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## From Oppressive to Benign: A Comparative History of the Construction of Whiteness in Brazil in the Post Abolition Era

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### Abstract

This essay deconstructs the ways in which Brazilian patriotic intellectuals transformed the oppressive whiteness of the Portuguese colonial project to what I call “benign whiteness.” After providing a brief history of the development of whiteness and hybridity in Latin America, I highlight patriotism and racism in thinkers such as Cuban José Martí, Uruguayan Enrique Rodó, and Brazilian Euclides da Cunha. After World War I, Brazilian cultural elites, along with the bourgeois state, promoted and institutionalized cultural hybridity as a unique trait that bound Brazilians together in a superior way to the United States. The patriotic trope of hybridity masked white privilege while benign whiteness stymied racial solidarity even as it continued to marginalize non-white populations. I show how whites and many almost whites along with foreign intellectuals, helped propagate the idea of Brazilian benign whiteness, an ideology that continues to impact Latin Americans today.

**Key Words:** Luso-whiteness, whiteness, Latin America, Brazil, hybridity, post-abolition.

In the 1993 song “Haiti,” Brazilian singer-songwriters Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil provide a poignant commentary on the complexity of race and power in Latin America. The song criticizes Brazil’s racist social hierarchy while focusing on the beating and murder of 111 prisoners in Sao Paulo who were “presos indefesos, mas presos são *quase* todos pretos/ Ou quase pretos, ou quase brancos *quase* pretos de tão pobres/E pobres são como podres e todos sabem como se tratam os pretos.” While the song denounces racism in Brazil, it also describes the construction of “whiteness” and “blackness” and each one’s relationship to power in a matter-of-fact style. The use of “quase” (almost) underscores the hybrid and fluid Latin American construction of race in general and whiteness in particular while implicitly indicting white supremacy as the main force behind racism and injustice (See Veloso and Gil, track 1). “Haiti” stands as a popular intervention in a long tradition of Latin American texts that promote hybridity as the essence of racial identity formations in Latin America.

While miscegenation, *mestizaje*, and syncretism have all been *de facto* influences on the creation of Latin American societies since the arrival of Europeans and Africans in the fifteenth century, ideas of Latin America as a region of hybrid nations free of racial prejudice only emerged as a patriotic trope after the end of slavery and the emergence of the United States as a

hegemonic power. In the post-World War I era, white Latin American cultural elites reimagined whiteness as a non-oppressive benign force that was simply part of a Latin American color spectrum. Simultaneously, these elites projected their countries on to the world stage as modern white or almost white nations. The hegemony of the United States provided the backdrop against which this trope of Latin American hybridity emerged under white tutelage. The history of that construction in Brazil represents a powerful Latin American example.

When European empires began to wither away after World War I, and the nation-state became the predominant political structure on the international world stage, many Latin American intellectuals, almost all white or almost white, helped to successfully construct and institutionalize an idea of Latin American whiteness that *idealized* hybridity (from the cosmic race, a nation of mestizos, to racial democracy). Moreover, white or near white writers instrumentalized the contributions of blacks and other non-whites thereby masking the entrenchment of white privilege and white superiority as a fundamental aspect of the new republics.

Latin American intellectuals in the 1920s and 1930s built upon the ideas of white superiority of the colonial past and established a dominant way of thinking about the region that continues to hold currency among many Latin Americans today. Over time, the cultural elites managed, controlled, and transformed colonial Iberian racial ideologies of the superiority of whiteness and European-ness that once benefitted the Portuguese and the Spanish from Europe, creating new patriotic ideas that would include “mixture” as part of the national family. In order to understand the masking of whiteness in the twentieth century, it is important to understand the three pre-twentieth century political processes that provided the foundation of Latin American whiteness and white domination: the creation of the Ibero-American caste system; the genocide of African-descendant and indigenous populations; and the use of migration as a tool of whitening.

### **The Colonial Background**

According to Juan de Sepúlveda, sixteenth-century Aristotelian scholar and advisor to the Spanish crown, white Europeans had a legitimate right to conquest since the powerful were meant to dominate the weak, and the white Christian Iberians were clearly the more powerful. Sepúlveda asked how the Spaniards had any “doubt that these people, so uncultivated, so barbarous, and so contaminated with impiety and lewdness, have not been justly conquered? . . .

For numerous and grave reasons these barbarians are obliged to accept the rule of the Spaniards according to natural law” (Hanke and Rausch 164-68). Consequently, both the Spanish and the Portuguese created similar hierarchies of racial identities that privileged white Iberians in law and practice. Non-whites were able to secure limited privileges based on their connections and affiliations with the wealthier white elite or, in rare cases, through the accumulation of their own wealth.

In 1494, the Spanish and Portuguese agreed to divide and conquer the new lands in the Atlantic world with the signing of Treaty of Tordesillas. From 1580-1640, Spain and Portugal were joined under the Spanish Hapsburgs Phillip II, III and IV and Brazil fell under Spanish authority. When Brazil was under Spanish rule, however, Spain still expected the Portuguese to be financially responsible for defending Brazil and carrying out many of the Hapsburg’s policies causing tensions that would eventually lead the two empires to separate in 1640 (Schwartz 33-48). Both empires created social hierarchies that defined European whiteness as superior to American whiteness (Creoles and Mazombos) and attempted to legally differentiate the progeny of unions between whiteness and indigenous mixture (Mestizos or Mestiços) and Iberian and African mixtures (Mulatos or Pardos).

The dominance of whiteness expanded with the aid of diseases, war, and prohibitions that decimated and segregated indigenous populations, and limited rights and movement of enslaved Africans and their progeny. The Spanish and Portuguese authorities instituted a racialized system in which the conquered often received incentives to venerate whiteness with the hope of more opportunities or possible social mobility. Marginalized married women and concubines could often secure a better standing in society if their white Iberian overlords took favor on them, recognized them, or claimed their offspring. The Spanish and Portuguese crown bestowed titles that recognized political power and the Spanish crown went as far as to create a system in which they sold certificates of whiteness to aspiring people of mixed African and European backgrounds. The purchase and acceptance of these certificates allowed a limited number of non-whites to climb the social ladder to acquire either a socially-constructed whiteness or what JM. Persánch has called “rhetorical whiteness,” signaling a type of tactical assimilation (Twinam 124-45; Persánch 50-53).

By the end of the colonial period, whiteness remained entrenched in the Latin American ethos as an identity of power even as sexual unions across racialized groups and syncretism created myriad racial identities with limited rights compared to European whites. For example,

Iberians limited the occupations that Indians and people of African descent could practice regardless of economic considerations. At the same time, a select group of individuals with higher economic and political status had the capacity to whiten themselves legally through a process called *gracias al sacar* as the cases of merchant Julian Valenzuela and José Manuel Valdes and others indicate. In most Latin American societies, similar social structures emerged, although unofficial and official recognition of miscegenation blurred the strictly dual relationship of power to racial purity and whiteness (Twinam 2015).

The general distinctions between the white conquerors and the non-white oppressed populations in this framework included a racialized geographical determinism in which American born whites were also deemed inferior to Europeans and assured European settlers of superior positions in societies. Thus, Peninsular Europeans were socially superior to Europeans born in the Americas (*Criollos* in Spanish America, *Mazombos* in Brazil). The fact that selected *pardos* and *mulatos* would later be able to purchase certificates of whiteness under certain conditions defined by the Crown facilitating a perception of an economic-based ethnic fluidity (Twinam 330). Over time, the emerging class system in Latin America became incompatible with the Iberian attempt at strict categorization of race. However, many Spanish and Portuguese men recognized their *mestizo* or *mulato* children and raised them with the privileges of whiteness even though by law they could not be able to hold many of the highest political offices or practice certain professions. Many African and indigenous mothers raised other *mestizos* and *mulatos* without these privileges. Patriarchy established a male-determined pattern of racial power in which class often played a mitigating role. These contradictions were not incidental, but the racial codes and dynamics must be seen as a concerted linguistic and cultural justification to maintain a cohesive Hispanic empire. Through the incorporation of “outsiders,” (that is, Africans) the Spanish and Portuguese pursued policies in the Americas similar to those used in in the formation of the Iberian Peninsula’s nation-state (Persánch 49-51).

By the end of the eighteenth century, European Enlightenment had produced a new philosophy of liberalism that called for the equality, liberty, and fraternity of men. These were the supposed tenets of the 1789 French Revolution that would have a direct impact on Latin America independence. For Latin American white elites, liberty meant freedom of white males in the Americas from the restrictions imposed by white Iberians. Equality referred to equal standing of white Latin Americans with the Spanish and Portuguese. Only in Haiti, a colony that was overwhelmingly black, did abolition of slavery and independence go hand in hand. In other

regions, independence preceded abolition in some cases by twenty to thirty years, and in the case of Brazil by almost seventy years. Independence leader Simón Bolívar frequently expressed his fear of a black revolution happening in South America, and other Creoles proposed ideas to prevent a race war (Geggus 25-27).

The major obstacle to economic and political dominance of the white Latin American upper classes had been the white *peninsulares* who controlled trade and commerce and reinforced the distinction between white *peninsular* and white and almost white Creoles. Nonetheless, emerging American consciousness incorporated the racist beliefs that European dominance was justified by natural law, thus excluding non-white racial groups from their discussions of national identity. When new Latin American leaders evoked the Mexican or Brazilian nation after the wars of independence (1810s to the 1830s) in which many non-whites participated, they essentially meant white Creole Mexico or white Luso-Brazil. Indians and Blacks as well as mestizos, particularly those of lower economic rank were absent from this formulation. Aversion to blackness and indigeneity was fundamental to the American nations attempting to promote modern images, which ironically embraced the Europeanness of their former colonizers.

Many states also pursued discriminatory migration policies that prohibited migration from areas that white elites considered undesirable and created campaigns that attempted to attract migrants from Europe, particularly northern Europe. In Argentina, Chile and Brazil for example, states promised land and opportunity to white migrants from Europe. These practices aimed to preserve or institute whiteness as the dominant force (Persánch 60).

### **Independence, Whiteness and Modernity**

Simón Bolívar (1783-1830), the South American revolutionary and father of South American independence, recognized that in Venezuela the European had mixed with the African and the indigenous in the common nation, which he called the “womb of our common mother,” (Bushnell 42, 96). Yet, like most Creoles of his day, Bolívar was intensely skeptical of the ability of the non-white masses to partake fully in the new United States of South America that he envisioned (Bushnell 12-30). By the turn of the nineteenth century, Africans, indigenous people, and their offspring constituted a majority of the population of the Americas. Although Bolívar was initially reluctant to include blacks in his campaign against the Spanish, prejudice gave way to political expediency (Rout 126). Lieutenant Leonardo Infante, General José Laurencio Silva, Navy hero José Prudencio Padilla, and Afro-Uruguayans Dionisio Oribe and Joaquín Lenzina all

fought with their white Creole counterparts against Spain. Nonetheless, even today Latin Americans honor very few black or indigenous men as founding fathers of their respective nations. Even in Cuba, a country that is predominantly black and mixed, white Creoles Carlos Manuel de Céspedes and José Martí occupy the most honored ranks in the Cuban collective consciousness.

As the nation-states defined their geopolitical territories, national consolidation and order became essential. Within this context, post-colonial elites wanted to ensure that their nations possessed the appropriate labor force to guarantee the effective functioning of their economies. Bolívar's white Creole identity served him well because, despite his privileged position, he was able to express solidarity with his Spanish American brothers, whether enslaved or free. The common Spanish enemy had provided a cause around which Bolívar galvanized the support of the popular masses with whom he sympathized. The Haitian masses had proven loyal during the rebellion against French colonialism in Saint Dominique, and Bolívar counted on the colonial masses to fill the ranks of his armies. Bolívar espoused a language of unity despite the anti-black feelings that members of his class harbored (Geggus 25-26).

To fight colonialism, Creoles and Luso-Americans planted the seeds of nationalism that would sprout into separate nations (Deutsch 1-16). Nationalism, according to Edward Said, accompanies decolonization in two stages: firstly, resistance against an outsider; secondly, ideological resistance when efforts are made to forge a community against all pressures (209). Among Latin American countries, cultural whiteness as ideal was the glue that would sustain the fractured caste system left by the Iberian colonial project. Men like Bolívar utilized the rhetoric of an incipient nationalism to forge a *patria* that would be ruled by white Creoles. Neither white Spanish Americans nor white Brazilians conceived of their nations as multiethnic communities of citizens. Their primary goal was to expel Spain and Portugal from the region, not to articulate a vision for resolving racial disparities in their newly formed countries.

Argentina provides us with an example of the cultural dynamics in the region. Argentine intellectuals opposed to the dictatorship of Juan Manuel de Rosas from 1829-1852 produced a wealth of anti-Rosas materials that was also anti-black and anti-American. The Argentine intellectual discourse against dictatorship in the nineteenth century provided a curious window into whiteness in Latin America as white Eurocentric Argentine intellectuals such as Domingo Faustino Sarmiento and Esteban Echeverría allied themselves with a discourse of whiteness, one that they used to vilify Rosas, associating him with blacks, mulattos, and the popular masses, or

what Sarmiento calls “barbarism.” After Rosas’s defeat in 1852, Sarmiento and others would call for the importation of “civilization” that in essence, meant white European migration (Sarmiento 18, 249; Echeverría 7-34). Simultaneously, he argued that Latin America’s ability to survive would depend on its ability to follow the example of North America, which had successfully transferred European values across the Atlantic (Sarmiento 245-248).

In a similar fashion, elite white Brazilians clamored for the creation of an empire ruled by the white son of the Portuguese monarch in 1822 when Dom Pedro I, born in Portugal, declared Brazilian independence. When Pedro abdicated in 1831, his white Brazilian-born son Dom Pedro II succeeded him at the age of five when people of African descent represented the majority of the population (Buccifero 174). However, Pedro II did not govern Brazil until his coronation in July 1841 at the age of fifteen. The ascendance of an emperor perceived by his American subjects as legitimate ushered in a period of relative peace, distinct from the socially and politically turbulent decade from 1831-1841 when the Brazilian regency governed Brazil on Pedro II’s behalf. Indeed, having a white Brazilian-born emperor of royal blood was critical to the vision of the newly independent Brazilian elite, and Pedro II would govern Brazil for 58 years at a time when the country continued to rely heavily on enslaved African labor.

Brazil strove to maintain a positive image in the international arena, and U.S. scrutiny was of particular importance as Brazilians had attained an impressive commercial trade with their northern neighbor by the middle of the nineteenth century. Despite the centrality of African slavery until 1888 in Brazil, and the fact that the majority of the population was of African descent, white Brazilians emphasized the European aspects of Brazilian culture. Transnational elite class alliances in this context became even more important than political affiliation or cross-racial alliance within national boundaries. Thinkers such as Joaquim Nabuco (1849-1910), a major spokesman for the abolitionist-republican movement, indicated that the relationship between abolition and immigration was not incidental. Essential to Nabuco’s anti-slavery stand was his hope for *embranqueamento*, or whitening, of seeing Brazil as becoming more European (223). For this reason, Nabuco also opposed the immigration of East Asians as it would “complicate the situation” (Skidmore 9).

Meanwhile, Nabuco compared the plight of blacks in Brazil to blacks in the United States, stating that there was some mobility of Brazilian blacks who were better off than their counterparts in the United States. Nabuco believed that the dominant white Brazilians had afforded Africans opportunities that the United States had denied them (21). Nonetheless,



despite his pro-abolitionist stance, Nabuco attributed the problems in Brazil to the African presence, asserting that the vice of African blood came into widespread circulation, not owing to the African, but to the system of slavery. “Without slavery,” he explained, “. . . Brazil could have been like Canada or Australia” (98-100).

Elsewhere in Latin America similar sentiments arose from white privileged revolutionary heroes. José Martí, the Cuban national hero of the same period took a parallel but slightly different approach to his whiteness and to white privilege. He attacked the myth of the inferiority of people of mixed racial ancestry at a time when Cuba’s population was more than half *mulato*, or *mestizo*. Martí stressed the lack of racial conflict among Cubans in an address to a New York audience in 1895 when he stated that “in Cuba there is no fear whatever of racial conflict. A man is more than white, black, or mulatto. A Cuban is more than white, black or mulatto” (Martí, *Our America* 278-79).

Martí’s Cuba was undoubtedly plagued by racial prejudice, yet his rhetoric of unity attempted to rise above the racism of the day, often using admonitions encouraging the races to mix and poetic patriotism discouraging conflict in the pursuit of a post-racial, color-blind society (Martí, *Our America* 278-79, Poey Barro 56-60). Indeed, Martí instrumentalized blacks as a part of a greater unified white-directed nation and he saw the assimilating blacks as a positive symbol of a superior Cuba (Persánch 113). Moreover, as Eugene Godfried has indicated, Martí’s vision was what he calls “euroiberocentrista,” and Hispanic, particularly given his views of other parts of the non-Hispanic Caribbean. His views of Curaçao, for example, are outright racist (Godfried 1-13). In the early twentieth century, however, Cuban patriotic thinkers venerated Martí because of his ability to elevate *cubanidad* (Davis, “Mulato o criollo” 82). Ironically, in the wake of independence in the twentieth century, the Cuban government would ban all black political parties and wage war against black rebels who challenged racism (Helg 123-42).

The white Uruguayan writer José Enrique Rodó best expressed criollo Latin America’s twentieth century sense of whiteness and hybridity as a patriotic and anti-American defense when he wrote in his 1900 classic *Ariel*:

We Latin Americans have an inheritance of Race, a great ethnic tradition to maintain, a sacred bond which unites us to immortal pages of history and puts us on our honor to preserve this for the future. In the United States, their history is above all a spasm of virile activity. The typical hero is he who wants. . . North American life, indeed, describes Pascal’s viscous circle in a ceaseless seeking for

well-being with no object outside of itself. . . Its prosperity is as immense as its incapacity of satisfying even a mediocre view of human destiny. (93)

Like Martí, Rodó provided ideological resistance against an encroaching United States, as he inverted Domingo Sarmiento's contention that South America was barbaric and Europe and the United States civilized (Sarmiento 2003). For Rodó and others, Latin America had become "civilized," not through economic, political, or social change, but in the realm of culture. Latin America seemed to possess an ability to unite individuals of different racial backgrounds underneath the white Creole umbrella, while Creoles deemed the U. S. and its unchecked expansion barbaric.

This vision of unity crafted by self-appointed whites who saw themselves as guardians of national culture was more projection than reality in terms of internal racial dynamics and demographic representation in the major realms of politics, culture, and economics. Furthermore, at the turn of the nineteenth century, intellectuals throughout the region were neither entirely optimistic nor necessarily proud of their unique heritage, as the case of Bolivian intellectual Aclides Arguedas indicated with the title of his 1902 essay *Pueblo Enfermo*. Arguedas not only blamed the 'sickness' in his country on the preponderance of "Indians" and their "psychology," but also because he believed that Bolivia would not be able to attract European immigrants. At the same time, Arguedas uses an Iberian sensibility to critique criollos whose whiteness had been debilitated by the American environment (Arguedas 404; Gomes 7-19).

The opening of a new century provided an opportunity for speculation by leaders and thinkers in the Latin American republics. In this context, the Brazilian republic, created in 1889, would re-embrace its Portuguese heritage in a newly found national pride that would be unleashed by the military's brand of republicanism. Brazilian positivism had played a key role in the construction of "order and progress," the motto adorning the new Brazilian republican flag in the late nineteenth century. By the end of the nineteenth century, the positivist-minded Benjamin Constant would preside over a reformed professional military that promoted what Robert Nachman has called "practicing positivism," which called for the reformation of mentality, habits, and customs, but within a paternalistic, hierarchical and corporatist framework that relied on education and access to capital (Nachman 1-23). Not surprisingly, in 1910, João Cândido, a black Brazilian, led one of the most important revolts in the navy to protest capital punishment, a brutal legacy of slavery (Morel 2016).

While Argentina had succeeded in transforming itself from a mestizo and Afro-Argentine nation to a white one through migration by the 1930s, the Brazilian state had limited success in attracting migrants from Europe (Lesser, *Negotiating National Identity* 8). Still, as the Brazilian economy modernized, most manufacturing and service sectors preferred hiring new migrants rather than African-descendants who were deemed “backward.” Thus, abolition freed whites from being associated with a nation that practiced slavery but, as Katia M. Queiros has noted, for the majority of the formerly enslaved, it meant “the freedom to remain poor and indigent” (211) and, consequently, black or almost black. Kim Butler has insightfully described that phenomenon as a general imposition of order that “has prevented the equitable participation of blacks in national society” (17). Even many liberals who supported abolition did so not because they wanted the enslaved to be citizens, but because it was detrimental to their international image and their elite concept of a white nation.

Joaquim Nabuco, one of Brazil’s leading abolitionists, best reflected this view when he wrote in 1886 that Brazilians wanted to eliminate slavery “not simply because it is morally illegitimate, but because slavery ruins the country economically, debases its politics and prevents immigration. Indeed it is a system which prevents our incorporation into modernity” (223). In this period, Brazilian writers also began to explore Brazilian hybridity through depictions of the *mulato* or the *mestiço*. Aluísio de Azevedo’s novel *O mulato*, published in 1881 and José Ferraz de Almeida Júnior’s 1879 painting *The Woodcutter* became reference points for the generation, although not without a sense of pessimism and fear reminiscent of Sarmiento’s *Civilization and Barbarism*, a texts that underscored Sarmiento’s own fears of South American demographic trends, and his desire to emulate what he believed was North America’s successful transfer of European values and European migrants (248-250).

Brazilian liberals shared the desire to transform their society to become whiter or almost white. In several other countries including Uruguay, Paraguay, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic, white intellectuals and politicians lamented the failure of liberalism to “whiten” their societies. The Dominican Republic’s historical anti-Haitian and anti-black campaign is a case in point. Silvio Torres-Saillant has documented the significant historical celebration and embrace of blackness before the rise of negrophobia and white supremacy that began to cast the eastern side of the island as culturally Hispanic and mulato (cast as almost white) rather than black (30-33).

Most Latin American societies embraced abolition by the end of the nineteenth century. Nonetheless, the newly created liberal republics with constitutions and plans for economic

development utilizing European ideas had not yet resolved issues of education for the masses or integration of marginalized populations. Nor had the new Latin American elites adequately developed mechanisms for the integration of its newly liberated citizens. In Brazil, official legal abolition in 1888 assumed a freedom not yet in practice. The looming fear of black discontent or revolt helped shape the elite's republicanism. Not surprisingly, in the wake of abolition, the republic set out to create an orderly society. White Republican military leaders from Deodoro da Fonseca to the positivist-minded, civilian president Washington Luis valued order over civil liberties or justice. Throughout the Republic, states passed anti-black laws masked as vagrancy laws as Decree 1,435 in Minas Gerais in 1900, which prohibited begging. These policies aimed to make blackness invisible in a white-constructed hybrid society (Higgins 146-47).

Euclides da Cunha's 1902 classic *Os Sertões, or Rebellion in the Backlands*, best reflected these racial and cultural tensions. Influenced by the pervading positivism of the time, da Cunha looked towards a future Brazil where order would rule (Nachman 1-23). In this period, Da Cunha's work centered on the creation and destruction of Canudos, the anti-republican, predominantly non-white community in the northeast in 1892. Da Cunha defined what he called "The Brazilian Man," while idealizing the Portuguese influence and denigrating the African. The Portuguese linked Brazil to the intellect of the Celts, he argued while the Black Man, the "homo afer, filho das paragens adustas e bárbaras, onde a seleção natural, mais que em quaisquer outras, se faz pelo exercício intensivo da ferocidade e da força" (56). Influenced by Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer, da Cunha concluded that biological evolution demanded the guarantee of social evolution.

He saw the evolution of the races towards the *pardo or mestiço*: a whiter version of the black and indigenous popular masses whom the Brazilian military had just decimated in Canudos. This sense of hybrid benign whiteness, or almost whiteness, was striking in its condemnation of blacks and indigenous people. According to da Cunha, blacks were "humble and docile," the indigenous man, a "roaming nomad, not adapted to toil" (Da Cunha 42, 45-47). While writers like the republican Alberto Torres refuted Da Cunha's ideas, he and others still believed that Brazil was racially behind and could still "catch up," essentially by becoming culturally white. Torres believed that there were no superior or inferior races, only advanced and backward ones (Skidmore 17; Torres 129). Still, Brazilian elites who feared possible disorder by the popular urban masses of the coastal cities, believed that indigenous people and blacks would, like the

Canudos of 1896, become victims of progress. They would eventually be absorbed by the larger white mestiço “quase branco” population (Beiber 171; Burns 16-35).

### **Institutionalizing Hybridity as Whiteness After World War I**

A generation after abolition, patriotic writers such as Gilberto Freyre led Brazil's crusade to view cultural inclusion and mixture as a means to celebrate its national culture. In the process, Freyre's generation downplayed the endemic social displacement of blacks and indigenous people in Brazil. Freyre's explicit celebration of hybridity in food, sexuality, and other customs highlighted the white Portuguese ability to adapt to the tropics, and culturally and sexually intermingle with conquered peoples. Indeed, Freyre wrote of Portuguese social and sexual intermingling with other cultures as a cultural and historical trait of necessity. His ideas also developed from his personal experience as a white or almost white privileged Latin American intellectual in the United States, where he witnesses racism against Brazilians (Tannenbaum 1946). Freyre's scholastic and personal experience abroad had, as Jeffrey E. Needell has succinctly shown, a profound effect on his conceptualization of Brazilian identity (51-60). For example, Freyre's classic work *Casa Grande e Senzala* (*The Masters and the Slaves*) created a static notion of Brazil that celebrated benign whiteness, hybridity and miscegenation while downplaying historical injustice (Costa 348).

Other writers and politicians reiterated or paralleled Freyre's ideas for decades. José María Bello from Pernambuco, for example, called for Brazilians to realize their historical roots and the three great ethnicities that had contributed to the development of Brazil: the African, the Portuguese, and the indigenous. As in Freyre's interpretation, the white Portuguese become the major heroes since they had provided a cultural umbrella of integration through a common language and religion (Bello 1936). The Portuguese were endowed with a certain cultural ability, which allowed them to easily mingle among peoples of other races and cultures. Historian Sergio Buarque de Holanda would further argue that Brazil was still linked to Portugal through tradition (15), even as its dictator, António de Oliveira Salazar (1932-1968), continued to justify his country's colonization of Africa.

The force and intellectual power of patriotic writers such as Freyre and Buarque in the 1920s helped Brazil emerge as a modern symbol of peaceful coexistence and racial intermingling yet to be achieved in Europe and the United States. In this context, Portuguese whiteness ceased to be the oppressive force that colonized Brazil and parts of Africa, and became a benign agent

of a hybrid Brazil. This view would endure well after World War II, as Brazil accepted immigrants fleeing Nazi Germany. To foreign writers like the Jewish Austrian author Stefan Zweig, Brazil appeared culturally superior precisely because of its racial and religious tolerance. Zweig called his 1942 travelogue *Brazil: A Land of the Future*, for example, and while living in Brazil, he wrote that he had never “seen a finer place” and that “negroes worked in the open air like in slavery days only happy . . .” (Davis and Marshall 15). Zweig joined other white male European intellectuals, such as Blaise Cendrars, who exalted their experiences in Brazil because of perceived tolerance and exoticism at a time when religious intolerance and racial segregation were major obstacles to consolidation in the Western European republics (Davis, “Exile and Liminality” 51; Davis and Marshall 24-25; Cendrars 2010).

Brazilian cultural producers throughout the twentieth century would continue to express and reshape ideas of benign ‘hybrid whiteness’. The classically trained Brazilian singer Elsie Houston boasted about how Brazilian musicians had successfully integrated what she called the “primitive quality of the native melodies,” which made Brazil a modern nation, (“BRAZILIAN MUSIC ON THE AIR”) unwittingly admitting to what bell hooks has called “a system of knowledge and power reproducing and maintaining white supremacy” (117). While many patriotic Brazilians sincerely embraced and promoted the centrality of Africa to Brazilian and explored indigenous and other non-European influences, they also promoted hybridity and mixture as a cultural ideal. Few espoused economic, social, political, or cultural policies that would empower non-whites in concrete ways. Moreover, many whites and almost white Brazilians instrumentalized blacks and black culture to celebrate hybridity and to downplay the historical oppressive whiteness that had perpetuated slavery and other systems of racial oppression.

Whiteness through hybridity or the possibility of whitening was implicit in the Anthropophagite Revolution that celebrated Brazil’s ability to cannibalize other cultures and make it uniquely Brazil. This cannibalizing created an idealized white or almost white Brazilian type (Oswald de Andrade 1928). World War I signaled the failure of European cultural models for the Brazilian reality. A new generation of Latin American intellectuals witnessed the moral crisis and pessimism in the West described by European writers such as Spengler (104-13), and the economic downturn signaled by the 1929 stock market crash (Spengler, 96-99). Yet, Brazilians also appreciated it when respected European intellectuals began to celebrate non-western cultures in a number of movements, from surrealism to primitivism, to escape the

oppressive whiteness of their history. In this context, Brazilian ideas of hybridity emerged as possible antidotes and examples of new possibilities, fueling a wave of patriotism and exploration in many fields.

While authors like Paulo Prado in *Retrato do Brasil* (1928) continued to view sexual and social intermingling with sadness and pessimism, many others recognized the power and centrality of racial intermingling as a critical force to the founding of Brazil from different perspectives. In Cassiano Ricardo's *Martim Cereré* (1928), for example, a Brazilian "race" emerged from an indigenous base followed by an amalgamation with the African and Portuguese. Mario de Andrade's treats this amalgamation more satirically in *Macunaíma* (1928), the story of the black Tapanhumas Indian from the interior of Brazil who migrates to the booming city of Sao Paulo. The protagonist of the same name is an anti-hero who succeeds through the use of magical powers and a sense of independence. These attributes combined magnificently with modern technology in what the author called "a revolt against the traditional national intelligence" (Mario de Andrade, *O movimento modernista* 24-25). Andrade satirizes whiteness while describing it as part of the Brazilian landscape, all the while celebrating the Brazilian capacity to make things work, or the *jeitinho* (Tosta 140-57).

Even with satire, the building of national consciousness around hybridity and benign whiteness stymied solidarity among blacks, *mestiços*, *mulatos* and indigenous people. Abdias do Nascimento, founder of the Black Experimental Theater in 1944, believed that the greatest triumph for white superiority was that it convinced *mulatos* that they were not black (Nascimento 2016). Encouraging celebration of and public declaration of *Negritude* would be difficult in a society that had not erected explicit barriers for racial integration or created explicit racist laws as in the United States. De facto, racial and cultural intermingling meant that prior to the late black consciousness movements in the post-abertura era people who defined themselves as black (rather than pardo or mulato, for example) constituted an absolute minority.

Whiteness through hybridity represented an example of identity politics, which Stuart Hall argues, "achieves its positive through the narrow eye of the negative" (19-39). White Brazilians and almost white Brazilians as well as almost black Brazilians construct their identities in opposition to the negativity of blackness because, to cite Gil and Veloso's "Haiti" again, "todos sabem como se tratam os negros" (Gil and Veloso).

### **Patriotism and Benign Hybrid Whiteness**

The 1930s ushered in a new era with a group of intellectuals who came of age in the 1920s. With the ascendance of the middle-class government of Getúlio Vargas, this patriotic-minded generation entered government institutions, particularly the Ministry of Education and Culture, helping to institutionalize the notion of benign whiteness and positive hybridity. Paradoxically, President Vargas, who governed Brazil from 1930-1944 and 1950-1954, succeeded in encouraging Brazilians to identify with an idealized white nation while celebrating its racial hybridity. In the process, nationalists created enduring national myths and symbols, which effectively marginalized racial consciousness for the rest of the twentieth century even as the Brazilian state, private enterprises and individual employers excluded or marginalized black and almost black Brazilians from important positions, including the diplomatic corps (D'Avila 2003). While contemplating the value of minorities to the nation, white dominant intellectuals from the 1920s to the 1950s consistently instrumentalized them as they promoted Latin American's hybridity and racial mixing.

Nationalist writers, mostly in Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo, constituted a cultural elite who emerged to construct the nation's cultural identity, one that they could celebrate internationally. They did not expand on the notion of who could participate in the creation of a new Brazilian national culture. Instead, the cultural elite, many from or identifying with the middle class, became respected producers of the nation and guardians of national consciousness by virtue of their class and education (Ramos 229). Whiteness, nevertheless, remained central to power. Whites and near whites continued to speak about and for non-whites. Indeed, few non-whites, almost blacks and blacks emerged as national representatives in national and international institutions or in the mainstream press.

As migrants, blacks, *mulatos*, and *mestiços* began to swell the major urban centers after World War II, writers continually began recognizing the historical contribution of previously ignored racial sectors to the formation of national identity. Brazilians and other Latin Americans continued to project positive national racial images, celebrating cultural mixture, but creating few policies that would provide economic or social opportunities to structurally transform society (Fernandes 2007). Thus, Brazilians succeeded in transforming toxic and oppressive white racial oppression into benign hybrid whiteness by often evoking the Freyrian trope of miscegenation.

American observers also helped propagate the idea of Brazilian benign whiteness during the Cold War. Frank Tannenbaum, for example, portrayed the African slave of Latin America in



a relatively positive light in comparison to the enslaved subject in the southern United States (Tannenbaum 112). Stanley Elkins followed with a similar study, arguing that slavery in the U. S. was a result of rampant capitalism while in Latin America the presence of the Church and laws of manumission did not allow the slave to be reduced to the status of “commodity.” While Carl Degler’s *Neither Black nor White* concluded that whites in Brazil dilute their prejudice, but as blacks educated themselves and became more economically stable, prejudices would manifest themselves as in the United States (Degler 19, Tannenbaum 112). This line of thought served to enhance the ideas of Brazilians who claimed the uniqueness of the Brazilian racial experience.

Other Latin Americans had similar ideologies. For example, Mexican Minister of Culture José Vasconcelos’s 1922 classic *The Cosmic Race* represents a similar vision of Mexico after the Mexican revolution and continues to be a reference point for Mexicans and Mexican-Americans. Vasconcelos argued that Mexicans had created a fifth race that joined the best of all the other races (Vasconcelos 25-26). Yet, here again, this cosmic mestiço race tended toward the European, more white than black or indigenous. While Edison de Sousa Carneiro and Bolívar Lamounier demonstrated the political implications of the white-hybrid paradigm and its role in coopting the masses in “La nacionalización del negro en el Brasil” (1954) and “Raça e Classe na Política Brasileira” (1968), Abdias do Nascimento was the first to call the Brazilian practice of whiteness a genocide. In his work *O Genocídio do Negro Brasileiro* (1978) Nascimento argued that the policies of miscegenation, discrimination, rape, and torture were tantamount to genocide, hardly a benign act (Nascimento 1978; Skidmore 7-36; Carneiro 6-18, Lamounier 39-50).

Between 1904 and 1929, migrants from Portugal, Spain, Italy, Japan, Turkey, Russia, Germany, and Austria settled throughout Brazil. In an attempt to ‘Brazilianize’ European migrants, the 1891 Brazilian Constitution guaranteed Brazilian citizenship to anyone living in the country for longer than six months. Despite the nationalist rhetoric of thinkers, such as Oliveira Viana, who cautioned against allowing the entry of exotic and non-Latin elements (383-385), the country’s immigration policies reflected a whitening ideal well into the twentieth century. Individual states and the federal government tried to welcome working peoples who they considered “whiter” and thus culturally advanced and restricted immigration from other populations including Jews and the Japanese (Lesser, *Negotiating National Identity* 8, 169). Vargas’s 1930s labor laws, which attempted to impose job quotas for Brazilians encouraged nativism, but did little to ameliorate underlying social inequalities. Moreover, the federal government lacked the

resources to effectively monitor or control migration (Lesser, “Immigration and Shifting Concepts” 38).

In Central America, economic projects such as the railroads and the Panama Canal depended upon skilled and unskilled cheap laborers from the Caribbean islands who were mostly black. The demographic changes in Central America during this period represents the only regional example of countries that did not become whiter as a result of the influx of laborers from the Caribbean islands and Asia. Even in these areas, however, countries like Honduras continued to forge a white-mestizo identity against the black Garifuna outsiders (Euraque 81-90). In 1941, Panamanian president Arnulfo Arias, who represented the white-mestizo majority, promulgated a Constitution that denied citizenship to Blacks of West Indian descent (Priestly 52).

### **Conclusion**

Scholars of Latin America used to call the study of historical whiteness simply ‘history.’ Unlike the dominant narrative in the United States, Latin American nations in general and Brazil in particular forged dominant narratives of a whiteness based on hybridity that instrumentalized its minorities. Julio Ramos described this process of creating dominant ideas in Latin America as a “. . . created field, ordered, in the same politically predetermined disposition, from the discourse that names and... engenders the field of that identity” (229). These seemingly distinct dominant narratives do not represent fixed or static monolithic realities. Indeed, the historical evidence of the Americas clearly documents a shared reliance on slavery, an Atlantic cultural exchange, and a cultural, political and sexual mestizaje. Thus, it is important to understand when, how and why, to paraphrase Benedict Anderson’s work, Latin American national and regional elites and patriotic intellectuals imagined or reimagined their nations (Anderson 1991).

Shaped by changing national and international political and economic forces, the different narratives of whiteness emerged over time, and hybridity became an important ingredient in Latin America, but not in the United States. Despite the shared history of oppression of Indians, African slavery, migration and various forms of cultural mixing, few North Americans employ tropes of hybridity or mixture to describe the United States, while few Latin Americans refer to their countries as nations of migrants. By the end of World War II, Latin American patriotism had shifted from the days of independence, and the role of race in the rhetoric of nationhood within the region had also changed. The expansion of American hegemony (ironically detected when we refer to the United States as America) also provided a force towards which Latin

American nationalists directed their efforts. For many Latin Americans, the United States of America became synonymous with progress and economic development, but also with racism, segregation and “toxic whiteness.” Anti-Americanism served Latin American patriotism by providing an economic and cultural imperialist enemy against whom the promotion of the idea of “the mestizo-white nation” could be fashioned. The emergence of texts created in the patriotic spirit of the 1920s and 1930s were passed down after World War II.

Privileged white Latin American writers have tended to assume the position of caretaker of national culture and of the popular sectors, often instrumentalizing marginalized groups for patriotic purposes as if their ability to speak for the nation was somehow natural or preordained. Linda Alcoff reminds us that “speaking for others” carries social and political ramifications for the speaker as well as for the subjects being described. Ultimately this is also a question about representation and who represents whom (6-15). The white Brazilian cultural elite have continued to forge myths of the whiteness or near whiteness from a discursive location where non-whites play no roles in those particular constructions.

Today Brazilians (and Latin Americans in general) continue to grapple with the legacy of hybrid whiteness inside and outside of Brazil. Many Brazilians abroad, for example, have begun to shift their visions of nationhood and self as they encounter new ways of imagining race or as they confront racism, anti-immigrant sentiments and generalized Latinofobia. In the United States, Latino/a constructions of race often clash with white North Americans version of race and whiteness. African-American communities understand more readily the notions of hybridity and colorism although, historically, becoming whiter often resulted in what North Americans called “passing.” Nonetheless, most United States Americans understand Latinos/as as “people of color” or “non-white,” although Latino communities may often include whites, blacks or *mestizos* or *mestizos* and their descendants born in the United States, the majority of whom have been shaped by the idea of benign whiteness. The tensions between Latin America and United States American construction of whiteness underscores the regional and national constructions of race. In an attempt to navigate her transregional sense of belonging, Dominican writer Julia Alvarez called herself a “white woman of color” (Alvarez 6).

What privileges does this construction of whiteness or Latinidad afford Latinos/as who can claim whiteness in a country grappling with Latinofobia and where accents become a marker of nonwhiteness? The case of Brazilian whiteness and white privilege provides us with a window on to the complex construction of whiteness in the Americas writ large. Franz Fanon warned us

against the pitfalls of any national consciousness movement or construction that attempts to be an “all-embracing crystallization of the inner most hopes of the *whole* people” (Fanon 1). Understanding the comparative history of the construction of the *mestiço*, *the mulato* or the hybrid nation in Brazil allows students of the region to deconstruct Brazil’s particular sense of whiteness and highlight the location and privilege (Alcoff 2-3). Many in and outside of Brazil continue to promote the country’s *mestiço*-ness at the expense of blackness and without paying attention to what Djalma Riberio has called the “lugar de fala” (Ribeiro, 2016).

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