

BOOK REVIEW ESSAYS

Blood, Nation, Science, and Language: Essentializing Race from the Sixteenth Century to the Present

Nancy P. Appelbaum

Binghamton University, State University of New York, US

nappel@binghamton.edu

This essay reviews the following works:

The Cultural Politics of Blood, 1500–1900. Edited by Kimberly Anne Coles, Ralph Bauer, Zita Nunes, and Carla L. Peterson. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. Pp. vii + 274. \$95.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9781137338204.

Speaking of Spain: The Evolution of Race and Nation in the Hispanic World. By Antonio Feros. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017. Pp. ix + 370. \$45.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9780674045514.

Theorizing Race in the Americas: Douglass, Sarmiento, Du Bois, and Vasconcelos. By Juliet Hooker. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp. ix + 280. \$53.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9780190633691.

The Science and Politics of Race in Mexico and the United States, 1910–1950. By Karin Alejandra Roseblatt. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018. Pp. xii + 255. \$29.95 paperback. ISBN: 9781469636405.

Race and the Brazilian Body: Blackness, Whiteness, and Everyday Language in Rio de Janeiro. By Jennifer Roth-Gordon. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017. Pp. ix + 248. \$27.95 paperback. ISBN: 9780520293809.

Degrees of Mixture, Degrees of Freedom: Genomics, Multiculturalism, and Race in Latin America. By Peter Wade. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017. Pp. vii + 344. \$27.95 paperback. ISBN: 9780822363736.

Scholars struggle to encapsulate race in all its complexity. Most of us view race as a social fact, not a biological reality. Its historical contingency and mutability—its simultaneous reality and unreality—make race an especially slippery subject. These six books examine diverse topics such as the early modern origins of race, the ways in which racial ideas have changed over time, the use of race for political and scientific ends, and the persistence of racial essentialism in the present. The books all pay very close attention to language, and they emphasize tensions between purity and mixture. Other common threads include an association between blood and race, the conjoined emergence of race and nation, and the transnational (and transimperial) circulation of racial ideas. The authors explore some of the ways that race has been practiced and routinized: how it is embedded in scientific research, policy making, and everyday interactions. They probe how race has been coupled and uncoupled with nation and science. The books make clear, moreover, that race does not go away when we disavow it or try not to talk about it. And yet, when people do talk explicitly about race, we are not always talking about the same thing.

Race and Blood in the Early Modern Iberian World

Essays in the *Cultural Politics of Blood*, edited by Kimberly Anne Coles, Ralph Bauer, Zita Nunes, and Carla L. Peterson, examine the “origins of the modern concept of race” from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries (2). They trace examples of how “blood—one of the four bodily fluids known as humors in the early modern period—permeates discourses of human difference” (1). In so doing, the essays build on the influential work of María Elena Martínez, who analyzed the relationships between race, blood, and caste in early modern Spain and Mexico.¹ Martínez found that Iberians started to use *raza* in conjunction with *sangre* as early as the sixteenth century to label “New Christians” (descended from Muslims and Jews) as vile and distinct from “Old Christians.” She found a growing sixteenth-century consensus that both parents passed on essences of their lineages to their offspring through blood (as well as through blood’s putative derivatives: semen and breast milk). Discriminatory *limpieza de sangre* (“clean blood”) statutes proliferated, along with an increasingly rigid discourse of human difference and a growing emphasis on women’s sexual purity.

As is well known, the Iberian idea of *limpieza de sangre* was adapted in the Spanish Indies to differentiate between the descendants of Spaniards, Indians, and Africans. Martínez argued that each of these groups came to be understood as having its own “unity of substance,” which was diluted through *mestizaje*. Over time, *mestizaje* gave rise to a proliferation of *casta* classifications.² Flexibility was thus built into essentialism: some “stains” (such as indigenous ancestry) could be erased from a Spanish lineage over several generations. As discussed below, this obsession with purity and mixture has reemerged in racial discourses and practices ever since.

The Cultural Politics of Blood illustrates some parallels and convergences of the Iberian and British empires, though unfortunately it does not deeply interrogate the empires’ mutual influences.³ Literary critics and historians contribute fascinating essays on a wide range of topics from Cervantes and Sor Juana to Linnaeus and the US Civil War. They cast new light on the concept of *limpieza de sangre* and lay out some of the ways that blood was referenced to denote political affiliation with empires and nations. For scholars of race in Latin America, a key essay in the collection is Ruth Hill’s “The Blood of Others: Breeding Plants, Animals, and White People in the Spanish Atlantic.”

Hill argues that ideas about human mixture and “whitening” originated in “domain transfer” from animal and plant husbandry (45). She draws on cognitive scientists’ theories about “folkbiology,” whereby humans tend to assign underlying essences to flora and fauna (including humans) when sorting them into categories.⁴ Beliefs about human mutability—about evolution and degeneration—were rooted in premodern practices of managing animals and plants, which involved interbreeding and hybridization.

For evidence, she combs early modern dictionaries, treatises on animal husbandry, imperial reports, and a variety of other texts and *casta* paintings. Animal-human analogies abounded. Human ancestry came to be understood as analogous to animal breeding, which influenced human caste taxonomies. It is well established, for example, that the word *mulato* derived from *mulo*. *Mestizo* appeared in sixteenth and seventeenth-century texts to refer to animal mixtures and hybrid plants. Eighteenth-century artists featured horses, considered noble animals, in some *casta* paintings; horses appeared alongside the lightest-skinned and least “degenerate” of the American castes because “possession of a horse suggested proximity to Spanish blood” (50). Like Martínez, Hill emphasizes how such representations offered the possibility for redemption: degeneration could be reversed over several generations of whitening. Her sophisticated and nuanced analysis could be enriched with more historical context, particularly given that the essay ranges across centuries and continents.

¹ María Elena Martínez, *Genealogical Fictions: Limpieza de Sangre, Religion, and Gender in Colonial Mexico* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008). Historians often delineate the early modern period as coterminous with the Latin American colonial period, beginning with the Conquest and culminating in the Age of Revolution, roughly the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries, though the volume under discussion also includes essays on the nineteenth century. For a review of some recent works on race in colonial Latin America, see Emily Berquist Soule, “Race and Rule in the Colonial Andes,” *Latin American Research Review* 53, no. 3 (2018): 632–638, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.25222/larr.264>.

² Martínez, *Genealogical Fictions*, 163.

³ A growing literature emphasizes both their similarities and their “entanglements,” e.g. Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, ed., *Entangled Empires: The Anglo-Iberian Atlantic, 1500–1830* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).

⁴ Scott Atran and Douglas Medin, *The Native Mind and the Cultural Construction of Nature* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2008).

Race and Blood in Empire and Nation

The racial labels we most commonly use today were largely the product of early modern imperialism and then codified in the Enlightenment; they emerged hand in hand with the expanding power of western Europe. Out of empires and their legal and labor systems, particularly transatlantic slavery, emerged overarching categories such as black, Indian, and (somewhat later than the others), white.⁵ Empire was thus central to the formulation of race as we know it today. Nation, as these books show, also mattered. Race was used to both justify and undermine emerging national projects. The use of race and blood to naturalize and question both empire and nation is examined by Antonio Feros in *Speaking of Spain: The Evolution of Race and Nation in the Hispanic World* as well as by David Sartorius in his contribution to *The Cultural Politics of Blood* (discussed above).

The emergence of nations and nationalism was accompanied by much discussion and debate over race. Feros and Sartorius point in different ways to the intersections of race, blood, and nation. For Feros, in particular, “race and nation were concepts linked from the outset and developed in conjunction with one another” (9). Nation (another unstable and mutable term) both reaffirmed the importance of race and contested it. Race served both to naturalize nationalist aspirations emerging out of the Spanish Empire and also to undermine independence efforts and reaffirm empire.

Feros analyzes texts authored by various Spanish and Spanish American thinkers from the sixteenth century to the Enlightenment. He starts by summarizing early debates on “whether one or several ‘nations’ lived within Spain and whether its people shared certain characteristics or diverged” (6). The divergences were not limited to Old Christian Spaniards versus new Christians, or Spaniards versus colonized or enslaved peoples. Divisions such as Castilians versus Andalusians and Cantabrians versus Catalans were just as salient. Feros thus expands on the work of Martínez by problematizing the early modern existence of Spain and Spanishness. He links discourses of *limpieza de sangre* to long-term processes of Iberian political centralization and consolidation, through which a Spanish nation, language, and national identity emerged (but has never been fully accepted or entirely dominant, as recent events in Catalonia demonstrate). Paradoxically, Iberian settlers and their descendants in America often identified as Spaniards earlier and more emphatically than did their peninsular counterparts, in order to differentiate themselves from indigenous people, Africans, and persons of obviously mixed descent.

As early modern writers and policymakers advanced images of a more unified Spain, they developed inconsistent and varied “theories and laws to determine who was and was not a real Spaniard” (51). Such theories often included the idea that Spanish characteristics were passed down from one generation to the next through blood. They argued over the question of whether American-born subjects, even those who traced their origins back to the peninsula and identified as Spanish, were truly Spaniards. For the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Feros emphasizes the lack of consensus regarding inhabitants of the Indies and the gradual, uneven emergence of “a proto-racialist discourse” regarding Africans and Indians (113). He identifies an “epistemological shift” in the late eighteenth century, particularly on the part of Spaniards such as Jorge Juan and Antonio de Ulloa, who defined American indigenous people as an intellectually inferior “red race” (209–210) in response to the demographic resurgence and rebelliousness of Andean populations. Spanish and Spanish-American writers, as well as indigenous rebels, thus contributed to the emerging Enlightenment taxonomy of continentally based races. By the eighteenth century, moreover, whiteness was also an explicit part of the discussion. New World *criollos* self-identified as white and Spanish, while peninsular Spaniards, in contrast, “invented a nation pure in origin, white, and, by dint of nature and ideology, located in Europe” (189). In his final chapter, Feros traces out in detail how racialized understandings of national identity undermined efforts to forge a new transatlantic Spanish nation at the Cádiz parliament in 1812.

Throughout, Feros synthesizes and discusses a broad range of published primary sources and secondary literature in a clear and highly accessible narrative about the emergence of the Spanish nation and the origins of fissures that continue to mark that nation today.⁶ *Speaking of Spain* is therefore quite useful to

⁵ Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010); Nancy P. Appelbaum, Anne S. Macpherson, and Karin Alejandra Roseblatt, eds., *Race and Nation in Modern Latin America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

⁶ Some of the key scholarly works cited and discussed by Feros include Martínez, *Genealogical Fictions*; Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, “New World, New Stars: Patriotic Astrology and the Invention of Indian and Creole Bodies in Colonial Spanish America, 1600–1650,” *American Historical Review* 104, no. 1 (1999): 33–68; Serge Gruzinski, *The Mestizo Mind*, trans. D. Dusinberre (New York: Routledge, 2002); Anthony Pagden, *The Fall of Natural Man* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Ilona Katzew and Susan Deans-Smith, eds., *Race and Classification: The Case of Mexican America* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), along with many other works in multiple languages.

scholars of the history and culture of Spain and its empire. The book is also suitable for undergraduate courses.

Scholarship on nineteenth-century Spain and Cuba has shown us that such questions about race and nation did not disappear with the dissolution of the empire. In his essay in *The Cultural Politics of Blood*, entitled “Colonial Transfusions: Cuban Bodies and Spanish Loyalty in the Nineteenth Century,” Sartorius finds that nineteenth-century Spaniards and Cuban elites used blood and race to legitimate their colonial ties even as most of the rest of Spanish America pulled away from Spain. Over the course of the century, however, “the particular salience of blood discourse to the political logic of the Spanish Empire became increasingly unstable” (230). He finds a shift from arguments for political loyalty based on blood lines to a more inclusive (though gender-exclusive) emphasis on blood spilled on the battlefield in defense of either the empire or the nation.

Complicating and Reimagining Race and Nation

Toward the end of his essay on Cuba, Sartorius quotes an 1898 letter by Máximo Gómez, the military leader of the insurgent forces in the final war for Cuban independence. Gómez famously rejected Spain's overtures, which had been couched in the language of Spanish blood ties. Gómez insisted there were “no differences of blood or race,” only “good or bad nations,” to justify his alliance with the United States against Spain (245). Gómez wrote those stirring words, which echoed other Cuban patriots' calls for prioritizing the Cuban nation over race, precisely at a moment in global history characterized by the ascendance of white supremacy. Cuban patriots at the end of the century such as Gómez, José Martí, and Antonio Maceo were unusual, but not entirely alone, in invalidating the predominant importance of race (248).

Increasingly over the course of the late nineteenth century and into the twentieth, race had been gaining legitimacy as a scientific tool for analyzing and ranking human cultures and bodies. The prevalence of scientific racism in the Americas constrained critical thinking on race, even by those who sought to combat racism and fight the racialized imperialism of Spain or the United States. Such constraints are evident in the cases of four iconic thinkers, including two white Latin Americans and two African Americans, studied by Juliet Hooker in her innovative book *Theorizing Race in the Americas*. Each man opposed central tenets of the scientific consensus of his day but was constrained by the overall context in which he operated. Indeed, rather than reject the concept of race altogether, they expounded racial theories that favored mixture.

Hooker labels their theories “subaltern,” which is a bit of a stretch for at least her two Latin American figures: Domingo F. Sarmiento (1811–1888) and José Vasconcelos (1882–1952), given their elite status, international reputations, and political power. Sarmiento, after all, rose to become president of Argentina (1868–1874). Vasconcelos had an enormous influence on Mexican culture and education as the secretary of education and rector of the National Autonomous University in the 1920s. Hooker argues that their views were subaltern inasmuch as Latin American thought was marginalized from North Atlantic intellectual debates and because they criticized US expansionism and hemispheric dominance. Their views countered globally dominant discourses of white supremacy, she argues, by favoring *mestizaje*.

She juxtaposes their ideas with those of Frederick Douglass (1818–1895) and W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963), thus staging a “dialogue” that did not exist” (18). Each of her four subjects, she finds, tended to distort the realities on the other side of the North-Side divide. The two Latin Americans “positioned their region as an alternative to their own creative misreading of U.S. race relations,” while the African Americans also drew on their own romanticized misreadings of Latin American and Caribbean racial dynamics to elaborate critiques of US racism (3). She argues, moreover, that viewing their lesser-known writings through this “hemispheric frame” reveals “constitutive elements of a political theory of race,” which can be recuperated to enrich political theory today (4).

Regarding Douglass, for example, she emphasizes what she calls his theories of “democratic fugitivity,” whereby he sought both self-determination and democratic integration for black Americans. She sees his support of proposed US annexation of the Dominican Republic in 1870–1871 as reflecting Douglass's commitment to reshaping the United States as a “multiracial democracy” (48), and she reassesses his brief experience as a diplomat in Haiti (1889–1891) and his involvement in the Haitian exhibition at the 1893 Chicago World's Columbian Exposition. She argues that he “found in Haiti a model of black political agency” (65). In her chapter on Du Bois, she argues that his Afro-futurist and “mulatto fictions” reveal his advocacy of racial mixture “outside of the distorting context of white supremacy” (130).

In her chapter on Vasconcelos, Hooker emphasizes how experiences living in the overtly racist United States at various points in his life led him to insist that Latin Americans also needed to come to terms with their own racism. Vasconcelos is most famous for his exaltation of the “cosmic race,” which is often

seen as a whitening discourse that celebrates mestizaje while devaluing blackness and indigeneity. Hooker emphasizes how mestizaje has been used to “open spaces for certain kinds of political inclusion” (157) and elaborate more radical philosophies. For example, she looks at how Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa has invoked Vasconcelos. Even the admittedly racially pessimistic Sarmiento, she argues, did not embrace all the tenets of scientific racism and Anglo-American superiority that were emerging during the mid-nineteenth century. Her argument for the ongoing significance and potential of these iconic thinkers is weakest in this chapter, given that Sarmiento’s anti-imperialist views on Anglo and Latin America were not unusual for his time and his views on Latin Americans’ racial makeup became increasingly negative in his later years, as she lays out in detail.⁷

Hooker’s emphasis on noncanonical works and hemispheric dimensions enriches the already extensive scholarship on these four men, providing a creative contribution to critical race studies and decolonial political philosophy. The book might have had a broader impact on Latin American studies had she incorporated more less-famous thinkers who also theorized about race, sometimes in dialogue with these icons.⁸ Perhaps other scholars will take up that challenge.

Modern Science, Policy, and Blood

Sartorius ends his essay on blood discourse in nineteenth-century Cuba with the emergence of modern human sciences that “absorbed some of what blood once indexed” (230). Indeed, race formed a central building block in the early foundations of the disciplines of anthropology and biology. As anthropologist Peter Wade notes in his book *Degrees of Mixture, Degrees of Freedom*, discussed below, the early twentieth century was characterized by “an uneven but fairly broad scientific consensus endorsing race as a concept with which to theorize—and evaluate—human diversity” (53). This consensus subsequently gave way at mid-century to a “growing scientific consensus that rejected race as a fundamentally undemocratic way to evaluate and judge human diversity” (53). And yet, as both he and historian Karin Alejandra Rosemblatt show, scientists and policymakers have not entirely purged race from their endeavors even when disavowing racism and adhering to liberal ideals of universal equality. Elements of earlier racial discourses and assumptions about blood, purity, and mixture reappeared in new scientific and bureaucratic language and practice.

Like Hooker, Rosemblatt studies the international circulation of ideas about race and the ways that thinkers in North and South looked across the border at each other’s societies for both positive and negative models. However, Rosemblatt’s book *The Science and Politics of Race in Mexico and the United States* explores actual cross-border dialogues that did take place among Mexican and US experts, in this case scientists and bureaucrats. While Hooker finds a “hemispheric frame” in overlooked published works by canonical thinkers, Rosemblatt finds her hemispheric frame in archives. She delves into manuscript collections in the United States and Mexico to study the policy proposals, academic networks, and fieldwork practices of some iconic early twentieth-century figures, including José Vasconcelos as well as Manuel Gamio, Franz Boas, and Robert Redfield. Importantly, Rosemblatt also includes less famous but highly influential women and men of the first half of the twentieth century such as Moisés Sáenz, Kate Claghorn, Laura Thompson, Felix Keesing, and especially John Collier. In his capacity as US commissioner of Indian Affairs (1933–1945), Collier proposed an “Indian New Deal.” Paradoxically, he also administered an internment camp for US citizens of Japanese descent during WWII. Like some of the other US experts discussed in the book, Collier applied knowledge he gained in Mexico to craft policies for American Indians and other ethnic minorities. He was influenced by the “the Mexican emphasis on ethnographic knowledge,” which in turn was shaped by the responses that both Mexican and US ethnographers encountered in the communities they studied (90). The influence of Mexican experts (and human research subjects) on US experts was rarely acknowledged, given the asymmetries of power that shaped their exchanges.

Rosemblatt examines institutions such as the National Research Council, founded in 1916, and various international congresses to argue that the history of Latin American studies in the United States goes back to

⁷ Many of his Spanish American contemporaries extolled the virtues of the “Latin race” to counter US expansion and interventionism, as discussed by Michel Gobat in “The Invention of Latin America: A Transnational History of Anti-Imperialism, Democracy, and Race,” *American Historical Review* 118, no. 5 (2013): 1345–1375; and Aims McGuinness, “Searching for ‘Latin America’: Race and Sovereignty in the Americas in the 1850s,” in *Race and Nation in Modern Latin America*, edited by Nancy P. Appelbaum, Anne S. Macpherson, and Karin Alejandra Rosemblatt (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 87–107.

⁸ For example, for the mid-nineteenth century, just mentioning the country I know best (Colombia, which included Panama), some innovative writers and theorists regarding race and national/continental identity included Manuel Ancizar (1812–1882), Justo Arosemena (1817–1896), Candelario Obeso (1849–1884), and José María Samper (1828–1888), among others.

the 1910s and 1920s. She places race, rather than the Cold War, at the center of that history. US debates and anxieties in the 1920s over immigration and race inspired anthropologists (most famously Robert Redfield) to look south. By the 1930s, US anthropologists and officials were influenced by Mexico's *indigenista* policies as they considered how best to assimilate American Indians and other minorities.

A common goal of both the Mexican and US experts, especially from the 1930s onward, was to integrate and acculturate indigenous populations while preserving certain aspects of indigenous cultures. Roseblatt argues that neither group of experts ever fully escaped the constraints of a "liberal capitalist modernity" that cast indigenous peoples and other minorities as culturally, if not biologically, inferior (59). Outcomes were, however, different on each side of the border. Mexicans focused more on class and social divisions in what they viewed as a largely mestizo nation, though they associated Indians with poverty. Race and culture "popped up incessantly when economic hierarchies were discussed" (168). Meanwhile the US experts emphasized what they cast as problematic racial and ethnic minority groups. Roseblatt's sophisticated and subtle analysis is significant for scholars of race, class, and the transnational history of science. Considered together, Roseblatt's and Hooker's books reveal the often-elided influence of Latin America and the Caribbean on US intellectuals and policies.

Like Roseblatt, Wade is interested in the tensions between difference and equality in scientific practices shaped by liberal political orders and capitalist economies. He surveys the history of population genetics, especially in Latin America, and then examines the current practice of genomic science in three countries: Colombia, Brazil, and Mexico. The book is a companion to an earlier collaborative book, *Mestizo Genomics: Race Mixture, Nation, and Science in Latin America*.⁹ Wade coedited that volume with Latin American social scientists who had collaborated with him on a transnational ethnography of contemporary genetic science. From 2010 to 2013, they observed labs and traced scientific networks in each country and also studied how scientific information circulated outside the lab, examining popular media and assembling focus groups. In the new sole-authored book, Wade places their key findings in broader historical and social context, drawing on a broad range of scholarly literature. He argues that even as twentieth- and twenty-first-century scientists have largely discarded race as an explicit way of theorizing human diversity, they have continued, like their predecessors, to fixate on blood and other bodily fluids. For example, in the mid-twentieth century, scientists collected blood types, assuming that biological variations in blood would correlate to racial and cultural difference. With the advent of genomics at the end of the twentieth century, the focus has changed from blood type to DNA, also obtained through bodily fluids, and the information that DNA can provide about ancestry.

Wade and his research collaborators found differences and similarities in their national cases. In each country, genetic science has been used to contest certain racialized policies and national imaginaries as well as to reinforce other policies and imaginaries. In Colombia, geneticists have reinforced the ingrained Colombian national image of a country composed of a racially mixed national population compartmentalized in racially distinct regions. Recent studies there and in Brazil also make assumptions about the ancestral and genetic purity of particular ethnicities and communities. For example, geneticists in both countries use contemporary African and indigenous communities as proxies for past populations, thus "genetically reifying ancestral populations" (44). Geneticists have also viewed *antioqueños*, a salient regional group in Colombia, as an isolated population, based on questionable historical assumptions. In Brazil, geneticists have intervened in ongoing debates over multiculturalism and anti-racist policies, for example by arguing against racial quotas and affirmative action. In Mexico, meanwhile, genomics has adapted elements of the *indigenista* discourse studied by Roseblatt, by supporting state practices of protecting and integrating Indians, while reinforcing the underlying assumption that the normative Mexican is mestizo.

In all three national cases, Wade perceives the continuation of a long-standing, highly gendered tension between purity and mixture. He insists that the concept of "genetic isolates" in the genomic literature assumes social restrictions on female sexuality, but he argues that scientists mute this gendered underpinning. He concludes that genomics "has great potential to contribute to democratization, but at the very moment

⁹ Peter Wade, Carlos López Beltrán, Eduardo Restrepo, and Ricardo Ventura Santos, eds., *Mestizo Genomics: Race Mixture, Nation, and Science in Latin America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014). For a review of this volume and some recent historical scholarship on Latin Americans of African descent see Lowell Gudmundson, "Afro-Latin America in Flesh and Blood: Lives from the Battlefield, Cane Field, and Courtroom; Representations from Literature, Politics, and the Genomics Lab," *Latin American Research Review* 52, no. 4 (2017): 689–696, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.25222/larr.234>. For a recent review of social science literature on race by Wade himself, see Peter Wade, "Racism and Race Mixture in Latin America," *Latin American Research Review* 52, no. 3 (2017): 477–485, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.25222/larr.124>.

in which it emphasizes mixture as conducive to democracy, it reestablishes the relative purifications, boundaries, and separations that enable hierarchy" (266).

At moments, this generally compelling argument veers into abstractions. Together with the earlier volume based on the same research, however, this book provides a significant and unusual contribution to the field of science studies by centering the analysis on Latin American scientists. For scholars of race in Latin America, Wade updates and complicates our understandings of how race has been made, unmade, and remade by scientists and policymakers.

Language, Bodies, and DNA

Most scientists may have rejected blood quantum as a way of measuring ancestry and defining identity, but "folkbiological" understandings of underlying essences have not gone away and are not confined to what some cognitive scientists have referred to as the "native mind."¹⁰ An intriguing chapter in *Degrees of Mixture, Degrees of Freedom* seeks to explain the circulation of ideas about race and genetics in "the public" by summarizing the results of focus groups and interviews carried out in each country. Many of the participants in the focus groups and interviews have gone through DNA testing, and most are university students, including some in the life sciences. These study participants seem to see the DNA data as confirming their prior assumptions. Importantly, the human subjects do not simply reassert the reality of race; nor do they reject it entirely. Notably, people in the focus groups speak of their origins "in terms of a familiar genealogical reckoning of halves and quarters" (225), which has been reinforced by the standard DNA testing protocols used in Latin America. Participants report having sought DNA analysis in order to find out about their indigenous, African, and European percentages. Their views, as quoted in the book, resonate with conversations I have had about race with my students in the United States. One Mexican participant says "race is to differentiate some people from others by color" (236), while another describes race as largely objective and "anatomical," if locally inflected: "because ideology doesn't come into it, nor culture—well, a bit, yes, it depends on the region, above all they are anatomical" (236). Others, however, see race as a cultural construct. In sum, according to Wade, the "uncertain status of race in daily life is not resolved" (225).

How people today talk about race, as well as class, is also a subject of anthropologist Jennifer Roth-Gordon's *Race and the Brazilian Body*. The book is based in part on ethnographic research carried out in Rio de Janeiro in the 1990s with poor and working-class youth in a public housing project, and in part on Roth-Gordon's more recent observation of middle-class families in the same city. The latter research includes playing audio snippets of conversations of poor youth to middle-class families to study their reactions. Roth-Gordon finds that the middle-class listeners tend to criminalize and racialize the poorer speakers, assuming them to be criminals even in a case in which one of the speakers explicitly describes himself as a crime victim, not a perpetrator. The listeners focused on the speakers' use of slang (*gíria*) and improper grammar. Roth-Gordon concludes from this experiment that Rio residents use sonic as well as visual cues to interpret bodies and establish racial difference between self and other: "Residents don't just see bodies. They hear them speak; they sometimes imagine how they speak; and sometimes they hear them speak without seeing them at all" (31).

While *cariocas* value racial "cordiality" and tolerance, Roth-Gordon argues, Rio is saturated with beliefs in white superiority. Her subjects thus continue to rely on race to make sense of, and ultimately justify, the hierarchical social order in which each group must continually fight to establish its place. She finds that middle-class residents, insecure in their whiteness and feeling unsafe in this crime-ridden city, follow "three critical social racial imperatives: (1) the need to display whiteness, (2) the desire to avoid blackness, and (3) the obligation to remain racially 'cordial'" (46). Meanwhile, black residents sometimes choose what Roth-Gordon characterizes as a whitening self-presentation, simply in order to survive. Given how much has been written on race in Brazil, her findings are not surprising.¹¹ Yet she presents them in an accessible narrative that would provide compelling reading for an undergraduate course on race or Brazil and might help us all better understand why famously "cordial" Brazilians recently elected an uncordially racist president.

¹⁰ Atran and Medin, *The Native Mind*.

¹¹ See Edward E. Telles, *Race in Another America: The Significance of Skin Color in Brazil* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004). The literature is too extensive to do justice. On race in Rio from a historical perspective, see for example Sueann Caulfield, *In Defense of Honor: Sexual Morality, Modernity, and Nation in Early-Twentieth Century Brazil* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 2000; Paulina Alberto, *Terms of Inclusion: Black Intellectuals in Twentieth-Century Brazil* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011). The latter compares black intellectuals in Rio, São Paulo, and Salvador da Bahia.

Conclusion

Hill argues in her essay for the *Cultural Politics of Blood* that early modern writers essentialized human difference in a folk-biological manner contrary to modern science. Yet, Wade's and Roseblatt's studies undermine any clear dichotomy between modern and early modern (or scientific and prescientific, "native" and "Western") thinking on race. Meanwhile, Roth-Gordon shows that beliefs in essential racial differences are alive and flourishing today, even in an avowedly "cordial" and racially fluid context. We still talk about blood: carrying the blood of our ancestors in our veins, blood quantum, and blood spilled for the *patria*. We no longer believe that milk is a form of blood, but when we swab our saliva to test for ancestral DNA, we assume that bodily fluids can tell us something about our true identity. Geneticists largely disavow race as a scientific concept, while DNA analysis disrupts assumptions of purity. Nonetheless, the tension between purity and mixture is ever present, even as we continue to redefine and argue over the relationship between race and nation in the twenty-first century.

If we can take one insight away from these diverse books, written from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, it is the persistence of racial thinking over many centuries. Race remains a social reality even for those of us who dismiss it as scientific fiction. Even as race has been redefined and rejected, racial assumptions have been redeployed and racism has been reinscribed in new contexts. We humans seem unable to disarticulate race from blood, identity from lineage. We cannot seem to escape our deeply entrenched assumptions that outer appearances and behaviors connote underlying essences that profoundly differentiate one human being from another.

Author Information

Nancy P. Appelbaum is Professor of History and Director of the Latin American and Caribbean Area Studies program at Binghamton University, State University of New York, where she previously chaired the History Department. She is the author of two prizewinning books: *Mapping the Country of Regions: The Chorographic Commission of Nineteenth-Century Colombia* (2016, Spanish-language edition 2017) and *Muddied Waters: Race, Region, and Local History in Colombia, 1846–1948* (2003, Spanish 2007), as well as articles and essays. With Karin Alejandra Roseblatt and Anne S. Macpherson, she coedited *Race and Nation in Modern Latin America* (2003).

How to cite this article: Appelbaum, Nancy P. 2020. Blood, Nation, Science, and Language: Essentializing Race from the Sixteenth Century to the Present. *Latin American Research Review* 55(2), pp. 352–359. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.925>

Submitted: 08 April 2019

Accepted: 08 April 2019

Published: 23 June 2020

Copyright: © 2020 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

LARR

Latin American Research Review is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the Latin American Studies Association.

OPEN ACCESS 