

Blackness and Quilombola Identities in the Amazon

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**Negritude e
Identidades
Quilombolas na
Amazônia**

Resumo

Em *The People of the River: Nature and Identity in Black Amazonia, 1835-1945*, Oscar de la Torre examina a relevância econômica e demográfica da região amazônica, argumentando que identidades a ela relativas devem ser historicizadas. O autor discute eventos históricos, como a Cabanagem, bem como fluxos econômicos e sociais, os quais impactaram demograficamente a região. Divergindo de outros autores brasileiros e estrangeiros, De la Torre demonstra que identidades, tais como as quilombolas, precisam ser compreendidas além das normas constitucionais de 1988, bem como além do século XX. Para tanto, De la Torre nos leva a eventos coloniais e pós-independência, discutindo os importantes vínculos da Amazônia com o tráfico de escravos e com o comércio global de diversas commodities.

Palavras-chave: Amazônia, quilombo, quilombola, tráfico de escravos, identidade.

Abstract

In *The People of the River: Nature and Identity in Black Amazonia, 1835-1945*, Oscar de la Torre examines the economic and demographic relevance of the Amazon region, arguing that identities must be historicized. The scholar discusses historical events, such as the Cabanagem, as well as economic and social flows that demographically impacted the region. Diverging from Brazilian and non-Brazilian scholars, De la Torre contends that identities, such as quilombola ones, must be understood beyond the 1988 Constitution of Brazil, as well as beyond the twentieth century. To examine this topic, De la Torre takes the reader to colonial-era and post-independence events, discussing crucial links between the Amazon and slave trade, as well as with the global commodity market.

Keywords: Amazon, quilombo, quilombola, slave trade, identity.

DE LA TORRE, Oscar. **The People of the River: Nature and Identity in Black Amazonia, 1835-1945.** The University of North Carolina Press, 2018. 242p.

Oscar de La Torre is a historian at the University of North Carolina. He focuses on various issues concerning Blackness, including resistance before and after abolition. His book *The People of the River: Nature and Identity in Black Amazonia, 1835-1945* discuss events during and after abolition in Brazil (1888), having a strong emphasis on the historicization of quilombos and Blackness in the Amazon, a region the author claims is often left behind from scholarly analyses on Black populations in Brazil. De La Torre (2018) also questions an emphasis on present-day human rights discussions, which he attempts to historicize. Sources indicate a strong economic importance of the region, the use of Black labor in the Amazon, and Black Brazilian resistance. The book is counterpoint to Jan French's (2009) work on identities in modern Brazil and complements more recent pieces on the development of local quilombo engagements, such as Sean Mitchell's (2017) discussion on *quilombola* identities in the Alcântara airspace base region.

De La Torre's piece examines the history of quilombos and Black Brazilian engagements in the Amazonian region, emphasizing the historical nature of such developments. The book claims that while constitutional provisions recognizing quilombos and their descending communities were important for Black communities in Brazil, the relationship between those communities and land-based practices is much older, dating back to the colonial period. In other words, while scholarly work has emphasized the construction of identity with the 1988 Constitution, Black identities have been formed much longer ago. It is true that the 1988 Constitution brought important gains to Afro-Brazilian populations, leading to programs such as the 2004 Brasil Quilombola, often resulting from activities and pressures by social movements and actors. However, these identities were not formed in the twentieth century, as seen in the examples given by De La Torre in the book (DE LA TORRE, 2018, p. 4). Here De La Torre diverges from Jan French, as the latter emphasizes the process of identification with pre-existing categories (DE LA TORRE, 2018, p. 4; FRENCH, 2009).

De La Torre provides a historical analysis of the area's occupation and economic development. In 1615, the Portuguese crown fostered the development of agriculture and the importation of African enslaved workforce to the Amazon region.

But it was with the Marquis of Pombal, in the mid-1700s, that concerns with neighboring colonial forces (France, England), drove the Crown to establish the Companhia Geral de Comércio do Grão-Pará e Maranhão, whose tax and legal privileges, drove a new wave of enslavement in 1755 (DE LA TORRE, 2018, p. 12). About two-thirds of enslaved Africans came from Upper Guinea during the company's existence, whereas the last third came from West Central Africa and São Thomé (DE LA TORRE, 2018, p. 13). Portuguese consolidation in Angola by 1750 led to a gradual increase of enslaved people coming from that region in the 1780s (DE LA TORRE, 2018, p. 13). Importation of enslaved Africans peaked between 1800 and 1810 (DE LA TORRE, 2018, p. 14). The economic importance of the Amazon is also underscored by De La Torre. In the early 1800s, one third of all cocoa imported by Europe came from Amazonia, whereas by the 1810s the region kept a 25% chunk (DE LA TORRE, 2018, p. 17). The growth of cocoa plantations, which threatened crops held by free peasants, contributed to the Cabanagem revolt of 1835 (DE LA TORRE, 2018, p. 17). Despite the emergence of the Cabanagem, slave labor continued to be relevant in Pará between 1835 and 1870 (DE LA TORRE, 2018, p. 16). Cacao, sugar, rice, manioc, flour, meat, and hides contributed to the economic stability of the province (DE LA TORRE, 2018, p. 16). In the late 1860s rubber began to lead exports in terms of size and value, and sugar was reworked towards the internal market. One of the arguments espoused by De La Torre refers to the notion of "internal economy", which is often applied to the production of crops other than the dominating export ones. In the case of *Amazônia*, this involved the cultivation of manioc, the extraction of resources, and an intense relationship with canoe peddlers, which demanded time and, in some instances, brought enslaved people sources of income (DE LA TORRE, 2018, p. 6). Instead of "internal," De La Torre contends that "parallel" is a more appropriate term (DE LA TORRE, 2018, p. 7). These activities, as suggested by a body of literature that includes Judith Carney's examination of rice cultivation in the Americas, involved the use of knowledge coming from Africa; in the case of the Amazon, possibly forested Congolese areas (DE LA TORRE, 2018, pp. 6-7). Slavery existed in the Amazon, and its importance to the local economy was not minimal.

De La Torre gives special importance to uprisings in the Amazon. Had Cabanagem not happened, Amazonia would have become a "slave society" and not a "society with slaves" (DE LA TORRE, 2018, p. 136). When rubber emerged as a

major export commodity, slave production was redirected to the internal market and, in fact, core areas of rubber extraction between the 1870s and 1913 did not overlap with plantation localities (DE LA TORRE, 2018, p. 137). As the rubber economy declined in the 1910s, alternative products such as Brazil nuts became a source (DE LA TORRE, 2018, p. 137). Local workers continued to organize. In 1995, the Boa Vista community received a collective land deed (DE LA TORRE, 2018: 143-144). While acknowledging the relevance of such developments, De La Torre claims that the novelty of the constitutional provision should not obfuscate the tradition of Black engagement (DE LA TORRE, 2018, p. 144).

De La Torre (2018) complements the works on quilombola identities, such as the ones by Jan French, and Sean Mitchell (2017). For the purposes of this review, a more detailed comparison with French's (2009) in *Legalizing Identities: Becoming Black or Indian in Brazil's Northeast*, is an interesting approach. French (2009) provides a different perspective on identities and their formation. The book examines a community in Northeastern Brazil, whose Black members' identification as indigenous contributed to their recognition by the federal government. Conversely, other communities with shared origins adhered to a quilombo identity, partnering with social movements which demanded rights. A large part of French's work, unlike De La Torre's analysis, relies on the relationship between legal categories and state recognition. One of the communities described by French (2009), for instance, seems to have benefited from 1970s legislation, which in addition to provisions post-democratization (including the 1988 Constitution), led to land recognition in the 1990s. This is further examined in Chapter Three of French's book (FRENCH, 2009, pp. 43-76). Whereas French (2009) underscores the role legal identities have in the recognition of indigenous and quilombo communities, De La Torre (2018) is concerned with pre-existing practices and developments. In doing so, the scholar avoids placing an emphasis on the 1988 Constitution and on legal norms. De La Torre (2018), as a historian, gives rather importance to change over a long period of time, instead of emphasizing more recent legal changes and political transformations.

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