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The cultural-political category of Amefricanity

Translation: *Gonzalez, Lélia (1988). A categoria politico-cultural de amefricanidade. In: Tempo Brasileiro 92: 69-82*

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Introduction

This text reflects on ideas that came before it, particularly those rooted in Betty Milan's work as developed by M. D. Magno². It offers a fresh and creative perspective on the cultural and historical formation of Brazil that, for geographical reasons and, above all, for unconscious reasons, is not what is generally affirmed to be: a country whose unconscious formations are exclusively European and white. On the contrary, this country is an African America whose Latinity, because inexistent, had the T exchanged for the D, then to have its name recognised with all the letters: *Amefrica Ladina* (it is not accidental that the

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² M.D.Magno, *América Ladina: introdução a uma abertura*

Brazilian *cultural neurosis* has *racism* as its main symptom). In this context, all Brazilians (and not only the “blacks” or “brown” from IBGE³) are *ladino-amefricans*. For a good understanding of the stratagems of racism as featured above, it is worth recollecting the Freudian category of *denial* (*Verneinung*): “A process by which the individual, although formulating one of their wishes, thoughts or feelings, until so suppressed, continues to defend themselves from it, denying that it belongs to them⁴. As a denial of our ladino-amefricinity, Brazilian racism turns itself against those that are the proof of it (the Blacks) while stating that it doesn’t do so (Brazilian “racial democracy”). I recommend reading M. D. Magno’s⁵ brilliant text to gain a deeper understanding of this issue from a Lacanian perspective.

Thanks to exposure to various Black cultural expressions from different countries in the Americas, I have noticed similarities in spoken language that resonate with our nation. It is correct that the Black presence in the Caribbean (here understood not only as insular America but also including the Atlantic coast of Central America and the northern part of South America) has modified the Spanish, English and French spoken in the region (when it comes to Dutch, for lack of knowledge, I can’t say much). In other words, what I call “pretuguês” is nothing more than the imprint of the Africanization of the Portuguese spoken in Brazil (never forgetting that the coloniser used to refer to the enslaved Black Africans as “Blacks” and the ones born in Brazil as “criollos”) is easily observable above all in the Spanish spoken at the Caribbean region. The tonal and rhythmic character of the African languages brought to the new world, and also the absence of certain consonants (such as the L and R, for instance), highlight an aspect hardly explored about the Black influence in the continent’s historical-cultural formation as a whole (not to mention the “criollos” dialects in the Caribbean). Similarities are even more evident in the music, dances, belief systems, etc. It is unnecessary to mention how much of that is covered by the whitening ideological veil, concealed by Eurocentric classifications such as “popular culture” and “national folklore”, etc., that minimise the importance of the Black contribution.

Another very unconscious aspect of what we are talking about here refers to yet another Freudian category, the partial object (*Partialobjekt*), which is so defined:

Types of objects targeted by partial drives, without the implication that a person as a whole is taken as an object of love. These are mainly parts of the

³ Translator note: Here, Gonzalez is referring to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), a governmental agency responsible for demographic, economic, and geographic studies in Brazil.

⁴ Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *Vocabulário da Psicanálise*

⁵ M.D.Magno, *América Ladina: introdução a uma abertura*

body, real or fantasised [...], and their symbolic equivalents. Also persons person can identify themselves as or be identified as a partial object⁶.

Well. At least when it comes to Brazil, one should pay attention to a whole range of literary works (Jorge Amado⁷, for instance) but also to the other manifestations of Brazilian sexual fantasies. They are concentrated on the partial object par excellence of our culture: the butt⁸ (*bunda* in Portuguese). Turning to *Aurélio*⁹, one can notice that this word is inscribed in the vocabulary of an African language, the *quimbundo* (*mbunda*) language, which has considerably influenced how we speak in Brazil. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that the *Bundos* are part of an Angola *Banto* ethnic group that, besides the abovementioned *quimbundo*, also speaks two other languages: Bunda and Ambundo. If we consider that Luanda was one of the major ports for exporting enslaved people to America... Consequently, in addition to certain fashion trends (such as the G-string bikini) that aim to make this partial object obvious, it should be noted that the term has given rise to many others in our “pretuguês”. For this reason, I like to make a pun, affirming that the Lusitanian Portuguese “does not speak or say bunda (butt)” (from the verb *desbundar*- let loose or unwind)¹⁰.

I was struck by various cultural expressions that highlight the Black presence in the Americas, which led me to consider the need for a category that goes beyond the Brazilian context and adheres to interdisciplinary standards. This led me to contemplate the concept of "Amefricanity" within a broader framework.

Racism, Colonialism, Imperialism and Its Effects

We understand that European colonialism, as we currently define it, took shape during the latter half of the 19th century. In this same period, racism was

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Translator note: Jorge Amado, a renowned Brazilian author, is celebrated for his portrayals of feminine, mixed-race sexuality in his works. His novels often explore the complexities of Brazilian society, highlighting the intersection of race, gender, and sensuality.

⁸ Lélia Gonzalez, "Racismo e sexismo na cultura brasileira."

⁹ Translator note: The Aurélio Dictionary, officially known as "Dicionário Aurélio da Língua Portuguesa," is one of the most authoritative and widely used dictionaries in Brazil. It plays a significant role in the standardization and understanding of Brazilian Portuguese, serving as an essential reference for linguists, educators, students, and writers.

¹⁰ Translator note: The pun does not really work in English because, in Portuguese, "diz bunda" (saying butt) sounds vocally the same as "desbunda" (let loose or unwind).

constituted as the Euro-Christian (white and patriarchal) superiority's "science", as the *Arian model* of explanation¹¹ that would not only be the triadic classification referential of positivist illuminism within the emergent sciences of humanity but still guide the perspective of Western academic production today. It is worth mentioning that this process was developed on the fertile ground of the pre-colonial (15th-19th Centuries) ethnocentric tradition that considered the cultural manifestations of "savage" people as absurd, superstitious or exotic¹². Hence, the "naturalness" with which the ethnocide and destructive violence of the pre-colonial European forces was brought down upon these peoples. Throughout the second half of the 19th century, Europe would transform all this into a task of rational explanation of the (from then on) "primitive customs", in an issue of administrative rationality of its colonies. Now, facing resistance from the colonised, violence will assume renewed and more sophisticated contours, to the point of, sometimes, not seeming as violence, but as "true superiority". The texts of Fanon or Memmi demonstrate the alienation effects that the colonial dominance efficacy would have over the colonised.

When we analyse the European countries' strategies in their colonies, we can see how much racism plays a fundamental role in the internalisation of the coloniser's "superiority" over the colonised. It showcases at least two distinct tactics working toward the same objective: exploitation and oppression. I am referring to, in this case, to what is commonly known as *open racism* and *concealed racism*. The first is characteristic of the societies of Anglo-Saxon, Germanic or Dutch origins, establishing that Blacks are the persons who have had Black ancestors ("Black blood in the veins"). According to this ideological articulation, miscegenation is something unthinkable (although rape and sexual exploitation of Black women have always happened), as the white group intends to preserve their "purity" and to reaffirm their "superiority". Consequently, the only solution, explicitly accepted as the most coherent one, is the segregation of non-white people. In South Africa, with its doctrine of "equal" but split development, the apartheid is the most refined model of this type of racist theory and practice. In societies with Latin origins, there is concealed racism, which I classify as *racism by denial*. Here, it prevails the "theories" of miscegenation, assimilation and "racial democracy". The so-called Latin America, which actually is much more Amerindian and Amerfrican than anything else, can be seen as an excellent example of racism by denial. Above all, in the countries with Luso-Spanish colonisation, there are very few exceptions (such as Nicaragua and its *Statute of Autonomy of the Atlantic Coast Regions- Estatuto de Autonomia de las Regiones de la Costa Atlántica*) that confirm the rule. For this reason, I believe it is important to look at the historical formations of the Iberic countries. This is a reflection that allows us to

¹¹ Martin Bernal, *Black Athena*

¹² Gérard Leclerc, *Anthropologie et colonialisme*.

comprehend how this specific kind of racism can be developed to constitute a more efficient form of alienation for the discriminated people than the previous one.

Spain and Portugal's historical formation took place within a centuries-long struggle (the Reconquista) against the presence of invaders differentiated not only by the religion they professed (Islam); after all, the tropes that invaded Iberia in 711, that besides being majorly Black (6700 Moors to three hundred Arabs), were as well commanded by the Black general ("Jebell") Tariq ibn Ziyad (the lexical modification of the term Jebel Tariq resulted in Gibraltar, the word that came to name the strait until then known as Pillars of Hercules). On the other hand, we know that not only the soldiers as the gold from the Black Kingdom of Ghana (west Africa) had much to do with the Moorish conquest of Iberia (or Al-Andalus). It is worth noting that the last two dynasties to govern Al-Andalus came from West Africa: the Almoravids and Almohads. During the latter's reign, the most eminent philosopher of the Islamic world, the Aristotelian Averroes, was born in Cordoba (1126). Needless to say, from a racial and civilisatory perspective, the Moorish presence has left a profound imprint on the Iberic societies (likewise in France, Italy, etc.). From that, it is understood that racism by denial has, in Latin America, a privileged site of expression, as Spain and Portugal acquired vast experience in the most efficient processes of articulating racial relations.

We know the Iberic societies are structured following a rigidly hierarchical model, where everything and everyone had an assigned position (even the types of nominal treatment adhered to the rules imposed by the hierarchical legislation). As different and dominated ethnic groups, the Moors and the Jews were subjected to violent social and political control. The societies that later constituted what is currently known as Latin America were the historical heirs of the social classification ideologies (racial and sexual) and the juridical-administrative techniques of the Iberic metropolises. Racially stratified, the open forms of segregation were dismissed, for the hierarchies guaranteed the superiority of whites as the dominant group¹³. The humorist Millôr Fernandes' statement that "there is no racism in Brazil because the Blacks know their place" summarises our previous points¹⁴.

Therefore, the affirmation that everyone is equal before the law has a clearly formalist character in our societies. Latin American racism is sufficiently sophisticated to keep Black and Indigenous folks in the condition of subordinated

¹³ Roberto DaMatta, *Relativizando: uma introdução á antropologia*

¹⁴ Lélia Gonzalez, "Nanny: pilar da amefricanidade."

segments within the most exploited classes, thanks to its most efficient ideological form: the whitening ideology. Circulated in mass communication media and by the traditional ideological apparatuses, this ideology reproduces and perpetuates the belief that Western classifications and values are the only true and universal ones. Once established, the white superiority myth demonstrates its efficiency by the effects of shattering and fragmentation of the racial identity it produces: the desire of whitening (of “cleaning the blood”, as they say in Brazil) is internalised, with a simultaneous denial of ones’ own race and culture¹⁵.

Returning to the other form of racism, explicit segregation, it is observed that its effects on the discriminated groups, unlike racism by denial, reinforce their racial identity. Actually, one’s own racial identity is easily recognised by any child belonging to these groups. In the case of Black children, they grow up knowing who they are, without feeling ashamed of it, which allows them to develop other forms of perception within the societies they live (in this sense, United States Black women’s literature is a very rich source; and Alice Walker, practically the only one known in Brazil, is a fine example). In this case, attention should be drawn to the cadre of young activists in the liberation movements of South Africa and Namibia. Alternatively, consider the fact that the Black movement in the United States achieved much broader social and political achievements compared to the Black movements in Colombia, Peru, or Brazil, for instance. Along these lines, it is also understood why Marcus Garvey, the extraordinary Jamaican and legitimate descendant of Nanny¹⁶, became one of the greatest champions of Pan-Africanism or why the young Guyanese Walter Rodney produced one of the most forceful analyses against colonialism-imperialism, demonstrating *'How Europe Underdeveloped Africa,'* and thus was assassinated in the capital of his country on June 13, 1980 (I had the honour of meeting him and to receive his uplift in a seminar promoted by the University of California in Los Angeles, in 1979). For all of that, we will know the reasons behind other assassinations, such as those of Malcolm X or Martin Luther King Jr.

The scientific production of Black people from those countries on our continent is characterised by progress, autonomy, innovation, diversification, and national and international credibility, leading us to a profound spirit of determination, given the obstacles imposed by dominant racism. But, as I said before, it is precisely the objective consciousness of this unabashed racism and the firsthand knowledge of its cruel practices that such commitment arouses in the sense of reclaiming and affirming the humanity and competence of an entire ethnic group deemed 'inferior'. The severity of these systems led the Black community to come together and fight, at different levels, against every form of racist oppression.

¹⁵ Lélia Gonzalez, "Por um feminismo afrolatinoamericano."

¹⁶ Refer to Lélia Gonzalez: "Nanny: pilar da amefricanidade."

Now, the process is different in societies characterised by racism by denial, as previously mentioned. Here, the cultural strength emerges as the best form of resistance. This does not mean isolated voices do not rise, making analyses and complaints about the current system. It was the execrable effects of French assimilationism that led the Martinican psychiatrist Franz Fanon to produce his masterful analyses of the socio-economic and psychological relationships between the coloniser/colonised¹⁷. In the Brazilian case, we have the figure of the Honorable (title received at the international conference of the Black world in 1987) Abdias do Nascimento, whose rich production (analyses/criticisms, theatre, poetry and paintings) is not acknowledged by many of his brothers and absolutely ignored by the country's white' intellectuality (who accuse him of sectarianism or 'reversed racist', which logically presupposes 'right-wing racism'). Noteworthy is that both Fanon and Nascimento were only internationally acknowledged and recognised, but not in their home countries (Fanon was only honoured in his country after his premature death; hence, the manifestation of his death-bed wish to be buried in Algeria). Unnecessary to emphasise the pain and loneliness of these brothers, of these examples of effective Black power.

Still, from my perspective, a significant contradiction remains when it comes to the political-ideological forms of struggle and Black resistance in the New World. We remain passive when facing the political-ideological stance of the region's dominant imperialistic power: the United States. Along this path, I also began to reflect on the category of amefricanity.

As we saw earlier, Brazil (the country with the largest Black population on the continent) and the Caribbean region show significant similarities regarding the Africanisation of the continent. However, when it comes to the United States, we know that enslaved Africans faced severe repression in their attempts to preserve their cultural expressions (for instance, having their hand amputated if they played the atabaque drum). The puritanism of the Anglo-American coloniser, concerned with the "true faith," forced them into conversion and evangelisation, leading to the erasure of their African roots (Alex Haley's moving text reveals the full significance of this process). But cultural resistance persisted, often clandestinely, especially in communities in South Carolina. The reinterpretations and cultural recreations of Black people in that country primarily occurred within Protestant Christian churches. The Civil War brought them the abolition of slavery, and with it came the Ku Klux Klan, segregation, and the denial of citizenship. The heroic struggles of these discriminated people culminated in the Civil Rights Movement,

¹⁷ Franz Fanon, *Os condenados da Terra (The Wretched of the Earth)*; *Pele negra, mascarar brancas (Black Skin, White Masks)*

which moved the entire world and inspired Black people in other places to also organise and fight for their rights.

An active and creative minority, victorious in their main demands, the Black community in the United States has accepted and rejected a series of self-identifying terms: "coloured," "negro," "black," "Afro-American," and "African-American." It is these last two terms that drew our attention to the contradiction inherent in them.

Amefricanity as a Category

The terms "Afro-American" and "African-American" lead us to an initial reflection: the notion that Black people exist only in the United States and not throughout the entire continent. They also point to the unconscious reproduction of the United States' imperialist position, asserting itself as *the* America. After all, what about the other countries of South, Central, Insular, and North America? Why consider the Caribbean as something separate when it was precisely there that the history of this America began? It is interesting to observe when someone is leaving Brazil, for example, saying they are going to America. We all, from any region of the continent, make the same reproduction, perpetuating the imperialism of the United States by calling its inhabitants "Americans." And what are we, Asians?

As for us, Black people, how can we attain an effective consciousness of ourselves as descendants of Africans if we remain prisoners, "captives of a racist language"? For this reason, in contrast to the aforementioned terms, I propose the term "Amefricans" to designate *all of us*¹⁸.

The political and cultural implications of the category of Amefricanity are indeed democratic; precisely because the term itself allows us to transcend territorial, linguistic, and ideological limitations, opening new perspectives for a deeper understanding of this part of the world where it manifests: the Americas as a whole (South, Central, North, and Insular). Beyond its purely geographical aspect, the category of Amefricanity encompasses a whole historical process of intense cultural dynamics (adaptation, resistance, reinterpretation, and creation of new forms) that is Afro-centred, meaning it references models such as Jamaica with its dominant Akan model; Brazil with its Yoruba, Bantu, and Ewe-Fon models. Consequently, it guides us towards the construction of an entire ethnic identity. Needless to say, the category of Amefricanity is closely related to those of *Pan-Africanism*, *Negritude*, *Afrocentricity*, etc.

¹⁸ Lélia Gonzalez. "A Socio-Historic Study of South American Christianity: The Brazilian Case."

In my view, its methodological value lies in the fact that it allows the possibility of rescuing a specific *unity*, historically forged within different societies that were formed in a certain part of the world. Therefore, the América, as an ethnographic reference system, is a creation of ours and of our ancestors in the continent where we live, inspired by African models. Consequently, the term "Amefricans" designates an entire lineage: not only that of the Africans brought by the slave trade but also of those who arrived in America long before Columbus. Yesterday, as today, Amefricans from the most diverse countries have played a crucial role in elaborating this "Amefricanity" that identifies in the diaspora a common historical experience that demands to be duly recognised and carefully researched. Although we belong to different societies on the continent, we know that the system of domination is the same in all of them, namely: racism, this cold and extreme elaboration of the Aryan model of explanation, whose presence is a constant at all levels of thought, as well as part and parcel of the most diverse institutions of our societies.

As seen at the beginning of this text, racism establishes a racial and cultural hierarchy that pits white Western superiority against Black-African inferiority. Africa is depicted as a dark continent, devoid of its own history (Hegel); hence, reason is deemed white, while emotion is Black. Consequently, given their subhuman nature, the socioeconomic exploitation of Africans across the continent is considered natural. However, thanks to the works of African and American authors such as Cheikh Anta Diop, Théophile Obenga, Amílcar Cabral, Kwame Nkrumah, W.E.B Du Bois, Chancellor Williams, George G.M. James, Yosef A.A. Ben-Jochannan, Ivan Van Sertima, Franz Fanon, Walter Rodney, Abdias do Nascimento, and many others, we know the extent to which the violence of racism and its practices has stripped us of our historical legacy, dignity, history, and contribution to the advancement of humanity in philosophical, scientific, artistic, and religious realms. We understand how the history of African peoples underwent a brutal change with the violent European incursion, which relentlessly underdeveloped Africa¹⁹, and how the slave trade brought millions of Africans to the New World.

From a historical and cultural perspective, it is important to recognise that the African American experience differed from that of Africans who remained on their own continent. By adopting the self-designation of Afro/African-Americans, our brothers and sisters in the United States also characterise the denial of this rich lived experience in the New World and the consequent creation of "Amefrica." Furthermore, there is the concrete fact that our African brothers and sisters do not

¹⁹ Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*

consider them as true Africans. The active forgetting of a history marked by suffering, humiliation, exploitation, and ethnocide points to a loss of their own identity, subsequently reaffirmed elsewhere (which is understandable in the face of racial pressures in their own country). However, we cannot overlook the heroic resistance and creativity in the struggle against enslavement, extermination, exploitation, oppression, and humiliation. Precisely because, as descendants of Africans, the African heritage has always been the great revitalising source of our strength. For all these reasons, as Amefricans, we have made specific contributions to the pan-African world. Embracing our entire Amefricanity, we can transcend an idealised, imaginary, or mythified view of Africa and, at the same time, turn our gaze to the reality in which all Amefricans on the continent live.

“Every language is epistemic. Our language should contribute to the understanding of our reality. A revolutionary language cannot inebriate, cannot lead to confusion”, so teach us Molefi Kete Asante, creator of the Afrocentric perspective. Thus, when the self-designation of Afro/African-American occurs, the real gives way to the imaginary and confusion sets in (Afro/African-Americans, Afro/African-Colombians, Afro/African-Peruvians, and so on), along with a kind of hierarchy: Afro/African-Americans occupy the foreground, while the Garifuna of Central America or the indigenous people of the Dominican Republic, for instance, are relegated to the background (after all, they don't even know they are Afro/African...). And the question remains: what do Afro/African-Africans think?

It's worth noting that, in their eagerness to see Africa in everything, many of our brothers and sisters from the United States who are now discovering the richness of Bahian cultural creativity (like many Latinos in our country) are flocking to Salvador to discover reminiscences of African cultures. The mistake is twofold: the evolutionist (and Eurocentric) view of survival and the blindness to the creative explosion of something unknown, our Africanness. For all these reasons, and much more, I believe that politically, it is much more democratic, culturally much more realistic and logically much more coherent to identify ourselves from the category of Amefricanity and call ourselves Amefricans: from Cuba, Haiti, Brazil, the Dominican Republic, the United States and all the other countries on the continent.

“An ideology of liberation must find its experience in ourselves; it cannot be external to us and imposed by others than ourselves; it must be derived from our particular historical and cultural experience²⁰.” So why not abandon the reproductions of imperialism that massacres not only the peoples of the continent but of many other parts of the world and reaffirm the particularity of

²⁰ Molefi K. Asante, *Afrocentricity*, p.31.

our experience in America as a whole without ever losing awareness of our debt and the deep ties we have with Africa?

At a time when relations between people of African descent across the continent are becoming closer, when we, Amefricans, are more aware than ever of the great similarities that unite us, M.K. Asante's proposal seems extremely topical. Especially if we think of those who, in the more or less recent past, gave their testimony of struggle and sacrifice, opening up paths and perspectives so that, today, we can carry on what they started. Hence, my insistence on the category of amefricanity, which has flourished and been structured over the centuries marking our presence on the continent.

During the enslavement era, it manifested itself in revolts, in the elaboration of strategies of cultural resistance, in the development of alternative forms of free social organisation, whose concrete expression can be found in the quilombos, cimarrones, cumbes, palenques, marronages and marron societies, spread across the most different parts of the continent²¹. And even before that, in what is known as pre-Columbian America, it already manifested itself, decisively marking the culture of the Olmecs, for example²². Recognising it is, ultimately, recognising a gigantic work of cultural dynamics that doesn't take us to the other side of the Atlantic, but brings us from there and transforms us into what we are today: Amefricans.

²¹ Elisa Larkin Nascimento, *Pan-africanismo na América do Sul: emergência de uma rebelião negra*.

²² Ivan Van Sertima, *They Came Before Columbus: The African Presence in Ancient America*