

**Afro-Brazilians: Cultural Production in a Racial Democracy** by Niyi Afolabi.  
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Niyi Afolabi's *Afro-Brazilians: Cultural Production in a Racial Democracy* is an informative and purposefully written work. The Nigerian scholar critiques Brazil's societal denial of racial inequality yet celebrates Afro-Brazilian activist artists' "strategies of survival" as they make their voices heard through literary and musical cultural production (1), while delineating connections between Brazilian and Nigerian culture. *Afro-Brazilians* explores allegories of identity through the lenses of Yoruba cosmology and Pan-African sentiment.

Afolabi recalls his first trip to Brazil as an exchange student from Nigeria, when he discovered that "the psychology of slavery" deeply pervaded Brazilian society (ix). The discrimination shown toward people of African descent in Brazil reflected the country's "deluding concept of racial democracy," which is still "sacredly sanctioned in all spheres of Brazilian life" (ix). He specifically notes the tendency for Afro-Brazilians to be poorly educated and politically powerless. Thus, Afolabi highlights the achievements of Afro-Brazilians who have successfully gained influence while also speaking truth to power.

Afolabi presents various forms of Afro-Brazilian life and art that reflect cultural resistance, using the lenses of identity, ancestrality, Afro-Modernity, and cultural production. He highlights the works of writers such as Solano Trindade, whom he characterizes as "an Afro-Brazilian Langston Hughes" (208) and discusses the role of musician and "griot" (132) Gilberto Gil in sparking the 1960's "pop-cultural" *Tropicalismo* movement, comparing him in his activism and exuberant performances to Nigerian Afro-Beat pioneer Fela Kuti (127).

In the first half of the book, Afolabi explores “cultural collectives” like Quilombhoje and “women writers” such as Miriam Alves, lauding their ability to voice the oppression felt by Afro-Brazilians. He notes the presence of the Yoruba term “axé” in Afro-Brazilian culture, loosely translated from the Nigerian ethnic group’s language as “vital force,” and used to promote the retention of “dignity and sanity” through writing, performing, and “celebrating Afro-Brazilian heroes through symbolic actions” (2). He also examines ancestral linkages among enslaved Brazilians who returned to Nigeria after the abolition of slavery and the creation of Nigerian-Brazilian identity: “Brazilians who returned to West Africa have a lot to celebrate and reminisce about” (113).

Chapter 6 is an investigation of hindrances to popular participation in Afro-Brazilian Carnival, and chapter 7 explores the “processes of dehumanization of Afro-Brazilian actors” (3) in films produced in the second half of the twentieth century, wherein roles were built upon popular characterizations of slaves. Afolabi’s assertion that Africans people of African descent recognize and address the commodification of their cultures is evident in his treatment of the commercialization of yearly Carnival festivals. “The producers of Afro-Brazilian culture are no longer in charge of their own culture but are treated as petty informants to the professional exploiters and beneficiaries of that culture through the latter’s economic power and control—a condition that is only tangentially redressed during Carnival celebrations” (21).

Afolabi spends the remaining chapters discussing the place of tradition and ancestrality in Afro-Modernity through the works of writers such as Ronald Tutuca and samba vocalist Leci Brandão, whom he characterizes as an “ancestral mother” (357). In his view, ancestrality, or the remembrance and re-adoption of ancestral practices and

beliefs, represents a framework for uniting people of African descent, to forge a sense of community and shared values that can aid in addressing the ills of slavery and colonialism.

*Afro-Brazilians* offers an expansive investigation of various expressions of cultural pride by a wide array of artists. There is ample literary analysis and commentary on the mainstreaming of indigenous traditions and marginalization of authentic culture bearers while the overly extensive variety of historical figures and cultural products that the author examines takes away from the work's sense of cohesion. Afolabi's commitment to the people's political empowerment is commendable. This book acknowledges the presence of Afro-Brazilian individuals who have raised their voices against societal inequalities and presents a hopeful determination for self-empowerment and healing through culture reclamation.

**Reviewer:** Lara Diane Rann is a PhD student in Ethnomusicology at University of California-Los Angeles and a native of Charlotte, NC. In addition to her research in Music and Dance as Healing Agents and her investigations of cultural tourism in Brazil, she is a dancer, vocalist, and coordinator of UCLA's ArtsInitiative, where she mentors first generation college student artists.