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Review / Reseña

Anadelia A. Romo, *Brazil's Living Museum: Race, Reform, and Tradition in Bahia*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010.

Bahia as the Epicenter of Afro-Brazilian culture

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Anadelia A. Romo's *Brazil's Living Museum: Race, Reform, and Tradition in Bahia* is a well researched, well written and absorbing book that sets out to explain how the state of Bahia acquired its reputation as the most Africanized, and at the same time the most racially harmonious, area of Brazil. Grounded on the premise that "demography is not destiny" (2), Romo acknowledges that the state's black majority in itself cannot explain Bahia's predominant black identity. Therefore, she analyzes the processes

and actors that, during the twentieth century, produced the now taken-for-granted notion that Bahia is “Brazil’s Africa.”

The book’s five chapters are organized around specific realms where Brazilian and foreign intellectuals, state officials, members of the Bahian elite, and Afro-Bahian leaders met and established dialogues concerning the importance and the role of African traditions in Bahia. Romo carefully and in rich detail describes the tensions in these relationships, but also how these different actors’ ideas sometimes converged, thus leading to a “cultural crafting” of Bahia’s image as the “cultural heartland of the nation” (6). As the arguments gradually and convincingly build up, the book efficiently guides the reader from one chapter to the next.

The first chapter, “Finding a Cure for Bahia,” focuses on the medical discourses on race (and specifically on the black race) of the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century. In a moment when racial determinism dominated the medical sciences both nationally and internationally, many Bahian physicians were turning away from biology to look at the social environment as the major sphere of intervention through which modernization would be made possible. In the early decades of the twentieth century the debates on race and reform shifted significantly from the medical to the social sciences in Bahia, even though there was still a lot of dialogue and fluidity between these two fields.

In the second chapter, “Contests of Culture,” Romo offers a fascinating account of the First and Second Afro-Brazilian Congresses (respectively 1934 and 1937), and how these events established a new language on race where culture took the central place that had previously been occupied by biology. These two congresses were major moments for the transformation not only of the meanings of race, but also of the meanings of Africa within Bahia, and ultimately of Bahia within Brazil. Romo’s thorough analysis shows how these ideas shifted between the first and the second congresses, and how these events were sites of debate and dispute among key intellectuals on the role of Afro-Brazilian culture and its meanings for Brazilian identity. Romo offers an insightful explanation of how Nina Rodrigues became a kind of currency among these intellectuals, and how his name was utilized by Edison Carneiro, Artur Ramos and

Gilberto Freyre either to confirm or deny the status of Bahia as the center of Afro-Brazilian studies. Carneiro, for instance, “rewrote [Rodrigues] as an activist and began to use him to convince Bahian authorities that the idea of religious tolerance had legitimacy” (81).

The Afro-Brazilian Congresses were crucial realms for the recognition of Brazil’s Africanness. The 1937 congress, held in Bahia and organized by Edison Carneiro, was very important in that sense, especially because of the participation of influential Afro-Brazilian priests and priestesses of Candomblé, among them Eugênia Ana Santos (Mãe Aninha) and Martiniano Eliseu do Bonfim. As these two religious leaders mutually reinforced each other’s status as experts in the “authentic” and “pure” African traditions, they strengthened the idea of Bahia as “Brazil’s Africa.” Mãe Aninha, for instance, frequently stated that Bahia was the “Black Rome.” In addition, while they confirmed their roles as important Afro-Bahian religious leaders, they also ensured that the black masses supported the congress. These Afro-Bahian representatives, as much as the scholars of Afro-Brazilian culture, emphasized the centrality of Africanness in Bahia’s Candomblé. Even Edison Carneiro, who in the first congress had focused more on the primacy of the Brazilian environment, shifted his arguments to emphasize African lineage and ideas of purity. Romo is careful not to homogenize “Afro-Bahians” or “Afro-Brazilians” and she discusses how ideas of “purity” and “authenticity” were also disputed among Candomblé leaders and practitioners. Among the most important outcomes of the second congress was the resolution to found a self-governing body for Candomblé (the Union of Afro-Brazilian Sects), and the delivery of a formal petition for religious freedom to the governor.

One of the most interesting, albeit brief, contributions of this chapter is Romo’s discussion of the reflexivity of the Brazilian social sciences of the 1930s, despite (or perhaps because of?) its still incipient and extra-institutional character. Northeastern scholars respected Afro-Bahian cultural representatives as interlocutors instead of just as a source of information for their studies. As a consequence, the overwhelming presence of Afro-Bahian religious leaders and practitioners in the Second Afro-Brazilian Congress had a crucial impact on the scholarly debate about

African traditions that took place there: “And given the hostility toward Africa shown at the first congress, it is also remarkable that the Salvador congress envisioned adherence to African traditions as worthy of respect. In fact, presenting their findings to a black audience, well informed in the traditions of Candomblé may have led some scholars to reframe their findings” (84).

The Second Afro-Brazilian Congress was thus a unique moment of cooperation between intellectuals, state officials, and Afro-Bahian religious leaders, which granted a more positive image for Bahia’s Africanness. This tendency was later buttressed by the Estado Novo (1937-45) and the Vargas government’s efforts to create a popular notion of *brasilidade*. Yet, as discussed in Chapter 3, “Preserving the Past,” the debates surrounding the Museu do Estado in the early 1940s provide evidence that Brazilian elites did not completely accept popular and/or black culture. Although its curator José do Prado Valladares sought to highlight Afro-Brazilian culture in the museum and, more broadly, in Bahia’s official identity, he met with fierce resistance on the part of the state’s sugar elite. As Bahia became evermore associated with “tradition” and depicted as the birthplace of Brazil, an intense debate took place over how the past should be represented. The sugar elite wanted museums and other official institutions to showcase their sumptuous colonial sugar culture by projecting a version of history that marginalized the black and the indigenous presences. Influenced by the idea that museums should function as tools to educate and modernize the masses, Valladares ultimately reshaped the Museu do Estado to portray the elite version of Bahia’s colonial past.

In this chapter, Romo discusses the significance of the *baiana* attire (the combination of the white voluminous dress, the head-wrap, and the bead necklaces worn routinely by many Afro-Bahian women) for the image of the state of Bahia. A baiana dress (accompanied by the famous, but by then no longer used, *balangandan* adornment) was exhibited in the Museu do Estado roughly at the same time when the first edition of *Bahia Tradicional e Moderna*, the journal of the state’s Office of Culture, displayed on its cover an image of a fully-garbed baiana, juxtaposed against the modern skyline of Salvador’s port. Because the baiana has become the

quintessential representation of the state of Bahia, illustrating postcards, tourism brochures, websites, and the overall state's official publicity, maybe Romo could have delved more into the history of this trope, especially since it became increasingly widespread as the state's image became increasingly associated with tradition.

Chapter 4, “Debating African Roots,” analyzes how the debates on Bahia’s African traditions were influenced by the arrival of several US scholars in the late 1930s and early 1940s, including Melville Herskovits, E. Franklin Frazier, Ruth Landes, and Donald Pierson. Romo shows how the dialogue between these researchers and Brazilian intellectuals contributed to establish the notion of Bahia as a “city of the past.” Some of these scholars defined Bahia’s supposedly traditional character as the reason for its allegedly harmonious race relations. Romo examines how this idea became hegemonic among both Bahian and US scholars as she details the politics of endorsement and suppression that pervaded their professional and personal relationships.

These foreigners were accepted or censored depending on their alignment with ideas already dominant in Bahia, ideas that stressed racial harmony and a focus on African lineage and ‘survivals.’ Though they arrived with their own cultural and theoretical baggage, they were also deeply influenced by their local guides—such as Arthur Ramos, José Valladares, and Edison Carneiro—who served as cultural filters and native authorities of a particular Bahian reality. (114)

Foreign scholars, such as Landes and Frazier, who failed to endorse the notion of Bahia’s harmonious racial relations resting on its “repository of traditions,” were criticized, censored, and even ridiculed by Bahian scholars and their US allies.

The emphasis on Bahia’s supposedly static nature was also prominent in the famous UNESCO studies on race relations that took place in the 1950s, and which is the focus of the last chapter, “Embattled Modernization and the Retrenchment of Tradition.” As Bahia could no longer compete with the modern Southeastern states for political or economic power, the state became increasingly defined as the authentic guardian of Brazil’s past. If this idea had already been put forward by institutions such as Valladares’ Museu do Estado, by events such as Bahia’s

Afro-Brazilian Congress, by the narratives of foreign anthropologists, and by the budding tourism literature of the 1940s and 50s, the UNESCO studies further consolidated Bahia's status as the locus of Brazil's essence. As such, Bahia should no longer be modernized, but should instead be "protected" from social change so as to preserve its exceptional racial harmony.

The book's brief conclusion lacks the depth that characterizes the other chapters. Although it is equally well documented, its overview of Bahia's contemporary racial dynamics mostly replicates some of the dominant ideas in the current US scholarly discourses on race in Brazil. The first of these notions rests on the binary understanding of Afro-Brazilian groups as being either politically or culturally oriented. Although early in the chapter Romo states that "(...) the black community in Bahia often managed to reconcile privileging African heritage and fighting for contemporary change" (154), she later asserts that the power of the major black organizations in Bahia (e.g. the blocos afro) is limited to the realm of carnival: "Beyond the realm of carnival, however, efforts to build an active black political movement gained little support in Bahia" (155).

The binary classification of these groups as either cultural or political is closely connected to a linear understanding of black mobilization, where black cultural groups are expected to arrive at a race-based form of political activism:

This dynamic of a vibrant black culture combined with a stagnant, paternalistic, and white political elites defines Bahia and remains to some extent inexplicable. Although the lack of enthusiasm for race-based politics is noticeable all across Brazil, it remains puzzling in Bahia, where a black majority could prove a major force in politics, where blacks espouse a strong sense of black pride, and where Africa is valued as a motherland. (156)

This frequently mentioned puzzle, that Brazil has the largest black population outside of Africa but with one of the lowest levels of racial consciousness, will remain for as long as scholars try to fit together mismatched pieces. Overcoming the puzzle requires acknowledging that race-based politics are not the only, or the ultimate, form of black political mobilization. And although groups that self-define as "cultural," such as the blocos afro, may have participated little in Bahian political culture, they

have brought about fundamental changes to the region's cultural politics. Having produced new discourses on Africanness and blackness, which in turn have significantly shaped the public image of Bahia, the *blocos afro* have necessarily participated in reshaping local processes of power.

The answer to Romo's concerns can be found in the very pages of her excellent book. All of her chapters, in one way or another, explain that the idea of Bahia as racially harmonious was established in conjunction with the notion that Bahia was the epicenter of Afro-Brazilian culture. Black intellectuals and leaders have participated in the construction of these tropes, and this trend has persisted well into the twenty-first century. Furthermore, Bahia's mythic Africanness, while inspiring oppositional black identities, is also largely intertwined with the constraining notion of *baianidade*, which promotes a black image for the state at the same time that it keeps the black majority at bay. Romo had already hit the nail on the head when she acknowledged, in the opening pages, that demography is not destiny.