
Article

The persistence of myth: Brazil's undead 'racial democracy'

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Abstract This article addresses a recurrent tension in the literature on race and racism in Brazil. On the one hand, we find the so-called myth of racial democracy presented as the dominant racial ideology in Brazil, obscuring enduring racial inequality and thwarting the development of a mass-movement for racial justice. On the other hand, we find periodic announcements that the myth of racial democracy has definitively died. Accordingly, I theorize the myth of racial democracy as a paradoxically undead myth and ask what it is about the form of this peculiar myth that allows it to survive its own repeated death. Drawing on Roland Barthes' theory of myth, I show how the celebration of racial mixture, or *mestiçagem*, functions as a mythological signifier of racial democracy that operates beneath and beyond the level of conscious thought, activating powerful affects and desires even in those who ostensibly know better.

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What does it mean to describe racial democracy in Brazil as a myth? In popular parlance, 'the myth of racial democracy' simply indicates that many people, both in and outside of Brazil, incorrectly believe that Brazil is a country without systemic racism. This usage accords with the most conventional usage of the term 'myth' as 'a near synonym for "mistaken belief", or perhaps, "widely or deeply held beliefs with no solid foundation in the facts of the matter"' (Baeten, 1996, p. 5). Many scholars and activists offer a more sophisticated elaboration of this popular account by treating the myth of Brazilian racial democracy as a particular species of ideology. For example, Michael Hanchard (1994b) provides a neo-Gramscian interpretation of the myth of racial democracy as a form of hegemony that functions to undermine black consciousness and solidarity and to depoliticize racial inequality. Alternatively, in a partial recuperation of Brazilian racial democracy, scholars such as Brian Owensby (2005) and Peter Fry (2000, p. 97) have advocated



an ‘anthropological view’ of myth as ‘a charter for social action or as an ordered system of social thought that enshrines and expresses fundamental understandings about society’. Such an account treats racial democracy as a passionately felt, collective aspiration of the Brazilian people that could well be mobilized on behalf of its own realization, thus avowing its potential social and political utility without naively affirming its empirical accuracy.

All three accounts converge on one point: that Brazilians do, in fact, widely subscribe to the myth of Brazilian racial democracy, or at the very least believe that Brazilian racism is relatively mild. Curiously, though, we also find many announcements from the 1980s to the present of the death of this myth. In 1988, on the occasion of black movement-organized protests against the celebration of the centennial of Brazil’s abolition of slavery, the magazine *Istoé* proclaimed that ‘[t]he myth of racial democracy appears to be definitively in its grave’ (quoted in Andrews, 1996, p. 483). Six years later, Hanchard (1994a, p. 165) himself describes the infamous case of the black daughter of the governor of the state of Espírito Santo being physically assaulted in a middle-class apartment building for briefly holding up the elevator as ‘another nail into the coffin of the ideology of Brazilian racial democracy’. Meanwhile, December Green (2016, p. 156) offers the year 2000 as the agreed-upon expiration date, owing to the publication of government-sponsored reports on racism by the Institute for Applied Economic Research: ‘But the moment of reckoning for Brazil—and the end of the myth of racial democracy—is widely believed to have come five years later [than 1995], when a mirror was held up to Brazil and the country saw itself in a new light’. These recurrent death announcements emphasize several distinct mortal blows: the emergence of a black movement denouncing racial democracy as a myth, highly publicized acts of undeniable racism, growing public admission of systemic racism in Brazil, and official government recognition of the need for pro-active anti-racist action.

Recent survey data confirms that growing numbers of Brazilians acknowledge the enduring force of racism, especially anti-blackness, in Brazilian life. For example, in surveys of adult Brazilians in the state of Rio de Janeiro conducted in 1998–1999, Stanley Bailey (2004) finds that a majority of Brazilians of all color categories support at least some affirmative action policies and acknowledge that racial discrimination causes black disadvantage, with levels of support and acknowledgment highest among blacks. In his later, book-length study of racial attitudes in Brazil, however, Bailey (2009) finds that variation in racial beliefs based on racial group identity is minimal based on two additional national surveys from 1995 and 2002. He concludes that ‘the population’s interpretation of the myth [of racial democracy] is not what the literature would have it to be at all during the 1995 through 2002 period, that is, a hierarchy-embracing legitimizing ideology’ (Bailey, 2009, p. 216). More recently, in comprehensive 2010 surveys conducted across Brazil as part of the Project on Ethnicity and Race in Latin America,



Graziella Moraes Silva and Marcelo Paixão (2014, pp. 198, 211) also find majority support with no significant differences across racial/color categories for affirmative action as well as widespread acknowledgment of 'the advantages of whiteness and structural disadvantages of blackness'.

With respect to the government, the administration of Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995–2003) pioneered the recognition of racism and anti-blackness as systemic elements of Brazilian life. President Cardoso created government agencies tasked with combatting racial discrimination and signaled his own support for affirmative action policies. Though his administration's actions on race remained largely symbolic, their significance lay in the fact that 'a head of the Brazilian government had recognized racism for the first time and announced the possibility of measures to promote racial justice, breaking with decades of official denial of racism' (Telles, 2004, p. 56). The governments of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003–2011) and Dilma Rousseff (2011–2016) moved beyond Cardoso's symbolic acknowledgment of racism and implemented policies such as affirmative action in public universities and mandatory teaching of African history and culture in public schools (Ribeiro, 2014). For now, at least, these policies remain in force, though their future is tenuous under the present far-right administration of Jair Bolsonaro.

Does this mean that the myth of racial democracy has in fact already died? Hanchard's use of the phrase 'nail in the coffin' is telling insofar as it suggests that whatever is inside that coffin may not be entirely disposed to remain there. Alexandre Emboaba da Costa (2014, p. 28) rightly highlights a distinction between believing 'racism and discrimination are societal issues *in the abstract* (i.e. when asked on opinion surveys)' and properly recognizing racism 'when confronting actual situations loaded with racialized meaning'. Consider Moraes Silva's and Paixão's finding that only 46% of self-identified blacks, 28.7% of self-identified whites, and 26.3% of self-identified browns report 'having experienced or witnessed situations in which people were treated unfairly because of the color of their skin' (p. 211). As opposed to their finding of insignificant variations between racial/color categories on support for affirmative action and abstract recognition of racial disadvantage, here we find that respondents who self-identify as black are significantly more likely to report personal experiences with racial discrimination. At the same time, it is also striking that even a majority of self-identified blacks claim they have never personally experienced or witnessed racial discrimination based on skin color. This suggests that racial democracy in Brazil can simultaneously die as widely held conscious belief and yet live on as unconscious and quotidian common sense and as an affectively powerful collective dream, especially but not exclusively for those Brazilians who identify as white or brown. Accordingly, I view racial democracy in Brazil as a paradoxically *undead* myth.



If this view is persuasive, then finding yet another way to refute the myth serves little purpose. Instead, we should heed the words of Lilia Moritz Schwarcz (2012, p. 109): ‘Demonstrating, yet again, the fallacies of the myth of racial democracy (which is in fact a myth) is perhaps less important than reflecting on its efficacy and endurance, beyond its theoretical discredit, which dates back to the late 1950s’.¹ In this spirit, I draw on a fourth understanding of myth, one that has received virtually no attention in the literature on racial democracy in Brazil: Roland Barthes’ (2012, p. 217) structuralist account of myth as a ‘mode of signification, a form’. Examining myth as a particular signifying form proves especially useful in the case of Brazilian racial democracy. It allows us to analyze the myth’s capacity for endless resurrection from a new vantage point, one that illuminates the exceedingly difficult bind that advocates of racial justice confront in Brazil. To be clear, I am not advocating Barthes’ interpretation of myth as the singularly ‘correct’ one, but merely highlighting its particular utility in the Brazilian case.

The myth of racial democracy

Let us begin with a brief overview of the myth of racial democracy itself: what it says, how and why it emerged in the 1930s and began to falter in the 1950s, and in what sense it can be understood today as undead. The myth emerged from the ideological and intellectual ferment in the wake of the abolition of slavery in 1888 and the end of the Brazilian Empire the next year. Compared to other settler colonial societies in the Americas, Portuguese settlement in Brazil was relatively sparse, while at the same time Brazil imported significantly more African slaves (Bergad, 2007, pp. 62-63). As a result, Afro-descendants (combining the black and brown/mixed census categories) comprised a slight majority of the population of Brazil following abolition (Directoria Geral de Estatística, 1898). This fact caused great anxiety amongst a Brazilian elite eager to join the pantheon of ‘civilized’ nations (Skidmore, 1993, ch. 2). After all, European and North American scientific racism unequivocally taught the superiority of the white race, the inferiority of the black race, and the disastrous consequences of racial miscegenation. Accepting these doctrines would seal Brazil’s fate as a nation doomed to permanent backwardness.

Unsurprisingly, most Brazilian intellectuals resisted such a dispiriting conclusion. While maintaining the doctrine of white superiority and black inferiority, Brazilian thinkers and writers such as José Batista Lacerda and Francisco José de Oliveira Vianna began to reconsider the consequences of miscegenation. Under certain propitious circumstances, they argued, miscegenation could result in the dominance of superior white blood, therefore allowing a multi-generational process of *branqueamento*, or whitening, that would ultimately extinguish the black population of Brazil and yield a civilized, white nation. Miscegenation - the very



mark of Brazil's damnation for orthodox scientific racists such as Arthur de Gobineau - became its great hope of salvation for the theorists of *branqueamento*.

Theories of *branqueamento* essentially served as the soil out of which the myth of racial democracy would eventually grow. Proponents favorably compared Brazil's solution to the race problem to regimes of segregation and apartheid, often condemning the cruelty and hatred that segregation fomented in the United States. Through *branqueamento*, Brazil could peacefully achieve a unified and harmonious society without bitterly opposed racial castes. Thus Manuel de Oliveira Lima simultaneously waxes romantic about the end of blackness in Brazil and boasts that the characteristic tolerance and indulgence of Brazilians 'prevents us from hostility toward the Negro on any level, even race mixture' (quoted in Skidmore, p. 72). Oliveira Vianna amplifies this claim, offering a tribute to Brazil's spirit of harmonious racial coexistence: 'In no other country in the world do the members of such distinct races coexist with such great harmony and such a profound spirit of equality' (quoted in Munanga, 1999, p. 71). Vianna simultaneously avows black inferiority and claims that 'love' will solve the 'black problem' in Brazil, preventing it from becoming a divided and unequal society like the United States: 'There is no danger that the black problem will arise in Brazil. Before it could arise, it will be solved by love. Miscegenation robs the black element of its numerical significance, diluting it in the white population' (quoted in Munanga, p. 78). These peculiar and self-contradictory odes to interracial love and harmony offered by proponents of black elimination provide the bridge from scientific racism to the myth of racial democracy in Brazil.

Gilberto Freyre, arguably Brazil's most famous social theorist, would be the first to walk across that bridge. His 1933 epic *Casa Grande e Senzala* is widely credited (or blamed) as the founding text of Brazilian racial democracy. Although the phrase 'racial democracy' does not appear in the text, intellectuals in and outside of Brazil have repeatedly bundled together the ideas expressed in the book and given them the label of racial democracy. Freyre seeks to identify the distinctive essence of Brazilian civilization, an essence that he traces above all to the patriarchal 'big houses' and 'slave quarters' of Brazilian slaveocracy. Like the theorists of *branqueamento* before him, Freyre views the Brazilian character as uniquely flexible, malleable, and tolerant. He traces this malleability to Brazil's Portuguese settlers, dubiously claiming that Portugal already possessed 'an easy and relaxed flexibility' owing to its 'ethnic and cultural indeterminateness between Europe and Africa' (Freyre, 1966, p. 78). Despite frequent acknowledgments of the brutality and sadism of Brazilian slavery, Freyre (p. xlv) nonetheless contributes to a long-standing romanticized myth of a more 'humane' Brazilian slavery by waxing lyrical about the 'the relations of the white masters with their slaves'. These so-called relations ultimately birth Brazil as an irreducibly mixed, brown nation lacking clear boundaries between races, therefore also lacking the intense racial hostilities and conflicts of the United States or South Africa. Or, as Freyre (p. xii)



himself put it: ‘The absence of violent rancors due to race constitutes one of the peculiarities of the feudal system in the tropics’.

For both Freyre and Oliveira Vianna, racial mixture, or *mestiçagem*, proves the lynchpin in Brazil’s racially harmonious civilization. But the work of *mestiçagem* in fact differs dramatically for the two thinkers, and the tension between these distinctive understandings of *mestiçagem* lies at the heart of the myth of racial democracy. For Oliveira Vianna and other theorists of *branqueamento*, *mestiçagem* is merely a means to an end: the dilution and ultimate disappearance of blackness so as to produce a civilized white Brazil. *Mestiçagem* here refers strictly to biological mixture, with African culture viewed as primitive and a happy casualty of the civilizing process. Freyre sharply rejects the vehement anti-blackness of this approach. For him, *mestiçagem* is a permanent and foundational element of Brazilian-ness, or *brasilidade*. Furthermore, he praises both biological and cultural *mestiçagem*, cataloging numerous positive contributions that African and indigenous peoples have made to Brazil’s syncretic culture. Antonio Sérgio Alfredo Guimarães (2002, p. 121) describes two crucial innovations in this approach: first, ‘the recognition of the cultural debt that the Brazilian nation owes to blacks’ and, second, ‘the idea that, as a people, Brazilians exceeded the formative elements of the nation (whites, blacks and Indians, in racial terms...), thereby constructing themselves as a meta-race, a people, the Brazilian people’. For Freyre, the best elements of Brazil’s original peoples - whites (Portuguese), blacks (Africans), and indigenous Brazilians - become permanently entangled and mutually adapted to each other, producing a new brown (*moreno*) people uniquely adapted to life in the tropics of the New World.

The presence of indigenous peoples in Freyre’s narrative deserves further attention. Although Freyre describes the many contributions of indigenous Brazilians to Brazil’s unique culture, he also adopts the familiar settler-colonial trope of indigenous peoples as confined to the past, living on only in ghostly form via the adoption of their beliefs and practices by settlers. Yuko Miki (2018, p. 11) describes how ‘Indian extinction’s invention was integral to the very forging of a racially inclusive national identity, negating the possibility of indigenous citizenship even as Indians were celebrated symbolically as progenitors of the nation’. Accordingly, the ongoing process of cultural and biological mixture that truly defines Brazil for Freyre, and for countless neo-Freyreans in his wake, is the mixture of black and white. This mixture constitutes the core of the racial democracy myth, with indigenous peoples and immigrant populations such as Japanese-Brazilians occupying extinguished, marginal, ornamental, or permanently foreign positions.

My purpose in this article is not to offer a close reading or normative judgment on Freyre’s work. Rather, I want to emphasize how Freyre’s account of *mestiçagem* has become inextricable from the myth of racial democracy and from Brazil’s understanding of itself as a nation. The causal line that Freyre drew between



mestiçagem and 'the absence of violent rancors due to race' was repeatedly taken up and deployed in more and less cynical fashion by subsequent generations of thinkers, writers, activists, and politicians. The power of *mestiçagem* as signifier of Brazilian racial democracy 'lies in its dual imagined function as simultaneous cause of and evidence of the lack of racism in Brazil' (Stanley, 2018, pp. 732–733). This fact proves crucial to understanding the 'undead' quality of the myth of racial democracy in Brazil today. But first, let us sketch some key examples of Freyre's uptake in order to underscore the fundamental connection between *mestiçagem* and racial democracy in the Brazilian national imaginary.

Getúlio Vargas, president from 1930–1945 and briefly again from 1951 to 1954, pioneered the cynical deployment of *mestiçagem* as sign of racial democracy and Brazilian national identity. He shrewdly recognized the myth of racial democracy as a convenient tool to forge national unity, quash dissent, and burnish Brazil's international image, particularly after the declaration of the *Estado Novo* in 1937 and the suspension of existing democratic institutions. According to Darién Davis (1999, p. 84), Brazil's cultural nationalism under Vargas was based on two factors: 'the notion of *brasilidade*, and cultural unity based on racial democracy in which political and ethnic dissident voices would be silenced for the good of the whole'. Regarding *brasilidade*, the Vargas administration held that 'miscegenation under Portuguese tutelage had played crucial parts in its creation' (Schwarcz, p. 48). Schwarcz underscores the many 'official projects... implemented to recognize in *mestiçagem* the true nationality' (p. 48) under the *Estado Novo*. Vargas saw popular culture as a powerful instrument for molding nationalist sentiment, and relentlessly promoted popular icons of *brasilidade* such as soccer, carnival, and samba—all of which signified *brasilidade* in part through their visible (and audible) incarnations of *mestiçagem*.

Samba provides a particularly striking and prominent example. It is often described 'as a hybrid (mixed) form' that combines Afro-Brazilian and European styles of music and dance (Pravaz, 2008, p. 83). During the Vargas era, aggressive government censorship led to the dissemination of a sanitized version of samba called *samba de exaltação* that presented 'a Brazil strong, unified, and unique, without the racial problems of the United States and Europe' (Davis, p. 162). Schwarcz (p. 68) finds that the popular samba of this epoch 'ends up transforming the ideal of *mestiçagem* into the locus of national identity'. Samba celebrates a highly gendered form of *mestiçagem* in a fashion that clearly recapitulates Freyre, exalting the beautiful and bewitching *mulata* as an eroticized symbol of *brasilidade*. Though government censorship no longer seeks to confine samba to an uncritically nationalist genre, and critical and resistant forms of samba have proliferated, the iconic nationalist samba of the Vargas era endures in the Brazilian and global imaginary as a powerful representation of Brazil's most singular traits: sensuality, dance, festiveness, and racial mixture.



The Vargas administration's cynical celebration of *mestiçagem* largely functioned as a façade to reconfigure its own deep and sustained anti-blackness in a more palatable light for an international audience, with *branqueamento* never buried far beneath the surface. Racial democracy also served key economic functions during and after the Vargas era. The state strove to integrate black workers into a modernizing economy at the lowest rungs, maintaining a racial capitalist order built on the hyperexploitation of black workers hidden beneath the veneer of cultural and symbolic incorporation: 'In this case, the emergence of the discourse of racial democracy, that is still taken today as an element of Brazilian identity, coincides with the beginning of the project of adapting Brazilian society in the 1930s to industrial capitalism' (Almeida, 2019; also see Guimarães, 2002). To this day, even refutations of the myth of racial democracy that emphasize continuing forms of interpersonal and representational acts of racism sustain an occlusion of structural racism embedded in the capitalist economy that Silvio Almeida aims to reveal. Finally, in addition to burnishing the Brazilian image on the international stage, and masking the subordination of black workers intrinsic to emergent racial capitalism, the Brazilian state has also celebrated *mestiçagem* and racial democracy to depress and demobilize any nascent black movement in the name of national unity: 'The two themes of nation-state unity and racial democracy are interconnected. National unity was proclaimed by the Brazilian elite to contain and avoid disruption to its continued privilege and its efforts at state building' (Marx, 1998, p. 176). Hence, elite and state-driven nationalist and economic projects have much to do with the proliferation of racial democracy discourse in the 1930s and beyond.

But many intellectuals writing in the shadow of Freyre's influence were more sincere adherents. The novels of Jorge Amado, for example, painted an intoxicating picture of Brazil as a country where racial mixture produced a joyful, festive, and sexually libertine people (Vieira, 1989). The French anthropologist Roger Bastide echoed this depiction in a more sober, reportorial context in a series of articles published in the *Diário de S. Paulo* in 1944. In the third article, he offers a striking account of Brazil's racial democracy that centers *mestiçagem* as cause and symbol:

I returned to the city by tram. The vehicle was full of workers returning from the factory, who mixed their exhausted bodies with those of the amblers returning from the park of Dois Irmãos. A population of mestiços, of whites and blacks fraternally clustered, squeezed, and piled together one on top of the other, in an enormous and friendly confusion of arms and legs. Close to me, a black man exhausted by the day's efforts let his head fall heavily, covered in sweat and drifting off to sleep, onto the shoulder of an office employee, a white man who carefully adjusted his shoulders so as to receive that head as if in a nest, as if in a caress. And that provides a lovely image of the social and racial democracy that Recife offered to me on my return trip, in



the twilight landscape of suburban Pernambuco (quoted in Guimarães, p. 154).

Guimarães (p. 155) astutely notes how this passage effectively resignifies democracy itself: 'The democracy to which Bastide refers, inspired by Freyre and Amado, cannot be reduced to civil rights and liberties, but reaches for a more sublime region: aesthetic and cultural liberty, of creation and miscegenated coexistence'. In Bastide's lyrical account of his tram ride, *mestiçagem* and racial democracy become virtually one and the same.

In their review of the Afro-Brazilian press in the 1940s, Guimarães and Márcio Macedo (2008) find a complicated and ambivalent relationship to racial democracy. Focusing on the column 'Problems and Aspirations of the Brazilian Black' in the *Diário Trabalhista*, they recount a heated debate over the existence of racial discrimination and a 'black problem' in Brazil. While writers such as Aguinaldo Camargo, José Pompílio, Sebastião Rodrigues Alves, and Abdias do Nascimento (arguably the most famous black movement activist in Brazil) highlighted anti-blackness as a fundamental element of Brazilian life, others such as Guerreiro Ramos and Aladir Custódio acknowledged color prejudice but favorably compared the racial politics of Brazil to the United States and warned against black militancy. Maria de Lourdes, who would later write a column for the black paper *Quilombo* on the struggles of black women, was one of many to sing the praises of Brazil as a mixed nation: 'The black woman has been and will always be united in flesh and spirit with the elevation and valorization of our great Brazilian people, the most beautiful mixed people (*povo mestiço*) in the world' (quoted on p. 157). Notably Guimarães and Macedo find that it was exceedingly rare in the 1940s that 'black protest reached such a level of radicalism that it threatened well-consolidated ideas regarding Brazilian racial harmony or the mixed character of the Brazilian people' (p. 168). The appeal of racial democracy via *mestiçagem* to Brazilian blacks in the 1940s, while clearly limited, was nonetheless still present. After all, *mestiçagem* appeared to offer a possible path toward eventual incorporation as equals into the Brazilian nation, something that did not seem available to their counterparts in the United States, and that permitted some hopefulness about the future.

The international dissemination of Brazil's myth of racial democracy proved so seductive that in the 1950s UNESCO would sponsor a series of studies of race relations in Brazil, hoping that other countries struggling with racial conflict might learn from Brazil's example. The first product of these studies, *Race and Class in Rural Brazil*, brought together the work of several anthropologists in Brazil and echoed Freyre's and Bastide's account of racial democracy stemming from *mestiçagem*. The very first lines of Charles Wagley's (1963, p. 7) introduction sound the familiar themes:



Brazil is renowned in the world for its racial democracy. Throughout its enormous area of a half continent race prejudice and discrimination are subdued as compared to the situation in many countries. In Brazil three racial stocks—the American Indian, the Negro and the European Caucasoid—have mingled and mixed to form a society in which racial tensions and conflicts are especially mild, despite the great racial variability of the population.

Yet the UNESCO-sponsored studies would eventually take a very different turn. Bastide himself, in partnership with the Brazilian sociologist Florestan Fernandes, would reverse his own earlier assessment, broadening the scope of racial democracy to include civic equality and acknowledging that it did not exist in Brazil. In a famous passage paraphrasing an anonymous white respondent to a survey question, Bastide and Fernandes (1959, p. 164) describe Brazil's dominant racial ideology as 'the prejudice of not having prejudice' (*o preconceito de não ter preconceito*). This pithy phrase neatly captures what it means to call racial democracy a myth. Bastide and Fernandes depict racial democracy as a widely shared illusion that perversely functions to sustain existing racial prejudice and subordination.

Fernandes would become an academic pioneer in the deconstruction of the myth of Brazilian racial democracy. His comprehensive 1965 study, *A Integração do Negro na Sociedade de Classes* (The Integration of the Black into Class Society) served as a touchstone for countless researchers and activists seeking to expose the hidden racism and anti-blackness of Brazilian society. In the 1970s and 1980s, Brazil's modern black movement, especially the Movimento Negro Unificado (MNU) established in 1978, would declare all-out war on the myth of racial democracy, seeing it as a primary obstacle in the fight for racial justice. Because *mestiçagem* served as the ubiquitous signifier of racial democracy, efforts to dismantle the myth often took the form of critiques of *mestiçagem* as the farcically anti-racist mask worn by an older, more obviously racist discourse: *branqueamento*. Accordingly, Abdias do Nascimento sharply distinguishes true integration from Brazilian-style mixture: 'Never have they "integrated themselves" except for the insidious programs of acculturation, assimilation, miscegenation and syncretism of Black peoples and their cultures *into* the dominant white population and culture, processes that inherently involve their partial or complete destruction' (1989, p. 88). Similarly, in his comprehensive study of the history of the ideal of *mestiçagem* in Brazilian thought, Kabengele Munanga (p. 90) explains:

Mestiçagem, as articulated in Brazilian thought from the start of the nineteenth century to the middle of this [twentieth] century, whether in its biological form (miscegenation) or its cultural form (syncretism), paves the way for a uni-racial and uni-cultural society. Such a society would be constructed according to the hegemonic white racial and cultural model, to



which all other races and their respective cultural productions should be assimilated.

Drawing on Munanga's work, Elisa Larkin Nascimento (Abdias do Nascimento's wife of 36 years, until his death) claims that 'the notion of African inferiority remains the basis of the whitening ideal, which is the motor of miscegenation, and it has remained intact, if unexpressed, in the national consciousness' (2007, p. 54). The work of scholars and activists like Fernandes, Munanga, and both Nascimento's has played a crucial role in unmasking Brazilian racism before the eyes of Brazil's people and governors, and in encouraging growing numbers of Afro-descendant Brazilians to embrace a black identity rather than a mixed one.

Afro-Brazilian feminists have contributed some of the most powerful critiques of the myth of racial democracy, as they detail its gendered elements and its particularly insidious consequences for black women. Specifically, they have relentlessly critiqued the mulata as symbol of *brasilidade*. For example, Lélia Gonzalez (1981) reminds her readers that 'the greater portion of mixed-race Brazilians come from rape, violence, and sexual manipulation of female slaves' (p. 265) and that this legacy extends to present-day depictions of black and mixed women as 'easy' and 'good in bed' (p. 266). She concludes that the cult of the mulata, masquerading as proof of racial democracy, has become embedded in the Brazilian entertainment and tourist economies, effectively creating 'the modern profession of mulata so that young black women can continue to be exploited, now as export products' (p. 266). As Djamila Ribeiro (2018, p. 143) elaborates, the problem with this ostensible celebration of black and mulata 'sensuality' is not that there is anything intrinsically wrong with sensuality, but rather with 'confining us to this role, denying our humanity, multiplicity, and complexity'. Gonzalez and Ribeiro together expose how glorifications of *mestiçagem* as the sign of Brazilian racial democracy not only degrade and objectify black and mixed women but also commodify them, adding a crucial intersectional element to the analysis of racial capitalism in Brazil.

Yet *mestiçagem* continues to exert a powerful pull on the Brazilian imagination. In the most recent official Brazilian population survey conducted in 2016, more Brazilians identified themselves as brown or mixed (*pardo*, 46.7%) than white (44.2%) or black (8.2%) (IBGE, 2017). Of course, one may identify as *pardo*, yet still recognize and denounce deep and systemic racism in Brazil. Yet the continuing and even growing embrace of a *pardo* identity directly contravenes the efforts of black Brazilian activists to create a more expansive *negro* identity, best expressed in the 1990 campaign led by the Afro-Brazilian feminist Wania Sant'Anna to dissuade Afro-descendants in advance of the census from identifying as *pardo* or *branco* (Nobles, 2000, p. 152). Equally telling is recent ethnographic work that explores the enduring symbolism of *mestiçagem* as prophetic herald of an



aspirational racial democracy for many ordinary Brazilians, including Afro-descendants themselves (Goldstein, 1999; Pravaz, 2008; Sheriff, 2001). In her interviews with Afro-Brazilian women in a Rio de Janeiro shantytown, Goldstein (p. 567) observes that '[s]exual unions across the color line are assumed to provide the proof of Brazil's racial democracy as if there were no patterned forms of inequality embedded in or enacted through racialized eroticism'. In another Rio favela, Sheriff finds a profound yearning for racial democracy through *mestiçagem* despite widespread recognition of racial democracy's empirical fraudulence: 'Although people in Morro do Sangue Bom soundly denounce *democracia racial* as an accurate description of the world in which they live, their use of the polite register is, in a sense, an attempt to support its prescriptive beliefs: neither race nor color *should* matter because all are members of the (miscegenated) Brazilian family' (p. 57). Sheriff's findings are particularly revealing because they show how one can fervently embrace racial democracy as the natural consequence of *mestiçagem*, yet recognize that its realization has been inexplicably thwarted in the present.

It is no surprise, then, that academic and popular works that deploy *mestiçagem* not merely as a neutral descriptive category but as a symbol of Brazil's admirable fluidity and openness continue to enjoy great popularity. Take, for example, the optimistic appraisal offered by the Brazilian sociologist Bernardo Sorj (2000, pp. 128–129):

The miscegenation of the population is not an ideological mystification, even if it has been realized under oppressive conditions. It is a great cultural treasure that Brazil, in spite of the opposing efforts of racist ideologues and small proto-fascist groups, has never absorbed the Manichean, exclusionary classificatory discourses of European and North American culture.

Echoing Sorj, in 2006 the popular Brazilian television presenter Ali Kamel published a widely read critique of affirmative action policies. He condemns these policies for importing inappropriate 'black' and 'white' racial categories from the United States to Brazil, where they threaten to subvert the longstanding and salutary embrace of *mestiçagem*: 'In a certain sense, I would say, cultural anthropophagy can only be possible in a nation that truly is a mixture of diverse peoples. This ideal of the nation emerged victorious and consolidated itself in our imaginary. We liked to see ourselves in this way: miscegenated. We did not like to see ourselves as racist' (Kamel, 2006, p. 19). Similarly, Antonio Risério, also a sociologist, criticizes the contemporary Brazilian black movement for failing to embrace the progressive potential in *mestiçagem* and for advocating an un-Brazilian 'black' identity. Referencing Freyre, he praises Brazil's unique plasticity: 'But the plasticity of Brazilian society—its extraordinary capacity to incorporate, absorb, and dissolve—is a fact. Brazil truly is a *melting pot*—always more for *padê* [an Afro-Brazilian religious ritual] than for apartheid' (Risério, 2007, p. 34).



Risério and Kamel ultimately argue, much like Sheriff's interview subjects, that racial democracy should be embraced as a powerful aspiration rather than as an empirical fact, its future potentiality rooted in the very real foundation of *mestiçagem*. Finally, the conservative geographer and newspaper columnist Demétrio Magnoli (2009, p. 16) makes explicit this potentiality: 'In Brazil, on the contrary [as opposed to the United States], the principle of political equality finds support in the powerful identity narrative of *mestiçagem*, which erases the borders of race'. These authors seek to maintain the egalitarian and democratic potential of *mestiçagem* without explicitly affirming that Brazil is a racial democracy. We might say that they simultaneously disavow and avow the myth, contributing to its undead status.

All these contradictory strains of Brazilian popular self-understanding came together during the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro in 2016. Gough (2017, p. 207) describes the final scene of the ceremony, in which representatives of the city's top samba schools performed an abbreviated, stylized version of their typical carnival parade accompanied by iconic Brazilian musicians Caetano Veloso, Gilberto Gil, and Anitta: 'The final scene incorporated ideas about samba, Brazil's multiracial demographics, and broader notions of musicality, happiness, and the festive in Brazil that have long circulated in the global imaginary'. The musicians performed the 1942 patriotic samba song "Isto aqui, o que é" (This here, what it is) that represents Brazil's uniquely joyful character through the swinging hips of a sensual *morena*. The choice of this song 'recalled government national efforts that began in the 1930s to brand Brazil as a happy, sexually prolific, and racially democratic country through samba' (Gough, p. 208). But this is only half the story. For this trite retread of Brazilian racial democracy came on the heels of a longer, more ambivalent performance of Brazil's history. This performance 'complicat[ed] persistent notions of the country's tri-racial origins' by depicting Japanese and Middle Eastern Brazilians alongside the familiar indigenous, European, and African populations, highlighted the cruelty and brutality of Brazilian slavery, and 'portrayed an urban, contemporary Brazil, where continued struggles over social inclusion coexist with variegated and prolific musical cohorts' via dance, samba, and hip-hop performances (Gough, p. 206). In short, the opening ceremony effectively acknowledged Brazil's deeply rooted and ongoing struggle with racism only to erase that very acknowledgment in its closing scenes with a typical *samba de exaltação*. It would be difficult to find a better representation of the peculiar, undead status of the myth of racial democracy—brought back to life in the very same performance that had just dismantled it.

We are left with a series of crucial questions: how does the myth of racial democracy survive so many ostensible burials? How could the directors of the Rio opening ceremonies fail to see the blatant contradictions in their own work? Why do so many Brazilians of all colors acknowledge racism in the abstract, yet fail to recognize it in their own day-to-day lives? In the next section, I will broach these



questions through Roland Barthes' theory of myth. As we shall see, the myth of racial democracy conforms remarkably well to the contours of mythological speech that he outlines.

Reading Barthes in Brazil

As noted in this article's introduction, Barthes understands myth as a particular 'mode of signification, a form'. Concretely, mythological speech functions as 'a second-order semiological system' (p. 223). Drawing on Ferdinand de Saussure, Barthes holds that semiological systems always entail a relationship between three terms: a signifier, a signified, and a sign. Barthes criticizes 'common parlance which simply says that the signifier *expresses* the signified' (p. 221). Instead, he draws attention to the crucial importance of the sign, which refers to 'the associative total of the first two terms' (p. 221). He gives the example of a bouquet of roses that indicates the giver's passion:

Do we have here, then, only a signifier and a signified, the roses and my passion? Not even that; to put it accurately, there are here only 'passionified' roses. But on the plane of analysis, we do have three terms; for these roses weighted with passion perfectly and correctly allow themselves to be decomposed into roses and passion: the former and the latter existed before uniting and forming this third object, which is the sign (pp. 221–222).

In mythological speech, the same triadic relationship between signifier, signified, and sign holds. However, the signifier in myth has a distinctive characteristic: it is drawn from an already constituted sign in a prior semiological chain. When the passionified roses from our first example become a signifier of a new signified, we enter the realm of myth. Baeten (p. 99) invites us to imagine the roses 'in a photo of two smiling people in an advertisement for diamond rings'. This advertisement works because roses have already been passionified; the advertisement is a myth.

For Barthes, as Baeten explains, mythological speech is deeply duplicitous and dangerous. It effectively erases the 'history and contingency' (p. 100) of the first-order sign (the roses, in our example). The smiling couple in the advertisement have no authentic story or personality. Baeten elaborates: 'The image of two people in love becomes *any* two people, and the love becomes completely sentimentalized; in fact, the image must be so devoid of specific content that the observer may see him or herself in it as the signified' (Baeten, p. 100). While roses do not inevitably signify passion in first-order speech, once they have been appropriated for the advertisement, their ostensible connection to passion becomes naturalized, eternal, unquestionable. Barthes sees this duplicitous form of speech as ideally suited to the propagation of bourgeois ideology under capitalism, for both myth and bourgeois ideology share 'the task of giving a historical intention a natural justification, and



making contingency appear eternal' (p. 254). As we shall see shortly, the myth of racial democracy functions in almost exactly this manner.

One need not share Barthes' Marxist orientation to find his concept of myth useful for the analysis of politics. Karsten Friis (2000), for example, adapts Barthes' theory of myth to elaborate securitization theory in international relations, supplementing Barthes with Foucault rather than Marx. Stephen Spencer (2006, p. 16) applies Barthes' theory of myth explicitly to racial discourse and imagery, arguing that we can understand the concept of whiteness as myth. Of course, Barthes' best-known example of myth is the *Paris-Match* advertisement featuring 'a young Negro in French uniform...saluting, with his eyes uplifted, probably fixed on a fold of the tricolor' (Barthes, p. 225). According to Barthes, the black soldier saluting the flag is 'already formed with a previous system' (p. 225). The second-order image signifies 'that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any color discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors' (p. 225). Barthes famously deconstructs the mythological power of French imperialism here. Our deconstruction of racial democracy follows a similar trajectory.

What, then, is the semiological chain in the myth of racial democracy? I have shown in the previous section that *mestiçagem* has become the privileged signifier of Brazil's racial democracy at least since the 1930s. The 'associative total' of these terms, then, what Barthes calls the sign, is Brazilian-racial-democracy-via-mixture. But the first term in this chain, *mestiçagem*, like Barthes' black soldier, has itself been appropriated from several previous semiological chains and drained of its historical specificity. In order for *mestiçagem* to signify racial democracy unproblematically, it cannot be the *mestiçagem* advocated by theorists of *branqueamento*, with their evident anti-blackness. It cannot bear the marks of violent colonial usurpation and rape that so often produced it. It cannot reflect structural conditions that position poor Afro-Brazilian women as vulnerable to easy economic and sexual exploitation. The *mestiçagem* of racial democracy must instead reflect those uniquely Brazilian qualities initially indicated by Freyre: adaptability, fluidity, flexibility, plasticity, tolerance. That is to say, we are already dealing with *mestiçagem* as sign rather than first-order signifier. In the hidden semiological chain obscured by the myth of racial democracy, *mestiçagem* originally signifies all those Freyrean qualities, as well as Brazilian sensuality and interracial love. The sign of this buried semiological chain is a softened, eroticized, convivial and egalitarian *mestiçagem*, epitomized by the beautiful *mulata* samba dancer. In order to signify racial democracy, *mestiçagem* must undergo precisely the conversion of meaning (the sign in the first semiological chain) into mere empty form (the signifier in myth) that Barthes describes: 'When it becomes form, the meaning leaves its contingency behind; it empties itself, it becomes impoverished, history evaporates, only the letter remains' (p. 227). Michael Tager (1986, p. 632)



expounds the ideological consequences of this evaporation of history: ‘Myth obliterated the memory that peoples were once conquered, hierarchies once imposed, and objects once made’. So it is with *mestiçagem*.

Remarkably, Barthes himself wrote a glowing review of Freyre’s opus. He describes the book as ‘a brilliant product of that sensitivity to total history developed in France’ (1953, p. 44). Specifically, he commends Freyre’s novel ‘sexology’ (p. 44) and work of ‘courage and struggle’ to redress ‘the horrendous mystification that the concept of race has always represented’ (p. 45). This does not undermine our reading of racial democracy as myth, however. Rather, it underscores that myth’s power is so strong that even Barthes, the self-conscious mythologist, can be effectively intoxicated by the right myth. Diana Knight (1993) has previously noted Barthes’ already complicated and ambivalent relationship to Orientalist mythmaking. She argues that his usually perceptive skepticism about Orientalist discourse ran up against a blind spot concerning the potential liberatory power of (homo)sexuality in his reflections on his own stay in Morocco: ‘And it is surely sexual politics which tie Barthes to an Orientalism which he seeks, in other ways, to go beyond’ (p. 624). The very same blind spot may help to explain Barthes’ fondness for Freyre, who constructs the racial democracy myth through an explicit account of unbridled plantation sexuality as the foundation of the miscegenated Brazilian nation.

But we might expect Brazilians themselves to be less vulnerable to this intoxication. Nobody in Brazil today would seriously affirm that *mestiçagem* has always and only emerged from relations of mutuality, love, or conviviality. Freyre himself repeatedly acknowledges the violence, sadism, and coercion that characterized master-slave sexual relations: ‘The truth is that it was we who were the sadists, the active element in the corruption of family life; the slave boys and mulatto women were the passive element’ (pp. 402–403). One might think that, insofar as we can expose the buried history of conquest, compulsion, and domination lurking behind *mestiçagem* as mythological signifier, the myth itself should crumble like a house of cards on a crooked foundation. In practice, however, this history can be acknowledged only to dismiss its contemporary relevance. Consider Risério’s distinction between *mestiçagem* past and present: ‘Mestiçagem, today, can’t be seen as violence against black women – not only because of the couplings of black men with white women, but because unions with white men, in our time, happen through the assent (or if not through the initiative) of the negromestiça [black and mixed] woman’ (p. 54). Risério treats the history of *branqueamento* in a similar manner. He acknowledges the historical advocacy of *mestiçagem* as an anti-black tool of *branqueamento*, but insists that in reality *mestiçagem* acts just as surely as an agent of blackening as of whitening: ‘If miscegenation diminishes the black population, does it not also lead to a decrease in the white population? Finally, miscegenation whitens – and doesn’t darken? What magic is this?’ (p. 56). In short, Risério can move back and forth between a



bad *mestiçagem* associated with violence and *branqueamento*, largely confined to the past, and a good one, associated yet again with Brazil's unique fluidity and flexibility. His confidence that *mestiçagem* can divest itself of its ugly historical character enables the preservation of *mestiçagem* as empty, ahistorical form even as its historicity is formally acknowledged.

Barthes clearly foresaw the power of myth to survive its own apparent unmasking. He warns that 'myth essentially aims at causing an immediate impression—it does not matter if one is later allowed to see through the myth, its action is assumed to be stronger than the rational explanations which may later belie it' (p. 241). Barthes implies here that the immediate impressions that myths create do not operate at the level of rational thought. A thoughtful and sophisticated mythmaker like Risério can certainly construct rationalizations to defend an explicit embrace of the mythological signifier, but most readers of myths will not write a complex treatise on the various elements of the myth. In order to understand the common, everyday functioning of myths, we must instead reckon with how myth operates beneath and beyond the level of conscious, rational thought, instead spontaneously activating powerful affects, desires, and emotions.

Successful myths appropriate a first-order sign that is so culturally ubiquitous and hegemonic that it can do its signifying work without initially requiring conscious reflection. The roses in the commercial for the diamond ring instantly stand in for passion, love, and romance. One does not need to pause and carefully ponder what roses mean. And passion, love, and romance are not primarily cognitive states but affective ones. Once the roses have done this affective work, we may well consciously dismiss the ad and remember our own failed romances, our critiques of marriage, the bloody history of conflict diamonds. But if our rational critiques do not penetrate to the same affective level as the ad's initial impact, then they may not be sufficient to combat the desires stirred by the advertisement. This, at any rate, is the advertiser's wager. We can return to the original semiological chain and unmask what it has hidden at a conscious level without actually erasing the unconscious circuit of affect put into play by an omnipresent cultural sign. Consider how often roses and diamond rings appear in familiar scenes in popular culture—suitors appearing on their beloved's doorstep with a bouquet of roses, public marriage proposals on bended knee with a diamond ring presented to an overjoyed girlfriend. All these scenes prime us repeatedly to 'read' the advertisement as myth on an unconscious, affective level, regardless of our conscious beliefs about love, romance, marriage, roses, or diamonds.

Mestiçagem is a similarly omnipresent cultural sign in Brazil, appearing in texts, images, media, advertisements, tourist propaganda, musical and theatrical performances, sporting events, and even popular culinary traditions. Hence, Brazilians are primed to 'read' *mestiçagem* as myth on the same unconscious, affective level. Consider as an example Schwarcz's (pp. 58–59) description of *feijoada*, a world-



famous black bean stew often presented as Brazil's national dish, and traditionally consumed with family on Saturdays:

At first known as 'food of slaves', feijoada became a 'national dish', conveying a symbolic representation of *mestiçagem*. The beans (black or brown) and the rice (white) refer to the two great formative segments of the population. Alongside them are gathered the accompaniments—the kale (the green of our forests), the orange (the color of our abundance). We have here an example of how ethnic elements or specific customs become the material of nationality.

As with roses and diamonds, one can be deeply skeptical upon reflection that *mestiçagem* has truly functioned in Brazil to produce racial democracy, yet still experience a kind of affective intoxication upon receiving the countless sensory impressions of *mestiçagem* in the course of an ordinary day. Specifically, Alexandre Emboaba da Costa (2016, p. 25) notes that 'understandings of mixture and racial democracy' in Brazil are typically 'expressed through sentiments of interconnectedness, harmony, and conviviality'. When the very food on one's plate can trigger these sentiments, the myth of racial democracy may survive on an affective level long after it has been consciously dismissed. It is a successful myth precisely because even those who 'know' better still receive the second-order sign of *mestiçagem* as a mythological signifier: emptied of its specific historical content, purified and rendered innocent just as Barthes described.

In referring to the myth of racial democracy as undead, then, I do not mean to suggest that it is stagnant or sterile. Quite the contrary, virtually any well-formed and effectively deployed myth can survive its own unmasking and achieve a similar undead status. With Barthes' help, we can see how Brazil's undead racial democracy is not really a paradox after all, but merely the effective deployment of a myth. Myths are undead in the sense that they can die in our conscious, reflective lives but persist in our unconscious and affective lives. And in that latter realm, myth is animated, vigorous, and in constant motion, as Amanda Macdonald (2003) argues. For her, motility constitutes the very essence of Barthes' concept of myth. What makes myth so dangerous is that it appears as '[m]ovement that occurs without a cause other than itself' (p. 62). Just as zombies unceasingly pursue their victims, myths unceasingly pursue their targets in the subterranean world of affect.

But Brazilians do more than simply read *mestiçagem* passively as they absorb everyday sensual stimuli. They also routinely participate actively in constituting scenes of *mestiçagem*, effectively binding themselves to the motion of the myth. Sites and practices of festive racial mixing in Brazilian cities, such as carnival, smaller street festivals, samba schools, and multiracial clubs, pubs, and public spaces, sustain the collective imaginary of racial democracy by inviting Brazilians to lend their own bodies and practices of sociability to a performative re-constitution of that imaginary. Crowded public spaces in which differently



racialized subjects socialize, dance, sing, flirt, laugh, and touch create especially dense and efficient circuits of affective transmission. Participants in these scenes can savor their own collaboration in the coming-to-be of racial democracy via *mestiçagem*. Peter Fry (1995/1996, p. 134) captures this affective experience as he describes his feelings upon entering a multiracial *botequim* (a kind of Brazilian pub) shortly after witnessing the police harass a black friend in Rio:

I felt humiliated for having written an article calling for the 'reality' of racial democracy!

Returning to the city, we entered a *botequim*, a *botequim* full of people of all possible appearances, old and young, women and men, of every possible color. The environment of good-tempered coexistence was the perfect antidote to the police assault. Bit by bit, I relaxed.

Drawing on Barthes, we can understand the customers at the *botequim* as literally turning their own bodies into second-order signifiers of racial democracy as they participate in ordinary city life. Insofar as their own practices of racial mixing feel voluntary and innocent to them, and allow them to enjoy what da Costa (2016, p. 30) calls 'the happy objects of affective community', they contribute to the draining of meaning, context, and history from *mestiçagem*. The lingering intoxication of these practices can also inoculate Brazilians against the contradictory evidence of elite, prosperous white spaces and neighborhoods and predominantly brown and black *favelas*. A myth that not only draws upon an omnipresent cultural symbol but conscripts people into the very performance of that symbol should not surprise us with its extraordinary staying power.

This account of the myth of racial democracy's staying power puts racial justice advocates in Brazil in a difficult position. Merely refuting the myth yet again hardly seems sufficient to uproot it. Instead, the black movement in Brazil must consider strategies to combat a pernicious myth that functions at the unreflective level of quotidian affective experience. This dilemma calls for strategies to render racism and anti-blackness visible not only via conscious reflection but also on a similarly immediate and affective level. But a deeper question remains: what should advocates of racial justice in Brazil do with *mestiçagem*, given its cultural ubiquity as a sign? Should they simply denounce it as a laundered tool of black extermination, as Nascimento seeks to do? Alternatively, can *mestiçagem* be refigured and reimagined in a genuinely egalitarian manner, as Risério seeks to do, but without erasing history and naturalizing racial democracy? Or can *mestiçagem* be effectively severed from racial democracy entirely, disrupting the semiological chain upon which the myth relies? These are extraordinarily difficult questions, but reckoning with them initiates an important step beyond the stagnant cycle of politically impotent refutations of a myth that will not die a natural death.



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Notes

1. All translations from Portuguese are my own, unless otherwise noted.

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