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RESPONSES

“Eparrei! Maleme pra ele, minha mãe!”

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The Place of the Forge: The African Diaspora, History, and Comparative Literature



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Abstract: In times of crisis when literature and world languages are threatened by economic hardship, they should draw closer to African diaspora studies. The African diaspora is so vast, longstanding, and diverse that it must be studied using a comparative, multilingual, interdisciplinary, and international approach that includes study in French, Portuguese, and Spanish alongside an understanding of Latin America. Breaking with the academic marginalization of the past, I examine the word “ghetto” as it relates to Afro-Latin American literature, culture, and history, attempting to open this enclosed space with the goal of a more complete, logical, and democratic understanding of the Americas.

Keywords: African diaspora/diáspora africana, Afro-Brazil/Afrobrasil, Caribbean/Caribe, humanities crisis/crisis de humanidades, comparative literature/literatura comparada, cultural studies/estudios culturales, inter-American literature/literatura interamericana, slavery/esclavitud

One third of the Americas, 200,000,000 people, have African ancestry, and most Afro-descendants live in Latin America (“Afro-descendants”). From 2014 to 2024 is the United Nations International Decade for People of African Descent (“International Decade”) and 2016 was a US presidential election year, which brings me to contemplate the role of African diaspora history in our understanding of literature, in particular works in world languages and comparative literature, as fields that are often considered “in crisis” (Jay 10). This is largely due to the “great recession” of 2007. During the 2008 election cycle, anti-immigrant presidential candidate Newt Gingrich, evoking the slums inhabited by marginalized Latinx and African Americans, referred to Spanish as “the language of living in the ghetto” (Sharockman). Today, one could argue that, like languages, African American studies has also been ghettoized in academia.

I doubt Gingrich considered the ongoing debate among Oxford linguists regarding the etymology of the word “ghetto.” It is Venetian Italian, and its roots reach as far back as 1516, when the first ghetto was recorded (Lieberman). It was built not to house Afro-descendants but another marginalized group, the Jews. According to linguist Anatoly Lieberman, despite multiple folk etymologies, “ghetto” likely means “narrow street.”

The enclosure implied by the term can be used to describe the epistemological limitations imposed on African American studies. This enclosure comes in many forms. Still-prevailing suppositions about Black literature are that it:

- Matters only to Black people.
- Is unique to the United States.
- Is not part of the canon—haphazard, low-quality, “ghetto.”
- Is written only in English.
- Discusses only race, separate from other discourses of identity and oppression, such as gender, sexuality, class, and religion.

In opposition to the narrow interpretation of African American studies as an academic ghetto, I propose that it is not only more expansive than a narrow street or an urban island like those of Venice, but that it is one of the saving graces of the comparative literature and languages departments and disciplines because of its international, multilingual scope. My metaphor for this is “the place of the forge.” Among the seventeenth-century folk etymologies of the term “ghetto,” still believed today is “the place of the foundry.” To “found” means to fuse metals, to heat into a liquid, and form into new solid structures, weapons, and edifices. To “found” means to establish, to build, or rebuild.

I imagine comparative literature as “the place of the forge,” and what follows is an overview of areas that exemplify the trans-Atlantic scope of African diaspora literature. In Latin America, where most Africans were taken during the slave trade, syncretic religions based on those of Yoruba and Dahomeyan peoples emerged in a Catholic context, such as those popularly known as Cuban Santería, Brazilian Candomblé, and New Orleans Vodoun. These faiths emerged as a “camouflage” for the African beliefs of the enslaved, and represent a tempestuous syncretism of ideas in contexts of slavery, misunderstanding, and oppression. The god of the forge for syncretic Yoruba-based faiths is Oggún, who is also a god of war (González-Wippler 25). This bellicose deity, syncretized with Saint Peter and Saint George, is a mixture of the West, Africa, and the Americas (25–26). He is at home on the former Slave Coast of Africa and the present-day beaches of Bahia. He can be seen in the furnace of conflict that emerged in Birmingham, AL, referred to as “Bombingham” after the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church was attacked in 1963 for being a citadel in the war against segregation. This struggle was among the first live depictions of the United States on the televisions that were entering the homes of Latin Americans in the 1960s. Chileans Alberto Fuguet and Sergio Gómez mark the beginning of today’s McOndo generation of writers as beginning in the Cuban Revolution (starting in 1959) and the popularization of television in Latin America (beginning in 1962) (16). The Revolution used the imagery of the Civil Rights struggle to paint itself as the vanguard of an international resistance to the racist United States and to racial oppression throughout the Atlantic (De la Fuente 296). To this day, US Americans in general—including those who are African American—are unaware of their international audience in their struggles for liberty and justice for all. For example, Black Lives Matter has drawn attention to police brutality in Brazil, the country with the largest black population outside of those in Africa. Between 2010 and 2013, $\frac{1}{6}$ of Rio de Janeiro’s homicides were committed by police and $\frac{4}{5}$ of victims were Afro-descendants (Carless). Reform is needed more than ever, given the police brutality and impunity that has been portrayed in the film *Ônibus 174* (Padilha and Lacerda). Film and literature are among the most visceral intellectual examinations of racism, violence, resilience, and continental unity.

I want comparative literature, cultural studies, and African American studies to strengthen their bonds to better integrate academia racially and culturally under the sign of the Orisha, or deity, Oggún. He is a symbol of strength, foundation, and fluidity, since he is constantly melting, mixing, and forging new things (González-Wippler 26). Sadly, the economic crisis of 2007 has caused the study of literature, particularly in world languages, to fall into decadence. Perhaps the most symbolic blow to comparativism came in 2010, when the University of Toronto’s Centre for Comparative Literature was nearly struck down due to budget limitations. It was founded by the visionary Northrop Frye (Hutcheon), the famous Structuralist critic of the twentieth century (Eagleton 79). Structuralism posits that literature can be decontextualized and analyzed through narratological structures (79). The beauty of this method lies in that the inner-workings of great works of art from different national and linguistic traditions can be compared to create a more cosmopolitan understanding of literature.

From this tradition comes critic Earl Fitz’s notion of inter-American literature. In my work, I attempt to synthesize this comparative approach with the diasporic approach of scholars like Lesley Feracho, Antonio Tillis, and William Luis. Fitz sums up his approach in “Internationalizing the Literature of the Portuguese-Speaking World” (439), but he has labored since 1967 on a

history of inter-American literature that combines and compares the Anglophone, Francophone, Hispanophone, and Lusophone traditions along thematic and aesthetic lines (12). Fitz argues that the specialists best suited to unite the literary traditions of the Americas are US Brazilianists, who typically speak Portuguese, English, and Spanish (440).

Brazil is central to the study of Africa in the Americas, since roughly ten times as many enslaved Africans were sent there than were sent to the United States, and this history begins 100 years before 1619, the year African slavery began in the British colonies (Landers and Robinson 1). Without transatlantic slavery, Brazil would have meant nothing to Europe, colonially speaking. It is named for a tree that was used to dye clothing, the only product of use that Pedro Álvares Cabral discovered when he stumbled upon the continent in 1500, en route to India (Eakin 14). It was only when sugar plantations began to sprout up like the repeating islands of the Hispanic Caribbean that Brazil became heavily populated and developed by Europeans and their African captives beginning in 1533. When *bandeirante* slave catchers created the first great gold rush of the Americas in Minas Gerais, Africans were the captives that pulled the metals from the mines and forged them into the gold plate of churches. Brazil declared its independence in 1822 (Eakin 28), but it nearly entered the twentieth century with a king and slaves when abolition finally arrived in 1888 and a bloodless coup brought in the Republic in 1889 (Eakin 37). The transition to republicanism gave rise to the novels of Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis, whom critic Harold Bloom considers “the supreme Black literary artist to date” (674). I argue with Eduardo de Assis Duarte and Maria Nazaré Soares that he is emblematic of the influence of Afro-descendants on canonical literature and the necessity to include them in the canon of the Americas (44). Furthermore, if more African captives were sent to Brazil than any country (5.37 million sent, 4.86 million arrived), and if trans-Atlantic slavery lasted longer in Brazil than in any other place on earth, why is there not a Portuguese requirement in every African American studies department (Estimates Database)? If 11.2 million people in total were taken to Latin America, why is Spanish, the majority language, not required (Gates 2)? I fear that ignorance of the rest of the African diaspora limits African American studies to a narrow street that Paul Gilroy warned against over twenty years ago in *The Black Atlantic* (223) and to which Afro-Colombian Manuel Zapata Olivella opened the gates over thirty years ago in his novel *Changó el gran putas* (1983).

It is the intercontinental breadth of the African diaspora that makes it “the place of the forge” for me. One example is the *Afro-Hispanic Review*, the premier literary journal in Afro-Hispanic studies, which is edited by William Luis. It shows that the African diaspora necessitates comparative and interdisciplinary studies that include not only Spanish America but also texts from Brazil and Haiti. The Revolution of Saint-Domingue (1791–1804), which Luis considers the most important event in Caribbean history, was the first foundation of a nation in which all people, especially and explicitly Blacks, were free citizens (18). This, along with the centrality of the Pan-African Negritude movement, Frantz Fanon’s post-colonialism, and the cultures of Francophone Africa is why French and Haitian Creole (taught at Florida) are necessary for the deepest understanding of Black literature. Haitian-style ideals of citizenship would only come to the United States in juridical form in 1868 with the Fourteenth Amendment. Why is this ground-breaking revolution not yet at the heart of every French and African American studies program? Luis’s comparative work on Black literatures of the Americas came to full fruition when he became editor of the *AHR* in 2005. Luis has spent many years working with the journal, founded in 1982 by Stanley Cyrus and Ian Smart Howard (DeCosta Willis 80). It has served as a forum where creativity and intellectual inquiry by literary and cultural critics from far beyond the United States are celebrated and promoted. There are other important African diaspora journals that have published Afro-Latin American criticism: *African American Review*, *The College Language Association Journal*, *Callaloo*, and the *Publication of the Afro-Latin American Research Association*. However, Luis has pushed the limits of African diaspora studies like no other through thematic numbers. For example, he devoted a special issue to the most important

Afro-Hispanic novelist, the aforementioned Manuel Zapata Olivella. Alongside specialist guest editors, he published one-of-a-kind issues on Afro-Asia (2008), Afro-Caribbean religions (2007), and Equatorial Guinea (2009), a comparative analysis of the conflicted cultures of Hispaniola (2013), and an Afro-Brazilian issue (2010). While the isolation of Afro-Hispanic and Afro-Brazilian literature has in some ways contributed to its richness and diversity—authors in these journals write on virtually any aspect of texts by or about Afro-descendants—the broad outlook of Luis's journal makes it a place Oggún forges new foundations and weaponry to fight invisibility of a vital bond of the Americas.

One reason for an interdisciplinary approach to studying Afro-Latin American literature is its longstanding oral tradition and the different documents one must consult to reconstruct the history of slavery in Latin America. In Spanish America, this was partially corrected by Miguel Barnet's interviews with 104-year-old former slave rebel Esteban Montejo in *Biografía de un Cimarrón* (2006), now celebrating its fiftieth anniversary. Studying slave history in Latin America is different from the United States because of the lack of traditional slave narratives like those of Olaudah Equiano and Frederick Douglass (Helg 85). If one looks for an example of this tradition, s/he will find only two examples. One is Juan Manzano's *Autobiografía del esclavo poeta* (2007). The other is that of Mahommah Baquaqua, which was narrated in Canada and published in Detroit in English in 1854 (Lovejoy and Law 2010: 10) and which was only translated and published in Portuguese in 2016 by Bruno Veras (Gómez Licón). It is considered Brazil's "only slave narrative," since Baquaqua traveled Brazil, Haiti, the United States, and Canada. However, there are bills of sale, military records, and documents of baptism and confessions to the Inquisition, among other church documents, that can be used to reconstruct the lives of Afro-Latin Americans (Helg 85). President Obama's normalization of US relations with Cuba will hopefully lead to more preservation and divulgence of autobiographical slave documents. Another consideration is that Brazil already had mulatto writers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who were not only free but literate poets like Domingos Caldas Barbosa (1739–1800) (Marques 49) and the formerly enslaved poet and autobiographer Luís Gama (1830–1882) (Ferreira 10).

Alongside works modeled on the traditional Western canon, one can find a rich musical tradition that dates at least to the slave ships and the cultures of those whose bodies filled them, as Roberto González Echevarría notes in *Cuban Fiestas* (35). This musical tradition is bound to the sacred drums that continue to be used to invoke African spirits (Luis 5). Oral story-telling is central to the folktales that anthropologists Lydia Cabrera anthologized and Zora Neale Hurston fictionalized from the 1930s to the 1950s (Hoffman-Jeep 337), as well as to the sacred narratives on the spirits that Afro-Catholic believers still consult regarding their daily concerns. These faiths are medium- and possession-based, so a record of life under slavery or another moment in Latin American history can be found on the lips of the initiated. This syncretism is a key difference from the US abolition and even Civil Rights traditions, since most activists in these movements were more traditional Christians, and mostly devout and traditional Protestants.

The most evident link between the African diaspora in Latin America and the United States is the subgroup of Afro-Latinx. They have faced discrimination and negotiation both from white-dominant US culture and from their cultures of origin, particularly Cubans, Dominicans, and Puerto Ricans. Luis has defined this group as a unique US phenomenon, the result of homogenizing perceptions by US hegemony, and a counter-discourse ("Afro-Latino/a Literature and Identity" 34). Perhaps the most famous Afro-Latina musician is Afro-Cuban Celia Cruz, but Jesse Hoffnang-Garskoff traces the tradition to Afro-Puerto Rican Arturo Schomburg, the documenter of the Harlem Renaissance (7, 66). Schomburg was an antiracist activist alongside José Martí in Cuba, but he later decided to focus on creating Black history as a discipline (Hoffnang-Garskoff 70). Afro-Latino Piri Thomas portrays race and marginality in "Home Sweet Harlem" in *Down These Mean Streets*. Today, Dominican-American Junot Díaz muses on anti-Haitianism among Dominicans in his Pulitzer-Prize-winning *The Brief, Wondrous Life of*

Oscar Wao (2005). In all three cases, the ghettos of Metro-New York are a reality that is depicted but subverted—the characters are often criminal and always marginalized, but they are not ignorant or limited in their mobility—they look beyond the United States in search of identity, justice, and discovery. For these and other reasons, I see parallels in Fitz's inter-American literature and Luis's insistence that Latin American literature, and the subset of inter-American literature that most interests me, must include Latinx and Afro-Latinx literature of the United States. Luis compares US Latinx literature to the Latin American boom of the 1960s and claims it has set the "groundwork for becoming the literature of the twenty-first century" (*Looking Out* xiii). An understanding of Spanish, Portuguese, and French support the deepest understanding of these texts, especially those written in the colloquial, code-switching English of Afro-Latinxs.

Most of the African diaspora is in Latin America, and it has been there for more than a century longer than the United States. Few among us can deny that racial issues are constantly in the news regarding the African diaspora or that the topic is relevant to our daily lives in the Americas. While the study of comparative literature is being denigrated in the name of economics, African diaspora studies is as vital and central to universities' diversity missions as ever. They are also central to their globalization and cultural competency missions because of the international nature of the diaspora. UNESCO has declared the decade 2015–2024 to be the "Década del Afrodescendiente," a New Millennium term that attempts to unite the diaspora ("International"). Today African diaspora programs are continuing to broaden their reach, such as Harvard's Afro-Latin American Research Institute and Florida International University's joint program in Latin American and African diaspora studies. I encourage scholars and teachers to be children of the syncretic blacksmith Oggún: learn another language, incorporate African diaspora authors, characters, language, and cultural production into your work, and remember that, in myriad ways, Africa has made the Americas what they are today.

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Resposta 1 a “The Place of the Forge: The African Diaspora, History, and Comparative Literature”



“Eparrei! Maleme pra ele, minha mãe!”

Renato Alvim

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Palavras chave: African diaspora/diáspora africana, Brazilian literature/literatura brasileira, Dias Gomes, inter-American literature/literatura interamericana, *O pagador de promessas*

A questão da diáspora africana e sua pouca visibilidade ou mesmo presença limitada no cânone literário pode ser lida por uma alegoria representada por Dias Gomes em *O pagador de promessas*. Nessa consagrada peça teatral vertida no filme coroadado com a Palma de Ouro de Cannes em 1962, o protagonista vê-se impedido de cumprir uma promessa de levar uma cruz ao altar de uma igreja de Santa Bárbara pelo fato de o padre considerar sua promessa—feita a Iansã em um terreiro de umbanda—uma heresia. A trama gira em torno das consequências da intransigência do padre em relação ao sincretismo do protagonista, Zé do Burro. A confusão “natural” na cabeça de Zé do Burro aponta para a fusão que se estabelece no funcionamento de um processo autêntico de constituição da diversidade brasileira (o sincretismo religioso é resultante e articulador da sobrevivência de práticas diversas, porém sem razão de serem auto-excludentes)—daí o espanto de todos os personagens, tipos, figurantes e representantes de variadas facetas da cultura brasileira em relação à intransigência do padre. Não é senão uma questão de tempo até que a promessa seja cumprida, porém o preço é a vida do protagonista, levado ao altar sobre a mesma cruz que carregara por muitas léguas desde o interior da Bahia até a capital, a cidade de Salvador. A alegoria da intransigência do padre revela seu movimento em direção contrária ao processo natural de fusão (*forging*) que vem se constituindo o que se conhece como cultura brasileira até os dias de hoje.

De maneira semelhante imaginamos que relegar-se a uma mínima fatia do cânone literário a contribuição da diáspora afro-americana (representada em sua totalidade por uma abrangente literatura afrodescendente nas Américas) representa um movimento contrário ao reconhecimento processo de formação da identidade do que se constitui hoje a literatura nas e das Américas. Em muito se perde ao não se considerar uma articulação do conjunto literário—possibilitada por estudos em literatura comparada, por exemplo—atravessado por tantos marcadores de identidade (como elementos culturais, históricos, sociais, econômicos etc.) de que comungam as Américas.

Como na referida obra de Gomes, é preciso articular-se um movimento que questione e repudie resistências persistentes que forcem um hiato, e não se dirijam a um processo de fusão ou comunhão de traços identificatórios na produção literária da diáspora afro-americana. Na obra de Gomes, foi a população, e não um gesto do líder religioso, o que levou a cabo o cumprimento da promessa do protagonista, legitimando o sincretismo em sua autenticidade; assim, imaginamos que não surgirá necessariamente um convite ao cânone como gesto de inclusão literária da diáspora afro-americana, senão seu caminho passo a passo como resultado da produção incisiva de autores, da multiplicação de leitores e da consequente elaboração de pesquisa que levem em conta os tantos aspectos interdisciplinares que criam a interseção inerente a essa diáspora.

Ao notar a dificuldade que enfrentará o protagonista para pagar sua promessa, uma das personagens, Minha Tia, baiana, vendedora de iguarias nos arredores da igreja, saúda e pede proteção de Iansã: “Eparrei! Maleme pra ele, minha mãe!” (Gomes 110). “Eparrei” e “Maleme” são termos de origem ioruba que significam, respectivamente, “olá” e “proteção”. Sua fala aponta para a recepção que Zé do Burro recebe dos habitantes da capital baiana, daí a necessidade de ela pedir a bênção a Iansã. Minha Tia dá boas vindas (reconhecendo a presença e pedindo guarida) àquele que tenta trazer ao centro da igreja uma mensagem de comunhão entre celebrações religiosas. No entanto, as tempestades por que passará são previstas por Minha Mãe. Essa mesma invocação segue em paralelo com invocações religiosas a Santa Bárbara, protetora contra as tempestades. Na questão da diáspora africana, o reconhecimento e a salvaguarda de sua importância são vistos aqui também como imprescindíveis para a sua sobrevivência.

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Response 2 to “The Place of the Forge: The African Diaspora, History, and Comparative Literature”



Disrupting Moments in World Language Education: Promising Changes

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Keywords: African diaspora/diaspora africana, disrupting/disruptiva, intercultural/intercultural, interdisciplinary/interdisciplinario, learning paradigm/paradigma de aprendizaje

In his essay above, John Maddox is one of many scholars who promotes “the role of African Diaspora history in understanding particular works in world languages and comparative literature . . . because of its international, multilingual scope.” I would argue that the inclusion of African diaspora history in these departments, although “disruptive” (meaning to throw into disorder the formal curriculum) is proving to be critical to the overall quality of these programs. Indeed, the rationale for incorporating and integrating discussions of this nature in our classrooms is tied to the intercultural and multilingual components of our field.

As the second decade of the twenty-first century moves forward and communication and learning technology accelerate—coupled with a growing immigrant population—language professionals find that they need to be more flexible and culturally responsive in their course content and delivery. Furthermore, while the study of learner attitudes, motivations, and beliefs continues, experts in course and curriculum design are witnessing what Randal Bass calls “disruptive moments in teaching” (1). According to Bass:

Our understanding of learning has expanded at a rate that has far outpaced our conceptions of teaching. A growing appreciation for the porous boundaries between the classroom and life experience . . . has created not only promising changes in learning but also disruptive moments in teaching. (1)

Bass continues, “formal curriculum is being pressured from two sides. Both of those pressures are reframing what we think of as the formal curriculum” (2).

With the recent shift from an instructional paradigm to a learning paradigm, many books and articles on the science of learning are available. Today, educators find themselves connecting what they now know about learning to instructional practices. Therefore, if our goal as world language professionals is to help students achieve linguistic and intercultural competence—two essential learning outcomes that both educators and employers endorse—we need to connect these outcomes with students’ engagement in a planned sequence of high-impact practices.

In 2008, the National Survey of Student Engagement published a list of ten high-impact practices. According to the survey:

these practices are the college experiences that highly correlate to the most powerful learning outcomes. Students’ participation in one or more of these practices had the greatest impact on success, on retention, on graduation, on transfer, and on other measures of learning.

These practices include: learning communities; service learning; collaborative assignments and projects; capstone courses; diversity/global learning; common intellectual experiences; writing-intensive courses; undergraduate research; internships; and first-year seminars.

Kuh states, “these practices have high impact because they induce student behaviors that lead to meaningful learning gains” (13).

All of this brings us back to “the place of the forge.” African studies intersects with many disciplines, world languages being one. The study of Spanish, French, and Portuguese, together with the literature, and colonial and post-colonial history of the countries where these are spoken, strengthens the bond between comparative literature, African studies, and languages. This “disruption” in the formal curriculum of these programs is having positive educational results. World language professionals do well to ask, “What do students need to know, and be able to do that will “enable them to both thrive and contribute in a fast-changing economy in . . . global, societal, and often personal contexts?” (Kuh 2). I contend that if global competence is one of our desired student outcomes, our course material should include the reading and analysis of works by and about people of African descent, texts that illuminate the human condition and challenge the learner to explore the themes of identity and social injustice. Furthermore, our world language frameworks should involve teaching for social justice, as “Social justice challenges, confronts, and disrupts misconceptions, untruths, and stereotypes that lead to structural inequality based on race, social class, gender” (Nieto 2).

Kuh’s list of important student behaviors induced by high-impact practices, includes “discovering relevance of learning through real-world application” (15). The authors of *Words and Actions: Teaching Languages Through the Lens of Social Justice* provide examples of “real-world application” of social justice education in the world language classroom (see Glynn, Wesely, and Wassell). They help us see how a framework that fosters the exploration of identity, real-life experiences, intercultural understanding, historical empathy, and action against injustice, has great impact on learner success. As a result, learners better understand themselves in relation to others, and acquire the needed intellectual tools to move into the position of advocate for justice.

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