

Garifuna leaders: the struggle for Garifuna rights across the Americas

Authors: Khalilah Coombs, Udoka Meremetoh, Jay Nelson, Citlali Ramos, and Belkairys Taveras

Introduction

The Garifuna community is a unique and vibrant group of people who have managed to preserve their culture and language despite the numerous struggles in their history. Their leaders have played an essential role in advocating for their rights and serving as a voice of the Garifuna people. This article will explore the impact of Garifuna leaders in the past and present and highlight their contributions to the preservation of their culture. Additionally it will explore the advancement of the rights of their people. Specifically, this article will focus on the role of community leaders as advocates for the rights of Garifuna communities residing in Honduras, New York (USA), Belize and Guatemala.

Honduras: the struggle for land



[A pelican resting on a Garifuna fishing boat in the Cayos Cochinos located in the Caribbean Sea off the coast of Honduras](#) by [Krimo 18](#) is licensed under [CC BY-SA 4.0](#)

1 This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 2.0 Generic License](#).



Many Garifuna people live in Triunfo De La Cruz, a beautiful region of the Northern coast of Honduras. Agriculture is vital to the people who reside in this area. However, the government is trying to gentrify this area and big corporations are trying to steal the land from its residents. This gentrification, which involves both state and non-state actors, has been at the cost of the history and culture of the Garifuna people. Indigenous people who have been raising their voices against this development are being increasingly targeted by corporations, resulting in their displacement, and the kidnapping and death of their leaders. Afro-indigenous people have been faced with racial discrimination to the extent that over 50 of them have been assassinated. This is despite an international court order that has provided protection for indigenous Hondurans' land rights.

Faced with this turmoil, the Garifuna people have sought help from those in power in the United States. However, U.S. politicians have tried to prevent asylum seekers from entering the U.S. Ironically, wealthy white Americans are settling in indigenous islands and building retirement homes. Thus, the United States contributes to the problem of racial discrimination and gentrification issues in Honduras. U.S government, however, is not using its external sovereignty to bring awareness to these issues. The United States considers Honduras's gentrification and racial issues to be an internal sovereignty problem, to be dealt with within the Honduras region. While Honduras has ordered the protection of indigenous groups, this has been ineffective as the Garifuna people continue to be the target of severe violence and many hate crimes.

In 2015, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights found Honduras guilty of violating Garifuna communal property rights in Triunfo de la Cruz. During the court proceedings, the attorney general maintained that the Garifuna had no claim to indigeneity and had been using that belief to justify the anti-black rhetoric. The government routinely protects the rights of mestizo settlers and foreign investors who have set up developments throughout the country. This further displaced communities living in other areas for centuries. Following the ruling of 2015, land defender activists have been experiencing escalating levels of violence and even death. This includes the forceful disappearance of Snider Centeno. Four Garifuna men were also taken at gunpoint by uniformed assailants. The kidnappings of Suami Aparicio Mejía, Milton Joel Martínez, Gerardo Rochez, and the death of Goldman Environmental Prize winner Berta Cáceres became public knowledge. The attack of the Garifuna in Honduras and the pillaging of their territories in the pursuit of globalization is a reflection of the widespread violence against black and indigenous communities across the Americas. While Black and indigenous cultures are sentimentalized for tourism, they are victimized, targeted, railroaded, abused, displaced, and killed. One of the important activists in this fight against gentrification and displacement is Miriam Miranda.

2 This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 2.0 Generic License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/2.0/).



Miriam Miranda- the land defender



[Miriam Miranda, Liderança garífuna](#) by [Felipe Canova](#) is licensed under [CC BY-NC 4.0](#)

Miranda was born in the small Garifuna village of Santa Fe, Colon, in northern Honduras. Her family left the village for more jobs and educational opportunities. Miranda eventually started studying at a public university in Tegucigalpa. There she got involved with social movements dedicated to aiding women living in poor communities. Doing this work, she was inspired by these women's stories, and her feminism and activism started to bloom. She took what she learned from these experiences to become one of the leading voices in the fight for Garifuna rights in Honduras.

The Honduran government has failed to protect land titles which allowed foreign investors and illegal drug cartels to take and use land rightfully owned by the Garifuna. This has led to the displacement of many of its residents. The Organización Fraternal Negra Hondureña/Black

3 This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 2.0 Generic License](#).



Fraternal Organization of Honduras (OFRANEH), led by Miranda and the Garifuna community, has organized to defend their land and preserve the culture.

Miranda and other "land defender" activists are often kidnapped and detained. Many of them are often killed. Despite the constantly looming threat of death, Miriam Miranda remains a prominent activist fighting for the rights of the Garifuna people in Honduras.

The Garifuna in New York: navigating identity and political representation.



[Garifuna Dance Theater](#) by [maisya_nyc](#) is licensed under [CC BY-SA 2.0](#)

For many Garifuna people, political participation and representation is an often-troubling subject. It requires the negotiation of identity and wading through the waters of government bureaucracies. To fully understand why political representation for Garifuna people might be sparse, it is first necessary to acknowledge how they navigate identity politics.

For many Garifuna people, being referred to as Black or Hispanic proves ill-fitting. The conversations surrounding representation can be challenging to navigate. This is especially the case for Garifuna people living in New York as "they must negotiate between these already established categories, fitting neatly within none of them" (England, 24). In her quest to understand the varying opinions on identity amongst Garifuna people in New York, Sarah England notes that some Garifuna people have distanced themselves from Blackness while others have embraced it. For some, identifying with the struggle of Black Americans and the leaders of the civil rights movement has led to embracing Black identity. For others, due to the

4 This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 2.0 Generic License](#).



denigrated status of American Blackness, distancing oneself from Blackness is a way for one to receive better treatment.

In his letter to the women of NYC who have been working to preserve the culture and history of previous generations, Professor López Oro highlights the embracing of Blackness in Garifuna culture. He explains how some Garifuna people view themselves as Black Indians, Afro-Indians, or Black Caribbeans. However, identification is limited to categories that do not fully encapsulate the nuances of Garifuna's identity. How can political representation be achieved without figureheads portraying the Garifuna people as a monolith?

The Garifuna are Caribbean people who live in various countries in Latin America, such as Nicaragua, Honduras, and Guatemala. The Garifuna community has migrated from Latin American countries into the United States for decades but had more prominent communities in the late 60s, early 70s. Due to migration, this group developed prominent communities in New York, specifically the Bronx and Spanish Harlem. It is emphasized that New York is where Garifuna people come from all three nations: Guatemala, Belize, and Honduras. Garifuna people embrace a lifestyle focused on fishing and horticulture that allowed them to prosper throughout the coast of Central America. They also have a language of their own. The Garifuna people from Belize had no trouble adapting to the language and culture of New York; yet those from Guatemala and Honduras relied on Spanish and the Garifuna language. Future generations of Garifuna will be responsible for retaining their English language since they were born in the United States. The types of jobs they have in New York are different for men and women. Women worked domestically (at home), while men worked in the food and restaurant businesses. Both genders worked in industrial garment industries as well as manufacturing houses. New York City is where the Garifunas thrived economically and culturally. They can retain their culture in New York by building their community while also being able to maintain and provide for their families back home.

In Garifuna society, women play an essential role in culture. They are considered a pillar of the home that provides stability and resistance to the home and the community. The Garifuna woman is hard-working and seeks sustainability in the community and the culture. They transmit their knowledge to future generations to keep the Garifuna culture alive, and they take pride in the intersection of being female and Garifuna. At the same time, the Garifuna woman strives and stands out in political and territorial struggles in which men tend to be more predominant.

In the letter to the Garifuna women in NYC, Professor Paul Joseph López Oro highlights the work of Aida Lambert. This Garifuna activist moved to NYC from Honduras to represent her culture and her identity as Garifuna. Lambert distinguishes between African Americans,

5 This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 2.0 Generic License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/2.0/).



Indigenous, and Latinidad. Since she and the second generation of Garifuna migrants in NYC do not identify with any of these races, we have to consider her mindset.

In Aida Lambert's role as an activist, she has focused on making the Garifuna culture known, promoting visibility and recognition in New York City since it is one of the cities with the largest Garifuna community in the United States. Lambert's purpose was to introduce the Garifunas to have their own identity and be well represented in the state, thus becoming a tremendous influence for the following generations in New York.

Another important representative of the Garífuna community who stands out for her work in representing the community and elevating her identity as an Afro-Latina woman is Janel Martínez. Martínez's work is based on recognizing how her identity as an Afro-Latina stems from African American descent. This allows us to understand that she focuses on her Blackness. At the same time, Martínez seeks to represent the Garinagu community in journalism since there is a gap due to the lack of representation of African Americans in the media.

Professor Paul Joseph López Oro: an advocate for the Garifuna in NYC



Professor Pablo Joseph López Oro is a Brooklyn, NY native of Honduran Garifuna descent. He specializes in Black Latin American studies and Black Latinx social movements having received his master's in African American Studies from Northwestern University and a master's in Latin-American Studies from the University of Mexico. He then received his doctorate in African and African Diaspora studies from the University of Texas at Austin. Professor López Oro has taught Black and Latinx studies in many universities throughout the country including the University of Texas at Austin, the University of Virginia, Hunter College, and John Jay College of Criminal Justice. He has written extensively on the Garifuna culture and history,

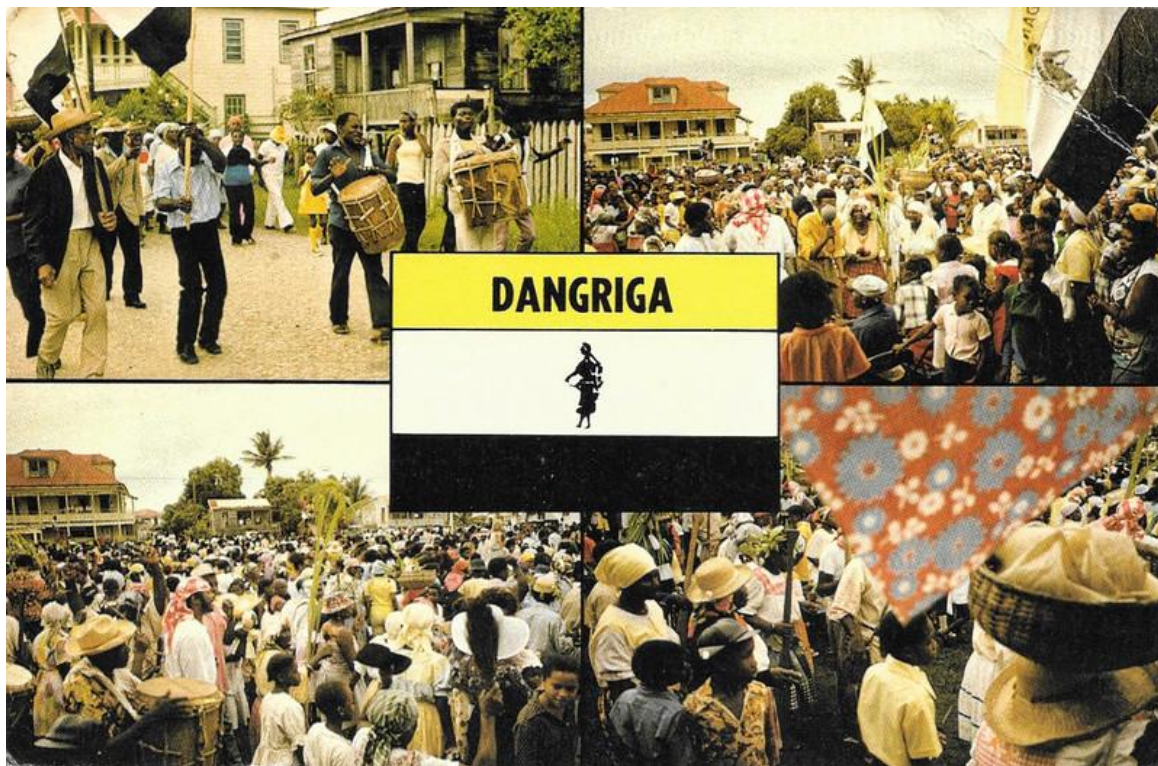
6 This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 2.0 Generic License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/2.0/).



composing work on the subjects of black indigeneity, Garifuna activism, Afrolatinidad, gender, feminism, sexuality and more.

Professor López Oro once stated, “My research and teaching is at the intersection of Black Studies, Latin America, Caribbean, Latinx Studies, and gender and sexuality with a particular focus on queer feminist activism among black Central Americans. My work is situated in contemporary Afro Latinx Studies as black feminist and queer analysis remain absent in most Afro Latinx scholarship.” One of his proudest achievements as an academia based activist is bringing light to histories that are often overlooked. Professor López Oro is currently working on books concerning Garifuna identity and queer politics.

Belize: Cultural Discrimination and Cultural Shame



[Souvenir du Belize, janvier '82](#) by [Pascal Ray](#) is licensed under [CC BY-NC-SA 2.0](#)

Since the colonial era, Garifuna in Belize have been stereotyped as savage with their rituals, customs, and cultural practices being viewed as primitive. As a result, many created and lived in homogenous communities and villages where most adults and children openly speak Garifuna. Unfortunately, once they enter more diverse and multiethnic communities such as modern day Dangriga, they must decide between speaking their native tongue or English creole which is

7 This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 2.0 Generic License](#).



considered the more "authentically Belizean" language. Because of this constant internal battle, the older generations are finding that there is now this shame that the youth have regarding speaking their native language; there is the looming fear of the death of the language, culture, history and link to the past.

When asked directly about the shame many children feel surrounding their culture, some identified the following as observed reasons: lack of Garifuna businesses which means other languages must be spoke for transactions, the language isn't taught in schools in a town where more than half of the population were Garifuna, and children are teased for speaking the language. Another theory is that the English creole hold resentment against the Garifuna due to the fact that the Garifuna were never enslaved. This marginalization causes a lack of regard and respect from other ethnic groups who often treat Garifuna as lower class.

With the town of Dangriga becoming more multiethnic, a cultural hierarchy has formed with one particular group being pushed lower. This is definitely affecting how the youth view themselves and their place in their own country. Preserving the culture is crucial but increasingly difficult with the changing climate. Despite a lack of inclusion in politics and national discussions, most Garifuna people still remain proud of their ancestry, especially in Dangriga which was once considered the "Garifuna town" of Belize.

8 This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 2.0 Generic License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/2.0/).





Festa del Garífuna Settlement Day by Pitxiquin is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0

Thomas Vincent Ramos & Settlement Day

Thomas Vincent Ramos was an influential leader in early 20th century Belize. Ramos was a black intellectual inspired by the words and work of Marcus Garvey; he wanted to ensure the welfare of the afro-indigenous people. Ramos was a part of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and the African Communities League (ACL). Ramos did not stand for assimilating into any form of Caucasian culture. Ramos had a very abstract and complex way of thinking; he did not view triumph as living up to a white man's standards. Ramos knew that independence was not independence if the people of Belize and Honduras had to live the lifestyle of their colonizers after freedom. He viewed prosperity as having the power to live any way an individual wants without having social status.

Thomas Vincent Ramos was a patriot, social activist, icon, and proud Garifuna. Before migrating to Dangriga Town, Belize, in 1923, Thomas Vincent Ramos was born in Puerto Cortez, Honduras, on September 17, 1887. Once in Belize, Ramos worked several jobs, working in

9 This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 2.0 Generic License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/2.0/).



farming, composting, grocery, candy making, and boxing management. Cultural activism and community work were his main passions, especially involving the Garinagu or Garifuna. Only a year after moving to Belize, he established the Carib Development and Sick Aid Society with the objectives of helping the elderly and protecting Garifuna culture and its people. Ramos eventually founded Garifuna Settlement Day (originally Carib Disembarkment Day) and began the celebrations in Dangriga in 1941. A request for November 19 to be observed as a public and bank holiday was written by Ramos, Mateo Avaloy and C. S. Benguche. They wanted the heritage, culture, and ancestral journey of the Garinagu/Garifuna to be recognized, celebrated, and honored. The commemoration included mass, thanksgiving service, and a parade. Initially, the celebration was designated to the district but became a national holiday in 1977. Thomas Vincent Ramos passed away on November 13, 1955, but his legacy continues through the work of the organizations such as the National Garifuna Council and the Battle of the Drums Secretariat. In 1990, a monument was inaugurated in Dangriga Town to honor and memorialize Ramos' legacy and contributions to Garifuna culture.

Gloria Núñez and Afro-descendant women's rights in Guatemala



[Garifuna women of Belize display traditional food upon the visit of President Tsai Ing-wen from Taiwan](#) by [Makoto Lin/Office of the President](#) is licensed under [CC BY 2.0](#)

10 This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 2.0 Generic License](#).



The fight for Women's Rights and equality is a universal movement. However, demonstrations come in various forms depending on the different circumstances. In Guatemala, the fight for women includes Black and Brown women. These women are often overlooked in feminist theory.

Gloria Núñez is a woman from the Garifuna community in Guatemala. She has gained international reputation as an advocate for Afro-descendant women. Gloria Núñez adjoins the intersectionality perspective to discrimination against Black women in the workplace. Intersectionality is the ideology of how multiple essences interact to construct unique customs of oppression.

Núñez speaks out against the disproportionately low pay that Afro-descendant women receive compared to their counterparts. Black women in Latina countries are likely to be more disadvantaged compared to other demographic groups. Afro-Latinos in general face many racial biases and prejudices that contribute to their placement in work settings and society.

Gloria is a teacher and facilitator in a program called "Gobernabilidad Compartida." Here, she gained the skills to lead meaningful conversations; she took these skills to begin her organizations meant to involve women in social and political environments. From a young age, Nunez has fought to break stereotypes surrounding Garifuna Women. One of the struggles Núñez faced from an early age was adultification and over-sexualization. Her experiences motivated her to advocate for Garifuna women's rights. She managed to get a school that focused on politics established for Garifuna women and African American descendants. She also emphasized the importance of being educated so that they could be involved and productive in society. Another impactful milestone of her career was becoming a part of "Red de Mujeres Afro-descendientes con las Garífunas." This organization allowed women who were African American and Garifuna descendants to speak up on being acknowledged to gain more resources that would benefit their community. Gloria has taken a leadership facilitator role in the Shared Governance Programme, organized by NIMD Guatemala. Gloria Nunez is an essential figure and mentor for Garifuna Women, Garifuna Community, and African American descendants in Guatemala. She is passionate about leading these communities to speak on politics and representation.

References

11 This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 2.0 Generic License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/2.0/).



Admin. (2021, April 19). *Pity the nation: Honduras is being eaten from within and without*.

Tricontinental. Retrieved May 1, 2023, from <https://thetricontinental.org/dossier-39-honduras/>

Curran, W. (2012). A Neighborhood That Never Changes: Gentrification, Social Preservation, and the Search for Authenticity. *American Anthropologist*.

England. (1999). Negotiating race and place in the Garifuna Diaspora: Identity formation and transnational grassroots politics in New York City and Honduras. *Identities* (Yverdon, Switzerland), 6(1), 5–53. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.1999.9962635>

Garifuna (garinagu). Minority Rights Group. (2021, January 28). Retrieved May 1, 2023, from <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/garifuna-garinagu/>

Garifuna. Minority Rights Group. (2021, February 6). Retrieved May 1, 2023, from <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/garifuna-2/>

Gonzalez. (1979). Garifuna Settlement in New York: A New Frontier. *The International Migration Review*, 13(2), 255–. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2545031>

KUSENBACH. (2012). Japonica Brown-Saracino 2009: A Neighborhood That Never Changes: Gentrification, Social Preservation, and the Search for Authenticity. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 36(6), 1359–1361. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2427.2012.01216_6.x

Loperena. (2021). *Frontiers of Dispossession, Territories of Freedom*. NACLA Report on the Americas (1993), 53(3), 211–214. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10714839.2021.1959810>

12 This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 2.0 Generic License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/2.0/).



Meet Miriam Miranda, Honduras. Nobel Women's Initiative. (n.d.). Retrieved May 1, 2023, from <https://www.nobelwomensinitiative.org/meet-miriam-miranda-honduras>

Miriam Miranda Chamorro. The University of Texas at Austin School of Law. (n.d.). Retrieved May 1, 2023, from <https://law.utexas.edu/humanrights/directory/miriam-miranda-chamorro/>

Mollett. (2006). Race and Natural Resource Conflicts in Honduras: The Miskito and Garifuna Struggle for Lasa Pulan. *Latin American Research Review*, 41(1), 76–101.
<https://doi.org/10.1353/lar.2006.0012>

Mujeres Que Lideran: Gloria Núñez, Defensora de las mujeres garífunas en Guatemala. NIMD América Central. (n.d.). Retrieved May 1, 2023, from <https://centralamerica.nimd.org/publications/mujeres-que-lideran-gloria-nunez-defensora-de-las-mujeres-garifunas-en-guatemala/>

Mulongoy, M. (2013). *Discrimination, social exclusion and vulnerability of the Garífuna Women in Guatemala: An exploratory study on underlying causes* (dissertation).

Oro. (2021). Black Caribs / Garifuna: Maroon Geographies of Indigenous Blackness. *Small Axe : a Journal of Criticism*, 25(3), 134–146. <https://doi.org/10.1215/07990537-9583488>

Pelayo, P. (2020, November 18). *Thomas Vincent Ramos and garifuna settlement day*. Belize Living Heritage. Retrieved May 1, 2023, from <https://www.belizeivingheritage.org/thomas-vincent-ramos-and-garifuna-settlement-day/>

13 This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 2.0 Generic License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/2.0/).



Philosophy, C. (2022, December 27). *The queerness of Indigenous Blackness*. The Caribbean Philosophical Association. Retrieved May 1, 2023, from <https://caribbeanphilosophy.org/blog/queer-garifuna>

Play, Jankunú Play. (n.d.). Kanopy. Retrieved May 1, 2023, from <https://www.kanopy.com/en/product/48760?vp=bmccuny>.

Preserving Garifuna culture and engaging youth through a dance known as Wanaragua in Belize. UNICEF Belize. (2019, September 16). Retrieved May 1, 2023, from <https://www.unicef.org/belize/stories/preserving-garifuna-culture-and-engaging-youth-through-dance-known-wanaragua-belize>

Ronza, M. (2022, April 22). *Women who lead: Gloria Núñez, a champion of Garifuna women in Guatemala*. NIMD. Retrieved May 1, 2023, from <https://nimd.org/women-who-lead-gloria-nunez-a-champion-of-garifuna-women-in-guatemala/>

Swasey, D., By, Swasey, D., & Friday. (2022, November 4). *The reasons that Thomas Vincent Ramos fought for garifuna settlement day in Belize*. Amandala Newspaper. Retrieved May 1, 2023, from <https://amandala.com.bz/news/the-reasons-that-thomas-vincent-ramos-fought-for-garifuna-settlement-day-in-belize/>

Umalali & the garifuna collective. WOMEX. (n.d.). Retrieved May 1, 2023, from https://www.womex.com/virtual/cumbancha_putumayo/umalali_the_garifuna

14 This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 2.0 Generic License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/2.0/).



Working together for the vindication of the rights and dignity of afro-descendant women. UN

Women – Americas and the Caribbean. (n.d.). Retrieved May 1, 2023, from

<https://lac.unwomen.org/en/noticias-y-eventos/articulos/2021/07/dia-de-las-mujeres-afrolatinas>

YouTube. (2008). *YouTube*. Retrieved May 1, 2023, from

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_JsmPbrZBjk&ab_channel=DocumentaryEducationalResource](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_JsmPbrZBjk&ab_channel=DocumentaryEducationalResources)

s.

YouTube. (2017). *YouTube*. Retrieved May 1, 2023, from

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yaaiTtyIRjI&ab_channel=BRICTV.

YouTube. (2021). *YouTube*. Retrieved May 1, 2023, from

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nBTA3m5hB1A&ab_channel=AfricanaStudiesatPenn.

15 This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 2.0 Generic License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/2.0/).

