

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Race, Racism, and Antiracism in Brazil and Mexico

Theodore W. Cohen 

School of Africana and Multicultural Studies, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, Illinois, US
Email: theodore.cohen@siu.edu

This essay reviews the following works:

The Pursuit of Ruins: Archaeology, History, and the Making of Modern Mexico. By Christina Bueno. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2016. Pp. xi + 280. \$29.95 paperback. ISBN: 9780826357328.

Mestizo Modernity: Race, Technology, and the Body in Postrevolutionary Mexico. By David S. Dalton. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2018. Pp. x + 248. \$84.95 hardcover. ISBN: 9781683400394.

Becoming Brazilians: Race and National Identity in Twentieth-Century Brazil. By Marshall C. Eakin. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. Pp. xvii + 343. \$31.99 paperback. ISBN: 9781316626009.

Redeeming La Raza: Transborder Modernity, Race, Respectability, and Rights. By Gabriela González. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. xvi + 261. \$36.95 paperback. ISBN: 9780190909628.

The Brazil Reader: History, Culture, Politics. Edited by James N. Green, Victoria Langland, and Lilia Moritz Schwarcz. Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2019. Pp. 608. \$32.95 paperback. ISBN: 9780822371076.

Frontiers of Citizenship: A Black and Indigenous History of Postcolonial Brazil. By Yuko Miki. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pp. xix + 306. \$29.99 paperback. ISBN: 9781108405409.

Estudiar el racismo: Afrodescendientes en México. Edited by María Elisa Velázquez Gutiérrez. Mexico City: Secretaría de Cultura, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2019. Pp. 619. Mex\$445.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9786075393209.

Almost any discussion of race and racism in modern Brazil requires a reference to Gilberto Freyre's *Casa-grande e senzala* (1933). In Mexico, the same can be said for José Vasconcelos's *La raza cósmica* (1925) as well as for two of Manuel Gamio's seminal texts: *Forjando patria* (1916) and *La población del valle de Teotihuacán* (1922). Since they were published, these books have come to symbolize national celebrations of *mestiçagem* and *mestizaje* in both countries and across Latin America. Racial and cultural mixture buttresses Freyre's romantic depiction of the Portuguese plantation system and Vasconcelos's celebration of Spanish spiritualism. In contrast, Gamio perceived *mestizaje*'s antiracist potential in the rejection of these colonial legacies: if national unity was achieved through modern

anthropological methods that condemned racial hierarchies, then indigenous communities could be protected and benevolently integrated into a unified national society.

Freyre, Vasconcelos, and Gamio—each of whom lived or studied in the United States—have also become points of departure for comparing Latin American and US racial formations. They defined the former through racial mixture and tolerance and the latter, with its Anglophone legal culture, in relation to segregation and racism.¹ These claims of racial harmony came under scrutiny after the Second World War, when the civil rights movement in the United States helped Latin American activists expose the limits of the region's racial claims and illustrated the need for racial activism in countries thought, at the time, to be less racist than the United States, if not devoid of racism all together. The ideas made famous by Freyre, Vasconcelos, and Gamio were myths, not realities, and they were symbolic of dreams deferred, not representations of racial utopias ready to be enjoyed by all of humanity.² Most recently, and founded on the idea that race itself is historically contingent and socially constructed, a post-revisionist generation of researchers across the humanities and social sciences has examined the racialization of space, culture, and knowledge—including the narrative strategies about how national pasts, presents, and futures are conceived—to demonstrate how these myths are made, reproduced, consumed, and critiqued.³ This requires, as the books in this review demonstrate, that scholars not only historicize these myths but also contend with the constantly evolving nature of race, racism, and antiracism in ways that unpack social, cultural, and intellectual dimensions of antiblackness, anti-indigeneity, and *mestiçagem/mestizaje*.⁴

Accordingly, Freyre, Vasconcelos, and Gamio—and the words they penned—have become touchstones for understanding the racial dynamics of nation building in their respective countries and for the modern definitions of Latin America itself. In short, each of the books under review point to some of the ways in which these racial myths were made and/or unmade in the name of what, at that particular time, was considered to be a condemnation of racist theories and practices. They collectively illustrate how our understandings of racialized pasts and their relevance today challenge us to think across geographic, cultural, and disciplinary boundaries when we investigate the racist and antiracist potentialities of *mestiçagem* and *mestizaje*.

¹ In regard to this voluminous topic, see, for example, Mara Loveman, *National Colors: Racial Classification and the State in Latin America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); and Alejandro de la Fuente and George Reid Andrews, eds., *Afro-Latin American Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

² There is an extensive literature evaluating these comparisons, especially for Brazil; for example, see Carl N. Degler, *Neither Black nor White: Slavery and Race Relations in Brazil and the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1971); David Hellwig, ed., *African-American Reflections on Brazil's Racial Paradise* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992); Emilia Viotti da Costa, "The Myth of Racial Democracy: A Legacy of the Empire," in *The Brazilian Empire: Myths and Histories*, rev. ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 234–246; and Micol Seigel, "Beyond Compare: Comparative Method after the Transnational Turn," *Radical History Review* 91 (2005): 62–90.

³ Regarding the need to consider racialization as a component of the history of race and nation in Latin America, see Nancy P. Appelbaum, Anne S. Macpherson, and Karin Alejandra Roseblat, eds., *Race and Nation in Modern Latin America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); and Nancy P. Appelbaum, "Post-revisionist Scholarship on Race," *Latin American Research Review* 40, no. 3 (2005): 206–217. For an example of how these ideas have recently been studied in relation to questions about antiracism, see Peter Wade, James Scorer, and Ignacio Aguiló, eds., *Cultures of Anti-Racism in Latin America and the Caribbean* (London: Institute of Latin American Studies, School of Advanced Study, University of London, 2019).

⁴ In his own analysis of these questions, the anthropologist Peter Wade similarly notes that we need to think about these racial discourses not as myth or reality but "as a myth but also more than a myth"; see Wade, "Racism and Race Mixture in Latin America," *Latin American Research Review* 52, no. 3 (2017): 484, <http://doi.org/10.25222/larr.124>.

Racism and racial myths

Brazilian and Mexican claims of racial harmony had to be more than stated—they had to be restated, reimagined, and woven into the multiple fabrics of society generation after generation. The intellectuals and cultural producers who articulated them continually reacted to new social and cultural mores, legal statutes, and political regimes throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. Drawing on Benedict Anderson's theory of the imagined community, the historian Marshall C. Eakin calls this intellectual and cultural process a form of “myth-making” (1). His *Becoming Brazilians* reveals how “The influence of Freyre permeates nearly every nook and corner of contemporary Brazilian culture” (4). Eakin acknowledges that *Casa-grande e senzala* has framed his intellectual pursuits since he first read it after his freshman year of college. But the racial climate surrounding Freyre's sociological study in 1972 was very different from when it was published in 1933 or when Eakin wrote *Becoming Brazilians*. Establishing the context for his argument, he explains that initially *Casa-grande e senzala* “sent seismic shock waves through the small world of Brazilian intellectual and literary circles . . . but probably not even a minor tremor among the vast majority of Brazilians” (79).

Eakin explores how different forms of technology and the cultural expressions they disseminated shaped the two main ideologies buttressing Freyre's racial vision of Brazil's past, present, and future: racial harmony and *mestiçagem*. He argues that Freyre's depiction of what would be eventually called racial democracy only began to take hold of the national imaginary once new technologies—radio, film, and television—spread these two branches of Freyrean thought.⁵ Most notably, the creation of a national television network during the military dictatorship (1964–1985) allowed a Freyrean civic nationalism to be built into the landscape of Brazilian society. This brings Eakin to one of his more provocative points: racial harmony began to come under scrutiny in the 1970s and 1980s, when most Brazilians defined the nation through miscegenation. These two pillars of Brazilian racial formations therefore cannot be described as synonymous political and cultural ideologies, for “the myth of *mestiçagem* has been more powerful, widespread, and enduring than the myth of racial democracy” (5).

In *Mestizo Modernity*, the literary and cultural scholar David S. Dalton similarly explores how racial mixture came to symbolize Mexican racial formations after the 1910 Revolution. He too is interested in the relationship between technology and race. But rather than look at technology as a form of infrastructure and cultural dissemination, as Eakin does, Dalton examines how Mexicans represented technology in literature, art, and film to forge a homogeneous national populace. “The technologized body existed beyond any single worldview,” he argues, “and instead became a trope through which cultural producers—and consumers—could imagine the country's racial identity and its ties to modernity” (12). For Dalton, *mestizaje* blossomed as a futurist, posthuman desire that he reads through Donna Haraway's theorization of the cyborg. Accordingly, he defines the *mestizo* as the state-sanctioned technologically hybrid descendant of nation's pre-Columbian indigenous peoples. After the 1910 Revolution, Mexicans encountered the cyborg's “oppressive potential,” not the “highly liberatory potential latent to the figure” that Haraway posits or that the postrevolutionary Mexican cultural producers Dalton studies desired (22). He uncovers the antiracist visions postrevolutionary Mexicans wanted to depict and the racist paradigms they unknowingly celebrated.

Dalton analyzes a wide range of textual and visual sources, from José Vasconcelos's *La raza cósmica* and *Prometeo vencedor* (ca. 1916) and murals by Diego Rivera and

⁵ On the origin of the term *racial democracy*, see Paulina L. Alberto and Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof, “‘Racial Democracy’ and Racial Inclusion: Hemispheric Histories,” in de la Fuente and Andrews, *Afro-Latin American Studies*, 277.

José Clemente Orozco to Carlos Olvera's 1968 novel *Mejicanos en el espacio* and films from the 1940s to the 1970s. The representation of the mestizo cyborg is easiest to identify in murals painted by José Clemente Orozco and Diego Rivera. For example, Orozco's *El hombre en llamas* (Guadalajara, 1936–1939) depicts the Spanish Conquest “as the tragic (but natural) result of two unevenly developed cultures coming into contact” (73). With the conquest acting as a parable for postrevolutionary society, the indigenous assimilate into Spanish society when their bodies become “fused with a mechanized industry” (80). In contrast, Rivera painted a more optimistic and harmonious future. Highlighting the Aztec earth goddess, his *Pan-American Unity* (San Francisco, 1940) “places Coatlicue’s fleshy face on the mechanistic side of the image, while her robotic face appears on the organic side” (84).

Written chronologically, *Mestizo Modernity* begins not with filmmakers or artists but with Vasconcelos. For Dalton—and for many scholars of postrevolutionary nation-state formation—Vasconcelos’s imprint on postrevolutionary mestizaje stemmed from his time directing the Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP) between 1921 and 1924.⁶ Setting the stage for later incarnations of the mestizo cyborg, chapter 1 reads *La raza cósmica* dialogically through Vasconcelos’s less well-known play *Prometeo vencedor* to explore how “Vasconcelos viewed science—when subordinated to aesthetics—as key to producing an improved humanity, even posthumanity” (32). In analyzing *Prometeo vencedor*, Dalton takes note of how Vasconcelos used Prometheus’s knowledge of science to chart the stages of human existence, from protohumanity to humanity and finally to a racially mixed, bodiless posthumanity. Dalton provocatively applies this futuristic perspective to Vasconcelos’s celebration of a cosmic fifth race, the melding of the world’s four racial groups (European, Asian, African, and Amerindian), in *La raza cósmica*. He concludes that Vasconcelos ultimately wanted to transcend this cosmic race and mestizaje itself with a bodiless sixth race.

Vasconcelos’s posthuman race was neither the beginning nor the end of the conversation about the relationships among racial mixture, technology, and postrevolutionary modernity. These conceits would be remade and extended in art, literature, and film for decades, just as the rest of *Mestizo Modernity* details. Thus, the publication of *La raza cósmica* alone did not envision Mexico’s eventual mestizo unity and its antiracist yearnings, just like, as Eakin argues, Freyre’s *Casa-grande e senzala* did not immediately establish Brazil’s claim of racial harmony or cement the national fable surrounding the benevolence of mestiçagem. For these racial claims to enter the textures of Brazilian and Mexican societies, they had to be more than stated: they had to be restated and manipulated across cultural mediums, technological innovations, and political projects.

Contextualizing racism and antiracism

Claims of racial harmony in Latin America were not new when Freyre published *Casa-grande e senzala* or when Vasconcelos penned *La raza cósmica*. As the historian Yuko Miki explains in *Frontiers of Citizenship*, they originated with the nineteenth-century liberal ideologies that venerated mestiçagem/mestizaje. In broad terms, these interracial ideas were postcolonial responses to Spanish and Portuguese colonialism, slavery in the Americas, and eventually US segregation; they rejected any discussion of the so-called Indian or black problem as racist.⁷

⁶ José Joaquín Blanco, *Se llama Vasconcelos: Una evocación crítica* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1979); and Claude Fell, *José Vasconcelos: Los años del águila (1920–1925): Educación, cultura e iberoamericanismo en el México postrevolucionario* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1989).

⁷ For equivalent examples of this in Mexican history, see Agustín Basave Benítez, *México mestizo: Análisis del nacionalismo mexicano en torno a la mestizofilia de Andrés Molina Enríquez*, 2nd ed. (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2002); Ben Vinson III, *Before Mestizaje: The Frontiers of Race and Caste in Colonial Mexico* (New York:

When Miki began the research that became *Frontiers of Citizenship*, she was interested in studying *quilombos* in late nineteenth-century Brazil. The archives she encountered and the silences they produced challenged her to ask, “Why has Brazilian postcolonial history been so focused on people of African descent and comparably so little on the indigenous?” (9). Building on the post-revisionist approach to racial formations in Latin America, she implicitly argues that these spatial and epistemological associations—with Brazil operating historically as a country affiliated to the African diaspora and with Mexico affixed to grand indigenous empires—cannot continue to guide research into race and nation in either country or anywhere else in the region. Miki claims this racial schema “occludes our own hand in mapping Latin America with racialized historical narratives” (10).⁸ In response, *Frontiers of Citizenship* provides a detailed account of how the histories of indigeneity and blackness intersect, diverge, and at times move in parallel in the decades following Brazilian independence, when theories of *mestiçagem* began to take shape.

Miki orients the reader to the Atlantic frontier, where nineteenth-century Brazilian state formation was underway, the enslavement of Africans was not preordained, and indigenous communities remained at the margins of society. Moving fluidly among discussions of European immigration, demands for indigenous extermination, and debates over the abolition of slavery, she argues that frontier acted as a place where “the relationship between race, nation, and citizenship were daily tested and defined” (8). This racialized history of citizenship begins with the 1824 Constitution, which granted citizenship rights to all free native-born individuals. Miki explains that this seemingly deracialized definition prevented enslaved Africans and indigenous peoples, who were assumed to be unassimilated and thus uncivilized, from securing the rights and responsibilities others born in Brazil received. As the frontier moved, Afro-descended and indigenous peoples negotiated with, resisted, and took up arms against the state and each other. By midcentury, elites cast miscegenation as a solution to these racial conflicts. In 1845, the German naturalist Karl Philipp von Martius paved the way in his award-winning essay “Como se deve escrever a história do Brasil,” which defined the nation as the fusion of its Portuguese, indigenous, and African heritages.

Miki shines in explaining how racist assumptions permeated this seemingly race-neutral precursor to Freyre’s claims of racial harmony. The African-descended and indigenous peoples deprived of citizenship rights used royalism, military service, *marronage*, and emancipation to acquire them. However, within this context, theories of indigenous disappearance—which emerged with the new discipline of anthropology—contended that indigenous communities, such as the Tupi, could no longer contribute to national development; in other words, they could only become citizens if they ceased to be indigenous. This racialized project, Miki concludes, contradicted the benevolence of Brazil’s racial mythologies and set Brazil on its path toward becoming a nation associated more with blackness than with indigeneity.

While Freyre’s ideas loom over Miki’s *Frontiers of Citizenship*, postrevolutionary Mexican state formation sits chronologically at the end of Christina Bueno’s *Pursuit of Ruins*. Focusing on archaeology during the Porfirio Díaz regime (1876–1910), Bueno explains how the nineteenth-century celebration of the pre-Columbian past was part of a larger

Cambridge University Press, 2017); and J. E. Delgadillo Núñez, “La esclavitud, la abolición y los afrodescendientes: memoria histórica y construcción de identidades en la prensa mexicana, 1840–1860,” *Historia Mexicana* 69, no. 2 (2019): 743–788.

⁸ Also, see Peter Wade, *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America* (London: Pluto Press, 1997); and Barbara Weinstein, “Erecting and Erasing Boundaries: Can We Combine the ‘Indo’ and the ‘Afro’ in Latin American Studies?,” *Estudios Interdisciplinarios de América Latina y el Caribe* 19, no. 1 (2008): 129–144. For an overview of why the racialization of space is so important in modern Brazilian history, especially in relation to Freyre’s ideas, see Barbara Weinstein, *The Color of Modernity: São Paulo and the Making of Race and Nation in Brazil* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

racial project to write a national history rooted in indigenous inferiority, a topic that also informs Miki's analysis of indigenous citizenship. The undeniable racist and patriarchal beliefs within Mexican social science animates Bueno's archival sources and shapes the history she tells. But she also encourages scholars to consider the artifacts these archaeologists disinterred, the institutions they established, and the narratives they told as part of a longer history of Mexican *indigenismo*. The actions of relatively untrained individuals like Alfredo Chavero and Leopoldo Batres set the stage for Mexican archaeology to be professionalized after Díaz was overthrown and for scholars, like Gamio, to establish the racial, cultural, and historical boundaries of postrevolutionary mestizaje through more methodologically rigorous investigations into the nation's indigenous peoples and cultures.⁹

According to Bueno, the assembly of Mexico's national patrimony was selective and tied to local, national, and global politics and intellectual currents. Mexican and foreign adventurers, profiteers, and academics bought and exhumed artifacts and monuments to sell, study, and collect. Among them, Batres is the central figure in *The Pursuit of Ruins*. As Bueno explains in detail, he cast a colonial gaze toward indigenous communities, past and present, while he trekked through the country digging up artifacts and unearthing ruins, including at world-renowned archaeological sites like Mitla, Monte Albán, and Teotihuacán. Moreover, he moved inelegantly and imprecisely between the pre-Columbian past and the ethnographic present while he mapped pre-Columbian ruins. This act, itself a fundamental part of modern statecraft, emphasized regions where sedentary indigenous communities resided and rendered nonsedentary civilizations barbaric, largely invisible, and irrelevant for Mexican modernity.

A subtheme in *The Pursuit of Ruins* is the institutional and disciplinary histories that Batres's archaeological project began and that continued long after his influence waned. The General Inspectorate of Archaeological Monuments of the Republic, which he directed from 1885 to 1911, became the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) in 1939. In 1882, the National Museum reorganized, moving away from the natural sciences and toward history, anthropology, and archaeology. Most notably, in 1906, its professors began teaching students such as Gamio, who would go on to have frequent conflicts with Batres and, with Gamio's publication of *Forjando patria* and *La población del valle de Teotihuacán*, would set the parameters for postrevolutionary Mexican social science.

While Gamio and his archaeological study *La población del valle de Teotihuacán* wrap up Bueno's history, he and his publications float almost invisibly around Gabriela González's *Redeeming La Raza*. The same is true for José Vasconcelos and his conception of Mexico's cosmic potentialities. Both are mentioned but not cited in González's history, which details the attempts by activists of Mexican origin in Texas to refute US claims of their racial inferiority in the first half of the twentieth century. González is not directly concerned with the question of race, racism, and nation in Mexico, and this is why she does not discuss Gamio and Vasconcelos as much as Dalton and Bueno do. Writing a history of activism, chiefly by middle-class women, through archival research and oral histories, González focuses on the individuals, families, and institutions critical of the racist and gendered dimensions of global capitalism.

González argues that "the quest for rights itself represented a modernist intervention in a racist society" (5). The first half of *Redeeming La Raza* explores this political activism from a Mexican perspective that, for example, documents labor activism among Magonistas on both sides of the border. The second half analyzes how these redemptive projects acquired

⁹ Regarding the professionalization of the social sciences in Mexico, see Clara Meierovich, *Vicente T. Mendoza: Artista y primer folclorólogo musical* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1995); and Mechthild Rutsch, *Entre el campo y el gabinete: Nacionales y extranjeros en la profesionalización de la antropología mexicana (1877-1920)* (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2007).

more of a US political sensibility by embracing the New Deal and rejecting biological definitions of race after the Second World War. While the individuals and institutions she explores espoused various methods to advocate on behalf of people of Mexican origin in Texas, she focuses three overarching perspectives: “social change,” which activists often affiliated with unionization; respectability politics and “cultural redemption,” a process that ultimately was about becoming *gente decente*; and “social stability,” a project that looked to state institutions for social change (16–17).

Discussions about race and racism contextualize rather than animate the histories of Mexican and Mexican American social uplift that González reveals. US racial segregation, not Mexican *mestizaje*, is her point of departure. Consequently, she writes about Mexican racial theories and social anxieties in the United States in a more holistic fashion, as “the ‘Mexican Problem,’” than the other books in this review do (194). In this transnational context, González astutely provides a short “Note on Usage” following the acknowledgments and preceding the introduction. “In its usage within the United States,” she begins, “the appellations ‘Mexican-origin’ and ‘ethnic Mexican’ refer to people of Mexican descent, whether they are native-born citizens, naturalized citizens, legal residents, or undocumented residents” (xv). Turning to *la raza*, she explains that some of the activists she studies used the term “to foster ethnic pride and unity across the axes of gender class, and national differences” (xv). In this context, Vasconcelos and Gamio appear in passing as the intellectuals responsible for laying the foundation for postrevolutionary racial unity. González sees this project of racial redemption as fundamentally cultural and the term *la raza* as emblematic of these cultural initiatives. Yet, in contrast to this conclusion and to other works on race and culture in Mexico, she states that the ideas espoused by Vasconcelos, Gamio, and others of their generation were “marked by racial ideologies that continued to privilege the notion of biological race” (129).¹⁰

What is unclear in *Redeeming La Raza* and in many of the books under review is how ideas about race, racism, and antiracism were received. As these books show, theories of *mestiçagem*/*mestizaje* and racial harmony in Brazil and Mexico had many dimensions and acquired countless connotations while they moved across historical epochs, disciplinary and cultural boundaries, regional and national spaces, political projects, and racial epistemologies. In short, inquiries into reception would help readers better understand the everyday processes of nation-state formation—and the power dynamics behind them—that constructed and eventually deconstructed these national myths. Eakin’s research could leave readers wondering whether listening to samba and bossa nova, watching telenovelas, and cheering for the Brazilian soccer team helped Brazilians understand the nation’s claims about its racial past and present. Similarly, Dalton acknowledges that the esoteric theories about cyborgs he uses did not exist when Vasconcelos penned *La raza cósmica* or when Rivera and Orozco painted murals. Nonetheless, we may ask: Did cultural critics recognize and embrace the racial fantasies that Dalton equates to *mestizaje*’s technological hybridity? For González’s *Redeeming La Raza*, did Mexican-origin activists take inspiration from the texts written by Gamio and Vasconcelos? And was the divide between cultural and biological race that she describes evident to these reformers (and to Gamio and Vasconcelos)? Rather than take these nationalist claims about racial harmony as racist or not, some discussion of their reception would allow us to think about the peculiarities of

¹⁰ For more nuanced works on race, culture, and biology in Mexico, see Alexandra Minna Stern, “From Mestizophilia to Biotypology: Racialization and Science in Mexico, 1920–1960,” in *Race and Nation in Modern Latin America*, ed. Nancy P. Appelbaum, Anne S. Macpherson, and Karin Alejandra Roseblatt (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 187–210; and Karin Alejandra Roseblatt, *The Science and Politics of Race in Mexico and the United States, 1910–1950* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018). The historian Laura Gotkowitz deconstructs the cultural and biological dimensions of race and racism in “Introduction: Racisms of the Present and the Past in Latin America,” in *Histories of Race and Racism: The Andes and Mesoamerica from Colonial Times to the Present*, ed. Laura Gotkowitz (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 1–53.

what constituted racism and antiracism at any particular moment, in any location, through different cultural mediums, and across history.

The past and future histories of race and racism

Questions about reception, of course, are easier to ask than they are to answer. As Miki notes in relation to the histories of the Afro-descended and indigenous peoples she explores, archives rarely provide “a well-balanced chorus of black and indigenous voices” (26). Accordingly, González’s reconstruction of the lives of Mexican-origin activists deserves praise. After all, the recovering of individual lives through archival sources, oral histories, and cultural analysis can humanize the individuals whose existence racialized discourses about colonialism and imperialism, slavery, and liberalism have discredited. These scholarly projects often take inspiration from and seek to contextualize contemporary political activism, cultural expressions, and social movements led by individuals like Mexico’s Subcomandante Marcos and Sergio Peñaloza Pérez as well as Brazil’s Abdias do Nascimento.

The necessity and urgency of these scholarly, political, and social movements point to the unfulfilled quests to forge racial harmony in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. “In many ways, the great dream of the nineteenth-century founding fathers and nation-builders,” Eakin writes in the epilogue of *Becoming Brazilian*, “has now eluded their descendants *twice*—even though, for a few decades in this century, it seemed within their grasp” (257). Constitutional changes and the recognition of quilombos in Brazil, Miki explains at the end of *Frontiers of Citizenship*, has provided a sense of hope for the future. “They show us,” she concludes, “new ways of thinking about our present, past, and possible futures, and the stories we tell about them” (260). Conceiving of race, racism, and nation in this way—as story about the past and a vision toward an elusive antiracist future—points to the intersection of contemporary politics and the historiographic interventions that these books make.

The last two books in this review—the second edition of *The Brazil Reader*, edited by James N. Green, Victoria Langland, and Lilia Moritz Schwarcz, and *Estudiar el racismo: Afrodescendientes en México*, coordinated by María Elisa Velázquez—pull together the diverse cultural and interdisciplinary threads about race, racism, and antiracism already described, and elucidate the enduring yet variegated power of these claims about racial harmony. Green, Langland, and Schwarcz have the difficult task of not only telling the entire history of Brazil through primary sources accessible to readers not familiar with the country but also of updating *The Brazil Reader* twenty years after the first edition was compiled by Robert M. Levine and John Crocitti. They follow the expected arc of Brazilian history, moving from Portuguese conquest and colonialism through independence, the empire, and the rise of republicanism, and on to populism, the military dictatorship, and redemocratization. They, too, frame the book with a look toward the future, with the “wave of optimism” that permeated civil society as the country ascended on the world’s stage in the decades after the military relinquished political power in 1985 (1). With eleven roughly chronological sections, *The Brazil Reader* follows a simple format: each section begins with an editors’ introduction, continues with short historical sources accompanied by contextual essays, and ends with a biography of an emblematic figure (or two) written by one of the editors.

The Brazil Reader is not a book specifically about race or any other single theme in Brazilian history and society. The editors’ optimism for Brazil’s future, after all, is related to international politics; any optimism—or pessimism, for that matter—about the nation’s racial futures is left for readers to discern through their own reading of the primary and secondary sources included. Nonetheless, *The Brazil Reader* is much more

effective and nuanced than the first edition in how it weaves the histories of blackness, indigeneity, and *mestiçagem* into the national narrative, and this alone makes the book a welcome contribution.¹¹

The first half of *The Brazil Reader* brings race to the forefront. The first three sections (“Conquest and Colonial Rule, 1500–1579,” “Sugar and Slavery in the Atlantic World, 1580–1694,” and “Gold and the New Colonial Order, 1695–1807”) situate indigenous and Afro-descended peoples at the center of the national narrative. Thinking about what constitutes Brazilian history, the editors note at the outset, “When we speak of the history of Brazil, however, we generally mean the history after 1500, when the area became marked by encounters between its original inhabitants, the indigenous peoples, and the waves of new arrivals who came from Portugal, Africa, and elsewhere, and when Brazil’s natural resources became directed toward a growing system of global trade that transformed the land and resulted in the development of a new society” (7). The agency of enslaved Africans and their quest for freedom comes to life with two colonial reports about Palmares and with Langland’s biographic portrait of Chica da Silva de Oliveira. In the nineteenth century, questions about slavery, the slave trade, and abolition remain prominent. Emblematic of the master narrative Miki outlines, indigenous history drifts into the background and is most obviously represented by an excerpt from José de Alencar’s 1857 romantic novel *O Guarani* and a criticism of it by Afro-Brazilian Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis. As the editors reach the twentieth century, *The Brazil Reader* turns toward the intellectual and cultural histories that frame Brazil’s claims of racial harmony and its transformation into a racist myth in need of criticism and reform.

Green, Langland, and Schwarcz stand out in how they carefully situate Freyre’s *Casa-grande e senzala* within Brazilian history. An excerpt of von Martius’s essay “Como se deve escrever a história do Brasil,” which Miki also analyzes, is included, introduced by the editors as a foundational postcolonial text that “foreshadows later interpretations of Brazil as a country defined by a peculiar racial harmony, an idea that would become a pervasive notion by the 1930s” (187). Debates about racial inequality and racial mixture appear with excerpts by Raimundo Nina Rodrigues and João Batista Lacerda. Only then do the editors include a selection from Freyre’s seminal text that depicts the enslaving of Africans as the basis for miscegenation in Brazil. They situate this excerpt within larger debates about racial hierarchy, racial mixture, and democracy in twentieth-century Brazil—and they even include critiques of these racial claims, for example, with Nascimento’s 1968 “Myth of Racial Democracy.” As they note in their introduction to their selection from *Casa-grande e senzala*, “While the implications of some of his ideas have long been debated, even today Gilberto de Mello Freyre (1900–1987) is considered one of the great interpreters of Brazilian culture” (330).¹²

While Green, Langland, and Schwarcz begin *The Brazil Reader* with the relatively well-known racial dimensions of Portuguese colonialism and slavery, María Elisa Velázquez introduces *Estudiar el racismo* with an opposite point: that most Mexicans are unaware, either willfully or unknowingly, of their nation’s African-descended population. Since there already exist numerous edited collections in Mexico detailing the importance of

¹¹ The first edition of *The Brazil Reader*, for instance, includes a section “Race and Ethnic Relations” that spans almost the entire twentieth century and therefore isolates the history of race and ethnicity from the broader historical contexts provided elsewhere in the book. The editors also placed an excerpt of Freyre’s *Casa-grande e senzala* in the section on imperial and republican Brazil rather than in its historical moment during the Getúlio Vargas administration; see Robert M. Levine and John J. Crocitti, eds., *The Brazil Reader: History, Culture, Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

¹² The historian Jessica Lynn Graham expertly explores the different interwar meanings of democracy that Green, Langland, and Schwarcz implicitly explore in relation to Freyre’s ideas; see Graham, *Shifting the Meaning of Democracy: Race, Politics, and Culture in the United States and Brazil* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019).

Mexico's African-descended population to the nation's history, culture, and society, the contributors to *Estudiar el racismo* do not attempt to retell that narrative but rather use historical, visual, literary, and ethnographic sources to understand, as Velázquez explains, "the genealogy of racism toward Afro-descended people in Mexico [la genealogía del racismo hacia las personas afrodescendientes en México]" (18).¹³

Like *The Brazil Reader*, *Estudiar el racismo* spans the entirety of Mexican history. Unlike the other books about Mexico in this review, seminal texts by Vasconcelos and Gamio are absent in this tome. But this does not detract from its empirical richness. Instead, the contributors cite Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán's historical and ethnographic research from the 1940s and 1950s, which integrated African-descended communities into Gamio's ethnographic project to document all of the peoples and cultures residing in modern Mexico.¹⁴ The collection's strengths lie in its discussion of the colonial period (part 1) and the ethnographic present (parts 3 and 4). Yet its innovation is in how the contributors affix the often-overlooked nineteenth century (part 2) to the history of colonial slavery and to the methodological, theoretical, and political debates about black visibility in twenty-first-century Mexico. In this way, the essays approach the same ontological problem that Miki unpacks about the racial assumptions buttressing national identities. Implicit throughout the collection is the question: How do scholars study blackness in a nation defined by its indigeneity and mestizaje?

To begin the section on the colonial period, Rosario Nava Román and Velázquez explore how blackness, as an empty signifier, acquired negative connotations that facilitated its association to the enslavement of Africans and then to nineteenth-century biological racism. This frames a fundamental thread in *Estudiar el racismo*: antiblack racism is ubiquitous in Mexican history, but the meanings ascribed to blackness and racism changed when Mexico gained independence and when biological definitions of race replaced cultural ones. Within this historical framework, discussions about the stereotypes associated with blackness and slavery's legacies reoccur throughout *Estudiar el racismo*, including in the essays by Marco Antonio Pérez Jiménez and María Camila Díaz Casas, which conclude the first section with analyses of black social integration through marriage patterns and the debates about African-descended citizenship that informed the 1812 Constitution of Cádiz.

Essays in the second and third sections use various theoretical orientations and sources—such as literature, photographs, textbooks, and ethnographic observation—to analyze antiblack racism and humanize the experiences of those who endure it. For example, Christina V. Masferrer León turns to Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony to explore the limited discussions of African-descended peoples in primary school textbooks published by the Secretaría de Educación Pública; Carlos Correa Angulo takes inspiration from intersectionality and black feminism to explore the sexualization and exoticization of blackness; and Itza Amanda Varela Huerta turns to translation and communication studies to explore the political and ontological debates around black self-identification.

¹³ For example, see Luz María Martínez Montiel, coord., *Presencia africana en México* (Mexico City: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 1997); María Guadalupe Chávez Carbajal, coord., *El rostro colectivo de la nación mexicana* (Mexico City: Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas, 1997); María Elisa Velázquez and Ethel Correa Duró, comp., *Poblaciones y culturas de origen africano en México* (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2005); Elisabeth Cunin, coord., *Mestizaje, diferencia y nación: Lo "negro" en América Central y el Caribe* (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2010); and Juan Manuel de la Serna, coord., *De la libertad y la abolición: Africanos y afrodescendientes en Iberoamérica* (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2010).

¹⁴ Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, *La población negra de México, 1519–1810: Estudio etnohistórico* (Mexico City: Ediciones Fuente Cultural, 1946), and Cuijla: *Esbozo etnográfico de un pueblo negro* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1958).

The fourth section of *Estudiar el racismo* weaves together many of the passing references made throughout the previous sections. While the collection begins with a historical perspective that looks to the present, it concludes with an ethnographic perspective that looks to the past. Accordingly, Citlali Quecha Reyna and Alicia Castellanos Guerrero discuss the history of anthropology from its origins in establishing biological racism and justifying nineteenth-century imperialism, through postwar expressions of cultural racism, to the postmodern ethnographic theories that facilitate the antiracist quest to integrate blackness back into Mexico's social and cultural landscape. Synthesizing the collection's argument about racism and thus antiracism, Castellanos challenges us to "to think about racism in the plural, that is, the different types of racism, which involves an examination of its historical character, its cultural and national peculiarities, and the diverse aspects of the racialized subjects, spaces, forms, and levels found in accordance with these contexts [pensar el racismo en plural, esto es, los distintos tipos de racismo, lo que implica un reconocimiento de su carácter histórico, sus peculiaridades según las tradiciones nacionales y culturales, los diversos rostros de los sujetos racializados, los espacios, las formas y niveles en que se manifiesta según los contextos]" (581–582).

Conclusion

The history of race and nation that the contributors to *Estudiar el racismo* provide is simultaneously a history of racism and the search for an antiracist solution. Along with the other books in this review, Velázquez's edited collection helps deconstruct the claims of racial harmony that cast a shadow over any inquiry into indigeneity and blackness in Brazil and Mexico. Yet the authors collectively do more than this. They challenge us to see the histories of racism and antiracism beyond an artificial binary where all things are either racist or not, and where those terms have absolute meanings that transcend any specific historical, cultural, or national context. Instead, we must situate our research within broader interdisciplinary matrices that historically and culturally account for how race, racism, and antiracism were conceived and received when a particular law was enacted, a book published, a painting painted, or a myth made. After all, the national narratives associated with Freyre, Vasconcelos, and Gamio and the contemporary grassroots movements responding to them meet dialogically at the intersection between the racial futures these intellectuals desired and the antiracist futures envisioned today by activists and by the authors who wrote the books in this review.

Theodore W. Cohen is an associate professor of Africana Studies and History at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. He is the author of *Finding Afro-Mexico: Race and Nation after the Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 2020).