

## Towards a (Re)Writing of Africa and the Americas

By Jean-Arsène Yao | March 29, 2025

- **Histories:** What is the scholarship that has most informed or enriched your own approach to the study of Latin America and Africa (Latin America-Africa)?
- **Histories:** What do you see as having been key debates in and/or challenges for the field, historically?
- **Futures:** What recent scholarship on Latin America-Africa are you most excited by?
- **Futures:** What do you see as key debates in and/or challenges for the field going forward?

Despite their geographic distance and significant differences, Africa and Latin America often mirror each other, due to their shared histories of European colonization and of the transatlantic slave trade. Whether we are discussing the geopolitics of knowledge or a relationship to history, the challenges facing the postcolonial world are no different on either side of the Atlantic. From the perspective of my training as a historian of the Americas and my work as an African professor of Hispano-American Civilizations at the Félix Houphouët-Boigny University (Ivory Coast), I believe that it is necessary to understand practices, discourses, and strategies of reappropriation as a means for decolonizing imaginaries of Africa and [Latin] America. This position is reflected in my answers to the four questions posed in the framework of this questionnaire.

### Histories

The academic work that has most influenced my approach to the study of Latin America and Africa is undoubtedly the body of work produced by Manuel Lucena Salmoral, who was my doctoral thesis supervisor at the University of Alcalá (Spain). Lucena Salmoral is one of the leading Spanish specialists on African slavery in the Americas and the Caribbean. Not only is the topic itself of immense interest, Lucena Salmoral also knew how to use the variety of documents preserved in archives in Spain and the Americas relating to the history of slavery in these geographical areas and, indirectly, in Africa. A topic that also connects to other related concerns, such as captives, trafficking, trade, minorities and marginal classes, emigration, and exile.

The transatlantic triangle of Iberia, Africa, and the Americas, with its traumatic relations stemming from the so-called “discovery” and colonization of the American continent, as well as the human costs experienced on this side of the Atlantic, is aptly conveyed in his books *Los códigos negros de la América española* (“The Black Codes of Spanish America,” 1996) and *La esclavitud en la América española* (“Slavery in Spanish America,” 2002). Slavery was socially and economically part of the existence and *raison d’être* of the provinces of the Indies. Labor was needed and there were no qualms about the means by which that labor

force was acquired, which resulted in the widespread use and development of slavery in the Americas. The expertise Manuel Lucena Salmoral accumulated over almost fifty years is poured into these books, which are undoubtedly required reading for specialists on the subject. Here one finds a meticulous reconstruction of historical reality, including the near-unimaginable fortitude of the enslaved, exemplary fighters against adversity and historical subjects whose efforts positively contributed to the development of Spanish and American societies.

But Lucena Salmoral has not been my sole influence. From my encounters with Vicenta Cortés Alonso, another of the foremost Spanish experts on slavery, emerged the book *Esclavos y libertos en los mundos ibéricos: Obra completa de Vicenta Cortés Alonso* ("Slaves and Freedmen in the Iberian Worlds: The Complete Works of Vicenta Cortés Alonso," 2011), which I edited. *Esclavos y libertos* is a compilation of all Cortés Alonso's published work, bringing together 26 essays grouped into five chapters, which range from research on the slave trade to the social integration of Black people and their descendants, from the conditions enslaved people faced during the plantocracy to their liberation. In addition to providing a study of the Spanish slave trade since the beginning of the fifteenth century, this book perfectly illustrates the transatlantic triangle (Iberia-Africa-America) and the traumatic relations stemming from the discovery and colonization of the American continent, on both sides of the Atlantic. Beyond supplying transcription of several historical documents and thereby providing specialists in the study of with an indispensable resource for consultation and analysis, this book draws a parallel between the conditions of enslaved Black people in Spain and the Americas.

Likewise, since 2016, working in collaboration with the UNESCO Chair in Afro-Ibero-American Studies at the University of Alcalá and together with colleagues in the Groupe de Recherche et d'Études Latino-américaines (GRELAT), we have organized a colloquium that brings together researchers from different countries and perspectives to work on the confluences and discontinuities between Africa and the Americas, promoting renewed dialogue around these questions. The colloquium takes a multidisciplinary approach to the study of the forms and mechanisms of enslaved peoples' resistance as well as looking to the new forms of relation that emerged between Africa and the Americas after abolition and onward to the current, global moment.

In terms of the most important debates in the field: it is crucial that we do not forget that Spain occupies the dishonorable last place amongst European countries to abolish the trafficking of Black people. This fact, moreover, requires an analysis of the methods of investigation in this field of study, as well as of the need to identify existing and usable documentary sources.

On the other hand, there is a need for the cross-sectional study of Africa-Latin America that captures the strong socio-historical links between the two regions. Indeed, human and cultural contact between Africa and the Americas, deriving from the colonial project initiated by Christopher Columbus, has been marked by confluences and discontinuities between the two regions. Nevertheless, as a wide range of scholarship shows, there are convergences around the political, generic, and epistemic questions of domination and resistance: issues that inform the unearthing and rewriting of histories of colonialism and slavery on both sides of the Atlantic. It is therefore crucial to reinforce the work of rigorous critical reexamination of

existing biographies and historical archives, especially in Africa. This is fundamentally a matter of knowing how to identify and give an effective account of the various issues that can be read, seen, or heard in cultural discourses and practices in these struggles for the full recognition of African and Afro-descendant citizenship.

Indeed, the colloquium that we organized in 2019 resulted in the proceedings published under the title *Áfricas, Américas y Caribes: Representaciones colectivas cruzadas, siglos XIX-XXI* ("Africas, Americas, and Caribbeans: Crossed Collective Representation from the Fifteenth to the Twenty-First Century"). This edited volume demonstrated that one of the consequences of the so-called "encounter of the two worlds" was that it allowed Afro-descendant diasporas to recognize Africa as the cradle of their ancestors, and therefore as part of the process of construction of national and ethnic historical identity to build a whole new set of opinions, information, values, and beliefs. At the same time, this vision also implies an object-group relationship, resulting in conflicting and even contradictory sociopolitical positionalities. When these positionalities—the scope of which must be rigorously assessed—crystallize in the social imaginary, they have the potential to give rise to collective myths that can mobilize or even subvert a sociopolitical order grounded in Eurocentrism in the Americas and the Caribbean. Yet they can also lead to contradictory positions and confrontations, including between African and Afro-descendant populations.

Finally, I think it is important to point out that the (re)construction of Africa, as much as from within as from its diasporas, should be a place without borders and a space for marvelous re-imagining. The mythification of the mother continent or, conversely, its geopoetic reformulation—particularly through artistic events and/or African or Afro-descendant literary production—should be understood as an alternative space for forging connection. It is a restorative framework as well as a space of refuge for interactions that make it possible to understand the questions of belonging and the practices of legitimation that are tied to these imaginaries. This approach should be in line with the contemporary (re)creation of an inclusive imaginary in which the (re)conceptualization or even the remaking of the self is a necessary precondition for liberation from the specters of coloniality.

## **Futures**

Amongst the contemporary scholarship that most interests me is that which studies the questions of "otherness" and the discourse of alterity in Afro-descendant social movements in Latin America. Research by John Antón Sánchez, in Ecuador, and Santiago Arboleda Quiñonez, in Colombia, highlights Afro-descendant organizations that, through discursive and political action, make possible the representation of these communities in civil society. From this framework, they pose crucial demands for an agenda centered on the recuperation of these communities' history, the recognition of their rights as citizens, and the fight against racism, social exclusion, and poverty. Such studies show that Afro-descendant communities develop their collective action—aimed toward such goals as the protection of their territory and culture in the face of the climate crisis—through various forms of pressure, demanding that the state respect its guarantees and obligations. While such issues traditionally give rise to studies of a historical and sociological nature, the originality of these scholars' approach is that they focus specifically on the development of unexpected forms or practices rooted in the affirmation of Black identity in places such as Mexico, Ecuador, or Colombia. To do this, they look to many different kinds of cultural production, written as well as spoken, by

individuals or groups marginalized or otherwise perceived as a threat. Such scholarship—including work by Santiago Arboleda Quiñonez, in Latin America (*Etnoeducación, etnización afrocolombiana y forcejeos decoloniales* [“Ethno-education, Afro-Colombian Ethnicization, and Decolonial Struggles,” 2019]) and by Achille Mbembe, in Africa (*De la postcolonie: Essai sur l’imagination politique dans l’Afrique contemporaine* [On the Postcolony, 2000])—forms part of decolonial and Southern studies and contributes to the study of ethnic minorities within national groupings as well as of the political mechanisms put in place to guarantee ethnic minorities’ legal recognition or equal access to local political resources.

Yet there are also challenges. In the essay “Le long tournant décolonial dans les études africaines: Défis de la réécriture de l’Afrique” (“The Long Decolonial Turn in African Studies: Challenges of Rewriting Africa,” 2021), Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni lays out a concern that I fully share. In short, Ndlovu-Gatsheni makes clear the need to fully understand the ways in which colonial, nationalist, Marxist, and postcolonial thought—all of which informed and helped to shape African studies—have been absorbed or even disrupted by the decolonial turn. He proposes a decolonial framework grounded in a necessary rethinking of the conceptual bases of African studies as informed by the resurgent and insurgent push for decolonization in the twenty-first century. It is necessary, therefore, to turn critical attention toward the postcolonial social regime, which characterizes the experience of African societies, as well as toward a Western (post)colonial discourse obsessed with the idea of Africa as a peripheral and dependent space. From my perspective, there is an urgent need to develop an endogenous tradition of knowledge production that will allow Africa to break its epistemic dependence and become a source of theories of universal scope. In this sense, Paulin Hountondji in *Les savoirs endogènes: pistes pour une recherche* (“Endogenous Knowledge: Avenues for Research,” 2018) shows us the way forward.

*Translation from Spanish by Magalí Armillas-Tiseyra and Sarah M. Quesada*

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