

## Public space and Afro-Colombian informal vendors in Cali, Colombia<sup>1</sup>

### *Espacio público y vendedores informales afrocolombianos en Cali, Colombia<sup>2</sup>*

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#### Abstract

25.5% of all African descendants in Colombia reside in the city of Cali representing 26% of the total population of the city. In this way, Cali is one of the cities with the highest Afro-Colombian population in the country. The city has been the principal center of attraction for migrant populations from the South Pacific Coast of Colombia in which the Afro-Colombian population is prevalent. These regions are the poorest in the country. Informal vending in Cali is carried out primarily by rural and/or internally displaced migrants. In this paper, I am interested in finding out if Afro-Colombians endure a higher marginality and discrimination rate as street vendors than the self-identified mestizos and white or if, on the contrary, both groups face similar levels of discrimination. Thus, I intend to find out if black bodies are marked by discourses of

undesirability and crime in public spaces in Cali. Additionally, informal street vending is understood by urban scholars as well as the government of Cali as a class struggle. This understanding effectively deracializes the informal vending landscape, while also reifying the invisibility of black racialized bodies in equality discourses. Many authors claim that the current problem in Colombia of recognizing the diverse racial composition of informal vendors and understanding these struggles only through class impedes a well thought out discernment of the social and economic realities faced by racialized bodies in public spaces.

**Keywords:** Afro-Colombian, public space, Cali, race, urban studies, right to the city

<sup>1</sup> **Origin of the article:** Data for this article was collected through unfunded research. Primarily semi structured interviews conducted in the months of December 2018 and December 2019.

<sup>2</sup> **Proveniencia del artículo:** Los datos de este artículo se recopilieron a través de investigaciones no financiadas. Principalmente entrevistas semi estructuradas realizadas en los meses de diciembre de 2018 y diciembre de 2019.



## Resumen

El 25.5% de todos los afrodescendientes en Colombia residen en la ciudad de Cali, lo que representa el 26% de la población total de la ciudad. De esta manera, Cali es una de las ciudades con mayor población afrocolombiana del país. La ciudad ha sido el principal centro de atracción para las poblaciones migrantes de la costa del Pacífico Sur de Colombia en la que prevalece la población afrocolombiana. La venta informal en Cali es llevada a cabo principalmente por migrantes rurales y/o desplazados internos. En este artículo, me interesa saber si los afrocolombianos sufren una mayor marginalidad y discriminación como vendedores ambulantes que los auto identificados como mestizos y blancos o si, por el contrario, ambos grupos enfrentan niveles similares de discriminación. Por lo tanto, propongo averiguar si los cuerpos negros

están marcados por discursos de indeseabilidad y crimen en los espacios públicos de esta ciudad. Adicionalmente, este fenómeno es entendido por los académicos urbanos, así como por el gobierno de Cali como una lucha de clases. Esta comprensión ratifica la invisibilidad de los cuerpos racializados negros en los discursos de igualdad. Muchos autores afirman que el problema actual en Colombia de reconocer la composición racial diversa de los vendedores informales y entender estas luchas sólo a través de las clases impide un discernimiento bien pensado de las realidades sociales y económicas que enfrentan los cuerpos racializados en los espacios públicos.

**Palabras clave:** Afrocolombiano, espacio público, Cali, raza, estudios urbanos, derecho a la ciudad.

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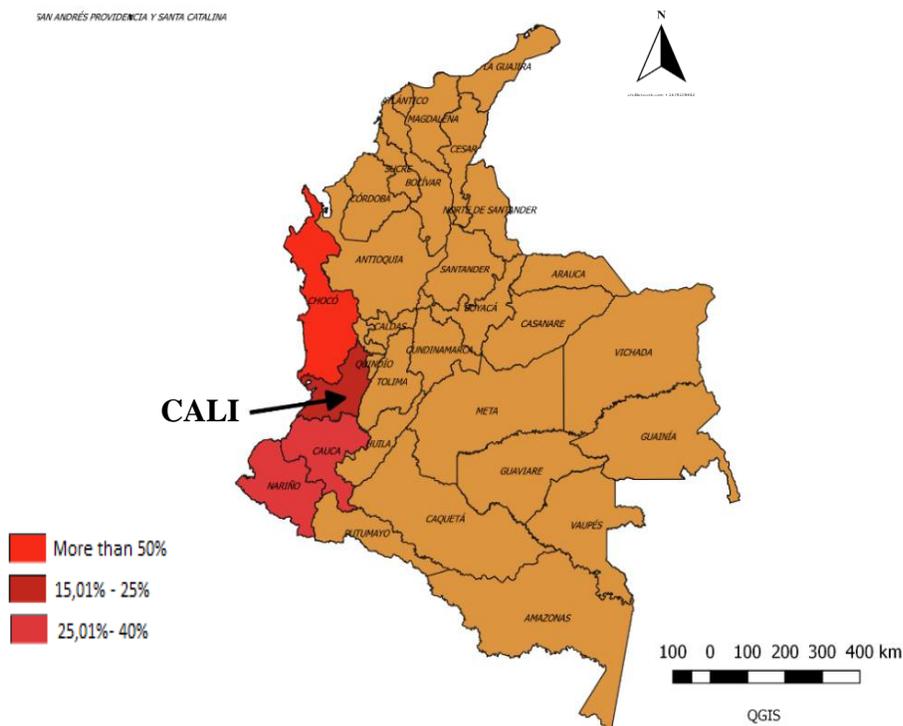
## Introduction

Cali, Colombia is one of the largest destinations for migrants in the Americas, and in the last two decades the city has received its greatest influx of displaced people due to internal violent political conflicts in the country (Galvis, 2014). For 2013, an estimated six million internally displaced migrants had relocated to large urban centers in Colombia and in 2014, the country's armed conflict produced almost 400,000 migrants (Shultz *et al.*, 2014). The current and continuous flow of migrants to Cali is a consequence of years of armed

and political conflicts, in addition to a lack of basic opportunities that resulted in the growth of the informal sector, particularly in the form of street vending.

By 2005 Afro-Colombians constitute around 10.4% of the total population in the country but continue to be highly concentrated in the lowest socioeconomic strata in the Pacific region of Colombia (Figure 1) (Ministerio de Cultura República de Colombia, 2010).

Data derived from: DANE (2005).



**Figure 1.** Afro-Colombian participation by department on the Pacific Coast

As a matter of fact, Afro Colombian communities in the country have the highest indices of illiteracy; and according to the Ministerio de Cultura de la República de Colombia (2010) 14,32 % claimed to have had gone without food for at least one day in the week before the Census; a figure well above the national average of the total population with a report of 7.22%. Informal vending in Cali is conducted primarily by rural and internally displaced migrants, including Afro-Colombians and indigenous

populations who look for better opportunities in Colombia's urban areas (Orozco *et al*, 2018). Yet, Cali lacks the socio economic and physical infrastructure to support this major influx of labor and displaced migrants.

However, there are no reliable statistics that record the number of street vendors in Cali. Simultaneously, the government of Cali has never accounted for the vendor's racial identity. Despite, the rise of informal vendors in the city is continuously growing together with Cali's urban

regeneration spatial policies that seek to redevelop public space for the safe use by its citizens and tourist by "recovering" public space from illegal use and disorder.

Since the 1990s, Cali has implemented aggressive spatial recovery policies that resulted in the creation of spaces of exclusion based on class and racial inequalities by prioritizing the social elite's views of the correct design and usage of public space. Hence, the government failed to include the needs of marginalized populations in the city, specifically street vendors and the homeless, and thus failing to solve the spatial discourses the historical spatial complexities of race and class in the country as they relate to local urban regimes (Donovan, 2008; Galvis, 2014).

It is clear that Cali's spatial policies criminalize vendors because street vending is associated with crime, disorder, health risks, and unemployment. Hence, Cali's government objective is to eradicate crime and "recover" public space primarily from removing street vendors.

Many authors critique Colombia's neoliberal urban spatial policies as increasing class inequalities through the implementation of policies that only seek to maximize profits through the improvement of public space aesthetic for elite consumption and capital accumulation. Nonetheless, few scholars (Meza, 2003) have addressed how race, class, and space shape the experiences of Afro-Colombian informal street vendors in Cali. Black bodies (Afro-Colombians) are marked by discourses of crime,

displacement and undesirability in public space that are differently racialized from "mestizo" informal street vendors.

Black bodies specifically, have been interpreted as criminal and as such, as street vendors, they endure higher rates of discrimination in the city and in the country. Meza (2003) wrote a study about Afro-Colombian street vendors in the capital city: Bogota. In his study, it is discussed how Afro-Colombian street vendors in Bogota experience harassment from the local government and citizens not only due to being informal vendors but also for their race.

I will use his study to argue that Afro-Colombians endure higher marginality and discrimination as informal street vendors than those that self-identify as mestizo or white. Hence, being marked by discourses of crime, displacement, and undesirability in public spaces, I consider that informal street vending in Cali is understood as a class struggle for the local government.

This perception through class effectively deracializes the informal vending sector, by reinforcing the invisibility of black racialized bodies in Cali's equality discourses. Not recognizing the diverse ethnic background of informal street vendors and understanding these struggles only through class impedes a well thought out discernment of the social and economic realities faced by racialized bodies in public spaces.

### **Methodology**

In order to further my argument, I follow interview data collected during the months of December 2018 and December 2019.

This paper is based on twenty in depth interviews of adults working as informal street vendors in the commercial sector of the city of Cali (Figure 2). In addition to participant observation, secondary data was collected through newspaper articles, official state documents and public

campaign documents. The interviews were administered to N= 12 Males, N=8 Females. In terms of ethnic and racial classification, N=10 self-identified as Afro-Colombian, N=5 indigenous and N=5 mestizos.

Source: Google Maps image 2018.



**Figure 2.** Study area in red circle. Commercial center of the city of Cali.

Out of the N=20, N= 8 self-declared victims of forced displacement and civil war and relocated from the Pacific region of Colombia to Cali. Among the respondents N= 12 declared their socioeconomic strata as 1 and 2<sup>3</sup>.

The interviewees do not have a work permit to operate as street vendors, and thus are considered by the local state as illegal sellers. The interviewees sell a variety of products, one of them sells

“chontaduro” a typical fruit from the Pacific coast of Colombia, another sells tinto (Colombian coffee) together with bread and other biscuits and the others sold prepared foods and cell phone timecards or minutes.

The interview addressed the participants' demographics, the operational characteristics of their businesses, whether or not there is a legal permit to occupy public space and their experiences in the

<sup>3</sup> The country has institutionalized socioeconomic characteristics of housing and levels of poverty in order to distribute public services across the country. Classified from 1 to 6, 1 and 2 categorized at the lowest poverty levels.

involvement of raced, gendered, and classed processes part of the street vending systems in Cali.

### The role of “pluri-ethnic” recognition in public spaces in Colombia

In 1991, Colombia modified its constitution and its diverse ethnic population was officially recognized. Through the adoption of law 70, “law of black communities”, the country recognized the cultural differences of Afro-Colombian communities compared to mestizos and adopted legislation to prevent the invisibility of this historically marginalized population in the country. This legislation granted specific ethnic rights to Afro-Colombian communities, such as the ownership of ancestral lands

and mandated that the national curriculum incorporate Afro-Colombian history (Arocha, 1996). This modification to the constitution was seen as a way to remedy the discrimination towards Afro-Colombians in the country.

However, as expected this legislation has not worked as intended. It is true that Afro-Colombians are celebrated as a cultural community in events such as “El festival del Petronio Alvarez” (an event that gathers musicians from the Pacific coast of Colombia in the city of Cali) (Figure 3) but in terms of everyday practices, Afro-Colombians still encounter discrimination based on the same stereotypes that the modification of the constitution intended to eradicate.

Retrieved from: [ViajaColombiaTravel](#) bloggers.



**Figure 3.** Publicity for the Music Festival of Petronio Alvarez in Cali Colombia.

For example, in the study of Meertens *et al.*, (2008), Afro Colombian women are still objects of sexism, racism and sexual harassment. Black women are hence sexualized and through of as socially inferior and are disrespected, even in public spaces. In general, these authors

argue that in the country, the bodies of Afro-Colombian women are often perceived as poor and sexually available.

Over the last decades, Latin American and Colombian intellectuals have deepened the knowledge production about racial discourses as they relate to the Afro

communities (Arroyo *et al.*, 2016; Restrepo, 2005; Mosquera and Barcelos, 2007). Afro-Colombians have also engaged with activist and academic discussions that have forward the Black Colombian agenda. In the 1990s, there is a rupture towards racialized knowledge, developed through transdisciplinary frameworks highlighting the importance of race and racialization as entangled with social, cultural, and economic mechanisms particular to Latin America, by developing new perspectives on blackness, slavery, and colonization.

In Colombia, blackness is still understood in relation to histories of slavery and colonization. In other words, Colombian nation building has produced specific cultural imageries of black Colombian bodies. Historically complex understandings of slavery, emancipation, and informal street vending are essential for recognizing the spatial process of racialization of blackness in the country. A reason why it is so important to understand how the racialized experiences of Afro-Colombian informal street vendors in the city are historically related to class, gender and the state.

Before the 1991 constitution, *mestizaje* (the process of mixing between racial groups) was established as the sociocultural force underlying social hierarchies in the country. According to Paschel (2010), *mestizaje* was then undertaken as a way of eliminating racial hierarchies among its populations and racial discourse was understood through it. By reifying the notion that populations

were organized by homogeneous national identities (Arocha, 1998).

The legal discourse of the constitution of 1991 was focused on recognition of diverse communities but not on equality between races (Paschel, 2010). In this sense the law of black communities guarantees recognition of ethnic communities in rural zones and cities with high Afro Colombian populations, but it did not confer individual rights. Hence inequality continues to be related to race and regional disparities in the country.

For Arocha (1998), it is the reason for the lack of understanding of racial differences and discourses furthered the marginalization of racial groups by integrating racial populations into excluded categories as “others” or “minorities”.

The ideology of *mestizaje* ensured then the exclusion of Afro-Colombians from debates about national identity, and thus, Afro-Colombians are not seen as representative of Colombian national identity. Meaning that Afro-Colombians were and continued to be seen as part of a homogenization process and contested their claims regarding ethnic and racial discrimination. In this sense, the law of black communities is interpreted as a way to culturally protect “black communities” and their rights of education and land in specific territories, particularly in the areas around the Pacific coast, while neglecting Afro-Colombian individuals residing in main cities like Cali.

Finally, it is important to highlight that the law of black communities is still not

effective and has not brought any positives changes so far for these communities in any region of the country (Robledo *et al.*, 2015).

### **Informal street vending vs the neoliberal practices in public spaces of Cali**

Cali's local government's official discourse of creating an urban classless public space has been criticized by many scholars (Berney, 2010; Galvis, 2014). These scholars argue that the articulation of inclusive, equitable and classless spaces in Cali are actually deeply rooted within historical processes of class and race differences. They also argue that the rights to the city are not fully accessible to all citizens across class lines, especially the homeless population and informal street vendors (Berney, 2010; Galvis, 2014).

Many authors (Donovan, 2008; Galvis, 2014) criticize Colombia's neoliberal urban spatial policies condemning them as promoters of class inequalities, as they seek to maximize profits by focusing on elite consumption and capital accumulation in public spaces. Cali's urban regeneration spatial policies follow the same pattern, by redeveloping public space for its safe, meaning, according to the local government, providing spaces free of illicit drug use, violence and informal street vendors.

Since the mid-90s, Cali has implemented spatial recovery policies designed to produce class equality in public spaces and equitable resource distribution across the city (Berney, 2010). The urban redevelopment projects have focused on

socially sustainable urbanism through the creation and enforcement of urban policies designed to recover public space as a way to reduce urban inequalities. However, this supposedly socially sustainable urbanism has resulted in the creation of spaces of exclusion based on class and racial inequalities by prioritizing the social elite's goals of the appropriate design and usage of public spaces. In this sense, the local government failed to include the voices and necessities of the low and middle socioeconomic populations, in particular informal vendors and the homeless. It also failed to fold into spatial discourses the historical spatial involvements of race and class in Cali as they relate to local urban regimes (Donovan, 2008; Galvis, 2014).

Current spatial recovery policies criminalize informal street vendors because they are often associated with health risks, crime, unemployment and public disorder. In this way, the local government aims to eradicate crime and reclaim public space mainly by expelling informal street vendors.

Spatial policies in Cali are very much influenced by western neoliberal ideologies of what public spaces should be.

Studies by urban scholars and geographers have shown that urban redevelopment policies aimed at reimagining urban space have excluded the urban poor (Donovan, 2008). These redevelopment programs attempt to rescue the use of public spaces in cities from marginalized populations. Specifically aiming to implement

systematic exclusions and the removal of informal street vendors and homeless people in the sites targeted for redevelopment, as these populations do not fit the image of a newly developed urban space.

In this sense, informal street vendors are often blamed for crime, dirtiness, and violence, a discourse that calls for removal, relocation, and eradication of vending practices in public spaces targeted for regeneration by the local government. Local state policies created under the banner of “safe spaces” sometimes aggressively target informal street vendors because street vending represents insanitation, public disorder and unemployment. Arising from decades of criminal activity (drug dealing, murders, thefts) in the commercial center of Cali and other highly frequented public spaces in the city, the local government has taken aggressive measures to eradicate crime and take back public spaces by “cleaning up” undesirable populations and knocking down old commercial buildings and converting them into residential areas for the middle class (who do not want to live in those areas due to their reputation. Most of the projects were and are a failure).

Professor Martínez, an expert in Cali’s urban processes, states:

In exchange the prestige of the large-scale shopping center and the closed residential complex, which exemplify

and deepen social precariousness, is consolidated, as the former is exclusive, and the latter segregates the city socio-spatially. The city appears reborn now as an agglomeration of buildings and routes; neither urban, nor city, as soon as the deepest meaning of the city is demolished in two senses: as a continuous public space and culturally, with the elimination of contact with others. All of the above, added to precarious or non-existent planning, and to the lack of public policies of heritage conservation and inclusive urban renewal, to the diffuse metropolitan expansion, to the privileged use of the private automobile, to the increase of citizen insecurity, to the exclusive outsourcing of the center, has led to the physical and functional deterioration of the urban center (translated from Spanish. Martínez Toro, 2014, p.180)

In Cali, street vending is mainly located in the historical city center where most of the economic activities are situated. Informal vendors primarily sell food (including fruits and vegetables which are mainly brought either from the Pacific or Andean region), nonperishable goods, arts, cell phone minutes. They also engage frequently in selling coffee in the streets, collecting paper for recycling, cleaning shoes in the square, selling sweets on buses or cleaning windshields at traffic lights.

The local government has been incapable of assimilating and organizing their economic activities. As a result, most of the street vendors do not possess social security (Figure 4), employment contracts or a pension, and have a very low income per month that accounts for less than Colombia's minimum wage (877.803 Colombian pesos or 263,41 US Dollars in 2019)<sup>4</sup>.

The ethnic distribution of informal vendors in Cali is primarily composed of

mestizos with a representation of 42,50%, followed by Afro-Colombians with a representation of 23,15%, 21,63 % recognize themselves as white and the remaining 12,14% as indigenous (Robledo *et al.*, 2015) (see Figure 5). In the study of the Secretaria de Asuntos Etnicos del Valle del Cauca (Robledo *et a.l.*, 2015) the proportion of Afro-Colombians and indigenous people in the city of Cali is 26% and 7% respectively.

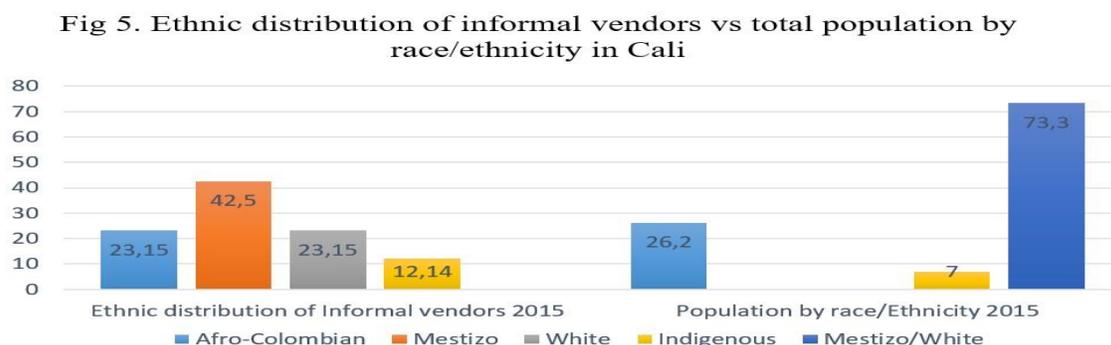
Source: Author.



**Figure 4.** First day of December and there is already an increase in Street vendors in public spaces. As sells increase during Christmas, many families go shopping for gifts and decorations in these areas. Commercial center of the city of Cali, next to public bus stop.

<sup>4</sup> Most of the interviewees state that their monthly income is between 285.000 to 400.000 Colombian pesos (85 to 130 US Dollars)

Source: Robledo *et al.*, (2015)



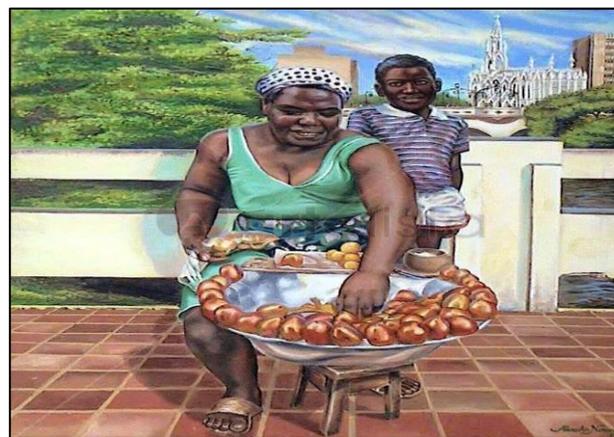
**Figure 5.** Ethnic distribution of informal vendor’s vs total population by race/ethnicity in Cali.

It is important to note that the Afro-Colombian population is not over-represented in the figures on informal street vending as opposed to the mestizo population, which dominates in this aspect of the informal economy of the city.

The current government strategy to deal with street vending is to reduce their labor rights in order to promote formal employment. However, this strategy has not yielded positive results.

According to an interview given by the leader of Sintraviecali (Organization of street vendors in Cali) in a local newspaper (Peña, 2019), the city of Cali has had many attempts to regulate and organize street vending in the historical city center (Figure 6), but all of these projects have failed. For example, in 2010, there was a relocation process of 2,850 vendors. The majority of them were relocated to 315 premises in two different shopping centers at the historical city center, but the entity in charge of the process collapsed and was liquidated due to many debts.

Consequentially, the vendors had to hand over the premises. Hence, in my view, institutional presence, inspection, and surveillance must increase along with a new focus on the entire regulatory system in order to encourage and create more formal employment opportunities.



**Figure 6.** Paint from Alberto Novoa, Colombia 2013:

“...the figure of the black woman announcing the fruits of the huge bowl she carries on her head. This colorful and rustic representation acts as a very attractive magnet for the tourism industry, and Afro vendors assimilate it also in order to fit in some kind of work that will ensure their livelihood...” (Meza, 2003, p. 19).

### **Belonging and employment: Afro-Colombian street vending experiences**

The Afro-Colombian vendors interviewed identified barriers towards street vending by discussing problems related to racialization, belonging and employment. It is important to highlight how forced migration shaped their experiences as street vendors in Cali. 60% of the Afro-Colombian interviewees identified as victims of forced displacement due to internal armed conflicts.

Since the 1940s, Colombia has suffered from violent political conflicts between multiple guerrilla groups and the Colombian government. A war that remains active. This armed conflict is not just a battle between the state and guerrillas, but also includes several paramilitary groups that have been attributed to events of extreme violence against civilians to maintain control over their territories.

“Violence associated with the conflict has forcibly displaced more than 8.1 million Colombians since 1985” (Human rights watch, 2016).

This violent conflict has directly caused the displacement of millions of Colombians, placing Colombia as the country with the highest number of displaced people in the world. Most of the IDPs have been displaced from rural to urban areas; however, armed conflict in major cities has led to an increase in intra-urban displacement, implicating a shift in displacement modalities (Human rights watch, 2016).

Several studies discuss the negative impacts of displacement on marginalized ethnic communities in major cities like Cali (IDMC, 2020; Velez, 2013; Sandoval *et al.*, 2011). For instance, Velez (2013) argues that displacement dissolves social networks and local knowledge that had been part of the survival strategies of ethnic communities in the country. Velez claims that ethnic and racial communities have more difficulty in incorporating into social and economic systems and networks in cities due to discrimination and the absence of social support. Additionally, the hostile social environments in major cities promote isolation and separation from communities.

Many of the Afro-Colombian interviewees expressed feelings of isolation through their difficulty in finding viable communities to support their rights as street vendors. Many of them discussed feelings of isolation in Cali compared to their communities of origin, mainly in the Pacific area of Colombia that are until this day where the majority of Afro-Colombian population had been situated.

“When people asked where I come from I always say Guapi [a town in the Pacific coast], even though I have lived in Cali many many years. Every day, when I wake up, I want to go...but yes, of course, no, no, I do not feel like a Caleño. But I had to live

here. Because it is like this” (Male, 45 years old)<sup>5</sup>

The majority of the Afro-Colombian interviewees who relocated to Cali due to forced displacement from their communities described a sense of loss in cultural and community ties from their communities of origin. The interviewees described feelings of being “outsiders” or “different” in the so called multicultural urban landscape of Cali. An Afro-Colombian vendor who had been living in Cali over 15 years elaborated:

“...here in Cali I see many Black people like me, but they are different. They lived in Cali always... born here... grow in the city. But for me? My family and me? No. I feel different. Here they thing we come from the jungle and do not do anything... Back in my community, I was like everybody else. We eat the same, all the same. Here is another thing. You never get used to...” (Female, 40 years old)<sup>6</sup>.

Thus, the word “difference” is racialized as inferior. As a male Afro-Colombian interviewee stated:

“Yes. the police come to do their rounds to take people and vendors out of the streets. They always come for me and the other black people first. Everybody can see that. It is just that. But I told him. The other day, the police throw my car with the mangos.

He threw it! he threw my mangos on the floor! and he said negro mother\*\*\* get out of here. I think yes, it is because I am black... they are not so rude to the others. I see that. I see that...” (Male, 28 years old)<sup>7</sup>.

Afro-Colombians interviewees, when arrived in Cali, come across to new forms of embodied racialization that is delegitimized by a multicultural national discourse. The interviewees experience a rupture with the ways of understanding the racial, cultural and social practices of their communities, which are in turn often erased by the multicultural discourse in their new urban environments. It is clear, then, that there is a need to understand how bodies are racialized differently in their communities of departure and the urban environments of destination. When put into practice, racial meanings change as they operate in different scales as racial distinctions are deeply embedded in the colonial project of Latin America, and continue to be a form of social ordering, historically through multicultural discourses and under mestizaje (Thomas and Kamari, 2013).

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<sup>5</sup> Interview conducted and translated by author, Cali, Colombia, 2018

<sup>6</sup> Interview conducted and translated by author, Cali, Colombia, 2018

<sup>7</sup> Interview conducted and translated by author, Cali, Colombia, 2019

## Spatial policies and the criminalization of Afro Colombian informal street vendors

In 2016, mayor Armitage began evicting street vendors from the historic city center. He launched an operation to control public space in the “Obrero (worker) neighborhood”, prohibiting the occupation of public space by informal street vendors, declaring informal vending as prohibited, and creating a system where informal street vendors could be prosecuted and penalized. Furthermore, he militarized the city center by increasing the police presence in order to deter street vendors from returning to sell in the city center. These strategies were not originally implemented by Mayor Armitage, as he continued the work of previous mayors of the city. These policies and measures secured Armitage’s vision of Cali as a site of securitized and democratized public spaces, and also reified his vision for future development and progress of the city as “safe and clean”. One of his objectives was to make the city more attractive to tourists. As a matter of fact, tourism in the city has increased annually by 3.2% in the last years (Orozco, 2019). Armitage restricted sales near and around the MIO stations (the public transportation system in Cali). Many of the Afro-Colombian vendors that were interviewed described this campaign as going further than just removing informal vending from these areas but as also as a general way to harass Afro- Colombian people hanging around in these areas.

Source: Alcaldía de Santiago de Cali (2015).



**Figure 7.** “Vendors will have to request temporary permits for street vending during the holiday season”.

“I was with my cousin just talking here in the MIO... We were waiting for my brother. We were just about to take the MIO and go back home when the police came and kicked us out... we did not know why... we were just waiting... they said: Get out of here or you just have to come to the station with us...” (Female, 55)<sup>8</sup>.

The Secretaría de Convivencia Ciudadana de Cali, the government office responsible for executing the city’s urban policies, conducts daily police operations around the city up to this day. They remove everything that is “invading” public space. As an Afro- Colombian street vendor elaborated:

<sup>8</sup> Interview conducted and translated by author, Cali, Colombia, 2018

“Well, the police came and removed us from the area and accused us of trying to sell drugs. They also removed other vendors who were selling in the same place, but they were not treated as badly as they treated us, calling us names, “monkeys” they said, and we were not doing anything, I was just talking” (Male, 23 years old)<sup>9</sup>.

Armitage’s hostile strategies aiming to recover the historic city center of Cali, include the removal of informal vendors and bodies deemed as “the other” from public transportation stops accusing them of criminalizing these public spaces. The vendor’s bodies are hence perceived as criminal because they are illegally selling in public spaces. For some Afro-Colombians, it is clear that their bodies are discriminated and criminalized on two counts: as informal street vendors and as blacks. This double criminalization was noted by the Afro-Colombian interviewees; in contrast indigenous and mestizo interviewees expressed being criminalized because of class, as being poor and working as street vendors, but not because of their race and/or racialization processes.

“No, no, no, not because I am Indio... it’s because we don’t pay taxes. They think we don’t contribute. They just want business that pays. Sometimes they tell me, ok leave or we will take you down but that’s it.” (Male, 42)<sup>10</sup>.

This aggressive behavior of the police towards informal vendors clearly evidence the further marginalization of these populations. This is a strategy to remove street vendors and bodies considered as “others” that criminalized these public spaces. In this sense, vendor’s bodies are perceived as criminal because they are illegally selling in public space. In Meza (2003) study Afro-Colombians living in Bogota experience the same socio-racial discrimination based on restrictive street vending policies in public spaces and the criminalization of their bodies.

The experience of Afro-Colombian informal vendors in this study also differs by gender. Black men acknowledged and discussed that they are doubly criminalized by being street vendors and by being black. Females also expressed how in addition to being doubly criminalized, they are often sexualized by their male customers:

“If I am nice.... Well I have to be nice to the customers... they think they can flirt with me and joke about me otherwise they won’t buy... and well I need them to buy of course, sometimes one has to suffer to feed the children” (female, 25 years old)<sup>11</sup>.

According to Meza (2003), Afro-Colombian female informal street vendors in Bogota are victims of racial and sexual harassment on the streets. In Meza’s study, black women who sold *chontaduro* (a fruit from the Pacific coast), which is believed

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<sup>9</sup> Interview conducted and translated by author, Cali, Colombia, 2018

<sup>10</sup> Interview conducted and translated by author, Cali, Colombia, 2019

<sup>11</sup> Interview conducted and translated by author, Cali, Colombia, 2018

to have aphrodisiac powers, were often stereotyped as sexual objects, and vendors had to tolerate the obscene looks, jokes, and gestures of some men. Often the actions of men reflected the prejudices about black women as sexually available and unworthy of respect (Meza, 2003).

“My wife says that when she is selling her food, people imitates the way she walks or talk... but also police threat her as if she was a sick dog begging for money... she is not... she is just working... life in the city is hard...” (Male, 23)<sup>12</sup>.

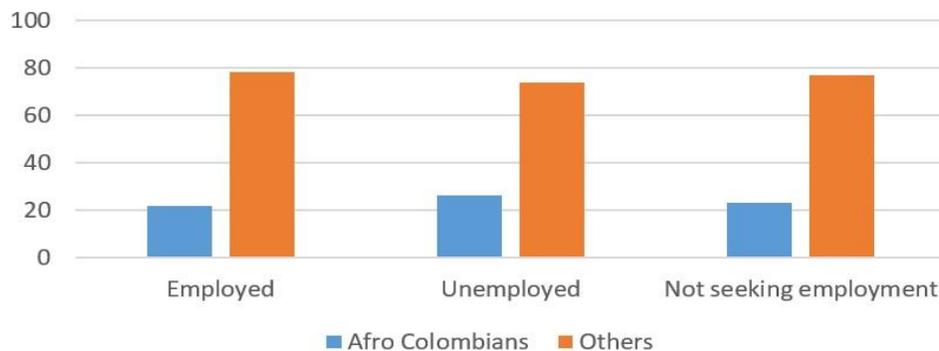
**Afro-Colombians and the labor market**

A study by Arroyo *et al.* (2015) on the discrimination of Afro-Colombians in

Cali’s labor market confirms that there is a low presence of the population that recognized themselves as Afro-Colombians in the labor market of the city. Moreover, the study also found that the majority of Afro-Colombians is unemployed (26,36%), another significant proportion is inactive (23,28%), meaning that they do not participate in the labor market, and only a small proportion of the population is employed (21,9%) (Figure 8). This limited presence of the population that is recognized as Afro-Colombian in the Cali labor market could constitute in itself a sign of possible discrimination against this population.

Source: Based on the EECV (Nov. 2012-Jan. 2013) in Arroyo *et al.* (2015).

**Fig. 8. State of employment, according to own race perception**



**Figure 8.** State of employment, according to own self race perception.

All the participants in this paper that self-identified as Afro-Colombians declared their economic situation as extremely

precarious (1) while living in worse economic conditions compared to people self-identified as mestizos declaring their

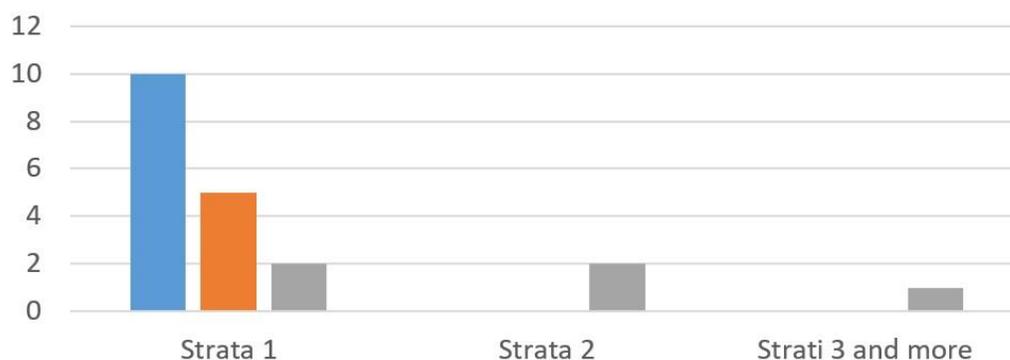
<sup>12</sup> Interview conducted and translated by author, Cali, Colombia, 2019

status within the range of 2-3. Hence, compared to mestizo participants, the Afro-Colombian participants in this study

lived in harsher economic conditions as well as described higher discrimination levels, based on race (Figure 9).

Source: Based on interviews. The results from this figure cannot be generalized in quantitative terms. A larger sample with an adequate representation of different ethno-racial identity groups is required.

**Fig. 9. Interviewee's socio economic strata**



**Figure 9.** Interviewee's socio economic strata.

The Afro-Colombian interviewees also described barriers toward employment due to lack of education and work experience, but also because of their race. Two afro Colombian interviewees described experiences with racial discrimination either in the workplace (when having formal employment) and/or applying for employment. They express their frustration to their non-black friends who constantly negated their racialized experiences. One of them said:

“they don't believe me. They think I pretend to be a victim. I am sure I didn't get that job just because I come from Buenaventura. Because they laugh at how I talk. It is difficult. I

thought it would be easier here than in my hometown” (female, 25 years old)<sup>13</sup>.

It is clear to this woman that being black is a disadvantage when competing for formal employment. She also highlights how non-black Colombians do not believe that discrimination based on race is still a problem. They think that discrimination rather exists due to class in terms of lack of education, underemployment, resource allocations and the fact she has a migration background.

“There are many vendors here ok? But they (the police) come straight at me and tell me “hey, black mother

<sup>13</sup> Interview conducted and translated by author, Cali, Colombia, 2019

f\*\*\*er, I told to get out of here and don't come back" so of course, what else can I do?" (Male, 23 years old)<sup>14</sup>.

In this sense, Afro-Colombian interviewees perceived and understood their race and bodies as marked by discourses of undesirability, crime, and displacement in public spaces and the labor market. Afro-Colombians described being harassed by the police at higher rates not only because they were selling without permits and illegally but because they were black. These racialized and classed experiences by Afro-Colombian informal vendors differed from the understandings described by the non-black informal vendors perceived solely as classed (being poor and uneducated). As such, the failure to recognize the diverse racial makeup of informal street vendors in Cali. It does not lead to a deep understanding of their social and economic realities and necessities.

### **Conclusion**

It remains necessary to conduct more interviews and to pursue other research methods such as extensive fieldwork (methods of observation and participation) in order to address real conclusions in the present study. However, with twenty interviewees, a few days of observation in the area, and a literature review, it is safe to state that Afro-Colombians face a higher vulnerability than the non-Afro-Colombian population in Cali when working in both the informal and formal sector. Additionally, the city of Cali shows significant levels of sociodemographic and

socioeconomic inequalities between the Afro-Colombian population and the non-Afro Colombian population, at both the household and individual levels. As such, the neoliberal ideologies of public space in the city and the existing legislation regarding black communities, defined this population as a cultural community geographically located in the rural areas or far away from the main cities, whose bodies are dislocated in the urban landscape, further marginalizing Afro-Colombians living outside their cultural communities in the urban centers. Despite the good intentions of the modification of the constitution in 1991 to detach race and racial inequalities from local narratives and discourses in the country, we see that this has not been put into practice. Even though the constitution of 1991 legally secured citizen's rights to public space, as well as the recognition of ethnic diversity, in practice, the local state is producing spaces of exclusion in Cali along the lines of race and class, and additionally marginalizing the informal street vendor population as criminalized bodies. By just understanding and studying public space programs as class issues, the local state does not consider the Afro-Colombian street vendor population in the city. The local state policies created under the banner of "Cali: A city for all" make clear that the bodies of informal street vendors are undesirable due to their perceived link to poverty, health risks, and public disorder in public spaces. It is essential to recognize the racialized historical colonial

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<sup>14</sup> Interview conducted and translated by author, Cali, Colombia, 2018

context of the country in terms of race, mestizaje, and recent neoliberal practices copied from the western world that shape the lives of those who use public space to make their living.

More significant investment is needed in education for the population that is recognized as Afro-Colombian, as a critical element to access to suitable employment and, consequently, to improve the well-being of this population and its social environment. Similarly, it is necessary to generate social inclusion policies that focus on closing social gaps, guaranteeing equal opportunity in access to education and quality jobs for the Afro-Colombian population, regardless of sex, race, origin, religion, or any other characteristic of their own or their environment. Lastly, it is recommended that social entrepreneurship programs be promoted and strengthened, focusing on the population that perceives itself as Afro-Colombian in the city of Cali.

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