MANY RIVERS TO CROSS

Black Migrations in Brazil and the Caribbean

Edited by

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Foreword

Darién J. Davis
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> It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness… one ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.
>
> W. E. B. Dubois, *The Soul of Black Folks*

There is a direct connection between the pioneering work of W.E. B. Dubois and this important volume entitled *Many Rivers to Cross: Black Migrations in Brazil and the Caribbean*. Dubois developed a theory of dual consciousness, or "two-ness," to describe the African American experience. He focused on North American territorial boundaries, but he also thought about the role of Black migration. In his 1917 article in *Crisis*, the official magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Dubois anticipated the impact of the movement of Black Americans from the south to the north. This phenomenon would later be called 'The Great Migration.' Dubois would also become increasingly interested in the global African diaspora and Pan-Africanism. This volume engages and expands upon many of Dubois' ideas, including dual and multiple consciousness, transnationalism, and other 'great migrations.' By focusing on Brazil and the Caribbean, two geographical regions that have received more African migrants than anywhere else in the Atlantic world, this work offers students multiple possibilities to expand their knowledge on Black migrations in the global south.

My excitement about this volume connects to my incessant quest to find and promote good sources about African descendants. Like Dubois and many scholars studying the Black experience, my research was initially nationally bound. I began my scholarly career by studying nation-building and race in Cuba, the largest Caribbean nation. Learning Portuguese and moving to Brazil in the late 1980s exposed me to a rich new historiography and way of understanding the Black experience from a comparative perspective. Meeting Abdias do Nascimento and many other Afro-Brazilians interested in making diasporic connections helped shape my scholarly trajectory and that of many of my peers. Our attendance at multi-lingual conferences and connections to networks preparing for the United Nations World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance in 2001 also advanced

our understanding of the commonalities and differences of the transnational Black experience.

In one of my conversations with Nascimento, he spoke warmly of his friendships and admiration for many African American and Caribbean writers and activists, including Marcus Garvey, who wanted to form a branch of his Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in Brazil, and Léon Damas, one of the founders of the Negritude movement. Nascimento also talked about his connection to Africa and his participation in the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture in Dakar, Senegal, in 1977. He was interested in Brazil's migratory connections to the major regions associated with the trans-Atlantic slave trade well before the field of Black migration studies had emerged as a bonified field of inquiry. His self-imposed exile in the United States in the 1960s also allowed him to educate Americans on Afro-Brazilian struggles and expand the global reach of Black Studies.

Nevertheless, even in the early twenty-first century, most historians interested in diffusing knowledge about African descendants in Latin America and the Caribbean utilized the nation-state as the framework of analysis. Works on Afro-Mexicans, Afro-Columbians, and Afro-Cubans began to multiply. My 2000 work, *Afro-Brazilians Hoje*, followed this model. These works did not explicitly study the experience of Black Latin Americans through the lens of migration.

Indeed, before the wide availability of the internet as a research tool, historians had limited access to archives and historiographical information from different cultures. Travel constraints and limited language training also made transnational historical studies more challenging to produce. Moreover, history graduate programs often dissuaded students from pursuing comparative or transnational history dissertations. Nevertheless, edited volumes by historians from different national perspectives often allowed students to make broad cross-national comparisons and inter-regional connections. As early as the 1940s and 1950s, scholars such as Frank Tannenbaum attempted to compare Latin American slave societies with the United States. Stanley Elkins followed with a study that argued that slavery in the U. S. was a result of rampant capitalism. At the same time, in Latin America, the presence of the Church and laws of manumission engendered a different societal dynamic (Tannenbaum).[1] These broad comparisons did not explicitly examine slavery as forced migration. However, they helped pave the way for the fields of migration and diaspora studies that would later alter the Academy.

[1] See also Carl Degler, Neither Black nor White: Slavery and Race Relations in Brazil and the U.S (New York: Macmillan, 1971).

As students began to receive training in several languages and had access to multiple archival materials, historians such as Robert Brent Toplin in the 1970s and Rebecca Scott published comparative analyses of slavery, abolition, and race in English. Their work also appeared in edited volumes alongside other scholars (Toplin; Scott). These studies provided further knowledge for the early development of Black migration studies *avant la lettre*.

Students also benefitted from scholars who wrote on the global Black experience. Stuart Hall's essays on Black representation, policing, and transnational Black popular culture (Hall) and Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (1993) provided ways of thinking about diaspora, migration, and circulation of black cultures. However, the edited volume and special journal editions with diverse articles dedicated to the Black experience in Latin America and the Caribbean still represent the best forums for providing in-depth scholarship on the transnational connections among African descendants or Afro-Latin Americans. *No Longer Invisible: Afro-Latin Americans Today* (1996) was a significant milestone. That edited volume combined scholarly and journalistic views on the formation of diverse Afro-Latin American communities.

The edited publication *Beyond Slavery: The Multifaceted Legacy of Africans in Latin America and the Caribbean* explored different national themes from a continental perspective (Davis 2006). Black mobility from colonial to contemporary times emerged as a theme in this volume, but only one essay focused specifically on Black transnational migration. Bobby Vaughn and Ben Vinson III provide an insightful analysis of Afro-Mexican migrants in the United States. George Reid Andrew's 2004 *Afro-Latin America* was a pioneering work in a different sense, as it created a grand narrative for students to imagine a general field of Afro-Latin American studies. Still, Andrew's work does not focus on migration.

The development of the internet, digital access to archives, increased interconnectivity across national borders, and the strengthening of African-descendant networks allowed for more transnational research in the twenty-first century. At the same time, the development of diaspora theory, which explores the triad among homeland, host land, and diasporic groups, and migration studies, which examines push/pull factors and migration networks, helped historians to study migration and mobility throughout history.

Migration studies emerged as an interdisciplinary field of inquiry that analyzes forced and voluntary movement across regional, national, linguistic, and cultural boundaries. Migration studies also includes the movement of commodities, ideas, and cultural products. Works on Black migration by historians follow these trajectories, enhancing our knowledge and analysis of the mobility of racialized Black subjects or African descendants. *Many Rivers to*

Cross: Black Migrations in Brazil and the Caribbean represents a vital contribution to this scholarship.

According to voyages.org, between 1514 and 1866, Brazil received more than three million enslaved Africans, while the Caribbean received almost four and a half million. Those numbers represent a significant percentage of the diaspora compared to the seven thousand deported Africans who arrived in Europe and the over three hundred thousand forced to go to the United States. Despite the geographical proximity and shared histories of colonization, slavery, indentured servitude, and migration, few scholars have studied the commonalities between the Caribbean and Brazil or the exchanges between the two regions. This volume helps fill that lacuna and opens new dialogues about the transnational Black experience. *Many Rivers to Cross: Black Migrations in Brazil and the Caribbean* encourages readers to contemplate the implicit and explicit connections and commonalities through the lens of Black migration.

In her essay, "Defining Diaspora, Defining a Discourse," Kim Butler reminds us that the diasporic experience is predicated on the scattering of peoples over more than one generation and throughout various geographical experiences (Butler, 191-215). However, the literature on Black migrations in English has focused mainly on migration streams to the global north. Research on migrants in the United States is particularly robust. In her essay on Black American tourism to Bahia, Brazil, Patricia Pinho advises scholars to avoid overemphasizing the Black experience in the United States as the most critical experience. She suggests that students examine the multiple African diasporic experiences and their ways of seeing and experiencing the world (Pinho). In this project, Rocha has assembled a group of scholars who help us do just that.

In her introduction, Rocha explains that she chose 'Black migration' to speak about Brazil and the Caribbean because of the specific meaning of Blackness in the Brazilian and Caribbean contexts. Interrogating 'Black migration' in Brazil and the Caribbean as opposed to 'African descendants' or migrants of 'African descent' introduces a specific set of epistemological and discursive queries related to hybridity, visibility, and cultural African-ness, which has shaped both regions. "Black subjects," as scholars such as Mintz and Price tell us, are *de facto* Afro-Creoles, peoples forcibly separated from their specific ethnic African cultures who creatively drew on materials and practices from other cultures and reconstituted a new culture in the Americas (Mintz and Price). Stuart Hall also informs us that Black popular culture and, by extension, Blackness constitutes "a contradictory space," a site of strategic contestation that cannot be generalized but must be mapped out in specific historical and geographical spaces (Hall 1993, 51-52).

The essays in this volume do not explicitly engage the philosophical debates surrounding identity or color within the Black community. Instead, they

explore Black migrations through paradigms of agency, labor, production, and power within colonial, imperial, and national frameworks. The authors also center the experience of black subjects as migrants and as part of a diaspora with lasting connections to Africa, even as they carve out new lives and networks outside of Africa across generations. The chapters explore diverse types of migrations and employ different nomenclatures as they refer to forced enslaved and freed labor to internal migrations within national borders.

Forced migration was the driving force that undergirded the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The end of the slave trade slowed the flow of involuntary migration, but the illegal flow of captives continued clandestinely to the Caribbean and Brazil. For its duration, forced African migration provided local white elites with cheap labor for diverse economic, social, and cultural activities. The enslaved toiled in homes, on plantations, and on public works and infrastructure. Africans and their descendants' engagement in self-emancipation also entailed migrating to maroons, quilombos, or cimarrones away from European-dominated centers of power.

With the abolition of slavery, African descendants often continued to perform the same tasks for meager salaries or in exchange for accommodation or basic needs. Others left their homes and places of worship in search of new opportunities. Cities and towns across the Americas often responded to the flow of Afro-Descendants across the region with anti-Black regulations, including vagrancy laws, curfews, and registration laws. Others criminalized Blackness, prohibited Black assembly, and eventually institutionalized Black mass incarceration.

Despite these obstacles, people of African descent remained inspired to preserve their cultural inheritance, seek lives of dignity, and pursue economic sustainability within and across national borders and bodies of water. Formal state emancipation occurred in the Caribbean and Brazil, beginning in 1791 in Haiti and ending in 1888 in Brazil. The first waves of migration after abolition saw the formerly enslaved take advantage of their new access to mobility. More specific studies need to be conducted on Black migrants and the saliency of race as migrants moved from areas of drought, poverty, and violence to areas of better opportunity and freedom.

Black Migrations and the Caribbean

The Caribbean is a multi-geographical region shaped by migratory flows from Africa, Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. It includes the islands between North and South America and the littoral countries of South and Central American mainland. However, Caribbean migrant communities can be found in diverse

places in the Americas, from Canada to Chile. Writers of the Greater Caribbean have exposed the legacies and contradictions of these migrations.[2]

The unequal exchanges among diverse peoples, nonetheless, initiated a series of cultural and religious fusions, syncretism, and social intermingling, which led to mixed or Creole American cultures. In the French Caribbean, the rhetoric of *creolité* promotes this view of the Caribbean and parallels the notion that Brazil is a culturally syncretic *mestiço* country. As Rocha indicates, the cultural reality and celebration of cultural mixing often clash with the official state and elite anti-Blackness in Brazil. This may also be true of certain Caribbean nations. (Davis 2022, 127-148).

Migrations from southern Europe, the Middle East, and Asia also played distinct roles in constructing the national houses, to paraphrase the metaphor utilized by José Luis Gonzalez in his essay *The Four-Storeyed House*. However, the politics of migration has often led to exclusion and xenophobic national policies. At the same time, the economic costs of caring for local underprivileged populations or migrants often pose significant challenges for post-colonial countries such as Brazil and nations in the Caribbean.

Brazil

Since the birth of the Brazilian nation at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Brazilian leaders have traditionally focused on augmenting the country's status on the world stage through bilateral relations with the world's most potent hegemons in Europe and North America. Historically, building relationships with the Caribbean was hardly a priority. As in the Caribbean, waves of migration have played critical roles in shaping Brazilian nationhood. Yet, migration has not become a significant part of the national discourse on identity. Essays in this volume may help change that. Several authors clearly illustrate that the forced and voluntary movement of Black migrants played vital roles in shaping individual and community relationships to empire and nation.

Whether discussing the flight of enslaved cowboys across or within Brazil or the movement of Black subjects within the Caribbean and Brazil, this volume establishes dialogues with well-known processes and historiographies in the United States. Carlos Eduardo Coutinho da Costa's use of "The Great Migration" to refer to Brazil, for example, allows us to reconceptualize meanings of phenomena often associated with the United States. The historical contextualization of

[2] See the works of Garcia Marquez in Colombia, Maryse Condé in Martinique to Martin Dobru in Surinam, Julia Alvarez from the Dominican Republic, and Edwidge Danticat from Haiti.

Black Haitian migration to Cuba and Brazil by Couto and Rocha also helps us expose the dynamics of colorism and nativism, issues that can be applied to Black migrations elsewhere.

Rocha also wisely includes essays focusing on the connection between transnational or transregional Black mobility and the movement of commodities and bodies (cassava and penal culture are two examples). She also includes a chapter that explores the importance of Ethiopia as a symbol of Africa among the African diasporic community. The migration and exchange of ideas among African descendants across the Atlantic give us new insights into transnational exchanges, circulation, and "Currency of Blackness." (Davis and Williams 2006, 143-170).

While the Caribbean has not figured prominently in Brazil's political or economic development, countries such as Haiti, Jamaica, and Cuba have often captured the Brazilian popular imagination. These islands' historical revolutionary roles have captivated Brazilians for generations. Bordering mainland nations close to Brazil, such as Guyana, French Guiana, and Surinam, have influenced border dynamics. Hopefully, this work will inspire future works on these and other borders with Brazil.

Conclusion

The legacies of colonialism and slavery have shaped contemporary dynamics in Brazil and the Caribbean. Plantation economies and extractive processes benefitted European colonizers at the expense of local communities. Endemic class and racial-based color prejudice dominated the Caribbean and Brazilian landscapes for centuries. Brazil eventually emerged as a linguistically unified geocultural and political entity, while the distinct Caribbean nations generated multiple political and linguistic realities. Migrations, forced and voluntary, have played a critical role in all these processes. European migrations to the Americas often led to the destruction or transformation of the people and landscapes of the First Peoples. The subsequent migrations of Africans and their descendants left their imprint on various sectors of the Caribbean and Brazilian societies.

A note on terminology

It is also worth noting that the scholars in this volume currently work and reside outside of the United States and Europe. In other words, they are scholars working on the periphery. The fact that they write about migration for an English-reading audience from that perspective also represents a call for transnational dialogue. Readers will come across racial and cultural terms that come out of the Caribbean and Brazilian historical contexts. Terms such as

"moreno," "Euro-mestizo," "mulato," or "métis," for example, cannot be adequately translated into English without specific contexts. At the outset, Rocha explains why she chose to title the volume "Black migrations" rather than use the term "African descendants" in the title. Other scholars in this volume utilize many racial terms to refer to black people in different contexts. As we have seen from Stuart Hall, "Black" continues to be a contested term, and that argument is part of lack migration history writ large. There is no global authority that sets the boundaries and definitions across languages and cultures.

Readers may also note the different contemporary uses of words such as *slave* and *enslaved*. Among scholars writing in the United States and the United Kingdom, there is a growing preference for 'enslaved' where possible. This choice is not mere political correctness. Rather, this attention to language represents an earnest attempt by scholars to be more precise and to acknowledge that *enslaved person* refers to an individual deported and forced to work against *their* will.[3] Enslaved Africans came from all strata of society and practiced multiple professions before their enslavement. Many scholars often aim to employ *slave* to refer to the status *or* description of the economic system. Yet this convention and sensibility is hardly universal. Moreover, translating racialized and gendered terms presents an additional challenge. For example, consider translating the Spanish term *esclavo fugitivo* (literally "escaped or fugitive slave"), a term that necessarily legitimizes the slave condition as an original status. Is 'self-emancipated African descendants' better or does it distort the historical record? Like many historians working in the field, scholars in this volume navigate these linguistic challenges as they provide insightful analysis. They embrace multidimensional issues that will engender discussion and debate.

Migration studies forums are also grappling with language. For example, migrant activists in the English-speaking world encourage students to use the term "migrant" rather than "immigrant," the latter of which implies the movement of a subject into a specific national space or host land. Migrants often move to, from, and through multiple geographical spaces and cross many boundaries. Is it best to refer to Haitians moving from Brazil to Argentina and Chile as immigrants in each case or migrants over many borders or both?

[3] 'Their, they, them' as substitutes for his/hers, he/she, and him/her also represents another language shift that does not necessarily enjoy universal appeal in the United States or elsewhere. These non-gendered terms are particularly challenging and often problematic in gendered languages such as Portuguese, Spanish, and French.

Immigration policy, after all, is the purview of nations. Scholars in the text use 'migrant' and 'immigrant.'

Whatever the terminology, Hannah Arendt has shown us that the nation-state's construction of rights and laws does not apply to many migrants, including the stateless (Arendt 1951, 276-280). Additional studies of enslaved Africans as migrants compared to other migrants and poor whites will reveal regional idiosyncrasies. National policies in the post-abolition era will provide other insights. Beyond the possibilities for linguistic debates, this volume invites readers to engage the history of Black migrations from multiple viewpoints. Rocha helps provide valuable historical sources and frameworks that expand on previous historical studies. *Many Rivers to Cross: Black Migrations in Brazil and the Caribbean* also complements the contemporary migration analysis across many disciplines. This work is a valued addition to migration studies and a must-read for students interested in the history of Black migrations.

Darién J. Davis,
29 October 2023

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