

## Revealing Africamerica

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*Africamericanos* makes an essential contribution to both art and knowledge by portraying a major presence existing throughout the Americas. A presence that has been unseen, denied, ignored, overlooked. A presence without which it is impossible to understand the Americas. By revealing this hidden presence, *Africamericanos* challenges viewers to confront misrepresentation with visible truths.

*Africamericanos* breaks new ground by portraying a panoply of images of diverse realities from the perspectives of photographic outsiders and insiders to Afrodescendant communities. In doing so, it seeks to reinforce Afrodescendant identities by reflecting their images in a comparative Latin American and Caribbean context and to encourage others to get to know them.

*Africamericanos* inspires questions about this presence. What did Africans contribute to the Americas? What did they and their descendants create? What are they about today?

Without knowing about the presence and contributions of Africans and their descendants from the beginning of the five-hundred-year history of the modern Americas, it is impossible to know the Americas. Much of what is assumed to be foundational is contradicted by historical facts.

The Americas are generally considered to be a European creation, because European nations conquered the indigenous inhabitants and colonized the hemisphere. Demographic data challenge that simplistic assumption.

After European invaders nearly annihilated the indigenous populations with epidemic diseases and brutal treatment, European nations sought in Africa a replacement labor force to develop their new colonies. Superior weaponry facilitated their enslaving twelve to fifteen million people, mostly from the Atlantic coast of western Africa, from the Senegal River on the northern border of what is now Senegal to the southern border of what is now Angola.

Enslavers transported their human property to the Americas as enchained merchandise forced into the holds of hellish ships. To justify their inhuman exploitation of these African people, Europeans developed elaborate theories and philosophies to characterize them as less than human, as inherently inferior.

Between 1500 and 1800, during the formative years of the European colonies that became the American republics, six and a half million people crossed the Atlantic Ocean from Europe and Africa. Only one million came from Europe. Five and a half million people came from Africa. So during the first three hundred years of the five-hundred-year history of the modern Americas, the population of the hemisphere was overwhelmingly African and Afrodescendant.

The idea that the Americas were a European creation ignores the majority of those who peopled and built the new societies, as if the story of the minority represented the whole. *Africamericanos* opens a way toward revealing a greater truth.

Of the millions of Africans enslaved in the Americas, 95% were taken to Latin America and the Caribbean. Extending from Argentina in the south to Mexico in the north, the geography of *Africamericanos* is encompassing. Ironically, Latin America is also where Afrodescendants and their contributions have been the most denied, obscured, invisibilized.

Another misconception that complements and buttresses the fiction of the Americas as a European creation is the belief that Africans, based on theories of their inferiority, were brought only as unskilled laborers, ignoring or denying the knowledge and skills these involuntary migrants brought with them from Africa.

Contrary to what is generally assumed, since the development of colonies in the Americas required information and abilities European colonizers did not have, they forcefully “recruited” Africans specifically for their knowledge and skills, especially in the areas of metallurgy and agriculture. American slavery should therefore be seen in part as a brain drain and transfer of technology from Africa to the Americas.

Seizing possession of the gold of devastated indigenous populations, the Spanish and Portuguese imported Africans to mine it. Beginning in the mid-1400s, the Portuguese had traded in gold with Africans from the region they called the Costa da Mina, later the British colony of Gold Coast, now Ghana. Enslaving their former trading partners, the Portuguese characterized them as *negros minas* for their well-known metallurgical expertise.

During Brazil’s gold rush centered in Ouro Preto in Minas Gerais, owners claimed that the presence of *negros minas* in their gold mines brought “almost magical luck for finding gold.” Luck? Or expertise? In gold-mining regions of Colombia and Ecuador, Mina is a common family name among Afrodescendants, denoting their ancestors’ origins.

Foods retaining African names refer to agricultural and gastronomical knowledge brought from the continent. Peas known in Haiti as *pwa congo* (Congo peas) indicate their place of origin in the Kingdom of Congo, which spanned parts of what are now Angola and the two Congos. Called *wandu* in the Kikongo language, the peas are called *guandu* in Panama and *guandul* in the Chota Valley of Ecuador.

One can eat *mondongo*, tripe stew, from Argentina to Mexico, as well as in the Dominican Republic in the Caribbean. Also called by other names, such as *menudo* in Mexico, *cau cau* in Peru, and *guatita* in Ecuador, the term *mondongo* always also applies. Like *wandu/guandu/guandul*, the word *mondongo* comes from the Bantu language family of Angola and the Congos, perhaps referring to the Kingdom of Ndongo.

Their initially enslaved status has been a pretext for the omission of the contributions of African and Afrodescendant populations from the official histories of the nations of the Americas. National histories, should they mention these populations, focus on them as “slaves.” “Slave” is a term that conscientious thinkers, aware of its implications, no longer use to refer to human beings, considering it insulting and denigrating to the ancestors of Afrodescendant populations.

To call human beings “slaves” suggests that the enslavers’ efforts to deprive their victims of their humanity were successful. Systems of slavery have existed around the world throughout human history. But in the racialized context of the Americas, rather than making clear that the fact of being enslaved was a condition, the term “slave” implies that the condition represented the essence, the totality, of human beings. It suggests that Africans and their descendants were inherently “slaves,” rather than free people in Africa whom European captors enslaved, often for their knowledge.

Enslaved Africans and their descendants proclaimed their humanity by creating new cultural forms that continue to enrich the Americas. *Africamericanos*, in portraying evidence of such Afrodescendant creativity, employs visual evidence that challenges biased perspectives.

Setting foot on American soil after an unimaginably traumatic voyage, Africans began recreating their lives, creating new lives, using memories of Africa to imagine new

cultures in the oppressive environment of the unfamiliar land. People from the Central African region of the Kingdom of Congo, who constituted the majority of Africans enslaved in the Americas, recreated their royal traditions, especially in Brazil and Panama. A Congo queen dances in one of the introductory murals of *Africamericanos*.

African masking traditions resurfaced in western guise, often in the form of Christian devils, as in images from Mexico by Koral Carballo and Hugo Arellanes and from Venezuela by Nelson Garrido. The Catholic Church characterized African spirituality as diabolical and assigned the role of devils to Africans and their descendants in Christian rituals. Africans took advantage of this opportunity to maintain their masking behaviors while imposing their own meanings and interpretations.

African spiritual systems were fundamental to Afrodescendant survival, overcoming colonial efforts to eliminate them. Yoruba spirituality from Nigeria and Benin in West Africa was reconstituted and reshaped in Brazil, Cuba, and Haiti, as *Africamericanos* portrays through Brazilian images from the important historical collections of Pierre Verger and José Medeiros and enigmatic Haitian images by Bruno Morais and Cristina de Middel.

According to the Organization of American States (OAS), there are now more than two hundred million Afrodescendants in the Americas, with more than one hundred and fifty million for them in Latin America and the Caribbean. Of that number, more than a hundred million are Afro-Brazilian. Based on the 2010 census, the Brazilian government acknowledges that 54% of the population is Afro-Brazilian. Brazil is the nation with the largest population of African origin in the Americas and second largest in the world, after Nigeria in West Africa.

The OAS also indicates that these two hundred million Afrodescendants constitute a third of the current population of the Americas. An important cause of the decline in the

relative proportion of African descendants is that, beginning in the late nineteenth century, some countries —the most notorious for vaunting its European identity being Argentina— invited and recompensed European immigrants for coming to “whiten” their populations, in order for them to correspond to their image of a modern nation.

All the nations in the Americas have Afrodescendant populations and most have some or many regionally-based, culturally diverse communities characterized by different origins, historical experiences, and current circumstances. In *Africamericanos* a case in point is Mexico’s three disparate groups located on the Caribbean and the Pacific coasts and near the northern border with Texas.

African conceptual cartographies continue to transcend the European colonial boundaries that became the frontiers of the American nations, mapping ancestral African commonalities across diverse communities. In *Africamericanos*, the masking traditions of Mexico and Venezuela and the Yoruba spiritual systems of Brazil, Cuba, and Haiti are illustrative.

Cultural expressions of African origin characterize not only Afrodescendant communities, but also national identities. Cuba is known for its *rumba*, Brazil for its *samba*, Uruguay for its *candombe*. Ironically, *tango*, the dance for which the world knows Argentina, the country that most vehemently denies its African heritage, as photographer Nicolás Janowski affirms, is a term from the Bantu language family of Central Africa. Although its African name survived, the Africanity of the dance succumbed to the policy of whitening.

Africans contributed to the Americas the majority of the human beings who constituted the demographic foundation of the population, as well as knowledge and skills that allowed the new inhabitants to survive and develop the nascent societies and rich

cultural phenomena that characterize both Afrodescendant communities and national identities.

Given the common origins of the multiethnic nations of the Americas in the enslavement of Africans and their descendants, it should come as no surprise that national systems are characterized by structural racism and discrimination against Afrodescendants. During the last three decades, Afrodescendants have been coming together to organize themselves, learn from each other, and collaborate on projects promoting their collective interests. As they have been learning more about themselves—through their own efforts, since national educational systems have taught them nothing—they have also been insisting on securing full citizenship rights and being formally recognized by their governments for their contributions to their nations.

Thanks to persistent political and cultural activism, Afrodescendants from Argentina to Mexico have succeeded in securing official recognition in constitutions, national holidays paying homage to their heroines and heroes, and even month-long celebrations of their heritage, creating new platforms for making themselves visible.

In getting to know each other, Afrodescendants have discovered commonalities and been influenced by differences. Seeking to enhance their expanding sense of being part of the African Diaspora, some have, in recent years, been attracted to the Yoruba spiritual system that represents one of the most intensely African phenomena in the Americas. It has inspired many Afrodescendants to integrate its powerful symbols into their worldviews.

Such is the case of Baltazar Castellanos in Mexico and Gustavo Esquina and Manuel Golden in Panama, creators of the murals that introduce the exhibit. Although neither Mexico nor Panama had any significant Yoruba presence, the artists included in the

murals images from the Yoruba pantheon, staking their claim to sources of meaning from diasporic realities beyond their own.

These murals inviting and initiating visitors into *Africamericanos* mingle West African Yoruba spirituality with Central African Congo royalty in a seemingly whimsical—but conceptually profound— collaboration between Afro-Pacific and Afro-Caribbean imaginaries in a trans-American mix. They also reenact centuries-old African encounters in twenty-first-century African diasporic synergies.

For more than three centuries, Africans torn away from diverse ethnic groups, language families, and political, spiritual, and philosophical systems encountered each other throughout the Americas. In spite of the horribly oppressive situation of their unaccustomed enslavement, they transcended their ethnic identities to blend elements of their ancestral lifestyles to create new syntheses that became Afrodescendant cultures. Today Afrodescendants are transgressing constricting national identities to create overarching diasporic ones.

The propitious timing of *Africamericanos* documents and brings to light this redefining moment of contemporary encounters in which Afrodescendants are visibilizing themselves and, in so doing, collaborating in revealing to the world a more complete and complex vision of Africamerica.