

Book Review

Blackness and Social Mobility in Brazil, by Doreen Gordon.

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DOREEN GORDON PRESENTS A METICULOUSLY CRAFTED BOOK THAT devotes its 268 pages and a Prologue to an investigation into a central issue concerning the largest black population in the Americas, located in Brazil. Indeed, several scholars in the field of Luso-Hispanic studies have underscored the marginalisation, poverty, racial and social exclusion of Blacks in countries from Mexico to the Southern Cone. Gordon's research allows her to sift through mythical claims of social equality, racial harmony, and democracy through a bold and critical inquiry into the factors that both propel and impede the upward movement of Blacks, from the margins of poverty to economic success and social visibility. Salvador, Bahía in the Northern region of Brazil, chosen by Gordon, is an ideal area for such a study.

This book is the result of an impressive undertaking, involving many years of field work in Brazil, a commitment to learning Portuguese to facilitate communication with field participants, and serious, careful analyses and inscriptions. The project was inspired by a deep desire to understand the various transformations in Brazilian society that facilitate upward mobility among Brazil's black families in the Northern region of the country.

A well-written prologue provides an overview of the book and its objectives to bring new perspectives to the issue of the emergence of a black middle class in Brazil after thirty years of significant economic and political changes. Several global factors including the UN Human Rights Council's call for global action against racism directed at people of African descent are also cited as having contributed to this movement in Brazil.

Gordon promises a rich, multi-textured study, focusing on a small group of Afro-Brazilians' economic success in contemporary urban Brazil, unearthing information about life choices, networking and business initiatives that aid in their upward mobility. She skilfully locates her research within broad theoretical paradigms such as post-colonial studies, broad post-modernism and information that speaks to Brazil's efforts to reduce social and economic inequalities in the country.

The prologue also establishes her intention to contribute to critical and comparative race studies through her engagement with issues of diaspora, Black feminist thought, issues related to Afro-Brazilian identity and agency (Gordon xxviii) and promotes an understanding of the place of racial and gendered class consciousness and anti-racist politics in Brazil and in the Americas in general. Some necessary terminologies are defined to clarify their meanings in the Brazilian context. "Middle class" is one such term that is highlighted for the difference it presents in other places, having several tiers of difference in Brazil.

Gordon frames her intentions, findings and analyses in seven enlightening chapters. In Chapter 1 Gordon explains the intention to disturb Brazil's long-standing claims that "racial divisions had been overcome by the miscegenation of African slaves, Portuguese colonisers and the indigenous populations" (Gordon 1). Gordon was sternly counselled by certain Brazilians against the folly of thinking that her research project would rewrite long-standing official Brazilian discourse on racial mixing and harmony, and was pointed to the preferred writings of Gilberto Freyre, whose views on race and racism in Brazil are favoured.

Gordon presents her choice of ethnography as the research design for the study and traces traditional upward mobility for dark-skinned Brazilians – through alliances with Euro-Brazilian elites – to then indicate the multiple ways in which this upward mobility may occur in contemporary times. The evolution of this shift is explained through the focus on a range of economic factors, age, socioeconomic background and gender. Gordon defends her ethnographic research and how it allowed her to explore social networks and attitudes to community involvement, explaining that some Black Brazilians did not initially agree with the idea that there was a black middle class in the country and expressed scepticism.

A number of conceptual and theoretical issues regarding race and class and their relevance to her approach are discussed, including theories advanced by Cultural Studies theorists such as Stuart Hall, and claims related to classical Marxist theories, theories about race and class, issues of social mobility, and social stratification. There is vast engagement with a wide range of positions

advanced by anthropologists and theorists in Brazil and internationally, Fanon, Santos, Remy, Andrews, Beckford, Gilroy, among others, to highlight how their definitions of identity, race, and racism are different from, or coincide with her position.

Indeed, Gordon confronts the nagging claim that race is a social construct, by stating that embracing such a position, does not belie the fact that race is real and affects people's daily lives in Brazil, as a process of racialisation – that is, the way cultural and physical traits are “reproduced through ideological, institutional interactions and linguistic practices that support a particular construction of Difference (Hasenbalg 332). Moreover, her study is propelled by a firm conviction and understanding that racism, a system that distributes power, privilege, welfare and security among people distinguished, classified, and structured in terms of ideas about their physical nature and behaviour (Wade et al. 2019, 2) plays a crucial role in the struggles of Brazilian Blacks for social and economic upward mobility.

Gordon's study reveals that Brazilian society is skewed against Blacks, but that there is a Black middle class in contemporary Salvador comprising highly positioned Blacks, despite the complexities and ambiguities that underline the processes of social mobility in Brazil.

Black social mobility in the context of Brazil's historical, social, political and economic landscape and the socioeconomic inequalities that prevail in the country are studied. Brazil's myth of racial democracy is dismissed as Gordon highlights the flawed traditional explanations of inequalities in Brazil in terms of class only.

A profile of Salvador, past and present, and its large African descendant population is provided. It is a place of historic beauty, considered to be a Mecca for Blacks in the African diaspora and is traditionally known for its rich Black cultural life, having evolved from being a military defence centre, through to an industrialised space. Salvador witnessed significant transformations in the 1950s with the discovery of oil – and modernisation with federal money through the 70s, 80s and 90s. Policy changes which have resulted in economic growth in the early 2000s saw some Blacks move out of poverty. Education is underlined however, as the first means by which Blacks began their upward mobility in the early 20th century, despite continued racial stereotyping, racism, and unfair representations in the media and other public spheres.

Interestingly, we learn that there are laws against racism in Brazil, with some participants even revealing that they had filed lawsuits against what they consider to be racist actions against them. Despite this, what remains clear is that in Brazilian discourse, race is not considered to be a barrier to social mobility even

though participants expressed incidents of racism in everyday life. Deep cultural notions about racial entitlement hinder Black social mobility.

In “Racial Discourses and Identities”, Gordon examines the different discourses of race which are constantly being re-worked and evolving in the context of Salvador and have been influenced by racialised meanings that are constantly being transformed by political struggle in Brazil and by a powerful White or European descendant elite who wield much power in the region.

Racial formations in the Caribbean and Latin America, including Brazil, are analyzed as legacies of slavery and colonialism. Discourses of brownness, discourses of whiteness, and discourses of blackness are all examined for how they serve to bolster the myth of racial harmony and democracy in Brazil with a powerful Euro-White group controlling the conversation about race and class and reinforcing dominant values of whiteness. Global racial theories and ideologies that affect interpersonal relations and social transitions and the very dominant ideology of “racial mixing” or *mestizaje* that is so entrenched in the explications of the racial dynamics across the Hispanic Caribbean and Latin America, including Brazil, are underlined and problematised.

Gordon argues that whiteness is not a straightforward identity (Hartigan 2000) and whiteness is both visible and invisible at different times and shaped by class and gender. This refers to the ways in which Whites and the privileged classes are often hidden from the Black community as they have their private lives of privilege. But whiteness becomes very visible among Blacks in the hyper-valuation of White bodily features – hair, light-skin – on billboards and on television. Blackness is also not straightforward, but a complex set of cultural constructions – so Afro-Brazilian social identities are not fixed, but are contradictory in the unequal social context of Brazil.

Gordon explores the way or ways in which “research participants understood, performed and subverted racial identities – while bearing in mind that Blacks often have no control over the way they are positioned, valued, or judged (113) in the society. National ideologies on race and some social movements in the Caribbean and Latin America are seen to challenge the ‘White bias’ increasingly more and more.

In “Class Biographies in a Racialized World”, Gordon presents the cases she studied. She combines live stories with her discussions of themes of race, racism and the social, cultural, and economic factors that affect their mobility. She traces the educational, occupational, and family trajectories that inform their negotiation of the physical and social networks. She simultaneously debates the

gender theories, showing how several women's movements have aided mobility of Black women, by bringing awareness of traditional stereotypes of black women since the 2000s. These cases of upward and downward mobility show that there is no systematic manner in which Blacks ascend to higher classes or lose their social status – revealing the fuzzy boundaries of race and class in the city. The cases also revealed the difficulty of placing some participants in well-defined class categories.

In Chapter 5, Gordon also analyzes ways in which participants experienced class as it intersects with race, gender, and religion. Their lived experiences and struggles as they attempted to move up and identify with a different class – after achieving higher education or financial independence – are shared. Some participants continued to be involved in their communities in different ways – although this is not always well-received by persons in the lower socioeconomic positions. Participation involved religious groups or Afro-Brazilian movements –and the reaction is that the involvement in these organisations could simultaneously perpetuate historical patterns of patronage between White elites and Blacks. There is also a sort of suspicion about financial benefits derived from Black cultural organisations being used for the benefit of Black communities.

Gordon's research highlights two ways of achieving social mobility in Brazil:

1. Ways related to the celebration of African derived cultural forms;
2. Drawing on the universally future oriented vision of achieving social equality by attaining professions with higher incomes (186).

Discussions about social mobility include ideologies about restitution after slavery and on the charitable Christian-duty model, that is, those who are privileged should help the less fortunate.

The positive and negative roles of 'blood connections' in social mobility including the way in which family patterns help to consolidate middle class status are explored. But upwardly mobile Afro-Brazilians may also be individualistic in the way they regard family members, especially since their darker skin can lead to uncomfortable situations in upper class neighbourhoods. Wealthy Black Brazilians can experience racism when they move into upper class neighbourhoods so families may carefully choose to leave behind darker members. Fictive family connections can also be made to help to achieve social mobility.

In the Chapter 7 the debate surrounds Brazilian's preoccupation with physical appearance and the regard for a particular type of female body as being more appropriate for acceptance into the upper classes. Widespread plastic surgery,

promoted by the media and facilitated by credit plans and price reductions prevails. For Black women in Brazil to be regarded as acceptable into upper classes they need to acquire a particular type of physical appearance. Brazil has more plastic surgery than anywhere else in the world because the idea of femininity and acceptability are tied to a European image. There has been a recent shift, however, in racial thinking which has made it a little less problematic for Black women to identify with a particular class.

Through live, engaging stories, such as the ones about Nubia, Gordon's research confirms that Blacks are not the political or economic majority, but have ways of re-positioning themselves economically. They negotiate Salvador's race and class hierarchies in various ways – socially, politically, culturally, economically, aesthetically and through family networks.

Conclusion

Despite the focus on Salvador as a specific region in Brazil, Gordon maintains that the findings from her study may be used to generalise about Blacks in other regions of Brazil as well as in the global context, and how they experience hierarchies of race, ethnicity, culture, and gender:

“What happens to black populations . . . around the world poses a potentially revolutionary challenge to structures of inequality in the world at large and all of this takes place at a time of changing global relations and power dynamics in the century to come” (Gordon 248).

A very useful appendix is included at the end of the book and the ‘Diasporic Positionalities’ that shape it are firmly defined.

The preference for ethnography and its suitability for a less traditional approach involving multiple sites and socialising with participants is presented. The author wanted to do an ethnographic study that would allow her to focus on personal, racialised discourses and processes of social mobility.

Details of how data analysis was done and the way in which reflexive dyadic and interactive interviews were conducted and used to provide information for the study are explained. This section is particularly useful to younger researchers for providing guidelines on how to conduct careful ethnographic research, giving attention to scrupulous field notes, diaries, and selective, axial, and open coding.

We are given a good impression of how carefully and systematically the researcher engaged with the material. The result is a well-written, well-researched,

informative, educational book written in a language that is accessible to a wide cross-section of readers. This book makes an indispensable contribution to the study of race relations, issues of marginalisation, individual identity, and agency in Brazil, Latin America and the Caribbean and provides a deeper understanding of how Black Brazilians in Salvador negotiate the twisted knots of race, class, gender and sexuality as they aim to achieve upward social mobility. The stories of real life participants give great realism to what would otherwise have been abstract theoretical debates. Included photographs are also very elucidating.

It is timely, especially as many Black Brazilians now celebrate a change in Government in Brazil for many reasons. It is timely as the contributions of Blacks to nation building is being celebrated in special ways across the world at this time, for instance the Windrush people in the UK.

Congratulations, Dr Doreen Gordon. This book finds its way to many shelves in many libraries and gets used by many – students, and lecturers – who will use it as a teaching resource, as well as graduate students, and anyone with an interest in Brazil and broader diasporic studies.