

## Introduction

I FIRST LEARNED that there were black people living someplace in the Western Hemisphere other than the United States when my father told me the first thing that he had wanted to be when he grew up. When he was a boy about my age, he said, he had wanted to be an Episcopal priest, because he so admired his priest at St. Philip's Episcopal Church in Cumberland, Maryland, a black man from someplace called Haiti. I knew by this time that there were black people in Africa, of course, because of movies such as *Tarzan* and TV shows such as *Shena, Queen of the Jungle* and *Ramar of the Jungle*. And then, in 1960, when I was ten years old, our fifth-grade class studied "Current Affairs," and we learned about the seventeen African nations that gained their independence that year. I did my best to memorize the names of these countries and their leaders, though I wasn't quite sure why I found these facts so very appealing. But my father's revelation about his earliest childhood ambition introduced me to the fact that there were black people living in other parts of the New World, a fact that I found quite surprising.

It wasn't until my sophomore year at Yale, as a student auditing Robert Farris Thompson's art history class "The Trans-Atlantic Tradition: From Africa to the Black Americas," that I began to understand how "black" the New World really was. Professor Thompson used a methodology that he called the "Tri-Continental Approach"—complete with three slide projectors—to trace visual leitmotifs that recurred among African, African American, and Afro-descended artistic traditions and artifacts in the Caribbean and Latin America, to show, à la Melville Herskovits, the retention of what he called "Africanisms" in the New World. So in a very real sense, I would have to say, my fascination with Afro-descendants in this hemisphere, south of the United States, began in 1969, in Professor Thompson's very popular, and extremely entertaining and rich, art history lecture course. In addition, Sidney Mintz's anthropology courses and his brilliant scholarly work

on the history of the role of sugar in plantation slavery in the Caribbean and Latin America also served to awaken my curiosity about another black world, a world both similar to and different from ours, south of our borders. And Roy Bryce-Laporte, the courageous first chair of the Program in Afro-American Studies, introduced me to black culture from his native Panama. I owe so much of what I know about African American culture in the New World to these three wise and generous professors.

But the full weight of the African presence in the Caribbean and Latin America didn't hit me until I became familiar with the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, conceived by the historians David Eltis and David Richardson and based now at Emory University. Between 1502 and 1866, 11.2 million Africans survived the dreadful Middle Passage and landed as slaves in the New World. And here is where these statistics became riveting to me: of these 11.2 million Africans, according to Eltis and Richardson, only 450,000 arrived in the United States. That is the mind-boggling part to me, and I think to most Americans. All the rest arrived in places south of our border. About 4.8 million Africans went to Brazil alone. So, in one sense, the major "African American Experience," as it were, unfolded not in the United States, as those of us caught in the embrace of what we might think of as "African American Exceptionalism" might have thought, but throughout the Caribbean and South America, if we are thinking of this phenomenon in terms of sheer numbers alone.

About a decade ago, I decided that I would try to make a documentary series about these Afro-descendants, a four-hour series about race and black culture in the Western Hemisphere outside of the United States and Canada. And I filmed this series this past summer, focusing on six countries—Brazil, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Mexico, and Peru—choosing each country as representative of a larger phenomenon. This series is the third in a trilogy that began with *Wonders of the African World*, a six-part series that aired in 1998. That series was followed by *America Behind the Color Line*, a four-part series that aired in 2004. In a sense, I wanted to replicate Robert Farris Thompson's "Tri-Continental" methodology to make, through documentary film, a comparative analysis of these cardinal points of the Black World. Another way to think of it is that I wanted to replicate the points of the Atlantic triangular trade: Africa, the European colonies of the Caribbean

and South America, and black America. *Black in Latin America*, another four-hour series, is the third part of this trilogy, and this book expands considerably on what I was able to include in that series. You might say that I have been fortunate enough to find myself over the past decade in a most curious position: to be able to make films about subjects about which I am curious and about which I initially knew very little, with the generous assistance of many scholars in these fields and many more informants I interview in these countries.

The most important question that this book attempts to explore is this: what does it mean to be “black” in these countries? Who is considered “black” and under what circumstances and by whom in these societies? The answers to these questions vary widely across Latin America in ways that will surprise most people in the United States, just as they surprised me. My former colleague, the Duke anthropologist J. Lorand Matory recently explained the complexity of these matters to me in a long and thoughtful email: “Are words for various shades of African descent in Brazil, such as *mulattoes*, *cafusos*, *pardos*, *morenos*, *pretos*, *negros*, etc., types of ‘black people,’ or are *pretos* and *negros* just the most African-looking people in a multidirectional cline of skin color–facial feature–hair texture combinations?” And how do social variables enter the picture? Matory asks: “Suppose two people with highly similar phenotypes are classified differently according to how wealthy and educated they are, or the same person is described differently depending upon how polite, how intimate, or how nationalistic the speaker wants to be? In what contexts does the same word have a pejorative connotation, justifying the translation of *nigger*, and in another context connote affection, such as the word *negrito*?”

How important is the relation of race and class? As Matory told me, “Debates about ‘race’ are almost always also about class. We debate the relative worth of these *two* terms in describing the structure and history of hierarchy in our two societies. North Americans,” he concluded quite pungently, “tend to be as blind about the centrality of class in our society and vigilant about the centrality of race as Latin Americans are vigilant about the reality of class and blind about the reality of race.” And what about the term *Latin America*? Though this term lumps together speakers of the Romance languages and ignores the fact that there are millions of speakers of English, Dutch, and various creole languages throughout the Caribbean and South America, for convenience

sake, it seemed to be the most suitable and economical term that we could agree on to refer to this huge and richly various set of societies, each with its own unique history of slavery, genetic admixture, and race relations.

The more I learn about the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the more I realize how complex and extensive the cultural contacts among the three points of Robert Farris Thompson's "Tri-Continental" triangle could be, even—or especially—at the individual level, both those of slaves and of black elites, with Europeans and Americans and with other black people. Most of us were taught the history of slavery in school (if we were taught at all) through simple stereotypes of kidnappings by white men, dispersal of related tribal members on the auction block to prevent communication and hence rebellion, and the total separation of New World black communities from each other and from their African origins. The idea that some members of the African elite were active players in the commerce of the slave trade or that they traveled to the New World and to Europe and home again for commercial, diplomatic, or educational purposes is both surprising and can be quite disturbing.

While some scholars of slavery and of African American Studies (and I include myself in this group) may have come late to an understanding of the remarkable extent of contact between Africans on the continent with Africans in Europe and throughout the Americas (as well as, for our purposes in this book, the similarities and differences in the historical experiences and social and cultural institutions Afro-descendants created throughout the Western Hemisphere), intellectuals, writers, musicians, and elites of color have long been keenly aware of each other, starting as early as the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, if not before. For example, exchanges between African rulers and the courts of Europe started very early in the modern era. We know from the visual archival record, for instance, that emissaries from the monarchs of Ethiopia and the kingdom of Kongo came to the Vatican as early as the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, respectively, and established formal diplomatic embassies there. An Ethiopian embassy before Pope Eugenius IV at the Council of Florence in 1439 is depicted in bronze at the entrance to St. Peter's. And Antonio Emanuele Funta (or Ne Vunda) was ambassador to the Vatican from Kongo, sent by King Alvaro II to Pope Paul V in 1604, via Brazil and Spain, arriving in

1608, when he died. The role of African elites in the trans-Atlantic slave trade after the early 1500s led to diplomatic and commercial negotiations back and forth between Europe and Africa and Africa and Brazil, for example. And this is a logical development, once we allow Africans the same degree of agency that we presume for Europeans in the exercise of the slave trade, which was, all too often, I am sad to say, first and last, a business. But these commercial contacts were followed by those between scholars and intellectuals as well. “El negro Juan Latino,” a former slave who wore his blackness in his name, became the first African professor of grammar at the University of Granada and the first African to publish a book of poetry in Latin, in 1573. Latino is mentioned in the opening section of Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* and was sometimes cited in biographical dictionaries in the eighteenth century as evidence of the African’s “improvability.” The Abbas Gregorius, from Ethiopia, collaborated with a German scholar to create the first grammar of the Amharic language less than a century after Juan Latino thrived. We recall him both through his grammar and through a striking image of him that has survived. But black men and women of letters from across the black world seem to have shared a certain fascination with each other as well and seem to have taken inspiration from the accomplishments of each other, if only through works such as the Abbé Henri Grégoire’s *De la littérature des nègres* (The Literature of Negroes), published in 1808. In 1814, the Haitian Emperor Henri Christophe ordered fifty copies of Grégoire’s book and invited him to visit his kingdom.

Perhaps in the same way that Latin and the Roman Catholic Church gave men and women of letters in the late Middle Ages—say, in what is now Italy or what is now Germany or France—a certain degree of common culture, even if workers or serfs in those societies did not share access to that common identity, so, too, black writers in Boston and New York, London and Paris, Jamaica and the Gold Coast throughout the eighteenth century could be aware of each other, sometimes commented on each other’s existence, read and revised or troped each other’s books, sometimes even corresponded about each other, and traveled back and forth either between Africa and Europe, America and Europe, or among Africa, Latin America, America, and Europe. I am thinking of Jacobus Capitein and Anton Wilhelm Amo from the Gold Coast, both of whom attended universities in Europe before returning to Africa; the Jamaican Francis Williams, one of the first black

persons to read law at Lincoln's Inn in London (whose writing Hume disparaged in his influential essay "Of National Characters" of 1754), and who returned to Jamaica following his studies to establish a school, just as Capitein did in the Gold Coast; the widely read and commented on poet Phillis Wheatley, the first person of African descent to publish a book of poetry in English, who sailed to London to publish her book and served as inspiration to some of the black abolitionists there; the master of the epistle, Ignatius Sancho, who corresponded with Sterne and who wrote about Wheatley's enormous significance; and the first five authors of a new literary genre called the slave narratives, who revised what I call "the trope of the talking book" in each of their memoirs of their enslavement. One of these, the best-selling author Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa), who was born in Africa, visited fourteen islands in the West Indies as a slave (including the Bahamas, Barbados, Jamaica, Montserrat, St. Kitts, and the Mosquite Shore) and the United States, before ultimately settling in England as a free man. Many of these people were cited by foes of slavery as *prima facie* evidence that the African was at least potentially the intellectual equal of Europeans and was therefore an argument for the abolition of slavery. Indeed, Grégoire dedicated his book to Amo, Sancho, Vassa, his friend Cugoano, and Wheatley, among others.

As the free African American community grew in the United States, contacts with the Caribbean and Latin America increased dramatically in the nineteenth century. The black abolitionists Henry Highland Garnet and Frederick Douglass offer two salient examples. Garnet, a militant abolitionist, the first black minister to preach to the House of Representatives and a pioneering figure in the black colonization movement, traveled to Cuba as a cabin boy before he was ten and in 1849 founded the African Civilization Society to advocate for the emigration of free black people to Mexico and the West Indies, as well as to Liberia. Garnet served as a missionary for three years in Jamaica. In 1881, he became the United States minister to Liberia, where he died two months later and where he is buried. Frederick Douglass, between January 24 and March 26, 1871, served by appointment of President Ulysses S. Grant as the assistant secretary to the commission to Santo Domingo, exploring the possibility of annexing the Dominican Republic as a state, the nation's first black state, according to Douglass, who passionately supported this plan for this reason. Between 1889 and 1891, Douglass

served as the US consul general to Haiti and chargé d'affaires to the Dominican Republic. During this period, Douglass wrote several essays and speeches about the Haitian Revolution and Toussaint Louverture and the importance of Haiti as “among the foremost civilized nations of the earth,” as a speech delivered on January 2, 1893, was entitled. Even in nineteenth-century African American literature, Cuba was a fictive presence, for example, in Martin R. Delany’s novel *Blake* (serialized in 1859 and in 1861–1862) and in a short story published by Thomas Dettler in 1871 entitled “The Octoroon Slave of Cuba.”

In the twentieth century, as we might expect, the contacts only increased in degree and number. Booker T. Washington, as the historian Frank Andre Guridy notes, had extensive interchanges at the beginning of the century with black Cuban intellectuals such as Juan Gualberto Gómez, whose son studied at Tuskegee. His autobiography was published in Spanish in its first Cuban edition in 1903, just two years after it was published in the States. Washington developed programs that trained black Cuban students at his Tuskegee Institute in the vocations and industrial arts and trades. Washington’s educational program also influenced the thinking of the black Brazilian intellectual Manuel Querino.

Marcus Garvey’s United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in the early decades of the twentieth century had more of a presence throughout the Caribbean and Latin America than most of us have realized, again thanks to Frank Guridy’s research. Garvey named the ships of his Black Star Line after black heroes such as Phillis Wheatley and Frederick Douglass, as we might expect, but also after Antonio Maceo, the “Bronze Titan,” one of the leading generals in the Cuban War of Independence and one of Cuba’s founding fathers. The first stop of the *Frederick Douglass*, in fact, on its 1919 Caribbean tour was Cuba; the Cuban branch of the UNIA was founded that year, and Garvey visited Cuba two years later in March 1921, a trip that was covered in the *Heraldo de Cuba* newspaper in Havana. It turns out that Cuba had more branches of the UNIA than did any country other than the United States. The UNIA operated in Cuba until 1929, when it was closed down under the Machado government, using the same law, the Morua law, that had been used to ban the all-black Independent Party of Color and the organization of political parties along racial lines in 1912.

Du Bois—himself of Haitian descent, through his father, who was

born in Haiti in 1826—proudly boasted of the many Afro-Latin Americans who attended the Pan-African Conference in London in 1900 and the first Pan-African Congress in Paris in 1919. At the 1900 conference, representatives from St. Kitts, Trinidad, St. Lucia, Jamaica, Antigua, and Haiti attended. In the pages of the *Crisis*, Du Bois reported that thirteen representatives from the French West Indies attended the 1919 congress (just three less than came from the United States), seven from Haiti, two from the Spanish colonies, one from the Portuguese colonies, and one from Santo Domingo. He tells us that Tertullian Guilbaud came from Havana, “Candace” and “Boisneuf” came from Guadeloupe, “Lagrosil” from the French West Indies, and “Grossillere” from Martinique. Du Bois also tells us that Edmund Fitzgerald Fredericks, a “full-blooded Negro,” attended from British Guiana.

The historian Rebecca Scott discovered that the Cubans Antonio Maceo and Máximo Gómez not only visited the United States but rented a house together in New Orleans, in the Faubourg Tremé district in 1884. The pivotal role of black officers such as Maceo and black soldiers in the Cuban-Spanish-American War attracted the attention, as you might suspect, of black journalists, intellectuals, and activists throughout the United States. Du Bois, of course, regularly covered events germane to the black communities throughout the Caribbean and South America as well as Africa in the pages of the *Crisis*, and published Arturo Schomburg’s (himself a Puerto Rican) account of the massacre of three thousand followers of the Independent Party of Color in Cuba in 1912.

James Weldon Johnson, perhaps truly the Renaissance man of the Harlem Renaissance, had extensive contacts with Afro-Latin America. In 1906, he was made consul to Venezuela; in 1909, he transferred to Nicaragua. In 1920, the NAACP sent Johnson to investigate allegations of abuse by occupying US Marines. He blasted the imperialist intentions of the US occupation of Haiti in a three-part series published in the twenties in the *Nation* magazine, a series he published as the book entitled *Self-Determining Haiti*. In his autobiography, *Along This Way*, Johnson relates the curious and amusing story that, just as he and a companion traveling on a train are about to be booted from a “first-class car,” or a white car, and removed to the Jim Crow car, they talk to each other in Spanish. This is what happens when they do:

As soon as the conductor heard us speaking in a foreign language, his attitude changed; he punched our tickets and gave them back, and treated us just as he did the other passengers in the car. . . . This was my first impact against race prejudice as a concrete fact. Fifteen years later, an incident similar to the experience with this conductor drove home to me the conclusion that in such situations any kind of a Negro will do; provided he is not one who is an American citizen.

These levels of contact not only occurred between intellectuals and writers and at the diplomatic level. Stories about black baseball players pretending to be Cuban were part of the lore of black popular culture when I was growing up; teams in the Negro Baseball Leagues played teams in Cuba and even took “Cuban” names as early as the late nineteenth century, names such as the Cuban Giants, the Cuban X-Giants, the Genuine Cuban Giants (one team was named the Columbia Giants). And several “Cuban” teams, which purportedly included white and black Cubans and some African Americans, played in the United States under these rubrics in defiance of the color line, including the All Cubans, the Cuban Stars (West), the Cuban Stars (East), and the New York Cubans. So what we might think of as “transnational black consciousness” has unfolded at many levels of culture, high and low, between African Americans and black people in the Caribbean and Latin America, as extensively in the arts and letters as in popular cultural forms such as sports.

Of course, several musical collaborations come to mind, including “Cubana Be, Cubana Bop,” recorded in 1948 as a single by Dizzie Gillespie, Chano Pozo, and George Russell; and the albums *Orgy in Rhythm*, recorded by Art Blakey, Sabu Martinez, and Carlos “Patato” Valdes in 1957, and *Uhuru Afrika*, recorded by Randy Weston and Candido Camero in 1960, to list just a few early notable examples.

Intricate relations obtained among black writers and critics of the Harlem Renaissance, especially Langston Hughes, who lived for a total equivalent of a year and a half with his father in Mexico and who translated the works of Caribbean writers, such as Nicolás Guillén and Jacques Roumain, from Spanish and French into English. Hughes and his colleagues who created the Harlem Renaissance were pivotal as role

models in the birth of the Negritude movement in Paris in 1934, for its founders, Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor. Both movements were directly influenced by Jean Price-Mars's pioneering scholarship of black vernacular traditions and the Vodou religion in works such as *So Spoke the Uncle*.

In all, it is clear that, for well over 250 years, in various degrees and at several levels, there has existed a Pan-African intellectual community keenly aware of one another, looking to one another for support and inspiration to combat anti-black racism in Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, and the United States, in the northern and southern hemispheres. And you might say that now it is the scholars of diaspora studies who are catching up with the creative writers, artists, activists, athletes, and intellectuals who have long seen themselves as sharing a certain special sort of transcontinental New World "black" subject position.

In spite of the unique histories of slavery and persons of African descent in each of the six countries discussed in this book, certain themes recur. In a sense, this book is a study of the growth and demise of the sugar economy in many of these countries, along with that of coffee and tobacco. In most of these societies, a great deal of miscegenation and genetic admixture occurred between masters and their slaves, very early on in the history of slavery there. Several of these countries sponsored official immigration policies of "whitening," aiming to dilute the numbers of its citizens who were black or darker shades of brown by encouraging Europeans to migrate there.

And speaking of skin color, each of these countries had (and continues to have) many categories of color and skin tone, ranging from as few as 12 in the Dominican Republic and 16 in Mexico to 134 in Brazil, making our use of *octeroon* and *quadroon* and *mulatto* pale by comparison. Latin American color categories can seem to an American as if they are on steroids. I realized as I encountered people who still employ these categories in everyday discussions about race in their society that it is extremely difficult for those of us in the United States to see the use of these categories as what they are, the social deconstruction of the binary opposition between "black" and "white," outside of the filter of the "one-drop rule," which we Americans have inherited from racist laws designed to retain the offspring of a white man and a black female slave as property of the slave's owner. Far too many of us

as African Americans see the use of these terms as an attempt to “pass” for anything other than “black,” rather than as historically and socially specific terms that people of color have invented and continue to employ to describe a complex reality larger than the terms *black*, *white*, and *mulatto* allow for.

After extended periods of “whitening,” many of these same societies then began periods of “browning,” as I think of them, celebrating and embracing their transcultural or multicultural roots, declaring themselves unique precisely because of the extent of racial admixture among their citizens. (The abolition of “race” as an official category in the federal censuses of some of the countries I visited has made it extremely difficult for black minorities to demand their rights, as in Mexico and Peru.) The work of José Vasconcelos in Mexico, Jean Price-Mars in Haiti, Gilberto Freyre in Brazil, and Fernando Ortiz in Cuba compose a sort of multicultural quartet, though each approached the subject from different, if related, vantage points. The theories of “browning” espoused by Vasconcelos, Freyre, and Ortiz, however, could be double-edged swords, both valorizing the black roots of their societies yet sometimes implicitly seeming to denigrate the status of black cultural artifacts and practices outside of an ideology of *mestizaje*, or hybridity.

What did all of these societies ultimately share in common? The unfortunate fact that persons of the seemingly “purest” or “unadulterated” African descent disproportionately occupy the very bottom of the economic scale in each of these countries. In other words, the people with the darkest skin, the kinkiest hair, and the thickest lips tend to be overrepresented among the poorest members of society. Poverty in each of these countries, in other words, all too often has been socially constructed around degrees of obvious African ancestry. Whether—or how—this economic fact is a legacy of slavery, and of long, specific histories of anti-black racism, even in societies that proudly boast themselves to be “racial democracies,” “racism free,” or “postracial,” is one of the most important themes explored in this book and cries out to be explored and acted on in the social policies of each of these six countries.

## Brazil

### *“May Exú Give Me the Power of Speech”*

On the whole emancipation [in Brazil] was peaceful, and whites, Negroes, and Indians are to-day amalgamating into a new race.

—W. E. B. Du Bois, 1915

In South America we have long pretended to see a possible solution in the gradual amalgamation of whites, Indians and Blacks. But this amalgamation does not envisage any decrease of power and prestige among whites as compared with Indians, Negroes, and mixed bloods; but rather an inclusion within the so called white group of a considerable infiltration of dark blood, while at the same time maintaining the social bar, economic exploitation and political disfranchisement of dark blood as such. . . . And despite facts, no Brazilian nor Venezuelan dare boast of his black fathers. Thus, racial amalgamation in Latin-America does not always or even usually carry with it social uplift and planned effort to raise the mulatto and mestizoes to freedom in a democratic polity.

—W. E. B. Du Bois, 1942

FOR A VERY long time, whenever I heard the word *race*, only images of black people in the United States came to mind. As silly as it might sound now, to me, then, *race* was a code word for black people, and for their relations with white people in this country. I think that this is probably some sort of African American exceptionalism for people my age, people who came of age in the Civil Rights Movement of the late fifties and sixties. Even today, in our era of multiculturalism, I still find it necessary sometimes to remember that *race* is not just a black thing, that *race* (by which most of us mean ethnicity) signifies a lot of

different kinds of people, representing a full range of ethnicities, in a lot of different places, and that African Americans in this country don't have a patent on the term or the social conditions that have resulted either from slavery or the vexed history of racial relations that followed slavery in the United States.

I should say that African Americans don't have a patent *especially* on slavery, as I much later came to realize, throughout the New World. When I was growing up, I simply assumed that the slave experience in the New World was dominated by our ancestors who came to the United States between 1619 and the Civil War. And I think that many Americans still assume this. But it turns out that the slave ancestors of the African American people were only a tiny fraction—less than 5 percent—of all the Africans imported to the Western Hemisphere to serve as slaves. Over eleven million Africans survived the Middle Passage and disembarked in the New World; and of these, incredibly, only about 450,000 Africans came to the United States. The “real” African American experience, based on numbers alone, then, unfolded in places south of our long southern border, south of Key West, south of Texas, south of California, in the Caribbean islands and throughout Latin America. And no place in our hemisphere received more Africans than Brazil did.

I think that probably the first time that I ever thought about race, integration, segregation, or miscegenation outside of the context of the United States, Jim Crow, and the Civil Rights Movement was the night that I saw the film *Black Orpheus*. I had thought about Africa quite a lot, and the black people who lived in Africa, from the time I was in the fifth grade, in 1960, the great year of African independence, the year that seventeen African nations were born. But thinking about black people and Africa is not the same as thinking about race. No, that came, for the first time, when I was a sophomore at Yale, assigned to watch *Black Orpheus* in the class called “From Africa to the Black Americas,” the art history class taught by the great scholar Robert Farris Thompson.

*Black Orpheus*, directed by Marcel Camus and shot in Brazil, was released in 1959, to rave reviews. In fact, it won the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival that year and an Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film and a Golden Globe for Best Foreign Film in 1960. Based on a play written by Vinicius de Moraes entitled *Orfeu da Conceição*, the film adapts the legend of Orpheus and Eurydice. Set mostly in the Morro da Babilônia favela in the Leme neighborhood in Rio de

Janeiro, the film is stunning, even fifty years later, for the fact that it seamlessly transforms a classical Greek tale in black or brown face, as it were, without preaching about race or class and without protest or propaganda. It just assumes its propositions, as it were. The key Greek characters are here, including Hermes, the messenger of the gods, and Cerberus, the three-headed dog that guards the gates of Hades, as well as Orpheus and Eurydice, of course, played by an athletic Breno Mello and the irresistibly beautiful Marpessa Dawn, the goddess of black Brazilian cinema, who turned out to have been born in Pittsburgh of Filipino and African American descent.

Three things grabbed me when I saw the film. First, as I have mentioned, was the seamless translation of the Greek myth to a Brazilian context, with the race of the characters taken for granted and not trumpeted or strained in any way. Second was the use of Umbanda and Candomblé, which some people have called Brazil's national African religions. When Orpheus descends (down a spiral staircase at, cleverly, the Office of Missing Persons) into Hades to find and retrieve Eurydice, "Hades" turns out to be an Umbanda ritual, complete with female worshipers dressed in white and the pivotal Yoruba god Ogun. Eurydice's spirit speaks to Orpheus, in fact, through one of these female worshipers, now possessed by her spirit. Most striking sociologically, perhaps, is the fact that virtually everyone in the film is black or brown; very few "white" people appear in the film, and none appears in a significant role, similar, as I later discovered, to Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Watching the film, my friends and I thought that Brazil was that most remarkable of places: a democracy in brown. Brazil, judging from the film, was a mulatto. For us, *Black Orpheus* seemed to be a sort of cinematic analogue to Gilberto Freyre's theory of Brazil as a unique racial democracy. And all that made me want to visit there, but not as much, to be honest, as the vain hope that I'd spot one of the daughters of the beautiful Marpessa Dawn.

I thought about all of this, in flight, high above the Amazon, I supposed, on my way to Brazil for the first time, heading to Carnival in February 2010. Between 1561 and 1860, Brazil (as we have seen) was the final destination of almost five million African slaves—some of them, perhaps, my distant cousins. But that wasn't where my mind was taking me. Try as I might, I couldn't help dwelling on the Brazil of my imagination: the pageantry and ecstasy of Carnival; its syncretic mixtures of

indigenous, African, and European cultural elements; the dancing to music and song born in Africa; the Yoruba, Fon, and Angolan-based religions blended into Candomblé and Umbanda; the many regional expressions of Afro-Brazilian religions such as Xangô, Batuque, Tambor de Mina. All of these forms of culture were signal aspects of an irresistibly vibrant national culture synthesized from so many strands contributed by its multiethnic people—a sea of beautiful brown faces with brilliant white smiles, at least as shaped in my mind by Carnaval scenes from *Black Orpheus*.

So much of Brazil's syncretic culture manifests itself at Carnaval. And the most "African" of the various manifestations of Carnaval traditions in the country occurs each year in Bahia. As I boarded the packed connecting flight from São Paulo to Salvador—full of Brazilian tourists from other parts of the country, tourists from other countries, and even a few other African Americans, some of whom I learned were regulars—I began to wonder what exactly I would find when my plane touched down. Because about 43 percent of all slaves brought to the Americas ended up in Brazil, today over 97 million Brazilians in a total population of 190 million people have a significant amount of African genetic ancestry, self-identifying as either Brown (*parda*) or Black (*preta*) in the federal census (among five categories, including White (*branca*), Yellow (*amarela*), and Indígena, Brown, and Black). This makes Brazil in effect the second-largest black country in the world, after Nigeria, if we use definitions of blackness employed in the United States. (Brazil, one might say, is genetically brown, though there are some areas of the country, such as Porto Alegre, that are overwhelmingly white.) And a third of Brazil's slaves—about a million and a half people—landed in Brazil through the port here, in Bahia.

Thanks to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, we now know that about 70 percent of them came from Angola, and much of black Brazilian religion is based on two sources: the Yoruba orishas from western Nigeria and Benin and also what the historians Linda Heywood and John Thornton call "Angolan Catholicism," whose roots were in Angola and which the slaves brought with them to Brazil. (Angolan Catholicism was born out of King Afonso's skillful and deliberate blending of Christianity and Central African religions promoted by "Xinguillas" (as the Portuguese called them), a process that was well advanced by 1516, even before there was any significant African presence in Brazil.

And Angolan Catholicism was every bit as much an African religion as was the Yoruba religion of the orishas. When many slaves from other parts of Africa arrived in Brazil, they were converted to Catholicism not as practiced in Portugal but as practiced in Angola, and indeed many were in fact catechized by Angolans informally, if not formally.) And this syncretic combination manifests itself in the religion called Candomblé, one of the most compelling cultural products of Pan-African culture in the New World. Candomblé is at the heart of black Brazilian culture. And if Brazil's black culture has a capital, it is Bahia, without a doubt.

Brazil, I knew, was also a place of contradictions. It was the last country in the Western Hemisphere to abolish slavery, in 1888, just after Cuba abolished slavery in 1886. But it was also the first to claim it was free of anti-black racism, as Gilberto Freyre's doctrine of "racial democracy" became associated with Brazil's official identity. When I studied Brazil in college, at the end of the sixties, it was still generally thought to be a model society of a postracial world—a far cry from the rigidly segregated United States that the Civil Rights Movement was attempting to dismantle—although its racial-democracy ideology had come under fire (Du Bois critiqued it in 1942) and its military dictatorship had forbidden debate about race and racism in the country. And, indeed, Brazil remains one of the most racially mixed countries on earth—a hybrid nation descended from Africans, Europeans, and its original indigenous inhabitants. In the United States, people with African ancestry are all categorized as black; in Brazil, racial categories are on steroids, including at least 134 categories of "blackness." Brazilians, or so I'd been told, believe that color is in the eye of the beholder. But who are the Afro-Brazilians? And what do they think of their history—of their own relation to Africa and to blackness? I wanted to know their story.

Bahia had especially fired my imagination, since so much of the literature about African retentions in the New World refers to rites and cultural practices developed there. Five hundred years ago, the Portuguese established a sugar cane empire in this region, in the present-day states of Bahia and Pernambuco—one of the largest plantation economies on earth. Initially, the Indians were used as field workers, but their numbers proved inadequate. The Portuguese needed slave labor to meet the demand, and so Africans were poured into the region. The

first Africans came from the Portuguese Atlantic islands as specialized workers employed in the sugar-making process proper. As the demand for sugar increased, the number of slaves imported to Brazil exploded. Angola was the central source of these slaves.

By 1600, Brazil produced half the world's sugar, and that sugar was produced through the labor of African slaves. I was extremely keen to see this place that so many Africans had first looked on when they disembarked from the slave ships, no doubt terrified and miserably disoriented, awaiting their fates in the New World, some even convinced that they were about to be eaten by white cannibals! But nothing I had dreamed or imagined, nothing I had read or even researched, prepared me for what I experienced in Bahia. I stepped out of my car on a busy street and looked around, and I thought, "My God, I am back *in Africa!*" Seriously. Everywhere I looked, I saw Brazilians with Africa inscribed on their faces and just as deeply on their culture. Across the street, I spotted a woman's headdress I had seen just a few years before in Nigeria. Because of the long history of cultural trade between Bahia and West Africa, going back to the nineteenth century, West African cloths and other cultural objects were part of the trade, along with slaves.

Few of us realize that the traffic of the Yoruba between Brazil and Nigeria has been a two-way street at least since the early nineteenth century, when some freed slaves returned to the mother land in growing numbers after the defeat of the 1835 Muslim rebellion there, creating cross-pollination in Yoruba religious practices, among other things. Today, I learned, there is a great attempt of some culturally conscious black Brazilians to be "authentic," and items such as cloth are still imported, though Brazilian-manufactured cloths make up the majority percentage of those used by Candomblé devotees and middle-class blacks, since imported cloth is very expensive. Bahia celebrates its African roots, its African heritage, and never more so than during Carnival. The people here are more "African," genetically, than in any other concentrated part of Brazil. The smells in the air, the gait of men in the streets, the way women move, their ways of worshiping and their religious beliefs, the dishes they eat—all remind me so much of things I had seen and smelled and heard in Nigeria and Angola, but transplanted across an ocean, similar and familiar but distinct: Africa, yes, but with a New World difference, Africa with decided twists.

Mesmerized, avidly on the lookout for those daughters of Marpessa

Dawn, I walked the streets for hours before heading off to my first meeting, with João Reis, professor of history at the University of Bahia. I wanted to understand what had happened here, and so I wanted to start with Professor Reis, who has spent his entire professional life studying the history of slavery in Brazil. Straight off, he told me that ten times more Africans had come to Brazil as slaves than had gone to the United States. The reasons, he said, were both economic and geographic. Brazil was closer to Africa than was any other major destination in the New World (far closer than were the Caribbean or the English colonies in North America); in fact, though it is counterintuitive, it was quicker and easier to sail to Europe from certain African ports through Brazil, as it were. Moreover, the land surrounding the magnificent Bay of All Saints, where Salvador, Bahia's capital, was founded in 1549, was a fertile growing ground for one of the era's most desirable and extraordinarily profitable products: sugar. As a result, by the beginning of the seventeenth century, the words *sugar* and *Brazil* were synonyms. And virtually all of it was produced with slave labor. Sugar is a leitmotif of this book; as the center of sugar production shifted, so did the size of the slave trade and the slave population, over a two-hundred-year period from Brazil to Haiti to Cuba. While both Mexico and Peru had sugar mills, and these were worked by slaves, most Afro-Mexicans and Afro-Peruvians labored in urban areas, many worked in the textile industry, and still others produced foodstuffs in towns. In Colombia, or "New Granada" (outside the scope of this book), they worked primarily in mines and not in sugar.

"Salvador, Bahia, was one of the most important Atlantic cities in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and through the eighteenth century," Reis explained to me, with the patience of a great lecturer used to teaching hopelessly unprepared US undergraduates. "In the nineteenth century, it was full of foreigners from Europe, from the United States, from the Caribbean, and from Africa. It was a multicultural society, a cosmopolitan society, maybe even more cosmopolitan than the way we live here today." Reis explained that Brazil was a prime destination for adventurers, and accordingly, many Europeans who came to Bahia were single men. In the British colonies of North America, entire families often emigrated to set up new lives. But in Bahia's early history, Portuguese bachelors were the norm; and they found sexual conquest where they could—brutally, or coercively, and sometimes willingly—first among

native women and then among African slaves. The racial blending that later came to define Brazil began.

I asked Professor Reis how these slaves were treated, especially in comparison to the treatment of slaves in the United States. Were they treated better, more humanely, than were their counterparts in the United States? That they were, of course, is part of Freyre's explanation of the origins of Brazil's "racial democracy" and is now part of its national mythology. The national story Brazil likes to tell today about its slave past is highly unusual. According to this story, the country made a more or less seamless transition from slavery to tolerance, from a terribly informal yet terribly effective racism (Brazil had no laws prohibiting blacks from occupying any post in society or politics) to racial democracy, because of the intimacy—specifically, sexual intimacy—between master and slave. How could this come about? And could any country make such a shift? Was slavery in Brazil somehow fundamentally different than it was in the United States? The answers I got were complex.

Reis told me that the people of Bahia often freed their slaves or allowed them to buy their own freedom. Indeed, citizens of Bahia granted manumission—emancipation—to more slaves than did any other region in the Americas. You'd think that made it a lucky destination, if a slave could ever be considered lucky. But it belied a deeper, more disturbing reality. There were many more slaves in Bahia at a certain point in the slave trade than there were almost anywhere else—and for most of those who had been born in Africa, life in their new country was short and unbearably harsh. (As slavery matured in southern Brazil thanks to mining and, later, coffee, Minas, Rio, and São Paulo came to have larger slave populations. The city of Rio, for example, became in the mid-nineteenth century the largest slave city in the hemisphere ever, with close to one hundred thousand slaves.) Bahia's steady supply of human labor caused many slaves to suffer especially bad treatment, just because they were so easily replaceable, like spare parts for a car. Working conditions were often brutal beyond description.

"American planters did not have such easy access to the source of slave production in Africa," Reis explained to me, "so slaves were treated much better in the US than they were in Brazil. There, they had better housing, better clothes; they were better fed. And from very early in the slave trade, the slave population was self-reproductive there. Nothing of this sort happened in Brazil."

In Brazil, Reis continued, slave owners could always replace dead Africans with living Africans, at minimal cost. Most of us don't realize how close Brazil is to the west coast of Africa, so importing new slaves could be cheaper than the costs of food, medicine, or decent shelter for older slaves. This wasn't the case in the United States, where the transportation costs of slavery were material and the life of an individual slave was, in a perverse way, accordingly highly valued. In Brazil, the Portuguese often effectively worked the slaves to death because it was cheaper to replace them than to care for them.

The slaves who received their freedom were the exceptions, not the rule, given the huge numbers of slaves imported into Brazil. According to Reis, many of those slaves who managed to be manumitted were the offspring—or descendants—of sexual liaisons between female African slaves and their masters, often the result of rapes. In these cases, the Brazilian-born, mixed-race children fared much better in gaining their freedom than did their African-born mothers, or than most of their female contemporaries and virtually all of their male contemporaries. In this way, different classes of black people emerged under slavery and perpetuated their class position, with “class” being signified by color, by degrees of mixture—hence, the birth of the browning of Brazil. But most of the slaves would not have mixed with white Brazilians, of course; if they propagated, they did so with one another.

“I'm not saying that there was no mixing, no reproduction,” said Reis quietly. “There was. But that was on the margins. And the slaves who were born in Brazil received manumission much faster and easier than the African-born person, because they could develop relationships with masters which were more intimate, which were easier to manage—completely different to the Africans who came over without knowing the language, who were sent directly to the labor fields. Most domestic slaves, for example, were born in Brazil. They were in the big house. They were closer to the master's family. And so they could get manumission easier. There are statistics showing precisely that in the competition for manumission, the Brazilian-born slave, especially the mixed race, was much more successful than African-born slaves. It was not humane.”

After saying goodbye to Reis, I wanted to examine for myself evidence of Bahia's African roots, having read so much about them. So I visited Pai (Portuguese for “Father,” in the religious sense) João Luiz



A Candomblé ceremony in Father João's temple in Salvador. (Christina Daniels)

at his nearby Candomblé temple. As we have seen, Candomblé is the religion created in Brazil by slaves looking for a way to stay in contact with their ancestral gods from Angola, Nigeria, and Dahomey (now the Republic of Benin). Brazil nursed, nurtured, re-created, and embraced the rituals of Candomblé. But Africa birthed them.

Father João's temple is one of more than eleven hundred Candomblé shrines in Salvador. I love learning about the Yoruba gods and reading stories about them—stories as rich as the stories we cherish about the Greek and Roman gods—in their various manifestations on both sides of the Atlantic. Whereas Zeus and Jupiter and their compadres live in Western culture through literature, here the gods live through ritual and worship, generally alongside the Holy Trinity and the Christian saints, though the literature of Umbanda and Candomblé, written by initiates, is also very popular in Brazil, as it is in Cuba. I admire Father João, and told him so, for keeping the African gods alive in the New World.

"It's very important to me," he told me, as we sat down to chat, just outside his temple, in a favela, as we waited for his devotees to arrive for a ceremony. "I was born into a religious family. When I was seven years old, the spirit became a part of me. At fourteen it came to me again, and by the age of sixteen I was in charge of a temple. I'm now forty-nine years old, and I never think about stopping. I just think about evolving and growing. We raise our sons in order for them to take over this vivid and true religion from me, when I am no longer able."

Father João explained how Candomblé combined African traditions with certain tenets of Roman Catholicism—teachings that some Africans had come across first in Angola, because the Portuguese often baptized captured slaves before shipping them to Brazil, and that others encountered only after they arrived in Brazil. But Thornton and Heywood pointed out to me, however, Candomblé's African origins are far more complex: "The Portuguese did capture and then baptize African slaves," they explained to me. "In fact, they usually did, but this misses the point. Christianity was indigenous to West Central Africa, not only in the Kingdom of Kongo where it had been the 'national' religion since the early sixteenth century, and where people took immense pride in being Catholic, but in Angola, too, where the colonized population was also Christian and even in places like Matamba and among the Dembos people that weren't under Portuguese control but accepted the religion anyway." Though the roots of Candomblé are multiple, then, its foundation is solidly in Angolan Catholicism, as we have seen, and in the Yoruba and Fon religions of the orishas and voduns, as imported from Nigeria and Dahomey. These religions organized around worship of the Orishas are still actively practiced in West Africa today and, in various

forms, throughout the New World, as Candomblé in Brazil, Santería in Cuba, and Vodou (also known as *Sevi Lwa* in Creole) in Haiti. (*Oriṣa* is the Yoruba word, *orixá* is Portuguese, *oricha* is Spanish, and *orisha* is English. The gods of Vodou are called *iwa*, rather than *orishas*.)

The spread of these religions, and their commonalities, throughout the larger Latin American slave community is one of the great mysteries in the history of religion and one of the most fascinating aspects of the history of African slavery in the New World. How and why the Yoruba gods became the foundation for this truly Pan-African religion is another great mystery, since the Yoruba were not a dominant ethnic group among the slaves. There are many theories about this, including the relative lateness of the influx of Yoruba slaves in certain parts of Latin America, namely, Bahia and Cuba. Despite the considerable geographic, national, and linguistic barriers of Africans living in Brazil, Cuba, and Haiti, for instance, all of the Yoruba-affiliated religions that they created are cousins, as it were, with their gods bearing the same names (save for linguistic differences among French, Spanish, English, and Portuguese) and similar functions and characteristics as deities. It is also true that Candomblé's precedents among the Ewe-Gen-Aja-Fon ethnic cluster are "just about as rich as its precedents among the ancestors of the Yoruba," as the anthropologist J. Lorand Matory pointed out to me. Followers of Candomblé, the Brazilian version of this larger panreligion, pray to the orixás, deities that are different expressions of the complex human experience and the natural world. The supreme god, Olodumaré, does not have a place in the rituals, being too distant from humans. He is not even considered an orixá, properly speaking. The orixás form a pantheon of gods that help their devotees to survive and live fulfilling lives; the orixás belong to a problem-solving religion. Somewhat like the Greek and Roman gods and somewhat, perhaps, like Catholic saints, orixás keep lines of communication open between mortals and the divine—existing in a state of being somewhere between man and God.

Father João described to me his theory of how the slaves' desperation for relief from the horrendous conditions of their enslavement led to their invocation of the orixás and gave birth to Candomblé. "When the slaves arrived here, they arrived like animals," he said. "They had no value. People just wanted work from them. If it wasn't for the orixás that they brought to Brazil in their hearts and in their minds . . .," his

voice trailed off, and he shook his head, seeming to imagine their despair. “I believe that black people here survived, or managed to carry on, because they had a lot of faith in the orixás. The churches could never have replaced African gods. It was a way they had to worship because they didn’t have the liberty to express their religion. The Catholic religion did not provide a path for them. So they used Candomblé in order to communicate with the orixás and ask for protection. This was how they survived.”

I asked Father João how this unique mixture of faiths had changed over the centuries—and what he saw in its future. “There was a time when Candomblé faced much discrimination,” he said, beaming, referring to opposition from Brazil’s white, elite establishment. “But today the people of Brazil are beginning to give it the respect it’s due. Back then, Candomblé had no way of evolving because black people were not allowed to study. They were oppressed. Today we live in a more civilized society, where people try to understand the religion. I believe Candomblé has everything in its power to grow.” He went on, though, to say that devotees of Candomblé are increasingly subjected to vicious verbal attacks and even physical violence by members of evangelical Christian churches today.

Following a religious ceremony, which struck me as very similar to ceremonies I had seen in Nigeria and ones I was to see in Cuba and Haiti, I left Father João’s temple reflecting on the fact that as much as the people of Africa were oppressed under slavery, their culture, their energy, and their ways of life and worship could not be extinguished. They took powerful new forms that still endure across Brazil (and, indeed, wherever slaves were taken in the New World). Candomblé is one manifestation of this process. The next stop on my journey was designed to consider another of these Pan-African cultural forms: capoeira.

Like many art forms, capoeira can be hard to describe in words. It is an extraordinary physical discipline, combining martial arts, dance, and rhythms. Today, its elegance and power can be seen all over the world. But its roots are believed to be traced to urban, nineteenth-century Rio de Janeiro. In the neighborhood of Vale das Pedrinhas, I sat down with renowned capoeira master Mestre Boa Gente, to be interviewed live on his community radio program. He began to talk about how slaves developed capoeira. “The masters of the house, the barons and the colonels,



The author with Mestre Boa Gente and his capoeira group. (Christina Daniels)

did not want the black people to organize themselves,” he said, his eyes bright, his entire body engaged in his story. “On coffee plantations, on sugar plantations, weapons were not allowed. But the black people were being tortured. They discovered, in capoeira, a way to strengthen and defend themselves.”

According to Mestre Boa Gente, slaves began conditioning their bodies through movements and exercises that became capoeira in preparation for self-defense or rebellion (though there’s no evidence that it was ever used for any actual fighting). They couldn’t be caught readying for battle, he said, so they disguised their regimen as a kind of ceremonial, even celebratory, dancing, consisting of well-coordinated and syncopated, almost balletic movements and movements characteristic of the martial arts.

“They would be there, training,” he explained, “and then they’d hear the cavalry coming. There would be a lookout, a capoeirista, watching, and when he saw them, he’d start playing to the sound of the cavalry. And everything would change from a fight to a dance.” Scholars believe that capoeira has its roots in different African martial arts traditions, but no one knows for sure. One version of capoeira is called “Capoeira

Angola,” but it originated in Brazil; the reference to Angola no doubt stems from the fact that so very many of the slaves in Brazil hailed from Angola. Capoeira Angola is less popular than Capoeira Regional. As Africans’ lives were transformed by slavery, they transformed African traditions and created entirely new ones. They created a new culture in their new world, and capoeira is one such form.

“The cavalry would turn up, and they would see all the black people doing their samba,” Mestre Boa Gente went on, laughing. “And the cavalry would say, ‘Oh, the blacks, they are playing around, they are dancing.’ And they’d start clapping. When the cavalry left, they’d continue training.” Today, Mestre Boa Gente helps to keep Bahia’s young people off the dangerous streets of the favela by teaching them capoeira. He gives them a proud black tradition to carry forward—an energy and passion that cannot be denied (indeed, he has more energy than any sixty-five-year-old I’ve ever met).

Not every historian agrees with Mestre Boa Gente’s story of how capoeira was born. In 1890, two years after the abolition of slavery in 1888, the Republican criminal code introduced capoeira as a specific crime and repressed, persecuted, and exiled its practitioners in Rio. Gradually, capoeira—always vibrantly alive underground—came out of the shadows and was performed as a ceremonial dance in parades and marches. Its military applications, however, are believed by many scholars to be folklore. Still it is hard, in this vibrant man’s presence, not to respect the authority of Brazil’s black oral traditions and accept every word he says. Capoeira certainly has no greater champion. “If everyone did capoeira, there would be no wars,” he proclaimed. “Capoeira is not a sport. It’s something that enters you. With every practice, with every day, you get stronger and stronger.”

Having caught some of Mestre Boa Gente’s seemingly boundless energy, I hit the streets once again, eager to learn about Bahia’s famous version of Carnival. Like so many public celebrations, Carnival combines a great number of traditions. The ancient Greeks staged Saturnalias and Bacchanalias, wild parties that included masters and slaves alike. The Catholic Church later absorbed these sorts of celebrations to create what we now recognize as Carnival, even before the slave trade to the New World began. In Mardi Gras celebrations in New Orleans—and in the liturgical traditions of Catholic, Episcopal, and a few other churches—Fat Tuesday (or Shrove Tuesday) is the culmination



A female member of Ile Aiye, during a Carnival procession. (Toninho Muricy)

of these celebrations, the day before Ash Wednesday, which marks the beginning of Lent.

Carnaval, like its cousin Mardi Gras, is essentially a joyous annual festival marking the beginning of Lent—one last chance to live it up before embarking on the forty days of this somber fasting period, ending with the feast of Easter. Traditionally, many Catholics and other Christians give up meat or other indulgences for forty days. (In fact, the word *carnival* derives from the Old Italian *carnelevare*, “to remove meat.”) In Brazil, Africans added their own traditions to the European traditions. The parades for Carnaval in Rio and São Paulo consist of various samba schools and Blocos Afro and other groups with their respective costumes, bands, and floats. These are akin to “krewes” in New Orleans’s Mardi Gras. At the start of the processions of one of the leading Blocos Afro, Ile Aiye, a figure called the “Mãe de Santo” (the mother of the saints) tosses popcorn to the crowds as a symbolic propitiation to the lord of pestilence, Omolu, asking him to intervene to ensure a peaceful celebration.



Carnaval: Bahianas in the parade. (Toninho Muricy)

For a long time, what we might think of as Afro-Carnaval, though joyously celebrated, was a relatively simple street party in Bahia, heavily influenced by Yoruba traditions, compared to the national and well-orchestrated event it is today. Indeed, black brotherhoods were banned from participating in the official Rio Carnaval at the turn of the twentieth century because they were so “African,” or “primitive.” In the earliest colonial periods, these brotherhoods played a key role in promoting Afro-Brazilian participation in all of Brazil’s religious festivals, well before the Yoruba became a significant presence in the slave trade there. Though they weren’t banned at this point, there were complaints made that some of their practices were “heathenish.” This ban occurred when Brazil was engaging in an official policy of “whitening,” by encouraging the immigration of millions of European migrants. (In fact, between 1872 and 1975, just over 5.4 million Europeans and Middle Eastern immigrants came to Brazil.) But in the latter half of the twentieth century, black samba groups were welcomed back into official celebrations; later, in the seventies, influenced by the Black Power movement in the United States, reggae, and Pan-African movements on the continent, a variation of these samba groups called Blocos Afro came into being, a testament to black pride and consciousness.

I traveled to meet with João Jorge, founder of Olodum, one of sev-

eral principal Blocos Afro. While some of these Afro-Brazilian cultural organizations have a strong cultural-nationalist and activist bent, Olodum is more multicultural than nationalist or traditionally African, as is the Blocos Afro called Ile Aiye (“the world is my house,” in the Yoruba language), headed by the magisterial leader named Antônio Carlos Vovo, a man strikingly regal, with a noble bearing reminiscent of a Benin bronze bust (*vovo* means “grandfather”). He explained to me that Ile Aiye is dedicated to preserving the traditional forms of Candomblé and is restricted to black members. When I asked him how in the world one determines who is “black” among the rainbow of browns and blacks that is the face of Brazil, he laughed and said that it is up to prospective members to self-identity.

J. Lorand Matory informed me that “the original entry test in Ile Aiye involved scratching the applicant’s skin with a fingernail. Only if it blanched with ‘ash’ would the applicant be admitted.” With good humor, Vovo added, “We know the difference.” I got the feeling that Vovo’s was a most cosmopolitan definition of blackness: if you say you are black, then you are black. And in Brazil, a huge percentage of the



The author and Olodum’s João Jorge. (Toninho Muricy)

population, through its DNA, would most probably satisfy the US law of hypodescent, reaffirmed by the Supreme Court as recently as 1986 (as James Davis points out in a fascinating book about color classification in the United States entitled *Who Is Black? One Nation's Definition*).

I marched along behind Ile Aiye's remarkably stunning procession, starting from its headquarters in Curuzu, a section of the Libertade district, or *barrio*, at about 9:00 p.m. and converging on the Campo Grande in the center of the city at about 3:00 a.m. The members were all dressed in crisp white, red, and yellow dresses and robes (the official colors of Ile Aiye) and singing hauntingly beautiful songs. I could just as easily have been in Yorubaland, it seemed. Vovo's Ile Aiye represents one stream in the politics of culture of the Blocos Afro; João Jorge's Olodum represents another. Both understand full well the enormous political potential of black culture in Brazil; they just pursue their goals in different ways.

"Olodum was founded as a Carnival group, to create art and culture from the black-consciousness movement," João Jorge explained. "Before, Carnival was a celebration, purely and simply for fun. The black population participated, but without a black *consciousness*. The change—the rupture—came when Olodum and other organizations affirmed themselves as black, affirmed that these identities serve political roles. Today, Carnival in Bahia is an instrument of the black population, a means of social promotion—entertainment through raising awareness."

This is a street party and an expertly choreographed parade with a purpose, I thought. But I also recognized the tension between the Carnival of yesterday and the Carnival of today. While African religions, ideas, art, and exuberance had found ways to persist and flourish, it was clear that the stamp of "slave" had never quite disappeared from the Afro-Brazilian experience, and connotations of inferiority associated with slavery shadowed the darkest and "most African" of the Brazilian people. Ile Aiye and Olodum and the other Blocos Afro had to be born, I recognized, as part of a larger effort to restore the legacy of Africa to a place of honor from which it had fallen during Brazil's period of whitening, the long period following the abolition of slavery in which it was in denial about its black roots.

As much as I hated to leave this magical center of African culture in the New World, I now felt that it was time for me to travel beyond Bahia. I knew that further inland an even greater genetic mixing of



The procession of Ile Aiye to the Campo Grande. (Toninho Muricy)

Africans, indigenous peoples, and Europeans had been common. And understanding the many complexities of this mix, I realized, was the only way to begin to understand the complexities of race and racism in contemporary Brazil.

As I drove into the hills of the interior, watching the landscape steadily elevate as we approached the mining region, it occurred to me that this was the journey many slaves had taken in the eighteenth century. The sugar empire in Brazil was fading then, as global prices fell. But gold and diamonds were discovered in the high sierra. Portuguese investors brought slaves to perform more labor there, in a place called Minas Gerais, meaning “general mines.”

I soon arrived in the town of Diamantina, where Júnia Furtado, a professor of history, had agreed to meet with me. I was immediately struck by my new surroundings. Diamantina was a Portuguese colonial town, built in 1710, and is preserved to near perfection. You can see drawings of it from three hundred years ago that look almost exactly the same as it does today (though back in the eighteenth century the place



Diamantina: the author and Professor Júnia Furtado. (Toninho Muricy)

would have been buzzing, whereas now it is a rural university town and a tourist destination).

Anyone could tell Diamantina was different from Bahia—and a long way from Africa—just by looking at it for a moment. But Professor Furtado told me something right off the bat that set the two of them even further apart. In Diamantina, she said, blacks and whites had lived together, side by side, throughout the age of slavery. Indeed, she said, many freed slaves owned property, just as they did in Bahia, Pernambuco, and São Paulo. (Bahia also had a class of urban slaves who could move about freely, earn a living, and pay the owner a regular fee; they were called *negros de ganho*.) Furtado explained to me, “Sometimes they even came to own their own slaves. We know that white people, freed black people, and freed mulattoes lived on the same streets, all over the city,” she continued. “There were freed black people living on the larger streets in nice houses, with two stories.”

After hearing about the brutal working conditions of Bahia’s sugar plantations and Minas’s plantations and mining fields, this was rather surprising to me. I asked Furtado how this could have occurred at a time when Europeans considered Africans barbaric, uncivilized, and inferior. In the United States, after all, we had communities of free blacks in both the North and the South; about 10 percent of the black popula-

tion in 1860 was free. But they generally didn't live in integrated communities with whites.

"This place was very distant from everywhere else," she explained, referring to the urban context in contrast to the life of a slave on a plantation or in a mine. "In the eighteenth century, it took months to travel here, so these people were pretty much apart from the rest of the world." In other words, in Diamantina, blacks and whites could live outside social norms. What happened in Diamantina, it seemed, stayed in Diamantina. And quite a lot happened, especially at night. I asked Furtado how free blacks came to be free in the first place. She explained that many of these freed blacks were women, that white men in Diamantina frequently took African women as concubines and then freed them in their wills or on their deathbeds, while others allowed the women to work in the mines or as prostitutes, saving their money to buy their own freedom. "They had to live amongst themselves," Furtado explained. "White men were the majority of the free population, and they needed women to have sex."

The bachelor factor again, I thought, realizing that while, in some ways, Diamantina sounded downright progressive, hadn't slave women always been forced to be concubines for white men throughout the slave trade and across continents in the New World? I asked Furtado what made the women of Diamantina so different.

"Women really achieved a superior social status here," she asserted. "In 1774, around 50 percent of the houses were owned by black women. They possessed slaves. They were able to have a status very similar to the men they were living with."

I found it hard to believe the church would put up with any of this. Furtado nodded with a mischievous smile. "Of course the church disapproved completely of this situation," she chuckled, "but what we saw here was a kind of silence from the church. There were some visits from bishops, and all this sin was denounced. People would pay some amount of money and say, 'I won't do it anymore.' But when the bishop left the city, everybody started living together again!"

The line, according to Furtado, was drawn at marriage. While couples could live together and trust everyone around them to look the other way, only "equals" received the sanctification of the church to marry. "White married white, freed people married freed people, black people married black people," she stated flatly.

Furtado then offered to take me to the house once owned by the most famous black woman in Brazilian history, a woman named Chica da Silva, one of Diamantina's most successful women in the eighteenth century. She's an icon in Brazil. In the 1970s, her story was even made into a film starring the country's first black female superstar, Zezé Motta. Few slaves in the history of the United States could imagine a life as complex as Chica's. And the difference between slavery in Brazil and slavery in the United States lay in the essence of her story: Chica da Silva could *almost* escape her blackness.

Furtado told me that Chica da Silva was born in Brazil and came to Diamantina as a slave. Her master, a white diamond merchant, fell in love with her. "When he met her," said Furtado, "he'd just arrived from Portugal. She had already one small boy with her former owner, a doctor, and he bought her from him. And I think it was a case of love—an immediate case of love, because he arrived in August, in December she already belonged to him, and he freed her on Christmas Day."

"They stayed together for fifteen years," Furtado continued, as we wandered through Chica's impressive home. "They had thirteen children together, one after another. And she was buried in São Francisco Church, a very exclusive church for the white brotherhood."

The thought of an African woman rising to such a height within a slave-owning culture seemed miraculous. But Furtado explained that this ascendance did not come without cost. Chica da Silva was black, yet her rise to power within the community was part of a conscious "whitening" effort. "She acted like she was a white woman," Furtado explained. "She dressed like one; she was buried in the white church. What can I say? It was a way of integration."

The consequences of Chica's choice—the shedding of most vestiges of her black identity—echoed for generations in the lives of her children and grandchildren. "They really embraced the white," Furtado said. "Because it was the way of social climbing in this society. The goal was to become white people." Indeed, Furtado's research shows that many of Chica's sons moved with their father to his homeland of Portugal, settling in Lisbon and presenting themselves as whites in Portuguese society. There are even records that suggest that some of Chica's descendants in Lisbon paid money to the Crown officially to erase their black heritage.

"We have the registers," said Furtado, "of investigations of her blood



Idealized image of Chica da Silva. (Toninho Muricy)

because her sons and grandsons who wanted to take any position in the Portuguese society had to have their lineage investigated, their genealogy. Because having someone who was black or Moor or Jewish—they're all problems. It was forbidden for them to enter in the Order of Christ or to enter in the university to apply for a job or a position. So they had to apply this way in Lisbon, and then they had to ask for forgiveness to the queen for having a grandmother or a mother who was

black. They had to pay money. And because of the money they had, in fact these children got good positions, good jobs, good places, even in Portugal.” They managed to erase their blackness bureaucratically.

This points to something crucial in Chica’s story. We shouldn’t think of hers as a case of a mixed person “passing,” which is the analogy that we, as Americans, generally come to right away. It was much more complicated than that. Chica was definitely African descended, and no amount of European clothing or mimicked behavior could change that. But she wasn’t simply trying to hide that. Rather, she was doing something fundamentally different: she was advancing by class. After all, lower-class Portuguese who achieved wealth did much the same thing: they abandoned their country customs and took on the airs of the aristocracy, if they were able to. In the United States, in contrast, no amount of wealth or behavior would ever make a black-skinned person “white,” and that is a fundamental difference between the two societies. Class was fluid in Brazil, in a way that it was not for black people in the United States. The process, in other words, was always about class status first and much less about race per se, something very difficult for us to grasp in the United States.

I thought about this as we left the house. Chica da Silva’s transformation from a slave to a wealthy matriarch included a whitening process. Her star wouldn’t have risen if she had practiced Candomblé, worn traditional garments, and, well, stayed black. And her decision had an effect on her family for generations. I found this capacity of a female slave for social mobility fascinating, since it was so unlike the experience that this same person would have had in the United States, but I also have to say that I found it somewhat disturbing. And the more I thought about it, the more confusing the story seemed to me. I realized, with a start, that I was thinking about Chica da Silva in terms of “passing” for white in the United States, not in the way race was socially constructed in Brazil. Everyone in Brazil knew that Chica was black; money and manners “whitened” her socially only. In the United States, a drop of blood is all it takes to make a person “black”—and the history of passing is replete with tragedy, from the descendants of the abolitionist writer and physician James McCune Smith to the Harlem Renaissance novelist Jean Toomer to the *New York Times* book critic Anatole Broyard. But could blacks in Brazil choose a more nuanced racial identity than we can in the United States? Were the scores of racial

classifications that Brazilians of color used to describe themselves neutral descriptors, or were these ways to separate from the darkest, most “Negroid” aspects of the African experience in Brazil, and their connotations as base, inferior, and degenerate? Was I imposing a US interpretive framework on the subtleties of a society I was ill prepared to understand? Had Brazil’s long history of miscegenation created a complexly shaded social structure, from white, on one end, to black, on the other, which had managed, somehow, to escape the negrophobia that remains so much a part of US society? In other words, should we be celebrating the social fluidity that Chica da Silva enacted for herself and her progeny, rather than critiquing it? If so, should we, in the era of multiculturalism and mixed-race identities, look at Chica and people like her as prophets of the social construction of race, as harbingers of a new era in race relations?

Questions like this can quickly become abstract, academic, and impossible to answer. I’ve often found that the place to go for a reality check is the barbershop or the beauty shop. After all, black hair is a big deal—whether you embrace it, tame it, or straighten it with a hot comb or chemicals. I wanted to know how Brazil’s mixed-race culture dealt with black hair; I wanted to know what was hiding in “the kitchen.”

I headed to Belo Horizonte, capital of the state of Minas Gerais. I knew there were concentrated Afro-Brazilian communities in the favelas there—the poorest areas. And that’s where, in the blackest part of Minas Gerais, I stepped into the beauty shop of Dora Alves to find out just how beautiful black is in Brazil. Alves does hair, but she also does politics, as a cultural activist. She told me that her customers often ask her to make their hair look straighter, less frizzy, less kinky . . . more white. Alves teaches them to take pride in their black hair and their black heritage.

“Sometimes, we’ll have someone arriving at the salon,” she told me, “and she is so depressed, with such low self-esteem. She thinks her hair is ugly, that her hair is terrible. Sometimes the mother still has her baby in a stroller, and she arrives asking me, ‘Oh, my God, is there any way to solve this hair?’ Sometimes we go into schools, and the teacher will come up with a child—he’ll whisper, just like this, into my ear, ‘Do you think there’s anything that can be done?’”

I shook my head, astonished at the idea of exposing the skull of a baby in a stroller to the torture of hair-straightening chemicals.

“I’ll say, ‘No, let’s have a chat!’” Alves went on, emphatically. “I sit down, I put the child on my knee, and I say, ‘Your hair is beautiful. You are beautiful. I’m organizing a fashion show, and you can be in it.’ And the child starts to relax, and the next thing you know, the child is strutting around. She’s all happy, all joyful, walking around like Gisele,” referring to Brazilian Gisele Bündchen, whom *Forbes* magazine recently said was the highest-paid model in the world.

Alves wants to reach kids early, so she regularly visits schools and community centers to promote black pride. It’s a big commitment, especially for a woman who runs her own business. But it drives her to distraction to see Afro-Brazilians trying to leave their blackness behind the way Chica da Silva did.

“Why do so many black women have low self-esteem here in Brazil if they have Afro hair?” I asked. Why would black people be so alarmed at having black hair in the world’s second-largest black nation?

“It’s a question of history,” Alves explained, shaking her head. “It’s also a question of the media, too. You see it in the advertisements, in magazines, on TV—you see that most of the women are white. If you go and count, there might be one black girl, just one. And the rest are white, with their hair straightened out. So black women can’t see themselves at all.”

They can’t see themselves at all, I thought, stepping out of the shop. I turned back to wave at Alves and thank her again. But my mind was spinning with questions. Black people were everywhere, but had they absorbed Brazil’s urge to whiten itself? And their history included characters like Chica da Silva, who had walked away from her blackness—and been idolized for it. In the United States, everyone just sees me as black, and that’s how I think of myself. But in Brazil, racial mixing had made things far more complicated, more graduated, more nuanced, perhaps?

So what is blackness in Brazil? And just how beautiful is white? As someone with a mixed-race heritage myself, I decided to ask passersby on the street what they thought of me. And I learned, quickly, that my color was in the eye of the beholder.

“If I lived in Brazil,” I asked one man, “what color would I be?”

“*Caboclo*,” he answered.

I asked another man, “What race am I, what color?”

“*Pardo*,” he said.

The answers kept coming, all different. “Light *moreno*.” “*Mulatto*.” “*Cafuso*.” Each was specific, as if describing a different color of the rainbow. It seemed objective—to a point.

“We’re all black, even though we’re different colors,” one man argued.

“I’m black,” another piped in. “He’s light *moreno*.”

“Black. He’d be black,” a woman said. “I’m not a racist, no.”

Her answer rung in my head. I couldn’t help noticing that those who called themselves black and identified me as black did so with a certain defiance, or apologetically. Many people wanted to be one of Brazil’s seemingly endless shades of brown, not black, and to assure me that I was brown, too. Were these categories, these many names for degrees of blackness, a shield against blackness? The mixing in Bahia, Minas Gerais, and other areas in slavery times and replicating itself since had produced Brazilians of a brown blend. But these many shades of black and brown clearly weren’t equal.

I called my friend Professor Reis and described my experience to him. He reminded me that there are in fact well over a hundred different words to describe degrees of blackness in Brazil: 134, in fact—a word for every shade. Very dark blacks are *preto* or *negro azul* (blue black). Medium-dark blacks are *escuro*. *Preto desbotado* refers to light-skinned blacks. If you’re light enough to pass for white and you seem to be trying, then you’re *mulatto disfarçado*. *Sarará* means white-skinned with kinky hair. The country’s focus on color, it struck me, bordered on obsession. The list went on, and on, and on, dizzyingly.

I decided to return to Salvador, Brazil’s black capital, to find out what in this country’s past made attitudes toward blackness so problematic—to learn more about Brazil after slavery, when degrees of blackness were already spread across the country. I met with Wlamyra Albuquerque, another historian who teaches at the Federal University of Bahia. We settled in the library at the Geographical and Historical Institute, carefully drinking cool glasses of water so as not to damage the fragile works in the archives. I asked her what the white ruling class had thought about African culture in Brazil after the abolition of slavery in 1888. “The elite reacted very badly to the end of slavery,” she replied. “What bothered them was how to deal with the large population of color. Various ministers who were a part of the government believed that in order for Brazil to become a civilized country, it had to undergo

a process of whitening. The government invested a great deal in European immigration to the country.”

Abolition may have ended slavery, Albuquerque said, but it didn’t transform Brazil into the tolerant multicultural nation that so many blacks and white abolitionists must have hoped it would become. Between about 1884 and 1939, four million Europeans and 185,000 Japanese were subsidized to immigrate to Brazil and work as indentured servants. The process, a formal government program, was called *branqueamento*—which translates, literally, as “whitening.” Obviously, the white elite hoped to increase the number of whites reproducing among blacks to lighten the national complexion. But the effort was also aimed sharply at eradicating vestiges of African culture.

“The government told Brazilians that to be black was something close to savagery,” Albuquerque explained. “From that moment, they began to persecute practices that were seen as black—like Candomblé and capoeira—trying to convince people that these practices were barbarous and that it was a civilizing act to stop them.”

As I silently cheered for Candomblé and capoeira—African creations that survived the era of *branqueamento*—Albuquerque began to tell me about one black man, a pioneering intellectual, who had taken a bold, brave stand against the government’s racist ideologies. His name was Manuel Querino. He’s still little known even inside Brazil. His story is rarely taught in universities, much less in high schools. But he is an important figure nonetheless: a historian, artist, labor unionist, and black activist who deserves to be better known. You might think of Querino as a Brazilian mixture of Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois: he pushed for technical education for blacks and was a teacher at a trade institute, like Washington; but at the same time, he was a member of the exclusive Instituto Geográfico e Histórico (where I was talking to Albuquerque), as Du Bois would have been. But unlike Washington and Du Bois, he was also involved in trade unionism and local politics (he was an alderman), and he often allied himself with oligarchical politicians. Querino, in other words, was a rather complex man.

“Querino emphasized the role of the African as a civilizer,” Albuquerque told me. “He thought there was no need for the white immigrants, as Brazil had already been civilized by the Africans. He said the Brazilian worker was much more capable than the foreign worker of dealing with the challenges of Brazilian society.”

“Querino was also an artist and spoke about this population’s artistic abilities,” she continued. “He was concerned with showing African customs and traditions in Bahia. So he was a dissonant voice when everyone else was saying that those who came over as slaves were not capable of a more sophisticated style of work.”

I was stunned that I had never heard of this man. (I later learned that the hero of the novel *Tent of Miracles*, by Jorge Amado, is partially based on Querino. Amado can be thought of as the Gilberto Freyre of Brazilian literature.) Slaves were acknowledged as essential in many quarters. But Querino had argued that Africans were integral to Brazil’s cultural identity. For me, hearing about his life was like learning for the first time about W. E. B. Du Bois or Carter G. Woodson—two of my great personal heroes in African American history. I was absolutely riveted as Albuquerque began searching the archives’ copy of one of Querino’s essays for her favorite passages.

“Here it is,” she said, thumbing through a journal. “‘Whoever reads history will see the way in which the nation always has glory in the African that it imported.’ It’s about how we should have pride in being the descendants of these Africans. Querino is the father of black history here—and also of black mobilization and of racial positivity within the black movement.”

Querino was a seminal figure in the black intellectual history of Brazil. And yet, as I learned from Professor Albuquerque, Querino’s pioneering ideas about race and racism largely died with him in 1923. Instead, the creation of Brazil’s official identity—as one of the world’s few truly mixed, supposedly racist-free nations—is credited to the work of one man: Gilberto Freyre.

Unlike his unsung counterpart Querino, Freyre is taught widely in schools, even in the United States, and is celebrated for recognizing the value and significance of Africans within Brazilian culture (I read his work when I was in college). But also unlike Querino, Freyre was white. He was born into a middle-class family in 1900, only twelve years after abolition. His father was a public employee, and his mother’s family owned a sugar plantation. Freyre spent his youth on plantations owned by his mother’s relatives. And plantation life served as the inspiration for Freyre’s most celebrated work, published in 1933: *Casa Grande e Senzala* (*The Masters and the Slaves*; a better translation would be “The Big House and the Slave Quarters”). In that book, he argued that race

relations in Brazil were quite fluid during slavery, in spite of the violence at the heart of the system. But slavery, he argued, was not solely defined by violence. He described Brazil, the last country in the Western Hemisphere to abolish slavery, as the first place most likely to eliminate racism, because it was not a mainstream mentality of normal Brazilian citizens. Racial democracy was in process of being constructed.

Freyre argued that because blacks, whites, and indigenous peoples were all having sexual relationships and reproducing with each other—a mixing traditionally called *miscegenation*, a term of some baggage and controversy today—race relations were better in Brazil than they were in slave-owning cultures that were more rigidly segregated. I'd brought my copy of Freyre's book with me and, as I traveled across Brazil, frequently looked over some of the key passages that had stuck with me all these years later. I found that they still troubled me, like this one:

The truth is that in Brazil, contrary to what is to be observed in other American countries and in those parts of Africa that have been recently colonized by Europeans, the primitive culture—the Amerindian as well as the African—has not been isolated into hard, dry, indigestible lumps incapable of being assimilated by the European social system. . . . Neither did the social relations between the two races, the conquering and the indigenous one, ever reach that point of sharp antipathy or hatred, the grating sound of which reaches our ears from all the countries that have been colonized by Anglo-Saxon Protestants. The friction here was smoothed by the lubricating oil of a deep-going miscegenation.

Freyre claimed that whites and blacks not only had sex but sometimes married, with the church's blessing (though live-in arrangements were suitably "damned by the clergy"). He argued that this racial mixing constituted the core of Brazil's identity. Like Querino, he maintained that Brazil wasn't Brazil without Africans and their culture. But his work lacks any real sympathy or understanding of what it actually means to be a Brazilian of African descent.

I realized then that Freyre had, in many ways, taken Querino's place in Brazilian history. He's credited with the first view of Brazil as a nation that should take pride in its mixed-race heritage. But did he articulate

anything beyond an essentially primitivist or romantic view of race relations during slavery?

Every Brazilian, even the light-skinned fair-haired one, carries out in him on his soul, when not on soul and body alike . . . the shadow, or at least the birthmark, of the aborigine or the Negro. . . . In our affections, our excessive mimicry, our Catholicism, which so delights the senses, our music, our gait, our speech, our cradle songs—in everything that is a sincere expression of our lives, we almost all of us bear the mark of that influence.

When Freyre wrote these words, in 1933, US blacks were under the boot of Jim Crow. Segregation was the order of the day, and many whites in the United States were fighting to keep it permanent. And yet Freyre asserted that black Brazilians and white Brazilians were bound together by blood and destiny. He argued that they had created each other, that they mutually constituted each other. Many people who read Freyre in the United States—he was actually educated at Baylor and at Columbia—during these years of Jim Crow must have thought he was either dangerously radical or else insane. Who alive here then would ever have dared claim that the United States could be the world's model racial democracy?

When I first read Freyre, I remember faulting him for being overly romantic, even naïve. Masters raped slaves. Many long-term sexual relationships were the result of coercion at best. Respect between peoples comes with social equality. And, obviously, when one person owns another, there can be no equality. Period. But I had to acknowledge the impact that Freyre's writing is said to have had on Brazil. Some scholars argue that it changed the way whites looked at blacks, and it also changed the way blacks thought about themselves, though it is difficult to imagine a work of scholarship having this much social impact. Freyre, drawing on mid-nineteenth-century Brazil legend, was nevertheless one of the first scholars to argue more or less cogently that Brazil—its culture and its identity—was created by the blending of three equal races: Europeans, indigenous peoples, and Africans. We cannot overestimate how novel this idea was in its time, or how eagerly liberal and progressive academics, such as W. E. B. Du Bois, seized on it—at

least for a time—in their attempt to undermine de jure segregation in the United States.

Traveling north from Salvador, I was greeted warmly by Gilberto Freyre Neto, the grandson of the writer, at the writer's home in Recife, the capital of the state of Pernambuco and the fourth-largest metropolitan area in Brazil. After Bahia, Pernambuco was Brazil's second-largest center of sugar-plantation slavery in colonial Brazil. Recife's airport is named for Freyre, surely a first, or at least one of the very few times that an airport has been named for an intellectual! I told him I was honored to meet him after having studied his grandfather at Yale. And I relished my personal tour of Freyre's house, where he lived from 1940 until his death in 1987. Neto showed me his grandfather's medals of honor, the desk at which he sat and wrote his books, and even a first-edition copy of *Casa Grande e Senzala*.

Neto's life is dedicated to keeping his grandfather's work alive, so he was happy to sit with me and dig into Freyre's writings. I started by asking him how attitudes toward black people changed after his grandfather's 1933 masterpiece was published.

"I think the book was a real turning point in the 1930s," he told me. "Gilberto raised the Brazilian blacks to the same cultural standing as the Portuguese. He equated them. He said Brazil only became Brazil when African culture, which was often superior to Portuguese, became culturally miscegenated. From that moment on, we had a 'complementariness.' We became an ideal meta-race."

At the time *Casa Grande e Senzala* was published, Germans were rallying behind Hitler and his calls for Aryan purity. Freyre took the completely opposite view, arguing that its racial mix was essential to bringing Brazil to the height of its cultural and societal potential. Whitening had been a mistake.

"His studies were based very heavily on experiences that my grandfather lived through and information that he was able to gather from sources that were curiously trivial," Neto explained. "A lot of the time, they were not even considered academic. He drew from newspaper cuttings, interviews with elderly people, knowledge that was gathered mostly from interactions. So my grandfather inhabits the dichotomy of either 'Love Gilberto Freyre' or 'Hate Gilberto Freyre.' Some academics think of him as a novelist, while others think of him as one of the most profound analyzers of Brazilian society."



*The Redemption of Cain*, by Modesto Brocos (1852–1936). Three generations of a Brazilian family, each successively whiter (black grandmother, mulatto mother, and white baby). (Museu Nacional de Belas Artes)

Novelist, sociologist, neither, or both, Freyre’s impact really can’t be overstated. His writings changed attitudes about race across the entire nation. Many of Brazil’s leaders, no matter what their politics were, sooner or later embraced his ideas. They overturned institutionalized policies that overtly discriminated against blacks. Brazil’s official whitening process came to an end. And Freyre fixed, in its place, the concept of “racial democracy”—the idea that Brazil was so racially mixed that it was beyond racism.

Beyond racism. I sat back for a moment. I was beginning to feel something romantic toward Brazil—as Freyre had always felt. Even today, Brazil boasts of its racial harmony and its multicultural identity.

And I could almost see it. While the United States was busy policing the racial boundaries with Jim Crow, Freyre was arguing, Brazilians were busy embracing one another! The joyous celebration of Carnaval became a globally recognized symbol of Brazilian brotherhood across racial lines. Racial democracy certainly seemed to lie at the heart of Brazilian identity.

But could it be real? What about Brazil's extensive poverty, especially among blacks? What about *Ile Aiye* and *Olodum*, which rose in the seventies from a need to reassure blacks (and to educate whites) that it is glorious to be descended from Africa? Like any reasonable person—black or white—I want to believe we live in a world where a society beyond racism can exist, not just in theory. But I need to see evidence of this progress to believe it. And in the restaurants where I ate and in the hotels where I stayed, in upper-class residential neighborhoods, on the covers of magazines at city newsstands—virtually everyone in a position of power looked white.

Neto was adamant in response to my questions. If racial democracy isn't real already, he assured me, it is becoming real. He read once more from his grandfather's works: "I think we are more advanced in solving the racial question," he quoted, "than any other community in the world that I know."

I left Neto with as many questions as answers and headed south to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil's most famous city—and its cultural and intellectual capital. I'd managed to secure a meeting with Zezé Motta, the actress who played Chica da Silva in Brazil's famous film, which premiered in 1976. As a black actress, I thought, she must have had strong feelings about playing this character, and I was hoping she could help me clarify my feelings about this so-called racial democracy.

What I didn't expect—and what I got—was a meeting with a most thoughtful, articulate artist. Chica da Silva may have personified racial democracy, but life for Zezé Motta has been quite different. "Before I became successful," she said, "I took pictures for advertisements, and the client did not approve them, saying, 'This client is middle class and wouldn't take suggestions from a black woman.' And on TV, I played various roles which were actually always the same one: the maid."

"I was always defending Chica da Silva," she explained. "I would say, 'Chica da Silva did what she had to do. Don't demand Angela Davis attitude from her.' Her merit lies in the fact that she was born a slave,

but she could not accept this. She turned the game around and became a queen.”

Perhaps paradoxically, at the same time she defended Chica da Silva for being complicit in her own whitening, Motta discovered how connected she was to her own blackness.

“It’s very hard for a black person in Brazil to have a career as an actress,” she confided, “but in the case of Chica da Silva, it had to be a black woman. The producer didn’t want me because I was too ugly—until very recently, in Brazil, the black people were considered ugly. The producer preferred her to be a mulatta, a lighter actress. But the director didn’t budge. It had to be a black woman.”

Who wouldn’t want Chica da Silva—a black woman—played by this great, and stunningly beautiful, black actress? I kept listening.

“After the film, I was considered a Brazilian sex symbol,” she laughed, “because the character became very present in the male imagination. At that time, there would never be a black person on the cover of the big magazines, because they’d say, ‘The cover sells.’ But as I had become the queen, the sex symbol, an important magazine put me on the cover. And someone high up in the magazine said that if it didn’t sell, the person who signed off on it would be fired!”

Motta’s portrayal of Chica da Silva made her a star, overnight. She enjoyed the recognition that came with her fame, and she was certainly proud of her work. But her new status brought her new experiences along Brazil’s ever-moving color line. And those experiences revealed to her Brazil’s anti-black racism—a racism that her country claimed did not exist.

“I traveled to sixteen countries promoting the film, including the United States,” Motta continued. “And I started to think, ‘There are so few black actors in the Brazil media. Where is everybody?’ This country has a debt toward its black people.”

I thought about Motta’s words as I traveled to my next meeting. I’d arranged to sit down with one of my heroes, a truly great man who has spent his life advocating for Afro-Brazilians: Abdias do Nascimento. I had wanted to meet him for a very long time; Nascimento is one of the gods of the international black-intellectual tradition. He is now ninety-six years old, but the grip of his handshake is still firm and his mind razor sharp. He’s been fighting the good fight for three-quarters of a century, as a senator, a university professor, and a writer. Nominated for

the Nobel Peace Prize, he founded the Institute of Afro-Brazilian Studies in Rio and is widely recognized as the country's greatest black activist. Some people even call him the Nelson Mandela of Brazil.

I was honored to be in his presence, and I told him so. He accepted me graciously, with the calm and dignity of a leader naturally born. An exquisite gold statue of Exú, the messenger of the gods, stood on a china cabinet near Nascimento's dining table. I asked him about the status of black people, politically and socially, in all aspects of contemporary Brazil. Was racial democracy an ideal or a reality? Had it ever existed? Could it ever blossom?

"This is a joke, which has been built up since Brazil was discovered," Nascimento replied with conviction. "And Brazil likes to spread this around the world. But it's a huge lie. And the black people know that. The black people feel in their flesh the lie that is racial democracy. You just have to look at the black families. Where do they live? The black children—how are they educated? You'll see that it's all a lie."

He listened patiently while I recounted my recent visit with Gilberto Freyre's grandson. Nascimento didn't buy plantation life as whites and blacks holding hands in the sunshine, either. He told me he found the idea "sentimental." And if you don't accept that picture, he pointed out, you can't accept racial democracy. Interestingly enough, in the late forties, Nascimento published a short-lived magazine called *Quilombo*, in which Freyre and other white intellectuals published essays in a column entitled "Racial Democracy."

"There is the myth that slavery in Brazil was very gentle, very friendly, even," he said. "These are all fabrications. Slavery here was violent, bloody. Please understand, I am saying this with profound hatred, profound bitterness for the way black people are treated in Brazil—because it's shameful that Brazil has a majority of blacks, a majority that built this country, that remain second-class citizens to this day."

He spoke so passionately but without bombast, his convictions firm, well considered, strong. In his eloquence, he reminded me of the Nigerian Nobel laureate for literature Wole Soyinka. As I continued to listen, somewhat in awe, Nascimento explained how formal racism in Brazil had been replaced by an equally dangerous informal racism. Racial democracy was a mask, a public face that Brazil put on for the world, he explained. Day-to-day, real-life Brazil was still hostile to blacks, still trying to "whiten away" vestiges of African culture.

“My parents never talked about African gods,” he lamented. “I researched them, but the African gods were hidden. The only gods that appeared in public were the Christian gods, the Catholic ones. But the gods of those who lived in little huts, who were ashamed or afraid to reveal their true beliefs?” He shrugged his shoulders and held out empty hands. “It was not a law. It was an unwritten law that one shouldn’t really talk about African gods. It’s only now that African gods are talked about openly.”

“I was the first black senator who was conscious of being black,” he said, proudly. “And I ripped the fantasy of the Senate apart. Every single session, I would start by declaring, ‘I invoke the orixás! I invoke Olorum! I call Exú! May Exú give me the power of speech! Give me the right words to get at these racists who have been in power for five hundred years! The right words to tell Brazil, to tell the world that the black people are aware, that the black people are awake!’” I could only imagine that scene, the horror on the faces of his fellow senators as he declaimed about the Yoruba gods, invoking my favorite of the lot, Exú, messenger of the gods, the god of interpretation, rather like Hermes in Greek mythology. I glanced at his statue. It was almost as if the lovely, nine-inch gold statue of the trickster broke into a smile. We both burst into laughter.

I asked him what he saw in Brazil’s future. Was he optimistic that the situation might improve? I was curious to see how he’d respond to the question. I was expecting, I think, some kind of visceral explosion. Instead, Nascimento was very calm and seemed to have long ago formed his answer.

“If I weren’t an optimist, I would have hung myself,” he told me. “This action is so repetitive—this thing that has been going on for five hundred years. So if I weren’t an optimist, I would have hung myself.”

Everything Nascimento said made me more eager to see more of Brazil as it truly is. The Brazil of my imagination had its place. Brazil’s vision of itself has its own life. But for this journey to have meaning, I needed to witness the Brazil of the real world. And there could be no better place than Rio de Janeiro. I roamed widely through the wealthy neighborhoods, Copacabana and Ipanema, walking the beaches and driving around the lovely homes. I began to recognize the wisdom in Nascimento’s words. There were very few black people anywhere. I stopped at a newsstand and looked at the magazine covers, slowly

taking in what I was seeing: rows upon rows of white faces, white models, a white Brazil. I could have been in Switzerland. As I looked for even one brown face among these pictures, I thought of Zezé Motta's story. If someone asked me for proof that we were standing in a majority-black country, I couldn't have produced it at that newsstand.

I asked myself what black Brazilian I could remember having seen consistently in the media in the United States. Pele, the Albert Einstein of soccer, came to mind first, but then so did Ronaldo, Robinho, Ronaldinho, Neymar, and other soccer players. Maybe a musician or two, such as Milton Nascimento, and a model or two. That was it.

I went on, looking for black Brazil. And I found it—not at Ipanema or Copacabana but in Rio's famous slums, the favelas. I arrived in the particularly infamous neighborhood called the City of God, one of Brazil's most famous favelas, if only because it was the title of a very popular and well-made film released in 2002. Here, among some of the world's worst slums, Afro-Brazilian life was vibrant, visible, omnipresent, and distressfully poor.

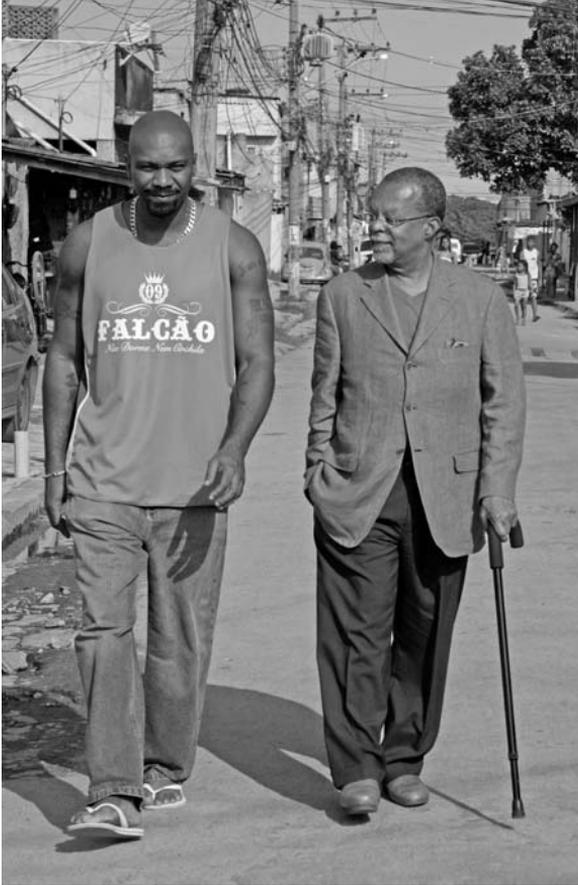
The City of God is where Brazil's most famous rapper, MV Bill, was born and raised. I knew he still lived there—even though his fame made it more than possible to leave. He was happy to talk to me about what life is really like for Afro-Brazilians. I started by asking him why he still lives in the same poverty-stricken favela. In the United States, hip-hop stars tend to move to Beverly Hills or a comparable neighborhood when they make it, no matter where they came from.

"I don't condemn those who make money, leave the ghetto, and go to live somewhere else," he replied. "But my thing with the City of God is different, independent of whatever money I make. Living here is part of my identity."

The City of God looked like the opposite of wealthy Rio—here, all the faces were different shades of the darker browns. I asked MV Bill if everyone in the neighborhood is black.

"The majority," he answered, nodding his head. "The City of God is considered one of the blackest neighborhoods in Rio de Janeiro. But even here in a black neighborhood, it is the smaller population of lighter people that have the best opportunities in life."

The remains of whitening, I thought immediately. Those who appear to fit the European dream of *branqueamento* are doing better than their darker neighbors, even after all this time.



The author with MV Bill, Brazilian rapper. (Christina Daniels)

“But in Brazil, we’re not allowed to talk like this,” MV Bill said, interrupting my thoughts. “We have to live in a racial democracy that doesn’t exist. There is no equality.”

I told MV Bill that my own experience had reflected that. During my travels, I was fortunate to stay in nice hotels and to eat at good restaurants, but I had often been the only black person who was not serving. MV Bill only seemed surprised to hear I’d been treated so well.

“It’s because of your social standing,” he explained. “But there will still be many places where you’d be the only black man and you’d still be treated badly.”

I had assumed that MV Bill would be treated well wherever he

went. After all, the man is a star. But now I asked him if he had ever suffered poor treatment just for being black.

“Of course,” he answered readily, “before, during, and after my fame.”

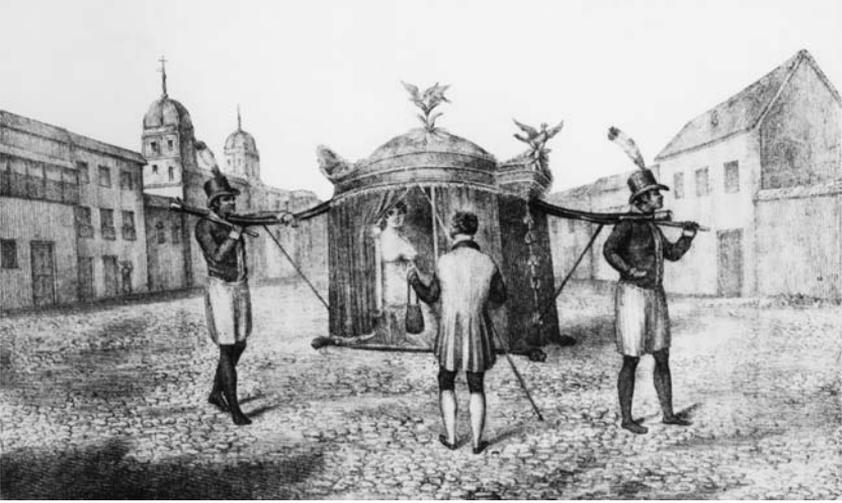
“Why is Brazil so racist?” I finally said, for the first time on my journey. “It’s the second-largest black nation in the world.”

MV Bill nodded. He knew what I was asking, even if he didn’t have an answer. “We have lived under the myth of racial democracy,” he replied. “But this is exposed as a lie when we look at the color of the people who live in favelas, the color of the people who are in prison, the color of the people who survive by committing crimes. People will tell you that our problem in Brazil is an economic problem or a social problem, anything but a racial problem—it can never be racial. But it is.”

His words struck an emotional chord. In the United States, too, blacks are often accused of being at fault for their own poverty.

“There are a lot of people who don’t have jobs because they have not had access to education,” he went on. “And without access to education, they have not been able to get any professional qualifications. And without any qualifications—on top of all the prejudices against those who live in a place like this—it is very hard to get good jobs. We have a lot of people who are not criminals, who are not drug addicts, but who don’t have an occupation, who are not doing anything.”

I sat back, trying to process his comments. While it is true that racial segregation was outlawed in Brazil, the legacies of slavery—so recently abolished, relatively speaking—persist, as does color prejudice. Although segregation had never been legal, as it had been in the United States, it manifests itself throughout Brazilian society. As I would find to be true throughout Latin America, the darkest people in these societies tend to be at the bottom of the social scale. Racial democracy was a beautiful and alluring ideal, but had it ever been more than a romantic white worldview, designed to keep Afro-Brazilians in their place? After all, a black-pride movement is not needed, is it, in a society in which racial democracy obtains? As Abdias do Nascimento explained to me quite perceptively, because of this ideology of the country as blessedly free of racism, Brazil never had a civil rights movement, like the one we had in the United States, because it did not have *de jure* segregation to rail against. Brazil’s racism was informal—devastatingly effective, but informal nonetheless. And this meant that blacker Brazilians never



“A Brazilian Sedan Chair and a Person Begging for the Church, 1821,” engraving. (Getty Images)

have had a chance to demand redress for the racism that they still feel they suffer.

I turned to watch children playing in the street, young lives full of potential. I asked MV Bill if he thought any of these children might one day become the Barack Obama of Brazil.

“I think so, yes,” he said, smiling. “But there is only one way: through education. And education in Brazil is a luxury item. I think our greatest revolution will be to have young people like these becoming lawyers, having political power, influencing the judicial system. Those are the signs we hope for.”

I left MV Bill, and his inspiring spirit of hope, in the City of God. But our conversation lingered in my mind. The cycle of poverty is inevitably vicious—no money means no education, no education means no job, no job means no money. And the cause for this cycle, most scholars and activists agree, is the legacy of slavery and a function of the lingering remnants of anti-black racism. What was Brazil doing to right this wrong, to begin, systematically, to put an end to the inequality that slavery visited on persons of African descent and their descendants?

The answer won’t surprise Americans, but it has taken hold only recently in Brazil: affirmative action. The future, the hopes, and the very

lifeblood of Afro-Brazilians lie in the hands of the country's university system. But unlike affirmative-action programs in the United States, Brazil has embarked on a most radical, and extremely controversial, form, one destined to stir even more controversy in many quarters of Brazilian society than affirmative action has done in the United States.

The first program designed to offer poor blacks a road out of poverty was launched in 2003 at the State University of Rio de Janeiro. It set aside 20 percent of the university's admissions for black students, and it was the only program of its kind anywhere in the country. Now, similar programs have spread through Brazil, leading to often fierce debates. The goal? To help achieve the dreams articulated so eloquently by MV Bill and Abdias do Nascimento: to integrate the middle class, in the same way that affirmative-action programs did in the United States starting in the late sixties, so that black children could grow up to become engineers, lawyers, and doctors in relative proportion to their percentage in the population.

I knew the introduction of affirmative action had been very controversial in Brazil. So I scheduled an appointment to hold a debate with a class taught by Professor Marilene Rosa at the State University of Rio de Janeiro. She offered to speak with me about what affirmative action means for her country and how both blacks and whites feel about it.

"I started teaching at this university in 1995," she told me. "There was already a debate surrounding affirmative action at that time, although it took until 2003 for any laws to be passed."

But then, virtually overnight, the student body at this traditionally white university began to reflect the cultural diversity of Brazil as a nation. I asked her what happened when the program went into effect and what the reaction of the community had been. Rosa shook her head.

"It suffered criticism from all sides," she said, "criticism that said the level would fall, saying the university would fall behind other universities, and it didn't happen. On the contrary, at present I'm coordinating a study group, and my best students are the quota students."

Supporters argued that without affirmative action, Afro-Brazilian children had no chance to achieve equality, much less become leaders who could represent their communities in society and government. Slavery and racism left blacks at a disadvantage, keeping generation after generation of black youth trapped in poverty. Only through affirmative action, and through quotas, they argued, could blacks succeed in

numbers proportionate to their share of the population. And then, perhaps, social equality could follow.

Critics of the policy were just as vocal. They argued that affirmative action would only increase interracial friction—by forcing Brazilians to focus on race rather than to dismiss it as irrelevant. Brazil’s many categories of blackness didn’t help soothe any tensions. After all, who was “black”? Rosa spent a fair amount of time directing students toward different resources that they needed to thrive. Defining blackness, she explained, was defining who got into the university.

“There was even a debate at one point between the students, who created a sort of court to determine who the quota students would be by looking at them,” she explained. Ultimately, however, who was “black” was left to self-identification—a very good thing, too, since I couldn’t imagine the judgments of such a court dictating young people’s futures! But Rosa laughed at my indignation. She saw young people fighting for their blackness, their identity, and it gave her hope for the future.

“I used to say, ‘How good when someone declares themselves black to get somewhere,’” she said, smiling broadly. “The idea of declaring yourself black is already a victory.”

Many public universities followed the lead of Rosa’s school, and some have put even higher quotas in place. (The Federal University of Bahia, perhaps fittingly, reserves 40 percent of its spaces for poor and black students.) But these were wrenching changes, she stressed to me, and her students continue to argue about affirmative action among themselves, to this day. As a professor, I know that a debate among students can be quite enlightening. So I asked her to set up a debate, and she graciously obliged. What I saw did not disappoint.

“Are we not perhaps camouflaging a much deeper problem?” one student asked urgently. “If the aim is to end racism, aren’t we just reinforcing it in reverse?”

“It’s not a way of camouflaging racism,” another answered. “It’s a way of showing that we’re trying to readdress it. Because for four hundred years, blacks were enslaved, and when it was abolished, they were excluded.”

“What we are doing is attacking the consequence,” a young woman countered, “and not the cause.”

“Whoever benefits from it is in favor, and whoever doesn’t is against it,” another student said wearily.

“There are 130 million active voters today,” said a young, Afro-coiffed man (one of half a dozen students who belonged to the black student union, who had come to the debate wearing identical T-shirts), whose tone and attitude reminded me of black students in the United States in the late sixties. “Out of these 130 million, only 3 percent hold a university diploma. There are 40 million illiterate people in the country today. The university is already an oligarchic space, an aristocratic space. All of us here are in a privileged position. This is a privilege, do you understand? This is not debatable.”

“The role of the public university is to educate all parts of society,” one young man piped in. “The public university is not there to cater to the elite.”

“I’d like him to itemize the privileges he says the elites get,” another student shot back, “because I don’t see whites being privileged but, instead, blacks or lower-income people being privileged when they’re able to opt for the quota system.”

This is getting good, I thought.

“You don’t know what the privileges are?” another student asked, incredulous. “In higher education, 1 percent of professors are black. In the health system, black women get less anesthesia in labor than whites. This is official data. Black people with the same education as white people get paid 35 percent less while doing the same job.”

I watched these passionate young people, the black nationalists among them growing ever more vocal, more adamant, taking pride in displaying contempt for foes of affirmative action, and thought about scenes like this from the late sixties back at Yale, when ours was the first affirmative-action generation and many of us acted out our political convictions and our anxieties in similarly offensive, impatient ways. I also thought about the privileges of my own life, privileges enabled by my inclusion among that pioneering generation. In 1966, Yale University graduated six black men. The class of 1973, which entered three years later, consisted of ninety-six black men and women.

I wanted to let these students speak and argue and hash it out for themselves, but I also wanted them to know that I would never have gone to Yale without affirmative action. Barack Obama would not have attended Columbia University, and it’s likely he would not have attended Harvard Law School. Affirmative action—by which I mean taking into account ethnicity, class, religion, and gender as criteria for col-

lege admission—is not a perfect remedy for a history of discrimination, by any means; but it is the best system we have in the United States to address a past that can't be altered. “Not even God can change the past,” Shimon Peres is fond of saying. But equal access to elite college education can help to change the effects of structural inequities we inherit from the past. And ultimately, I believe, in Brazil or in the United States, education will be the only way to redress the most pernicious effects of centuries of race-based slavery and a century of anti-black racism, formal and informal. Diversifying the middle class—changing the ratio of black Brazilians to white Brazilians in the upper economic classes, aiming for some sort of curve of class more reflective of Brazil's ethnic composition—is the only way to achieve the “racial democracy” of which Brazil so proudly boasts. Even with the quite drastic form of affirmative action that some of its universities have decided to implement (and Brazil's Supreme Court is soon to weigh in on the legality of these rigid quotas, just as the US Supreme Court did in our country), this sort of class redistribution among Brazil's large black population is going to take a very long time.

I have to say that I found myself somewhat sad to learn from the black people I interviewed that “racial democracy” was at best a philosophical concept, perhaps a dream or a goal, and at worst an often bandied about slogan, rather than a revolutionary anomaly that had been piercing itself across centuries of racial discrimination in Brazil. I remember my excitement when I first encountered this idea in the late sixties, hoping that someplace existed in the Western Hemisphere in which black people in a mixed-race society had been accorded their due as full and equal citizens—a place in which white people didn't discriminate against black people because they were black. There is so much that I love about Brazil, the largest African outpost in the whole of the New World: Candomblé, Carnaval, capoeira; its astonishing menagerie of classifications of brown skin; languidly sensual music forms such as samba and bossa nova; films such as *Black Orpheus* and *City of God* that startle with their bold innovations in the representation of blackness; *feijoada*, its national comfort food of pork and beans; the enticing sensuality more or less openly on display on its beaches; the seamless manner in which practitioners of Roman Catholicism marry this religion to Candomblé; and, always, its soccer teams, among many other things.

Nevertheless, Gilberto's Freyre's "racial democracy" is a very long way from being realized—so far away today, it occurs to me, that I wonder if he meant it to be a sort of call to arms, a rallying cry, an ideal to which Brazilians should aspire. How much farther away must it have been in 1933, when he formulated it? I had expected to find an immense, beautiful, rich landscape, occupied by one of the world's most ethnically diverse people, whose identity has been informed over half a millennium by a rich and intimate interplay among indigenous peoples, Africans, and Portuguese. I certainly found those things. I discovered an Afro-Brazilian experience that is vibrantly alive, evolving, impatient, engaged—right now, today.

At the same time, I encountered a social and economic reality that is deeply troubled, deeply conflicted, by race, a reality in which race codes for class. Perhaps Nascimento is right that for decades, Afro-Brazilians of every hue have lived, and perhaps suffered, in the shadow of a myth. Their country told them that racial democracy had made, or would make, everything racial all right and that there was no need to fight for equal rights. But today's Brazil is a very long way from becoming a racial paradise, and any sensible black Brazilian—and white Brazilian—knows that. Half a millennium of slavery and anti-black racism can't be wiped away with a slogan, no matter how eloquently wrought that slogan is. Nevertheless, I had seen a great deal that made me hopeful, most notably the fact that black consciousness is clearly establishing itself as a political force throughout the society in various ways, ways that compel the larger society to listen. And perhaps Brazil's experiment with affirmative action in higher education—no matter how it is modified, as it will be—will begin to accomplish in the twenty-first century the sort of equality of opportunity that has proved to be so elusive in Brazil for so very long, a Brazil richly and impressively "African" and black in its cultural diversity yet always already economically dominated by the white descendants of the masters and the descendants of post-emancipation white immigrants. I hoped, as my plane took off, that I was witnessing the realization of Abdias do Nascimento's invocation to the god Exú that Brazil's black community at long last find its political voice as forcefully and as resonantly as it had long before found its artistic voice and that, in so doing, Brazil might experience a new kind of social revolution, a revolution that could lead to the creation of the world's first racial democracy.