



PROJECT MUSE®

Race, Gender, and Ethnicity in Contemporary Brazil

Mónica Treviño González

Latin American Research Review, Volume 43, Number 1, 2008, pp. 219-224
(Review)

Published by Latin American Studies Association

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/lar.2008.0014>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/232375>

RACE, GENDER, AND ETHNICITY IN CONTEMPORARY BRAZIL

Mónica Treviño González
McGill University

Negras in Brazil: Re-envisioning Black Women, Citizenship, and the Politics of Identity. By Kia Lilly Caldwell. Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007. Pp. 256. \$68.00 cloth, \$24.95 paper.

Race and Multiraciality in Brazil and the United States: Converging Paths? By G. Reginald Daniel. University Park: Penn State University Press, 2006. Pp. 384. \$55.00 hardcover, \$25.00 paper.

Race in Another America: The Significance of Skin Color in Brazil. By Edward E. Telles. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006. Pp. 336. \$19.95 paper.

The study of race relations in Brazil has historically been characterized by more or less favorable comparisons with the United States, as well as acrimonious debates between those who see Brazil as truly embodying (or aspiring to) “racial democracy” and those who decry the glaringly unequal conditions of Brazilians of European and African descent. The recent adoption of affirmative action policies in Brazil at a time when these are increasingly under attack in the United States has done little to settle the arguments. Similarly, that the Afro-Brazilian movement is attempting to redefine racial classification from a seemingly infinite spectrum of color categories to a more binary system that includes all people of African descent as *negros*, while African Americans are demanding recognition of intermediate categories between “black” and “white,” only seems to reinforce the idea that these two countries are mirror images of each other.

G. Reginald Daniel offers a historical comparison of race relations in Brazil and the United States that seeks to account for these different paths, seeing them not so much as mirror images but rather as convergent. Daniel presents a concise history of racial formation in each of these countries, locating the common Eurocentric roots of both systems of racial classification and following the strategies of resistance of subordinate groups in each instance. In the first section (7–138), which has a historical focus, he explains the initial divergence between Brazil’s “ternary” path and the United States’ “binary” route primarily by reference to the small presence of whites in Brazil, which created an intermediate social stratum

available to mainly mixed-race “Free Coloreds” (31). In addition, white Brazil’s concerns about the large numbers of non-whites and their effects on the country’s prospects for development led to the adoption of a whitening policy which somewhat acknowledged the “improved” condition of mulattoes in comparison to blacks (34–37). This account is largely intended as a repudiation of Gilberto Freyre’s racial democracy in *The Masters and the Slaves* (1933), and as such highlights the entirely non-egalitarian nature of the ensuing color categories of *branco* (white), *pardo* (brown), and *preto* (black). Similarly, Daniel is careful to present the resistance strategies of non-white Brazilians throughout this period, providing a genealogy of the ideas of solidarity between *pardos* and *pretos* that have characterized the modern Afro-Brazilian movement (53–84).

To this account the book opposes the formation of a binary system of racial classification in the United States (85–118) and the demands for recognition of multiracial identities of mulattoes (119–138). The primary usefulness of this historical comparison is that it provides a concise summary of the main trends in racial hierarchies in both countries that explicitly recognizes and clearly explains that, while the two systems look different, they are at heart similar in that they are both intended to maintain white supremacy and dominance.

Daniel’s account of the convergence of the two paths (139–258), with a binary discourse developing in Brazil among Afro-Brazilian activists, and the struggle for the recognition of self-identifiers such as “biracial” and “multiracial” as official categories in the United States census, follows quite logically from the accounts of resistance to the chosen models of white dominance in each country as outlined in the earlier sections of the book (53–94, 119–138). What Daniel finds interesting in these “adoptions” of each other’s exclusionary systems as a response to their own, is that both instances of resistance are rooted in attempts to eliminate the Eurocentric premise underlying both systems of racial hierarchy. By comparing the historical processes of racial identity formation in both countries, Daniel manages to create cautionary tales for both resistance movements: binary classifications can negate real differences, while ternary classifications can divide without actually providing equal inclusion. Both Afro-Brazilian and African American activists, in Daniel’s argument, should aim to “affirm the equality of differences in the manner of egalitarian pluralism, while at the same time nurturing new kinds of inclusion based on equality in the manner of egalitarian integration” (295).

This volume provides two primary contributions. The first is the concise clarification of the common Eurocentric (and antiblack) stance of both racial classifications, which should give pause to those who defend the “color spectrum” as inherently less exclusionary than the binary system. The second and perhaps more important insight provides a clear explanation for the apparently contrary evolutions of the two systems of race rela-

tions. Far from evolving on dissonant paths, race relations in Brazil and the United States reflect similar struggles toward the equal inclusion of multifaceted racial identities, struggles that are constrained by the enduring premise of white/black exclusivity.

The comparison between racial hierarchies in Brazil and the United States is also, though less directly, addressed in Edward Telles's masterful volume. Telles sheds light on the debate between the two opposing "camps" on race in Brazil. There are those who marvel at the high levels of miscegenation, relatively low levels of residential segregation, and seemingly cordial race relations in Brazil—the celebrators of hybridity, fluidity, and ambiguity in racial identities who are associated with the defense of the notion of Brazil as a "racial democracy."¹ On the other side are those who have focused on the staggering material inequalities that are so unambiguously defined along racial lines in education, income, health, and social status—those who denounce "racial democracy" as an ideological tool that has for so long prevented Afro-Brazilians of different shades from organizing collectively to demand and obtain equal inclusion into Brazilian society.²

Telles's exceptional book reconciles these seemingly irreconcilable positions. This richly documented study provides a detailed account of all the maddening complexities of racial identities and race relations in Brazil. The historical formation of racial identities, the state's racial policies, and the resistance and mobilization of Afro-Brazilians are all clearly explained and neatly contrasted with the corresponding situations in United States. And Telles finds that race in Brazil differs greatly from race in the United States, while sharing its status as a marker of exclusion.

To shed light on the central seeming contradiction of race relations in Brazil—the relatively high levels of cordial social interaction between blacks and whites coupled with the objectively high levels of racial inequality—Telles offers a conceptual reframing of the problem of such clarity that, once expressed, it seems almost self-evident. He shows that these are not mutually exclusive understandings, but rather simultaneous dimensions of race relations, which he terms horizontal (sociability) and vertical (material standards of living). It is because different researchers focus on one or the other of these dimensions that their views of race relations in Brazil seem to describe different societies (8–9).

Analyzing both dimensions of race relations in Brazil, the first three chapters provide a vivid and meticulously documented account of racial formation in Brazil, spanning the development of discourse and ideology

1. See for instance Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant, "Sobre as Artimanhas da Razão Imperialista," *Estudos Afro-Asiáticos* 24, no. 1 (2002): 15–33.

2. See for instance Michael Hanchard, *Orpheus and Power: The Movimento Negro of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, Brazil, 1945–1988* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

from overt white supremacy in the nineteenth century to the notion of racial democracy in the mid-twentieth century to the official endorsement of affirmative action policies at the turn of this century. With this ideological background in place, Telles focuses on the shape and effects of racial classification in Brazil (chapter 4), which so clearly reflect the two dimensions of race relations: based on phenotype and color rather than genotype or heredity, popular conceptions are characterized by blurred boundaries, ambiguities, and contradictions that are subject to contextual interpretation, and yet ultimately there is an unmistakable distinction between whites and others, especially when privilege or marginality are assigned.

Chapters 5 and 6 provide a devastating picture of material inequality in education, income levels, employment, and occupation, and highlight the pervasiveness of racial discrimination and racist discourse. Importantly, these two chapters on the vertical dimension of race relations also serve to highlight the unavoidable significance of skin color (and phenotype more generally), which so distinguishes Brazil's racial order from its binary cousin in the United States, along with the very minor advantage that "brownness" provides in comparison to blackness. Here, Telles simultaneously expresses the surface flexibility of race and the finality of the barrier to equality that it represents.

In addressing the indicators of horizontal race relations—intermarriage and residential segregation—chapters 7 and 8 provide an incredibly nuanced picture of racial sociability in Brazil. Interracial marriages and neighborhoods are indeed remarkably common (to North American eyes), justifying the perception of cordiality in race relations. However, Telles notes that these are not universal trends in Brazil. The higher the social category, the less likely they are. Thus, it is clear that while the lower strata of society operate in a more or less color-tolerant context, the apex of the social pyramid has a decidedly more exclusive racial outlook.

Telles's bi-dimensional analysis produces, in the last two chapters, an equally convincing two-pronged strategy for addressing racial and social inequality in Brazil. Antidiscrimination public policies should contribute to break the ideological barriers for a more profound interracial sociability, one that includes the white elites. A key element in this strategy would be the reduction of Brazil's general inequality—reducing the abyssal chasm between the hyper-rich and hyper-poor by adopting universalist policies of poverty alleviation. Simultaneously, affirmative action policies should create the equality of opportunity for Afro-Brazilians that is necessary to ensure that such universalist policies benefit them equally.

There is but one failing in this extraordinary book, and it is not negligible: the discussion here, as in Daniel's book, almost entirely omits the dimension of gender. Kia Lilly Caldwell seeks to fill this gap in an ethnographic study that highlights intersectional and co-constructed aspects

of gender and racial social identities in Brazil. In many ways, Caldwell brings to the micro level the analysis of the construction of race and gender in Brazil that Telles illustrates at the macro level. And while her work is not strictly comparative, the author's positionality as a black woman from the United States serves to highlight the different approaches to "Afro-femaleness" in the two countries.

Starting from the observation of the almost complete invisibility of Afro-Brazilian women in Brazilian society, Caldwell explores the ways in which the discourse of racial democracy has normalized and naturalized the idea of Afro-Brazilian women as being merely sex objects (especially for *mulatas*) or domestic servants (for darker black women). Combined with the pervasiveness of antiblack aesthetics in popular culture, this has resulted in a negative imprint on Afro-Brazilian female bodies. Caldwell here provides an excellent discussion of what these seemingly abstract discourses concretely mean in the individual and collective construction of marginalizing identities.

One of the real contributions of this book is that it gives a richly detailed account of the gendered dimensions of racial discourse and identity, and it helps us to understand the racial dimensions of gender discourse and identity. In the case of Brazil, the degree to which miscegenation is at the core of national identity has made Afro-Brazilian women the necessary physical providers of pleasure, comfort, and wombs. As a result, Caldwell argues, Afro-Brazilian women are positioned as "the altruistic caretakers of white Brazilians, rather than full citizens and equal participants in Brazilian national culture" (77). Caldwell goes on to provide a detailed ethnographic account of the attempts some of these women have made to re-create their identities autonomously, both individually and collectively. The process of democratization through the 1970s to the present created spaces for collective forms of struggle, through which Afro-Brazilian women have begun to claim their place as full citizens.

Caldwell's book provides an important extension to the works of Daniel and Telles in two important ways. First, it highlights the fundamental role that gender has played in the creation of Brazil's racial order. We should indeed not forget that the miscegenation that gave rise to the color spectrum was predicated on the objectification and sexual exploitation of Afro-Brazilian women, or that the cordiality and intimacy posited by Freyre rested on the nursery and kitchen duties of Afro-Brazilian domestic workers. In a broader sense, the co-construction of race and gender is also understood as a feature of all multiracial social orders. In this sense, Caldwell leads us to ask how this process has occurred in the binary racial system of classification in the United States, where miscegenation has historically been discouraged, and thus invites a comparative project.

Secondly, her book establishes that the collective struggle of Afro-Brazilian women for recognition has equally served to affirm blackness

and femaleness as legitimate forms of self-identification, paralleling and complementing the black movement's claiming of *negro* as a collective identity or classification for Afro-Brazilians with the clear political aim of challenging the alleged egalitarianism of Brazil's color spectrum. Again, an analysis of the construction of black female identities in the United States should provide an interesting counterpoint to this struggle.

The study of race relations in Brazil continues to be usefully illuminated by comparison with the United States. However, as these books demonstrate, only a careful analysis of the particularities of each case will produce the sort of insight that Telles in particular provides. And it is clear that a systematic comparison at macro and micro levels is likely to provide a clearer understanding of each country's system and of the seemingly convergent evolution of the two nations.

As for the initial question of whether Brazil is racist or not and how it compares to the United States, these three books allow us to understand that the question should be posed differently: how do we understand race in Brazil, and to what extent does our understanding of race in the United States help to illuminate or obscure the answer?