

# H-Net Reviews

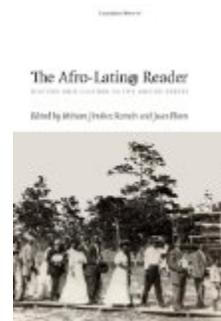
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Miriam Jiménez Román, Juan Flores, eds. *The Afro-Latin@ Reader: History and Culture in the United States*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010. xiv + 566 pp. \$99.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-4558-9; \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-4572-5.

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## Understanding Afro-Latin@s in the United States

The idea that gave birth to this collection was the need for course material on Latin@ race and culture, “at various institutions during the past twenty years” (p. xiii). Not surprisingly, these essays and sources about the Afro-Latin@ experience in the United States has a primary goal: to be used in the classroom and to be a teaching resource. Scholars can also benefit from this edition, however, since the objective is to define and review the culture of a group that is neither black nor Latin@ only, but whose history and understanding has been divided by nomenclature and characterized by the precise cultural context of the United States.

Although the term is yet to be universally accepted, as mentioned by the editors Miriam Jiménez Román and Juan Flores in their introduction, the purpose of this edition is “to reflect the complex histories of Africans and their descendants in the Americas.” Equally important is to use the term Afro-Latin@ “as an expression of long-term transnational relations and of the world events that generated and were in turn affected by particular global social movements” from Pan-Africanism, to Negritude, to the Harlem Renaissance and Afrocubanismo (p. 1). With this double purpose in mind, the editors offer a historical review that begins about mid-nineteenth century and reaches to the present. They also point out that the term Afro-Latin@ is of recent origin and is meant “to identify the constituency of the many vibrant anti-racist movements and causes that have been gaining momentum through the hemisphere for over a generation” (p.

2). This impetus has been more evident after the 2001 UNESCO World Conference against Racism that convened in Durban, South Africa. More importantly, in the United States, the term has surfaced “as a way to signal racial, cultural and socioeconomic contradictions within the overly vague idea of Latin@” (p. 2).

Editors Jiménez Román and Flores offer a series of essays and testimonies addressing the definition and history of the concept of Afro-Latin@ experience in the context of the United States through four paradigms they called “coordinates.” These “coordinates” are, group history, transnational discourse, relations between African Americans and Latin@s, and the specific lived experience of being Afro-Latin@.

Prompted by what the editors’ see as Afro-Latin@s’ recent self-identification, the first coordinate tries to recognize the origins of this group’s history (however, there is no specific data or bibliography offered to demonstrate this self-identification). They speak of an “Afro-Latin@ history” and their attempt to trace “a trajectory of a collective experience through the entire span of the history of the United States” (p. 4). Thus, the book is divided into ten chapters or parts that offer original excerpts and essays of that trajectory, beginning in the 1900s. These parts represent the main stages of the creation of an Afro-Latin@ consciousness and experience in the United States.

From Cabeza de Vaca’s *Relación*, Estevanico el Negro

is identified as the first Afro-Latin@ historical personage, whose Blackness and Spanish language create this distinct cultural character. Jack D. Forbes and Virginia Meacham Gould indicate in their essays the idea of racial mixing as the object of fascination and curiosity, and often “the only mechanism available for improving one’s circumstances within a patriarchal, racist power structure” (p. 5). However, it is later in the nineteenth century when larger numbers of people of Hispanic Caribbean origin come to the United States. They come mainly from Cuba (the cigar industry in Florida, reviewed by Susan D. Greenbaum’s essay), Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Central America (Panama and Honduras), and the coastal areas of Colombia and Venezuela, shifting the geographical focus from Florida to New York City in the twentieth century, and the cultural focus of Latin@s and African Americans to their relationship to the African diasporic world. Arturo Alfonso Schomburg, a Black Puerto Rican who served under the leadership of José Martí in the club Las Dos Antillas, represents this position. Part 2 focuses on his legacy as one of the main collectors and bibliographers of Africana during the Harlem Renaissance, founder of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, and “the most illustrious and self-conscious of all Afro-Latin@s in the United States as well as the one whose aspirations and ambiguities seems most deeply exemplary of Afro-Latin@ social experience” (p. 7).

Part 3, “Afro-Latin@s on the Color Line,” attests to the racial experience of Afro-Cubans and Afro-Puerto Ricans, such as Jesús Colón, and the ways in which they navigated the color line. And because music has been an important expression of Afro-Latin@ experience in the twentieth century, part 4 centers on the roots of salsa and popular music, to give way to the self-consciousness and political claims of the “Black Latin@ Sixties” in part 5. Essays from Carlos Cooks, Pablo Guzmán, Piri Thomas, and Luis Barrios illustrate the reflections of young Puerto Ricans in the United States and the paradoxes of their identity.

After the outburst of political and cultural expression of the 1960s, the 1970s saw growing attention to women’s experiences; thus part 6 is devoted to Afro-Latinas, especially regarding heterosexual and homosexual identity. Angela Jorge’s “The Black Puerto Rican Woman in Contemporary American Society” together with the essays by Marat I. Cruz-Janzen and Ana M. Lara address critical reflections on the gender and sexual experience of Afro-Latinas.

Parts 7 to 10 focus on the challenges to construct the Afro-Latinidad, first as a distinction from Blackness, then as a combination of multiracial characteristics. The term “Afro-Latin@” in the United States emerged in the 1990s in order to understand the group not as a monolithic one, but as complex and informed by different histories and backgrounds that intersect in the experience of being both Black and Latin@ in the concrete cultural frontiers of the United States. A set of essays review the later evolution of the concept and examine the struggles, misconceptions, and stereotypes that Afro-Latin@s experienced. Once again, popular music (hip hop) is described as the Afro-Latin@ “zone” of cultural expression. Wayne Marshall’s essay positions reggaeton as a clear sequel to rap, “and yet with its Spanish language lyrics ... it appears to be even more pronounced Afro-Latin@ rather than African American with a Latin@/Caribbean admixture” (p. 11).

The second coordinate on which this edition is grounded understands the Afro-Latin@ experience as guided by “a clear appreciation of the transnational discourse or identity field linking Black Latin Americans and Latin@s across national and regional lines” (p. 11). This idea points to migratory movements and references to the homeland, as the history of the country of origin is always present in the ideologies and experiences of Afro-Latin@s in the United States. However, the editors insist, “it is increasingly important to resist the limitation of Afro-Latin@ to its national United States confines” (p. 12), which seems to be in contradiction to their goal of mapping the experience of this group in this geographical area. This transnational characteristic is, indeed, an intrinsic part of the Afro-Latin@ experience itself, which the editors underline.

In order to understand the cross-cultural relations between Latin@s and African Americans in the United States, it is important to “recognize clearly the presence of a group that embodies both at once” (p. 13); part 10 therefore includes, on the one hand, reflections by Mark Sawyer, James Jennings, and others, who favor the creation of a common agenda; and those of Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, Ed Morales, William Darity, Jason Dietrich, Darrick Hamilton, and others, on the other hand, who write on the gravitation toward Whiteness. This divisive tendency points to the racial and cultural discrimination that both Latin@ and African American communities suffer.

The final coordinate speaks of “the fact of Afro-Latinidad” (to borrow Franz Fanon’s phrase “the fact of blackness”), which looks at the distinctive and unique ex-

perience lived “by people who are both Black and Latin@ in all aspects of their social life” (p. 14). Relying on W. E. B. Du Bois’s concept of “double-consciousness,” the editors refer to a complex and multidimensional experience within the context of social life in the Black, Latin@, and United States American dimensions, thus the “triple-consciousness.” The use of this “catchy term,” only wants to point out “the increased complexities of the ‘color line’ in light of the transnational nature of present-day social experience” (p. 15). Finally, Du Bois’s concepts in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) allow the editors to create an image for the experience of Afro-Latin@s in the United States that rests on the triple-consciousness, the word *folk*, “which harbors both a class and a racial difference,” and the goal of the “dawn of freedom.”

Jiménez Román and Flores have certainly assembled a unique and valuable selection. Through this collection they have offered a revisionist history that for the first time traces the trajectory of the Afro-Latin@ experience in the United States. The four coordinates (group history, transnational discourse, cross-cultural relations, and Afro-Latinidad) establish and connect the different aspects of that experience. I found particularly useful the inclusion of critical essays and original works as well as pictures to depict the different periods and characters of the Afro-Latin@ experience. With this edition, the general reader has direct access to manuscripts and sources informing the particularities of Afro-Latin@ history and culture in the United States.

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