

## MANUEL ZAPATA OLIVELLA, *Racial Politics and Pan-Africanism in Colombia in the 1970s*

**ABSTRACT:** The First Congress of Black Culture of the Americas, held in Cali, Colombia, in August 1977 and organized by Afro-Colombian intellectual Manuel Zapata Olivella, was the first Pan-Africanist conference held in Latin America. This paper examines the obstacles Afro-Latin American activists faced in organizing a racially defined event and analyzes how they articulated their own interpretations of black radical politics. It shows that a Pan-Africanist event in Latin America had to account for ideologies of racial harmony and mixture. Observers throughout the region mobilized these ideas to discredit the First Congress as a racist and illegitimate threat to mestizo nationhood. Afro-Latin American activists used it as a platform to debate and denounce ideologies of racial harmony and mixture which many argued cloaked racism and impeded black mobilization. However, for many of the delegates engaging with black radical politics did not imply an absolute rejection of these ideas, but instead highlighted the varying ways in which Afro-Latin American activists understood and contested these concepts in the 1970s. Many Afro-Latin American delegates, even those who were openly critical of ideologies of racial harmony, called for multiracial forms of solidarity and expressed support for culturally mixed visions of the nation-state.

**KEYWORDS:** Manuel Zapata Olivella, Colombia, Pan-Africanism, racial harmony, citizenship

Between August 24 and 28, 1977, over 150 intellectuals, artists, and activists from across the African diaspora celebrated the First Congress of Black Culture of the Americas, in Cali, Colombia. Bringing together people of African descent from South and North America, the Caribbean, Africa, and Europe, the event was the first Pan-Africanist meeting held in Latin America.<sup>1</sup> Spearheaded by the Afro-Colombian intellectual Manuel Zapata Olivella, the Congress drew the participation of people such as Afro-Brazilian activist Abdias do Nascimento, Grenadian scholar Stanley Cyrus, and the Nigerian writer and future Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka.<sup>2</sup> There were also envoys of Senegal's

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1. I understand Pan-Africanism as the intellectual and political efforts to promote solidarity between people of African descent and fight the legacies of slavery, racism, and colonialism, and their contemporary manifestations.

2. Zapata was a physician, anthropologist, and prolific writer. From the 1940s, he was at the vanguard of struggles for racial justice in Colombia. He helped establish the Club Negro (1943), the Centro de Estudios Afro-Colombianos (1947), the Fundación Colombiana de Estudios Folclóricos (1973), and the magazine *Letras Nacionales* (1965). For

President Léopold Senghor, one of the founders of the *Négritude* movement, as well as observers from the Organization of American States (OAS) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).<sup>3</sup>

A great sense of urgency to cultivate racial consciousness and solidarity in Latin America drove the organization of the Congress. For the organizers, it was time to “leave lamentations behind and strike out for concrete vindications”—to dismantle the legacies of slavery and “reclaim” their rightful place within American societies.<sup>4</sup> According to Zapata, the conference sought to reaffirm black culture and identity in the Americas, to overcome the political alienation imposed on black people since slavery, and to combat racial discrimination against “black and indigenous peoples . . . [and] their *mestizo*, *mulato* and *zambo* descendants” on the whole continent.<sup>5</sup> Zapata’s criticism of state policies silencing black culture and of official denials of racism was an indictment of ideologies of racial harmony and a rejection of the idea that Latin America was more racially tolerant than the United States. However, Zapata also noted Latin America’s mixed composition and suggested that black mobilization in the region had to account for racial mixture. That Zapata—arguably Colombia’s most prolific thinker of *mestizaje* and blackness in the twentieth century—organized the first Pan-Africanist meeting in Latin America is extremely significant.<sup>6</sup> The Congress is an opportunity to examine how his

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some examples of his works exploring questions of race and diaspora, see *He visto la noche* (Bogotá: Editorial Los Andes, 1953), which is an account of his experience travelling to Mexico and the United States in the 1940s, and his epic black diasporic novel, *Changó, el Gran Putas* (Bogotá: Ministerio de Cultura, 2010). For other works by Zapata dealing with ideas about race, nation, blackness, and *mestizaje*, see *¡Levántate mulato! Por mi raza hablará el espíritu* (Bogotá: Rei, 1990); *La rebelión de los genes: el mestizaje americano en la sociedad futura* (Bogotá: Altamir, 1997); and *El árbol brujo de la libertad: África en Colombia—origenes, transculturación, presencia* (Bogotá: Ediciones desde Abajo, 2014). For a collection of some of his published materials, see Alfonso Múnera, ed., *Por los senderos de sus ancestros: textos escogidos, 1940–2000* (Bogotá: Ministerio de Cultura, 2010). For secondary publications about Zapata’s life and work, see George Palacios, “De rebeldías y revoluciones: perspectivas críticas desde abajo y desde Oriente en el pensamiento de Manuel Zapata Olivella,” *Estudios de Literatura Colombiana* 42 (2018): 117–138; Mara Veveros Vigoya, “Manuel Zapata Olivella (1920–2004),” in *Pensamiento colombiano en el siglo XX*, Vol. 3, Carmen Millán de Benavides, Santiago Castro-Gómez, and Guillermo Hoyos Vásquez, eds. (Bogotá: Universidad Javeriana, 2013); William Mina Aragón, *Manuel Zapata Olivella. Un legado intercultural. Perspectiva intelectual, literaria y política de un afrocolombiano cosmopolita* (Bogotá: Ediciones desde Abajo, 2016); Antonio D. Tillis, *Manuel Zapata Olivella and the Darkening of Latin American Literature* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2005); Richard L. Jackson, *The Black Image in Latin American Literature* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1976); Richard L. Jackson, *Black Writers in Latin America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1979); and Richard L. Jackson, *Black Literature and Humanism in Latin America* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988).

3. Lista de participantes, in *Primer Congreso de la Cultura Negra de las Américas*, UNESCO et al., eds. (Bogotá: UNESCO, 1988), 14–15.

4. “Circular anunciando la convocatoria del Primer Congreso de la Cultura Negra de las Américas,” October 12, 1976, in *Primer Congreso*, 3.

5. Manuel Zapata Olivella, “El Congreso de la Cultura Negra. Nueva era para la identidad de América,” in *Primer Congreso*, 19–21.

6. While non-black scholars such as Gilberto Freyre, José Vasconcelos, and Fernando Ortiz have received significant attention as prominent thinkers of ideologies of racial mixture and *mestizaje*, Manuel Zapata Olivella needs to be reconsidered as part of that intellectual tradition.

ideas about race and nation shaped the planning of this event and his understanding of black diasporic politics.

Moreover, the Congress gives us a privileged window to evaluate how Afro-Latin American activists debated ideas of race and nation within Latin America and across the boundaries of Spanish and Lusophone America and how they imagined their own forms of transnational black mobilization.<sup>7</sup> Ideologies of racial harmony and mixture and comparisons with the politics of race relations in the United States informed the debates and responses to the Congress. At times, US delegates insisted that Afro-Latin Americans faced little racial discrimination and questioned their strategies of political organization. Meanwhile, government authorities and media observers within Latin America invoked the same racial comparison to oppose black mobilization. Many observers linked the conference with radical politics across the African diaspora, such as the Black Panthers, to portray the activities of delegates as dangerous and illegitimate threats to mestizo nationhood.

Scholars of black mobilization in Brazil have shown that comparisons between Latin American and US race relations have proven difficult to avoid, and in the case of Brazil and the US racial dynamics were produced as part of a process of mutual exchange.<sup>8</sup> The regional parameters of the Congress in Cali also reveal the varying ways in which Afro-Latin American activists understood and contested notions of racial harmony in the 1970s. For some, especially Zapata, there was no contradiction between mestizaje and organizing a Pan-Africanist meeting. For others, such as Nascimento, ideologies of racial mixture could hinder black mobilization.

The goals of the Congress—to reaffirm black culture and identity, challenge ideas of racial harmony, and advance new forms of political organization—reflected the changing debates about race, nation, and black mobilization in Latin America in the 1970s. From the 1930s, the work of scholars such as Gilberto Freyre and

7. For a discussion on the historical and academic divide between an “Afro-descendant” Brazil and an “indigenous” or “mestizo” Spanish America, see Barbara Weinstein, “Erecting and Erasing Boundaries: Can We Combine the “Indo” and the “Afro” in Latin American Studies?” *ELAL: Estudios Interdisciplinarios de América Latina y el Caribe* 19:1 (2008): 129–144.

8. For detailed analyses of the intellectual and historical development of racial comparisons between Latin America and the United States, see Micol Seigel, *Uneven Encounters: Making Race and Nation in Brazil and the United States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), and “Beyond Compare: Comparative Method after the Transnational Turn,” *Radical History Review* 91 (2005): 62–90; Paulina L. Alberto and Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof, “‘Racial Democracy’ and Racial Inclusion: Hemispheric Histories,” in *Afro-Latin American Studies: An Introduction*, Alejandro de la Fuente and George Reid Andrews, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); and George Reid Andrews, “Brazilian Racial Democracy, 1900–90: An American Counterpoint,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 31:3 (1996): 483–507. See also Pierre-Michel Fontaine, “Transnational Relations and Racial Mobilization: Emerging Black Movements in Brazil,” in *Ethnic Identities in a Transnational World*, John F. Stack, ed. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981).

Frank Tannenbaum had helped to crystallize the idea that in contrast with the United States, where racial discrimination was fixed and legally sanctioned, the absence of rigid racial stratifications in Latin America created more racially harmonious societies.<sup>9</sup> By the 1970s, however, activists and scholars increasingly denounced notions of racial harmony as myths that obscured the existence of racism and impeded organizing along racial lines.<sup>10</sup> Inspired by political movements across the African diaspora, in the 1970s Afro-Latin American activists launched organizations, periodicals, and events promoting black culture and racial consciousness.<sup>11</sup> Afro-Latin Americans also began to participate in Pan-Africanist events. Zapata was a delegate at the 1974 Colloquium on Négritude in Latin America in Dakar, while Nascimento participated in the Sixth Pan-Africanist Congress in 1974 and in the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) in Lagos in 1977.

A turn to the Congress in Colombia and the ideas of Zapata complicates and broadens this historiography by revealing major regional variation in terms of how black activists engaged with ideas of racial harmony and mixture. The tendency of some scholars to see black mobilization in Latin America as antithetical to the embracing of ideologies of racial mixture and harmony has led them to overlook the novel approaches of other Afro-Latin American thinkers to black diasporic politics.<sup>12</sup> Critiques of ideas of racial harmony in the 1970s are also often based on the Afro-Brazilian experiences of activism,

9. See Gilberto Freyre, *Casa-Grande e Senzala: Introdução à história da sociedade patriarcal no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Nova Aguilar, 2000); and Frank Tannenbaum, *Slave and Citizen: The Negro in the Americas* (New York: Vintage Books, 1946).

10. For discussions on the Afro-Colombian movement in the 1970s from some of its founding activists, see Carlos Calderón Mosquera, *Política, economía e historia en la Colombia y el Cbooc de hoy* (Bogotá: Editorial Cosmos, 1972); Juan de Dios Mosquera, *Las comunidades negras de Colombia: pasado, presente y futuro* (Medellín: Cimarrón, 1986); Amir Smith Córdoba, *Cultura negra y avasallamiento cultural* (Bogotá: Centro para la Investigación de la Cultura Negra en Colombia, 1980), and *Visión sociocultural del negro en Colombia* (Bogotá: Centro para la Investigación de la Cultura Negra en Colombia, 1986); and Valentín Moreno Salazar, *Negritudes* (Cali: Editores XYZ, 1995).

11. George Reid Andrews, *Afro-Latin America, 1800–2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 183–186.

12. For a discussion on how the emphasis on Brazil came to be, see Tianna S. Paschel, “Rethinking Black Mobilization in Latin America,” in *Afro-Latin American Studies: An Introduction*, De la Fuente and Reid Andrews, eds., 222–263. While most of the scholarship on race relations has historically focused on comparisons between Brazil and the United States, similar arguments have been made about other Latin American countries. Notable examples of the scholarship that views ideologies of racial harmony as politically neutralizing include Michael Hanchard, *Orpheus and Power: The Movimento Negro of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, Brazil, 1945–1988* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Aline Helg, *Our Rightful Share: The Afro-Cuban Struggle for Equality, 1886–1912* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Anthony W. Marx, *Making Race and Nation: A Comparison of South Africa, the United States, and Brazil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Thomas E. Skidmore, *Black into White: Race and Nationality in Brazilian Thought* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993); and Winthrop Wright, *Café con Leche: Race, Class, and National Image in Venezuela* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990). A more recent example for Colombia that builds on this academic tradition is Pietro Pisano, *Liderazgo político “negro” en Colombia, 1943–1964* (Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2012).

including the important work of Nascimento.<sup>13</sup> They are also often reduced to opposition to a generic concept of racial democracy.<sup>14</sup>

As other scholars of race and mobilization have argued, the prevalence of ideologies of racial harmony made mobilization difficult but simultaneously opened spaces for other forms of activism.<sup>15</sup> Building on those insights, this article argues that Afro-Latin American delegates at the Congress were not simply denouncing racial democracy as a myth but rather were negotiating different—and at times competing—understandings of ideologies of racial harmony and mixture. While finding inspiration in black movements in the United States and elsewhere in the African diaspora, they also sought to carve out their own trajectories of political organization in ways that accounted for the particularities of race in Latin America.

Despite the differences between activists and criticism coming from multiple fronts, Afro-Latin American delegates unequivocally argued that racial discrimination existed in their societies and that they had to organize against it. According to these activists, what made race and racism in Latin America particular was, first, the belief that processes of racialization and racial discrimination existed outside of legal frameworks. Further, the region was structured by racial and class hierarchies whereby black, indigenous, and some mestizo people were at the bottom, rather than simple binaries between black and white people. This had important implications for mobilization. The widespread nature of economic disparities meant that multiracial forms of organization were politically necessary. But the persistence of racism and racial discrimination also meant that delegates had to develop strategies that addressed the specific forms of class and racial oppression they faced as people of African descent.

Although the Congress was the first Pan-Africanist meeting in Latin America and a major achievement of black activism in the region, it has until recently received little systemic attention.<sup>16</sup> More recently, scholars such as Carlos Alberto

13. See for instance Abdias do Nascimento and Elisa Larkin Nascimento, *Africans in Brazil: A Pan-African Perspective* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1982); Abdias do Nascimento, *Racial Democracy in Brazil, Myth or Reality? A Dossier of Brazilian Racism* (Ibadan, Nigeria: Sketch Publ. Co., 1977).

14. For a discussion on the development of the term and concept of racial democracy, see Alberto and Hoffnung-Garsk, “Racial Democracy,” 277–287.

15. See for instance Paulina L. Alberto, *Terms of Inclusion: Black Intellectuals in Twentieth-Century Brazil* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Ada Ferrer, *Insurgent Cuba: Race, Nation, and Revolution, 1868–1898* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Alejandro de la Fuente, *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth-Century Cuba* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); and Marixa Lasso, *Myths of Harmony: Race and Republicanism during the Age of Revolution, Colombia 1795–1831* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007).

16. For example, Darién J. Davis et al., “Pan-Afro-Latin African Americanism Revisited: Legacies and Lessons for Transnational Alliances in the New Millennium,” in *Afrodendants, Identity, and the Struggle for Development in the Americas*, Bernd Reiter and Kimberly Eison Simmons, eds. (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2012),

Valderrama Rentería and Silvia Valero have reaffirmed the significance of this meeting for understanding Afro-Colombian and Afro-Latin American diasporic thought and politics. In the case of Valderrama, the meeting is an example of the ways in which black culture was mobilized by black activists to advance claims against racism and for racial justice.<sup>17</sup> I complement this account by analyzing the central role that ideologies of racial harmony and mestizaje played in the debates at the Congress and by documenting the responses to this event from non-black commentators.

The Congress in Cali ultimately invites us to broaden the trajectories of the Afro-Colombian and Afro-Latin American social movements and the scope of Pan-Africanist politics. Despite growing research about Afro-Colombia, this work tends to focus on the constitutional debates of the 1990s that recognized black people as a distinct ethnic group and subsequent social movements.<sup>18</sup> Analyzing the Congress deepens our understanding of Afro-Colombian mobilization and transnational black politics in Latin America in the 1970s, by unveiling the extraordinary networks of Afro-Latin American cooperation that

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22; Anthony Ratcliff, “‘Black Writers of the World, Unite!’ Negotiating Pan-African Politics of Cultural Struggle in Afro-Latin America,” *The Black Scholar* 37:4 (January 2008): 27–38; and Maguemati Wabgou et al., *Movimiento social afrocolombiano, negro, raizal y palenquero: el largo camino hacia la construcción de espacios comunes y alianzas estratégicas para la incidencia política en Colombia* (Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2012).

17. See Carlos Alberto Valderrama Rentería, “La política cultural de la negritud en Latinoamérica: debates del Primer Congreso de La Cultura Negra de Las Américas, Cali, Colombia, 1977,” *Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* 26:1 (2021): 104–123. Silvia Valero offers an introduction that contextualizes the debates of the Congress in Cali and republishes documents from this meeting in her book “*Los negros se toman la palabra*.” *Primer Congreso de la Cultura Negra de las Américas: debates al interior de las comisiones y plenarias* (Bogotá: Universidad Javeriana, 2020).

18. Afro-Colombian mobilization during the constitutional debates of the 1990s contributed to black people being recognized as a distinct ethnic group for the first time in the 1991 Constitution and acquiring ethnic and territorial rights. Many of these rights are enshrined in *Ley 70*, or the Law of Black Communities. For an in-depth analysis of these processes and strategies of mobilization after the 1991 Constitution, see Tianna S. Paschel, *Becoming Black Political Subjects: Movements and Ethno-racial Rights in Colombia and Brazil* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016). For other texts about the social movements that emerged in the 1990s see, Ulrich Oslender, *The Geographies of Social Movements: Afro-Colombian Mobilization and the Aquatic Space* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016); Kiran Asher, *Black and Green: Afro-Colombians, Development, and Nature in the Pacific Lowlands* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009); Eduardo Restrepo, *Etnización de la negritud: la invención de las ‘comunidades negras’ como grupo étnico en Colombia* (Popayán: Editorial Universidad del Cauca, 2013); Carlos Efrén Agudelo, *Multiculturalismo en Colombia: política, inclusión y exclusión de poblaciones negras* (Medellín: La Carreta Editores, 2005); Luis Carlos Castillo G., *Etnicidad y nación: el desafío de la diversidad en Colombia* (Cali: Programa Editorial Universidad del Valle, 2007); Arturo Escobar, *Territories of Difference: Place, Movements, Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); Michael Birenbaum Quintero, *Rites, Rights, and Rhythms: A Genealogy of Musical Meaning in Colombia’s Black Pacific* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019); and Anthony Dest, “Disenchanted with the State’: Confronting the Limits of Neoliberal Multiculturalism in Colombia,” *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies* 15:4 (2020): 368–90. Important texts for understandings the politics of race and blackness in Colombia are Nina S. de Friedemann, *De sol a sol: génesis, transformación y presencia de los negros en Colombia* (Bogotá: Planeta, 1986); Peter Wade, *Blackness and Race Mixture: The Dynamics of Racial Identity in Colombia*, Johns Hopkins Studies in Atlantic History and Culture (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Peter Wade, “The Cultural Politics of Blackness in Colombia,” *American Ethnologist* 22:2 (1995): 341–357; Peter Wade, *Music, Race, & Nation: Música Tropical in Colombia*, Chicago Studies in Ethnomusicology (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); and Peter Wade, “Mestizaje, Multiculturalism, Liberalism, and Violence,” *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies* 11:3 (2016): 323–343.



existed at the time and the contributions of Afro-Colombian activists to these processes.<sup>19</sup> These networks paved the way for future instances of transnational collaboration, such as the 2001 World Conference Against Racism in Durban, South Africa, and its preparatory meeting in Santiago, Chile, in 2000, where black activists from across Latin America congregated in a large scale.<sup>20</sup>

Further, the scholarship on Pan-Africanism and black radical politics in the 1970s has mainly focused on the English- and French-speaking diaspora.<sup>21</sup> The Congress shows how Afro-Latin American activists contributed to these movements by centering their particular histories of race and nation and articulating their own interpretations of black transnational solidarity.<sup>22</sup> The first two sections of this article trace the origins and organization of the Congress; a third section contextualizes the event within larger efforts of black activism in Colombia in the 1970s; and the last two sections examine the debates at the Congress and the responses to it in the Colombian press.

19. For general overviews of the emerging Afro-Colombian social movements of the 1970s, see Pietro Pisano, "Movilidad social e identidad 'negra' en la segunda mitad del siglo XX," *Anuario Colombiano de Historia Social y de la Cultura* 41:1 (June 2014): 179–199; Peter Wade, "El movimiento negro en Colombia," *América Negra* 5 (1993): 173–191; and Wabgou et al., *Movimiento Social*. Some pioneering texts dealing with questions of race and Afro-Colombian mobilization from the 1970s center on the experiences and claims-making strategies of Afro-Colombian peasants from across the country. These include Nina S. de Friedemann, *Villarrica. Una comunidad negra en el foco de un programa de investigaciones multidisciplinarias en desarrollo rural* (Cali: Instituto Colombiano de Antropología e Historia, 1974), and "Negros: monopolio de tierra, agricultores y desarrollo de plantaciones de caña de azúcar en el valle del Río Cauca," in *Tierra, tradición y poder en Colombia: enfoques antropológicos* (Bogotá: Instituto Colombiano de Cultura, 1976); Mateo Mina, *Esclavitud y libertad en el Valle del Río Cauca* (Bogotá: Fundación Rosca de Investigación y Acción Social, 1975); Michael K. Taussig, *Destrucción y resistencia campesina: el caso del Litoral Pacífico* (Bogotá: Punta de Lanza, 1978); Orlando Fals Borda, *Doble historia de la costa: Vol. 1 Mompos and Loba, Vol. 2 El Presidente Nieto, Vol. 3 Resistencia en el San Jorge, Vol. 4 Retorno a la tierra* (Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2002).

20. See for instance Michael J. Turner, "The Road to Durban—And Back," *NACLA Report on the Americas* 35:6 (May/June 2002): 31; Sueli Carneiro, "A batalha de Durban," *Estudos Feministas* 10:1 (January 2002): 209–214; Mala Htun, "From 'Racial Democracy' to Affirmative Action: Changing State Policy on Race in Brazil," *Latin American Research Review* 39:1 (2004): 60–98; and Romero Rodríguez, "Entramos negros; salimos Afrodescendientes," *Revista Futuros* 2:5 (2004).

21. Although some of these texts do engage with Latin America in some form, the ideas and politics of Afro-Latin Americans, or how these play out in Latin American national contexts, are not the central concern and are not considered in a systematic way. See for instance Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); Minkah Makalani, *In the Cause of Freedom: Radical Black Internationalism from Harlem to London, 1917–1939* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Nico Slate, *Black Power beyond Borders* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Adam Ewing, *The Age of Garvey: How a Jamaican Activist Created a Mass Movement and Changed Global Black Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014); and Carla Burnett, "'Unity Is Strength': Labor, Race, Garveyism, and the 1920 Panama Canal Strike," *The Global South* 6:2 (2012): 39–64. A notable departure from this trend is the recent book by Hakim Adi, which for example examines some of the ideas of Nascimento: *Pan-Africanism: A History* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

22. For examples of works about black diasporic politics in Latin America, see Frank Andre Gurrity, *Forging Diaspora: Afro-Cubans and African Americans in a World of Empire and Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Solimar Otero, *Afro-Cuban Diasporas in the Atlantic World* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2010); Lara Putnam, *Radical Moves: Caribbean Migrants and the Politics of Race in the Jazz Age* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); and James Lorand Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion: Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matrarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

## PAN-AFRICANIST ANTECEDENTS: ZAPATA IN DAKAR, 1974

Manuel Zapata's participation and exchanges with other Latin American intellectuals at the 1974 Colloquium on Negritude in Latin America in Dakar inspired him to organize the Congress. This colloquium was organized by Senegalese President Senghor as part of larger efforts to export his ideas of Négritude and black solidarity outside Africa.<sup>23</sup> The conference explored the significance of Négritude outside of Africa and drew the participation of Latin American intellectuals such as the Guatemalan *indigenista* novelist Miguel Ángel Asturias, the Mexican philosopher Leopoldo Zea, and the Colombian historian Germán Arciniegas. There were also, in Zapata's words, black Peruvians, Brazilian *mulatos* and *zambos*, multiracial black people from the Antilles, and "los triétnicos" of Colombia, Panamá, and Venezuela, as well as delegates from Spain, Portugal, and France. Zapata was, however, alarmed by the absence of Latin American indigenous delegates at the conference.<sup>24</sup>

The multiplicity of terms that Zapata used to speak about blackness in Latin America reflected his ideas of mestizaje. A polymath, Zapata was a physician, anthropologist, and writer. From the 1940s, he was at the vanguard of struggles for racial justice in Colombia. He helped establish the Club Negro (1943), the Centro de Estudios Afro-Colombianos (1947), the Fundación Colombiana de Estudios Folclóricos (1973), and the literary magazine *Letras Nacionales* (1965). For Zapata, mestizaje was a tri-cultural process of acculturation between indigenous, African, and European peoples and their descendants.<sup>25</sup> Much of his work focused on putting the popular culture and history of black and indigenous peoples at the center of *colombianidad*.<sup>26</sup> For instance, in a 1976 article in *Letras Nacionales* he criticized national elites for measuring themselves by North American and European standards and for conceiving their own populations as being in a state of "illiteracy and backwardness."<sup>27</sup> Instead, Zapata argued that the popular culture and folklore of black and indigenous peoples were necessary for the "conscious revindication of the nation" and a key weapon to combat imperialism and

23. For a discussion of Senghor's Pan-Africanist politics in the 1970s, see Andrew Apter, "Beyond Négritude: Black Cultural Citizenship and the Arab Question in FESTAC 77," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 28:3 (November 2015): 1–14.

24. Manuel Zapata Olivella, "Negritud, indianidad y mestizaje en Latinoamérica," *Negritud* 3 (May–July 1978): 18–19.

25. For an elaboration of his ideas of racial mixture, see Manuel Zapata Olivella, *El árbol brujo de la libertad. África en Colombia: orígenes, transculturación, presencia: ensayo histórico mítico* (Valle del Cauca: Universidad del Pacífico, 2002), 112.

26. Manuel Zapata Olivella, "Opresión y explotación del africano en la colonización de América Latina," *Revista de la Universidad de Medellín* 22 (July–September 1976), in *Por los senderos*, 317.

27. Manuel Zapata Olivella, Editorial, *Letras Nacionales* 5 (November–December 1965), 19.



racism everywhere.<sup>28</sup> For him, cultural particularity not only coexisted with a broader national culture but was central for advancing social and political change.

At Dakar, participants discussed concepts such as *negritud*, *indianidad*, and *mestizaje*. Some participants, like Leopoldo Zea, minimized the importance of race in struggles for justice and equality in Latin America. For Zea, *indigenismo* and *negritud* were rooted in a common experience of cultural and economic dependency and were banners of liberation and decolonization.<sup>29</sup> However, *indigenismo* brought together “Indians, whites or mestizos,” and thus could be the basis of a new *latinoamericanismo*, whereas *negritud* was rooted “in the black man himself” and could not function as an inclusive political platform.<sup>30</sup> By defining *mestizaje* as a white/indigenous exchange, Zea effectively placed blackness outside the boundaries of Latin America and framed *negritud* as an exclusionary ideology. He further claimed that the national problem in Latin America was no longer one of race—“between Indians and whites”—but of class: “between exploited and exploiters.”<sup>31</sup> On one hand, Zea’s analysis referenced widespread Marxist ideas across Latin American intellectual circles that prioritized class over race to explain social conflicts in the region. But on the other, his views capture the broader process analyzed by anthropologist Peter Wade whereby indigenous people are associated with ethnicity and malleable forms of cultural difference, while Afro-descendants are associated with race, often defined around fixed notions of phenotypical difference.<sup>32</sup>

By contrast, Zapata argued that *indianidad* and *negritud* were both central to struggles for social justice in Latin America and that black and indigenous people were the forces behind these movements. The Dakar colloquium confirmed to him that the influence of Africans in Latin America could not be understood in isolation from indigenous contributions, which were “equal to or much more powerful than all the ethnic and cultural structures of America.” At the same time, to Zapata the absence of indigenous participants and the expectation that black delegates could represent them revealed a historical pattern in which others, including contemporary *indigenistas*, spoke on indigenous peoples’ behalf. It is also possible that leaders like Senghor similarly believed that black Latin Americans were suitable envoys, which would reflect a

28. Manuel Zapata Olivella, “El folclor como afirmación de la nacionalidad,” *Páginas de Cultura* 16 (March–April 1967), in *Por los senderos*, 233–236.

29. A copy of Zea’s intervention in Dakar was published in *Latinoamérica. Cuadernos de Cultura Latinoamericana*, a journal based at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM). Leopoldo Zea, “Negritud e indigenismo,” *Latinoamérica. Cuadernos de Cultura Latinoamericana*, 89 (1979). I consulted this publication at the UNESCO Archives in Paris (008 (=96: =97) NEG).

30. Zea, “Negritud,” 17.

31. Zea, “Negritud,” 13.

32. Peter Wade, *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America* (London: Pluto Press, 2010), 15.

broader disconnect between some Pan-Africanist currents and specific political struggles in Latin America. In Zapata's view, the difference between *negritud* and *indianidad* was that those who embraced the former accepted their blackness, whereas *indigenistas* were whites or mestizos who acted out of intellectual interests and who were disconnected from the concrete struggles of indigenous peoples.<sup>33</sup>

The Dakar colloquium convinced Zapata that struggles for racial justice in Latin America had to account for the region's multiracial character. He saw no contradiction between ideas of Pan-Africanism and *mestizaje*. The histories and contributions of black and indigenous people, along with their claims for equality, could not be separated from one another. If their experiences of exclusion and discrimination were part of what Wade referred to as similar "structures of alterity," overcoming them required collaboration and dialogue.<sup>34</sup> Positioning himself as a Pan-Africanist leader, Zapata declared that if Du Bois and Garvey had led "the anti-discriminatory struggles in the US and Africa" it was time for "the winds of *Negritud* to return to Latin America."<sup>35</sup>

Although there is overlap between Zapata's notion of *negritud* with the ideas of the *Négritude* movement in Africa and the French-speaking Caribbean, particularly around questions of cultural hybridity and racial mixture, these are nonetheless distinct concepts.<sup>36</sup> Zapata, who conceived of *negritud* as an "aesthetic political ideology" was both influenced by and in dialogue with cultural and political movements across the African diaspora, including the Harlem Renaissance, the *Négritude* movement, and decolonization struggles in Africa.<sup>37</sup> In fact, during his time in the United States in the 1940s he became friends with writer Langston Hughes, and he dedicated the Congress in Cali to the French-Guinean *Négritude* poet Léon Goutrand (Léon-Gontran) Damas.<sup>38</sup>

33. Zapata Olivella, "Negritud, indianidad y mestizaje," *Negritud* 3 (May-July 1978): 18–19.

34. Wade, *Race and Ethnicity*, 40.

35. Zapata Olivella, "Negritud."

36. For discussions about the role of cultural hybridity and racial mixture in the *Négritude* movement, see Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015), in particular chaps. 2 and 3. Also see Irina Dzero, "Meanings of Hybridity in Aimé Césaire's 'Discours sur le colonialisme,'" *French Review* 85:1 (2011): 102–114.

37. From another version of Manuel Zapata Olivella, "Negritud, indianidad y mestizaje," *Revista de Historia* 1:2 (July 1976), in *Por los senderos*, 295.

38. In the 1940s, Zapata developed a friendship with African American writer Langston Hughes. At the time, he reported that in one instance he told Hughes that in Colombia black people had "equal rights" and did not face forms of violence similar to black people in the United States. A statement that captures Zapata's shifting ideas about race and nation in Colombia and Latin America, it also underscores the ways in which these ideas in Colombia were being produced in dialogue with the United States prior to the 1970s. Manuel Zapata Olivella, "Langston Hughes, el hombre," *El Sábado*, August 23, 1947. He also discusses his relationship with Hughes in *He visto la noche* (1953). In the publication of the documents of the Congress in Cali, Zapata paid homage to Damas and other *Négritude* poets. "León Damas, poeta de América," in *Primer Congreso*, vii–ix.

As such, Zapata used *negritud* to refer to cultural and political projects across Africa and its diaspora, valorizing blackness and promoting the cultural, political, and economic liberation of people of African descent. This concept was also fundamentally tied to *mestizaje*. In his view, *negritud* was not only necessary for black Latin Americans but “essential” for the “full authenticity” of the “American *mestizo*.”<sup>39</sup> Put differently, for him, blackness and the histories, experiences, and contributions of black people were an essential dimension of processes of cultural and racial mixture in Colombia and the region at large.

## ORGANIZING THE FIRST CONGRESS

The Congress was a major logistical task that required years of planning and coordination across the Americas, the Caribbean, Africa, and Europe, in several languages and with limited funds. Although Zapata was the architect of the Congress, it was convened by the Centro de Estudios Afro-Colombianos, La Fundación Colombiana de Investigaciones Folclóricas, and the Asociación Cultural de la Juventud Negra Peruana. The organizers reported that cultural authorities opposed the event by characterizing it as “a neurotic idea of people insecure (*acomplejados*) about their skin color.” Officials in various countries, including Mexico, Venezuela, Peru, Chile, and Argentina, told the organizers that they were citizens, not Afro-descendants. These official responses reproduced the long-held view that black activism was incompatible with definitions of citizenship in Latin America.<sup>40</sup>

Opposition to the Congress manifested in various forms, notably in the denial of funds by Latin American authorities. Originally, the Congress was scheduled for October 1975 in Bogotá, but financial issues delayed it. To overcome this challenge the organizers successfully lobbied OAS and UNESCO. On May 13, 1977, Zapata wrote to Stanley Cyrus, one of the main coordinators outside Colombia, stating that “the friends from OAS took very seriously their commitment to give blacks their first congress of black culture.”<sup>41</sup> Whereas fundraising with OAS was done directly by the organizers, the Office of International Relations at the Colombian Ministry of Education served as an

39. Zapata Olivella, “*Negritud*,” in *Por los senderos*, 296.

40. Manuel Zapata Olivella, “De la universalidad a la presencia combatiente,” in *Primer Congreso*, 181–182.

41. Stanley Cyrus was one of the first editors of the *Afro-Hispanic Review*. His relationship with Colombia was tied to Afro-Colombian literature. He was the first to translate the work of the Afro-Colombian writer Carlos Arturo Truque, including *Granizada y otros cuentos*. Fabio Martínez, *Carlos Arturo Truque: Valoración crítica* (Cali: Universidad del Valle, 2014), 11–13.

intermediary with UNESCO.<sup>42</sup> There was, however, no official support from Colombian authorities.<sup>43</sup>

Funding was not the only problem. Zapata claimed that at a preparatory meeting held in Cartagena in December 1976, with delegations from Colombia, Panamá, Brazil, and the United States, ideological and organizational frictions emerged. Tensions apparently arose over whether to invite “acculturated blacks” from the former colonies of the “Latin” empires or the “oppressed brothers” from territories that had experienced Anglo-Saxon rule.<sup>44</sup> Disputes about the boundaries of black solidarity and the nature of racial consciousness in Latin America and beyond were clearly central from the moment of the Congress’s inception. While acculturation likely referenced an extensive process of mestizaje in Latin America, the geographical line drawn between the Latin empires and Anglo-Saxon colonization echoed Tannenbaum’s notion of ‘the Two Americas.’ Tannenbaum argued that in contrast to the British colonies, where enslaved people were defined as chattel, in Latin America slaves were endowed with a moral and legal personality that had produced national projects which lacked the rigid racial stratifications of the United States.<sup>45</sup>

Zapata, however, did not elaborate on the source of this debate or on who defended each position, thus making this episode ultimately inconclusive. It nonetheless reinforced the degree to which for Zapata racial mixture had a positive connotation. For him there was no tension between claiming mestizaje as a defining feature of Latin America and organizing a Pan-Africanist congress. Rather, the Congress was a necessary step to improve the lives not only of black people, but “the entire multiracial society of the Americas.”<sup>46</sup> In the end, organizers agreed to invite delegates from the North Atlantic and to relocate the Congress to Cali, given the strong Afro-Colombian presence on the Pacific Coast.

Zapata’s vision of Pan-Africanism expanded and deepened the dialogue between the Americas and Africa that started in Dakar. A call for papers and invitations from the Centro de Estudios Afro-Colombianos was sent to universities, research centers, and others all over the Americas, the Caribbean, and Africa. Zapata also tried to invite high-profile people such as President Senghor, the poet Léon Goutrand Damas,

42. At the time I consulted this archive in 2014, the material was in the process of being organized and re-catalogued. Letter from Manuel Zapata Olivella to Cyrus Stanley, May 13, 1977. Manuel Zapata Olivella Collections (henceforth MZO Collections), Vanderbilt University.

43. This lack of support is in some ways surprising, considering Zapata’s role within the Ministry of Education. During his tenure at this ministry, he helped plan the First Congress of National Culture in 1966 and other important cultural events in the 1970s.

44. Zapata Olivella, “De la universalidad,” 181.

45. Tannenbaum, *Slave and Citizen*.

46. Zapata Olivella, “Negritud.”

American writer Alex Haley, and boxer and activist Muhammad Ali. Whereas the invitations to Senghor and Damas—who for Zapata were the leading voices of *Négritude* in Africa and the Antilles respectively—linked the Congress to larger intellectual currents in the Black Atlantic, invitations to Haley and Ali connected it to black activism in the United States.<sup>47</sup>

By reorienting the conversation to Latin America, Zapata also decentered the North Atlantic as the locus for black intellectual production and organization. He invited Afro-Latin American intellectuals and activists including Marino Viveros and Aquiles Escalante from Colombia; Raul Giovanni da Motta Lody and Clóvis Moura from Brazil; Gerardo Maloney and Armando Fortune from Panamá; Salomón Chala from Ecuador; Jean-Baptiste Romain from Haiti; Eulalia Bernard from Costa Rica; and José Marcial Ramos Guédez from Venezuela. Non-black intellectuals such as Nina S. de Friedemann from Colombia, Sidney Mintz from the United States, Fernando Romero from Peru, and Carlos Esteban Deive from the Dominican Republic were also invited. Not all attended, but the invitations show how academic production and black activism were developing in dialogue with each other and across transnational and transracial scales. The gendered character of the invitees and participants also points to the male-oriented dynamics at the Congress and of the emerging Afro-Latin American movement more broadly.

In Zapata's personal papers, there are also numerous lists of potential delegates from Latin America, including those in countries not often associated with African influences, such as Mexico, Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, Bolivia, Paraguay, Argentina, and Chile.<sup>48</sup> The decision to include these countries was consistent with Zapata's belief that racial discrimination and the study of black culture had to be approached on a continental scale—one of the objectives of the Congress. He believed that *indianidad*, *negritud*, and *mestizaje* had to be studied together and that *Négritude* and Pan-Africanism were channels to improve the situation of black, indigenous, and poor and marginalized Latin Americans more broadly.

Once news of the Congress spread, academics, writers, and students wrote to Zapata asking to participate and congratulating him for the initiative. Nascimento wrote to Zapata on August 1, 1976, to commend him on his “great efforts and idea to promote black culture in Latin America.”<sup>49</sup>

47. Letter from Manuel Zapata Olivella to Léon Goutrand Damas, July 29, 1977. Lista de invitados I Congreso de la Cultura Negra de las Américas. Letter from Manuel Zapata Olivella to Jorge Benhur, August 9, 1977. MZO Collections.

48. Various undated lists typed and in handwriting with the names of potential delegates to the First Congress of Black Culture of the Americas. MZO Collections.

49. Letter from Abdias do Nascimento to Manuel Zapata Olivella, May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1977. MZO Collections.

Days before the Congress, Mervyn M. Dymally, the lieutenant governor of California, who was originally from Trinidad, also wrote to the organizers to congratulate them on their “efforts to establish closer ties and a common identity among members of various third-world populations.”<sup>50</sup>

The Congress was a truly transnational achievement. Regional committees were created to promote and coordinate delegations from the Americas. The Grenadian-born academic Stanley Cyrus organized the delegations from the West Indies and Uruguay; Clóvis Moura and the Instituto Brasileiro de Estudos Africanistas (IBEA) led the Brazilian delegation.<sup>51</sup> Meanwhile, several committees were created across the United States. Jazz musician and educator Leonard Goines managed the committee for New York; Wilber J. Roget from Tufts University did the same for the Boston area; and James Early from Howard University, managed that of the Washington, DC, area.<sup>52</sup>

The composition of these committees reflected Zapata’s activities abroad in the year prior to the Congress. In 1976, as part of the Fulbright-Hays program, Zapata taught a class at Howard University. The course explored the African presence in Latin America and the contributions of people of African descent to “history, art, music, folklore and socio-political structure.” According to Zapata, while black North Americans were seeking to build cultural links with Latin America, his goal was to promote “Latin American studies in North American institutions.”<sup>53</sup> His stay at Howard and visits to other universities in North America created networks of academic and political collaboration that later materialized in Cali. On January 10, 1977, Early wrote to Zapata saying that he hoped the Congress would promote both Afro-Colombian and Afro-American consciousness.<sup>54</sup> Although advancing black consciousness would be a central theme at the Congress, national, regional, and diasporic understandings of race and black mobilization would have to be negotiated first.

## AFRO-COLOMBIAN MOBILIZATION IN THE 1970S

The Congress and Zapata’s ideas call attention to a vibrant history of black activism in Colombia that has been mostly ignored by the scholarship on social

50. Letter from Mervyn M. Dymally, lieutenant governor of California, to the participants of the First Congress of the Americas, August 16, 1977. MZO Collections.

51. “Negros das Américas em congresso,” *Movimento: Cena Carioca*, November 1, 1976, 10.

52. Letter from Gerald L. Davis, May 11, 1977. Letter to Wilbert, J. Roget, May 19, 1977. Letter from James Early to Manuel Zapata Olivella, January 10, 1977. MZO Collections.

53. “A população negra dos EUA busca vínculos culturais na América Latina,” *Diário de Pernambuco*, March 16, 1976.

54. Letter from James Early to Manuel Zapata Olivella, January 10, 1977. MZO Collections.



movements of this period.<sup>55</sup> Building on earlier struggles, the scope of black mobilization expanded dramatically in the 1970s.<sup>56</sup> Afro-Colombian activists used diverse strategies to promote black organization, study black culture and history and combat racial discrimination. Such strategies included black conferences, the presidential campaign of Juan Zapata Olivella (Manuel's brother) for the 1978 election, and the creation of a leftist black press. An examination of these efforts shows that mobilizing ideologies of racial harmony to make demands for inclusion was a central feature of racial debates in Colombia beyond Zapata. Many Afro-Colombian activists framed their activism in terms of combatting broader structural inequalities and insisted on multiracial forms of solidarity.

Several conferences preceded the First Congress, and they helped articulate the demands of an emerging Afro-Colombian social movement. These included the annual Encuentro Nacional de la Población Negra Colombiana from 1975 to 1977, the Tercer Encuentro Regional y el Primero del Litoral Pacífico in 1975, and the Congreso de Negritudes in Medellín in 1977. Led by Valentín Moreno Salazar, a black lawyer and politician from Chocó, the Primer Encuentro Nacional, held in February 1975 in Cali, brought together Afro-Colombian activists from across the country for the first time. The meeting resulted in the creation of the Consejo de la Población Negra to channel the collective demands of Afro-Colombians. For instance, at the second Encuentro in Quibdó in September 1976, participants sent a petition to President Alfonso López Michelsen calling for educational and economic development in the Pacific and Caribbean regions.<sup>57</sup> At the Congreso de Negritudes in Medellín, the Consejo launched the campaign of Juan Zapata as part of the Movimiento de Negritudes y Mestizaje. For some activists, a racially defined presidential bid was clearly seen as necessary to advance their political agendas.

Affirming and disseminating black culture and political ideas were central goals of the Afro-Colombian movement in this period. Amir Smith Córdoba, a black

55. See for instance Mauricio Archila, *Idas y venidas, vueltas y revueltas: protestas sociales en Colombia, 1958–1990* (Bogotá: Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular, 2003); and León Zamosc, *The Agrarian Question and the Peasant Movement in Colombia: Struggles of the National Peasant Association, 1967–1981* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

56. There is a growing body of historical work about Afro-Colombian mobilization since the first decades of the twentieth century. See Pisano, *Liderazgo político*; Francisco Flórez-Bolívar, “En sus propios términos: negros y mulatos y sus luchas por la igualdad en Colombia, 1885–1947” (PhD diss.: University of Pittsburgh, 2016); Orlando Deavila Pertuz, “The Battle for Paradise: Tourism Development, Race, and Popular Politics during the Remaking of Cartagena (Colombia), 1942–1984” (PhD diss.: University of Connecticut, 2019); Claudia Leal, *Landscapes of Freedom: Building a Postemancipation Society in the Rainforests of Western Colombia* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2018); Jason McGraw, *The Work of Recognition: Caribbean Colombia and the Postemancipation Struggle for Citizenship* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014); and Laura Correa Ochoa, “Black and Indigenous Entanglements: Race, Mobilization and Citizenship in Colombia, 1930–1991” (PhD diss.: Harvard University, 2021).

57. Moreno Salazar, *Negritudes*, 83–91.

sociologist from Chocó and member of the Consejo, founded the Centro para la Investigación y Desarrollo de la Cultura Negra (CIDCUN) in Bogotá in 1975 and the publications *Negritud* (1975) and *Presencia Negra* (1978), the latter inspired by the Paris-based Pan-African journal *Présence Africaine*.<sup>58</sup> These forums became the main outlets for what became known as the Movimiento de la Cultura Negra. One of the priorities of this movement was to connect the experiences and struggles of Afro-Colombians from across the country, especially from the Caribbean and Pacific regions, which had been largely seen as separate.<sup>59</sup> The movement also sought to make their demands internationally visible and to situate their struggle within larger diasporic debates. *Negritud* reported that members affiliated with the Movimiento de la Cultura Negra had met with Muhammad Ali and with the general secretary of UNESCO, Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow, in their visits to Colombia in 1977 and 1978.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, in *Presente*, a leftist newspaper from Quibdó, on the country's Pacific coast, Juan Zapata explained that his presidential bid was a continuation of the "profound changes" unfolding in Africa and that it was time to create an alternative movement that would challenge centuries of white rule in Latin America.<sup>61</sup>

The invisibility of these struggles in subsequent historical understandings of the nation's black activism perhaps stems from the intense opposition Afro-Colombian activists faced: they were often accused of inciting racial hatreds. The mainstream press described Juan Zapata's presidential campaign as unpatriotic and racially divisive. Zapata was accused of promoting "an agglomeration of racist order" in a "country where everyday racial boundaries disappear with greater impetus."<sup>62</sup> Hostility to Afro-Colombian activism was often framed by comparisons with the United States. According to a journalist, black political activism was justified only in the United States, where racial discrimination was the most "shameful stigma of that gigantic and enduring plutocracy."<sup>63</sup> Many observers in the Colombian press perceived Afro-Colombians' racial claims as a case of reverse racism and constructed any

58. Wabgou et al., *Movimiento social*, 100.

59. Amir Smith Córdoba, "Negritud, Cultura Negra y Avasallamiento Cultural," *Negritud* 1 (November 1977-January 1978): 6. For scholarship addressing the fragmented geography of race and nation-making in Colombia, see Nancy P. Appelbaum, *Mapping the Country of Regions: The Chorographic Commission of Nineteenth-Century Colombia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), and *Muddied Waters: Race, Region, and Local History in Colombia, 1846–1948* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); and Peter Wade, *Blackness and Race Mixture: The Dynamics of Racial Identity in Colombia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993). Bethan Fisk, "Black Knowledge on the Move: African Diasporic Healing in Caribbean and Pacific New Granada," *Atlantic studies (Abingdon, England)* 18.2 (2021): 244–270.

60. "El movimiento de cultura negra con Ali," *Negritud* (November 1977-January 1978): 3; "El director general de la UNESCO con el Movimiento," *Negritud* (May-July 1978): 3.

61. Juan Zapata Olivella, "El color de una candidatura," *Presente*, August 1977; "¿En 1978 mandato oscuro? Juan Zapata Olivella es un candidato oscuro, pero no un oscuro candidato," *Presente*, June 1977.

62. Francisco Gómez Valderrama, "El Congreso de la Negritud," *Occidente*, August 25, 1977.

63. Armando Barrameda Morán, "El candidato de la negritud," *El Heraldo*, April 5, 1977.

discussion about race as foreign to the nation—a typical response to black activism in many parts of Latin America at the time.

However, Afro-Colombian activists insisted on debating Colombia's racial problems and invoked the comparison with the United States to explain their own experiences of racial discrimination. Moreno countered the accusation that they were emulating foreign ideas and strategies like Garveyism or the Black Power Movement. To him, Stokely Carmichael's idea that there was "no good white" did not apply to Colombia.<sup>64</sup> What made Colombia's variant of racism particular to Moreno and other activists was the close link between blackness and economic exclusion. Moreno complained that little progress had been made on the demands made to President López in 1976 and that racism endured. Offering an institutional definition of racism, he explained that while there was no interpersonal racism to speak of, it certainly existed "underhandedly in the system."<sup>65</sup> According to Carlos Calderón Mosquera, the general secretary of the Centro de Estudios Afro-Colombianos and editor of *Presencia Negra*, while their movement was not racist, they were certainly "*raciales*" (racial), given the intersection of race and class in the country. He cited the fact that historically haciendas were mainly cultivated by black people; yet Buenaventura, the richest port in the country, was essentially a slum, and for half a century the US-owned company Chocó Pacífico had exploited the mineral resources of Chocó at the expense of its inhabitants, who were mostly black.<sup>66</sup>

When Juan Zapata was asked if there was racial discrimination in the country, he also framed his response in terms of structural disparities. He argued that all ethnic groups in Colombia did not have access to the same opportunities and some faced great challenges climbing the social ladder. Although he did not believe "interpersonal discrimination" existed in the country, it was also true that there were "inequalities in the implementation of the laws that say we are all children of the same *patria*."<sup>67</sup> On one hand, Juan Zapata's campaign sought precisely to elevate the socioeconomic conditions of "all parties, all racial mixtures and all oppressed peoples in the country."<sup>68</sup> On the other, he sought to promote racial consciousness among the country's African and indigenous-descended populations.<sup>69</sup> *The Chronicle*, an English-language newspaper based in Colombia, reported that Zapata's political movement spoke to the needs of the non-white majority whose interests had been historically

64. Moreno Salazar, *Negritudes*, 3.

65. Medardo Arias S., "Amin es un redentor. Dice el presidente del Consejo Nacional de Negritudes," *El País*, August 27, 1977.

66. Carlos Calderón Mosquera, "Notas del editor," *Presencia Negra*, January-February, 1979.

67. "Habla el candidato de las negritudes," *El Espectador*, May 1, 1977.

68. Moreno Salazar, *Negritudes*, 81.

69. "En Cartagena proclaman a Zapata Olivella el 29," *El Colombiano*, April 28, 1975.

neglected.<sup>70</sup> While Juan Zapata saw no contradiction between ideas of racial harmony and black politics, the ambiguity of his and Moreno's responses also signaled the challenges of denouncing racism publicly.

Outside of Zapata's campaign, other Afro-Colombian activists insisted on multiracial forms of organizing. Some argued that a shared history of exploitation and marginalization meant that the black and indigenous struggles should be in dialogue. At the Primer Encuentro of 1975, delegates called for fighting the exploitation faced by black Colombians along with indigenous people and workers.<sup>71</sup> They demanded that "blacks, mestizos and the Indians" be able to participate equally in the organization of the state.<sup>72</sup> In *Negritud*, Afro-Colombian columnists often referenced the shared struggles of black and indigenous people in the country. One column noted that in Colombia no one was more vilified than the Indian, and another stated that the marginalization faced by black and indigenous people could not be subsumed by class struggle, as many in the left seemed to think it could.<sup>73</sup> Rather, they had to organize in ways that addressed the shared racial and economic forms of alienation they faced.<sup>74</sup>

For many Afro-Colombians, the profound structural inequalities in Colombian society made multiracial cooperation not only relevant but politically necessary. Hernán Rodríguez, one of the delegates at the Primer Encuentro in Cali, questioned the relationship between the black movement and the white or mestizo proletariat. He argued that being part of the proletariat did not mean you had no notion of a "superior race," but that the mestizo proletariat lacked economic, political, and cultural power to maintain racial segregation.<sup>75</sup> He concluded that "Our struggle must be undertaken by organizing ourselves as proletarians, without neglecting our black problems."<sup>76</sup>

Similarly, in *Negritud*, columnist Rosa Amalia Uribe argued that the situation of black people had to be understood in the wider context of class struggle. But she also reiterated the need to maintain parallel struggles, since black people were discriminated against both for being poor and for being black.<sup>77</sup> Delegates at the Primer Encuentro argued that since black and indigenous people faced "misery and permanent exploitation," a non-capitalist approach was necessary

70. "Juan Zapata Olivella, Presidential Candidate 1978–1982," *The Chronicle*, August 1977.

71. Moreno Salazar, *Negritudes*, 26.

72. Moreno Salazar, *Negritudes*, 13, 68.

73. "El indio," *Negritud* 3 (May–July 1978): 8.

74. Raquel Kremnitzer, "Negritud y racismo," *Negritud* 2 (November 1977–January 1978): 11.

75. Moreno Salazar, *Negritudes*, 65.

76. Moreno Salazar, *Negritudes*, 66.

77. Rosa Amalia Uribe, "Razón de ser del movimiento de cultura negra," *Negritud* 2 (November 1977–January 1978): 29.

to fight oppression and racism.<sup>78</sup> By aligning their efforts with those of socialism in Latin America, Afro-Colombian activists were helping to redefine the programs of the left. As a columnist in *Negritud* stated, Marxism was not “dogma, but a guide for action” and politicians of the left had to confront the reality of racial oppression.<sup>79</sup> Zapata himself supported communist ideas and politics in Colombia. Calls for structural change and multiracial solidarity would be at the heart of the debates in the Congress, highlighting the shared links between national and transnational forms of black mobilization in Latin America.

### THE POLITICS OF RACIAL COMPARISON AT THE CONGRESS

Despite efforts to forge black solidarities across the Americas, the delegates struggled to discuss race and politics outside of what historian Paulina Alberto has termed the “racial politics of comparison” between Latin America and the United States.<sup>80</sup> The participation of US delegates and the ban against the majority of the delegation from Brazil by Brazilian authorities steered the discussions toward this racial contrast.<sup>81</sup> This comparison was in turn mobilized to promote different visions of race, nation, and justice in the region. Some observers, especially in the Colombian press, used it to suggest there was no racial discrimination. Others, including Afro-Latin American delegates, used it to argue that despite the differences with the United States, there was racism in Latin America, and they used the Congress to unpack the particularities of race and nation in their societies. They insisted that for racism to exist it did not have to be legally sanctioned. Further, they claimed that the region was structured by complex racial and class hierarchies that placed black and indigenous people and poor mestizos at the bottom. This overlap between class and racial oppression meant that Afro-Latin Americans had to advance multiracial forms of organizing while developing strategies to confront the specific forms of oppression that black people faced.

While the deliberations at the Congress were organized around four working groups, the most intense debates about race, nation, and mobilization

78. Moreno Salazar, *Negritudes*, 25.

79. Kremnitzer, “Negritud y racismo.”

80. Paulina L. Alberto, “When Rio Was Black: Soul Music, National Culture, and the Politics of Racial Comparison in 1970s Brazil,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 89:1 (2009): 3–39.

81. The majority of Brazilian delegates were prevented from leaving the country when authorities refused to exempt them from an obligatory deposit for traveling abroad. The government tried to not appear to be flagrantly barring the delegation from a Pan-Africanist event, but since most delegates could not afford the fee, it was effectively a ban. “Problemas de delegação brasileira,” *Movimento*, February 25 -March 2, 1980, 10. After Colombia, the US official delegation was the largest one. It was primarily composed of intellectuals, many of them African Americans. Among them were poet-theorist Larry Neal, historian Zelbert Moore, and anthropologists Vera Green and Sheila Walker. Charles H. Wright, founder of the Museum of African American History in Chicago in 1968, also attended.

transpired in sessions where delegates drew policy recommendations, and in the Colombian press.<sup>82</sup> In one report of the meeting's proceedings, US participant James Henderson reported that "one of the most important features" of the conference "was the ideological and cultural gulf separating Latin and Anglo Black attendance." Like other Pan-Africanist events, the Congress invoked a common history of enslavement and oppression to promote racial solidarity. While US delegates recognized that the situation of African Americans had improved since the civil rights movement, US observers struggled to read changing racial politics in Latin America outside a US-centric racial perspective. Most African American delegates did not find in Colombia the "brittle tensions found in the Deep South prior to the days of Martin Luther King." In their view, Afro-Colombians were not forced to confront the "official" forms of discrimination that "non-whites" experienced in public and private spaces in the United States.<sup>83</sup>

Observers from the United States used class and racial mixture to question the existence of racism in Colombia. For many, diagnosing racism in a place like Colombia was complicated by the fact that "poverty was multiracial," which raised the question of whether color was relevant at all. Just as other Latin American intellectuals did at the colloquium in Dakar, US delegates privileged class over race to explain social disparities in Latin America. But unlike Latin American delegates, they did not try to unpack the nexus between class and race. Moreover, for US delegates like Alberto Deveaux, a black businessman from Los Angeles, the absence of a clear black-white line complicated establishing the scope of a racial problem in the country. In contrast to the United States, *mestizaje* made it difficult to determine the number of Afro-Colombians, since many identified as "mulatos" or "zambos." For the journalist Peter Nares, not even the nation's statisticians thought "in racial terms" because of Colombia's multiracial tradition. These views equated mixture with the absence of racial thinking and implied that racism ineluctably entailed the sort of white-black binary allegedly found in the United States.<sup>84</sup>

Although many Latin American delegates sought to decenter the United States as the referent for understanding racial politics in the Americas, they could not escape the comparison easily. To account for racial discrimination in Latin America, they frequently invoked the US experience in some way. Afro-Brazilian delegate Eduardo de Oliveira y Oliveira complained that from

82. The four working groups were: Thought, Socioeconomic Structure, Production and Technology, and Ethnicity: *Mestizaje, Castas and Classes*.

83. James D. Henderson, "A Report on the First Congress of Black Culture of the Americas," Nina S. de Friedemann Collection, Luis Ángel Arango Library, Bogotá, 3358-4259.

84. Peter Nares, "The Black Problem in Colombia," *The Chronicle*, August 1977.



Tannenbaum to Carl N. Degler, two well-known US scholars working on comparative race relations, questions of race in Latin America were always articulated in “English.”<sup>85</sup> Even Nascimento, who was arguably the harshest critic of racial democracy at the Congress and one of the few Afro-Brazilians who did make it to Cali, believed that racial discrimination in Brazil was different from the “obvious” anti-black racism of the US and South Africa.<sup>86</sup> Zapata also argued that racial issues in Latin America could not be understood “on the basis of foreign concepts.”<sup>87</sup> The perceived absence of racism in Latin America stemmed from the fact that people of African descent in the region were simultaneously “emancipated and marginalized.”<sup>88</sup> On one level, blackness was central to dominant ideologies of racial mixture—even when the concrete contributions of black people to the nation were ignored or silenced by intellectuals and government authorities. But on another, mestizaje did not mean lack of racial stratification, as was evidenced by the persistent violation of the economic and political rights of people of African descent.<sup>89</sup>

The Afro-Latin American delegates argued that although the experiences of race and nation in Latin America differed from those in the United States, racial discrimination across the region was real and pervasive. The report by the Congress’s Black Ethnicity and Mestizaje working group made an important distinction between racism and racial discrimination. While racism required legal and institutional backing, racial discrimination occurred when an individual or group with power denied “economic, educational, political or religious resources” to black people. In their view, despite the end of legal segregation in the United States, laws and institutions continued to enforce racism. In Latin America, on the other hand, the practice of racial discrimination was “underhanded, subtle, overt or covert.”<sup>90</sup> On paper, national constitutions recognized the citizenship rights of black people, but in practice their social, economic, and cultural rights continued to be violated. Delegates drew attention to the particular situation of black women, whose contributions to the social and economic development of the region were silenced and who faced discrimination on the basis of both race and gender.<sup>91</sup> In other words, for Afro-Latin American participants, racial discrimination did not need to be enshrined in the law to exist. As one Afro-Brazilian delegate put

85. Eduardo de Oliveira y Oliveira, “De las afinidades electivas: etnia y compromiso,” in *Primer Congreso*, 28.

86. Nascimento, *Racial Democracy*, 83.

87. Manfred Rosenow, “Manuel Zapata Olivella: An Interview,” *The Chronicle*, August 1977.

88. Nascimento, *Racial Democracy*, 83.

89. Manuel Zapata Olivella, “El negro americano. Identidad negra en América Latina,” *Seminario Cultural*, August 28, 1977.

90. “Comisiones de Trabajo Recomendaciones. Etnia negra y mestizaje,” in *Primer Congreso*, 145.

91. “Filosofía y afectividad,” in *Primer Congreso*, 152.

it, although in Brazil black people were equal under the law, they did not enjoy “de facto equality.”<sup>92</sup>

In contrast to many US participants, Afro-Latin American delegates were unequivocal in their denunciations of racial discrimination. For many Latin American delegates, racial mixture and racial discrimination could coexist. *Mestizaje*, Zapata argued, did not imply lack of racial stratification or a historically more benign slave system.<sup>93</sup> They also countered the class-based explanation put forth by some US delegates. As anthropologist Nina S. de Friedemann explained, and as delegates reiterated throughout the conference, “class and ethnicity were not competing modes of conscience and conflict”; they were interrelated and mutually constituted.<sup>94</sup>

For Afro-Latin Americans at the Congress, the opposition to racial demands in Latin America also contrasted sharply with the advances brought by the civil rights movement in the United States, again underscoring the centrality of the racial comparison.<sup>95</sup> According to the report of the Black Ethnicity and *Mestizaje* working group, in Latin America racial discrimination was based on a whitening ideology that operated by denying the “creative” contributions of people of African descent to the nation. Challenging pervasive imaginaries of *mestizaje*, they argued that whitening also created a loss of tradition and alienation from their condition of blackness, preventing black solidarity.<sup>96</sup> In Zapata’s words, “the Black man must be made aware of his own race, of his own problems.”<sup>97</sup> For Oliveira, alienation was maintained by Afro-Brazilians’ lack of access to education after slavery, the silencing of Afro-Brazilian culture and history, and the dominance of North American scholarship.<sup>98</sup> The implication here is that racial problems in Latin America were in fact worse than in the United States due to this denial, and thus that specific forms of racial politics were required.

Although Afro-Latin American and African American delegates agreed to promote racial consciousness and solidarity, there was no consensus on how to achieve them. Henderson reported, “The considerable North American Black delegation tended to look a bit patronizingly upon their Latin brothers as

92. Henderson, “A Report on the First Congress of Black Culture.”

93. Manuel Zapata Olivella, “Opresión y explotación del africano en la colonización de América Latina,” in *Primer Congreso*, 57.

94. Nina S. de Friedemann, “Etnicidad, etnia y transacciones étnicas en el horizonte de cultura negra en Colombia,” in *Primer Congreso*, 43.

95. “Filosofía y afectividad,” in *Primer Congreso*, 151.

96. “Comisiones de Trabajo,” in *Primer Congreso*, 145.

97. Rosenow, “Manuel Zapata.”

98. Oliveira y Oliveira, “De las afinidades,” in *Primer Congreso*, 25–29.

entering the same path toward ethnic awareness and pride that they had trod for nearly two decades, while the Latins seemed unwilling to believe that the North Americans had anything useful to offer them in the way of strategies for improving their condition.”<sup>99</sup> Many US observers suggested that experiences of mobilization in the United States, such as the civil rights movement, was the standard for defining black activism in the Americas and explained its absence in Colombia as due to “the commendable tolerance” of black Colombians. African American delegates referred to the Afro-Colombian movement as “nascent,” or “just getting off the ground,” and “maybe 25 years behind the movement in the US.”<sup>100</sup>

The belief that Latin America lagged behind and had nothing to teach the United States in terms of black mobilization reveals a further dimension to the power dynamics at play at the Congress and the potentially imperialist orientations of some US delegates. As Micol Seigel has noted, racial comparisons with Latin America could be used to reinscribe notions of US national superiority.<sup>101</sup> Although increased mobilization along racial lines was regarded as necessary to emulate the successes of the civil rights movement in the United States, some doubted that a black movement could operate in a mestizo nation and wondered whether black Colombians should mobilize along racial lines or “remain in the political mainstream and work side by side with low-income whites and mestizos.”<sup>102</sup>

Another topic of confrontation concerned capitalism. For some Afro-Latin American delegates, black liberation was necessary to deepen revolutionary projects in Latin America. While US delegates were reluctant to condemn capitalism, many Afro-Latin American delegates tied their efforts to the political left.<sup>103</sup> During the general assembly, Nelson Estupiñan (Ecuador) and José Campos (Perú), called for the “total transformation of the state” through the implementation of socialism.<sup>104</sup> The available sources do not allow us to determine who supported or rejected the motion, but their proposition reflected broader calls for structural change at the Congress. Many Afro-Latin American delegates saw their activism as a two-front struggle against class exploitation and racial discrimination. On one hand, they called for transforming the situation of all “workers, marginalized and illiterate peoples (*pueblos*)” in the Americas and expressed a commitment to multiracial forms of

99. Henderson, “A Report on the First Congress of Black Culture.”

100. Nares, “The Black Problem.”

101. Seigel, “Beyond Compare.”

102. Nares, “The Black Problem.”

103. Henderson, “A Report on the First Congress of Black Culture.”

104. “Asamblea Plenaria: proposiciones, resoluciones y recomendaciones,” in *Primer Congreso*, 167.

organization. On the other hand, they noted that the struggles of “the white proletariat” were not identical to those of “black and indigenous people,” which implied the need for autonomous forms of black mobilization.<sup>105</sup>

Disagreements about race and mobilization also took place among Latin American delegates. Although they emphatically denounced racial discrimination, many disagreed on how ideas and categories of mixture were linked to black mobilization. Zapata and Nascimento exemplify these competing visions. During the drafting of the report of Group A, which centered on Thought, some delegates protested Zapata’s efforts to include racial categories such as ‘zambo’ and ‘mulato.’ In response to these complaints, Zapata “replied that the terms reflect cultural realities in Latin America and must be employed. . . We can’t suppress our ancestry.” In contrast, Nascimento opposed discussing racial dynamics in Latin America in terms of mixture, proclaiming “that he did not want to acknowledge his white blood.”<sup>106</sup>

Although debates concerning ideologies of mestizaje and racial harmony have frequently been framed in terms of the comparison between the United States and Latin America, the clash between Zapata and Nascimento reminds us that understandings of these ideologies were not monolithic, even among black radical activists within the region.<sup>107</sup> Nascimento’s famous denunciation of racial democracy in Brazil was therefore not the only model available to other Afro-Latin American activists. In an interview with *The Chronicle*, Zapata argued that any analysis of race and black activism in Latin America had to take mestizaje into account. In his view, it was more useful to speak of “underprivilege” than of racism, because the former term connected racial inequities to broader class struggles and because it highlighted the disadvantageous incorporation of former slaves into the nation, as well as the lack of educational and professional opportunities.<sup>108</sup>

Zapata’s structural reading of racial disparities was echoed by other Afro-Latin American delegates from Ecuador and Panamá. Oswaldo A. Díaz argued that racial conflicts in Ecuador between blacks, whites and “*los tenteenelaire*”—mestizos, zambos and mulatos—were the product of structures of domination which continued on from the colonial period.<sup>109</sup> Similarly, for Armando

105. “Comisiones de Trabajo,” in *Primer Congreso*, 146–147.

106. Henderson, “A Report on the First Congress of Black Culture.”

107. For an elaboration on the heterogeneity of Afro-Latin American political thought, see Frank A. Guridy and Juliet Hooker, “Currents in Afro-Latin American Political and Social Thought,” in *Afro-Latin American Studies: An Introduction*, De la Fuente and Reid Andrews, eds., 179–221.

108. Rosenow, “Manuel Zapata.”

109. Tenteenelaire is one of the racial categories or *castas* that emerged in the colonial period; it referred to a racially mixed person of African descent. This term is used recurrently by Afro-Ecuadoran writer Adalberto Ortiz Quiñonez in his

Fortune, Panamá was a “hybrid society,” what he called “*indoafroeuropea*,” but since the colonial period, class and race had been conflated, placing indigenous and black peoples in a condition of subordination. In Díaz and Fortune’s analysis, there was no contradiction between racial mixture and racial discrimination. For them however, racial discrimination had to be understood in the context of structural hierarchies produced by colonialism.

Nascimento did not oppose an economic reading of racial problems in Latin America, but in his writings of the 1970s racial mixture features as politically paralyzing, and for good reasons. After being barred from the official Brazilian delegations at the Sixth Pan-Africanist Congress (1974) and FESTAC (1977) for his activism, Nascimento denounced racial democracy as a genocidal ideology that sought to obliterate “Black people as a cultural and physical entity”—a far more radical position than Zapata ever held.<sup>110</sup> In his view, the denial of visas to Brazilian delegates was not a bureaucratic issue as the government argued, but rather clear evidence of the many abuses perpetrated against Afro-Brazilians.<sup>111</sup> The Instituto Brasileiro de Estudos Africanistas, headed by Clóvis Moura, who was not able to travel to Cali, also deemed this as “discriminatory” and as a denial of an opportunity to discuss common problems in a continental and democratic framework.<sup>112</sup> But unlike the delegates who imagined the region through *mestizaje*, Nascimento framed the problem in black and white terms. Racial democracy in Brazil was a “metaphor” for racism that sought to erase Afro-Brazilians through “assimilation, acculturation and miscegenation.”<sup>113</sup>

Zapata and Nascimento’s contrasting views on *mestizaje* also reflected how different governments in Latin America acted on ideologies of racial harmony and mixture.<sup>114</sup> The Brazilian dictatorial regime was invested in upholding the

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1943 novel *Juyungo: historia de un negro, una isla y otros negros*. Oswaldo Díaz Ortiz’s presentation at the Congress analyzed this novel as a way to explore racial relations in Ecuador. Oswaldo A. Díaz, “Relaciones sociales dentro de una sociedad multiracial,” in *Primer Congreso*, 65–72. For an examination of *Juyungo*, see Ximena González-Parada, “Ecuadorian Blackness and the Poetics of Resistance and Solidarity in Adalberto Ortiz’s Novel *Juyungo*,” *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, *Travesía* [blog] 30:1 (2021): 61–74.

110. Nascimento, *Racial Democracy*, 131.

111. Ángel Romero, “Congreso de Negritudes enjuicia discriminación,” *El Tiempo*, August 29, 1977.

112. “Brasil negro não vai a Colômbia,” *Versus* 14, September 1977, in *Afrolatinoamérica*, Fundação Perseu Abramo and Soweto Organização Negra, eds. (São Paulo: Editora Fundação Perseu Abramo 2014), 21.

113. Nascimento, *Racial Democracy*, 83.

114. For a discussion on differences between racial politics in Brazil and Colombia, consider José Maurício Andion Arruti, “Emergencia étnica, conquista territorial y conflicto entre comunidades indígenas y negras em Brasil y Colômbia – notas exploratórias,” *El Otro Derecho* 26–27 (2002): 99–112; Peter Wade, “Brazil and Colombia: Comparative Race Relations in South America,” in *Racism and Ethnic Relations in the Portuguese-Speaking World*, Proceedings of the British Academy 179, Francisco Bethencourt and Adrian J. Pearce, eds. (Oxford and New York: Published for the British Academy by Oxford University Press, 2012).

image of the country as a racial paradise at home and abroad.<sup>115</sup> To propagate this image, authorities actively surveilled Afro-Brazilian activists at home and prevented them from participating in Pan-Africanist events.<sup>116</sup> I have not found evidence suggesting that the Colombian state was policing Afro-Colombian activists involved with the Congress.<sup>117</sup> But Colombian officials also did not support it, suggesting it was not seen as a relevant or valid expression of blackness. Brazilian commentators noted these differences and the link between black mobilization and democracy—or lack thereof. According to Mirna Grzich, the only Brazilian journalist at the conference, Afro-Colombians were more organized than their Brazilian counterparts, as a result of the political situation in the country where there was “voting, elections and habeas corpus.”<sup>118</sup>

Despite the frictions that emerged throughout the Congress and the criticisms and opposition faced by the organizers, a spirit of solidarity prevailed. Negritud was proposed as an alternative philosophical and political strategy to make claims and demand equal rights for Afro-descendants in Latin America. This strategy, however, did not imply a mass return to Africa, but rather “identification with black culture and the struggle in the diverse countries where black people live, to defend that identification and that culture.”<sup>119</sup> Delegates agreed to join forces against the legacies of slavery in the Americas and against what Nascimento described as all forms of “dehumanization and injustice,” especially in South Africa.<sup>120</sup> During the plenary session, delegates expressed solidarity with the goals and decisions of the World Conference for Action Against Apartheid, which was happening concurrently in Lagos, Nigeria. For delegates, the “war against segregation and the oppressive

115. For in-depth explorations about how the Brazilian state used Pan-Africanist and other international spaces to uphold this image, see Jerry Dávila, *Hotel Trópico: Brazil and the Challenge of African Decolonization, 1950–1980* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Nascimento and Larkin, *Africans in Brazil*; Nascimento, *Racial Democracy*; and Micol Seigel, *Uneven Encounters: Making Race and Nation in Brazil and the United States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

116. This was the case around the phenomenon known as Black Rio. In 1976, soul concerts organized by Afro-Brazilians spread across working-class neighborhoods of Rio de Janeiro, sparking a national controversy. Whereas some on the left saw the genre as inauthentic, others on the right claimed it posed a threat to national security. Intelligence officers surveilled the activities of Afro-Brazilians participating in soul events and interrogated members of soul bands. Alberto, “When Rio Was Black.”

117. Colombian state authorities were policing and persecuting leftist activists across the country, including those in the peasant and trade union movements, many of whom were of African descent. Among these were Sancy Mosquera, a black activist from Chocó active in the Communist Youth (JUCO). In 1974, he helped organize the strike against the US-owned mining company Chocó Pacífico, and in the 1980s he established Afro-Colombian organizations in Bogotá. For evidence of the forms of state surveillance faced by Mosquera and other black activists from Chocó during the strike against the mining company see for example, “Informe al Departamento de Policía, Chocó, October 26, 1974.” Correspondencia del Departamento de Chocó, Ministerio de Gobierno, Despacho del Ministro, 1974. Box 65. Folder 2. Folios, 163–166. Archivo General de la Nación (AGN), Bogotá, Colombia.

118. “Contra o racismo por uma nova história,” *Versus* 16, November 1977, in *Afrolatinoamérica*, Fundação Perseu Abramo and Soweto Organização Negra, eds., 25.

119. “Comisiones de Trabajo,” in *Primer Congreso*, 147.

120. Stella Pombo, “Congreso de Negritudes: solidaridad con hermanos africanos,” *Occidente*, August 27, 1977.



minority colonial regime” in South Africa implicated “black peoples from all over the world.”<sup>121</sup>

Participants also reiterated that they did not want the Congress to end in abstract academic research agendas.<sup>122</sup> Rather, *negritud*, as a movement, entailed institution-building and cooperation. They proposed establishing national centers modeled after the Centro de Estudios Afro-Colombianos and greater engagement with international bodies such as the United Nations, the Organization of American States, and the Organization of African Unity.<sup>123</sup> In addition to integrating the history and culture of black descendants in national curriculums, they demanded that American governments and international bodies elevate the contribution of black people to the same historical and cultural level of Europeans and indigenous peoples.<sup>124</sup> These transnational and coordinated efforts, the Afro-Latin American delegates hoped, would pressure Latin American governments to fulfill their constitutional commitments to civil and human rights.<sup>125</sup> Claims for equal citizenship at the Congress however faced major resistance in the Colombian press.

## RACE WAR AND THE POLITICS OF BLACK CULTURE

The debates around racial democracy and black mobilization in Latin America transcended the Congress. Mainstream national press outlets covered the event extensively, giving us a window into how a wider public responded to black mobilization and to the first Pan-Africanist event in Latin America. Press coverage also helps us understand how the wider public used the racial comparison with the United States to delineate what was considered legitimate speech and claims-making strategies by Afro-Colombians. While the press largely saw Afro-Colombian activism in the 1970s as illegitimate and as a threat to the unity of the nation, the Pan-Africanist scope of the Congress made those efforts ostensibly more subversive.

The press, particularly Cali-based newspapers such *El País* and *Occidente*, conveyed a profound anxiety over whether the activities of the delegates were political rather than academic or cultural. Although Cali has a large

121. “Asamblea Plenaria,” in *Primer Congreso*, 165.

122. The proposals at the Congress echoed those put forward by the founders of the Teatro Experimental do Negro (TEN) like Nascimento and other Afro-Brazilian activists, starting in the 1940s. See Alberto, *Terms of Inclusion*, 163–178; 213–218.

123. “Filosofía y afectividad,” in *Primer Congreso*, 153.

124. “Asamblea plenaria,” in *Primer Congreso*, 166.

125. “Forma de dinamizar las conclusiones, recomendaciones y proposiciones del I Congreso de la Cultura Negra de las Américas,” in *Primer Congreso*, 173.

Afro-descendant population, political and economic power has been held by white and light-skinned mestizo elites. For historian and columnist Francisco Gómez Valderrama, talking about “negritudes,” or blackness, and about historical links with Africa was “anachronistic,” a mere intellectual curiosity for anthropologists, sociologists, and “tropical folklorists” that had no real “applicability” to the nation. He warned: “Let’s hope that the Congress . . . is nothing else that an explosion of words and folklorism.”<sup>126</sup> In his view, the conference was nothing but a folkloric spectacle and should remain so. Others opposed the political implications of organizing around black culture because doing so was regarded as exclusionary. Raúl Echavarría Barrientos, a journalist, described the Congress as a gathering of “educated blacks. . . But not black culture.” He argued that this event “gave a racist connotation to culture,” for culture did not have “color or frontiers, nor was it private to whites, or to blacks, or yellows.”<sup>127</sup> Meanwhile, for Gómez, the very premises of the Congress were false, as there had never been any “racial discrimination whatsoever” to begin with.<sup>128</sup>

Observers such as Gómez and Echavarría thus sought to reduce the claims of black citizens to academic exercises and folklore, depriving black culture of its political potential. The delegates were acutely aware of these boundaries and criticized state efforts to transform black culture into folkloric spectacles. Sebastião Rodrigues, for example, condemned the Brazilian government for approving of black people only “as long as they stayed marginalized in their favelas and only come to dance and do performances that produce money for the state,” while ignoring their socioeconomic demands.<sup>129</sup> Nascimento also denounced this view of black culture, stating that his visit to Colombia confirmed that, as in other Latin American countries, black culture was marginalized and regarded as “folkloric and primitive.”<sup>130</sup>

The pressure to define the Congress as strictly academic or cultural was such that the delegates released a bulletin assuring the public that their efforts were not driven by sectarian or partisan interests.<sup>131</sup> To prevent further controversy, Juan Zapata did not attend the Congress; nonetheless, a letter in support of his candidacy from President Senghor was read in one of the last sessions.<sup>132</sup> Zapata and Nascimento, however, did not shy away from framing the Congress

126. Gómez Valderrama, “Congreso de Negritudes.”

127. Raúl Echavarría Barrientos, “Negritudes,” *Occidente*, July 26, 1977.

128. Gómez Valderrama, “El Congreso de la Negritud.”

129. “Proposiciones finales, aprobadas en pleno,” in *Primer Congreso*, 178.

130. “Población negra reclama igualdad de derechos,” *El Espectador*, August 24, 1977.

131. “Homenaje al poeta Artel,” *El País*, August 16, 1977.

132. Juan Zapata Olivella, *Reseña de la primera candidatura negra de Colombia* (Port-au-Prince: Xpress, 1985), 40. I consulted this book in the personal archive of Jairo Zapata, son of Juan Zapata Olivella.

as a political attempt to find solutions to the problems they faced from a transnational perspective. Although the Congress was not partisan, for Zapata it was unequivocally political, “because its aim is to encourage people to confront their destiny.”<sup>133</sup> Nascimento echoed this view, noting that the Congress was historic “because it’s the first time that the black people in the Americas congregate not just to sing and dance, as was always the case, but to make serious decisions that have extra-continental implications.”<sup>134</sup>

The mainstream press dismissed the Congress by resorting to the typical responses deployed across Latin America to oppose black activism: mixture versus racism and the primacy of class over race. Gómez argued that the perceived disadvantages of black Colombians had nothing to do with racial prejudice, but were the result of poverty and underdevelopment, which affected whites, mestizos, and indigenous people alike.<sup>135</sup> In an editorial in *Cromos*, a popular cultural magazine, writer Eduardo Pachón Padilla also denied the existence of “racial segregation” in the country by suggesting that race was less relevant to social mobility in Colombia than in the United States. As evidence, he cited Afro-Colombian men who had climbed to positions of power and were respected “by the upper classes,” like politician Diego Luis Córdoba, journalist Manuel Mosquera Garcés, writer Daniel Valois Arce, and syndicalist José Raquel Mercado. Even though many of these men had denounced and organized against racial discrimination in their lifetimes, one of the delegates pointed out that “those were the exceptions that precisely confirmed the rule.”<sup>136</sup>

Some commentators opposed the Congress by drawing a contrast between black Colombians and indigenous peoples. Gómez, for instance, argued that whereas indigenous people deserved special legislation because of the system of exploitation they had experienced in colonial times, the claims made by black Colombians had no historical basis. Disregarding the history of slavery and its legacies—the organizing principles behind the Congress—he claimed black people were a “tiny minority” who did not constitute “a powerful and decisive force within the context of the country’s historical development.”<sup>137</sup> Numerically however, the Afro-Colombian population is substantially larger than the indigenous one, by some accounts the third largest in the Americas after Brazil and the United States.<sup>138</sup> Gómez was merely reproducing the

133. Rosenow, “Manuel Zapata.”

134. Ángel Romero, “Congreso de Negritudes enjuicia discriminación,” *El Tiempo*, August 29, 1977.

135. Gómez Valderrama, “El Congreso de la Negritud.”

136. *Cromos*, “¿En Colombia hay negros? Sí . . . y los blancos nos tienen jodidos,” August 31, 1977.

137. Gómez Valderrama, “El Congreso de la Negritud.”

138. Throughout the twentieth century, Colombian authorities did not systematically count the population numbers for Afro-Colombian and indigenous people, with population estimates fluctuating significantly over time. In the 1960s, the Banco de la República offered population estimates along ethn racial lines. It estimated the indigenous population to

indigenista imaginary of Colombia promoted by many elite politicians and intellectuals throughout the twentieth century, which imagined the nation around an indigenous past and minimized its African origins.<sup>139</sup>

Gómez took his criticisms further, suggesting that the Congress and its participants were dangerous and unpatriotic: “It is excessively dangerous, the movement that is brewing in the country where a group of black professionals trained in universities that encourage anarchic attitudes or the repudiation of democratic values, are trying to start an alleged fight for black vindications, the battle horse to fulfill, with personalist aims, a demagogic, antipatriotic and clumsy campaign, creating enmity, animosity and pugnacities among members of the supposedly black communities, the mestizos, indigenous and white people that surround them.”<sup>140</sup> The association of black activists with radical university politics suggests that for some, black mobilization was part of broader social movements of this period that were deemed subversive. Moreover, by claiming that the Congress was the work of a few seditious academics, Gómez dismissed the demands of the delegates and removed their claims from broader struggles for racial justice. His references to “enmity” and “animosity,” however, revived the familiar specter of race war, a narrative used since the wars for independence to neutralize efforts to challenge established racial hierarchies.<sup>141</sup>

The fear of racial confrontation was also fed by linking the Congress to some of the most brutal examples of political violence in Africa and the diaspora. A glaring example of this was the publication of a cartoon about the conference

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be around 2.2 percent, the black population (*negros*) 6 percent, and the *mulato* population to be 24 percent. According to the 2018 national census, indigenous people account for approximately 4.4 percent of the national population and Afro-Colombians for nearly 9.3 percent. Yet, black organizations and international organizations have long disputed official figures for people of African descent and estimate the Afro-Colombian population to be closer to 26 percent. See T. Lynn Smith, “The Racial Composition of the Population of Colombia,” *Journal of Inter-American Studies* 8:2 (1966): 213–35; DANE, “Población indígena de Colombia. Resultados del censo nacional de población y vivienda 2018,” September 6, 2019, <https://www.dane.gov.co/files/investigaciones/boletines/grupos-etnicos/presentacion-grupos-etnicos-2019.pdf>, this and other digital addresses in this note accessed April 3, 2022; DANE, “Población afrocolombiana, raizal y palenquera. Resultados del censo nacional de población y Vivienda 2018,” November 6, 2019, <https://www.dane.gov.co/files/investigaciones/boletines/grupos-etnicos/presentacion-grupos-etnicos-poblacion-NARP-2019.pdf>; and Judith Morrison, “Race and Poverty in Latin America: Addressing the Development Needs of African Descendants,” *UN Chronicle* 44:3 (2007): 44, <https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/race-and-poverty-latin-america-addressing-development-needs-african-descendants>.

139. Important works about indigenismo in Colombia include Juan Friede, ed., *Indigenismo y aniquilamiento de indígenas en Colombia* (Bogotá: Ediciones CIEC, 1981); and Gregorio Hernández de Alba, “Teoría y práctica del indigenismo en Colombia,” *Anuario Indigenista* 25 (1965), 117. For a more recent study, see Brett Troyan, “Re-Imagining The “Indian” and the State: Indigenismo in Colombia, 1926– 1947,” *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* 33:65 (2008): 81–106. For works that explore the comparison between black and indigenous people in Latin America, see Peter Wade, “Afro-Indigenous Interactions, Relations, and Comparisons,” in *Afro-Latin American Studies: An Introduction*, De la Fuente and Reid Andrews; and Wade, *Race and Ethnicity*.

140. Gómez Valderrama, “El Congreso de la Negritud.”

141. See Lasso, *Myths of Harmony*.

with the caption: “So Amin is coming incognito?”<sup>142</sup> In the cartoon, two men of African descent, presumably delegates, share a rumor that Ugandan dictator Idi Amin would attend the Congress secretly. Colombian newspapers in 1977 reported on Amin’s dictatorial excesses extensively and frequently used racist images and language to portray him, often depicting him as a cannibal. One such column described how the “Giant” Amin had eaten half of an uncooked hippopotamus.<sup>143</sup> By invoking Amin as a metaphor to describe the Congress, accounts like this suggested that black political mobilization was inherently dangerous, barbaric, and essentially anti-democratic, like the government of Idi Amin.

One day after the cartoon was published, *El País* interviewed Afro-Colombian leader Valentín Moreno, asking whether he agreed that Amin was “a madman who makes the world shudder with his antics and is killing members of tribes that are not his own.” Moreno replied that many of the allegations made against Amin were fabricated by former colonialists who sought to discredit his revolutionary policies in favor of his “race.” The interview was then published under the headline “Amin is a Redeemer, Says the President of the Consejo Nacional de Negritudes.”<sup>144</sup> Carlos Calderón Mosquera, the general secretary of the Centro de Estudios Afro-Colombianos, also expressed a favorable opinion of Amin when asked by another newspaper, arguing that he represented “the new Africa in the struggle for liberation.”<sup>145</sup> It is not clear from the available sources how Soyinka, a Nigerian intellectual and one of Amin’s fiercest critics, reacted to these ambivalent defenses of Amin by Afro-Colombians at the Congress.

Yet, the fact that Afro-Colombian activists felt compelled to defend Amin partly reflected efforts to counter images of Africa as barbaric and backward. After all, the press’s interest in Amin, who was not invited to the Congress, was a deliberate effort to link any form of black politics with violence. Such links were reinforced through references to militant forms of black activism such as those of the Black Panthers in the United States. When asked about the Black Panthers, Moreno replied that the members of the black movement he was part of were “enemies of violence,” but also argued that violence was produced by “social inconformity” with an unfair system.<sup>146</sup> The mainstream press presented the Congress as a triumph of a radical “Black Power” movement,

142. “¿Dizque Amín llega de incógnito?” *El País*, August 26, 1977.

143. Manuel Martínez de Efe, “El Gigante Idi Amin ha llegado a comerse medio hipopótamo crudo,” *El País*, September 23, 1977.

144. Arias S., “Amin es un redentor.”

145. *Cromos*, “¿En Colombia hay negros?”

146. Arias S., “Amin es un redentor.”

even though the Afro-Latin American delegates distinguished racial discrimination in Latin America from the violent “apartheid” of South Africa or the United States and claimed the strategies of activism they were proposing, though inspired by those in the United States, were different.<sup>147</sup>

These responses reveal the challenges of organizing a Pan-Africanist event in Colombia and the perceptions of this event within the mainstream and largely white media of the country. For many commentators, racially defined black mobilization, or in some cases simply talking about the existence of racism, was a seditious act and a threat to the public order. Yet, while this kind of opposition, which invoked longstanding anxieties of race war, made black organization in the country difficult, it ultimately failed to contain the efforts of black activists at the Congress.

## CONCLUSION

A focus on the First Congress of Black Culture of the Americas foregrounds the rich conversations on race, justice, and political mobilization happening within Latin America in the 1970s. The Congress showcases the creativity and independence of Afro-Latin American political thought. These insights are especially illuminating regarding the thinking of its organizer, Manuel Zapata Olivella, who argued that Pan-Africanism, and more broadly black mobilization in the region, had to account for cultural and racial mixture. Although Afro-Latin American delegates at this meeting were inspired by black movements in the United States and across the African diaspora, they were simultaneously seeking to establish their own paths of activism. Thus, while the debates at the Congress involved comparisons with the politics of race relations in the United States, these discussions revealed a far more complex debate that transcended scholarly comparisons of American racism versus Latin American “racial democracy.”

Afro-Latin American delegates were not merely denouncing a generic concept of racial democracy. Rather, they were unpacking the particularities of race and nation in Latin America, as well as the intersection between race, class, and racial mixture in the region. These delegates elaborated a nuanced political position based on the understanding that the history of *mestizaje* had produced societies where race and class overlapped in such a way that they had to be addressed together, and in a structural manner. This position demands that the struggle against class and racial oppression require cross-class and cross-racial

147. *Cromos*, “¿En Colombia hay negros?”



alliances between indigenous people and poor whites and mestizos—a powerful vision for social transformation in Latin America that was as relevant then as it is today.

The networks of solidarity that were established at the conference in Cali continued long after the event's conclusion. This event was followed by two more congresses of black culture, one in Panamá in 1980 organized by sociologist Gerardo Maloney, and another in São Paulo in 1983, led by Abdias do Nascimento. The alliances forged between Afro-Latin Americans and other black activists and with international organizations at these events offer fertile terrain for future research and draw attention to a rich history of black organization within Latin America. Ultimately, these congresses invite us to explore alternative genealogies and trajectories of radical politics in the African diaspora and to reevaluate the contributions of Afro-Latin Americans such as those of Zapata to black diasporic ideas and movements.

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