The Power of Black Voices: Afro-Latin Identities in the Americas

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It is such an honor, once again, to join hands and minds and hearts in this richly diverse community, reminding ourselves of the strength and legacy of the likes of Marion Thompson Wright and Clement Alexander Price. Connecting, as our colleagues, Jack Tchen and Lacey Hunter have done today, our time to times past, this 44th MTW lecture –"The Power of Black Voices: Afro-Latin Identities in the Americas" to the 27th MTW Lecture "Times Longer than Rope," as we pledge collectively not to forget that much of our contemporary social tapestry was stitched together over time, from other places, in this case across the Black Atlantic.

Now, I hope you forgive the social psychologist in me, for this unpacking of identity, in this case Afro-Latin but applicable of course to all our socially constructed categories built across history and homelands, calls out to me how we are and always have been wedded to seeing the world through imagined prototypes instead of the fuzzy sets that actually populate it.[2] How we privilege fantastical, imaginary homogeneity within our identity groups, ignoring and undervaluing the actual diversity of lived experiences (and histories and travels). We do this, intentionally or not, but sadly often with the result of building unbridgeable gaps of humanity across groups, gaps that not only miss the nuances of within group variation but that habituate us to perceive (and then construct) a divided and divisive, all or none, mine not yours, in-cast or out-cast, social reality. In this vein, wouldn't it be such a gift to our collective intelligence if we could routinely do what our wonderful speakers will do for us and with us today, in this case, as they mess up the so simplified assumptions of Black identity in this country by pushing us to think across the histories and borders and cultures of all the Americas that came and continuously come to define who belongs with whom, and who we persistently call "other."

Who is Black, who is white, who is Latinx, as if our daily life and interactions were rigidly scripted by a godly census-taker rather than complexly and creatively constructed in vivo by our histories? Indeed, at a personal level, at a family level, our lived experiences, the languages we speak, the food we customarily eat, the homelands we visit, the stories we grow up hearing, are not simply populated at all. Just think of the stories that we will hear about today from esteemed linguist and educator, Nodia Mena, of Garifuna history and culture, traversing from the Caribbean to Central America to New York City, bringing a rich mixture of African, Indigenous, and Spanish culture. Accordingly, Paul Joseph López Oro describes the

[1] Invited welcome remarks given at the 44th Annual Marion Thompson Wright Lectures, presented by the Clement A. Price Center on Ethnicity, Culture and the Modern Experience at Rutgers University – Newark, February 17, 2024.

[2] Cantor, N., Smith, E., French, R., & Mezzich, J. (1980). Psychiatric diagnosis as prototype categorization. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, *89*(2), 181-193.

"transgenerational Garifuna New Yorkers of Central American descent" as negotiating "multiple subjectivities as Black, Indigenous, and AfroLatinx."[3]

Leading us to ask: Has that complexity and richness been appreciated? Probably not, for as a society and across the oceans, we place others neatly in those perceptual boxes, as legal scholar, Tanya Hernandez will courageously note today as she exposes the commonplace biases among Latino communities fed by cultural practices of "othering." And our discussions today will so uncover this rich but messy identity world we live in, for, as Juan Flores and Miriam Jiménez Román have described in their analysis of the "triple-consciousness" of Afro-Latino culture in the U.S., "Afro-Latinos occupy a crucial place in contemporary racial and ethnic relations in the United States and internationally. They are a group that typically falls between the cracks of prevailing classifications, and yet at the same time stands to serve as the most significant bridge across a growing, and increasingly ominous, social divide."[4]

Yes, the homogenization of our social world is our peril, for as any good psychologist will tell you, behavior – how we treat each other – follows perceptions; what we "see" (and believe to be real) is what we then force to be true. Our simplified version of the social world becomes the basis for a rigid pecking order of worthiness that defines access to opportunity and power; it also replicates itself in our daily lives, prescribing on one hand, who we live with and go to school with and how we vote, and on the other implicitly instructing us on who to stay away from and so much more.

We surely see this perilous simplification of group identity (and all the daily life systemic barriers for some and power for others that follow from it) on display in this country, acompanied, somewhat ironically, by efforts to whitewash – literally and metaphorically – any discussion of or learning about the role of group identity, historically and currently, in shaping access to the so-called "American dream." Indeed, this is a moment of erasure of history, when it thus becomes all the more important, as our colleagues at the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice remind us of repeatedly, to dialogue about our history and to consider what the outlines of a progressive restorative justice framework might look like, as they are currently doing through the Reparations Council, co-chaired by our own Dean Taja-Nia Henderson with esteemed historian Khalil Gibran Muhammad.

Fortunately, despite the national mood of erasure, we are certainly seeing locally a strong appetite for understanding the public history (that is often not so public) that draws a line from slavery to red-lining to residential and school segregation, and other aspects of anti-Blackness, as our Rutgers-Newark scholars, led by Mark Krasovic and Tim Eatman team with our community partners, Richard Cammarieri, Jean-Pierre Brutus and Deborah Smith Gregory, to hold community dialogues on reparations.[5] Moreover, as our colleagues, Belinda Edmonson, Kornel Chang, Sean Mitchell, and Bernie Lombardi, who designed the Sawyer Seminar on Natives and

[3] López Oro, P.J. (2020, 2021). Garifunizando Ambas Americas: Hemispheric Entanglements of Blackness/Indigeneity/Afrolatindad, *Postmodern Culture,* 31(1&2).
[4] Flores, J. & Jiménez Román, M. (2009). Triple-Consciousness? Approaches to Afro-Latino Culture in the United States. *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies,* 4(3), 319-328.
[5] See https://www.newark.rutgers.edu/news/rutgers-newark-community-partners-join-university-michigan-center-social-solutions-explore

Nativists, Migrants and Immigrants, in an American City, compellingly documented, the history that connects group identity to access and opportunity, quickly dismantles the simplifications of Blackness, revealing the interweaving of histories, geographies, and identities in a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, historic city like Newark.[6]

Importantly, as treasured historian Lorgia García Peña will help us see and understand and discuss today, the anti-Black and anti-indigenous narratives also have a long and storied presence in the politics and daily lives, in the colonial histories of both oppression and resistance across the Americas. Nonetheless, often in resistance to these oppressive movements, as Lacey Hunter has noted in describing today's topic, "the strength and resilience of Black voices in the Americas" shines thru in this history and reminds us of "the many ways African descended people have defined and redefined themselves across the Atlantic world in the last four centuries." And, of course, this transnational narrative of oppression and resistance and resilience simmers only slightly below the surface in our current moment of tension over "borders" of all sorts, as we in the U.S. persistently ask questions of "origin" – who belongs in "our" America, where did they come from, who are our "natural relatives"? as Tim Raphael and Julie Winokur poignantly document in the Newest Americans: Stories from the Global City.[7]

Moreover, this mounting and rigidly defined xenophobia is spreading even as – perhaps precisely because – we live in a moment of enhanced global displacement, such that the impact of our reliance on simplified perceptions of otherness, rooted in ignorance of the varied richness of historical identity narratives, will continue to take a deep toll on humanity, and importantly, on generations to come, – as Mayte Green-Mercado, Brian Murphy, and Gary Farney have seen in their work on the Mediterranean Displacements Project.[8] Yes, as we quickly learn in unpacking the complexities hidden in the simplifications of Black, Afro-Latin, and Latinx identities, borders and boundaries, not to mention cultures and histories, never followed the prescriptions of our census-takers, much as our stereotypes, implicit biases, and explicit practices might try to pigeon-hole them.

Accordingly, as we consider the persistent tendency, over history and across geographies, to caricature, simplify, homogenize and pit otherwise complex and overlapping racial and ethnic identities and identity groups, and contrast this with what we learn today about *The Power of Black Voices*, and what that implies about the resilient movements across time of so many other groups as well, there is another lesson that I see in this fraught moment. In particular, this suggests to me why it is so important to push back on the growing movement of skepticism about the humanities, the arts, and the humanistic social sciences. What we're seeing in our current moment is more than the usual under-appreciation of the fundamental importance of these disciplines to our ability to understand ourselves and to grow as human beings. In what I think of as a paradigmatic example of the phenomenon that social psychologist Rupert Nacoste calls "hibernating bigotry,"[9] we are now seeing efforts in a growing number of states to literally

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[6] See https://globalracialjustice.rutgers.edu/event/sawyer-seminar-ru-n-natives-and-nativists-migrants-and-immigrants-american-city

[7] See https://newestamericans.com/

[8] See https://sites.rutgers.edu/mdp/

[9] Rupert Nacoste (2015), *Taking on Diversity: How We Can Move From Anxiety To Respect*, Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.

make it illegal to tell the fulsome story of who we are—in short, to make it illegal to tell the truth.

So, in many ways, the need has never been greater for us all to learn about and talk about the personal histories that we all carry forward and that so contribute to the diversity of lived experiences – histories and experiences that both build a base of perseverance and knowledge and talent to cultivate, and simultaneously that must be told so as to dismantle the tendency to mark people insidiously as "others." And we will hear today, from distinguished curator, Ariana Curtis, just how artistic expression can create a public memory exchange to both enrich our understandings and simultaneously to counter our worst tendencies. For it is time to learn and to resist ignorance; time for dialogue, so we can partake in building safer, more just, more truthfully complex communities – locally, nationally, and globally. And, my friends, that is what we are doing today, with thanks to our organizers and speakers and participating friends of MTW, and to Marion Thompson Wright and Clement Alexander Price who are surely egging us on in this moment.