

REVIEW

Véronique Boyer, *The Amazonian Puzzle: Ethnic Positionings and Social Mobilizations*
(trans. Precious Brown)

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Véronique Boyer's book *The Amazonian Puzzle* opens with an anecdote about three brothers in a village ten hours by boat from Pará state's capital in Brazil. Each brother views his ethnic identification differently: one declares himself Black, another Indigenous, and the third wishes to be both. Intriguingly, all three seek state recognition as 'Quilombolas' (descendants of maroon settlements, effectively 'Black'). They respond to the government's failure to progress with a territorially defined project for 'Traditional Peoples' – a new category replacing the derogatory label *caboclo*, which identified those outside Indio or Quilombola definitions.

Boyer adeptly documents and critiques this chapter of Brazilian multiculturalist and identity politics. She accounts for the ingenious ways people mobilise to reassert different political identities, accessing land and better rights to health and education. When people claim to be 'mixed' and interpret their mixture, saying 'we have **decided** to be Quilombolas' or 'we have **opted** to be traditional' (p. 5), they disrupt prevailing ethno-legal categories, inviting accusations of 'ethnic fraud' (p. 3).

The book's central argument posits that Amazonian populations claim new ethnic identities neither purely instrumentally nor as a return to fixed ancestral identities, but by introducing mixture (*mistura*) as a key register. This persuasive argument is corroborated throughout, with chapters developing a framework for negotiated yet deeply felt identifications in specific situations. Chapter 1 gives ethnographic substance to 'decision' and 'choice' through the story of the three brothers. It shows how individuals retain personal singularities despite group choices: 'my grandmother was already a healer', 'he hunts like his grandfather' (p. 28). Chapter 2 examines how individual narratives gain traction among relatives to create the singular voice required by law. Local political consciousness forms through exploring new legal avenues to improve community conditions, rather than through legal abstractions (as the state might prefer). Chapter 3 traces the complicated history of social classification through the term *caboclo* and the

resulting dilemma of invisibility. Chapter 4 explores a more transgressive use of *caboclo* spirits in possession cults. Chapter 5 expounds the local theory of mixture, allowing for multiple legitimate transformations. Chapter 6 offers an illuminating piece of intellectual history on the division between rural Amerindian and urban African-inspired religious practices.

The book is an outstanding contribution to studies of identity formation and social mobilisation. Boyer delves brilliantly into the terms asserting Indianness or 'Quilombolity' (a coined neologism) as legitimate and legal, while explaining potential transitions between identities. She examines the local theory of *mistura* – mixture, crossing, transformation – where various strands coexist as equally valid. What brings one to the forefront of collective identity is choice, which Boyer explores as a specific logic of action, a local theory of agency.

Boyer contrasts dominant views on mixing with those of mixed Amazonians. While mainstream perspectives see mixing as resulting in blurred identities, requiring 'de-mixing' to reconstitute pure forms, mixed Amazonians can identify as Black or Indigenous without erasing other origins. One can be 'Black and mixed' or 'Indian and mixed' without contradiction, with different aspects of identity coexisting and shaping individual narratives.

The author relates this political manoeuvring to the transformational logic of the *caboclo* spirits in urban spirit possession cults. The *caboclos* of the spirit world are associated with a principle of ordered multiplicity (invisible *caboclos* are grouped into 'lines' by their attributed place of residence), yet they are free and transgressive – mixing residences and forging their own kin ties. The origins are traceable, but the experience is malleable. Boyer does not suggest that the native theory of *mistura* is a rural enactment of urban possession cult ritual. However, she argues that this faculty of action and the knowledge of lines (a particular understanding of non-fusional mixing) help reconstitute in ritual form the social flexibility that ordinary *caboclo* men and women have historically experienced. In ordinary life, they have known this flexibility largely in terms of suffering and disparagement rather than power, which they must ultimately transcend to escape the negative stereotypes that the whitening Brazilian state associates with the real *caboclo*: idle marginality and degenerative social undifferentiation. By juxtaposing ritual and everyday realms, Boyer suggests that the *caboclo* spirit enables the conversion of negative attributes into signs of power. This inversion can also occur politically when villagers choose empowering identity categories.

The *caboclo* of possession cults represents both a transgressive imaginative resource and a theory of agency stemming from openness and multiplicity. Boyer explores the relationship between religious and political realms, avoiding ontological precedence of either. She prefers the language of 'elective affinities' (albeit confined to a footnote on p. 121), suggesting that legally conceivable options owe as much to modes shaping classification and interaction with beings as these modes inflect trajectories of social transformation. Inspired by Thomas J. Csordas, Boyer considers the figure of the *caboclo*-spirit as 'portable message' – motifs transposable between domains. However, she contextualises this native theory historically and sociologically. The urban spirit possession universe absorbed historical contact, resulting in persistent yet singular tropes of syncretism during a period when mixing was valued. Similarly, the need to develop language

intelligible to the state yet meaningful locally likely encouraged a theory of unstable mixture that is forceful yet malleable.

The analysis demonstrates how historical and political processes produce categories of thought, and how these categories, in turn, shape political processes. The book surpasses its stated goal of explicating how 'the comparison with the field of possession is likely to shed light on current concerns about the "ethnic" origins of social groups' (p. 9). A major asset is the book's revelation of the category of thought propelling transformation while explaining its formation. Unlike other Indigenous Amazonian cases, Boyer avoids tethering categories of thought to singular social formations, revealing a plurality of origins and narratives.

Written in dialogue with the sociological literature of *caboclos* in Brazil, and through intriguing comparisons with ideas of Amerindian metamorphosis, *The Amazonian Puzzle* offers subtle analysis bridging religion and politics. Its implications extend beyond Brazil, appealing to those interested in *mestizaje* (as attested in the Foreword by Peter Wade), Indigenous rights and ethnicity, local theories of agency, and popular religion.