



Political remittances, connectivity, and the trans-local politics of place: An alternative approach to the dominant narratives on ‘displacement’ in Colombia



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ABSTRACT

This paper moves beyond the humanitarian perspective that tends to frame the understanding of the internal displacement in Colombia, which, by 2011, had affected between 8.5% and 11% of its national population. We investigate how outmigration creates connections between the rural place and its urban *Colonias* through social and political exchanges that configure a trans-local community bound by its struggle for the right to territory. By examining the case of the afrodescendant community of La Toma in Colombia, the paper aims to rethink contemporary dynamics of social governance in ethnic communities, whose building process binds socio-political spaces beyond de-territorialisation. In this respect, we argue that social and normative categories such as ‘displacement’ and ‘ethnic territories’ need to be reinterpreted to include the interactive political ideas and actions that connect societies forced into motion.

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1. Introduction

Colombia represents one of the world’s most dramatic cases of internal displacement. The government’s official figure for internally displaced persons (IDPs) is close to 3.9 million while nongovernment organizations cite almost 5.3 million (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2012). Thus, in 2011, IDPs made up between 8.5% and 11% of Colombia’s national population. Compared to other population groups, displacement has affected ethnic communities¹ more severely (Vélez-Torres, 2012b; Rodríguez Garavito et al., 2009). Between 1995 and 2005, almost 1 million afrodescendants were uprooted from their territories (Asher and Ojeda, 2009: 299), and it is their experience of displacement and migration that forms the empirical focus of this paper.

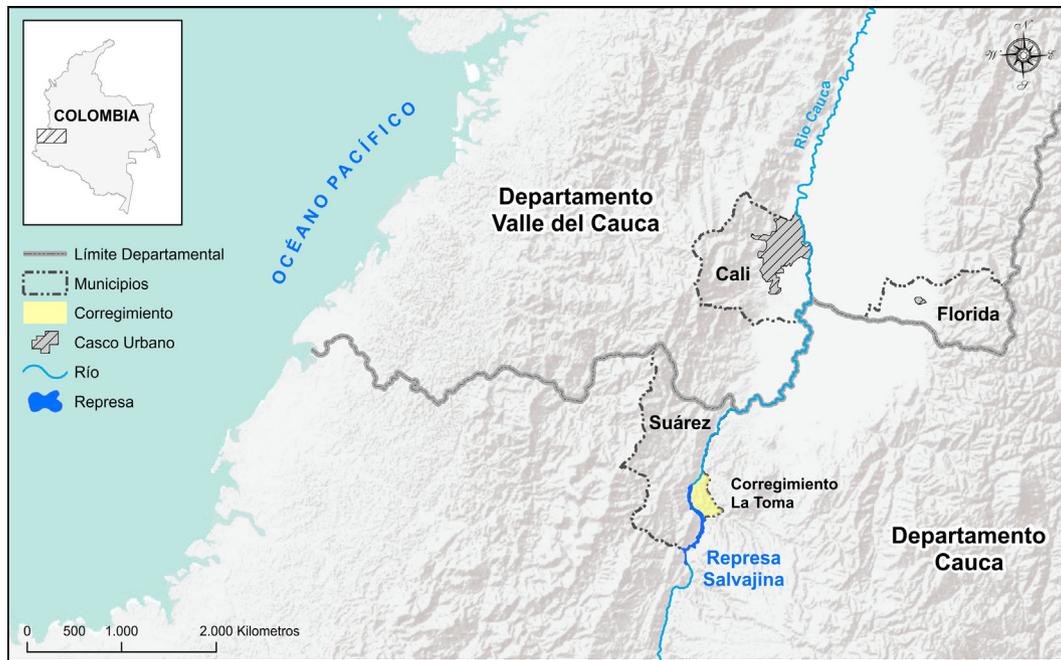
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¹ The Political Constitution of 1991 declared Colombia a multi-ethnic and pluricultural nation. Indigenous, Afrodescendants, and Rom communities were recognised as ethnic groups whose differentiated rights were made constitutional thereafter. In coherence with the ILO Convention No. 169, collective property rights are constitutionally granted to afrodescendants and indigenous peoples when organised in *Consejos Comunitarios* and *Cabildos* as autonomous administrative units in ancestral territories.

Located southwest of the Colombian Andes, La Toma District hosts an afrodescendant community whose traditional agro-mining practices are based on their access to water, land, and gold. However, since the 1980s, when the Salvajina Dam flooded the area’s most fertile and gold-rich land, local livelihoods have been dramatically affected, leading to new trajectories of forced migration for these communities. While some people moved their production activities uphill, others left for cities such as Cali, Popayán, Florida, and Bogotá. In 2000, after the community had learnt to live with their families in multiple locations and developed strategies to combine alternating periods of migration and return in the harvesting and mining seasons, a second peak of out-migration took place. Paramilitaries took control of the region to protect the interests of different multinational corporations as well as to gain control of trafficking routes through which to illegally export cocaine. Since then, disputes over the control of cocaine and gold production chains have increased, forcing more people to migrate.

This paper draws on the case of La Toma to analyse the trans-local community-building process between people who stayed in the hometown and migrants who moved to the sugarcane plantation in Florida and the urban slums of Cali (see Map 1). We draw on this case to counter the dominant narratives of ‘displacement’ in Colombia as a “fixed” and humanitarian condition. We suggest that instead these migrations can be understood as a process that connects people across time and space to form diasporic



Map 1. Map of La Toma District in the Municipality of Suárez, Department of Cauca; and the Municipalities of Cali and Florida, Department of Valle del Cauca. *Source:* Open Street Map 2013 (at: <http://www.openstreetmap.org/#map=5/51.500/-0.100>) and SIG-OT 2013 (at: <http://sigotn.igac.gov.co/sigotn/>). Created for this study by Laura Ramírez.

communities that, while forced into motion, struggle for their right to place and territory. We demonstrate that violence is not the only driver of migration from La Toma: rather, dispossession also explains the increased mobility as it worsens people's historically poor access to rights and services such as health, education, and work. We also show that new political ideas and practices acquired through migration contribute to how the trans-local community from La Toma has struggled to remain connected and defend their territory.

Thus, we investigate how migration and displacement form trans-local practices that connect people. Through their political orientations and engagements, migrants contribute to place-making processes (Massey, 1992, 1994, 2009) in the rural areas they leave behind, while the political practices they bring with them affect the no-less-political quotidian manner to inhabit the new locations. Acknowledging that community and territory are neither self-evident, unproblematic nor abstract categories (Elden, 2010), our main objective is to empirically question (Polzer Ngwato, 2012) how outmigration creates connections between the rural place and its migrating *colonias*, and how these interactive connections are established and reproduced through social and political exchanges.

Following the introduction, the paper starts by framing the conceptual debate on mobility and migration from the perspective of diasporic communities created through social and political practices of connection. We then contextualise La Toma as a place of outmigration and explain the methodology used to address such a context and study the trans-local practices of place and community building. In the subsequent analytical sections, we first characterise the connectivity practices between the *colonias* and La Toma, and then build on these practices to show how political transactions within the multi-sited community have contributed to a trans-local process of community building, revolving around the *Consejo Comunitario* as the societal authority for territorial governance.

Finally, we reflect on the practices of connection and how despite the discontinuity of geographical space generated by migration, La Toma is a core topographic reference for the community

and the axis of the political connections developed by migrants and nonmigrants. The territory has developed as the main discursive connection between migrants and nonmigrants, becoming at the same time a political aim and the emotional, symbolic, but also physical condition of a trans-local socio-political organisation. In the last section, and building on this place-making process, we contest the hegemonic humanitarian approach to forced migration in Colombia, challenge the understanding of identity and community as being tied to a discrete place, and show how social agency in responding to migration has repositioned the community in their struggle to defend their territory.

2. Beyond 'displacement': community diaspora and political remittances connecting people and places

'Internal displacement' as a humanitarian crisis forms a paradigmatic background for understanding migration in Colombia. In this section, however, we present an alternative analytical framework that focuses on how internal displacement develops in diasporic communities whose bonds between the territory of origin and location(s) of displacement make way for political mobilisation and exchanges across the trans-local space. We see this approach as an alternative to the dominant and inadequate discourses of the media, government, and certain social organizations that equate displacement with de-territorialization.

In Colombia, displacement is most often understood in the context of 'violence'. In the past century, two major episodes of concentrated violence have framed the overall context of civil conflict: La Violencia during the late 1940s and early 1950s – that gave origin to the left-wing FARC² guerrilla later in 1964 – and the wave of violence during the 1980–1990s in relation to confrontations between left-wing guerrilla groups and right-wing paramilitaries, which was also linked to the organised drug trade (Lozano-García et al., 2010; Asher and Ojeda, 2009). The violence has continuously intensified since the 1990s and affected rural areas, forcing their

² Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – its acronym in Spanish.

civilian inhabitants to move away in great numbers and settle in poor urban neighbourhoods (e.g. Ibáñez and Vélez, 2008).

However, 'violence' as the main explanation for displacement silences the overall situation of dispossession. The active role of the Colombian state in relation to endorsing, for instance, mining concessions, dam projects and large-scale plantations in the name of development has not only challenged local people's land rights and deprived them of their livelihoods, but also formed unholy alliances between the state, business actors and illegal armed groups, inducing further displacement (Escobar, 2004; Oslender, 2008; Grajales, 2011). By ascribing to the guerrilla and paramilitaries the main responsibility for displacement, the government disregards its own actions and omissions in addressing policies that enhance dispossession. Our argument in this paper is, therefore, that violence, conflict and dispossession interact in complex ways and set people and communities in motion. Furthermore, as we shall illustrate, this general context takes particular forms in local contexts and becomes a driver and creator of migrants' mobility and flows.

Nevertheless, the official explanation for the high number of IDPs in Colombia focuses on internal, armed conflict and the associated illegal drug trade that have beleaguered the country. Accordingly, the government has framed its understanding and actions within a predominantly humanitarian perspective, which emphasises support for the displaced *outside* their territory of origin. This human rights perspective is also mirrored in most academic literature on displacement in Colombia (Lozano-García et al., 2010; Muggah, 2000; Rodríguez Garavito et al., 2009; Guevara and Arango, 2009). Such studies range from analyses of the armed conflict and the regime of terror driving displacement (Castillejo, 2000; Oslender, 2008) to criticisms of controversial accounting and statistical presentation (Oslender, 2010) and the relevant humanitarian attention systems (Ibáñez and Vélez, 2008; Ibáñez and Moya, 2010). However, these approaches tend to neglect the broader field of the political economy of displacement. In doing so, they divert attention from the more mundane aspects of how and why people move away from places characterised by civil conflict, and how they remain connected to their families, communities, and territory.

This widespread explanation of displacement discussed above has been captured in analyses of the role of diasporas in conflict-ridden societies (Van Hear, 2011). Over the last few decades, 'diaspora' has become an academic and public euphemism for a diverse set of population groups on the move. The concept has come 'to encompass a multitude of ethnic, religious and national communities who find themselves living outside the territory to which they are historically "rooted"' (Carter, 2005: 55). In this respect, what distinguishes the concept of a diaspora from other transnational approaches to migration is their members' attentiveness to the importance of territorial identity (Blunt, 2007). It is with an emphasis on identity formation around a claim to a common territory and on the political mobilisation around this claim that we apply the term 'diaspora' (for an extended discussion of the many applications of the concept, see e.g. Bruneau, 2010).

A central aspect of diaspora studies is also to understand how the migration experience and practice takes place in a trans-local social space, implying that analyses cannot focus exclusively on migrants as isolated persons or groups; rather, studies should include an understanding of how migrants are connected through the networks of social relations they sustain across locations (Sørensen, 2007). Making use of a trans-local lens shows us how ordinary people straddle different worlds and create communities that span borders (Levitt, 2001) and how resources and ideas are exchanged between people and groups. Central to a diasporic framework for understanding trans-local exchanges then, is that place-making and identity formation are linked to territory as a

material repository of rights and membership (Polzer Ngwato, 2012: 563) and, moreover, that they transcend the local through migrants' social, economic, and political connections. This is what critical geopolitics refers to as the contradictory nature of spatial-political transformation 'holding together both de-territorialization and re-territorialization' (Carter, 2005: 61).

In terms of connectedness, remittances form an important link between the host and home sites; the literature posits remittances as a transnational economic relationship of income, investment and capital from migrants to the household left behind (Goldring, 2003: 4; de Haas, 2006: 566). These economic exchanges have attracted extended interest (e.g., World Bank, 2009) and has privileged the economic at the expense of the social, and thereby ignored important aspects of migration's transformative qualities (Levitt and Lamba-Nieves, 2011). The concept of social remittances has therefore been suggested to counter this bias.

It is in the context of social remittances within the diasporic space that we might explore the process of trans-local political mobilisation. Social remittances cover the exchange of ideas and behaviours between places: symbols, values, norms, identities and experiences (Levitt, 1998; Levitt and Lamba-Nieves, 2011). This is not solely an exchange within networks of families and households, but also the extended movement of knowledge and practices in the context of collective contacts and actions. Thus, the exchange and deployment of remittances are closely linked with an orientation and identification that motivates them – activist engagements that shape political processes at both ends of the 'migration chain' (Piper, 2009).

'Political remittances' constitute a part of social remittances where political mobilisation may develop around particular rallies, voting practices or social organisation. Studies of how migrants' knowledge and practices develop over time show that, not only does politics transplant and ensure migrants' continued involvement and contacts over time (Levitt and Lamba-Nieves, 2011), homeland developmental concerns help reshape political power structures and enhance the political participation of migrants in local politics in their host area (Piper, 2009; Sabur and Mahmud, 2008). While political remittance can entail the exchange of particular political ideas from migrants' new homes and infuse them in homeland politics (e.g., Goldring, 2003; Steen, 2007; Piper, 2009), they can be interpreted as practices of belonging in the sense that it affirms the migrants' on-going role as members of a local society. Political remittances have been explored with a focus on the transfer of democratic ideas and practices, and studies have looked at whether and how migrants' political trans-nationalism is a positive force in strengthening the formal rules of organising political representation and participation (e.g., Itzigsohn and Villacrés, 2008).

In this paper, we build on these insights on trans-local politics and examine how they develop and form the diasporic space; we explore how migrants' political trans-localism can develop as a positive factor in place and community building through political mobilisation to defend the homeland. Thus, in our subsequent analysis of how migrant connections have developed within the extended broader social field of La Toma's diaspora, we pay particular attention to the role of political remittances by exploring (a) the historical development of migrant connections, (b) how political ideologies and practices develop and travel between locations (La Toma, the sugarcane plantation in Florida, and the urban slum in Cali), and (c) how local politics in La Toma could benefit from political ideas and practices from the colonias to defend its territory against dispossession. In this way, our analysis links up with the renewed and more politicised interest in the production of place that has emerged in anthropology and human geography, most of the time in connection with the impact of and resistance to globalisation and neoliberalism (Massey, 1992, 1994, 2009; Escobar, 2001). However, by emphasising the intertwined

processes of de-territorialization and re-territorialization the analysis attempts to explore political mobilisation and agency in and of the diasporic community.

3. Methodology

La Toma District is located in the southwest mountain chain of the Colombian Andes. The district encompasses more than 1300 households and covers an area of 7000 ha (*Observatorio de Discriminación Racial*, 2011). The first gold mines were established in this region in 1636, and during colonial times the main workforce in the mines comprised black slaves. Thus, even before the abolition of slavery in 1851, local afrodescendants who were able to buy their freedom with gold had begun to settle in the area. Hence, through many generations now, the afrodescendants have established strong and multifaceted relations with the territory, which have provided them an important foundation for their livelihoods based on small-scale gold mining, agriculture and fishing. As is the case for many smallholders in the global south (*Bernstein*, 2010: 104) and for most Colombian afrodescendant communities (*Escobar*, 2004: 161), the production system in La Toma has been oriented towards subsistence rather than accumulation. However, this system has changed dramatically over the last three decades, and households and individual migrations have become part of La Toma's livelihood practices.

We have applied a multi-sited methodology to explore the forms and importance of connections between La Toma and migrants' host sites. Between 2009 and 2013, field research was developed and implemented in La Toma and two colonias, Florida and Cali. The research was based on an overall participatory research practice. The first field stay took place in La Toma District and lasted six months (2011); the second lasted four months and was divided between the colonias in Cali and Florida (2012). A final and relatively short field stay took place in 2013 in La Toma. We approached the history of territorial conflicts in La Toma and the drivers of migration by conducting workshops with La Toma's non-migrants to draw maps that could help visualise the trajectories of local dispossession that had stimulated the outmigration.

The same methodological techniques were used in the three locations and participants were selected based on similar demographic and pedagogical principles. Following *Cresswell* (2012: 647), the methods were designed to capture the multiple dimensions of mobility and included (a) inter-generational workshops to build memory lines of the history of conflict and struggles both in La Toma and the outmigration sites, (b) participatory documentary processes engaging local youth in order to build autonomous visual representations of the community's history and current territorial challenges (*Vélez-Torres*, 2013), (c) interviews with local leaders and public officers to explore their different positions on the local conflicts in La Toma and the outmigration sites; and (d) reviewing the archives preserved by local leaders and institutions to characterise government and community approaches to the conflicts, the migration and government policies.

In the colonias, participants in the activities were family members and friends of people previously met in La Toma. From them, we snowballed a sample of participants to the different participatory techniques. As this study is not statistically representative of outmigrants from La Toma, it is possible that people not reached in the study do not have the same interest and commitment to the defence of La Toma as an ancestral territory. However, it is important to clarify that: (i) the methodological techniques aimed at different age groups and people with different occupancies. As will be shown in the next section, this enabled a broad range of positions among participants based on different experiences, expectations and ideas about La Toma. Hence, the sample was

not limited to people with certain political trajectories. (ii) It is actually the case that migrants from the colonias, as well as people staying in La Toma, differ in their views on what strategies should be incorporated in the defence of La Toma. As explained in the second to last section of the paper, this is a permanent negotiation process among the colonias and the Consejo Comunitario. (iii) Despite the diversity of histories of mobility and different dimensions of connectivity with La Toma, all participants in this research were keen to support the defence of La Toma. Dispossession seems to have rooted deep in all members of this diasporic community, motivating them to collectively resist it.

The memory workshops in particular illuminated how the afrodescendants have established a continuous relationship with the territory, and in this respect how rivers and waterway-based connections have played a central role in establishing the local economy, family relations and communities (see also *Oslender*, 2002). Insights from these workshops were used to develop documentary video that focus on the trajectories of dispossession in La Toma and show how these processes relate to outmigration. In Florida and Cali, the participatory videos also focused on the social changes and economic challenges faced by migrants and migrant communities. The videos were followed up by life-history interviews that focused on migrants' experiences with mobility and their perceptions of local conflicts. Sharing time and space with the "extended" community from La Toma and living in Cali and Florida enriched our comprehension of what it means to be a trans-local subject with multi-site household arrangements and a trans-local community, predominantly gravitating around the disputed locale of La Toma.

4. New settlements and the socio-political trajectories of migrants

Most adults and the older inhabitants of La Toma have experienced mobility within the region, but they all agree that it was the construction of the Salvajina dam in the 1980s (*Vélez-Torres*, 2012a) that forced them to start migrating to the cities. Mobility and connectivity is an ancestral social practice of afrodescendant communities in the Pacific region, not least for managing and making use of a landscape crisscrossed by rivers and streams (*Oslender*, 2002; *Meza*, 2010: 67–101). The history of the settlement as free men and women, the region's economic geography, and afrodescendants' trajectories of resistance have not only sculpted the landscape, but also navigated the rivers. The novelty, however, was the feeling that they were being displaced by domestic and foreign actors who had come to dispossess the community of their land, water and valuable resources such as gold. This change in practices of mobility is in line with *de Haas'* argument (2006: 568), which suggests that historical seasonal migration in the Middle Atlas Mountains has transformed into increasing national and international rural–urban migration in the postcolonial era.

In 2010, more than 7000 afrodescendants inhabited La Toma. However, local leaders estimate that besides the population that stayed in the territory, more than 3000 people have been forced to migrate during the past three decades to cities such as Cali, Florida and Bogota into what they call the colonias. In this period, three political-economic drivers characterise the migration flow from La Toma. The first, between 1979 and 1985, is the construction of La Salvajina dam, which generated the most dramatic wave of migration in the community's history. Dispossession related to the dam's construction is continuous (*Vélez-Torres*, 2012a) and "lack of opportunities in La Toma" and well-established family networks built between La Toma and the cities have contributed further to "drop-by-drop" migration to the cities. During 1980–2000, inhabitants developed a strategy for economic diversification by

incorporating periodic labour migration to sustain their livelihoods. On returning to La Toma during the mining and harvest seasons, many migrants would take up informal and poorly paid employment in the cities or work as poorly skilled labourers on the nearby sugarcane plantations.

The second era of political-economic change occurred between 2000 and 2004 when the AUC³ paramilitaries' control of the region, intended to protect private economic interest of national and foreign companies operating locally, drastically restricted human mobility. Their terror regime made the movement of people and commodities both difficult and dangerous. While some migrants felt compelled to stay in the cities for longer periods, the new generation born and raised in the cities began to lose some of the connections their parents had with the territory. Thus, the generational difference emerges as a relevant feature of social differentiation within households; moreover, encouraging younger migrants to engage with the strategies and processes of trans-local community building and defence of their homeland against dispossession constitutes a palpable political challenge.

The most recent political-economic driver has been the immigration of *paisa* and *nariñense colonos* (colonisers) looking for coca and gold in La Toma region. Thus, 2009 onwards, local disputes over access to gold mines has increased and forced people to migrate. Violence has also intensified since then: the colonos and their illegal armies have forced the local community away from their traditional mining setting along the river, streams and surrounding mountains. In this context, killings and murder threats against local miners have also contributed to the decision of some migrants to remain in the cities.

While these structural drivers make up an important framework for understanding why people move between places, migration is also stimulated by the overall lack of resources and historical marginalisation of livelihoods in the area. In this sense, the decision to migrate is not a passive one by the rural poor, driven exclusively by structural economic forces (de Haas, 2006) or territorial violence. In order to fully appreciate the dynamics of migration flows between La Toma and its colonias, one needs to acknowledge the agency of individuals and households and, therefore, to assess factors such as gender and inter-generational differences within the community. In the following sections, we describe what characterises the two colonias and how migrant connections have developed between them and La Toma.

4.1. In Florida

The colonia of Florida⁴ consists mainly of families who migrated together two or three decades ago, motivated by the economic stability supposedly offered by the sugar mills. One of the first to arrive was Don Arnoldo Torres, who explained that he decided to sell his land in La Toma to his brother “before the water came to flood it”, referring to the Salvajina dam that flooded the agro-mining valley of the Suarez municipality in 1985. At that time, he was told that the mills were offering jobs, and in 1980 he moved and started to work in the Ingenio Ríopaila-Castilla. Since then, friends and family members have joined him in Florida. Like Don Arnoldo, almost all male adults in the colonia work for the sugar mills or on the sugarcane plantations. Women are either employed as fulltime live-in domestic maids in Cali or are responsible for housekeeping.

³ The United Self-Defence Group of Colombia – its acronym in Spanish – are illegal armed groups from the far-right wing.

⁴ Florida is located in the south of the Valle del Cauca Department. According to the national census of 2005, it has more than 56,000 inhabitants. The economy of the town and the region is based on the sugarcane plantations and agro-industry. For a closer look at this migration site and the dynamics of the colonia in Florida, watch the participatory documentary produced in 2012 at: <http://youtu.be/VsZisrY1Yho> (Florida, part one) and <http://youtu.be/1-xarPu8qxs> (Florida, part two).

Almost all households are economically dependent on the poorly paid jobs offered by the sugar mills. Long hours of work in the sun and seven-day weeks have compelled some of them to compare this work regime to slavery. Accordingly, workers and their families have become increasingly concerned with labour rights, and unionisation and strikes are a prominent practice.

Adult males' low wages have made it necessary for adult females⁵ to find whatever job possible to contribute to the household income. A 34-year-old mother of three children, married to a sugarcane cutter in the Ingenio Ríopaila-Castilla, has worked as a live-in domestic maid in Cali for two decades and describes her situation as follows:

The problem in Florida is that you may be able to find a job as a housemaid but no one will pay what one really deserve[s]. Due to the low wages, most women who are wives of sugarcane cutters have to go to find any work in Cali: we go there from Monday to Saturday, and on Saturday afternoons we come back home to rest and share only Sunday with the family. (04/2012)

Poor labour conditions do not apply only to adult women with low levels of schooling; young women with secondary schooling and/or vocational training are also unable to find jobs. This overall situation, including the absence of mothers, has shifted the burden of housekeeping and the care of younger siblings to families' older daughters. As one young woman asserted, “We have ended up replacing our mothers as housekeepers. At the same time we are daughters, mothers [to our younger brothers and sisters], and wives [to our fathers]” (04/2012).

Young men, being mostly second-generation migrants, are generally unemployed, and despite the fact that they have not lived in La Toma and have no deep roots in their parents' homeland, La Toma has emerged as the only alternative to unemployment. One young man put it quite plainly:

Here in Florida, there are no opportunities. There is nothing to do here! [...] I have tried everything to find a job but I cannot find any. [...] And now I do not know what else to do. Maybe I should just go to La Toma to work in the mines; at least we can still go there to work. . . Many young people are now going to La Toma [in every school holidays] to work in the mines because they are unable to find anything else. (04/2012)

Making a living is closely connected to the expansion of the region's sugarcane agro-industry. Thus, since 2005, the colonia has collaborated with other unionised sugarcane cutters to defend their workers' rights. This has provided the colonia with new knowledge of rights and new political actions. One sugarcane cutter expressed these acquired ideas and practices thus:

Our rights were often violated. Before, if you were my boss, I would not even have the right to look you in the eye. So, at some point, we got tired of seeing how badly we were treated. And in 2005 we said, ‘well, let us go on strike’. After that, the employers gave us some education opportunities [...], but in 2008 the situation became really bad again. At that moment, we decided to mobilise ourselves with other sugarcane cutters working in the nearby sugar mills. [...] As people from my town in La Toma well know, even President Alvaro Uribe Vélez came and tried to convince us to stop mobilising, claiming that we were from the guerrilla. But we told him, ‘No sir, how can we be from the guerrilla if the only weapon we have is this machete with which to cut sugarcane in order to make a living for our families?’ It does not seem right to me that going on strike to claim

⁵ Interestingly, most women in this locale self-identify as “wives of sugar-cutters”, which shows how livelihoods and gender identities in Florida gravitate around the sugarcane agro-industry.

something is feared in the same light as if one from the guerrilla [...] Our Political Constitution speaks about the right to a decent job, and this is what we were claiming. (04/2012)

Despite their social mobilisation, labour conditions for sugarcane cutters in Florida in 2012 were still poor and the repression extreme. During fieldwork for this research in 2012, the social leader of the union negotiating workers' salaries, Daniel Aguirre Piedrahita, was killed; as fear spread, the salary negotiations froze.

Thus, while a few generations ago people could easily come to Florida and find a job in the mills or sugarcane plantations, this is neither easy nor comparably attractive any longer, and migration to Florida has almost stopped. While the sugarcane monoculture keeps expanding along the lowlands of the Cauca Valley, mechanisation has decreased the demand for labour. Some sugarcane cutters have been made redundant with no compensation, some have been offered low indemnifications, and a few others have been promised an economic incentives plan for returning home, which presumes the ownership of land in the 'homeland' (La Toma). While information about these plans is no more than rumour among the sugarcane cutters and people in La Toma, the community leaders have started to reflect on how to incorporate political and economic remittances from the La Toma diaspora, as this is the first time that socio-economic conditions in this migrating site seem to be forcing an imminent return.

4.2. In Cali

In Cali,⁶ migrants' motivation for moving and settling are less homogenous than in Florida, and occupations and livelihoods more diverse. Likewise, most migrants have moved there independently, allowing them to be more flexible when accessing all sorts of informal work. Motivations and occupations can be divided into three groups: (a) male adults who migrated a long time ago, have built a family in the city, and gradually engaged in middle-skilled jobs; (b) young adult single mothers who have come to the city to work as fulltime live-in maids; and (c) young males who have migrated recently, looking for employment, to study, or to engage in the 'artistic world' of dancers and musicians that Cali provides. Known as the "capital of salsa" and characterised by public investment in cultural programmes (El Tiempo-Redacción Cali, 2013), migrants from La Toma have imagined Cali as a welcoming place in which to start an artistic career – a place where it is possible to study and work at the same time. However, as one adult man suggested, the reality is that few of the young migrants who come here realise their dreams.

Physically, the colonia is dispersed along the impoverished suburbs of the Aguablanca District, but men and women's occupations and, therefore, forms to inhabit the city differ. Young male migrants are likely to be engaged in informal jobs such as selling products on the streets, helping to recruit passengers for the crowded buses, performing on the buses, hairdressing, and working temporarily in the construction sector. By contrast, women's employment experiences are more confined to working as fulltime live-in domestic maids. Most adult and young women in the colonia are single mothers whose only motivation to work in such conditions is to be able to earn enough money to sustain their families by remitting money to their mothers in La Toma, who in turn, care for their children.

Males who moved here one or two decades ago have managed

to establish families and engage in middle-skilled jobs. Interestingly, some of the work they do is thought to be part of a 'connecting strategy' of the migrant community that sustains networks and political awareness of the conflict situation in La Toma. A 29-year-old musician and hairdresser explained it like this:

We have been hairdressing in the colonia tomeña for 13 years in the Aguablanca District. The occupation functions as a newspaper, as a communication medium: any information from La Toma that comes to this place, I disseminate. And what this [communication dynamic] does is unify our forces. In other words, this place strengthens us: on the one hand, we do not disperse too far in the city, and on the other hand, we always remain in contact with people back home because this place helps us debate the problems that are taking place in La Toma, in our hometown. (04/2012)

However, the physical fragmentation of the La Toma diaspora along the city in different neighbourhoods and informal employment has resulted in the colonia's failure to meet the expectations of different migrant groups who will practices of unity and a sense of continuity. This situation is consistent with the racialised demography of the city, which other scholars have analysed in correlation with national and regional displacement (Urrea-Giraldo et al., 2007; Barbary et al., 1999). Despite the physical fragmentation of the colonia in the city, people feel the need to remain connected not only to their homeland but also within the colonia; a young leader who has struggled to study law at a private university in Cali explains:

I have faced many financial difficulties in studying at the university because the fees are very high. [...] People in La Toma earn their livelihood through traditional mining and agriculture, so it is difficult for a young person like me to afford the equivalent to 1200 euros every semester, which is what I have to pay to study here. Despite the hard situation, I do not give up because I am convinced that I can finish my Bachelor's degree, specialise, and use law as a legitimate tool to help the black community in La Toma and in the country who have been marginalised and live under conditions of exclusion and racism. (04/2012)

The political ideas and practices of the colonia in Cali have developed in relation to its exposure to the clientelist electorate system. Some migrants have been involved in regional electoral campaigns, sometimes using La Toma as a place from where to gain votes. Yet local leaders in the colonia have emphasised the need to go beyond the electoral system to articulate their ideas and practices as a broader political plan for the community from La Toma. However, given the numerous challenges of living in Cali, La Toma has continuously served as a place for migrants to return and seek relief during "the hard times"; this has given Cali's 'situation' priority in the political agenda of La Toma's community leaders.

5. Colonias–La Toma relations and political mobilisation

What the preceding characterisation of the two La Toma migrant colonias indicates is the importance of reference to La Toma District as a physical and symbolic locale connecting people for political mobilisation among the La Toma diaspora. On the one hand, it implies that political awareness and mobilisation is socially valued by the community left behind; on the other, it suggests that migrants effectively communicate with people in the homeland about political challenges in the different locations. Social networks, periodic visits and diverse socio-political trajectories in the colonias have contributed to the establishment of a hetero-

⁶ Cali is the capital of the Valle del Cauca Department. According to the national census in 2005, it has more than 2.7 million inhabitants, which makes it the third-most populated city in the country. For a closer look at this migrating site and the dynamics of the colonia in Cali, watch the participatory documentary produced in 2012 at <http://youtu.be/B5Ytt3dlh4g> (Cali, part one) and http://youtu.be/TF80_eDWhs0 (Cali, part two).

geneous but connected trans-local community with roots in La Toma territory. This spatial dispersion of the La Toma community should be understood in relation to the different ways of conceiving and doing politics in migrants' host sites. In the cases analysed, however, the colonias have exercised their support for legal processes and social organisation (triggered in La Toma) to confront the threats of eviction and dispossession that people left behind in La Toma are experiencing.

For migrants in the colonias, La Toma is the community and the family they have left behind, but it is also a homeland to be protected – it is their heritage and that of coming generations, and the place to which they should always be able to return. This belonging builds on a shared memory of a territory that has been sculpted and defended through social struggle. The territory, as a disputed and reclaimed space, has empowered migrants with a shared identity of struggle. In this section, we build on these connectivity practices to show how political transactions within the multi-site community have contributed to a trans-local process of community building, revolving around the Consejo Comunitario in La Toma as the societal authority for territorial governance and as a primary engine of political mobilisation.

Transitional Article 55 of the Political Constitution 1991 and Law 70 of 1993 granted afrodescendant communities the right to a *Consejo Comunitario* as their main administrative authority, and entitled them to *Territorios Colectivos* as their formalised collective land. Regulated by Decree 1745/1995, the Consejos Comunitarios are administrative authorities mandated to organise afrodescendant communities in their defence and protection of ethnic and territorial rights. A Consejo Comunitario constitutes the total inhabitants of an afrodescendant territory, who take collective decisions in relation to the community and territorial planning through an annual general assembly. Each Consejo Comunitario has a board of directors that represents the community in any legal and/or bureaucratic process. Among other afrodescendant communities from the Pacific, the Consejo Comunitario from La Toma has chosen to create a *Plan de Vida* as a self-defined political agenda to administrate their territory.

Compared to afrodescendant communities on the Pacific Coast (Offen, 2003), collective land entitlement was not as successful in the inter-Andean valley. Among other cases, the legal formalisation of La Toma as a collective territory has been delayed and heavily bureaucratized; despite the constitutionalised right to collective territory, the community from La Toma is still struggling to be legally entitled to their land. However, the community has built and defended the Consejo Comunitario as a strategic communitarian institution with the unique ability and envisioned capacity to remain independent of the government and electoral parties. It has become, in other words, the most important political tool for afrodescendants with which to defend their right to territory and ensure other constitutionalised ethnic rights. Nonetheless, the institution of the Consejo Comunitario is beset by numerous challenges, in particular when it is supposed to be a societal body that represents a diasporic community with diverse experiences, acquired expectations, and trans-local social and political practices.

The memory and imagination of migrants and nonmigrants have developed into a sense of belonging that is rooted in the existence of La Toma as physical and social community space. As a consequence, all migrants that took part in this research agreed on the primacy of its defence. An elderly woman living in Florida said energetically:

If they were going to evict us, then we would all go back to La Toma! Because we are from there, and if at any time we want to go back, we should have the right to do so. It would be dreadful if we did not have a place to go back in case we could not find a job or did not feel comfortable here any more. (04/2012)

An adult male in Florida remarked on his family connections as an important relation to La Toma, and highlighted the importance of the unity among migrants and nonmigrants on the issue of protecting their territory:

I am very much aware of what is happening to my people and to my hometown. [...] In fact, when they [the multinational] said that they were going to evict the people from La Toma, we told the family that they should let us know how the process developed. Because they might call us at any time, and even if we have to ask for special permission [from the sugar mill] to join them, they have all our support and should know that they are not alone. (04/2012)

Likewise, the current challenges facing migrants in Cali and Florida are of concern to the Consejo Comunitario. The Consejo sees the need to articulate the spatial dimensions of politics to the plans for La Toma as a community and – hopefully – as a collective territory. For people in La Toma, the colonias are persons who have had to leave but who have remained part of the community. For the Consejo and the local leaders, migrants “have the same rights to the territory as those who have stayed” (interview with a male elder, La Toma, 04/2011). Moreover, for one leader from the Consejo, migrants are key players in the defence of the territory because their ideas and the capacities they have built can help strengthen the social mobilisation against dispossession:

It may happen that we find different perspectives and different thoughts among the colonias, but we must join all visions together. We must unify the thoughts from the colonias with the *Plan de Vida* for La Toma. We need to use the new knowledge of migrants as a tool to remain a community in the long run. Otherwise, believe me, it seems very clear to me that if we do not unify, we will not be able to hold La Toma for long, and we may all end up migrating to places where there will not be opportunities for all! [...] We [the leaders in La Toma] should come to the colonias not only during election periods but always. We have to speak with the people and build a projection strategy with them. [...] As regards the youth, we have to tell them “this is what is happening, we have experienced this, we have struggled in this way, and in consequence this land is ours.” (04/2012)

Through the *Plan de Vida*, the community in La Toma has created a new sphere of values within which they defend their traditional socioeconomic practices and contest government schemes that have been imposed in order to exploit their territory. In the Alto Cauca, this concept has grown hand in hand with the claims of the Nasa indigenous movement. However, among the afrodescendant communities it is a political statement that has encountered frequent difficulties in becoming formalised through the legal avenues required by the state. On the other hand, the *Plan de Vida* is constantly defied because it represents a threat to the capitalist exercise of power by actors with strong economic interests in the territory.

As an example of the challenges faced in the case of La Toma, and despite the Consejo's attempts to incorporate the experiences of migration and migrants' new knowledge in the community's autonomous *Plan de Vida*, many questions and concerns remain: how should they deal with the not-so desirable habits and urban customs such as drug consumption and delinquency? How can they gain the most from what migrants can bring to the territory in terms of new knowledge, skills and economy? How should they deal with the new waves of return-migration in terms of the employment available? How can they create opportunities for education and work, for example, through the technification of mining and diversification of agriculture?

Migrants to the colonias have analogous questions: how should the Consejo include their experiences and expectations in the Plan de Vida? Thus, the need to broaden the socio-political scope of the Consejo requires it to comprehend the context of the migrating sites: on the one hand, it is crucial to plan for the practicalities of dealing with waves of returning migrants; on the other, it is also important to acknowledge the situation of those migrants who want to stay in the cities but remain active community members. One leader from the colonia in Cali framed it in this way:

It should not be necessary for us all to stay in La Toma to feel that we are represented by the politics of the Consejo Comunitario. In fact, as long as we are organised, we can stay here [in Cali] and feel as though we were there [in La Toma]. And this is not about elections, because that is a myth. This is about self-organising the colonias to bring our voices to La Toma. (04/2012)

People in the colonias know that this is a challenge both for the Consejo in La Toma and for the migrants – activating political engagement at both ends of the ‘migration chain’ (Piper, 2009). These shared intentions and questions can be reframed to ask how they can build a trans-local societal authority for territorial governance that would remain open to political remittances from the colonias while incorporating the needs of migrants as part of the Plan de Vida of a multi-site community. Responding along this line of ideas, one leader from La Toma who was invited to a workshop in Florida explained the Consejo’s plans as follows:

We expect to generate employment. We have started with agriculture and food production, but we also want to improve the mining so that gold extraction rises but remains clean [in the sense of not using mercury and cyanide]. But what one has to know is that without territory there is nothing: everything would be up in the air. [...] I will say one thing: if people in Florida lose their jobs cutting sugarcane, what will they do? They will return to La Toma! This situation requires a plan, an urgent short-term plan. (03/2012)

The interests of connecting a multi-site community and building a trans-local political organisation merges in the defence of La Toma’s territory. This local space, with its symbolic, physical and emotional dimensions, is the kernel of a shared history and an imagined future for migrants and nonmigrants; as a multidimensional space that connects them both, protecting La Toma requires an articulated organisation and mobilisation plan. The territory is the gravitational core of a universe of ideas and practices; this means that, despite the pushing and pulling drivers of migration, La Toma is the locale that people will defend against dispossession. Hence, its defence is not only the multi-site community’s aim, but also the axis of their will to develop a connected socio-political organisation. In other words, La Toma’s territory is both the *raison d’être* for and a condition of a trans-local community; trans-local social organisation and mobilisation remain, nonetheless, a political challenge.

6. Political remittances and trans-local community building

We have the same politics among people in La Toma and the colonias because wherever we are, wherever we go, we are black communities and we should have our Consejo Comunitario. This is the right we were granted by law. One may be here in Florida but should have the right to be part of the Consejo Comunitario. We belong to it. We should claim the special rights we have as black communities no matter where we are because those rights make us different, make us what we are. (03/2012)

The preceding statement, made by a leader from La Toma now living in one of the colonias, summarises how the reality of mobility has begun to compel local political leaders to become involved in trans-local political mobilisation. They have come to realise the potential strength of the connections between the home community in La Toma and related migrant communities on the sugarcane plantation (in Florida) and in the urban slums (in Cali).

Although separated physically, people exchange political remittances, connecting ethnic discourses in La Toma with those in the colonias on issues of class and labour rights, unionisation, and electoral practices. In this way, the migration process and experience have helped broaden the political scope of the Consejo Comunitario, not only in terms of the mutual remittances that support social organisation in La Toma and the migrating sites, but also in relation to the challenges of building a trans-local community that can defend its homeland while moving (physically and socially) beyond it. Since the community has been forced to become multi-sited, the politics of place reaches new dimensions that extend beyond the local territory.

Given the rights that migrants are perceived to have to their home territory, La Toma’s inhabitants see migration as the community’s mainstay in defending their territory against dispossession. Leaders in La Toma and the colonias agree on the need to bring these practices of connectivity and new senses of place to the community’s autonomous *Plan de Vida*. Thus, it is both in relation to the actual exercise of territoriality and the negotiations involved in the *Plan de Vida* that the ‘displaced’ population becomes integrated with territorial politics – the leaders of La Toma consider migrants to be legitimate and active actors in place and community building. In this context, the continuous flow of forced out-migration represents a new political scenario for the Consejo Comunitario and drives it to look for a more comprehensive approach to the politics of place.

The trans-local politics of place brings forth questions that range from the practical to the juridical, and which concern more than just the Consejo Comunitario in La Toma. Given the relative importance of displacement in Colombia and the disproportionate number of afrodescendants among IDPs, these reflections are relevant for many other afrodescendant and indigenous peoples who have been affected by the last three decades of forced migration in the country. In terms of national legislation and government policies, plans, and programmes, and in order to challenge both the “primordial” and “strategic” conceptions of identity (Polzer Ngwato, 2012: 562), it is vital to rethink ethnic rights according to these spatialized social dynamics of ethnic migration. Insofar as the Consejos Comunitarios were intended to be autonomous administrative authorities representing the interests, realities, and needs of these ethnic communities, the politics of the Consejos is legally confined to people actually living in rural areas. While protecting their right to territory, this bias has tended to deny the challenges of forced mobility and further political agency of migrants.

Migrant connections and the exchange of political remittances between the colonias and La Toma have resulted in a new awareness of political activism. However, far from arguing that the territory has become less important to communities on the move, the case illustrates how defence of the territory has become a condition and reason for people to remain connected, despite the violence of de-territorialisation. Defending the territory through diverse political remittances and interactive political connections has become a point of convergence among the dispersed trans-local community. Yet, with the normative barriers that the community faces, migrants and nonmigrants alike agree on the political challenge of building a trans-local community that ties together its interests, experiences, realities, and dreams in an autonomous *Plan de Vida*. Thus, despite the narrow normative approaches to

migration and the collective lands of afrodescendants, this has not been a de-mobilising factor.

7. From dominant narratives on ‘displacement’ to the realisation of diasporic place-making

In this paper, we have sought to extend the conceptualisation of political remittances as being related to practices of political organisation gained through diasporic connections and the socio-economic and political trajectories of migrant communities. We have also demonstrated that internal migration points to the significant role of political remittances in a context where the defence of the territory against dispossession is the axis of connectivity through mobilisation. In this respect, we have demonstrated that political remittances, connectivity, and the trans-local politics of place are closely related processes that, when studied in particular contexts, can enlarge our understanding of displacement beyond a humanitarian framework.

This conceptualisation challenges the dominant narratives on displacement (Mooney, 2005) that have effectively insisted on causal connections between armed violence, the territorial action of expulsion, and the victimisation of local inhabitants. By framing the causes of displacement within armed confrontations, this discourse disregards the complexities of the root causes of migration and of the actors and interests that contest the control over territories where displacement originates. In this way, government institutions have successfully shifted the responsibility for forced migration onto violent third-parties such as the guerrilla and paramilitaries, denying the responsibility of the state. The state’s humanitarian actions are thereafter presented – and in many occasions also experienced – as policies (socially) ‘rescuing’ the affected. Yet, the government rarely accepts responsibility for the policies, plans, and programs that encompass local practices of dispossession. Dispossession of access and control over territorial goods and services by local communities is taken out of the equation of displacement, and therefore a simplified explanation of forced migration has emerged. This has left the community and the government with a poor ability to prevent new migration, and the government with questionable methods for granting the right of migrants to return.

On the other hand, displacement is also understood in dominant discourses as a fixed condition of expulsion and abandonment of one’s homeland. This understanding tends to imply that, in order for the state to be able to “manage mobility”, it must ‘freeze the movement’ and therefore posit forced migration as a given and finished condition, rather than as a process of movement and trans-local place building. Migrants often contest this rigid approach to displacement precisely because for most migrants displacement is not a permanent situation but one that they continuously fight against – before and after being uprooted. What we are suggesting here is that forced migration can be better understood as a process that takes place (i) across space, (ii) across time, (iii) in connection with other migrants, and (iv) in dialogue with previous individual and community migrating experiences.

In the case of La Toma, one element that has added to the understanding of displacement is that, historically, this migration has located the homeland, La Toma District, as a symbolic and emotional axis of connection, identity, and belonging. It is from this spatial repository of social representations and political mobilisation that the diasporic community was created; ideas and practices of connectivity make it clear that, while negotiating both de-territorialization and re-territorialization, the La Toma community have resisted the concept of abandonment implied in the narratives on ‘displacement’. This is for three reasons. First, an important part of the community decided to stay in La Toma.

Second, those who left La Toma remained connected through their political mobilisation in order to defend their homeland territory from the threats represented by multinational corporations’ economic interests. Third, most people who migrated conceived of strategies for returning (which are independent of government plans). This case study, therefore, speaks of the importance of entitled territory to afrodescendants and ethnic groups; this disputed aim has translated in the case of La Toma into the persistent collective commitment of the community to defend their territory, livelihoods and culture.

Community identity is rooted in La Toma as an “owned” territory and has been sculpted by the social and political practices put in place to defend it. In terms of identity politics, this case forces us to speculate whether the migrant communities are better portrayed by concepts such as “dispossessed” than by “displacement”. Our analysis of the politics of place implies that we must recognise the need felt by local people to expand the dominant causality between displacement and violence to address the structural causes of forced migration. On the one hand, this suggests that we must acknowledge the role played by economic actors and interests as well as government policies and plans in enhancing certain models of accumulation that induce dispossession and displacement. On the other hand, it also advocates challenging the constraints of official definitions and policy actions, which disregard the forces that set people in motion as well as the connectedness through which communities struggle against de-territorialisation.

In this way, this research contributes to the scholarship on migration by emphasising the spatial implications of mobility and the production of place. By focusing on diasporic community building and political mobilisation as simultaneous processes, we have demonstrated how the increasing forced migration is not solely a process of de-territorialization but also of re-territorialization. Given the growing importance of conflict, violence, and dispossession as drivers setting people on the move in the global south, an analytical framework that focuses on trans-local diasporic connections and the (political) mobilisation of movers and stayers can augment our understanding of the role of agency in situations that are often understood merely through a framework of victimisation.

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