

De Inga y Mandinga x El Sefardim

by Antonio M. Gómez

Diaspora. It is a word long-associated with both Sephardic Jews and people of African heritage in the Americas. A word used with increasing frequency. But, what does diaspora mean? More importantly, *how does it feel* to be in diaspora? In social scientific terms, a diaspora is a diffusion, or fanning out, of a group with a concentrated identity, be it ethnic, racial, religious, linguistic, etc. **De Inga y Mandinga's** various productions have explored the experience of the African diaspora in the Americas, particularly as it has intersected with Indigenous identities. This production expands that vision to include the meeting of two diasporas in the Americas – one African and the other Sephardic Jewish (Jews of the Iberian Peninsula).

Like two waves breaking onto a common shore, the intersection embodies both confluence and crosscurrents, as the two waves meet and fan across the sands of New World shores. There are many differences in the experiences. In 1492 Spanish Jews were forced to convert or be exiled. They spread out across Europe, North Africa and Western Asia. But, from the financiers and crew of Columbus' initial expedition onward, the destiny of the Sephardim would also spill into the Americas. Conversos (converts) made the crossing and in some cases secretly maintained their identities as Crypto-Jews in the most remote corners of the Spanish Empire (New Mexico, tropical Peru, etc.). Closer to home, Seattle's rise as the economic hub of the Puget Sound was fueled by Sephardic merchants who outfitted the Alaska-Yukon Gold Rush.

Africans, on the other hand, were forced to migrate, dehumanized as human property. About 10.7 of the 12.5 million souls sent across the Atlantic survived the brutal Middle Passage. Indeed, it is on the backs of Africans and their descendants that much of the material wealth of the modern Americas is built, from our greatest cities to our most profitable industries, to the commodification of music, dance, cuisine, etc. In fact, the economy of the whole of Europe rose on the forced labor of the African diaspora. Yet, Afro Latino and African American communities not only survived. They birthed artistic practices that expressed the human condition so precisely – from sorrow to joy – that the cultural innovations of the African diaspora in the Americas now shape the globe's most embraced genres, from the earliest iterations of xacarás, cumbees and spirituals to jazz, R&B, blues, reggae, rock, hip hop, salsa, cumbia and reggaetón.

Persistent racism, colorism and religious discrimination in Latin America have continued to impact the fortunes of Black and Jewish Latin Americans in very distinct ways. But there are important intersections of commonality that the program tonight explores: Both communities endured religious persecution at the hands of a multi-century Inquisition – a shabby front for a property grab, fronted by Christian zeal-

ots, while quietly concentrating capital among a hegemonic few. From Mexico to Peru, there is documentation of how the Inquisition was used to outlaw African spirituality and cultural expression (and turned a blind eye to slavery), even as it was used to persecute prosperous Jewish merchants and justify the transfer of their wealth.

With cultural, religious and economic pressures bearing down on both Africans and Jews, both groups developed gorgeous yet very intimate artistic practices. From the private spaces like the Crypto Jewish kitchen or the enclosed Afro-Brazilian *roda* (circle) de capoeira, to practices hidden in plain sight through syncretism: St. Barbara as a public-facing stand-in for the Yoruba deity Changó in Cuba, or the maintenance of Sephardic Judaism masked as a Christian feast of Santa Esterica (Esther) in New Mexico. Indeed, when societal channels for the transmission of culture and religion remain shut, parent and child become the co-conspirators to help identity endure. One of the most striking aspects of this program is the way it centers on women and mothers as the transmitters of hope and faith.

How beautiful that these two diasporas, distinct in their experiences but connected in several common challenges, come together in this collaborative performance, set in the historically Black neighborhood of a city that is home to the U.S.' third largest Sephardic population. Thank you for being part of it.

