

**The Afro Latino/African-American Dialogue
Points of Unity Conference
At the Caribbean Cultural Center African Diaspora Institute
408 West 58th Street, NY, NY 10019
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Edward Paulino is currently an assistant professor in the Department of History at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice/CUNY in New York City. He received his B.A. in History at SUNY/New Paltz in 1992, an M.A. in History from Arizona State University in 1994, and a Ph.D. in History from Michigan State University in 2001. His dissertation traced the political history of the Dominican border and its role in the creation of the Dominican Republic with special emphasis on the post 1937 project to nationalize the border. He is currently revising his dissertation manuscript to include the implications of the 1937 Haitian massacre on future anti-Haitian campaigns of violence in the Dominican Republic.

If the goal of this Points of Unity Dialogue is to create links that bridge the contact and understanding between African-Americans and Latin Americans of African descent, then the late Dr. Ruth Hamilton is a prime example of the possibilities of creating long-lasting linkages connecting the African Diaspora across multi-dimensional borders. Dr. Ruth Hamilton exemplified the notion of reaching out across the Diaspora. As an African-American woman from the U.S. South, she was dedicated to educating people about the presence and contributions of people of African descent. At Michigan State University she co-founded the African Diaspora Research Project (ADRP) which “studies the dispersion and settlement of African peoples beyond the continent of Africa.” The project’s newsletter *Conexões* has been distributed throughout 42 states and more than 50 countries throughout the world making ADRP a voice of black self-reclamation and autonomous empowerment through education. Throughout the world people learned that ADRP was a unique place where scholars, particularly those of African descent, came to critically examine and engage the history of a people which has long been vilified, stereotyped, exploited, enslaved, colonized and imitated for commercial profit.

Dr. Hamilton understood that that as an African-American (which as a group represents the most affluent black community in the world), she was in a special position to reach out to her fellow descendants of the Middle Passage and reconnect with a long lost family that was separated by the chains of evil. One of the most important things she did to connect with the African Diaspora was to invite and secure funding for graduate students of African descent to attend Michigan State University and participate in the ADRP program. You cannot even begin to imagine how powerful it was for me to be around fellow black students who were in the departments of music, sociology, linguistics, history, and anthropology. These students spanned the globe from Kenya, Brazil, Panamá, Puerto Rico, Trinidad and Tobago, Nigeria, Canada, and the United States.

We met twice a month to discuss our research and to share our personal experiences with racism and our own definitions of blackness. I believe ADRP can be used as a useful model for future projects that seek to unite people of the African Diaspora particularly throughout the Americas.

One way to empower the Diaspora is to create independent exchange programs where Afro-Latin Americans can attend undergraduate and/or graduate schools in the United States. This is extremely important for Americans here because we often are deprived of meeting Afro-Latin American visitors particularly students not to mention tourists. For example there are many Brazilian students studying in the United States but unfortunately most of the students I've met were white. This is unacceptable for a Brazil, a country that has the largest concentration of black people outside of Africa and where, according to the World Bank, "people of color comprise nearly half of the national population." Therefore, I propose a type of affirmative-action for student exchange programs. For example a scholarship/exchange program would be established in which black students would be recruited from poor and working class Latin American neighborhoods in conjunction with local universities so that they can attend college in the United States.

Like the Fulbright Program that supports student and scholar exchanges that promotes cultural awareness, understanding, and educational training between the United States and the rest of the world, the Afro-Latin American exchange program would send Americans of African and Latino descent to places like Mexico, Colombia, Brazil, Cuba, and Uruguay. And like the Fulbright program, Afro-Latin American exchange students would return home to invest in their communities at the end of their tenure. In the exchange both countries will benefit economically and socially. Black students will travel between and within northern and southern hemispheres changing the make-up of today's traditional traveler. No mere tourists, these black students will spread their regional cultures throughout the Americas challenging many uninitiated people to rethink their traditional notions of race and national identity. The common refrain might be "Damn! I didn't know they had black people in Mexico, Colombia, Peru, Uruguay, or (even) the United States." It is interesting to note that given the ubiquitous and pervasive local and international visibility of black culture, people of African-descent remain limited in their ability to cross boundaries. Despite being the creators of transcendental culture, people of African-descent remain conspicuously absent from the top economic, social, and political circles of power that ipso facto restrict their ability to enter these spaces. Just take a glimpse of the tourist resorts in the Americas for example. From Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Brazil, Colombia, Panama, or the United States, black people are usually the staff, the workers rather than the bright colored bracelet-wearing sun-bathing tourists listening sometimes and ironically to an Outkast CD. And it doesn't get any better in politics and sports which clearly reveal this racial and ethnic inconsistency. Throughout the Americas, in countries with sizeable concentrations of black people, the majority of the athletes in national sports teams are black. The owners are not. In politics the grassroots constituencies are of African descent yet the political leadership is not. This also applies to the United States which has a disproportionately higher black representation in politics and financial circles thanks to structural changes in policy such as Affirmative Action than places like Brazil or the Dominican Republic. And even in a

country like the United States that has seen the rise of black millionaires and a visible professional and black middle class, no black person has ever been elected President. In Latin America, the situation is less sanguine. Even in Cuba, a country where after the 1959 Revolution race was supposedly supplanted by class and where everyone was just Cuban, being black, as Cornel West has written, still mattered. More than forty years after the revolution Cubans have noticed the inconsistencies of this race-less socialist dogma. In the last few years, no black Cuban has formed part of Castro's inner political circle of power. Moreover some Cubans, like my black Cuban friend in Havana, see race as paramount. In a very matter of fact way he told me he expects to see a black person first get elected president in the United States than in Cuba. In more democratically oriented countries like the Dominican Republic being a black candidate especially with ethnic ties to Haiti can subject you to a virulent racist campaign like the one endured by the late José Francisco Peña Gomez in the 1990s.

The hope for the twenty first century of course is to see talented people of African descent not only win the Heissman Trophy or MVP awards at the NBA All-Star game but also in the same proportions win governorships, presidencies, and CEO positions. As the never outdated Marx would say control the modes of production.

Of course, there needs to be a dialogue between all the groups in the African Diaspora on what exactly constitutes blackness in order for such exchange and scholarship programs to succeed. As for Latinos and African-Americans in the United States there is a long history of collaboration between these two groups. Both groups have lived and died in segregated public housing and under funded schools. The Balkanized geography of the metropolis that is New York City has created a multi-generational closeness with these two groups that other Latinos and African-Americans from other parts of the United States find strange and even awkward. It is a common sight and a testament to this shared experience to see African-Americans enthusiastically wave Boricua flags at the annual Puerto Rican Day Parade in New York City. Or to see Spike Lee display the centrality of the Latino bodega in the life of a young African-American Brooklyn girl in *Crooklyn*. Indeed it was an African-American (Brett Tinsely) with roots in the U.S. South who taught me (a Dominican-American) and many of my Latino neighborhood friends to play organized baseball for the Lower East Side Smith Royals in New York City.

In the future, this relationship can serve as a strong precedent for other collaborative projects. First African-Americans can join with Latinos, particularly Latinos of African descent, and start campaign ads, commercials, and/or video projects undermining the insidious but pervasive mainstream notion of Latinos as singularly mestizo or white. Just like no one complexion in the African-American community can solely portray the kaleidoscope of colors that comprise this group (Prince, Paul Robeson, or Lena Horne, Alicia Keys), Latinos cannot just be portrayed in film, television or magazine as everything but black. It's a disgrace. No one complexion should have a monopoly in defining what a Latino looks like. For example, there is a shocking absence of black people in Spanish language TV. In Spanish language television, you can count the number of black people in the different and daily variety and news shows. Latin American soap operas are notorious for the lack of either indigenous or black characters. And when characters of color do appear on Spanish television they are usually in the sports' highlight reels or usually in subservient positions as telenovela domestics. To this

day, it is still mind boggling how even the late Celia Cruz (the queen of Salsa) a few years ago did a running soap opera cameo as a maid! Imagine Cassandra Wilson playing a maid. It's scandalous.

I believe African-Americans can facilitate the conversation that Afro-Latinos are having and must have with other non-black Latinos about being recognized as part of the Latino community. Unfortunately, the premium on whiteness is still important in the entertainment industry as witnessed by Jennifer Lopez's meteoric rise to stardom leaving some Latinos to question the essence of a meritocracy in acting especially when other equally capable actors such as the darker-skinned and fellow Newyorikan Lauren Velez (of New York Undercover fame) has failed to receive a modicum of contract solicitations for her excellent acting abilities. African-Americans can also recruit Afro-Latinos to attend Historically Black Universities and Colleges or HBCUs. If every HBCU designated two scholarships for two black Latinos (regardless of country of origin) to attend their college, you would create another avenue of progress for young people of African descent who often have few or fewer opportunities to escape their local and national socio-economic conditions.

Lastly, and this is paramount, there is the task of preserving the historical memory of Africans and their descendants in the Americas. Although it has been suggested in the past, I propose that both groups organize an exploratory committee to see the construction of a monument/memorial/museum called the International African Diaspora Memorial Center (ADMC) on the Washington DC Mall. This center will be dedicated (sanctioned by the United Nations) to remembering the crime against humanity that was the European enslavement of Africans and will stand as a testament to us that these human beings suffered unimaginable horrors during the Middle Passage and endured chattel slavery and generational apartheid with unexplainable resiliency. The Center will house galleries representing the Americas and conduct exhibits that will range from chains used to transport African slaves to videos showcasing comparative black musical genres featuring Robert Johnson and Anthony Santos playing the Blues and Bachata, while Ella Fitzgerald sings to Susana Baca on an interactive digital display. The ADMC will also conduct seminars, lectures, and conferences in many subjects relating to the African Diaspora among which one can be a nation-wide campaign to teach American school children how to play the conga drums. In particular there will be theoretical discussions on how immigration and personal experience influence changing notions of black identity for someone like me who growing up in the barrios of New York City rejects whiteness and its extensions despite the light-skinned privilege I obtain in the Dominican Republic: a privilege that a poor black Haitian does not have—and one that I do not deserve.

Overall the ADMC will be practicing what we are discussing in theory today: the need to physically cross borders the way hip-hop and rap have musically. But beyond listening to each other's spiritual and cultural production we must *see* each other face-to-face, unashamed without the fictitious cinematic portrayals that have for so long trained us to hate ourselves by hating our reflection. But that reflection must be confronted and when this happens, it will speak English, Spanish, Portuguese, Creole, Papiamentu, Dutch, French, and countless linguistic derivations borne out of a baptism of metal and water. Languages, like their speakers, that survived in faith and song while things fell apart. We are at the beginning of a journey like Alice going down the Rabbit Hole and

Neo taking the red pill. Only by creating educational bridges of understanding and self-discovery will we be able to liberate ourselves to remove the mask Fanon warned us about and climb out of the cave of darkness into the all-encompassing light of autonomous self-reflection. After all, they might have been different ships but the one-way trip from Goreé and El Mina was one and the same.