Dreams, Defiant Struggles

**Critical Perspectives
on Blackness, Belonging, and Civil Rights**

Edited by

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Redrawing Borders of Belonging in a Narrow Nation: Afro-Chilean Activism in the Hinterlands of Afro-Latin America

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"Negra, ándate a tu país, vienes a puro prostituirte!" These words—"Black, go back to your country, you come here just to prostitute yourself"—were part of a string of insults directed at Gloria María Grueso Mina, an Afro-Colombian woman residing in Chile. According to her, two women approached her on a street in the northern Chilean city of Arica on November 17, 2013 and, unprovoked, yelled racist invectives at her and shoved her, apparently intent on compelling Grueso Mina to move herself and her car from the spot where she had been waiting. Her accosters, she later realized, were Carmen Ocaya Grandon and her daughter Lisette Sierra Grandon, the latter an elected city council member in Arica (Lumbanga de Arica, 2013).

Incidents such as this, in which individuals of African descent are subject to verbal and physical aggression simply for the color of their skin, are hardly unique to Chile. When combined with disparities in education, income, health, and housing observable between African descendants and majority *mestizo* (mixed Indian and European ancestry) populations throughout Latin America, it is no wonder that Afro-Latin Americans are moved to act, in the form of identity based collective organizing and activism, in pursuit of equality (Hernández, 2013; Mullings, 2009; Rahier, 2012). In Chile, hostility of the sort faced by Grueso Mina had reportedly been on the rise at the beginning of the twenty-first century, not only for blacks but also for others perceived as "not Chilean" in some way. This rise corresponds with what has been described as "the most important migratory influx of the last forty years," originating primarily from other Latin American and Caribbean countries (United Nations, 2013). Despite the unfortunate familiarity of Grueso Mina's experience, it was nevertheless an opportunity to draw public attention not only to racism, but also to the very real presence of African

descendants in present-day Chile. The latter might seem of lesser significance than the act of racism itself were it not for the fact that the presence of African descendants in this particular nation is regularly overlooked and even denied outright in both official and popular representations of the country.¹

The exchange between Grueso Mina and Sierra Grandon was reported in various media outlets, though Sierra Grandon denied that the exchange ever took place. Grueso Mina wrote a letter to the head of the Arica City Council reporting the incident and requesting assistance. A month later, several local organizations also directed a letter to the council, circulating it publicly as well, denouncing the lack of response to Grueso Mina's original communication and to what had occurred, stating that "silence is part of the 'structural racism' maintained by public institutions for more than two centuries" ("Chile: Silencio," 2013). Further, their letter indicated that, in accordance with the recommendations of local, national, regional, and international human rights institutions, incidents such as this should at the very least be investigated to determine if racism and xenophobia were in fact involved. Chile's anti-discrimination law, known as the *Ley Zamudio*, was passed in 2012 to offer legal recourse in the event of acts of discrimination. The letter accused the city council of an ethical and moral dereliction of duty for not addressing, or even discussing in its meetings, the accusation of abuse of power by one of its members.

Among the six organizations supporting Grueso Mina and calling for action through the letter, three were Afro-Chilean groups based in or near Arica—Organización Lumbanga, Organización de Mujeres Afrodescendientes Hijas de Azapa, and Asociación de Organizaciones y Comunidades Afrochilenas Azapa Territorio Ancestral. The others included two for Colombians residing in Chile, and one for immigrants in general. While Gloria María Grueso Mina is Afro-Colombian, at the time of the incident she had lived in Chile for 30 years, was married to a Chilean, had three Afro-Chilean children, and was a member of an Afro-Chilean organization. Unlike María Grueso Mina, most members of the Afro organizations responsible for the letter were Chilean by birth and traced their ancestry to African descendants present in Chile's northern region for several generations. Before 2000, none of these Afro-Chilean organizations existed; now, they are just three of an ever-increasing number of such groups unified

1. While I employ the term "Afro-Chilean" in this essay, the more common term used by members of the population itself is *afrodescendiente*, "Afro-descendant." An explanation for their choice will be offered later in the essay. My own use of "Afro-Chilean" is intended for the purpose of distinguishing those Afro/African descendants with historical roots in what is now Chile from African descendants with roots elsewhere in Latin America.

around African descent. Individually and collectively, these groups have come to be the public face and voice of a population present, but virtually invisible, for over 400 years.

The discussion that follows examines the historical and contemporary roots of Afro-Chilean invisibility and the nature and trajectory of collective organizing that has emerged only since the early 2000s among Afro-Chileans to counter that invisibility.² Chile's African-descendant population occupies multiple margins—hinterlands—that shape its particular collective experience, identity, and struggle. During exploratory fieldwork carried out in and around Arica over the course of June 2010, I observed the extent to which the early stages of the Afro-Chilean struggle for inclusion in the nation relied, and continues to rely, on notions of descent above and before notions of race, color, blackness, or even ethnicity or culture—ideas and realities that feature prominently in the collective organizing of Afro descendants elsewhere. The phenotypic and cultural reality of a majority of the Afro-Chilean population seems a likely explanation for the primacy of discourse around descent and recovery. While many African-descendant populations in the diaspora have faced the challenge of social and political invisibility, the invisibility faced by Afro-Chileans is compounded by the hue of their skin and the loss of distinct cultural expressions. The pale-hued bodies of many of Chile's contemporary self-identified African descendants are often read as phenotypically indistinguishable from the Chilean majority; their cultural identity, until the onset of collective organizing, was similarly read, and even lived, as indistinguishable. Regardless of whether or not Afro-Chilean activism is, in fact, markedly different from the activism practiced by Afro descendants elsewhere, the fact that there is a desire and need for it in this forgotten corner of the global African diaspora, and that it has appeared systematically and publicly only since the turn of the twenty-first century, highlights the temporally and spatially enduring nature of struggles for equality in the African diaspora.

2. This chapter reflects the preliminary steps of what I intend to be an ongoing ethnographic project on emergent grassroots organizing among Afro-Chileans. These preliminary steps include ethnographic fieldwork carried out in Arica and Valle de Azapa in June 2010 along with tracking of the popular press and social media related to Afro-Chileans from the early 2000s onward. The fieldwork emphasized interviews with individual Chileans who self-identify as Afro-descendant and participant observation in meetings and events involving different Afro-Chilean groups in Arica and Valle de Azapa. In order to protect the anonymity of those interviewed, names are not used in connection with quotes, and some information from the interviews is paraphrased or otherwise integrated into the text alongside analysis informed by published sources. Interviews were conducted in Spanish; all translations are my own.

Belonging in a Narrow Nation

Chile is a “narrow nation” not only in terms of the slender expanse of land contained within its political borders (217 miles at its widest point), but also in terms of who its citizenry is popularly imagined to be. Much like neighboring Argentina to the east, and Argentina’s northern neighbor Uruguay, Chile is perceived to be one of Latin America’s white nations (Sater, 1974). This is both a racial whiteness, associated with European phenotypic characteristics, and a social whiteness, associated with European cultural practices and beliefs. The description in the *Lonely Planet* travel guide offers a good example of this view of the country: “Most Chileans are mestizos, although many can still claim purely European descent. In much of the country, social class is still a greater issue than race” (Bernhardson, 1993, 33). In a national context such as this, with a narrow conception of who belongs, dark-skinned individuals like Gloria María Grueso Mina become perpetual outsiders; blackness and African descent have no natural place in the nation, but are instead associated with foreignness, leading to adimonishments of the sort directed at Grueso Mina—“go back to your country.”

According to the 2002 national census, 4.6% of Chile’s 15,116,435 inhabitants were registered as belonging to one of eight officially recognized indigenous ethnic groups (Comisión Nacional, 2003).³ The Mapuche represent the vast majority, 87.3%, of the indigenous population. It is they who tend to dominate, and therefore define, discussions of diversity and discrimination in the country, when such discussions take place. The vast majority, 95.4%, of the national population is not considered ethnic (i.e., indigenous) and is assumed to fall into the categories of *mestizo* or white, which are not included on the census. Notably, Chile’s *mestizo* is reported to be more white than indigenous, according to recent DNA sampling of the population described in the national popular press (Donoso, 2011).⁴ Claims that race is a biological reality that can be identified through DNA or through other biological or

³ Results from the more recent 2012 census were challenged because apparently 10% of the population was left out of the process.

⁴ A genetic study carried out by Francisco Lizcano of the Universidad Autónoma de México calculated that of the 95.4% of the population that is not “ethnic” (i.e., indigenous), 52% is white/European and 44% is *mestizo*. A separate study by the Universidad de Chile calculated the breakdown to be 30% European-descendant and 65% *mestizo* (mixed indigenous and European) descent, further asserting that European descent is predominant in the mixture of these *mestizos* (Donoso, 2011). Of course, DNA is not the same as the lived experience, connection to heritage, and identification of those from whom the DNA comes. The point, therefore, of including these statistics is to demonstrate that the narrative of Chile as a white/*mestizo* nation emerges from contested scientific discourse as well as from historical and political discourse and popular culture.

physical markers is contested within the scientific community (Yudell et al., 2016). Consequently, rather than these statistics being *proof* that Chile is primarily white, they are instead but one example of the sociopolitical forces, both contemporary and historical, propelling the *perception* that Chile is primarily white. The census, after all, has not counted African descendants as a separate category since 1940. At that time, blacks and mulattos were reported to number 1,000 and 3,000 respectively (Garrison, 2003). With no official data on how many African descendants there are now, this part of the population has suffered statistical erasure. There has *not*, however, been an *actual* erasure of people identifying as African descendant, something that became clear with the formation, beginning in the year 2001, of multiple organizations based around shared African descent. The activities and demands of these groups have pushed the borders of belonging in Chile, challenging traditional expectations of who Chileans are and, by extension, what it means to be Chilean.

In the Hinterlands of Afro-Latin America

In *Afro-Latin America: 1800–2000*, historian George Reid Andrews defines “Afro-Latin America” as those nations in the Spanish and Portuguese speaking Americas whose populations of African descent meet a “threshold of significance” (2004, 4). That threshold, he suggests, is at least 5–10% of a nation’s population. He explains: “This seems to be the level at which ‘blackness’ becomes a visible element in systems of social stratification and inequality, and at which African-based culture—patterns of sociability and group expression—becomes a visible part of national life” (2004, 4). With this as his criterion, his otherwise geographically and temporally wide-ranging book is silent on certain locations in Latin America. Based on the content and geographical focus of the ever-expanding field of Afro-Latin studies, Andrews is not the only one paying particular attention to nations that meet or exceed that percentage.⁵ Chile is *not* one of those nations.

The demographics at the center of Andrews’s criterion are rooted in colonial-era slavery and its legacy. He explains that the “heartlands of Afro-Latin America” historically were highly developed centers of

⁵ Among those making this same observation are Wade (2006), who points to a bias toward Brazil in the literature, and Gudmundson and Wolfe (2010), who point to Mexico and Central American nations as among the overlooked in both scholarly and popular terms relative to the islands of the Caribbean, the United States, and Brazil. It must be noted that, *Afro-Latin America: 1800–2000* aside, Andrews does explore elsewhere the histories of African descendants in locations falling near or below that “threshold of significance,” including in *The Afro-Argentines of Buenos Aires, 1800–1900* (1980) and *Blackness in the White Nation: A History of Afro-Uruguay* (2010).

plantation-based export production to which large numbers of enslaved Africans were imported, places like Brazil, Venezuela, Cuba, and Puerto Rico. These locations, where the descendants of these imported enslaved Africans have stayed, remain the heartlands of Afro-Latin America today. Demographic estimates of Afro-Latin America at the turn of the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries show that by 1900 Chile was relegated to what could be called the "hinterlands of Afro-Latin America" by virtue of its exceedingly small African-descendant presence.⁶ In the absence of a comprehensive census, sources attempting to acknowledge an African-descendant presence today estimate it to stand at no more than 1–2% of the national population, if that. Rather than being a reason for exclusion from serious scholarship on Afro-Latin America, this low percentage makes a study of the Chilean population all the more compelling. Not only has this extreme minority sustained itself in the face of extensive phenotypic and cultural invisibility or extinction, but it generated multiple identity-based organizations that, in ten short years, made inroads into gaining state and popular recognition of African descendants as a real collectivity and an important part of the nation.

Arguably, Afro-Chileans occupy multiple hinterlands beyond the merely demographic, and just as demographics have implications, so too do other kinds of hinterlands for the particular experiences and challenges faced by the unknown number of African descendants inhabiting Chile. Afro-Chileans occupy the *geographic* and *sociopolitical* hinterlands of Afro-Latin America as well as those of their nation.⁷ The place they occupy in scholarship (whether local or international) might also be described as a hinterland. Afro-Latin American studies has expanded exponentially in recent years (as noted by Dixon, 2012; Andrews, 2009; Wade, 2006). Over the past 20 years, amidst an increasing number of monographs, edited volumes, journals, professional organizations, and conferences dedicated specifically to Afro-Latin America, a diversification in subject matter and geographic focus is observable, which includes a move away from slavery and from the

⁶ Andrews opens *Afro-Latin America* with three maps, credited to William Nelson, illustrating the estimated percentage of blacks and mulattos in Latin American nations as of 1800, 1900, and 2000.

⁷ "Hinterland" is not to be confused with "borderland" as it has been used elsewhere (e.g., Gloria Anzaldúa, 1987) with a concern for boundary crossing, cultural and racial mixing, or contested space. Instead, I mean to invoke an outer margin that is geographic, physical, and sociopolitical. While both the phenotype and cultural identity of many Afro-Chileans could easily be described in terms of *mestizo*-ness, it would be the homogenous *mestizo*-ness shared by the larger nation. With their focus on claiming African descent, on being *afrodescendientes*, and reclaiming the traditions of earlier generations of ancestors, notions of mixed-ness or a unique *mestizo*-ness have not taken hold in the discourse of the Afro-Chilean organizations.

locations of Brazil, Colombia, and the Caribbean which have garnered the lion's share of attention in the past (Andrews, 2009). All this contributes to progress toward a decentering of the United States in scholarship on blackness and the African diaspora. It seems a fitting shift in light of the fact that a majority—85%—of Africans transported through the transatlantic slave trade arrived in the Caribbean and Latin America (Curtin, 1972) meaning that "the heart of the New World African diaspora lies not north of the border, in the United States, but South" (Andrews, 2004, 3). Amidst the growing attention being paid to Afro-Latin America, Chile remains but a footnote, seldom if ever mentioned in scholarship, with the exception of a limited number of historical investigations into colonial-era slavery (see Mellafe, 1984; Flusche and Korth, 1983). The intervention made here intends to respond to that void, but also to try to explain which factors of the Chilean situation led to that void in the first place.

A brief accounting of how blacks originally came to inhabit what is now Chile suggests that the process of rendering this population marginal and invisible began long ago. The first blacks to arrive did so in the company of the Spaniard Diego de Almagro who, in 1536, set out to explore and conquer the southern portion of the Andes. He was accompanied by an army of 100 blacks and a far larger number of Indians. When de Almagro failed, his compatriot Pedro de Valdivia returned in 1541 to make another attempt, again in the company of enslaved Africans. Blacks continued to enter the territory, initially passing through Panama or Cartagena and stopping in Callao on the coast of Peru, and later arriving via an overland route from Buenos Aires. Under slavery, they were used to supplement the indigenous labor force, working in agriculture, mining, construction, domestic service, and as cowboys. Because Chile was a remote colony, and not a particularly wealthy one, the effort and cost of importing slaves was prohibitive and consequently slavery never became the significant institution it was elsewhere in the Americas. One estimate suggests that only 0.01% of the entire transatlantic slave trade was Chilean, situating the area at the margins of the transatlantic slave trade. Chile declared independence from Spain in 1810, and in 1823 it became the first Spanish American republic to abolish slavery (Mellafe, 1984).⁸

It was at that point that Chile's African descendants were erased from the nation's historical record, seemingly vanishing into the general population upon their emancipation. If and when blacks are mentioned in relation to Chile—at least prior to the inception of Afro-Chilean organizing in 2001—

⁸ Chile's then 4,000 enslaved blacks were freed that year without restriction, joining an already existing population of free persons of color that, almost 50 years earlier, likely numbered between 13,000 and 15,000 (Klein and Vinson, 1986).

the standard narrative asserts that slavery was never a significant institution there, ended early, and that the small number of blacks who were present blended into the dominant population through miscegenation or died out due to alcoholism, disease, and climate (Francisco Encina qtd in Sater, 1974). Such a minimizing or dismissive narrative is a challenge in itself, and not just because it hides the very real contributions made by enslaved and free blacks to building the colony and then the nation. It also discounts the inherently exploitative and unequal circumstances under which they did so. It implies that blacks were never numerous enough to be of consequence or to inspire systematic discrimination once free.

Afro-Chileans occupy the geographic and sociopolitical hinterlands of Afro-Latin America in addition to the obvious demographic margins.⁹ Chile offers an example similar in many ways to that of neighboring Bolivia in this regard. Neither conforms to the socioeconomic expectations of the origins and subsequent development of a plantation system in the Americas. While most African-descendant populations in Latin America confronted increasingly mixed (i.e., *mulatto/mestizo*) societies post-emancipation, Bolivia had an overwhelmingly indigenous one and Chile an overwhelmingly white/European-influenced one. This has had implications for the identity formation of both Afro-Bolivians and Afro-Chileans and has led to different forms of activism in the two countries.

In the Hinterlands of the Nation

Despite their absence from census records since 1940, a concentrated Afro presence can be found in present-day Chile if one looks, quite literally, to the physical margin of the nation; that is, to its northern border. It is in the city of Arica and the neighboring Valle de Azapa and Valle de Lluta that Afro-Chilean activism was born and has flourished.

Arica is a port city of approximately 195,000 inhabitants located 11 miles south of the Peruvian border, making it the northernmost city of this long and narrow nation. Valle de Azapa and Valle de Lluta are rural areas stretching southeast and northeast from the outer limits of the city. With this border zone as the center of the Afro-Chilean population and its organizing efforts, it is necessary to introduce the term *afro-ariqueño* (Afro-Arican) here, which is used locally in addition to *afrodescendiente*. This location-specific label reveals that the emerging image of what it means to be

⁹ I argue elsewhere that despite the global reach of the African diaspora, there are nevertheless certain locations and circumstances outside of the African continent in which people of African descent are perceived as *particularly* "out of place" physically, culturally, socially, and historically relative to other locations and circumstances (Busdiecker, 2009).

African-descendant in Chile is actually based on realities in this particular place. The nearby border plays a significant role in those realities.

As several locals were quick to point out to me, Arica is closer to the capital of Bolivia than it is to the capital of Chile. La Paz is an eight-hour bus trip from Arica while Santiago, Chile's capital city, is about 24 hours away by bus. This distance from the political, economic, and population center of the country means that all of Arica's inhabitants (not just Afro-descendants) reside at the periphery of their nation.¹⁰ With regard to this location, one local activist with whom I spoke at length observed that most Afro-Latin American organizing starts in urban centers or capital cities, making what is happening in Arica unusual. What he was describing, as he discussed the formation of various groups, was the creation of a "center" at what was otherwise an edge.

The historically contested nature of the Chile-Peru border is implicated in the identity formation of all locals. After the War of the Pacific (1879-1883),¹¹ Chile and Peru signed a treaty; it stipulated that Chile would administer the provinces of Tacna and Arica for ten years. After that, a plebiscite would allow the area's inhabitants to decide their nationality. That plebiscite never occurred. In 1929, it was decided that the area would be divided between the two countries, with Arica belonging to Chile and Tacna to Peru. A process of *chilenización* (Chilenization) took place in the area that involved the aggressive promotion of Chilean national identity through the press, schools, and churches, and through the forced removal of non-Chileans (Skuban, 2007). Afro-descendants who resided in the region, cultivating cotton and sugarcane and producing olives and olive oil, were among those forced over the border into Peru. Their presence and contributions to the local economy and culture were erased from the landscape and narrative of the nation. However, some Afro-descendants managed to remain in the region or returned to claim lands left behind.

Neither Chile nor Peru tells the story of this group.¹² Their ancestors originally arrived as Africans, were Peruvian during slavery, and alternately Peruvian and Chilean at different times post-emancipation (see Sater, 1974). The eventual nationality of *any* descendant of the transatlantic slave trade is a product of chance, the result of where slave traders transported their captives. This arbitrariness of citizenship is perhaps heightened for the

¹⁰ The local population includes *mestizos*, Aymara Indians, and immigrants from neighboring nations.

¹¹ The War of the Pacific involved a struggle between Chile, Bolivia, and Peru over disputed territory along the Pacific coast rich in valuable mineral resources, including sodium nitrate.

¹² This account was similarly told by at least five individuals, in separate interviews, as they explained their family history in the region.

African descendants in Chile because the contested border between Chile and Peru was decided so recently; many families still preserve a living memory of being Peruvian. The unflinching use of the terms *afrodescendiente* and *afroariqueño* for self-reference, as opposed to *afrochileno*, may be a reflection of their relationship, tenuous in manifold ways, to the nation; the choice of the former links them to the larger African diaspora (*afrodescendiente* being the most inclusive term and increasingly popular among activists throughout Afro-Latin America) and the latter to a very localized sphere of belonging, avoiding the nation entirely.¹³

Another sociopolitical force implicated in the identity of Afro-Chileans and Chileans in general is the notion of *la raza chilena* (the Chilean race). The idea dates back to the early 1900s and to the work of Chilean physician Nicolas Palacios, who asserted in *La Raza Chilena* (1904) that Chileans belonged to a unique and superior race. While *mestizaje* (racial mixture) is a process and ideology found throughout Latin America, its manifestation in Chile, following Palacio's claims, was distinct. He proposed that Chileans were a unique mix of Spaniards and valiant Araucanian Indians. The Spaniards who colonized Chile were not just *any* Spaniards, but rather of predominantly *Germanic* bloodlines descended from the Visigoths. Because of this mix, Palacios said that Chileans should *not* be considered Latin like inhabitants of other nations in Latin America; instead, Chileans were a *superior race*. This positive characterization was embraced by the population and a mindset based on the notion lingers to the present day, where it is reflected in, among other things, a downplaying of any internal diversity in the Chilean national population and the idea of Chilean identity as essentially white. Contributing to a racially and culturally whiter nation were immigration policies, focused on northern Europe, that operated before, during, and after the height of *la raza chilena* discourse (see Rout, 1976). The *raza chilena*, then, contributed to a *narrow image* of *who* is Chilean or *who belongs* to Chile; it does not allow for consideration of blacks, blackness, or African descent.

Motivation for Action

"No one ever talked about being Afro [...] People might have guessed about their origins and history, but you couldn't talk about those things. Everyone was [just] Chilean." These were the words of an Afro-Chilean woman in her forties, recalling her childhood in Valle de Azapa during an interview. She went on to explain that at school they never learned about

¹³ *Morenos de Azapa* is another local term, though more common prior to collective organizing efforts. *Moreno* is a general term for those with a brown skin tone.

the history of slavery in Chile, much less about a black presence in Chile post-emancipation. Hers was a story of silences. Such historical, social, and statistical silences, erasures, and invisibility are only a part of the reality faced by Afro-Chileans. The experience of Gloria María Grueso Mina, described at the outset, is evidence of a different, more overtly aggressive exclusion from the nation.

In an interview, a self-identified *activista afrodescendiente* (Afro-descendant activist) in his thirties recounted to me an incident in which his identity was questioned when crossing the border back into Chile from Peru. A border official doubted he was really Chilean because he appeared "too dark to be Chilean." The insinuation was that he was a Peruvian trying to pass as a Chilean, but *not* that he was a black or Afro-descendant foreigner. Peruvians are expected to be darker skinned—more *moreno*, brown-skinned—than Chileans because of the prominent indigenous population in that country. This same individual, who was viewed as perhaps too *moreno* to be Chilean, went on to describe how in Chile he is often perceived as too *mestizo* to be Afro-descendant. He acknowledges that aside from sometimes being viewed as a bit browner, he "looks like any other *mestizo* Chilean" and, he readily admits, his straight black hair definitely does not help to convince anyone otherwise. When he first started presenting himself as an Afro-descendant activist, he was met with skepticism so often that he took to carrying a photo of his black grandmother in his wallet to give people proof of his ancestry.

Herein lies one of the unique challenges to Afro-Chilean activists and activism—the challenge of rallying behind African descent while inhabiting bodies perceived as white or *mestizo*. Afro-Latin populations across the region encompass a great deal of diversity and that diversity includes the presence of racially mixed individuals. In Chile, the extent of that mixing is great and one can see the impact of slave-era demographics, *la raza chilena*, *chilenización*, immigration policy, pervasive silence, and aggression on the very bodies of *afrodescendientes*. It is for this reason that *descent* appears primary—over "race," color, and blackness—in uniting the population. Reclaiming ancestry, including the history and customs of one's predecessors, offers a means to establish the reality of collective identity in the absence of visible "proof of difference" on the body.¹⁴

The invisibility of African descent on the body, while important to the Afro-Chilean experience, is not shared by all. Prominent activist Marta Salgado Henríquez has communicated a different sort of personal experience in public speaking engagements, newspaper articles, and in her own writing, as well as in an interview with me. She opens a 2010 essay with the following assessment of her experience:

¹⁴ I seldom heard the term *negro* (black) used, even casually, during fieldwork.

For many years I had to struggle because of being different. My hair, my color of skin, made me look different from people in my city and, of course, the rest of my social environment, my school, the community in which I lived. Over the course of my life, I endured the mocking laughter of those who called me “negra,” as if my color was something bad or something that wasn’t normal for people, [all this] right up to now when I am among the group considered senior citizens. (2010, 225)

Salgado is one of the founders of the country’s first Afro-Chilean organization, Oro Negro, formed in 2001. The original objectives of the group are typical of the many organizations that followed: to achieve political and social recognition of Afro-descendants in Chile; to recover and disseminate Afro-descendant history and culture; to see to the education and training of Afro-descendants so that they can participate in various professions; to protect Afro-descendants from discrimination in education, health, housing, and employment.

Redrawing Borders of Belonging

The 2001 formation of Oro Negro came late to the field; in the rest of Afro-Latin America, the early 1990s saw a sharp rise in collective organizing and grassroots social movements (Dixon and Burdick, 2012). Marta Salgado cites her participation, and that of a few other Afro-Chileans, in the Regional Conference of the Americas held in Santiago in late 2000, as the impetus for the formation of Oro Negro. The conference in Santiago was one of many events held around the world in preparation for the September 2001 World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance held in Durban, South Africa. Salgado recalls being met with surprise from other attendees, including Afro-descendants from other Latin American countries, who were unaware of an Afro-descendant presence in Chile.

Additional groups were formed soon after Oro Negro, drawing their membership from Chile’s northern region. Organización Lumbanga was founded in 2003 and has since, along with Oro Negro, attracted the most public attention. Other groups include *Compara Tumba Carnaval* and *Agrupación Arica Negra*. A group for elders was formalized in 2010, *Agrupación de Adulto Mayor Julia Corvacho*. Two groups dedicated to women were also formed, *Colectivo de Mujeres Luanda* and *Agrupación Mujeres Afrodescendientes Rurales Hijas de Azapa*. Oro Negro itself divided into an NGO and a dance group, *Compara Oro Negro*. Attempts at umbrella entities intended to promote greater communication and coordination between different Afro-descendant organizations, as well as a unified voice before the public and state, have included the *Alianza*

Afrochilena, the *Confraternidad de Familias y Agrupaciones Afroariqueñas*, and the *Asociación de Organizaciones y Comunidades Afrochilenas Azapa Territorio Ancestral*.¹⁵

While the preceding list is not necessarily exhaustive, it does point to considerable activity and efforts at community building among Afro-descendants in the area. Considering the limited size of the population, its geographic concentration, and the fact that such organizational life only started in 2001, the number of organizations is impressive. Participants explain that the groups differ somewhat in terms of their focus, some emphasizing music and dance or culture more broadly, and others emphasizing education and politics. Additionally, some draw their membership from rural areas while others draw primarily from within the city limits of Arica. Some allow non-Afros to join, others do not. Interpersonal differences were also hinted at as an explanation for the apparent rapid proliferation of groups.

What all the organizations have in common is the goal of valuing and promoting Afro-descendant identity. To that end, these groups have been responsible for researching the history of people of Afro descent. They have collected oral histories from elders, culminating in the local publication of two books by two prominent activists, *Lumbanga: Memorias Orales de la Cultura Afrochilena* (*Lumbanga: Oral Memories of Afro-Chilean Culture*) by Cristian Baez Lazcano and *Afrochileno: Una Historia Oculta (Afro-Chileans: A Hidden History)* by Marta Salgado Henríquez. These groups have organized workshops about history, music and dance, culinary traditions, instrument construction, and traditional crafts as well as seminars and conferences on various themes, all as a means to educate both Afro-descendants and others.

Music and dance have been particularly important in engaging public attention, with various groups participating in local folk parades and other performances. A closer look at what is danced provides insight into the cultural loss and re-creation experienced by the population. At one group’s rehearsals, I watched as choreography was created using the motions involved in harvesting olives. No dance with these motions existed or had been passed down to this generation; in the absence of preserved dances (the *tumba carnaval* being an exception),¹⁶ the group used an activity important to their history to create something representative of their identity. The music played was subject to

¹⁵ The municipal government of Arica formed an *Oficina de Desarrollo Afrodescendiente* (Office of Afro-descendant Development) in 2010, a sign, in part, of the impact of civil society efforts on government. The office explains its purpose as “breaking the barriers of structural racism, rendering the Afro-descendant community visible, in accordance with [...] the Durban Declaration and Plan of Action” (Municipio de Arica, 2010).

¹⁶ *Tumba carnaval* refers to a dance performed by African descendants in Arica during carnival. Oral history suggests that it dates back several generations. Accompanied by the rhythm of drums, dancers attempt to push each other with the movement of their hips.

a similar process of invention. I observed, for instance, two skillful percussionists search the internet, looking for Afro-Latin sounds to inspire their own rhythms; they were searching, they explained to each other, for something that “sounded African” to be combined with a “Chilean sound or rhythm” to create something uniquely their own. These efforts at developing informed moves and sounds were contrasted, by those belonging to that particular group, to less rigorous creations on the part of other groups. As one activist explained it, other groups, in the absence of any investigation or information, would “Africanize everything and produce something that has nothing to do with anything particularly Chilean or *afro-ariqueño*.” However, whatever is performed likely helps display an element of shared expressive culture that is distinct from that of other non-Afro-descendant Chileans.

The Patrimonial Slave Route, a local branch of UNESCO’s larger Slave Route Project, is another important venture. It was publicly inaugurated in 2009 and represents the efforts of the Ministry of National Assets in conjunction with various Afro-descendant groups who had been working on it for two years prior. It is a touristic and cultural route comprised of 12 locations across Arica, Valle de Azapa, and Valle de Lluta. These include a small museum of Afro-Chilean history, a plaza in what was once a black neighborhood (known as Lumbanga) during the colonial period, and a church in which enslaved blacks were once baptized. This route inserts Afro-descendant history and an undeniable Afro-descendant presence into the physical landscape, thereby publicly claiming/reclaiming the spaces which Afro-Chileans and their ancestors have moved through. The route has seen various degrees of use and upkeep; it remains to be seen if its full educational and economic potential will be realized.

Two major long-term political efforts include formally petitioning for legal recognition of Afro-Chileans as an ethnic group and for their subsequent inclusion as a group in the national census. There has been extensive activity around these demands, particularly on the part of the Alianza Afrochilena, including public demonstrations (marches and performances), letters, and meetings involving government and census officials. Despite coverage in the news media and, most significantly, grassroots realization of a pilot census of Afros in the northern region in 2009, Afro-descendants were ultimately denied ethnic status and not included in the 2012 census. This, according to activists, is one of the greatest hurdles, “because if you are not there [in the official statistics] you don’t exist,” and if you do not exist, then securing collective rights and protections, political representation, formal inclusion in public policy, development projects and school curricula, and the systematic tracking of disparities and discrimination are formal impossibilities. “You cannot be dealt with as a group,” explained an activist, “if you do not officially exist as a group.” In 2013, the Instituto Nacional de Estadística

(INE) announced that, for the first time, it would survey around 5,000 homes in the urban and rural areas of Arica and Parinacota in order to capture a representative profile of the Afro-descendant population and its housing, education, and income realities. This was a direct response to the years of petitions and proposals for statistical inclusion generated by the Afro-descendant population itself.¹⁷ The survey resulted in a count of 8,415 self-identified African descendants from 5,700 households canvassed in the northern region between August and November of 2013 (Bertin, 2014). Despite this long-awaited act of recognition and official statistical proof of presence, the 2017 national census, once again, did not give respondents the opportunity to identify as African descendants and so no data on the population was officially collected at a national level.

Reconfiguring the Heartland

The emergence of Afro-Chilean organizations from civil society, beginning in the early 2000s, marked a collective and organized attempt to achieve visibility and equality for this long-overlooked population. The varied activities of these groups have, taken as a whole, contributed to a gradual shifting in the landscape of Chilean identity and perhaps even Afro-Latin identity. The activities of these groups have challenged and redrawn multiple borders of belonging. Recovering the history of Afro-descendants in the area has meant redefining to whom Chile “belongs” and who “belongs” to Chile. A presence of over 400 years’ duration means that Afro-descendants have contributed to the nation for as long as those of Spanish descent: “The black is part of the *raza chilena*, not the romantic, pseudoscientific myth, but the real *raza*; those who lived, worked, and struggled to free and build Chile” (Sater, 1976, 38). While the pale-hued bodies of many of Chile’s Afro-descendants have made their relationship to blackness a seemingly tenuous one, their efforts at cultural recovery represent a collective declaration that African descent belongs to them regardless and that they belong to the larger African diaspora community in Latin America and across the globe, even if that larger community never knew they existed. It would appear that Chile’s Afro-descendants have simultaneously challenged the whiteness of Chile and what the blackness of Afro-Latin America looks like and how it is lived. While the pursuit of official state recognition of

¹⁷ Similar petitioning and proposals are observable among African-descendant populations elsewhere in Latin America. They received attention in the wake of the 2001 adoption of the Durban Declaration and Program of Action, which included among its policies and practices for states a call for statistical data collection and disaggregation of groups vulnerable to racism and xenophobia.

the population continues, a degree of popular recognition has already been achieved. Afro-Chileans, through their own collective efforts, are moving beyond the statistical, geographic, and ethno-racial hinterlands to which they have been relegated for centuries, redrawing the borders of belonging in the Chilean nation as well as within Afro-Latin America.

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