# Book Review

– *Becoming Black Political Subjects: Movements and Ethno-Racial Rights in Colombia and Brazil,* by Tianna S. Paschel. Princeton University Press, 2016.

In Brazil and Colombia alike, Afro-descendants have been substantially included in ethno-racial reforms. In *Becoming Black Political Subjects*, Tianna Paschel sets out the rationales and peculiarities of this inclusion. Her comparative analysis is threefold. First, she explores the conundrum of why Colombia and Brazil adopted black rights. Not only were these rights counterintuitive to their earlier insistence on colour-blindness and universal citizenship, the black movements advocating for such legislation seemed hardly forces to be reckoned with; lacking in size, resources, allies, and popularity. Second, Paschel scrutinizes why specific rights for black populations have taken on such distinctive contours in Colombia and Brazil, despite the countries' comparable histories of slavery, mestizaje, and *conversion* to ethno-racial reforms. Third, she looks at the aftermath of the reforms, exploring their social and political effects.

To understand why and how black political subjects became institutionalized, Paschel adopts a transnational perspective. In the introductory chapter, we learn that ethno-racial reforms became possible and unfolded at the intersection of extra- and intra-national events, or, as Paschel puts it, in moments of *political field alignment*: 'when the conditions of possibility in global fields and domestic political fields converge' (p. 19). The interplay between global and national dynamics runs like a red thread throughout the subsequent chapters. Chapter 2 touches upon the mestizaje politics that preceded today's citizenship frameworks. It shows that while post-independence Brazil and Colombia both clung onto ideologies of miscegenation in reaction to Euro-American racism, they ended up locating Afro-descendants in variegated slots of otherness. Whereas in Brazil black citizens were central to the nationalist narrative of racial democracy, in Colombia they remained symbolically excluded from ideas of nationhood. Chapter 3 builds on this historical analysis and examines the emergence of black social movements as well as their struggle to gain political ground in discursive terrains of racial equality.

The next two chapters (4, 5) illustrate how black movements succeeded in obtaining ethno-racial rights by seizing the opportunities provided by transnational norms of cultural difference and racial equality. Moving beyond the scholastic persistence to link Afro-Indigenous rights to a single *multicultural turn*, Paschel identifies two global-domestic alignments: the *multicultural alignment* (1980s-1990s), which particularly held sway in Colombia and ignited the allocation of collective lands to Afro-descendants, and the *racial equality alignment* (2000s-2010s), which in turn mainly impacted Brazil, translating into a robust set of affirmative action policies. While state fragmentation and the symbolism attributed to Afro-Colombians made Colombia more susceptible to the earlier phase of culture politics, the anti-racism strategies and political connections of the Afro-Brazilian movement made racial equality laws especially pronounced in Brazil.

Hereafter, we arrive at the actual implementation of legislation. In Chapter 6, Paschel sketches how black movements walk a political tightrope between acquiring resources from the state and facing bureaucratic co-option. This sceptical tenor continues into Chapter 7, wherein Paschel draws attention to how the reforms' transformative potential has been jeopardized by competing economic interests. Finally, the concluding chapter (8) provides an overview of the ethnography's numerous theoretical contributions, which relate to social movement theory and race/ethnicity studies.

Documenting the shift towards ethno-racial reforms in two countries seems an ambitious task, but it is exceptionally well taken on by Paschel. By keeping an eye open for ideological and institutional changes lying beyond the nation-state, she merges both cases into one coherent narrative. What is more, by connecting the substantial achievements of marginalized black movements to transnational discourses of multiculturalism and racial equality, Paschel convincingly lays bare the limitations of state- and activist-centric theories of social movements. Yet she does not lose sight on the importance of domestic politics either. In her historical descriptions of the relationships between the two states and black movements – wherein canonical events seamlessly blend with quotations – Paschel meticulously details the particularities of both Brazil and Colombia.

That said, two modest critiques on the Colombian analysis seem in place. For one, I find the section on mining somewhat meagre, especially given the vastness with which gold extraction has transformed Afro-Colombian livelihoods in the past 10-15 years. Paschel describes mining operations in rather unspecific terms. She brusquely bundles corporate and informal mining together as 'the inevitable outcome of capitalist expansion' (p. 195) and is silent on the distinctive ways in which state-sanctioned mining companies and wildcat miners affect – and are affected by – rural communities.[1] Also, in explaining why multicultural reforms happened, the ethnography is thin on examining how Afro-Colombian land rights are concomitant with governmental and capitalist expansion (see Asher & Ojeda, 2009; Cárdenas, 2012). Granted, Paschel

does make the claim that 'collective titling was necessary for the later expansion of capitalism in these areas' (p. 190), but she leaves this relationship analytically and empirically unexplored. In fact, in Chapter 7 she shows how state-facilitated capitalism wreaks havoc on the implementation of collective land tenure, which one can also take as counter-evidence to the here-cited claim.

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**Note**

1. For more detailed analyses on the case of COCOMOPOCA, which Paschel describes, see Martínez-Basallo (2010) and Tubb (2014).

**References**

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