Strengthening Black-Brown Solidarity: Latino/a Race, Unauthorized Blacks, and the Roots of Anti-Brown Violence[1]

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Abstract: This essay analyzes intersecting experiences of racism and U.S. state violence, black-brown tensions, and future possibilities for anti-racist solidarity. Its race analysis and moral evaluation proceed from a Chicano perspective and through the theoretical lens of transnationalism, thinking about anti-black racism as a global imperial project. The author argues that sustained analysis of Latino/a racialization (and racism), of the precariousness of black citizenship, and of the genesis of anti-brown racist practices within and alongside anti-blackness can all function to strengthen black-brown solidarity.

Keywords: Racism, violence, anti-racist solidarity, Cyprian Davis

Buttressing "In-Between" Spaces: Black-Brown Solidarity as Nepantla

Some 13 years ago, in a column that he wrote for the Catholic News Service, Fr. Cyprian Davis, O.S.B. called us to prepare for a new church reality. He wrote:

In another decade or so U.S. Catholics will learn that our church is more black, brown and in-between than Caucasian and more catholic than they dreamed. Will we be prepared for what that will mean?[2]

In his column, Davis did not prescribe necessary preparations for this authentically catholic reality or explain what he envisioned as the

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[1] An early version of this essay was presented just five months after the death of Fr. Cyprian Davis, O.S.B., as the invited Public Lecture for the Black Catholic Theological Symposium Annual Meeting on October 15, 2015 at St. Norbert College (De Pere, WI), part of an interracial dialogue on state violence. Later, the essay was presented as The Sister Eva Regina Martin, S.F.F., Ph.D. Lecture for the Institute for Black Catholic Studies (Xavier University, New Orleans) on April 4, 2016. These presentations are noteworthy given the text's repeated references to Davis and to New Orleans. The essay is submitted to the Journal of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium with deepest gratitude for the critical insights and 'welcome table' offered to me by the Black Catholic theological community.

[2] "Benedictine priest, top chronicler of black Catholic history, dies," *Catholic News Service,* May 10, 2015, accessed July 24, 2017, http://www.catholicnews.com/services/englishnews/2015/benedictine-priest-top-chronicler-of-black-catholic-history-dies.cfm.

space "in-between" black and brown. Nevertheless, I would like to use his "in-between" as a metaphor for black-brown solidarity and the alternative (post)racial futures that we are called to build. In Chicano/a thought, we use the Nahuatl word nepantla to signify contested (commonly violent) and liminal "in-between" spaces or situations wherein new socio-historical, material, and spiritual realities are born.[3] My aim in this essay is to highlight three areas of analysis and dialogue that can help cultivate a solidarity that overcomes black-brown antagonisms and complicity in white supremacy, and that fosters effective resistance to racist violence in its diverse forms. I argue that sustained attention to Latino/a racialization (and racism), to the precariousness of black citizenship, and to the genesis of anti-brown racist practices within and alongside anti-blackness can all function to strengthen black-brown solidarity and effective anti-racist practice.

Appraising the Catholic Church in 21st century United States, I do not find that we are adequately prepared for the racial reality that Fr. Davis anticipated. Many among us remain unprepared or unwilling to acknowledge the melanin-blessed composition of the Church in the U.S.—past, present, and future. This lack of preparation is reflected in the racially disparate funding levels and priorities of the Church's pastoral ministries, and in the demographics and priorities of the Church's pastoral leadership and theological institutions. Moreover, beyond intra-ecclesial concerns, into the realm of ecclesial mission in the world, our Church remains unprepared to recognize and adequately respond to the brutalized image of God in our midst, which often manifests itself in bloody black and brown bodies lying beyond the so-called sanctuary of our pews.[4] Analyzing the U.S. penal system and policing practices, I see black life, "God's Image in Black,"[5] stamped on and stamped out by state violence on a daily basis while we, as a

Church, remain woefully unprepared to name and resist the manifestations of this sinful structural violence.

Thus, I propose three "buttresses" that are necessary for strengthening the nepantla of black-brown solidarity within and beyond the Church. I do not aim to speak a definitive word on these three areas of concern, but I propose each of them as an area that warrants continued analysis and dialogue amid efforts to build an emerging "in-between" reality that transcends black-brown antagonisms and makes possible effective resistance to systemic and interpersonal violence against black and brown bodies. My goal in discussing violence against black and brown bodies together is not to displace anti-black racism[6] as the central theoretical concept for understanding racism in the U.S., but rather I aim to broaden the common use of the categories of blackness/anti-blackness to include Afro-Latino/as often racialized and treated as 'black' or 'negro/a' but, paradoxically, excluded from discourses of black racial belonging and politics.[7] Additionally, I aim to encourage analysis and dialogue regarding Latino/a anti-blackness and the relationships between anti-black and anti-brown violence, in order to promote more effective solidarity in the work of survival and anti-racism.

Buttress 1: Latino/a Racialization

Some Latino/as are racialized as black or negro/a by socially dominant Anglos or Latino/as, and experience racism that targets this racialized identity. Naming and dismantling these racist social dynamics are necessary tasks for strengthening black-brown solidarity. Lamentably, this reality is commonly eclipsed and ignored in popular and academic discourses. In the U.S. context, dominant social discourses construct Latino/a identity either as an ethnic identity devoid of race, as a white ethnic identity, or as a "third option" racial identity coterminous with brownness that modifies the country's dominant black-white racial binary. (These approaches to Latino/a racialization are fed by dominant Latin American discourses that similarly deny race, that privilege whiteness, or that construct mestizo/as as the dominant racial group.) "Latinos as raceless," "Latinos as white," and "Latinos as a brown 'third

[3] For discussion of the Nahua origins of nepantla, see Walter D. Mignolo, "Introduction: From Cross-Genealogies and Subaltern Knowledges to Nepantla," Nepantla: Views from South 1.1 (2000): 1-8. For analysis of Gloria Anzaldúa's use of nepantla, see AnaLouise Keating, "From Borderlands and New Mestizas to Nepantlas and Nepantleras Anzaldúan Theories for Social Change," Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge 4 (2006): 5-16.

[4] Bryan Massingale has detailed the depths of this unwillingness and inability of Church leadership to respond adequately to racist state violence in Racial Justice and the Catholic Church Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2010. He has further developed this analysis most recently in a lecture titled, "The Catholic Church and the Movements for Black Lives: Can They Be Allies?" See Bryan Massingale, "The Catholic Church and the Movements for Black Lives: Can They Be Allies?" (public lecture delivered at Manhattan College, New York, New York, February 14, 2017).

[5] Cyprian Davis and Jamie T. Phelps, Stamped with the Image of God: African Americans as God's Image in Black (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2003).

[6] For a critique of multiracialism for undermining anti-racist praxis, see Jared Sexton, Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

[7] For scholars theorizing blackness/negritud in Latino/a contexts, see Miriam Jiménez Román, et al., ed., The Afro-Latin@ Reader: History and Culture in the United States (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010) and the Dominican Black Studies issue of The Black Scholar, volume 45, which was published in 2015.

race'" all function to erase the reality of over a hundred million African-descended Latino/as worldwide, many whom experience racism on the basis of a socially-constructed negritude/blackness.[8] This eclipsing of Latino/a racialization and racial oppression sustains the Eurocentric and assimilationist politics of both Anglo and Latin America and of the neoliberal/neocolonial world social order.

Take note during U.S. election campaigns just how often one encounters opinion polls and discussions that juxtapose Black concerns with Latino concerns, as if there were no black Latino/as. Or take note of presentations of homogenized "Latino concerns" that fail to differentiate the interests of affluent, white-identifying, Cuban-Americans from those of brown-skinned Chicano/as experiencing multi-generational poverty from those of recently-arrived Honduran refugees, many of whom are dark-skinned, African-descended, Garifuna. Afro-Latino lives, negro and negra lives, are harmed by the continued construction of Latino/as as either non-racial or white or a collective "brown race."

Anti-racist solidarity is eroded by these constructions in two significant ways. First, when the blackness/negritude of some Latino/as is ignored from within (by others racialized as 'black') or from outside (by non-blacks), we weaken transnational, inter-ethnic black solidarity. Second, when black/negro lives don't matter to lighter-skinned Latino/as, black-brown solidarity breaks down. This harm may take the form of colorblind racism [9] (wherein racism against negro/as is perpetuated by denying its existence) or via discourses of mestizaje that value a mixed and homogenized mestizo/a identity above a putatively conquered indigenous blackness (Africa) and brownness ("New World"). [10] Ensuring that black/negro lives matter socially begins with acknowledging the realities of Latino/a racialization and the oppression of blackness/negritude.

Non-black Latino/as do not exist outside of racially oppressive systems and discourses of whiteness and mestizaje. Thus, when acknowledging racialization, non-black Latino/as ought not construct

[8] Tanya Kateri Hernández, *Racial Subordination in Latin America: The Role of the State, Customary Law, and the New Civil Rights Response* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
[9] Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006).
[10] *See* Néstor Medina, *Mestizaje: Remapping Race, Culture, and Faith in Latina/O Catholicism* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2009). *See also* Mariana Ortega and Linda Alcoff, *Constructing the Nation: A Race and Nationalism Reader* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009).

ourselves only as victims of anti-brown racism, but also as perpetrators and persons with varying degrees of complicity in the oppression of black people within and beyond Latino/a communities.

Consider my own context in New York City, with its large and multi-ethnic black population. One can recognize the practical implications of having an inadequate language for analyzing and discussing racial systems and multiple Latino/a racial identities. For example, I have repeatedly witnessed brown-skinned Latino/a police officers (working alongside white Anglo officers) as they surveil, harass, and/or assault young black Dominican and African-American men. One cannot interpret and dismantle the racially discriminatory policies of an aggressive and notoriously corrupt New York Police Department[11] if we think that Latino/as only exist in a raceless social space or only experience the realities of race as victims of anti-brown practices and policies.

Buttress 2: Anti-Black States and Precarious Black Citizenship
The relationship between modern/colonial[12] citizenship and anti-black racism is a second locus of concern that warrants deep and continued analysis, in service of strengthening anti-racist solidarity. Whereas, in the U.S., questions of *citizenship* and *unauthorized political status* are commonly constructed ethnically as "Latino issues" or racially as "brown people issues," I argue that unauthorized state residence, second-class citizenship, and citizenship in subaltern states are fundamentally "black issues" due to the historic and ongoing role of anti-black violence in producing the global social order. The world order, characterized by white capitalist hetero-patriarchy, is sustained by a fundamentally anti-black logic—viewing *blackness* (and proximity to it) as inherently deviant and a threat to *whiteness* constructed as superiority, entitlement, and impunity.[13]

This black political subalternity and homelessness has roots in Europe's dominating economic relations with Africa and in the Atlantic

[11] "NYCLU Releases 16 Years of NYPD Corruption Reports," New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU), March 27, 2010, accessed November 03, 2016, http://www.nyclu.org/news/nyclu-releases-16-years-of-nypd-corruption-reports.
[12] "Modernity/coloniality" is a concept introduced by sociologist Aníbal Quijano and later developed by other decolonial thinkers. It refers to the inherent historical and epistemological ties the concepts "modernity" and "coloniality." *See* Aníbal Quijano, "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality," *Cultural Studies* 21 (2007): 168-178.
[13] Linda Martín Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 205-224.

slave trade, both of which date back to the 16th century. [14] The modern/colonial nation-state and its related notions of *sovereignty* and *citizenship* emerge in the 17th century within a European-dominated social world already characterized by widespread anti-black violence. Thus, the formation and preservation of modern/colonial nation-states is one way in which anti-blackness constitutes anti-indigenous violence (against indigenous Africans) and intersects with violence against other indigenous populations racially coded as "brown" or "non-white."

This black subalternity and displacement endures in the African continent today via political-economic and military domination by NATO countries. Collective racialized subordination and homelessness also endures in the lives of members of the African diaspora, particularly in communities subjected to the racialized violence of policing, incarceration, and deportation institutions. As I discuss this second "buttress" for black-brown solidarity, I have four imperial and hegemonic images in mind: 1) The roughly 700 U.S. military bases scattered across the globe, 2) Louisiana's Immigration and Customs Enforcement checkpoints, 3) the death-dealing[15] Orleans Parish Prison, and 4) the Danzinger Bridge, forever associated with the murder of black civilians by New Orleans police officers and a subsequent cover-up of their crimes. I imagine the transnational neocolonial social order's vast network of walls and cages,[16] enforced at gunpoint, which maintain black (and brown) subordination and immobility.

Consider the meaning of black citizenship, It can be helpful to consider, where in the entire Western Hemisphere is a black-majority nation (as a political community) truly sovereign over its affairs? Where in this entire hemisphere is a black-majority nation politically "at home," native, or autochthonous, without external political-economic and military control? In the U.S. context, the racist rhetorical jab, "Why don't you go back to Africa?" reflects this imposed black political

[14] Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London: Bogle L'Ouverture Publications, 1972), 95-113.
[15] "Orleans Parish Prison: A Big Jail with Big Problems," American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), accessed July 24, 2017, https://www.aclu.org/other/orleans-parish-prison-big-jail-big-problems. *See also* "Deaths in OPP," Orleans Parish Prison Reform Coalition, accessed July 24, 2017, https://opprcnola.org/the-context/timeline-of-deaths-in-opp/. For information on uncounted deaths at the prison, see Naomi Martin, "Inmate deaths sometimes go uncounted at Orleans Parish Prison," *The Times Picayune*, October 14, 2014, accessed July 24, 2017, http://www.nola.com/crime/index.ssf/2014/10/deaths_go_uncounted_at_orleans.html.
[16] Joseph Nevins, "Policing Mobility: Maintaining Global Apartheid from South Africa to the United States," in *Beyond Walls and Cages: Prisons, Borders, and Global Crisis,* ed. Jenna M. Loyd, et al. (Athens: University of Georgia Press), 19-26.

homelessness in the Western Hemisphere, a marginality produced by a global social order anchored in the institutions of the modern/colonial nation-state and its related constructions of citizenship. *Blackness* and *citizenship* appear to be opposed concepts within modernity. Even aside from questions of collective self-determination, where in the Western Hemisphere do sizable numbers of *individual* black persons (especially black women) enjoy a noteworthy access to centers of political-economic power? Borders, inter-state relations, citizenship, penal, policing, and immigration policies operate on a racist logic that sustains collective and individual black subordination, displacement, and premature death.

For over a decade, the Black Alliance for Just Immigration (BAJI) has been contributing to a greater understanding of the inaccessibility and precariousness of black citizenship. Through a human rights and racial justice lens, BAJI educates the public about black immigrant life and suffering, advocating for black immigrants living in the U.S., especially the more than 600,000 undocumented blacks now living in the country.[17] Listening to BAJI and collaborating with the work of their national alliance of community organizations is one way to strengthen black-brown *nepantla* and reimagine black and brown relationships to violent state institutions, to imperial/hegemonic citizenship, to dominant actors in the labor market, and to the struggle for collective political-economic self-determination.

Buttress 3: Anti-Brown and Anti-Black Racism: Theorizing the Relationship

When my father's brown-skinned, Mexican-American family was displaced from the agricultural labor camp of his early childhood, they managed to buy a small home in Buena Park, California, becoming the first non-white family on the block. He recalls that when he was a child playing in the streets, he would often be called a racial slur by a young white neighbor—not one of the many slurs that white Anglos invented for people of Mexican descent, but rather, the n-word. Some of my father's earliest experiences of racism were rooted in the history of anti-*black* racism in the U.S.

While this anecdote does not provide us with definitive data or the basis for a racial theory, it raises an important question about anti-brown racism generally: *How ought we to understand and theorize colorism and anti-brown racism in relation to anti-black racism?* Did my

[17] Black Alliance for Just Immigration and NYU Law School Immigrant Rights Clinic, *The State of Black Immigrants,* accessed July 24, 2017, http://www.stateofblackimmigrants.com/assets/sobi-background-sept27.pdf.

father's neighbor perceive my father as a *proxy* target, in the absence of a black body, the "necessary evil" in a warped white racial psyche? Or was the n-word used against him because his brown skin signaled a *proximate* social relationship "close enough" to those darker-skinned persons constructed by whites as "n#####s" and imagined as threats to whiteness? If not, was my father's experience a type of *peripheral* racism, a "spill-over" or collateral damage effect of white assaults on blackness? Alternatively, was my father actually imagined and briefly "made black" (in some minute sense) in that moment of racist identity construction? Or was his being called the n-word merely an accidental peculiarity of an otherwise distinct anti-brown experience of racism *parallel* to anti-blackness?

Although I cannot here elaborate a theory of anti-brown racism, I argue that analyzing historical and systemic roots of anti-brown racism in the modern/colonial globalization of anti-black racism is yet another "buttress" for effective anti-racist praxis and black-brown solidarity. To be clear, systemic anti-brown practices and ideas are not identical to black experiences of oppression. Furthermore, anti-brown racisms are not simply less intense forms of anti-black oppressions. Racial oppression is a manifold reality and unique features accompany varying social contexts. Nevertheless, I encourage communities to analyze and discuss historical and systemic roots of anti-brown racisms in anti-black oppressions, because non-black Latino/as sometimes conceptualize our experiences of racism as something separate from and parallel to, or even exceeding, the oppression of black peoples. These are generally erroneous interpretations and are socially harmful ways of conceptualizing the relationships between our experiences of oppression.

Anti-black practices often precede and migrate into anti-brown racism (not only against brown indigenous peoples and mestizos, but also against Arab-Americans, Punjabis, Filipinos, and others). At times, brown Latino/as are "collateral damage" in systemic and repressive violence against black bodies. More often, however, we are perceived as distinct threats to whiteness, and are on the receiving end of violent schemes previously developed to violate black/negro bodies. In both instances, brown people who want to understand the threats to our present and future in this land are wise to look at how black people are currently suffering and surviving racist social systems, and participate in black-led efforts to dismantle these systems. Systemic practices designed to destroy and control black bodies and communities have almost always harmed brown Latino/a lives—forced labor (though not

chattel slavery), forced migrations, demands for documents authorizing presence and travel, debt traps, legalized property theft, forced sterilizations, exclusionary walls (or red lines), detention and imprisonment, exclusions of agricultural and domestic workers from most federal labor laws, and the lynching tree. Brown Latino/as end up ensnared in the same traps laid out for our *negro* and *negra* neighbors, and we often exacerbate the problem by failing to see our divine future as inescapably tied to the survival and liberation of black bodies and communities in the land of bloody borders and the home of prison labor.

Conclusion

Welcoming our divine fullness of life (John 10:10) requires that we labor together imaginatively and shrewdly amid a neocolonial social order that globalizes racial oppression, punishes subaltern solidarity, and incentivizes resistance-weakening divisions and isolation. It is my sincere hope that Catholic churches and theological organizations will become spaces that buttress and cultivate the *nepantla* of black-brown healing, solidarity, and resistance to systemic violence. Re-mixing a sermon by Archbishop Oscar Romero that focused on his own context of systemic violence, wherein he himself re-mixed St. Irenaeus, I hold tight to the conviction that *los pueblos negros completamente vivos son la gloria de Dios (the glory of God is black communities fully alive).*[18] Let us labor (and play), en conjunto, over walls built to divide us, among cracks in a global order crumbling under its own weight, and in every "in-between space" where we are pressed together, to welcome this future to earth, as it is in heaven.

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[18] "Early Christians used to say *Gloria Dei, vivens homo* ('the glory of God is the living person'). We could make this more concrete by saying *Gloria Dei, vivens pauper* ('the glory of God is the living poor person')." Oscar Romero, *Voice of the Voiceless: The Four Pastoral Letters and Other Statements* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1985), 187.