

Black Latin America: Legacies of Slavery, Race, and African Culture

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In this fifth and last special issue of the *HAHR* published under our editorial tenure at Yale, we turn to questions of slavery and race as well as the role of people of African descent in Latin American history. The history of black slavery and, subsequently, of race relations is an aspect of Latin American history that has become a central theme of scholarly activity and has made Latin American historiography increasingly relevant to scholars of other regions of the Americas. Since the days of Frank Tannenbaum's *Slave and Citizen* (1947), which itself drew on the work of Latin American scholars such as Gilberto Freyre and Fernando Ortiz, a comparative approach has, at least, implicitly framed much of the historiography of slavery, race, and racism in the Americas. The early comparisons were often based on a set of implicit epistemological assumptions: there were fundamental differences in the nature of modern race relations between Latin America and North America; variations in the patterns of slavery in the two regions were in some way responsible for the differences in race relations; and that religious, economic, cultural, and political factors determined the trajectory of race relations. In the last 40 years or so, a whole generation of world scholarship has struggled with these questions and challenged these earlier assumptions. These debates have made this one of the most active areas of research in Latin American history.

Despite the comparative framework that often organized the research, much of the advancement in the study of these topics has been made in a national or regional context. During the 1960s–80s, national historiographies of slavery and race throughout the Americas developed and deepened, providing new perspectives on the colonial and national experiences of individual countries. Within their national focus, however, these studies were often implicitly informed by methods and techniques used by historians working in other contexts so that even at the local and national levels such studies were framed

comparatively. In the process of the field's development, scholars increasingly found the need to read widely in the history and ethnography of Africa in order to understand the process of identity formation on both sides of the Atlantic, trace the process of racial labeling and the rise of "scientific" racism, and to integrate the history of racially defined subgroups into a history that had been built on the analysis of class relations and national formation. The development of the historiography of slavery and race relations as it affected people of African and Afro-American origins has been one of the most vibrant areas of research not only in countries such as Brazil, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic, where slavery played a predominant role in the national history and people of African origins constituted a large proportion of the population, but also in Argentina, Peru, and Mexico, where these issues coupled with demography weighed differently in their national history and memory. The history of Afro-America and of Afro-Americans is truly hemispheric and transatlantic.

The essays that appear in this issue were not solicited but came to the *HAHR* through the normal submission and review process over the last few years. They indicate the varied interests and approaches of many scholars who are presently working on questions of slavery and race relations. The articles cover many regions in Latin America and range in time from the colonial period to the twentieth century. They also represent a number of methodological approaches and types of historical analysis.

The articles appear in chronological order. We begin with Javier Villa-Flores's study of blasphemy among slaves in seventeenth-century New Spain. Blasphemy drew the attention of both religious and civil authorities as an act of sacrilege and disorder. Drawing primarily on Mexican Inquisition materials, Villa-Flores is able to demonstrate that slaves were often charged with this crime while in the midst of cruel punishments that resulted from their enslaved status. This is evidence of the brutal nature of slavery, but it also underlines the conflict between the slave as property and the slave as a member of the community of believers with obligations as members of the church. Villa-Flores goes further and presents a number of cases in which slaves were able to shift the responsibility for their blasphemy on to the shoulders of the masters whose excessive treatment caused the violation of accepted Catholic norms. This was a creative manipulation of the Holy Office by the slaves themselves and a demonstration of how structures and institutions of power and control could be subverted by the weak.

Whereas Villa-Flores's article concentrates on urban slavery in New

Spain and on a form of resistance within the colonial institutional framework, Flávio dos Santos Gomes examines maronage, a common form of slave resistance outside of institutional controls. His study of maroon communities in the frontier region between the Brazilian Amazonia and Guyana documents not only the well-known phenomena of maronage but also its peculiar features in zones of imperial rivalry and contested sovereignties. Santos Gomes argues that runaways often learned to manipulate to their advantage the political and racial borders on this frontier. Slavery and the resistance it spawned was thus an essential element on the frontiers of the Brazilian slave regime just as it had been in the area between Florida and the Carolinas and elsewhere where political, economic, and racial frontiers converged.

Next Peter Blanchard focuses on the movements for independence and the discourse adopted by masters and slaves during the struggles for independence in South America. Just as there had always been a complex relationship and inherent contradiction between the biblical ideas of slavery and salvation, whereby slavery became a metaphor for particular political and spiritual conditions, so did the Enlightenment's concepts of independence, liberty, citizenship—with its metaphorical use in political and religious discourse—clash with the reality of slavery. As liberators and patriots increasingly used “slavery” as a descriptor of the colonial condition, slaves, in particular, perceived both the ironies and the opportunities that this discourse created. Many cast their lot with the crown, which seemed determined to ameliorate slavery, but leaders of independence movements soon realized that promises of freedom could also serve to mobilize slaves into the patriot armies. The result of promises of both royalists and patriots and of the process of independence itself was the disruption of the system of slavery, a system that could not be reconstructed once the fighting had ended.

The next two articles are studies of the legacy of slavery and the role of Afro-American culture and its perception within two national societies, namely, early-nineteenth-century Brazil and early-twentieth-century Cuba. In both cases, the definitions of criminality and the evaluation of Afro-American cultural practices were clearly formulated in relation to each other. First, Maya Talmon Chvaicer examines the practice of *capoeira* among Afro-Brazilians. She demonstrates the transformation of this martial art, dance, and game into a far more sinisterly perceived technique of violence, feared by authorities as a criminal and potentially disruptive activity. Capoeira moved from being an aspect of slave culture and recreation to a being a potential weapon of slaves, not only as a martial art but also in its display at processions and public festi-

vals as a symbolic gesture against the slave system. The tensions around capoeira between slave intention and societal response is an important thread in the story offered here.

Societal evaluation of perceived African cultural practices are also central to the study of Cuba presented by Alejandra Bronfman. Drawing on her doctoral research, she take up the question of *brujería* and the secret Afro-Cuban associations or *ñáñigos* in newly independent Cuba at the beginning of the twentieth century. It is a story that shows how inclusionist tendencies that hoped to make Afro-Cubans part of the new nation coexisted with racial theories that viewed blacks as inferiors and potential criminals. The project of nation-building in Latin America, in general, and in Cuba, in particular, was accompanied by the development of scientific thought, especially in the writings of Fernando Ortiz whose works marked the beginnings of Cuban anthropology, bringing criminology and anthropology in close association. Making use of police records, Bronfman demonstrates that the reported ritual crimes of *negros brujos* led to a kind of “blood libel” and a to a hysteria that included lynchings on the island. But alongside the critical discourses of primitivism and criminality that condemned Afro-Cuban practices existed a belief in the right to citizenship and freedom of religion that tempered the racialist discourses. The interplay of these tendencies lies at the heart of this article that represents a burgeoning growth in scholarship in the area of Afro-Cuban themes.

The final article addresses the questions of race and ethnicity in twentieth-century Latin America by examining an incident of racial and ethnic violence on the frontier of Haiti and the Dominican Republic that has played a central role in the sense of ethnicity and nationhood in those two countries. Negative attitudes toward Haitians expressed by Dominicans have often been described as an element of contemporary Dominican life. I, in fact, witnessed this firsthand during a trip to the Dominican Republic in 1975: I was riding in a taxi from the airport, with historian Stanley Engerman. We stopped briefly at a traffic light and two young boys ran out to clean off the windshield. The cabbie ordered them to stop to which the boys replied, “We need to eat; we have no money.” So the cabbie said, “Vayan a cortar caña” to which the two urchins responded, “¡Pero no somos haitianos!”

It is this attitude of depreciation based on historical factors and racial perceptions that is examined in Richard Turits’s study of the defining moments in the twentieth-century history of the Dominican Republic and Haiti, the 1937 massacre of Haitians on the border of the two countries. This early example of ethnic cleansing carried out under the directive of the dictator, Rafael Trujillo speaks to the intersection of race and nationality in the Dominican Republic.

As Turits points out, however, Dominican anti-Haitianism was a result, not a cause of the massacre. The events and how they have been remembered serves as a good example of how racial and ethnic definitions have been mobilized for the purposes of state projects, and how, even among populations where color differences are not always obvious, racial and ethnic categories have come into play.

The legacy of slavery and societies in which racial categories are apparent weigh heavily throughout Latin America. This special issue presents some of the recent scholarship on these themes. For the preparation of this issue, the *HAHR* received the generous support of the Gilder-Lehrman Foundation, which also sponsors the Institute for the Study of Slavery, Abolition, and Resistance at Yale University. The place of Afro-Americans in the history of Latin America is well represented by the articles in this issue that seeks to present a sampling of current research and to stimulate further development of this dynamic field.

