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Colectiva Matamba: The Afro-Colombian Feminist Collective Mobilizing Against Structural Racism

Down an unpaved road in southern Bogotá, Glenda Palacios stands covered in flecks of lime green paint. She is teaching an art class to a group of local children, encouraging them to keep their brushstrokes inside the stencils taped to the cinderblock wall of the Alfonso López community center. The stencils depict musical instruments from the Pacific Coast, as well as a portrait of local community leader Rosa Murillo.

Glenda is a member of the Colectiva Matamba Acción Afrodiaspórica (Matamba Afro-Diasporic Action Collective), a group of “lady activists, empowered female warriors who display courage and tenacity,” as their website describes. Based in Bogotá, this collective of young women engages in collective action that promotes the rights of Afro-Colombian women living in precarious neighborhoods. At present the group, founded in 2013, has 13 members who are students, lawyers, professors, journalists, anthropologists, and economists.

The Colectiva’s actions are based in an understanding of ongoing structural racism in Afro-Colombian communities. “Being a Black woman... means that you understand what structural racism is,” said Palacios in an interview in Bogotá. “[You see] the unequal conditions, the violence, how young black kids are killed, how Black women are violated. It’s very intense.”

The Colectiva takes its name from Ana María Matamba, an Afro-Colombian woman who managed to buy her freedom from a slave owner in the mid-18th century. Instead of taking his name, she adopted her own African surname. She went on to earn enough money to pay for the freedom of other enslaved people.

Ongoing Structural Racism

Women have suffered multiple types of violence at the hands of various actors including guerrillas, paramilitaries, and soldiers during the 52-year long armed conflict in Colombia. Sexual violence was used as a strategy of war, deployed against over 24,000 direct victims around the country. In certain cases, such as the massacres in Bahía Portete and El Salado, women were raped or sexually tortured in order to sow discord and shame in their communities.

Moreover, over half of the over seven million victims of internal displacement are women. Women suffering displacement often are forced to relocate shortly after experiencing the deaths of partners. As researcher Donny Meertens notes in a 2012 report, the relationship between sexual violence and displacement is threefold: “sexual violence may have been part of the violent acts that caused the forced displacement; threats of sexual violence may have been the direct cause of displacement; and sexual violence may continue as one of the particular vulnerabilities of women during and after displacement.”

For Afro-Colombian women, the reality is even more extreme. Members of the Colectiva are concerned about the increase of feminicides among Black women, particularly in the most conflict-affected parts of the country, including the Pacific coast. Recently, they have begun to conduct sit-ins in the District Attorney's office to pressure them to investigate the systematic killing of Black women.

"For the D.A., our bodies don't count," said Anyela Perea, a cofounder of the Colectiva. "We have decided to make our own database so that we can register [the feminicides] and collate the information we have so that we can describe what happened to these women." The Colectiva coordinates with the Red Feminista Antimilitarista (Antimilitarist Feminist Network) to maintain a monthly record of feminicides in the country and attempts to pressure the state to better protect women against gender violence, as well as push these cases through the judicial system.

In 2017, Colombia's National Centre for Historical Memory released a report about the sexual violence that took place during the conflict, which highlights that the sexual violence suffered by Black women is part of a longer history of historical violence that has existed since the colonial era. The report found hegemonic discourses about Afro-Colombian women and their bodies represent them as inferior, using labels that automatically place Black women in contexts whereby they are socially discriminated, economically excluded, and likely to be victimized in contexts of violence. The report concludes that the disproportionate victimization of Black women is closely linked to both their race and sex.

Joining Matamba: Finding the Sisters They Never Had

Glenda is from Antioquia, a department in northwest Colombia. Her family was one of the few black families in a white-mestizo town. Her family was displaced from the north of the department in 1990, when she was only two years old, after her father faced death threats and some of her neighbors were killed. Her mother fled one night with the three children—but Glenda's parents rarely talk about that painful time. Glenda's mother eventually received her teaching certification.

Glenda's friend introduced her to the members of Matamba in 2016 when she moved to Bogotá to study economics. "I met the Colectiva and I fell in love with them. I can identify with my *compañeras* in the Colectiva. We share a past and a present, we share our struggle, and we share daily realities. They taught me about their form of resistance—a collective struggle."

Anyela's experience with the Colectiva has been part of her own political journey. Born and raised in Bogotá, some of her earliest memories involve going to visit her mother's family in Cauca and not understanding why her cousins didn't have access to water or electricity like she did in the capital. With the help of her godfather, Anyela began to spend time with the Youth Communist Group. Eventually she joined a group of Afro-Colombian students, where the agenda included gender, race, and class struggle. But she felt there was a disconnect between what the Communist movement said about class struggle and its failure to coherently include gender struggle in its analysis.

“The Colectiva arose from a redemptive political necessity—a need to tell our stories, to engage in activities with other women, to create intergenerational ties, and to transform our contexts,” said Anyela. “Here, I found the sisters that I never had. They are fundamental in my life, and I am fundamental in theirs...we are strong women with the necessary force and will to make changes.”

Resisting Structural Racism

The Colectiva relies on a number of approaches in its work to resist structural racism. The most important of these is their effort to politicize Black women in Bogotá, by not only giving them tools to understand the patriarchal and racist system they live in, but also to develop a strategy of resistance. They conduct workshops in marginalized neighborhoods around the city with high populations of displaced Afro-Colombian people, including Kennedy, Ciudad Bolívar, Usme, and Suba. The Colectiva also holds public discussions at local universities to debate Black feminism, cultural appropriation, and racism.

The Colectiva engages in marches and sit-ins as part of their more direct political action. They participated in protests demanding better living conditions for Afro-Colombians in Chocó and Buenaventura and have denounced police violence against Afro-Colombian women outside police stations, which in one episode led to the accused official being disciplined and relocated. In one instance, Glenda was the victim of police abuse. While in the Plaza de Bolívar during an event, a police officer apprehended, handcuffed, and arrested her with no cause. Despite filing a legal suit against the police officer, Glenda recognizes that it is highly unlikely that she will ever get any justice.

In addition to their work combatting feminicide and the government’s refusal to investigate killings, the group frequently publishes *comunicados* denouncing instances of sexual violence, as well as affirming their support for international movements like #NiUnaMenos. This year the Colectiva plans to go to Buenaventura where they will paint a mural with the New Wings Butterfly Network, a group that struggles against sexual violence in the post-conflict context. The department of Valle del Cauca is one of the sites of most concentrated violence against women in the country, given its central role in the dynamics of the conflict and international drug trade. In June 2018 alone, nine women were victims of feminicide in Cauca.

The Colectiva also engages in cultural and artistic programs. “We talk about culture because our ancestors resisted through their use of culture, music, and art,” says Anyela. They go to marginalized neighborhoods around the cities and paint murals with the faces of local female leaders in order to highlight the important role they play in the community. The group also engages in community theatre performances. “With [these activities], we hope that the whole community can come together,” says Anyela.

All of these strategies of resistance are collective and aim to include other community organizations. The group maintains strong ties with women who have engaged in community activism for decades, and pay special attention to intergenerational exchange. “This is central for us, because we understand the role that our ancestors played [in history]—their processes of liberation and resistance. We feel that [their spirits] accompany us in all of our struggles,” says

Glenda. “We understand—and we see—that talking to one woman doesn’t just impact that woman. She talks to her husband and her children, and sometimes starts to meet up with women of her own age to struggle and resist from a different perspective. What we are doing also has an impact on future generations.”

The *compañeras* work hard to be role models in their communities for young people as well. “We try to tell them that no matter what happens, you can call us. And the knowledge that I can call someone if something happens to me is really important. The girls know that we are always going to be here to help them,” said Anyela.

Feminism for Whom?

Within the collective there is controversy over whether or not to call themselves “feminists.” “There are some members of the Colectiva who don’t call themselves feminists... this is because we have had lots of struggles with white feminists in the past. They only defend what they consider *women’s rights*. For example, women’s right to work,” Glenda explains. “But Black women have always had to work. Maybe Black women would prefer to be in their own houses, taking care of their own children, but they can’t because they have to take care of other people’s children. We often find that white feminists aren’t willing to adopt a position where they problematize their own racism.” She concludes, “So when we talk about feminism, it’s important to define *which feminism*.”

This narrative fits within a broader spectrum of Indigenous and Afro-descendant feminisms in Latin America that resist uncritical engagements with what gender justice looks like for their communities, as sociologist Agustín Láo-Montes has described.¹ He states that since the 1990s, this “robust wave of collective actions” has protested the negative effects of neoliberalism and advocates for “distributive justice, radical democracy, ecological life, gender and sexual equity and ethnic-racial rights.”

Groups like Matamba advocate for an intersectional feminism that accounts for diversity of gender, race, and sexuality.

Anyela echoes these sentiments. “Feminism is a political movement that fights for social equality,” she says.” But when Black women have never [properly] been understood as women, I can’t buy into this understanding. When white women were asking to be in the streets, my ancestors were already in the streets, working for free as slaves. What type of freedom does white feminism include? We understand femininity differently. We live our femininity different. We resist differently.”

Colombia’s Uncertain Future

¹ Laó-Montes, Agustín 2016 “Afro-Latin American Feminisms at the Cutting Edge of Emerging Political-Epistemic Movements.” *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 14 (2): 1–24.

Despite the signing of the historic peace agreements with the FARC in late 2016, the security context in Colombia remains precarious. Hundreds of social leaders have been killed since 2016, many of them Afro-Colombian. “Regardless of whether the conflict has ended or not... this victimization shows us the structural racism that doesn’t allow our communities to rebuild themselves,” says Anyela. Some of these leaders were friends of the *compañeras*. It has been painful for the members of the Colectiva.

Although none of the members of Matamba have themselves been threatened themselves, they take actions to keep a low profile in the neighborhoods in which they work. Glenda says: “For a big group of Black women to arrive in a new neighborhood is suspicious. We go accompanied by the leaders.”

Despite this, however, Glenda remains steadfast. “My mother always helped me to understand that we are valuable, magic people who come from great *luchadoras*,” she said. “We come from *cimarrones* [escaped slaves] and my mother would remind us of this every day, so that we can continue their struggle.” When asked about whether she is afraid of the threats against social leaders Anyela harkens back to her roots, stating firmly: “No—we come from *cimarronas*.”

Julia Zulver earned her doctorate in Sociology from the University of Oxford in 2018. Her work focuses on gender mobilization in contexts of high risk. She currently holds an adjunct teaching post at the Universidad del Rosario in Bogotá, Colombia.