

forms of knowledge, it seems to me that volumes like this – that move between languages, practices and perspectives – are what is needed to further that project.

doi:10.1017/S0022216X2000084X

## Oscar de la Torre, *The People of the River: Nature and Identity in Black Amazonia, 1835–1945*

(Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), pp. xiii + 225, \$34.95, pb.

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The historical depths of Amazonian Maroon descendants turn current Brazilian politics into a tiny accident, a negligible – and let's face it, stupid – blip on the centuries-long struggle against racism, colonialism and imperialism in Latin America. *The People of the River* is a thin book, but reading it in this moment can stir up deep emancipatory feelings. Oscar de la Torre combines social and economic historiography with on-site ethnographic conversations, mythical exegesis and environmental history to recast the past and present of Amazonian Afro-descendants in their full entanglement with the forest.

Unlike most histories of slavery and maroonage, this is a book about crucial alliances between humans and non-humans. The West African slaves who ran away from plantations, formed communities beyond the waterfalls, and finally fought for their rights to citizenship and land tenure were never alone. In their quest for freedom, rainforest Maroons and their descendants – locally known as *quilombolas* – were not only accompanied by Amerindian peoples and other Amazonian peasants: as this study shows, Maroons were also strategically allied with manioc tubers, banana trees, Brazilian nuts, giant snake spirits, the intricate rivers of the lowlands and other non-human entities that could never be subjugated by colonial oppression and its blind projects of natural exploitation.

This book uses two major conceptual devices to reinterpret the transition from slavery to – free – Black peasantry in Amazonia. The first is the notion of 'environmental creolisation', which captures the 'process of acquaintance with the opportunities and constraints of local environments' (p. 7). The interpretive innovation consists in addressing the changing landscape of the Amazon basin not only as the green and passive backstage where runaway slaves found refuge, but as a living historical archive with rich environmental inscriptions. In attending to how Maroons came to understand and use Amazonia's seasonal rhythms, forest products and horticultural potential, the notion of environmental Creolisation reflects how African descendants adapted to this nature-cultural context, fusing with

people – mostly native Indigenous folks – but also with non-humans, and becoming active agents of such a vibrant landscape.

The second conceptual departure proposed by de la Torre with respect to conventional historiography is the shift from the notion of a slave ‘internal economy’ to the alternative descriptor of a ‘parallel economy’. It is widely known that African slaves had a certain degree of economic autonomy within the plantations, and that a significant amount of trade relations occurred at local or regional levels, that is, besides the international export networks of the colonial metropolises. In contradistinction, the author suggests we read slaves’ economic initiatives as exceeding the confines of the plantations. The parallel economy started on small horticultural, slash-and-burn patches, locally called *roças*. These were nothing other than provision grounds where slaves experimented first with subsistence, later building surreptitious, vital trade relations with itinerant merchants. In the nineteenth century the apparently inoffensive horticultural patches provisioned for slaves became sites of social and cultural recalcitrance: there, some slaves started to cultivate the bits of freedom that later gave space to their economic independence.

The book illustrates the processes of environmental Creolisation and the emergence of parallel economies of slave and Maroon descendants in six chapters that encompass events occurring between 1835 and 1945, but also exceed this time frame. Chapter 1 describes how after the peasant revolt against Portuguese rule in Amazonia – called the Cabanagem (1835) – slaveholders needed to adapt productive strategies in plantations to new social, economic and environmental pressures, witnessing the expansion of a new African-descendant demography that became more tied to Amazonian socialites than to the slave trade economy. Chapter 2 draws on the myth of the ‘big snake’ – which has both African and Amerindian cosmological traits – to deploy an original mytho-historic narrative of the Maroon struggle against colonial power and slaveholding elites, who are epitomised in the figure of a legendary monster that Maroons had to tame. Chapters 3 and 4 trace, through particular slave and Maroon biographies, the pivotal subsistence role of manioc cultivation and the crucial alliance with Brazil nut harvesting and its commercial possibilities to further substantiate the strategies undertaken by Maroons to navigate towards freedom after the abolition of slavery (1888). Chapters 5 and 6 trace the twentieth-century emergence of powerful discourses, economic practices and forms of political mobilisation that put Amazonian Black peasants in the position of claiming their acquired rights to citizenship and collective land tenure in modern Brazil.

*The People of the River* makes clear from the outset that its aim is to demonstrate that current Black identity politics has history. Unlike other historiography, it departs from the common place of looking at Black peasant movements as a political ‘construction’ that originates from recent Western environmentalism. Instead, de la Torre invites us to look at the telling environmental traces of Maroon descendants’ agro-ecological strategies, now threatened by large-scale mining and hydroelectric projects, in order to recast Black identity not as discourse, but as vibrant matter. This book therefore sees the physical inscriptions and more-than-human alliances of a powerful, Afro-descendant decolonial project. For me, as an ethnographer of contemporary *quilombola* societies, a missing actor in the story is the

body of slave-Maroon-Black Amazonian peasants. Yet even for reading Black Amazonian identity on these present, corporeal archives of reality, *The People of the River* provides an inspiring illustration of how time and social processes can become environmentally substantiated, and how the futile words of current politics in Brazil are swallowed by the depths of its immense history.

doi:10.1017/S0022216X20000851

## **Anne Luke, *Youth and the Cuban Revolution: Youth Culture and Politics in 1960s Cuba***

**(Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2018), pp. xviii + 161, \$60.00, hb.**

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Anne Luke's *Youth and the Cuban Revolution* offers a fresh analysis of the complex relationship between the Cuban Revolution's leadership and the island's youth. Although an ample body of interdisciplinary scholarship has already addressed the subject of youth in revolutionary Cuba, most of these studies comprised a small slice of larger works on the Revolution. Luke's book offers a broader, more holistic and nuanced account of the relationship between the Cuban leadership and the island's youth.

The first chapters provide an overview of the regime's obsession with youth as the central player in Fidel Castro's goal to mould a 'new man'. The leaders argued that the island's young people represented, in Che Guevara's terms, the 'purest of ideals' and 'the pliable clay out of which the new man [...] can be fashioned' (p. 25). Youths, the revolutionary leaders insisted, remained untainted by capitalist society and could be re-educated into pure, 'perfect products of the Revolution' (p. 27). The leadership's effort sought nothing less than selflessness, sacrifice and purity, indeed perfection, among Cuban youth. The ensuing chapters review this ambitious effort, focusing particularly on the first decade, before the regime yielded to Soviet pressure after the 1970s economic collapse.

Luke details how the problem of non-compliant youth increasingly frustrated the regime. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Castro continued to rail aggressively against youth recalcitrance, long after the leadership's idealism regarding the role of youth had faded. The effort to make young people the engine to propel the Revolution toward success remained unrelenting. As Luke argues, youth became for the Castro government both the problem and the solution, and this tension continued to plague the government over the decades.

Eventually the leadership discovered that while many Cuban youths cultivated the attitudes outlined by the state – some because they were believers, others because they understood that such behaviour was their ticket to join the elite