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AFRI 0210: Afro-Latin Americans and Blackness in the Americas

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Regional and National Divergence in Afro Latin American Identity

"A human skull?" Federico asked anxiously. 'No it was the skull of a Negro', Don Guillermo answered."

(Díaz Sánchez, 68)

In Ramón Díaz Sánchez's famous novel *Cumboto*, which takes place in late XIX century and early XX century rural Venezuela, there is a scene where, when finding a buried skull, the master's son asks whether it is a human skull, to which the father responds that it is not— it is a Negro skull. While reading this, we might be shocked to see the demeaning tone of this statement; yet, the truth is, this scene is representative of the historical and structural power dynamics and sense of superiority that Whites and landowners in Venezuela— and all of Latin America— felt towards their Black and slave counterparts.

Regardless of whether Black populations are viewed as inferior or not, we must step back first and ask ourselves: Where does the idea of Blackness come from? The concept of Blackness in the Americas come from a history of colonization, in which Europeans displaced African blacks to use as slaves in their American colonies. There are many issues to cover under the question of Africanity. Does Blackness equal Africanity and vice versa? To add an additional layer to this conversation in regards to Black populations and their sense of Africanity, we will focus on the idea of Afro Latin America. If we understand that the Black population in Latin America, came as a product of colonialism, being transported from Africa to the "New World,"

we can start to understand the complexity of the Afro-Latino identity. Latin America is known for being a land whose population is a product of the mix of European, Indigenous, and Black populations. This mix of cultures translates into an extremely intricate and complicated sense of Afro-Latinity.

When talking about Afro Latin America, the idea of whether or not it can be understood as a single entity is an important question. This paper argues that, given the diverse set of social, economic, political, and historical conditions in the different Latin American nations and even smaller regions within nations, *it is not possible to offer a monolithic conceptualization of Afro-Latin American identity*. This is due to the fact that every region of Latin America has a diverse set of customs, power dynamics, historical moments, and race distribution that have determined the role that Black identity has been both understood and represented throughout the years. All of this will be explained through the lense of Natividad, the mulatto narrator of the story *Cumboto*, and using Winthrop Wright's analysis of Venezuelan race relations in the book *Café con Leche*¹ and other texts by Frank Tannenbaum,² C.L.R. James,³ George Reid Andrews⁴ and Peter Blanchard,⁵ which offer several historical and analytical perspectives on the history of Latin American race relations. The topics discussed will be: the definition of race, the comparison of Latin America with the United States, the justification of slavery and the history

¹ “*Café con leche*” is a term used by Venezuelans to describe their mixed racial identity. Café (coffee) symbolizing Blackness, and leche (milk) symbolizes Whiteness. Hence, the mix of the two creates a shade of Brown, that is characteristic of Venezuelans, and Latin Americans as a whole, product of the mixture of Black, White and Indigenous peoples.

² Frank Tannenbaum’s *Slave and Citizen* is a comparative study of race relations in the Americas, that poses a comparison between slavery in Latin America and in the United States.

³ C.L.R. James’s *The Black Jacobins*, is the story of Toussaint L’Ouverture and the Haitian Revolution.

⁴ George Reid Andrews’s *Afro-Latin America* recounts the history of the African diaspora in Latin America from emancipation to the present.

⁵ Peter Blanchard’s *Slavery & Abolition in Early Republican Peru* is a historical recount of the history of Afro Peruvian slavery.

of emancipation and abolition, African cultural expressions, the socioeconomic status and moral superiority associated to race, and the implications of Latino identity as a form of assimilation or negation of Africanity.

When analyzing the Afro-Latin American identity— and any racial or ethnic identity— one of the first questions that we must pose, is how will we define race. Reid Andrews states that race is not a scientific fact but a social, cultural and ideological construction (6). Yet, there is also literature that suggests that it is a biological aspects of human races.⁶ For the purposes of this essay, we will focus on the social and cultural implications of being Black, White, Indigenous⁷, Mulatto,⁸ Zambo,⁹ Mestizo¹⁰ or Pardo,¹¹ leaving aside any biological definitions. Moreover, we will relate African identity with being in one way or another associated with Blackness.¹²

When Frank Tannenbaum explains the differences between slavery in Latin America and slavery in the United States, he comes to the conclusion that in the United States slaves were utterly stripped of their humanity, whereas in Latin America they still remained as "people" even though they were slaves (68). There are many problems with this argument. First of all, it is assuming that slavery is justifiable in certain contexts. Blanchard poses a similar argument, when

⁶ See www.biologyreference.com/Ar-Bi/Biology-of-Race.html and www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23684745

⁷ The idea of Indigenous identity and how it influences Latin, and more specifically Afro Latin identity is a constant matter of debate and research. In *Cumboto*, Díaz Sánchez briefly mentions “Indians” in Part I, and with the character of Pastora (80). Although an important element of discussion, given the resources given in these books this essay will focus on the African identity, and mainly its relation to Whiteness.

⁸ *Mulatto* is the offspring of one white parent and one black parent.

⁹ *Zambo* is a term used to refer to a Latin American of black and Native American ancestry, or a person of black and white ancestry.

¹⁰ *Mestizo* in Latin America, is a person of mixed American Indian and European descent

¹¹ *Pardo* is a word used in the Spanish colonies in the Americas to refer to the tri racial descendants of Europeans, Indigenous Americans, and West Africans.

¹² This is a debate we had in class and that there is much literature about. Can Africanity and Blackness be synonymous? What identity does a White African have?

he tries to legitimize slavery because of the economic functions that slaves had for colonial economies, and implies that slavery "was not that bad."¹³ Nonetheless, leaving aside the topic of justification of slavery, Tannenbaum seems to generalize Latin America into a single entity. This overgeneralization is where the problem lies in defining Afro Latinity as a whole. Tannenbaum ends his book by talking about the possibility of a post-racial society in the future, where people will not even understand what our "quarrel" was about (128). Although unrelated to the topic of the conceptualization of Afro Latin identity, when discussing topics of race I consider that this idea he poses is crucial: is a "post-racial" society ever possible?

Moving aside from the oversimplification of the American history of slavery, it is also important to look at the history surrounding wars for Independence and emancipation in Latin America. In *The Black Jacobins*, James recounts the story of the Independence of Haiti.¹⁴ An important factor that James brings to light is that we must understand the Haitian Revolution in the context of the French revolution. It permits us to think about Afro-Latin American identity as definitely intertwined with Europe, because the truth is, the reason an African diaspora initially existed in the Americas, is that they were brought to America because of the economic interests of Europeans. So, the African experience was always tinted by European ideals. Nevertheless, in every Latin American country, the degree of European influence and European pride varied. In Argentina, for example, which had a greater majority of Whites, they have historically liked to present themselves as Euro-Americans, whereas other countries, such as Venezuela and Brazil which had a great percentage of Blacks, have engaged in a more mixed racial identity (Wright 9).

¹³ Discussed in class on Blanchard on October 10th, 2017.

¹⁴ There exists a common debate of whether or not Haiti is part of Latin America. For the purpose of this paper, we will assume that it is.

Continuing on the topic that not all Afro Latinos can be viewed as a single entity, in *Cumboto*, Natividad talks about how he came to understand that all Negroes are not the same, nor even similar, given that even among those who can be called “pure-blooded,” there are differences ranging from physical characteristics to the most subtle variations in intelligence (Díaz Sánchez 101). The narration of the slave Natividad, is a radically different story than the narration about the story of the powerful Toussaint Louverture. Here we can see that not even at a regional level, but at an individual level, depending on multiple factors, the African identity is different. An important question to raise is the following: Does the disappearance of whites from newly independent Haiti imply that color and racial issues are solved once and for all?¹⁵ James says at one point that in Haiti, rivers of blood had to flow for the Independence against Whites (197). The truth is that historical racist biases do not disappear, and social hierarchies in regards to race and socioeconomic status still persist and have an influence in the Afro-Latin American identity. Wright explains how even nowadays most Venezuelan elites do not want their children to marry blacks, for fear of losing important social status as a result (5).

Moving away from Haiti, but still expanding on the topic of historical race relations, one of the most important arguments that Reid Andrews poses is the fact that Afro-Latin America is not a fixed or immutable entity, but rather, it ebbs and flows (5). As with any “identity”– gender, sexual identification, social, economic, cultural, and in this case, racial– many factors come into play when determining what people understand by your identity. In the case of Afro Latinity it definitely depends on specific regions and their historical backgrounds. We must understand that even though African-American¹⁶ identity seems very predominant, during the period of slavery,

¹⁵ Discussed in class on James on September 19th, 2017.

¹⁶ In reference to people of African ancestry in the United States, not in all of the Americas.

ten times as many Africans came to Spanish and Portuguese America as to the United States (Reid Andrews 3). Even inside of Latin America the variation is greatly different. Reid Andrews provides graphs that show the distributions of Black and Mulatto populations in different countries: Brazil, Venezuela, Cuba and Dominican Republic, had a much higher percentage than Ecuador and Peru, for example, which had a more Indigenous presence (156). Even today, the identity of Afro Latinos can vary immensely depending on the location, and the racial distribution and customs of that location. Inside every Latin American country, there are certain regions where the Black population is heavily concentrated.¹⁷ Moreover, given the globalized world we live in nowadays, there also exists the question of whether emigrating to a different country leads individuals to be more “proud” and upfront about their African roots, or to try to deny these roots given that, unfortunately, there still exists a certain level of discrimination in many parts of the World against Blacks.

Reid Andrews mentions how racial markers— skin color, hair, facial features— are not necessarily conclusive in Latin America, where economic success and other forms of upward mobility can “whiten” dark-skinned people in ways that were not the case in the United States. (5). In contrast, when talking about Venezuela, Wright poses an opposite argument. He states that color rather than race, appearance rather than origin, play far more important roles in influencing the Venezuelan perceptions of individuals (3). There are many questions that arise from these statements. First of all, does appearance determine your “Whiteness” or “Blackness,” is it your social status, or is it a specific mix of both factors? Furthermore, what does Whiteness even mean and why is Whiteness associated with the upper class, and with economic security? This is

¹⁷ For example, Barlovento in Venezuela and Bahía in Brazil.

definitely due to Latin America and Africa's histories of colonialism and enslavement. Yet, the degree to which appearance, race, and socioeconomic status play in your role in society, can vary greatly between nations and historical periods.

Additionally, Reid Andrews explains how African forms of music and dance, which were different depending on the region— samba and capoeira in Brazil; rumba and son in Cuba; candombe, milonga and tango in Argentina and Uruguay; merengue in the Dominican Republic (9)— were historically rejected by white elites in so many Latin American countries. To the contrary, in the XX and XXI centuries many of these forms of music, despite the race or class you pertain to, have been glorified in Latino culture and signify an enormous part, of not only Afro-Latin American identity, but of all Latin American culture around the world. This leads us to pose a series of questions: Is this form of embeddedness of African cultural expressions in all Latino culture positive or negative for the Afro Latino identity? Are white and mixed race Latinos appropriating sounds that are not theirs, or is it a beautiful expression of a mixed identity? For the purpose of this paper, I will not go into further details of the implications of music in African identity, but it is very important to think about how cultural representations can seem to glorify or undermine Africanity.

In relation to Reid Andrew's book, we talked a lot about what this multiracial identity of Latinos implies for the Afro Latino population.¹⁸ Many questions came in the debate of what a mixed, white or black identity means for a Latino. One very important point is the idea of identifying as mixed or even using the umbrella term "Latino" as a certain form of negating your blackness. If being more Latino implies you are more mixed, and therefore more White and less

¹⁸ Discussed in class on Reid Andrews on September 28th, 2017.

Black, this brings into question again the concept of racial superiority associated with Whiteness. Going back to *Cumboto*, there are innumerable examples of this sense of White superiority in the novel. From Federico's initial hesitation to approach the black Pascua, which is unclear whether it is out of shyness or racial prejudice (Díaz Sánchez 204), to Grandmother Anita's clear understanding of what her destiny was as a Black woman in Venezuela when she states that she knew that white was white and black was black, and that the black man was destined to be the slave of the white man (Díaz Sánchez 118). Definitely the identification as a Latino, depending on whether you are White-passing, or are viewed as Black, can act as either a negation or a celebration of Blackness. The implications of this self-identification vary greatly between countries, and also between regions of the United States.

Continuing on the topic of conceptualizing all Afro Latin Americans as a whole, it is important to note that Africans, before coming to America, were considered part of different regions or nations and not this overall term "African."¹⁹ Regardless, when they were displaced from their home continent, they were generalized into one group alone. Although this paper is exploring the reasons why there are many differences between *Afro Latin* identities, it is crucial to understand that the same happens with "pure" African identity.

Going back to the more specific historical perspective, in Peter Blanchard's historical account of the abolition of slavery in Peru, we can come to see how slaves did differ in different nations. Blanchard talks about Peruvian slaves having "certain advantages" in comparison with neighboring countries; yet, they were still property and still subject to the whims of their owners (63). One of the differences between Peru and other countries, was that abolition was less

¹⁹ Discussed in class on Andrews on September 26th, 2017.

violent, yet the process was inefficient and took over 30 years. By the end of the book, Blanchard seems to imply that we "should give them credit for non-violence." This relates to Tannenbaum's idea of "good" slavery in Latin America. Following up on the point previously stated, I consider that it is of utter importance to note that, regardless of the situation of "better" or "worse" slavery, ownership and enslavement of human beings is never justifiable.

One of the most important points that Blanchard addresses is the idea that although *libertad* can mean freedom for the nation; it does not mean freedom for all the people who made up that nation (1). In other words, Independence for nations in Latin America did not automatically translate in a fair and equal society. This ties to the idea of "racial democracy"²⁰ and the difference between "freedom on paper" and actual social customs and practices of equality between individuals. For example, the *Law of the Free Womb*²¹ seems revolutionary on paper, but in practice, it was not truly feasible for a young boy or girl, whose parents were slaves, to live a free and economically stable life without relying on some other form of unjust work conditions. Moreover, similar to James's story of Toussaint Louverture, this book seemed to imply that sometimes not enough credit is given to slaves in process of abolition and Independence. Abolition was "not just men signing documents,"²² but rather a full social and racial revolution.

Moving away from the topic of the history of slavery, and more into what this history of colonialism created in terms of the racial composition of the population, we will now pass on to

²⁰ Discussed in class on Wright on October 12th, 2017.

²¹ *Freedom of wombs* (in Spanish *Libertad de vientres*), also referred to as free birth, was a judicial principle applied in several countries in South America in the 19th century; it freed slaves' children at birth, rather than having them become the property of the parents' owners. Although intended to be a gradual abolition of slavery, the principle was unevenly applied and many countries did not follow through with full abolition.

²² Discussed in class on Blanchard on October 10th, 2017.

further explore the concept of “mixture,” its implications for Afro Latin American identity, and how it varies between countries. This idea that Latin America is primarily defined by its mixture of races raises important questions. Is miscegenation and mixture implicitly a form of “whitening” the population, or is it a natural human phenomenon that occur when several racial groups live in the same space? Moreover, what implications does this have in gender dynamics? There is a Brazilian saying that states that “black women are for work, mulatto for sex, white for marriage.”²³ Without going too much into detail about gender relations, we can clearly see here a power dynamic between men’s preference over women.²⁴

Heading back to Winthrop Wright's *Café con Leche*, this book explains many aspects of race relations in Latin America, and also the differences between nations. In the first chapter, Wright presents of with the idea of racial discrimination existing on a spectrum. He states that if a scale existed for measuring the relative amounts of racial prejudice and discrimination found in Latin American nations, Venezuela and Argentina would sit near opposite poles (Argentina being the most discriminatory, and Venezuela the least), and Brazil would fall somewhere between them, closer to Venezuela than to Argentina (Wright 9). This presents us with the common misconception that Venezuela is a form of "racial utopia," which is far from the truth. As Wright explains, Venezuelans have substituted, in their own minds, economic discrimination for racial discrimination (131). In other words, “*there is classism, but not racism,*” a common idea that Venezuelans repeat.²⁵ Venezuela is a very important nation to be used to understand Afro-Latin American identity, given that it is a clear example of the "silent racism"²⁶ that exists in many

²³ Discussed in class on Wright on October 12th, 2017.

²⁴ The topic of intersectionality between gender and race is a very important and researched topic, but for the purpose of this essay, because of time and space constraints, we will not go into further debate.

²⁵ From personal experience growing up in Caracas, Venezuela.

²⁶ Discussed in class on Wright on October 10th, 2017.

Latin American regions; they refuse to acknowledge that racism exists and use classism to achieve a “post-racial” society. Yet, even though racism is a lot more subtle and nuanced than in the United States, it is definitely still there. Moreover, even in comparison with Cuba and Brazil, midcentury Venezuela had no black political organizations as such, and only citizens of mixed racial origin made significant contributions (Wright 113). Here we can see how political participation of Afro Latin Americans also varied greatly.

Furthermore, Wright explains to us how Venezuela tried to increase European immigration, and denied African or Caribbean immigration, as a means of “whitening” the population (Wright 44). As Wright says, Venezuelans wanted only a little café with their leche (131)– in the metaphor that black is coffee, and white is milk, Venezuelans have tried to use a bit more milk to “improve” society. As Grandmother Anita in *Cumboto* tells the story: a man married a white girl to “improve the race” (Díaz Sánchez 51). This exemplifies the “it’s ok to be black, just not too black” mentality present in Venezuela and other countries. Also in *Cumboto*, the character of Fernando Arguindegui says that his father was convinced that the Negro had to emancipate himself from the protection of the white man, but mainly from the horrible pigment (Blackness) that is more degrading than any sin (Díaz Sánchez 216). This is a clear example of colorism²⁷ and moralistic views on skin color and race. This also relates to the previous topic of whether identifying as Latino, given this amoral view of Blackness, is a way to separate yourself from Blackness. Moreover, Wright also talks about how being of a higher socioeconomic status achieves greater Whiteness, which ties back to the idea of how the history of power relations between Whites and Blacks have led us to associate whiteness with economic prosperity.²⁸

²⁷ Discrimination based on skin color.

²⁸ While posing this analysis, as a “white-passing” Latina, I even came to ask myself whether or not I identify as Latina or as exclusively white, for my benefit, given certain situations.

Cumboto has many other elements that speak to race relations in Latin America. The romance between Don Federico and Pascua, is representative of the whole history of sexual relations between mixed races, that gave rise to the huge population of mulattoes, and then the further mixture of the three races: Indigenous, Black, and White. The part in which Natividad questions himself whether he had lived like a man, and comes to the conclusion that he was no more than Federico's reflection, and even something less than a dog, because dogs have a certain amount of free will (Díaz Sánchez 241), is clearly a representation of the little amount of free will that slaves had with their owners. An important question to ask is: Is it always the case that power relations come up in mixed friendships?²⁹ I would argue that they did, and even nowadays they do. Lastly, the character of Pastora, the indigenous girl that was abused sexually by so many men, and that existed purely as an object, also serves to exemplify the way in which Indigenous people, and women, were (and are still) considered inferior.

In spite of all of the reasons that previously explain why we cannot offer a monolithic conceptualization of Afro Latin America, we must take into account that there do exist any elements in common for Afro Latino identity and culture. The explanation that Tannenbaum gives us that, at least on paper many Latin American countries had less class division, is true to a certain extent. Moreover, it is also true that Latin American countries had a greater level of miscegenation than the United States, creating more racial mixture, that, as we explained before, could have served as a way to help countries better assimilate and nurture their African roots and ancestry. In reference to Blanchard's statement about all slaves having to answer to the wills of

²⁹ Discussed in class on *Cumboto*, on October 17th, 2017.

their owners, we can also see a similarity between all African slaves in America, regardless of their region.

Coming back to *Cumboto*, it was never clear who was the mother of the mulatto slave Natividad. In the chapter *Grandmother Anita's Trunk* (Díaz Sánchez 244) there are a series of letters that seem to imply that Doña Beatriz, the white wife of Don Guillermo the landowner, had an affair with a black man and had a child, which can leave us to imply that Doña Beatriz could be Natividad's mother. This whole story of Natividad's lineage serves as a metaphor for race relations in Latin America. Having two sons, Federico and Natividad, of a similar age, one was recognized as superior over the other, because of his "pure" White race, and because his father was the landowner. Even though it is mentioned that Natividad and Federico were *like* brothers, (Díaz Sánchez 168) Federico is portrayed as superior.

The truth is, *there is no single definition for Afro-Latin Americans*. If there is one thing that is important to understand about Afro Latin America, is that it has a complicated history of unspoken racism and racial mixture that make it difficult to forge a unified identity, not only as Afro Latinos, but also as Latinos in general. We must understand the different historical dimensions of colonialism, concepts of social class, and the way that appearance relates to class dynamics. The concept of Latin Americans as being "multiracial" does not eliminate racism against Blacks, but can even exacerbate it in a different way, because of the sense of White superiority associated with the idea that the whiter you are on the the spectrum the more socially acceptable you are. Once again I must pose the question: Is a post-racial society truly possible, given what we now know about the history of race relations? As long as there are individuals that say that a Negro skull is not a human skull, I must say I find this to be impossible.

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