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Author

Gonzalez de Allen, Gertrude

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From the Caribbean to the U.S.: Afro-Latinity in Changing Contexts

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GERTRUDE GONZALEZ DE ALLEN
SPELMAN COLLEGE

This essay, which engages Afro-Latin identity as it shifts from the Caribbean to a mainland U.S. context, begins with an acknowledgement of its challenges. The first is race. This challenge lies in accounting for the changes in perception, understanding and use of racial categories as subjectivity shifts location. The second is culture. Since this essay addresses Afro-Latin identity as it moves through various national contexts, this analysis must necessarily have a trans-national dimension.[1] The challenge is to account for cultures within cultures, given that Caribbean and U.S. mainland cultural spaces are not monolithic. The third is migration. This challenge lies in identifying rhythms, movements, and their fragmentations, disruptions, and gatherings.

Despite the fact that there are similarities between race in the Caribbean and the United States, there are also differences. A dimension of U.S. race relations that can be seen as repeated in the Caribbean is the way in which racism exists to protect white privilege. However, in the Caribbean, one added dimension of race relations is an ever-present colonial power transformed: the transformation is either as an owner of the island(s), as is the case with the Virgin Islands (which the U.S. bought from Denmark), as an extension of the colonial government through commonwealth or an oversees department, or as a latent influence exercised by a former colonial power. This latent influence may manifest as economic, political, and/or cultural dominance; for example, England may still exercise influence over Jamaica, Barbados or Trinidad, although these islands are independent. Despite the fact that commonwealth status gives Puerto Ricans greater control over their internal political affairs and ethnic and cultural identity, these freedoms are limited by U.S. legal, constitutional, military, diplomatic, and economic sovereignty. The race hierarchy seen in the United States and whose residue is found in the Caribbean and in any former colonized region is splintered by the uniqueness of the Caribbean as a region, and even more so by the individual resonance of cultural, social and economic rhythms of the particular group of islands to which one may refer. This means that the Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, Jamaica, and the Dominican Republic may have similar dimensions of race, but that there are "unique particulars" as well. This essay attempts to begin to address this notion of unique "particulars of race." What does the term "unique particulars" mean? Within this context, it means nuances such as history, economy, migratory patterns, ethnic diversity and culture.

Although race is a very important component of this essay, it is not the main focus or emphasis. This essay is also about showing how conversations about Afro-Latin descendants living in the Caribbean, Latin America and the United States must be seen as a valuable component of

Diaspora studies, dialogues about identity, thinking through colonial, post-colonial and de-colonial problems and ideologies, as well as Africana philosophy. As such, this essay contributes to the de-colonial turn by advancing the constructive engagement with Afro-Latin thinkers and their conversations with Africana and Latin American philosophy. I will begin by summarizing elements of another essay, "Discourse of Memory," where I explore some key ideas related to the problems that I am engaging here. Second, I will elaborate on the question of what happens when Afro-Latinity as a concept enters U.S. discourse. Finally, I will show what this discourse has to offer Afro-Caribbean and Latin American philosophy.

1. Summary of "The Discourse of Memory"

In the essay "Discourse of Memory," I explore how the works of Afro-Latin American writers, Manuel Zapata Olivella (Colombia), Quince Duncan (Costa Rica) and Nelson Estupiñán Bass (Ecuador), converse with existing and pre-existing theoretical and philosophical discourses in Latin America, Europe and the African Diaspora. It argues that there exists a vibrant theoretical discourse within the Afro-Latin American intellectual tradition that has been ignored by contemporary African-American and Latin American philosophy. This work is necessary, because although Zapata Olivella, Duncan, and Estupiñán Bass are accomplished creative writers and essayists, to date much of the examination of their work has focused on their literary, cultural, and political production. The notion that these writers are also thinkers with philosophical import has been largely ignored.

This project is inspired by Paget Henry's *Caliban's Reason: Introducing Afro-Caribbean Philosophy,* which argues that a philosophical tradition exists in the Caribbean, among its creative writers, essayists, historians, and critical cultural theorists. "Discourse of Memory" arrives at a similar conclusion about the Afro-Latin American intellectual tradition. The conclusion is that there exists philosophical import in the work of Afro-Latin intellectuals, particularly its essayists, that is worth serious consideration. Manuel Zapata Olivella, Quince Duncan and Nelson Estupiñán Bass were chosen from among many Afro-Latin writers because they have produced a large body of essays, creative writing and interviews that are more easily accessible (from the U.S.) and clearly point to the ways in which each author converses with the Africana philosophical tradition.

Certainly, Zapata Olivella, Duncan, and Estupiñán Bass are not trained philosophers. This fact should not deter the reader from seeing the ways in which they are philosophical, since philosophy—particularly Afro-Diasporic philosophy—can be and is often rooted in discourses about daily life. About this issue, Paget Henry writes the following in his book, *Caliban's Reason*:

> From the Afro-Caribbean perspective, philosophy is an intertextually embedded discursive practice, and not an isolated or absolutely autonomous one. It is often implicitly referenced or engaged in the production of answers to everyday questions and problems that are being framed in nonphilosophical discourses. (2)

As Henry argues, one does not need to be a trained philosopher to be philosophical. In addition, philosophy is not always practiced as an independent self-sustained discourse; instead, it is often the opposite, i.e., set in discourses about daily life. After careful examination of these three writers, it becomes evident that Zapata Olivella's, Duncan's, and Estupiñán Bass's writings contained general philosophical themes and pre-occupations that address the same issues and questions found in Africana thought and more specifically shows influence and conversations with Africana and Latin American philosophical discourses.

Memory is a major thread that links Zapata Olivella, Duncan, and Estupiñán Bass to a broader diasporic and global conversation, as well as serving as the everyday life thematic from which other theoretical questions emerge. Some of the important questions tackled by Zapata Olivella, Duncan, and Estupiñán Bass include: Are Latin Americans, particularly Afro-Latin Americans free? Do God and/or the ancestors exist as sources of knowledge? What is truth for a colonized subject? Can truth be known through reason or intuition? Is memory able to provide the knowledge needed to survive and prosper? Does the individual have rights vis-à-vis the state? And, what is the function of punishment?

2. When Afro-Latinity Enters U.S. Discourse about Identity

When Afro-Latinity enters U.S. discourse, it dissipates into one of several tropes of identity and political discourses. First, Afro-Latinity engages the discourse of race. Out of this engagement comes the question: what does it mean to be Black in the U.S.? The question of Blackness and its implications in this context are crucial when moving from one cultural context to the next. Although Afro-descendants are disenfranchised all around the world, race distinctions and their meanings vary on different continents, and in different regions, national and political cultures. Understanding Blackness within the context of history and politics in the United States is necessary in this evaluation. More important than the U.S. context are the ways in which Blackness shifts and changes across regions as the Afro-Latin subject transforms her way of interpreting Blackness and the changing climate. Second, Afro-Latinity enters the discourse of ethnic and cultural identity. When it becomes evident that an Afro-Latin person is not an African-American, questions about ethnic and cultural identity arise. The citizenry insists on knowing the other elements of the subject's identity location. They ask: are you Hispanic, Latina, Chicana, Iberian? Third and finally, Afro-Latin subjects also dialogue with the discourse of national identity. This means that they engage the question: are you Puerto Rican, Virgin Islander, Dominican, Cuban, Costa Rican, American, etc.? In this exchange, national and cultural loyalties are investigated and even tested.

In addition to the aforementioned questions of identity location, Afro-subjects are forced into identity categories without choice. This means that in a new national community, there is an external over-determination. Among the first identity determinations is race, which in a U.S. context supersedes ethnicity; that is, it is given more importance as an identity marker than ethnicity.

In the book *Racist Culture Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning,* David Theo Goldberg argues that racialized discourse changes (as a discourse and as an expression) when a variety of new concerns are generated by and from modernity (43). To this idea, I add that racialized discourse also shifts for the subject when crossing psycho/social borders such as culture, class and migration history and when altering geography within and without a nation state. Evidence of this pervasiveness can be found in the situating of subjects based on notions of phenotype rather than on expressions of individual character. Of course, phenotype is also linked to what Goldberg calls pre-conceptual elements of racialized discourse: "classification, order, value, and hierarchy" (49). In practical terms, the "classification value and hierarchy" may have linked race to class. Ultimately, the body that is racialized becomes an abstract entity. For Goldberg, this means that in modernity "subjectless bodies were thus dramatically transformed into bodies of subjection" (50). This grammar or order in which "Black" bodies in particular were classified, remains an integral part of identity-construction and racialized discourse in the contemporary United States. In this grammar of racialized subjection, the body is nothing but an empty shell to which all others respond. It is absent of personhood—the second person—the "You." In the essay "Sociality and Community in Black: A Phenomenological Essay," Lewis Gordon argues that the "You" is "peculiarly absent in discussions of race and racism" (112). Part of this absence, he contends, is related to an "ontological suspension" where general perceptions and ideas about an object or subject ("thematization") rather than its being ("what something is") are conversed with and emphasized (112). In entering the racist culture of the United States, the transition may be very difficult, especially if the Afro-subject comes from a place where a sense of self has been strongly defined in a community where sociality predominates over excessive individualism.[2] Lack of awareness of this shift in perception of the "You" might mean that an Afro-Latin subject may have to live in "ontological suspension." This is a hazard of moving into the U.S.'s unique anti-black context.

In the U.S. context, difference has multiple categories such as class, age, sex, race, sexuality, etc. These categories can serve to mask the central role race has had in identifying distinction. These distinctions are subtle yet nefarious, labeled silly and no longer in existence, but nevertheless remain at the core of day-to-day social relations. This is the reason why in the Northern United States, I might be perceived mostly as a Black subject, but in the Southern United States I am clearly a "fair-skinned" Black subject. Despite the fact that many would insist that there is no difference—because to be "Black is to be Black"—some might argue, today shadism still matters in some Black communities, particularly in southern areas of the United States. It also matters in places like Cape Town, South Africa, where the so-called "coloureds" currently struggle to redefine themselves in a changing political, social, and economic climate, and where activists continue to work against racial hierarchies in a post-apartheid system.

According to Goldberg, "difference and identity inhere in the concept of race," adding that "domination of a particular race is established in respect to a series of differences from other individuals or groups and by virtue of a series of identities between those considered alike" (51). In contemporary U.S. racial politics, particularly in the South, to be "white" still has more relevance for day-to-day privileged relations than whether an individual is of German, English or French ancestry, because it is "whiteness" that garners the privilege rather than the ethnic identification. Similarly, to be perceived as "Black" has more consequence than to be known as African, Haitian, Costa Rican, or American. Police brutality against Black men is pervasive and does not discriminate on the basis of ethnicity. Senseless treatment of Black men by police officers in the late twentieth century continues. For this reason, racial over-determination from without is a first relational identity marker that Afro-Latin subjects must contend with when moving into a U.S. context. In practical terms, this means what Lewis Gordon indicates: "Blacks are forced to take extra-ordinary measures to live ordinary lives; an ordinary life, after all, should not involve expected encounters with the criminal justice system" (Gordon 118).

When entering into a U.S. context, an Afro-descendant is first identified as a "Black" entity (without question). This racial identification is both empty and filled with meaning. It is empty for the arrivant in the sense that she may not fully understand and/or relate to the situated connotations carried by the term. However, the term "Black" is always already designated with meaning within the host country. More sophisticated and informed evaluators of the Afro-subject may identify her ethnicity (Hispanic or Latina), but not before the presence of some other marker, such as language barriers, accent, dress, mannerism, cultural references, etc. For many Afro-Latinos who migrate to the U.S., there exists a tension between race and ethnicity. Racial identity not only denotes political and social class, but also has cultural undertones. In the U.S., race and culture are so closely linked that there are often used interchangeably. This can be seen in the phrases: "she does not act 'Black'" and "she acts white." The ambiguity created by the multiple functions and meaning of the term affects those who might be racially Black, but culturally some other nationality other than the U.S. mainland.

Given the ambiguities in understandings of the term race, an Afro-Latin subject, who has never taken part in an African-American culture, may be asked to reproduce it. This is the source of tension. When Afro-Latin subjects show confusion or assert ethnic and cultural difference, while also saying that they cannot reproduce desired elements of the African American culture or even understand what is meant by Blackness in a U.S. context, the accusations of racial prejudices begin.

It is easy for the average citizen of the United States to confuse race and ethnicity, because although race is a central identity category, it is an ambiguous term. This ambiguity comes from not only a long history of use, but also a wide range of theories about race in an equally wide variety of points of view with respect to how race is used, understood and classified. In the essay "Racial Formations," Michael Omi and Howard Winant articulate the idea that race is "largely a modern phenomenon" (13). They show how race has always been a subject of religious, scientific and social debates (13-16). Furthermore, Omi and Winant assert that for Christians the question is the following: if there are different kinds of people, then how does one reconcile the story of Adam and Eve? (14). Scientists, on the other hand, cannot agree on a scientific basis for difference based on biology (16). Finally, sociologists are more inclined to look at race as a social concept, since they believe that "race categories and the meaning of race are given concrete expression by the specific social relations and historical context in which they are embedded" (16).

Noted global social theorist Immanuel Wallerstein has a different point of view about race. Wallerstein conceptualizes race as a method of explaining or categorizing pastness, which can be seen as both a reflection of what actually happened or a construction of the prior based on contemporary interpretation (78). Wallerstein concludes that the latter characterization is the most common understanding and response to identity categories based on pastness. In the essay "The Construction of Peoplehood: Racism, Nationalism, Ethnicity," Wallerstein writes:

This being the case, it makes little difference whether we define pastness in terms of genetically continuous groups (races), historical social-political groups (nations) or cultural groups (ethnic groups). They are all peoplehood constructs, all inventions of pastness, all contemporary political phenomena (78-79).

For many Africana thinkers, race goes beyond peoplehood constructs. These thinkers see race not only as a category of identity, but even more so intimately linked to oppression of African descendants. Among the most noted of these are Africana intellectuals who have analyzed oppression of Afro-descendants from the point of view of Marxism. Among the first was Aimé Césaire, who in his earlier years as a radical Black intellectual identified himself as not only a Marxist, but also a communist. However, from a very early stage, Césaire became disillusioned with Marxism's narrow view of all oppression as exploitation of subjects based on a value placed on their labor, and thus class. For this reason, Césaire was among the first to point out that Marxism did not account for race; as such, Marxism faced difficulties for being an ideology that would liberate African descendants.[3]

Cornel West looks at race from what he calls a genealogical materialist analysis. In *Prophesy and Deliverance*, West shows how race is a phenomenon of meaning and practice of identity and power that is made possible by developments in Modern discourse, such as the scientific revolution, the Cartesian transformation of philosophy, and the classical revival (50). In *Keeping the Faith: Philosophy and Race in America*, West agrees with Césaire's earlier critique of the uncritical use of Marx for developing race theory. West articulates his disagreement with Marxist theory (as it relates to race theory) as double-edged (267). He writes:

> First, I hold that many social practices, such as racism, are best understood and explained not only or primarily by locating them within modes of production, but also by situating them within the cultural traditions of civilizations.… Second, I claim that the Marxist obsession with the economic sphere as the major explanation factor is itself a reflection of the emergence of Marxist discourse in the midst of an industrial capitalism pre-occupied with economic production; and, more important, this Marxist obsession is itself a symptom of a particular Western version of the will to truth and style of rationality which valorizes control, mastery and domination of nature and history (267).

More recently, in *From Class to Race: Essays in White Marxism and Black Radicalism*, Charles Mills also moves from a class-based theory of oppression to one that is founded on an expansion of the material social "base" to include race (55). He holds this view in part because of the belief that "racial self-identification and group solidarity trump other identities and group belongings (170).

The ambiguity of race often confuses the arrivant, who attempts to understand where to fit in within the scheme of political, social, and economic relations. This might mean choosing to identify as an African-American, because there are no alternate discourses or categories in which they fit. It is into this category that those with few language barriers fall. Those who do not speak English are identified as Latin American, but fade into the background like in many Latin American communities where they already exist. Certainly, when asked to fill out job, college, and graduate school applications, an Afro-Latina is often asked to choose an identifying category, and even today the choices are limited: Black or Hispanic (non-Black). The question is the following: what happens in the translation from the Latin American and the Caribbean to the U.S.?

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon can be interpreted as answering this question. This answer is unmistakable: once Black, always Black, no matter where one goes in a colonial/post-colonial world. Similarly, in the "Introduction" to *Existence in Black*, Lewis Gordon would also argue the same, i.e., that Blackness travels and persists in what he calls an anti-Black world. It is true that in examining Black neighborhoods in Latin America, such as Colombia's "El Choco," one may see a similar thematic to that found in places where there exists racial oppression against Blacks, such as poverty, a poor educational system, high unemployment rates, etc. Yet there is still a difference: the choice of self-identification. For example, in St. Croix where I was born and raised, the majority of the population is Afro-descendant. In the mid-to late-twentieth century, the most important marker of social location could be characterized as family and migratory history—i.e., not a racial category but rather where your family came from. The privileging of family history is also driven by the fact that the U.S. Virgin Islands experienced a wave not only of varying national colonial occupations, but also of colonizers and subsequent immigrant communities for labor and other financial opportunities. For these reasons, race was not always a primary identity marker. Instead, migratory history, ethnicity, and national identity were essential descriptors of class, privilege, and social location.

Before being purchased by the United States in 1916, the Virgin Islands changed colonial hands six times. Among its colonial owners were Spain, France, the Knights of Malta, and Denmark. Cultural shifts were exacerbated by a wide variety of cultural groups passing through for economic opportunities. For example, during Danish colonial rule non-Danish Western European opportunists were invited to lease the plantations for a chance at turning a profit. This was because the Danish citizenry had little interest in plantation life; however, its government saw it necessary to participate in ownership of colonies as a demonstration of political and economic strength and competitiveness. Later, in the early twentieth century, during U.S. American rule, many immigrants were welcomed to the Virgin Islands, particularly St. Croix, to work the sugar cane plantations. When those plantations were shut down, immigrants from other islands continued to come for work in the tourist industry to fill the need for skilled labor for construction projects, and to gain U.S. citizenship or passage to the United States. This means that since its modern conception and perhaps even before during pre-Colombian native rule, these islands had witnessed waves of immigrant communities come and go, replenishing the population and creating growth in the local economy. In such a place—where Afro-descendant groups of various kinds control community social, cultural, and political interests—discourse about identity places less emphasis on race and more on family history and on commitment to community. Often this migratory history has class implications, and class, in this context, is also rather complex.

From the time of colonization, race and class have been intimately linked. Since European colonists have always been more privileged than any other groups, Afro-descendants of course were always treated as an inferior group. Nevertheless, in the twentieth century, Afro-descendants in the Virgin Islands directed the islands culturally, socially and politically. However, the economy is still controlled by foreign corporations and non-Afro descendants. . At the same time that they control much of the economy, they live largely secluded from the majority of the population, choosing to seemingly fade into the background, particularly when it comes to cultural, social, and political dialogue. Given these dynamics, several Virgin Islands emerge. It is a place where foreign business interests can be cultivated, attracted, and protected, as long as there is an appearance of contribution to the local economy by way of jobs. These foreign interests, however, remain foreign. This means that there are varying degrees of investment by these companies and the U.S. expatriates who work in them into the local population. The investment has cultural and social implications to the degree that separate communities are formed and fostered. When the HOVENSA oil refinery in St. Croix was fully operational most of the foreign workers lived in the company's gated community. Many of those who live in this gated community lived maintained lives from the locals, and thus separate communities were formed and maintained.[4] Because there is a neo-colonial dimension in their relationship of to the island, the interests of these groups are protected despite the fact that their economic and social contribution to the community might be in question. In an island community, this migration history is noted in such a way that it means something about how the community responds to these separate communities in terms of social and cultural relations.

Because I grew up in a neighborhood that was predominantly Puerto Rican, my primary communal identity marker would not be Blackness (an understood category of being), but rather family history (or even ethnic identity), i.e., my Puerto Rican-ness. On the other hand, in the U.S. an essential identifying marker would be the color of my skin. Within a mostly African American community in the South, this light skin may symbolize privilege. This privilege, based on a special version of a racial category (light-skinned Black), is also prevalent in Cape Town, South Africa, where phenotype is still an important marker of privilege.[5] However, in St. Croix (among the majority population), family history would be the primary marker of class and social status, not the color of one's skin.[6] That is, to be identified and marked as a Puerto Rican in the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s meant, in many cases, to be on the lower end of the social scale.[7] This is because Puerto Ricans in St. Croix were migrant workers who came to cut sugar cane in the early twentieth century. Over time, this community established itself and gained greater status in the community. Early migrants to St. Croix from Vieques, Puerto Rico, represented the opposite of privilege. Any Puerto Rican-identified person had to contend with many negative stereotypes.

Also note that there is a further class complexity between "big island" and "small island" politics. Those migrating from Vieques, a small island, were considered uneducated and not cosmopolitan. Descendants of these groups suffered greater social alienation both from "big island" people (like the Puerto Rico mainland) and "small island" people (with U.S. English-speaking privilege). For these reasons, one must conclude that class categories in St. Croix were not exclusively racial or marked by skin color like in the U.S. Instead, I have argued for the view that a combination of economic resources, family history, and a long-standing relation to the community and the island mark class and social privilege. Note that this essay does not assert that race or phenotype is not relevant in the Virgin Islands; in fact, phenotype does play a role in the race dialogue. Instead, it contends that race was not the only or most important marker of identity in community and "island to island" relations (affecting class privilege and discrimination).[8]

Evidence of the other more relevant identity markers is found in the ways in which locals socialize with each other on a daily basis. In social circles, one of the primary questions does not relate to the color of your skin, but to which family you belong and where on the island you live. So, in answering the question, "who are you?" one might say, I am a Jones from Fredericksted or a Galiber from Christiansted. Sometimes, instead of being asked, "who are you?" one might hear the question, "to whom do you belong"? In Spanish, they will say, "¿de quién tú eres?" Again, here family in community is privileged, because it is usually an elder that attempts to situate you within the context of a history of familial relations.

When moving from the Virgin Islands to the U.S., the identity question changes. In the U.S., the question would be the following: "what are you"? A better-informed person might ask, "how do you identify"? or "what do you call yourself"? These questions come from the point of view of classification. Here again, the "you" is empty, because it is transformed into a framework. The question "who are you?" or "to whom do you belong?" speak more to a depth of history and requires the subject to identify herself in terms of family and community. The second set of questions requires that the subject identify herself through external markers, in many cases related to the categories resulting from a dialogue about personhood and difference during modernity. In the latter case, significant weight is given to race as a social, political, and economic category.

When moving from the Caribbean to the U.S., there is a shift in the use and function of Blackness. In changing contexts, an Afro-Latina moving from the U.S. Virgin Islands to the mainland U.S. has to shift from a space rich and layered with differences based on more than just phenotype and economic means to a condition summarized by one word, one meaning, one attitude: "Black." In the United States, the term "Black" often collapses race, class, ethnicity, culture, and national and familial history. In St. Croix, the term Black would not translate the migratory history of families (moving from Vieques, PR, to the Virgin Islands or moving from Montserrat to the Virgin Islands and the Virgin Islands to Denmark and back again). Certainly, Blackness exists in the Virgin Islands. But Blackness is often invoked when referring to a colonial and post-colonial situatedness. Blackness arises when: 1) engaging colonial history; 2) relating to the colonial relationship with the U.S.; 3) articulating whiteness and white privilege manifesting on the island; 4) articulating a neo-colonial condition; and 5) engaging individuals in community from the point of view of knowledges and powers that disagree, subjugate, and suppress, i.e., "coloniality of power" (Quijano) and "an other thinking" (Mignolo). That is, the notion of Blackness emerges whenever one has to engage in discourse about colonized Afro-descendant subjects from the colonizing episteme, i.e., thinking with and within the "coloniality of power." In the latter case, Blackness emerges when Afro-subjects see themselves and similar other subjects primarily as subjects of imperial domination; an additional complexity results from an inability to function epistemologically, politically, and socially outside of the "coloniality of power." This means failure or inability to exist or think from the borders and/or practice "an other thinking." For example, in the twentieth-century Virgin Islands, white Americans were often viewed as experts, even though many arrive ignorant of local nuances and particulars. The concept of the "white" American person as expert and better-capable in almost any and all circumstance is a symptom of those who lack "an other thinking." From this vantage point, white Americans can come to the Virgin Islands, get jobs, and set-up business more quickly and more successfully with little questioning of their abilities and qualifications. There is equally the stereotype of the local Black person who does not like to work and lacks basic skills to do minor or complex tasks efficiently.

In the U.S., Blackness is a fixed category denoting social (class), cultural, and political location. Blackness, a racial category, is the answer for all. In dialogues among Afro-Latinos, one of the most significant themes is that the complexities that speak about family and cultural history unique to the ways in which we call or understand each other is lost in Afro-U.S. racial discourse. First, there is no choice of self-identification. Second, the terms are so limited that they function mostly as a socio-political position from which one wages political, social, and economic battles. Third, Blackness has often symbolized the negation of one's humanity and dignity. Although Negritude, the Harlem Renaissance, and the Civil Rights and Black Power movements sought to redefine "Blackness," residues of its the fundamental meaning remain.

3. Contributions of these discussions to Caribbean and Latin American philosophy

Contemporary U.S. dialogues about identity must continue to engage the complex ways in which identities are constructed and operate in Latin America and the Caribbean. The U.S. dialogue, with its unique particulars, often dominates and obfuscates other parallel dialogues about identity that are equally (if not more) intricate and valid, and which provide valuable information for understanding identity in changing contexts. For this reason, a greater and continued dialogue and exploration of identity, particularly its effects on Latin American and Caribbean migrations, is necessary. Second, race discourse is so central in the U.S. that its dominance re-inscribes the colonizing dynamics of power that put racial categories into place. Continued dialogue about the importance of race, when not viewed in tandem with other realities of existence and constructions of the self in the Americas re-affirms racial discourse in its most negative forms. Therefore, the discussions about identity in this essay and in works by Afro-Latin thinkers contribute to the de-colonization project through a decentralization of dominant U.S. epistemological identity frameworks.

In the essay, "The De-Colonial Option and the Meaning of Identity in Politics," Walter Mignolo makes a distinction between "identity politics" and "identity in politics," while advocating the latter (43). Race dialogue in the U.S. is often riddled with "identity politics," a discussion about how race is manifested. Afro-Latin dialogues about race and identity seek to engage in "identity in politics," that is, in discussions about how to change the political climate in such a manner that Blacks are empowered and accounted. These conversations pay particular attention to the ways that Afro-descendants exist and contribute to the communities and nations in which they live.

In the "Introduction" to *Teoría y práctica del racismo*, Quince Duncan and Lorein Powell point to a "new consciousness that arises from the specificity of the problem of Blacks" in Latin America (9). This "new consciousness" created a movement inspired by a conference Manuel Zapata Olivella organized in Colombia; out of this conference held in 1977 arose a series of other conferences around Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa (Powell and Duncan 9). This movement was global in scale and showed the ways in which discourse around identity, race, and racism can build bridges and spark political movements that link communities and continents, i.e., a practice of "identity in politics." This global perspective helps us not only to understand how Afro-Latinos understand race and racism in Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa, but also helps to combat both U.S. intellectual hegemony and continued political and economic hegemony from other former colonial powerhouses. Borrowing from Morrocan philosopher Abdelkebir Khatibi's discourse about the marginality of Arabic languages, thinking and philosophies vis a vis those of the West, Mignolo has called this stance "pensamiento otro," "an other thinking" (Mignolo, 2000, 71). Writing in this tradition also engages in "an other thinking."

In general, the question of Afro-Latin subjectivity in its changing contexts adds much-needed dialogue and complexity to the question of race, in particular to the concepts of "Blackness" and racism and the narrative of the geo-politics of the interstices. The question of "Blackness" highlights the need to revisit the term and disrupt its location. In attempting to complete the de-colonial project, one must then ask the following questions: Does the continued re-appropriation of the term Black still serve as a useful political and social category for identification? In what ways (if any) do dominant U.S. identity frameworks limit the ways in which those who reside or think on the borders may choose to be in the world? In what ways do Afro-descendant subjects define themselves? And how are these constructions of self and community relevant to the unique particulars of specific social, political, and economic conditions?

The dialogue about Afro-Latin subjectivity also addresses the question of the geo-politics of the interstice, and the ways in which it forces a continued discussion about race construction and highlights how identities are not exclusively determined from without. That is, there are other significant ways in which Afro-communities structure their identities. These conversations are not just about a colonial hegemonic presence, but also most importantly about how communities of Afro-descendants see themselves and their relationships with other African Diaspora subjects. This conversation is an interstitial one, because it does not always already work through the lens of dominant colonial discourse.

A key issue is how identity dialogues may place greater emphasis on different aspects of identity markers or realities according to different or changing historical circumstances. In Latin America, theorists of African descent like Quince Duncan reject both multi-cultural theories and theories regarding the obsolescence of race on the grounds that both of these theoretical points of view are ways in which the dominant discourse chooses to ignore the racism they have caused

(Powell and Duncan 28-36). According to Duncan, those who believe in the obsolescence of race fall into a trap set by hegemonic discourses that seek to end the struggles against racism. In the essay "El fenómeno del racismo," Duncan writes:

> A growing effort to deny the existence of races (also derived from Europe) is nothing but a mere manifestation of racism,… to negate the existence of these phenotypic differences among human beings, is to run away from the problem of racism, falling into a new and subtle trap of the West (Western culture) (Duncan and Powell 36).[9]

One must understand the importance of Duncan's point of view within the context of Latin American history and theories about culture and race. Earlier in his essay, Duncan calls attention to the Argentine thinker Domingo F. Sarmiento who, in the book *Facundo o civilización y barbarie* (1845), pointed to the products of race mixture as people who were "lazy and incapable of competing in the industrial movement" (Duncan 28). Theories like those purported by Sarmiento in the nineteenth century are Duncan's evidence of a long history of racist bias against any subject who is even in part Afro-descended. Given this discourse, it is evident that theories about race mixture and multiculturalism have been used historically in Latin America to hide the long presence of African descendants and their significance throughout the region. In this socio-political context, for Afro-Latin theorists in the 1970s, 80s and 90s, asserting difference and resisting homogenization became an important political strategy to fight the unique particulars of racial discourse and racist discrimination in Latin America. Asserting existence and calling attention differences, their meanings and consequences became important. Emphasis on this perspective was the main reason why, after much criticism from his Afro-Latin colleagues, Manuel Zapata Olivella re-thought his tri-ethnic view of identity theory outlined in his book *La rebelión de los genes*.

To understand the aforementioned view about race and racism held by Quince Duncan, it is important to take into account the dynamics of identity in changing contexts. In the U.S., African American activists of the twentieth century, like Martin Luther King, sought to lessen the emphasis on racial difference and highlight the importance of an ethical obligation to granting full human and citizenship rights as a political strategy for economic, political, and social freedoms and opportunities. This perspective can be seen in a speech delivered in 1957, in which Martin Luther King talks about the repealing of the *Plessy vs. Ferguson* decision as the coming of a "new age" in the U.S. About the reversal of *Plessy vs. Ferguson*, King said: "It affirmed in no uncertain terms that separate facilities are inherently unequal and that to segregate a child because of his race is to deny him equal protection of law. With the coming of this great decision we could gradually see the old order of segregation and discrimination passing away, and the new order of freedom and justice coming into being" (King 19). For King, this new age meant "to rise above the narrow confines of our individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of humanity" (19). Although Duncan is not calling for segregation, his theory does emphasize racial difference, whereas thinkers like Martin Luther King needed to call for a more integrative approach to social relations. Although in the 1960s other cultural and political movements were to attempt to influence Afro-political thought in the

U.S. to think through the importance of racial difference and racial solidarity, social integration and class mobility would dominate the political agenda for many African-Americans, particularly the middle class in the mid- to late-twentieth century.

This essay does not seek to put values on the varying approaches to understanding the multiple epistemic locations of identity, particularly as they are viewed and defined by Afro-descendants in changing contexts. However, this essay emphasizes the importance of understanding the unique particulars about the dynamics of identity as Afro-subjects change contexts. Dialogues about race and identity, as one moves from the Caribbean to the U.S. to Latin American and Africa, show some interesting and different circumstances that relate to the same subject matter. The de-colonial turn must address in greater detail these unique particulars.

Notes

[1] In this essay, I use the term Afro-Latin instead of the term Afro-Hispanic. Part of the reason for this choice is that I wish to not only call attention to Afro-descendants who are Spanish speaking or derive from a Spanish speaking community (but do not speak Spanish) living in the United States, but also to address those who live in Latin America and the Caribbean. The term Hispanic is embedded in and reflective of U.S. discourse about identity. Part of the project here is to dislodge the dominance that U.S. dialogue often commands when confronted with perspectives outside of it.

[2] The notion of sociality used here is also derived from Lewis Gordon. It means a relation bond in community that exists beyond a pragmatic end, such as a building project, or a political end, such as the election of a senator, governor, president. For more information about sociality as developed by Gordon, see the essay "Sociality and Community in Black: A Phenomenological Essay."

[3] For more information, see Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism.*

[4] The St. Croix oil refinery was created, owned and operated by Hess Oil in 1966. HOVENSA represents the efforts of two companies Hess Oil Cooperation and Petroleos de Venezuela. The refinery closed its refinery capacity in February of 2012.

[5] In summer of 2005, I taught at a Human Rights program in Cape Town, South Africa. During this time, I was able to witness and experience a racism that lingers in varying levels of the social, economic, and political culture.

[6] An important note here is that color does indeed have important dimensions for social interactions; phenotype does have some implications for how beauty was conceptualized. However, note that not all women and men who had European features were considered attractive . For example, to be thin in the early twentieth-century Virgin Islands was not the most appealing feature. Women with well defined curves and with "meat on her bones" received much attention. Excessively thin women/girls were often teased. Phenotype values within racial dialogue does have complexity in this context.

[7] Note that the Virgin Islands have seen waves of immigrants from other islands in the 1970s, 80s, 90s like Dominica, St. Lucia, Nevis, St. Kitts, Montserrat, Trinidad and Tobago, St. Bart's, the Dominican Republic, etc. Immigrants from these islands also suffered from prejudice and discrimination due to their immigration history.

[8] Here the phrase "in community" is very important, since outside of communal relations with much class and ethnic conflict, there was a race dialogue. The race dialogue was in direct relation to neo-colonial dominance by the U.S. In