

Latin America and African Diaspora Studies

By Antonio D. Tillis

If the African Diaspora is understood in academia to imply geographical localities where Africans and Africa-descended persons have (im)migrated (forced or otherwise) and contributed to the formation of nation and national culture, then Latin America is central to this intellectual discourse. The intersection of the genesis of Africanity and the New World, now referred to as Latin America and the Caribbean, has a definitive history that is steeped in the beginning of the sixteenth century and continues into the twenty-first century. Although scholars such as Ivan van Sertima, Vincent Bakpetu Thompson, and others note the potential arrival of Africans into areas of the “New World” during pre-Colonial times, this brief note chronologically focuses on the mass movement of Africans from West Africa, Niger, the Congo, and other areas of Africa to what is referred to today as Latin America broadly defined.

Cuban National Poet Nancy Morejón speaks poetically to the convergence of Africans in the New World in her work “*Mirar Adentro: Del siglo diesiseis data mi pena*” [“Looking Within: From the sixteenth century dates my suffering”]. The poetic reference indicates the historical arrival of the first Africans into the Spanish-Caribbean islands for the purpose of involuntary slave trade (Knight, 1990). However, since the sixteenth century, Africans and Africa-descendants in the Americas have created a cultural heritage spanning from the northern, central, and southern Americas to the contiguous string of islands comprising the Caribbean nations. Replete with linguistic and cultural manifestations of the collision between colonial powers, indigenous and African heritages, this geopolitical landmass referred to as Latin America (so named due to the shared Latin-based languages of Spanish, French, and Portuguese) is of grave importance to the study of the African Diaspora. First, the second largest “Black” population to date outside the country of Nigeria is found in Latin America: Brazil. Second, many countries, such as the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Cuba, boast populations of Blacks or mixed-Blacks as high as 84% of the total population (Minority Rights Group, 1995). Third, Latin America has a rich cultural and political history that centers protest and resistance in the African Diaspora, ranging from sixteenth-century slavery, emancipation, and liberation to neo-slavery and twenty-first-century Black political protests for civil rights. Finally, cultural productions in many Latin American nations speak to the vast impact and influence of African traditions on national and regional cultural manifestations. The abovementioned is merely a surface presentation of the intricate intellectual link between Latin America as a diverse geographical region and African Diaspora Studies as a discipline in the academy.

With respect to racial politics and African Diaspora Studies, Latin America offers a ripe geopolitical space from which discourse surrounding racial and ethnic identity can be configured. Latin America provides African Diaspora Studies a wide template from which scholars and students can engage the disparate and multifaceted typologies used for identifying subjects miscegenated in “Black,” that is, African ancestry. Such intellectual inquiries facilitate the ontological and epistemological understanding of “Who is Black?” as F. James Davis (1991) investigates, or delve into interrogating the phenotypical construction of blackness, as does Charles Mills in *Blackness Visible* (1998). Latin America is said to have one of the most miscegenated populations of people in the world; many are biologically mixed-“race” people with African blood. So, if the intellectual camp of the African Diaspora is to have a borderless geospatial configuration with respect to questioning the different manifestations of “Blackness”

globally, then Latin America is an important geographical area for such an undertaking in the discipline.

Additionally, the study of African cultural practices in Latin America is pivotal to African Diaspora Studies. In the area of religion, critical investigation into the *Regla de Ocha*, *Regla de Palo* in Cuba, *Santería*, *Candomblé* in Brazil, and Voodoo, to name a few, has a tradition that is based in religious practices found in the Bantu and Congo regions of Africa (Bellegarde-Smith, 2005). Similarly, musical traditions, such as the Argentine tango, Brazilian samba, Dominican merengue, Colombian champeta, Cuban son, Martinican zouk, are all said to be of African origin and represent cultural syncretism over time between European, indigenous, and African traditions (Morales, 2003). For African Diaspora Studies, Latin America provides an intricate tapestry of Africanized traditions that are manifested differently in the forms of music, dance, and religion.

In the area of literary studies and the African Diaspora, Afro-Latin American literature is a booming area of intellectual and critical investigation. Afro-Hispanic Studies as a discipline is an emerging field in academic circles in the United States. Suffice it to say, scholars, independent researchers, and enthusiasts throughout the world are beginning to render critical approaches to this “darker” boom in Latin American letters. Virtually rendered invisible by the U.S. academy until the 1970s, writing by Latin Americans of African ancestry represented a vacuous space in critical anthologies and literary histories. At the fore of the literary consciousness of most scholars, the presence of Black writers in Latin America has its genesis in the early twentieth century with the published work of Cuban Nicolás Guillén. However, scholars like Stanley Cyrus, Josephat Kubayanda, Marvin Lewis, Miriam De Costa Willis, Richard Jackson, Shirley Jackson, Edward Mullen, William Luis, and others produced seminal scholarship that necessitated a revisionist approach to Latin American literary historiography regarding Black writers and their contributions to the development of national bodies of literature (Jackson, 1979; Tillis, 2008). Slavery, emancipation, and the aftermath provided much fodder for Latin Americans of African ancestry to write themselves into the national literary discourse. Many of these writers use literature as the vehicle to stage social protest and to address the plights of diasporic Africans in terms of invisibility, economic and political disenfranchisement, poverty, resistance, and empowerment.

Thus, the importance of Latin America, and the Caribbean by extension, to the discipline of African Diaspora Studies is immeasurable. Largely due to the mass forced migration of Africans during the trans-Atlantic slave trade, communities of black and brown people exist in nation-states throughout the Americas, specifically those whose native hegemonic language is a mimetic reflection of European rule. Africa-descended peoples in Spanish, French, and Portuguese nations have contributed to the ontological and epistemological understandings of the histories, cultures, and civilizations of Latin America. These communities collectively represent “other” geospatial and geopolitical voices in the immense territorial collective referred to as the African Diaspora. In so doing, Latin America has a solid academic position in African Diaspora Studies.

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