

REVIEW ESSAY

Centering Black Women's Labor History in Latin America

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Joan Flores-Villalobos, *The Silver Women: How Black Women's Labor Made the Panama Canal* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2023).

Anasa Hicks, *Hierarchies at Home: Domestic Service in Cuba from Abolition to Revolution* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

Tais Machado de Sant'Anna, *Um Pé Na Cozinha: Um Olhar Sócio-Histórico para o Trabalho de Cozinheiras Negras no Brasil* (São Paulo, SP: Fósforo, 2022).

Abstract

This review article surveys recent books that explore black women's integral role in the labor history of Latin America and the Caribbean. As emancipated Latin American and Caribbean black women transitioned away from slave labor, they faced intense, enduring racial and gender discrimination in the labor market. Despite these hostile conditions, these black women tirelessly resisted and rebelled against oppression. Moving beyond the framework of black women as mere contributors to social, political, and economic systems, the reviewed books' authors center black women as historically inextricable from these foundational elements that sustain the region.

Three recently released books, Tais Machado de Sant'Anna's *Um Pé na Cozinha: Um olhar sócio-histórico para o trabalho de cozinheiras negras no Brasil*,¹ Anasa Hicks's *Hierarchies at Home: Domestic Service in Cuba from Abolition to Revolution*, and Joan Flores-Villalobos's *The Silver Women: How Black Women's Labor Made the Panama Canal*, expand our historical understanding of the integral place of black women's labor in building and sustaining the nation across nineteenth- and twentieth-century Latin America and the Caribbean. These books center black women's lives, narratives, and resistance and offer a critique of the social, political, and economic systems that impact black lives throughout the region.

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In her book, *Um Pé na Cozinha*, Brazilian sociologist Taís de Sant’Anna Machado comprehensively examines the social dynamics that have long surrounded black women cooking professionals in Brazil, from the abolition of slavery in the nineteenth century to the present. Firmly centering black women in her work, she writes, “[These chefs] are a small part of a long-lasting story of intimate, invisible and essential work of black women in the kitchen, as well as the persistence of critical thinking, agency and different forms of resistance from these workers” (26). Slavery casts a long shadow over Brazilian history, particularly given that the country was the last in the Américas to abolish the brutal institution in 1888. The translated title of Machado’s book, “A Foot in the Kitchen,” is a reference to a racist expression that tethers black women to their historically undervalued and hidden labor. Following the racist logics of the domestic space that were inherent to slavery, the kitchen was a racialized, gendered, and segregated workplace for black women. Despite their excellence as cooks, black women’s work was normalized as subordinate to their white counterparts due to this history.

Social hierarchies in the field of gastronomy reflect the deeply entrenched logics of slavery that are still broadly present in Brazilian culture. For example, in Monteiro Lobato’s *Aunt Anastacia’s Tales*,² the book’s fictional character Tia Nastácia, derived from Lobato’s family household worker Anastácia, is a Brazilian black woman who served as a family cook and nanny in children’s literature. Tia Nastácia is an engaging storyteller who imparts wisdom and fables to the fictional children in the book, just as she has done for generations of Brazilian children. As Machado observes,

The place of enslaved black woman cooks as the experts of Brazilian cooking culture is part of the author’s agenda of resignification and valorization of the cultural heritage of a slave past, of its reminiscences at the beginning of the 20th century, defending the need to preserve these fundamental aspects of an ideology of ‘Brazilianness.’ (132)

Lobato’s literature has been part of the education canon in Brazil for nearly a century, which is consequential for black women’s representation. In recent decades, there has emerged a critical discourse about how this folklore normalizes classist, anti-black, and gender-based stereotypes against black women, and Machado’s book expertly advances these critiques.

Using rich texts, including archival documents, photographs, and interviews, Machado carefully demonstrates how slavery is a pervasive force in constructing contemporary narratives of subordination around black women’s labor. Machado also deftly paints a more complicated picture that demonstrates how the abolition of slavery generated new forms of gendered racialization. For example, in the chapter “Black women cooks, white male chefs,”³ the author shows how the cook/chef distinction was racialized and gendered to minimize black women’s culinary expertise. Ultimately, the category of “chef” became socially constructed as the standard under which white men attain success and acclaim. As a result, the social mobility of black women cooks in Brazilian society has been undermined and their contributions to the field erased. Despite these deliberate attempts to subvert black women cooks, Machado also celebrates and champions their successes in the kitchen and beyond by highlighting their culinary contributions to black community life through festivals and social clubs, among other venues.

Machado makes an impressive effort to not only ensure that black women cooks are centered in her narrative, but she also cites black women scholars to support her theoretical interventions. Although her work centers Brazilian thinkers such as Sueli Carneiro, Lélia Gonzalez, and Luiza Bairros, Machado engages with U.S. scholars like Patricia Hill Collins, Sadiya Hartman, Ruha Benjamin, Kia Lily Caldwell, and Keisha Khan Perry as well. Her thoughtful inclusion of transnational scholarship encourages comparative dialogue.

Anasa Hicks's *Hierarchies at Home* is another methodical and layered text that focuses on Cuban domestic workers from the 1886 abolition of slavery on the island to the 1959 Cuban Revolution. In her book, Hicks rigorously interrogates ideologies of racial democracy and explores the limits of class analysis and socialism during this era. Though black women's labor emerges as an emblematic piece of Cuban progress, Hicks elucidates the mismatch between the national narrative and the lived realities of Cuban domestic workers.

With her focus on domestic service, Hicks's work offers a fascinating take on the centrality of emotions and violence to the emerging formation of Cuban identity, or what is commonly referred to as *cubanidad*, in the decades following abolition. As Hicks writes, "The raceless *cubanidad* the island publicly espoused and the racially stratified counter-*cubanidad* that domestic service upheld ran on parallel tracks, each ensuring the other's continued course over decades" (10). To be sure, this performance of racialized and gendered intimate labor and its relationship to affective ties has broad implications for Cuban national identity.

Historically, domestic chains of global labor have heavily relied upon affective ties to maintain hierarchies of power. The Cuban case is no exception. Domestic servants were (and still are) often described by their employers to be one of the family. Hicks explains the significance of this discourse, noting that "[t]his emotional logic had to do with race relations in Cuba, dictating that racial interactions between Cubans of African and European descent be harmonious, affectionate and familial" (73). Leveraging the accounts of domestic workers in the archive, Hicks identifies this commonplace racial democracy narrative as fully compatible with the Cuban nationalist project. From the abolition era forward, Hicks traces the evolution of Cuban labor history and the place of black women service workers within it. She shows that despite economic and political transformations in Cuba, the Caribbean, and beyond, social dynamics of race and gender stubbornly endure.

The connections tying intimacy, racial democracy, and national unity together were replicated during the 1959 Cuban Revolution. After Fidel Castro took power, paid household work in Cuba was seen as anti-revolutionary. In turn, domestic workers were perceived as a lowly group in need of socialist liberation from their oppression. However, this viewpoint overlooks both the resistance of individual domestics and the collective organizing they carried out within the *Sindicato del Servicio Doméstico* (Union of Domestic Workers), an organization that was founded in 1939, a full two decades before the revolution. This union furthered the nationalist narrative of domestic worker intimacy with the evolving socialist Cuban state. As Hicks comments, "... the visual reality of the women's blackness combined with their and others' narration of Fidel's action on behalf of domestics collapsed any space between Afro-Cubans after the revolution and Fidel himself. *He helped them; Fidel helped black Cubans.* Once more,

intrapersonal intimacy overtook a narrative that prioritized self-determined activism” (138). Domestic workers’ position as intimately tied to the state helped to facilitate Afro-Cuban inclusion into the political project of revolution while diminishing domestic workers’ autonomy and agency. Not only does Hicks’s analysis open a new and perspective of the Cuban revolution, but she also sheds further light on the gender and racial dimensions of an emerging Cuban identity.

In *Silver Women*, U.S. empire, gender, race, and labor collide as historian Joan Flores-Villalobos reexamines the construction of the Panama Canal in the early twentieth century. Black West Indian women are the central protagonists in Flores-Villalobos’s account, and through their history, the author demonstrates how the U.S. pursued not just economic and geopolitical advantage for itself through the Canal; it also created a social engineering project that sought to reproduce a U.S. racial and class order in Central America and the Caribbean. Although the construction of the Panama Canal was a multiracial, multinational, and multicultural effort, laboring black West Indian women faced anti-black sexism while traversing borders and geographies in search of work opportunities.

Black women’s labor, whether as cooks, laundresses, domestic workers, or other service workers, was essential to the daily functions of construction within the Panama Canal Zone. However, as in Brazil and Cuba, the logic of slavery, rooted in a devaluation of black women’s work in the region, informed the wage discrimination they encountered. Flores-Villalobos states, “Though Black women’s entrepreneurship was still embedded in a colonial economy, it nevertheless marked a departure from British expectations about the appropriate transition to free labor, namely, their desire for a dependent wage labor force still tied to the plantation” (27). Despite these conditions, black women sought out creative ways to move and alternative forms of labor to sustain themselves and their families.

One of the strongest examples of black West Indian women’s resistance was their opposition to the roll system. The roll system was a systemic stratification of labor. While white American workers benefited from higher wages on the roll system gold tier, the “silver” status of black West Indian men meant they were paid lower wages for performing the same work. Black West Indian women rejected the system and innovatively pushed back against it. As Flores-Villalobos writes, “Americans may have established the racialized standards of labor value in the Canal Zone through the roll system, but black West Indian women consistently evaded the absoluteness of that system by manipulating American desire for their services and valuing their own work above the prices Americans expected” (135). With full understanding of the indispensable nature of their work, West Indian women worked around a racially discriminatory labor market to earn their rightful pay.

Villalobos-Flores’s book is captivating and provocatively written. The text is analytically rich and incisive, and yet, at times, it reads like a novel. Readers may find themselves cheering for the black West Indian women as they resisted or confronted moral panics, hyper-surveillance, aggression, and wage suppression. Although colonial norms and imperial powers attempt to contain their existence in the Canal Zone within a narrow construct of “respectability,” the black women who are the central actors in Flores-Villalobos’s work build their own worlds to push back against racialized and gendered repression.

These three books on black women's labor have been released at a critical moment. In recent years labor movements have carried out collective actions, including strikes, throughout the Américas. Following the emergence of movements for Black lives around the hemisphere, including *Reaja ou Será Morto* and *Las Vidas Negras Importan*, there have also been simultaneous calls for greater attention to the ways in which antiblackness permeates collective struggles around issues of labor, gender, sexuality, and immigration.

Each project touches upon black women's sexuality and the policing of their bodies with limited state protection for their livelihoods. Their labor as domestics, caregivers, and cooks compels their existence in public spaces in ways that traditionally Eurocentric standards of femininity, respectability, and moral uprightness do not allow for black women. Despite the vulnerabilities that these authors clearly show in their relationship to state practices, these black women laborers are also punished for their resistance to the racial and gender norms that exclude them.

The audacious spirit of these laboring black women was stunning given the scope of the constant scrutiny, violence, and oppression they routinely faced. With their painstaking research, each author was careful to uplift the humanity of these black women. In each book, they show that black women workers are innovative. They take up collective action within their communities to support one another. They forge informal kinship networks and friendships, which also create pathways for their survival. Because of this, they are empowered to collectively resist.

The analysis told in all three books will be beneficial to students of comparative black women's labor history across Latin America and the Caribbean. Moreover, the historical focus of each work contributes to current conversations around changing labor relations and protections for racialized groups. For students and teachers of intersectional race, class, and gender scholarship, either of these texts would be a satisfying read. Indeed, each of these scholars has ensured that the efforts of these tireless black women have been restored to their rightful, central place in the literature.

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Notes

1. The English translation of the book title is *A Foot in the Kitchen: A Socio-historical Perspective on the Work of Black Women Cooks in Brazil* (2022). All quoted English translations in this essay are mine.
2. The original title is *Histórias de Tia Nastácia*. Monteiro Lobato, *Histórias de Tia Nastácia* (São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1995).
3. The original chapter title is "Cozinheiras negras, chefs de cuisine brancos: o trabalho culinário profissional no Brasil no século 20".

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