

RACE RELATIONS IN VENEZUELA AND THE BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS  
CHALLENGE, THROUGH THE LENSE OF LA RED DE ORGANIZACIONES  
AFROVENEZOLANAS (THE AFRO-VENEZUELAN NETWORK)

A Thesis

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by

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates race and Black consciousness in the context of Latin America with a focus on Venezuela. The needs of African descendants in Latin American communities are often ignored and disregarded. This lack of attention along with the historical relationship between Blacks and non-Blacks in Latin America has caused a rise in Black consciousness. Among the leaders of the Black consciousness movement in Venezuela is La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas (The Afro-Venezuelan Network). This thesis also investigates how La Red, as a mode of sustainable resistance and activism in Venezuela, is fighting to gain recognition for Afro-Venezuelans.

This research aims to afford La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas with recognition and agency through exposing its role in attending to the current plight of African descendants in Venezuela. This work employed field research in Venezuela. La Red is currently leading the socio-political movement of African descendants in Venezuela. This organization preserves and disseminates cultural, political, and social information. La Red also propogates Afro-Venezuelan artistic, historical, and cultural knowledge and expression throughout Venezuelan society. This thesis demonstrates that La Red is combating the historical and contemporary race question. It also demonstrates that La Red is a valuable asset to the Black consciousness movement in Venezuela

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Sade R. Anderson, the youngest of three girls, was born in Rapid City, South Dakota. Shortly after her birth she moved to Rhaunin, Germany where she spent the first five years of her life. After leaving Germany she was raised in various places throughout the United States all as the result of her father being in the United States military. Raised by her two parents Sade was raised to respect education, and the performing and visual arts, and to embrace other ethnicities and cultures.

Sade's upbringing in various places caused her to acquire an appreciation and liking for diverse people, cultures, foods, and languages. Sade has always enjoyed traveling and learning about people and their customs from around the world. This early exposure to unique traditions fostered Sade's interest in the cultures of Latin America, and later the culture of African descendants in that region. Sade is a grassroots activist, dancer, painter, and lover of culture.

After finishing high school a year early, Sade went on to attend the historically Black university, Bowie State University in Bowie Maryland. She graduated Magna Cum Laude in May of 2007 with a Bachelor's of Science in History with a Pan-African concentration. Sade's involvement in the Pan-African Student Youth Movement at Bowie State University provided her with exposure to the activism of African descendants in Latin America, which prompted her interest in her current research. This interest along with her background interest in various cultures have lead her to pursue a Master's degree in Africana Studies at Cornell University.

*This work is dedicated to  
My unborn child and my companion/bestfriend, Albert S. Richardson*

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Prior to meeting a group of Afro-Colombian activists who are members of Afro Red in 2004, I was unaware of the socio-political movements of African descendants in Latin America.<sup>1</sup> It is common knowledge that African descendants have been dispersed all over the world including Latin America. What is not widely known is the recent movement for social change in Latin America among Blacks from this region, perhaps similar to the Black consciousness movements of the United States and South Africa. This thesis attempts to investigate the social movement of Afro-Venezuelans.

In researching this new topic, I came to find out that not much has been written on Black social movements in Latin America. However, it has been noted that at least 15 million African descendants in Latin America have been organizing against racism.<sup>2</sup> Venezuela is no exception. An insignificant amount of literature has been published on Blacks in Venezuela, specifically on their social movements. La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas (The Afro-Venezuelan Network), also known as La Red, is currently the major Black consciousness organization in Venezuela. The main headquarters of the organization is located in Caracas, Venezuela.

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<sup>1</sup> Afro Red is a Black activist organization in Colombia. This organization was created to bring to light pertinent issues of African descendants in Colombia. Afro Red has come to the United States numerous times to spread knowledge of the organization, but most importantly about the plight of African descendants in Colombia and to make connections with African descendants in the United States. In 2004 they spoke at Bowie State University, which I attended for my undergraduate studies.

<sup>2</sup> Noelia Elda Saucedo, "Profiles of Black Latinos in Academe: The Identity Dilemma and the Perception of Self," Dissertation, Arizona State University, 2002; Ann Arbor, Michigan: Microform Publications of ProQuest Information and Learning, University of Michigan, 2003, 111.

## *Statement of the Problem*

Only over the last thirty-five years have scholars been writing about the history and culture of African descendants in Latin America, and Venezuela specifically, in looking at how their identity is manifested throughout society. Most scholars agree that Black identity in Latin America is confronted with racism or racial discrimination. Not all however, agree to what extent this racism exists. When I refer to the term racism or racial discrimination I am referring to the definition provided by the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. This Convention states that racism or racial discrimination “shall denote any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on motives of race, color, lineage or national or ethnic origin whose purpose or result is to nullify or diminish the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, in equal conditions, of human rights and fundamental liberties in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other sphere of public life.”<sup>3</sup> Therefore racism or racial discrimination are, for all intents and purposes in this thesis, synonymous. There are new perspectives that originate from the idea mentioned above that states that Blacks in Latin America are indeed confronted with racism or racial discrimination. Scholars who are expanding on this notion from new perspectives have then gone beyond to discuss what African descendants in Latin America, and specifically in Venezuela, are doing to combat this racism and/or racial discrimination. Other opposing scholars claim the age-old myth of “racial democracy” and thus refute any notion of racial discrimination. Venezuelan Blacks as well, find themselves in the midst of this discussion, and also fit within both scholarly schools of thought, some agreeing that they face racism and others claiming that an actual “racial

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<sup>3</sup> Ariel E. Dulitzky, “A Region in Denial: Racial Discrimination and Racism in Latin America,” in *Neither Enemies Nor Friends: Latinos, Blacks, Afro-Latinos* Edited by Anani Dzidzienyo and Suzanne Oboler (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 41.

democracy” exists. Some Afro-Venezuelans see themselves as African descendants with Venezuelan cultural additives. Others do not consider themselves Afro-Venezuelans at all, but instead deny either part or all of their African ancestry and prefer to be considered simply Venezuelans, which has come to mean “café con leche,” coffee with milk or simply put, mixed. This denial is usually associated with the fact that within Latin America, Black has historically been equated with social and economic inferiority. This racial category is unlike that in the United States where those who are identifiably Black regardless of origin, typically regard racism as being alive and prevalent. However, my thesis looks to the former group of Afro-Venezuelans that indeed embrace their Black identity, to those who continue the discourse not only of their history and culture, but of their resistance against racism. Even though this group of Blacks is small in comparison to those in places like Brazil and Colombia, their contribution is still significant.

African descendants in Venezuela hold a unique and difficult position within Venezuelan society. They are often rejected by European-descended and Indigenous Venezuelans, forcing them to either assimilate or seclude themselves. This rejection also often causes shame or embarrassment within Black communities, perpetuating self-racial hatred. Because of this some African descendants feel obligated to intermix with Spaniard or Indigenous Venezuelans in order to join a different color status. However, since enslavement and colonialism, some African descendants instead have resisted oppression by European-descended and mestizo Venezuelans, which has recently been marked by a form of activism. La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas, the leading Black activist organization in Venezuela, continues this legacy of resistance. The mere existence of such an organization confirms at least three major points. The first is that there is indeed a significant Black population in Venezuela; possibly at least 20 percent, but because the national census does not

include a category for Blacks, the actual total is unknown. The second is that racial discrimination and racism are present in Latin America and Venezuela respectively. And lastly Blacks in Venezuela are actively fighting for social and political freedoms.<sup>4</sup>

The history of La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas is the focus of my thesis, given the fact that the plight of Afro-Venezuelans has not received much recognition. The majority of literature written on Blacks in Latin America and their social movements has pertained to Colombia and Brazil. This has mainly been the case because Brazil has the largest Black population in Latin America followed by Colombia. However, Venezuela is third. Therefore, Venezuela is usually the last to be thought of or discussed in the context of this topic. Also, Black activists in Venezuela have only recently become more visible in national and international arenas, unlike greater visibility of Afro-Brazilians and Afro-Colombians in Brazil and Colombia because of their plight having been acknowledged earlier. Nevertheless, Afro-Venezuelan activists have begun to gain more recognition from this visibility. La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas has been the leader of this new activism. What I am arguing, therefore, is that La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas is making significant contributions to Black social movements in Latin American and specifically to the lives of African descendants in Venezuela.

The lack of research on Afro-Venezuelan history, culture, activism and social movements is a problem, for it perpetuates a sense of invisibility among Afro-Venezuelans. The lack of research creates a gap between Afro-Venezuelans and non-Afro-Venezuelans nationally and internationally. Without research, the African World would remain ignorant of the history, plight, struggle, and current strategies of Afro-Venezuelans. Many African descendants throughout the world are oblivious to the fact

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<sup>4</sup> Humberto Marquez, "Activists Call For Statistics on African Diaspora," June, 25, 2007. available from <http://www.proquest.com.proxy.library.cornell.edu:2048/>, accessed November 6, 2007.



that there are people of African ancestry in Venezuela. Afro-Venezuelans experience issues of racism, just like African descendants throughout the rest of the African Diaspora. Thus it is important to document the history of Afro-Venezuelan reactions to these issues.

La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas is one example of organizing in order to resist racial discrimination. Documenting and exposing the history, purpose, goals, membership, and activities of La Red will draw attention to Afro-Venezuelans that they otherwise would not receive. The more exposure La Red receives, hopefully the greater the support they will obtain from other parts of the African Diaspora and beyond. This will also hopefully allow cross-cultural bonds and cross-national networks to be created. This is a worthwhile endeavor to take on because the stronger one portion of the African World is, the better the chance those African descendants in remaining areas will be able to learn and expand on ideals and strategies that may help their respective communities as well.

In summary, Afro-Venezuelans do make up a significant sector of the society, regardless of the lack of proper documentation. Afro-Venezuelans have a unique past, in the fact that they have been erased and made invisible from Venezuelan society since colonialism because the government considers them to be fully integrated, but yet they also have much in common with the rest of the African Diaspora. Within the Afro-Venezuelan community there is also a significant portion that acknowledges and respects this relationship. A manifestation of this respect is the embrace of African heritage and the active resistance to hold onto this heritage. La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas is one current source of active resistance that was created from this portion of the Afro-Venezuelan community. My analysis will demonstrate that La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas is a significant part of Afro-Venezuelan history that deserves our attention.

### *Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of my thesis is to confirm that Afro-Venezuelans have indeed created political and social institutions that play a vital role in their communities. I wish to investigate the social, cultural and economic dimensions of the African population in Venezuela. I argue that La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas has contributed to the welfare as well as the political, civil, and cultural rights of their communities. I want to interrogate the current movement for recognition by La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas in Venezuela. The objectives of the movement are: affirming the African historical legacy of Afro-Venezuelans, recognizing themselves as a distinct racial category, and ridding Venezuelan society of racial discrimination against Afro-Venezuelans in all facets of life.

Specifically, I wish to focus on La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas, a Black institution created by and for Afrovenezolanas in 2000. The Network was created out of the Multicultural Day Festival that was organized in 1992 by Jesus “Chucho” Garcia. Mr. Garcia also founded the *Fundacion Afroamerica* (African American Foundation), which is now one of the forty organizations that comprise the Network. These organizations have come together to strengthen their numbers and make their conditions known throughout the country. The Network serves as the coordinator of all the smaller organizations.

This study is intended to further give exposure to La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas and the current socio-political situation in Venezuela. My rationale for exploring the history of La Red particularly their founding, purpose, objectives, organizational structure, accomplishments, and current goals and projects, is to add to the current body of scholarship that exists on the topic of Black social movements in Latin America. I will address the benefits of La Red to their local communities and

Black communities worldwide. Through my research, I aim to find out how La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas functions within Venezuela. I will attempt to address the following questions: (1) How and why is the experience of Afro-Venezuelans unique? (2) Do Afro-Venezuelans actively considered themselves a part of the African Diaspora? (3) How and why was La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas created? (4) Has La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas been a mobilizing force in Venezuela? In order to fully understand the context in which La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas exists, one must know the history of African enslavement in Latin America, specifically in Venezuela, and the racial dynamics of these two areas.

#### *Limitations of the Study*

This study is limited to a specific Afro-Venezuelan activist organization: La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas. The findings, therefore, may not be typical of Afro-Venezuelans who are not members of La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas or those who do not participate in any way with La Red. My research on La Red is based on a small sample size; it includes personal accounts, history of enslavement in Venezuela, history of La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas, and opinions of race relations in Venezuela. Therefore, the views of the participants may be unique and subject to personal biases. Furthermore, participants might have been selective in sharing the organization's weaknesses since most often people are likely to want to look favorable to others.

This study is also limited to research that was collected over a five-week period of time, between May 29, 2008 to July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2008. Traveling to Venezuela was the only true means of conducting interviews and gathering significant information,

since this information is unavailable in the United States. However, the findings are based on a variety of sources beyond interviews, such as participant observation, newspapers, literature produced by the organization, and conversations with persons outside the organization. The five-week window of time only permitted for a small number of participants available to provide relevant information.

### *Theory*

An African-centered approach is one relevant theoretical reference point used in my research. African-centered approach has been defined as a global theoretical framework that locates the inquiries and explanations of the life worlds of African peoples at the center of their experience.<sup>5</sup> Molefi Asante, the first to actually define Afrocentricity or the African-centered approach, confirms this definition by stating that, “in regards to theory, it is the placing of African people in the center of any analysis of African phenomena.”<sup>6</sup> This is important, as Tsehloane Keto states, because “use of a center outside Africa (with regard to my thesis specifically, the African Diaspora) creates immense problems of intellectual ‘dislocation’ even if the adopted center is described as ‘cosmopolitan’.”<sup>7</sup> Tsehloane Keto considers an Africa-centered paradigm to be “an instrument of self-definition, self-worth, and self-determination. The paradigm is essential for conceptualizing African reality, for securing equal paradigm time in world history, for reformulating global consciousness about the African world.”<sup>8</sup> In alignment with Keto other scholars have also stated that “the

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<sup>5</sup> Ayele Bekerie, “Theorizing Africana Studies,” ASRC 404 Afrocentricity Lecture, Cornell University. (2007, August 30).

<sup>6</sup> Molefi Asante, *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change* (Sauk Village, Illinois: African American Images, 2003), 2.

<sup>7</sup> C. Tsehloane Keto, *Vision, Identity and Time: Historical Perspective of an African-Centered Paradigm* (New York: University Press of America, Inc., 2001), 17-18.

<sup>8</sup> Keto, *Vision, Identity and Time* (New York: University Press of America, Inc., 2001), 18.

Afrocentric model believes human beings have the capacity for self-mastery, self-direction, and self-regulation.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, Africans deserve to be autonomous rather than under domination.

This approach among others enhances my research because it centers the African people of Venezuela in their struggle for recognition. Specifically, La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas looks to place Afro-Venezuelans at the center of their analysis of Venezuelan society. The organization focuses on the issues of Afro-Venezuelans because they feel Afro-Venezuelans are the most appropriate group to fulfill the needs of Afro-Venezuelans. As Keto stated, looking outside of one’s center can be problematic even when others are considered to have good intentions. No one knows the history, plight, and current needs of Afro-Venezuelans better than Afro-Venezuelans themselves. Knowing self versus allowing others to define you is also a part of Afrocentrism. Keto’s description of the need to be self-defining and self-determining, is a key aspect of La Red. The organization serves as the voice of Afro-Venezuelans. In the Network’s call for recognition it is simultaneously calling for self-determination, self-definition, and self-regulation as a community within the greater context of Venezuela.

A major tenet of the African-centered approach is that it assumes Africa is the earliest ancestral home of all the peoples of the world.<sup>10</sup> Nah Dove, who writes on the issue of women within the African-centered paradigm states: “As Cheikh Anta Diop and others have shown, Africa is the cradle of human civilization and therefore culture.”<sup>11</sup> Since Africa is considered the cradle of culture, culture also plays a major role in Afrocentrism. Clovis Semmes who has analyzed Afrocentricity as a Social

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<sup>9</sup> Jerome H. Schiele, “Organizational Theory from an Afrocentric Perspective,” *Journal of Black Studies* 21 (1990): 153.

<sup>10</sup> Ali A. Mazrui, *The Africans: A Triple Heritage* (London: BBC Publications, 1986), 41.

<sup>11</sup> Nah Dove, “African Womanism: An Afrocentric Theory,” *Journal of Black Studies* 28 (1998): 517.

Science, defines cultures as such: “culture is both enduring and changing. It is the institutionalization of specific solutions to life problems in order that successive generations may benefit from and build upon previously constructed solutions to problems. Yet culture is dynamic, in that it must adapt, based upon changing societal needs and goals. Consequently, a people’s ability to survive and prosper depends upon its continued ability to create and preserve solutions to old and new problems.”<sup>12</sup>

Doves asserts that “The concept of cultural unity is the bedrock of the more recent academic movement in the development of African-centered and/or Afrocentric thinking that reclaims and reconstructs an African worldview as central to the renovation of African values and beliefs and the restoration of Africa and her people.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, the African-centered approach assumes that African values and cultural practices, such as communalism and the importance of passing down knowledge through generations, are appropriate points of departure for analyzing or interpreting African phenomena.

La Red acknowledges Africa as the birthplace of humankind. The founder, Jesus Garcia, has written extensively on the connections between Venezuela and Africa. Garcia writes specifically about central Africa, mainly the Congo region where many Afro-Venezuelans’ ancestors have been traced.<sup>14</sup> Also the significance of culture and cultural unity is visible through the mere existence of La Red. La Red functions as a reminder of Afro-Venezuelan cultural history. The active teaching of this cultural history to younger generations of Afro-Venezuelans, which is a major part of La Red’s mission, is an acknowledgement of Africa as well. African values and practices can

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<sup>12</sup> Clovis E. Semmes, “Foundations of an Afrocentric Social Science: Implications for Curriculum-Building, Theory, and Research in Black Studies,” *Journal of Black Studies* 12 (1981):4.

<sup>13</sup> Dove, “African Womanism: An Afrocentric Theory,” *Journal of Black Studies* 28 (1998): 519.

<sup>14</sup> Jesus Garcia, “Demystifying Africa’s Absence in Venezuelan History and Culture,” ed. Sheila S. Walker, *African Roots/American Cultures: Africa in the Creation of the Americas* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2001).

specifically be seen through La Red's various organizational objectives, cultural exhibitions and cultural/spiritual festivals. Festivals such as San Juan de Congo, the religious and African cultural exhibition celebrated in Black communities throughout Venezuela, are displays of the cultural and spiritual continuity Afro-Venezuelans maintain. La Red was partially created to preserve Afro-Venezuelan culture and to share this with Venezuelan society.

The African-centered approach recognizes that women are self-defining and self-determining and their voices are critical to the well being of the whole community.<sup>15</sup> Academics such as Patricia Hill Collins, Clenora Hudson-Weems and Nah Dove among others, have written on the place of Black women and their mutual relationship with Black men in their commitment to the Black community. Through this approach and Black women's obligation to the Black community, Black women are seen as playing a vital role in social organizing. According to Nah Dove: "Both the woman and the man work together in all areas of social organization. The woman is revered in her role as the mother who is the bringer of life, the conduit for the spiritual regeneration of the ancestors, the bearer of culture, and the center of social organization."<sup>16</sup>

With regard to Black women's involvement in the Afro-Venezuelan Network they are viewed as playing a pivotal role in the struggle for Afro-Venezuelans. Afro-Venezuelan women are visible at all levels of the organization. Afro-Venezuelan women's positions range from basic membership to leadership roles on the executive board. La Red has numerous organizations within the Network that focus on, and are primarily run by Afro-Venezuelan women. One such sub-organization is Cumbe de

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<sup>15</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 112.

<sup>16</sup> Nah Dove, "African Womanism: An Afrocentric Theory," *Journal of Black Studies*, 28(1998):520.

Mujeres Afrovenezolana that centers their efforts on equal job opportunities and countering female stereotypes in the media.

It is also important to recognize what an African-centered paradigm is not. This paradigm is not Eurocentric or hegemonic. “Afrocentricity expresses the need to change hegemonic cultural aggression through research and writing from the African perspective.”<sup>17</sup> By Eurocentric I am referring to the following definition: “Eurocentrism...envisions the world from a single privileged point. It maps the world in a cartography that centralizes and augments Europe while literally ‘belittling’ Africa...In sum, Eurocentrism sanitizes Western history while patronizing and even demonizing the non-West; it thinks of itself in terms of its noblest achievements- science, progress, humanism- but of the non-West in terms of its deficiencies, real or imagined.”<sup>18</sup> Keto agrees that “the Europe-centered perspective that is hegemonic allows the writing of a history that makes the rest of humanity outside Europe invisible and peripheral. This invisibility is affected by the use of phrases whose connotations deny all humanity to people who are not European. The contacts made between Europeans and other peoples of the world such as Africans, Asians, and the First Americans are couched in terms of ‘European discovery’.”<sup>19</sup> An African-centered approach does not dehumanize or deny persons who are not of African descent. It also does not claim discovery of persons or places that existed long before African arrival. An African-centered approach is non-threatening and non-dominating.

The hegemonic Eurocentric Paradigm is not an acceptable approach according to the Afro-Venezuelan Network. Many of those within Venezuelan society perpetuate the Eurocentric paradigm through their racist actions. The Network wants to overturn

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<sup>17</sup> Bayo Oyeade, “African Studies and the Afrocentric Paradigm: A Critique,” *Journal of Black Studies* 21 (1990): 237.

<sup>18</sup> Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 2-3.

<sup>19</sup> Keto, *Vision, Identity and Time* (New York: University Press of America, Inc., 2001), 48-49.



this paradigm and replace it with a non-hegemonic one.<sup>20</sup> The organization does not believe that a Eurocentric view is legitimate for Afro-Venezuelans and African descendants as a whole to utilize. La Red employs African knowledge as an epistemological grounding, as stated in its objectives. Until Eurocentric domination is curtailed, the Afro-Venezuelan Network will continue their fight for autonomy.

This study also utilizes theories about race. The main theory that drives this study is that race is a social construct and not a biological status.<sup>21</sup> Stephen Cornell and Douglas Hartmann articulate this position from a sociological perspective in their 1998 work, *Ethnicity and Race*. Anthropologist Angelina Pollak-Eltz also stands firm on this definition of race within *Black Culture and Society in Venezuela* published in 1994.<sup>22</sup> This is based on the premise that physical appearance or genetic makeup does not always coincide with one's racial identity. This theory is especially important when discussing African descendants in Latin America because their identity is so complex. With this theory, one is forced to go beyond the United States notion of hypodescent, better known as the one-drop rule, to explain the Afro-Latino self. Therefore the scientific, biological definition of race and theories surrounding it are not valid in Black communities in Latin America. However, sometimes biology of race does fit, in such cases as La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas, which is the focus of this thesis.

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<sup>20</sup> Garcia, "Demystifying Africa's Absence," ed. Sheila Walker *African Roots/ American Cultures: Africa in the Creation of the Americas* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 2001).

<sup>21</sup> Stephen E. Cornell and Douglas Hartmann, *Ethnicity and Race: Making Identities in a Changing World* (Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press, 1998), 24, 35-36.

<sup>22</sup> Angelina Pollak-Eltz, *Black Culture and Society in Venezuela (La Negritud en Venezuela)* (Caracas: Venezuela: Public Affairs Department of Lagoven, 1994).

## *Methodology*

My approach is qualitative involving in depth interviews and analysis of the leaders of The Afro-Venezuelan Network. In researching in Venezuela during the summer of 2008, I transcended the problem of language with translation. One of the main resources that inform my study of La Red is interviews. I conducted official interviews with the leading figures within the Afro-Venezuelan Network such as the founder and members of the executive board. Those interviewed were Jesus “Chucho” Garcia, Luisa Madris, Angela Diaz, and Alexis Machado. Due to time constraints and traveling problems, I was only able to interview four main members. Also due to time constraints, I was only able to administer two questionnaires to two Afro-Venezuelans outside of the organization. Through these questionnaires, I asked a variety of questions ranging from racial identification to knowledge of La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas. I took part in participant observation, which included observing the daily activities and lives of Afro-Venezuelans. I also observed typical occupations held by Afro-Venezuelans, as well as their cultural celebrations, religious practices, and extra-curricular activities. I used these observations to analyze the previous and current living conditions of Afro-Venezuelan people. However, I was unable to document the general impact of the Afro-Venezuelan Network on the larger Black community. Through my archival research, I analyzed the documentation of the organization through their magazine, website, published pamphlets and books, and videos. I used visual documentation to record all of my participant observation, as well as interviews gathered during my field research in Venezuela.

## *Literature Review*

The literature review addresses three key areas of significance with regard to this thesis: (1) The historical background and legacy of Africans in Venezuela and more broadly in Latin America. (2) The description of race relations in Venezuela and Latin America overall. (3) The founding of La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas in Venezuela within the broader context of social movements in Latin America. These three areas will now be reviewed.

## *Historical Background*

Leading scholars whose works discuss the historical background of Latin America and Venezuela specifically and whom I look to in order to inform my thesis are Michael Conniff and Thomas J. Davis, Eduardo Bermudez and Maria Suarez, Leslie B. Rout Jr., Angelina Pollak-Etlz, Jesus Garcia, and Herbert Klein.

Conniff and Davis' text gives a broad overview of the African experience in Latin America.<sup>23</sup> Conniff and Davis focus much of their research on Africans taken to the Andean Region, with a lot of focus on Peru. This work provides statistical information on Africans and African descendants in Latin America during various historical periods. There are a few pages dedicated to Venezuela specifically. These pages touch on history, culture, and resistance. The summary of this text is that indeed Africans were brought in large numbers to Latin America from Africa during the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Conniff and Davis discuss in detail the role of Africans and their descendants in Latin America society before the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They also describe

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<sup>23</sup> Michael L. Conniff and Thomas J. Davis, *Africans in the Americas: A History of the Black Diaspora* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994).

how Africans were able to either be incorporated into some Latin America societies or how they created or maintained their own social circles. I used this text to supply this thesis with historical background of Latin America in general and Venezuela specifically. Conniff and Davis provide my thesis with a basis of what has been documented about African descendants in Venezuela. Their writing is relevant to my thesis in supplying part of the historical framework of Latin America. Conniff and Davis's work helps put together the full story of how Africans arrived in Latin America and how the status of African descendants evolved through colonialism.

Bermudez and Suarez provide a chapter on Venezuela that details the history and contributions of Afro-Venezuelans specifically; thus, this work differs from Conniff and Davis's work.<sup>24</sup> Bermudez and Suarez discuss the history of Venezuela's society based on enslaved labor. Class and racial categorization is discussed as well. An interesting area mentioned in this text unlike many of the others is that it addresses the immigration of Africans from the Caribbean, mainly Antilleans, to Venezuela during the period when the Spanish were financially and physically unable to bring Africans directly from Africa. Interestingly, to this day, these Caribbean- African descendants have maintained their Caribbean culture; including mainly speaking English, in a city in Venezuela called El Callao. The recognition of the Antillean-Venezuelans speaks to the issue of a diaspora within the African Diaspora. This chapter also interrogates the Black family, religion, economics, and self-perception in Venezuela, where the notion of denying one's African ancestry is discussed. Foundations and organizations led by Afro-Venezuelans are discussed though no specific names are given, but since the authors acknowledge these types of institutions do in fact exist within Venezuela, which give validity to La Red de Organizaciones

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<sup>24</sup> Eduardo Bermudez and Maria Matilde Suarez, "Venezuela," ed. Minority Rights Group, *No Longer Invisible: Afro-Latin Americans Today* (United Kingdom: Minority Rights Publications, 1995).

Afro-Venezolanas' existence. This chapter gives an overview of various aspects of Afro-Venezuelan history, culture, and life.

Leslie B. Rout, Jr. is a very well-known historian on the subject of African descendants in Spanish or Latin America. He acknowledges the work that has been done early on, but contributes further insights such as a critique of Venezuelan scholars' view of Afro-Venezuelans and how race is depicted by these scholars, but not actualized. He also uses more African-centered terminology and perspective than many of the other writers on this subject including the first historians who decided to write on the subject, who often underplayed the harshness of enslavement in Latin America. His prominent text gives a broad history of Africans in Latin America similarly to Conniff and Davis' work, except with a more even synopsis of various countries.<sup>25</sup> Within these various countries Rout focuses on enslavement, resistance, plantation life, race dynamics, and statistics. Rout does focus in detail on African descendants in Venezuela like Bermudez and Suarez. However, Rout quotes directly many native Venezuelan historians who have written on Venezuela and how these historians attempt to minimize the racial discrimination of African descendants in Venezuela after the period of enslavement. This is also a unique addition to Rout's work since few other scholars writing on the subject look to Venezuelan writers to either agree with or refute pertinent issues. Rout's *The African Experience in Spanish America* is a good foundational work on the subject of the African Diaspora within Latin America.

Unlike the other scholars I have mentioned, overall I am not sure what Pollak-Eltz's intentions were in writing this work.<sup>26</sup> She is a professor at a university in

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<sup>25</sup> Leslie B. Rout, Jr., *The African Experience in Spanish America* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2003).

<sup>26</sup> Pollak-Eltz, *Black Culture and Society* (La Negritud en Venezuela) (Caracas, Venezuela: Public Affairs Department of Lagoven, 1994).

Caracas, Venezuela. She has authored over five books on Blacks in Venezuela. This work specifically suggests that Africans in Venezuela are well integrated into the society and that they are not actively trying to gain civil and human rights because they already have full civil liberties, which I find to be contrary to fact. The work was written in 1994, which is before the formal creation of La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas, but not before the creation of the cultural festivals and foundations created by members of La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas and Afro-Venezuelans in general for distinct recognition within Venezuelan society. I use Pollak's text in order to provide an opposing view to the majority of literature written on the subject. I also use Pollak's text in order to provide an anthropological perspective to my work since the majority of those who have written on Africans in Latin America are historians.

Pollak-Eltz does however, discuss Afro-Venezuelan history, music, religious festivals with an emphasis on African elements within Catholicism, medicinal practices, linguistics, and family. In her discussion on the history and contributions of Africans on Venezuelan society, she does provide historical information as the majority of the other authors I utilized. However, through her discussion of these features within Venezuelan society, Pollak-Eltz reaches a different conclusion than the others, insisting that "we do not find a coherent black culture."<sup>27</sup> My question then is, if it is possible for one to collect information on these distinct aspects of Afro-Venezuelans, how can there not be a coherent culture? Pollak-Eltz writes: "The material I collected has proved the main thesis of the present book: in Venezuela racial consciousness is almost lacking and the black population is integrated into national society." In this regard, if there is no racial consciousness why did Jesus Garcia, of La

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<sup>27</sup> Pollak-Eltz, *Black Culture and Society* (La Negritud en Venezuela) (Caracas, Venezuela: Public Affairs Department of Lagoven, 1994), 19.

Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas, whose work is later discussed, and others create festivals and organizations to insist on recognition? If Blacks were well integrated into the society why would Afro-Venezuelans be marching, protesting, and organizing for better treatment? If the national society included Afro-Venezuelans why would they make up almost the entire lower class? Even more so, why are Afro-Venezuelans, as an ethnic group or race, excluded from the Constitution? By exclusion from the Constitution, I am referring to the fact that nowhere in the current Constitution do the words Afro-Venezuelan or African descendant appear. As I discuss later in this thesis, the word Indigenous is included in the Constitution and a clause exists within it stating Indigenous rights. The question then is why are Indigenous persons included and African descendants excluded? These are some of the various issues that I raise throughout my thesis to refute Pollak's generalizations about Afro-Venezuelans. I utilized this text as a basis of typical present-day arguments about Afro-Venezuelans and African descendants in Latin America in general by non-Afro-Venezuelans. I also used Pollak-Eltz's text, utilizing her evidence, to challenge many of her conclusions and thus further strengthen my argument that African descendants in Venezuela do in fact have a coherent Black culture and are in fact race conscious resulting from their lack of integration into the national society .

Jesus Garcia, mentioned above, is the author of various articles and books, and is one of the founders of La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas (The Afro-Venezuelan Network), a socio-political Afro-Venezuelan organization that is the focus of my thesis. Garcia is a scholar who has made it his mission to recover the African presence in Venezuela's identity. Garcia's perspective is similar to Rout's and was important for me to utilize since he himself is Afro-Venezuelan. Garcia's work is different from the others I utilized not only because it is a work written from within instead of outside, but because Garcia focuses on the direct connections of Africa,

mainly the Congo, to Venezuela.<sup>28</sup> He also writes about historical and contemporary issues in Venezuela and Latin America more broadly. The other works center their work on historical time periods, typically only through the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In “Demystifying Africa’s Absence in Venezuelan History and Culture,” Garcia re-iterates the fact that within many texts written on Africans in Latin America, Africans are considered merely contributors to folklore, music, and mainly bringing African drums and drumming techniques, and magic or sorcery to their respective countries. Garcia makes clear that these texts are aligned with the ideology of Arturo Uslar Pietri, the celebrated Venezuelan writer, who believed Africans arrived in Venezuela without a culture and thus did not make any contributions that benefited Venezuela. As a product of Venezuelan schools, Garcia notes that this discourse is taught in school curricula and if it was not for the oral traditions of elders within the Black communities of Venezuela, such as Barlovento where Garcia and the majority of Blacks are from, Afro-Venezuelan history and culture would be completely erased and he himself would not have been made aware of his rich heritage.

In this article Jesus Garcia discusses his first trip to the Republic of the Congo in 1985 where he went to find more information and documentation about the relationship between Central Africa and Venezuela. He researched the national archives and found documentation on both passive and active maroonage. He goes on to name various Maroon leaders that led rebellions in Venezuela such as Miguel Luango in 1749 (Luango referring to where he originated--the original name of the Republic of Congo before colonialism), and José Leonardo Chirinos, who led a rebellion in 1795. He informs the reader that many words, style of dance and music

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<sup>28</sup> Jesus Garcia, “Demystifying Africa’s Absence,” ed. Sheila S. Walker, *African Roots/American Cultures: Africa in the Creation of the Americas* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2001).



typical to Latin America, specifically Venezuela, were derived from these Congolese ancestors.

According to Garcia, many Afro-Venezuelans have recently begun to self-reconceptualize and dismiss the category assigned to them by Eurocentric scholars. Garcia suggests a culture of resistance continues to exist, where cultural elements are acting in opposition to post-colonial efforts until all persons can equally coexist. According to Garcia, many Afro-Venezuelans are taking part in a contemporary maroonage in a sense. This has been manifested in festivals, foundations, organizations, textbooks, and films all created by, for and about African descendants in Venezuela. Overall this article assisted with the historical foundations of Africans in Venezuela and how they are recycling and reconnecting to their African heritage.

Klein's work that I focus on in this thesis is a classic text on the issue of African enslavement in Latin America as well.<sup>29</sup> He is one of the earliest authors to write on the subject. Klein is pretty even-handed in his analysis of African enslavement in Latin America and the treatment of Africans and their descendants thereafter. Klein gives a broad range of Latin American countries as Rout does, and shows the significance of the extensive activity of African descendants in Central America as do Conniff and Davis, such as their work in mines, factories, and the pearl-diving industry. Klein provides plenty of detail on enslavement, colonialism, Indigenous and Black relations, the types of occupations held by these racialized groups and their work conditions all within the context of Mexico and Peru. In addition he gives an overview of Spain's conquest, enslavement policies, and relationship with Portugal as well. Klein writes a descriptive chronological history of Africans in Latin America through to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. *African Slavery in Latin*

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<sup>29</sup> Herbert S. Klein, *African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

*America and the Caribbean* touches on Black life during this period through the use of religion and statistics. Klein also mentions specifics to Venezuela throughout the text. *African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean* does not however, contain an exclusive chapter that elaborates on the specific historical conditions of Venezuela. Klein is more general with regard to Venezuela, possibly because of the lack of sources or knowledge. Nonetheless, Klein's work is a good, comprehensive introduction to the general topic of African descendants' legacy in Latin America, which provides my thesis with this overview.

### *Race Relations*

Among those writing on the subject of racial dynamics in Latin America are Winthrop Wright, Peter Winn, Stephen E. Cornell along with Douglas Hartman, Ariel Dulitzky, Ginetta E.B Candelario, and Elda Noelia Saucedo. Like Klein, Wright's work is a very well known text on Venezuela.<sup>30</sup> Wright's *Café Con Leche: Race, Class, and National Image in Venezuela* was used in order to create a contextual understanding of how race was shaped historically in Venezuela specifically and how that has led to how race is viewed today throughout Latin America in general. Wright also informs us of the role class often plays in connection with race in Venezuela and how class is a direct result of racial prejudice. I also utilize the notion of everyone being what many Venezuelans and Latinos alike call, "Café con leche," which means in English, coffee with milk, and how that concept came about. The idea behind the phrase "café con leche," is that everyone is mixed with European, Indigenous, and African blood, creating a general complexion, similar to the color of coffee with milk

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<sup>30</sup> Winthrop R. Wright, *Café Con Leche: Race, Class, and National Image in Venezuela* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990).

in it. I fuse this notion with that of everyone in Venezuela being considered Venezuelan versus any specific ethnicity or race, thus touching on the issue of nationalism versus racial identity. Moreover, Wright discusses the African population in Venezuela and historical discriminatory practices against them. He provides some information on enslavement and resistance early in the text. Then he does on to discuss race relations after abolition, the new wave of elitism, which brought with it the notion of whitening the population, and ends with race relations in Venezuela during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This text provides an elaborate history of race and class in Venezuela both before and throughout the twentieth century. This work particularly sets the foundations for Chapter 3: Race Relations in Latin America emphasizing the explicit racial context of Venezuela historically and contemporarily.

In Peter Winn's work, I focused my reading on chapter eight entitled "A Question of Color."<sup>31</sup> This chapter breaks down the difference in how race is defined and perceived within the United States and Latin America. Winn's work is more an overview of how race is seen and defined in Latin America versus specifically how it is perceived in Venezuela. Winn states, similar to Stephen E. Cornell and Douglas Hartman's argument in *Ethnicity and Race* discussed below, that "For North Americans, moreover, race is biological and biology is destiny. In Latin America and the Caribbean, on the other hand, where the issue is physical appearance, racial mixing is prevalent, and 'passing' is common, the laws of genetics mean children may appear to be a different 'race' from their parents. Class and culture also play a part in a region where 'money whitens,' and 'colonels are never black,' no matter how dark their skin."<sup>32</sup> However, Winn makes it very clear that even though race is categorized differently in these two parts of the world, racial prejudice definitely exists in Latin

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<sup>31</sup> Peter Winn, *The Changing Face of Latin America and the Caribbean* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 292.

<sup>32</sup> Winn, *The Changing Face* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 292.

America but manifests in different forms than in the United States. I then utilize this text along with Winthrop's in order to situate the history of race and identity within Latin America as a region. I also utilize this text in juxtaposition to these views and concepts in the United States context.

Cornell and Hartmann define and describe race and ethnicity from a sociological perspective in *Ethnicity and Race: Making Identities in a Changing World*.<sup>33</sup> In this sense their work is different from the authors previously stated because they are sociologists rather than historians and because their work is less of a narrative of race over time and more theoretical analysis. Cornell and Hartmann break down each of the terms, race and ethnicity, their variations, and the usage within various societies, mainly focusing on European usage, from the past to the present and then comparing the two terms. The text refers to ethnicity and race within various cultural environments as well, including those within Latin America. My focus is on the authors' interpretations of race. This sociological emphasis on the definitions of race reflects the belief in the social construct of race, which is greatly aligned with the typical view of race in Latin America. Cornell and Hartmann confirm that race is a social and not a biological construct. In Chapter 3, I discuss how this confirmation allows room for social prejudice and discrimination. The authors' definitions help to explain and reinforce how race is determined in Latin America and Venezuela respectively. However, *Ethnicity and Race* does not provide information on how these definitions specifically affect African descendants in Latin America, which is why I supplement this information with the other works mentioned. I simply utilized *Ethnicity and Race* to inform my thesis with historical theories and definitions of race.

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<sup>33</sup> Cornell and Hartmann, *Ethnicity and Race: Making Identities in a Changing World* (Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press, 1998).

I also utilize this work to supply the reader with a sociological perspective on these issues, which then adds to the historical foundations and view points.

In general Dzidzienyo's and Obler's *Neither Enemies Nor Friends: Latinos, Blacks, Afro-Latinos*, a relatively new book, provides a great deal of current research that is being conducted on African descendants in Latin America and their relationship to the society in which they live.<sup>34</sup> This work, very much aligned with "A Question of Color," in *Americas: The Changing Face of Latin America and the Caribbean*, as well as *Café Con Leche*, is more current. *Neither Enemies Nor Friends* also provides sections that compare race in Latin America and the United States, similar to Winn's piece. I focus on Ariel Dulitzky's article that explicitly deals with racism and discrimination. Dulitzky does an excellent job of describing these terms and giving comprehensive examples of each within Latin American society. Although Dulitzky is a Clinical Professor of Law he, like Cornell and Hartmann, offers comprehensive definitions of race and ample analysis. Dulitzky also reveals the notion of various levels of racism that help to explain the differing types of racism and/or racial discrimination. Dulitzky labels these three denials as literal, interpretive, and justificatory. Each level of denial is construed as creating the various types of racism and/or racial discrimination. Although this text does not offer particular examples of racism and/or racial discrimination in the Venezuelan context, the author asserts that at least one level of denial exists within all Latin American countries and most-likely a combination of the three. I utilized these levels of denials in Chapter 3 to give the full spectrum of how race, racism and/or racial discrimination is used, justified, explained, or ignored in Latin American society including Venezuela.

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<sup>34</sup> Dulitzky, "A Region in Denial: Racial Discrimination and Racism in Latin America," in *Neither Enemies Nor Friends: Latinos, Blacks, Afro-Latinos* ed. By Anani Dzidzienyo and Suzanne Oboler (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

Candelario's *Black behind the Ears: Dominican Racial Identity from Museums to Beauty Shops* is a sociological analysis of multiple travel narratives during enslavement and colonialism that focus on trips taken to the Dominican Republic along with present-day narratives of Dominicans.<sup>35</sup> This text is truly unique and different from the other texts I chose to work from in that it focuses on the Dominican Republic, which has a well-known history of troublesome race relations. This text also is a mixture of historical information such as Wright's and Winn's works, with a focus on personal accounts by individuals who either visited colonial Dominican Republic or those who lived there. This work exposes the well-known denial of Blackness in the Dominican community and how these perspectives were interpreted by visitors to the area. Candelario dates this denial back to the period of enslavement and goes on to explain how it has manifested into complex race relations in contemporary periods. By this, Candelario refers to the self-hatred of darker-skinned Dominicans and the negative stereotypes of Blackness perpetuated by lighter-skinned Dominicans. The author gives detailed accounts of relationship preferences and physical beauty standards that typical Dominicans hold dear, which classically excludes Blacks. Even though this text focuses on the Dominican Republic, it sets a foundation for the denial of racial discrimination that exists throughout Latin America, which Dulitzky also discusses. Within my chapter on race relations I refer to *Black behind the Ears* in order to re-iterate the fact that some, in fact many, Latinos partake in racial discrimination or racist acts. I use this more well-known case of racism in the Dominican Republic to show how Venezuela is no exception to this case of racism even though the knowledge of African descendants in Venezuela is less well-known.

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<sup>35</sup> Ginetta E. B. Candelario, *Black Behind the Ears: Dominican Racial Identity from Museums to Beauty Shops* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

*“Profiles of Black Latinos in Academe: The Identity Dilemma and the Perception of Self”* by Elda Saucedo provides four profiles, or biographies of dark-skinned Latinos.<sup>36</sup> Since this work focuses on biographies it coincides with Candelario’s work in providing personal narratives, which provide my thesis with information based on primary sources. Saucedo’s dissertation raises the issues of race and self-identification. I focus on these two themes within her work to inform my thesis. Although the author’s definitions of race and identity are not as fully inclusive as those by Cornell, Hartmann, and Dulitzky, I agree with her main argument that dark-skinned Latinos should be able to self-define and be able to move within or outside of Black and Latino social circles if they choose to without being forced to stay within only one. The majority of Saucedo’s work makes the clear point that the subjects of her dissertation ultimately identified with the country that they or their families came from versus their skin color. This position speaks to the issue of nationalism as identification rather than identifying with one’s race. This identification provides an opposing view to how the members of La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas, the organization I focus on within this thesis; identify themselves and the identity they are promoting within Venezuela, along with other African descended groups throughout Latin America. Saucedo’s work supplies my thesis with similar and contradictory arguments with regard to the arguments of the other authors and myself. Therefore her profiles offer another perspective on the complex identity of dark-skinned or physically African-descended people in Latin America.

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<sup>36</sup> Saucedo, “Profiles of Black Latinos in Academe: The Identity Dilemma and the Perception of Self,” Ph.D. Dissertation, Arizona State University, 2002; (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Microform Publications of ProQuest Information and Learning, University of Michigan, 2003).

*La Red de Afrovenezolanas/ Social Movements in Latin America*

A fair amount of literature has been produced on the subject of social movements and race relations in Latin America. There are many works that specifically explore social movements. Peter Winn, Arturo Escobar along with Sonia E. Alvarez, David Meyer, Nancy Whittier, and Belinda Robnett, Richard Stahler-Sholk, Harry E. Vanden, and Glen David Kuecker, Karen Carrillo, and Jesus Garcia are a few authors who focus on either social movements in general, social movements explicitly in Latin America, or La Red de Afrovenezolanas, one of the leading social movement groups in Venezuela. All of these subjects together help to shape the framework for the focus of my thesis on La Red de Afrovenezolanas.

Peter Winn's *Americas: The Changing Face of Latin America and the Caribbean*, contains a chapter entitled "Making Revolution," in which he dedicated a few pages to the political history of Venezuela leading up to Hugo Chavez's presidential candidacy in 1998. This recount of political history provides a good background to the effects that politics have had on social movements in Venezuela. I utilize this information to discuss how Afro-Venezuelans have been excluded from the political arena and how Chavez is the first president to take their plight into consideration. In another chapter of *Americas*, entitled "Children of the Sun," Winn discusses the organizing efforts of Indigenous persons in Latin America. He also touches on the progress made by Indigenous groups. This information informs my brief discussion of how Indigenous persons are fighting for similar recognition and rights that persons of African-descent in Latin America are fighting for. As the title of Winn's work suggest, his main argument is that the face, or the prominent image of the inhabitants of Latin America is changing, however there are still strides to be made. As I mention in my last chapter, in Venezuela Indigenous people have been



granted the right to be recognized as a distinct ethnic group within Venezuelan society and to have their history and culture be taught in all public and private schools. These rights were given under Chavez's presidency, but as evident in the 1999 Constitution, Afro-Venezuelans have not. Thus I utilize this information to point out that as a distinct ethnicity, Indigenous people have been legally recognized and granted special rights unlike the Afro-Venezuelan population that is currently struggling for the same treatment.

Escobar and Alvarez provide my thesis with a theoretical framework of social movements in Latin America.<sup>37</sup> Their text *The Making of Social Movements in Latin America: Identity, Strategy, and Democracy* specifically affords this thesis with the foundational arguments and perspectives on the issue of social movements in Latin America. Different from Winn's work that focuses on specifics, Escobar and Alvarez provide more of a historical overview of social movements in Latin America. The authors of this text do acknowledge that there is currently a new wave of social movements in Latin America with various purposes. The authors provide reasons why this is so, such as economic crises, natural disasters, and shifts in governments. Within this summary of movements this text informs the readers of the relationship these movements have with politics, economics, and democracy in general. Although the text is a synopsis of what is currently happening in Latin America, there are a few chapters that describe specific movements such as in Venezuela, Peru, and Colombia. The text similarly does not highlight any specific movements of African descendants in Latin America. The authors address a few Indigenous movements however. Interestingly, while looking at Venezuela in this work, the focus is on the ecology movement, which informs my chapter on social movements, adding to the diversity of

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<sup>37</sup> Arturo Escobar and Sonia E. Alvarez, *The Making of Social Movements in Latin America: Identity, Strategy and Democracy* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992).

movements that exist specifically in Venezuela. As a result my work draws on the foundational information supplied by Escobar and Alvarez.

*Social Movements: Identity, Culture, and the State* by David Meyer, Nancy Whittier, and Belinda Robnett discuss the study of social movements in general.<sup>38</sup> Similar to *The Making of Social Movements in Latin America*, Meyer, Whittier, and Robnett supply a survey of contemporary social movements. However the latter focuses on social movements emphasizing the social spheres that determine the need for a movement versus emphasizing the politics behind this need as the former does. This text focuses on the major social issues that movements in the last few decades have been organized around, those being: women's issues, sexuality issues, worker's rights, civil rights, and political rights. The text also touches on social movements worldwide, with a brief section on Latin America. Although the information provided on Latin America is not sufficient, the text is still valuable in outlining social movements in general. I utilize this work in order to give a broad scope of social movements to set the stage for specific social movements in Latin America and then more specifically in Venezuela, narrowing the focus down to La Red de Afrovenezolanas.

Stahler-Stolk, Vanden, and Kuecker have written an up-to-date study of social movements in Latin America that gives a comprehensive overview of the fight for political and social change.<sup>39</sup> *Latin American Social Movements in the Twenty-First Century: Resistance, Power, and Democracy* provides both theoretical and research-based analysis. This text is a combination of *The Making of Social Movements in Latin America* and *Social Movements*. The wide variety of backgrounds of the authors of

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<sup>38</sup> David Meyer, Nancy Whittier and Belinda Robnett, *Social Movements: Identity, Culture and the State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>39</sup> Richard Stahler-Stolk, Harry E. Vanden and Glen David Kuecker, *Latin American Social Movements in the Twenty-First Century: Resistance, Power and Democracy* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008).

this work offers different perspectives ranging from political to anthropological. I utilize this work to give a current account of social activism in Latin America. Since the authors provide research on a variety of countries that have significant Black populations, I then inform the reader of these movements relative to the Afro-Venezuelan movement. Especially relevant is the chapter on Afro-Colombians, which highlights their historical plight and contemporary resistance. Professor Kwame Dixon writes about the political and social status of Afro-Colombians and how they came to be recognized in the constitution, unlike Afro-Venezuelans. Dixon also discusses the continued struggle of Afro-Colombians even after this legislation was passed. Dixon's main argument is that the current socio-political movements enacted by African descendants in Latin America indeed exists and needs to be further explored. This chapter specifically, and this text generally, supplies my thesis with a background to the current socio-political environment of Latin America.

Karen Carrillo is one of a few newspaper columnists who have documented the existence of La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas. She has authored several articles in the *New York Amsterdam News* that highlight what La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas is, what they are asking for, events they've hosted, and the organization's relationship to President Chavez.<sup>40</sup> Carrillo incorporates participant observation with information gathered from interviews. Hence her articles differ from the other texts mentioned in that her work is a primary source on La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas based on her travel experience to Venezuela. Carrillo's main argument is that La Red is an essential institution in Venezuela. Carrillo also points out that La Red is the leading institution struggling for Afro-Venezuelan rights. Although the journalist writes objectively about the Afro-

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<sup>40</sup> Karen Carrillo, "For Afro-Venezuelans, Chavez is the only hope for change," *New York Amsterdam News*, 95 (2004): 2.

Venezuelan Network, she only provides minimal subjective arguments. She does not elaborately discuss the effects of La Red on the Afro-Venezuelan community or on Venezuelan society. The author also does not note where or how La Red fits into the broader context of social movements in Latin America created by African descendants. Nonetheless, Carrillo's articles speak to social movements indirectly by discussing the Afro-Venezuelan social movement currently led by La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas. I draw upon Carrillo's works to enhance my arguments on the purpose, objectives, and existence of La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas from a spectator's perspective.

Jesus Garcia, mentioned above has also written extensively on behalf of La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas, the organization he helped to create. Garcia brings primary source material as well to my analysis of La Red. Garcia has written books and magazine articles in the name of La Red and what the organization is calling for. As a founder and member of the organization, Garcia provides history, strategies, and goals of La Red. Also through a personal interview that I conducted with Garcia, I was able to incorporate the relationship La Red has with President Chavez. As someone able to write from within, Garcia, unlike the other authors mentioned, is able to write from experience as an activist, and also as a Black, male citizen of Venezuelan society, therefore supplying the reader with a different perspective. Garcia is not only critical of the society in which he lives, but also of the organization he founded, constantly looking to improve and reach more of the Black community in Venezuela. Jesus Garcia provides an important view that greatly informs my thesis research.

### *Organization of the Thesis*

The first chapter discusses the introduction, the problem, the purpose of the study, and limitations of the study; the research methods and framing of the study with a review of the relevant literature to examine historical legacy of African descendants in Latin America and Venezuela specifically; to define and identify race relations in Latin America and Venezuela specifically, and to give a brief history of La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas. Chapter 2 provides a historical overview of the experience of Africans brought to Latin America and Venezuela in particular. The third chapter classifies and describes racial dynamics between African descendants and European descendants in Venezuela and Latin America in general. Chapter 4 documents the creation of La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas from conception to the present. Chapter 5 presents the conclusion, recommendations, and future research endeavors.

## CHAPTER 2: THE HISTORY OF AFRICAN DESCENDANTS IN LATIN AMERICA

The history of African descendants in Latin America, and Venezuela specifically, is similar to that of the rest of the African Diaspora, such as Brazil, Jamaica, and specifically, in many ways, to the African Diaspora in the United States. That history covers a period of pre and post-enslavement. However, the history of African descendants in Latin America is also different in various ways. The history of the African Diaspora in Latin America began with the first African arrival in Latin America, and in Venezuela particularly, during the sixteenth century.

The nature of enslavement in this geographical area was just as inhumane and cruel as the rest of the sites in the Americas. However, there were different stipulations created by local and royal Spanish governments that created advantages for enslaved Africans in Latin America. These stipulations provided a different experience, and often better opportunities, for some enslaved Africans throughout Latin America. These stipulations included womb-laws that dealt with early manumission depending on your mother's status before legal abolition of enslavement and relaxed oversight of the enslaved, which was typical of plantation owners who often allowed maroonage to occur and/or retention of African culture in plantation settings.

These various provisions frequently allowed enslaved Africans to develop communities, or *cumbes*<sup>41</sup>, inside and/or outside plantation environments. The nature

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<sup>41</sup> Cumbe, or the plural form *cumbes*, refers the communities created by runaway enslaved Africans in Latin America. Other terms commonly used to describe these communities in Latin America as well are *palenques*, *quilombos*, *mocambos*, *ladeiras* or *mambises*. They all describe new societies that maroons in this geographical region created. These communities ranged from short-term settlements with few residents to long-term full-blown estates with thousands of members. Richard Price, *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1973), 1.

of these communities was similar to traditional African communities, in that they were spaces of expression, familial connection, retention of culture, and an avenue of freedom. Throughout Latin America, and Venezuela specifically, enslaved Africans developed communal spaces that lasted throughout enslavement that often have remained as homelands to their descendants.

In examining the differences within the African Diaspora, however, in particular, regard for race, class, and miscegenation were, and often times still are, viewed differently through the eyes of the European enslavers and their descendants in Latin America. These views are often seen as different from those of Europeans in the United States, while in reality reflecting the same Euro-centric mentality, but through a different lens. Nevertheless, the similarities between African descendants around the world tend to be greater than the differences. The search for commonality amongst the Latin American African Diaspora and the African Diaspora throughout the globe is deepening. This growth is especially true amongst Latin America and North America.

The connection between African descendants in Latin America and North America is thriving partially because of their historical experiences of Trans-Atlantic enslavement. However, South and North America experienced different styles of enslavement and colonization. South America and southern parts of the United States were colonized by the Spaniards at one point in time. At the same time South America experienced a different style of enslavement and colonization as compared to North America. As a result, African descendants in South America have not experienced the same plight as those of North America, but similar. Since enslavement was practiced differently in Latin America, distinct patterns of racial relations have emerged.

The mentality of people in Latin America about race is different than that of North America, but especially different from that of the United States. This socialization has caused a host of differences in the way Africans in the societies of

Latin America exist and co-exist with non-Africans. To be specific, the notion of café con leche explains the general view of race in Latin America, including Venezuela. The phrase “café con leche” literally translates to “coffee with milk,” but the idea is that more milk should dilute the coffee. Thus the general consensus is that everyone is mixed with some European (the milk) and either African or Indigenous blood (the coffee), thus they are all simply Venezuelan. In response to this notion some Africans in turn see themselves as café con leche rather than primarily African. Also this causes a majority of European, and in some cases Indigenous persons, to justify their racial ideology and their lack of recognition of African descendants throughout Venezuela because of the idea that no one is fully any one racialized group, but rather mixed.

In this chapter, I intend to lay the foundations for African enslavement in Latin America generally, and Venezuela specifically. This summary includes the chronological history of the institution of enslavement in these areas, by focusing on territories that Spain possessed from the 16<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century C.E. with some emphasis on Portugal’s role in the Slave Trade.<sup>42</sup> By analyzing the institution of enslavement in general throughout Latin America, I give information on estimated figures of how many Africans were brought to Latin America. Specifically I look at Mexico and Peru, the two countries that have a large amount of documented information about the lives of African descendants during enslavement. I also explain areas of labor that Africans were forced into and how they fared. In dealing specifically with Venezuela, I give key numerical figures and information on specific areas of African labor. I provide information on resistance and abolition in Venezuela and elsewhere throughout Latin America. This information is intended to setup the main chapters of this thesis by serving as a historical background. This chapter sheds light on the social and

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<sup>42</sup> C.E. refers to Common Era, a time period after the birth of Jesus Christ, also known as A.D.



economic positions of African descendants in present-day Venezuela. This information is also used to set the backdrop for the African descendant's movement currently going on in Latin America and Venezuela in order to combat inferiorized status. The main focus of the thesis is on La Red de Afrovenezolanas, an Afro-Venezuelan activist organization. My research looks to contribute to the field of Africana/Diaspora Studies along with Latino/Latin American Studies. It may also contribute to the relatively new study of African descendants in Latin America and more specifically to social movements and activism engaged by African descendants in Venezuela and Latin America generally.

Racial hierarchy where Spanish-speaking African descendants are placed at the bottom is a product of racial socialization in Latin America. It is also a direct result of enslavement. Prior to European invasion, there were Indigenous cultural groups living throughout Latin America. Those groups include the Yukpa of Venezuela, the Quechua of Bolivia, and the Cabecar of Costa Rica. The Portuguese and the Spaniards confronted these cultural groups in Latin America during the 16<sup>th</sup> century C.E. "Already using the enslaved labor of Africans, Muslims, and Guanches in Europe and the Atlantic islands, the first Spaniards and Portuguese immediately went about enslaving all the American Indians they could find and keep."<sup>43</sup> Eventually the quest for full enslavement of the American Indians declined. A new arrangement was developed for the Indians to perform semi-free and free labor. The major free Indian populations that were targeted were in present-day Mexico, Guatemala, and Peru. These countries were rich in mineral resources such as gold, silver, and agriculture. The areas south of present-day Guatemala and north of present-day Ecuador during

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<sup>43</sup> Hebert S. Klein, *African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 22.

the 16<sup>th</sup> century C.E., were not seen yet as having possessions worth exploiting.<sup>44</sup> The Spaniards were partially able to exploit the American Indians at first because of their relationship with the American Indian nobility.<sup>45</sup> At the same time, “through wage-labor incentives and through discriminatory taxation large numbers of Indian laborers were attracted,” to the notion of wage-labor jobs.<sup>46</sup>

Interestingly there was a gradual recognition of the idea to enslave Africans as a labor source. This idea sprung up mainly because of the killing of American Indians by diseases caught from Europeans and the abandonment of the nomadic Indians of major peasant regions.<sup>47</sup> Thus there was no longer an abundant source of indigenous labor and the Spaniards were determined to continue with their capitalist investments. Once the American Indians were considered too depopulated the Portuguese and Spaniards decided to discontinue enslaving the American Indian populations as their primary source and began the quest of venturing to Africa for labor.

The reasons for the Spaniards and Portuguese decision to enslave Africans versus any other people throughout the world were simple. According to Herbert Klein, “They found African slaves useful for the very reasons that they were kinless and totally mobile laborers. Indians could be exploited systematically but they could not be moved from their lands on a permanent basis. Being the dominant cultural group, they were also relatively impervious to Spanish and European norms of behavior. The Africans, in contrast, came from multiple linguistic groups and had only the European languages in common and were therefore forced to adapt themselves to the European norms.”<sup>48</sup> Angelina Pollak-Eltz, an anthropologist who has written a

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<sup>44</sup> Klein, *African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 25.

<sup>45</sup> Klein, *African Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 22.

<sup>46</sup> Klein, *African Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 24.

<sup>47</sup> Michael L. Conniff and Thomas J. Davis, *Africans in the Americas: A History of the Black Diaspora* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 111.

<sup>48</sup> Klein, *African Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 25-26.

handful of books on African descendants and their culture in Venezuela, agreed with Klein's idea and stated that, "in the case of the forced migration of large African groups to the New World, cultural transfer was only possible on a very limited scale."<sup>49</sup> One can beg to differ since African retention on a large scale was and continues to be a factor in various diaspora communities such as in Haiti, Cuba, Brazil, and Venezuela.<sup>50</sup> Often times, Africans brought to these areas continued to speak their native language and practice their traditional spiritual systems, which can be seen through the predominance of Orisha throughout the previously named countries. At the same time, since the Africans that they intended to enslave would not necessarily have relatives or members of their common ethnic or lingual group, and would become more movable than the Indigenous groups that the Spaniards previously exploited, the Africans seemed a premium target.

Prior to this realization the Portuguese had already "opened up" or exploited the West African coast, which made African people inexpensive to be bought and sold at this time. By this time, being the 16th century C.E., because of Portugal's extensive traveling and trading, a financially viable relationship developed between Europe and Africa, particularly West Africa. Since this relationship had matured by the 16th century C.E., the trading of Africans had ceased to be expensive and irregular between the two continents. The Portuguese exploitation of various natural minerals such as gold and ivory also caused Africans to replace all other enslaved persons in European markets.<sup>51</sup> This made West Africans very accessible to the Spaniards and Portuguese in order to enslave them and transport them to Latin America.

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<sup>49</sup> Pollak-Eltz, *Black Culture and Society* (Caracas, Venezuela: Public Affairs Department of Lagoven, 1994), 12.

<sup>50</sup> Garcia, "Demystifying Africa's Absence," ed. Sheila S. Walker, *African Roots/American Cultures: Africa in the Creation of the Americas* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2001).

<sup>51</sup> Klein, *African Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 27.

The Spaniard's enormous wealth allowed them to be able to be the first Europeans to be able to transport Africans as enslaved labor, mainly uprooting them to Mexico and Peru during these early stages of the Atlantic Trade. Peru in particular had a severe demand for enslaved labor when silver production caused Lima, the capital, to be deemed the most prosperous region of the Americas.<sup>52</sup> This resulted in a major trade expansion. This occurred partially because of the amalgamation of the Portuguese and Spanish royal governments between 1580 and 1640 C.E., thus allowing the Portuguese to provide the Spanish markets in the Americas with Africans to enslave.<sup>53</sup> Based on this supply and demand relationship between Spain and Portugal, anthropologist Angelina Pollak-Eltz claims that "The Spaniards never took an active part in the slave trade... Africans always arrived on foreign ships."<sup>54</sup> Simply because the Spanish were supplied with Africans often by the Portuguese rather than acquiring Africans directly from the continent does not in any way imply that the Spaniards were not active in the trade either internationally or domestically. If they were not active in the trade, then enslaved Africans would not have occupied Latin America. As noted by Klein the majority of Africans supplied to the Spanish by the Portuguese were initially from the Senegambia zone of West Africa and later from the Congo and Angola.<sup>55</sup> However, Pollak-Eltz, who notes Acosta Saignes' work, states that "according to his studies, the most of the slaves came from Zaire, Congo and Angola and were of Bantu Stock, while only a few came from West Africa between Senegal and Nigeria."<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Conniff, Michael L. & Davis, Thomas J., *Africans in the Americas* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 109.

<sup>53</sup> Klein, *African Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 29.

<sup>54</sup> Pollak-Eltz, *Black Culture and Society* (Caracas, Venezuela: Public Affairs Department of Lagoven, 1994), 20.

<sup>55</sup> Klein, *African Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 29.

<sup>56</sup> Pollak-Eltz, *Black Culture and Society* (Caracas, Venezuela: Public Affairs Department of Lagoven, 1994), 24-25. In this quote, Zaire refers to what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The trade of Africans to Peru, specifically, is known as the longest and most unusual of the European trade of African people.<sup>57</sup> After being initially brought to reaching Lima the enslaved Africans were then sold throughout the neighboring areas, which consisted of Upper Peru (Bolivia) and Chile in the south to Quito in the north.<sup>58</sup> Initially enslaved Africans tended to be heavily grouped in urban areas, but new economic roles opened up for them at the margins of the Indian rural society.<sup>59</sup> Living and working at the margins of Indian rural society caused the miscegenation of Africans and Indians that is very noticeable and often acknowledged in Latin America. These mixed persons are referred to as zambos, or persons of African and Indigenous blood. Africans that remained in Peru were predominantly labored to mine silver, mercury, gold, work within agriculture to a large extent, and ranch European animals. Also as within parts of the United States, Africans in Latin America were also seamen on personal and regal ships.<sup>60</sup> “On average the plantations of the irrigated coastal valleys...had around forty slaves per unit. But sometimes the larger estates could reach 100 slaves.”<sup>61</sup>

Also as within the United States, Africans brought to Latin America were craftsmen and artisans in their own right. In Peru this was the norm. “In the skilled trades they predominated in metal-working, clothing, and construction and supplies. Every major construction site found skilled and unskilled slaves. In some trades by...17<sup>th</sup> century, free and slave Africans and Afro-Americans were dominant. Thus of 150 master tailors in the city, 100 were blacks, mulattoes, or mestizos.”<sup>62</sup> Africans were also employed in a host of factories in Peru that specialized in making hats and

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<sup>57</sup> Klein, *African Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 29.

<sup>58</sup> Conniff, Michael L. & Davis, Thomas J., *Africans in the Americas* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 115.

<sup>59</sup> Klein, *African Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 29.

<sup>60</sup> Klein, *African Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 31.

<sup>61</sup> Klein, *African Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 30.

<sup>62</sup> Klein, *African Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 31.

leather by-products. African labor was also solicited in slaughterhouses and for producing bricks and stones for construction of the capital, Lima.<sup>63</sup>

By the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century C.E., a majority of the cities in the northern and central, Andean coastal and interior had Black populations that equaled approximately that of the Spaniards, which accounted for half of the total population.<sup>64</sup> The pattern of the ownership of Africans in Latin America in general would be modeled after Peru.

“In the urban and sometimes even in the rural areas, slave rentals were as common as direct ownership. Most skilled artisans were rented out by their owners. Often the skilled and semi-skilled slaves maintained themselves and simply rented themselves, supplying their owners with a fixed monthly income, and absorbing their own expenses for housing and food. For most unskilled slaves, it was common to rent them to Spaniards or other free persons who paid both wages and maintenance cost. Thus a complex web of direct ownership, rentals, and self-employment made the slaves and extremely mobile and adjustable labor force.”<sup>65</sup>

When referring to slave rentals, Klein is referring to a leasing of enslaved Africans that was cheaper than purchasing Africans outright. However, this web of access allowed Africans to have a different type of freedom and retention of assets that was not as common in the United States. Within this unique and multi-faceted network of possession by Africans, “in some cases they were paid wages equal to white workers, in others they were paid less even than the rental wages of the slaves.”<sup>66</sup> Taking a moment to reflect on the term slave used, Klein refers to African people with

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<sup>63</sup> Klein, *African Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 32.

<sup>64</sup> Conniff & Davis, *Africans in the Americas* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 115.

<sup>65</sup> Klein, *African Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 33.

<sup>66</sup> Klein, *African Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 33.

this term throughout his text, versus using the appropriate term enslaved Africans, which takes into account not only African peoples status but humanity.

An interesting shift in labor occurred in Peru when major cities began to expand. Indigenous persons migrated to these urban centers, in turn again becoming the free labor that the Spaniards needed, thus decreasing the necessity for African labor, which was indeed more expensive. By the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century C.E. and the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century C.E. Africans were no longer a significant element in the mining industry.<sup>67</sup> Mexico during this period faced the same transition. Indians and mestizos in Mexico that were given a salary began fulfilling more of the Spaniards labor needs.<sup>68</sup> Mestizos refers to persons mixed with Indigenous and European blood. The growth of the enslaved African population in Mexico also reflected this shift from Mexican labor to Indian labor. “In 1570 there were an estimated 20,000 slaves in all of Mexico; at their peak in 1646 the total slave labor force reached some 35,000. These slaves represented less than 2 percent of the total African population brought to Spanish America. By the last decade of that century, Peru had close to 90,000 slaves, while Mexico had only 6,000 left.”<sup>69</sup> The number of Africans in Mexico was low because of the influx of responsive Indians to the Spaniards demands. Since Indians in Mexico were more willing and able to work than those of the Peruvian regions, the Spaniards no longer had to transport as many Africans as before thus the number of Africans steadily declined.

During the 17th century C.E., Spain and Portugal were among the wealthiest of all European countries. This of course attracted attention from the rest of the world, causing the Dutch, French, and British to get involved. The Lesser Antillean islands

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<sup>67</sup> Rolando Mellafe, *Negro Slavery in Latin America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 31.

<sup>68</sup> Klein, *African Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 35-36.

<sup>69</sup> Klein, *African Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 36.

were particularly exploited by various northern European nations, which initially challenged Spanish and Portuguese control of the sugar trade in the so-called New World and later caused the British to attack Spanish possessions.<sup>70</sup> “Though the English failed in their attack on well-defended Santo Domingo, they did take the lightly held island of Jamaica. The French followed shortly after with a successful settlement of western Santo Domingo... abandoned by the Spaniards since 1605 C.E. Thus Spain was left in the Caribbean with only Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the eastern region of Santo Domingo.”<sup>71</sup>

By the middle to the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century C.E., the New World saw a large influx of African people. Spanish America alone was the third largest area of importation next to Brazil, with the non-Spanish-speaking Caribbean importing over 350,000 Africans.<sup>72</sup> The 18<sup>th</sup> century C.E. saw sugar as the major cash crop for the entire New World, especially Spanish America. Cultivating sugarcane was one of the major areas of labor that Africans were forced to work. According to Herbert Klein, “Something on the order of 80 percent of the slave population was gainfully employed.”<sup>73</sup> This raises an interesting question; focusing on Klein’s usage of the term ‘gainfully’, which implies lucratively or advantageously, does Klein truly believe that this was the case? If 80 percent of Africans were gainfully employed would not 80 percent have bought their freedom in societies in which they were able to have done so? It is true however that a large percent of Africans were forced to work on the newly founded sugar plantations in order for the Europeans to dominate the world market. This may have been what Klein was referring to when he used the phrase

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<sup>70</sup> Mellafe, *Negro Slavery in Latin America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 35-36.

<sup>71</sup> Klein, *African Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 52.

<sup>72</sup> Klein, *African Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 53.

<sup>73</sup> Klein, *African Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 61.



gainfully employed. Yet, most enslaved Africans did not gain any type of income for their labor. Only a few were given some land not monetary funds.

The middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century C.E. saw Spain's drive to bring more Africans to the American colonies. This drive exacerbated the competition Spain had with the English. The English took over the *asiento* (or monopoly contract) for slave trading to Spanish America. The English, specifically their South Sea Company monopoly gained 144,000 *piezas* from what they brought into Spanish American ports over a twenty-five year period.<sup>74</sup> Since the English were the main suppliers and carriers of Africans to Spanish America, some scholars consider Spain to have played a non-active role in the trade itself.<sup>75</sup> Gradually Argentinean ports were developed and served to enlarge the trade of Africans as well. Although Africans were brought to Argentina the majority were dispersed throughout the major ports in Colombia, Peru, and Panama.<sup>76</sup>

The temporary British control of Cuba during the 1760s, which would become Spain's largest colony and major sugar producer, caused a shift in trade for the Spaniards as well.<sup>77</sup> "This meant the eventual adoption in 1789 of free trade in slaves for all nations to the Spanish American possessions. The results of these various actions were the growth of new slave centers in northern South America, above all in sectors of Nueva Granada and Venezuela, and the islands of Puerto Rico and Cuba."<sup>78</sup> This stage of Spanish enslavement marked the decline in the roles of Mexico and Peru, the two previously leading countries in African exploitation.

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<sup>74</sup> Mellafe, *Negro Slavery in Latin America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 56.

<sup>75</sup> Pollak-Eltz, *Black Culture* (Caracas, Venezuela: Public Affairs Department of Lagoven, 1994), 20.

<sup>76</sup> Mellafe, *Negro Slavery in Latin America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 62.

<sup>77</sup> Klein, *African Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 83.

<sup>78</sup> Klein, *African Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 83.

The decline in the roles of Mexico and Peru brought about the revival of two new colonies. Since there was a lack of native labor on the previously insignificant lands of Nueva Granada, present-day Colombia and Venezuela, the Spaniards increased their involvement in the trade of Africans to these territories.<sup>79</sup> These two new lands brought gold and cacao into mainstream production. Unfortunately for the Spaniards, gold would diminish by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century C.E. At the same time this was positive for African people because their use as enslaved labor declined and many were able to buy their freedom in response to these events.<sup>80</sup>

Specifically in Venezuela, the cacao plantations presented a more fixed situation. During the late 16<sup>th</sup> century C.E. Portuguese traders helped ship cacao to Mexico which in turn reaped large profits for Venezuela, thus permitting them to create a plantation economy locally with this crop as well. These profits allowed Venezuelans to be able to afford to supplement African labor for Indigenous labor, since Indians often did not respect plantation routines and were seen as unreliable.<sup>81</sup> Not surprisingly, Africans were more than laborers; they were innovators. “Africans not only provided the needed labor but also brought their own agricultural technology to the arduous tasks of clearing land, digging irrigation ditches, planting shade crops to protect the cacao seedlings, and caring for the trees as they matured. Farmers in western Africa employed similar methods in their agriculture, so individuals from that region adapted to the work on plantations with little difficulty.”<sup>82</sup> Today many of these cacao plantations are still in existence; they are worked and owned by African descendants of these previously enslaved Africans.

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<sup>79</sup> Winthrop Wright, *Café Con Leche: Race, Class, and National Image in Venezuela* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 15.

<sup>80</sup> Klein, *African Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 85.

<sup>81</sup> Wright, *Café Con Leche* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 16.

<sup>82</sup> Wright, *Café Con Leche: Race, Class, and National Image in Venezuela* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 16.

The regression of the enslavement period in Latin America, moving through the 1700s, saw an expansion of the free African population. “Thus in northern South America and Panama, the free colored represented half or more of the total national populations. In Panama, 50 percent of the 63,000 population were free colored; in Venezuela where slavery was still an expanding institution, there were almost 200,000 free colored who represented 46 percent of the population.”<sup>83</sup> This would in turn make for unique race relations in South America and Latin America as a whole once abolition set in.

Continuing through the 1700s up until the beginning of the Haitian Revolution in 1791 C.E., there were various examples of resistance throughout Latin America as will be discussed, yet the revolution had a profound impact on enslavement that would hasten the deterioration of the institution. At the same time there was a significant bourgeoisie class of cultivators, in places such as Cuba and Puerto Rico that empathized with the Spaniards and would stay loyal to them.<sup>84</sup> Nonetheless there were various incidents of resistance in both of those colonies. The Haitian Revolution also significantly affected the economic status of Latin America. Once slavery came to an end because of the revolution, this also saw the end of the richest plantation economy in the world and as the result of this economic shift, Cuba’s and Puerto Rico’s sugar industry would take Haiti’s place in the world market by the 1800s.<sup>85</sup> Cuba would also be the last Spanish American colony to abolish the institution of enslavement because of this status.

In looking specifically at Venezuela’s history in the midst of the Spaniard trade and conquest of Latin America, there are a few distinct features involved in the history

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<sup>83</sup> Klein, *African Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 88.

<sup>84</sup> Klein, *African Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 91.

<sup>85</sup> George Reid Andrews, *Afro-Latin America, 1800-2000* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 17-19.

of African enslavement. As early as 1530 C.E., the first documented Africans were brought to Venezuela, then part of the colony, Nueva Granada (New Granada).<sup>86</sup> These original Africans were considered conquistadores, meaning Spanish soldiers who helped to conquer indigenous populations. This same time period also brought Africans, rudely called by the Spaniards, bozales, meaning ‘wild people’, directly from the continent against their will, initially to work in the mines or in the pearl diving industry.<sup>87</sup> From the period of 1500-1530 C.E., Spaniards brought a little over 2,000 enslaved Africans from Cape Verde and Guinea to Venezuela. Another 2,600 Africans were brought from 1536-1550 C.E. Thus the result at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century C.E. was that there were about 13,000 Africans in Venezuela, which accounted for 6 percent of Africans taken to Latin America during this time.<sup>88</sup>

One facet of enslavement that is distinct in Venezuela’s history is that by the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century C.E., the lands of Venezuela that had been conquered and the trade of Africans to Venezuela were both governed by the Catholic Church under the administration of the Spanish Crown.<sup>89</sup> Secondly, during the first 20 years of the 18<sup>th</sup> century C.E., Venezuelan landowners bought enslaved Africans in the Caribbean versus purchasing them through the Portuguese. These Africans became known as Ladinos, or Caribbean-born, Spanish-speakers.<sup>90</sup> This was mainly because as the cacao plantation economy peaked, the demand for Africans increased, and it was of course more inexpensive to acquire Africans from places in the New World

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<sup>86</sup> Leslie B. Rout, Jr. *The African Experience in Spanish America* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2003), 111.

<sup>87</sup> Wright, *Café Con Leche: Race, Class, and National Image in Venezuela* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 16.

<sup>88</sup> Minority Rights Group, *No Longer Invisible* (United Kingdom: Minority Rights Publications, 1995), 244.

<sup>89</sup> Rights Group, *No Longer Invisible* (United Kingdom: Minority Rights Publications, 1995), 244.

<sup>90</sup> Mellafe, *Negro Slavery in Latin America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 50.

versus directly from Africa.<sup>91</sup> The result of this increase in the buying of Africans saw the overall number of Africans in Venezuela reach 70, 000 during the 18<sup>th</sup> century C.E. alone, which caused Africans to then account for 18 percent of Africans in Latin America.<sup>92</sup> Today the exact percentage of African descendants is debated because the census has not been compiled on the basis of race since 1876 C.E., which is why La Red de Afrovenezolanas that will be discussed at length in Chapter 4 is pushing the government to create a subgroup of Afro- Venezuelans within the next census in 2010 C.E.<sup>93</sup>

A third distinct aspect of enslavement in Venezuela was the relaxed pattern of local control that allowed Africans to benefit from little to no vigilance.<sup>94</sup> The extraordinary amount of land that was unsettled accounted largely for enslaved Africans' freedom of movement.<sup>95</sup> "The need for manual labour led landowners to create arrangements for settling the workforce within the boundaries of the estate, granting slaves conucos-plots of land where they could build their houses, cultivate subsistence crops and enjoy their own communal life."<sup>96</sup> The term conucos described above refers to family farm lands that were occasionally granted to enslaved Africans. Also, "over time, such provision developed into a pattern of land use that was not substantially different from one based on free workers. The social organization of production on Venezuelan colonial estates, then did not rest on the strict and vigilant rule of masters over slaves, but rather involved a relation of common dependence."<sup>97</sup> Thus there was a very different dynamic between enslaved Africans in Latin America,

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<sup>91</sup> John V. Lombardi, "The Abolition of Slavery in Venezuela: A Nonevent," ed. Robert Brent Toplin, *Slavery and Race Relations in Latin America* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1974), 229.

<sup>92</sup> Rights Group, *No Longer Invisible* (United Kingdom: Minority Rights Publications, 1995), 245.

<sup>93</sup> Rout, Jr., *The African Experience* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2003), 256.

<sup>94</sup> Rights Group, *No Longer Invisible* (United Kingdom: Minority Rights Publications, 1995), 245.

<sup>95</sup> Rout, *The African Experience* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2003), 112.

<sup>96</sup> Rights Group, *No Longer Invisible* (United Kingdom: Minority Rights Publications, 1995), 246.

<sup>97</sup> Rights Group, *No Longer Invisible* (United Kingdom: Minority Rights Publications, 1995), 246.

specifically in Venezuela and those who enslaved them in comparison to others parts of the African Diaspora, for instance in the United States.

Interestingly, these landowners did not attempt to regulate their African workers' religious affiliation, dissimilar to the Catholic Church, which made it a priority to convert enslaved Africans.<sup>98</sup> This is very different than the plantation owners in the United States where the seasoning process was created in order to break down Africans mentally, physically, and spiritually. The seasoning process was also used to impose European-American ways of life, including religion to cause a disconnection and disassociation with the African continent. Yet in Venezuela that was not the case. "Thus the black workforce was largely left alone to continue with its own religious activities, to increase the productivity of its conucos and to trade crops clandestinely."<sup>99</sup> That being so presents another unique and significant aspect within Venezuelan history that in turn allowed Africans to live a different life than in other parts of Latin America and even more so than in the Caribbean or North America.

At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century C.E. and beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century C.E., Venezuela was characterized by a domestic trade of Africans. Instead of travelling to the Caribbean, other parts of Latin America, or trading with the Portuguese, Venezuelan landowners decided to buy and sell Venezuelan born Africans within the country.<sup>100</sup> This was very similar to what the plantation owners in the United States tactfully decided to do once the Slave Trade Act of 1807 was enacted by the British. Both of these strategies decreased prices in their respective countries. "Between 1780 and 1850 this internal trade was controlled by a group of local slave traders known as *negreros criollos*...By about 1800, 99.5 per cent of the slaves traded by these Creole

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<sup>98</sup> Andrews, *Afro-Latin America, 1800-2000* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 70.

<sup>99</sup> Rights Group, *No Longer Invisible* (United Kingdom: Minority Rights Publications, 1995), 246.

<sup>100</sup> Lombardi, *The Decline and Abolition of Negro Slavery in Venezuela: 1820-1854* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing Corporation, 1971), 6.

businessmen were mulattos (people of mixed Afro-Hispanic parentage, also known as pardos) and zambos (part African, part indigenous) born in the country.”<sup>101</sup> The increase in the domestic trade of African people caused the international trade to decrease; thus only a little over 2,000 Africans were brought to Venezuela during the 19<sup>th</sup> century C.E. <sup>102</sup>

A unique characteristic of many Latin American former colonies, especially in Venezuela, was the mixture of the different types of Africans the colonizers brought to their respective country. This was to have a direct effect on race and race-relations in colonial society. The Spaniards in the beginning brought Castilian-born Africans or conquistadores to Venezuela, then Africans were brought from either Africa or various parts of the Caribbean, and lastly there was an internal trade that focused on Africans born and raised in Venezuela.<sup>103</sup> Following enslavement and abolition, colonial society created a caste dynamic in which your association was determined by your complexion, family ancestry, capital, and whether your blood was “pure”. <sup>104</sup>

The era between 1750-1810 C.E. marks a period in Venezuelan history when the society was divided between wealthy, politically powerful Hispanic Whites and Creoles that made up the “upper classes,” and a mixture of Africans, Indigenous, and whites that consisted of the “lower classes.”<sup>105</sup> The race amalgamation of Venezuela and most of Latin America today is a product of the white women scarcity and of the fact that Spanish men had no qualms about being sexually involved with African women, which in turn caused intermixing and then these persons of mixed heritage intermixed with those of other origins, which added to the complexity of ethnicity in

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<sup>101</sup> Rights Group, *No Longer Invisible* (United Kingdom: Minority Rights Publications, 1995), 247.

<sup>102</sup> Rights Group, *No Longer Invisible* (United Kingdom: Minority Rights Publications, 1995), 247.

<sup>103</sup> Rights Group, *No Longer Invisible* (United Kingdom: Minority Rights Publications, 1995), 247.

<sup>104</sup> Wright, *Café Con Leche* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 22.

<sup>105</sup> Rights Group, *No Longer Invisible* (United Kingdom: Minority Rights Publications, 1995), 247-48.

Venezuela today.<sup>106</sup> Not unusually, those of the lower castes, free or otherwise, were not permitted to participate in institutions of higher education, political establishments, or ministries.<sup>107</sup> Also not unusually, those of the lower classes were allowed to join the military and many purchased their freedom through these means.<sup>108</sup>

During the height of the cacao production, those Africans that were not yet legally free were gradually replaced by free laborers who were hired to take their place. This wave of new workers caused planters to have a larger pool of labor to choose from. In this instance it became cheaper to hire paid workers than to provide land for enslaved laborers to work on.<sup>109</sup> Thus plantation owners began to revoke the conucos that were previously given to enslaved Africans in order to cultivate, which caused an increase in rebellions along with maroonage. As in the majority of countries in Latin America, enslaved Afro-Venezuelans settled in maroon communities and, more frequently as time went on, in cumbes. Some styles of maroonage are considered petite, which was usually temporarily set up in mountain camps or settlements, while others were long-term. “Known variously as palenques, quilombos, mocambos, cumbes, ladeiras, or mambises, these new societies ranged from tiny bands that survived less than a year to powerful states encompassing thousands of members and surviving for generations or even centuries.”<sup>110</sup> Also during this period spiritual societies and brotherhoods were created by African-Venezuelans that were also major hubs of rebellions.<sup>111</sup>

Venezuela experienced many rebellions. “Already beginning in 1152, with the rebellion headed by ‘El Negro’ Miguel in the Buria Mountains, in the 1749 Kongo and

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<sup>106</sup> Wright, *Café Con Leche* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 13-14.

<sup>107</sup> Wright, *Café Con Leche* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 11 & 29.

<sup>108</sup> Rout, *The African Experience* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2003), 173-174.

<sup>109</sup> Rights Group, *No Longer Invisible* (United Kingdom: Minority Rights Publications, 1995), 249.

<sup>110</sup> Richard Price, *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas*, (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1973), 1 & 33.

<sup>111</sup> Mellafe, *Negro Slavery in Latin America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 111.



Loango Rebellion in Caracas, and later in the 1795 uprising instigated by a Loango man called Cocolofio and led by José Leonardo Chirinos, we see evidence for the construction of a specifically African idea of ‘independence’ in Venezuela.”<sup>112</sup> The last rebellion described in 1795 C.E. was the uprising in the Coro district of Venezuela that took place in what is now the current capital of Falcón State.<sup>113</sup> “The first real scare came in May 1795 C.E. near Coro, when a free zambo tenant farmer named José Leonardo Chirinos led an abortive three-day uprising of slaves, free blacks, pardos, zambos, and Indians. Much like the revolt led by Nat Turner several decades later in Virginia, the Chirinos insurrection began with the killing of several slaveholders and members of their families.”<sup>114</sup> Coro to this day has one of the highest concentrations of African descendants in Venezuela since many of these descendants’ ancestors remained in the city after enslavement. As late as 1824 C.E., Africans rioted in the streets of Petare, Caracas, for equal treatment.<sup>115</sup> These rebellions prove the long-standing tradition of resistance in Venezuela. Though this resistance has taken on different forms since this time period, it has nevertheless continued.

At the closing of the 18<sup>th</sup> century C.E., the colonial administration of Venezuela tried their best to stifle these rebellions, especially because of the upsurge of the War of Independence.<sup>116</sup> This war was against Spain in order for Venezuela to be autonomous, thus becoming what it is now. As within the United States, African-Venezuelans were active on both sides of the war, either with the Spaniards or the patriots, mainly because both sides offered freedom and recovery of lands once the war ended.<sup>117</sup> Scholars have suggested that if African descendants had not fought on

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<sup>112</sup> Jesus “Chucho” Garcia, “Demystifying Africa’s Absence in Venezuelan History and Culture,” ed. Sheila S. Walker, *African Roots/American Cultures: Africa in the Creation of the Americas* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2001), 285.

<sup>113</sup> Klein, *African Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 207.

<sup>114</sup> Wright, *Café Con Leche* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 26.

<sup>115</sup> Wright, *Café Con Leche* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 26.

<sup>116</sup> Rights Group, *No Longer Invisible* (United Kingdom: Minority Rights Publications, 1995), 250.

<sup>117</sup> Rights Group, *No Longer Invisible* (United Kingdom: Minority Rights Publications, 1995), 250.

the side of the patriots, that the Spanish regime would not have been defeated.<sup>118</sup>

Many Africans remained on their lands without truly involving themselves in the war and sustained their harvest on unoccupied lands under a type of land tenure. Some Africans took the war as an opportunity to destroy the assets of those who enslaved them.<sup>119</sup>

Often out of rebellion came maroonage, the act of a maroon running away/escaping from enslavement. As discussed earlier, in many cases petite maroonage, or short-term flight from the plantation, was a common response to enslavement and the Venezuelan War of Independence. In some cases this petit maroonage escalated to grand maroonage, or permanent settlement.<sup>120</sup> In some cases there were negotiations between Africans who decided to leave plantations and the owners of those plantations. Some planters were willing to accommodate runaway Africans because they could not afford to lose them while other planters were not inclined to make deals. Thus, some Maroons or Cimarrones, would return to plantations and be severely punished, while others would be modestly chastised.<sup>121</sup> Another option was that the maroons would permanently resettle in the vast uninhabited lands around them. An even more unique option, mainly found in Latin America, was to make their way to major urban centers, which often had significant populations of free Africans. This way these newly, self-freed Africans could easily absorb into the legally free African population and have little chance of being exposed.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Garcia, "Demystifying Africa's Absence," ed. Sheila S. Walker, *African Roots/American Cultures: Africa in the Creation of the Americas* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2001), 286.

<sup>119</sup> Rights Group, *No Longer Invisible* (United Kingdom: Minority Rights Publications, 1995), 250.

<sup>120</sup> Price, *Maroon Societies* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1973), 1.

<sup>121</sup> Conniff & Davis, *Africans in the Americas* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 62.

<sup>122</sup> Klein, *African Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 198.

The Africans who decided to permanently re-settle in uninhabited or semi-inhabited lands had been creating maroon communities or cumbes for about 300 years. The most prominent recorded cumbes in Latin America in general spawned out of associations of Africans in rural industries such as mining and fishing. The largest were those found in the mountainous areas of Mexico, Panama, Colombia, and Venezuela.<sup>123</sup> Venezuela, which we are most concerned with here, was home to one of the earliest established cumbes, which was formed by escaped African pearl divers on the island of Margarita in 1549 C.E. Venezuela had large cumbes; one of the most important and well-known of which was established in the 1550s under King Miguel, of ladino parentage, who led the local gold mine workers in a revolt.<sup>124</sup> These Africans created coalitions with Indigenous maroons as well. This contact of Africans and Indigenous persons would add to the miscegenation between these groups much like that of the Seminoles of Florida and the enslaved or free Africans in the United States.

In the scholarship that has been done on cultural manifestations of maroon societies, there are some general features that these communities seem to share regardless of region. “Maroons indeed drew on their diverse African heritages in building their cultures. But unlike other Afro-Americans, who were unable to pass on integrated patterns of traditional culture, maroons could and did look to Africa for deep-level organizational principles, relating to cultural realms as diverse as naming their children on the one hand, or systems of justice on the other.”<sup>125</sup> Maroon cultures did practice various aspects of traditional African culture; everything from military techniques to warding off magic.<sup>126</sup> Scholars who have written on the subject on Maroons believe the cultural continuities of these communities are rooted in

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<sup>123</sup> Mellafe, *Negro Slavery in Latin America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 34.

<sup>124</sup> Rout, *The African Experience* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2003), 111.

<sup>125</sup> Price, *Maroon Societies* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1973), 28.

<sup>126</sup> Price, *Maroon Societies* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1973), 29.

maintaining African ways of life. “The cultural uniqueness of the more developed maroon societies rests firmly...on their fidelity to ‘African’ principles on these deeper levels, to underlying cultural principles whether aesthetic, political, or domestic rather than on the frequency of their isolated ‘retentions’ .”<sup>127</sup>

Due to the decrease in the localized trade of Africans within Venezuela and the lack of vacant land, maroon activities waned by the late 17<sup>th</sup>, and beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century C.E.<sup>128</sup> Some cumbes or palenques survived until the 19<sup>th</sup> century C.E. but the 1700s saw the majority of them come to an end. Once the institution of enslavement ceased to exist, cumbes gradually became subsistence agricultural communities.<sup>129</sup> Many of these communities still exist today and are a means of economic gain for Africans in Venezuela. Many of the descendants of enslaved Africans stayed on these lands instead of moving to major cities, such as Caracas, the capital.

The year 1830 C.E. marked the ending of the Venezuelan War of Independence, which culminated in Venezuela’s separation from Colombia. Leading up to Venezuela’s independence, this period again called for a shift in the status of enslaved Africans in Venezuela. By 1810 C.E. the Supreme Council had enacted a decree that prohibited international slave trafficking. In 1821 C.E. the Law of Freedom of the Wombs, or Law of Manumission, was enacted. “The heart of the law was the provision for free birth of all slave children.”<sup>130</sup> Although these laws reduced the generational curse of enslavement to an extent, these laws also continued the institution for generations born prior to the law’s passing. “First, if born after 1830, the freeborn children of slaves would have to serve their mother’s master until the age of twenty-one. The second change provided a government subvention of the

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<sup>127</sup> Price, *Maroon Societies* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1973), 30.

<sup>128</sup> Klein, *African Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 203.

<sup>129</sup> Wright, *Café Con Leche* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 15.

<sup>130</sup> Lombardi, *The Decline and Abolition of Negro Slavery* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing Corporation, 1971), 48.

manumission program to assure the annual freedom of at least twenty slaves. This humanitarian proposal could not hurt the slave holders very much, since the minimal twenty slaves could easily be made up out of the oldest and least useful.”<sup>131</sup> At the passage of the laws stated above, “likewise, owners of haciendas were obliged to educate, dress and feed the slaves. A fund was created for the progressive liberation of slaves via boards of manumission.”<sup>132</sup> Another similarity between Venezuela during the early 1800s and the United States during the late 1800s was the creation of boards and organizations that were deemed “helpers” of previously enslaved Africans in order to ease them into the free society. I am sure that some if not many of these boards had the same intentions as many of those within the United States, which was not always to help propel Africans forward in society, but further isolate them from Europeans. Some organizations sought to help Africans from a patronizing perspective since some believed that Europeans had the answers and solutions for African people.

The abolition of enslavement in Venezuela was ratified on March 24, 1854 C.E. At the time of the abolition there were an estimated 11,285 free Africans and 12,093 enslaved Africans.<sup>133</sup> The abolishment of enslavement was not a response to a change in ethics, but rather a response to the economic downturn of the institution of enslavement around the world. Unlike the United States Constitution, the first national constitution of the Venezuelan Republic, enacted on September 22, 1830 C.E., asserted that the nation was assembled by Venezuelans either by birth or citizenship, under a political union.<sup>134</sup> This notion of all being Venezuelans whether by birth or naturalization, is why race is such a complex issue in Venezuela today. Children are taught, “We are all Venezuelans,” regardless of our Spanish, African, or Indigenous

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<sup>131</sup> Lombardi, *The Decline and Abolition of Negro Slavery* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing Corporation, 1971), 51.

<sup>132</sup> Rights Group, *No Longer Invisible* (United Kingdom: Minority Rights Publications, 1995), 251.

<sup>133</sup> Rout, *The African Experience* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2003), 251.

<sup>134</sup> Rights Group, *No Longer Invisible* (United Kingdom: Minority Rights Publications, 1995), 251.

origin, or any mixture of the three backgrounds. In creating a complex racial situation in Venezuela, and Latin America in general, the Spaniards created a curtain that veiled the oppressed (Africans and Indigenous persons) from seeing the reality of their history in order to prevent protest and opposition. These notions will further be discussed in the following chapter.

According to Klein at least a full generation after abolition or approximately up to the 1930s, previously enslaved Africans and previous sellers/buyers of Africans disputed over access and power over resources. Thus the transition to a society that allowed both groups to function on common ground took almost as long as the process of emancipation. As within the United States, many African descendants in Latin America were forced to continue to work on the lands of those who previously enslaved them. However, in some cases, Africans were able to secure their own land and produce their own crops, which in many instances, “they demanded immediate withdrawal of their wives and daughters from field labor, and end to gang-labor arrangements, payment in money wages for all labor, and access to usufruct land for their own cultivations.”<sup>135</sup> The previous enslavers chose whether or not to acknowledge these requests or employ indentured immigrants or discharged soldiers, which some indeed chose to do.<sup>136</sup>

In many countries throughout Latin America, Africans remained the main labor sources after abolition in such places as Mexico, Peru, Brazil, and Venezuela.<sup>137</sup> In these countries where Africans remained the basic workforce, there was often a better cohesion and awareness of African heritage, which thus allowed at least some parts of African heritage to continue to exist in many of these countries. However, in

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<sup>135</sup> Klein, *African Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 258-259.

<sup>136</sup> Lombardi, “The Abolition of Slavery in Venezuela: A Nonevent,” ed. Robert Brent Toplin, *Slavery and Race Relations in Latin America* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1974), 237.

<sup>137</sup> Lombardi, “The Abolition of Slavery in Venezuela: A Nonevent,” ed. Robert Brent Toplin, *Slavery and Race Relations in Latin America* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1974), 240.

the other countries, Africans were threatened in the job market by European immigrants such as the Italians, so they were eventually absorbed into the lower urban class of society and have in many instances stayed within that economic bracket. This was the case in countries such as Argentina and Uruguay.<sup>138</sup>

Venezuela's fate was a combination of the former and the latter of that described in the previous paragraph. According to Klein in *African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean*, by the second or third generation after abolition, high rates of mobility had been achieved, particularly in countries where cultural awareness existed. He also asserts that in some societies the struggle for acceptance has been more bitter than in others. He closes by stating, "Whatever the variations, however, in most of Latin America by the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century C.E. the Afro-American presence had become an accustomed and accepted part of the culture and national self-identity of most of the ex-slave societies."<sup>139</sup> If this is in fact true, then the question is how is culture and self-identity of African peoples in these countries perceived? What notions of African culture are accepted as facts? How accepted are Africans descendants in these countries? And how truly accustomed to African culture are non-Africans in Latin America? These questions will be answered in the following chapter on race and race relations in Latin America, and Venezuela specifically.

The history of enslavement in Latin America and Venezuela in particular had commonalities and differences with that of the United States. Spain's relationship with and eventual partnership with Portugal led to their contact with Africans. These Africans were mainly brought from West and Central Africa, from such places as Angola and the Congo. Spanish America also saw an influx of enslaved Africans from

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<sup>138</sup> Marshall C. Eakin, *The History of Latin America: Collision of Cultures* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 230.

<sup>139</sup> Klein, *African Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 271.

the Caribbean. This mainly took place during the early 1700s. About fifty years later the trade began to be domesticated. It became too expensive to purchase Africans and thus an internal trade existed throughout Latin America, and Venezuela.

Regardless of how Africans were transported to Spanish America, they continuously resisted Spanish and local rule up until abolition and different forms of resistance have continued up until present-day. There were rebellions throughout Latin America including Mexico, Panama, and Colombia, with some of the first in Venezuela. These rebellions and various types of resistance took place despite the laws that the Spanish crown had enacted. These laws included the Free Womb Act that granted the children of enslaved women freedom from birth, which in turn had various conditions that prevented the law from truly “freeing” any large numbers of enslaved Africans. For many Africans the only answer was maroonage of diverse kinds. Petite and grand maroonage existed throughout Latin America and often these Africans would form coalitions and/or intermix with Indigenous persons.

The War of Independence for Venezuela that ended in 1830 C.E. was fought by many Africans and in turn they were not “given” freedom. The pressure from the rest of the European world, especially by the British, caused Spain to finally relinquish the strong hold it had on the trade. Then in turn the individual governments in the various countries abolished the institution at their own pace. Venezuela did not legally abolish enslavement until 1854 C.E.; 24 years after the Venezuelan War of Independence was fought for the autonomy of Venezuela. Even then Africans did not fair well.

Post-abolition was met by aggression and discrimination from the elites in Venezuela. Skin color and ancestry determined ones economic and social status. Although Africans were able to serve in the military as they had informally done during the war, they were not able to hold political office. Even though the history of



Africans in Latin America reflects the notion that Africans fared well compared to those in the United States with continual overt racism and discrimination, is it fair to compare? In some countries where Africans were so well-integrated within either Spanish-ruled or Indigenous societies that they then in turn became no longer Africans, you can say they were better off to a certain degree. This is in comparison to those who did not intermix to the extent that they were no longer recognized as Africans. For many of those who remained predominantly African, they were however, able to maintain communities that continued African cultures and heritages, often to a greater extent than those who were absorbed into the other ethnicities. Some African descendants today would feel that someone within the latter category was better off because they were able to maintain a cultural memory that has been passed down from generation to generation, unlike many of those in the United States who have nothing to hold onto because that memory has long been lost.

African enslavement created a very complex situation in Latin America including Venezuela. This institution was as brutal and inhumane in this region as it was throughout other parts of the world. Africans to some extent in Latin America and Venezuela were able to either escape from enslavement or acquire land and property for themselves. In order to better understand the issues raised above and how race relations helped shaped the current status of African descendants in Venezuela, I will discuss in the following chapter the history of race and race relations in Latin America and specifically in Venezuela. Even though the phrase to describe the race that is now considered “Venezuelan” is “Café con leche,” or coffee with milk, it has been said that to this day Venezuelans prefer more milk than coffee.

### CHAPTER 3: RACE RELATIONS IN LATIN AMERICA

The purpose of this chapter is to define and describe the history and present status of race and race relations in Latin America. In doing so, I will also examine the similarities and differences between race and ethnicity. By defining race, one will be able to see how race relations have been constructed in Latin American society. In describing race relations in Latin America, I intend to portray and examine the type of social environment that African descendants have experienced since enslavement. Also in discussing race relations in Latin America, I will be setting the background for the emergence of the organization La Red de Afrovenezolanas and key issues it continues to face.

Whether in the 15<sup>th</sup> or 16<sup>th</sup> centuries C.E., Sociologists Peter Wade and Stephen Cornell both agree that the word race first appeared in the European language. This was mainly because of the expansion of European travels and conquests during this time that caused them to encounter other people who were physically and culturally different from them.<sup>140</sup> Until roughly 1800, race was commonly defined as lineage or a group of descendants that shared ancestry, giving them various levels of collective qualities of identity.<sup>141</sup> Biologically, “in technical terms, a race can be thought of as genetically distinct sub-population of a given species.”<sup>142</sup> Not only did Europeans think about race in terms of biology, but in modern times, “for North Americans, moreover, race is biological and biology is destiny. In Latin America and the Caribbean, on the other hand, where the issue is physical appearance, racial mixing is prevalent, and ‘passing’ is common, the laws of genetics mean children may appear

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<sup>140</sup> Stephen Cornell and Douglas Hartmann, *Ethnicity and Race: Making Identities in a Changing World* (Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press, 1998), 35-36.

<sup>141</sup> Peter Wade, *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America* (Chicago: Pluto Press, 1997), 6.

<sup>142</sup> Cornell and Hartmann, *Ethnicity and Race* (Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press, 1998), 21.

to be a different ‘race’ from their parents. This does not mean that there is no racial prejudice in Latin America and the Caribbean, but rather that it takes different forms.”<sup>143</sup> Thus, one can say that race is social. Socially, Cornell says “we can define a race, then, as a human group defined by itself or others as distinct by virtue of perceived common physical characteristics that are held to be inherent. A race is a group of human beings socially defined on the basis of physical characteristics.”<sup>144</sup>

Race is a flexible concept. Some believe that race is a social construct and thus only racialized groups exist. This line of thinking also implies that there is only one human race. Thinking of race as a social construct can often cause one to associate societal disparities with one’s social status instead of one’s “race” or color of skin. Since discrimination in Latin America is considered to be solely based on class, this eliminates historical incidents of racism that have not completely been resolved, which were based on “race” not one’s social status. This elimination of historical incidents does not force society to take responsibility for enslavement or racial discrimination post colonialism, but rather promotes the notion of forgive and forget. Since racism has changed over time and taken on various forms, this creates room for one to find new ways of denying that racism and discrimination actually exist. Many in Latin America, in viewing race as a social construction, pretend to ignore the physical factors that differentiate people and claim to focus on solely one’s economic or educational status. Even if one attempts to ignore physical attributes that does not mean that racialized groups are socialized equally. Disparities exist between racialized groups because they have been socially stratified. An imbalance exists between groups based on the fact that they are socially different. Therefore, race as a social construct does not equal non-discrimination or the lack of racism. As I will further explain in

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<sup>143</sup> Peter Winn, *The Changing Face of Latin America and the Caribbean* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 292.

<sup>144</sup> Cornell and Hartmann, *Ethnicity and Race* (Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press, 1998), 24.

detail throughout this chapter, the main reason why racialized groups are socially stratified in Latin America is based on the historical relationship between African descendants and European descendants in Latin America. Race can be defined through various constructs, but continues to be the means by which people are separated.

As noted in *Neither Friends Nor Enemies: Latinos, Blacks, Afro-Latinos*, by Ariel Dulitzky, the idea that racism does not exist in Latin America can be categorized by three types of denial. The denial of racism or racial discrimination in Latin America can be said to be based on literal denial, interpretive denial, and justificatory denial. Literal denial implies that nothing has happened, meaning racism has never occurred. Interpretive denial reflects the notion that what is happening in society with regard to race is actually something other than racism or discrimination. Justificatory denial looks to make the claim that racial happenings are justified.<sup>145</sup> The consensus by mainly European descended persons throughout Latin America is that neither racism nor racial discrimination is a part of society.<sup>146</sup>

Literal denial is the mentality of many in Latin America; they believe that racism or racial discrimination has not existed in the past or present.<sup>147</sup> This literal denial is linked to the notion that Latin America is a region that practices racial democracy without acknowledging the concept of multiple racialized groups. “The most syllogistic form of literal denial is the widespread myth that the region boasts a racial democracy because the concept of race has been officially rejected by government institutions. This type of denial has many variations but essentially amounts to saying that if races do not officially exist, then racism cannot exist

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<sup>145</sup> Ariel E. Dulitzky, “A Region in Denial: Racial Discrimination and Racism in Latin America,” in *Neither Enemies Nor Friends: Latinos, Blacks, Afro-Latinos* Edited by Anani Dzidzienyo and Suzanne Oboler (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 40.

<sup>146</sup> Dulitzky, “A Region,” *Neither Enemies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 42.

<sup>147</sup> Dulitzky, “A Region,” *Neither Enemies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 42.

either.”<sup>148</sup> Literal denial allows no one to take the blame for the real challenges that African descendants in Latin America face. In other words, this form of denial encourages cover up and reluctance to address issues of racial discrimination.

This literal denial and pride in “racial democracy” is very apparent in Venezuelan consciousness. Winthrop Wright, a historian and author of *Café Con Leche: Race, Class, and National Image in Venezuela*, discusses not only the historical view of race in Venezuela but the present view as well. Even though he does not use the term denial, he does admit that white Venezuelans have never seen themselves as racists. Wright states, that “in this regard, it should be kept in mind throughout the present century Venezuelans defined racism in terms of the virulent, hate-filled type of discrimination and segregation found in the United States; they have not considered the subtle forms of discrimination they practice as racism. Rather, they think of racism as an open conflict between distinct racial groups, a type of behavior that they believe they have avoided over a long period of time.”<sup>149</sup> This statement raises three important issues with regard to race and denial. This quote first points to the fact that white Venezuelans define racism differently than persons outside of Latin America typically do. They view racism as being extreme; specifically hate-filled, which could be interpreted to mean that unless an act or attitude reflects some form of extreme detestation then it cannot be defined as racism. The second significant point that this quote conveys is that white Venezuelans also believe that racism involves an open conflict between two distinct racial groups. The issue of open or closed conflict could mean that unless the conflict is public that it also is not a legitimate racial divergence. Thirdly, the issue of racial conflict existing between two distinct racial groups brings into play the fact that white Venezuelans believe that Venezuelan society is comprised

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<sup>148</sup> Dulitzky, “A Region,” *Neither Enemies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 43.

<sup>149</sup> Wright, *Café Con Leche* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 126.

of only one race, which means that two distinct racial groups do not exist in their eyes. Thus white Venezuelans believe that if two distinct racial groups do not exist then racism does not exist.

The second type of denial that is often exhibited in Latin America is interpretive. In interpreting the scope of race in Latin America, it is important to note that the rise of activism by both African descendants and Indigenous people has become more visible over the last twenty years. These groups persistently push for the eradication of racism. In Venezuela, the creation of La Red de Afrovenezolanas by Afro-Venezuelans came about in order to bring their issues to the forefront. Interpretive denial does not look at the literal but “instead of denying that economic and social indicators show a wide gap between races, they commonly give reasons other than racism to account for the disparities among Blacks, indigenous peoples, and whites. These disparities, attitudes, and prejudices are framed in far less pejorative or stigmatizing theoretical terms than racism or racial discrimination.”<sup>150</sup> The frames that interpretive denial can be confined within are euphemisms, legalisms, responsibility, or isolated incidents. The notion of poverty as the attributing factor to differences among racialized groups is a euphemism that is widely believed. This notion of poverty has been explained in the sense that class is often perceived as a racial identity in Latin America, where one’s wealth can whiten their skin. Along with the fact that unlike the United States where any degree of African ancestry (one drop of Black blood) makes a person Black, in Latin America one drop of non-Black blood means that a person is not Black and can easily claim to be not Black.<sup>151</sup> This allows persons in Latin America to become socially white and then politically white as

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<sup>150</sup> Dulitzky, “A Region,” *Neither Enemies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 43.

<sup>151</sup> Winn, *Changing Face* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 291-292.

well.<sup>152</sup> “In Puerto Rico, as in other Latin American countries, classism is more evident than racism and a person is not considered Black for having dark skin. Moreover, being Black in Puerto Rico does not necessarily make an individual a subject of discrimination, unless you are Black and poor. If you are educated and/or wealthy nobody will consider you Black, regardless of your skin color or your African features.”<sup>153</sup> “The syllogism goes something like this: People discriminate against Blacks or indigenous people not because they are black or indigenous, but because they are poor.”<sup>154</sup> Yet as noted by Florestan Fernandez, “by their heavy concentration at the bottom of the socioeconomic scale, blacks became the double victims of both class and race prejudice.”<sup>155</sup> Consequently, one could say that Blacks and Indigenous people are poor because they are Black or Indigenous; thus their race, caused them to be discriminated against and their class or economic status becomes a default status as a reaction to racism.

Legal arguments are often used by Latin American governments and institutions to deny the existence of racism. “One form of legalistic argument is to maintain that racial discrimination is nonexistent in Latin America because the laws in the countries of the region do not establish rules of segregation or apartheid as is the case in certain other parts of the world... The implication of this statement is that discrimination can only exist when it is established by law, and not when sectors of the population are discriminated against by deed or when laws are applied or enforced in a discriminatory way.”<sup>156</sup> Contrary to the idea that because no laws have been

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<sup>152</sup> Ginetta E.B. Candelario, *Black behind the Ears: Dominican Racial Identity from Museums to Beauty Shops* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 43.

<sup>153</sup> Elda Noelia Saucedo, “Profiles of Black Latinos in Academe: The Identity Dilemma and the Perception of Self,” Dissertation, Arizona State University, 2002; Ann Arbor, Michigan: Microform Publications of ProQuest Information and Learning, University of Michigan, 2003, 108-109.

<sup>154</sup> Dulitzky, “A Region,” *Neither Enemies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 43.

<sup>155</sup> Florestan Fernandes, “Beyond Poverty: The Negro and the Mulatto in Brazil,” in *Slavery and Race Relations in Latin America* Edited by Robert Brent Toplin (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1974), 278.

<sup>156</sup> Dulitzky, “A Region,” *Neither Enemies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 45.

written or enacted to enforce racism or racial discrimination then Latin American societies are not racist, one can make the argument that a society such as the United States that eventually made laws against racism and racial discrimination is often indeed seen as still racist. So does this mean one society is racist and one is not or that both societies are in fact racist? Scholars have concluded that racial discrimination is not less real because it is not legal.<sup>157</sup> Laws do not necessarily exhibit the mentality of the common people of a society. More often than not, the government's views do not match that of the citizens. Thus the lack of laws does not prove anything.

Puerto Rico presents an interesting example of the legal argument discussed above. Puerto Rico, like the majority of Latin American countries, has claimed that racism does not in fact exist, yet there is evidence of laws that have been created to combat racism. "When Puerto Ricans drew up their own constitution in 1952, an extensive Bill of Rights was included that effectively spelled out the illegality of racial discrimination."<sup>158</sup> According to this evidence, as recently as 1952, the Puerto Rican government saw a need to incorporate a clause in the Bill of Rights that shows that racial discrimination does exist in Puerto Rico, and also that it is illegal to practice. This contradicts the typical mentality of the common person in Puerto Rico and much of Latin America that fiercely denies that racism or racial discrimination has a real presence. Even though this is an explicit and significant example contradicting the legal denial argument that is so prominent in Latin America, these laws have little to no effect on the mentality of the society.<sup>159</sup>

Cuba presents the same situation as Puerto Rico. Cuba, along with Puerto Rico and the majority of Latin American countries will admit slavery existed, but claim that

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<sup>157</sup> Winn, *Changing Face* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 313.

<sup>158</sup> Thomas G. Mathews, "The Question of Color in Puerto Rico," in *Slavery and Race Relations in Latin America* Edited by Robert Brent Toplin (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1974), 309.

<sup>159</sup> Mathews, "The Question of Color in Puerto Rico," in *Slavery and Race Relations in Latin America* Edited by Robert Brent Toplin (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1974), 309.



after its abolition that Blacks were then integrated into society. They associate this integration with racial democracy and claim that Blacks are either so included and incorporated into society that they do not encounter racism or racial discrimination because they are the same as everyone else. In addition to this there is the belief that no laws need to be created because there is no racialized group to protect since everyone is one and the same. However, in various countries including Cuba “The legal system of the Republic banned all institutional forms of racial discrimination at the beginning of the twentieth century.”<sup>160</sup> Since the government enacted laws against discrimination that indeed proves that discrimination existed enough for them to have to outlaw it, and after a history of racism it is very unlikely to completely eradicate it from society. Thus one could assume that it is very possible, if not certain, that racism continues to exist in Cuba and Latin America in general today.

Venezuela, which is most relevant to this thesis, has had even more recent legislation passed in order to eliminate racial acts against Blacks. “On May 24, 1945, three prominent hotels in Caracas refused accommodations to the eminent North American singer, Robert Todd Duncan, his wife Gladys, and his accompanist William Allen because of their race. Despite reservations made previously by his agent...the manager of the Hotel Majestic informed Duncan that he did not have rooms available for the artist’s party. Managers of the Carlton and the Avila Hotels also turned down Duncan’s request for rooms. Yet, according to a witness, all three managers gave the impression that they had space until they actually saw the Duncans and Allen.”<sup>161</sup> As a result of this racist incident, Venezuelans acted quickly to resolve it because they did not want this incident to reflect how they feel about race relations. They were

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<sup>160</sup> Marianne Masferrer & Carmelo Lago-Mesa, “The Gradual Integration of the Black in Cuba: Under the Colony, the Republic, and the Revolution” in *Slavery and Race Relations in Latin America* Edited by Robert Brent Toplin (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1974), 351.

<sup>161</sup> Wright, *Café Con Leche* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 97.

especially conscious of how the world would view them because around this same time Brazil had to face the exact issue with the famous dancer, Katherine Dunham and received negative reviews. Thus, “within a week of the incident they passed legislation that prohibited all public services from practicing racial discrimination in any form.”<sup>162</sup> Again, if no racial discrimination had taken place, the Venezuelan government would not have felt the need to enact a law prohibiting racial discrimination. This event took place a little over sixty years ago, but still shows signs of lingering racism in the twenty-first century.

Sometimes Latin American governments will acknowledge that acts of racial prejudice take place, but will deny any responsibility attached to the incident.<sup>163</sup> “The argument is that even though some acts of racism and racial discrimination have occurred, such acts are events that cannot be attributed to the government, are out of its control, and are the product of deeply rooted social practices or private actors.”<sup>164</sup> Often the view in Latin America is that racism is from external influences such as from recent immigrants from non-Latin American countries or from external mass media.<sup>165</sup> It is typical in Venezuela to portray racism as an outside event brought to a respective country by others versus acknowledging that racism existed prior to immigrants’ migration. If racial incidents are a product of “deeply rooted social practices and private actors,” does that not mean that the society as a whole is indeed affected by this mentality? Whether or not the government indeed initiated this mentality therefore becomes irrelevant, for the focus should be that members of the society indeed have negative racial attitudes and if the government does not act upon this then it also should be considered racially discriminatory. Deeply rooted social

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<sup>162</sup> Wright, *Café Con Leche* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 98.

<sup>163</sup> Dulitzky, “A Region,” *Neither Enemies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 46.

<sup>164</sup> Dulitzky, “A Region,” *Neither Enemies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 46.

<sup>165</sup> Fernandes, “Beyond Poverty,” in *Slavery and Race Relations in Latin America* Edited by Robert Brent Toplin (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1974), 292.

practices by private or public actors indeed perpetuate racism and racial discrimination throughout a society.

In a biography, a Puerto Rican woman stated that, “However, I can’t say that there is no racial prejudice in Puerto Rico; it exists in a more subtle way. For example, my mother would always tell me to get out of the sun, because I would get more Black or darker. She would also comb my hair in long curls to show everyone that I had ‘good hair,’ which would eliminate the possibility of being perceived as Black. Consequently, I grew up thinking that White was good and Black was bad and I wanted to be White like my sister, Toribia.”<sup>166</sup> Even though this incident is specific to Puerto Rico, this notion of blackness being something negative and something that one does not want to be associated with, is common throughout Latin America. These childhood connotations are most likely similar to many Latino children; thus we could say that they grow up with the same mentality, perpetuating racial prejudice to their children and generations to come. Since these same persons live and exist within a society, they are likely to spread their views to others, in turn creating a society with large portions of the population having the same mentality. Therefore a government is responsible for not working to prevent this mentality from continuing to perpetuate and affect persons who are being ostracized by the society.

Another common response by governments is to claim that an act of racial prejudice is simply an isolated incident. Some specific governmental responses are that ‘such acts arise in an isolated way and are the result of the motivation of individuals or very small groups,’ or ‘What occurred was an ‘isolated incident;’ such events never occurred in the past, and since they have not happened again, it is unfair to brand our government as racist on the basis of this single event.’<sup>167</sup> Are not most

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<sup>166</sup> Saucedo, “Profiles of Black Latinos,” Arizona State University, 2002; Ann Arbor, Michigan: Microform Publications of ProQuest Information and Learning, University of Michigan, 2003, 109-110.

<sup>167</sup> Dulitzky, “A Region,” *Neither Enemies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 47.

acts of racism multiple isolated incidents rather than one large one? It might be safe to assume that the first incident of racial hatred or discrimination prompted someone to do the same to someone else and thus perpetuated a mentality that spreads throughout communities and thus society.

Justificatory denial, the third common denial, is either an attempt to justify the belief that racism does not exist or to show that the acts of racism that do exist are justifiable.<sup>168</sup> One common example in Latin America of justifying the belief that racism does not exist is with the use of the word “negrito,” or “negrita,” which means either little Black girl or boy. This term is very interesting because it is very commonly used in Latino communities as a so-called term of endearment that refers to persons of African descent, although it is sometimes used to refer to non-Blacks. However, my interpretation of the term is that it is indeed racist. This is for the simple fact that there is no other term in Spanish used to denote ones race as a supposed term of endearment. In three biographies by Black Latina women, the term “negrita,” was used to refer to them and their dark skin. One of the women who is of African American and Mexican descent stated that she disliked the term and felt a connotation with it. “The family in Mexico would refer to her as ‘la negrita’ which means the little Black girl. Consequently, Alexis felt discrimination within her own Latino family. Although she states that being perceived as Black does not bother her, she has always felt the sting of being discriminated especially by her own family.”<sup>169</sup> Another woman within these biographies who is of Panamanian and Puerto Rican descent stated, “She is the darkest in the family and her mother calls her ‘mi negrita’.”<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Dulitzky, “A Region,” *Neither Enemies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 47.

<sup>169</sup> Saucedo, “Profiles of Black Latinos,” Arizona State University, 2002; Ann Arbor, Michigan: Microform Publications of ProQuest Information and Learning, University of Michigan, 2003, 75-76.

<sup>170</sup> Saucedo, “Profiles of Black Latinos,” Arizona State University, 2002; Ann Arbor, Michigan: Microform Publications of ProQuest Information and Learning, University of Michigan, 2003, 82.

The third woman, that is Puerto Rican, said however, “My mother called me ‘mi negrita’ ... it was meant as a term of endearment, rather than a put down. In fact, I would hear a man calling his wife negrita or the wife calling her husband ‘negrito’ even when neither one of them were Black. Therefore, the word negrito or negrita is not an offensive term in Puerto Rico or in Panama. However, if someone calls you ‘negro sucio’ or ‘negra sucia,’ which means dirty Black, that is considered offensive.”<sup>171</sup> It is not a coincidence that these three women are dark-skinned and called “negrita.” Even though the last women justified the use of the term, it is still hard to believe this justification since there are no such terms in Spanish to describe any other race such as little white or little brown. Often, someone will compare “negrita” or “negrito” to the term “rubia” or “rubio” used to describe someone with blond hair, kind of like what is termed as ditzy or dumb blond in the U.S. You could say that referring to blond hair could technically be referring to a white person since most non-whites do not naturally have blond hair, but regardless the term is referring to someone’s hair not someone’s skin color or ancestry. Focusing on ones race as a means to identify someone does not qualify as a term of endearment in my opinion.

Another way to show that acts of racism that exist are indeed justifiable is to blame the victim or to make the victim invisible. An example of making the victim invisible can be seen in Argentina. “Witness the popular Argentine saying: ‘We Argentines are not racist because we don’t have any Blacks.’ The collective conscience in that country of the Southern Cone however refuses to ask key questions such as why today there is no Black population in Argentina, whereas in 1850, 30 percent of the population of Buenos Aires was Black.”<sup>172</sup> Following the whitening process that all Latin American countries went through, governments have officially

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<sup>171</sup> Saucedo, “Profiles of Black Latinos,” Arizona State University, 2002; Ann Arbor, Michigan: Microform Publications of ProQuest Information and Learning, University of Michigan, 2003, 109.

<sup>172</sup> Dulitzky, “A Region,” *Neither Enemies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 47.

rejected the idea of racial identification by claiming that the entire population is mixed (mestizaje) instead. This has allowed the government to make Blacks invisible without physically causing them any harm. If these non-Black officials do not physically or legally assault Blacks they cannot be accused of what they consider racism. Thus, these culprits are not charged with racism and do not face any consequences.

Dissimilar to Dulitzky's analysis of racial denial, Florestan Fernandes breaks down racism into only two levels of reality, those being overt and covert. He states that rather "what we have in this regard is two different levels of reality perception and behavior connected with 'color' and 'race': (1) overt perception and behavior in which racial equality and racial democracy are presumed and proclaimed, but also (2) covert perception and behavior in which a complex combination of factors, in part a product of the Brazilian past, move through, below, and beyond the social stratifications to negate the validity of racial democracy."<sup>173</sup> Although Fernandez's research focus is on Brazil exclusively, his scrutiny of racism also holds true for Venezuela and Latin America in general.

In line with Fernandes' argument, Peter Winn makes the case that the covert racism that is highly visible in Latin America can be seen as worse than the overt type of racism that exists in the United States. Winn states that, "the lack of overt discrimination, moreover, makes racism in Brazil more difficult to combat. In the United States...blacks knew 'what they had to fight against, because their limitations were defined and clear-cut. But in Brazil, because these things are ambiguous, racism has a more solid base.' Although the ambiguities of race relations had enabled Brazil to avoid the bitter racial conflict that has plagued the United States, for many people... 'this is the worst kind of racism.'"<sup>174</sup> Regardless of overt or covert levels of racism,

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<sup>173</sup> Fernandes, "Beyond Poverty," in *Slavery and Race Relations in Latin America* Edited by Robert Brent Toplin (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1974), 278.

<sup>174</sup> Winn, *Changing Face* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 313.

Fernandes asserts that white supremacy exists. “White supremacy is a present-day reality in almost the same way as it was in the past. The organization of society impels the Negro and mulatto to poverty, unemployment or underemployment, and to the ‘Negro’s job’.”<sup>175</sup> Winn agrees that racism exists in the Americas aside from North America, although it commonly takes on atypical forms.<sup>176</sup> One could say that racism within institutions, which is present in various Latin American societies, would not be considered atypical as Winn suggests. However, the fact that evidence of institutional racism that can only be identified as such and not as an individual incident is hard to prove. Thus many scholars believe that instead of characterizing the type of racism that exists in Latin America the same way scholars have about the United States, a distinction has to be made because of the avenues through which it is visible.

Aside from the denials that both Dulitzky and Fernandes suggest, there is also a sense of denial that comes from Blacks themselves. In Puerto Rico, scholars have found that Black or Afro- Puerto Ricans are also quick to deny that racial discrimination subsists.<sup>177</sup> Because of this denial, Puerto Rico presents a society where this is a significant Black population, but that population shows modest interest in social change for their communities.<sup>178</sup> Cuba presents a similar situation with Afro-Cubans. In Cuba some Afro-Cubans are persuaded by white propaganda that attempts to prove that since the Revolution many opportunities have been opened to Blacks that they did not have before. Thus some Afro-Cubans accept this propaganda and integrate into white society.<sup>179</sup> What the white majority fails to acknowledge is that the

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<sup>175</sup> Fernandes, “Beyond Poverty,” in *Slavery and Race Relations in Latin America* Edited by Robert Brent Toplin (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1974), 287.

<sup>176</sup> Winn, *Changing Face* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 322.

<sup>177</sup> Mathews, “The Question of Color,” in *Slavery and Race Relations in Latin America* Edited by Robert Brent Toplin (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1974), 313.

<sup>178</sup> Mathews, “The Question,” in *Slavery and Race Relations in Latin America* Edited by Robert Brent Toplin (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1974), 314.

<sup>179</sup> Masferrer & Lago-Mesa, “The Gradual Integration of the Black in Cuba,” in *Slavery and Race Relations in Latin America* Edited by Robert Brent Toplin (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1974), 380.

Revolution brought change to the lives of the lower-classes in general, not Blacks specifically.<sup>180</sup> Therefore Blacks are simply indirect recipients of the advantages brought by the Revolution.

Blacks have also shown signs of denial in Venezuela. Elitist Blacks or wealthy Blacks have taken on the mentality of whites and thus deny racism. “Successful blacks accepted the same attitude, adopted the norms of the white society to which they had been admitted, and broke with their black past. Furthermore, those few successful blacks lost their ties with the less fortunate blacks. They made no attempts to call attention to their race. Nor did they lead efforts to establish black political or cultural movements. Rather, they accepted the doctrine of nondiscrimination as the gospel for social behavior and sought to identify themselves with the culture of their white compatriots. For them and their white counterparts, clothes, education, language, social position, and the accumulation of wealth combined to make an individual whiter in the social context.”<sup>181</sup> Therefore Blacks in Latin America, as well as other parts of the African Diaspora, are in some cases assimilating into the society, thus convincing themselves that racism has not survived. This can prove detrimental to the movement of those Blacks who chose to distinguish themselves from the rest of society and demand that racism be recognized and dealt with.

Although some Blacks throughout Latin America have chosen to concur with whites that racism and/or racial discrimination does not exist, there are other Blacks who refuse to believe this. In Venezuela specifically, some African descendants are continuing to hold whites accountable and demand justice. These Blacks are also looking within their own communities to strengthen positive notions of their distinct

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<sup>180</sup> Masferrer & Lago-Mesa, “The Gradual Integration of the Black in Cuba,” in *Slavery and Race Relations in Latin America* Edited by Robert Brent Toplin (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1974), 381.

<sup>181</sup> Wright, *Café Con Leche* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 5-6.



culture. La Red de Afrovenezolanas, which will be discussed in detail in the following chapter, is one of the leading organizations in Venezuela to help promote Afro-Venezuelan unity. In order to combat Eurocentric acts and attitudes, La Red is calling for Blacks to take a stand. The founder of La Red, Jesus Garcia, states: “This is why many Afro-Venezuelans have in recent years been implementing a process of self-reconceptualization, of stripping ourselves of concepts that Eurocentric social scientists have imposed on us and our realities, fraudulent foreign concepts that, lamentably, still continue to plague us, and that we must identify and deconstruct when we sit down to write about our communities.”<sup>182</sup> Garcia confirms that Black communities have created spaces that allow for new types of resistance, some of which must be mental. “In contemporary reality there are new palenques and quilombos, translated as militant practice that allows us to reappropriate our own self-perceptions. This new practice in the case of Venezuela includes festivals such as ‘Multicultural Day,’ initially created for Afroamérica 92, and now celebrated every year in the heart of Barlovento.”<sup>183</sup>

The example stated above by the founder of La Red de Afrovenezolanas in Venezuela, is one of the many examples of current, active resistance that is being made by African descendants in Latin America. African descendants are organizing and forming alliances in order to combat the denials of racism discussed throughout this chapter, from whites and Blacks alike. Being Black does not exempt one from the problem of racism, since as mentioned, some Blacks are often perpetuating the notion that racism does not exist and therefore does not affect Black people throughout Latin America. Thus sometimes Blacks can be more of a detriment to themselves and their

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<sup>182</sup> Garcia, “Demystifying Africa’s Absence,” ed. Sheila Walker, *African Roots/American Cultures: Africa in the Creation of the Americas* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2001), 287.

<sup>183</sup> Garcia, “Demystifying Africa’s Absence,” ed. Sheila Walker, *African Roots/American Cultures: Africa in the Creation of the Americas* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2001), 288.

community than a white perpetrator. The activism of present-day Blacks throughout Latin America insures that race relations are being debated and combated.

As presented, racism and/or racial discrimination is greatly denied by the majority and sometimes the minorities. These denials include literal, interpretive, and justificatory. Literal denial is equivalent to complete denial. This level of denial is when there is no acknowledgement of racism occurring or existing at all. Interpretive denial assumes that what occurs within society with regard to racial disparities is not racism or racial discrimination, but in fact something else altogether. A common diversion from racism within interpretive denial is classism, which is the most widespread and frequently used argument throughout Latin America and within literature about Latin America. Lastly, justificatory denial is the belief that racism and/or racial discrimination is literally justified. Justificatory denial can also be exhibited when there is an attempt made to justify the notion that racism does not exist. All of these denials are prevalent throughout Latin American societies. Denial adds to the existing problem of racism. If one is willing to acknowledge that racism does exist than it would be much easier to combat or defeat. The lack of acknowledgement causes one to have to work on breaking down two layers, the first being getting one to actually admit that racism and racial discrimination exist, and then breaking down actual racism and discrimination thereafter. This is an even greater challenge.

Aside from the three denials, I propose a fourth denial that comes from within. There is evidence that shows that Blacks, the potential and typical victims of racism and racial discrimination, are often in denial themselves. Interestingly, some Blacks in Latin America deny that racism exist within society overall. However, unlike Blacks in the United States that have typically improved their social and economic status through education, many Blacks in Latin America have accumulated wealth by

marriage. Both however, may consider themselves to be upper class, often taking on the mentality of whites in the society. Thus in taking on this mentality, based on this highly regarded status, many of these Blacks view Blacks other than themselves differently. Many of them then see racism the way whites have explained it within Latin American society. Since whites in Latin America tend to deny that racism exists, some of these Blacks assume this to be true as well. Some Blacks in Venezuela and throughout Latin America struggle between their national and ethnic identities thus strive to be as closely affiliated as possible with their nationality of being Venezuelan, which denotes their birthplace, but not their African ancestry. In associating themselves with being Venezuelan they can more closely associate with white society in order to live what they consider, a better life. Unfortunately these Blacks are a detriment to the erasure of racism throughout Latin America. Some would say that these Blacks are even more of a detriment to the elimination of racism than whites. Regardless, these Blacks are not helping the racial situation in Latin America.

Numerous examples can be given of all of these types of denials. Puerto Rico, Cuba, Brazil, and Venezuela to name a few, describe countries where these denials can be seen. Whether these acts of racism and discrimination are overt or covert, as described by Florestan Fernandes, it is important that those from within and from without Latin America recognize that racism is alive. It is also important for all to recognize that racism is alive in Latin America throughout various facets of society and thus has to be attacked on all these fronts. First, Latin Americans and scholars who focus on this region have to be willing to acknowledge that racism is real in Latin America and simply because it takes on a different form than other countries that are considered racist, does not mean that racism does not exist. Different variations of an idea do not mean that it no longer has qualities of the original. In the case of racism in Latin America, it means that it is that much harder to fight against.

In addition to the denials that penetrate the minds of many persons in Latin America, there are those who actively challenge these denials and actively endorse the opposite. Many believe that racism and racial discrimination is real and present in Latin America. Some of these same persons are actively fighting against these shielded forms of racism. One example of organizations actively battling racism is La Red de Afrovenezolanas in Venezuela. This is one of many organizations in Latin America that are not only struggling for the rights of Blacks, but also the elimination of racism. This organization along with others is currently helping to open the minds of the masses to the idea of the existence racism and suggesting ways to combat it.

Race relations are said to be very complex in Latin America. However, racism indeed exists throughout all facets of life in Latin America. The denial of racism, in addition to the fact that racism exists is what makes race relations in Latin America complicated or at least more complicated than the obvious forms of racism that exist in some other parts of the world. The activism by Blacks and advocates of Blacks are helping to improve race relations in Latin America. These Black activist groups are likely to be the leaders of the movement for social change in Latin America just as Blacks in the United States and South Africa were.

In the next chapter, I will examine what these Black activist organizations intend to accomplish by focusing on the case of Venezuela. Based on the advancement of Blacks throughout the world, I project that in the near future that Blacks who reside in Latin America will achieve at least nominal equality. I suspect that if this was to occur it would pose a similar situation to that of the United States, with laws that protect Black civil liberties and advocate equal treatment of Blacks within a variety of institutions within society.

CHAPTER 4: LA RED DE ORGANIZACIONES AFROVENEZOLANAS  
(THE AFRO-VENEZUELAN NETWORK): THE LEADER OF BLACK SOCIO-  
POLITICAL ORGANIZING IN VENEZUELA

This thesis has provided a history of African descendants in Latin America, and specifically, in Venezuela. The second chapter provided a detailed account of how African descendants arrived in Latin America, beginning in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. I then go on to discuss the case of Venezuela in particular, where some scholars report that Africans arrived as early as 1500C.E. In that chapter I discussed the role of the Spanish and Portuguese in transporting Africans to their respective territories. I also discussed the predominant plantation system of cacao and sugar and how Africans fared on these plantations. I explored a typical form of resistance throughout the enslavement period, that being maroonage. I ended that chapter with the attainment of Venezuelan independence and the abolition of enslaved Africans in that country.

The third chapter focused on race relations within Venezuela and throughout Latin America. I explained how race relations changed after abolition, through the colonial period, and afterwards. Blacks have gradually gained a more humane status, but still deserve better treatment, which is thus the reasoning for the case study of La Red de Afrovenezolanas in chapter four. Within the chapter on race relations, I focus on the notion of “Café con Leche” in Venezuela, which purports that all Venezuelans are mixed. I agree with scholars that this notion of mixed racialized groups serve to deny the racism that continues to exist in Latin America. Whitening of the population throughout Latin America as a means to marginalize Black people was also discussed. I explore the levels of denial that commonly exist amongst Latinos. These denials are divided into three categories: literal, interpretive, and justificatory. Literal denial implies that racism has never occurred. Interpretive denial reflects the notion that what

is happening in society with regard to race is actually something other than racism or discrimination. Lastly, justificatory denial looks to make the claim that racial incidents are defensible. Through these types of denials I give specific examples to prove that indeed racism does exist and that unless Venezuelan society and Latin American societies in general accept this, little will change for Black and Indigenous communities.

I proved that the history of African descendants and race relations in Venezuela and Latin America as a whole are still greatly connected to what is occurring in those regions now. Enslavement and skewed race relations have triggered the development of black consciousness social movements, such as La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas, which as highlighted in the present chapter. Chapter four will delve into the conditions of Afro-Venezuelans, what they are demanding, and how they are going about achieving their goals.

Resistance against enslavement and white supremacy in general, has been a trend amongst African descended peoples throughout history. Resistance can be defined as a struggle against oppression, which can take many forms. Often resistance has manifested through political activism. In present-day Venezuela, African descendants are engaging in a socio-political movement fighting for Afro-Venezuelan recognition. “African and Indigenous Populations have played an essential role in struggle for civil rights in Venezuela in general.”<sup>184</sup> Over a hundred and fifty years removed from enslavement, Afro-Venezuelans are still not recognized as a legitimate member of the society. Afro-Venezuelan activism for social and political parity is relevant to the continuous global struggle of African people for their basic human rights. “People of African heritage everywhere continue to struggle and thrive under

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<sup>184</sup> Karen Juanita Carrillo, “Afro-Venezuelans, Blacks From Louisiana Celebrate Venezuela,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 96 (2005): 2.

all kinds of oppressive conditions and what we have to do is keep our eyes on the prize.”<sup>185</sup> Some Afro-Venezuelans are currently striving to center their social and political experience on their heritage and customs instead of assimilating into the mainstream of Venezuelan society. By mainstream, I am referring to ideas and styles that constitute the dominant trend in a given society.<sup>186</sup>

In this chapter, I highlight the socio-political activism of La Red de Afrovenezolanas (The Afro-Venezuelans Network) from its conception in 2000 to the present. I will examine its activism by explaining the history of Black social movements in Latin America, the history of La Red de Afrovenezolanas, the relationship of the Afro-Venezuelan Network to President Hugo Chavez, and major events hosted by the Network and Afro-Venezuelan women’s involvement. I will give primary source information documenting the organizing efforts of the Afro-Venezuelan Network based on personal interviews with members of the organization, literature produced by the organization, the organization’s website, and newspaper articles. The purpose of highlighting the political activism of Afro-Venezuelans is to contribute to the discussion about the plight of African descendants throughout Venezuela and Latin America.

There is evidence of organized Black socio-political movements throughout Latin America, historically and currently according to scholars Kwame Dixon, Arturo Escobar, Sonia E. Alvarez and others. “Contemporary black social movements are part of this trend, but Afro-Latin social movements in Latin America and the Caribbean have a long history. Their antecedents include maroon communities during slavery; the Haitian Revolution, the massive slave revolts in Bahia, Brazil in 1835; and the

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<sup>185</sup> Bridgit Brown, “Afro Venezuelan Women Take the Stage at Festival Betances,” *The Bay State Banner*, 42 (2007):1.

<sup>186</sup> Random House, *Random House Webster’s Handy American Dictionary 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition* (New York: Random House, 2001), 184.

Cuban Independent Party of Color in 1908.<sup>187</sup> At times, blacks in Latin America fashioned their own independent formations such as self-emancipated communities (palenques), black militias, religious practices, and mutual aid societies. Other times, they forged tactical alliances with whites, Indians, and mestizos to create multiracial movements that had a profound effect on the region.”<sup>188</sup>

A number of scholars including Kwame Dixon, Arturo Escobar, and Sonia Alvarez point to the 1960s as the re-awakening period of social movements in many Latin America countries since the end of colonialism in the 1800s. “If a point of origin for the current wave of protest forms were to be assigned, we would have to say that they emerged out of the historical conjuncture that started to coalesce in the late 1960s and has since branched out in a number of directions. The factors most commonly cited in this regard are (1) the crisis of development in most of the region...and (2) the crisis of political parties and mechanisms of representation on all sides of the spectrum.”<sup>189</sup> Moving through to the 1980s, Latin America continued to see decades of new organizing. Mobilizing has not diminished since then and most-likely will continue. The issues that people in Latin America have been organizing around and the groups that have been mobilizing since the 1960s include everything, “from squatters to ecologists, from popular kitchens in poor urban neighborhoods to Socialist

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<sup>187</sup> Within this quote, maroon communities refer to independent living formations, both semi-permanent and permanent, created by self-emancipated enslaved Africans. The Haitian Revolution refers the first successful Black revolt that took place in Haiti between 1791-1804, which inspired many rebellions around the world and set the precedent for Black freedom. The 1835 slave revolt in Bahia, Brazil that Dixon is referring to is considered one of the most significant rebellions in Brazil that is said to have led to abolition of slavery as an institution in Brazil. Lastly, the 1908 Cuban Independent Party of Color refers to the Black political party created Afro-Cubans and mulattos in order to receive social and civil rights. The creation of the party lead to the armed rebellion in 1912 where many of the party members had their lives taken.

<sup>188</sup> Kwame Dixon, “Transnational Black Social Movements in Latin America: Afro-Colombians and the Struggle for Human Rights,” ed. Richard Stahler-Sholk, Harry E. Vanden, and Glen David Kuecker, *Latin American Social Movements in the Twenty-First Century: Resistance, Power, and Democracy* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2008), 182.

<sup>189</sup> Escobar & Alvarez, “Theory and Protest,” ed. Arturo Escobar & Sonia E. Alvarez, *The Making of Social Movements in Latin America: Identity, Strategy, and Democracy* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), 4.



feminist groups, from human rights and defence of life mobilizations to gay and lesbian coalitions, the spectrum of Latin American collective action covers a broad range. It includes, as well, the movements of black and indigenous peoples; new modalities of workers' cooperatives and peasant struggles; middle- and lower-middle-class civic movements; the defense of the rain forest; and even cultural manifestations embodied, for instance, in Afro Caribbean musical forms (such as salsa and reggae) and incipient antinuclear protest in some countries."<sup>190</sup> The simple fact that various issues have been the focus of social organizing exhibits that Latin America has social challenges that are affecting people and the persons being affected are willing to demand what they feel is rightfully theirs.

Some scholars believe that even though social movements have been continuous, their specific meaning, concerns, and tactics have changed. The difference between the 1960s and the 1980s has been identified by Fernando Calderon, Alejandro Piscitelli, and Jose Luis Reyna as focusing on governmental and political issues versus present-day movements that instead focus on cultural identities and places/avenues for social expression.<sup>191</sup> According to Harry Vanden, this new movement is different from the old in that it has been affected by new age technology and the lack of violence. "These current mobilizations seem to be different from the popular uprisings that preceded them. The systems of mass communication and related communication technology, and easy, low cost access to the internet have combined with higher levels of literacy, widened access to higher education and much greater political freedom under the democratization process... However, unlike radical revolutionary

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<sup>190</sup> Escobar & Alvarez, "Theory and Protest," ed. Arturo Escobar & Sonia E. Alvarez, *The Making of Social Movements in Latin America: Identity, Strategy, and Democracy* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), 2.

<sup>191</sup> Fernando Calderon, Alejandro Piscitelli & Jose Luis Reyna, "Social Movements: Actors, Theories, Expectations," ed. Arturo Escobar & Sonia E. Alvarez, *The Making of Social Movements in Latin America: Identity, Strategy, and Democracy* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), 23.

movements of the last few decades, these new movements do not employ or advocate the radical, revolutionary restructuring of the state through violent revolution. Rather, their primary focus is to work within civil society, and push government and society to the limits to achieve needed and necessary change and restructuring.”<sup>192</sup> This difference as addressed by Vanden is very evident with regard to La Red de Afrovenezolanas as a strategy and will be discussed later in this chapter.

Dixon however considers these movements new for a different reason. He states: “They are new compared to traditional political actors in that they either mobilize different people or they are the same people acting in more spontaneous, democratic, decentralized ways, or because they are introducing new participatory strategies outside of the traditional political arena. These movements may also be responding to new forms of social subordination, often sharpened by neoliberal policies.”<sup>193</sup> I would say that all of these reasons hold true for social movements in Latin America.

Since Latin America does in fact have a history of social movements, we can briefly discuss major movements throughout the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, as well as Central and South America since colonialism. In Brazil, for example, Black movements in major cities such as Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro from the 1920s to the 1940s along with conferences held by Black intellectuals of the time, to articulate new perspectives on how race functioned within Brazilian society.<sup>194</sup> The 1940s in Puerto Rico was also challenged by Black Puerto Rican protest against the discrimination that

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<sup>192</sup> Harry E. Vanden, “Social Movements, Hegemony, and New Forms of Resistance,” ed. Richard Stahler-Sholk, Harry E. Vanden, and Glen David Kuecker, *Latin American Social Movements in the Twenty-First Century: Resistance, Power, and Democracy* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2008), 44.

<sup>193</sup> Dixon, “Transnational Black Social Movements,” ed. Richard Stahler-Sholk, Harry E. Vanden, and Glen David Kuecker, *Latin American Social Movements in the Twenty-First Century: Resistance, Power, and Democracy* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2008), 182.

<sup>194</sup> Fernandes, “Beyond Poverty,” ed. Robert Brent Toplin *Slavery and Race Relations in Latin America* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1974), 279.

Blacks faced in public places during the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>195</sup> According to Robert Levine the last major Afro-Cuban demonstration in Cuban history took place in 1912. The Afro-Cuban Movement was “an illegal political organization led by Evaristo Estenoz and Pedro Ivonet during the Gomez administration (1909-1913) to gain better treatment for Cuban blacks and to restore the right to organize political groups based on race or color. Thwarted, they led an insurrection in 1912 in Oriente province which was crushed by government troops advised by United States officers, killing about 3,000 blacks.”<sup>196</sup> Levine’s text that purports that there has not been any major Afro-Cuban protest since 1912 was written in 1980 and thus does not cover the decades that follow. Conversely, more updated studies provide evidence that since the 1990s there has been a resurgence of social movements in Cuba by Black artists and intellectuals to denounce racist practices such as racial profiling by police, various societal depictions of Blacks as troublemakers prone to violence and crime, and the denial of granting jobs to Black women by Cuban society.<sup>197</sup>

In the footsteps of this tradition, currently “there is a new movement in Latin American countries to celebrate their African heritage and to fight racial discrimination. In fact, a recent study has concluded that the nearly 15 million people of African descent in Latin America have begun to organize against racial discrimination and poverty that affects the majority of Black communities.”<sup>198</sup> This further acknowledgement of recent mobilization in Latin America admits two major ideas. The first is that the use of the term “new” confirms that Latin America has a

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<sup>195</sup> Mathews, “The Question of Color,” ed. Robert Brent Toplin *Slavery and Race Relations in Latin America* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1974), 308-309.

<sup>196</sup> Robert M. Levine, *Race and Ethnic Relations in Latin America and the Caribbean: An Historical Dictionary and Bibliography* (Metuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1980), 3.

<sup>197</sup> Alejandro De La Fuente, “The New Afro-Cuban Cultural Movement and the Debate on Race in Contemporary Cuba,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 40 697-720 (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 697, 699 & 700.

<sup>198</sup> Saucedo, “Profiles of Black Latinos,” Dissertation, Arizona State University, 2002; Ann Arbor, Michigan: Microform Publications of ProQuest Information and Learning, University of Michigan, 2003, 111.

history of social movements as affirmed by the scholars previously discussed who research Latin America. Secondly, this acknowledgement of movement in general means that recognition is being given to various groups for their efforts thus bringing to light their plight and making their struggles more well-known.

There are numerous African descended organizations mobilizing throughout Latin America. Presently, “throughout the region Afro-Latin groups are emerging as powerful social movement actors in various countries, like the Afro-Venezuelan Network (Venezuela); Mundo-Afro (Uruguay); Coordinadora Nacional de Organizaciones Negras Panamenas (Panama); the Process of Black Communities in Colombia (PCN); the National Movement for the Human Rights of Black Communities of Colombia; or Cimarron, and the Association of Internally Displaced Afro-Colombians, or AFRODES (Colombia); and the Geledes, the Institute for Black Brazilian Women, and CEERT, the Center for Research on Race Relations in the Workplace (Brazil). Many of these NGOs (nongovernmental organizations) function on shoestring budgets, are often excluded from national human rights discourse and face the daunting challenge of representing communities that are often dispersed, displaced, and suffer from low levels of self-identity. Their work over the years has been quite impressive as they have developed national, regional, and transnational networks, and by doing so, have been able to more forcefully articulate their struggle from a wider lens that includes comparative and international human rights perspectives.”<sup>199</sup> These organizations are not only working on behalf of their own struggles but are connecting with other Afro-Latin organizations across borders. “Afro social movements in the Americas like other groups (indigenous and women) in the region are transnational as many now have regional, national, and global support

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<sup>199</sup> Dixon, “Transnational Black Social Movements,” ed. Richard Stahler-Sholk, Harry E. Vanden, and Glen David Kuecker, *Latin American Social Movements in the Twenty-First Century: Resistance, Power, and Democracy* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2008), 184.

and connections. Additionally, many share common political or ideological views such as challenging racial and gender discrimination in education or the workplace. Along with the struggle against racial and gender discrimination, many Afro-Latin social movements have waged popular resistance to neoliberal policies of Latin American and Caribbean governments.”<sup>200</sup>

There are various reasons why these Latin American movements have either resurfaced or been created anew. Some academics believe these movements have arisen out of the fact that “in recent years, a great many of the masses and some of the middle class seem to feel that much touted return to democracy, celebration of civil society and incorporation in the globalization process has left them marginalized economically if not politically as well. The reactions in Mexico, Brazil, Bolivia, Ecuador, Venezuela, Argentina, and even Uruguay have been strong and significant.”<sup>201</sup> Yet some works that were written in the 1990s question whether these movements will truly bring about change. “Nonetheless, it remains to be seen if such forms of contention can force sufficient changes in the national economic and political power configurations to achieve greater economic equality and ensure effective political participation. Some even wonder if these new forms of contention will ultimately prove effective in generating the change that is so sorely needed. In the meantime, these movements represent an intense challenge to the extant neoliberal capitalist systems and the established parties and politicians--if not the forms of governance themselves--and are extremely subversive of the status quo.”<sup>202</sup> Unlike the

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<sup>200</sup> Dixon, “Transnational Black Social Movements,” ed. Richard Stahler-Sholk, Harry E. Vanden, and Glen David Kuecker, *Latin American Social Movements in the Twenty-First Century: Resistance, Power, and Democracy* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2008), 183.

<sup>201</sup> Vanden, “Social Movements,” ed. Richard Stahler-Sholk, Harry E. Vanden, and Glen David Kuecker, *Latin American Social Movements in the Twenty-First Century: Resistance, Power, and Democracy* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2008), 41.

<sup>202</sup> Vanden, “Social Movements,” ed. Richard Stahler-Sholk, Harry E. Vanden, and Glen David Kuecker, *Latin American Social Movements in the Twenty-First Century: Resistance, Power, and Democracy* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2008), 45.

intellectuals who wonder whether significant change can be brought about by these movements, I rather wonder whether relevant change would, in fact, come about without these movements.

Venezuela has a history of social movements. Venezuela can be considered the first country in Latin America to create legislation with regard to the environment as early as the 1970s.<sup>203</sup> There was a significant movement around environmental issues during this decade. Since then, there is a “growing consensus” that the masses are being left behind and marginalized.<sup>204</sup> The overall scene in Latin America displays that, “poverty is persistent throughout the region and has risen in many countries. A large segment of the population seems left out of what economic growth has taken place. As the masses and segments of the middle classes have expressed their frustration, the last few years have seen popular uprisings, aborted presidential terms, economic chaos, attempted coups d’ etat and the continued impoverishment of the masses if not segments of the middle class.”<sup>205</sup> African descendants in Venezuela are currently continuing to engage in this type of social and political organizing. “From Los Angeles to Rio de Janeiro, from the Bronx to Salvador Bahia—brown, black, and Indigenous peoples are challenging racial inequality, while at the same time constructing alternative models for political participation.”<sup>206</sup>

Unfortunately for scholars who want to explore African descendants in Venezuela or other less-visible Black presences, “the literature on Afro-Latin social

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<sup>203</sup> Maria Pilar Garcia, “The Venezuelan Ecology Movement: Symbolic Effectiveness, Social Practices, and Political Strategies,” ed. Arturo Escobar & Sonia E. Alvarez, *The Making of Social Movements in Latin America: Identity, Strategy, and Democracy* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), 151.

<sup>204</sup> Vanden, “Social Movements,” ed. Richard Stahler-Sholk, Harry E. Vanden, and Glen David Kuecker, *Latin American Social Movements in the Twenty-First Century: Resistance, Power, and Democracy* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2008), 43.

<sup>205</sup> Vanden, “Social Movements,” ed. Richard Stahler-Sholk, Harry E. Vanden, and Glen David Kuecker, *Latin American Social Movements in the Twenty-First Century: Resistance, Power, and Democracy* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2008), 42.

<sup>206</sup> Dixon, “Transnational Black Social Movements,” ed. Richard Stahler-Sholk, Harry E. Vanden, and Glen David Kuecker, *Latin American Social Movements in the Twenty-First Century: Resistance, Power, and Democracy* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2008), 181.

movements is sparse and focuses heavily on Afro-Brazilians.”<sup>207</sup> Thus more field research has to be done on this area of study. This chapter is based on my field research in Venezuela, which allowed me to see what is happening in Venezuela and how Blacks are mobilizing for change.

As stated in chapter one, African descendants first were transported to the Americas during the sixteenth century C.E. Six percent of enslaved Africans were taken to Latin America (Central and South America). It is not certain what fraction of that six percent were specifically taken to Venezuela. However, records show that by the 18<sup>th</sup> century at least 70,000 Africans were enslaved in Venezuela.<sup>208</sup> Venezuela was under Spaniard colonization from 1531-1821, yet even after independence Blacks continued to be regarded as less-than. The enslaved Africans were brought to work on plantations and as is the case of most Africans were dehumanized. These Africans were not given social rights or political rights, and were not permitted to attend school.

The plight of Africans in Venezuela caused many Africans to escape and form their own communities. “For nearly five centuries, the communities formed by these Africans dotted the fringes of plantation America, from Brazil to the south-eastern United States, from Peru to the American south-west. These areas have been known at different times by different names: like palenques, quilombos, mocamboes, cumbes, ladeiras, or mambises.”<sup>209</sup> The defining attributes of the maroons were self-sufficiency, self-defining, and self-pursuing. These Africans chose to escape and live an autonomous life since a significant part of enslavement and colonialism was about preventing Africans from embracing their heritage.

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<sup>207</sup> Dixon, “Transnational Black Social Movements,” ed. Richard Stahler-Sholk, Harry E. Vanden, and Glen David Kuecker, *Latin American Social Movements in the Twenty-First Century: Resistance, Power, and Democracy* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2008), 182.

<sup>208</sup> Rights Group, *No Longer Invisible* (United Kingdom: Minority Rights Publications, 1995), 245.

<sup>209</sup> Edward Scobie. *Global Afrikan Presence: Reparation, Resistance, Repatriation* (New York: A&B Books Publishers 1994), 186.

These maroon societies, often called *cumbes* in Venezuela, counteracted colonial practices and allowed Africans to maintain their language, culture, and religion. The maintenance of their culture and the creation of their own communities were their forms of resistance during this time since this was prohibited and often had severe repercussions. The War for Independence in Venezuela took place in 1810. “After April 19, when the maroons were given arms and organized military leaders who promised them all sorts of riches, they abandoned the *cumbes* and hurled themselves into combat.”<sup>210</sup> Some maroons fought in the War of Independence and over time intermarried with Spaniards or Indigenous peoples. Others remained on the land they inherited from their ancestors and continued a free life.<sup>211</sup>

The year 1854 marked the end of enslavement in Venezuela, but since abolition, Africans still have not been considered equal to their white counterparts. Today most Afro-Venezuelans live along the Caribbean coast or in poor neighborhoods in Caracas, Maracay-Valencia, or Maracaibo.<sup>212</sup> To this day Africans are not considered an integral part of the population. As a racial category, Afro-Venezuelans are not specifically recognized in the constitution and are not included as a distinct racial group in the population census. Plots of land owned by Afro-Venezuelans are also not recognized as their own by the government. Information about Afro-Venezuelans have historically not been included in school curriculum at any level, until 2008. In Venezuela the African descended population is not seen as a distinct ethnicity within the country. The African descended population does not want to be considered mixed or simply Venezuelan, but rather wants to be recognized as a

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<sup>210</sup> Miguel A. Saignes, “Life in a Venezuelan *Cumbe*” in *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas* ed. By Richard Price (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 73.

<sup>211</sup> Pollak-Eltz, *Black Culture and Society* (Caracas, Venezuela: Public Affairs Department of Lagoven, 1994), 25.

<sup>212</sup> Marques, “Venezuela: Blacks Say Racism Persists Years After Slavery’s End,” Global Information Network 24 March 2004 1. <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed November 17, 2007).



distinct ethnicity as Indigenous descendants are. All of these issues point to the invisibility of African descendants in Venezuela and that is what La Red de Afrovenezolanas intends to address.

The current government in Venezuela, also known as the “Bolivarian Revolution,” claims to be concerned about the lives of Afro-Venezuelans. Hugo Chavez Frias, the current president of Venezuela, has been in office since 1998. He won as a candidate for the party (MVR) the Fifth Republic Movement with 56% of the votes.<sup>213</sup> Chavez succeeded the previous president, Rafael Caldera Rodriguez. Chavez’s admiration for Simon Bolivar, the anti-colonial leader, and Fidel Castro, have influenced his ideas of what an inclusive government encompasses.<sup>214</sup> One of the Venezuelan President’s first initiatives for political change was to create a new constitution. This constitution looked to incorporate previously excluded populations, specifically indigenous populations, which make up 1.5% of the current population.<sup>215</sup> The constitution has an entire section ‘Chapter VIII, On the Rights of Indigenous Peoples’ that recognizes indigenous communities.<sup>216</sup> He also “issued resolutions that officially acknowledge indigenous languages, history, and culture and mandates that they be taught in all public and private schools and in universities.”<sup>217</sup> Unfortunately Afro-Venezuelans have yet to be recognized as an ethnic group with guaranteed equal rights.

According to political activist and scholar, and founder of La Red, Jesus “Chucho” Garcia, Afro-Venezuelan music is respected, but Afro-Venezuelans (Afrovenezolanos) themselves are not. “Enough of playing the drums. If we don’t take

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<sup>213</sup> Carrillo, “For Afro Venezuelans, Chavez is the only hope for change,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 95 (2004): 2.

<sup>214</sup> Carrillo, “For Afro Venezuelans,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 95 (2004): 2.

<sup>215</sup> Carrillo, “Afro Venezuelans march for recognition,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 98 (2007): 2.

<sup>216</sup> Carrillo, “Afro Venezuelans, march for recognition,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 98 (2007): 2.

<sup>217</sup> Carrillo, “Afro Venezuelans,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 98 (2007): 2.

a political stance, the drums will soon enough disappear. I'm a musician, but I understand that this is a political moment that we must take advantage of so that our children will not have to suffer."<sup>218</sup> In understanding this political moment, that being the current political mood under Chavez and the need for political activism, Garcia has been organizing at least since 1992, when he helped to create the Afroamerica Festival. This cultural festival transformed into the annual Multicultural Day Festival hosted in Barlovento, a coastal city in Venezuela that has predominantly African inhabitants.<sup>219</sup> The first Afroamerica Festival in 1992 spawned the founding of Fundacion Afroamerica (African America Foundation) in 1993 with support of UNESCO (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization). The goal of the Fundacion Afroamerica is to research the sub-Saharan African presence in Venezuela and the Caribbean. The Foundation publishes a journal entitled *Afroamerica* and has recorded nine discs of music as a part of the Memoria Musical de Origen Africana en Venezuela (African Musical Memory in Venezuela) project. The Foundation has also published sixteen Cuadernos de historia regional (Regional History Notebooks) used in primary and secondary schools in Barlovento and plans to apply these same strategies to fifteen other regions that are 90% Afro-Venezuelan while tailoring the information to the needs of the people of the city where they are studied. Salto al Atlántico (Jump to the Atlantic) is a documentary film produced by the Fundacion Afroamerica as well.<sup>220</sup> Garcia's creation of the African America

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<sup>218</sup> Carrillo, "Afro-Venezuelans look to complete Chavez' Bolivarian Revolution," *New York Amsterdam News*, 96 (2005): 2.

<sup>219</sup> Garcia, "Demystifying Africa's Absence," ed. Sheila S. Walker, *African Roots/American Cultures: Africa in the Creation of the Americas* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2001), 288.

<sup>220</sup> Garcia, "Demystifying Africa's Absence," ed. Sheila S. Walker, *African Roots/American Cultures: Africa in the Creation of the Americas* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2001), 289.

Festival and Foundation helped set in motion the Afrovenezolanos political movement and later the creation of La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas.

Jesus “Chucho” Garcia, born and raised in Barlovento, Miranda State, Venezuela is currently the External Advisor to the Vice Ministry of Africa and the founder of La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanos (The Afro-Venezuelan Network). La Red is the leading Afro-Venezuelan network of organizations presently in Venezuela. La Red was created in June of 2000 and is an umbrella organization comprised of over forty smaller organizations located throughout Venezuela.<sup>221</sup> The main purpose of the organization is to work toward the advancement of Afro-Venezuelans and to insure that Afro-Venezuelan communities receive equal government assistance as non-Black communities.<sup>222</sup> The Network is broken down into three levels: the national assembly, the board of directors, and the various local associations. The main responsibility of the national assembly is to approve the annual plans of the respective organizations. The board of directors deals with inter-institutional relations, international relations, organizing, and finances. These members are chosen at the annual assemblies and serve two years. Lastly, the various local associations, also known as “cumbes,” just as the maroon societies in Venezuela were called, are made up of smaller groups throughout the various states. Each group chooses their respective representatives.<sup>223</sup>

The “cumbes” are the umbrella associations for the smaller organizations. These cumbes are broken down into these major categories: mujeres (women), afro juvenil or jóvenes (youth), educadores (educators), cultura (culture), tecnología

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<sup>221</sup> Jesus “Chucho” Garcia, Founder of La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas, interview by author, 3 July 2008, Caracas, video recording, La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas Headquarters, Caracas.

<sup>222</sup> Alexis Machado, Founder of Eleggua, interview by author, 3 July 2008, Caracas, video recording, La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas Headquarters, Caracas.

<sup>223</sup> Jesus “Chucho” Garcia, “¿Que es La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas? Organization Information Packet La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas Headquarters, Caracas, Venezuela, 7.

(technology), agricultoras (agriculturists), and comunicación (communications). The association for women would be called Cumbe de Mujeres Afrovenezolana and would serve as the network for all the organizations that are related to women's issues. All of the categorizes of cumbes are represented by women, men, children, and elders throughout each of the fourteen of twenty-four Venezuelan states as long as there are organizations that are applicable to them. These fourteen states mainly include predominately Black coastal areas such as Aragua, Lara, Carabobo, Miranda, and Falcon, but are also found where there are larger numbers of indigenous populations such as Anzoategui, Guarico, Merida, and Zulia. Below is a list of La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas' ten new objectives.

Table 1: The New Objectives of La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas

The New Objectives of La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas
Objective 1: To facilitate the articulation of Afro-Venezuelan organizations to promote sustainable development of Afro-Venezuelan communities within the realms of culture, sports, economics, education, environment, health, social issues, and actions related to inserting the organization into public politics of the local, regional, international, and private institutions
Objective 2: To prompt the strengthening of the organization in order to achieve greater efficiency of the organizations' work in Afro-Venezuelan communities
Objective 3: To encourage financial and economic development of cooperatives in the sectors of crafts, culture, tourism, infrastructure, agricultural, livestock, fishing, education, environment, health, services, technology, and sports that make up the Network of Afro-Venezuelan Organizations
Objective 4: To endorse an ideological political proposal supported by an Afro-epistemology oriented toward Afro-Venezuelan sovereignty against all forms of domination, along with establishment of a south-south dialogue between the African Diaspora in the Americas and Caribbean as well as with Africa
Objective 5: To support the protection of tangible and intangible cultural patrimonies
Objective 6: To establish a plan of formation and permanent training in different academic and non-academic modalities of the members in the Network and the urban and rural Afro-Venezuelan communities
Objective 7: To promote working with children, adolescents, adults, and seniors of both genders
Objective 8: To stimulate the creation of alternative media of communication such as the radio, television, info centers, and common publications
Objective 9: To fight against any form of racism, xenophobia, intolerance, exclusion, and discrimination toward the African descendants or any citizen in Venezuela or the world that suffers from this type of aberration of humanity
Objective 10: To establish organizing and supportive links with national and international organizations that share similar objectives

Although my analysis of La Red is limited based on my research limitations, I can affirm that based on my research and observations the majority of these objectives have been or are being fulfilled. Objectives two through ten were visibly apparent in my contact with members of La Red and the events they hosted. For instance, the Commemoration of Leonardo Chirinos who is a well-respected maroon leader who led the rebellion of 1795 C.E. was an event hosted by La Red that exhibited many of these objectives. The commemoration was a joint effort of La Red and the Presidential Commission For the Prevention and Elimination of all the forms of Racial Discrimination, which many members of La Red are a part of; this shows the organization's link to other organizations that share similar objectives and their commitment to fighting against any form of racism as described in objectives nine and ten. This event also featured musical acts by youth and women's groups, which speaks to the organization's desire to work with females and males of all ages, their protection of cultural tangible patrimonies, the non-academic training of members of the rural and urban Afro-Venezuelan community, their facilitation in articulating Afro-Venezuelan organizations' sustainable development, and the promotion of the strength of the organization, all as stated in objectives one, two, five, six, and seven. Also during the time of my field research La Red was finalizing plans for its television network and radio station, which demonstrates its fulfillment of the creation of alternative media, objective eight. These are just a few examples of how La Red has met its objectives, often doing so by maximizing its exposure through various avenues.

Through these objectives the Network advocates six major changes. First the Afro-Venezuelan Network is calling for the creation of a new census that categorizes and counts Venezuela's Black population. Second, the organization wants Afro-Venezuelan history to be added to school curriculums. The third issue the Afro-

Venezuelan Network wants to be addressed is for a Federal-level ministry to be created to implement the 2001 World Conference Against Racism's "Durban Plan of Action". Fourth, it advocates the creation of a Ministry to implement United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) Convention on Diversity and the creation of an Afro-Venezuelan Ministry, to address the everyday lives of Blacks in the country. The fifth issue it advocates is to have their lands officially recognized and to have Congressional Representation to lobby on its behalf. And sixth, the Network demands to be included in the National Constitution. I will address three of these six major issues in further detail.

A recent challenge, out of the various changes that La Red advocates for is statistical research with a specific emphasis on Afro-Venezuelan inclusion in the national census. According to Garcia, "To reinforce our demand for recognition, we want to know exactly where we stand. Perhaps we make up 20% of Venezuela's 27 million people."<sup>224</sup> The first national census was taken in 1876 and since then no statistics have been compiled on the basis of race in Venezuela since.<sup>225</sup> According to Winthrop Wright at the end of the colonial era, 60 percent of Venezuela's total population had African origins.<sup>226</sup> According to Saucedo, there were at least 15 million people of African descent mobilizing around Black concerns throughout Latin America in 2002.<sup>227</sup> Kent asserts that as of 2006, African descendants make-up one quarter of Latin America's population of 400 million.<sup>228</sup> Regardless of what scholars

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<sup>224</sup> Marquez, "Activists Call For Statistics on African Diaspora," June, 25, 2007. available from <http://www.proquest.com.proxy.library.cornell.edu:2048/>, accessed November 6, 2007.

<sup>225</sup> Rout, Jr., *The African Experience* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2003), 256.

<sup>226</sup> Wright, *Café Con Leche* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 14.

<sup>227</sup> Saucedo, "Profiles of Black Latinos," Dissertation, Arizona State University, 2002; Ann Arbor, Michigan: Microform Publications of ProQuest Information and Learning, University of Michigan, 2003, 111.

<sup>228</sup> Robert B. Kent, *Latin America: Regions and People* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2006), 82.



believe the population to be, La Red is challenging the Venezuelan government to do the research and give an accurate account.

In June of 2007 the Network hosted a two-day seminar on the experience of Afro-Latinos. One of the issues brought up was census data and its inaccurate representation of Africans in Spanish-speaking countries. Jesus Garcia, head of the Network stated: “The Afro-descendant identity is excluded from all of the country’s statistical instruments. But we are going to mobilize to correct that shortcoming with a view to the next census, in 2010.”<sup>229</sup> Nirva Camacho, a member of Cumbe de Mujeres Afrovenezolanos, another group within the Network, made it clear that “We don’t only want numbers, but also studies that can shed light on the situation in terms of poverty, education, health and labor. In the case of women, we are also affected by European standards of beauty and femininity as applied in the world of employment.”<sup>230</sup> At the seminar, Garcia also mentioned the idea of specific projects for Afro-Venezuelans to participate in, such as “preserving the environment, because some communities of people of African descent are located in areas rich in biodiversity and water resources, such as national parks and other areas.”<sup>231</sup> The most important issue overall for the Network in terms of what they “want are public policies and constitutional and legal recognition of the Afro-descendent dimension of problems

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<sup>229</sup> Marquez, “Activists Call,” June, 25, 2007. available from <http://www.proquest.com.proxy.library.cornell.edu:2048/>, accessed November 6, 2007.

<sup>230</sup> Marquez, “Activists Call,” June 25, 2007. available from <http://www.proquest.com.proxy.library.cornell.edu:2048/>, accessed November 6, 2007. These website citations refer to web media produced by the Global Information Network, a New York domestic, non-profit, news organization founded in 1986. This network provides media through print, broadcast, and the World Wide Web. Humberto Marquez’s articles in particular are utilized in order to provide the most recent coverage of La Red de Afrovenezolanas and African descended movements in Latin America.

<sup>231</sup> Marquez, “Activists Call,” June 25, 2007. available from <http://www.proquest.com.proxy.library.cornell.edu:2048/>, accessed November 6, 2007.

like poverty, as well as our potential and the contribution to building the nation that we have made over centuries.”<sup>232</sup>

Specifically looking at the issue of Afro-Venezuelans being included in school curriculum, it was not until 2007 that African and Afro-Venezuelan heritage began to be included in school curriculum. The lack of inclusion in school curriculum caused some students simply to not attend school. This was mainly due to discrimination from teachers and peers alike, often because no knowledge of Afro-Venezuelan culture was known to them. A psychologist, Freddy Gonzalez, conducted research on discrimination in education at a school in the state of Aragua, which is located on the coast and has a significant Black population. He found that “discrimination is exercised in an indirect manner, through disdain, exclusion, restriction, and preference.”<sup>233</sup> Gonzalez pointed out that these indirect offenses were between the teachers and students through their “external indications, including facial expression, glances, postures, verbal exchanges, location in the classroom and nicknames that demonstrate discrimination towards Afro-Venezuelans.”<sup>234</sup> Gonzales also observed that discrimination took place in the form of mainly non-Black students receiving compliments and honors in addition to them being assigned major roles in cultural ceremonies and events.<sup>235</sup> These are a few reasons why the Network feels it is imperative to have their own Afro-Venezuelan centered schools eventually, but also to include Afro-Venezuelan culture and history into public education at all levels.

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<sup>232</sup> Marquez, “Activists Call,” June, 25, 2007. available from <http://www.proquest.com.proxy.library.cornell.edu:2048/>, accessed November 6, 2007.

<sup>233</sup> Marquez. “Venezuela,” Global Information Network 24 March 2004 1. <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed November 17, 2007).

<sup>234</sup> Marquez. “Venezuela,” Global Information Network 24 March 2004 1. <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed November 17, 2007).

<sup>235</sup> Marquez. “Venezuela,” Global Information Network 24 March 2004 1. <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed November 17, 2007).

Angela Diaz, also a member of La Red, is a native of Valencia, Carabobo State, Venezuela, and works for the Ministry of Education in Venezuela. Specifically she is the Coordinator for Intercultural Education throughout Carabobo State. The term interculturality is used in her job description instead of multiculturality. The difference according to Diaz is that interculturality puts all cultures on the same level and allows positive understanding and interaction between them. There is encouragement of learning and respecting all cultures, unlike the use of multiculturality, which Diaz states puts all cultures “in the same boat,” with one dominant culture at the forefront.<sup>236</sup>

Diaz works closely with all the districts within Carabobo State that have predominantly African and Indigenous populations. She specifically works with 12 Afro-Venezuelan communities and 12 Indigenous communities in Carabobo. Her job is linked to a program that President Chavez created in 2000 to incorporate Indigenous history and culture into the education curriculum nationwide. However, the move to incorporate Afro-Venezuelan history and culture into the education curriculum began only recently in November of 2007 and is only taking place so far in Carabobo State. This cultural enrichment program calls for each school to focus on one African or Indigenous community for a period of four to five months. Within this time period the students take trips to these communities to research how the descendants live, their artistic manifestations, their culture, and spirituality and then the students make school presentations on what they have learned. Once all the schools have finished with their student presentations, there is a larger meeting with all the schools within the state of Carabobo to allow an inter-exchange amongst the students to discuss what they discovered from their research. This is the first time in history that this type of meeting

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<sup>236</sup> Angela Diaz, Director of Intercultural Education to the Ministry of Education in Venezuela, interview 1 July 2008, Caracas, video recording, Museum District, Caracas.

amongst students took place in Venezuela. The first of these large meetings was held on July 2, 2008. The goal is to eventually develop this same Afro-Venezuelan and Indigenous cultural recognition program throughout all twenty four states in Venezuela.<sup>237</sup>

Diaz's relationship with the Afro-Venezuelan Network has provided the Ministry of Education with cultural information materials and resources that are now being used in schools. These materials now supplement the Eurocentric texts that have been typically used in schools since the 1800s. Diaz reports that nowhere within regular textbooks do you see Black people, their history, or contributions to Venezuela society. By using these new texts as learning tools within education, children will grow up knowing about both African and Indigenous cultures that are native to Venezuela and will be prepared to accept persons from these backgrounds. Diaz articulated that she, like Gonzalez, has witnessed Afro-Venezuelan students being denied attention or recognition in the classroom because the teacher believes they are inferior simply because they are Black.<sup>238</sup> Angela Diaz believes that if it was not for La Red this school initiative would not have existed; her job would not have existed, and African descendants that previously were silent would not now be making their voices heard and expressing their needs to be included in school curriculum and society as a whole. Diaz continues to fight alongside La Red in order to enhance La Red's organizational objectives. Therefore in terms of influencing the educational system, La Red is making strides.

La Red also wants to resolve the issue of being incorporated within the newest Constitution that Chavez re-vamped after coming into office. The Network is calling

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<sup>237</sup> Diaz, Director of Intercultural Education to the Ministry of Education in Venezuela, interview 1 July 2008, Caracas, video recording, Museum District, Caracas.

<sup>238</sup> Diaz, Director of Intercultural Education to the Ministry of Education in Venezuela, interview 1 July 2008, Caracas, video recording, Museum District, Caracas.

for a reform of the 1999 Constitution, so that it recognizes the nation's multi-ethnicity and calls for respect for Afro-Venezuelan rights. Just as Chapter VIII of the new Constitution is entitled, "On the Rights of Indigenous Peoples," which includes clauses regarding the indigenous population, La Red is calling for a section on the rights of Afro-Venezuelans. The government also "issued resolutions that officially acknowledge indigenous languages, history, and culture and mandates that they be taught in all public and private schools and in universities," which La Red believes is only fair to apply to Afro-Venezuelans.<sup>239</sup> When Afro-Venezuelans asked to be recognized in the 1999 Constitution alongside the indigenous, "they were told that Venezuela had so thoroughly incorporated its Black residents that it officially considered itself a 'mestizo' nation."<sup>240</sup>

The use of the term *mestizo*, meaning of mixed-blood, as described in Chapter 2 of this thesis, proves again how Blacks are made invisible in Venezuela. It is interesting to note that the term *mestizo* is used to defend why Blacks do not need separate recognition in the Constitution, but is not used to describe Indigenous persons, who are considered distinct from the rest of society. La Red believes that this is just another mode of racial discrimination by the government and demands that this change. I would even go so far as to say that this denial of inclusion into the Constitution is a way of refusing to acknowledge and take responsibility for the plight of Afro-Venezuelans. If a section on Afro-Venezuelans is incorporated into the Constitution or even just the term Afro-Venezuelan is included, this holds the government responsible to addressing the needs and demands of the Afro-Venezuelan community. However, it is easier to ignore the request of inclusion; that way the government does not feel forced to address these issues.

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<sup>239</sup> Carrillo, "Afro Venezuelans," *New York Amsterdam News*, 98 (2007): 1.

<sup>240</sup> Carrillo, "Afro Venezuelans," *New York Amsterdam News*, 98 (2007): 2.

La Red views the new government under President Chavez as a vehicle to have their requests heard and fulfilled. The assistant to the director of culture in Sucre city, Maryori Marquez, explained that Afrovenezolanos look at the Chavez government as the beginning of multiculturalism and pluriculturalism in Venezuela. "Up until now, there's been no respect for minorities but only those minorities officially recognized."<sup>241</sup> Even though Afro-Venezuelans are still not "officially recognized," Chavez has made more of an effort than any other president to listen, respect, and address their concerns. At least two leading figures within the Afro-Venezuelan Network are working closely with President Chavez. Jorge Guerrero Veloz, the president of Afro Araguenos Civil Association (ACA) and current head of the African-American Foundation, both organizations that fall under the umbrella of the Afro-Venezuelan Network, along with Jesus Garcia, founder of the Afro-Venezuelan Network, are both part of the Presidential Commission For the Prevention and Elimination of all the forms of Racial Discrimination.<sup>242</sup> Garcia has articulated that the organization views Chavez as a means, but not as the end. The Afro-Venezuelan Network is not looking for the government to provide everything for them, but rather provide the avenue through which they can do for themselves.<sup>243</sup>

Afro-Venezuelan women are making their mark within the Chavez government, the Afro-Venezuelan Network, and in the world of activism in general . Nora Castaneda, who is of African and Indigenous descent, was appointed by Chavez to be the President of the Women's Development Bank (Banco Mujer) in 2004.<sup>244</sup> This addition to the government was in response to women's demands for

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<sup>241</sup> Carrillo, "For Afro Venezuelans," *New York Amsterdam News*, 95 (2004): 2.

<sup>242</sup> Garcia, Founder of La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas, interview by author, 3 July 2008, Caracas, video recording, La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas Headquarters, Caracas.

<sup>243</sup> Garcia, Founder of La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas, interview by author, 3 July 2008, Caracas, video recording, La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas Headquarters, Caracas.

<sup>244</sup> "Venezuelan women's leader touring U.S." *People's Weekly World*, January 30, 2004, National Edition, <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed November 17, 2007).

improvement within the most impoverished neighborhoods and communities. Along with Jesus Garcia, Luisa Madris, a cultural coordinator within the Afro-Venezuelan Network, who will be further discussed below, is also a member of Chavez's Presidential Commission Against Racism.

In terms of Afro-Venezuelan women's involvement in the Network, there are numerous organizations throughout the country that focus on and are run by these women. One such organization is Cumbe de Mujeres Afrovenezolanas (Group of Afro-Venezuelan Women). This organization advocates the transformation of the image of Afro-Venezuelan women. These women are fighting to get rid of the stereotypes that perpetuate the negative image of mujeres Afrovenezolanas (Afro-Venezuelan women) that are not a true representation of who they are.<sup>245</sup> Another organization formed by Afro-Venezuelan women is Union de Mujeres Negras de Venezuela (The Union of Black Women of Venezuela). The Union was created in 1989 and also deals with issues of African women, specifically in terms of employment and family life.

Luisa Madris is one of the coordinators of the Cumbe de Mujeres (umbrella women's association), and also works within the Cumbe de Afro juvenil (African youth) and de Cultura (Culture), all in Miranda State. Born and raised in Curiepe, Barlovento, Miranda State, Luisa Madris has been working alongside Afro-Venezuelan activists for over thirty years to better the plight of Afro-Venezuelans. She is the general director and founder of an Afro-juvenil music and dance troupe called Muchachera, an organization within La Red, which was created to keep children from typical social risks. For the last thirty years Madris has been teaching children about African history, culture, music, and dance that is traditional to Venezuela. She also

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<sup>245</sup> Marquez, "Activists Call," June, 25, 2007. available from <http://www.proquest.com.proxy.library.cornell.edu:2048/>, accessed November 6, 2007.

teaches the children how to make various musical instruments using traditional materials such as parts of trees and animal skin. Along with making instruments, Madris educates the youth on oral histories of Curiepe and Venezuela in general.

Luisa Madris founded Muchachera on the basis of preserving not only Afro-Venezuelan history, music, and culture, but specifically that of her hometown, Curiepe. She expressed that with the coming of modernism, or a divergence of the past with an emphasis on technology and industrialization in Venezuela, she knew it was important to preserve this history through the generations living in Curiepe in order to pass along the history. Thus now, Madris's daughter is an active member and assistant within Muchachera.<sup>246</sup> According to Madris, one of the highest achievements she has received as being the director of such a group is to see the fruits of her labor. She described how youth that she previously instructed, are now not ashamed of knowing their history and now sing and dance Afro-Venezuelan style without embarrassment. She explained in detail how the children she has mentored take the lessons they have learned under her tutelage with them wherever they go and throughout their lives maintain a sense of pride. She believes that Muchachera has a guaranteed history because of this generational transfer of knowledge, seeing as though she has taught the mothers and fathers of the youth she is currently educating.<sup>247</sup> However, Madris feels there is less of a guarantee of Afro-Venezuelan historical continuity unless there are more efforts made. She feels a lot has been done and progress made, but more recognition needs to be paid and white racism in Venezuela has to be combated.<sup>248</sup>

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<sup>246</sup> Luisa Madris, Founder of Muchachera, interview by author, 29 June 2008, Curiepe, tape recording, Juan Pablo Sojo Elementary School, Curiepe.

<sup>247</sup> Madris, Founder of Muchachera, interview by author, 29 June 2008, Curiepe, video recording, Juan Pablo Sojo Elementary School, Curiepe.

<sup>248</sup> Madris, Founder of Muchachera, interview by author, 29 June 2008, Curiepe, video recording, Juan Pablo Sojo Elementary School, Curiepe.



With regard to activism in general, Afro-Venezuelan women have been actively involved since as early as the 1980s. The Red de Mujeres Afro-Caribenas y Afro-Latinos Americanos (Network of Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Latin American Women) was created in 1982. This organization was created “to give Afro Latina women a solidarity network that would support their advocacy efforts in their respective countries.”<sup>249</sup> The members of this organization consist of government elected officials and women leaders in general. A member of Cumbe de Mujeres Afrovenezolanos, Nirva Rosa Camacho Parra, is the representative of the women’s Network from Venezuela. The Network of Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Latin Women was asked by the Caribbean Cultural Center/ African Diaspora Institute along with Hunter College’s Global Afro-Latino and Caribbean Initiative to speak at the Afro-Latin Women of Power Conference in New York City.

The conference was a week long of lectures that took place in late March 2006. The Afro-Latin and Afro-Caribbean women discussed the conditions that Africans in Hispanic countries face. Ms. Epsy Campbell-Barr, the Costa Rican congressional representative of the Network of Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Latin Women, noted that there are at least 150 million people of African descent in the Americas, and because of this, she said: “You may think of us as a minority, but when you look at our numbers, you’ll see that we are actually the majority.”<sup>250</sup> Galvan of the Dominican Republic explained that the organization’s push “is to promote an acceptance of pride in African ancestry... (and) that women should push their governments to adopt an Inter-American agreement against racism and discrimination; for a permanent United Nation’s forum protecting the cultural and economic heritages of African descendants; for all nation’s to create recognized indices to measure their societies’ degrees of

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<sup>249</sup> Carrillo, “Afro-Latin Women of Power Conference tours NYC” *New York Amsterdam News*, 97 (2006): 1.

<sup>250</sup> Carrillo, “Afro-Latin Women,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 97 (2006): 1.

racial equality; and for mechanisms to ensure that the resolutions of the United Nations World Conference against racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and related intolerance are followed.”<sup>251</sup> Afro-Venezuelan women are currently helping their male counterparts to promote awareness of African descendants in Latin America to help nurture the connection between African descendants around the world.

Alexis Machado, who founded an all Afro-Venezuelan women’s singing and dance troupe, Elegua, has helped to foster La Red’s relationship with sectors of Chavez’s government as well. Machado, born and raised in Barlovento, Miranda State, is a musician of multiple instruments and a singer/songwriter. He writes the majority of the music for Elegua, which focuses on local, national, and international issues that affect people of African descent.<sup>252</sup> Machado has assisted in the current relationship between La Red and the Ministry of Culture. Now the Ministry of Culture is working with Machado and others in encouraging the recognition of Afro-Venezuelan culture in schools and cultural institutions such as the National Women’s Institute. In addition to achieving at least a cordial relationship with the Ministry of Culture, the organization has just begun a relationship with local radio and television stations in order to broadcast Afro-Venezuelan programming. These media initiatives began in the summer of 2008 and are still in the beginning phases. He believes that once La Red officially came into existence and all the smaller organizations came under one “umbrella”, Afro-Venezuelans have been advancing.<sup>253</sup> Prior to this, the various smaller organizations had been working individually without much success. Now as one force, change has been occurring gradually.

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<sup>251</sup> Carrillo, “Afro-Latin Women,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 97 (2006): 1.

<sup>252</sup> Machado, Founder of Elegua, interview by author, 3 July 2008, Caracas, video recording, La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas Headquarters, Caracas.

<sup>253</sup> Machado, Founder of Elegua, interview by author, 3 July 2008, Caracas, video recording, La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas Headquarters, Caracas.

Even with the successes of La Red in just over eight years, Machado definitely acknowledges that racism is alive in Venezuela. He did state however, that the racism that exists in Venezuela is not like that of Bolivia, Colombia, or the United States. Interestingly, Machado also discussed that racism has increased since President Chavez took office. According to him, Venezuelans do not want to accept that Venezuela is now being run by an African descendant, who he and others recognize Chavez to be, particularly having more African blood in him than previous presidents.<sup>254</sup> This denial primarily represents those who also deny their own African ancestry. Machado insists however that “more or less 80 percent of Venezuela’s population is of African descent, but it also includes those who do not recognize that they are of African descent, but we know that they are.”<sup>255</sup> Unfortunately most of those who deny their African heritage do so because they do not want to be associated with the negative stereotypes that Blacks are characterized as having. Machado said: “We have been stereotyped as lazy, weak, and as not having done anything to benefit our community, or anything intellectual, and always we are placed at the bottom.”<sup>256</sup> Also Blacks are stereotyped as only knowing how to dance and play musical instruments. Similar to the notion of “shuck and jive” in the United States, Afro-Venezuelans are only thought of as being able to entertain. This is made obvious at the cultural festivals that people of all ethnicities attend in Venezuela, which is a part of the minimal interaction between Blacks and non-Blacks. Even though Machado himself is a musician, and the organization has spent significant time exposing cultural aspects of Afro-Venezuelan culture, they are now switching their

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<sup>254</sup> Machado, Founder of Elegua, interview by author, 3 July 2008, Caracas, video recording, La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas Headquarters, Caracas.

<sup>255</sup> Machado, Founder of Elegua, interview by author, 3 July 2008, Caracas, video recording, La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas Headquarters, Caracas.

<sup>256</sup> Machado, Founder of Elegua, interview by author, 3 July 2008, Caracas, video recording, La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas Headquarters, Caracas.

focus towards political issues because they want Venezuelan society to also see Afro-Venezuelan people as intellectual, artistic, and professional.<sup>257</sup>

The Afro-Venezuelan Network has been very active the last five years. The organization has hosted and taken part in various events to promote awareness about their status in Venezuela and to gain support for their movement. In 2004, “From May 21-24, Afro-Venezuelans hosted the end to “Desde Africa Venimos/We Came From Africa,” their two month long commemoration of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of Black Slavery in Venezuela.”<sup>258</sup> This commemoration led to the call for African Venezuelans as a distinct ethnicity to be included in the Constitution. Also out of this celebration came the idea for the creation of at least ten Afro-Venezuelan centered schools. Also out of this event came the “call for a ‘Permanent Commission on Afro-Venezuelan History’ designed to help all Venezuelans recognize, learn, and appreciate Afro-Venezuelan culture.”<sup>259</sup>

In November 2005, an “Evening of Solidarity with Bolivarian Venezuela” took place at New York’s Town Hall. This event was created to connect people within the United States to the people of Venezuela. William Camacaro of Alberto Lovera Bolivarian Circle, mentioned that the purpose of the event was to bring together the people of Venezuela and the United States to build relationships outside of the conflicts the Venezuelan and the United States’ government have. He also added that out of the event they hope to establish a United States-based network of organizations in solidarity with Venezuela.<sup>260</sup> The evening hosted an array of speeches from prominent leaders such as Rev. Lucius Walker, Ramsey Clark, Lynne Stewart, Mumia Abu Jamal, Father Luis Barrios, U.S. Rep. Jose Serrano, and performances by the Afro

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<sup>257</sup> Machado, Founder of Elegua, interview by author, 3 July 2008, Caracas, video recording, La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas Headquarters, Caracas.

<sup>258</sup> Carrillo, “For Afro Venezuelans,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 95 (2004): 2.

<sup>259</sup> Carrillo, “For Afro Venezuelans,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 95 (2004): 1.

<sup>260</sup> Carrillo, “Afro-Venezuelans, Blacks from Louisiana,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 96 (2005): 2.

Venezuelan group Elegua. Veloz, president of Afro Araguenos Civil Association (ACA) and current head of the African-American Foundation, mentioned earlier in this paper, stated that, “This event helps us show the U.S. population that the Venezuelan process is not a dictatorship. We are trying to construct a social sphere that allows us to democratize. Under the new constitution of 1999, we have the ability- for the first time in Venezuela- to construct our lives as Afro Venezuelans in a non-colonial, non-imperialistic, non-racist society.”<sup>261</sup> Overall the event allowed the people of the U.S. to find out what is actually going on in Venezuela for themselves aside from what the U.S. government has led them to believe.

Another event hosted by La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas was the March for Recognition. The march took place on Tuesday, March 20, 2007. Participants marched from Caracas Plaza Miranda to the halls of the National Assembly. The march was a non-violent protest with thousands of people in attendance. This march was to push for the continued acknowledgement and representation of Afro-Venezuelans. According to a reporter, “the general feeling during the event was not anger, but happiness. With drums, chants and banners held aloft, marchers appeared intent on celebrating the occasion with demonstrations of their ethnic pride. The march ended with the presentation of a petition to the National Assembly to have the Bolivarian Constitution reformed.”<sup>262</sup> Aside from the march, “members of the Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas held a week of forums entitled, ‘Racism in Venezuela’ and ‘Racial Discrimination in the Mass Media.’ La Red also sponsored exhibits showcasing Black culture in Venezuela.”<sup>263</sup>

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<sup>261</sup> Carrillo, “Afro-Venezuelans, Blacks from Louisiana,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 96 (2005): 2.

<sup>262</sup> Garcia, Founder of La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas, interview by author, 3 July 2008, Caracas, video recording, La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas Headquarters, Caracas.

<sup>263</sup> Carrillo, “Afro Venezuelans,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 98 (2007): 2.

The results of the work done by the Network has been mixed. The Commission Against Racism that the Network called for began on June 8, 2005. “At the Encuentro International, the Chavez government announced that it was ready to set up a Presidential Commission Against Racism in Venezuela. Even though Chavez is obviously of African and indigenous descent, it has taken six years of lobbying to have such a commission.”<sup>264</sup> According to Garcia, “We’re not part of the government and we’re not at all part of the opposition to the Chavez administration. We just think that with the implementation of these...principles, we will make the Bolivarian revolution complete.”<sup>265</sup> Aside from the formation of this particular Commission, the other two commissions mentioned earlier, the UNESCO’s Convention on Diversity and the Afro-Venezuelan Ministry, have not yet been created.

However, La Red has achieved its goal of being included in school curriculum, at least to some extent since this is only the case in Carabobo, one out of 24 states in Venezuela. Sadly, aside from the Commission Against Racism and the inclusion in school curriculum in Carabobo, the remainder of issues La Red has been advocating have not been resolved. One of those issues is that of Afro-Venezuelan landownership. Currently, the lands of African descendants have not been officially recognized as belonging to those who live on them. There is still a year to go before La Red finds out whether their wishes of being included in the census will be fulfilled because the next census take will be in 2010. With the numerous roadblocks have come a few successes. La Red values these achievements and is not discouraged by the downfalls, but rather continues to struggle in the tradition of its ancestors, for what they know they deserve.

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<sup>264</sup> Carrillo, “Afro-Venezuelans look,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 96 (2005): 1-2.

<sup>265</sup> Carrillo, “Afro-Venezuelans look,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 96 (2005): 2.

In this chapter I have described a relatively new aspect within the emerging field of Africans in Latin America. Within this field more specifically I have examined a specific case in the realm of activism in Venezuela. I have provided a brief historical summary related to the Afro-Venezuelan presence in Venezuela. I have also briefly explained aspects of the political climate of Venezuela under President Hugo Chavez. I explored the plight of Afro-Venezuelans. Most importantly, I introduced La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas, their founding, membership, purpose, goals/objectives, structural breakdown, current work, and relationship to the Chavez government. Within the Network I highlighted four significant members: Jesus Garcia (founder), Angela Diaz (liaison between organization and Ministry of Education), Luisa Madris ( Director & Founder of Muchachera and Coordinator of Cumbe de Mujeres Afrovenezolanas), and Alexis Machado (Founder of Eleggua). I touched upon the gender dimension of the organization by showcasing some of the activist work of Afro-Venezuelan women within La Red, and Afro-Venezuelan women's activism in general. The events and achievements of the organization have been explained as well. In focusing on the current situation of Afrovenezolanos (Afro-Venezuelans), I have contributed to the ongoing research of activism performed by Spanish-speaking Africans in the African Diaspora.

With regards to contributing to the field of Africana Studies, La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas as an organization is significant for many reasons and needs to be documented. The history, work, membership, and contributions of La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas needs to be recorded and preserved. On a broad scale, the work of La Red fits into the history of social movements throughout the African diaspora. In the tradition of African descendants around the world, La Red contributes to the legacy of organized resistance. Throughout the African diaspora, African descendants have resisted various forms of oppression. This resistance

manifested itself in many forms from suicide during enslavement and maroonage, to armed struggles, sit-ins, and refusal to meet European aesthetic standards. The African descendants in Venezuela, as others historically and contemporarily, believe they deserve the same rights as their non-Black counterparts and see mobilization as a means to achieve these rights. In fact, La Red has added what some would call a new strategy in addition to what African descendants have traditionally done in response to discrimination, that strategy being to work with the government using a non-violent approach. La Red does not see itself as part of the government, but does not see itself as part of the opposition either. Rather, La Red sees the current government as a valuable tool to work with in order to gain what is rightfully theirs.

With regard to the subject of social movements in Latin America, La Red represents a specific example for Venezuela. La Red provides these social movements with various strategies and methods that can be mimicked or adjusted. The progress of La Red during its short existence speaks volumes to its work and thus can be seen as a working example for change. La Red in comparison to other Black social movements in Latin America is still less acknowledged in scholarly literature than Black social movements in Colombia or Brazil. However the case of Blacks in Venezuela is becoming more well-known and La Red as an organization geared towards Black interests is also gaining more attention. As the Network continues to share its plight internationally, its recognition will grow over time. Thus as a newly formed group it still has time to “blaze its trail.”



## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

As a result of my research I have drawn a few major conclusions. Through my experiences in Venezuela I was able to see the living conditions, economic status, occupations, and lifestyles of many Afro-Venezuelans. These observations in conjunction with my analysis of the research that has been done by scholars on the subject have led me to conclude that Blacks are still at the bottom of the social and political ladder as they have been since being brought to Venezuela. Thus, first I have concluded that there is a need for La Red de Afrovenezolanas because Blacks in Venezuela are not treated as equals to their white counterparts. La Red is the only Afro-Venezuelan organization in Venezuela fighting for Afro-Venezuelan social, civil, and political rights. I have also concluded that La Red is helping to foster the growing pride of African ancestry by Afro-Venezuelans. My research also showed that La Red is making significant strides in accomplishing its goals, such as its progressive relationship with President Chavez and the inclusion of Afro-Venezuelan history and culture in some school curriculums, which both were non-existent before La Red. Thus we can conclude that overall La Red is likely to fulfill the remainder of its major goals.

The results of my research demonstrate that the Network plays a role in the continuity of Black resistance in Venezuela. By this I am referring to the organization's drive to combat oppression by the government and society through active means such as marches, protests, petitions, conferences, and various other avenues. My research also shows that La Red holds a significant position in the larger collection of social movements throughout Latin America. La Red has been gaining recognition nationally and internationally. This is visible through the extensive traveling that members of La Red have done including trips to the United States, as

discussed briefly above. The Network can also be said to be a significant transmitter of Afro-Venezuelan culture and history for generations to come. Since La Red focuses on educating Afro-Venezuelans of all ages, and looks to do so through cultural events, music, its journal, and school curriculum, it can be assumed that future generations will know more about the work of the organization and hopefully pass that tradition on. My main conclusion is that if enslavement, the legacy of racism and the Latin American heritage of whitening the population were removed from Venezuelan and Latin American history, there would be no need for La Red or any other similar social movements. The mere existence of these socio-political organizations prove that racism and racial discrimination are alive and well in Latin America. Without the work of La Red de Organizaciones Afrovenezolanas and other progressive organizations, Blacks would not have progressed this far.

Nonetheless, there are various limitations to my research on La Red in Venezuela. Overall my research was limited because of my lack of fluency in the Spanish language. Thus I was not only unable to personally engage with non-bilingual members of La Red, but I also had to conduct all of my research in Spanish and later translate my results. Also since my research was conducted over a span of five weeks between May 29, 2008 to July 4, 2008, I was only able to observe the Network within a short period of time. Aside from personal interviews, visits to the Network headquarters, and personal visits with the founder of La Red, I was only able to see the product of the organization's work on two occasions. One of those occasions was observing the results of the cultural integration program at an elementary school in Puerto Cabello, Valencia State, Venezuela. This trip to Puerto Cabello with Ms. Angela Diaz, mentioned above, allowed me to see the children present their findings on African and Indigenous cultures of Venezuela, which is a combination of La Red and the government's push to incorporate typically excluded persons into the school

curriculum. Prior to my research trip to Venezuela, I read of the work La Red was doing and promoting within schools, specifically its desire to integrate Afro-Venezuelan history and culture into curriculum. I was pleased to see that this was in fact taking place, although I was able to attend only one school presentation and thus cannot give a holistic view of the public school system's inclusion or exclusion of this type of curriculum. The second occasion where I was able to observe the progress of La Red was at the Commemoration of Leonardo Chirinos, where two members of La Red were guest speakers. My understanding of things said throughout the event was again limited because of my lack of Spanish language fluency.

Time constraints added to the limitations of my research in that it caused me to be unable to interview more members of La Red. Distance was the main challenge in preventing these interviews from taking place. Time also did not allow for my questionnaire to be distributed. I intended on surveying predominantly Black communities to get a sense of how well-known La Red is and how they have affected the people in these areas. Although I was unable to administer these questionnaires due to time constraints and language barriers, during the time I was in Venezuela, there were no other visible Afro-Venezuelan organizations. All of these organizations I encountered were members of the larger La Red Network, which seems to demonstrate the leadership of La Red in the Afro-Venezuelan movement. Time, language, and transportation are three major factors that limited my research. However, aside from these limitations my research gives supportive details about La Red, an organization that is not well-known.

For further research I plan to return to Venezuela in order to fully document more of the various Cumbes and what they are producing. I plan on conducting more interviews with members of La Red and hope to interview Blacks and non-Blacks living in Venezuela in order to determine the impact La Red is having on Venezuelan

society. I also would like to interview Blacks and non-Blacks in order to better determine how Blacks are treated on an everyday basis. I also intend to disseminate my original questionnaires throughout Black and non-Black communities to determine the direct effects La Red has had on Black communities throughout Venezuela. I would also like to meet with members of Ministries and Commissions run by the Chavez government to examine how they view La Red and what La Red is demanding. If possible I hope to see President Chavez out in the Black community to ascertain whether he is responsive to the Afro-Venezuelan Network. Overall I desire to spend more time with La Red as an organization and continue to document its organizing efforts.

For further investigation, I recommend updated research be conducted. Most of the literature that speaks specifically to the status of Blacks in Venezuela is at least twenty to thirty years old. Those texts mainly focus on enslavement and colonialism in Venezuela. Some of the newer texts focus on race relations and attempt to challenge the myth of racial democracy, but none concentrate specifically on Blacks in Venezuela. These texts also do not input first-hand accounts by Afro-Venezuelans into their analysis. Two exceptions to this are articles written by reporters who have interviewed members of La Red and the Black community at large in Venezuela.<sup>266</sup> These articles provide primary source material. However, books also need to be written utilizing this information. As a general suggestion more research and written analysis need to be conducted on Afro-Venezuelans and the Afro-Venezuelan Network.

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<sup>266</sup> Humberto Marquez who writes for Global Information Network and Karen Carrillo who writes for the New York Amsterdam News provide primary source information within their articles.

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