

# Practised Identities in the World of Ethnic Politics in Chocó

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*“For us the territory is life because here we can develop all our customs, our vision, our ways of development, our ways of subsistence, and our ways of relating to the nature. . . We understand that to defend the territory and to defend the natural resources is to defend life itself in the communities because our communities live from the territory and it provides everything– the spirituality, the culture, and our way of life.” (Isabel, youth activist in COCOMACIA, Chocó, Colombia)*

**Abstract:** In this article, I explore the mechanisms behind identity production among youth activist in the ethno-territorial organisation COCOMACIA in western Colombia. This particular case is just one example of countless political struggles resting on the idea of a common ethnic identity. Due to the global importance of identity in today’s political arena it is essential to better understand the concept of identity, how it comes into being, what it means to people, and what role it may play in social movements and processes of change and resistance. The issue is approached with a practice theory of the self that suggests that identities are produced in everyday practice where both agency and structures play a part. It combines the study of persons with local practices and larger historically institutionalized struggles, and understands identity as constituted in a dialogic process between person and society where agency emerges in the practice of improvisation and play. The young activists in COCOMACIA are torn between the protection of traditional practices and local culture, the longing for development and modernisation, and their own dreams about the future. They navigate through different, and often contradicting worldviews, practices and ideologies, and by answering to the world in everyday practice they negotiate new ways of being, living, and identifying themselves.

The concept of ethnic identity has been of great importance in the Colombian department of Chocó since the early 1990s– in politics, development projects and in the strategies of social movements. The majority of the population in Chocó are descendents from enslaved people from Africa who are still living in marginalisation in one of Colombia’s poorest regions. The black communities’ sense of belonging to a unique ethnicity rests on the idea of cultural unity and shared local practices in the villages inhabited by Afro-Colombians in the western part of the country. In 1993, a law passed by the Colombian government granted the ethno-territorial organisation el *Consejo Comunitario Mayor de la Asociación Campesina Integral del Atrato* (COCOMACIA), the official land title over 700,000 hectares of land in western Colombia, based on the black communities’ rights as an ethnic group. Today the territory is owned and administered by COCOMACIA which promotes the protection of the traditional way of living and the local culture. At the same time the organisation supports and implements initiatives of bringing development and modernisation to the region. The new generation of youth activists engaged in the political work

of COCOMACIA are torn among the struggles to preserve their traditions and culture, the urge for modernisation of their marginalised communities, and their own dreams and hopes about the future. This article argues that the young activists in COCOMACIA navigate through different and often contradicting worldviews, practices, and ideologies and negotiating new ways of being, living, and identifying themselves through everyday activity.

In this article, I explore and identify the mechanisms behind identity production among youth activists in COCOMACIA, specifically situated in local ethnic politics in Chocó. This particular case is just one example of countless political struggles that rest on the idea of a common ethnic identity, a topic that has been extensively dealt with within various academic fields with different theoretical starting points. Due to the global importance of identity in today's political arena, it is essential to better understand the concept of identity, how it comes into being, what it means to people, and what role it may play in social movements and processes of change and resistance. As quoted in Martín et al. (2006, 6): "identity politics is in itself neither positive nor negative. At its minimum, it is a claim that identities are politically relevant— an irrefutable fact. Identities are the locus and nodal points by which political structures are played out, mobilised, reinforced, and sometimes challenged." In order to explore these issues I use a theoretical framework developed by Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner and Cain (1998) and Holland and Lave (2001) which combines the study of people with local practices and larger historically institutionalised struggles. Their concept of identity goes beyond the idea that social structures are the main shaping tools when it comes to identity production. Instead, their focus lies on how identity and agency are being developed in actual practices that are "situated in historically contingent, socially enacted, cultural constructed 'worlds'" (1998, 7) such as academia, domestic relations or local politics. Holland et al. (1998, 51) name these cultural realms as "figured worlds". These worlds are often, but not always, informed by major societal structures. Holland et al (1998, 169) suggests the term "space of authoring" for the place where agency and identity takes shape through a dialogic process between person and society, and between inner and outer worlds.

This article is structured into four sections: first, a section explaining the methodology applied; second, a historical chapter that gives a brief background of the development of the ethnic discourse in Chocó; third, a section where the theoretical framework is presented; fourth, a case study exploring how identity production in the specific setting of local ethnic politics in Chocó can be understood when analysed within the specific theoretical framework used in this study. In the first part of the case study it is argued that the sphere of local ethnic politics in Chocó can be understood as a culturally constructed world, or figured world. Then, this article looks into how major societal structures related to power affect the figured world of local ethnic politics and its participants. The third part of the case study focuses on how the young activists in COCOMACIA react and answer to the situations they have to face in everyday life and to the world(s) in which they are located, using the concept of space of authoring. Finally, one example is presented of how seeds of new figured worlds can be planted through the process of self-authoring.

## Methodology

When approaching the subject of ethnic identity it is of great importance to move away from the question of *what* ethnic identity *is* and instead move towards an understanding of *how* it is *constructed*. One should avoid speaking about "ethnic groups" as it tends to give the impression that people seemingly belonging to these groups are part of homogenous and fixed entities with shared interests and that certain characteristics can be attributed to their members. According to Brubaker (2002, 166-167) such ideas of ethnic groups have a tendency to be "essentializing and naturalizing". Ethnicity should therefore be conceptualised in "relational, processual, dynamic,

eventful and disaggregated terms” and ethnicisation conceptualised as “political, social, cultural and psychological processes”. Approaching ethnicity and ethnicisation with these assumptions, ethnic identity is not understood as something that exists in the world independently from our understanding of it, but as constructed through “perceptions, interpretations, representations, categorizations and identifications” (Brubaker 2002, 174). Rather than presuming that ethnicity plays the main role in identity formation in the context of the black communities of Chocó, my analysis focuses on the activists’ practised identity within the specific setting of the “figured world” of local ethnic politics:

When anthropologists and other contributors to cultural studies of the person write about “identities” they are usually concerned with “cultural identities,” identities that form in relation to major structural features of society; ethnicity, gender, race, nationality, and sexual orientation. Our concept of identity is both broader and more particular. We focus on the development of identities and agency specific to practices and activities situated in historically contingent, socially enacted, cultural constructed “worlds”: recognized fields or frames of social life, such as romance, mental illness and its treatment, domestic relations, Alcoholics Anonymous, academia, and local politics. (Holland et al. 1998, 7)

This approach looks at the practised identity of the young activists in the particular setting of the political participation in ethnic politics without assuming that ethnicity is something that permeates all aspects of the activists’ identity, or has the same meaning in all spaces of their lives. It also makes it possible to see how other social categories, for example gender and race, play a part in the practised selves in this specific setting through the “personalisation” of the politics of ethnic discourse. Above all, it provides a way of discovering the source of agency and the possibility for change in the most unequal power relations.

The analysis is based on data collected from interviews with members of the youth branch of the ethno-territorial organisation COCOMACIA. In total, five youth activists (3 female and 2 male), were interviewed from June to November in 2018.<sup>2</sup> The group of interest for the interviews consisted of youth engaged in local ethnic politics in Chocó. The questions asked during the interviews touched upon their engagement with COCOMACIA, the role of the concept of ethnic identity in their political work, as well as its importance for them as individuals. The interviews also explored the experiences and emotions that the youth activists have of being Afro-Colombian and of living in a marginalised area of Colombia. In addition to the interviews I have worked with and travelled within the territory of COCOMACIA during one year. My observations during this time have been important as they have contributed to my understanding of the context and improved my ability to analyse the material collected from the interviews. In my analysis of the material I used the “Documentary Method” that was developed by Ralf Bohnsack, who in turn draws upon the work of Karl Mannheim. This method fits my study as it focuses on the activity that takes place in practice and in utterances, which has helped me to move away from the question of what ethnic identity is towards the question of how the self is produced in practice. This method aims to overcome a common problem in qualitative research: the analysis either stays on the level of common-sense knowledge or the researcher claims access to knowledge that is out of reach for the actors themselves (Bohnsack 2010). The methodology developed by Mannheim (1952, 46) recognises that there are two levels of meaning— that of “intentional expressive meaning” and that of “objective meaning” or “documentary meaning”. He describes the intentional expressive meaning as what was meant by the subject in the moment and the objective meaning as what exist beyond intentions. By using the Documentary Method one strives to go beyond what is shown explicitly in text or actions and find the meaning that underlies the action or the utterance (Nohl 2010).

## The Ethnicisation of Chocó

The history of black communities in western Colombia starts in the 16<sup>th</sup> century when enslaved people were forcefully displaced from Africa to work in mines in the region for the Spanish colonisers. Slavery was abolished in Colombia in 1851 but the department of Chocó has continued to be one of the most marginalised and poor regions in Colombia. In the era preceding the ethnicisation of the region Losonczy (1999, 16) describes the identities in the black communities constructed through an underlying strategy that systematically reorganised exogenous cultural materials, which resulted in identities with open and mobile borders rather than something with essential meaning and expressions. Through this strategy different elements from Catholic, Western African, and indigenous heritage merged and created collective memories. Villa (2001) explains the pre-ethnicisation identity as an “artifice made out of fine thread [filigrana], a tapestry woven from materials from diverse sources, caring not about their provenance nor about their final product” (Escobar 2008, 209). The new concept of ethnic identity invented in the 1990s was, according to Villa (2001), the result of a process that reaches as far back as colonial society. Restrepo (2013, 37-57) points out three elements that were crucial for the turn of politics in the 1990s. The first factor was that inhabitants of the flood banks of the river were increasingly threatened by big wood companies that exploited the natural resources in the area that had been populated through generations by black farmers. With this threat came a greater need for defending the territory and the local way of life. The Catholic Church was the second factor that had an important role in this development and played a crucial part in the creation of Asociación Campesina Integral del Atrato (ACIA, later COCOMACIA). By the end of the 1970s, the way the missionaries worked changed when the Claretian Missionary started to question and criticise the earlier pastoral practices. The new discourse was not focused on “civilising” the inhabitants in the communities or imposing the idea of progress or western morals on the farmers, but was instead informed by liberation theology. The team focused their resources on productive initiatives such as health projects with a focus on traditional and alternative medicine, daycare for children, literacy programs, cultural preservation programs, and perhaps most importantly on organising the inhabitants politically. The third important element that contributed to the ethnicisation in Chocó was the presence of a group of anthropologists, agricultural economists, agronomists and engineers who worked in the region in the 1980s with a development project by the name El Proyecto Desarrollo Integral Agrícola Rural (DIAR). This group problematised the common perception of the black farmers as irrational, lazy and backwards and highlighted the unique production processes in black communities. In 1987 an important study by July Lesbeerg and Emperatriz Valencia was released using the framework of DIAR. The report is a detailed work that described the productive model of the settlements by the Atrato river that showed the complex economic and social rationale behind the productive model of the local farmers and how these connected to environmental cycles in sophisticated ways. This study was later to become part of the empirical and analytical material of the notion of territoriality of the black communities and was appropriated into the organisational discourse of ACIA.

All these events took place during a time marked by neoliberal economic and political reforms made by the Colombian state. According to Escobar (2008, 158), up until the 1990s the Pacific region in Colombia had been treated like a region to colonise or conquer. This attitude changed in the 1990s with the idea of development— a new discourse that created a “collective consciousness of marginality and an awareness of exclusion” in the Pacific. This opened up the possibilities for interventions from governmental institutions, international development agencies and entrepreneurs. Extensive development projects that aimed to integrate the region economically into the rest of the country disrupted the local cultural practices. With the institutionalisation of a neoliberal global order in many Latin American countries, resistance also appeared in various

sites, which challenged capitalist modernity. Escobar (2008) argues that even though modernisation and development are likely the most powerful global structures, or designs, that have come from the modern West, it has in the process been transformed in local contexts and rearticulated by subaltern perspectives. The Pacific region in Colombia was drastically being transformed by development discourses and neoliberal policies threatening the possibility for survival of the local way of life and therefore became the breeding ground for resistance and the organisation of social movements. The implementation of Colombia's economic policies and politics in the global world order provided a way for local movements to seek help for their claims through international law. In 1988, COCOMACIA used the framework of international rights for the first time to claim their right to the territory based on their ethnic identity. In the early 1990s, a new constitution was being written which emphasised the concepts of multi-ethnicity and pluri-culturality as principles that were to define the new image of the nation.

In 1993, a new law (Law 70) recognised the black communities' right to collective ownership of the territories which they had historically occupied. The law established mechanisms for the protection of their cultural identity and their rights as an ethnic group. The communities were also given new political agency and new spaces for representation opened up in governmental institutions. Restrepo (2013, 98-99) argues that the processes that followed the writing of the new constitution can explain much of what characterised many of the social organisations that were created in the 1990s. The new political environment opened up possibilities for new types of organisations that pursued a discourse of rights based on ethnicity. Many existing organisations re-elaborated their strategies and adapted their discourses to this new context. According to Escobar (2008), the process of ethnicisation was not a top-down process but a rearticulation of identity that was created through the interaction among different actors such as activists, experts, ethno-territorial organisations, and black communities at this time. They forged together through negotiating terminology and through the practice itself. Furthermore, this process depended on operations that naturalised identity, portrayed black groups as "wise environmentalists" and "located black groups in space and time in particular ways". This new discourse tended to have more objectifying notions of territory and culture that had gone from a more fluid regime to a more normative and modern one and a "significant re-articulation of local experience" (Escobar 2008, 212).

Restrepo (2013, 15-17) has pointed out four different conceptual emphases that have been important in the study of ethnicity in the region. The first one can be named the "enfoque afrogenético" [afro-genetic focus] and has been pursued mainly by a group of Colombian anthropologists.<sup>3</sup> They argue that black ethnicity and identity in the Pacific is something that has always existed, and that predates the creation of Law 70 for hundreds of years. Since colonial and post-colonial times this group has been invisibilised and marginalised in the national political context in Colombia. The rise of organisations based on ethnicity and the increase in representation of Afro-Colombians in various institutions that took place in the 1990s are by these researchers understood as advancing the visibilisation of Afro-Colombians. The second emphasis was mainly developed by researchers<sup>4</sup> connected to the development project (DIAR) in the 1980s— a cooperation between the Dutch and the Colombian governments. The people working in the project did ethnographic research on the patterns of settlement, models of production and cultural strategies of Afro-Colombians in the region. As mentioned before, the work of these researchers later became important for the advocates for the creation of an ethnic identity because they highlighted the unique and environmentally friendly production systems in the region. The third school that Restrepo identifies was developed in a dialogue between Colombian and French sociologists, political scientists, geographers, and demographers. According to researchers belonging to this school<sup>5</sup>, the new discourse of ethno-politics that was advanced by local organisations, NGOs and governmental institutions was part of a greater reconstruction of the Colombian political arena where ethnicity

was used as a political resource. For this group of researchers, the focus has been on the political, social and economic conditions under which ethnicity became possible as political capital, and on what strategies have been used by these actors. The fourth group of researchers<sup>6</sup> that he identifies are the poststructuralists, concerned with discourses of power and resistance. Restrepo (2013) himself understands the concept of black communities as an ethnic group as historically and politically constructed but through a historically marked process. He argues that there is a problem with understanding identity as something with a predetermined essence and as a de-contextualised invention with the objective to gain economic and political benefits. In contrast to these ways of understanding the ethnicisation of the Pacific he argues that this process has to be seen as a result of inter- relational and contradictory practices by actors such as the local population, ethno-territorial organisations, NGOs, governmental institutions and programs, and the Catholic Church. If the ethnic conceptual turn which took place in the 1990s is looked at from this perspective, it can be understood as both a rupture and a continuation of the past. This means that discourses and rhetoric of the organisations in the Pacific changed but that these new identities and images were anchored in concrete experiences and local conditions and history.

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework applied in this study is developed by Holland et al. (1998), and Holland and Lave (2001) and heavily draws upon the work of Vygotsky, Bakhtin, and Bourdieu. Their ideas combine the study of people with local practices and larger historically institutionalised struggles. Their theoretical approach to identity assumes that identity is constituted through a dialogic process between person and society, between the individual and the collective, where both agency and structure take part. People situated in certain social and historical positions use the cultural resources available and their limited agency to improvise. Through practice, they construct their subjectivity. The point of departure is the premise that “identities are lived in and through activity and so [they] must be conceptualized as they develop in social practice” (Holland et al. 1998, 5). Participants in local practice are constantly in conflict and tension over different ideologies, worldviews, political stances, and affected by power. It is not only the local (local history, practices and institutions) that matters but the local is always a part of larger economic, historical, political and cultural struggles that are being localised through local practice where “enduring struggles and intimate identities are mediated” (Holland and Lave 2001, 3).

Holland et al. (1998) identify three insights as the basis for a practice theory of the self: discourses are changeable and can be used as tools for identity formation; the self is embedded in practice as it is also practice in itself; the sites where the self is constructed or produces are multiple. The implications of these insights lead to a complex relationship between the self and culture in anthropological research:

Subjectivity...is seen to be developing at an interface, within the interplay between the social and embodied sources of the self, in that might be called the self-in-practice...This self-in-practice occupies the interface between intimate discourses and practices to which people are exposed, willingly or not, in the present. (Holland et al. 1998, 32)

While culturalist approaches to identity emphasise the potency of cultural systems of meaning or cultural “rules” to determine individuals’ action and self-identification, constructivists’ approach focuses on how individuals position themselves in situations while interacting with others. Bourdieu (1977) showed that with a purely culturalist perspective it is impossible to explain behaviour as new situations will occur where the individual has not learned how to behave in

front of all possible situations according to cultural rules. At the same time, the cultural aspect of behaviour cannot be neglected as culturally constructed morals have an impact on how people choose to confront different situations. These two perspectives of human behaviour cannot be separated in practice and therefore Holland et al. (1998) suggest putting these two central approaches to identity in a dialogical framework to better understand how identity is produced. By doing so the concept of improvisation, and what is produced in the moment of improvisation, comes into focus. Holland et al. (1998, 17-18) explain the idea of improvisation based on the insights of Bourdieu:

Improvisations are the sort of impromptu actions that occur when our past, brought to the present as habitus, meets with a particular combination of circumstances and conditions for which we have no set to response. These are the openings by which change comes about from generation to generation.

Improvisation is not seen as an end product, but as the beginning of a potential change of the habitus. In contrast to Bourdieu, Holland et al. (1998) argue that this process can happen within a lifetime. Furthermore, they argue that the production which happens in moments of improvisation is used to direct their own and others' behavior:

As an often unintended but sometimes purposive consequence, there is a continual process of heuristic development: individuals and groups are always (re)forming themselves as persons and collectives through cultural materials created in the immediate and the more distant past. (1998, 18)

This should not be interpreted that people can merely construct whichever identity they wish, but rather that they are restricted by their position, experience, and cultural resources.

At the heart of the debate about subjectivity and identity lies the problem of human agency. Foucault, one of the most influential researchers in the area of subjectivity, shed light on the production of subjectivity through practices connected to power and through discourses, but was criticised for not sufficiently taking into account how the self actively constitutes itself. Hall (1996, 13-14) criticised Foucault for not explaining how "individuals are summoned into places in the discursive structures". He argued that a theory is needed that explains the mechanisms behind how individuals identify with their place in these discursive structures and how they "fashion, stylize, produce and 'perform' these positions, and why they never do so completely". To solve this problem Hall (1996, 5) turns to psychoanalytic theory and argues that identity arises from the intersection of the discursive formation that puts us into a position and the "process which produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects". This meeting point Hall (1996, 5) calls "the point of suture". Holland et al. (1998) argue that the concept of suture implicates that the subject arrive at this meeting point as already performed and instead they suggest the concept of "co-development" to better illustrate the process of development where people and the social are linked together. This co-development takes place through practice, something that Vygotsky's student Leontiev, Bourdieu and Bakhtin emphasized in their work on the self. Leontiev (1978) viewed people as always in the act of doing something, that something being a collectively defined, historical and socially produced activity. Bourdieu (1990, 52) established a dialectic and mutually constitutive relationship between structures and subjectivity that he called practices:

The theory of practice as practice insists, contrary to positivist materialism, that the objects of knowledge are constructed, not passively recorded, and, contrary to intellectualist idealism, that the principle of this construction is the system of structured, structuring dispositions, the habitus, which is constituted in practice and is always oriented towards practical functions.

Bakhtin (1981, 293-94) described a dialogic process in which we act as both speakers and listeners and make meaning of the worlds for ourselves. In this process Bakhtin places the activity of “authoring the self”. The insights are essential to the idea of human agency that Holland et al. propose. With the conception “heuristic development”, Holland et al. (1998, 18) want to emphasize two processes in the everyday practice where making of identity takes place and where agency can be identified. The first is the process where improvisation happens, and the second is the appropriation of the product of improvisation as heuristics for the following activity. These processes are important because “to the extent that these productions are used again and again, they can become tools of agency or self-control and change” (1998, 40). Holland et al. draw on the work of Vygotsky to explain how these processes can be understood as a source of human agency. Vygotsky (1930) focused on humans’ ability to be liberated through symbols, by using them and actively constructing them through semiotic mediation. He theorised that humans can assign meanings both individually and collectively to objects and behaviour, and that when they are placed in the world they affect people’s psychological processes. Even if individuals construct their own “mediating devices”, they are mainly appropriated from others and socially produced together with others, which restrict semiotic mediation as agency and as a tool for taking control over one’s behavior. Depending on their ability to objectify themselves and their consciousness of themselves as an actor in a world that is culturally constructed she can, through semiotic mediation in these processes, execute a limited agency and control over her behaviour (Holland et al. 1998).

Holland et al. (1998) always keep their focus on how we exist in activity, both in the spaces of practice and in the space of authoring. They bridge Bourdieu’s space of practice, Bathkin’s self-authoring with Vygotsky’s focus on symbolic mediation and play in order to understand how figured and imagined worlds, when acted out, can be materialised. Holland et al. localise those “practice identities” to four different contexts of human activity: figured worlds; positionality; space of authoring; and making worlds. These concepts will be further discussed with the findings in this study.

## **“For Us, Territory is Life” - the Figured World of Local Ethnic Politics**

Rather than focusing on identity created along the lines of major social structures such as ethnicity, gender, or class, this study uses the starting point of what Holland et al. (1998) identify as a figured world. The identification and definition of the figured world being studied is essential as it is within and in between those worlds in which identity production is assumed to happen. The definition of figured worlds as stated in Holland et al. (1998, 52) is “. . . a socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others”. The idea of figured worlds are not that they are permanent objects but that they are products of continuous processes which we, through participation, shape and by which we are shaped. It is in relation to the figured world that identities are being developed as these worlds give meaning to action and manifest themselves materially through people’s local practices. Among the majority of the youth activists interviewed in Chocó the notion that the inhabitants in the black communities pertain to a unique culture and have a different way of relating to the territory and the nature is strongly rooted. Yenny, one of the youth activists in COCOMACIA, expresses her relation to the territory in the following way: “I feel that my roots are there, I feel that my essence is there, and I cannot lose my essence because if I lose my essence, I lose something intrinsic within myself that won’t allow me to move forward.” Isabel, another young activist who left the territory with



her family when she was a young girl, also emphasises the importance of the nature and territory for the black population in the region: “For us the territory is life because here we can develop all our customs, our vision, our ways of development, our ways of subsistence, and our ways of relating to the nature.” Many of the youth activists in COCOMACIA assign the local practices in the territory, and the territory itself, cultural and social meanings that goes beyond its purely materialistic value that is the mere survival of the inhabitants, both on the individual and the collective level. A unique relation and connection between the territory and its inhabitants is highlighted as vital to the population and something that singles them out from “the rest”. Some of the interviewed activists described a change within themselves and their way of relating to the territory after they had become active in COCOMACIA. Claudia, a youth activist, describes the insight she got from getting involved in the organisation:

When I entered COCOMACIA I began to understand what the love for the territory was, the autonomy. The territory means a lot, because the territory is what gives one everything. For you it does not mean a lot, for some people from other parts it has no meaning, but for the people here it is where one has one’s livelihood. . . COCOMACIA made me see another point of view, to love my culture more, my identity, to make me feel proud of what I am.

This statement implies that a learning process is required to understand the meaning and importance of the ethnic politics of COCOMACIA and to understand what importance ethnicity has, one needs to be socialised into this “world”. Figured worlds are constantly produced and reproduced in a flow of production through the interaction between people, between the individual and the collective, and between the personal and the social realm. Figured worlds affect the identities of the people engaging in them on a personal level, as expressed above, however the participants are not passive receivers but rather active in the configuration of the figured world. Without the active engagement of these activists in the production and reproduction of the figured world of ethnic politics, it would not exist. Participants need to learn the “rules” of the figured world, but at the same time they construct the world through participating in it. In this way figured worlds depend on the constant meaning-making of cultural artefacts and in relation to them, identities are being developed through people’s local practices. The concept of figured worlds developed by Holland et al. (1998) is useful for understanding the way the youth activists assign meaning to local practices and to the territory. What is essential to the figured world, is that the youth activists depend on artefacts that are individually and collectively given meaning and direct behaviors when put in an environment. In this case, the relation between inhabitants and territory and the local practices in the communities can be seen as such artefacts that have been assigned meaning beyond their purely materialistic functions. This conforms to Vygotsky’s idea of cultural artefacts: figured worlds are being constructed and reconstructed through the practice of meaning-making through semiotic mediation by identifying the activists’ assignment of deeper meanings to the ways of living in the territory and to local practices. Through those artefacts, figured worlds are being constantly “made” through the practice of its participants. Based on the interviews with the activists in COCOMACIA I argue that the sphere of local ethnic politics in Chocó can be understood as a figured world that is culturally constructed, but that is nonetheless affected and intertwined with major social structures. The relation between these two platforms of identity production will be dealt with in the next chapter.

## **“Being Afro is Synonymous with Resistance” - Positionality and Figured Worlds**

Figured worlds are not created in the moment of interaction but are created around greater power structures that need to be taken into account when looking at the practice of identity production: “Local practice comes about in the encounters between people as they address and respond to each other while enacting cultural activities under conditions of political-economic and cultural-historical conjuncture (Holland and Lave 2001, 3). In the case of COCOMACIA, the organisation has been informed by a long history of slavery, marginalisation, discrimination and struggle for survival, freedom and rights. Isabel, one of the interviewed activists, puts the situation for Afro-Colombians in Colombia into words: “Everything we have today has been won through struggle, through years of resistance, from living in vulnerable conditions, from living abandoned...”. Claudia continues on the same theme: “If a black person does one bad thing in Colombia, they discriminate everyone. You can do 1000 good things here, but if one person does something bad it gets out to all the newspapers.” Holland et al. (1998, 125-43) makes a theoretical distinction between two aspects of identity that at the same time interrelate with each other the figured and the relational. The first aspect is concerned with identity connected to figured worlds (narratives, desire, storylines, etc.) and the other aspect is concerned with one’s position and sense of social place or position in relation to others. Positionality is linked to power, privileges, and status but these cannot be understood as fixed or universal frames as they are interconnected to figured worlds. Social frameworks like gender, class, ethnic groups, and race cut through most social worlds but are locally figured. In accordance with Bourdieu, Holland et al. (1998, 60) argue that figured worlds, or fields, are not only imaginary but are a “social reality that lives within dispositions mediated by relations of power”. In all the interviews with the young activists these two aspects of identity can be detected but not separated. The story told about ethnic identity in Chocó is multilayered. It is a story about a unique relation to nature and specific local practices that characterise the inhabitants and the local culture and also a story about major power structures and a history of marginalisation that has affected the black communities in western Colombia for centuries to this day. By looking at the history of the ethnicisation of Chocó one can see that the figured aspect of identity has had materialistic gains as the recognition of ethnic identity was the basis for Law 70 that granted COCOMACIA the title over their territory. Likewise, if we look at the history it can also be assumed that the materialistic circumstances, historic events and social structures played a crucial part in the articulation of a common ethnicity in Chocó. The realm of imagination and the material world cannot be separated as they constitute each other in a dialogic relationship and therefore neither can be analysed separately. In every moment of existence, both the relational and the figured dimensions are present and need to be answered. In the next part I will look into how the answering to the world results in the authoring of the self.

## **“I Thank God for the Colour of My Skin” - the Authoring of the Self**

While figured worlds can maintain and strengthen privileges and power structures, the identities that are produced within them can also guide resistance and liberation. The cultural system of a figured world, together with major social structures, sets a tight framework for a person’s development of identity, but does not exhaust the possibilities of variety, change, resistance or agency. Hermeneutic moments of rupture can make people aware of the figured worlds that direct everyday practice. This can also happen on a collective level if for some reason an indicator of

relational identity becomes objectified and therefore accessible for reflection in relation to a social category. Objectification of a group can often be a basis for organisation and resistance. When people learn about figured worlds, and identify with them, they may oppose their position in this world and even imagine an alternative world. This leads us to Bakhtin's concept of self-fashioning, or what Holland et al. call space of authoring. The concept of space of authoring refers to the activity of answering to the world that we are facing. Based on results in their case studies, Holland et al. (1998, 169) find it necessary to go beyond the idea that individuals reproduce the collective internally in an unproblematic process and therefore draw upon Bakhtin's vision that identities are continuously formed in a "conflictual, continuing dialogic of an inner speech". Holquist (1990, 47) builds on Bakhtin's idea of self-fashioning by using the concept of "dialogism" to describing the meaning-making people are involved in in every moment of existence when being faced by with different messages (ideologies, languages, social codes, physiological stimuli, etc.):

So long as I am in existence, I am in a particular place, and must respond to all these stimuli, either by ignoring them or in a response that takes the form of making sense, of producing - for it is a form of work - meaning out of such utterance.

It the making of meaning that Holland et al. (1998) understand as the space of authoring. This is where we author the world by utterances, not as totally independent beings but with constrained possibilities and on the basis of the production of others that one has been exposed to. The youth activists from COCOMACIA that were interviewed showed individual ways of facing the cultural and structural frameworks in which they exist. Some had similar ways of responding and processing these frameworks, while others stood out from the rest. The most common way of talking about being Afro-Colombian in Chocó was to emphasise the positive feeling towards being Afro-Colombian. Claudia said: "I love my skin every day and I thank God for it. It means a lot, it means how the ancestors fought, the people brought from Africa". Yenny stated: "I think that if I was born again I would beg to God that I was born as Afro-Colombian again because I love the colour of my skin". She continues "It is like it makes me more whole, it helps me, and I want to remain Afro to the day I die, because it is something beautiful that I carry with me and something I cannot neglect". In analysing these utterances in relation to the context in Chocó and the reality for Afro-Colombians in Colombia, they can be understood as resistance or answers to a hostile environment and to oppressive social structures. Expressing gratitude for being black and appreciation for one's skin colour or hair is necessary and important because it is not in line with the mainstream discourse or popular opinion. Holland et al. (1998, 178) point out, in accordance with Bakhtin, that the "I-for-myself" realizes itself explicitly in words and categories, naming the 'I-for-others' and the 'others-for-myself.'". These words that one uses to describe oneself can, in Vygotsky's (1978, 1987, 1998) meaning, be understood as symbols for the own self which can direct one's future activities. His idea was that people can actively assign meaning to artefacts both on an individual and on a collective level in order to control their own behaviour. By starting to objectify oneself it is possible to start to reflect about the position one is placed in and therefore also imagine how it could be different. One tool in this process would be to alter the meaning of artefacts. In the context of Chocó, the black populations have suffered, and still are suffering tremendously from discrimination and stigmatisation due to racism. The process of semiotic meditation could be a way for these activists to liberate themselves from the negative narrative of being Afro-Colombian by negotiating new meaning and values to their identity. This ability, or agency, in this process should nevertheless be exaggerated as it is not so much of an individual choice and more of a collective creation dependent on broader social structures and discourses. In this light Yenny's and Claudia's positive statements about their skin colour and their relation to the territory could be read as a step in this process to alter the meaning of being Afro-Colombian for others as well for themselves.

The negative stereotypes of Afro-Colombians in Colombia and the activists personal experiences from racism and discrimination can be thought of as “internal interlocutors” (Holland et al. 1998, 179) against which defenses and answers can be formulated. In this process the social is interconnected with the internal in a dialogic process. Different worldviews, ideologies, narratives and opinions are formulated in the social realm and internalised and reformulated, contested and answered within the person and then again put into the social in interpersonal interaction. Holland et al. (1998, 173) emphasise the importance of understanding that the self in Bakhtin’s understanding is a position and not content but one that is positioned in a constant “flow of activity”. It can never be complete and does not exist outside this flow of activity. As the social speech becomes integrated with one’s self-activity, the result could turn into fossilised everyday habit and acknowledged as a person’s essence, in this process the ability to be aware of the mediated artefacts behind the self-activity will be lost, and thus, the ability for change. Vygotsky believed in the possibility of freedom from this type of habitualised environment through directing one’s behaviour through signs and by collectively articulating an alternative world by being aware of this engrained activity. Bakhtin put a lot more weight on status, power and social structures than Vygotsky which is something that Holland et. al (1998) argue must be added to his idea about inner speech as it is affected by social struggle in a complex way as social speech is not neutral in relation to social stratifications. Bakhtin (1981, 288) developed the concept of “heteroglossia” which refers to that languages cannot be neutral as they are always connected and interdependent on the context in which they exist. He also argued that people often find themselves in situations where different voices contradict one another and direct one’s action in different directions. The conjoining of these different voices he called self-authoring, that in Holland et al.’s words would be “orchestrating voices” (1998, 178). Bakhtin emphasised the importance of “internally persuasive discourses” (1981, 345) for the process of self-authoring, which means that people construct personalised discourses built on words that are half ours and half others’. It gets more complex as Bakhtin recognises the variety of internally persuasive discourses within us that are engaged in a struggle and that contains different values, ideologies and worldviews. The construction of an internally persuasive discourse will never be finalised but is always in dialogue as new situations and contexts create new internal discourses.

Miguel was the activist who deviated the most from the other activists when it came to his expressed feelings about ethnic identity in Chocó. Miguel, who was not born in Chocó but in a city in the adjacent department of Antioquia, came to Chocó when he was twelve years old to live with his birth mother who lives in a community in the territory of COCOMACIA. When he came to the territory, he became involved in COCOMACIA and, with time, he became one of the young leaders in his community and took the role as vice president in the local community council for a period of time. Miguel stands out from the other activists interviewed as he rejects the idea that the black communities make up an ethnic group: “I think that we need to start defending our rights, the abandonment of the state, this is what we need to start to defend. Not assume the discourse that we are going to defend the black people of Chocó, no. We are going to defend the inhabitants of Chocó”, he continues: “I don’t see the difference between a black person and a white person, I only know that we are Colombians.” Despite his many active years in the organisation, Miguel’s life before moving to Chocó seem to be important in shaping his attitude towards the concept of identity. He later in the interview says that in Apartadó where he is from people mix socially, and there it is not such a big difference between Afro-Colombians, indigenous and white people. If we assume that Miguel is not taking part of the figured world of the local ethnic politics in the same way as the other interviewed activists are, or at least not to the same extent, then he sees no meaning in maintaining certain practices or cultural meanings of the territory as they simply do not fill a function. Instead, he seems to rely on the liberal idea of human rights as the basis for the social work he is engaged in in his community. Whereas all the

other activists have been emphasising the ways in which Afro-Colombians are different and unique, Miguel simply rejects the idea of a categorisation of people based on their race or ethnicity and adopts the liberal discourse of universalism. Holland et al. (1998) points out that it should not be taken for granted that actors who interact with a certain figured world automatically go through an identity formation according to it. Perhaps their disengagement is deep enough to form an identity relevant to it or to simply reject it. We as humans live in and in the interface between many different figured worlds and are facing contesting ideologies and worldviews. Throughout the continuous interaction between the social and the individual we need to react and answer to these contesting discourses, and, depending on how we do that, we make our self. It is important to highlight that Miguel's attitude towards a more "development friendly" approach cannot be seen as a choice made completely voluntarily by him, but instead is highly dependent on influences by the global discourse of development, progress and modernisation. Participating in a figured world does not automatically mean that a person conforms to it or adapts to it in the same way as the majority. Individuals bring different cultural resources, experiences, memories and personal histories when entering and answering to it.

I argue that all these very different experiences and personalised meanings of being Afro-Colombian cannot be separated from broader structures of ethnicity and race in Colombia. I see all the statements from the activists as responses to this— answers that have been individualised and differentiated within each person through the activity of self-authoring within figured worlds. Both the activists that give importance to the idea of otherness and counter societies' devaluation of blackness and the activist who denies that Afro-Colombians are any different from white or indigenous people, do this in a context where race indeed matters even if they react or answer to race in distinct ways. Agreeing with Holland et al. (1998), I argue that this process can be understood as a dialogic process between the social and the personal that goes both ways and that is constantly happening in the everyday interaction between people. Bakhtin (1981, 345) painted this as a process in which different voices, worldviews, ideas, ideologies and values are being orchestrated and individually put together to "internally persuasive discourses". In the interviews with the activists in COCOMACIA it is clearly the case that they all are affected by enduring struggles over power when giving words to their understanding of themselves. It is also true that their personal histories, traits and situations entail a certain substantiality of the person. None of the above positions taken by the young activists can be seen, or maybe even understood separate from the dominant discourse about Afro-Colombians in Colombia. The activists do not invent separate words or positions from this discourse, nor from the figured worlds that they are participating in. Rather, they have developed them through close interconnectedness with them, even though in very different ways, through the process of self-authoring. Bakhtin (1981, 348) meant that this process of self-authoring is especially important in the struggle against a dominating discourse:

The importance of struggling with another's discourse, its influence in the history of an individual's coming to ideological consciousness, is enormous. One's own discourse and one's own voice, although born of another or dynamically stimulated by another, will sooner or later begin to liberate themselves from the authority of the other's discourse.

The process of self-authoring is not a straightforward path, and it is certainly not a matter of autonomy and freedom of choice. It is complex because of the myriad of contradicting and contesting voices resulting in different positions and identities as we have seen in the case of the youth activists in COCOMACIA. Through the process of self-authoring existing worlds can be enforced or transformed, and seeds of new worlds can be planted.

## “We Could Change Realities from our Own Vision” - the Making of New Worlds

Figured worlds are not stable entities but are constantly challenged and transformed as they exist in a dialogic relationship with other worlds and discourses. When looking at the specific case of the young activist in COCOMACIA, a negotiation between the protection of traditional practices and the local culture, and the longing for “development” and modernisation of the region can be discerned. This negotiation is visible in the following paragraph where Isabel, one of the activists, talks about the vision of the youth in COCOMACIA:

I decided with other colleagues to take on the challenge of how we could change realities from our own vision as young people, from our vision as black people, but also contribute to the defense of the territory and the struggle for the traditions and culture of black people, to fight for the differences that we have, because we have a different development plan from the rest of the country because our vision, our life forms demand it.

Alternative development is a concept that is important in the political work of COCOMACIA. It promotes an idea of development and better living standards in the territory but still aims to honour and protect the local traditional practices and values. All of the activists that I have interviewed are enrolled in the university or have recently graduated and are about to start their professional careers as lawyers, social workers or engineers. At the same time they identify themselves with the ethnicity of the black communities in the territory of COCOMACIA and identify with the local life in the rural villages in Chocó. Furthermore, the presence of national and international human rights organisations is very high in Quibdó which promotes the discourse of development and human rights. The activists live in the interface between different worlds that are calling for their attention, which they forge together in the process of self-authoring– finding new ways of (re)defining themselves and their dreams by constantly orchestrating contradicting worldviews, values and ideologies. Alex, one of the young activists, believes that combining the preservation of the essence of culture and a change of lifestyle is possible:

The culture is like politics, the culture is dynamic, and I believe that the culture cannot be static. There are things that must change, with time passing the world will change, and the communities have to adapt to the new rhythm of life, but without losing its essence.

The discourse of alternative development, and the way of combining elements, visions and ideas from distinct ideologies and worlds among the young activists can be analysed as the negotiation of new figured worlds that have come into being through improvisation and play. The concept of play is central to Vygotsky’s theories (1978, 1987), and always draws upon known and old social activity. It also take one beyond it, always in and through an imaginary setting of a figured world. People always learn how to play, and the boundaries of the play, from earlier generations and from others with whom they interact is therefore always socially and historically shaped. Play is also what makes us able to imagine alternative ways of living and being, and without it, it would be impossible to get a sense of oneself and to understand human agency. Through play we can act differently which in turn can lead to think differently and imaginations can become embodied. Holland et al. (1998, 236) describe why play is important in the creation of figured worlds:

It is in the opening out of thought within the activity of play, what we might call the cultural production of virtualities, that allows for the emergence of new figured worlds, of refigured worlds that come eventually to reshape selves and lives in all seriousness.

Holland et al. (1998) acknowledge the important insights that theorists like Foucault and Habermas have contributed to the understanding of habitual action, but also argue that they missed paying attention to the human ability to improvise and to put together what we know as imaginary alternative worlds. It is exactly here that we find human agency and where new worlds can be made. The process of making worlds is not so much a question of choice but of production. Holland et al. (1998, 251) describe that figured worlds “move through us as spoken discourses and embodied practices”, and as social production moves through us the “political becomes personal”. The discourse of alternative development embraced by the ethno-territorial organisations in Chocó reflect the necessity of the youth activists to negotiate new stories that coincide with their realities, convictions and dreams about the future that are marked by historically institutionalized struggles.

## Conclusion

The results in this study show that the majority of the young activists interviewed participate in a culturally constructed world, or figured world, that highly values local practices and culture, and the idea of a unique relation between the territory and the inhabitants in the black communities in Chocó. However, the process of identity formation is also informed by greater political, cultural and economic structures in which the activists and the figured world are located. The majority of the black population in Chocó lives in marginalised communities and is facing discrimination on the basis of their race— aspects which are entwined with the lives of the activists in COCOMACIA and the figured world of local ethnic politics. By answering to the world, which has both relational and figured dimensions, the activists practise self-authoring by combining and negotiating different worldviews, ideologies and practices. The activity of self-authoring should be understood as highly dependent on already existing practices, but which also enables human agency through improvisation. This is visible in the ways in which the activists individualise the cultural, social and the political, and tell their own stories. The study shows that other possible figured worlds also have an impact on the activists, such as the world of development, brought to the region by international organisations, institutions and NGOs. Through the practice of self-authoring the young activists negotiate new ways of being, and thus, seeds of new figured worlds can be planted. The concept of alternative development can be understood as one example of how the young activists formulate new stories and identities, merging elements of different figured worlds that are situated in a changing economic, political and social reality.

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## Notes

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<sup>2</sup>The interviews were audiotaped with consent from all the interviewees, and I informed that the information provided in the interviews would be anonymised. All the names in the interviews have been replaced and I have left out names on communities and places in their stories that could identify them. The interviews were made in the activists' native language Spanish and the quotes are my own translation.

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