

PROLOGUE

“Ellos son blancos se entienden.” (Spanish)

“Eles que são brancos, se entendem.” (Portuguese)

(“They understand each other, they’re all White.”)

—An aphorism culled from the author’s
personal experience with folk sayings of Latin America

An aphorism is often accepted as a concise expression of a social truth. Yet, these pithy sayings, like most units of language, have the tendency to reveal both intent and effect when reviewed with critical considerations for their surface arrangement and deeper structural levels. For example, the saying that introduces this section of my study makes it obvious that the “speaker” and the “spoken about” are actors in separate social environments who nevertheless share a context controlled by precepts of race. In questions of race, this surface level/deep structure approach to an apothegm more often than not reveals more about a society’s true psychology of race than the pronouncements of “racial democracy” or “race-neutral” identification that one finds in the “politically correct” declarations of most Latin American societies. Both Spanish-speaking Latin America and

its Portuguese-speaking geographical associate, Brazil, actively support issues of race while denying, at the same time, the existence of practices of racial victimization. Yet there are many expressions that can be extracted from the folk mythology of both areas that carry inferences of a racial dichotomy. For the most part, they demonstrate the convoluted psychology of folk maxims that carry the intention of jocular diversion along with the deleterious and misconstrued result of implying a social truth in a contextual atmosphere of “racial harmony.” For example, in Spanish-speaking areas one hears:

El negro, si no la hace a la entrada, la hace a la salida.
 (If a nigger doesn’t mess up at the beginning, he’ll mess up at the end.)

In Brazil, the thought is the same, although with a slight edge of volatility:

O preto que não caga na entrada, caga na saída.
 (The nigger that doesn’t shit things up in the beginning will shit them up at the end.)

Of course, the determination of the entertaining or didactic aesthetics of such pronouncements depends on the listener’s social position.

However, my main interest in the presentation of the following essays concerns the image and social effect of the aesthetics of blackness that one finds in the creative literature of Latin America. For the aphorisms presented earlier, the question of entertainment versus didacticism might have been simplistically rhetorical, but in the area of creative literature, an exposition in this sense requires more expansion. Is it also rhetorical, then, to ask if the end result of creative literature is aimed only at entertaining the reader, or is there also a didactic goal? Given that most short stories, novels, epics, poems, dramas, and memoirs are constructed as an author’s reaction to an analysis of experiences, concepts, or an imagined world, the literary target can serve to pique an interest or present a truth as the writer perceives it. It is with this last element in mind that I have looked at the reality of the Afro Latino image in various examples of Latin American creative writing (i.e., novels, poems, short stories, and song lyrics) wherein

the fictive cosmos alludes to a concrete and real space. The imagery of the Afro Latino person registers, upon careful reading, as a form of *noesis* or perception, perhaps truth by design. In short, we are led to approach the author's organization of his or her fantasies as recognition of the Afrodescendant's symbological factor in the national societies where Spanish and Portuguese are the modes of communication in the Americas.

With the previous thought in mind, I crafted the four essays in this study to be correlated in overall theme and concept. However, they can and should each be read as separate discourses. Their organization is within the pragmatics of a common literary experience, that is to say, the integration of Afrodescendants into the literary spaces of Latino culture as symbols of national identity. The context of the first three essays is based on the creative writing of authors with a Latin American mindset, wherein we go from a specific geopolitical environment (e.g., Cuba, Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, or Mexico) to promote by hypothesis that the topics discussed can also apply to the entire area termed Latin America, in part if not as a whole. Under this guise, the specific terminology—*Latin America*—includes all the countries in the Americas where Spanish and Portuguese are spoken. The basic tenet I am proposing is to establish, with some validity, the extent to which the national psyche has accepted or rejected (as can be shown in one specific case) the ethnic Afro Latino and Afro Latinism as icons of the national culture.

Most natives of the Spanish-speaking and Portuguese-speaking areas of the Americas are not oblivious to the fact that there are black and partially black natives in their regions. Yet the phenotypic distinctions that would affirm an infusion of African genes apparently are not so discernible to the non-native observer, or even to a sizeable group of non-native academicians. Many of the latter claim to specialize in Latino or Hispanic studies and make suppositions about the culture that distort the Afrodescendant presence. Perhaps their stance is politically motivated since the same color gradations are apparent in U.S. nationals and are cause for differential treatment toward those who are not accepted as white.

Nonetheless, Africans were introduced into the Latin American area in the early sixteenth century, long before the institution of slavery became

part and parcel of North American politics and the culture of its economy. As a matter of fact, Plymouth, Massachusetts, and Jamestown, Virginia, did not become a reality for early settlers from England until 100 years after Africans had been transported to the Americas by the Spaniards and the Portuguese. By 1510 the first sizeable group of Spanish-speaking Africans (*ladinos*) arrived in Hispaniola from Spain. By 1518 non-Spanish-speaking Africans were being shipped directly from the Continent. Cuba received its first large group of slaves in 1520. Notably, the first major slave revolt in the Americas broke out in 1522 on Hispaniola, on the sugar plantation of Diego Columbus, Christopher's son. In both Cuba and Hispaniola, slave revolts began almost as soon as the Africans could plan an escape route or devise a means of retaliation. In 1533 a revolt at the Jobabo mines in the Oriente area of Cuba was recorded as eventful, although only four slaves, allegedly, took part. In his article, "The Slave Trade in Mexico," Aguirre Beltran, the Mexican researcher of African populations in his country affirms, "The first slaves to arrive in Mexico accompanied their masters in the enormous task of the Conquest. They came from the island of Cuba, to which they had been brought under royal licenses several decades after the discovery of America" (429).

The island of Cuba and the island called Hispaniola, which later became Haiti and the Dominican Republic, were not the only Latin areas that saw the wheels of their colonial economy turn with the forced labor of African captives. Each and every country in Latin America that survived as a colony of Spain (or of Portugal, in the case of Brazil) and that early in the nineteenth century acquired independence from their European colonizers promoted their economy with slavery. Yet, when Aguirre Beltran published "The Slave Trade in Mexico" in 1944, the editor of the journal in which it appeared (*The Hispanic American Historical Review*) felt that more concentrated studies needed to be made on the African's presence in the Americas, and especially on the so-called Spanish-American mainland:

Since the Negro has been more adequately studied in Brazil and the Caribbean, this issue of *The Hispanic American Historical*

Review has been organized around the subject of the Negro on the Spanish-American mainland. (24.3, Aug. 1944, Editorial page)

Most of what was presented in that issue focused principally on linking the African directly to slavery within a historical, anthropological, and sociological perspective. Integration as a person into his or her respective community did not seem to merit being studied in any depth. The Afro Latino is seen mainly as an object to be clinically dissected considering only the guidelines of history, anthropology, or sociology. In "The Slave Trade and the Negro in South America," Fernando Romero, in citing the weaknesses of previous studies, concludes that the list of countries that require investigative studies to determine the physical presence of the African person in South America should be increased to include Ecuador, Chile, Uruguay, and Argentina. As he declares, "Such omissions do not seem desirable to the writer [i.e., Romero], for these countries also received a large number of Africans..." (370). Later studies, with different methodologies and interests, have confirmed that there is a definite and viable African image in the aforementioned regions. The thematic path we have followed in the essays of the present work extends the African image found at the surface level to include a deep-structured total integration within a national space. For example, in the essay on "phenotypes," it would be impossible to acknowledge the gradations in skin color that one finds in the Dominican Republic and most Latin American countries without accepting the root cause(s) that produced the distinctions. The indigenous Indian, the usual scapegoat for the basis of color variations in Latin America, is present in some countries, but not in all. To wit, the range of *mulatos*, *pardos*, *morenos*, *trigueños*, and even the prototypical Latin phenotype would have been difficult to produce without an African presence.

I consider it important to show that authors native to diverse Latin American cultures do find that their use of the Afro Latino image can provide their literary canvases with subtle symbols of nationalism and even of racism without resorting to the stridency of political populism. After all, literature is a slice of life that has been given direction and

meaning from a percipient's (i.e., author's) point of view. Still, when accepting an author's claim for the ethnoracial perspective of his or her country as predominantly black, somewhat black, or not black at all, published demographical statistics can be misleading in all of Latin America, precisely because of another observation that Romero makes and asserts with a quote by a fellow observer of race: "Any study of the Negro in Spanish America encounters the initial difficulty of determining who is a Negro" (375). Quite unexpectedly, this perception of Latin America's carefully guarded psychological misgiving about the ethnic and racial image it would be comfortable projecting becomes the subtext of the article that originally was proposed by Romero as a historical investigation (369). It would appear that his concerns for evidence of a declared racial connection, as well as the failure of this to be as forthcoming as anticipated, impeded his approach to obtain facts and truths:

Moreover, as long as social prejudice existed, and as long as social stratification was based upon degrees of pigmentation, it was natural for every South American to try to appear Caucasian, or very close to it. The Negro, accordingly, passed himself as mulatto, and the latter declared himself "white." (374)

Thus, in his discussion of Peru and its census figures, Romero determined that:

And since on the other hand, existing racial prejudice led every offspring of mixed unions to seek classification as a "white" [...] within the figure for Caucasian inhabitants, many individuals are included who are not of this race. All of this has as its consequence the fact that the percentages of Negroes that appear in the censuses of 1876 and 1940 are false through defect. (379)

It was not without reason that Susana Baca, a contemporary black Peruvian singer, would assert that even though she grew up surrounded by black music, she could find no mention of Afro Peruvians in the history books of Peru (see Essay I).

Therefore, since most Latin American countries vacillate in recognizing wholeheartedly the African-descendant population in their midst

and moreover decry the proliferation of African genes in their genetic constitution or base, the image of an Afro Latino as an actual person, with genetic ties to Africa, remains an enigma whose existence is often difficult to fathom for the masses in the United States. This perception pertains to most North Americans, both black and white. Political correctness, however, has attempted to refocus the racial distortion by adopting and adapting the term “Hispanic,” a nomenclature that has elicited much debate in the Spanish-speaking world. Consequently, we have determined, a priori, that the cultural construct of an Afro Latino reality must have remained confined within the geographical purview of the political, social, and linguistic boundaries of the Latin American paradigm. It seems as if people in the United States never noticed, or remained confused by, the black Latin baseball players of the major leagues or the boxers, like “Kid Chocolate,” who visit this country. Then again, we are more than aware that during the Second World War, Puerto Rican troops recruited by the United States were placed in color-stratified units: the fairer-skinned ones who spoke English were considered “white,” or close enough to be admitted as such. And those that were determined to have the unmistakable physical characteristics of black people were assigned to African American battalions. Would it be a conundrum, then, to consider the Afro Latin and the African American to be co-genotypes within a shared genetic basis? There are signs, although feeble, that the invisible is slowly becoming visible. In a commentary recently published in *Black Enterprise*, a journal directed to the business-oriented African American population, there was the observation that

traditionally, marketers see black people as a monolithic group. Few studies examine black diversity in terms of age or social status; fewer still acknowledge our cultural diversity. After all, we are Caribbean, Afro Latino, and African, as well as African American. (Hutson 52)

Depending on the mindset, where matters of race are solidified in a commonly held thought, the clear and undisputable fact might go unnoticed that all the groups mentioned in Hutson’s remark share a singular

genetic base: African. Until the cultural diversity of black people is accepted, some national groups will not be considered to have African-descendants in them. The uncertainty of racial parameters as they pertain to Latin Americans is not a topic of discussion for most Americans who subscribe to the rhetoric of “Hispanism,” as if the term in some measure promoted a decree of racial singularity. Nonetheless, it has to be considered that an Afro Latino, by the narrowest of definitions, refers in the main to someone with genetic ties to Africa by birth or descent, and who has also been endowed with a sociocultural heritage (current or in disuse) from the Latin culture of the Portuguese-speaking or Spanish-speaking Americas. This, I declare, is a form of “ethnogenesis.” Likewise, it has to be taken into account, as Romero confirmed over sixty years ago, that one’s physical appearance (in Latin America) *might* determine one’s racial assignation, although this is not absolute. Both racial blackness and racial whiteness, in Latin America, can become correlative at some point in the charting of skin tones and the graphing of the accompanying morphology of hair quality and facial features. Since the Latin American author lives and shares his space with conationals of diverse races—or, in a sense, ethnicities—we considered it pertinent to look at the author’s aesthetic approach to race or the ethnicities of his or her country and the resultant creative literature. We observed the semiotic context, implanted in the literary space, with language as symbols that betray the rejection or acceptance of race/ethnicity by the national psyche, and especially the place that phenotype assumes as an artistic construct in the hierarchy of national symbols.

The fourth essay has been organized with the goal of diminishing the concept of Afro Latinism as mythos only, arguing that it should be viewed as a vital experience. It is here that we turn to an African space in real time as opposed to a fictive context. True, an African presence in the Latin space does validate the basic mythology that one finds in the literary concept of such Cuban films as *Guantanamera* and *Patakin*, with perspectives that may have come straight out of the African-related *Kulturgeschichte* of Cuba, or of Brazil with a film such as *A Deusa Negra*. Does Africa contain, nevertheless, a reality that can be conjoined to that

of its Latin counterparts and serve as inspiration? It should be noted that the examples we offer in the fourth essay establish the contemporary presence of an Afro Latino link with the African continent's history and present, and with possibilities for the future, perhaps as it may pertain to the creative literature written by Latin American authors of diverse ethnic groups: black, mixed, and white. It is in this spatial reality that we confront the returnees' psyches, their strengths and weaknesses, their sensitivities, their social status, and the vagaries of human experiences without the spatial, political, and psychological constraints of slavery that still plague the Latin kinship. The new environment does not share the Latino space's sociopsychological atmosphere of noetic perceptions of enslaved race and ethnicity. We look for roles of behavior for survival, such as the African spirituality observed in Essay I. We observe the prominence or absence of phenotype as demonstrated in Essay III, or if there will be a sense of hierarchy based on economics and a perception of royalty and class entitlement.

But is it logical, some might question, to consider the symbology of an African identity in the creative literature of Latin America, and the actual existence of descendants of returnees to Africa from Latin America under the same rubric of African Latin identity? If we find that the image of the African Latino and the Latino African carries a correlative relationship, it is not without reason to explore the possibilities that such a concept offers for establishing an identity that is germane to both African and Latin heritages. In Essay IV, as we explore the world of Latino returnees to the African continent, we hypothesize how a black Latin psychology would have evolved without the encumbrance of a slave mentality .

Our curiosity about the possibility of locating Latino returnees to Africa was piqued by references to the fact that the Brazilian poet Luiz Gama was the son of Luiza Mahin, whose origins were claimed to be in Ghana. We read that she had been a hunted revolutionary figure in the fight against the enslavement of Africans in Brazil, and subsequently learned that the poet's mother might have returned to the Continent. However, the available literature presented this more as a probability

than as fact. Nonetheless, the Kingdom of the Mahi is not unheard of, although there is some speculation as to whether the Mahi migrated to the Yoruba territory of present-day Nigeria from a region associated with today's Ghana (formerly called the Gold Coast). The background of the poet's mother and her African affiliation are not fantasy. Yet would Luiza Mahin return to the Gold Coast or to Nigeria after taking part in a rebellion against slavery and oppression in Brazil, we asked? Our supposition was that after a prolonged sojourn in Brazil, she could in all probability return to the Gold Coast or Nigeria a free Latina African, as opposed to remaining a fugitive, Portuguese-speaking African Latina in Brazil.

When it comes to the possibility of Africans returning to the Continent with their "latino" acculturation, the most common presumption, in the creative literature, seems to be that African enslavement to the Americas was a one-way journey and ties to the Continent were truncated completely. This thought and its ensuing aesthetics are underscored by the fact that in recent history none of the African countries, except Ghana, has ever made an overt appeal to Afrodescendants in the New World Diaspora to resettle in their nation and retrace the roots of their ancestors. This concept can perhaps be amended to include The Gambia. This West African country has of late made an effort to capitalize on the fame of Alex Haley's *Roots* and encourage African Americans of the United States to explore their heritage in the land of the novel's protagonist, Kunte Kinte, not as resettlers but as cash-spending tourists. Neither country, apparently, has given serious consideration to the Afro Latin as an integral element of the overall ethnic image of Africans and African descendants in the Diaspora. Contrary to popular notions, however, we are aware that there were large numbers of liberated Africans who did return to Africa in the nineteenth century, principally settling in Sierra Leone and Liberia. They did so with the assistance of England and the United States, and not at the expressed invitation of endemic groups already located in those areas. Furthermore, they were returnees from English-speaking countries and did not share in the culture or languages of the Latin American sphere. As a matter of fact, those African-descendant groups that American and British organizations returned to Africa tended to remain at social and

political odds with the native peoples they found in their areas of settlement. For this group of returnees, apparently, the intention that led them to promote a concept of ethnic differences was aimed at maintaining an identity for themselves apart from that of the national groups that were already established in the spaces they would share.

Would Latino returnees demonstrate a similar reaction? For those freed individuals who returned from regions of British and United States control, there was the perception that a hierarchical ethnic separateness would promulgate and sustain the presumed status associated with the acquisition of British and North American cultural habits and mindsets. Along with this, there is the outsider's view that subjacent in the attitudes of economic and social entitlement harbored by the returnees is an undeniable element of *colorism*. It is common knowledge that European and African miscegenation among the returnees and their descendants was a *fait accompli*, just as in the Americas (north and south), in Europe, and on the African continent. Latin America, however, has additionally been endowed with a recognized phenotypocracy where social and economic entitlements are exigent. Would this mindset carry over to resettlement in Africa?

Either because manumission was only theoretical or because their rebellious acts put them at odds with the authorities, in the nineteenth century, the abandonment of some Latin territories became a viable alternative for many ex-slaves. Lingering cultural traits, vivid oral histories for some, and personal memories for others caused the image of Africa to be relived with nostalgic longings and a yearning to return. There were areas, they felt, such as Nigeria, Benin, Togo, and the Gold Coast, which would now enable them to relive a dream of belonging. Consequently, the return to Africa became a reality. Today there are descendants of those returnees to Africa whose group or clan identity depends mainly on their ancestors' sojourn in the Latin world. While these diasporic Latinos or Latino Africans have not been given a *niche sui generis* in the fictional imagery of Latin America's creative literature, their existence is both real and historic and merits consideration along these lines. If the aesthetics of artistic creativity have a strong foundation

in the artist's social reality, then the Latino African should be drawn into the space of recognition and artistic design. As the saying goes in Latin America: "*Lo que ojos no ven, el corazón no siente.*" ["What the eyes don't see, the heart doesn't feel"].

With the previous thoughts in mind, I have posited that the presence of both the Latino in Africa and the African in Latin America merits inclusion in the artistic creation of a true perspective of the African Latino image, not as subsets of each other but as correlative ethnic groups. These were the guidelines of the first three essays, which led to the exposition in the fourth and final essay on the "Tabom" of Ghana, descendants of Afro Brazilians who in 1836 lay claim to their ethnic roots as a rationale for the justifiable reassimilation of black Latins into the folds of native African cultures.