

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Kathryn Joy McKnight, Leo Garofalo, eds. *Afro-Latino Voices: Narratives from the Early Modern Ibero-Atlantic World, 1550-1812*. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2009. xxxvii + 377 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-87220-993-0; \$57.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87220-994-7.

Nancy Raquel Mirabal, Agustín Laó-Montes, eds. *Technofuturos: Critical Interventions in Latina/o Studies*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2007. ix + 420 pp. \$150.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7391-0895-6; \$39.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7391-2578-6.

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Memories of the Future: Across the Afro-Hispanic and U.S. Latino/a and Chicano/a Americas

Although a discussion of book covers does not usually constitute a part of a scholarly review, I find that in the case of the two collections reviewed here, each book's most excellent cover art helps to illuminate the conceptual aims of their respective editors. On the cover of *Afro-Latino Voices* is Adrián Sánchez Galque's 1599 painting of three maroons, or escaped slaves, titled *Mulatos de Esmeraldas*. Painted on the occasion of a treaty between the Spanish colonial authority and a maroon community or *palenque* known as Esmeraldas in what is now Ecuador, the portrait shows the representatives of this community as proud, important men, dressed in a combination of African, native, European, and even Chinese sixteenth-century finery. They flourish the broad hats of European gentlemen in their hands, and as José F. Buscaglia-Salgado notes in his *Undoing Empire: Race and Nation in the Mulatto Caribbean*, each of the three men "is wearing a buttoned shirt with *gorgueras* and *puñetas*, the ruff and sleeves that were fashionable adornments in the attire of Spanish gentlemen of the time." They wear necklaces of seashells from the coast, but their shirts are covered with Andean highland *ruanas* or ponchos, and over these "they have rich and colorful cloaks of Chinese silk ... as references to trans-Pacific trade." [1] Finally, these men sport huge, fabulous Amerindian gold earrings and nose rings piercing the tops as well as the lobes of their ears and their noses. All proudly carry spears. It is a glorious painting of what the editors of *Technofuturos* might call, in Cuban scholar Fernando Ortiz's term, "transculturation": those times where cultures forcibly conjoined bleed together.

Afro-Latino Voices is part of a fairly recent and much larger project that both conceptualizes and grants sub-

jectivity to those whose lives have been under historical erasure. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, research on the transatlantic slave trade has been greatly enhanced by Cambridge University's 1999 multisource database, which itself has over the last ten years been greatly expanded, and, in 2006, the whole collection was made available on an open-access Web site, the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database. [2] Much of what constitutes new data on this Web site shows that Latin American slaving expeditions were greatly underrepresented in the 1999 database. For the scholars who write in the two collections I review here, such work as has been done over the last ten to fifteen years has aided in opening up standard scholarly discourses of Latin American as well as U.S. Latino/a, Chicana/o, and I would even venture to say African American studies. Such openings result in sometimes messier but often more nuanced ways of thinking about the "Americas," producing new synchronic and diachronic local, nation-state, and global histories.

Afro-Latino Voices is a compendium of the "voices" (primary sources) of African and Afro-Creole American men and women heard via official letters and legal documents, such as wills and petitions dictated (or more rarely self-written) to a third party, as well as records from Spanish American interrogations and inquisitions of African and Afro-Latin American subjects. Although the introductions to the sections and to the book overall are in English, the documents themselves are presented in Spanish and Portuguese and translated into English on facing pages. Thus we read/hear the wishes, protests, demands, and petitions from African royalty, such as Queen Njinga (spanning the early 1500s to around 1550 in what

is now known as Angola); *bozales* (newly arrived African slaves in Spanish and Luso-America); *cimarrones* or “maroons” (escaped slaves and their families who set up independent *palenques*); and free Afro-Andalusians fighting for the Spanish Crown. We can read enslaved, freed, and freeborn Afro-Latin Americans’ wills, testaments, and bequests to their families and, often, to ethnic confraternities of other African and African-heritage peoples in the colonial New World. The documents point to their defenses of their rights as well as litigations against the church, local colonial authorities, and the Spanish Crown. The arrangement of the compilation is specifically meant not only for scholars but also for students; each set of documents is accompanied by a brief but thorough scholarly and historical background and, sometimes, interpretation of the events surrounding the documents. In their introduction, the editors suggest thematic ways in which the book could be organized for teaching, and provide a set of maps at the front, more resources for teaching at the end of the chapter bibliographies, and throughout the text a glossary of italicized words which might not be familiar to readers. Finally, the editors offer reading strategies to students and teachers alike.

The book’s organization begins with “Politics and Wars,” which moves from the above-mentioned Queen Njinga’s letters through Central African slave wars and to the early conflicts between maroons and colonial Spanish authorities, which I discuss briefly below. The second section, entitled “Families and Communities,” is intended to show the ways Africans and African-heritage peoples built and maintained mutual aid societies, and how they entered into the legalities of Spanish colonial inheritance laws. In this section, María Elena Díaz’s “To Live As a Pueblo: A Contentious Endeavor, El Cobre, Cuba, 1670s-1790s” shows how over the course of a century the slaves of the copper mines of Santiago del Prado were “deprivatized” when the mine, along with the slaves themselves, became the property of the Spanish Crown. Although still slaves, these people could, and did, take advantage of their new status as *royal slaves* to petition for various prerogatives, including, as the author notes, “the option to become a *pueblo*” (p. 127). This, among other things, allowed them to litigate as a community directly before the Crown for the right not to be sold away, removed, or “re-enslaved.” That the community survived such an attempt when the mine was reprivatized in the 1770s, and then again was given collective emancipation by the Crown in 1800, makes for fascinating reading.

The third section, “Religious Beliefs and Practices,” shows the diversity of ways that Afro-Latin Americans negotiated with the power of the Catholic Church; tried

to protect the remains of their own African beliefs; and even, as in David Wheat’s “A Spanish Caribbean Captivity Narrative: African Sailors and Puritan Slavers, 1635,” coped with dealing with Puritan settlers. In Wheat’s chapter, two *biafara*, or West Coast Africans enslaved as sailors and based in Cartagena, relate the tale of their capture by Dutch pirates and resale to English Puritan colonists living on Providence Island, off the Caribbean coast of what is now Nicaragua. Escaping the island, four *beafada* (Western African language group) slaves and several Europeans, shipwrecked on the shore of Granada, Nicaragua, were brought to the governor of Portobelo. Two of the recaptured slaves, besides giving much valuable information about Providence and its inhabitants to the Spanish, claimed their experiences with the Puritans were so terrible (especially in terms of the heresies they witnessed) that they were eager to identify themselves as *Catholic* slaves. Although we cannot know, as Wheat points out, why they might have intended, if indeed they did, to escape “back” to slavery in Cartagena, it is hard not to see at least some aspects of their self-presentation in Portobelo as “performances” of what they thought the Spanish governor would want to hear.

The fourth and final section deals specifically with documents detailing legal trials, where Afro-Spanish and Luso-Americans are either accused of a crime or accuse their masters, or in some cases both. Ana Teresa Franchin’s “The Case of Javier; Esclavo, against His Master for Cruel Punishment, San Juan, Argentina, 1795” and Richard Gordon’s “Confessing Sodomy, Accusing a Master: The Lisbon Trial of Pernambuco’s Luiz da Costa, 1743” show how slaves could be accused and accusers at the same time. Franchin examines a case of a runaway slave who turned himself in so that his judges would understand the extent of the punishment which his master had (illegally, as it turns out) put him through. Gordon discusses a case of a slave sodomized by his master who was to face the Lisbon Inquisition as a “sodomite” and convince them that he was an unwilling victim.

These are salient texts in humanizing slaves, maroons, and former slaves as multifaceted actors. For example, both Kathryn Joy McKnight’s “Elder; Slave, and Soldier: *Maroon* Voices from the *Palenque* del Limón, 1634” and Charles Beatty-Medina’s “*Maroon* Chief Alonso de Illescas’ Letter to the Crown, 1586” show these men not just as escaped slaves negotiating the autonomy of their community, but also as people who, in their struggle with colonial authority over the entire area, mixed with as well as attacked and enslaved the local Amerindians.[3] As the editors point out, part of what makes a compilation like this valuable is that one can

trace the ways, even in heavily mediated texts such as Inquisition documents, by which these men and women learned to use the language and values of the Creole, Portuguese, and Spanish Peninsular legal and religious systems to defend themselves and to assert whatever rights they could under such systems. Although this is true, one of the real joys of a text like this is discovering how people who arrived in the New World almost exclusively as slaves were not merely passive victims but negotiators with varying amounts of agency in terms of their lives, their beliefs, their property, and especially their state(s) of freedom. Some of these were slaves who were able to buy their freedom; rent themselves out and keep a small portion of the profits; or even, as in the case of the slave in Gordon's "Confessing Sodomy," get the colonial court to give them permission to "sell" themselves to fairer masters.

My only quibble with this collection is with the title using the term "Latino" rather than "Latin American" or even "South American." Although this may seem a small thing, distinctions in terminology (even when the terms themselves sometimes seem overly totalizing) are necessary to get at continuities. To be clear: making distinctions between Hispanophone Latin American peoples and the Latino/a communities that have established themselves for generations in the United States helps to clarify the important histories of and continuities between, say, Mexicans and Mexican Americans. If, as many scholars urge, we must think in genuinely trans-American ways, Latin Americanists too would do well to think through such distinctions.

Afro-Latino Voices represents an invaluable resource for thinking not just about blackness in Latin America but also about historical differences between, for example, the experiences and racial politics of Afro-Latin Americans and those of African Americans and their translation into very different sets of racial politics. This is the segue I find most useful in thinking about these two collections together. Especially in the last fifteen years or so, the term "Latino" as it is used in the United States has often been (mis)used to mean one monolithic unity, suppressing the depth and variety of historical, racial, and political differences between, for example, Cuban Americans, Puerto Ricans, Nuyoricans, and Dominican Americans. *Technofuturos*, a big and ambitious collection of essays, aims to tease out some of those differences in order to present a more complex picture of Hispanophone and Hispanophone-descendent people living in the United States. Its cover presents a detail from a "digital mural project" by self-identified "social art practitioner" John Leños; dated 2001, the mural is called "Last

one to cross the Digital Divide is a rotten egg!" (John Jota Leños Digital Mural Project). Leños, according to his Web site, belongs to a "mainly hybrid tribe of Mexitaliano Xicangrigo Güeros called 'Los Mixtupos' (mixt-up-oz)." Leños is a member of "Los Cybrids," three Chicano/a artists who are part, as he puts it, of "La Raza tecocrítica." As they see it, these artists' work is to demystify celebratory mythologies of technology that purport to put the "world" at our (white, privileged) fingertips. The detail on the book's cover references the mapping of (brown) bodies onto circuit boards to one side of the mural, while on the other side a *cholo* stands behind a series of ghostly Chicano/a child images leaping playfully into the midst of the wreckage of unidentifiable but clearly industrial parts. Leños glosses the mural by noting that poor people often fall between the (industrialized) cracks of the "Digital Divide." The presumed openness of the digital world will not automatically offer poor people the social mobility we might imagine.[4]

Ramón de la Campa's excellent essay "Latin, Latino, American" opens the first section, "Historical Futures." Here he examines how the "Latino" has existed at least from the late 1800s at the crossroads of many different "American imaginaries," from the classic essay "Our America" (1892) written by the hero of Cuban independence José Martí to queer, conservative Mexican American essayist Richard Rodríguez's *Brown: The Last Discovery of America* (1998). Although La Campa insists on the essentially "opaque" nature of the U.S. term "Latino/a," he aims to particularize its referents by, for example, focusing on America's "split states," those countries where up to half the population live in the (former) North but send remittances and often travel back and forth from the (former) South, creating a different kind of imagined nation even as actual state-controlled borders grow more rigid. In a thought-provoking move toward the end of the essay, the recognition of such old/new sites of investigation should, La Campa reasons, yield new ways of reading (and imagining) the Americas. This calls for new ways of reading traditional canons, an argument he makes against the "American" conservative insularism of writers as diverse as Rodríguez and pragmatic philosopher Richard Rorty.

This kind of work can confound, along the way, seemingly immutable dualities, such as "North" and "South," as well as bring to the fore still relatively under-theorized areas, like the study of U.S. Afro-Latinos/as and Afro-Latin Americans. For example, although *Technofuturos* collects essays across Chicano/a and Latino/a experience and history in the United States, it is one of only a few collections to begin to pay attention to Afro-

Latinos/as in the United States. Two such essays can be found in the first section. Agustín Laó-Montes's "Afro-Latinidades: Bridging Blackness and Latinidad" postulates, in the spirit of the section's title, a historical tracing of Afro-diasporic experience both to Latin America (here, *Afro-Latino Voices* could provide an important resource) as well as in the United States. Such attention to historical differences and similarities would, Laó-Montes suggests, trouble the U.S. black-white binary that continues to make invisible Afro-Latino/a experience in the United States. Jossiana Arroyo's following essay "Technologies: Transculturations of Race, Gender, and Ethnicity in Arturo A. Schomburg's Masonic Writings" highlights the important Afro-Puerto Rican bibliophile's negotiations of Caribbean and African American notions of race, manhood, and nationality via his activities in black and Afro-Latino Masonic lodges. Scholarly attention to Afro-Latin Americans has gotten underway only in the last fifteen years or so; add to this the fact that a unified study of U.S. Afro-Latinos/as still exists in something of an embryonic state, and the work in *Technofuturos* aids in reconceptualizing the "technologies" of race and gender at work across the Americas in this as-yet understudied area.

La Campa's essay might well have served to open the next section, titled "Globality," which contains essays that aim to situate "Latino/a" and "Chicana/o" as terms that must be understood in the context of a globalized and mobile Americas. The authors in this section examine just such split-state experiences as La Campa discusses. For example, Arturo Arias's "Central American Diasporas: Transnational Gangs and the Transformation of Latino Identity in the United States" is a fascinating look at the ways Central American criminal activity was transformed and made more powerful by the deportation from the United States to Guatemala and El Salvador of, borrowing from poet Maya Chinchilla, "Central-American Americans," young members of Los Angeles's Mara Salvatrucha and 18th Street gangs. Arias reveals the deep-rooted histories that entangle Central America with the United States. (My only reservation here is that his description of these two countries as "a sort of Wild West" sounds a bit like fevered U.S. imaginings about the entirety of Mexican and Central American life, and is much too generalized to belong in an essay as detailed as this [p. 176].) Erika Marquez's "Transmigrant Sexualities: The Closet and Other Tales by Colombian Gay Immigrants in New York City" adds to the growing body of work on queer Latin American/Latino/Chicano sexualities, tracing out the differences between Latin American/Latino and U.S. queerness. She examines how

the framing concepts of "identity" and "the closet" do not fully theorize "sexile" (exiles because of their sexual orientation) Colombians who now negotiate their queerness in very different queer communities of New York.

The third and final section, "Writing Self," I find to be the weakest of the book. In a gesture that seems almost automatic in many Latino/a and Chicano/a essay collections, this section includes mainly what have come to be thought of as "testimonial" pieces, some straightforward, others more literary. The weakness of the section issues not just from the sense that including such writing seems now almost obligatory rather than thoughtful, but also from many of the essays themselves, where either the writing itself or the concepts informing the "testimonial" sometimes seems murky or even self-indulgent. Of the more successful attempts is Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez's "An AIDS Testimonial: It's a Broken Record/Ese Disco Se Rayó." It is a performance piece meant to be set to music (a fact the reader does not find out until the end of the piece), which although evocative, illustrates the difficulty in reading silently what is meant to be performed. Ramón Solórzano Jr.'s "Accent Generación: Technological Choice and the Spanish Option in Post-9/11 América" provides an interesting scholarly discussion of Spanish-language use in the United States, but seems strangely placed in a section devoted to personal meditations on the Latino/a self.

Although it is difficult to bring together a text meant for historical research in the early modern period of the Hispanophone and Lusophone Americas with a collection of critical work on the twenty-first century question of "whether Latinidad and Latino/a studies can operate within a larger transnationalist, global, and/or hemispheric context" (p. 3, *Technofuturos*), there are ways in which these two volumes can complement each other. As the editors of *Technofuturos* emphasize, such work necessitates thinking about the past(s), present(s), and the future(s) of constant flows and stoppages of bodies, ideas, commodities, and economies across the Americas not only from the U.S.-centric viewpoint of studies of recent immigration to the North, but also via deep and complex *histories*, always incomplete, of the Americas.

Notes

[1]. José F. Buscaglia-Salgado, *Undoing Empire: Race and Nation in the Mulatto Caribbean* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 89.

[2]. The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, Emory University, www.slavevoyages.org (accessed September 30, 2010).

[3]. See also Charles Medina, "Caught between Rivals: The Spanish-African Maroon Competition for Captive Indian Labor in the Region of Esmeraldas during the Late Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries," *The Americas* 63, no. 1 (July 2006): 113-136. Medina examines marronage as a set of long-term strategies and activities reaching far beyond the act of escaping enslavement. Flight was only the first, if essential, step in a process

with many possible outcomes. The maroons of Esmeraldas used numerous approaches—collaborative, competitive, and even predatory—in their effort to thrive under adversarial and hostile conditions (ibid., 115).

[4]. John Jota Leños Digital Mural Project, http://www.leanos.net/projects/digital_mural/cybrids/index.html (accessed September 30, 2010).

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