
THE TRANSATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE AND THE REIMAGINATION OF COLOMBIAN IDENTITY IN THE POETRY OF JORGE ARTEL

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Abstract

*The literary tradition of South America has generally been imagined and legitimized in terms of the continent's Hispano-American cultural heritage, epistemologies, and genealogies. Amid this hegemonic tradition, Black and Indigenous cultural presences and creative imaginaries have been relegated in favor of Hispano-American worldviews. Artistic creations by these "other" subjects have long been considered secondary to the Creole/mestizo canons, and have thus not benefited from the same degree of critical attention and circulation in mainstream literary circles. However, the trend is gradually changing, at least with regard to Afro-Colombian literature, as new generations of creative voices have gradually gained space and interrogated the generally accepted paradigms of Colombian identity. In the same vein, works long shunned by critics and the reading public have been reevaluated and granted increased editorial attention, critical scrutiny, and legitimizing awards. Jorge Artel's poetry reinscribes Black bodies, cultural symbols, epistemologies, and legacies of the transatlantic slave trade into Colombian national history. His poetry, which is inscribed within the negrista tradition, reexamines the Colombian Atlantic space, especially his home city of Cartagena de Indias, questioning entrenched cultures of marginalization. His collection, *Tambores en la Noche* (Drums in the Night), first published in 1940, can be considered a reimagination of that city's memorial cartography in order to underline the vestiges of enslaved Africans and their continuous configuration of Colombian national identity.*

Keywords: Sea, Ancestor, Colombia, Identity, Memory, Exclusion

Introduction

The coastal part of Colombia, specifically the port city of Cartagena, was the gateway through which many enslaved Africans entered the Latin American world. From 1580, it became one of the key destinations in Latin America for enslaved Africans. At the time, the trade was dominated by large-scale Portuguese merchants who established many commercial contacts and supplied slave labor across Peru and New Grenada as well as a large part of the Caribbean (Ortega, 2000, p. 90). Thus, Cartagena carries immense significance in the imaginary of the Afro-Colombian subjects and their sense of being and belonging to the Colombian nation. In terms of the genealogies of the African presence in Colombia, Cartagena is where something ended and something else began, a space of transition, cross-cultural pollination, and the intersection of different cultures and civilizations.

As ironic as it is, Cartagena's relationship with Black voices and bodies is deeply reflective and metonymic of Colombia's relationship with a part of its national history. Antonio Virgal Ortega observes that the slave trade transformed the skin color of the city; in the mid-nineteenth century, the Black population constituted the majority of its residents (2000, p. 90). However, Cartagena has sought to shroud itself in the myth of being a White city, rendering its African cultural heritage invisible and relegating it to the status of folklore. Art and performance, especially as they relate to the Afro-Colombian population, have thus been used by minoritized Black people as tools for asserting the presence of Black bodies and Black voices, not as a mere excrescence or embellishment of Colombian national heritage, but as an integral force in Colombian history. The sacrifice of the Black and Indian populations in the war of independence, of which Cartagena was at the forefront, is hardly ever mentioned, while the memorial iconographies of the city's political heroes hardly reflect its Black figures (Caicedo, 2010, pp. 274–275).

Afro-Colombian literature from Cartagena constitutes, to a great extent, a critique of the myth of the White city in a White country that accords pride of place to its Iberian heritage and genealogy, while considering the African presence a blotch on that heritage. From the time when the slave trade was formally abolished in Colombia to the mid-twentieth century, the question of racial recomposition has been a major component of political debate in Latin America in general and Colombia in particular. Some of the Latin American nations came to consider their relative backwardness as a consequence of their racial makeup, and have proposed various ways of "improving" their races as a precondition for modernization. According to Pietro Pisano, many Colombian intellectuals believed that the racial composition of the country was responsible for various defects, and only immigration could turn the tides (2012, pp. 192–93). As elsewhere in Latin America, Black and Indigenous presences have been considered a problem, leading to insidious attempts to stymie their continuation. During the presidency of Camacho Roldan, for instance, there were several proposals to attract migration from Spain and Italy to whiten the Black and Indigenous peoples, who were generally considered inferior (Melo, 2018, p. 150). Such efforts sought to invisibilize the contribution of the Africans to the economic, cultural, and political well-being of the Colombian nation. Jorge Artel's poetry is inscribed within this dynamic of memory, using memory to resignify and to change the way Cartagena (and generally, Colombia) (dis)regards the African component of her self-identity.

Jorge Artel (1909–1994) was born in the city of Cartagena, where he grew up and later studied law at the Universidad Nacional de Cartagena. Due to his left-leaning political views, he aligned himself with the movement of Jorge Eliécer Gaitan, the political leader who dissented from the Liberal party to champion a popular movement aimed at restoring the soul of the Colombian nation to the common man in a country run by an established aristocracy based on a hegemonic two-party system. Gaitan's movement attracted public intellectuals, writers, and prominent social actors across the racial divide. His popularity among the Indigenous and Afro-Colombian masses is testified by the fact that his supporters were referred to as *negros*, or Blacks (Pisano, 2012, p. 134). When Gaitan was tragically murdered on April 9, 1948, the country went up in flames, with widespread protests and a witch hunt against his supporters,

many of whom went into exile. Artel left Colombia that same year, the beginning of a long exile that took him to Puerto Rico, El Salvador, Mexico, the US, Panama, and many other countries. During those years, he met other Latin American and African American intellectuals, including the renowned poet Langston Hughes (Prescott, 1996, p. 1). Such encounters not only strengthened his socialist ideology, but equally reinforced his belief in Afro-descendant art forms as the lifeblood of his artistic expression, in much the same way as Hughes and other pioneers of the Harlem Renaissance had built their art around the aesthetics of jazz and other performative genres with direct or indirect African ancestry. In this regard, his works can be inscribed in a lineage of *negrista* poets, including figures such as the Cuban Nicolás Guillén and especially the Colombian Candelario Obeso (1849–1884), generally considered the precursor of Black literary expression in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean region. In the views of María Elena Olivia, this *negrista* movement was greatly influenced by the Harlem Renaissance, but also by Garveyism and Haitian *indigenismo*, movements that acknowledged and fostered pride in African cultures as the basis of freedom from oppression for Afro-descendant peoples in the Americas (2020, p. 53). Though it never coalesced into a literary movement *sensu stricto*, it remained a constant presence in the works of Black poets in Hispanic America—such as Pilar Barrios (Uruguay), Estupiñán Bass (Ecuador), and Juan Pablo Sojo (Venezuela)—as a means of asserting their African descent and belief systems (*ibid.*, p. 61).

Though published in 1940, eight years before Gaitán's assassination, *Tambores en la Noche* (*Drums in the Night*) bears imprints of the general frustration of a nation that conceived of itself strictly within a Eurocentric mold, oblivious to those on whose sweat and blood the country's wealth was built, but who were left on the periphery of the national self-imagination and at the bottom of national development agenda. As the poet Oscar Maturana states in his poem "The New History," "Never did the Indians/Talk less of the blacks/cannon fodder for the enemies" appear anywhere in the pantheon of national heroes (in Caicedo, 2010, pp. 274–275). Jorge Artel's collection deploys the poet's aesthetic and ethical sensibility in defense of the underrepresented African genealogy in the construction of the Colombian nation. He creatively falls back on memories of pain to weigh on the conscience of those who commit the double crime of denying the descendants of enslaved Africans their fair representation in Colombian national history, and to interrogate the official inscriptions of memory in relation to Colombian cultural heritage. His poetry is not only written, but also sung and drummed in an innovative poetic language that deconstructs the Western written tradition and reinscribes the principles of African oral culture in poetic art.

Before engaging in an analysis of *Tambores en la Noche* (*Drums in the Night*) as an attempt to commemorate the slave trade and to give the Afro-Colombian his due within the Colombian national imaginary, it is essential to understand the complex reality of the invisibilization of Afro-Colombian peoples and their artistic works. The creative production of Afro-Colombians can be placed in the matrix of center/periphery dynamics with regard to Creole/mestizo domination. This reality is best reflected in the difficulty of publishing Afro-

Colombian and Indigenous authors in the Colombian book industry, given that their literary models and aesthetic practices are not considered artistic enough and are rather consigned to the realm of ethnographic curiosity, carnivalesque exhibitionism, and voyeuristic exoticism. This is a challenge that prominent and pioneering Afro-Colombian authors like Candelario Obeso, Jorge Artel, and Manuel Zapata Olivella have had to confront. In her book *The Power of the Invisible* (2018), Paula Moreno, Colombia's Minister of Culture (2007–2010), discusses the adverse reaction she faced from the so-called cultural elite (mainly based in Bogotá) with regard to her efforts to publish a mini-library collection of key Afro-Colombian authors:

The main cultural magazine of Bogotá featured an article titled “The Presence of the Invisible,” in which the author questioned the rationale of the project: “Why is there such an investment of state resources in this collection? Will it make the invisible visible? No doubt, it sounds good, powerful, and magical.” The entire content of the piece was rather ironic and offensive in nature. The author took out of context the fact that my name was mentioned in the collection's acknowledgements. The question I asked myself was: when the names of other ministers and public officials have been featured in similar endeavors, was that also considered proselytism? In my case, it was frowned upon as politicking. The piece insisted that speaking of “invisibility” was a gross exaggeration. A certain feeling of contempt and disrespect underlined these criticisms ... (2018, p. 149)¹

The political and cultural elite of Bogotá claimed the right to validate any cultural process in the country, and in their estimation, the valorization of Indigenous and Black literatures was not worth the effort. Culturally speaking, Afro-Colombians are faced with a situation that Walter Mignolo describes as an internal colonialism that contradicts the officially stated egalitarian values of these nations, concealing forms of racism overtly—or, in some circumstances, tacitly—sanctioned by the state through its (in)actions (2007, p. 112).

It is partly thanks to the aforementioned mini-library that several Afro-Colombian and Indigenous authors have gained any degree of critical attention. Jorge Artel's *Tambores en la Noche* (*Drums in the Night*, 1940) has been reedited and published in this collection. Artel's poetry is an eclectic mixture of several trends and tendencies that reflect the poetic potency and depth of the Afro-Colombian imaginary. He attempts to capture the rhythm of everyday life as well as the historical background of his personae, locating them within a history of the struggle for cultural and political freedoms. His poetry can be considered a cartography of African presence that draws on musical genres such as *cumbia* and *bullerengue* as forms of testimony and oral re-memoration of the tortuous trajectory of the African presence in the Americas. One key feature of Artel's poetry is the topos of the sea and the network of significations connected to this geographic trope. The sea is portrayed in his poetry as a space of witnessing, a spatiotemporal pivot on which the tragic odyssey of the ancestor unfolds. The imagination of the sea in terms of history echoes the interrogations of Adam Lifshey in *The Spectre of Absence*:

¹ Translation from the original Spanish. All Spanish-English translations are mine.

Why do so many texts, for example, begin by invoking something that is not there? How many writers are engaged, one way or another, in channeling the dead? How many are mediums? How many are exorcists? Are not all writings works of mourning? But for whom? And in the name of what? How many absent worlds are there to conjure? How many promised lands? Are not all writings works of conjuration? Can an ocean be a conjuration? Is the Atlantic? Is America? Is absence? (2010, p. 16)

The shores of the Atlantic Ocean constitute a space of memory and moral interpellation that continue to haunt the living on both sides of the Atlantic. In Artel's poetry, the sea becomes personified as a symbol of the difficult relationship between the Afro-Colombian subject and the lost (and now imagined) home, on the one hand, and a new space in which his presence is fraught with discrimination and dehumanization, on the other. The imagery of the sea and the kind of community that it represents in his imaginary is akin to that of the river in most Pacific communities in the western part of Colombia. In analyzing the symbolism of the river, Motta holds that it is an axis on which relational networks are anchored. It is a source of communication between various villages and communities. It is a source of identity and all that water represents, configuring a sense of home and according symbolic values to daily communal activities (2005, pp. 39–42). However, while the river in this sense portrays an intra-Colombian identity-scape around which the African communities sought to adapt to their American environment and implant their cultural imaginaries, the Caribbean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean signify a horizontal space that fertilizes the Afro-Colombian subject's imaginary of his African home. Instead of being the articulation of a center as can be seen in the river imagery, the sea is a space of dissemination and fragmentation. In this sense, Artel's inscription of the sea in his poetry deserves a closer look, and can be related to the concept of dialectics in the poetry of Edward Kamau Brathwaite and the poetics of horizontality as propounded by Bill Ashcroft.

Jorge Artel and Tidalectic Poetry

The sea provides both a source of inspiration as well as a tapestry of tropes and figurative expressions in Artel's poetry. In this light, there seems to be a clear interconnection between the marine imaginaries of Jorge Artel and the Barbadian poet Edward Kamau Brathwaite, especially with regard to the latter's notion of *tidalectics*—the poetics of the waves and their importance in the subject's coming to terms with his uprootedness from Africa and implantation in the Americas. In a critique of Brathwaite's works, Anna Reckin defines the tidalectic imagination as:

A “trans-oceanic movement-in-stasis” ... the movement contained in tidalectics is repetitious and anti-progressive and is not directed towards a finite conclusion in the same way as dialectic reasoning. Second, because of this removal of a conclusive stopping point, tidalectics tends to focus more on the relationships created between the points that the waves of movement travel between rather than a single destination. (2003, p. 2)

In line with Reckin's articulation of the concept of tidalectics, the persona of Artel's poetry conveys an ambivalent and hybrid personality as a complex product of both shores. As antagonistic as the constituent cultures and realities that underlie his personality may be, he is obliged to fashion out a creative existence from the aporias of history. Tidalectics is not a comfort zone, but the constant effort of harnessing the different currents of one's identities into a single relational and intercultural self-identity. Jorge Artel's poetic persona stresses both his Black identity and his appurtenance to Colombia by reminding the reader/listener of the problematic inscription of the Black body into the American space and its demand for recognition. This explains the persona's insistent recall of his history and trajectory, which are embedded in the experiences of his ancestors.

"Black, I Am"

Black I am, for many centuries.
 Poet of my race, I inherited its pain.
 And the emotion I evoke has to be pure
 In the coarse sound of the cry
 And the monorhythmic drum.

The depth, the shuddering accent
 With the frisking voice of the ancestor,
 is my voice.

The human anguish I exalt
 is not decoration for tourists.
 I do not sing pain for exportation! (Artel, 2010, p.49)²

Artel harks back to his ancestors' pain, as he is heir to their heritage. In other words, the ancestral pain is also his because the plight of the Afro-Colombian has metamorphosed from outright slavery to the practices of exclusion and denigration that plague the multicultural ideology of his nation. In such a context, the reflex of the poet is not to deny his identity, but rather to claim and affirm it. Artel's insistence on his African ancestry elicited strong reactions from some intellectuals, including the editor of *El Sábado* newspaper who, in 1944, criticized

² "Negro Soy"

Negro soy desde hace muchos siglos.
 Poeta de mi raza, heredé su dolor.
 Y la emoción que digo ha de ser pura
 en el bronco son del grito
 y el monorritmico tambor.
 El hondo, estremecido acento
 en que trisca la voz de los ancestros,
 es mi voz.

La angustia humana que exalto
 no es decorativa joya
 para turistas.
 ¡Yo no canto un dolor de exportación!

him for presenting himself as a Black poet, arguing that in Colombia, there was nothing like a “Black poet” (Pisano, 2007, pp. 79). He was writing at a time when certain intellectual figures embraced the official ideology that sought to present Colombia as a mestizo nation, entailing a harmonious fusion of the different peoples and cultures of Colombia. However, what Jorge Artel’s poetry underlines is the importance of claiming Afro-Colombian identity—not by negating the Colombian self, but by stressing the racial and cultural complexity of that self, a fact that certain sectors of society seek to obviate in favor of a narrow conception of Colombianness. In other words, his poetry is premised on the fact that being Black and being Colombian are not mutually exclusive (Pisano, 2007, p. 102). In this regard, Jorge Melo argues that the claim of a unitary Colombianness that obliterates constituent racial identities was in itself flawed: when examined keenly, such an ideology rested neatly on a conception of Colombia as a White and Catholic nation (2010, p. 193). This argument is inscribed within the dynamics of the *negrista* current in Colombian arts, especially poetry. *Negrismo* was based on the peculiarity of Afro-descendants’ cultural formation in terms of their spirituality, epistemology, and cultural practices, and how these were redefined in America, taking cognizance of the various national contexts and the attendant realities of their invisibilization of non-Creole cultures. It was argued by its proponents, such as Obeso, Guillén, Martan Gongora, and others that these cultural specificities were key to the authenticity of Afro-descendant creativity, and could be harnessed to contest the marginalization of Afro-descendant voices in the political, cultural, and social domains. As hinted above, the works of Candelario Obeso represent a pioneering endeavor in this regard (Casiani & Serabia, 2010), as a “mulatto” poet who assumed his appurtenance to the Black race and used his poetry to capture the everyday lives and conditions of Black individuals in the Colombian context, thereby debunking White superiority through a language that was less confrontational but nevertheless laced with sarcasm, irony, and humor.

The quest to understand the historical circumstances of his American presence is underlined in the highly figurative poem “La voz de los ancestros” (“Ancestral Voices”). The voices of the ancestors are said to echo stridently in the conscience of the persona. Though a distant echo from the past, this voice is said to be so resounding as to reverberate in the recesses of his soul:

“Ancestral Voices”

... I hear the winds galloping
 In the musical shadow of the port
 The winds, a thousand thirsty and dry routes,
 Filled with ancestral cries ...
 Those voices that speak of ancient tortures
 Voices so clear to the soul ...

Their generous voices
 From the depths of time
 Send me an echo
 Of dead drums,
 Of lost complaints
 In God knows which strange land,
 Where the bonfire light disappeared
 And with it the notes of the last song. (Artel, 2010, p.50–51)³

The voice is engaged in a quest for the essence of its being, but what it gets is ungraspable evanescence in the form of “an echo,” “dead drums,” “lost complaints,” “bonfire light disappeared,” the “last song” left on the island by the invading/retreating tides. This voice seizes the listener in the form of a cry, the cry of the wretched of the earth, the cry for recognition. It is the subaltern’s cry, which Nelson Maldonado-Torres captures in *Against War* as “Silence, distorted speech, and the cry of Negro affirmation become different expressions of the black in his and her coping with the condition of slavery, colonialism, and/or anti-black racism” (2008, p. 132). The distant cry, a cry for recognition, permeates the present of the persona. In effect, Artel engages in a back-and-forth tidal movement in his text, triggering an intertextual reading of the historical conditions of bondage and modern practices of exclusion under the oppressive gaze of the White man, as the persona states in the poem “Meeting”: “I have learnt to bear the prolonged blue gaze of the White man/Falling over my flesh like a whip” (107). The last stanza of the poem reenacts the conditions of the African ancestor’s separation from his mother continent. The imagination is fragmentary, for it is a history that does not avail itself wholly to us. Rather, it can only be imagined in an oneiric and clair-obscure setting: “Where the bonfire light disappeared/And with it the notes of the last song” (“Ancestral Voices,” 50–51). Here is where art plays a crucial role in allowing a picture, though blurred, of the pain of dismemberment caused by slavery and the slave trade. From

³ “**La voz de los ancestros**”

... Oigo galopar los vientos
 bajo la sombra musical del puerto.
 Los vientos, mil caminos ebrios y sedientos,

repujados de gritos ancestrales ...
 Voces en ellos hablan
 de una antigua tortura,
 voces claras para el alma ...

... sus voces desprendidas
 de lo más hondo del tiempo
 me devuelven un eco
 de tamboriles muertos,
 de quejumbres perdidas
 en no sé cuál tierra ignota,
 donde cesó la luz de las hogueras
 con las notas de la última lubrica canción.

slavery to modern times, being Black in Colombia has carried an existential stigma. Ortega posits that Colombia is a pigmentocracy whereby one's color still determines, to a large extent, the potential for sociopolitical and economic mobility: the less Black a person's skin, the better the access to opportunities for an upward climb (2000, p. 98).

The drum is a very potent trope in this collection, as it represents one of the main artifacts of material culture among Afro-Colombian people. Night drums symbolize the ability to communicate when there is a lack of a common language, to form a community in exile, and to sustain the ethical imaginaries of Black people, even in times of uncertainty:

“Drums in the Night”

Drums in the night
 Are like a human cry
 Trembling with music I heard them groan
 When these men who carry
 Emotions in their hands
 Snatch from them the anguish of an age-old yearning, of an intimate nostalgia,
 Whence lurks the sweetly savage soul
 Of my vibrant race
 With centuries soaked in moaning
 Night drums speak
 And their voices
 A deep call, so strong and clear
 It seems to resound deep in my soul! (Artel, 2010, p.57–58)⁴

The symbolic and existential value of “drums” in this eponymous poem, not to mention the entire collection, can hardly be overstated. Jorge Melo paints a scenario in which the enslaved

⁴ **“Tambores en la noche”**

Los tambores en la noche
 son como un grito humano.
 Trémulos de música les he oído gemir,
 cuando esos hombres que llevan
 la emoción en las manos
 les arrancan la angustia de una oscura saudade, de una íntima añoranza,
 donde vigila el alma dulcemente salvaje
 de mi vibrante raza,
 con sus siglos mojados en quejumbres de gaitas.

Los tambores en la noche, hablan.
 ¡Y es su voz una llamada
 tan honda, tan fuerte y clara,
 que parece como si fueran sonándonos en el alma!

Africans of the Spanish colony of New Grenada (Colombia) could not communicate among themselves, as they came from different cultures with different languages; thus, music and dance offered an indispensable means of communication among them (2018:162). Talking specifically about the drum, Raul Caicedo affirms that it “was the best means of communication between the enslaved Africans, taking advantage of the Spaniards’ inability to decipher the content of its musical codes” (2010, p. 331). The drum here shifts from being a mere object of entertainment and revelry to one of the various ways in which the enslaved Africans negotiate their existence in a new and desolate space. The poem gestures at certain conceptions that are typical of *negrista* poetry, portraying Africans as men that “carry emotions in their hands” just as it describes the persona’s soul as “sweetly savage”—an oxymoronic reference suggesting an uncompromising attachment to his African identity despite all the negative stereotypes attributed to the African “other” by European modernity and the Hegelian perception of non-White races. This poem underlines the liberatory impetus at the basis of *negrista* poetry, which some critics considered mere exoticism, more likely to end up entrenching stereotypes in the form of folkloric entertainment for elite White culture than to expose and redress the disadvantaged position of Afro-descendant peoples in Colombia and other Caribbean societies. This aspect is quite important, as Mansour argues that *negrista* poetry was not strictly racial in content, but equally addressed issues that were specific to the respective Latin American countries (Mansour, 1973, p. 145). Artel foregrounds his aesthetics in Afro-Colombian music and everyday practices, putting these at the service of his critique of a society still enthralled to discrimination and White supremacy. The infusion of African cultural artifacts such as drums and traditional musical forms in his poetry is not only meant as aesthetic embellishment or cultural exhibitionism, but also as elements of the spiritual and cultural reclamation of the African personality that underlies the contributions of African knowledge systems in shaping the ontologies and ethics of the New World.

The theme of mourning in this text requires a reconceptualization, for it does not merely hark back to the past. Rather, mourning becomes a process that releases energy and enables the subject to confront the challenges he faces in the present by virtue of reclaiming his African identity. It is mourning that stimulates the imagination and construction of an alternative ethic in human relationships beyond the master-slave binary. The drum is, therefore, a voice in the dark, and can be considered an interrogation or quest for an effective/affective transmission of the travails and dreams of the lost ancestors. Night drums constitute means of dreaming, of defying the night to sound the belief in the possibility of an alternative future despite the history of enslavement and exclusion. But above all, the mourning drum enacts an ethical interpellation of man’s conscience, irrespective of color, as the poetic persona insists in “Poem with neither Hate nor Fear”: “Blacks all over the world, those that have not renounced the order, nor disrupted the flag, here is the message: with neither hate nor fear, we are the conscience of America!” (127). By positioning the Blacks as the conscience of America, the poetic persona underlines gestures towards aspects of Afrodescendant cultures that are based on mutual recognition, ethical conviviality and reciprocity, along the lines of Fanon’s concept of a gift. The drum enacts a rapprochement between humans that echoes Fanon’s statement: “Man is motion toward the world and toward his like. A movement of aggression, which leads

to enslavement or to conquest; a movement of love, a gift of self, the ultimate stage of what by common accord is called ethical orientation. Every consciousness seems to have the capacity to demonstrate these two components, simultaneously or alternatively” (1968, p. 28). The ethical fabric of most colonial texts in the form of a cry is thus interwoven; in Torres’s terms, “in the struggle for recognition, with a loving subjectivity who is not able to love. Love becomes the key to articulating a Fanonian account of the colonial condition and of colonial subjects” (2008, p. 123).

As stated above, Jorge Artel’s poetry lies at the crossroads of various creative trends and currents, reflected in his changing and subjective rapport with the sea. His relationship with the waves is characterized by a tense harmony. Sometimes, his imagination is enthralled by the flow of the waves, thereby leading him to conjecture a stable identity and the idea of return, be it physical or spiritual. However, his relationship with the waves now and then begets intractable thoughts that lose sight of a clear definition and destination. This reinforces the tidalectic nature of the collection, in which the subject and the waves are neither settled nor stable, their changing nature apt to emphasize the varying facets of slave history. This tidalectic tendency can be discerned in several poems in Brathwaite’s *Arrivants* (1967), in which the sea waves play a key role in imagining the memorial flux and identity reconfiguration that underlie diasporic existence, with its tensions, fragmentation, nostalgia, and illusions, but also its creative promise. The case of the poem “The Cracked Mother” is quite profound:

And why do the waves come here
riding from allotted lands
behind the black barbed wire of rock
the white outworks of their foam;

why do they come as they do:
white hoofs beating high water on sand
leaping our smashed-in wish that they halt
that they keep the boundaries clear?

quiet at sundown, restless at noon,
land and sea balanced by sky.
But where are these loud gallopers going,
these bright spurs conquering tide and hill,

treaty, how will new maps be drafted?
Who will suggest a new tentative frontier?
How will the sky dawn now? (1967, p. 183–184)

In this poem, the imagery is that of a stronghold or firm territory (suggestive cognates of an essential identity) constantly invaded by the tides, the wells and beaches that bring back memories of loss and displacement, but compel the poetic persona to perpetually redefine his identity. The space of enunciation in the above poem is intermittently adrift, revealing the identities of the subject as a product of “drafted maps,” “tentative frontiers,” the “quiet” and “restless,” the “leaping sand” and “smashed-in wish.” The possibility of remaking and refounding is captured by the gerund of the collection’s title—*Arrivants*—for it is not a conclusive identity, but rather one that is reactualized through memory and dreams based on a deeply held faith—a term running through the veins of both the persona and the verses of the poem. The continuous cascade of the waves can be paralleled with the alignment of multiple interrogative verses in Brathwaite’s as well as in Artel’s poetry, possible attempts to come to terms with a history that has impacted the Afro-descendants’ existence without bequeathing them a pristine and unquestionable inventory of its events and definite meanings.

The sea is personified as the only witness of the presence and subsequent absence of the ancestor. She is believed to bear a secret force that can reveal, to the living, the circumstances of the silence-disappearance-death of slave victims. The sea, to echo Adam Lifshy’s words, is the incarnated specter of absence, for it represents the present past as well as the past present. The Greek philosopher Heraclitus is known to have said “one cannot step into the same water twice.” Hence, Artel’s perplexity at the sight of the sea, which gives the illusion of grasp, but can only present fluid and evanescent traces of ancestral presence. The sea is thus a site of inherent difference and *différance*, where, as “the ocean seems engaged in an infinite repetition of the same movement over and over again, the tide is, in fact, never exactly the same, nor does it re-tract or return to the same place of ‘origin’” (Llenín- Figueroa, 2012, p. 7).

In “Canción en el extremo de un retorno” (“A Song in the Extremity of Return”), the persona again exposes his complex rapport with the sea:

The sky will pull a large moon
 Onto the waters of the quay,
 For it to play with my soul.
 On the corners of the arsenals
 I shall wait for an abandoned song,
 Wrapped in the fishnet like a shad ...
 I shall return to contemplate my hundred open routes,
 We need to know ourselves better, the sea and me. (77)⁵

⁵ El cielo tirará una luna ancha
 a las aguas del muelle,
 para que juegue con mi alma.
 En los rincones de los arsenales
 me estará esperando algún canto abandonado,

To know the sea, as the persona purports, represents the possibility to know the self through knowledge of his ancestor. Taking up the abandoned song is a form of continuity, continuing to sing in defiance at the point where the singing of the ancestors had stopped due to the tragic circumstances that the persona is at pains to conjecture. The ocean is thus a caesura between three continents, a tragic comma between several worlds, in which the Afro-American writer inserts himself/herself to recapture the breath of the bygone ancestor, in a tidalectic hope of reconciliation with the latter's suffering. *Drums in the Night* is a symbol of resilience, endurance, renaissance, and overcoming. It is a creative will-to-life against the backdrop of historical conditions in which the subject's ultimate spiritual and physical death was the wish of his master, as can be seen by the number of enslaved Africans that were sanctioned and incriminated by the church and the Inquisition in Cartagena (Melo, 2018, p. 162).

The rhapsodic nature of Artel's poetry is perceived in his choice of words and the way he characterizes the movement of the sea. The poetry is routed rather than rooted, for even if there is a desire for an imaginative return to Africa, this Africa is not imagined as a pristine space. Rather, it is one that carries the sensibilities and the experiences of the route. The insistence on routes over roots pays heed to the process of creolization that resulted from the African subject's encounter with the Americas. Though his practices survived, they have undergone transformation, marked by the imprint of Christian, Hispanic, and Indigenous cultures (Ortega, 2000, p. 102). The African soul has been exposed to the winds and torrents of the Middle Passage. It is these varied experiences that grant a certain rhapsodic frenzy to the ardent drums, to a life that alternates between living, fishing, suffering, and singing. The singing and the drumming sustain the hopes of the subject and of better possibilities for self- and collective realization. The choice of adjectives such as "chaotic," "insistent," "dense," "vivid," and "ardent" underline the emotions that overwhelm the poet as he contemplates the port city that marks the entry point of his ancestors into the American space, a space that entails economic benefits and territorial acquisition for Western capitalists while bringing untold violence to Indigenous and Black peoples.

enredado en las atarrayas como un sábalo.

Y junto a las horas cálidas,
volveré a contemplar mis cien rutas abiertas,

hemos de conocernos de nuevo el mar y yo.

“Windward”

... And in the chaotic torrents of the port
The insistent emotion palpitates
The notes, dense savor of the night,
The vivid light of Africa ...
“Windward Windward
Land of ardent drums,”
Like another song,
Soft, the silhouette of a vigil at a distance.
The Black man lives his life. Fishes. Suffers. Sings. (Artel, 2010, p.88–89)⁶

The route to Africa, the forsaken home, the forbidden land (given that the African cultural expressions of the enslaved were censored by their masters) is considered the route of pain. Whereas home is supposed to inspire a sense of ideal reunion, the homebound memories of the persona are smitten with pain and agony due to the painful experiences that unfolded on the pernicious voyage from home. The body of the persona bears the scars of the ancestors’ suffering, as can be seen below: “Don’t you hear sycamores growing in my voice;/Don’t you see on my feet the tiredness of infinite sands/fettering my legs?/In remembrance of the tears, our inherited pains./Don’t you see the tattoos of the whip? Don’t you imagine distant chains and drums?” In this series of rhetorical questions, the persona invites his interlocutor to consider his body as a body of memory, a mnemotopos that points to the trajectory of an entire race made to undergo the dehumanizing consequences of European modernity and empire-building. It is a body that has been exposed to “horror,” “pain,” “tiredness,” “whip,” and “chains,” bearing scars of the successive phases of the coloniality of power.

“Route of Pain”

... routes of horror
in whose blue bounds destiny
united the song with the whip
and great pain matures like rum
man of the littoral

⁶ Barlovento

...Y en la tufurada tórrida del puerto
la insistente emoción palpita.
Tienen las notas denso sabor a noche, a lumbre viva de África...

«¡Barlovento, Barlovento, tierra ardiente del tambó!...».

Como otra canción,
tenue, el perfil de un velero se diluye a distancia.
El negro vive su vida. Pesca. Sufre. Canta.

my luminous Atlantic littoral
 don't you hear swaying sycamores
 growing in my voice;

Don't you see on my feet the tiredness
 of infinite sands
 fettering my steps?
 In remembrance of the tears, our inherited pains.

Don't you see in my words
 the tattoos of the whip?
 don't you imagine chains
 and distant drums? (Artel, 2010, p.98–99)⁷

With its complex dynamics of marine spatiality and the dexterous conjugation of memory and vision, Jorge Artel's poetic imagination can be analyzed from the standpoint of horizontality, a concept introduced to postcolonial studies by Bill Ashcroft. As Ashcroft maintains:

It is in horizontality that the true force of transformation becomes realized, for whereas the boundary is about constriction, history, the regulation of imperial space, the horizon is about extension, possibility, fulfilment, the imagining of post-colonial place. The horizon is a way of conceiving home, and with it, identity, which escapes the inevitability of the imperial boundary. Horizontality is, possibly, the *only* way in which the predominance of the boundary in Western thought can be resisted. (Ashcroft, 2001, p. 192)

⁷ "La ruta dolorosa"

... rutas de espanto,
 en cuyo linde azul unió el destino
 la canción con el látigo, y donde un gran dolor madura
 como ron alquitranado;
 hombre del litoral, mi luminoso litoral Atlántico ...

¿No escuchas cimbreantes sicomoros
 creciéndome en la voz;
 no miras en mis plantas el cansancio de infinitas arenas
 atándome los pasos?

En la reminiscencia de una lágrima
 residen nuestros dolores heredados.

¿No ves en mis palabras
 el tatuaje del látigo,
 no intuyes las cadenas
 y los tambores lejanos?

Horizontality is crucial in understanding the realities of resistance and resilience against the strictures of the plantation economy. The enslaved subject's attempts to remember his culture was often met with sanctions and penalization from the colonial master, whose main aim was to turn him into a tabula rasa. Pereachala considers the situation a form of alienation in which the enslaved had to abandon his spiritual and cultural self so as to become an imitation of his master (2003, p. 2). The enslaved is considered a man-animal, without past or future, at the service of the capitalist machinery of slavery. However, the regimes of prohibition, sanction, and discipline did not succeed in totally erasing the cultural substratum of the ancestral home, which found repose in the deepest recesses of the enslaved subject's memory (Ortega, 2000, p. 103). The punitive measures of the church and the feudal system had, as a consequence, the strengthening of the subject's daily struggles against oppression by his developing a counterculture that covered all of his living and survival spaces. This sustained mindset of overcoming can summarize the historical trajectory of most Afro-Colombian communities in the face of systemic and in some cases state-sanctioned exclusion in the current dispensation.

Horizontality underlines the ability to transcend one's immediate space, a space circumscribed by the dehumanizing strictures of the slave system. It enables the subject to factor in his current condition as a product of power disequilibrium and to free himself from the immediacy of his slave condition in order to "see/imagine" other spaces that fortify his spirit and fertilize his imagination. Horizontality is where sight meets vision and where promise meets hope. In the poetry of Jorge Artel, Africa does not just represent a nostalgic past; it is a space that informs the futurity of the Black subjects of the Americas. The enslaved body and his cultural imaginary constitute an excess, a possibility of transgressing the limits of the spatial strictures of the enslaving system, the possibility of self-affirmation in a dominantly Eurocentric postcolonial space.

The perception of Africa as the horizon in Artel's poetry and his unconditional embrace of his Africanity are captured in "Poema sin odio, ni temor" ("Poem with neither Hate nor Fear"), in which the poetic voice postulates that an imagination of the future of Afro-descendant people entails an acceptance of who they are. He thus indicts those members of the Colombian society who negate their identity:

If others eschew their human destiny, we, on the contrary, have to find ourselves,
Intuit, in the vibration of our heart,
the only wide and deep emotion,
definite and eternal;
we are the conscience of America. (Artel, 2010, p.124–5)⁸

⁸ si algunos se evaden de su humano destino, nosotros tenemos que encontramos,
intuir, en la vibración de nuestro pecho,
la única emoción ancha y profunda,
definitiva y eterna:
somos una conciencia en América. (Artel, 2010, p.124–125)

In the same poem, the above verse is reiterated to underline the importance of a negated race in the future of its adopted, yet appropriated, continent: America. By virtue of the conditions of displacement and of subjugation in the American plantation system, the Afro-descendant subject must acknowledge his routes and consider his Africanity as a fundamental cornerstone of his multiple identities. Considering the troubled past of the enslaved African subject, Artel considers the history of suffering as that which contributes to the fortification of individual and collective character, hence its undeniable place on the horizon of an ethically grounded society.

Conclusion

Tambores en la Noche (Drums in the Night) is one of the first texts dedicated nearly entirely to the conditions of slavery and its legacy in the Colombian context. The poetry uses memories of ancestral suffering to indict the horrifying effects of the slave system and its repercussions on the current state of interracial relationships in modern-day Colombia and Latin America in general. The slave trade and its dehumanization of the African other remains a persistent issue in Afro-Colombian sense of (non-)belonging to the Colombian nation. The poetry of Jorge Artel aligns itself with a tradition of Latin American poetry that perceives Africa as a source of existential anguish, but also insists on the importance of coming to terms with one's past and one's pain in order to construct a future that is based on racial inclusiveness and mutual responsibility. Jorge Artel's poetry ignites a persistent quest for knowledge of the ancestors' trajectories and inspiration from their resilience and ethics of relationality despite their historical conditions of bondage, positing the Afro-Colombian subject as the conscience of the nation in which s/he suffers exclusion.

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