

REVIEW ARTICLE

Women, Race and Popular Culture in Brazil

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Blessed Anastácia: women, race and popular Christianity in Brazil

John Burdick, 1998

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This is a fascinating piece of social anthropology, offering a detailed study of the cultural forms and layers of injustice that shape the colonial inheritance of Brazil while at the same time exploring the sources of racism within the human psyche. The significance of the female saint is central and it contributes to Burdick's focus on social issues affecting women concerning ideas of beauty, love, marriage, family and work. He uses these as a lens through which to explore attitudes to slavery, links with African ancestry, the formation of black identity, and the future of the anti-racist struggle. Methodologically, the study takes account of the voices and meanings of a wide range of racial and religious groupings in Brazil and avoids attributing ideological correctness to any of them. Racial groupings are broken down into *preta*, *negra*, *branca*, *morena*, *mulata*, and various shades in between. Religious groupings are identified in terms of Pentecostals (*crentes*) (p. 120), the inculturated Mass (p. 57), Anastácia devotees (p. 69), and *umbanda candomblé* (p. 64). Burdick uses ethnography as a form of political analysis capable of presenting different points of view across and between the black consciousness movement, proponents of the Catholic inculturated Mass, and evangelical Pentecostals, challenging each to listen to and consider what the other has to say.

Protestantism in particular is subjected to thorough and wide-ranging analysis. The power of the slave saint, Anastácia, as a model to inspire self-esteem and personal achievement by being for each devotee what she needs her to be, has clear resonances with the role of the Virgin in Hispanic and Latin cultures. The psychological process of modelling and the ritualized reciprocity inherent in personal devotion to the saint deserves a study of its own. Here, it did not receive the detailed treatment that the subtitle suggests. Instead the significance of hair straightening and

choice of partner to 'whiten' the family line were issues more thoroughly pursued by the author. In Brazil 71% of society is nominally Catholic and the exploration of African roots and genetic inheritance has come to be central to its contemporary Catholic culture. Perhaps, therefore, physical issues like body image and desire are more relevant than psychological ones.

Burdick focuses considerable attention on the Assemblies of God Pentecostal grouping that has spread to around 12% of the population. He suggests that women in this sector appeal to Proverbs 31, 'Fairness is an illusion and beauty will one day come to an end but the woman who fears God shall be praised.' Its language is universal, enabling *negra* identity to be valued by insisting that virtue is inherent in all God's creation and lack of physical beauty does not detract from beauty of the soul. Burdick suggests that this challenges stereotypes by appealing directly to the female psyche and giving women a spirit of confidence that enables them to reject stereotypes of excessive humility and self-deprecation and to confront power with truth. The author records a breakdown of racial division within the movement, especially with regard to intermarriage. He explores the deep suspicion of Pentecostals by the black consciousness movement that accuses them of diffuse and unreflective practice and too close a link with Europe. They in turn accuse the black consciousness movement of too narrow a tie with Africa. Anastácia's significance is explored from many angles and is judged to be ambivalent. She reinforces the image of the victimised slave and symbolizes silencing, yet she is loved for her serenity, for her willingness to suffer to protect her dignity and for keeping alive the horrors of slavery in the popular imagination. She represents moral exclusion versus moral triumph, though her very forgivingness is seen by the black consciousness movement as serving the continuance of white domination.

The rigour of this research is its strength, for it is inconclusive in identifying a way forward but brilliant in its respect for the complexity of the issues and in its definition of significant elements in the interplay between psychology and religion in the 'naïve consciousness' (*Freire*) of Brazil's population. The distinct religious movements become less important than the processes of change of consciousness which the author goes a long way towards clarifying. He acknowledges that interpretations of such processes are shaped by the ideological views of the interpreter, which raises questions about the bias inherent in his own study. However, Burdick has woven a rich and complex tapestry that invites the reader to select particular threads for further study and research. Its appeal extends way beyond the academic and is not confined to lovers of Brazil for its canvas is universally female.