


August 2015

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Recommended Citation

Floja, Boca (2015) "Collective Amnesia," *South*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/south/vol1/iss1/3>

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Collective Amnesia

Bocafloja

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A wide gap exists between the phenomenon of cultural appropriation and historical claim. How do you justify when you are 12, and at that age you have been programmed by an information structure and culture that has defined every identifying feature?

The migration phenomenon, the informal market, and the constant flow between the idealization of the First World in the northern corner and the underworld in the backyard, made it possible for me one day, while walking with my grandmother in a street market in Mexico, to stumble across a cassette tape with Ice Cube's face on it that said "Amerikkkas Most Wanted." My understanding of English, at that time, was quite limited, but I managed to understand the imagery and vaguely grasp the sentiment of what I read on the cover, which peaked my interest.

The models of success, beauty, progress, popularity and respect in Mexico are always linked to the White/European image and the most visible leaders in the media, political, religious, and cultural realm have never hesitated in referring to Spain as the motherland of all Mexicans, or at least the Mexicans that they protect and defend. We grew up with King Juan Carlos the First and Queen Sophia of Spain as the exemplary model of good taste for families. The popular culture role models that are heard on the radio or take up space on television always praise elements that are clearly Anglo-Saxon in their phenotype and virtues of beauty. All that which boasts the honorability of a family makes a necessary reference to Spanish, French, or Portuguese ancestors, depending on the region where they are encountered.

We don't have worthy role models. The majority of people who look even slightly like me always appear in denigrating roles and positions in the media. One of the most popular television personalities of the seventies and eighties was "La India Maria," or "Indian Mary," an indigenous woman that arrives to the city from the countryside without full command of the Spanish language and suffers all types of hazing and mistreatment, that when displayed on screen is intended to invoke humor.

“Submissiveness,” “naivety,” and “good heart,” are a few adjectives the first conquistadors used to narrate their initial experiences upon interacting with the indigenous peoples of New Spain, and continue to serve as characteristics that qualify as virtues in the framework of “the civilized oppressor and the good savage.” The continued repetition of this identifying value ends up naturalizing and confirming this process as almost an automatic part of the Mexican psyche. Another similar case is that of “El Negro Tomas,” or “Black Thomas,” a television personality of an 11-year-old black boy from the coast of Veracruz, Mexico, played by an adult male who wears a stereotypical Sambo mask, and is constantly reprimanding his mother in a hypersexualized double entendre (*antandra*) play on words. His apparent lack of interest or capacity for memory for activities at school, which his mother suggest for him to do, takes us back again to the registry of the colonial narrative that didn’t cease to signal negative traits, such as laziness, apathy, and libidinous behavior as a part of a series of vices in the personality of Black men of the American continent.

It is important to note that the mother’s character is played by a man portrayed as a black woman in stereotypical nanny costume, which demonstrates the incessant fervor for spiritual practices addressed in the representation in a rough, superficial, and disrespectful sense.

It is not too much to mention that the linguistic form in which these characters are expressed is already charged with a series of values that historically affirm centuries of manipulation, exclusion, and erasure. I am a firm believer that humor is an acute symptom of a specific and well-defined agenda and in this case, to give credit to this type of despicable spectacle would only convert me into an accomplice of my own abuse. It was in that way, seeing Ice Cube on the cover of the cassette, in a pose which in one way or another suggested a form of empowerment and strength, which allowed me to establish direct contact with the manifestation and exercise of historical claim, in spite of the hegemonies and geopolitics of that time, which dictate the contrary. To have deciphered in their totality, the lyrics of the album would have been nearly impossible for me, but it was more than clear that the Black man, in whichever country he lived, did not represent a sector of the population which had been benefitted and privileged by history. I knew very well that his words, just by their intention and the force in which they resonated, were dignified to share a different version of history, a version of history much closer to my reality, even with a distance of thousands of miles separating us.

Historically in Mexico, racial stratification has been concealed under the false discourse of harmonious miscegenation with the aim of destroying any possibility of questioning race within the fabric of an apparently homogeneous society. As a young boy, when looking at my father and reflecting on his reflection in me, I always knew that we were somehow different, physically and culturally. The ancestral memory manifested. The physiognomic remnants of thousands of African slaves arriving in

Mexico to work the sugar cane fields and mines renounced the forced possibility of dispersing itself in the collective amnesia.

Let's travel back to the 17th century. At some point around 1645 the African population in New Spain (Mexico as we know it today) represented the second largest assemblage of Africans in the Americas, right behind Brazil. In many periods during this century the Black population in Mexico was greater than the White. We could develop an extremely extensive summary of the many specific features of this Diasporic process, that cover from the smallest linguistic detail in which African contributions permeate our daily lexicon to a review of every cultural manifestation that occurs through elements which stem from Africa: food, oral tradition, religious practices, an endless number of elements that are fascinating upon discovering and analyzing, especially when for centuries these elements have been strategically erased and minimized by official history.

It is at this point where I necessarily go back to one of the lessons that I have learned from getting to know the work of Walter Rodney. Rodney did not limit the focus of his work to understanding and deciphering the processes in which we were transplanted from one continent to another, with all the theoretical complexities that implies. Rodney gives me the impression that he always understood that once having the privilege to learn and master information, one had to mobilize it and establish a series of projects that would allow us to transform our life's conditions, once clearly understanding the origin of our current condition and a brief survey of our future.

Current liberalism in a country like Mexico begins to capitalize on its own historical abuses in a very punctual way. What better propagandistic strategy to enrich an apparently inclusive state than making a case for ethnic and cultural diversity that exclusively focuses on the folkloric and exotic aspects of the Black experience? The state lays it out this way: make visible the Black presence as part of the statistical examples of the creation of the country, always in a form that seems to be a once-in-a-lifetime dream, far away, at a distance, a controlled and very safe dream. And on the other hand eliminate any possibility of creating a Black consciousness or identity that would put at risk the construction of a Mexican ideology manufactured in the realm of "crossbreeding."

Under this premise, the state and hegemonic culture in Mexico obstructs the possibility of generating Pan-African and diasporic ties of solidarity with other communities of the world. Specifically, and in an exemplifying manner, the state promotes an annual African cultural festival where one of Bob Marley's sons performs, and then "alternates" the headlining groups with a Son Jarocho group from Veracruz (even though San Jarocho has many African elements in its entirety). But it would still be difficult to expose a platform in which the ideas of Black world leaders are discussed, as if the relevance of these struggles wasn't inclusive and of central concern to our condition of existence as

citizens born in Mexico.

Even if we limit the example to local Mexican history, the recognition and valuation that the state has for Gaspar Yanga is minimal in proportion to the official registry of the country's colonial history, which describes his contributions as brief, almost insignificant passages in terms of their historical impact. Gaspar Yanga founded San Lorenzo de los Negros, one of the first free towns in the American continent through an uprising of marooned slaves and later a negotiation that obtained a transition to autonomy under the authority of the colonial Spanish regime in 1618, in the state of Veracruz.

We understand that convenient heroes are those who never challenged the normalized morality of the powers that be, those who obeyed the harsh guidelines of ecclesiastic powers even though on paper they affirmed a secular state. It is not accidental that few in Mexico know of Gaspar Yanga. His condition as Black and free with organizing, negotiating, and honorable skills still raises doubts about the fantasy of progress and baroque aesthetic harmony that prevails in the Mexico that calls itself independent.

It is in this way that the recognition of a Black consciousness or respect for cultural, organizational, and economic expressions of indigenous peoples represents an attack against Mexican hegemonic stability, regardless in many cases of the political affiliations that they represent. Mexican independence from Spain conceived a new model of internal colonialism in which the children of Spaniards and their direct descendants born in Mexico, clearly white Mexicans with all the privileges of race and class that their historic condition granted them, became the new lords who would benefit from the exploitation of the people.

The great wealth generated from the exploitation of local resources may not have been sent to the Spanish crown, but they neither was it distributed to benefit the social welfare of the people. The wealth stayed in the country, but solely accumulated in the chests of a few privileged families, who to this day continue to control the majority of the nation's resources. The poorest areas and the people most affected by exclusion and systemic marginalization were and continue to be the visibly darkest, in regard to the skin color of the settlers.

20 years have passed since I came across that Ice Cube cassette. I never imagined at that time that at some point in my life I would have found myself on the other side of the equation. By a string of almost logical events I became part of one of the first generations of young people that affirmed themselves as a community connected by Hip Hop. Years later, in the blink of an eye, I found myself rapping professionally and touring the country, in Mexico, and in other countries in Latin America and the United States.

On this journey I have discovered the capacity, impact and power of art, which goes beyond the individual satisfaction of a creative exercise. Walter Rodney knew very well that his role in academia was always strategic and one of his fundamental priorities was that of sharing his thinking with the people that did not have the possibility to expose themselves to certain types of knowledge that were restricted by the systemic conditions and reserved for a select group of people. Rodney knew that a Black man in prison, or homeless, would potentially have a greater chance of development and survival in this state of extermination if he had an enhanced awareness of his history and the reasons why his condition is what it is. Rooted in this learning, and taking advantage of the power of influence that artistic visibility provides, I accepted the responsibility to share and produce counterhegemonic knowledge. Swimming in a cultural industry where Hip Hop has been coopted by the system as one more tool in the processes of submission and normalization it was more than important to generate a project that broke the traditional modes of communication between artist and cultural consumer, which in the majority of cases lacks exchange or interaction, and instead exists in a unidirectional expression from the artist to the audience without any real feedback. That is how the “Quilomboarte Collective,” of which I am the founder, emerged.

Quilomboarte is an organization that produces multi-disciplinary cultural events in which rap and spoken word function as an unorthodox educational tool and an essential collaborative adhesive to social and political movements in the processes of transformation throughout the Americas. The organization derives its name from the communities in resistance, “Quilombos,” which during the colonial period on the American continent were established by fugitive black slaves (also known as *maroons* and *cimarrones*), indigenous peoples and others who rejected colonialism’s domination, who preferred to live as free people in communal form. Quilombos (also known as *mocambos* in Mexico and *Palenques* in Colombia) were founded as independent and self-sustaining collectives that rejected the state of slavery and its oppressive nature.

We believe in decolonization as a fundamental step in the process of understanding and establishing the meaning of self-determination in our communities. Our way of communicating with youth is through this project, which in the majority of cases would be the first time that many of these young individuals are exposed to a source of information that questions and is critical of accepted history, and in addition is imparted by a group of people with whom he or she can identify immediately.

In the overwhelming majority of events we hold in Mexico, we try to invite artists from the African diaspora that share a congruent discourse with the emancipatory needs of our people, offering a platform of exchange and interaction with youth in Mexico. One of the first steps to take in order to establish these platforms of solidarity is recognizing the fact that historically the system was designed

to create animosity between Black and Brown people.

It is worth remembering that in some cases the colonial regime in the Americas utilized African slaves as overseers of indigenous slaves, a divisive strategy between oppressed subjects that would naturally prevent any type of integrated uprising between Black and Brown. We are speaking of the first strokes of induced hate. The analogy could easily be applied to many of the present day ghettos in the United States where the enemy doesn't appear to be a mercenary and exclusive system but rather the neighbor with a skin tone slightly lighter or darker. It is indispensable that we solidify connections between different communities of the Diaspora, outside of the traditional circuits of development, which in many cases are found to be permeated by bureaucratic thinking which defends the interests of the liberal agenda. These dynamics are magnified when the vehicle itself questions the framework of "safe," of what it is considered high art, high culture, or "ethnic" culture, as they love to say.

Decolonize, self-manage, transgress, emancipate; our redefined vision of Hip Hop's four elements. There is a long way ahead of us, and this is the time in which we are witnessing the first and incipient drafts of an affirmative process related to Black identity within the Mexican population. The responsibility to facilitate the platforms that would open dialogues and give continuity to the production of culture that consensually demystifies national identity, race relations, and self determination is fundamental to our projection and agenda.

Gonzalo Aguirre Beltran, a Mexican anthropologist whose continuous contributions to Afro-Mexican studies gave him the recognition as one of the most relevant academics and researchers on the subject, plays a dual role in this historical process. On one hand, he was the first researcher to create a path toward the visibility and exposure of the subject within high-brow academia through the publication of several books and the entailment with state agencies.¹ Ironically, Beltran was also the one who, due to personal perceptions and expectations, halted the strengthening of and continued research on the Afro-Mexican legacy based on a myopic argument.

Beltran thought that the miscegenation between indigenous, Black and mestizo communities would end up diluting the African presence in Mexico by the seventies, when the planned Pan-American highway would be built and displace the towns of the Guerrero coasts, which, he argued, would entirely disaggregate the communities without leaving any trace of their existence.

The truth of the matter is that Aguirre Beltran's expectations have always revolved around the exoticism of finding a faithful reproduction of a sixteenth century community from Gabon or Guinea recreated in the Mexican coastal states of Guerrero or Veracruz in the nineteen-fifties. What Aguirre Beltran never fully understood is that the specific characteristics of the Black population in

¹ See Gonzalo Aguirre Beltran, *La población negra de México 1519-1810* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1946).

Mexico wouldn't be "less Black" because of their communal contextualization among indigenous communities. Neither was Aguirre Beltran ever interested in the process of politicization of Black towns, and he was even less interested in the development of solidarity bridges that would link the Black experience in Mexico with others along the Diaspora, with the intention of stimulating a sense of self-determination towards the states and nations that demarcate those communities.

Under this framework, I am reminded of Walter Rodney's contributions, and how he once mentioned in a speech on the street,² "No one today can afford to be misled by the myths of race." In that sense I would say that we've lived sedated under the placebo of inclusion in their national projects to the point where we defend with our own lives the interests of our main oppressors in the name of patriotic fervor, which has never ensured our interests within this political, social and economic model that is nothing else but neo-slavery in practice. We've learned to naturalize our apparent failure, assuming the entire responsibility of our conditions without questioning causes and origins. We have imported and perpetuated an irrational hate for "the other," when "the other" is for instance a reflection of ourselves.

I still have that old Ice Cube cassette that unleashed an entire series of events in my life. Ice Cube is probably not Amerikkas most wanted anymore, or maybe he never was, maybe it was just a mirage that drew a silhouette of a powerful conjuncture in the marginalized communities of South Central L.A, with the capability to impact and reproduce itself all over the world, which unto itself is a huge achievement. If something is clear to me, it is the fact that Amerikkka, written and spelled with three k's, no matter how sophisticated in its oppression and operation techniques, despite its subjective bubble of inclusion, racial democracy, and falsely inclusive public policies. Amerikka is still walking on our backs, capitalizing on our subjugated condition in order to keep satisfying mercenary interests in which you, me, and millions of people play a perpetual secondary role.

Today more than ever, Rodney's words still resonate as a constant reminder that the true social victories should have the capability to permeate the masses: the reason why it is fundamental to assume our responsibilities to the extent which is possible, and establish bridges that connect the academic discourse with organizing in our communities.

People are waiting for us outside.

2 See <http://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/rodneystrspe.html> for full speech.