

New Histories of Afro-descendant and Indigenous Latin America

Afro-Latin America 1800–2000. *George Reid Andrews*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. 284 pp.

Beyond Black and Red: African-Native Relations in Colonial Latin America. *Matthew Restall, ed.*, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005. 303 pp.

Sean T. Mitchell
University of Chicago

Despite the Cold War institutionalization of “Latin American studies” in the United States, writing on specific Latin American contexts (by Latin American or foreign scholars) frequently neglects comparisons elsewhere in Latin America. Instead, scholars tend to rely on explicit or implicit comparison to global metropolises, which in the 20th century most often meant the United States. This U.S.-focused comparative style has fundamentally shaped our understanding of race and ethnicity in the Americas. The ideologies of *mestiçagem* and *mestizaje*, forged in the first half of the 20th century by intellectuals such as Gilberto Freyre and José Vasconcelos, for example, have been periodically reinvented as ideologies of national racial exceptionalism through comparisons to the United States that largely overlook the rest of Latin America—comparisons that even critics of these ideologies tend to rely on.

This is just one of the reasons why *Afro-Latin America* and *Beyond Black and Red* are so timely and welcome. Each volume brings extensive new data and incisive new analysis to bear on the racial and ethnic

histories of Latin America and on our comparative understanding of the development of Latin America’s ethnically complex societies.

Afro-Latin America is a remarkably sweeping history of Afro-descendant Latin America from 1800—when slavery in the region began to show signs of a demise that would draw out for much of the century—up to the present. With analytic sophistication, agile prose, and a command of his subject matter developed over three decades of research, George Reid Andrews synthesizes our knowledge about the world created by the 5.7 million Africans brought to the Spanish and Portuguese colonies.

To meet the “threshold of significance” for inclusion in Afro-Latin America that Andrews establishes in the work’s introduction, at least 5–10 percent of a nation or region’s population must be of known African ancestry (4–5). By this criterion, Argentina, Mexico, and Peru slipped out of Afro-Latin America, over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries, while Brazil, Cuba, and Puerto Rico saw their black populations go from majorities to minorities (5). In order to explain this apparent proportional decline in Latin America’s black population, Andrews points, on the one hand, to European immigration and to lower black than white life expectancies. Yet, throughout the book, Andrews also details the fluidity and complexity of racial classification in Latin America, the many incentives to mask African origins in Latin America’s racially stratified societies, the

“whitening” campaigns undertaken by some of the region’s national governments, and the whitening effects of “economic success and other forms of upward mobility” (5), as causes of a transformation as much cultural as it is demographic. This deft integration of demographic data with nuanced qualitative analysis is typical of Andrews’ approach and is one of the book’s great strengths.

Another related strength is Andrews’ attention to “both sides of the relationship between macrolevel structure and microlevel human action” (8). After providing a panoramic account of Afro-Latin America at the start of the 19th century in chapter 1, Andrews crisscrosses the region in chapters 2 and 3 to analyze the fraught politics of freedom and abolition from 1810–1890. He elaborates the varied ways in which slaves exploited the opportunities provided by the era’s anticolonial wars in order to forge their own emancipation (55–67). Even for Brazil, where abolition came late and without the violence that characterized the rest of the region, Andrews focuses on the importance of the “massive campaign of civil disobedience” organized by both slaves and non-slaves (67), as much as on the structural forces undermining the institution at the end of the 19th century.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 carry us forward from the end of the 19th century to the present and also consider what the future might hold for Afro-Latin Americans. Guiding us through the scientific racisms and national policies geared towards the whitening of black and brown populations around the turn or the 20th century, the institutionalization of national ideologies valorizing mixture after the 1930s, and the more recent rise of black mobilization and state policies of multiculturalism, Andrews

adeptly attends to the interplay between structure and agency that produces history.

Although Andrews principally compares different Latin American contexts in *Afro-Latin America*, he also does a better job than most of his colleagues at offering incisive comparison to the United States—so similar in key aspects of its historical development with Latin America, but, of course, so massively and beguilingly different. In a discussion of the politics of labor around the turn of the 20th century, Andrews asks: “how were workers in Latin America able to come together to create the cross-racial alliances that proved so hard to construct in the United States and elsewhere?” (147). This question brilliantly inverts an assumption common to many post-Civil Rights era U.S. scholars. Rather than assume that Latin America got it wrong, and ask why race-based solidarities are so much weaker in Latin America than in the United States—as many U.S. researchers do—Andrews asks why cross-racial and class-based solidarities tend to be so much stronger in Latin America than in the United States. He gives three basic answers: (1) the “laws and ideologies of racial egalitarianism” forged during the independence period favored class-based rather than race-based forms of exclusion, and led to a consequent rejection of “racial preferences of any kind” among the working classes; (2) the presence of non-white majorities (or large minorities) in much of Latin America would have made it suicidal for labor unions to become reserves of white privilege (as often happened in the United States); and (3) a long history of labor organization among Afro-Latin Americans facilitated multiracial working-class alliances (147).

Afro-Latin America is unique in the literature on Latin America's African diaspora for its breadth, depth, and analytic scope. Yet it leaves the histories of conflict, alliance, cohabitation, and mixture between Afro-descendant and indigenous Latin Americans mostly unaddressed. Such a comprehensive effort would, of course, have required at least another book, and probably another 30 years of accumulated expertise. When such a book is written, it will likely owe a considerable debt to *Beyond Black and Red*, an excellent collection of essays edited by Matthew Restall, exploring the relations between Afro-descendant and native peoples in colonial Latin America. As Colin A. Palmer points out in the book's foreword, the new evidence found in each essay makes for "a volume [that] would not have been possible a decade ago" (xii). Necessarily less synthetic than Andrews' book, the volume nonetheless breaks new ground in its detailed and sophisticated treatment of black-native relations in a wide variety of Latin American contexts.

One key question runs through most of the essays: to what extent were black-native relations marked by conflict and to what extent by harmony? As Patrick J. Carroll points out in the work's final essay, it is likely that official documents in colonial Mexico recorded peaceful interaction much more rarely and poorly than they recorded conflict. For Carroll, the maintenance of "racial otherness" (252) was crucial to the maintenance of colonial domination and official documents served "to keep these groups divided and more easily controlled" (249). Because of this bias in the primary sources, historians have usually concluded that black-native relations were characterized by discord. Instead, Carroll argues, "blacks and natives

probably interacted more peacefully than not after the shock of the initial conquest period" (261).

Although most of the volume's authors take positions similar to Carroll's, explicit and implicit debate over the details raises some sparks and makes for an enjoyable read. For example, also concerned with colonial Mesoamerica (Guatemala and Yucatan), Christopher Lutz and Matthew Restall find, like Carroll, that the historical record is biased towards recording conflict (186). Yet, although they identify sporadic Spanish "attempts to keep Mayas and Africans apart while wittingly or unwittingly fostering prejudice between the two groups," they do not find evidence to substantiate the "organized and sustained campaign of segregation" that Carroll describes (212–3). Norma Angélica Castillo Palma and Susan Kellogg, on the other hand, provide a fascinating look at the everyday ways in which the Spanish fostered racial separation in colonial Mexico. Non-noble natives, for example, were forbidden to bear arms, dress like Spaniards, and ride horses; *mulatas* were prohibited from wearing silk, jewels, and indigenous clothing during the 17th century; and *mulatos*, Spaniards, and *mestizos* were not allowed to live in native communities (116). Yet Palma and Kellogg also lightly distance their interpretation from Carroll's. While they encounter "ample evidence of positive relationships" between blacks and natives in colonial Mexico, they also identify conflict, more a product, they argue, of social proximity than distance (116). Basing her arguments on colonial legal records in Nueva Granada (roughly corresponding to contemporary Colombia), Renée Soulodre-La France also finds harmonious black-native relations to be underrepresented in colonial documents (141). In keeping with the volume's

overall revisionism, Soulodre-La France works to undermine accounts of “irreconcilable racial and ethnic antagonisms,” showing how actual instances of interethnic violence were “rife with tinges of spontaneity and opportunism” (153).

While Soulodre-La France focuses on the spontaneous aspects of black-native violence, many of the volume’s authors emphasize, instead, the ways in which it was structured by the colonial societies in which Afro-Latin Americans and indigenous peoples lived; there were “patterns” of conflict and collegiality, as Ben Vinson III and Matthew Restall phrase it (45) in their analysis of military service in the Spanish American colonies. Stuart B. Schwartz and Hal Langfur, for example, detail ways in which interethnic violence was patterned by warfare in colonial Brazil. Missionaries mobilized indigenous people against *quilombos* (maroon settlements), “hostile” natives, and the Portuguese crown’s European competitors (88), while, on other occasions, blacks were recruited “to combat the depredations of natives” (89). Jane Landers also elaborates the role of geopolitics in structuring black-native relations. In her fascinating discussion of the conflicts on the Spanish Florida frontier, she analyses the ways in which black-native military alliances were shaped by (and impacted) the competition between the Spanish, British, and the nascent United States (70) in the Latin American peninsula that would eventually become the 27th U.S. state. Kris Lane also takes up the theme in his analysis of mining in Spanish America, demonstrating how racialized forms of labor exploitation patterned black-native interaction (180).

The essays in *Beyond Black and Red* also reveal the breakdown in these regimes of ethnic separation and control, a break-

down leading, as Matthew Restall puts it in the book’s introduction, to a progressive “blurring of divisions” (10) between ethnically marked groups. Like the demographic transformation that Andrews describes in the introduction to *Afro-Latin America*, this is a process as much conceptual as biological. The only essay to take it up as a principal object of analysis is, perhaps appropriately, the only essay by an anthropologist in a work otherwise penned by historians. Neil Whitehead analyses the history of the Black Caribs, phenotypic “blacks” who demand, in his clever phrasing, “that we read them as red” (240). In Whitehead’s analysis, hybrid identities, like that of the Black Caribs, threatened “established forms of colonial political and social authority” (225). And in one of the book’s few references to Latin America’s present-day politics of race, Whitehead notes that contemporary Black Caribs are “deploying their cultural and historical heritage to ameliorate and improve their situation with the island economy as a whole” (225).

This is a good juncture for our own return to the present. For 20th century Latin American history revealed racial ambiguity and hybridity to be just as compatible with racism and inequality as are racial fixity and purity. This suggests another reason why these volumes are so timely. Race relations in Latin America are changing: ideologies of mixture face mounting challenges, and new forms of consumer and popular culture, together with new struggles over racism, multiculturalism, affirmative action, racial inequality, and ethnic land rights are reshaping the ways in which race is lived in Latin America. History matters in these struggles, and *Afro-Latin America* and *Beyond Black and Red* make fundamental contributions to our understanding of this history.