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From the Editor

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This article is from an earlier iteration of Diálogo which had the subtitle "A Bilingual Journal." The publication is now titled "Diálogo: An Interdisciplinary Studies Journal."

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Celebrating Nuestra América’s African Heritage and Cultural Diversity

Upon their arrival in what came to be known as the Americas, Europeans imposed a rigid social structure based on the false supremacy of “whiteness” and forced “non-whites,” the indigenous people and African slaves, to the bottom. “Racial purity” became a useful tool of empire designed to keep wealth, political power and social privileges in the hands of an elite: those classified as “whites” or peninsulares, whose Spanish birthright automatically placed them in a privileged “racial” category. The Spanish crown was so obsessed with race and power that it banned from the colonial governments and official positions those classified as criollos, the children of “racially pure” peninsulares who regardless of their lineage, were considered racially impure by virtue of their place of birth. This contradiction proved fatal, as the politically “oppressed” criollos eventually rebelled against an “ungrateful” motherland.

Like all imperial ventures, the conquest of the Americas unleashed a violent cultural clash that has lasted to this day, 508 years after the arrival of the Europeans. Millions of Amerindians, Africans, Asians and Europeans died as the result of wars, epidemics, and forced labor. The clash, however violent, also gave way to cultural, linguistic, and religious exchanges and hybrids that created our beautiful multiracial, multiethnic, and multicultural people. Despite the Europeans’ efforts to keep the region free of racial and cultural “contamination,” by the early 19th century, the Americas had one of the most culturally and ethnically diverse populations in the world.

When Latin America gained its independence from Spain in bloody wars led by coalitions of Amerindians, African slaves and criollos, the new regimes struggled with the daunting task of governing the region. The only thing that Latin America seemed to have gained with independence was freedom from its European rulers. As most of the region drifted into civil wars among the criollo elite, Simón Bolívar lamented that governing the independent nations was as difficult, if not as impossible, as “plowing the sea.”

We could not even agree on what to call ourselves: Hispanos, Americanos, Hispanoamericanos, Latinos, Latinamericanos, Iberoamericanos, or Indoamericanos. In 1892, José Martí argued that neither Hispanic nor Latin could define the region’s great cultural and racial diversity. He suggested calling it Nuestra América, a far from perfect name, but one that at least recognized the region’s independence and diversity. Unfortunately, due to political turmoil and social instability, the more critical questions of class and race were left largely unresolved. As a result, the native populations that survived the wars of conquest and colonial repression for more than 400 years remained at the bottom of the social scales in the new societies. Like their African brethren, they remained socially marginalized—suffering discrimination and exploitation.

In this issue of Diálogo, our contributors turn their attention to the African heritage and cultures of Latin America. We honor the long struggle for survival and preservation of the rich and diverse cultural heritages of our people. Against all odds and despite brutal oppression and attempts at cultural genocide, Nuestra América not only survived, it prevailed and flourished.