The history of the peoples of African origin in (so-called) Latin America and the Caribbean is largely unknown in the United States. This is unfortunate. Africans or people of African descent today represent 33% of the population in the region. What accounts for this invisibility?

A partial explanation is that the Spanish Empire was for a long time only minimally involved in the slave trade. That was left to the Portuguese who built an empire and a domestic economy almost entirely based on the African slave trade that started even before the “discovery” of Abya Yala (as the Americas are referred to by indigenes). Spain engaged massively in the trafficking of human beings only later, when the empire entered its terminal crisis in the late eighteenth and the mid-nineteenth century.

The foundation of the Spanish Empire was not the sugar or cotton plantation but silver mining. For that, it could count on the forced labor of millions of indigenous men and women. The slave trade was indeed a highly regulated activity by the Spanish Crown, and it was always surrounded by controversy and resistance from sectors of the clergy, as the well-known history of the Dominican friar Bartolome de las Casas attests (Hanke 1949). Las Casas was known for his practical and theoretical defense of Amerindians in the sixteenth century. Yet he was blamed for a long time for the introduction of the Atlantic slave trade in the West Indies, even though he would at the end of his life become a fierce opponent of it. Thus one could say that the first abolitionist movement in Europe occurred in Spain with Las Casas in the sixteenth century, and not in Britain in the nineteenth century.

And yet in South America and the Caribbean, the slave trade as such was an activity that initially was largely conducted by Christian missionaries, in particular by the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits) and by the judeoconverso diaspora (Delgado Ribas 2013). Later the Dutch, French, and the British managed to monopolize the activity through piracy, contraband, corruption, war, and by unfavorable agreements signed by the Spanish Crown. Brazil is a case in point. Catechization and enslavement were entangled
here by the Portuguese as a pretext for the conversion and the salvation of the souls of the “barbarians” (Africans), who were deemed to be less than human. Baptism or conversion did not of course render enslaved people free; instead, it was used as a shield to prevent them from “falling back to paganism” or natural freedom (De Alencastro 2013, 48). Moreover, according to Jesuit pro-slave theory, slaves were not only private property, they were the proper currency of the colony (De Alencastro 2013, 55).

However, the more favorable environment of the slave trade within the Portuguese Empire explains only in part the high concentration of Africans in Brazil. In contrast to the Spanish Empire, the Brazilian colonial economy was founded on the sugar plantation, which absorbed large contingents of enslaved labor. The indigenous population was sparse. But gold was also abundant in Brazil. Gold mines in the seventeenth century would occupy an enslaved labor force of about half a million human beings who had been trafficked by the Portuguese from Africa. By contrast, in 1770, Spanish America was home to only 12.5% of the enslaved population, most of it concentrated in the Caribbean (Delgado Ribas 2013, 30). As mentioned above, this started changing dramatically at the end of the eighteenth century when Spain turned to the slave trade to preserve its last colonies in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and other places such as Venezuela and Colombia. This occurred precisely when the second abolitionist movement had taken force in Britain. The upsurge in the slave trade at this time was of such huge proportions that some scholars refer to this period as the “second slavery.” A spectacular import of enslaved labor was also recorded in Brazil and the Southern United States (Fradera and Schmidt-Nowara 2013, 7).

The history of Africans in the Americas was marked also by persistent resistance. The Haitian Revolution (1791–1804) was a pivotal moment. Haiti was the first modern nation in world history founded by the uprising of enslaved people. Haiti became a revolutionary center for the independence wars of the rest of Spanish America, helping Simón Bolivar launch his liberation campaign with ammunition and soldiers. But revolts against enslavement happened from the very beginning of the Middle Passage from West Africa. This occurred first in the ships that transported men and women, and later in the plantations and mines. The constant revolts of enslaved Africans would soon lead to the palenques, or free towns, founded by escaped enslaved people. Examples are the Palenque San Basilio in Colombia and the quilombos – the communities of fugitive slaves – in Brazil. Moreover, the legendary Garifuna of Central America originated partially as a shipwrecked population on the Caribbean island of Saint Vincent. Thus they never experienced slavery.

Fast-forward to the twenty-first century. Today Latin America and the Caribbean are home to 200 million people of African descent. As we write these pages, Colombia has elected its first Black woman as vice-president, Francia Marquez, an environmental activist who won the Goldman Environmental Prize in 2018. Yet the legacies of slavery are still present in the region. Police brutality against Black men and women in Brazil is a scourge, just as it is in the United States. The killing of Marielle Franco, a feminist and LGBTQ+ socialist and human rights activist, in Rio de Janeiro in 2018 by hired hitmen is still ingrained in our memories. People with African roots are consistently among the poorest in the region. Many have migrated to the United States searching for better lives, adding another layer to African American identity in the United States. Yet at the same time, they gain a new type of invisibility that follows the patterns of other peoples arriving from south of the border.
This is the first of two clusters of Tapuya that are focused on African Latin Americans. These authors aim to provide English-speaking readers with knowledge about contemporary issues and social movements focused on knowledge production that have been led by people of African descent in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

(1) Andrea Medrado and Isabella Rega explore how media and art activists have developed tools to build global social movements that can challenge the colonial legacies of social inequality and state repression. Based on workshops held in Kenya and Bahia, Salvador, they provide resources to overcome the colonial legacy of fragmented relationships between Global South peoples. They argue that such “artivism” can transform artists into cultural resistors to build repertoires of communication and to raise critical consciousness.

(2) Next is the translation of a 1980 interview with Lélia Gonzalez, a pioneer of Black feminism in Brazil who documented racist and sexist Brazilian policies and practices. The translators are Ana Gretel Echazú Böschemeir, Carine de Jesus Santos, Rosamaria Giatti Carneiro, and Giovana Acacia Tempesta. Gonzalez created important concepts for subsequent Latin American feminist thought, such as Amefrica Ladina, a concept that gives the region a new historical, cultural, and political direction. Yet she also developed a new paradigm of intersectionality based on the Brazilian experience, and her own critiques of the coloniality of knowledge. Her work had powerful effects also outside Brazil, influencing even Angela Davis who said in 2019, “I feel strange when I feel that I am being chosen to represent Black feminism. And why here in Brazil do you need to look for this reference in the United States? I think I learn more from Lélia Gonzalez than you could learn from me.”

(3) Claudia Magallanes Blanco draws attention to two recent collections of papers published by CLACSO, the Latin American Council on Social Sciences. This on-going series of books is one of the few earlier projects devoted to African Latin American knowledge production. See also Jimenez Roman and Flores (2010).

(4) Josué Ricardo López reviews Pensar sembrando/sembrar pensando con el Abuelo Zenón by Juan García Salazar and Catherine Walsh. It focuses on the experiences of African Ecuadorians.

(5) Saudi Garcia writes a review of Peter Wade’s Degrees of Mixture, Degrees of Freedom: Genomics, Multiculturalism, and Race in Latin America. Wade has been a student of race in Latin America for several decades now. In this book, he looks at the genetic research undertaken in Colombia, Mexico, and Brazil in the second decade of the 21st century. An interest in genomics seems to have developed parallel and in response to multicultural state policies in the region. According to Wade, Latin American genomics research serves to reinstate the myths of mestizaje by counter positioning mestizaje against a presupposed relative racial purity of indigenous and Afro-descendent peoples. Thus, the new genomic research instead of doing away with racist categories of race, recycles them by de-racializing mestizaje and racializing Afro-descendent and indigenous peoples. In this manner, racial hierarchies are rebuilt. The overall importance of Wade’s contribution is dispelling the notion that racial mixtures lead to racial democracies, a notion that has long pervaded in Latin American mythologies of race.
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