

BOOK REVIEWS

NEIGHBORHOOD, FESTIVAL, AND ETHNOGRAPHY: THE AFRICAN DIASPORA IN THE AMERICAS

Inside El Barrio: A Bottom-Up View of Neighborhood Life in Castro's Cuba. Henry Louis Taylor, Jr. Sterling, VA: Kumarian Press, 2009. xviii + 217 pp. (Cloth US\$72.00; Paper US\$26.50)

Kings for Three Days: The Play of Race and Gender in an Afro-Ecuadorian Festival. Jean Muteba Rahier. Interpretations of Culture in the Millennium Series [No. 8]. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013. xiii + 201 pp. (Cloth US\$95.00; Paper US\$27.00)

The Cooking of History: How Not to Study Afro-Cuban Religion. Stephan Palmié. Chicago, IL, and London, UK: The University of Chicago Press, 2013. xii + 360 pp. (Cloth US\$85.00; Paper US\$27.50; EBook US\$7.00-27.50)

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The books under review have three common characteristics. Their authors are anthropologists and university professors. The anthropologists conducted research projects based, for the most part, on fieldwork using ethnographic methods. Each author focuses on African descendants in a specific country within the Atlantic World of the African Diaspora.

Henry Louis Taylor, Jr. is professor of Urban and Regional Planning and founding director of the Center for Urban Studies at the State University of New York, Buffalo. His carefully considered findings and understandings rest on an ethnographic investigation of life in one neighborhood of Cuba's capital city, Havana. Jean Muteba Rahier is an associate professor of Anthropology, and director of the African and African Diaspora Studies Program at Florida International

University. He takes the reader on an ethnographic journey to an annual festival celebrated by two separate Afro-Ecuadorian communities of the Esmeralda region, noted in Ecuador for a high concentration of African-descent inhabitants.

In contrast to Taylor and Rahier, University of Chicago professor Stephan Palmié offers a major critique of social science research on Afro-Cuban religion. Foreign and Cuban social scientists, along with practitioners of Afro-Cuban religions, Palmié emphasizes, have participated in the development and use of methodological procedures from which social scientists repeatedly derive understandings of reality. In collaboration, Palmié then charges, the two groups propagated realities constructed by social science research as "truth," because relevant information had been gathered by methodological procedures deemed "legitimate" in scientific communities. According to Palmié, this was the process whereby the reality or truth of *Regla de Ocha*, one Cuban religious tradition "identified" and "constructed" by researchers, was scientifically confirmed.

Together, these three investigative endeavors illuminate and provide additional insights into community life for African descendants in two Spanish-speaking Caribbean countries within the Atlantic portion of the African Diaspora. However, caution! Whether one first reads about Ecuadorian celebratory experiences or neighborhood life in Havana, Palmié's deeper questioning of the reality or truth and authenticity of ethnographic field research reports is the most provocative work. Readers of all three books will find themselves thinking hard and long about Palmié's argument, because it disrupts the very idea that "a priori" veracity characterizes anthropology's long-held disciplinary premises regarding ethnography and its "thick" reporting of human cultural activities. This point does not minimize the significance of Taylor's wonderful examination of how the Cuban Revolution has produced a "people centered society" in the midst of socioeconomic hardships that have shredded the fiber of many a society. Nor are Rahier's descriptions of a common annual festival, celebrated differently in two Afro-Ecuadorian communities, diminished by

Palmié's exploration of sociopolitical factors that have affected academic research and social science's theoretical postulations about things black and religious in the Americas' African Diaspora.

Taylor devotes some 140 pages in one of his book's six chapters to reporting ethnographic findings from San Isidro, one of Havana's Afro-Cuban neighborhoods. His account of well-designed field research and his thorough descriptions of neighborhood life are sandwiched within five chapters presenting a dynamic and otherwise excellent analysis of Cuba's emergence as a 21st-century "people centered society," whose socialist development sharply contrasts with individualistic capitalist development in its dominating neighbor, the USA. I lean toward agreeing with Taylor's assessment that an "ideological duality emerged between the *clases populares* and *clases económicas* over the type of society that should be built" (p. 178) after the 1898 close of Cuban struggles for national independence from Spain. The USA intruded into the final 19th-century struggle, Taylor reminds us, before dominating the island's progress for 60 years.

Throughout *Inside El Barrio*, Taylor employs "dualism," a well-used concept in social science research, as core concept of sociocultural and political-economic development in Cuba for nearly a century. However, he employs the idea in refreshing and insightful ways as he critically analyzes the historical facts of Cuba's growth and its effects on urban Afro-Cubans. Taylor's epilogue, "Where Does Cuba Go From Here: The Post-Castro Era," summarizes his ethnographic findings by noting that Cuba's dualism is "the 'real' fight taking place behind the socialism versus capitalism debate, and it should be acknowledged as such." Pinpointing relevant facts, he also proclaims that "Today, *Cubanos* throughout the diaspora, including Miami Cubans, are participants in this ongoing ideological struggle" (p. 179).

As the subtitle of Jean Muteba Rahier's book states, he focuses on the "Play," as his respondents reenact their Afro-Esmeraldian Festival of the Kings' celebrations. His concern is with the significance and reciprocal influences of race and gender at two sites as each community presents its interpretation of the "Play." Propositions about the "Play" appear throughout the text, 174 pages divided into six chapters and illustrated by 20 "figures," actually maps, images, and photos of village activities. The book closes with a useful glossary of Esmeraldian Spanish terms, chapter notes (3 pp.), references (12 pp.), and an index.

Conceptualizations of race and gender are generally worthy of careful investigation, but this is particularly true in the Ecuadorian context for which we have relatively few first-hand reports in English. However, as I read Rahier's book, it evoked a sense of descriptive "overload." He aims, it appears, to report every detail (historical or contemporary) not only about every location, participant, and activity in the two villages but also about every aspect of their Festival of the Kings performances. I could not discern where Rahier clarified the major concepts—race and gender—despite his repeated claims that descriptive details directly illustrated those concepts. Without clear definitions of concepts and empirical evidence to illustrate them, a plethora of descriptive details neither produces conceptual clarification nor helps to develop theoretical propositions.

Rahier carries his excessively descriptive approach to the final sentence of the book's conclusion: "It is therefore absolutely necessary to pay careful attention to the always original local context that surrounds and supports a particular festivity, ritual, or play or any other cultural practice" (Rahier 2013:174). I wonder why this important issue was not raised in the introduction. Such a late shift in focus compromises the book's goal of investigating important concepts systematically and lucidly reporting the results. In fact, Rahier's discussion of the two Afro-Ecuadorian communities' management of pivotal race and gender issues leaves this reader questioning whether they are truly important elements of Esmeraldian identity.

Rahier also succumbs to overuse of ideas such as sexual dichotomy (p. 59), public reflexivity, liminal time (p. 94), and semiotic competence (p. 97) without explanatory definitions, working or otherwise. Although perhaps familiar to anthropologists, the meanings of these ideas may differ for social scientists practicing other disciplines. In contrast, he defines "serial polygyny" more rigorously in chapter 5, "Race, Sexuality, and Gender." The difficulty there is that the discussion of the phenomenon falls short, because Rahier again elevates the importance of describing "specific contexts" above analyses of the three concepts that illustrate their significance in Esmeraldian beliefs, values, or practices. As already mentioned, I do not subscribe to Rahier's proposition about describing local contexts, and my criticism of his reporting style leads directly to consideration of Stephan Palmié's critique of research on Regla de Ocha in Cuba.

Consistent with many of Palmié's other works, *The Cooking of History* shares his studied analysis and assessment of how the "trans-atlantic [*sic*] blur of inappropriately aggregated data, taken at face value, suggests the relative insignificance of space and time when it comes to detecting a distinct Yoruba ethos, in Africa or abroad" (p. 50). Although Palmié does an outstanding job of engaging expressions of this ethos in Cuba, he focuses on the reification of Regla de Ocha as a religious tradition. His proposition, set forth in the introduction, is that whether or not Yoruba traditions existed as a "religion," social scientists, specifically anthropologists, have led the way in constructing the Yoruba tradition as a reality and as the origin of an Afro-Cuban religion. Chapter 1, "On Yoruba Origins, for Example..." elaborates on this proposition. Palmié's cooking metaphor thus aptly expresses the conceptual meaning of reification.

The book's 372 pages are distributed among Acknowledgements, Notes on Spelling, an introduction, five chapters, a "Coda," an epilogue, notes, references, and an index. As usual, Palmié has done extensive research on antecedents to Yoruba tradition practices in Brazil, which established a "discursive boundary object that has come to mediate between two communities of practice—priests of the tradition and anthropologists" (pp. 35–54). He takes this proposition to Cuba, where, he contends, the two practice communities generated an interface wherein the "discursive boundary object" first emerged, and then harnessed it in projects pertaining to their own social worlds. The interface and discursive object, Palmié continues, produced infrastructures of scholarly and priestly careers from which, with the advent of an "ethnographic interface," launched further boundary objects into a circulation of enormous productivity (pp. 53–54).

Palmié's discussion of the Yoruba tradition's construction in Cuba strikes me as historically accurate and compelling: he contends the discursive boundary object's mediation began around 1909. In chapter 2, he identifies lawyer Fernando Ortiz (1881–1969) as a key figure among Cubans who forged links between the island's communities of scholars and practitioner-priests. However, he criticizes Ortiz's writings (based on frequent consultations with reigning Cuban priests) about Africa-inspired practices as early examples of the "Cooking of History." Palmié devotes chapter 3, "Or 'Syncretism,' for that Matter..." to details of that conclusion while engaging ideas about

"syncretism" and controversies associated with that concept. In "The Color of the Gods: Notes on a Question Better Left Unasked" (chapter 4), Palmié provides a broader discussion of this analytical arena and considers the arena's extension into the virtual realm in "Afronauts of the Virtual Atlantic: The Giant African Snail Incident, the War of the Oriatés, and the Plague of Orichas" (chapter 5). He brings the cooking metaphor full circle in the coda, "Ackee and Saltfish versus *Amalá con Quimbombó*, or More Foods for Thought."

Palmié's meticulous attention to participants and processes involved, he claims, in creating Cuba's "Yoruba" tradition leads him to question the validity and integrity of social scientists' research findings about the existence of Regla de Ocha as a "religion" and, by extension, the veracity of any "truth(s)" allegedly derived from ethnographic work. It seems that Palmié has been "percolating" ideas about participants, processes, and consequences of social science research, especially ethnographic fieldwork, on Afro-Cuban religion for some time. Unlike Taylor's and Rahier's books, Palmié's book is not an easy read. Written in a style that entwines both common and uncommon ideas, its sentences often become convoluted and difficult to follow. The benefit of continuing to read is that, in challenging reification, Palmié consistently employs irrefutable sources of established literature and knowledge based on ethnographic data.

But why does Palmié stop with religion? Social scientists are equally responsible for helping to reify such socially constructed concepts as "race" and, clearly, anthropologists have played a major role in propagating existing political notions related to that social concept. Palmié's reification challenge also reminded me of "democracy" in the USA, a mythical idea that has been constructed into reality. Or consider our previous understanding of "gender." Would not race, democracy, and gender be among the great "reified" concepts in contemporary use? What should we do about them?

Graduate students and undergraduates as well as faculty and researchers should read *Inside El Barrio*, which challenges most conventional and many academic misunderstandings about Cuba. Advanced graduate students may benefit from probing *Kings for Three Days* and thereby develop a more serious appreciation of field research tasks as they prepare for dissertation work. Yet, students reading *The Cooking of History* will require

guidance from faculty who have an extensive vocabulary, expansive knowledge of intellectual ideas as well as the logic of social science methods, and more than generalized familiarity with study of religion in the Atlantic World of the African Diaspora. I believe Palmié was writing just for that specialized audience. Most of the rest of us may lack sufficient background knowledge, or be too easily confused by abstract language, to grasp the full significance of his arguments. I wish it were not so!

DELIBERATING DIGITAL AND POLITICAL INFRASTRUCTURES OF RACE, NATION, GENDER, CLASS, AND POWER

¿Venceremos? The Erotics of Black Self-Making in Cuba. Jafari S. Allen. Perverse Modernities Series. Durham, NC, and London, UK: Duke University Press, 2011. xiii + 241 pp. (Cloth US\$84.95; Paper US\$23.95)

Human Rights and Gender Violence: Translating International Law into Local Justice. Sally Engle Merry. Chicago Series in Law and Society. Chicago, IL, and London, UK: The University of Chicago Press, 2006. xi + 174 pp. (Cloth US\$82.50; Paper US\$30.00; EBook [2009] US\$7.00-30.00)

Race, Class, Power, and Organizing in East Baltimore: Rebuilding Abandoned American Communities. Marisela B. Gomez. New York, NY: Lexington Books, 2013. xv + 274 pp. (Cloth US\$95.00; Paper US\$44.99; EBook US\$44.99)

eFieldnotes: The Makings of Anthropology in the Digital World. Roger Sanjek and Susan W. Tratner (eds.). Haney Foundation Series. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. x + 296 pp. (Paper US\$34.95; EBook US\$34.95)

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This essay queries the direction of cultural anthropological research in a “digital world” and the importance of ethnographic analyses (or analyses

informed by ethnography), given this digital world’s myriad forms of political disempowerment. Prompting the queries are four books—three single-authored monographs and an edited volume—published between 2006 and 2016. Jafari S. Allen considers how the Cuban state’s policies on race and sexuality affect the fashioning of national identity. Sally Engle Merry’s multi-sited ethnography explores cooperation among international political bodies to create a global discourse on gender and human rights, and support its implementation. Yet her ethnography simultaneously emphasizes the systemic disconnection between this global-gendered human rights discourse and local perspectives that reveal problems in translations of the discourse, as well as in its scope, scale, and legal implementation. Marisela Gomez’s multimodal, multisourced analysis investigates citizen and community advocacy in East Baltimore, where institutional power facilitates urban disinvestment. Roger Sanjek and Susan Tratner’s edited volume, divided into five parts, features chapters by 16 contributors who reflect on the consequences of using digital technology in fieldwork and other research settings.

The four books deal, to different degrees, with social contextualizations of system-driven disempowerment, individual and group agency, and new challenges of political organization. This review essay connects these themes to raise general questions about cultural anthropological research design and research methods in a “digital world” but focuses on questions relevant to cultural anthropologists working on African diasporic subjects and populations. More specifically, it closely examines “digital world” infrastructure and new political challenges of particular importance to African diasporic cultural anthropologists in order to highlight our research interests, fieldwork methods, and “digital risks” to them.

Global shifts in the presence, use, and increasing importance of digital technology devices, changes in Internet communication and media engagement, and creation of digital repositories and archives, are important considerations in what I view as bifurcated issues of historical and digital exclusion. “The mortality of human beings is linked to the potential mortality of data,” Martin Slama (*eFieldnotes*, p. 103) observes, and therefore it is not only merely anthropologists who worry about data loss but also their interlocutors. This presents an important problem space for ethnographic or ethnographically oriented analyses of forms of political-economic disempowerment.