

## Introduction

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This book about Afro-Latinx digital connections seeks to highlight how Latin American and Caribbean people of African descent, or Afrodescendants, use digital tools to bolster the agency of individuals and communities, both locally and across national boundaries. Many of the texts collected here are written by academics; interest in digital technologies, however, exceeds the boundaries of the academy, as anyone living in our contemporary connected world can attest. We have therefore also included interviews with Afrodescendants who use digital technologies to foster connections within and among Afrodescendant communities. The technologies examined here are symptomatic of a digital network encircling the globe at a truly breathtaking speed, a network which is itself the result of numerous interwoven networks of different sizes. Developments in mobile technologies, artificial intelligence, and the so-called internet of things are paving the way into a future of even greater human integration with computational hardware and software. Yet compared to the seemingly unalloyed enthusiasm that technology elicited just a few decades ago, today we are more ambivalent about the implications of a digitally connected world. On the one hand we cherish the apps on our phones and the gadgets that seem to make our life more “convenient,” but on the other hand we are also increasingly aware that the ubiquity of digital technologies facilitates hacking, the proliferation of malware, and surveillance by state

actors and others who can use these same technologies for nefarious ends. Nevertheless, between the poles of utopian freedom of action and dystopian disciplinary control lie other possibilities for individuals and groups to take advantage of what “the digital” has to offer.

Where does all this take us in terms of Afro-Latinx digital connections? We begin with the seemingly self-evident observation that the pervasiveness of digital technology has profound implications for the ambiguous yet inescapable constellations that constitute Afro-Latin America, or Afrodescendant “cultures” (we will address these terms in more detail below), and “cultures” at large, in the broad, anthropological sense of the word. We suggest that this is only seemingly self-evident because although digital technologies are an inescapable feature of daily life, their effect on cultural practices is not always obvious, even though manifold changes make themselves felt on the surface. What is important, however, is to move beyond mere appearances and enact a “deep description” that might give us some indication of how structures inherited from the past, particularly in Black communities, endure or change as digital tools are mobilized. It is important to note that we understand the digital domain not merely as a layer added to a “real” and robust culture that underlies it, much in the way that icing lies on a cake.<sup>1</sup> Rather, the digital is understood as firmly embedded in the practices of everyday life. Wherever digital technologies have been adopted, which is just about everywhere on Earth, the digital has been or is being incorporated into the cultural DNA, so to speak. This is particularly evident in the adoption of the mobile phone (cellphone, smartphone, pocket computer, or however one might want to understand it), which as it has spread across the globe has had large and frequently unforeseen effects on commerce, social relations, and political events. Positing the existence of a digital domain is therefore more an analytical strategy than an ontological one: the digital domain is not, in itself, a discrete and bounded set of objects, rules, and procedures operating at a distance from people and matter, although some of its objects such as hardware and software are commonly imagined that way. Even a cursory forensic examination of all things digital quickly uncovers connections to bodies, geographies, and resources, connections of which the Afro-Latinx digital ones are a subset.

It is also important to note that the digital devices and the infrastructures that make them useful depend on raw resources obtained from many regions of the globe, and that the myriad processes of extraction, production, distribu-

tion, usage, and disposal associated with digital technologies have deleterious effects on the environment, as is increasingly clear in our time of environmental emergencies.<sup>2</sup> For example, the labor needed to create and maintain digital devices and keep the digital economy afloat consists of real people, many of whom live in deplorable conditions.<sup>3</sup> We hear about blood diamonds, but how many of us know about the hidden workers that scan texts for Google or Microsoft or that disassemble the components of so-called e-waste?<sup>4</sup> Or how many of us are aware of the people who work according to stringent schedules in the warehouses from where objects purchased online are delivered?<sup>5</sup> Real, concrete matter is at the core of all digital interactions, including at the level of electronic zeros and ones and the surfaces on which they are registered. The digital world, therefore, is material all the way down.

The above digression into what the digital entails might seem tangential to the articles in this book. We suggest, however, that the materiality of digital technologies should be at the forefront of any examination of Afro-Latinx digital connections, lest current issues and claims (social, territorial, economic, environmental, etc.) with long historical trajectories grounded in physical circumstances get lost in the seeming intangibility of the digital domain. Moreover, an overemphasis on immateriality as the essence of the digital can accentuate the age-old division between mind and matter, or between theory and practice, rendering some of the problematics we address here as literally “academic.”

### Afro-Latin America, Afrodescendant, and Afro-Latinx

The panorama briefly sketched above, much of it now widely discussed in the media and in academic circles, forms part of the frame in which Afro-Latinx digital connections take place. Another critical part of the frame is the well-known history of cruelty and injustice endured by Africans and their descendants in the Americas.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, despite the backbreaking labor they endured (labor that propelled a modernity fueled by commodities such as sugar and cotton), most of these peoples’ histories remain absent in national narratives written after the independence movements of the early nineteenth century. People of African descent have been largely erased as actors in the project of nation-building in the Americas, a problematic state of affairs that remains mostly unchanged. It is against this history of invisibility that the terms “Afro-

Latin America,” “Afrodescendant,” and “Afro-Latinx” have emerged as signifiers of the agency of Black people in the Americas.

“Afro-Latin America” was coined at some point during the 1970s, and, as George Reid Andrews notes, the term was appealing because it suggested a set of common concerns or issues shared by people of African descent across the Americas.<sup>7</sup> This was important at the time, since Blacks were conceived of as a disconnected plurality, even within national boundaries: “Latin American writers and intellectuals had long been referring to their fellow citizens of African ancestry as Afro-Brazilians, Afro-Cubans, Afro-Venezuelans, and so on; from this usage the concept of a larger, transregional category of Afro-Latin Americans followed naturally. To the best of my knowledge, however, no one before [Anani] Dzidzienyo and [Pierre-Michel] Fontaine had thought to transform plural Afro-Brazilians or Afro-Cubans into a singular Afro-Brazil or Afro-Cuba, let alone an all-embracing Afro-Latin America.”<sup>8</sup>

This new, broader conception of an Afro-Latin America had momentous implications: “Latin Americans who are Africans” describes a set of individuals subsumed in a larger “Latin America,” which is constructed as normative, whereas the term Afro-Latin America suggests a large-scale community with shared concerns, claims, histories, and memories that resist being subsumed under and occluded by the unhyphenated category “Latin America.” In other words, “Afro-Latin America” stresses connections across the hemisphere that help define and bolster the agency of a particular set of individuals and groups as well as the connections that allude to a deep historical memory concealed like the bulk of an iceberg beneath the surface of national histories as they have been built in the Americas.

Another important term we have already introduced is “Afrodescendant,” which we will use to denote membership in the African diaspora that includes Afro-Latin America as one instance of a complex network of communities and identities, and that, much like “Afro-Latin America,” alludes to a set of shared historical circumstances and concerns. “Afrodescendant” has already been adopted by the United Nations, government agencies in various countries, and a growing number of NGOs, an action which is symptomatic of a contemporary momentum in the Black diaspora that is expanding ideas inherent in the concept of Afro-Latin America.<sup>9</sup> The categorical implications of these two terms are not meant to downplay regional differences or needs that are specific to particular places. Rather, the acknowledgment of an overarching historical

consciousness and agency of Afrodescendant peoples is an important corrective to an enduring racism and underplays the diverse roles these communities and individuals have played in Latin America.

The third term in the title for this section, “Afro-Latinx,” is of relatively recent vintage, and with its related term “Latinx” has added new dimensions to how Afrodescendants and Latin America are conceptualized. For example, historical Afrodescendant claims concerning civil rights continue to be important, but Afro-Latinx digital initiatives have drawn attention to two important issues that have not been sufficiently examined in the past: the role of gender in fashioning Black identities, and the idea that humanity can be defined solely in terms of adult males and females. “Afro-Latinx” has broadened the range of what it means to be Black in Latin America, and the intersectional implications of this term suggest a nuanced creative tension with the overarching category of Afrodescendant, a tension that can counter any temptation to ascribe a determinate positivistic essence to Blackness. We have therefore used the term Afro-Latinx in the title of this book as an acknowledgment of the breadth, variety, and complexity of contemporary Afro-Latin America.

The emergence of Afrodescendant issues in the Americas as described above should not be read as the arrival of agency where there had been none. Like other subaltern groups, such as Indigenous peoples, Afro-Latin Americans have been actively present as historical actors during and after the colonial period. However, the structural categorization of race inherited from colonial times has “edited out” this presence in histories, politics, culture, and the economy, occluding or downplaying the ways Afrodescendants have participated in different social spheres. In turn, Afrodescendants have resisted such concealment and erasure so as to reveal how processes of hegemonic cultural imposition do their work. Maroon communities, which were created by runaway slaves to establish collective ways of being in the world, are notable examples of how Black subjects made themselves visible by resisting bondage.

This tension between the visibility and invisibility of African descendants is the result of particular models of reality whose inbuilt prejudices have had disastrous consequences for millions of Black people. Such models were configured according to discrete rules that qualified data and justified particular actions, skewing representations of the social world and justifying egregious forms of behavior. Residues of these models persist, even in the digital realm, in discourses and representations of Afrodescendant peoples in the Americas.