

# Race Relations in Brazil: From the Development of the Mulatto to the Whitening of the Brazilian Population

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Conditions of settlement played a significant role within the development of the tendency to amalgamate and to assimilate ethnic minorities. Until stable conditions and a normal distribution of the sexes were achieved, cohabitation with native women commonly occurred. In contrast to the United States, few women from Europe migrated to Brazil within the first century of colonization. Such conditions laid the foundation for the development of a large mulatto population, subsequently creating a unique intermediate position of social mobility while also perpetuating the racial order in an effort to eventually whiten the Brazilian population.

However, a brief look at the concept of race is warranted before discussion of Brazilian race relations. Evidently, the notion of race has become central, whether directly or indirectly, within ethnically heterogeneous societies' hierarchical structures all around the world. However, scholars have recently emphasized that differences in skin color and phenotypes are merely products of environmental adaptation rather than biological facts. Thus, only a *human race* exists and any attempt to use the term in an objective, scientific, and neutral manner is undermined by unavoidable contradiction. Unfortunately, race still holds a social reality and tends to mold everyday social relations, especially within contexts where the position of groups whose legal and even democratic vindications depend upon emphasizing such racial distinctions.<sup>1</sup>

The Transatlantic slave trade set the stage for the formation of Brazil's, as well as the rest of the New World's, ethnically heterogeneous society. By the mid-sixteenth century, Portuguese were capitalizing on sugar production via the use of African slave labor. However,

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<sup>1</sup> Ricardo Ventura Santos and et. al, "Color, Race, and Genomic Ancestry in Brazil: Dialogues between Anthropology and Genetics" in *Current Anthropology* (University of Chicago Press: 2009).

the majority were transported within the second half of the eighteenth century.<sup>2</sup> Brazil reportedly received 40% of all slaves transported in the Transatlantic slave trade. Therefore, Brazil held the largest number as well as proportion of Africans to Europeans in all of the Americas. No state of the United States, not even Mississippi, has ever counted as high a proportion of people of color as have the states of Bahia or Pernambuco of Brazil. Despite the apparent social myth, variances exist in how the concept of race has manifested within the hierarchical structure throughout the Americas.

Thus, racial construction in Brazil is different from the dichotomous form found in North America. Any person of African ancestry is considered black in North America, no matter how white they appear; therefore, one is considered either black or white with little acknowledgment of an intermediate position. Migrant and natural born Europeans in North America categorized any persons of African descent within the same category, evidence of the “one drop rule” in which any amount of African ancestry assigned one to the black race. Therefore, North America’s concept of race is largely genetically based due to its ancestral emphasis.

A more extensive system of classifying ethnic differences exists in Brazil, largely due to a significantly larger and more visible mulatto population. Compared to the Native American labor force, decimated by overwork, physical abuse, and disease, Africans had a greater resistance to European diseases and were relatively easier to control because they were placed in an unknown environment, which all contributed to how they supplemented or replaced the Native American labor force. Africans became a cheaper and comparatively more reliable source of urban and agricultural labor for Portuguese settlers as well as for other colonial

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<sup>2</sup> Lisa A. Lindsay, *Captives as Commodities: The Transatlantic Slave Trade*, (New Jersey: Pearson, 2008); Michael A. Gomez, *Reversing Sail: A History of the African Diaspora*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

powers throughout the Americas.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, interaction among the ethnic groups varies across Brazil; for instance, conditions are generally more favorable for Africans the further north one travels. The following section will provide an in-depth view of the social construction of race specific to Brazil.

### **Construction of race**

Race is a modern concept born in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century during the colonial expansion of the Western European nation-states, specifically Spain, Portugal, Italy, France, Germany, Holland, Denmark, and England. G. Reginald Daniel explains that increased competitiveness among the nation-states of Europe, cultural and phenotypic differences between Europeans and the colonized populations, and the relative ease for European domination of those populations influenced their perceptions of all non-Europeans.<sup>4</sup> This in turn laid the foundation for the formation of the concept of race, which both justified the conquest and unique form of enslavement throughout the Americas. Daniel adds that despite variances in racial formation among different colonial powers, none of the populations that came under European domination contributed to the creation of the racial classification system imposed upon them, even as they inherited and internalized it. Nevertheless, the practice of slavery and its brutal exploitation of human labor provided fertile ground for the propagation and exploitation of race, and the scientific revolution, beginning in the Enlightenment period, added validity and justification for the subjugation of people of color.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>G. Reginald Daniel, *Race and Multiraciality in Brazil and the United States: Converging Paths?* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1949).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Marcia L. Mikulak, "The Symbolic Power of Color: Constructions of Race, Skin-color, and Identity in Brazil" in *Humanity and Society* (2011); Thomas E. Skidmore, *Black into White* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974)

Early in the nineteenth century, the Portuguese crown sought to separate the colors by law under the guidelines of Prince Regent in order to establish an all-white militia in Rio Grande do Sul. The construction of race was based on phenotypic differences, such as skin color tonalities, hair, and lips, rather than genetic or racial background.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, the focus is not upon genetic differences (such as in the United States), but on skin color, hair, and lips, with the principal criteria being skin pigmentation and hair texture when categorizing an individual. In addition, Brazil has displayed more pervasive miscegenation than in the United States which has led to the validated racial classification that differentiates the population into whites (*brancos*), multiracial individuals (*pardos* in official contexts; mulatto in everyday contexts), and blacks (*pretos*). In general, a black person or *preto* is one that is considered to be completely (or at least predominantly) African or Afro-Brazilian.<sup>7</sup> However, a black person with any indefinite amount of white is considered mulatto. On the other hand, mulattos represent a diverse range of products of miscegenation. Consequently, blackness and whiteness represent extremes on a continuum where physical appearance (in conjunction with class and culture, which will be discussed in the following section), rather than ancestry, has come to determine one's racial identity and status within the social hierarchy.<sup>8</sup>

A number of popular expressions arose in order to differentiate between the different multiracial products. These terms describe the variations more precisely than do the official categories. The official categories are limited to three: *branco*, *preto*, and *pardo*. However, common speech additions include *cabra* (bi-racial individual who has one parent of African

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<sup>6</sup> Tekla Ali Johnson, "Colonial Caste Paradigms and the African Diaspora," in *The Black Scholar* (2004).

<sup>7</sup> G. Reginald Daniel, *Race and Multiraciality in Brazil and the United States: Converging paths?* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1949).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

descent and the other of both European and African descent), and *moreno* (person of dark complexion, with dark eyes and dark hair, ordinarily a mixed-blood).<sup>9</sup> For the purposes of this paper, I will refer to such racial differences as black, mulatto, and white, although mulatto includes a whole range of color types between black and white.

The widespread dispersion of African blood in the white group obviously makes it difficult for its members to draw clear-cut racial distinctions. Nevertheless, it is still evident that Brazilians see more color distinctions, and thus are more aware of skin color. However, in Brazil phenotypes are not the only decisive factors in determining one's so-called race.

### **Class connections**

It is impossible for a black person in the United States to shed their ancestry, despite education, prestige or income. However, in Brazil one finds their place on the social hierarchy based on color as well as class; therefore, race is important, but not decisive.

In Brazil, a black person can include any of the following: poverty-stricken white, poverty-stricken mulatto, poor mulatto, poverty-stricken black person, poor black person, or black person of average wealth. A white person includes any of the following: a white who is wealthy, a white of average wealth, a white who is poor, a wealthy mulatto, mulatto of average wealth, or a black who is wealthy.<sup>10</sup> Thus, class cuts through racial lines.

The following is an excerpt from the travel diary of a visitor from New York commenting on the stark contrast of race relations while in Brazil:

Some of the most intelligent men that I met with in Brazil—men educated in Paris and Coimbra—were of African descent, whose ancestors were slaves. Thus, if a man have

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<sup>9</sup> Donald Pierson, *Negroes in Brazil* (London and Amsterdam: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967), 136.

<sup>10</sup> Carl N. Degler, *Black nor White* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1971), 105.

freedom, money, and merit, no matter how black may be his skin, no place in society is refused him.<sup>11</sup>

Thomas Ewbank, an English writer who travelled to Brazil further validates this contrast in the following description of wealthy persons of color:

Here are many people of color. I have passed black ladies in silks and jewelry, with male slaves in livery behind them. To-day one rode past in her carriage, accompanied by a liveried footman and a coachman. Several have white husbands. The first doctor in the city is a colored man, so is the President of the province. The Viscountess C----a, and scores of the first families are tinged.<sup>12</sup>

As early as the imperial period, the title of *capitão-mor*<sup>13</sup> whitened even dark mulattos. Thus, in the second decade of the nineteenth century, the Englishman, Henry Koster, referring to a conversation with a citizen of Pernambuco about a mulatto occupying the local office of *capitão-mor*, was told the man in question was not a mulatto. Koster insisted that he undoubtedly appeared to be mulatto and received the explanation that that, “He used to be a mulatto, but he is not now. For how can a *capitão-mor* be a mulatto?”<sup>14</sup> It is evident that prestigious social status tends to whiten individuals of color in Brazil.

In conclusion, possessing African ancestry can be a handicap, but is not as fixed as in the United States. As Brazilians say, “money whitens,” although it takes a good deal to whiten a full-blooded black person. However, once whitened by money, a black becomes a mulatto or

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<sup>11</sup> Daniel Kidder and James Fletcher, *Brazil and the Brazilians Portrayed in Historical and Descriptive Sketches* (Philadelphia: Childs & Peterson, 1857), 133.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Ewbank, *Life in Brazil* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1856), 267.

<sup>13</sup> A *capitão-mor* is the administrative head of a huge administrative unit in colonial Brazil, which subsequently became a Province and, after the founding of the Republic. (Pierson Glossary p.372)

<sup>14</sup> Henry Koster, *Travels in Brazil*. (London, 1816), 175-176.

*pardo*, regardless of his actual color. The following section details the circumstances that led to the development of Brazil's sizeable mulatto population.

### **Development of a large mulatto population**

Evidently, Brazil's large population of mulattos developed due to widespread miscegenation. Although relations between blacks and whites have largely been viewed as taboo, a number of factors led to the widespread acceptance of such sexual liaisons, as well as the informal legitimization of the interracial family in Brazil. First, Portuguese settlers, who were mostly single adult males, either bachelors, widowers, or married men who arrived without wives, faced limited opportunities for numerical self-perpetuation, while also having previously been exposed to miscegenation by the Moors. In turn, black, as well as mulatto women, developed positive attitudes toward such relations in hopes of receiving socioeconomic benefits for themselves and offspring. Consequently, extramarital relations, extended concubines, common-law unions, and marriages involving European men and women of color became the norm and were approved, if not encouraged, by the unwritten moral code, as well as by the church and the Crown.<sup>15</sup> In addition, the Portuguese Crown found it difficult to get immigrants to settle in Brazil due to immigration restrictions and the lack of appeal of Brazil's climate and hostile Native Americans.<sup>16</sup>

Miscegenation came not as a surprise to the Portuguese because they were somewhat accustomed to mixed unions due to the Moorish presence in the Iberian Peninsula. The Moors were individuals of a darker hue that brought a rich culture with them. They often belonged to the wealthy class who occupied the towns or lived in the principal castles and on the great

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<sup>15</sup> G. Reginald Daniel, *Race and Multiraciality in Brazil and the United States: Converging Paths?* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1949).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

estates. Consequently, it came to be considered an honor for Portuguese women to mate with Moors, and such marriages even occurred among members of the royal family.

Despite such a history, the main discrepancy in the perpetuation of the white population in Brazil was arguably due to a low ratio of white women in Brazil. Mainly during the first century of colonization, relatively few European women migrated to Brazil. The Crown even resorted to sending prostitutes and girls from orphanages in order to provide the necessary mothers for the creation of a new generation.<sup>17</sup> In addition, the available white Portuguese women lacked independence and voice, as well as control over a man's actions. Therefore, master-slave sexual relations prevailed with little interference from white women. Kidder and Fletcher's travel experiences in Brazil demonstrate how white women were kept under physical and psychological restraint and were in no position to object liaisons with slaves.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, the number of whites in Brazil remained small throughout the colonial period. In some areas, slaves outnumbered Europeans by fifteen to one. Even in many urban centers, almost half of the colonial population had some degree of African ancestry.<sup>19</sup> The predominance of Africans, in conjunction with the shortage of European women, gave rise to permissive attitudes toward miscegenation with women of African and Native American descent, despite legal barriers.<sup>20</sup> It became a large part of plantation life and was more visible than in North America. These mixed children often worked and lived in their master's home, which increased their fertility rate versus the physical strain of field work and lack of nutrition

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<sup>17</sup> Donald Pierson, *Negroes in Brazil* (London and Amsterdam: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967), 111.

<sup>18</sup> Daniel Kidder and James Fletcher, *Brazil and the Brazilians Portrayed in Historical and Descriptive Sketches*. (Philadelphia: Childs & Peterson, 1857), 164-66.

<sup>19</sup> G. Reginald Daniel, *Race and Multiraciality in Brazil and the United States: Converging Paths?* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1949).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

that field slaves endured. House women's fertility rate doubled that of black women in the field, subsequently increasing mulatto birth rates.

In the early days of the colony, Padre Nobrega wrote from Bahia, "Among the people here there are none who do not possess several *negras* from whom they have many children."<sup>21</sup> By 1872, the number of *pardos* (mulattos) nearly doubled that of *pretos* (blacks), according to the Brazilian Census.<sup>22</sup> Miscegenation became so widespread that a pure African supposedly did not usually exist in Brazil much longer than the third generation.<sup>23</sup>

In addition, black women developed a more optimistic attitude toward miscegenation when it became a distinct privilege to bear their children to a white master. Consequently, black women and their children would be placed in a more advantageous position, especially in terms of material benefits, and even freedom.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, miscegenation in Brazil has gone on unobtrusively for a long period of time. The lack of European settlers, especially of the female gender, set the stage for the inter-mixing of the ethnicities. The following section will demonstrate how the mulatto group continued to reap benefits due to their part-European descent.

### **Mulatto mobility**

Early in the colonial period, race mixture resulted in an intermediate population group occupying more favorable positions for social advancement, leading to what Carl N. Degler coined as the "mulatto escape hatch".<sup>25</sup> Mulatto slaves, because they were ordinarily chosen by their masters and mistresses for more delicate and household tasks, early developed into a

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<sup>21</sup> Donald Pierson, *Negroes in Brazil* (London and Amsterdam: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967), 118.

<sup>22</sup> Diretoria Geral de Estatística, "Recenseamento Geral do Império de 1872" (Rio de Janeiro: 1876), 2

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>25</sup> Carl N. Degler, *Black nor White* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1971).

distinct group apart from fieldworkers.<sup>26</sup> As a result of their shared white ethnicity, a number of factors led to the more favorable social placement of mulattos in Brazil.

Mulatto offspring of white masters and slave concubines were frequently reared in the master's house, where many learned to read and write. The lack of white women mitigated the opposition that these offspring would receive socially tolerated demonstrations of affection, as well as economic and educational protection from their white fathers. They were baptized, received the master's name, and often were married in accordance with the legal and religious practices, consequently establishing legitimate families and adding to the social security of their offspring. In addition, many of the *mulatinhos*, illegitimate children of the master, learned to read and to write even more quickly than white legitimate children. Such social differentiation from blacks permitted preferential liberation of the mulatto offspring and slave mistresses.

Thus, mulattos developed into a group with greater chances of vertical mobility early in the colonial period. Large numbers of mulattos remained in slavery, but were still disproportionately represented among free persons of color in Brazil. By the early nineteenth century, mulattos were the fastest growing segment of the free population. By 1882, over three-fourths of mulattos had been emancipated, while only one-eighth of blacks had been liberated.

However, it is important to understand that mulattoes faced increased opportunities for mobility only to the extent that white elitists facilitated it. Whites controlled their advancement in various forms. Early on, mulattoes were not allowed to serve in positions of high prestige, such as clerks and service occupations and experienced limitations to

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<sup>26</sup>G. Reginald Daniel, *Race and Multiraciality in Brazil and the United States: Converging Paths?* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1949), 159.

educational attainment. While, white patrons were also the ones who decided to extend land rights, credit, and protection to subsistence farmers of color.

Nevertheless, the mulatto occupies a special place, intermediate between white and black. No such place exists in the United States; thus, the mulatto in Brazil represents an escape hatch for blacks, which is unavailable in the United States. In Brazil, the mulatto is the one that has historically gained success rather than blacks. Thus, Carl N. Degler referred to mulatto's ability to be granted situational whiteness via reasons of talent, culture, or education as the "mulatto escape hatch".

In addition, the mulatto population's chances of mobility greatly increased due to the need to address increasing labor demands in the skilled labor force.<sup>27</sup> Mulatto women began to occupy positions such as domestics, midwives, seamstresses, skilled cooks, and hairdressers, while men worked as shoemakers, tailors, carpenters, butchers, street merchants, barber-surgeons, small tavern and shop keepers, and sailors. By 1888, mulattoes outnumbered blacks by as much as four to one in these areas of employment.<sup>28</sup>

The rise of the mulatto is also attributed to the return of young professional men who had been trained at European intellectual centers in the early nineteenth century. However, this rise also contributed to the disruption of the old order based upon slavery which was already facing losses due to economic shifts. There was also a gradual transfer of prestige from the rural aristocracy, which had been exclusively Europeans, to the urban intelligentsia, which increasingly included mulattos, particularly those of lighter shades.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Marcia L. Mikulak, "The Symbolic Power of Color: Constructions of Race, Skin-color, and Identity in Brazil" in *Humanity and Society* (2011); Thomas E. Skidmore, *Black into White* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).

<sup>28</sup> G. Reginald Daniel, *Race and Multiraciality in Brazil and the United States: Converging Paths?* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1949).

<sup>29</sup> Donald Pierson, *Negroes in Brazil* (London and Amsterdam: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967), 167.

Mulattos also had a tendency to form intimate relations with wealthy white individuals. Mulatto men were commonly known for their sexual attraction to the daughters of rich and influential European families, often leading to elopement and later to marriage with parental consent. Similarly, the mulatto women benefited from the myth of the sexual potency of the hybrid by quenching the sexual thirst of elderly widowers.<sup>30</sup> Such elderly white men from prestigious families married beautiful and classy mulatto women who also gave evidence of a sexual ardor beyond the ordinary.

As mulattos rose in class, upward mobility began to be accompanied by “horizontal progression.”<sup>31</sup> As they established themselves within economic and intellectual spheres, mulattos began to penetrate the “inner sanctuaries” of the more exclusive social groups, breaking down marriage and familial taboos.<sup>32</sup> Often times, the mulatto moved from the lower rungs of society to the middle or even upper class. Such mulattos achieved some measure of recognition and were enjoying certain advantages of the upper classes.

Today, multiracial individuals are gaining a constantly increasing measure of social recognition. Among them are prominent lawyers, jurists, physicians, engineers, politicians, diplomats, priests, educators, musicians, painters, poets, novelists, journalists, and so on.<sup>33</sup> In other words, mulattos have now penetrated to the top of the class scale.

The “mulatto escape hatch” represented increased opportunity for persons of color, but was not always well received by the self-acclaimed superior European. The following section describes the negative reception of mulatto mobility.

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<sup>30</sup> The mortality rate of white women was especially high during the nineteenth century.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

## White anxiety toward mulatto mobility

Mulatto mobility posed a threat for middle class whites who complained that mulattos do not stay in their place like blacks.<sup>34</sup> Mulattos tended to disassociate themselves from black people in order to gain social mobility. A prominent white Brazilian expressed such anxiety in the following quote:

I'm going to get out Bahia and go to São Paulo. This town is too full of mulattos and of mulatto traits... The mulatto is not like the black; he is a person without character. He has no honor. He's always envious, he's jealous, he's so busy 'maintaining himself,' pushing himself in where he isn't wanted, that he can't tend to his business or to his job; he can't do anything except make of himself a general nuisance.<sup>35</sup>

Brazilian whites acknowledge the mulatto's intelligence, but often resent the characteristic aggressiveness which the mulatto, in the course of his ambitious struggle to climb the social ladder, has developed. The comment is reflective of the common saying that, "A mulatto *pernostico*<sup>36</sup> is a redundant expression," meaning that the mulatto's characteristic desire to be white, while looking down on the pure black, tends to exaggerate the qualities he or she observes in the whites and to imitate them to such an extent that a word, *pernostico*, has been coined to describe them.

It appears that the mulatto's ability to escape the lower rungs of society come at a cost for all. In an effort to climb the social ladder, mulattos consistently distance themselves from

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<sup>34</sup> Donald Pierson, *Negroes in Brazil* (London and Amsterdam: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967), 231.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 231. See also a statement written by another Brazilian, "I resent their forwardness, their enviousness, their jealousy, their 'lack of respect,' their pretentiousness, their inconstancy and unreliability, their arrogance and (upon gaining some measure of improved social position) their overweening pride, their boastfulness, cocksureness, 'cheekiness,' and general manner of showing off."

<sup>36</sup> *Pernostico* is a Portuguese adjective that is literally translated to pedantic in English, meaning a person too concerned with unimportant details or traditional rules. They can be characterized as obtrusive, pompous, and meticulous.

their undeniable African roots, while often overly embracing the culture of their European model, consequently leading to the disgust of many whites and the perpetuation of the oppressive racial hierarchy. The following section further elaborates upon the effects of the “mulatto escape hatch” by demonstrating how mulattos contributed to the status quo in an effort to advance in society.

### **Mulatto contribution to African oppression**

Black communities remained subjected to chattel slavery as liberated mulattos perpetuated the same disassociation and oppression as the Portuguese settlers practiced. Mulattos have been found to be consistently proud of their white lineage and lived in constant fear of being associated with blacks, despite the obvious evidence of such relation. João Varella commented on this phenomenon in the following quote:

Of his white father, whom he never saw,  
He has a picture in the parlor;  
But of the Negro woman who gave him birth  
He has no picture, nor does he even speak of her.<sup>37</sup>

In addition, mulattos began to deny their African ancestry by sometimes claiming Native American descent because it did not hold the same taint as African blood.

Shortages of whites also led to the establishment of a civilian militia comprised of free persons of color by Portuguese monarchs. Throughout the colonial period, this militia was utilized in expanding the frontier, but slave owners also saw it particularly beneficial for suppressing slave uprisings and catching runaways. The colored militia found themselves

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<sup>37</sup> Donald Pierson, *Negroes in Brazil* (London and Amsterdam: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967), 227.

caught in between two worlds. Mulattos were reluctant to revolt against whites due to the threat of opposition from the Crown and colonial government, which would undoubtedly result in the loss of partial treatment by whites.

It is evident that mulattos were stigmatized for any African links, but rewarded for any degree of approximation to the European norm. “By granting multiracial individuals an intermediate status, European Brazilians allayed their discontent, held their resentment in check, and won their loyalty, without undermining white domination.”<sup>38</sup> Consequently, mulattoes pressed not for drastic social change, but for improvements in their own status.

Historically as well as presently, the better educated, the more skillful, and the wealthier of the colored portion of the population have been comprised of mostly mulattos, in Brazil as well as in the United States. However, the “mulatto escape hatch” has enabled these natural-born leaders to exhibit a superior status to blacks because they are not included in the Brazilian definition of *preto*. Therefore, capable individuals of color often turn their cheek to the oppression of blacks, thus, contributing to the status quo via inaction.<sup>39</sup> Meanwhile, many of the great leaders of black organizations in the United States have been multiracial, such as Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, W.E.B DuBois, Whitney Young, Walter White, John Hope, Adam Clayton Powell, and Roy Wilkins.<sup>40</sup> In Brazil, such men may have been tempted to ignore their African roots and to use the “mulatto escape hatch” for their individual advancement.

Abdias do Nascimento, a prominent Afro-Brazilian scholar, artist, and politician argues that, “Among us racism has the shape of a chameleon, constantly changing in tactics and strategy. It even takes the form of paternalism, cordiality, benevolence, and good will, as if it

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<sup>38</sup>G. Reginald Daniel, *Race and Multiraciality in Brazil and the United States: Converging Paths?* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1949), 31.

<sup>39</sup> Carl N. Degler, *Black nor White* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1971), 182.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

stood for miscegenation, acculturation, assimilation..."<sup>41</sup> The above quote from Abdias do Nascimento refers to how the "mulatto escape hatch" in the past contributed to a greater degree of colored advancement in Brazil than in the United States, but has had the effect of inhibiting the advancement of black people as a group.<sup>42</sup> The historical and corrosive nature of North American racism has welded black people into a relatively strong and effective social force, while the ambiguity of the color-class line in Brazil has left blacks without cohesion and leaders.<sup>43</sup>

Free persons of color also feared that the end of slavery would threaten their social position. They remained silent on the question of slavery and were generally reluctant to ally against it. Mulattoes were therefore valuable allies in preserving the social and political status quo for Europeans. To a certain extent, the advancement of the mulatto population inhibited collective black advancement, while some whites found the phenomenon threatening. The following section uncovers Brazilian elitist motives behind miscegenation.

### **Whitening of the Brazilian Population**

The general tendency throughout Brazilian history has been to gradually absorb all ethnic elements into the dominant European population.<sup>44</sup> Evidently, Portuguese settlers achieved such acculturation via miscegenation and the "mulatto escape hatch" with the most obvious effect being the reduction of physical differences between the ethnicities. Such whitening through miscegenation has made it possible for millions of individuals who possess African ancestry, but are phenotypically white, or near-white, to become self-identified and

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 275.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 275.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 275.

<sup>44</sup> Donald Pierson, *Negroes in Brazil* (London and Amsterdam: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967), 322.

socially designated as white.<sup>45</sup> Thus, mulattos are increasing, but their increase seems to be at the expense of the African and not of the European. The mulattos seem to be gradually absorbing the blacks, while they themselves are increasingly being incorporated into the predominantly European population.<sup>46</sup> Oliveira Vianna, a sociologist well versed in ethnic literature of Europe and the United States, further validates the occurrence of the whitening of the Brazilian population in the following quote:

The superior mix-bloods, those who during the long period of our national development have risen socially, did not rise nor establish themselves because of their mixed-blood mentality. Instead of preserving as they climbed the characteristics of their hybrid type, they on the contrary lost those very characteristics, left off being psychologically mixed; that is, they Aryanized themselves.<sup>47</sup>

However, the whitening of the Brazilian population is not merely a side-effect of inter-ethnic mixing, but has been significantly viewed as an elitist tool for achieving the goal of a white Brazilian nation. The gradual demolition of the African's 'savage' presence was seen as the solution to Brazil's problems of development. "If, according to the scientific racism dominant in this period, miscegenation and cultural blending were the disease, whitening through miscegenation and the Europeanization of Brazilian culture was the Brazilian elite's prescription for a cure."<sup>48</sup> Thus, whitening techniques such as miscegenation and European immigration were seen as the solution to the nation's problems.

Arthur de Gobineau, famous for the development of the Aryan master race theory, considered some mixtures "strategic", while mulatto's natural "degeneracy" and tendency to

<sup>45</sup>G. Reginald Daniel, *Race and Multiraciality in Brazil and the United States: Converging Paths?* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1949).

<sup>46</sup> Donald Pierson, *Negroes in Brazil* (London and Amsterdam: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967), 323.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

<sup>48</sup> Donald Pierson, *Negroes in Brazil* (London and Amsterdam: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967), 37.

acculturate could end in the disappearance of individuals of color from Brazil.<sup>49</sup> Thus, Gobineau argued that the miscegenation of the European white with the Brazilian half-caste could lead to the disappearance of the latter. However, Gobineau generally preferred the method of establishing an alliance of Brazilians with other European races instead of continuing miscegenation, which was carried out via vigorous immigration policy.<sup>50</sup>

Due to the pervasiveness of the “mulatto escape hatch” and the aggressive immigration policies of seeking European immigrants, the white population continued to increase. Under a century of immigration policy subsidized by the Brazilian government, Brazil imported more manpower of free whites than that of black slaves imported within the first three centuries of the slave trade.<sup>51</sup> The political and economic elites’ goal of achieving a white majority was shortly achieved in 1940 when the white population became a majority in certain locations, particularly the state of São Paulo.

Changing demographics due to European immigration has further extended the practice of miscegenation where high rates of interracial interaction and exchange among some of the older (Portuguese and African) Brazilian populations and immigrants have been significantly noted.<sup>52</sup> However, discrimination and prejudice persist, especially among poorer immigrants and individuals of a darker hue. Today, black organizations politicize blackness as strategic sources to challenge racism and inequality in face of repression, devalorization, misrepresentation, folklorization, and commodification. Afro-Brazilians are growing increasingly more visible in the political arena, furthering elitists’ fears of ‘Africanization’ by the black

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<sup>49</sup>Sales Agostos dos Santos and Laurence Hallewell, “Historical Roots of the ‘Whitening’ of Brazil” in *Latin American Perspectives* (2002), 73.

<sup>50</sup> By 1867, the Brazilian government began to invest heavily in its immigration policy with the explicit intention of countering the disproportion between blacks and whites. The government specifically wanted to attract German and Swiss immigration.

<sup>51</sup> This importation of Europeans at so high a level was possible only because of the passages paid for by the governments of Brazil and the state government of São Paulo.

<sup>52</sup> Zeila de Brito Fabri Demartini, “Immigration in Brazil” in *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies* (2006), 91.

masses. Unfortunately, Afro-Brazilians currently struggle with constant negotiation of new identities and to define identity and history on one's own terms, while also pushing to redeem Afro-Brazilian culture as significant, important, complex, and modern.<sup>53</sup>

## Conclusion

Clearly, race relations vary geographically. The combination of factors that contributed to Brazil's large mulatto population include a low ratio of white women, higher birth rates of offspring born to house slaves (who tended to be of mixed heritage) which all subsequently led to widespread and socially accepted practice of miscegenation. In addition, the way in which class cuts through racial lines permitted the mobility of persons of color, although black communities continued to be the most disadvantaged.

Mulatto's intermediate position provided the opportunity to increase one's social status by embracing the dominant culture, while also disassociating oneself with African heritage. Within this process, whites, especially from the middle and lower class, became threatened by this emerging group who started gaining access to roles previously limited to whites, such as government positions. Consequently, the strive to gain equal access to equality led to mulattos' perpetuation of the oppression endured by the Afro-Brazilian community, rather than taking advantage of their positions to demand equality for their darker community members.

Apparently, Brazilians are no less color conscious than other regions that fell to European colonialism and expansion, despite cases of colored mobility. The fact that black Brazilians are still disproportionately represented among the lower rungs of society is far from a coincidence. Although, class has been shown to play a significant role in one's placement on

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<sup>53</sup> Alexandre Emboaba da Costa, "Anti-Racism in Movement: Afro-Brazilian *Afoxé* and Contemporary Black Brazilian Struggles for Equality" in *Journal of Historical Sociology* (2010), 380.

the social hierarchy, race will continue to be the undeniable root of such prevalent instances of social, economic, and political inequalities.

Carl N. Degler stressed the pointed that mulattos are neither black nor white, but occupy an intermediate position that if taken advantage of can lead to individual success. However, such an economically and socially advantageous position has entailed circumstances that have led to their further rejection on a basis outside of African descent, while also stepping over blacks, even those that have birthed them. The goal of this research is not to criticize the actions of mulattos as a group. More importantly, it is to provide an in-depth examination of the rise of such conditions with respect to the impediment of social justice within the unique context of Portuguese hegemonic forces in Brazil. One must understand the historical contexts of inequality in order to deter the future perpetuation of such undeserving marginalization.

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