

Title: A 'new Black Atlantic'?
West African itineraries in Latin America

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Introduction

This presentation stems from ethnographic interviews performed in Tijuana, Baja California, from April to June 2019. Age 25 to 44, my informants are six men from Guinea-Conakry, Ghana, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, and Cameroon.

According to the interviews, primary rationales for these transnational human flows include: (a) the subjugated integration of Africa into the globalized world, (b) the critical state of local economies, (c) historic ethno-regional disputes transposed to civil wars and other armed conflicts, and (d) exacerbated environmental crises in times of climate change.

Hypothetically, the variables above created the conditions for a renewed version of Paul Gilroy's Black Atlantic: diasporic itineraries and struggles against modern terror and its concept of sovereignty, anti-black racism, distinct societal and state forms of nationalist hostility. As living political cultures and social systems, simultaneously uprooting reincarnations of the colonial trauma, defiant and vindictive paths, these trajectories are products of modernity and global phenomena; perhaps, planetary life-forces beyond internationalist initiatives and state-centered paradigms.

Likewise, it seems contemporary West African itineraries in Latin America revolve around what Peter Sloterdijk terms the political-kinetic tradition in modernity. Namely, patterns in

human movement close to martial mobilization: movement practically impossible to not enact. Movements towards more movement, these itineraries speak of courage and diligence in a world that still allows relations and social spheres based on solidarity and fellowship, yet also a world where humanity does not stop fighting against phantasmagoric monsters. Modern nation-states are like hybrid beasts between nativism and globalization; to certain privileged classes, they offer the possibility of multiple citizenships between the group, the nation, and the world society; for the wretched of the world, they multiply the violence of exile and displacement.

The Latin American roulette

During the past 25 years, African transnational dwellers reached Brazil and Argentina, but Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Costa Rica, and Mexico recently added to these destinations. They mainly arrived in Ecuador or Brazil, although recent accounts include Guyana and Argentina as significant entry gateways. Males primarily constitute these circuits, although women increasingly travel alone or with their families; they sometimes have professional or technical backgrounds, multilingual abilities, and previous experiences of transnational mobility.

For some, Ecuador and Brazil were immediate escape routes. For others, these countries became temporary destinations where they found labor opportunities, even if scarce and exploitative, to gather means and continue the journey. In many cases, travelers relied on established contacts in diasporic communities. Notably, in Quito and São Paulo, there are 'African neighborhoods' where they arrived searching for work, housing, or leisure.

The Ecuadorian context is paradigmatic. In 2016, due to growing international pressure, after almost a decade, authorities partly dismantled what in practice became one of the most open human mobility regimes in the world; for example, the possibility of admission without a visa or passport, through a consular letter. In any case, it is worth mentioning that restrictions on

African entries have been in place since 2010, plus the continuous training that Ecuadorian immigration officials receive from the US government.

Brazil stands out because it is the only Latin American country that established stable diplomatic and economic relations with Africa, particularly Angola and South Africa. From 2003 to 2016, the ties and connections between both regions became an authentic transnational arena. Thus, citizens from various African countries entered Brazil with a tourist visa valid for 15 to 90 days. Despite its relative openness, Brazil also forged a global border that does not necessarily translate into juridical and political rights.

The panorama of contrasts and ambiguities worsened in Colombia, where no rights approach on transnational mobility existed. For African travelers, the interval to obtain a transit permit valid for 15 days could take up to three weeks. As they reached the coasts of the Urabá Gulf, they took the perilous journey towards the Panamanian border, a course where shipwrecks are not unusual. Against time, through the Darien Gap, travelers must decide on the equation that reads: the shortest the route, the more dangerous. More often than not, aid from fellow wanderers could readily become the difference between life and death at this stage.

A form of hydrous connectivity, ethnic, linguistic, and religious identities played a significant role in how this support expressed itself. The resourcefulness of what I have called a 'new Black Atlantic' was comprehensibly summarized by one of my informants: 'life is like that, as we say, the hand that gives is the same hand that receives.' To cover expenses, communicate the latest news, foresee alternative plans, or find encouragement, African travelers contacted kinship, friends, and fellows in the US, who organized fundraising activities in their communities or provided much-treasured resources themselves.

With The International Organization for Migration and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the Panamanian and Costa Rican authorities designed an 'orderly flows' scheme through local and transnational humanitarian organizations to provide

transport, accommodation, food supplies, and basic health services. As they arrived at the first temporary shelter in Panama, transnational dwellers were numbered, examined, and vaccinated, their biometric information compared to the Interpol database. If there was no cause for alarm, Costa Rican authorities allowed transfers to their own temporary shelters.

For its part, the measures adopted by the Nicaraguan government were no less than police and military fortresses that allowed treacherous semi-clandestine crossings. No one spent more than a few hours in the country. Even after waging the entry fee, travelers were returned to Costa Rica if detained. Undoubtedly, this was a state-administrated illegal transit economy, a filter, and an aggressive containment campaign along porous borderlands.

In contrast, the position of the Honduran and Guatemalan authorities obeyed the principle of planned indifference. They did not prevent entries, but no assistance other than temporary transit permits existed. Naturally, indifference does not mean absence, as both governments send military, police, and immigration officials to be trained in retention and surveillance tactics with different US government agencies. In Honduras and Guatemala, non-governmental organizations, sometimes linked to ecclesiastical institutions and civil society in general, took the task of redressing state indolence.

In collaboration with the IOM and the UN High Commissioner, Mexican authorities also implemented a legal limbo management strategy to accelerate entries and departures through security checkpoints while providing essential services such as food, lodging, transportation, or temporary transit permits. Inadequate and insufficient, these actions belong to a three-decade-long process that transformed Mexico into a great arterial border. A territory where numerous transit routes coexist with obstruction locations, resulting from diffuse and equivocal policies that favor progressively more fluid and multidirectional trails but also more costly, risky, and tardier.

The position of the Mexican government was highly ambiguous. In January of 2019, authorities issued thousands of visitor cards for humanitarian reasons, and only five months later, under pressure from the United States, deployed the National Guard, causing an exponential rise in arrests and deportations. Unsurprisingly, the people affected by these and other repressive measures resolutely expressed their opposition. For example, on July 9, at the Chaparral checkpoint in Tijuana, around 150 African protesters denounced systematic extortion practices by immigration officials and local police; moreover, on August 21, at the Siglo XXI detention center in Tapachula, travelers from Africa, Haiti, and Cuba clashed with federal security forces.

Almost all of my informants arrived in Tijuana seeking asylum in the US, yet this objective was achieved only in two cases. For the rest, the alternative was to attempt regularization in Mexico under refugee status. The unprecedented increase of international protection requests in the country, the incapacity and subordination of Mexican authorities to US interests, Mexico's dysfunctional bureaucracy, and various erratic and restrictive policies pictured a daunting scenario. The dynamic but exploitative informal labor market in Mexico's northern border cities added to these challenges. At least one of my informants meditated on the risks and chances of alternative crossing routes to the US.

After four to six months of transit, in Tijuana, groups of three to five African transnational dwellers moved into tiny apartments barely equipped with essential services. They also relied on each other for work opportunities, mainly in construction and commerce. As newcomers or temporary residents, they spent Sunday afternoons outside one of the Haitian barbershops in the city's downtown, less than half a mile from the international line. Music filled the atmosphere with an air of familiarity. Some played domino, drank Jamaican or European beer, discussed business, and left. Others looked very pensive, even distracted.

My research confirms that political cultures and social systems do not depend so much on territoriality, essence, or rootedness but on pelagic forces that are the product of modernity

and vital forces upon its scorn and horrors. In order to trail the obstacles and dangers through Latin America, African transnational dwellers relied on economic and moral resources made available to them through a 'new Black Atlantic,' that is, a fluvial humanism or oceanic consciousness 'from below.' From their ties in Africa and the United States to their praxes of camaraderie during transit, these life forces allowed travelers to defeat the destructive powers that lay in wait for them.

These itineraries result from ceaseless interactions and amalgamations of peoples and nations across political and geographic borders at multiple scales. By way of self-criticism, here, we admit that the Black Atlantic paradigm has sometimes taken its deconstructive effort to the extreme of divorcing fundamental concepts such as Blackness and Africanness. To avoid this and other serious misinterpretations, in addition to analyzing the transnational moving spheres that made these itineraries possible, research focused on the historical conditions that gave birth to this 'new diasporic experience,' an endless world puzzle between colonial continuum, postcolonial transnationalism, and predatory globalization.

We understand that Gilroy's cosmopolitan humanist connectivity through water can also refer to a world of transnational bubbles. A kind of isolated hyper-connectivity related to a 'structurally hybrid' global regime in which states share sovereign rights over their borders with non-national institutions or non-state organizations. Accelerated mobilities, fast wire transfers, digital flows of information, communications, and surveillance, globalized swiftness merges with contexts where the lack of citizenship leads to inhuman conditions of existence.

Hasty and intermittent, these trajectories are part of the monstrous modern machinery by which everything spirited can also be abjection, trauma, and death. The thesis of human movement as a matter of political ontology enables us to reflect on the transitional experience of crossing imaginary lines that organize and determine critical social and spatial relations such as inside and outside dichotomies, autochthony and foreignness standards, or the difference between friends and foes.

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