A Contra corriente
Una revista de estudios latinoamericanos

Vol. 21, Núm. 3 (Spring 2024): 305-311

Review / Reseña

Henson, Bryce. *Emergent Quilombos: Black Life and Hip-Hop in Brazil.* Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2023. 266 pp.

Marcio Bahia

University of Notre Dame

Emerging Quilombos: Black Life and Hip-Hop in Brazil by Bryce Henson (2023) is not only a welcome addition to the field of Afro-Brazilian studies. It is a real game changer because it shifts the paradigms by which the Brazilian *intelligentsia* has constructed the notion of blackness in Brazil. Henson accomplishes this by offering a comprehensive ethnographic account of the hip-hop movement in Salvador, the capital of the state of Bahia, one of the most emblematic cities of the Brazilian African diaspora. The novelty of Henson's manuscript lies in the fact that Salvador usually evokes other images of blackness, not rap music, breakdancing, graffiti, or DJing, which are some common elements of the hip-hop movement. On the contrary, Salvador's cultural identity is anchored in an "Africanness" of the traditional cultural matrix imagined as having been brought by slaves during the colonial era. Known as the "biggest African city" outside of Africa, Salvador is famous all over the world for the preservation and celebration of its African roots through music, clothing, hairstyles, dances, accessories, and religion. The mere mention of Salvador brings up the sounds of the drums from the famous *blocos Afro*, musical groups dedicated to producing, spreading and honoring Afro-Brazilian culture, especially during carnival, the greatest popular festivity in Brazil. For most people, these *blocos Afro* are synonymous with black bodies wearing colorful and festive outfits inspired by African

motifs and happy black people dancing to energetic African beats. The most notorious *bloco* is Ilê Aiyê, also well known for their pageant that exalts the black female body as a symbol of beauty, pride, and power. Equally important to the cultural identity of Salvador are the Afro-Brazilian religions (especially *Candomblê*), which also preserve their black heritage by worshipping African deities and keeping traditional customs and songs. Finally, *Capoeira*, the mix of martial arts and dance created by enslaved people in colonial times, is another important piece of what is traditionally thought to be cultural staples of blackness in Bahia. The emblematic city of Salvador populates the imagination of anyone interested in the black diaspora, more specifically in what Paul Gilroy called "the Black Atlantic" in his seminal 1993 book. As a result, tourists and scholars flock to the streets of Salvador in order to feel, experience, and understand what it is like to be black in a large city in the Americas that has not lost touch with its African roots.

Bryce Henson defiantly upsets these traditional images of blackness in Salvador by offering a powerful ethnographic study of hip-hop in the city. Hip-hop in Brazil—that is, graffiti, DJing, breakdancing, and more specifically, rap music—is mainly associated with São Paulo, a globalized megalopolis that projects modernity and contemporary trends as trademarks of its vibrant culture life. Legendary hip-hop groups from São Paulo such as Racionais MCs or current rappers like Emicida are some of the most visible representatives of a *paulistano* rap scene well known by the general public and scholars alike. Therefore, connecting Salvador to the hip hop movement is a daring, unexpected, and fresh analytical maneuver that reconfigures the cultural mapping of black life and experiences in Brazil. Bryce Henson achieves this with a very sophisticated theoretical framework that builds upon previously established scholarly traditions, but which also offers its own innovative spins and perspectives.

The problematization of Salvador's cultural identity is not new in Afro-Brazilian studies. Patricia Pinho, for example, in her groundbreaking *Mama Africa* (2004), explored the dangers and paradoxes of the strategies employed by *blocos Afro* in their construction of black identities in Brazil. If, on the one hand, these identities are constructed to promote pride and empowerment, on the other hand, they are founded on fixed and essentialist principles that are centered on body representations that paradoxically reinforce racial stereotypes. Furthermore, Pinho showed how the hegemonic discourse of "Bahianness" based on these external manifestations of "Africanness" easily fell prey to processes of cultural commodification, in which

Bahia is sold as the quintessential destination of the African roots tourism industry on a global scale. Bryce Henson makes a very important contribution to this debate by offering the hip-hop movement in Bahia as an important alternative to understanding the contemporary racial politics in the city of Salvador. Henson's work is the result of more than ten years of careful ethnographic work that found in Salvador's hip-hop the strength of a cultural movement that has not been appropriated by the *status quo* or local political forces and has not been tamed by the tourism industry. On the contrary, through its rejected aesthetics, provocative songs, lyrics, symbols, and customs, Henson shows that Bahian hip-hop is a space of mighty cultural resistance capable of fighting back racial and social structures that have historically relegated black populations to subordination, violence, and oppression in Brazil.

In order to highlight the differences between Bahian hip-hop movements and the traditional images associated with Afro-Brazilian culture in Salvador, Henson proposes a typology of Blackness that serves as the epistemological foundation for his analytical framework. According to the author, there are three distinguished types of "Blackness" in Salvador, that is, three different ways in which the black experience is politically, racially, and socially constructed and lived. One of them, built upon Patricia Pinho's work, among others, is called "folkloric Blackness." In this category, black identity is experienced through the idea of an African cultural purity that is often trapped into "a set of essences, tendencies, and appearances" (11). The problem with folkloric Blackness, Henson states, is that it "homogenizes Black people as Africans with a timeless and static culture, with a presocial identity and culture. Black people must return to their roots and recuperate their lost selves. It is as if Africa, with all fifty-four of its nation-states, has stood still in the winds of time for the last five hundred years" (11). Therefore, seeing Salvador as a harbor of pure Africanness can easily lead to static representations of essentialist, nostalgic and romanticized black identities.

Moreover, these characteristics can be dangerously combined with another type of Blackness the author calls "mixed Blackness." This category draws upon the now infamous "myth of racial democracy," a term not coined by, but popularized by the works of the unavoidable Gilberto Freyre (especially his magnum opus, *Casa Grande e Senzala*, first published in Brazil in 1933). According to Freyre, Brazil's *mestiçagem*—that is, the mixing of indigenous, Portuguese and African peoples—is the country's defining racial and cultural trait, and instead of constituting a setback, it gave

Brazil its strength and a set of advantages over more racially divided societies such as the United States or South Africa. Gilberto Freyre defends the idea that Brazil's racial mixing has resulted in less harsh and more harmonious race relations, an idea that was later galvanized in the concept of "racial democracy." This concept was at the foundation of Brazil's official race relation narrative for decades in the twentieth century and was extensively used to push the idea of a country that was a "racial paradise," free from institutional racism, where different races could co-exist without tensions and conflicts. Furthermore, this narrative whitened and raised some black cultural manifestations such as samba and carnival as epitomes of the Brazilian mixed identity.

For Henson, this is where the traditional images of Salvador's "mixed blackness" and the ideas of racial democracy come dangerously close to each other. In the process of the commodification of culture, Bahia has produced images that sell the state as an Afro-Brazilian oasis in which mixed Black people can freely and happily live their Africanness. As Henson states, "culturally, mixed Blackness elevates certain Afro-Brazilian cultures to national symbols available for the use, production, and consumption of all Brazilians, most notably samba, capoeira and feijoada. Yet, mixed Blackness reduces Black cultural contributions to Brazilian civilization to folkloric elements and cultural expressions." (10). Interestingly enough, the combination of folkloric Blackness and mixed Blackness have become the hegemonic discourse of black identities in Salvador and is seen as the desirable, beautiful, admirable and acceptable way of living black experiences in Bahia. Finally, "abject Blackness" is the third prevailing type of Blackness that occupies the Brazilian imaginary. In Henson's definition, "abject Blackness" is "social death, derision, repression, incommunicability, accumulation and fungibility," dating back "to the earliest days of enslavement, justifying the commodification and dehumanization of Black people as chattel property […]," historically leading black people to a structural condition of "despair, misery, poverty, stigma, and injury" (9).

What about *Bahian* hip-hop? How does a cultural movement that emerged in the Bronx in the 1970s and then traveled to Bahia fit into Henson's typology? For the author, the hip-hop movement in Salvador represents an alternative, or rather, a refusal of these types of Blackness. It refuses to be reduced and relegated to the "abject Blackness box," in spite of the attempts of some actors in Bahia society as seen throughout the book. At the same time, it also "challenges the Brazilian mythology that a mythical and timeless African past feeds seamlessly into a racially

harmonious and mixed-race Brazilian present" (3). Henson cleverly anchors his analysis not only on the possible connections between the hip-hop movements in the U.S., Brazil and elsewhere, but mainly on what he calls Bahian hip-hop's *aquilombamento*. *Quilombos* are the famous maroon communities of runaway slaves in Brazil who founded villages and cities which provided alternative ways of living outside white domination. Henson's constant use of the word *aquilombamento* points not to a finished phenomenon evoking past resistance of black peoples, but to a *process* in the present that continuously shifts and negotiates black cultural identities. For Henson, Bahian hip-hop is an *emergent quilombo*—as the book's title states—which operates outside the prevailing narratives of Blackness in Salvador and searches for cultural affirmation outside the nationally accepted identity-based narratives—in a way, just like *quilombos* operated outside the social structures set up by the white colonizer.

This fresh perspective brings new analytical insights that escape the traditional analyses of youth subcultures, or socially oriented approaches based on the idea of inclusion vs. exclusion. By seeing Bahian hip-hop as an *emergent quilombo*, Henson is able to connect past and present, tradition and modernity in a constant flux of negotiated identities. One could argue that Henson's proposition to study Bahian hip-hop as an emergent contemporary quilombo constitutes another essentialist approach to Black cultural and social identities in Brazil. However, throughout the book, the author convincingly uses *aquilombamento* as a useful and dynamic operational term imbued with movement, tensions, fluidity, and identity negotiations. It helps the reader understand how black people in Salvador's hip-hop movement fight back in their everyday lived experiences of violence through resistance and community building (Chapter 1). Just like in past *quilombos*, it is their collective action today that provides the structures necessary to resist the official policies that promote state-sanctioned killings of black bodies. In Chapter 2, Henson goes deeper into the use of *aquilombamento* to frame contemporary Bahian hip-hop by exploring its origins and connections to U.S. black popular culture, but also to more traditional concepts like *negritude*, *conscientização* (critical consciousness) and ancestralism. In Chapter 3, Henson establishes an important distinction between "spaces of black culture"—spaces that display black cultures but retain their white racialization—and "black spaces of culture"—spaces run for and by black communities that work as modern day *quilombos*, and that to this day are persecuted and attacked by the state and official institutions.

At this point, it is important to highlight that resorting to *quilombos* to conceive race relations in Brazil is not new in Afro-Brazilian Studies, either. In fact, Abdias do Nascimento, one of the greatest Brazilian thinkers of the global black diaspora, became famous for developing what he called *quilombismo* in his writing since the 1980s. However, Henson's *aquilombamento* is mainly informed by another equally important black intellectual, Beatriz Nascimento. This choice is strategic because one of Henson's main objectives is to think about the process of *aquilombamento* outside traditional heteropatriarchal structures. In that regard, Beatriz Nascimento's sharp, insightful, and sensitive studies on *quilombos* perfectly feed Henson's conceptual engine in his proposed process of "ungendering" black Bahian hip-hop. Henson states that he wants "to think of a radically opening ungendering as instrumental to *aquilombamento*, key to the way it bestows upon Black people other modes of collectivizing, assembling, and forging communal spaces that protect and shield Black people" (21). This relentless effort to "ungender" hip-hop pervades the whole book, and is especially important in Chapter 4, when the author searches for spaces where black people foster new modes of affect and intimacy by refusing the virility and hostility commonly associated with the black masculine social life. In some rare cases in the book, the intersection of ungendering and historic *quilombos* comes close to idealization and speculation (111). However, Henson's approach is not naïve and he directly addresses the sexism, misogyny, and queerphobia that is common in the hip-hop universe. At the same time, his brilliant ethnographic work finds the cracks, the ruptures, the internal fissures, and the inside actors that disturb and challenge heteropatriarchy in Bahian hip-hop. By ungendering or queering hip-hop within the context of *aquilombamento*, Henson reinvigorates and reenergizes the *quilombo* as an operational concept in the twenty-first century, a timely and crucial theoretical move in the current day and time. Furthermore, he escapes from static, fixed and essentialist approaches and shows the vibrancy and continuous transformations and tensions within the Bahian hip-hop universe.

Finally, the three last chapters provide exciting case studies in which hip-hop actors engage in cultural and artistic activities marked by the synergic duality "aquilombamento/ungendering." Chapter 5 turns to the bodies, fashion, and hairstyles of Bahian hip-hop to simultaneously challenge the notions of black beauty and abject blackness in Brazil. Chapter 6 explores thought-provoking music videos of hip-hop artists from Salvador not widely known by the general public, and offers some of the most perspicacious and fascinating thoughts on the crossroads of race

and gender in Bahian hip-hop (177-183). Chapter 7 analyzes graffiti murals of Iemanjá, an Afro-Brazilian deity in *Candomblé* religion. These mural paintings fit into Henson's framework as their representations of Iemanjá distance themselves from the traditional portrayal of the Afro-Brazilian deity as a white woman. The Iemanjás captured by Henson's ethnography are black, with different body sizes and hairstyles. Last, but definitely not least, Henson surprises the reader and ends his book with a coda that he calls "a diasporic love letter." This is a deeply personal text that shows the author's trajectory from anger to love as he realizes the infinite potential of black diasporas around the globe as they build unimaginable new collective worlds. This poetic love letter reframes the whole book and imbues its theoretical sophistication with new meanings and nuances. It compels the reader to start the voyage again and re-read the book's 220+ pages under this new powerful love prism. Henson's book offers a journey that is filled with respect, intimacy and tenderness towards the cultural actors portrayed in his ethnographic work without compromising an inch of academic rigor.

Thanks to *Emergent Quilombos: Black Life and Hip-Hop in Brazil*, no future academic work on urban Brazilian black music will be able to ignore the vibrant hip-hop scene in Bahia. By the same token, Bahia's cultural identity, among scholars, will not be reduced to *blocos Afro* like Ilê-Ayê. The importance of this groundbreaking book has started to be recognized by the field; it was awarded an honorable mention in the Roberto Reis Award for best first monograph given by the Brazilian Studies Association in 2024, probably the first of many accolades to come. These are just the first signs of recognition of a young Brazilianist that pushes the boundaries of Black Studies, Latin American Studies, Cultural Studies, Anthropology, Diaspora Studies and Ethnography, and whose work points out daring and truly exciting new avenues of research.