

Critical Debates

On Afro-Latin American Studies, Especially About Brazil

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- George Reid Andrews, *Afro-Latin America: Black Lives, 1600–2000*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016. Maps, figures, tables, appendix, notes, bibliography, index, 136 pp.; hardcover \$25.50, ebook.
- Danielle Pilar Cleland, *The Power of Race in Cuba: Racial Ideology and Black Consciousness During the Revolution*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. Figures, tables, appendix, bibliography, index, 272 pp.; hardcover \$99, paperback \$29.95, ebook.
- Kwame Dixon, *Afro-Politics and Civil Society in Salvador da Bahia, Brazil*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2016. Figures, bibliography, index, 192 pp.; hardcover \$74.95.
- Jennifer Goett, *Black Autonomy: Race, Gender, and Afro-Nicaraguan Activism*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017. Figures, maps, bibliography, index, 240 pp.; hardcover \$85, paperback \$26, ebook.
- Gladys L. Mitchell-Walthour, *The Politics of Blackness: Racial Identity and Political Behavior in Contemporary Brazil*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. Maps, figures, tables, appendix, bibliography, index, 282 pp.; hardcover \$99.99, paperback \$35.99, ebook \$29.
- Tianna S. Paschel, *Becoming Black Political Subjects: Movements and Ethno-Racial Rights in Colombia and Brazil*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018. Figures, tables, bibliography, index, 328 pp.; paperback \$26.95, ebook.
- Jennifer Roth-Gordon, *Race and the Brazilian Body: Blackness, Whiteness, and Everyday Language in Rio de Janeiro*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016. Maps, figures, bibliography, index, 248 pp.; hardcover \$85, paperback \$34.95, ebook \$34.95.

I write this review essay in Rio de Janeiro, after the election of Jair Bolsonaro to govern Brazil for the next four years. The president-elect, on the day of his victory at the polls, declared on his social network the intention to “end all types of activism,” and even before the election, promised to criminalize social movements in Brazil.

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There have been many advances in the struggle against racism and the production of research on race relations and on Afro-Brazilian history and culture in the last 30 years in the country, largely thanks to the activism of the Brazilian black social movement over the twentieth century. The same has occurred in the last decades in other Latin American countries. One of the main historical demands of the activists of the transnational black movement throughout Latin America is precisely what the Unified Black Movement (*Movimento Negro Unificado*, MNU), an important black organization created in Brazil during the civil-military dictatorship, had already set out in its Charter of Principles in 1978: “reassessment of the role of blacks in Brazil’s History” (Pereira 2013). According to George Reid Andrews, “a new generation of black activists mobilized in the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s demanding that Latin American societies make good on the promises of a racial democracy” (Andrews, 15).

This leads us to the fact that “those activists can rightly claim to have put issues of race, discrimination, and inequality on national political agendas, forcing their explicit public discussion and thus ending, or at least reducing, black ‘invisibility’” (Andrews, 15, 16). The certain “visibility” achieved by black activists in different Latin American societies was accompanied by an increase in the production of knowledge about lives and the struggles of black populations in Latin America. The far right reactionary political wave, led in Brazil by President Bolsonaro, to a certain extent can also be read as a reflection of the difficulty of the “conservative” and extremely unequal Brazilian society in dealing with the progress made in the struggle against racism, as well as with advances achieved by movements in other social dimensions, such as gender and sexuality.¹

The quotas for black students in Brazilian public universities, which the black movement sees at present as its greatest historical achievement, especially after the creation of Federal Law no. 12,711, on August 12, 2012, are an example in this sense (Pereira et al. 2019). The large increase in the number of black students enrolled in public universities, the most prestigious ones in Brazil (unlike the U.S. system), has generated important changes even in the curricula of different courses, and with this has provided a substantial increase in the amount of research on African and Afro-Brazilian history and cultures and on race relations. These universities have been transformed by the increasing presence of black bodies and minds and by the debates and knowledge produced in the process of democratization of this place of power, which historically has been accessed almost completely by a white economic elite (see, e.g., Nascimento 2018). One of the political proposals of then-candidate Bolsonaro over the last few years was precisely to end the affirmative action for blacks in public universities and other achievements reached by social movements in Brazil.

Much has been written about the struggles of black populations in Brazil and in other Latin American countries (Paschel and Andrews, reviewed here; see also Hanchard 1994; Pereira 2013, 2016, among many others). A similar movement has been occurring in the United States, where in recent decades there has been a significant increase in the production of research and publications on blacks in Brazil

and in Latin America. The field of Afro-Latin American studies is defined by Alejandro de la Fuente and George Reid Andrews “first, as the study of people of African descent in Latin America and, secondly, the study of broader societies of which these peoples are members” (De la Fuente and Andrews 2018, 19).

Some of the most important books in the field of Afro-Latin American studies published in recent years in the United States are objects of analysis in this brief essay. Among the seven books presented here are productions in different areas, such as history, sociology, political science, and anthropology, which brings a diversity of disciplinary approaches and perspectives and contributes to the understanding of several dimensions of the lives and challenges faced by the black population in Latin America. The books deal with race relations and the black populations’ struggle in different Latin American countries, especially in Brazil.

KNOWING THE LANGUAGE

It is worth highlighting that all seven books bring, in their bibliographical references, evidence of interlocution with Latin American authors. Andrews, for example, says in his book that U.S.-based researchers who did research on blacks and race relations in Brazil in the early twentieth century did not speak Portuguese fluently. Those Americans who did their research in Brazil at the end of the twentieth century, such as Angela Gilliam and Michael Hanchard, were fluent in Portuguese; “this enabled them to burrow more deeply into local realities and to draw more informed, empirically based conclusions” (Andrews, 86).

I would add that by being fluent in the language, dialoguing with local researchers, and reading their production makes American researchers gain in analytical and academic quality, and also establishes a relationship in which Afro-Latin Americans are not only objects of research but are also understood as interlocutors in the production of knowledge through research. I understand this dialogue of the North American scholars presented here with Latin American scholars, evidenced in the analyses and also in the bibliographical references, as an important and positive characteristic that is currently present in the field of Afro-Latin American studies developed in U.S. universities.

George Reid Andrews, who is fluent in Portuguese, in his excellent book, has the merit of placing the African diaspora in Latin America in historical perspective, supported by extensive documentary research and qualified bibliography. The book is small in size but enormous in reading possibilities in the very body of the text and also in the footnotes, which open windows for the reader’s deeper investigation in several subjects, explaining aspects of the text, but mainly indicating bibliographical or documentary sources. It is a book that will please both the experienced scholar and the beginning reader, because when using different historical sources, such as census data or newspaper articles, Andrews brings a broad perspective on historical processes from the analysis of specific cases.

The book is divided into five chapters. The first, “On Seeing and Not Seeing,” is an introduction to the history of Afro-Latin America, in which the author dis-

cusses the fact that even though “central participants in the creation of Latin American societies . . . for most of the twentieth century people of African ancestry were excluded from accounts of the region’s history” (Andrews, 5). It has changed in the last decades, as already mentioned above. In the following chapters, “On Counting and Not Counting” and “Afro-Latin American Voices,” the author uses two different types of historical sources: census data and book-length memoirs, or manuscripts written or dictated by four Afro-Latin Americans, respectively, moving from the macrolevel perspective to the microlevel perspective to analyze different aspects of Afro-Latin American history. Chapter 4, “Transnational Voices,” focuses on Brazil and “examines what African-American visitors had to say about racial conditions in that country and how their views evolved over the course of the 1900s” (Andrews, 17).

Andrews concludes the book by presenting the current debates on race relations in Latin America, once again reviewing the idea of “racial democracy” and noting with optimism recent advances and achievements of black populations in the struggle for equity, whether in the context of the recognition of black history as part of the histories of their respective societies, or in the struggle to “achieve genuine racial equality” (93). Rich in analysis and historical content, Andrews’s book is also a very enjoyable read.

SILENCING THE DEBATE

Black Autonomy: Race, Gender, and Afro-Nicaraguan Activism, written by feminist anthropologist Jennifer Goett, makes an important contribution to the field of Afro-Latin American studies by analyzing the struggle for black autonomy in a community-based movement for autonomous rights in Nicaragua from the 1990s on, developed under conditions of prolonged violence. Goett theorizes “black autonomy as an expression of African diasporic identification and gendered political consciousness that cuts across the domains of sociality, livelihood, security, territory, and sexuality” (3).

Through a methodological perspective she identifies as “traditional feminist ethnography,” reflecting a collaborative methodology, emphasizing local voices and dialogue, she developed the research at different times between 1998 and 2013. At the same time, Goett presents aspects from intimate spheres of social life in the specific community of Monkey Point and tells us aspects of the history of Nicaraguan society and its dilemmas, without forgetting the black diasporic identity and vernacular cultural practices that the Monkey Point people take pride in and manifest “as a self-conscious practice of freedom in the face of racism, structural inequality, and annihilating violence” (10).

Very well written, her narrative at various points thrilled me with the vitality and political commitment expressed both in the description of the experiences of the Monkey Point people and in their analyses of inequalities in the global economy. The book is divided into an introduction and five chapters, which chronologically introduce the reader to the historical context of the collective mobilization of

the Monkey Point community from the late 1990s until the recognition of the territory's autonomy in the early 2000s and resistance to military occupation in the early 2010s.

The Power of Race in Cuba, by political scientist Danielle Pilar Cleland, made me think a lot about the current reality in Brazil with regard to race relations. Looking at Cleland's analyses of race relations in Cuba and the black people's own perceptions of racism on the island, the similarities with the racial issue during the so-called "years of lead" (*anos de chumbo*) of the civil-military dictatorship in Brazil (1964–85) are striking. Not only does Cleland understand that the constant assertion of "racial democracy protects racism and anti-black stereotypes by denying their power, influence, and even their existence" (5)—just as in Brazil and other Latin American countries historically—she also affirms that the Cuban government, by eliminating black organizations and any public discussion on racism, established a "national silence on the topic."

This led me to recall the National Security Law sanctioned in the hardest period of the dictatorship, on March 20, 1969, which, in Decree No. 510, determined in Article 33 the penalty of detention of one to three years for "inciting racial hatred or discrimination." Talking about racism in Brazil at that time could be enough to get a person arrested. With President Bolsonaro's coming to power, all the official discourse about race has been the same as in dictatorship times, of which Bolsonaro is a nostalgist; in the name of a "supposed" national union, the discourse does not even acknowledge the existence of social dimensions such as race, gender, and sexuality. Whether in a leftist government such as revolutionary Cuba or in the right-wing governments of Brazil's twentieth-century dictatorships or the current Bolsonaro administration, the denial and silencing of the debate about racism may be similar. As the Brazilian black activist Sueli Carneiro says, "between left and right I am still black."

Cleland, with great sensitivity, advances understanding of the complexity of race relations and black consciousness in Cuba by establishing analyses both from what she calls "underground critique (private conversations about racism in Cuba)" and what she calls "above-ground critique (activism, scholarship, art, and music)" (10), considering that she was able to rely on different sources produced during the research: "a survey taken from March to October of 2008 and in April and May of 2009 in the city of Havana, as well as 42 in-depth interviews conducted during the same period" (12). The survey was conducted among black Cubans, but the interviews were conducted with blacks, *mulatos*, and whites.

The book is divided into nine chapters in which Cleland rigorously presents the results of the research through analysis of the sources. Throughout the reading, I was struck by the relationship between the importance of the black population in the construction of Cuban society and the "invisibility" of this population when it comes to the history of the country, as already pointed out in the Andrews book. The fact that black history, such as the history of the Partido Independiente de Color (PIC), the first black political party in the Americas, created in Cuba in 1908, and many other stories of the black population are unknown by the Cuban popula-

tion and are still absent from official channels and curriculum, is similar to what happens in other Latin American countries, or even in the United States.

According to Clealand, following the “Special Period,” the long period of economic crisis in Cuba from the early 1990s, after the fall of the Soviet Union, until the mid-1990s, “the Cuban government changed their rhetoric regarding racism slightly, acknowledging that there may be some vestiges of racism left over from pre-revolutionary times that they have not been able to eradicate” (175). Some possibilities have been discussed in recent years in the Cuban government, such as “inclusion of more substantive black history in the national curriculum” (226). In this sense, the author ends the book mentioning a similar process that has been taking place in Brazil since the redemocratization period, in the late 1980s, after the end of the civil-military dictatorship, when there was a strengthening of the black movement and some important changes, including specific legislation presented by black representatives in the National Congress.

Although I agree with Clealand’s positive view of the achievements of the black movement in postdictatorship Brazil and her argument that the process of democratization in Cuba would be fundamental for black Cubans to meet similar achievements, I must say that the experience of fighting racism in Brazil in the midst of a period of political democracy has not been easy. In fact, in the history of the West, the existence of democracy has never been enough to eliminate racism and discrimination against political minorities. On the contrary, as Michael Hanchard reminds us in his new book,

The quest for homogeneity and the utilization of democratic practices and institutions to manage political inequality are often combined by governments and nationalists during moments of perceived or actual crisis to further marginalize populations that are considered unworthy of participation in the polity or, worse still, membership in society altogether. (Hanchard 2018, 207, 208)

The social reality in Brazil, despite the advances achieved by the black movement with great difficulty during the last 30 years of political democracy, confirms Hanchard’s understanding.

BLACK MOVEMENTS IN COLOMBIA AND BRAZIL

Tianna S. Paschel’s book, *Becoming Black Political Subjects: Movements and Ethno-Racial Rights in Colombia and Brazil*, is a must-read for anyone interested in the field of Afro-Latin American studies. This excellent book is the result of the broadest and richest research work I have ever read about the performance of the black social movement in Latin America, both because of the depth of analysis in relation to the movements themselves and their histories in Colombia and Brazil and for the brilliant questions, expressed in the title, that move the whole elaboration of the work.

Paschel, trained as a sociologist, goes beyond a history of the struggles and achievements of the black social movement in the two countries. The fundamental

questions which move the author are, why did the Colombian and Brazilian states go from citizenship regimes based in ideas of the universal and formally unmarked citizen to the recognition of black rights? and how did black social movements in both countries achieve that? And also, comparing the two different national contexts, why have black rights taken such distinct forms in different countries in Latin America?

Trying to understand, from a transnational perspective, how, even in the midst of official discourses of “racial democracy” and denial of racism, the black movement, “small and under-resourced networks of activists” with very few political allies and largely unknown to the masses, “in Colombia and Brazil did succeed—against all odds—in bringing about specific legislation for black populations as well as substantive changes in popular discourse” (3). Paschel resorted to different methodologies: she interviewed black militants, pursued ethnography, and plunged into archives to support her analyses. This makes the narrative construction that follows the presentation of the research questions even more potent. She extends, as in no other work I know, the scope of analysis: she starts from the idea that a plethora of political actors are involved in the process of “political field alignments,” comparing the realities of the two countries and especially contemplating the specific dynamics of each society, always articulating these specific dynamics to international political dynamics. It is a must-read indeed.

INHABITING URBAN CONTEXTS

Kwame Dixon, in his book, unlike the others reviewed here, focuses his research efforts on black identity and the fight against racism in only one city: the city of Salvador, Bahia. By conducting a case study in a single city, deepening possibilities for understanding a specific social context, Dixon contributes to the field of Afro-Latin American studies based on analyses of the black experience in a mostly black city, not only highlighting its history but also bringing to the forefront black political organizations and their performance in the city.

Dixon chooses to begin the book by presenting for the reader, in the first chapter, the city of Salvador, including the contemporary period, and then in chapters 2, 3, and 4 returning to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, analyzing insurrections during the period of slavery and the construction of different black movement organizations in the city in the second half of the last century. Chapters 5 and 6 are devoted to the debates on affirmative action for blacks in Brazil and specifically in the city of Salvador. Here, I must say that when talking about affirmative action in universities, the author makes some mistakes in relation to the current legislation and its determinations, revealing a lack of knowledge about the complexity of the public system of universities in Brazil. The first two public universities to adopt the quota system for blacks in Brazil were the state universities of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ) and Bahia (UNEB), between 2002 and 2003. The abovementioned Federal Law no. 12,711 was applied to all the federal universities only in 2012. The last chapter of the book is devoted to the debate on electoral representation in Salvador since the 1970s. This is an important book, very well written, committed to highlighting the black experience

in a major city in Brazil, which certainly makes a contribution to the field of Afro-Latin American studies, despite the small mistakes mentioned above.

Anthropologist Jennifer Roth-Gordon also makes her analyses in a specific social context, the city of Rio de Janeiro. In order to understand “how ubiquitous racial inequality, the notion of white supremacy, and national disdain for racial prejudice play out in the mundane experiences of everyday life,” specially through language, Roth-Gordon emphasizes race over class in her analyses of Brazilian inequality and focuses “on daily interactions to shed light on how racial inequality, and racial hierarchy on which it is based, is not just something people live in but also something that people actively negotiate and produce” (6). Her perspective enriches the possibilities for theoretical discussion about race relations in Brazil and complexifies the analysis of the subject in Latin American societies marked by social and racial inequality. It is an ethnography traced across race and class lines, between middle-class and *comunidade* experiences and perspectives. Roth-Gordon lived with middle-class families in the south zone of the city and interviewed and talked to young blacks from the *comunidade* Cruzada São Sebastião in Leblon. Roth-Gordon’s approach to reading “the body” is discursive; she analyzes “how racial ideas (or racial ‘discourses’) link observable qualities of bodies, including cultural and linguistic practices, to essentialized capacities that cannot be observed” (27).

I agree with the author in general terms about her analysis of the history of racial relations in Brazil in her first chapter, which is very well constructed. Yet as a historian of the black movement, and in view of the author’s own recognition that the reality of structural racism that she narrates is not “comfortable” for all Brazilians, I find it difficult to feel “comfortable” reading the title of the chapter “Brazil’s ‘Comfortable Racial Contradiction,’” even knowing that she presents “a few disclaimers” required by her “choice of this term.” She does not ignore the “contributions of activists or academics, past and present, who have long sought to expose and ameliorate this contradiction,” and she says that “the choice of the term highlights the fact that Brazil handles these larger contradictions quite well, making them seem ‘comfortable’ and commonsensical to many people, who adapt them to new situations and political climates” (5).

(And as a proud *carioca*, I need to say that a *carioca*, by the way, is a person who was born and grew up in Rio, or at least someone who understands and experiences the specific cultural codes created historically in Rio, not simply a “Rio resident,” as it appears sometimes in the book. It is not that easy to become a *carioca*! I am not an essentialist; I agree with the author’s cultural approach to the identities. But definitely, to reside in Rio is not enough to be a *carioca*.)

The last book under review, Gladys Mitchell-Walthour’s *Politics of Blackness*, focuses on racial politics in Brazil, using mixed methods to understand how interpretations of life experiences of Afro-Brazilians affect individual and group perspectives and behavior in the political world of three major cities: São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Salvador. Acknowledging that although “Afro-Brazilians comprise 53 percent of the population, they hold less than 10 percent [of the seats] in the National Congress,” Mitchell-Walthour, using an intersectional approach, tries to

understand how Afro-Brazilians explain political inequality in a country “stratified by race, class and gender, among other social categories” (2). Innovative in terms of methods and approach, wide-ranging and well written, this book is a very important contribution to the scholarship on Afro-Latin American studies, and this is also certainly a must-read for all the scholars who have been producing knowledge on Afro-Brazilian politics in recent times.

Although most of the books presented here deal with Brazil, from different perspectives, using different research methods and disciplinary approaches, I would say that together they could form a beautiful syllabus for courses in the field of Afro-Latin American studies, especially in U.S. universities, because of the English language. The abovementioned dialogue between scholars from the United States and Afro-Latin America is welcome to improve analyses and to keep contributing to the burgeoning scholarship on Afro-Latin American societies in difficult times such as this one we are living in, in Brazil, the United States, and other countries. I hope this dialogue can strengthen us as scholars and citizens in face of this far right-wing political wave led by white men who historically deny racism as a structuring element of our unequal societies in the Americas.

NOTE

1. We must not forget that Brazil, the country that received the largest share of the African people enslaved for about 350 years until the mid-nineteenth century, has, in racism, a structuring element of society historically, according to some of the authors presented here (Paschel, Andrews, Dixon, Roth-Gordon, Mitchell-Walthour).

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