

# CONTESTED MODERNITIES: Decolonial Knowledges, Transamerican Perspectives

by JOSSIANA ARROYO



**O**N FEBRUARY 26–28, 2009, THE TERESA Lozano Long Institute of Latin American Studies at the University of Texas at Austin sponsored the conference *Contested Modernities: Indigenous and Afro-descendant Experiences in Latin America*. The co-organizers, Profs. Arturo Arias and Charles R. Hale, collaborated with an interdisciplinary committee of UT-LLILAS affiliated professors to invite a group of distinguished scholars and activists from Latin America and the Caribbean as well as the United States to have a three-day conversation on the contemporary challenges facing Afro-descendant and indigenous populations in Latin America. We asked presenters to comment on the differences and commonalities of the social claims of these two groups and if it was possible to talk about a “politics of solidarity” between them. This, in itself, was a challenging task since these groups historically have been subjected to different forms of structural racism, and as a consequence have been represented as antagonists and set against one another in Latin American, as well as U.S., colonial modernities. As we argued in our call for papers: *We seek to explore and problematize this divide, without assuming that it should be eliminated, or that it should stay in place. Rather, our guiding premise is that rigorous historical, humanistic, and social analysis of the underlying question will both energize scholarly debates, and contribute to the bridge-building of commonality and difference, from which the struggles of both peoples stand to benefit.*

The group of distinguished invited scholars—Ginetta Candelario (Sociology, Smith College), Arturo Escobar (Anthropology, University of North Carolina), Michael Hanchard (Political Science, Johns Hopkins), Aida Hernández (CIESAS, Mexico), Bettina Ngwenou (African American Studies, UC Davis), Irma Alicia Velázquez Nimatuj (Anthropology, Guatemala), and Catherine Walsh (Social and Global Studies, Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar)—as well as those who responded to the call for papers, touched upon these dialogues from different disciplinary (and post/interdisciplinary?) perspectives. Their interventions mainly focused on the following themes: (1) Postcapitalist, postliberal, and poststatist societies; (2) alternative modernizations or the end of coloniality; (3) artistic manifestations of disparate cultural experiences; (4) points of convergence and points of divergence in indigenous and Afro-descendant experiences; (5) legal and political struggles for rights and new citizenship regimes; (6) communal systems, stability, non-capitalist practices, and nonstate forms of power; (7) human rights, indigenous communities, and Afro-descendant communities; and (8) religious practices and alternative modernizations.

When we think about Afro-descendant or indigenous populations in Latin America, the Maya K’iche’ in Guatemala, the Garifuna of Honduras and Belize, the Afro-Colombians in the Chocó or Atlantic Coast, and the Miskitu and Creoles in Nicaragua come to mind as the most representative or discussed groups. Our group of scholars and activists brought their insights to bear on the struggles of these groups as well as other less

well-known cases. They touched upon the need to historicize the local as a way to define political solidarities and local-international political activism. In their welcoming remarks, Professors Arias and Hale noted the recent United Nations approval of the “Declaración de los Pueblos Indígenas” (Declaration of Indigenous Peoples) in 2007 and its impact on the constitutional changes in countries such as Ecuador and Bolivia. Also noted was a statement from the recent World Social Forum (Bélem do Pará, Brazil 2009), which makes an urgent call for political alternatives, in light of the economic crisis. The first day of the conference was dedicated to questions of governance and the role that decolonial knowledges—such as state and governance, philosophy, religion, pedagogies, languages—have had culturally and politically in these struggles. Bettina Ngweno’s paper discussed the specificities of these issues in the Cauca Valley region

in Colombia where Afro-Colombians have been struggling along with indigenous groups to address their own claims to land, communal rights, and citizenship. Arturo Escobar, Catherine Walsh, and Irma Alicia Velásquez continued this discussion, adding the importance of alternative and decolonial knowledges as spaces for the reformulation of new critical languages of thought, research, and political activism. Arturo Escobar focused on

the new poststate social movements as a response to the crisis of the neoliberal state, while Catherine Walsh analyzed Manuel Zapata Olivella’s Bantu definition of “the American muntu” to respond to colonial forms of oppression over subjects, nature, and space. Irma Alicia Velásquez, an anthropologist of Maya K’iche’ ancestry, spoke of the difficulties posed by the co-optation of indigenous and Garifuna leaders and ways these state practices affect the struggle for social and human rights in Guatemala.

The keynote speaker for the conference, Boaventura de Sousa Santos, one of the founders of the World Social Forum, commented on the challenges he faces as facilitator of dialogues with activist groups in the Social Forum and in local contexts, such as Ecuador, Bolivia, or Brazil.<sup>1</sup> In his keynote, de Sousa Santos, who defined himself as a “tragic optimist,” made a call for a Global-South critique of the U.S. empire consensus from above to reinvent critical theory from below and to view political practices as forms of “intercultural translation.” In times when the co-optation of Afro-descendant and indigenous leaders-activists by the neoliberal nation-state threatens forms of racial and political solidarity, he made a call to define alternative forms of

state and nonstate solidarities. A key element of these dialogues, he argued, is to seek a common language of struggle. What he defines as “intercultural translation” is much needed to challenge state neoliberal co-optation, stereotypes among groups, and the ways social power intervenes in the reformulation of new critical pedagogies. “Intercultural translation” is also needed to create intelligibility and to facilitate a dialogue between subaltern actors and their conditions.

The second day of the conference opened with invited speaker Ginetta Candelario, who spoke of the need to historicize discourses of sovereignty and racialization in the Dominican Republic–Haiti and to understand this frontier country in the “nexus of Empires” in the Caribbean. For the Caribbean (including Francophone and Anglo Caribbean peoples), notions of triangulation—Caribbean, European (British, French, Spanish,

and Portuguese), and the United States—are still central for forming theories of racialization, race, and coloniality. For Candelario this is central to colonial histories in the region. She analyzed the role of travelers to the Dominican Republic in the nineteenth century who used indigenous representation and languages to claim sovereignty over the land. Hispaniola, first as a Spanish colony (Santo Domingo) and French colony (Saint Domingue),

and later the first black republic in the Americas (1804), also could give us access to other historical realities that started to define what it meant to be “Indian” or “black” in the Americas. The island of Hispaniola, for example, described by Silvio Torres-Saillant as “the cradle of blackness in the Americas,” was the site where the New Laws (Las Leyes Nuevas) were approved in 1542, changing the conditions of native labor and peoples and granting “humanity” under the Spanish empire encomienda system.<sup>2</sup> While some of the remaining native populations allied with the Spanish colonizers to appease or capture black maroons, other natives escaped along with black maroons into the mountains. When the French part of the island, Saint Domingue, became the richest colony in the Americas, black enslaved Africans who already were “nonhuman” were declared “property” once the laws of the Black Code (Code Noir) were instituted in 1685. After the Haitian Revolution in 1804, Haiti established new geographies of freedom for black peoples in the Americas, while producing forms of political blockage and constitutional disavowal from the United States and Europe.<sup>3</sup> Before we can address the commonalities in the political struggles of Afro-descendant and indigenous groups, therefore, it is important to



Illustration by Manuel Mendive, courtesy of Arte del Pueblo

understand that these differences created by colonial laws have influenced the ways these populations have negotiated their claims to humanity and political representation. While indigenous populations historically had used colonial laws to negotiate their claims to land, resources, and political representation, black populations in postemancipated societies had to negotiate their right to live as human beings and to “belong” to the nation-state even in countries where modern states were defined by inclusive ideologies of racial democracy (e.g., the Spanish Caribbean, Brazil). Some of these forms of participation, such as military enlistment (*enlistarse*) to die for the fatherland, are still key elements for the definition of who is and who is not a citizen today.

Meanwhile, invited speakers Aída Hernández and Michael Hanchard discussed other forms of subjection besides race, such as gender and sexism in the indigenous movement in Mexico and Guatemala, and what it meant for blacks as well as for white Creoles to negotiate blackness under “mulatto” definitions of political power, as occurred in the Caribbean and Brazil in Hanchard’s case. What was clear after these presentations was that blackness still appeared as a condition associated with enslaved labor subjected to global systems of capital. Blackness thus appears in a contradictory model defined by modernity itself, not outside of modernity but as modern-colonial subjects. If indigenous peoples were still subjected to oppression, they at least were represented ontologically as subjects, while the status of blacks remained in the uncertain nexus of the relation between life, death, and survival. So blackness as a condition is associated with what poet Audre Lorde defines as being here when “we were never meant to survive.”<sup>4</sup>

On the final day of the conference, Afro-descendant and indigenous activists and scholars discussed their work in panels dedicated to a variety of topics, such as human rights, reconfiguring the state, literature, and memory and ritual or religion. Their conclusion was that, although there have been successes, there is still much work to be done in the analysis of the paradoxes imposed by colonial modernity and capital. Jerome Branche, for example, made a call in his presentation to rethink “Our America” as a decolonial paradigm to understand the native-indigenous as a spiritual and important legacy for Afro-Caribbean people and Afro-Latinos, while

we need to be critical of ethnic constitutions in countries such as Bolivia that still do not recognize their black minorities. For Branche, the work of Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Latin American intellectuals such as Frantz Fanon or Abdias do Nascimento proves that for Afro-descendants horizontal forms of solidarity have been more influential than vertical negotiations with their respective nation-states, in the fight against structural racism and forms of subjection created by global capital. In contrast, indigenous groups continue to negotiate (strategically and pragmatically) on local levels to challenge multicultural and neoliberal policies, as Virginie Laurent and Rosamel Millán propose for the specific cases of Colombia and Chile. Racial, sexual, gender, and citizenship rights work together as new media technologies and the international forum built other languages of consensus, from above and below, as Erin Amason and Light Caruyo reminded us in their respective papers on Garifuna documentaries and the role of activist Sonia Pierre in Haiti. Haitians of Dominican descent and Haitians living in the Dominican Republic who are not recognized by either country face a “stateless” or “paperless” status, a condition of noncitizenship that locates them in the realm of nonhumans. The Haitian case is an extreme example of the challenges presented by the citizen-republican models created by the Enlightenment, which were constituted on the basis of black slavery. In this sense, Afro-descendants in Latin America are still treated as nonhuman and noncitizens. While Afro-cultures and religions have become central for national discourses, structural racism denies them full citizenship (Arroyo, *Travestismos culturales*).<sup>5</sup>

One contradiction present in the Haitian case and on a minor scale in other countries such as Cuba or Brazil is the key role played by international solidarities and NGOs in the United States, Europe, and Canada, to establish new critical dialogues on citizenship. Thus, it is clear that these North-South dialogues have an impact on local struggles and vice versa. For Afro-descendants in postemancipation Latin American societies, humanity and citizenship are still major concerns as structural racism denies them not only resources and political representation but also the right to exist. Nevertheless, the Brazilian black movement—the largest coalition of Afro-descendant movements in South America—for example, has taken the lead in such struggles in Latin

America, making possible the recognition by President Inácio (Lula) Da Silva’s administration that structural racism is at the core of Brazilian society, and the debunking of the myth of racial democracy. The panelists on the final day discussed the successful creation and implementation of affirmative action laws in the country and the current challenges faced by these policies from demands by different sectors of Brazilian society. The Brazilian Black Movement faces special challenges regarding the co-optation of black intellectuals into state or government positions and the need for a continuous dialogue between activists and base coalitions in all sectors of society.

To conclude, the conference was a successful exchange of ideas and opened new collaborative agendas for the future. One of the biggest challenges for Afro-descendant and indigenous organizations is to adapt their languages of struggle to the current political confrontations/negotiations between neoliberalism and the Latin American new left. Discourses on sovereignty, human rights, race, migration, governance, and ownership of natural resources proposed by these social movements clash with state decision-making. What was clear from this conference is that decolonial knowledges and “intercultural translation” are related to languages, mainly the way languages of struggle build solidarities among these groups. If we are living in a transnational-hemispheric moment, it is also true that this moment connects the global Third World South with the developed First World. While it is true that this dialogue should not be an imposition of U.S. perspectives on the South, it is also important to go beyond the traditional left-right dichotomies to make it an “American” dialogue in a radical, critical sense.

For example, a trans-American approach would be useful for Latin Americanist perspectives, as they discuss and compare the status of native populations in the U.S. and African Americans, and the impact that contemporary migration from Latin America and the Caribbean has had on their local struggles. Some comments by panelists and audience members began shifting discussions toward these commonalities and differences among activist agendas and struggles across the Americas. What would happen if these links between race and ethnicity were identified as an “American” language of decolonial perspectives and forms? If migration for economic

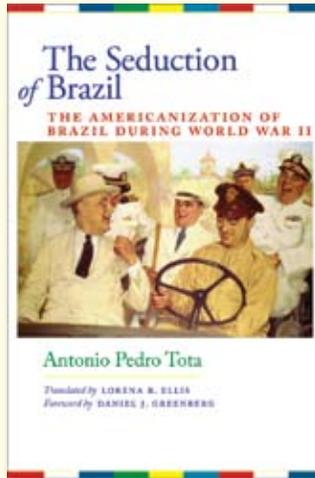
reasons and the power of transnational capital creates a subaltern status in immigrants who are mostly brown and Afro-Latino, it is clear that a new discursive “American” critique of race and racialization emerges from all these interactions, and that forms of coloniality of power remain significant referents for understanding exclusion and subjugation owing to race, gender, class, and sexuality. UT’s Teresa Lozano Long Institute of Latin American Studies, as was proved by *Contested Modernities* and as has been proven by our once-a-year collaborative-activist symposium *Abriendo Brecha*, has opened a discussion on these decolonial struggles in the twenty-first century. Inter-American and trans-American decolonial perspectives should come from critical dialogues as forms of political possibility and pragmatic solutions for an egalitarian democratic future.

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#### Notes

1. Boaventura De Souza is Professor of Sociology at the School of Economics, University of Coimbra (Portugal), Distinguished Legal Scholar at the University of Wisconsin–Madison Law School, Director of the Center for Social Studies of the University of Coimbra, and Director of the Center of Documentation on the Revolution of 1974 at the same university. He was one of the founders of the World Social Forum. Recently, he has published *Democratizing Democracy: Beyond the Liberal Democratic Canon* (2007) and *The Rise of the Global Left: The World Social Forum and Beyond* (2006).
2. Torres-Saillant, Silvio. “The Tribulations of Blackness. Stages in Dominican Racial Identity.” *Callaloo* 23.3 (2000) 1086–1111.
3. Arroyo, Jossianna. “Technologies: Transculturalizations of Race, Gender and Ethnicity in Arturo A. Schomburg’s Masonic Writings.” *Technofuturos. Critical Interventions in Latina/o Studies*. Ed by Nancy Raquel Mirabal and Agustín-Laó-Montes. Boulder: Lexington Publishers, 2008, 141–172.
4. Lorde, Audre. “A Litany for Survival.” In *The Black Unicorn*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1995.
5. See Arroyo, Jossianna, *Travestismos culturales: Literatura y etnografía en Cuba y Brasil*. Pittsburgh: Iberoamericana, 2003. ☀

#### NEW FROM LLILAS PUBLICATIONS



The LLILAS book series, copublished with the University of Texas Press, continues to publish scholarly works for use in graduate and undergraduate courses as well as for the general public interested in Latin America. The latest title for 2009 is in the Translations from Latin America Series:

***The Seduction of Brazil: The Americanization of Brazil during World War II***  
by Antonio Pedro Tota  
Translated by Lorena B. Ellis  
Foreword and commentary  
by Daniel J. Greenberg

Following completion of the U.S. air base in Natal, Brazil, in 1942, U.S. airmen departing for North Africa during World War II communicated with Brazilian mechanics with a “thumbs-up” before starting their engines. This sign soon replaced the Brazilian tradition of touching the earlobe to indicate agreement, friendship, and all that was positive and good—yet another indication of the Americanization of Brazil under way during this period.

In this translation of *O Imperialismo Sedutor*, Antonio Pedro Tota considers both the Good Neighbor Policy and broader cultural influences to argue against simplistic theories of U.S. cultural imperialism and exploitation. He shows that Brazilians actively interpreted, negotiated, and reconfigured U.S. culture in a process of cultural recombination. The market, he argues, was far more important in determining the nature of this cultural exchange than state-directed propaganda efforts because Brazil already was primed to adopt and disseminate American culture within the framework of its own rapidly expanding market for mass culture. By examining the motives and strategies behind rising U.S. influence and its relationship to a simultaneous process of cultural and political centralization in Brazil, Tota shows that these processes were not contradictory, but rather mutually reinforcing.

*The Seduction of Brazil* brings greater sophistication to both Brazilian and American understanding of the forces at play during this period, and should appeal to historians as well as students of Latin America, culture, and communication.

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This book may be ordered through the University of Texas Press. For more information, visit <http://www.utexas.edu/utpress/> or contact LLILAS Managing Editor Virginia Hagerty at <[vhagerty@mail.utexas.edu](mailto:vhagerty@mail.utexas.edu)>.