

Tanya Maria Golash-Boza, *Yo Soy Negro: Blackness in Peru* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011). 246 pages + bibliography and index. ISBN # 978-0813035741. Hardcover \$71.72

Natacha Margarita Carroll, University of Alberta

Yo Soy Negro: Blackness in Peru by Tanya Maria Golash-Boza offers a ground-breaking and controversial analysis of Black Ingenieros, people from Ingenio de Buenos Aires (hereafter Ingenio), a small village with a significant Black population, located in the northern Peruvian region of Piura.¹ Golash-Boza conducted her research primarily among Ingenieros living in Ingenio, but also among a few Ingenieros who lived in Lima or migrated to the capital at some juncture during their lives. *Yo Soy Negro* is largely based upon interviews of forty-nine Afro-Peruvian informants conducted over six months in 2003. The central thrust of *Yo Soy Negro* challenges many widespread notions about race. Specifically, Golash-Boza insightfully argues that skin colour is crucial to the definition of Blackness in Ingenio. In so doing she contests the idea, articulated by Carl N. Degler in 1971, that light-skinned African descendants in Latin America can adopt a non-Black identity via a process of social Whitening.² Golash-Boza also questions the assumption that all Blacks identify with Africa and that slavery is always a critical factor in Black identity formation. Golash-Boza explains that her case study does not correspond to Paul Gilroy's influential theory documented in his monograph *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) that underscores the salience of slave memories in shaping Black Diaspora identity (p. 117-118). Golash-Boza recognizes the fluidity of the conceptual framework of Blackness and embraces the idea that more than one definition of Blackness can exist in the Diaspora. Moreover, Golash-Boza questions the belief that the Afro-Latino experience is equivalent to the Latin American Indigenous experience thoroughly documented

¹ Ingenieros self-identify as "Black."

² Carl N. Degler, *Neither Black nor White; Slavery and Race Relations in Brazil and the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 245.

by scholars such as Marisol de la Cadena.³ *Yo Soy Negro: Blackness in Peru* declares that Afro-Latino communities deserve individual attention and greatly contributes to the scant number of monographs written about contemporary Afro-Peruvians.

At first glance some readers may cringe at the prospect of reading introductory chapters regarding slavery since the few monographs that do address Afro-Peruvians overwhelmingly focus on this abominable practice. Upon further inspection, however, Golash-Boza does not randomly provide historical information concerning slavery and the slave trade, but contextualizes Piura within this tragic period (early sixteenth century to 1854). In so doing, she contributes to the literature regarding slavery in northern Peru, a region often neglected by scholars who specialize in slavery and the slave trade. In addition, Golash-Boza's study of Afro-Peruvian identity involves ancestral origins, thus making the discussion of slavery pertinent to her interviews. Her informants' revealed that a regional identity historically rooted in the multiethnic struggle against the unjust conditions of tenant farming in the twentieth century prevailed in the community's oral family histories. Moreover, the majority of Golash-Boza's interlocutors did not previously ponder their ancestors' origins in Africa and many were unaware of the history of slavery in Peru. This suggests that many Ingenieros did not consider themselves members of the Black Diaspora and confirms that slavery and African ancestry did not define their identity.

Notwithstanding this lack of Black diasporic consciousness, Golash-Boza astutely emphasizes how Black Ingenieros should be considered members of the Diaspora. She strongly implies that Ingenieros should have access not only to local discourses, but also to global Black discourses that recognize the historical barbarities perpetrated against Black people. Golash-Boza concludes that many Ingenieros, particularly those who did not travel to Lima, were not

| 115

³ Marisol de la Cadena, *Indigenous Mestizos: the Politics of Race and Culture in Cuzco, Peru, 1919-1991* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

only unaware of the historical origins of racism, but also of the omnipresence of racism in everyday life. For example, when Doris, a middle aged woman, stated that she was never a target of racism, her daughter Lorena, a former domestic in Lima, challenged her mother's perspective (p. 138). Golash-Boza's underlying argument is that education and critical analysis equip people with the tools and knowledge necessary to recognize racial oppression. Golash-Boza leaves the more pressing question of how to combat racism unexplored. | 116

Golash-Boza maintains that the fundamental difference between Blackness and Indigenousness in Peru is that the first is primarily based on skin colour whereas the second is predominately based on cultural and social conditions. As a result, Golash-Boza contends that Black and Indigenous peoples experience the process of *mestizaje* (racial and cultural mixing) differently. For example, Golash-Boza posits that while Indigenous peoples gain inclusion into the broader society via acculturation (or de-culturation, depending on one's perspective), Blacks gain entry into the broader society via miscegenation. Accordingly, Golash-Boza asserts that Ingenieros who migrate to Lima for employment actually tend to acquire an acute recognition of discrimination and a pronounced Black identity. This experience contrasts sharply with the Indigenous experience presented by scholars such as Marisol de la Cadena.⁴ De la Cadena argues that in the Indigenous case, *mestizaje* involves shedding one's supposed poverty stricken and backward rural condition via exposure to an urban environment where one can learn Spanish, adopt city attire, learn "proper" etiquette and "improve" hygiene habits.⁵ In direct opposition to the Indigenous experience, Golash-Boza observes that Blacks are already culturally amalgamated; they speak the same language, wear the same clothes and eat the same foods as the dominant, White, class (p. 178, 186). Thus, for Blacks the Whitening process or *blanqueamiento* is literal whereas for Indigenous peoples the Whitening process is more figurative. The

⁴ de la Cadena, *Indigenous Mestizos*.

⁵ de la Cadena, *Indigenous Mestizos*, 29-34.

difference between the Black and Indigenous communities in terms of *mestizaje* should serve as a warning to intellectuals who simply apply established Indigenous racial frameworks to the Black community without first considering their suitability. It should also encourage other scholars to research the Afro-Latino experience. Furthermore, emphasizing the primacy of skin colour in the definition of Blackness not only departs from literature that examines the Indigenous population of Peru, but also differs from the widespread belief that Blackness in Latin America is a malleable identity construct that transforms according to cultural and social characteristics such as language, education, dress and wealth. | 117

Golash-Boza illustrates that Ingenieros valorized the terms they employed to describe skin colour (p. 150-169). For example, she discerned that even though colour terms were common, Ingenieros tended to avoid such terms when describing people who occupied a higher social status (p. 122). This observation discloses the deeper meaning behind skin colour, discrimination and notions of superiority. Golash-Boza concludes that while Ingenieros tended to prefer lighter skin, as evidenced by comments such as “Black but good-looking” (p. 164). They also embraced a Black discourse that depicted Blackness as superior to White *Serranos*, uniquely defined by Ingenieros as people from the Andes that tend to have light complexions, eyes and hair (p. 153). “Serrano” is generally considered a pejorative term that literally means “mountain-person.” Golash-Boza affirms that evidence of a “Black is beautiful” discourse is partly derived from television shows and commercials that depict Black models, actors and soccer players, among other famous international and national figures of African heritage.

Yo Soy Negro is rich in content and is written in accessible English. It presents a broad range of topics including the representation and presence of Blacks in Peruvian literary works, a discussion of some of the most prominent monographs concerning how Black and Indigenous communities throughout Latin America experience *mestizaje* differently, an examination of beauty discourses and a variety of interviews pertaining to identity and

Blackness in Ingenio and Lima. Due to the all-encompassing nature of *Yo Soy Negro*, it is ideal for neophyte students of Afro-Latino and Black Diaspora history. Notwithstanding, academics, graduate students and other voracious readers will also appreciate the arguments Golash-Boza presents; however, they may yearn for a more sophisticated and eloquent writing style. Importantly, the content overpowers the aesthetic simplicity of the text.

| 118

Yo Soy Negro helps pave the way for further research in Afro-Peruvian and Black Diaspora studies. For example, Golash-Boza's conclusions underscore how much work Afro-Peruvian organizations, headquartered in Lima, need to accomplish in order to adequately reach isolated and predominately Black communities like Ingenio. Golash-Boza remarks that the last workshop concerning Black identity held in Ingenio occurred approximately fifteen years ago! While Afro-Peruvian leaders and activists based in Lima recognize that there is a long road ahead before a significant number of Blacks throughout the nation embrace Black consciousness, it is noteworthy that organizations like The Black Association in Defense and Promotion of Human Rights (la Asociación Negra de Defensa y Promoción de los Derechos Humanos: ASONEDH) have been working with Afro-Peruvians in Northern Peru in communities such as Morropón, located a mere seven kilometers from Ingenio, for over twenty years.⁶ Indeed, Golash-Boza notes that one of her interviewees frequently travelled by bicycle to Morropón to attend workshops organized by NGOs. Due to the culture of gender difference, Golash-Boza asserts that women in Ingenio do not generally have the opportunity to become politically active in the Black movement. While this gender barrier exists, Golash-Boza does not mention that organizations like ASONEDH design and host workshops for Black youth as well as for older women in Morropón.⁷ Notwithstanding these ongoing efforts, the Afro-Peruvian movement struggles to spread Black consciousness.

⁶ Jorge Ramírez Reyna (founder and president of ASONEDH), in discussion with the author, 12 June 2011.

⁷ Ramírez Reyna, in discussion with the author, 12 June 2011.

Golash-Boza encourages researchers to explore other neglected Afro-Peruvian communities and classes. In order to determine if Ingenio is an exception or the norm among Afro-Peruvian and Afro-Latino communities more broadly, she urges scholars to continue researching the Afro-Latino experience. By examining a northern region of Peru, *Yo Soy Negro: Blackness in Peru* contests the erroneous yet widespread assumption that Blacks in Peru are only located in Chincha, a province situated in the department of Ica, south of Lima. Furthermore, *Yo Soy Negro* contributes to activists' efforts to make Afro-Peruvians visible by presenting the Black community of Ingenio de Buenos Aires as a worthy member of the Black Diaspora. | 119