

From Shipmates to Soldiers: Emerging Black Identities in the Río de la Plata by Alex Borucki, University of New Mexico Press, 2015, 320 pages. ISBN: 978-0-8263-5180-7, Paperback, \$29.99

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What did it mean to be Black in revolutionary Uruguay? The question increases in complexity if we think of communal identity as a dynamic process rather than as a fixed state. This moving target requires the scholar of identity to simultaneously extricate its various elements and track those elements' reactions. Alex Borucki offers just such a distillation in *From Shipmates to Soldiers: Emerging Black Identities in the Río de la Plata*.

Borucki presents identity as the product of several different shared experiences, arguing that Africans and their descendants found commonalities in the endurance of slave voyages, service in militias, and participation in urban associations. These common experiences encouraged individuals in the Río de la Plata region (encompassing much of present-day Uruguay and northern Argentina) to consider themselves part of a community with shared values and interests. While earlier scholars have generated a lively debate over the relative impact of African origins versus conditions in the Americas, Borucki aims to show their interconnection. The fusion of these different experiences along with a great deal of regional movement generated new possibilities for self-understanding.

Borucki deftly weaves together demographic data, legal documents, visual images, and memoirs. After an introduction to the history of the area and the themes of the book, Borucki's first chapter describes the foundation of the Black population of the Río de la Plata between 1777 and 1839. Quantitative data shows that during these peak years of the slave trade at least 70,000 people were forcibly brought into the region. The sheer volume supports the argument that the bulk of the Black populace in the region shared the experience of slave voyages. Chapter Two, "Shipmate Networks and African Identities, 1760-1810" builds upon this, using marriage-witness statements to contend that the bonds developed in slave passages endured. Such friendships became the foundation for the new networks of Black militias, confraternities, and tambos described in the following chapter. Borucki strikes a fine balance by highlighting the agency of Black leaders and associations while also showing the confines within Spanish rule. Associations often re-worked existing structures of power to achieve their own goals: using approved militias and confraternities to petition legal authorities, phrased in the rhetoric of Catholicism and loyalty to the crown. The tambo was a public ritual, meeting, and meeting-place, derived originally from West Central African funeral practices. Borucki suggests that while Black colonial militias were dominated by freemen, and the tambos, by enslaved Africans, confraternities (such as the Catholic brotherhood of St. Balthazar) allowed people from both groups to intermingle and form new networks.

The fourth chapter examines militias in the revolutionary/early independence period, arguing that black soldiers fought in those factions most aligned with their own interests. By the 1830s Black men composed much of the Uruguayan infantry. The following chapter examines "African-Based Associations, Candombe, and the Day of Kings, 1830-1860". Candombe, a successor of the tambo, referred to performances of music and dance of African origin. The largest candombes were performed on the Day

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of Kings, a Carnavalesque Catholic devotion. The Day of Kings became a site for the assertion of a Black Uruguayan identity; for instance, many participants wore military uniforms.

The final chapter discusses “Jacinto Ventura de Molina, a Black Letrado of Montevideo, 1766-1841”. He was exceptional, deriving considerable social mobility from his status as a letrado or man of letters. Yet his life also echoes the shared experiences that made for a wider Black identity in Río de la Plata. Molina’s parents endured slave voyages. Molina himself served as a lieutenant during the British invasions and he wrote appeals and petitions for confraternities. His writings voiced a Black identity founded upon combined African, Atlantic, and Platense experiences. Borucki’s case study of Molina crystallizes the developments catalogued in the rest of the book, making for an especially engaging culmination.

This mixing of historical strategies is the greatest strength of the monograph. Borucki seamlessly integrates big data and personal stories, approaching the issue of identity from both macro and micro positions. This makes for a fresh perspective on the important but under-studied issue of Black identity in a region that would later come to be seen as essentially White. As part of the University of New Mexico Press Diálogos Series, *From Shipmates to Soldiers* succeeds in provoking further discussion. The nature of the sources largely restricts the analysis to the activities of men; hopefully future research may incorporate women more fully into the story of Black identity in Río de la Plata. Also, this inquiry focuses on urban centres, particularly Montevideo. It may be productive to test Borucki’s thesis in the context of smaller towns and rural areas. Such a study might further advance the question Borucki briefly considers in his conclusion: how Black contributions to the nation became erased in official history and popular memory.

From Shipmates to Soldiers will interest a variety of specialists including scholars of Black history, military history, South America, nationalism, and Atlantic studies. More broadly, Borucki has made a significant contribution to identity studies, encouraging all of us to continue the dialogue.