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Sobeira Latorre

Southern Connecticut State University, sobeira.latorre@gmail.com

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Afro-Latino/a Identities: Challenges, History, and Perspectives

Sobeira Latorre, Southern Connecticut State University

Miriam Jiménez Román and Juan Flores, editors, *The Afro-Latin@ Reader: History and Culture in the United States*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 584 pp.

The Afro-Latin@ Reader: History and Culture in the United States explores the contradictions, complexities, and ambiguities surrounding the term “Afro-Latin@.” As editors Juan Flores and Miriam Jiménez Román argue: “The term befuddles us because we are accustomed to thinking of ‘Afro’ and ‘Latin@’ as distinct from each other and mutually exclusive: one is either Black or Latin@” (1). This distinction, as the editors rightly underscore, denies the experience of those who identify themselves or whose experiences mark them as both Black *and* Latino/a, and who do not fit comfortably into either category. *The Afro-Latin@ Reader* emerges as a noteworthy and valuable effort to validate that individual experience and to voice, document and historicize the collective experience of Black Latino/as in the US.

The editors of this groundbreaking collection argue that despite the historical relevance and rich cultural legacy of Afro-Latino/as, described as “people of African descent in Mexico, Central and South America, and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean and by extension those of African descent in the United States whose origins are in Latin America and the Caribbean” (1), racial paradigms in the US remain rigid and narrow in their definition and the contributions and diverse experiences of this growing population in the United States continue to be understudied. Adopting a multidisciplinary and transnational approach to the study of Afro-descendants of Caribbean and Latin American background in the United States, *The Afro-Latin@ Reader* makes an invaluable contribution to the fields of Latino/a, Caribbean, African American and African diaspora Studies.

The exploration of the African heritage in the Americas is not a new scholarly topic. Different aspects of the African presence in Latin America and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, particularly around music, religion, and other socio-cultural manifestations, have been documented, especially among scholars in disciplines such as history, anthropology, and Latin American and Caribbean Studies. Studies on individual Latin American and Caribbean countries

have also yielded significant insights into the particularities of racial discourse within distinct national contexts. More recently, this exploration is taking place within the context of the United States and has extended to fields like Latino/a, Black/African American, and Ethnic Studies.

Until the past decade, little scholarly attention was paid to the Afro-Latino/a population in the United States and the connections between Afro-Latino/as, Latino/as and African Americans. Some notable efforts to address this void include the 2005 anthology, *Neither Enemies Nor Friends: Latinos, Blacks, Afro-Latinos* edited by Anani Dzidzienyo and Suzanne Oboler and the 2007 collection of essays, *Technofuturos: Critical Interventions in Latino/a Studies*, edited by Nancy Raquel Mirabal and Agustín Laó-Montes. Both works, particularly the first, focus more intentionally on the interconnectedness between Latino/as, Latin Americans, African Americans, and Afro-Latino/as.

The Afro-Latin@ Reader enhances the existing literature on blackness and Afro-Latinidad in two significant ways. First, it captures and presents the specific contributions of Afro-Latinos to the history and culture of the United States. Second, it brings together personal and scholarly essays, poems, literary excerpts, interviews, book chapters, and testimonies, which jointly succeed in voicing the experiences of a community that has been historically silenced in multiple national and cultural frameworks. Situated within the context of US history and racial identity politics, the collection raises questions about the meanings and experiences of *Afro-Latinidad*: what does it mean to be an Afro-Latino/a? What is the relationship between Afro-Latino/as, Latinos/as and African Americans? How is the Afro-Latino/a experience shaped by specific national, historical, and cultural contexts?

Although the collection includes Afro-Latino/a voices from different parts of Latin America, it privileges those of writers who trace their origin to the Hispanic Caribbean region. This fact is not surprising and reflects demographic trends, since “Afro-Latin@s in the United States are preponderantly of Hispanic Caribbean origin stemming in numbers from Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Central America, and the coastal areas of Colombia and Venezuela” (6). The centrality of Caribbean voices in the text makes it particularly relevant to the field of Caribbean Studies. That being said, one of the strengths of the collection is the fact that it offers a broad transnational perspective of Afro-Latino/as, focusing less on national particularities than on the collective experience of Afro-Latinidad. In fact, despite differences in national, cultural, and class backgrounds, many of the contributors describe strikingly similar

experiences of isolation, shame, and confusion associated with the Afro-Latino/a identity in the US.

In the Reader's thought-provoking introduction, the editors define the term "Afro-Latin@" and argue that "in the treacherous counterposition of African Americans and Latin@s that characterizes the racial discourse in this country today, Afro-Latin@s as individuals and as a group constitute a potential bridge across the ominous ethno-racial divide" (4). Jiménez Román and Flores argue further that in addition to their potential for bridging this divide, an examination of the Afro-Latino/a experience complicates monolithic understandings of race in America. A focus on Afro-Latino/as thus reveals the "anti-Black racism within the Latin@ communities themselves" (2) and challenges "the African American and English-language monopoly over Blackness in the US context" (3).

The Afro-Latin@ Reader, which aims to "trace the trajectory of a collective experience through the entire span of the history of the United States" (4), follows a chronological structure. The introduction is followed by over sixty entries, which are divided into ten parts: 1. Historical Background Before 1900, 2. Arturo Alfonso Schomburg, 3. Afro-Latin@s on the Color Line, 4. Roots of Salsa: Afro-Latin@ Popular Music, 5. Black Latin@ Sixties, 6. Afro-Latinas, 7. Public Images and (Mis) Representations, 8. Afro-Latin@s in the Hip Hop Zone, 9. Living Afro-Latinidades, and 10. Afro-Latin@s: Present and Future Tenses. Individual entries deal with a wide range of topics including gender and sexuality, history, music, literature, sports, religion, family, the entertainment industry, language, and racism. Collectively, the anthologized works paint a nuanced and diverse portrait of the Afro-Latino/a experience, which reflects the "complex histories of Africans and their descendants in the Americas" (1).

The historical organization of the text allows readers to appreciate multiple shifts in perceptions of blackness and Afro-Latinidad throughout the history of the United States. In "Changing Identities: An Afro-Latin@ Portrait," for instance, Gabriel Haslip-Viera looks at his own family genealogy for clues as to how to understand the changing politics of race and ethnicity in the Americas. He argues that his family's "shifting ethno-racial identities demonstrate the arbitrariness and utter confusion of racial classification in the United States and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean" (142). Other historically grounded works consider the ways in which the inclusion of Afro-Latino/a figures in the history of racial discourse in the United States disrupts the prevalent Black/White binary that dominates the racial landscape in this country. In

“An Uneven Playing Field: Afro-Latinos in Major League Baseball,” Adrian Burgos Jr. provides an excellent example of what happens when Afro-Latino/as are rescued from historical oblivion. In his essay, the author analyzes the history of baseball integration with a focus on Afro-Latino players who navigated the color line. He concludes that, “Inserting Afro-Latin@s back in the history of baseball integration reveals a more complex history about baseball’s color line and unveils integration as a process that involved a wider series of actors than is commonly acknowledged” (128).

The collection successfully weaves together public and personal history, scholarly research and testimonial accounts. Scholarly essays on the historical trajectory of Afro-Latino/as, historically significant figures such as Arturo Alfonso Schomburg, musical traditions such as salsa and hip-hop, Afro-Latino/a performers and athletes, gender and sexuality, and religion offer various theoretical frameworks and approaches to the study of Afro-Latinidad. Personal accounts and autobiographical essays play a key role in furthering our understanding of the lived experiences of Afro-Latino/as. Poems and literary excerpts by renowned and emerging writers offer excellent literary examples of the ways in which Afro-Latino/as negotiate and re-define their racial identity. As a whole, the book explores the ways in which the experiences and interventions (creative, artistic, historical, etc.) of Afro-Latino/as function as sites of resistance to socio-cultural and political invisibility.

One of the goals of the text is to challenge romanticized notions of racial harmony in Latin America and the Caribbean, and to expose the internal racism often present in Latino/a communities in the United States. As several of the contributors underscore, racist ideology among Latino/a communities reflects dominant racial attitudes throughout Latin America and the Hispanic Caribbean. This ideology is often manifested through particular cultural practices and expectations such as “blanqueamiento” or “whitening,” which promotes, among other things, interracial marriage as a way to “improve” the race or “mejorar la raza.” Various entries express sharp criticism of the racial discrimination that many Afro-Latino/as experience from within their own families and communities. Another important aspect of the Afro-Latino/a experience involves the relationship between Afro-Latino/as and African Americans. Throughout the collection, essays on Arturo Alfonso Schomburg, Carlos Cooks, Pablo Guzmán, and others, “attest to the cultural bonds felt by Afro-Latin@s with their African American contemporaries” (9) as well as common interest and involvement in political and social movements.

Though women's voices are featured throughout the collection, the section exclusively dedicated to "Afro-Latin@s" includes essential writings that integrate issues of gender and sexuality with ongoing discussions of racial identity and national paradigms. In several essays and poems, Afro-Latina women report that the intersection of racism and sexism, in particular, has had a significant impact on their lives as women, Blacks, and Latinas. Just as they critique racist practices and limiting racial paradigms, Afro-Latinas write against the prevalent sexism and heterosexist assumptions within mainstream US society and Latino/a communities. The voices of Afro-Latinas offer illuminating insights into the ways in which women at, and from, the margins negotiate, redefine, and question fixed racial, gender, and sexual constructs. As Angela Jorge notes, addressing the challenges faced by Black Puerto Rican women, "The Black Puerto Rican woman is in a unique position since her oppression is threefold: sex, cultural identity, and color [...] One would think that this three-sided oppression is sufficient; however, she is further oppressed by the act of omission or absence of literature addressing her needs" (272). By collecting the works of Afro-Latinas from diverse national origins and perspectives, *The Afro-Latin@ Reader* makes an important step toward addressing those needs.

In addition to highlighting the often problematic positioning of Afro-Latino/as in US society, *The Afro-Latin@ Reader* celebrates the rich African heritage in the Americas. The collection highlights not only the many difficulties faced by Afro-Latino/a communities, but also the triumphs and successes of individuals whose notable contributions to the cultural, social, and historical landscape of the United States have until recently been ignored or misrepresented.

The Afro-Latin@ Reader is a great pedagogical tool and an excellent resource for students and scholars across the disciplines, but particularly those in the fields of Latino/a, Caribbean, African American, and Ethnic Studies. The collection succeeds in bringing together a wide range of texts, which may prompt classroom discussion on important issues including the politics of race in a transnational context, the interconnections between Latino/as, Latin Americans, African Americans, and Afro-Latino/as, the historical relevance of Afro-Latino/as, the relationship between race, gender, and sexuality, as well as the representation of Blackness in literature, the arts, US media, music, and sports.

One limitation with respect to the book's pedagogical utility is that the introduction does not sufficiently contextualize for readers the myriad ways in which blackness manifests itself in Latin America and the Hispanic Caribbean. Although the editors limit the scope of the book to

the Afro-Latino/a experience in the United States, a more thorough discussion on the politics of race in Latin America and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean would have provided a broader context from which to understand the racial attitudes that many Latino/as reproduce in the United States.

Such context is offered in recent scholarly books focused on racial identity in the other America, the one beyond the borders of the United States. *Afro-Latin America, 1800-2000* (2004) by George Reid Andrews and *Black in Latin America* (2011) by Henry Louis Gates Jr., for instance, explore the strong but complex African heritage in Latin America and the Hispanic Caribbean from various theoretical and disciplinary perspectives. Such focus on Afro-Latin America reveals the ongoing struggles of Afro-descendants for political and socio-cultural representation and visibility. These books could serve as stimulating complements to *The Afro-Latin@ Reader* and enrich classroom discussion around issues of blackness, nationalisms, and Afro-Latinidad. Together, these works focused on blackness in the Americas, point to the need to examine the African diaspora from a broader, transnational context. Such broader contextualization leads to a reconsideration of the cultural significance, political implications, and historical relevance of race and blackness in today's global society.

The collected works in *The Afro-Latin@ Reader* broaden definitions of blackness and latinidad and reveal the multiple ways in which Afro-Latino/as navigate national and cultural histories that have consistently denigrated or dismissed their African heritage and challenge US racial classifications that dismiss their cultural background and linguistic difference. *The Afro-Latin@ Reader* invites us to move beyond a binary understanding of racial identity and to embrace the allegiances that may be forged and, in many instances, have been forged among Afro-Latino/as, Latinos/as, African Americans, and other underrepresented groups in the US.