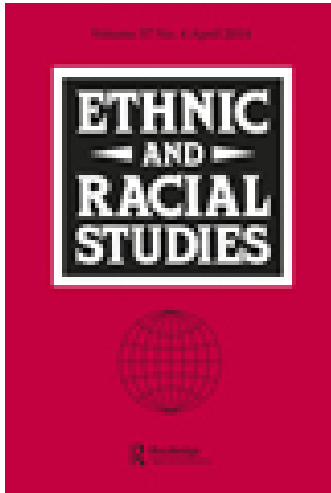


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Black women against the land grab: the fight for racial justice in Brazil

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BOOK REVIEW

Black women against the land grab: the fight for racial justice in Brazil, by Keisha-Khan Y. Perry, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2013, xxi + 240 pp., US\$25.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-8166-8324-65

With several real-life characters, such as Dona Iraci, Ana Cristina and Ritinha, and even herself, Keisha-Khan Perry offers the reader a detailed and moving book. As a writer passionate for a cause, her narrative has soul and Perry reveals what it means to be black.

The scene of the fight against racism and classism of land grab is the city of Salvador, Bahia, north-eastern Brazil. With the second-largest population of African descent in the world, and known as ‘the capital of happiness’, Salvador is the city of worldwide reference to carnival festivities.

However, there is a great paradox in this ‘false joy’ that benefits one group over another. As can be seen in the streets on February, the elements of the Afro-descendant culture, such as capoeira and candomblé, attract the most media attention. However, during the remaining months, these same elements are marginalized from what is considered normative.

In this book, the neighbourhood of Gamboa de Baixo is the real-life setting for the struggle of poor black women against social and racial inequalities in Brazil. Perry offers us an ethnographic reading of why there is an interest in keeping black people ‘out of sight’ in the urban centres of Salvador. Through the combination of state-sponsored institutional racism and the goal of ethnic cleansing, the author demonstrates the ‘cleansing process’ through the demolition of homes and eviction of residents from downtown to the city outskirts. Perry portrays insightfully the territorial division between black people and white people and denounces a split city.

While in the USA racial prejudice seems to be related to origin or ancestry, in Brazil it relates to the appearance of a person, as advocated by Oracy Nogueira from the University of São Paulo. In USA, you are considered black if you have a black relative, compared with Brazil, where a black person is identified by a stereotype based on phenotype.

Although there is a strong speech about the lack of one “black avatar”, based on the idea of miscegenation and racial democracy in Brazil by Gilberto Freyre, Perry’s book comprises a sombre spectrum of racism and the fallacy of this theory. For example, she describes several studies about Brazilians’ racial self-identification that demonstrate many shades of colour – over 100 – as an important marker of race and identity in Brazil. One thing is right: there is no good in being considered black.

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The lacking of a model for an 'authentic blackness in Brazil' is dismantled by the existence of strong prejudice and discrimination expressed through the lack of blacks in power. According to Perry, Brazilians still represent the remains of colonization and exploitation from the discovery of Brazil and thus the blacks are still stuck with an unequal social status.

For the author, race as a useful category of analysis does not reflect the questioning by the minority group about their subordinate status. Portrayed as poor, marginal, dangerous and servants, the image of blacks is reinforced by the media, and according to the author, this serves as justification for police violence against them.

If racial democracy exists ideologically in the discourse of the Brazilian people, and it reports an impossibility to distinguish black people and white people, it is through an analysis of police behaviour that these differences and the blackness are "found". Perry demonstrates familiarity with the social setting of racism in Brazil and states that in practice there are still barriers to be overcome between the 'worlds' of black people and white people there.

Through its militancy in the neighbourhood of Gamboa de Baixo, Perry observes another aspect of racism in Brazil: its strong relationship with sexism. For the author, there is a triple discrimination of black women and the poor, expressed through the domestication of the work of black women, and the invisibility of women's leadership in the fight for housing and against land grab. Still related to the private domains, the voices and even the cries of these women seem to be silenced by the lack of interest by the public authorities to offer better living conditions, as guaranteed in the 1988 Brazilian Constitution and in the Declaration of Human Rights 1948. The protection by the government in Brazil is sexist, elitist and targeted to wealthier classes.

When fighting against land grabbing, poor and black women are part of a social and political scenario previously belonging to men. Awareness of gender and class in the neighbourhood movement is comparable with the black movement in Brazil.

Thus, Perry denounces the standard removal of people – poor and black – to distant suburbs through violent eviction in the name of urban development. She makes a bold and brave gesture in taking up the fight of those women as her fight, and gives us an emotional description of the women, of their homes, their routines, their names and surnames, and, above all, of the faces who lived 'inside' the houses, and whose lives completely changed after they were evicted.

Black Women against the Land Grab is a book about the strength of black women and about their power of change through social movements and political activity. Gamboa de Baixo is a neighbourhood in Salvador, Bahia, but could be anywhere. Perry describes the situation of diaspora experienced by thousands of poor black women in the world, who are on the sidelines of society and waiting for justice. As she says, the struggle to transform disadvantageous social conditions against injustice and for the right to live with dignity and freedom must continue through the effort made by participation and leadership of black women as a political force.

This is a book aimed at social scientists, anthropologists, social psychologists, feminists and other researchers and students who are interested in understanding how identities of class, race and gender are important in social transformation. Through identification and participation in social movements, these women show empowerment in the fight against social inequalities.

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