

AFRO-LATIN AMERICA, 1800–2000

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INTRODUCTION

“New Census Shows Hispanics Now Even with Blacks,” the headline proclaimed. Documenting a profound shift in the racial and ethnic composition of American society, the 2000 census of the United States showed that, as a result of continuing immigration from Latin America, during the 1990s the national Hispanic population had grown by more than 60 percent. For the first time ever, the country’s 35.3 million Hispanic residents now slightly exceeded the black population of 34.7 million.¹

Quietly elided in such a report is the fact that “blacks” and “Hispanics” are not necessarily separate groups. In the nations of Latin America, people of African ancestry are an estimated one-quarter of the total population. Indeed, the heart of the New World African diaspora lies not north of the border, in the United States, but south. During the period of slavery, ten times as many Africans came to Spanish and Portuguese America (5.7 million) as to the United States (560,000). By the end of the 1900s, Afro-Latin Americans outnumbered Afro-North Americans by three to one (110 million and 35 million, respectively) and formed, on average, almost twice as large a proportion of their respective populations (22 percent in Latin America, 12 percent in the United States).²

Especially as ties of immigration, commerce, tourism, and culture bind the two regions ever more closely together, it seems obvious that we need histories of Latin America’s African diaspora comparable to those of the United States’s African diaspora.³ This book is an effort to provide such a history.

I first encountered the term “Afro-Latin America” in the late 1970s, in articles by two political scientists, Anani Dzidzienyo and Pierre-Michel Fontaine.⁴ It struck me as a brilliant coinage. Latin American writers and intellectuals had long been referring to their fellow citizens of African ancestry as Afro-Brazilians, Afro-Cubans, Afro-Venezuelans, and so on;⁵ from this usage the concept of a larger, transregional category of Afro-Latin Americans followed naturally. To the best of

my knowledge, however, no one before Dzidzienyo and Fontaine had thought to transform plural Afro-Brazilians or Afro-Cubans into a singular Afro-Brazil or Afro-Cuba, let alone an all-embracing Afro-Latin America.⁶

Fontaine used the term to “designate all regions of Latin America where significant groups of people of known African ancestry are found.”⁷ This requires some further definition, starting with “Latin America.” In keeping with customary usage both in that region and in the United States, I define Latin America as that group of American nations ruled from the 1500s through the 1800s by Spain or Portugal. Note that this leaves out the English- and French-speaking Caribbean countries, such as Jamaica, Haiti, and Barbados. These countries are very much part of the New World African diaspora, and their proximity to the islands of the Spanish Caribbean (Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico), to Central America, and to northern South America involves them directly in the history of the region. But for the purposes of this study, they do not form part of Afro-Latin America.

The second term requiring definition is “significant.” Fontaine clearly meant this is in a quantitative or numerical sense but did not specify numbers. In this book I have set the threshold of “significance” at people of African ancestry constituting 5–10 percent (or more) of the population for that region or nation to become part of Afro-Latin America. This seems to be the level at which “blackness” becomes a visible element in systems of social stratification and inequality, and at which African-based culture—patterns of sociability and group expression—becomes a visible part of national life.

People of African ancestry are not the only ones who live in Afro-Latin America, of course. Whites, Indians, Asians, and racially mixed people live there, too, often (and since 1900, almost always) outnumbering the black population. Whether majority or minority, however, the black presence marks a specific historical experience shared by almost all the societies of Afro-Latin America: the experience of plantation agriculture and African slavery. As the citizens of present-day Afro-Latin America struggle to escape the economic heritage of poverty and dependency left by plantation agriculture, they do so under the shadow of the social heritage of racial and class inequality left by slavery. This requires them to define their relationship to “blackness,” the most visible and obvious indicator of low social status. They must also decide whether, and to what degree, they wish to participate in forms of black cultural expression that have long been regarded by local and national elites as primitive and barbaric but have increasingly formed the basis of popular and mass culture in the region. All of these make the African inheritance of the plantation zones, and the issues of race and “blackness,” as inescapable for the white, mestizo, and Indian inhabitants of Afro-Latin America as for those of African ancestry.

Fontaine's definition also implies movement and change in the boundaries of Afro-Latin America over time. Afro-Latin America is not a fixed or immutable entity; rather, it ebbs and flows, though the tendency has clearly been for it to contract over time. Countries that in 1800 were majority black and mulatto—such as Brazil, Cuba, and Puerto Rico—by 1900 or 2000 no longer were so. Other countries that in 1800 had formed part of Afro-Latin America—such as Argentina, Mexico, and Peru—by 1900 or 2000 were no longer part of the region, as their black and mulatto populations fell below the 5 percent threshold. This is not to say that people of African ancestry disappeared from those countries or ceased to exist. Their absolute numbers, in fact, may even be greater today than they were in 1800 (though the lack of racial census data in those countries makes it impossible to prove this point). And while, for example, Mexico and Peru as a whole no longer qualify for inclusion in Afro-Latin America, specific subregions where black populations remain heavily concentrated—such as the coastal states of Veracruz and Guerrero in Mexico, and Ica in Peru—still do.⁸

Why has the proportional representation of the black population tended to decline throughout the region over time? Part of the explanation can be found in material causes: higher death rates and lower life expectancies for blacks than for whites, European immigration into the region, and other factors. But declines in the percentages of Latin Americans who identify themselves or are considered by others to be “black” had cultural causes as well, and these causes center on the third key term that Fontaine left unspecified: What constitutes a group, or for that matter a person, “of known African ancestry”? Even in the United States, answering this question has become more complex and difficult in recent years. In Latin America, where racial boundaries have historically been much more fluid and flexible than in the United States, the complexities and ambiguities of a person's racial identity are greater still. 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.⁹

How then do we “know” who in Latin America is of African ancestry and who is not? We “know” simply by accepting what natives of the region tell us. Any individuals described by themselves or by others as “black” (*negro* or, in Brazil, *preto*) or “brown” (*pardo*) or “mulatto” will be considered, for the purposes of this study, to be “of known African ancestry.”¹⁰

Such a procedure has several possible drawbacks. Some may question whether racially mixed pardos are really “of known African ancestry.” The very concept of “brownness” indicates that Latin Americans draw a distinction between people of mixed and unmixed African ancestry and see them as separate groups. To lump them into a single “black” category is in effect to impose North

American racial concepts on a part of the world where racial practices and categories are quite different.

Although “brownness” and “blackness” are distinct, both categories marked “impure,” “unclean,” socially contaminated ancestry—which is to say, African ancestry. During the colonial period this was true both at the level of formal state directives and in the popular mind, where blacks and browns were characterized by images and stereotypes that were somewhat different but in both cases overwhelmingly negative. Even after the colonial racial laws were struck down in the 1800s, these negative images of people of African ancestry persisted, regardless of whether that ancestry was mixed or unmixed.

Pardo racial status was created precisely in order to bar individuals who could claim European ancestry from the full benefits of whiteness. Like blackness, brownness was thus clearly differentiated from whiteness and imposed significant social disabilities on its members. Furthermore, as race mixture has progressed in the region over time, brownness rather than blackness has become the principal marker of African ancestry and nonwhite racial status.¹¹ And as research on the largest country of Afro-Latin America has made clear, racially mixed pardos suffer from racial barriers and discrimination very similar, both in degree and kind, to those suffered by pretos.¹²

This book is not about race as a scientific, genetic fact. It hardly could be, since race is *not* a scientific fact but a social, cultural, and ideological “construction”—a set of ideas—through which societies have sought to organize, structure, and understand themselves.¹³ This book examines how Latin American societies have used ideas about race to reserve wealth and power for those members defined as “white” and to deny those goods to members defined as “black” and “brown.” This is why, in his definition of Afro-Latin America, Fontaine referred to people of *known* African ancestry rather than simply to people of African ancestry. Society had to recognize them as African, and it signaled that recognition through the use of the color terms “brown” and “black.”

The question of who is of known African ancestry and who is not raises a second possible definition of Afro-Latin America. While Fontaine’s definition focused on places or societies with significant populations of African ancestry, an alternative definition of Afro-Latin America would focus not on a geographical region but, rather, on those groups and individuals identified, either by themselves or by the society in which they exist, as being of African ancestry. In a number of ways, this second definition is in direct contradiction to the first. The first is racially inclusive—again, most of its “Afro-Latin Americans” are not black or brown—and “Latin America-centric” in its emphasis on local demographic and social conditions. The second does not ignore those local conditions; local usage, after all, determines who is considered nonwhite. But it is primarily dias-

poric rather than local in its orientation; and it is racially exclusive, rather than inclusive.

Which Afro-Latin America is this book about: Afro-Latin America as a multiracial society based on the historical experience of plantation society, or Afro-Latin America as the largest single component of the overseas African diaspora? Unavoidably, it is about both, which, in turn, requires care and consistency of terminology to avoid ambiguity. Thus, in this book, I use “Afro-Latin America” in the racially inclusive, “Latin America-centric” sense to refer to those regions or societies where people of African ancestry constituted at least 5 to 10 percent of the total population. I use the term “Afro-Latin Americans,” however, in the racially exclusive, diasporic sense to refer to those individuals considered by themselves or by others to be “brown” or “black”—and therefore “of known African ancestry.”

Both meanings, and both phenomena, are equally important. The former plantation zones of Latin America were powerfully and irrevocably shaped by the presence of Africans and their descendants. If we wish to understand how the societies, economies, political systems, and cultures of those regions came to be what they are today, we must study the people who did much of the shaping: the members of the African diaspora. However, that diaspora did not form and act in a vacuum. From the very beginning of their presence in the New World, Africans and their descendants lived under the severest of constraints: those of slavery. As in the United States, black slavery persisted in Latin America into the second half of the 1800s. Even as Afro-Latin Americans made their way into freedom, first as individuals and later as a people, they found themselves further constrained by Spanish and Portuguese racial laws, by racism, and by poverty.

Previous attempts to synthesize Afro-Latin American history, all published in the 1960s and 1970s, tended to emphasize the limitations imposed on black action by those structural constraints.¹⁴ More recent research published in the 1980s and 1990s, however, not only has shed new light on previously unknown areas of the Afro-Latin American past but also has suggested new approaches to black history in the region, as well as new possibilities for synthesis. While acknowledging the importance of structural conditions—the economy, the political system, long-standing conditions of social inequality—scholarship of the last 20 years has tended to focus much more on slave and free black “agency” and their ability to take action against the structural and human forces that oppressed them.¹⁵

In the case of slavery, such actions ranged from the obvious, violent, and aggressive—flight, rebellion, theft, assault—to more subtle, “everyday” forms of response: negotiations with masters, speeding up or slowing down work rhythms, appealing to state courts and officials, forming family units, and developing African-based cultural practices.¹⁶ None of these responses succeeded in produc-

ing the changes in living and working conditions that slaves sought; rather, they produced complicated and contradictory results that moved slavery in directions that neither masters nor slaves had foreseen. Slave actions thus had powerful effects on the course of colonial and nineteenth-century Latin American history, effects that continued far beyond emancipation and the abolition of slavery. And forms of behavior that originated during slavery—negotiation with powerful patrons, collective labor actions, the struggle to form families, African-based cultural forms—proved unexpectedly durable and long-lasting, and continued to shape the course of Afro-Latin American history, and therefore of Latin American history, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Both histories are the product of the ever-evolving interplay between structural constraints and human thought, will, and action. This book is an effort to explore both sides of the relationship between macrolevel structure and microlevel human action, and especially the interactions between the two. How have larger structural conditions determined, limited, or expanded the opportunities available to Afro-Latin Americans? How have Afro-Latin Americans responded to those opportunities? And how have those responses, in turn, modified larger structures of economy, government, and society? Or to put those questions another way: How did Latin America set the terms on which the African diaspora in the region made its history? And in making its history, how did the diaspora transform Latin America, turning vast areas of it into Afro-Latin America?

In trying to provide answers to those questions, this book pays particular attention to the broad range of institutions and collective practices that Afro-Latin Americans forged as part of their struggle to construct lives of their own choosing. Some of those institutions and practices correspond to the racially inclusive, “Latin America-centric” definition of Afro-Latin America and represent instances in which blacks and mulattoes joined with whites, Indians, and mestizos to create multiracial movements that had profound impacts on the region. These include the independence armies, the national Liberal parties of the 1800s and early 1900s, the labor unions of the same period, and the populist parties and movements of the mid-1900s.

Other institutions and practices constructed by people of color correspond more closely to the racially exclusive, diasporic definition of Afro-Latin America. These include, in the late 1700s and early 1800s, runaway slave communities, black militias, and African-based mutual aid societies and religious congregations. By the late 1800s and early 1900s, middle-class Afro-Latin Americans were creating a rich array of racially defined social and athletic clubs, cultural and civic organizations, newspapers, and political parties. And by the end of the 1900s, race-based organizing had taken the form of resurgent black civil rights movements, recalling the clubs and organizations of a century earlier.

Other movements were initially diasporic in character but evolved over time to become pan-racial in their appeal. African-based forms of music, dance, and corporal movement—samba and capoeira in Brazil; rumba and son in Cuba; candombe, milonga, and tango in Argentina and Uruguay; merengue in the Dominican Republic—were rejected by white elites and middle classes in the 1800s as primitive, barbaric, and bordering on the criminal; in the 1900s these same dances were embraced as core symbols of national cultural identity. The same was true of African-based religions—Santería, Candomblé, Umbanda—that by the 1900s were winning millions of new adherents, many of them white.

Through these various organizations, institutions, and practices, people of color have played a central and crucial role in transforming the political, social, and cultural life of the region. Not only have they created much of what defines modern Latin American culture, but also they have driven forward a process of social reform and political democratization that has been at the heart of Latin America's political development over the last two hundred years. The history of the African diaspora in Latin America is thus inseparable from the history of the national and regional societies that it is part of. Just as African-American history can be read as the struggle of the United States to realize its highest civic and moral ideals, so, too, is Afro-Latin American history an integral part, and perfect reflection, of Latin America's struggle over the last two centuries to escape the limits imposed on it by poverty, racism, and extreme inequality.



This book begins with an extended look at Afro-Latin America at the end of the colonial period. After a survey of the political economy of slavery, chapter 1 examines the multiple ways in which slaves responded to their situation, employing a repertoire of tactics and strategies that were strikingly similar from one part of the region to another. And the results were surprisingly comparable as well: by 1800 slave resistance had succeeded in creating a web of runaway communities that stretched across Afro-Latin America, as well as free black and brown populations that dwarfed those of British, French, and Dutch America and, in most of the region, were larger than the slave population itself.

Free blacks and mulattoes had much greater freedom to organize collectively than slaves, and they used that freedom to create Catholic religious brotherhoods, extended families, African-based mutual aid societies and religions, and state-sponsored militia units. Militia service in particular paved the way for extensive black participation in the wars of independence, which in most of Spanish America were fought and won in large part by soldiers and officers of color. Those wars, dealt with in chapters 2 and 3, and the Liberal-Conservative political struggles that followed, produced a massive wave of social and political reform in the region as Afro-Latin Americans first overturned slavery and the colonial

racial laws and then pushed on to demand the full benefits of citizenship and legal equality.

Conditions were different in Brazil and Puerto Rico, which did not experience independence wars, and in Cuba, where islanders did not strike for independence until the second half of the 1800s. Thus, while slavery was being eliminated from mainland Spanish America, it was expanding and reaching its highest levels ever in Brazil and the Spanish Caribbean. Continuing imports of African slaves reinforced the presence of African-based cultural institutions in those countries, including African national associations, religious congregations, capoeira gangs, and, not least, runaway slave communities.

By the end of the 1800s, slavery had been abolished throughout Latin America, and the societies of the region were attempting to escape the legacy of the experience of slavery by “whitening” and “Europeanizing” themselves. While some countries—Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, Uruguay—succeeded in attracting millions of European immigrants and altering their racial composition, most did not. In fact, for Panama, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, and other countries that received hundreds of thousands of immigrants from the British and French West Indies, this was a period not of “whitening” but of “blackening.” Chapter 4 looks at the consequences of both developments, and of the export-based economic growth that took place during those years, for local societies and their citizens of African ancestry.

One of the principal black responses to the turn-of-the-century “export boom” was to join in the work of building labor movements that were multiracial in character. Chapter 5 explains how these movements went on to form the social and electoral base for the populist regimes that by the 1930s and 1940s had come to power in most of Latin America. Turn-of-the-century “whitening” was now displaced by new imaginings of Latin American nations as egalitarian “racial democracies.” The ideology of racial democracy, and intensifying industrialization and urbanization, combined to create unprecedented opportunities for black upward mobility in much of the region. But widespread racial prejudice and discrimination continued to impede black advancement, leading in the final decades of the century to a new wave of racially defined black political mobilization in Brazil, Colombia, and other countries.

Chapter 6, the concluding chapter, considers the current moment in Afro-Latin American history, examining the combined impacts of neoliberalism and democratization on black populations in the region and speculating on possible future directions of change.