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Bridging Cultures and Crossing Academic Divides: Teaching the Americas in the New Millennium

Construyendo Puentes sobre culturas y cruzando divisiones académicas: enseñando las Américas en el nuevo milenio

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Abstract

African Diaspora Studies and Latin American (and Latino) Studies are traditionally seen as two distinct disciplines, each having its own perspective, each having its particular areas of concern. Some scholars, however, see each of these fields of study as complementary, and take the position that neither field can be fully understood or appreciated without including the history, culture and theoretical framework of the other. I make this argument based on four factors: 1) Over 90% of the Africans brought to the Americas as slaves were sent to Latin America 2) A documented shared history for more than 500 years 3) A trend toward interdisciplinarity and multicultural perspective among scholars in the two fields 4) The shared political genesis of Black Studies and Latino Studies in the 1960s and 1970s. As someone who teaches Spanish language, and researches Afro-Hispanic writers and themes, I welcomed the challenge to enhance an existing Latin American and Latino Studies course with a curriculum to more fully reflect the development of the modern Americas as both a clash and combination of African, Native American (indigenous), and European peoples: their bloodlines, cultures, languages, faith traditions, and political struggles. This course is called "Founding Myths and Cultural Conquest in Latin America." It is one of two courses prerequisite to a major or minor in Latin American and Latino Studies, and is now regularly cross-listed in the African and Black Diaspora Studies Program.

Key words: Latin American, Latino, African Diaspora, Native American, tri-ethnic

Resumen

Los estudios de la diáspora africana y los estudios latinoamericanos (en Estados Unidos estos programas suelen tratar también a los latinos, estadounidenses de ascendencia latinoamericana) casi siempre se han visto como dos disciplinas académicas distintas, cada cual con su propia perspectiva, cada cual con sus propias áreas de enfoque. Sin embargo, hay algunos que estudian la historia, las culturas y las cuestiones de las Américas que mantienen que los dos campos son complementarios. Es más, mantienen que uno no puede comprender ni apreciar ninguno de los dos campos sin tomar en cuenta la historia, la cultura y el marco teórico de ambos. Como profesor que enseña la lengua castellana y estudia escritores y temas afro-hispánicos, yo recibí con entusiasmo la oportunidad y el reto de aumentar un curso actual de los Estudios Latinos y Latinoamericanos para que su programa reflejase más ampliamente el desarrollo de las Américas modernas como conflicto y fusión de tres razas: la africana, la indígena y la europea. En mi opinión, el curso debía reflejar la mezcla de sangres, culturas, lenguas, tradiciones religiosas y luchas políticas que formaron América Latina a partir de La Conquista. El nombre del curso es "Founding Myths and Cultural Conquest in Latin America" (Mitos fundacionales y conquista cultural en Latinoamérica). Es uno de dos cursos requisitos para todos que tengan los estudios latinos y latinoamericanos como su asignatura principal o secundaria. También se ofrece con frecuencia como curso cruzado en el programa de Estudios de la Diáspora Africana.

Palabras clave: Latinoamérica, diáspora Africana, indígena, triétnico, latinos

Summary

1. Introduction | 2. The Impact of the African Slave Trade on the Demographics of the Americas | 3. A Shared History: Indigenous, African and European Peoples in the Americas | 4. An Interdisciplinary Trend: Scholars Broaden Their View | 5. Shared Roots: Two Programs Born from the Same Political and Social Struggle | 6. Conclusions | References

1. Introduction

African Diaspora Studies and Latin American Studies are traditionally seen as two distinct disciplines, each having its own perspective, each having its particular areas of concern. Some scholars, however, see each of these fields of study as complementary, and take the position that neither field can be fully understood or appreciated without including the history, culture and theoretical framework of the other. In a radio interview after the 1999 publication of *Africana: the Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience*, the editors, Dr. Henry Louis Gates and Dr. Anthony Appiah, both of Harvard University, were asked what they considered their greatest surprise in the process of preparing this volume. Dr. Appiah responded that he was most surprised by the number of articles necessarily included to cover the experience of Africans and their descendants in Latin America.

As someone who teaches Spanish language, and researches Afro-Hispanic writers and themes, I welcomed the challenge to enhance an existing Latin American and Latino Studies course with a curriculum to more fully reflect the development of the modern Americas as both a clash and combination of African, Native American (indigenous), and European peoples: their bloodlines, cultures, languages, faith traditions, and political struggles. This course is called "Founding Myths and Cultural Conquest in Latin America." It is one of two courses prerequisite to a major or minor in Latin American and Latino Studies, and is now regularly cross-listed in the African and Black Diaspora Studies Program.

Four components contribute to a compelling argument that combining the elements of African and Diaspora Studies (abbreviated ABD) and Latin American and Latino Studies (abbreviated LAL) will allow for a more meaningful and comprehensive examination of the Americas in the 21st century than using either of these theoretical frameworks alone. These components are:

1. The dramatic impact of the African slave trade that brought more than ten million Africans to the Americas between 1450 and 1870, the vast majority to Latin America.
2. A shared history in which people of African, Indigenous and European descent often worked side by side in every aspect of society in the New World: agricultural, architectural, artistic, military and political (particularly in Latin America).
3. A growing trend toward interdisciplinarity and multicultural perspective among scholars currently working in both fields.
4. The shared political and intellectual genesis of Black Studies and Latino Studies in the United States: both were born from the simultaneous and sometimes cooperative efforts that resulted when the national and international struggles for political and social justice during the late 1960s and early 1970s spilled onto the campuses of U.S. universities.

2. The Impact of the African Slave Trade on the Demographics of the Americas

The population numbers alone astonish; they reveal powerful insights into the new demographics of the Americas that most of us have yet to fully grasp: A conservatively estimated ten million Africans were brought to the Americas between 1450 and 1870 (Schomburg Center for Research in African American Culture, 2013). The comparative context of this massive, forced migration reveals even more:

Indeed, of the first 6.5 million people who crossed the Atlantic and settled in the Americas, 5.5 million were African. Over 90% of these Africans were taken to South America and the Caribbean Islands. Almost as many were sent to the island of Barbados as to the United States, while almost nine times as many were enslaved in Brazil as in the United States (Schomburg Center for Research in African American Culture, 2013).

The first sentence of the above citation speaks directly to the traditional perspective within Latin American and Latino Studies, which tends to emphasize the roles of the Indigenous and European protagonists in the Conquest and Colonization. This view has often discounted or even omitted the impact of the African in this historical process. At the same time, the second and third sentences of the citation challenge the often prevailing view in African and Black Diaspora Studies which tends to place the United States and Anglo-America at the epicenter of the African slave trade. These population figures reveal that

less than 5% of Africans brought to the Americas as slaves were sent to the United States. The numbers challenge each field to revise and rethink the role of the African to achieve a wider perspective. The ABD view would take into account the scope of the African Diaspora beyond Anglo America and the greater importance of tri-ethnicity in Latin America. The LSLP view would re-examine its own model of Conquest and the colonial period to determine how such vast numbers of Africans influenced the historical process.

3. A Shared History: Indigenous, African and European Peoples in the Americas

In recent years, scholars have been actively exploring and documenting the concept of a shared history – a history placing more emphasis on the interconnection of the Americas, and revealing a more influential role of people of African descent in the creation of this history. *Afro-Latin America: 1800-2000* (2004) was one of the first and most comprehensive studies done incorporating these criteria. Andrews notes the common intellectual and philosophical influences and connections between the American Revolution (1775-1783, the French Revolution (1789-1799, the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804), and the Wars for Freedom in Latin America (1810-1890) (Andrews, 2004: 53-84). He also explores social-political-cultural processes he terms whitening, browning and blackening (Andrews, 2004: 117-190).

Mexico is a good example of a region where recent studies have done much to elucidate the extent of a shared history. Mexico's indigenous roots have long been well known and celebrated: the Aztec Empire as well as the Maya, the Toltec, the Olmec and other civilizations (Fuentes, 1999: 93-117). Only beginning in the 1940s with the work of Mexican anthropologist Gonzalo Aguirre-Beltrán, however, have scholars begun to reveal the extent of Mexico's African roots (Hernández Cuevas, 2004: 7-9). And people of African descent played major individual roles in the Conquest itself, as both high and lower ranking members of the forces commanded by Hernán Cortés in Mexico, Francisco Pizarro in Peru, and Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca in areas known today as Florida, Texas and northern Mexico. Africans and their descendants in Mexico, like their counterparts in Colombia, Cuba, Brazil and other colonial regions in Latin America, assumed roles in both the leadership and in the rank and file of the struggles for independence from Spain and other European colonial powers.

Yanga, brought from West Africa to New Spain (Mexico) in the late 16th century, established a community of escaped slaves in the area between Veracruz and Mexico City; after waging guerilla warfare against Spain's colonial troops for several years, he was successful in negotiating what some consider to be the first charter of Independence for a community in colonial America, signed by the Spanish Crown in 1630 (Carretero, 2006b: 26-32). José María Morelos, designated as *mulato* due to having African and Spanish ancestry, led the War of Independence in Mexico and played a primary role in abolishing slavery and the caste system (*Régimen de Castas*) in Mexico in 1824 (18-19).

More recently, in 2006, a ground breaking exhibition, "The African Presence in Mexico: from Yanga to the Present," at the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum in Chicago, documented the involvement of Mexicans of African descent throughout hundreds of years of the nation's history. The exhibit featured original castas paintings from the colonial period, photographs from the Mexican Revolution of 1910, and many other artifacts and artworks. The exhibition represented a collaboration between scholars and curators from Veracruz, Mexico and Chicago, Illinois. It hosted a symposium featuring scholars from both countries such as Marco Polo Hernández Cuevas (2004), Ben Vinson III (2001) and Sagrario Cruz-Carretero. The exhibition resided at the Museum Center for nearly one year, and produced a book documenting the exhibition and its related activities with text and dozens of color photographs; it also produced a teaching and learning guide on DVD for grades 6-12 to make the exhibits and information on Mexico's African heritage permanently available to students and their families.

4. An Interdisciplinary Trend: Scholars Broaden Their View

A growing trend toward interdisciplinarity and multicultural perspective among scholars in both LAL and ABD studies provides persuasive evidence that a combination of both perspectives is informing more and more research and pedagogy in either field. In *Neither Enemies nor Friends: Latinos, Blacks and Afro-Latinos* (2005) the authors, Anani Dzidzienyo and Suzanne Oboler (2005), delineate three identities as

distinct, but related, then explore this relationship in the United States context and in the contexts of several Latin American countries. In the eighth edition of *Latin America: An Interpretive History*, the authors, E. Bradford Burns and Julia A. Charlip (2007), set an innovative precedent. In their opening chapter (pp. 1-30), they profile the Indigenous, the European, and the African, each in a separate section, and use the same criteria to assess the social, political and cultural status of the people on the three continents in the late 15th and early 16th centuries – just before and just after the three encountered each other in the New World. I find this approach especially significant, because it is the first example I have noted where the authors have recognized and described the achievements and circumstances on the home continents of the three peoples who were to jointly inhabit the New World called the Americas. (And in the case of Europe and Africa, this assessment included their previous relationships and interactions).

Henry Louis Gates, well-known researcher and professor in the field of African and Black Diaspora studies at Harvard University, recently departed from his customary focus on people of African descent in the United States to travel to Latin America and produce a four-part film series for public television, *Black in Latin America* (with an accompanying written volume bearing the same title, both in 2012) that encompasses Cuba, Haiti and the Dominican Republic, Brazil, and Mexico and Peru. In his subsequent film project, *The African Americans: Many Rivers to Cross* (2013), Gates returns to his focus on Africa's descendants in the United States, but he retains his global perspective by making video references to both Latin America and Africa to give the U.S. experience a broader context.

In her presentation "Yo soy Negro: Defining Blackness in Peru, given at DePaul University in October of 2011b, based on her book of similar title, *Yo soy negro: blackness in Peru* (2011a), Professor Tanya Golash-Boza recounted her research conducted while she was living in black communities in northern Peru. Significantly, Dr. Golash Boza explicitly compared the theoretical frameworks of both ABD and LAL studies (she is trained as a sociologist) and explained how she found it useful to take both frameworks into account in order to better focus her own work and to position it in relation to previous and current research by other scholars.

Finally, in a course called "Latinos in the U.S.," offered at DePaul University in Chicago in the fall of 2013, Dr. Carolina Sternberg explores urban development issues in the Mexican American neighborhood of Pilsen in Chicago. She then presents a second Chicago neighborhood to provide a second, comparative example of ethnic neighborhood history and development issues. Perhaps surprisingly, Dr. Sternberg does not choose another Mexican American community, nor does she select a Puerto Rican community (which also figure prominently among Latino neighborhoods in Chicago). Sternberg instead selects Bronzeville, an African American neighborhood, to provide a broader context of comparison.

Although this trend is new, and on the rise in the last decade, it is not without precedent. It appears to be foreshadowed by the seminal body of work of Afro-Colombian novelist Manuel Zapata Olivella, and a few other Afro-Hispanic writers. Zapata Olivella's work, written primarily from a tri-ethnic perspective, was published between 1948 until his death in 2005. His epic novel, *Changó el Gran Putas* (1983) spans four continents and five centuries to tell the saga of the formation of the modern Americas from an African, Native American (Indigenous) and European narrative point of view. Two book-length studies have analyzed the impact of his work: Yvonne Captain-Hidalgo's *The Culture of Fiction in the Works of Manuel Zapata Olivella* (1993); and Manuel Zapata Olivella and the "Darkening" of Latin American Literature (2005) by Antonio Tillis. Richard L. Jackson, in his 1998 study, *Black Writers and Latin America: Cross-Cultural Affinities*, catalogs and analyzes cross-cultural contacts and influences between writers of African descent in the United States, Latin America and Spain, beginning from the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939).

5. Shared Roots: Two Programs Born from the Same Political and Social Struggle

Finally, we examine the shared roots of both Latin American and Latino Studies programs and African and Black Diaspora Studies programs. Both were born out of the social and political upheavals and the student uprisings that shook the United States in the early post-civil rights period of the mid- and late 1960s and the early 1970s. Just as students were among the vanguard organizing the civil rights movement – note the role of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and activities such as the Freedom Rides, in aggressively demanding justice and equal opportunity for Black Americans across the country, and especially in the South. The Civil Rights Movement itself,

which many observers feel culminated in the 1963 March on Washington, site of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's famous "I Have a Dream" speech, dramatically captured national attention and freshly focused it on the longstanding need for radical change to achieve social justice and equality if the US were to live up to its ideals of freedom and democracy. The march, and other related activities, bolstered the effort to pass landmark legislation such as the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

At the same time as King, Roy Wilkins, Whitney Young, and others were organizing communities and leading demonstrations throughout the South, the Midwest, the Northeast and in the nation's capital, César Chávez, Dolores Huerta, and others were organizing Latino communities, especially Mexican-Americans, in California, Texas and other states throughout the Southwest and Northwest. They were leading the struggle to achieve the right to collective bargaining and living wages for migrant workers. They made national headlines and challenged the absolute control of the growers over wages and working conditions by mounting successful boycotts of grape and lettuce crops.

Just as these movements for social justice in the African-American and Latino communities worked in parallel, and sometimes in cooperation, in the early and mid-1960s, so too did the movements which followed them. In their respective African American and Puerto Rican ethnic communities, the Black Panthers and the Young Lords often cooperated in cities such as Boston, New York and Chicago as they worked towards their goals to raise political consciousness, make the streets of their communities safer, and encourage the youth to educate themselves to take a more positive and active role in their communities. Dr. Jacqueline Lazú, a playwright, researcher and professor based at DePaul University in Chicago, Illinois has documented aspects of the history and relationship between these two cultural communities, and especially between the Young Lords and the Black Panthers of the greater Chicago area in her 2004 play *The Block/El Bloque: a Young Lords Story*.

The struggle of the African American, Puerto Rican, Chicano (Mexican-American) and other Latino communities wound its way from the urban streets to the hallowed halls of academia on university campuses across the nation. This struggle was a struggle to achieve social justice, self-determination, cultural recognition, and above all, it was the struggle of a people or community to gain a voice in defining its own identity and deciding how its story and history would be told. The struggle on campuses took place in an intellectual environment, and therefore it took on the characteristics of a war of ideas.

Sometimes the tactics became quasi-military, even if they were primarily non-violent. First African American students, then Latino students – sometimes working in separate efforts, and sometimes working together in each other's efforts – began to take over or "occupy" university buildings and level "non-negotiable" demands on university administrations. These demands nearly always included a demand for more students of color to be recruited and admitted, and more professors of color to be recruited and hired. And significantly, the occupying students often placed the demand to create a department or program of African American, Puerto Rican, Chicano or Latin American and Latino Studies at or near the top of the list. This demand alone was often the key to achieving greater recognition, representation, and voice. Winning this demand implicated greater potential to compete within the university and within a larger society that increasingly required higher educational standards and credentials in the workplace to successfully compete in domestic and global markets. But the creation of an ethnocentric academic department, program, and/or cultural center also represented both a validation of said ethnic community group by the larger society, and the opportunity for that group to tell its own story and set its own academic, cultural and political priorities in an environment that enjoys a degree of prestige and influence in the larger society: the university.

The birth of Black (African American) and Puerto Rican and Chicano Studies programs resulted from the social and political upheavals that rocked the nation in the late 1960s and early 1970s. And specifically, these academic programs and an increase in representation of communities of color in American (US) universities were born from the efforts and sacrifices of students and members of their communities of their own and preceding generations. Today these programs are often known as African and Black Diaspora Studies, and Latin American and Latino Studies. This is the history that produced Founding Myths and Cultural Conquest in Latin America, the course that I developed.

As I undertook the challenge to more accurately reflect the representation of Africa and her descendants in this prodigious and prolific blending of bloodlines, cultures and faith traditions, I also challenged myself to fairly represent our interaction as human beings and members of a human family. History and human nature widely distribute the opportunity to be victim or perpetrator, winner or loser. I

wanted to note examples of collaboration as well as examples of strife, and examples of commonality across cultures, both positive and negative. And I took note to point out a perennial hunger for justice in the midst of injustice, and the lengths that both groups and individuals will strive to reach freedom from tyranny or slavery.

Some consider the tri-ethnicity that characterizes the formation of the modern Americas to be a symbol of universality of the human experience and the blurring of borders between individuals and between nations across time and space. I confess that I share that view. But in my opinion, no writer better summarizes the saga of the Americas better than Manuel Zapata Olivella when he addresses his reader in the preface to his epic novel, *Changó el Gran Putas*.

...en esta saga no hay más huella que la que tu dejes: eres el prisionero el descubridor, el fundador, el libertador (Zapata-Olivella, 1992: 56).

(...in this saga there is no footprint except the one that you leave; you are the prisoner, the discoverer, the founder, the liberator (Tran. D.A. Gilliam).

And he ends his preface with these words:

Tarde o temprano tenías que enfrentarte a esta verdad: la historia del hombre negro en América es tan tuya como la del indio a la del blanco que lo acompañarán a la conquista de la libertad de todos (Zapata-Olivella, 1992: 57).

(Sooner or later you had to confront this truth: the history of the Black man in the Americas is as much yours as that of the Indian or that of the White man that will accompany him to the conquest of liberty for all (Tran. D.A. Gilliam).

6. Conclusions

The Conquest of the Americas is commonly perceived as a monumental clash between European and Native American (*indígena*), and especially between the Spaniards and the Aztec and the Inca empires. And true, those named are principal actors in this drama of conquest. But what is often only partly perceived, or is sometimes entirely unknown, is that Africans and their descendants, as well as the indigenous or Native American peoples and Europeans, and their descendants, all had major and interconnected roles in the formation of the modern Americas before, during, and especially after roughly the first forty years of conquest, warfare and disease that followed the landing of Christopher Columbus. Statistics have been cited earlier indicating that nearly four fifths of the first people who crossed the Atlantic to settle in the New World were African, and that over 90% of those who came were taken to South America and the islands of the Caribbean (African Slaves in the Americas, 2006). Furthermore, there is a wealth of evidence indicating the possibility of an African presence in Early America – in Mesoamerica and in South America – hundreds of years before the arrival of Columbus (Van Sertima, 1995: 5-27).

Many of the scholars who study the history, the culture, the literary and the folk traditions of the Americas fall into one of two perspectives, or theoretical frameworks: Latin American and Latino Studies; and African and Black Diaspora studies. Both categories are characterized by an interdisciplinary approach; both programs commonly include historians, sociologists, political scientists, writers and literary critics, musicologists, artists, art critics, and others. But only recently (within the last decade or two) have these two interdisciplinary approaches begun to consider each other's analytical framework and perspective.

In this article, I have argued that neither Latin American and Latino studies (LAL) nor African and Black Diaspora studies (ABD) can develop as rich and full an understanding of the Americas without taking each other's perspectives into account. I argue that we cannot ignore the impact of ten million Africans brought to the Americas (over nine tenths of them to the region now known as Latin America); the 500 years of history shared by the Indigenous, African and European peoples; the increasing evidence that scholars from both programs are more and more incorporating the analytical approach of their counterparts into their own work; that all are becoming aware of the implications of the common social and political roots of ABD and LAL programs of study in the decade between 1965 and 1975. All these factors taken together, I argue, should convince us of the benefit – and the necessity – to bridge cultures and cross academic divides as we endeavor to teach the Americas in the new millennium.

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