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# Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

**Prisca Gayles**, 2024, *Pain into Purpose: Mobilizing Emotions in Argentina's Black Resistance Movement*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 222 pp., ISBN 978-1-00956-971-2

**Key Words:** Blackness, Argentina, political mobilization, emotionality, invisibility

In *Pain into Purpose: Mobilizing Emotions in Argentina's Black Resistance Movement*, Prisca Gayles successfully fills a gap in Afro-Latine literature by examining Blackness where it is often invisibilized in the first book-length monograph with respect to the complexity of Black activism in Argentina (12). The book tracks Black political activism in the country from the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century through the COVID-19 pandemic, with ethnographic contributions from the author's fieldwork beginning in the late 2010s. Gayles' ethnographic work with activists in Argentina's *Movimiento Negro* (Black social movement) is an exemplar of how to mix activism with strong theoretical foundations.

*Pain into Purpose's* interventions manifest in two concrete ways: one methodological and the other theoretical. First, Gayles emphasizes the ethnographic richness available to scholars of *Afro-Latinidad* in places that are largely absent from the literature, encouraging ethnographers of the African diaspora in Latin America to look where Blackness has been systemically invisibilized. Countries in Latin America that frame themselves as homogeneously White following successful *blanqueamiento* (Whitening) campaigns can offer as much insight into contemporary racial dynamics as more common sites of study in the region. Second, Gayles theorizes emotionality as foundational to Black political mobilization in Argentina. She discusses how shared emotional investment among the heterogeneous Black community in Argentina is an effective technology activists use to combat the material marginalization and sociocultural erasure leveraged against the country's Black population. *Pain into Purpose* effectively illustrates how small political movements can be successful through micro- and macro-level engagement with emotionality.

Gayles opens the introduction with the brutal murder of George Floyd to illustrate how Black political actors in Argentina leverage emotions transmitted through transnational diasporic channels of activism to advance social justice missions in places without large Afro-descendant populations. She incorporates social movement theory to define these moments as emotional opportunity structures, or the “emotional expectations that positively or negatively sanction the emotional displays of social movements” (14). The introduction successfully illustrates how emotional racial discourses emanating from places with large Black populations are repurposed and strategically implemented in Argentina to advance racial equality despite the country’s popular associations of Blackness with that which is foreign and other.

The first chapter explores how everyday racializing practices contribute to the foreignization of Blackness in the context of “White” Argentina. Gayles uses a critical analysis of Whiteness—particularly notions of homogeneous Whiteness—to flip the traditional discourse of Latin American racial democracy on its head. She articulates the viability of myths of racial harmony in a place like Argentina when specific racialized processes invisibilize non-white phenotypes or attach them to notions of otherness. The framing of Blackness as foreign to Argentina expresses how Whiteness is reproduced within the analytic of racial democracy in Latin American polities with small Black populations.

However, I believe the author could have pushed her theoretical analysis further in this chapter, as she does not explicitly address how Argentina’s foreignization of Blackness may affect the country’s unique Black communities differently. Gayles notes that many of the movement’s activists (and her interlocutors) are not necessarily Black Argentines, but, rather, African migrants. Yet she appears to privilege the experiences of Black Argentines throughout the book. Perhaps African migrants’ voices are missing from this chapter because they *are* foreign, and, therefore, their Blackness is correctly labeled, and their being foreignized is less of an affront to their identities. If they exist, differing responses to foreignization within Argentina’s heterogeneous Black population might trouble some of the chapter’s arguments regarding shared emotionality within the *Movimiento Negro*. Such differences would highlight a point of departure between the two communities’ emotional engagement with foreignization, Argentina’s principal mechanism

for the otherization of Blackness. The author frames Argentina's Black community as heterogeneous but treats the variety of Black emotional responses to racialized practices of foreignization as singular. I am curious how Gayles' arguments could be examined on a *spectrum* of emotionality in political mobilization through a comparative analysis of the distinct Black communities she describes.

Chapters two and three center on emotions' macro-level role in Black activism in Argentina. Specifically, chapter two showcases the country's rich history of Black activism while centering some of the tragedies that sparked emotional and sociopolitical unrest among local Black communities. Gayles describes Argentina's *Movimiento Negro* as an embodied struggle. She highlights the activists' commonly used mantra, *poner el cuerpo*, or to put "one's whole being in action" (62), to communicate the stakes of the movement as warranting engagement of the mind and body as it confronts institutional authorities. Chapter three furthers these arguments by centering emotionality and describing "the dialectic of political opportunity and the emotional and cultural domain of politics that activists operate" (86). Gayles uses the term "emotional archive" to articulate the collective emotional history of Argentina, or that which activists use to shape the *Movimiento Negro*'s mobilization strategies. Here, the author furthers her central argument by effectively showing how activists use emotions as an appeal to larger governmental and non-governmental institutions reckoning with their own emotional-historical missteps as they relate to race. Memories of past authoritarian regimes and the systematic practice of disappearing innocent Argentines is the emotional archive upon which activists assert the *Movimiento Negro*'s demands for visibility.

While chapters two and three focus on macro-level roles of emotions in race-based social movements through an appeal to the country's emotional archive, chapters four and five examine the micro-level manifestations of emotionality in Argentina's *Movimiento Negro* via a Black feminist theoretical framework. Chapter four describes the movement as gendered and affective. Gayles notes the exceptional organizing capacity of the movement's women activists, as they're more adept at building affective relationships through shared experiences of pain and grief, thus fortifying the socio-political connections required to pursue social justice reforms. She argues that these gendered relationships organically produce a "Black feminist toolkit" (133) with which the

activists develop a critical consciousness informed by national and transnational Black feminist discourses of solidarity despite multivalent marginalization. Chapter five explores how the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the racialized, systemic inequalities in Argentina while strengthening the interpersonal relationships among female activists in the *Movimiento Negro*. The pandemic led to yet another emotional opportunity structure through which Black activists were able to strengthen mutual aid programs and solidify interpersonal, community relationships out of shared realities of emotional distress and economic uncertainty. These chapters successfully highlight the importance of emotional, interpersonal connections to sustain mobilization efforts for a Black community low in numbers and invisibilized in popular discourses. To attract and maintain membership, the *Movimiento Negro* requires emotional, symbiotic relationships that solidify the heterogeneous voices that constitute the small, though powerful, movement.

*Pain into Purpose* broadens the scope of the field, draws attention to the far-reaching, transnational currents of Black activism, and privileges the emotional foundations upon which small Black social movements operate and achieve success. In tracking emotionality, social movements, and transnational Black discourses—both at the institutional and interpersonal levels—the author successfully articulates how activists overcome their invisibility and can secure small, though important, everyday advancements, such as the 2013 inauguration of November 8<sup>th</sup> as the National Day of Afro-Argentines. Gayles’ work is a productive contribution to anthropology of the African diaspora in Latin America, social movement theory, and to Latin American studies more broadly. *Pain into Purpose* is a powerful examination of how emotions influence Argentina’s shifting racial dynamics and has the capacity to foreground future studies of Black political mobilization in places where activists are not only fighting racism, but also erasure.

**Author biography:**

Reed Margolis is a first-year PhD student in sociocultural anthropology at the University of Texas at Austin. He previously completed his undergraduate degree in cultural anthropology at Duke University in 2021. His research examines the relationship between Blackness and Western notions of liberalism in Argentina, specifically looking at how African migrants renegotiate the country's contemporary attitudes towards citizenship and migration.



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