

## BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

# Afro-Latin America in Flesh and Blood: Lives from the Battlefield, Cane Field, and Courtroom; Representations from Literature, Politics, and the Genomics Lab

Lowell Gudmundson

Mount Holyoke College, US  
lgudmund@mholyoke.edu

---

This essay reviews the following works:

**Afro-Latin America: Black Lives, 1600–2000.** By George Reid Andrews. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016. Pp. i + 123. \$24.95 cloth. ISBN: 9780674737594.

**From Shipmates to Soldiers: Emerging Black Identities in the Río de la Plata.** By Alex Borucki. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2015. Pp. vii + 306. \$29.95 paper. ISBN: 9780826351807.

**Conceiving Freedom: Women of Color, Gender, and the Abolition of Slavery in Havana and Rio de Janeiro.** By Camillia Cowling. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013. Pp. ix + 326. \$36.95 paper. ISBN: 9781469610887.

**Crossroads of Freedom: Slaves and Freed People in Bahia, Brazil, 1870–1910.** By Walter Fraga. Translated and with an introduction by Mary Ann Mahony. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016. Pp. vii + 313. \$26.95 paper. ISBN: 9780822360902.

**The Work of Recognition: Caribbean Colombia and the Postemancipation Struggle for Citizenship.** By Jason McGraw. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016. Pp. xii + 328. \$34.95 paper. ISBN: 9781469617862.

**Mestizo Genomics: Race Mixture, Nation, and Science in Latin America.** Edited by Peter Wade, Carlos López Beltrán, Eduardo Restrepo, and Ricardo Ventura Santos. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014. Pp. vii + 304. \$25.95 paper. ISBN: 9780822356592.

---

Few areas of Latin Americanist historical research rival the impact and achievements of the dozens of studies of Afro-descendant populations that have poured forth in the past two decades. This renewed interest in and reframing of the significance of Afro-Latin America, particularly in the postemancipation era, both mirrors and expands upon the studies—primarily of slavery and colonial era—of the Civil Rights generation of the mid-1960s to the early 1980s. The social and political context of our time deeply informs the research being carried out today, just as with that earlier generation, in particular the emergence of new social movements structured around ethnic identity claims and Afro-descendant community rights since the early 1990s.

The books reviewed here exemplify some of the most relevant topics and findings; they also reflect the legions of active researchers in this field today. While all five single-author volumes represent the work of historians, their topical breadth is noteworthy, engaging with paradigms from gender and ethnic studies to politics (mobilization, citizenship, military service, etc.), as well as the perennial concerns of processes internal to Afro-descendant communities (free versus enslaved, rural versus urban, African-born versus creole, etc.). The one edited collection explores a topic of vital concern to all Latin Americanists—race mixture and racialist discourse past and present—while also offering a series of participant-observer analyses of the findings and practices of genomics research laboratories in Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico.

The various studies might well be grouped and described in pairs as contributions by senior, junior, and midcareer scholars, whether based in Latin America or abroad. The most senior authors and editors have

produced texts that will serve as bookends of our analysis here, beginning with George Reid Andrews and his very broad goals and intended readership, and ending with Peter Wade and his colleagues and their highly unique subject matter. The authors of first books emerging from dissertations, Camillia Cowling and Jason McGraw, have mined their archival sources for illuminating contributions on highly specific sites and issues: maternalist policies and politics prior to abolition in Havana and Rio de Janeiro, and race and recognition in Caribbean Colombia, respectively. Those more midcareer historians, Walter Fraga for post-abolition Bahía and Alex Borucki for the transition from African to creole in the Río de la Plata, offer case studies employing some remarkable sources to reveal lived experience over long periods of time in prototypical or paradigmatic settings.

Earlier works authored by both Andrews and Wade have long figured as required readings for my course offerings on the topic.<sup>1</sup> Thus, ever in search of updates or substitutions, I was particularly interested in comparing these new works with my old standby assignments. The new book by Andrews differs substantially from any of his earlier works, responding to the clear need for something like a bridging introductory text for those more familiar with the US Afro-American literature and less so with Afro-Latin America. His success in pursuit of this goal makes this slim volume a very welcome addition to his already prodigious contributions to the field. When I began reading I wondered if its goal might simply be an extension backward in time, to 1600, of his groundbreaking and widely used textbook. It turned out to be something quite different, with only three of the five chapters addressing issues and contextual material presented in that volume (basically population distributions, census data and practices, and contemporary political strategies and struggles). Nor is this extended essay particularly reliant on any of Andrews's three earlier monographs on Afro-descendants in Argentina, Brazil or Uruguay.<sup>2</sup>

Sandwiched in the middle, in chapters 3 and 4, which occupy nearly half of the book's ninety-three pages of text, are fascinating descriptions of lived experiences ("Afro-Latin American Voices") and illuminating commentaries by Afro-American visitors from the United States ("Transnational Voices") on what they believed they saw on their travels to the region. Commissioned as the Nathan I. Huggins Lectures at Harvard University in 2012, the work clearly is intended to engage scholars and students of Africana studies in the United States, not only presenting a basic outline but also materials that might parallel more familiar approaches to the topic: voices, sociological processes, and the views on race relations in Latin America offered by writers whose larger work was perhaps better known. In my own classroom experience, Andrews's strategy brilliantly responds to a central challenge of how to begin such a course with a predictably diverse group of students on something approaching a level playing field, working with existing strengths of background, whether they be Latin American or US Afro-American, and filling in the gaps for both along the way.

In these two critical chapters the chronological boundaries are pushed back into the early colonial period with Afro-Latin American voices, beginning with the early seventeenth-century Peruvian mystic Ursula de Jesús. There follow the stories based on the writings of an early nineteenth-century independence fighter in Uruguay (Jacinto Ventura de Molina) and a Cuban patriot (Ricardo Batrell Oviedo) from the end of the century. A fourth and final vignette covers the now famous twentieth-century life story of María de los Reyes Castillo Bueno ("Reyita") in Cuba. Less ambitious chronologically, nearly all of the transnational voices are from the twentieth century, beginning with James Weldon Johnson in Venezuela in 1906. After briefly analyzing the repeated invocation of Haitian and Cuban independence struggle heroes by African Americans and white abolitionists alike in the United States throughout the nineteenth century, Andrews concentrates on twentieth-century Brazil for the remainder of the chapter, with the writings of a variety of famous and lesser known African American authors and journalists from the United States.

Given the longer time frame invoked by the book's title, at least one example of transnational eyewitness commentary from the earlier colonial era would have been welcome, especially given how the Spanish policy offering refuge and freedom to slaves escaping English control might well have helped frame the longer time period covered in the preceding chapter. Spanish reliance on colored militia forces throughout the empire, as well as their open recruitment of those fleeing their rival's control, had a great deal to do with such an outsized role for Afro-Latin Americans in the military during the nineteenth century as well. Readers might have also profited from a fuller discussion of the complex nature of Reyita's account, part autobiography and part *testimonio*, further complicated by the fact that it was recorded by and in conversation with her

<sup>1</sup> Peter Wade, "Blackness, Indigeneity, Multiculturalism and Genomics in Brazil, Colombia and Mexico," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 45, no. 2 (2013): 205–233, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022216X13000011>; George Reid Andrews, *Afro-Latin America, 1800–2000* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> George Reid Andrews, *The Afro-Argentines of Buenos Aires, 1800–1900* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1980); *Blacks and Whites in São Paulo, Brazil, 1888–1988* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991); *Blackness in the White Nation: A History of Afro-Uruguay* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

daughter. In sum, however, this volume is an ideal short introduction to the topic, easily assigned at the start of the semester and readily built upon thereafter. Most important, it draws in the novice reader with its middle chapters full of vivid images and acute observations, history with a human face, just the right sort of motivation to explore further in this vast area of scholarship.

Perhaps what most distinguishes the midcareer works by Borucki and Fraga is their longer time frames and prodigious documentation, combining and cross-referencing several different large-scale data sets gathered over a decade or two. Borucki's achievements are many and varied. He combines the data sets used in his earlier monographs on both abolitionism and the origins of slaves imported to the region with intriguing new sources on their lives and those of their descendants in America.<sup>3</sup> These include military enlistment records from the independence era wars, marriage records of couples and their sponsors, armed politics after independence, lay brotherhoods and voluntary associations identified with Afro-descendants, and even the life and times of Jacinto Ventura de Molina, a black *letrado* of Montevideo. He ends with a particularly haunting example of how later nineteenth-century Uruguayan patriots reimagined their participation in the Paraguayan War by literally whitewashing any lingering image of Afro-descendant soldiers as part of their heroic remembering.

Borucki's varied sources demonstrate the absolute centrality of two factors in nineteenth-century Afro-descendant life in the Río de la Plata: shared experiences of enslavement in Africa and arrival in America, along with military service and advancement for much of the nineteenth century. His findings on the role of Afro-descendants in the emergence and political life of Uruguay are particularly revealing, whether showing just how far up the chain of command certain Afro-descendants and freedmen advanced or by documenting their central role as fighters in caudillo warfare following independence. However, his reliance on the overwhelmingly male-dominant data sources chosen, shipmates in the Atlantic crossing and military life thereafter, is not only reflected in his title, it dramatically guides and colors the narrative, at times counterintuitively. While we catch glimpses of Afro-descendant women in his descriptions of the African king (and queen) societies and celebrations, he actually uses the marriage records of the time not to explore the origins and roles of the brides but rather the shipmate and military connections among grooms and their male witnesses or sponsors. The exercise reveals the long-term connections between shipmates and military service and among soldiers themselves, but in this instance and others within the text, readers will be reminded just how such a focused or angled documentary search and research agenda rewards and deprives at the same time.

Of all the works reviewed, none equal, in terms of the breadth of sources, Fraga's meticulous reconstruction of the transition of Bahia's 70,000 bondsmen from slavery to freedom (in a finely crafted translation by Mary Ann Mahony). In the introduction, Mahony refers to the author's strategy as following Carlo Ginzburg's method of nominative record linking ("linking data" or "crossing data," xiii), piecing together fragments from multiple sources in order to offer a more complex, longitudinal study of personal experience and social class formation. The method requires not just multiple data sets but inventive documentary strategies, from census and parish to plantation records; from criminal, civil, and police archives to newspaper and administrative accounts of uprisings and conflicts. One source in particular highlights the author's remarkable inventiveness. Faced with difficulties in identifying occupations and social class position of those who emigrated from the plantation districts to the city using sugar estate and census records alone, Fraga had recourse to the admission records of the Santo Amaro charity hospital to flesh out details. Few historians persevere so, or have the detective instincts to look for social class clues in the patient files of yesteryear's equivalent of the Red Cross and the hospital emergency room.

Fraga's findings invite comparison in innumerable directions. His data on the connections between free and enslaved, urban and rural populations are striking, especially when joined to a fascinating description of family and kinship relations that so readily crossed the lines of plantation and city, enslaved and free. Using information about families formed on the Pitanga Plantation and following them forward after abolition, Fraga is able to document the existence of two-parent households in fourteen of twenty cases under slavery (199), the proliferation of unions involving outsiders after abolition, and the density of kin ties. Needless to say, these ties were deployed both to gain freedom and to pursue urban opportunities for advancement thereafter.

<sup>3</sup> Alex Borucki, *Abolicionismo y tráfico de esclavos en Montevideo tras la fundación republicana, 1829–1853* (Montevideo: Biblioteca Nacional, 2009); *Esclavitud y trabajo: Un estudio sobre los afrodescendientes en la frontera uruguaya (1835–1855)* (Montevideo: Pulmón, 2004).

Bahia's long slide into near irrelevance as a sugar producer, accelerated by abolition, led to widespread outmigration from the plantations, but also to a dogged resistance by those who remained to protect their rights to provisioning grounds and days off to work on them. After abolition, sugar production may have declined, but what emerged in the old plantation districts was a myriad of adjustments, from varied rental and sharecropping arrangements, to endless piece-rate labor negotiations, to the commercial production of tobacco by both cash renters and sharecroppers, further straining the already unreliable labor market for cane workers, given the competing demands for their labor on their own plots. While former slaves continued to live on all the plantations, outmigration would eventually characterize the majority and their descendants. Their places were often taken, however, by backlander *catingueiro* migrants, further raising the temperature of already tense relations among the residents of all statuses. More generally, those once enslaved and their descendants deployed a whole series of social and expressive resources to resist their former status being used against them or even referenced by employers, managers, or fellow laborers.

Bahia's not-so-happy ending following abolition, its muddling through, may have more to tell us about our shared past and present than we once thought. The decades-long peasantist resistance to full proletarianization and the simmering social tensions amid economic decline seem ever more relevant, not just to the comparative literature on postabolition America but also to a whole series of contemporary dilemmas. Most readers will no doubt make their own direct comparisons with other postabolition sugar regions in crisis and decline, but others will see parallels and hear echoes from the US Rust Belt or other deindustrializing regions of Western Europe. Fraga's study is important not just for the history of Brazil or of slavery and abolition elsewhere in the Americas, but also for even more numerous regions and industries in transition and decline. Our historiographical traditions have long been distorted in the direction of success stories or emergent industries/regions, such as coffee and São Paulo for Brazil, or Cuba's transformation into the sugar industry's world leader at the same time. Progressives of diverse political stripes have long prioritized such exemplars of the march of history, of cutting edges, emerging markets, and transformative industries.

If men dominate the historical narrative offered by Borucki, women take center stage in Cowling's account of petitioners of freedom under two disparate but equally imperial/monarchical regimes. The Moret Law of 1870 for Spanish Cuba and the Rio Branco Law of 1871 for Brazil inaugurated the era of gradualist and maternalist abolition, of allegedly "free birth" for the children of enslaved women. However, Cowling shows how tenaciously the women themselves and their allies would have to struggle to make freedom effective, and protect it after the fact, within such monarchical rather than republican courts and civil societies. As with the so-called apprenticeship or guardianship emancipation programs elsewhere in the Americas, free birth legislation essentially created yet another arena in which to contest private power relations rather than any clear break with the past.

Countless monographs have demonstrated the female predominance in urban sites and economies the likes of Havana and Rio, and Cowling's data sets and cases build upon those findings.<sup>4</sup> With far more cases from Havana (over 700) than Rio, the focus in both settings is on the two decades following free birth legislation itself. Cowling disavows any formal comparison, but her findings do of course highlight similarities and differences along the way. In both cases the female petitioners engage in complex relations with their legal representatives, not to mention with the putative owners of themselves or their children, the targets of such litigation. Moreover, the case files most often do not provide any final legal resolutions, whether regarding findings of fact or rulings on status, much less the subsequent life course of the litigants. In an effort to construct a deeper social context, the author employs at times heroic efforts at contextualization or the discovery of other data sources on particular individuals.

<sup>4</sup> This gendered spatial pattern was recognized early in the classic studies by Frederick P. Bowser, *The African Slave in Colonial Peru, 1524–1650* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1974); and "The Free Person of Color in Mexico City and Lima: Manumission and Opportunity, 1580–1650," in *Race and Slavery in the Western Hemisphere: Quantitative Studies*, edited by Stanley L. Engerman and Eugene D. Genovese (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), 331–368; and by Kátia M. de Queirós Mattoso, *To Be a Slave in Brazil, 1550–1888*, translated by Arthur Goldhammer, foreword by Stuart Schwartz (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986). Its most detailed expression can be found in Christine Hünefeldt, *Paying the Price of Freedom: Family and Labor among Lima's Slaves, 1800–1854*, translated by Alexandra Stern (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994). Comparable Brazilian and Cuban analyses include Mary C. Karasch, *Slave Life in Rio de Janeiro, 1808–1850* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987); and Sandra Lauderdale Graham, *House and Street: The Domestic World of Servants and Masters in Nineteenth-Century Rio de Janeiro* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); as well as Karen Y. Morrison, *Cuba's Racial Crucible: The Sexual Economy of Social Identities, 1750–2000* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015).

Differences between the two settings also appear, and with consequences. In Brazil the legislation was domestic, initially promulgated with slave owners' interests in mind and clearly intended to keep reform gradual and postpone any general emancipation, assumptions swept away with lightning speed by the surge in abolitionist pressure in the 1880s, leading to universal emancipation in 1888. In Cuba slaveholders and their interests were far less central to the process; and Spain's imperial and counterinsurgency needs loomed large in the law's implementation prior to an equally external, imperial decree of abolition in 1886.

Cuban voices can be heard more clearly than Brazilian ones in Cowling's study, given the preponderance of the evidence available to her. However, in both settings the author is particularly effective in revealing the complex relationship of litigants, their lawyers, and the law itself, and the ways in which these women of color, often as the heads of household, made claims on freedom of movement and enterprise uniquely available to them in cities of imperial grandeur like Havana and Rio. In the first instance, Cowling shows not only how petitions involved complex translations of illiterate testimony into legalist textuality and proof, but also how the maternalist ideologies of gradualist emancipation could be used to stretch the boundaries in favor of far broader interpretations. On the other hand, these same scribes and representatives were legal professionals who themselves often held slaves and were more committed to the practice of law than to a particular outcome, much less any abolitionist cause. This elementary reminder of the inherent ambiguity and unexpected outcomes of the legal profession's relationship to partisan politics, its potential to produce consummate ironies, should have powerful echoes for many different readership groups, from a post-civil rights generation witnessing the recasting of the Republican-dominated Warren Court as arch-villain by conservatives in the United States, to participants in the polarizing Brazilian debate over the center-right Cardoso administration's legacy of affirmative action and university admissions.

In the second case, women's demands for their own or their children's freedom led them directly to seek access to the status of juridical personhood and its benefits, among them freedom of movement and employment and to contract on their own account, rights already enjoyed by the free majority of the city's residents in an economy that provided ample opportunities for women's wage labor, advancement, and even property ownership. There is no little irony in how women petitioners as imperial subjects and soon-to-be citizens foreshadowed a broad range of struggles for economic and occupational rights that would be echoed in subaltern male demands thereafter. Female petitioners in the 1870s and 1880s were lumped together with other perpetual minors as subjects deserving perhaps protection but not what would soon become republican rights or suffrage, which was not conceded until 1932 in Brazil and 1934 in Cuba, despite universal male suffrage in the latter case as early as independence in 1899. Maternalist and gender-coded ideologies of social reform thus had powerful impacts, both positive and negative, well beyond any role they played in advancing the abolitionist cause.

An additional, disturbing insight shared by Cowling and Fraga refers to a kind of shock or inability to adapt on the part of soon-to-be ex-masters, whether when challenged by petitioners for free birth protection or following general emancipation. Fraga goes so far as to refer to ex-masters being not just offended or nostalgic but "traumatized" (187). Given Cowling's documentary sources and their shorter time frame of reference, she describes only a sense of outrage on the part of some of her targets of litigation at the mere fact of being challenged. As with McGraw's description of the almost instant opposition to the expansion of male suffrage in Caribbean Colombia, the reader may well gain new insight into contemporary dilemmas of renewed anticolored racism, so readily standing on its head the much decried white privilege as a deeply felt white victimization instead.

Many readers' initial reaction to the title of McGraw's study of postemancipation Caribbean Colombia will be to puzzle a bit over what exactly "recognition" might mean; the struggle for citizenship of the subtitle, or perhaps something above and beyond? As it turns out, citizenship does not exhaust the meaning of recognition, however central it may have been. Rather, readers are asked to struggle with that peculiarly Latin American benevolence/malevolence regarding the race of the nation's actual and potential citizens. In order to be recognized within the race-blind, supraethnic republic of white or mestizo supremacy if not homogeneity, others would need to become or remain racially invisible. In political or cultural terms this required the deracializing of Afro-descendant leaders, whether in the form of taking an implicit loyalty oath not to speak of or for any race, or by offering much the same reassurance to founding fathers by lauding their efforts to grant Afro-descendants citizenship, a decidedly less recognized and more precarious form of citizenship, as it turned out.

McGraw is one of relatively few to work on the Caribbean coast during the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> He characterizes this as a society with slaves but not slave-based, an important distinction indeed. His analysis of the Afro-descendant *boga* men or boatmen/navigators of transport on the Magdalena River and their demise at the hands of steamships in the 1870s and 1880s sets the groundwork for understanding the particulars of racialized politics in the Caribbean region. The almost instant reaction against Afro-descendant suffrage following emancipation offers a jarring comparison not only with other nations but also with the radical republican image of Colombian Liberalism in that midcentury era available in previous studies. This ugly face of an otherwise cosmopolitan Liberalism rightly celebrated in recent times becomes readily visible not only in terms of the *boga* question and Barranquilla's allying with more openly racist theorists in Antioquia and Bogotá, but especially regarding the writings of Candelario Obeso, used extensively throughout the book. The offensively condescending reception accorded the writings, political thought, and aspirations of this highly visible Afro-descendant, by Liberal figures such as José María Samper, reframes the way we have come to think of mid to late nineteenth-century Colombian Liberalism over the past two decades or more. There were no doubt nineteenth-century reasons that explain why far more elegant white supremacist thinkers in early twentieth-century Brazil and Mexico proved more effective in embellishing and selling their cosmic race and racial democracy theories at home and abroad.

Beyond the issue of how race fundamentally conditioned and expressed many of the battles over labor rights and partisan politics, McGraw also shows how the utter lack of Liberal commitment to and follow-through on public education looms large in any explanation for the polarization along racial lines. He refers to it as the *letrado* problem, deeply ingrained in elitist acceptance of some and exclusion of many more Afro-descendants from high station or political power. Ultimately, it would be far more important than the crushing of the *boga* men and their chokehold over riverine commerce. Since McGraw does provide the relevant, meager public education expenditure and matriculation data, the picture is clear enough. Given this lack of funding, virtually no advance was made in terms of mass public education and little in terms of access to secondary education even for the talented few. Less clear for most readers will be the basis for the *letrado* culture wars of the time. Elite disdain for popular cultural forms, from marriage and religiosity to male violence, is repeatedly referred to but without the kind of vivid detail that even a very few criminal, defamation, honor, or paternity case files could surely have provided. The *gente decente*, Liberals included, no doubt had drawn their lines in the sand on cultural and moral questions, but readers are somewhat left to their own devices to imagine exactly what behaviors were thought to disqualify the masses in general and Afro-descendants in particular.

The volume edited by Wade, López Beltrán, Restrepo, and Ventura Santos is no doubt something of a wild card in a review such as this. However, beyond the volume's own merits, an earlier version of many of these ideas appears in my course's required readings, and their fate in class discussions informs my curiosity as reader of this new work. The four editors offer an introduction, followed by a Part 1 that includes three essays by the nationally based research teams (Ventura Santos, Michael Kent, and Verlan Valle Gaspar Neto for Brazil; Restrepo, Ernesto Schwartz-Marín, and Rosebelinda Cárdenas for Colombia; López Beltrán, Vivette García Deister, and Mariana Ríos Sandoval for Mexico) on their history and context. Part 2 includes three essays by observers and members of those same research teams on laboratory practices and strategies for self-promotion and diffusion of findings (Kent and Ventura Santos for Brazil; María Fernanda Olarte Sierra, and Adriana Díaz del Castillo H. for Colombia; García Deister for Mexico), along with another collectively authored (Wade, García Deister, Kent, and Olarte Sierra) chapter comparing the three cases, in addition to Wade's concluding essay. Space limitations in dealing with a collection as rich and varied as this impose themselves all too quickly, so we will cut to the chase without further, detailed descriptions.

Readers will perhaps be struck by how readily these early twenty-first-century genomics and laboratory science paradigms and representations can be compared with equally foundational statements of a century or more ago. Here I have in mind not so much the classic, polemical statement on Latin America's destiny by José Vasconcelos in Mexico, but rather history's romance at the hands of the likes of Manuel de Jesús

<sup>5</sup> Colombian history has occupied a key position in the renaissance of Afro-Latin American research, most of which has focused on settings other than the Atlantic coast or on the Independence era when dealing with the region. See, for example, Aline Helg, *Liberty and Equality in Caribbean Colombia, 1770–1835* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); and Marixa Lasso, *Myths of Harmony: Race and Republicanism during the Age of Revolution, Colombia 1795–1831* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007), on earlier periods for the Atlantic coast. Major studies of the Pacific coast regions of Colombia include Peter Wade, *Blackness and Race Mixture: The Dynamics of Racial Identity in Colombia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), and James E. Sanders, *Contentious Republicans: Popular Politics, Race, and Class in Nineteenth-Century Colombia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

Galván in the Dominican Republic and Octavio Méndez Pereira in Panama.<sup>6</sup> As Doris Sommer has shown, such romantic and at times fanciful invocations of indigenous heritage and its unique claim to historical and political legitimacy were the basis for several Hispanic and mestizo nationalist ideologies not just in postrevolutionary Mexico, no doubt the most visible and successful case.<sup>7</sup> This time, with the solidity and aura of science, genomics, and advanced math made visible through blood sample vials, lab coats, instrumentation, and reports to the citizenry, national identities are once again anchored in representations of Native American roots, not unlike the earlier novels' romantic and mythical rediscovery of Latin America's equivalent of Anglo-America's fables of Pocahontas and John Smith or the Lewis and Clark expedition with Sacagawea as guide and partner. Happy fraternal beginnings make for happy endings in the very distant future of statist multiculturalism's celebratory agenda and language, while the intervening centuries and their travails are left to its parallel, less celebratory agenda in the public sphere: damage control, apologies, and calls for tolerance and understanding.

Both the contextualizing and lab-practice essays by the nationally based research teams reveal fascinating convergences, intentionally exploited or not, between what the nation needs to know and what it either wants or is prepared to know. The comparison with my own classroom experiences attempting to teach this material to undergraduates (including many from foreign countries) in the United States leads to more questions than answers, but also to some serious doubts as to what the medium-term future may bring. The hold that ancient Native American ancestry seems to exercise over not just Mexican but also Brazilian and Colombian citizens' minds in the twenty-first century is stunningly revealed in the chapters on laboratory practice. Only in Latin America would one see full-page ads in newspapers breathlessly welcoming the news and celebrating "The Charrúa Live" (110), a perhaps misleading metaphor based on the fact that southern Brazilian gaucho ancestry can indeed be traced back in time, but unfortunately to a no-longer-existing indigenous population. Only in a nation so self-confidently mestizo as Mexico might one witness a campaign inviting Yucatán's citizenry to donate blood specimens in order to help identify indigenous genomic markers with which to gauge the genetic indigeneity not only of their fellow citizens elsewhere in Mexico but beyond its borders. All this despite the fact, as Wade and others have long pointed out, that the insistence on using present-day groups in Mexico or other countries (or indeed in Africa today for the "Sub-Saharan Africa" category), regionally "marked" as indigenous and endogamous for a certain number of generations, as surrogates or proxies for ancient Native American genetic markers virtually ensures that such groups' "mixedness" is understated and Native contributions to society-wide mixture overstated. Not a problem, given the happiness of both researchers and funders with the comforting and authenticity-building results obtained, once again via a scientific practice far removed from the inkwells of authors like Vasconcelos, Galván, or Méndez Pereira but not without its parallels in terms of the convergence of nationalist desire and allegedly historical or genetic facts. That such an indigenous heritage belongs to nearly everyone, and to no identifiable or recognized group with political or social clout, makes it perhaps the ideal vehicle for national pride, unity, and continuous funding, the lab science equivalent of national security or defense budgets in other contexts.

All of the chapters point precisely in the direction of messages congruent with the nearly universal Latin American ideology of mixedness as the inescapable, defining characteristic of all the various racial or ethnic groups in the nation. If we are all mixed, how dare we discriminate against another whose differences from ourselves are merely phenotypical and percentage-based, excluding them based on something we in fact share? The Mexico-based chapters offer not only some remarkable turns of phrase and images but food for thought, as we enter an age of renewed expression and respectability of white nationalist, if not always avowedly racist, thought on its northern border. While my students, not to mention colleagues and the general public in the United States more broadly, may shrink from the task of contemplating surrogate or proxy and DNA marker sources and selections, or the resulting mathematical calculations, here one sees quite different popularization strategies and conceptualization. From DNA analysis companies (ancestry.com, 23andme.com, myheritage.com) to popular television programs such as Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s "Finding Your Roots," fascination with the allegedly reliable tracing of ethnic, regional, or racial heritage as percentages of ancestry (today's equivalent of blood quotients and breeds of another era) is undeniable, and

<sup>6</sup> José Vasconcelos, *The Cosmic Race: A Bilingual Edition*, translated by Didier T. Jaén (1925; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997); Manuel de Jesús Galván, *Enriquillo: Leyenda histórica dominicana (1503–1533)* (Santo Domingo, 1882); Octavio Méndez Pereira, *Vasco Núñez de Balboa: El tesoro del Dabaibe*, 6th ed. (1934; Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1972).

<sup>7</sup> Doris Sommer, "Foundational Fictions: When History Was Romance in Latin America," *Salmagundi*, no. 82/83 (1989): 111–141.

undeniably profitable, above and beyond the use of DNA evidence in forensic and criminal cases, pervasive for decades now.

It remains to be seen whether this new period will lead to a longer-term hardening of newly geneticized national mirages and ideologies (barely distinguishable in some ways from the earlier biologized ones), multiculturalist and proudly mixed to the South versus proudly pluralist but mixture-resistant to the North. However, the uses of racialized, ethnicized, or geographical/continental origin genetic testing, in circles high or low, do not yet suggest a very serious challenge to reigning understandings and ideologies, North or South. Celebrity Africana studies scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. happily traces the multicultural roots of his celebrity guests, black and white alike, for an enthralled, if limited television audience. With a vastly different and perhaps larger audience, his mass media competitor, the Trisha Goddard Show, hosts another semi-celebrity—Craig Cobb, the white supremacist leader of a failed takeover of a near ghost town in North Dakota—mocking, to peals of audience laughter, the presumed absurdity of the politics of bigotry from a man whose DNA sample revealed his own “14% Sub-Saharan African” genetic heritage or origin. Unlike Latin American popular media, where a shared Native American ancestry appears to offer the blanket of belonging to virtually all, to some degree, so-called genetic or ancestry percentages in the North continue to separate as often as to join, in the spheres of both public spectacle and policy.

Assuming science, genomic or otherwise, will provide us no magic bullet for understanding or reconciliation, let me end with the same modest plea for history that I offer to my students year after year, precisely the kind of history exemplified by the books reviewed here, as well as a plea for the indispensability of Mexico for the United States. We should not forget that decisions to afford “white” status to both some Native Americans (in Oklahoma, Indian Territory) and some Mexicans were historical, political decisions with major consequences, typical of the consummate ironies referenced above. It was, after all, the challenge by a Mexican–American woman, Andrea Perez, to the nearly century-old statute prohibiting interracial marriage involving African Americans in California that set a precedent by the narrowest of margins (four to three votes in favor of the plaintiffs in *Perez vs. Sharp*, Supreme Court of California, 1948) two decades before the rest of the United States caught up, thanks to the US Supreme Court’s unanimous decision to strike down antimiscegenation laws nationwide in the *Loving vs. Virginia* ruling in 1967, itself the topic of a current feature film recounting those plaintiffs’ lives. However well intended, popular culture’s resurrection today of an obsessively black and white, or white and nonwhite, understanding of the US past, and of a genomic-framed assimilationism based on a red and white vision to the South, will serve as poor guides either for honoring our intertwined histories or for respecting each other and our differences in the present.

## Author Information

Lowell Gudmundson is Professor of Latin American Studies and History at Mount Holyoke College. His research deals with the social history of export agriculture (*Costa Rica antes del café* and *Coffee, Society and Power in Latin America*), and Afro-Latin American history (*Blacks and Blackness in Central America*, and as Senior Editor for Central America for the *Dictionary of Caribbean and Afro-Latin American Biography*). His most recent book is *Costa Rica después del café: La era cooperativa en la historia y la memoria*.

**How to cite this article:** Gudmundson, L. Afro-Latin America in Flesh and Blood: Lives from the Battlefield, Cane Field, and Courtroom; Representations from Literature, Politics, and the Genomics Lab. *Latin American Research Review*. 2017; 52(4), pp. 689–696 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.234>

**Submitted:** 04 December 2016

**Accepted:** 17 January 2017

**Published:** 23 October 2017

**Copyright:** © 2017 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



*Latin American Research Review* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the Latin American Studies Association.

