Bernd Reiter & Kimberley Eison Simmons (eds.)


This wide-ranging collection of essays on Afro-descendant populations throughout the Americas originated in a 2010 conference entitled “Reexamining the Black Atlantic: Afro-Descendants Still at the Bottom?” at the University of South Florida's Institute for the Study of Latin America and the Caribbean. The prologue, introduction, and conclusion are all by Bernd Reiter; Kimberley Eison Simmons’s contribution is limited to one substantive chapter. Given the increasing recognition and vocal resistance of Afro-descendant populations, the collection is timely and useful, swinging a spotlight across a range of countries, and including the voices of academics, activists, and other stakeholders. This makes for a lively and diverse tone to the collection, with an emphasis on a combination of breadth of accessibility with depth of understanding.

Although the collection has dropped the unifying framing of the Black Atlantic, Gilroy’s concept continues to haunt the volume. The first two sections are entitled “The Black Atlantic Reexamined” and “Double-Consciousness and Black Identity—Globalized,” but most of the chapters do not mention the Black Atlantic at all. Reiter refers to the book only very briefly at the beginning of the conclusion, while Faye V. Harrison, in the first substantive chapter, ably critiques its use as a cartographic category for people of African descent, since it leaves out as much as it includes—the African diaspora is of course global, and the Black Pacific must be as important as the Black Atlantic. It might sound like nit-picking (and to some extent I’d concede that it arises from a certain unreasonable irritation), but it is perhaps indicative of some of the conceptual difficulties of this kind of collaborative collection. First, one can select “Black Atlantic” as a conceptual frame in a call for papers, but responses do not necessarily engage with it, and it may actually be to the editors’ credit that they do not attempt to impose this framing in the scoping chapters. In the introduction, Reiter goes through a number of possible framings for the conceptualization of Afro-descent (race, culture, development, postcolonial), each of which is present in various papers, but none of which can be seen as really holding them together. Second, collections take time to bring together—the two-year period between the conference and the publication dates is not very long considering the breadth of the collection, but within that time “Black Atlantic” has moved from being on top of a wave of discussion in U.S. academic circles to seeming slightly dated, particularly in terms of the kinds of loose deployments that occurred at the top of its wave. The time lag may explain why “Black Atlantic”
no longer appears in the title of the collection but continues to ghost uncomfortably around its edges. An actual in-depth engagement with the substance of Gilroy’s concepts concerning race and identity might not have dated quite so quickly as this loose haunting.

Having got all that off my chest, I do want to emphasize that the volume brings together an interesting collection of papers, each of which makes its own contribution, and the overall effect of which is to provide an agenda around Afro-descent in Latin America and the Caribbean that has truly arrived on the global scene. The first part of the book sets out contexts and histories for the movement. Faye V. Harrison’s excellent chapter sets out an agenda around human rights and citizenship, in which she shows that addressing racism in relation to African-descent identities necessitates both a continued interrogation of the assumptions behind the category “human” and a sensitive sense of transborder coalition in which the specificities of local knowledges and self-identifications are not subsumed beneath inadequate and excluding theoretical frameworks. Darièn J. Davis, Tianna S. Paschel, and Judith A. Morrison then set out a history of pan-Afro-Latin American movements, tracing their development from early twentieth-century pan-African conferences to the realization that black organizations in the Americas could hold their governments to account following the Santiago and Durban conferences on racism in the early twenty-first century. Both of these chapters focus on the building of pan-continental collectivities that maintain a clear awareness of located specificity and diversity.

The rest of the book, divided into three sections, offers a range of case studies that explore this diversity. In the second section, Simmons’s chapter is particularly subtle in highlighting the shifting of racial meanings across borders, showing how the difference between African-American “bipolar racial categorization” (p. 76) and Caribbean color gradations translates into concrete readings of visible characteristics such as hair and skin color, both for African-American students traveling to the Dominican Republic, and for Dominican migrants to the United States. Read together with Juliet Hooker’s chapter on the combinations of race, ethnicity, and location in Nicaragua that shift both meanings and strategies in relation to multicultural politics, it is possible to see how racialized identifications in the twenty-first century follow a range of complex historical routes, resulting in complex localized and transborder politics. Section 3 provides a range of evidence of continued racial discrimination, especially in societies that would like to present themselves as “raceless,” while Section 4 highlights the importance of recognizing and working with people’s localized understandings and knowledges. Mamyrah A. Dougé-Prosper’s chapter on the “Take Back the Land” campaign in Florida reveals even more aspects
of diversity, highlighting in particular that few chapters (with the exception of
the one by Altagracia Balcácer Molina and Dorotea Wilson) really focus on the
difference that gender makes to Afro-descendant experience.

Overall, this complexly diverse collection will be useful to a wide range of
people who are interested in the politics and the lived experience of race in the
Americas.

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