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Black Women Against the Land Grab: The Fight for Racial Justice in Brazil by Keisha-Khan Perry (review)

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NEW RELEASE BOOK REVIEW

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Keisha-Khan Perry, *Black Women Against the Land Grab: The Fight for Racial Justice in Brazil*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013. 224 pp.

Keisha-Khan Perry's *Black Women Against the Land Grab: The Fight for Racial Justice in Brazil* focuses on the relations of race to land and water resources in Salvador, Bahia. She analyzes the struggles of black women activists of the Gamboa de Baixo neighborhood against displacement. The contests with urban developers take place as part of a long history of dislocation of the city's black residents to urban peripheries. Perry shows how these women resist and intervene in this history. The activists of Gamboa de Baixo organize themselves as black women to gain political power. Perry's book is an analysis of how they do so. It is also an analysis of why they must. Without hyperbole and in ethnographic detail, we learn that the central struggle of the Gamboa de Baixo activists is one of survival. Perry details how the activists pursue and realize coalitions, devise strategy and tactics for protests, as well as gather and share data towards collective action within and across black communities in Salvador. The women also navigate asymmetries within their communities, across class and gender lines, as well as divergences between members of the neighborhood belonging to different waves of migration.

While reading, I was reminded of Gil Scott-Heron's poem, "Who Will Survive in America?" The poem similarly revels in awakening to the fictions of history and confronting the unrealized promises of liberal democratic freedom. Perry's book is more hopeful than Scott-Heron's work. The women of Gamboa de Baixo make gains. They hold on. They believe in their struggle as citizens of Brazil. The stakes made clear in Perry's book effectively put the question to Brazil: "Who Will Survive?" This occurs not

as a point of comparison with the US or other regions of the black diaspora, but as a point of fact lent by the commonalities and particularities of Brazil.

Black Women Against the Land Grab is an excellent contribution to scholarship on race in Brazil in its focus on actors who consciously act towards countering material precariousness as politicized black subjects. Famously, Brazil's version of racial ideology and racial hierarchy operates through colorism, which presents what has been called "racial malleability" or ambiguity in which no one is completely monoracial (Pinho 2009:40). In Brazil, one aspires to move away from identification with blackness through phenotypic characteristics or ways of acting that approximate whiteness. Yet, as Vargas (2004) argues, such colorism logically presupposes a binary of black-white. He writes,

There would be no color multiplicity if it were not for the awareness of the races that generated them. Indeed, the common saying that "*passou de branco preto é*," literally meaning "if you're beyond white [or, if you can't pass as white] then you're black," reveals that underlying the color spectrum is a clear understanding of a white/non-white binary system that determines social privileges based on race. (2004:449)

Perry's approach refreshingly takes as its point of departure something like what Fanon (1967) referred to as the "fact of blackness"—for example, when Fanon writes, "I am given no chance. I am over determined from without" (1967:116). Perry states directly that she is rebutting scholarship that treats race (and blackness) as primarily ambiguous or subject to self-questioning and debate. The black women activists of Gamboa de Baixo explicitly articulate their mobilizations for land ownership as a confrontation with racial and gendered oppression. Such consciousness recurs at moments of interaction with employers, meetings with public officials, and other points of encounter both quotidian and unique to moments of protests.

Perry's book invites more scholarship on the formation of political subjectivities by processes of political and economic transformation in Brazil. She describes the construction of a type of politics in which there is a preference for collective social transformation by the Gamboa de Baixo activists. Perry writes that for black women,

...ultimately what they have to gain in better housing and land rights outweighs what little recourse they may individually gain in jobs or other goods in exchange for abandoning the struggle against the state. This knowledge fuels black women's political interest in claiming rights that transform their social conditions and form a new, equal society...The challenge remains, however, to negotiate between personal and communal transformations as part of their overall political projects. This challenge reflects a complex relationship to gender and racial oppression that black women experience as invisible workers, while underlining their vision for liberation from this form of enslavement. (166)

I wanted more of this line of analysis in the book. When Fanon discusses the "fact of blackness," he writes of the necessity of psychological repair. The colonial mind is not just oppressed; it is hurt. *Black Women Against the Land Grab* left me asking how this repair and healing occurs through or manifests in the Gamboa de Baixo women's activism. Perry shows how through action, mobilizing, and organizing, these women seek to overcome the material hardships incurred by regimes of racialized and gendered oppression. In that this resolves itself into efforts at democratic collective participation, the Gamboa de Baixo activists sometimes appear more as Rousseauian liberals than Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* revolutionaries. The activists are seemingly not afflicted with colorism nor bowed by domestic violence, which is good. Yet, I would like to have seen more about how this comes about, i.e., the social processes through which this occurs.

This oversight is, in many respects, explained by Perry's detailed ethnographic account of activists and black women's activism in Gamboa de Baixo, a worthy focus that has received insufficient attention in recent work on Brazil. Incorporation of more details and analysis of non-activists and non-activism might help to contextualize the activists, their actions, and their political consciousness. For example, Perry describes incidents of police brutality.

[The police] harass those in their path and are notorious for kicking small children or shoving old women out of their way. No one is exempt from their wrath...Some feel the police are doing their jobs, whereas others see their actions as proof of overt abuses of power.

But it is clear that the police violate the people more than they protect them. (122)

This is an important observation to be sure. I am left to wonder where are the voices of the people she mentions who say that the police are “doing their job.” In giving space almost exclusively to the activists’ voices, we are left with less material with which to better understand the emergence of the consciences behind those voices.

Here, more analysis along the lines of religious significations of Afro-Brazilian religions like Candomblé might also have been helpful to understand the activists’ care of the self and community. Analysis of this type comes through effectively in Perry’s attention to the spiritual importance of water to the residents’ sense of place. The significations of water relay the history in which the community is embedded, memories and connections to Africa and diaspora beyond the boundaries of the neighborhood. That Perry explicitly forgoes more extensive analysis of Afro-Brazilian religious significations takes away some of the complexity of these women’s formation as political, post-colonial subjects. She does not directly address how we are to understand these women in relation to liberal notions of citizenship, though the women insist on their political inclusion as citizens and pursue protests invoking their constitutional rights. How can we reconcile liberal participatory engagement and the fundamental existential violence of liberal society premised on taken-for-granted, though often unacknowledged, ethno-racial and gendered categories? I was unsure of what becomes of the violent fragmentation within racialized subjects wrought with colonial legacies of anti-black racism and gender bias. How is this factored into the overcoming sought by the Gamboa de Baixo activists? In the book, the answers redound towards liberal participatory citizenship, becoming ever more engaged citizenry. More insight, perhaps, lies in analysis along the lines of the significations of land and water with spirituality that Perry touches upon too briefly.

Finally, Perry invokes Lefebvre to argue that the ongoing racial subjugation of black urban residents takes place though the capitalist production of space. Lefebvre (1974) asserted that such production occurs in the material organization of objects in the world which take place through ideology at the level of understanding. The activists of Gamboa de Baixo struggle over the spatial order (which, as Lefebvre points out, is always a necessarily violent struggle for hegemony in the context of capitalism).

Perry's book invites more work on how taken-for-granted understandings of space (in its production of subjects that are supposedly at once universal and particular—racial/gendered/classed) occur through a logic of capital accumulation in the reorganization of daily life. Such processes are evident in the historical changes she describes, such as the construction of the walls separating Gamboa de Baixo from wealthier bordering neighborhoods and roads that facilitate transport of workers from peripheral areas to city centers to work, for example. That such transformations are embedded into the historical reorganization of capitalist relations of production (e.g., rural to urban migration, transnational flow of capital, etc.) are central to an analysis of the formation of particularly racial and gendered political subjectivities. Perry shows how the spatial order is enacted through elements such as the discursive depictions of black residents and neighborhoods as unhygienic, dangerous, and criminal. As Perry aptly explains, such characterizations are hardly new. It would be interesting for scholars to further pursue what is historically particular about the capitalist development of recent decades in its neoliberal guise that produces space as such.

This line of analysis would link up nicely with Perry's critique of culturalist movements for recognition by black activists. She argues that they are products of state adaptation to recognize racism in Brazil, and thus set state delimited terms for politics. Perry notes that cultural recognition elides, or perhaps side steps, the question of the social and material outcomes of anti-black racism. The focus on the production of asymmetries in the material well-being of the city's black residents occurs in the spatial organization of the society. Thus, land is a central point of struggle for the communities of Gamboa de Baixo. Those who would see residents displaced, including private developers and state officials, seek to enact visions of development in which the inhabitants of the neighborhood simply disappear. They vanish, for example, in the maps and drawings of planners and potential investors. Such production of social order are lived by the Gamboa de Baixo residents in their marginalization from road projects and housing construction, hyper surveillance, and violent state policing. There is much to gain from Perry's analysis of how the production of space structures certain terms for political subjectivities and forms of action over others. The activists' focus on land ownership both puts them in line with widespread struggles for land titles across Brazil (e.g., *quilombo* and indigenous movements, the Landless Workers' Movement) that have raged for decades and marks a moment of intervention unique to the present. The

quest for land titles both butts settling for mere cultural recognition and conforms to an historical moment in which achievement of land titles are the limits of politics under neoliberal governance.

Black Women Against the Land Grab is an excellent treatment of the production of racialized space in Brazil. This book will be a useful contribution to future scholarship concerning anti-racist resistance and struggles for land and water resources across the black diaspora. ■

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