

**BEYOND “OUR AMERICA”:**  
***Abiyala, América Ladina, and Our Afroamérica as Critical Geo-Historical Categories***

**ALÉM DA “NOSSA AMÉRICA”:**  
**Abya Yala, América Ladina e Nossa Afroamérica como categorias geo-históricas críticas**

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**Abstract**

If Jose Martí coined the concept *Our America* as a key construct in the invention of Latin America as a continent, here we are proposing two geo-historical categories with the aim of decolonizing the spatial and temporal imaginary: *Our Abiyala* from Native American feel-thinking and *Our Afroamerica* from Afro-descendant feel-thinking. *Our Afroamerica* is a translocal territory that crosses over and transcends national borders throughout the Americas, while composing those spaces. Its historical universe and its spaces of culture and politics mark a geography extending from South to North, sketching the length and the width of the routes of enslavement and resistance, from Argentina to Canada, transgressing the – imaginary as well as material – ramparts of the Rio Grande, that separate *Our America* from the *Northern Colossus*. On that key, *Our Afroamerica* includes the Afro-Latin American histories and cultures from the Mexican North to the Patagonia, as well as the Afro-Latinx ones that exist in the United States, thus composing (together with the Afro-North American spaces, in themselves a montage of the cultures of Africinity) a vast and diverse historical archipelago that we denominate *Afro-American Diasporas*. The main argument of the article is that *Our Abiyala* and *Our Afroamerica* constitute critical geo-historical categories to decolonize our collective imaginaries and engender modes of re-identification of self, history, and future horizons, which are key in the new wave of antisystemic movements. The monograph will layout both categories but will focus in *Our Afroamerica*,

**Keywords:** Abiyala. Afroamerica. Antisystemic movements. Diaspora.

**Resumo**

Se José Martí engendrou o conceito de Nossa América como ideia-chave na invenção da América Latina como continente, propomos aqui duas categorias geo-históricas com o objetivo de descolonizar o imaginário espacial e temporal: Nossa Abiyala, originada do sentimento reflexivo de nativos americanos, e Nossa Afroamérica, originada do sentimento reflexivo de afrodescendentes. Nossa Afroamérica é um território translocal que atravessa e transcende as fronteiras nacionais de todas as Américas, tornando-se parte desses espaços. O seu universo histórico e os seus espaços de cultura e política marcam uma geografia que se estende de Sul a Norte, traçando o comprimento e a largura das rotas de escravização e resistência, da Argentina ao Canadá, transgredindo as muralhas – tanto imaginárias quanto materiais – do Rio Grande, que separam a Nossa América do Colosso do Norte. Nesse sentido, Nossa Afroamérica inclui as histórias afrolatino-americanas e culturas do

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Norte mexicano à Patagônia, como também os afro-latinos que vivem nos Estados Unidos, comendo, assim, (juntamente com os espaços afro-norte-americanos) uma montagem das culturas da africanidade, um vasto e diverso arquipélago histórico que denominamos Diásporas Afro-Americanas. O principal argumento do artigo é que Nossa Abiyala e Nossa Afroamérica constituem categorias geo-históricas críticas para descolonizar nossos imaginários coletivos e gerar modos de reidentificação do eu, da história e dos horizontes futuros, que são chaves na nova onda de movimentos antissistêmicos. A monografia apresenta ambas as categorias, mas focará em Nossa Afroamérica.

**Palavras-Chave:** Abiyala. Afroamérica. Movimentos Antissistêmicos. Diáspora.

If Jose Marti coined the concept “*Our America*” as a key construct in the invention of Latin America as a continent, here I am proposing two geo-historical categories with the aim of decolonizing the spatial and temporal imaginary: *Our Abiyala* from Native American feel-thinking and *Our Afroamerica* from Afro-descendant feel-thinking.<sup>1</sup> In speaking of feel-thinking, I am following indigenous intellectuals from various locations of Our Abiyala, acknowledging the intertwining of affective and cognitive mediations of knowledge as well as the interplay of the ethical, aesthetic, spiritual, and epistemic dimensions of decolonial critical reason. Coined in the 1980s, Lelia Gonzalez’s concept of *Amefrica Ladina*, encompasses both Our Abiyala and Our Afroamerica, in so far as it reconceptualize the continent centralizing the histories, cultures, and agency of Amerindians (originary peoples) and people of African descent.

In this article, I will take, in broad strokes, steps toward a genealogy of the historical universe I call *Our Afroamerica*, which I see as a particular formation within *Amefrica Ladina*. Pursuing Gonzalez’s argument, I see Afroamerica as a complex and contested terrain inscribed by a variety of power struggles and mediated by vectors of class, ethnic-racial, gender, sexual, territorial, generational, and ideological difference.

*Our Afroamerica* is a translocal territory that crosses over and transcends national borders throughout the Americas while also composing those spaces. Its historical universe and its spaces of culture and politics mark a geography extending from South to North, sketching the length and width of the routes of enslavement and resistance, from Argentina to Canada, and transgressing the ramparts – the imaginary as well as the material – of the Rio Grande that separate Our America from the Northern Colossus. Our Afroamerica includes the Afro-Latin American histories and cultures from the Mexican North to the Patagonia, as well as the Afro-Latinx ones that exist in the United States, thus composing (together with the

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<sup>1</sup> *Abiyala* is a word from the language of the Kuna people (now living between Colombia and Panama) that means *the great land of all*. Abiyala was adopted as a category to denominate that part of the world “accidentally” called America in the context of the organization of networks of the indigenous movement in 1992 vis-à-vis the 500 years of the ill-called “discovery” by Christopher Columbus and his naval crew.

Afro-North American spaces, in themselves a montage of the cultures of Africinity) a vast and diverse historical archipelago that we denominate Afro-American diasporas.

I do not conceive of the African diaspora as a uniform formation but rather as a montage of local histories interwoven by common conditions of racial, political-economic, and cultural oppression that constitute familiar resemblances based not only on measurable historical experiences of racial subordination but also on cultural affinities and similar (frequently shared) repertoires of resistance, intellectual production, and political action.

Our Afroamerica is a space of identification, cultural production, and political organization framed by world-historical processes of domination, exploitation, resistance, and emancipation. Playing that political-epistemic drum, Coronil (1998) proposes post-Occidentalism as a critical strategy that must elaborate “geo-historical non-imperial categories” as exemplified by names such as *Our Abiyala* and *Our Afroamerica*. He argues that Occidentalism, rather than simply standing in as a counterpart of Orientalism, connotes its condition of possibility, offering this definition:

[B]y the term Occidentalism I allude to the sum of representational practices that take part in the production of conceptions of the world, which 1. separate the components of the world in isolated units; 2. de-link histories that relate to one another; 3. transform difference into a hierarchy; 4. naturalize said representations, and therefore 5. intervene, albeit inadvertently, in the reproduction of existing asymmetric power relations.

I construct my arguments on a post-Occidentalist beat, elaborating on geo-historical categories of a relational and procedural character that seek to reveal relations and to analyze processes that develop, as Said (1984) puts it, “between intercrossing territories and intertwined histories.” The historical world we designate as *Our Afroamerica*, the Afro-Latin American or Afro-Latinx world, is made up of the most populated zones of the archipelago of African diasporas in the Americas.<sup>2</sup> Employing this verbal reconfiguration we can build decolonial genealogies and cartographies that render – with a greater nuancing – the plurality of worlds composing this macro-region accidentally called America. In so doing, it

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<sup>2</sup> In the present work, I shall use a variety of denominations for geo-historical and identification purposes, including Afro-America, Afro-descendants, Afro-Latin/America, Afro-Latinx, Afro-Iberians, Afro-Hispanics, African diaspora, Afrodiasporic, Black Atlantic, and Black North-Americas. Even though this might be confusing, the intent is not only to advise on the plurality of names and their relatively subjective expressive value of self-denomination of the people who constitute these categories, but also to analytically demonstrate how they intercept and interlink in complex ways with respect to the intention of conceptualizing the African diasporas from various angles and at different levels, given their variety in time and space.

contributes to the critical task of constructing geo-historical categories in counter-current to the prevailing Occidentalist imperial imaginary.

The vast population that has been denominated as Afro-Latin American amounts to the major component of the African diaspora in the Americas. Demographic estimates (excluding the Afro-Latinx population in the United States) range from 120 to 200 million, depending on the definition of who should be considered an Afrodescendant and who should be counted/identified as Black. Taking into account official categories and/or self-definitions, a considerable percentage of Afrodescendants in Latin-America identify themselves as belonging to some category of “*pardo*”<sup>3</sup> or “mulatto.” Considering the available statistical information, in the present work I define as Afro-Latinxs the totality of peoples of a substantial African descent in the historical region of the world denominated Latinx/America, either by birth and/or by residence.

I often use the expression Latinx/America instead of Latin America to represent a translocal region corresponding to a historical collective that is not circumscribed either to the north or the south of the imperial borders of which the Rio Grande marks the division. Neither is it an expression merely constituted by a juxtaposing of nation-states created as a result of the collapse of the Portuguese and Spanish empires. It is rather a continental or hemispheric definition of a world-historical region composed of a diversity of peoples who populate the continental and insular territories colonized primarily by the Spanish and Portuguese Empires, as well as people of Latin American descent located in what is now U.S. territory. The definition is both open and flexible, as it overlaps with other formations such as the Greater Caribbean (the Antilles, continental territories, and global diasporas), encompasses a diversity of languages (European, Native American, Caribbean creoles) and is composed by a multiplicity of diasporas (African, East Asian, Arab, South Asian).

In this key, as a part of the exercise of decolonizing geo-historical categories, I question the very idea of Latin America an offspring of *Latinidad* a category that pretends to signify a global civilizational community, invented by ideologues of the French empire such as Ernest Renan, as a resource in the battle for world hegemony against the British Empire. It is from this signification of being “Latin” that the idea of Anglos versus Latinos emerged in the 19th century – an ideology that continues to underlie the racialization and ethnic divisiveness of terms such as Latin America and Latinxs in the U.S. At the turn of the century,

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<sup>3</sup> *Pardo* was the term used to designate a tri-racial descendant of European, Native American, and African.

in the context of the 1846-48 Mexican-American War and the 1898 Spanish-Cuban-American-Filipino War, a distinction came to be between an Anglo-Saxon America with an imperial will to monopolize the name “America,” and the vast region south of the Rio Grande whose creole elites eventually called Latin America, that Cuban anti-colonial champion Jose Marti named *Our America*. From then on, a variety of “Latinamericanist” discourses have debated the region’s identity – its ethno-racial, cultural, and intellectual meanings – and which historical projects should define its horizons for the future.<sup>4</sup> When I speak of Afro-Latin Americans or Afro-Latinxs, I take distance from closed, categorical or essentialist definitions, doing it with an understanding of their partial character and their limitations while at the same time perceiving their usefulness to denominate the subjects, peoples, and cultures of an area of the African diaspora in this territory of the world called the Americas.

I understand Afro-Latinx/Americans as a diaspora within a larger diaspora, a product of a global dispersion of African populations since the inception of the modern/colonial capitalist world-system, particularly within the Atlantic system, with multiple legacies and identifiable diversities at various levels and scales – from the local-national-regional to the hemispheric and global. This larger diaspora should be interpreted as a complex constellation of diasporas, a set of local histories linked by their common African ancestries and their world-historical trajectories of uprooting and banishment, of enslaving and resistance, of racial discrimination and leading-role participation in struggles against racism, all of these being conditions that tended towards the creation of diverse genres of cultural expression of multiple contributions to the processes of national formation, and of a variety of transnational projects for justice, democratization, and liberation.

### **Capitalist modern/colonial chattel slavery and the construction of Afroamerica**

The first Africans who settled in the Americas around 1505, mostly as an enslaved workforce, came to the island called Haiti by its inhabitants and named Hispaniola by Europeans. Following the relatively quick decline of the Indigenous population as a consequence of their subjection to slavery and servitude by the European crowns’ systems of *encomiendas* and *repartimiento* – indicating both forced labor and the illicit appropriation of land – and of being exposed to and dying from new diseases, the trade of enslaved peoples

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<sup>4</sup> For the invention of Latin America, see Laó-Montes (2008), Laó-Montes and Dávila (2001), Ramos (1988), and Mignolo (2006).

increased, and eventually the plantations based on enslaved workforce transformed into the first form of industrial production in the emerging capitalist world-system. Since the early 16th century to the 19th century, millions of sub-Saharan Africans were brought by force to the Americas through the capitalist slave trade. Most of the enslaved came to the region we know today as Latin America. Estimates of the number of Africans brought by the slave trade fluctuate from between seven to twenty million people.

Since the abolition of slavery and particularly since the early 20th century, diverse migrations and population flows of Afro-descendants through the Americas have also taken place. Within Latin America and the Caribbean, Central America and the United States, Afro-American diasporas have constantly articulated and diversified.

A study of the ethno-racial map of the Americas in the 18th century shows that Afro-descendants (Blacks and mulattos) make up the larger part of the population.<sup>5</sup> In view of this, during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, nation-states articulated and adopted demographic whitening policies, considerably reducing the Black and mulatto populations, especially in the territories occupied by Argentina, Chile, and the south of Brazil. Nevertheless, those places and regions where the Indigenous population was relatively smaller and Black settlements were more numerous and established continue to be key territories for Afro-Latinx diasporas and stand out as historical bulwarks of the African diaspora in the Americas. The geography of Afro-Latin-American diasporas has changed with time; however, places and regions in countries such as Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and Venezuela have been important centers since the beginning of the Africanization of the Americas.

Because Haiti was, in the 18th century, the wealthiest colony supported by enslaved labor, the Haitian Revolution constituted a development of exceptional importance for the culture and politics of resistance, as well as for the restructuring of colonial states and racial capitalism. The world-historical event of Black revolution in Saint Domingue should be considered the epicenter of Afro-American history of the times.<sup>6</sup> A widespread fear of masters was nurtured by the dissemination, in the whole diaspora, of a memory of revolutionary success and the possibility of a hope of freedom in enslaved Africans' cultures of resistance throughout the Americas. The Haitian Revolution (1796-1804) and its aftermath – as Aime

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<sup>5</sup> Some of those maps exist. For the most recent, see Andrews (2004, 2016) and the Minority Rights Group (1997).

<sup>6</sup> Academic literature about the Haitian Revolution is wide-ranging. Some of the best contributions are Dubois (2005), Fischer (2004), Fick (1990), James (1938), and Trouillot (1997).

Cesaire underscored – inaugurated the idea of *Négritude* and launched a cosmopolitan circuit of Afro-descendant racial politics that became a keystone of the abolitionist movement that constituted the first anti-systemic movement in the capitalist modern/colonial world-system.<sup>7</sup>

Since the 19th century, the central geography of Afro-Latin American diasporas has been identified mainly in relationship to three territories: Brazil, Colombia, and Cuba, sites of the largest Afro-descendant populations. Apart from Haiti, Cuba and Brazil were, to a certain extent, the most influential Black cultures of Latin America as a world region. Brazil and Cuba shared the peculiarity of both having experienced an increase in the immigration of enslaved Africans and in plantation agriculture all through the 19th century, even after the legal abolition of the slave trade and after the industrial revolution.<sup>8</sup> As a result, more Africans were destined for Brazil and Cuba, instead of being sent to other places in the Americas or of being supplied by internal markets of enslaved individuals as in the cases of Colombia and the U.S. The relatively large amount of Africans and their late arrival from the African continent had major implications for the strengthening and significance of Afro-diasporic expressive cultures (for instance, in art, music, literature, dance, and religion) and consequently for the rise of Black public spaces and their corresponding racial politics.

From the inception of modern slavery after the long 16th century, the creation of areas liberated from slave regimes – known as *cumbes*, *quilombos*, or *palenques*, which were created mainly by enslaved people who escaped from plantations – was crucial to the emergence of Afro-American identities, cultures, and politics. Those historical spaces that certain scholars call *sociedades cimarronas* proliferated, constituting a threat to the stability of slave regimes. The term *sociedades cimarronas* (maroon societies) is derived from the Spanish word *cimarrón*, which was originally used to stigmatize those who fled from slavery. These maroon societies or palenques became beacons of hope for achieving freedom, as well as ideological inspirations to identify with Africanity and *Négritude*. Their memory remains alive, as exemplified by the present-day identification with leaders such as Benkos Bioho, who headed maroon societies in New Granada in the 17th century, and by the current village

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<sup>7</sup> For abolitionism as the first antisystemic movement see Martin (2005), Santiago-Valles (2005), Winant (2001, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> Haiti is seldom included as a part of Latin America because the region tends to be reduced to the Spanish and Portuguese speaking countries. Here we include it for two main reasons: firstly, because of the impact of the Haitian revolution on the very constitution of the region, and secondly because, in the last analysis, the “Latin” as a category emerges, as we have noted, from ideologists of the French empire. Concerning the increase of slavery in Cuba and Brazil after its abolition in Haiti resulting from the Haitian revolution.

of maroon heritage on the Colombian Caribbean called *San Basilio de Palenque*. Benkos is invoked as a founding figure of Afro-Colombian history. In 1988, the march to celebrate the centennial of the abolition of slavery in Brazil was conceived to honor Zumbi, the last leader of the *Quilombo dos Palmares*, a kingdom of maroons in northeastern Brazil that lasted almost a century, from 1605 to 1694, until the Portuguese finally dismantled the settlement but not its legacy as revealed by today's Quilombola movement.

By the early 19th century, a growing archipelago of African diasporas can already be identified as a historical formation within the emergence of the world-region to the south of the Rio Grande to be named as Latin America. Afro-descendants were dispersed throughout the entire geographic area, from Mexico to Argentina, although their central geography was concentrated in Brazil, Cuba, Colombia, Panama, Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and Venezuela, as well as in (some urban, others rural) sub-regions of Central America (the *Garifunas* in Honduras and Guatemala, Nicaragua's Atlantic coast, Puerto Limon in Costa Rica), Ecuador, Peru, and Uruguay. Indeed, the combination of everyday resistances against slavery, rebellions of the enslaved together with free Blacks, and the abolitionist movement were the principal reasons for the abolition of the institution of slavery and for the emancipation processes from slave regimes in the Americas.

A peculiar modernity of the historical universe that I refer to as *Afroamerica*<sup>9</sup> and specifically Afro-Latin-America was born within Ibero-American locations of the Black Atlantic in the search for empowerment of the Afro-diasporic subjects who inhabited those worlds, through their daily struggles and the practical effects of their self-affirmation of memory, being, and culture.

### **The historical production of Afro-Latinx/America: From the wars for independence to the struggles for citizenship and national equity**

The continuous struggle of Afro-diasporic subjects to reclaim their humanity and to ratify their rights to a truth of their past, to a culture, and to fair living conditions resulted in the establishment of a subaltern space of historical agency in which the leading role would correspond to Afro-descendants throughout the continent. The existence of a middle stratum,

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<sup>9</sup> I use the term *Afroamerica* as it was coined as the name of a journal that circulated in Mexico in the 1940s; the meaning behind this idea is discussed and amplified throughout the book. This terminology is intended to provoke a complete overturn in the concept or idea of African-America and Afro-North-Americans in the sense of the "United States of America" that not only excludes Afro-Latin/Americans but also Afro-Canadians from within their rank of meanings.



composed of mulattos and free Blacks, was equally crucial for the organization of Black public spheres with their own publications, cultural production, teaching spaces, meeting places, and small enterprises. These “Afro” or “Black” social spaces and political-cultural scenarios were the historical foundation for Afro-descendants’ participation in the wars for independence and, consequently, in the nation-state formation processes that created Latin America and the Caribbean as a world-region. Latin-American history must be written from the viewpoint of African diasporas, while the history of Afroamerica could be recounted from the perspectives of the diverse Afro-Latin-American diasporas.

For instance, the wars against the Spanish empire that achieved the independence of the territories that were later organized as Latin American nations were seen by many Afro-descendants as an opportunity for the abolition of slavery and for the creation of more democratic forms of citizenship, although this was not the case of the Euro-American creole elites who identified themselves as being of Western ancestry as superior to “Blacks” and “Indians.” In Afro-diasporic historic narratives, protagonists were not necessarily leaders issued from the creole elite such as Simon Bolivar and Jose de San Martin; they were the masses of Indigenous individuals and Blacks, subaltern subjects who collectively composed the independence militias who fought on different fields for a more democratic political, economic, and cultural contract with their own leaders such as Jose Prudencio Padilla in today’s Colombia, and Quintin Banderas in Cuba.

From the viewpoint of Afro-descendants, the wars between Spain and creoles in the early 19th century can be interpreted as a combat between European and Euro-American Whites, dominant classes fighting for hegemonic power. In the course of the struggles, they made a commitment to grant the masses certain freedoms and participation, in exchange for political and military support; that is the reason why although many Afro-descendants struggled within the ranks of the military forces fighting for independence, others were recruited by imperial forces. In most cases, Blacks continued to be low-rank soldiers and did not manage to attain the grades of high-ranking officers, nor did they become political or intellectual leaders of the movement for independence. Cuba was a peculiar case due to the recognized importance of several Afro-descendant generals such as Antonio Maceo, while Colombia’s first independence epic was led by Blacks and mulattos who counted among their leaders Pedro Romero originally a Cuban from the Province of Matanzas.

The specificity of the Cuban situation is revealing, as the exception that confirms the rule, of the ethnic-racial politics that configured the emerging nation-states. After the Haitian

revolution, Cuba became the wealthiest plantation colony, having as its basis the greatest enslaved workforce. The conditions assured by formidable profits and the fear of another insurrection of the enslaved maintained loyalty to Spanish colonial rule by the island's plantocracy until the late 19th century. The Cry of Yara started the first war for independence in 1868; free "people of color" and the enslaved were sufficiently organized to play a key role in participating and providing leadership to the nationalist movement. Cuban independence forces had the peculiarity of being composed, in the majority, of people of color, having Black and mulatto officers as high-ranking generals. This had a big impact on the particularly anti-racist discourse that gained ground in 19th century Cuban nationalism, eloquently articulated by revolutionary general and political strategist Antonio Maceo, and writer and political leader Jose Marti. This points toward a narrative of the constitution of the Cuban nation that is different from the official memory that highlights the figure of White plantation owner Carlos Manuel de Cespedes as the initiator of Cuba's first independence war in 1868. In counterpoint, I propose, as a previous epic, the conspiracy planned by free Black Jose Antonio Aponte in 1812, inspired by the Haitian revolution and in concert with abolitionist movements and Afro-diasporic movements and networks throughout the Atlantic world.

Afro-descendants played an important role in the historical movement that gained the independence of territories that are now grouped together as Latin America. On the battlefield, they fought as soldiers of low military rank while at the same time were negotiating the abolition of slavery as well as their inclusion as full citizens in the emerging states. A reduced number of Afro-Hispanics were recognized as military, political, and intellectual leaders in several nascent countries such as Colombia, Ecuador, Venezuela, and Mexico. In Mexico, in the early 19th century, the rebellions led by Afro-Indigenous (or Afro-*Mestizo*), leaders like Vicente Guerrero and Jose Maria Morelos demonstrated the way in which struggles for racial and economic justice continued after independence. Yet, Guerrero's and Morelos' Africanity was virtually erased from Mexican national memory.

After having gained independence from formal political domination by European colonialism, the young Latin American nations remained economically subordinated to a world-economy dominated by the British Empire. Within each nation-state in the region, Blacks, Indians, and mulattos continued to be economically, politically, and culturally subjugated by the White creole elite that declared itself to be the heirs of Europeans and representatives of the West in the Americas. Independence movements prepared the ground for a gradual process of the abolition of slavery. However, the persistent condition of ethnic-

racial subordination, cultural devaluing, and class inequality contributed to rendering Black and Indigenous subjects as second-class citizens in the nascent Latin American nation-states. Such conditions established a new historical, racial, and social constellation of power, a neocolonial coloniality that framed cultural struggles and movements for social justice and citizenship in which Afro-Latino-Americans played a key role.

The process of constructing modern nation-states and liberal politics in Latin-American nation-states did not hold the same significance for Afro-descendants as for Whites and racially mixed members of the creole elite. By the mid-19th century, Latin-American polities—with the outstanding exceptions of Brazil, Cuba, and Puerto Rico, all of which remained as colonies—had abolished slavery. Afro-descendants deployed a plurality of forms of resistance and self-affirmation that resulted in the abolition of the legal codes of castes by the late 19th century. In the institutional domains of 19th century formal politics, Afro-Latin-Americans remained as clients of the liberal and conservative parties that shared alternations in power. Afro-Latin American struggles for inclusion, recognition, resources, and citizenship were significant forces in the historical debate for world-wide democratization. But, we still need to re-write national and regional histories recognizing the contributions of Afrodescendants to democracy and justice.

An important arena of struggle was staged against the devaluation of Afro-diasporic cultural forms and religious practices through Eurocentric/Occidental state policies and ecclesiastic doctrines. In Brazil and Cuba, where Afro-diasporic religions had become a basic element for the everyday life of many Afro-descendants, particularly in the most subaltern sectors, Afro-religious organizations such as *terreiros* in Brazil and *cabildos* in Cuba had to struggle in order to survive the degradation to which they were subjected. Afro-Latin Americans also developed their own public spaces for intellectual expression; the creation of newspapers, academies, and social clubs aimed, to a great extent, at the intermediate stratum of the mulatto society. Since the late 19th century, working-class free Blacks and mulattos have constituted a radical intelligentsia that was responsible for the emergence of an anarchist and communist workers' movement, as is most apparent in the case of Puerto Rico, which produced a workers' literature and press that constituted a proletarian public sphere in which Afro-descendants stood out.

During this same time period, Afro-Cuban social and political organizations had achieved national coordination through the creation of the *Directorio Central de la Raza de Color* (Central Directorate of the Colored Race) (Lanier, 1996). Cuba provides a clear

example of the formation of two different – albeit interconnected – domains, two spheres of Afro-Cuban life with elements of continuity to this very day, one of them led by the Westernized middle-class acting through the formal channels of the state and civil society and the other a subaltern counterpublic centered around working classes pushed to the margins in neighborhood and urban tenement houses. In counterpoint, these two different but intertwined domains – the one bearing the culture of the intellectual middle-class and the other comporting the subaltern popular culture – configures in its dialectical and dialogical relations the historical substratum of cultural productions and political cultures of Afro-descendants in Latin-America.

Another central historical field, located in an oppositional sphere of self-assertiveness for Afro-Latin-Americans, was the economic domain. After the abolition of slavery, most Blacks remained on the lowest wage levels or were pushed to the social margins. The Western world's booming urbanization process during the late 19th and early 20th centuries drew people of all backgrounds from the country to the city, including a mass migration of Afro-descendants. From this influx came the creation of an urban working class. In countries like Cuba and Puerto Rico, where a high percentage of the working class were Afro-descendants, these groups played a fundamental role in organizing the labor movement. This new working class led to the creation of the working class neighborhoods which were largely composed by Afro-descendants. While a high percentage of this urban Black population was marginalized from formal employment and citizenship, those settlements were also significant spaces for the production of Afro-Latin-American urban cultures that had – and continue to have – a national and transnational impact. The influence of Black urban cultures was facilitated by the growth of cultural industries since the first half of the 20th century.

### **The emergence of Afro-Latinx politics and the boom of Black cultural expressions**

The early decades of the 20th century set the stage for the creation of the first organizations that explicitly advocated for racial politics that tended to empower people of color in *Our Afroamerica: the Partido Independiente de Color* (Independent Colored Party) (1908) in Cuba and the *Frente Negra Brasileira* (Brazilian Black Front) (1931) in Brazil. Numerous world-historical conditions came together to give birth to a qualitatively distinct moment for Afro-descendants in Latin America. The first one was the Spanish-Cuban-American-Filipino War-SCAFW of 1898 which marked the birth of the North-American

Empire as a world power and informed the rise of Latinamericanism as a conscious discourse of regionality, coined by intellectuals of the Ibero-American world. The SCAFW of 1898 marked the political-economic domination of the United States in the hemisphere and the establishment of colonial and neocolonial forms of power in the Caribbean and Central America. Puerto Rico was annexed as a colony while Cuba remained a neo-colony. In North American imperial discourse, Caribbean and Central America became the “backyard” and new categories of ethnic-racial classification were developed. The racialized civilization cultivated the divide between “Anglos” and “Latinos” turned into a central issue in the Americas. White creole elites of the U.S. and Latin-America claimed to be heirs of the West in the Americas. Ibero-American elites defined their identities in relation to their external others (Europeans and North-Americans) and against their internal othernesses – Blacks, Native Americans, Asians, peasantries, homosexuals. This hemispheric division, along with the internal differences elaborated by creole elites, generated the parameters of both the U.S.’s imperial discourse and the hegemonic Latinamericanism of creole elites.

The creole ruling classes and the so-called intellectuals who presided over the young Latin American nation-states promoted policies of modernization that were built on racist themes of the times, including the nascent “science” of eugenics and social Darwinism (Stepan, 1991). The civilizing mission that guided the racial, cultural, and economic policies of Latin American states, which were also expressions of the global configuration of the coloniality of power/knowledge, involved a tacit equation between modernization and whitening. Therefore, in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Latin American governments undertook a policy of incentives, offering good jobs and subsidies for travel to White European immigrants, thereby attempting to change the ethnic-racial composition of the populations. The immediate effect was a substantial decrease in the Black population and an increase in our marginalization. In places like Uruguay, Argentina, and the south of Brazil, such efforts were successful. Nevertheless, they did not succeed in substantially transforming the ethnic-racial demographics in most of the region, particularly in places of Indigenous majorities such as Bolivia and Guatemala, and where there were large Black populations, as in Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, and Venezuela.

The general increase of global and regional migrations in the early 20th century, a period between two world economic crises (the 1873 crisis and the Great Depression of 1930) and World War I, accompanied by two revolutions – the Russian and Mexican revolutions, circa 1917 – also included migratory movements of the African diaspora within the Americas.

Following this movement, the massive migrations from the Anglophone Caribbean towards Central America and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean (especially Cuba and Dominican Republic) – first mostly as labor force for the construction of the Panama Canal and later as rural proletarians at the service of corporations such as the United Fruit Company – redistributed the geography of Afro-Latin American and Caribbean diasporas. Another important element of this migratory wave were the thousands of Haitians who moved to eastern Cuba, mainly to work in the sugarcane industry, together with laborers from the Anglophone Caribbean. The eastern part of Cuba became an Afro-diasporic, trans-Caribbean sub-region centered in the city of Santiago. This partly explains why the Universal Negro Improvement Association, led by Marcus Garvey – who visited Cuba twice during this period – was able to sign up some 350,000 registered members in Cuba.

Migratory patterns in other countries in this region resembled those of Eastern Cuba. Many Black migrants arrived to Central America from the Anglophone Caribbean to supply labor for companies such as the United Fruit Company. In Costa Rica they facilitated the creation of what became a vibrant Black community with its own cultural production (for instance, in literature) and evolved into a political movement centered on the coastal city of Limon, eventually gaining influence and presence in the country, and in the African diaspora. Similarly, Afro-descendant communities grew in Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama. In Honduras, Guatemala, Belize, and Nicaragua there is the much older story of the *Garifunas* who were compulsorily settled in the region at the end of the 18th century (circa 1789) when British colonialists expelled them from the island of St. Vincent after perceiving that these groups of Afro-diasporic maroons and Caribbean Indians were hard to colonize. These are quintessentially diasporic peoples, for they maintain their transnational ethnic identity as Garifunas wherever they are. Many of them live in metropolitan global cities such as New York and Los Angeles, but maintain identifying national distinctions as Guatemalans, Belizeans, and Hondurans as part of their Garifuna identity.

Such Afro-diasporic moves within Our Afroamerica had also bore some disastrous results. A particularly dramatic case was the 1937 massacre of nearly 30,000 Haitians in the Dominican Republic by order of dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo, who aggressively deployed a campaign in favor of a Negrophobic definition of Dominican identity based on anti-Haitian sentiments. Trujillo's dictatorship was the instrument for the development of a peculiar racist anti-Black posture in the Dominican Republic, substantiated by moving *Négritude* to Haiti, while intellectuals developed a Hispanophile discourse of Dominican nationality and an

Indigenous nomenclature in which every colored Dominican was classified as an “Indian” of a sort.

Dominican Republic also witnessed successive migration waves from the Anglophone Caribbean, particularly in the form of labor power for the sugar industry in the region of San Pedro de Macoris. Many of these thousands of new immigrants – who would eventually be labelled *Cocolos* in colloquial language – joined Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association. This particular migration wave also contributed to anti-Black fears against immigrants in this country. As revealed by Panamanian writer Orlando Alfaro in his 1924 book entitled *El Peligro Antillano en la América Central* other countries were exhibiting the same response.

Panama – a country that eventually became an axis for Afro-Latinx organizations at the national and hemispheric levels – historical tension between the West Indies (Anglophone and Francophone Antilles) and Afro-Hispanic diasporas (named “Colonial Blacks”) entailed negotiations to consolidate a unified national movement of Afro-descendants. The hegemonic nationalist discourse of the so-called colonial Afro-Panamanians – represented as authentic Panamanians, in contrast with Afro-Antilleans, rejected as foreigners – provoked fissures that have hindered the articulation of the Afro-Panamanian movement (Priestley; Barrow, 2008).

The period between the Great Depression of 1930s in the U.S. and the outbreak of World War II, the established structures of the modern/colonial capitalist world-system suffered severe blows, and Latin American societies were reconfigured. Changes occurred in rural areas including an increase in the concentration of land, the large-scale loss of land for Black farmers, and the emergence of a Black rural proletariat. These changes provoked the already-mentioned massive migration from country to city, which created the conditions for the organization of urban settlements that became centers of Afro-Latin-American politics and cultures. The Afro-descendants’ urbanization process and the growth of Black urban popular cultures were the cornerstones of the emerging process of the Afro-Americanization of public culture in Latin America in various local and national scenarios and throughout the whole region.

Three crucial elements explain how Afroamerican cultural practices survived this dramatic move from the rural peripheries to central areas. The changes that ensued are most visible in music and dance but are also apparent in other cultural genres such as literature, the visual arts, performance, and religion. The first element, was the struggle of Afro-descendants for reaffirmation and defense of their cultural practices as valid expressions of national

culture, against the hegemonic discourse and cultural policies that devalued them as marginal and backward. In countries such as Brazil and Cuba, there were attempts to repress Afro-diasporic religions until the early decades of the 20th century.

Those daily conflicts – racial, social, and cultural – were launched by the urban middle classes of mulattos and Blacks but also by Afro-descendants from subaltern sectors (working class and marginalize strata) who lived in the *barrios*, the nascent *favelas* in Rio de Janeiro, or Havana's *solares* – all terms joined together in face of poor, overcrowded neighborhoods. The Black middle strata launched its advocacy mostly in the political realm of citizenship, while the subaltern sectors fought more informally to keep their aesthetic, cultural, and spiritual practices.

The second process was the emergence of cultural industries such as radio, recording studios, entertainment, and film industry, that facilitated the dissemination of Black music and dances in several national and transnational contexts – most markedly in Brazil, Cuba, and Puerto Rico, in relation to Black Americans and Afro-Latinx metropolitan centers, particularly New York City. The third element was the organization of transnational networks of Afroamerican artists, writers, academics, political organizers, and cultural agents who cultivated translocal networks through cultural creations and political as well as epistemic activism, constituting cultural movements and intellectual currents that articulated the African diaspora throughout the Americas and in Europe.

The roles played by Afro-Latinxs in cosmopolitan networks of the African diaspora in the 1930s and 1940s deserve more detailed research. A productive angle that has been studied is the life projects and multiple links of Afro-Puerto-Rican Arturo Alfonso Schomburg, who is widely known as the creator of the largest archive of history and culture of the global African diaspora. The life and legacy of this Black Puerto Rican who founded what is still today the most important world archive for Black history became a pillar of the Harlem Renaissance and also the Chairman of the American Black Academy. His work is a rich and fertile source for the study of the avatars and articulations of the global African diaspora and particularly of *Our Afroamerica*.

This period of the 1920s and 30s produced powerful and energetic waves of Afro-diasporic reciprocity in particular through the political-cultural movements of three cosmopolitan networks of Black cultural creators and political activists: The Harlem Renaissance (New York), the movement of *Négritude* (Paris) and Afro-Cubanism (Havana). An important relationship in the Black diasporic cosmopolitan world was the one struck



between writers Nicolas Guillen (Cuban) and Langston Hughes (North-American), whose friendship, intellectual exchange, mutual translations of poetry, and reciprocal introduction to their respective national and linguistic contexts eloquently exemplified Afro-diasporic solidarity.

This period of growth continued into the 1940s, as exemplified by the organization of the *Instituto de Estudios Afroamericanos* (Institute of Afro-American Studies) and the publication of a short-lived journal called *Afroamérica* in Mexico. Both the institute and the review were launched and sponsored by a group of trans-American writers and activists of (or supportive of) the African diaspora that included the Cuban Fernando Ortiz, Afro-Cubans Nicolas Guillen and Romulo Lachatenere, Brazilian Gilberto Freyre, Haitian Jacques Roumain, Mexican Gonzalo Aguirre Beltran, Martinican Aime Cesaire, Trinidadian Eric Williams, Afro-North Americans Alain Locke and W.E.B. DuBois, and European anthropologist Melvin Herkovits.

### **Reconfigurations of Afro-Latin America in the Age of Neoliberal Globalization**

In the early 1980s, the crisis of the developmentalist project as a strategy to promote the growth and the state of general welfare in the world-economy converged with the decline of North-American hegemony in the political, economic, and cultural realms within the global system. The establishment and dissemination of neoliberal economic policies in every corner of the planet promoted open economies to cultivate the so-called free market, favoring investments and trade for transnational corporations. The rise of political rationalities that compelled cuts in state-level social expenditure, the liberation of economic regulations, and the reduction of democracy to its procedural dimensions had devastating effects on the lives of millions of Afro-Latin-Americans.

With the exacerbation of previously existing trends that undermined the ownership of small- and medium-sized properties of farmers, neoliberal policies also decreed the privatization and commercialization of vital resources such as water and forests, which had been common property or had scarcely touched by the logic of capital. Hence, regions inhabited by Black communities such as Colombia's Pacific coast, Esmeraldas in Ecuador, and Garifuna territories in Honduras, areas that, following initial colonization, had remained relatively abandoned, and consequently had relative independence from being recolonized by capitalists in quest of profit, became the target of the exploitation of land, labor, and natural resources.

By the 1990s, those places witnessed the emergence of social movements voicing demands for Afro-descendants' identities, history, culture, as well as for racial justice and territorial rights. They struggle against attempts to expropriate their lands and exploit their workforce while mobilizing for biodiversity, ecological integrity, and the right to remain in their ancestral territories. These movements of Afro-diasporic self-affirmation are coupled with growing worldwide ecological demands contra land appropriation and against the expropriation of communities by transnational corporations.

The proliferation of politicized terrains of struggle that characterized new ways of entering politics and were won by the new social movements that began a rapid growth in the 1980s opened up the political space for rising Afro-Latin-American movements. A key juncture in the emergence and articulation of Afro-Latin-American movements was the Continental Campaign of 500 Years of Indigenous, Black, and Popular Resistance in 1992. Another critical occurrence was the Third World Conference against Racism, organized 2001 by the United Nations in Durban, South Africa, which facilitated the consolidation of a regional agenda for Black movements in Latin America. Durban served as a mechanism of articulation to build networks, achieve better coordination, more focused debates, and improved negotiation of points involving historical projects and political agendas. All this had the effect of gaining a clearer sense of purpose and better organizational skills to shape a hemispheric movement of Afro-descendants in Latin-America. Delegations from states and civil society included Afro-Latinxs from the across the Americas (including the United States) at the Durban conference. This bestowed on this effort an Afro-diasporic trans-American character, an articulation of *Our Afroamerica*. Nevertheless, the post-Durban period revealed the limitations of organizing political agendas and historical projects in the institutional framework that prevail in the global order, as well as the differences within the Afro-Latin-American political field as I demonstrate in my book *Contrapunteos Diasporicos*.

In the present period, important gains has taken place in national scenarios, most of which resulted from the work of Black social movements. Nicaraguans approved a constitution in 1987 that acknowledged collective rights and ethnic-racial autonomy, to a great extent as a result of the struggle of Afro-descendants and Native Americans living on that country's Atlantic coast. In Colombia, the 1991 constitution stipulated cultural and social rights for ethnic groups, especially for Indigenous and Afro-Colombian peoples. A similar development took place in Guatemala, where the 1994 constitution placed the Garifuna for the first time on the ethnic national map, together with Indigenous communities. Something

similar happened in Ecuador, Panama, and Uruguay. In Cuba, a number of Afro-Cubans were strategically placed in the ruling Communist Party's Central Committee in the early 1990s. In Brazil, the organization of the Unified Black Movement in the 1980s was followed by the approval of a state strategy against discrimination by the latter years of the following decade. Since the 1990s, governments have approved national strategies against discrimination in public positions. Efforts were also made to promote the increase of Afro-Brazilians in universities, as well as in official posts.

All of this was endorsed by the so-called affirmative action plans that were hatched on U.S. soil, coming from Afro-North-American (including Afro-Latinx) political moves. Those plans inspired a public debate in Brazil around the issue of whether they would be welcomed in the Brazilian context. Likewise, a debate took place about collective rights to land ownership and citizenship of the *Quilombolas* – the name given to ancestral or long-term Afro-Brazilian communities, some of them residing in former maroon societies called *Quilombos*<sup>10</sup> – in the context of constitutional change and the celebration of the centennial of the abolition of slavery in 1888. The debate on *Quilombismo* revealed an ecological trend in the new Afro-Latin-American social movements. Political matters of great importance were promoted around the goal of historical continuity and for claims for reparations to be extended to the whole African diaspora in the Americas.

The growth of the Afro-Latin American middle strata – its formally educated and politicized classes – has been one of the most important phenomena in the development of social change for the African diaspora and can be attributed to a large extent to the long-term effects of the struggles for democracy and social justice. Yet, at the same time, at this very moment, under the aegis of neoliberal globalization, there has been a growing rise in inequality, marginalization, and poverty as well as the appearance of a new racism aimed at Afro-descendant subaltern sectors. A growing sentiment of fear as a component of the prevailing ethnic-racial “common sense” fuels policies of debasement and of the criminalization of sectors that have been socially marginalized, especially in urban centers. In countries such as Brazil, Colombia, Venezuela, and the United States, many of the members of the so-called “dangerous” classes are Black. In this context, an important form of self-affirmation and self-valorization, coming from the trenches of Afro-diasporic youth, is Hip-

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<sup>10</sup> In Spanish they are called palenques or cumbes. See Farfán-Santos (2016) and Wagner Berno de Almeida (2009).

Hop culture, originally a trans-diasporic product of Afro-descendants from subaltern urban spaces in the U.S., but now constituting a world youth movement. In Brazil and Cuba, rappers self-identify as part of an Afro-diasporic movement and as chroniclers of life in marginal sectors of society.

Afro-diasporic transnational consciousness and organization also manifests itself in sub-regional and hemispheric networks and in the groupings of Afro-Latin-American and Caribbean women. Meetings of Afro-Latina and Afro-Caribbean women have grouped grassroots organizations with women from every point of the Americas to unite in the struggle for the specific interests and needs of Black women in Latin America and the Caribbean. These groups are part of the Afro-diasporic movements of diverse character. An influential current self-define as bearer of a decolonial Black feminism aligned with the larger Afro-descendant movement while retaining their autonomy. The election of Francia Marquez as Vice-President of Colombia with an explicitly “anti-racist, anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchal” politics, demonstrate the tremendous significance of decolonial Black feminism as a radical force of liberation against entangled oppressions and their corresponding entwined violences. A global movement advocating for historical reparations because of the effects of slavery as a crime against humanity and the “afterlife of slavery” in the repertoire of interlocking oppressions and entangled violences – racial, sexual, social, geo-political, ecological epistemic – is championed by regional organizations such as CARICOM (Association of Caribbean States), the Institute for the Black World in the United States, and the *Articulacion Regional Afrodescendiente en las Americas y el Caribe* (Regional Articulation of Afrodescendants in the Americas and the Caribbean), a regional web of social movements. The *Coalicion Negra por Derechos* (Black Coalition for Rights), one of the most comprehensive Black alliances in Brazilian history, committed to organize a national campaign for reparative justice in their national assembly held November, 2023 in Alagoas. In short, a radical politics of reparation implies a redistribution of power, wealth, recognition, and representation that implies profound transformation in the world order of things. Playing this drum, hemispheric movements for Black Lives-M4BL, which incarnate the newest expression of Black radicalism from the hearts of *Amferica Ladina/Our Afroamerica*, encompasses struggles against class, gender, sexual, racial, ecological, cultural and epistemic injustice, bearing a radical vitalism – a politics of *Eros* against the necropolitics of the

civilizational crisis,<sup>11</sup> that makes *Amefrica/Afroamerica* into a beacon of hope and a Northstar.

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<sup>11</sup> See Lao-Montes (2022).

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