Making Tracks: Claudia Leal

23 August 2013
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Far Away, So Close
By **Claudia Leal**

When I was a child, my family would get into the car every vacation and drive seven hours from Bogotá to Bucaramanga through the Colombian Andes. We bought biscuits in Arcabuco and *bocadillo* (guava paste) in Vélez before driving down into the terrifying Chicamocha Canyon. My dad invariably told us to admire the imposing landscape while my sister and I plunged into our seats to avoid the sight of the precipices. Then came Pescadero, the burning bottom of the canyon, which signaled that we were close to another family get-together at our grandparents' house, full with their nine children and my numerous cousins.

Although we occasionally changed our destination, most of our trips remained within Colombia. We headed south to see pre-Columbian tombs amidst rugged mountains in Tierradentro, or flew to Providence Island, close to the coast of Nicaragua but officially Colombian territory. We crossed the deserts of the Guajira Peninsula near Venezuela, and visited Amacayacu National Park in the Amazon (and peeked into Brazil and Peru). In Gorgona, a tiny island off the Pacific coast, we climbed to the summit and found, hidden among the vegetation, the survey marker my dad had placed there 40 years before as part of a geodetic study of the country. We observed a sloth crawling from one tree to another just a few feet from our cabin, and searched for surviving lobsters that were swept onto the beach at a remote spot along the Caribbean coast, which has been since been ravaged by violence. Salomón Caizamo, who served a short time in prison for providing food for inexperienced and idealistic guerrillas, greeted us in Utría, where I marveled at the sight of sea and jungle coming together.

Right after graduating from college with a degree in economics, I went to La Macarena and worked for a semester as a teacher in a "boarding school" in the jungle. When I arrived, the school consisted of two huts, one serving as a kitchen and the other as a classroom. The kids slept on planks under the thatched roof while the teachers hung

their hammocks underneath them. At night I took pleasure in the wonderful noises of the forest, but was less keen about sharing my living quarters with mosquitos and roaches. Macarena took me far away from my comfort zone. For the first time I shared my life with people who ended up at the end of the world for lack of better choices. Never before had I been in a place so challenging, and never before had I learned so much.

That experience and my economics degree earned me a job in an ambitious biodiversity conservation project covering the entire Pacific coast of the country. I lived in Bogotá and travelled constantly to the chaotic cities of the region, crossed muddy trails, endured long journeys in motorboats and dugout canoes, visited the mangroves and the forests, and talked to black peasants and state officials. Again I experienced the jungle, worked with poor people, and got to know the margins of the Andean country I grew up in. And again I learned much about places I could hardly imagine from the classrooms I had shared with the children of distinguished members of our national society. Such a vibrant yet sad place; so contradictory and beautiful.

I wanted to write (and understand what I saw) and was under the impression that grad school was the right place for that. I had an interest in the environment plus a mind that thinks historically. For three years I had been getting to know a place with no official history, besides that of slavery and the quest for gold in the eighteenth century. With independence and emancipation it became a backwater. Only when a law in 1993 defined its people as ethnic, as having an “ancestral culture” and ecologically friendly practices, did the region become of interest to the outside world. I went to the department of geography at Berkeley to study how the place had become what I knew, that is, to fill the void in documented history from the early 1800s to the 1990s. After finishing, I got a job back home in the history department of the same institution where I did my BA.

Swamped and fascinated by courses and students (plus two beautiful mini-monsters of my own), my work has been guided by three main intellectual concerns. One is the environment, though not for its own sake. As much as I would have liked to study biology, my questions are centered on people. It is the creation of landscapes, the uses and conceptions different groups of people have of the environment that interests me most. A second concern is blackness, and race more broadly. In the Pacific coast of Colombia, where more than 90 percent of the population is black, I was forced to question my own *mestizo* (mixed-blood) identity and face the elusive issue of racism. Since then I have been trying to understand the historical underpinnings of racial difference and hierarchies in Colombia and Latin America. The third, which brings the

other two together, is place, specifically tracing how marginal regions or frontier areas form and become nationalized, all while taking part of broader transnational circuits.

I work on these three issues within the confines of Colombia. Parochialism? Perhaps. But to me it seems real, meaningful, and unavoidable, and also easier when living in Bogotá. I was born in this city and have come to realize how powerful the idea of the nation is for many of us. Those family trips profoundly shaped my sense of belonging, as did being conscious of my privileged position. Colombia is one of the most unequal societies in Latin America, and violence continues to make it worse. Colombia is also one of the most environmentally diverse countries in the world. My contribution is modest. I strive, along with others, to build a social memory that includes that diversity and recognizes the past of marginal areas and peoples. Perhaps rainforests and the quest and meaning of freedom for black people will someday appear in history textbooks alongside Simón Bolívar. My concerns are grounded in my particular life history and in specific localities, but the issues are much more general so various dialogues are useful and possible. Latin America has always been an explicit point of reference. The RCC allowed me to have a broader perspective, and it is in this direction that I want to work in the coming years. In this manner, I expect to contribute to the environmental humanities by bringing in certain parts of the world, as well as a dialogue between disciplines (history and geography) and topics (race and nature). I realize that my efforts are geared towards building a career and gaining recognition. But they are also, more deeply, a quest to give meaning to a life that started by touring the dirt-windy roads that somehow helped bring together a country called Colombia.

At the RCC, I started a project on the history of conservation. We'll see what fruits it will bring.