

RACE & IDENTITY

Legacies of Struggle: Reflecting on the AfroLatinx Voices Roundtable Series

By John A. Mundell

In the wake of the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor by police in the United States, Black Lives Matters protests spread across the world in the late spring of 2020. Many communities added the names of their loved ones killed by state violence, revealing that Covid-19 wasn't the only global pandemic. During that same time, the murder of 24-year-old Anderson Arboleda by police in Puerto Tejada, Colombia, rattled the Afro-Colombian community. Other tragedies, like the still-unsolved 2018 assassination of queer Black Rio

de Janeiro city councilwoman Marielle Franco, continue to remind us that power and prestige cannot stave off state-sanctioned anti-Blackness.

In response to the onslaught of racial violence and outrage, UC Berkeley's Center for Latin American Studies scheduled an online event called "The Latino Community and Black Lives Matter," with Daniel Coronell, the award-winning Colombian journalist who heads the news division at Univisión. The title and description echoed a common social media hashtag, #LatinxForBlackLives.

Yet, the slated speakers were all white men. In response, the graduate students who co-founded the Blackness in Latin America and the Caribbean (BLAC) working group in 2017, with sponsorship from CLAS, nervously penned a private letter to the staff to express our concerns.

As scholars of race in Latin America and the Caribbean, we believed that the title and its description, much like the hashtag, reified an imagined separation and distance between *Latinidad* and Blackness. *Latinidad*, or Latinness in English, is an identity sometimes erroneously categorized as a race or ethnicity, particularly within the United States, that seeks to combine the panoply of Latin American cultures along the lines of shared histories of Spanish and Portuguese colonialism, languages, and *mestizaje*, or race mixture. However, due to the conquest and enslavement of Indigenous Americans and Black Africans whose histories, cultures, and genealogies were subsumed into *Latinidad* by white and *mestizo* elites in order to appear more European, *Latinidad* continues to

structurally erase Blackness as well as Indigeneity. The everyday experience of Black Latinx or AfroLatinx people is rarely present in national media beyond simplified folkloric gestures by the nation-state (often limited to music, dance, and food).

In this context, our opposition was further intensified because of the headlining speaker's leadership position in a news organizations that notoriously vilified the anger and pain of Black Lives Matter protesters. Anti-Blackness continues to be pervasive in Latinx communities in the United States, in Latin America and the Caribbean, and within *Latinidad* itself as a structure of cultural identity. We wanted to recognize the good intentions of CLAS because, truly, white people (including myself) need to be having these conversations with each other. The same must be said of the entire field of Latin American Studies as one populated by mostly white scholars in the United States and Latin America. Yet, as the CLAS platform is respected the world over, it should be used differently.

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A march after the assassination of Councilwoman Marielle Franco and her driver, Anderson Gomes, Rio de Janeiro, March 2018.

Photo by Mídia NINJA.



In our letter, we asked:

How can we effectively engage anti-Blackness in the Latinx community without actual AfroLatinx voices in a public forum such as this? [...] Latinidad as an ethnic project can neither exist without Blackness nor effectively engage with the struggle for Black lives in the U.S. and across the Americas without reflecting inward and through the lens of AfroLatinx scholars and artists. [...] It remains incredibly difficult to begin and continue the conversation on what the broader Latinx community in the U.S. and across the world can do if we do not see Black people as members of that very community and foundational to its existence.

A day after sending our letter, the staff at CLAS responded with grace and the desire to listen to our concerns more directly via videoconference. They indefinitely postponed the event in question. Former director Harley Shaiken welcomed our criticism and asked what CLAS could do in order to (as we wrote) “take concrete action to include AfroLatinx scholar-activists and let them lead, especially on issues that disproportionately affect them, not only in grassroots activism but in academic spaces.” We agreed that a series of webinars featuring Black Latin American, Caribbean, and AfroLatinx artists, academics, and activists would provide an entry point. Our virtual roundtable series AfroLatinx Voices was born.

The goal of AfroLatinx Voices has been to feature Black voices in a predominantly white academic space and field. We sought to diversify our perspectives and the broader communities involved in the Center for Latin American Studies at UC Berkeley and beyond. Presented as conversations that straddled the academy and the constituencies of our speakers, a member of BLAC moderated each roundtable addressing a different theme: literature and writing; Black feminist activism; the historiography of Black Atlantic religions; and critical whiteness. As Blackness and anti-Blackness pervade the confines of borders, languages, and statecraft, we also wanted to use the series to stretch our conception of Latin America beyond Spanish America and Brazil. This approach meant a more open embrace of and critical engagement with the Caribbean as a porous discourse of culture, thought, and being that extended beyond its Spanish-speaking constituent nations and the archipelago itself, which was especially the case in our first event in October 2020.

This first virtual roundtable, “Writing Black Caribbean Women,” featured a conversation between Afro-Puerto Rican novelist and poet Aya de León and queer Jamaican novelist Nicole Dennis-Benn, both based



Nicole Dennis-Benn (top) and Aya de León.

in the United States. The discussion was moderated by BLAC co-founder Nicole Ramsey, a Ph.D. candidate in African American and African Diaspora Studies, who works on Blackness in Central America, cultural production, Belize, and Belizean migration to the United States. Both authors graced us with readings: de León read from *The Accidental Mistress* (2018) and *Side Chick Nation* (2019), two books from her feminist heist series (*Justice Hustlers*), while Dennis-Benn read from her queer Black transnational novels *Here Comes the Sun* (2017) and *Patsy* (2019), which reflect her own life story.

Both de León and Dennis-Benn embraced the title of the roundtable to describe themselves as Black Caribbean women writers, as well as the everyday act of writing Black Caribbean women’s stories. In her opening statement, Dennis-Benn remarked how most books she read about the Caribbean while she was in school in Jamaica were written by white British men. “Growing up, I felt like I was a caricature on the page as opposed to a real person,” she said. “I never saw myself, especially as a Black working-class Jamaican girl, now woman.” De León explained that it was the testimonies of Caribbean women that stayed with her, in particular, Audre Lorde’s collection of essays *Sister Outsider* and her autobiography *Zami*.

Notably, Dennis-Benn and de León mentioned the importance of language as a mode of recognition, representation, and affirmation for both author and reader.

While de León discussed her reliance on research and friends to check her language, Dennis-Benn was greatly influenced by the Black U.S. anthropologist and writer Zora Neale Hurston. Echoing Hurston’s incorporation of African American Vernacular English and its regionalisms, Dennis-Benn explained that writing in Jamaican *patois* “forces the reader to slow down and sit with it, to listen to the people” who are regularly left off the page. Like Conceição Evaristo in Brazil and Mayra Santos-Febres in Puerto Rico, among many of their Black women writer counterparts in Latin America and the Caribbean, both Dennis-Benn and de León envision their use of language as a Black feminist praxis. Through an insistence of language, their writing implodes the categories of respectability, of genre, and of a canon altogether, in order to most effectively write Black women’s stories the way they deserve to be told.

In December 2020, our second virtual roundtable revealed how these theories moved across borders in the collective actions of activists. “Transnational Black Feminisms and Activism in Latin America and the Caribbean” welcomed Tito Mitjans Alayón, an Afro-Cuban trans masculine feminist activist living in Chiapas, Mexico; Djamila Ribeiro, an Afro-Brazilian feminist philosopher, journalist, and activist based in São Paulo, Brazil; and Laura Hall, an Afro-Costa Rican human rights activist and political organizer based in Limón, Costa Rica. The event was moderated by BLAC member Ashley Ngozi Agbasoga, a Ph.D. candidate in Anthropology at Northwestern University working on Afro-Indigenous feminist movements and rights in Mexico. With people tuning in from all over the world, Mitjans, Ribeiro, and Hall discussed how their Black feminisms and identities were transnationally (in)formed.

Mitjans mentioned reading well-known Afro-Brazilian feminists like Carla Akotirene, Lélia Gonzalez, Sueli Carneiro, Beatriz Nascimento, and also Djamila Ribeiro, who affirmed this shout-out with a smile. However, it was *afrotransfeminismo* as co-imagined in a 2018 viral article by Afro-Brazilian trans women activists Maria Clara Araújo, Giovanna Heliodoro, and Erika Hilton — the first transgender city councilwoman in São Paulo, with a record-setting number of votes — that helped Mitjans situate himself within a Black trans/nationally informed identity. “I learned that there were Black people everywhere, despite the white mestizo Cuban narrative that locate them only in determined geographies. [...] Black feminist cartographies, for me, was a beautiful tool to locate myself.” Likewise, Afro-transfeminism allowed Mitjans to assert his place within new trends in feminism, despite the ongoing marginalization of Black women and trans people.

As Ribeiro discussed her own trajectory reading Black U.S. feminists like Patricia Hill Collins and Angela Davis, she challenged activists and academics in the Global North to actively read Black women’s writing in Brazil. Referencing her activist work that successively pressured publishing houses to translate these Black U.S. feminist authors into Portuguese, she mentioned two collections of books she is presently curating. The first, *Feminismos plurais* (Plural Feminisms), is a series of eight books authored by eight different Afro-Brazilian authors, women and men. The second collection honors the legacy of Afro-Brazilian feminist Sueli Carneiro. Several of the books have been translated into French, Italian, and Spanish and affordably priced in an effort to foster transnational conversations, especially among Black women. The collection includes *Mulheres quilombolas* (Quilombola Women), co-authored by 18 different women from Brazilian *quilombos*. Also known as “maroon communities,” these settlements were

From top: Djamila Ribeiro, Laura Hall, and Tito Mitjans Alayón. >>



formed by Africans escaping slavery prior to abolition in 1888 and often incorporated Indigenous peoples; many quilombos still exist today.

Laura Hall posed the transnational work of Black feminisms differently. As a descendant of West Indian immigrants who built the railroads in Costa Rica and harvested coffee along the country's Caribbean coast, she discussed how Black women's leadership has been integral to African cultures over a long history. Perhaps implicitly gesturing to Costa Rica's Vice President Epsy Campbell Barr, a Black woman, Hall said, "It is nothing new that Black women are at the head of government. For people of African descent...it's not novel. It's novel in this part of the world, but we come from kingdoms ruled by women, and we come from maroons guided by women." Hall herself is the vice president of Costa Rica's chapter of the Universal Negro Improvement Association in Limón, originally founded in 1914 by Jamaican political activist Marcus Garvey while living in Harlem. Hall reminded us that Black people are far from being a minority in Latin America and the Caribbean when we think beyond national borders.

Mitjans, however, challenged the use of "transnational" as a term because of his migrant status in Mexico. He showed how the state and the everyday discourse of *mestizaje* — the notion that the national population's race mixture stemming from the colonial period was congenial and free from violence — often



Andrea Guerrero-Mosquera (left) and Andreina Soto.

repress efforts to see a shared experience along racial lines. Referencing his own flight from Cuba as a Black, queer, and trans person who was politically active in the hip hop community, Mitjans cited the long tradition of Black knowledge production in Cuba prior to and after the Revolution. While the Castro government, "in its effort to end racism, erased Black critical production," Mitjans said, "the Black Cuban movement of hip hop [in the 1990s] was the beginning of the Black Cuban revolution that we have today." As examples, he cited workshops

given by exiled Black Panthers and Black U.S. hip hop artists visiting the island. On this note, Ribeiro agreed that the left in Brazil remains incredibly Eurocentric and led by white men who seem to still believe in racial democracy, despite the fact that quilombos were "places of socialism before socialism." These comments on the Black feminist legacies of transnational activism — from pan-Africanism and Black intellectualism to music and *marronage* — prove the continued relevance of history as a site of contention for Black social movements to stake their rights to difference.

Our third event in February 2021 spoke to the concerns of history and historiography of Afro-descendant populations in colonial Latin America and the Caribbean. "Re-writing Black Religions in the Atlantic World" featured Afro-Colombian historian of race, religion, and visual art Andrea Guerrero-Mosquera in conversation with Andreina Soto, a BLAC member and Ph.D. candidate of History at UC Santa Barbara, who studies race, religion, and law in colonial Venezuela.

Soto opened the event by asking how we might re-write histories where populations of African descent are the protagonists. Guerrero-Mosquera followed with a beautiful presentation on the history of *bolsas de mandinga*, amulets made of metal, cloth, or leather, often containing prayers scrawled on paper, that were worn by Afro-descendants. Guerrero-Mosquera offered examples from the colonial

period in Brazil, Suriname, and New Granada (modern-day Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, and Venezuela), citing several cases from New Spain in the Inquisition records that showed enslaved Black and mixed-race women using the talismans to protect themselves from their masters and to attract men they desired.

Archival research helped Guerrero-Mosquera recognize and affirm her own personal identity and its intersection with her work: "The fact that I could research and narrate people's histories through the archives...was so fascinating.

When I began my career, I didn't have an idea of my own consciousness as a Black woman, as a Black woman historian. [...] I didn't know what it meant to be Black...until I was finishing my undergrad when I was reading about [Alonso de] Sandoval in Cartagena de Indias."

Sandoval was a Jesuit priest who evangelized recently arrived enslaved Africans. He wrote one of the most detailed early accounts of slavery in the Americas, *De instauranda Aethiopum salute* (1627), and Guerrero-Mosquera's early interactions with the descriptiveness of his account spurred her to consider how the archive is often already a visual text, even when constructed only by words. When we consider actual images as text, Guerrero-Mosquera explained, "they let us go so much further," eventually establishing "a relationship between research on color, the conception of the body, of gender, and the circulation of knowledge more broadly."

Guerrero-Mosquera also observed how the field of History with a capital "H" is changing in Latin America and the Caribbean. More Black and Indigenous people in the region are arriving at a consciousness of their roots and proactively seeking to tell the stories of their own people, past and present, including via a wider access to academia. This "taking back" of the field, as Guerrero-Mosquera put it, allows us to counter the common notion of "there are no Black people here." As an example, she cited Erika Edwards's award-winning 2020 book on Black women in the archives of Argentina, a country that has long touted its "successful" whitening campaigns in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which brought thousands of European immigrants to its shores. Guerrero-Mosquera pointed to the commonplace narratives of *mestizaje* and whitening proffered by the state as the biggest culprits in the erasure of Blackness and Indigeneity in history and people's identities. As Guerrero-Mosquera's own personal story and research show, the struggle for recognition and rights for populations made invisible by these narratives is bolstered by the influx of Black and Indigenous scholars asking these questions of the field itself.

In April 2021, the fourth and final virtual roundtable in AfroLatinx Voices, "No Longer a Racial Democracy: Critical Whiteness in Latin America and the Caribbean" presented Black Studies scholars Patricia de Santana Pinho (UC Santa Cruz), Isar Godreau (Universidad de Puerto Rico en Cayey), and Erika Edwards (University of North Carolina at Charlotte). I had the pleasure of serving as the moderator. As critical race scholars in the social sciences, each presenter showed how they approach the looming question of what constitutes whiteness in a region that in



From top: Erika Edwards, Isar Godreau, and Patricia de Santana Pinho.

its majority has long denied the importance of race as a structure of difference in society.

Pinho opened by invoking her own configuration of whiteness in 21st-century Brazil, first as "wounded" in its reactions to the broader expansion of rights and economic opportunities for poor, mostly Black and Indigenous Brazilians under the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT, Workers' Party). With far-right President Jair Bolsonaro's rise to power leading up to his 2018 election, Pinho described whiteness also as "aspirational" — a tenet held since the days of slavery in the colonial period. This attitude became even more evident as many poor Black and brown Brazilians, who had previously benefited from PT policies, voted for Bolsonaro as a candidate who embodied heteropatriarchal, nativist, and elite whiteness.

Godreau approached whiteness in Puerto Rico as always interpolated with U.S. racial structures and the island's status as a colony of the United States. While the U.S. census of 2000 showed that 81 percent of Puerto Ricans identified as "white," Godreau recently conducted

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18th-century Casta painting of ambiguous racial classifications in New Spain (present-day Mexico).

an open-ended study in collaboration with Puerto Rican political anthropologist Yarimar Bonilla to understand how Puerto Ricans identified themselves racially. The responses for whiteness ranged from “burnt white” (*blanco quemado*) and “white Latina” to “white but mixed,” all in an effort to generate distance from Blackness and support the mestizaje narratives of convivial race mixture that literally bred out racism.

Edwards, on the other hand, explained how whiteness in Argentina became the “standardization of identity” to the point that any scholarship on race in Argentina, let alone whiteness, is almost an “afterthought.” Argentina had a long history of racial slavery with a high prevalence

of Black Argentines in the interior through the 1700s — and today in Buenos Aires, there are Black immigrants from the African continent, Brazil, other parts of Latin America, and the Caribbean — yet homogeneity has always been the goal. Massive immigration campaigns from Europe strived to “lighten” the nation, even though some immigrants (such as the Italians) were considered *trigueños* or dark-skinned. Homogeneity also meant that Black and Indigenous people of lighter skin tone would likely be classified as “white” in 19th-century Argentina. Thus, Edwards, like Godreau and Pinho before her, revealed the confluences of these state projects in creating whiteness and its desires as quite flimsy taxonomies.

Over the past months, the AfroLatinx Voices series has shown us how Blackness and anti-Blackness in Latin America and the Caribbean are and always have been transnationally informed. They remain integral to how we understand identity formation, popular culture, and governance more broadly in the region. Black Studies as an interdisciplinary field in and beyond Latin America and the Caribbean is under persistent transformation and in multiple directions. Perhaps most pressing is our return to questions of enduring relevance that undergird the field and its personal/intellectual investments. What does it mean to be a racialized subject in the world? And in the context of mestizaje, what does it mean to become a racialized subject, to become conscious of one’s racialization in the face of society and the state? How does race as a construction of the state but also of grassroots social movements and cultural production intersect with place, history, and modes of knowledge production?

Be it in the form of artistic expression, activism, or academia, our discussions with these phenomenal speakers have underscored the centrality of Black

feminisms to approaching these questions in the context of Latin America and the Caribbean. As a means to simultaneously engage across race, gender, sexuality, and class, the privileging of lived experience in Black feminisms extends the production of knowledge beyond academia’s ivory tower, across borders and languages. From this perspective, we are able to more horizontally deconstruct national narratives of race mixture in the Americas like mestizaje, creolization, and racial democracy that have come to fashion Latinidad in the United States as a pan-ethnic “Brownness” that silences Black and Indigenous voices. When we take these factors into account and listen to these voices, the separation of Latinidad from the everyday lived experience of Blackness should be understood as yet another form of exclusion. Be it a hashtag or a hyphen, even with the best of intentions, this discursive distance risks rationalizing the Othering of Black and AfroLatinx people to the point of their violation.

In her presentation, Djamila Ribeiro invoked the late Black Brazilian feminist and scholar Lélia Gonzalez who said, “Our legacy is not just a legacy of pain, but one of struggle, of resistance, and of power.” AfroLatinx Voices sought to honor these legacies of Black struggle across

Latin America and the Caribbean. As one of the authors of that letter written last June, I am grateful for the response and action taken by the Center for Latin American Studies to trust our vision as graduate students to bring more voices into the Berkeley community, even online. We sincerely thank the UC Berkeley Departments of African American Studies, Gender and Women’s Studies, Ethnic Studies, Spanish and Portuguese, Comparative Literature, and English, as well as the Doreen B. Townsend Center, the UC Santa Barbara Department of History, and Associate Professor of English Nadia Ellis, for sponsoring our events so that our speakers could be compensated. On a personal note, AfroLatinx Voices taught me so much and affirmed the scholarship and activism to which my colleagues and I have dedicated our lives. Each speaker came with effervescence and generosity to share their experience and their knowledge. We thank them and we thank you for joining us. May the lessons endure. As we say in Brazil, *a luta continua*, the struggle continues.

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A 2015 women’s march in Brazil calls for greater respect for Black Brazilian citizens and culture.



Photo by Janine Moraes. Courtesy of Secretaria Especial da Cultura do Ministério da Cidadania, Brazil.