

[Britt on Collins, 'Revolt of the Saints: Memory and Redemption in the Twilight of Brazilian Racial Democracy'](#)

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John F. Collins. *Revolt of the Saints: Memory and Redemption in the Twilight of Brazilian Racial Democracy*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2015. Illustrations. 480 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-5320-1; \$104.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-5306-5.

Reviewed by Andrew Britt (Emory University) **Published on** H-LatAm (June, 2017) **Commissioned by** Casey M. Lurtz

In 1992, state officials in Salvador, Bahia, coordinated the forced removal of around four thousand residents from the Pelourinho/Maciél neighborhood (p. 23).[1] That historic district, located at the geographical core of Salvador and named for the punishment instrument (pillory) long situated within it, was then knee-deep in a cultural heritage project bankrolled by Brazilian and international patrimonial institutions. The effort seemed to mark the apogee of more than a century of elite and official efforts to define the place as exceptional. While the details shifted across generations, that specialness concerned the district's supposed dual nature as deviant, dangerous, and backward, on the one hand, and the spatialized essence of Afro-Brazilianness, on the other. The UNESCO-backed, Bahian-led preservation initiative of the 1990s and early 2000s brought that contradiction to a new level of visibility. State authorities organized the removal of most of the predominately Afro-Brazilian resident population all the while working to valorize the Afro-Brazilianness of the place through buildings, objects, and select representative individuals deemed fit for international tourism and capital. With the neighborhood's "undesirable" Afro-Bahian residents out of the way, the long dream of revitalizing Bahia's *centro* as a "living museum" inched closer toward its depopulated, monumental realization.[2]

This important story of race, urban renewal, and historic preservation comprises the unifying thread in John F. Collins's impressive *Revolt of the Saints*. [3] Drawn from his years in the Pelourinho as an artisan and resident and later anthropologist, his retelling of the contemporary reconstruction of the Pelourinho is imaginative and unconventional. Readers will not find a neatly packaged tale of displacement filled with victimized but resilient residents whose stories reveal the short-sightedness or duplicity of state preservation officials. Some readers may well arrive at those types of conclusions by the book's end, but Collins outlines and exercises a more complicated and ambitious project. That anthropological project is both historical and about history, tied together with three arguments concerning changes in racial formation in contemporary Bahia (and, to an extent, Brazil more broadly), the co-production of racial identity, and the premises and promises of ethnography.

Collins enriches our understanding of contemporary shifts in Bahian racial politics, especially from the perspectives of Pelourinho residents. A wave of re-Africanization in 1980s and 1990s Bahia helped generate a shift from a so-called racially democratic valorization of mixture to a version of essentialism championing African purity and roots. Articulations of purity and roots are conditioned by the times, of course. Thus the majority of Afro-Bahian Pelourinho residents with whom Collins engages have little involvement with Candomblé, the religion supposedly synonymous with Bahian

Afro-Brazilianness. Perceived by residents as largely co-opted by the state through figures like former governor Antonio Carlos Magalhães (also the author of the Pelourinho's contemporary reconstruction), Candomblé has, Collins argues, given way to other spiritual outlets for the expression of black identity, such as Rastafarian Pentecostalism. The shift away from a racially democratic formation corresponds to a move toward racial identification more typical of the United States, though Collins does not see a full convergence on the horizon. Instead, he identifies a change from the salience of what Oracy Nogueira termed the "mark," or a range of (mostly) physical characteristics that serve to define difference, to the "origin." [4] Contemporary Afro-Bahians, in other words, have come increasingly to identify as such because of an affinity with Afro-descendant ancestry based in feelings of shared history and heritage. This configuration of race is, Collins stresses, a fundamentally historical condition and a novelty in Salvador, where until the 1980s *qualidade* (quality) is said to have been the more salient category of social identity and difference. [5]

Behind Collins's insights into changes in contemporary racial politics in Bahia is an especially compelling explanation for how those shifts have occurred. He proposes that in the Pelourinho, the bundling of buildings, objects, habits, places, and practices as valorized "Afro-Brazilian culture" has prompted individuals to rethink their own identities. Residents, he writes, "have come at times to understand themselves as a possession, or an object, that both belongs to and helps construct the nation" (p. 350). The hardening of recent racial identification has occurred, therefore, through heritage programs that objectify culture as property and establish a sort of incentive for identification with Afro-descendent genealogies. In his words: "What is critical, however, is that in the new racial ideologies being put together in the Pelourinho it be some *thing*, or substantive entity, in uniting a people. Rather than a constellation of qualities, then, race is gaining certain more formally recognized properties" (pp. 336-337). With examples ranging from debates about the origins of skeletons found in Salvador's central plaza to a fresh reading of the meanings of hot sauce in *moqueca* (fish stew), Collins makes a convincing case for underappreciated connections between materiality, property, and the production of racial identities. These insights should benefit and spur work both within and beyond Brazil.

Some of the most engaging sections of *Revolt of the Saints* center on the interactions between local residents and state authorities. Aiming to avoid both the fetishization of residents and the wholesale condemnation of state officials, Collins situates his narrative at the point of contact between the two. He shows how residents, targets of "moralizing surveillance" guised as care by authorities (p. 4), flip the script by conducting studies and amassing archives of their own in order to negotiate their relationship with the state and the terms of indemnifications. In doing so they engage in ethnography, a practice Collins comes to see as "a technique around which people may develop modes of contestation that draw on and at times rework the terms of their own exclusion" (p. 111). While we meet some of the officials directing the Pelourinho's reconstruction, residents' stories receive closest attention. Especially poignant is chapter 6's fine-grained analysis of the interaction between a public health official and resident Topa. The latter's story helps Collins to explicate the notion of residents as saints, a term that he employs to argue for "a productive confusion of the space between an object (a referent) and its sign vehicle" that reveals "one way a populace construed as objects, and as raw data ... may speak for itself by making Others speak" (p. 299). Collins aims for a candid representation of those who live(d) in the Pelourinho. The resulting collective portrait marks a significant contribution to the century-old subfield of studies of race in Bahia, from which we have often learned more about the practices of everyday life than its non-elite practitioners.

One imagines that Collins intends to provoke his readers. Historians are likely to read carefully the work's varying conceptions and definitions of history, and they will be interested by the representation of Pelourinho residents' relationship to the past as essentially about finding a usable history that is, beyond its practical utility, otherwise wholly inconsequential. For example, Collins writes: "over the course of my fieldwork I have found that history, understood as the projection of meaning onto supposedly objectively available events and processes, meant almost nothing to most Pelourinho residents" (p. 355). Other readers may be inclined to think about scale and comparison in the context of the Pelourinho. The regionalized nature of racial formation in Brazil makes generalizing about patterns of change across the nation as a whole challenging. One might say that the twilight of racial democracy, for instance, came much earlier elsewhere in Brazil if it ever dawned at all. In the text and endnotes Collins generally specifies his arguments at the scale to which they apply and does not cast unduly broad strokes. Lastly, one imagines that an ideal readership would be cultural heritage authorities themselves, or those Collins might charge with imagining alternative approaches to preservation programs he understands as "remarkably exclusionary, and oftentimes flimsily authenticated" (p. 347).

Revolt of the Saints could fit well on the syllabi of various seminars, especially those engaged with Brazil or Latin America, cultural heritage and preservation, urban studies and planning, and ethnography. Readers from the first and fourth will find particular interest in Collins's comments on and exercise of *malandragem*. This is a core element of Brazilian folklore that is often translated as "tricksterdom," but Collins proposes an alternative definition of the term—drawn from conversation with the Pelourinho *figura* Mago—to mean the refusal to take a singular position. Admitting deep reservations about having to take many singular positions through the textualization of his years in Salvador, Collins makes various efforts to infuse the book with this conception of *malandragem*. He winkingly terms the result a "substantially truthful" account (p. 74). Some readers may grow restive as that account's central arguments, which Collins states explicitly and in detail in the introduction and conclusion, simmer throughout in subsections that can shift in tone and topic from one to the next. That deliberate discontinuity, however, enlivens this personal collection of narratives animated by generations of local and non-local residents gripped by the Pelourinho.

Notes

[1]. For an examination of an earlier series of efforts to remake the Pelourinho, see Anadelia A. Romo, *Brazil's Living Museum: Race, Reform, and Tradition in Bahia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

[2]. Collins estimates a decline from 1,300 families in the Pelourinho in 1992 to about 150 by 2002 (p. 212). The page about the Pelourinho on the UNESCO website offers the following appraisal of the last two decades of the district's reconstruction/preservation: "In the 1990s, some 1,350 properties were restored in the Pelourinho district with the objective of developing the economic potential of the area by exploiting tourism. Concurrently, the number of residents in the historic centre decreased from 9,853 in 1980 to 3,235 in 2000 in a process of depopulation." See UNESCO, "Historic Centre of Salvador de Bahia," <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/309/> (accessed June 5, 2017).

[3]. One might be tempted to distill the intertwined elements of this story in the term "gentrification."

Collins employs the term in *Revolt of the Saints* most often as a modifier for authorities, as in the “state gentrification officials” (p. 168). In any case, the book is certainly apt to inform debates about the meanings of this term and its portability across time and space.

[4]. Oracy Nogueira, “Preconceito racial de marca e preconceito racial de origem—sugestão de um quadro de referência para a interpretação do material sobre relações raciais no Brasil,” XXXI Congresso Internacional de Americanistas, 1954. The paper can be found in *Tempo Social, revista de sociologia da USP* 19, no. 1 (November 2006): 287-308.

[5]. It is worth exploring further how this argument relates to other recent work on changing racial politics and ethnogenesis in the Northeast, such as Jan Hoffman French’s *Legalizing Identities: Becoming Black or Indian in Brazil’s Northeast* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009). Comparing these seemingly related processes, especially across urban and rural contexts, will prove interesting. See footnote 8 from chapter 6, page 399, for Collins’s take on the matter.

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