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Race and Book Collecting in Colombia on the Eve of Digitization

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His name smoothly rolled off Gustavo's tongue with envious ease. *Arnoldo Palacios*. In 2009 that Spanish "r" still could surprise my not-quite native tongue and set my cheeks on a fire of embarrassment. But Gustavo's captivating description of Arnoldo, a twentieth-century Afro-Colombian author whose oeuvre included novels, short stories and journalistic essays, convinced me to put aside my linguistic worries and ask for some titles. Gustavo, a fellow student in the Latin American Literature program at La Universidad del Valle in Cali, Colombia, was happy to share with me his knowledge about Arnoldo and the other Afro-Colombian authors he planned to include in his thesis. Although Arnoldo's name was known by many, Gustavo informed me, his books were extremely difficult to find. A search in the university library yielded just one text, *Las estrellas son negras* (1949), a forceful denunciation of the extreme poverty and racism that plagued Chocó, the home state of the author and the majority of the country's black population.

Gustavo assured me that Palacios had written much more than what was housed in our university library and that, with enough time and sufficient resources, one could gather a treasure trove of sources. There was no question that Gustavo was playfully nudging me to help him gather primary sources for his thesis, as he knew that I had greater ease to travel thanks to a Fulbright grant. Although I didn't imagine that contemporary literature such as Arnoldo's would directly benefit my research project on nineteenth-century anti-slavery literature, I was happy to learn more about the African Diaspora in Colombia and to help out a colleague. Plus, this was a great excuse to explore the country and to practice that pesky "r."

Over the following 10 months I fumbled through the card catalogs of regional and national libraries and scoured the shelves of countless second-hand book kiosks in search of Arnoldo's writings. How was it that La Universidad del Valle, the country's second largest university, only held one novel by this national icon, a man who was at the forefront of the early

Black Nationalism that arose in Colombia during the 1950s? A search in Bogotá's Biblioteca Nacional supplied just one additional book by Palacios, *La selva y la lluvia* (1958). Since I had failed to locate any of his works in bookstores I took advantage of the library's lax photocopy policy and requested two photocopies of the book: one for me and one for my *compañero* Gustavo. Without realizing it at the time, this marked the start of my effort to disseminate black press publications, a "grass-roots digitization" project I have continued to this day.

On a subsequent trip to Bogotá I talked with the Fulbright director about my small victories in locating Arnoldo's work. She put me in touch with a professor who informed me that, as luck would have it, Arnoldo had recently moved to Bogotá after decades in Paris. A few phone calls later I had managed to connect with Arnoldo, who invited me to his home in the outskirts of Bogotá. To prepare for the interview I reread my photocopied novels and transferred my favorite excerpts into a notebook. Although it would have been easier to just bring the novels I wasn't sure how this octogenarian would react to my pirated books.

On the first of what would become a dozen visits, Arnoldo and I talked for five hours. We discussed the characters in his novels, his anti-racism activism, his childhood in Quibdó and his life as a black intellectual from Colombia in the context of Pan-Africanism. He told me about how the only copy of his first novel, *Las estrellas son negras,* was lost in a fire on April 9, 1948, the day of the infamous "Bogotázo" when riots exploded throughout the capital city following the assassination of the Liberal leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán. Arnoldo delighted in seeing my draw drop as he told me that he rewrote the novel from memory in two furious weeks; that it wasn't as good as the original but that the novel's manifesto about the violence embedded in structural and everyday racism was more pressing than ever. And then Arnoldo asked me how I accessed his novels and if I would be so kind to lend him copies. It had been decades since he sold his final

copy of *Las estrellas son negras* when he found himself in dire financial straits and he couldn't remember the last time he touched *La selva y la lluvia*.

He howled in delighted laughter when I confessed that I had scanned both novels in public libraries. Open access and wide distribution of his novels that revalorized Afro-Colombian culture were paramount to his vision of equality. Of course he didn't care about the format in which they came; and of course he would like a pirated copy! And I had better print him a copy of the paper I was writing about his work. (He later told me, in his gentle way, that he enjoyed my article but that he preferred essays with more explicit political messages and fewer academic pretenses so as to more effectively fight for racial justice).

Over the year I recorded 30 hours of interviews with Arnoldo and found myself immersed in a vibrant milieu of academics, activists and creative writers. Arnoldo hosted me in his home, connected me with scholars of the African Diaspora and invited me to his lectures in Bogotá. He opened my eyes to other black writers such as Manuel Zapata Olivella and Roberto Burgos Cantor who, like Arnoldo, examined the legacy and memory of slavery, the meanings of diaspora and the roots of African culture in Latin America. My Afro-Colombian reading list increased in tandem with my conversations with street vendors and librarians, interactions that shared a common thread: black press publications were largely invisible and inaccessible due to insufficient reprinting and the marginalization of black authors from the national literary canon.

Towards the end of my trip Arnoldo became increasingly busy with the launch of his first book in decades, *Buscando mimadrediós* (2009). Shortly thereafter, a small publishing house in Bogotá printed 150 copies of *Cuando yo empezaba*, a collection of Arnoldo's early journalistic work. Thanks to Arnoldo I managed to secure a copy of this book before it promptly sold out. In a similar endeavor, the Ministry of Culture promoted the *Biblioteca afrocolombiana*, an initiative that aimed to make visible and available the works of Colombia's most prominent black authors.

In 2010, planned to coincide with the bicentennial of the republic, *Biblioteca afrocolombiana* began to circulate free copies of dozens of out-of-print titles and to provide open-access digital copies. Lively debates ensued about the history of racial justice activism and the significance of the bicentennial for Colombians of African descent, many of whose descendants remained enslaved decades after independence was declared in 1810. I realized that my "nineteenth-century project" was more connected to contemporary authors than I had previously appreciated.

A week before I returned to the US, the Ministry of Culture released an elegant hardback edition of *Las estrellas son negras*. As I crammed my belongings into a backpack in preparation for my flight home I contemplated leaving behind the scanned copy. I kept both. Beyond the significance of the narrative, the material artifacts are loaded with distinct symbolic meanings. The scanned copy of the 1949 original speaks to the history of a racially-marked literary market that has often neglected to (re)print black press publications and attests to Arnoldo's struggles against racism. The glossy cover of the 2010 commemorative edition suggests the end of an era in which Afro-Colombian culture and people were invisible and marginal within the nation. Yet, *Las estrellas son negras*, like many of the books in the *Biblioteca afrocolombiana*, depicts a history rife with contradictions, violence and tensions, thus pushing readers to contemplate both the progress and the incompleteness of racial justice projects such as *Biblioteca afrocolombiana*.

Over the years I updated Arnoldo on my research about the black press, sharing with him digitized copies of rare pamphlets and newspapers. When he died a few months ago, I reflected on his desire for me to write in a more subjective and accessible manner. Sharing the experience of compiling my own *biblioteca afrocolombiana* feels like a fitting homage. Although blood still rushes to my head when I talk about Arnoldo, it is not because I panic before gently rolling the "r" in his name–a skill I honed after countless discussions with and about him –but because he reminds me of literature's emancipatory and revolutionary possibilities.

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