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## “Interracial”<sup>1</sup> Sex and Racial Democracy in Brazil: Twin Concepts?

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Racial democracy is maintained in Brazil through both scholarly and popular discourses that consider “interracial” sex as proof of Brazil’s lack of a racial problem. In this article, I scrutinize the discourse that asks, “How can we be racist when so many of us are mixed?” I argue that racial discourses are embedded in everyday interactions, but are often codified or masked. “Race” is especially pertinent to sexuality, yet the two have hardly been analyzed together. In fact, it is not the belief in a racial democracy that is at the heart of Brazilian racial hegemony, but rather the belief that Brazil is a color-blind erotic democracy. Using my ethnographic data, I illustrate that “race” is embodied in everyday valuations of sexual attractiveness that are gendered, racialized, and class-oriented in ways that commodify black female bodies and white male economic, racial, and class privilege. [*Brazil, race, sexuality, poverty*]

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Graça: Robson, my son, What does a black pregnant woman have in common with a car that has a flat tire?

Robson: I don’t know, auntie, what?

Graça: They are both waiting for a monkey (*macaco*).

With great élan, Graça told me of this exchange with her favorite nephew, Robson, as a way of explaining why she and Robson were no longer on good terms. “It was only a joke,” related Graça. “But he didn’t like the joke.”

Graça is a black<sup>2</sup> domestic worker in her mid-40s and the central character in the book<sup>3</sup> I am completing about the humor of low-income women living in the shantytowns of Rio de Janeiro. The above interaction cannot be understood without understanding the situation in which the statements were made, including the racial implications of the term *macaco*. Concepts of “race” and color have for many years inspired much debate among Brazilianists.

The arguments developed in this article are based on long-term fieldwork in Brazil that began in 1988 and includes a total of 32 months of field research (1991–1993 continuously and shorter visits in 1988, 1995, and 1998). Between 1991 and 1993, I interviewed more than 300 women using a variety of research methods, including individual and focus group interviews, and the collection of life histories.<sup>4</sup> At that time, I also worked closely with medical personnel, AIDS activists, and feminist activists, some of whom overlap with elite and scholarly communities. In the beginning of my fieldwork, I focused thematically on the discourses of the AIDS epidemic and of sexuality among low-income women, but race and racialized

discourses emerged significantly in every encounter. After months of survey-style data collection, I opted for participant-observation, choosing to follow closely the daily lives of Graça and her network of kin and friends, living with them in one shantytown that I call *Felicidade Eterna* (Eternal Happiness) during a six-month period in 1992 and for shorter periods of time in 1995 and in 1998.

How Brazilians perceive themselves and others in racial terms and how interracial relations work in Brazil have been topics of great interest. Indeed, Brazilians have often prided themselves in being a nonracist society because of the reputed historical blending and mixture of indigenous American, Iberian, and African peoples into a single national identity. Brazil never developed legal supports to racism, thereby enabling it to avoid the legalized segregating practices that grew and were later challenged in other contexts (such as the North American case). “Brazil is different” seems to be the refrain of many scholarly analyses that deal with race relations. This is especially true when it comes to comparing Brazil to the United States.<sup>5</sup> Since the 1950s, most Brazilianists have agreed on the following interpretation of the construction of race in the two countries: Brazilians evaluate race primarily according to phenotype, offering a plethora of fluid and ambiguous categories,<sup>6</sup> whereas North Americans have until relatively recently tended to follow a “one-drop” (of blood) rule and a comparatively bipolarized (black and white) vision of race.<sup>7</sup> In Brazil, where one can place oneself or be placed by others along a color spectrum that shifts in relation to who is speaking and to whom one is speaking, as well as other aspects of context, this has never been so.<sup>8</sup> Everyday discourse is often about “color,” which suggests a continuum

of features, encompassing skin color, hair type, and facial morphology without positing separate racial types, whereas in the United States race is often used to suggest utterly separate human types, despite the fact that the term is a historical and social construction rather than an inherently meaningful category.

Color terms in Brazil are complicated and elide with words used to refer to "racial identities." The words include: black (*preto, negro*), white (*branco*), brown or mixed (*moreno, mulato*), dark (*escuro*), light (*claro*), closed (*fechado*), freckled (*sarará*), and others making both color and race confusing to insiders and outsiders alike. A person's race/color is determined not just by phenotype, but also by context, most importantly the real and exterior signs of class, including, among other factors, clothing, footwear, and the use of language and literacy. Marvin Harris's (1964a) classic article on race in Brazil, in which he suggested that the attribution of a racial category may be influenced by a person's class and argued for the appropriateness of the old Brazilian adage "money whitens," may still be relevant.<sup>9</sup> The situation of Graça and her cohort illustrates the way such valuations of color and the possibilities of class mobility play out in everyday discourses and relationships.

Graça lived in a dirt-floor shack made of wood and other found materials in Felicidade Eterna, a relatively new shantytown (less than 20 years old) located in what is commonly called the "periphery" of Rio de Janeiro.<sup>10</sup> Graça struggled to raise her own five children plus the four children for whom she took responsibility after the death of her sister. She also took care of three of her lover's children after his wife left him. She experienced very little economic mobility due to her low pay and because she was the sole person responsible for taking care of all of the children. Her dark skin color may also have had something to do with it. Graça's network of kin and friends was, for the most part, made up of other low-income women who had lived in or near Rio de Janeiro for most of their lives and who worked as either nannies, cooks, or cleaners in the homes of richer, whiter employers. These women usually described themselves as *morena* (brown, or mixed-race), but on certain occasions they would describe themselves or others as *preta* (black) and less often as *negra* (black).<sup>11</sup> Upward mobility is extremely low among this particular group.<sup>12</sup> They are among Rio's most economically disadvantaged residents.

Robson, who is a young, dark-skinned *moreno*, had impregnated a *morena* named Aninha ("little" Ana) in Felicidade Eterna. Graça did not like this girl very much and especially did not like the fact that the girl was so dark-skinned—as dark as Robson. Robson did not end up living with the girl but made considerable contributions to the child's welfare on a monthly basis, taking economic responsibility for the child even though the relationship with the mother had never really stabilized. Graça had very high

hopes for Robson and never liked the fact that he was courting Aninha—a girl who she felt was not good enough for her nephew. Although I challenged Graça because of what I assumed to be her own form of racism toward Aninha, she retorted that she had "only been joking"<sup>13</sup> with Robson when she told him the *macaco* joke. *Macaco*, simultaneously meaning "monkey" and "monkey wrench" in Portuguese, is also a racial epithet and can be extremely insulting. As we know from the earliest studies on humor (Freud, for example), jokes often get their punch by expressing perspectives that would otherwise be inexpressible. Statements made in the process of "only joking" can often provide a window into deeply held and troubling feelings, such as those that deal with race.<sup>14</sup> Robson, Graça thought, had a future. He had landed a well-paying job at a local department store after his stint in the army and had quickly moved into a managerial position—a rarity for a young man of his background and color. Graça thought he should not have been hanging around with a dark-skinned shantytown girl.

Living in a *favela* (urban shantytown) is automatically a class marker in Rio de Janeiro. As illustrated in the story above, there is also an underlying belief among the residents that those who are lighter-skinned or who have "whiter" characteristics have better chances of succeeding in life, including greater job opportunities<sup>15</sup> and even greater possibilities for leaving the poorest shantytowns and moving into neighborhoods that qualify as poor but respectable. Graça viewed herself as interested in protecting the best interests of her favorite nephew. Her discourse on "whitening"<sup>16</sup> consisted of a persistent discouragement of Robson from pursuing his romantic (and sexual) interest in Aninha. Her message, embedded in layers of humor such as the joke told at the opening of the article, would probably never be addressed in a serious conversation between her and Robson.<sup>17</sup>

Buried inside of Graça's joke is a codification of sentiments concerning both sexuality and race. Aninha, from Graça's perspective, is not worthy of serious attention from Robson because she is too dark-skinned. Similarly, underlying the complex positions on *democracia racial* or racial democracy that have challenged Brazilianist scholars since the 1950s is a codification of race inscribed into aesthetic valuations of sexual attractiveness that has nurtured both popular and elite visions of race in Brazil, but has not been addressed in the scholarly literature.

Emilce, Graça's best friend from childhood, is a dark black woman who recently "retired" after having worked many years as a *babá* (nanny) in the homes of rich white families in the South Zone of Rio. Emilce's 18-year-old daughter Neuza, who is also dark-skinned, became pregnant by a white boy from an economically more prosperous family living just outside of Felicidade Eterna. Because the boy had not taken any steps toward recognizing his relationship with Neuza nor his imminent paternity,

Emilce worked with her daughter to try to abort the child. They tried every poison imaginable but nothing worked.

Emilce is now herself 45 years old and the long-term "mistress" of a sergeant in the marines who she describes as tall, handsome, and black, and whom stays at Emilce's home one night a week. Emilce's youngest child, Rodenilsson, is the sergeant's child, and, according to Emilce, the sergeant has always been a fair and decent provider, not only for Rodenilsson and Emilce's other children, but for Emilce as well. She describes the economic security he provides her in the same context of explaining why she does indeed like him:

He helps a lot with things around the house. At times I am stupid, I don't request or demand. My deal with him is that if I am needing something, I go to the telephone and the same day he brings it. He lives a short distance from here. If I have this television—I am a widow and widows have a pension. I am a pensionist, but my pension wasn't enough to buy a television. If I have a television, it is because he gave it to me. This refrigerator—he gave it to me. If I have a roof, it was he who helped me. I constructed it. Now this man I really like. If I told you I didn't like him, I would be lying. He is the same [astrological] sign as my first husband. We understand one another. We never fight. [taped interview, 1992]

Emilce justifies her choice of being a mistress to a black man by emphasizing his status as a sergeant and his ability to provide her with economic security. Her discourse on romantic love is one that is intertwined with evaluations of a pragmatic sort, a position she shares with her other friends in Felicidade Eterna. A man's ability to provide is among the first few characteristics that low-income women mention in their own descriptions of an ideal partner.<sup>18</sup>

Emilce's grandchild, Wallace, came out very light-skinned. When Emilce appears in public with Wallace—shopping, taking a stroll, or carrying on some other grandmotherly activity—she is perceived by others to be his babá. Emilce remarks and laughs about her fate to once again be (mistaken as) a babá in the public eye. The links between color and class are particularly clearly drawn in the case of Emilce and her grandson Wallace. Color—hers and Wallace's taken together—is "naturally" perceived as an indicator of a class relationship. The irony of the story is that even with her own grandson—because he is so much "whiter" than she is—she cannot escape the automatic assumptions about their relationship. It is not so much that it is assumed that she is not related to the child. Rather, their presence together suggests a racialized class relationship: that of lower-class (black) nanny and upper-class (white) child. Emilce's friends smile when they see them out on the street together; grandmother and grandchild together play a visual joke on the world, and those who understand their "true" relationship get the joke and laugh.

Because color and class are so closely associated in Brazil, there is a taken-for-granted meaning in a black-skinned

woman caring for a white baby. Similarly, Graça's joke to Robson registers her disapproval of Robson's choice of a sexual (potential marriage) partner without making it necessary to directly announce her objections to Aninha's color. Aninha's color (and poverty) make her an inappropriate choice for Robson, an upwardly mobile black man, because in Graça's reading of the situation, Aninha has nothing to offer Robson.

These stories and their truncated contexts are examples of the way race is discussed, alluded to, joked about, and operated upon in the everyday lives of women in Felicidade Eterna. Race is bound up with a number of factors such as class, identity, and social and economic mobility. But race is specifically and yet subtly connected with sexuality, as I will argue in this article. In order to begin thinking about race and sexuality together, however, it is necessary to see how they work in the context of everyday discourses and to see where their presence is coded or silenced,<sup>19</sup> making interpenetration appear so normal that it is difficult, if not impossible, for the actors themselves to address them directly.

Despite the lack of legally sanctioned racism in Brazil, the structures of racism are present in everyday experiences. Because their existence and significance is often communicated in indirect forms of communication—jokes and coded silences—they are much more difficult to describe and challenge. For this reason, ethnographic approaches to race—ones that set out to capture how the discourses of color, race, racism, racial prejudice, and racialization permeate everyday life—are sorely needed. From my ethnographic data, I illustrate that race is embodied in everyday valuations of sexual attractiveness and that attractiveness is gendered, racialized, and class-oriented in ways that commodify black female bodies and white male economic, racial, and class privilege.

### Ana Flávia Peçanha de Azeredo: A Black Cinderella?

In 1993, *Veja*, Brazil's popular weekly news magazine, reported the case of Ana Flávia Peçanha de Azeredo, who was physically assaulted for delaying an elevator in a middle-class apartment building.<sup>20</sup> Because of her skin color, she was "mistaken" by her white assailants as a person not worthy of making others wait. In other words, she was assumed to be merely *preto e pobre* (black and poor) by her assailants, who assaulted her both verbally and physically. As it turned out, she was the 19-year-old daughter of the governor of the state of Espírito Santo, and she filed a racial discrimination suit against her attackers.

It is interesting that the *Veja* article described her as the "black Cinderella." Why Cinderella? Perhaps her attackers felt that they were rightfully throwing an imposter out of the ball. (Because in Brazil you would have to be a fairy-tale character to be both a governor's daughter and black.)<sup>21</sup>

The fact that their perceptions of her race masked to them the fact that she actually belonged at the ball, so to speak, again highlights the systemic relationship between race and class in Brazil.

In his article "Black Cinderella?: Race and the Public Sphere in Brazil" (1994b), Michael Hanchard, a political scientist, interprets this case as a "nail in the coffin" of the myth of racial democracy in Brazil. After all, here was a clear case of everyday racial discrimination and the perfect opportunity for a person with power to expose it. Hanchard uses this episode to suggest the development of an evolving racial polarization in Brazil, one that is beginning to make a clear-cut political distinction between black and white.

Her [Ana Flávia's] blackness in the eyes of her assailants implies a broadening of the category of negro/a in Brazil and more importantly an increasing polarization of racial categories. Her beating may signal that the mark of blackness has come to include Brazilians who are perceived as people of African descent, whether from Brazil or not. Unlike the distinctions between African- and Brazilian-born slaves in the previous century, Africanness—the parent symbol for blackness—no longer marks a place; it now marks a people. [Hanchard 1994b:178]

Peter Fry, in a series of publications (1995, 1995/1996), critiques Hanchard's previous work on the black consciousness movement (1994a) and his interpretation (1994b) of the Ana Flávia case. Fry argues that race/color casting in Brazil is highly situational and that racial bipolarization is more a desire of the politically correct North Americans and elite Brazilian classes and less a reality among the poorer and more popular segments of Brazilian society. Fry interprets Hanchard's work as subtly evolutionary in suggesting that an Americanized vision of race will lead to a more satisfactory form of race relations in Brazil. Fry instead highlights what he calls the "multiple mode"<sup>22</sup> of everyday racial discourse in Brazil—a discourse, that is, that appears to suggest that Brazilians conceptualize race as composed of multiple categories rather than as a simple dichotomy between black and white. In the process, Fry criticizes both *Veja* and Hanchard for having interpreted Brazil's race relations inappropriately, that is, from a North American perspective. He also suggests that the leaders of the Brazilian black consciousness movement are similarly out of touch with the majority of the population, who still think about and experience race situationally, with an eye for class differences.

To illustrate the complexity of popular Brazilian racial discourse, Fry takes the photograph of Ana Flávia and her father printed in *Veja* and uses it as a loosely constructed projective test to elicit descriptions from low-income Brazilians living in Rio de Janeiro. First, he presents the photograph from *Veja* of Ana Flávia and her father so that only the faces appear. Two "negro"<sup>23</sup> *garagistas* (men who care for the cars of middle-class individuals) whom Fry ques-

tions describe the governor and his daughter as either mulato and morena or mulata and moreno.<sup>24</sup> When Fry presents the entire photograph, revealing both the upper-class context of the two protagonists and the title of the article ("A Cinderela Negra"), the two *garagistas* laugh. Fry suggests that the wealthy surroundings, including the palatial room and the dress of the father and daughter, disqualified them from the category of negros in the eyes of the *garagistas*, causing them to burst out with laughter, as if Fry (and *Veja*) had played a visual joke on them. The implication was that they laughed as if they were wondering, *How could Veja describe her as negra while coming from that opulence?* Only the middle and upper classes, he contends, are succumbing to Americanized notions of race, while the popular classes continue to use multiple categories that rely heavily on signs of class.

While Fry recognizes the hierarchy within popular culture of African and European traits of inheritance, illustrated by descriptions of people as having *cabelo ruim* (bad hair) or a *nariz chato*<sup>25</sup> (flat nose), he suggests that such distinctions only become racist when African inheritances are valued as inherently inferior. He further suggests that there is some ambivalence in the negative evaluation of blackness, as evidenced by the large number of people who (when surveyed) choose their marriage partners across racial lines. Fry reproduces a table from the *Veja* survey (published in the same "Cinderela Negra" article) to illustrate his point that Brazilians cross racial lines in both their evaluation of beauty and in their choice of "ideal [marriage] partners." In this survey, informants were divided into black and white racial categories (Fry mentions that it is not stated in the article whether these are self-descriptions or descriptors used by the researchers) and then asked to choose their "ideal partner," with the choices consisting of white (branco), mixed-race (mulato), or black (negro). Fry notes what he considers to be the high percentage of positive responses concerning the mulato category (27% of whites and 31% of blacks said their "ideal partner" would be mulato) and suggests that the attitudes Brazilians have toward one another in the realm of sexual unions gives some credence to the notion that the "myth" of racial democracy may not be simply myth.<sup>26</sup> At the same time, however, I would note that of the whites surveyed, 53% preferred a white marriage partner, and of the blacks surveyed, 14% preferred a white partner and 37% a black partner. Significantly, the *Veja* survey was not broken down by gender.<sup>27</sup>

More critically, and what I particularly want to take issue with, is the fact that Fry's critique of Hanchard is based on the familiar Brazilianist notion that "Brazil is different" (i.e., not racist) because Brazilians celebrate (at least in their responses to the *Veja*-style surveys of ideal partner preferences) a "color-blind" sexuality, what I somewhat ironically call a "color-blind erotic democracy." The logic of Fry's scholarly argument is also repeated in the everyday

discourses of low-income Brazilians,<sup>28</sup> a discourse easily misread as a liberal attitude toward race and sexuality. What is more, Brazilian women living in shantytowns seem to be highly in touch with the notion of Brazilian exceptionalism in a concrete way. They point to interracial unions in their own communities as proof of their own nonracism and, conversely, point to the comparative lack of such unions in the North American context as an indictment of race relations there. Sexual 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. Thus, I would argue that Fry's defense of Brazilian racial democracy is held up in the everyday discourses of the low-income women I came to know and that it is supported by a relatively unexamined belief in Brazil's color-blind erotic democracy, a theme I will return to throughout this article.

But what, then, do we make of the case of Ana Flávia's assault? What, if not signs of race, with their corresponding negative class associations, motivated her attackers?

I agree with Fry that the racial discourse among the popular classes is multiple and intimately and ambiguously tied up with class, as my own examples illustrate. But Fry underestimates the effects of the negative valorizations of blackness and misses the contradictions inherent in the relationships between race and beauty and race and sexuality: that it is possible to see mixed-race sexual partners as ideal, even as more sensual and erotic, and yet evaluate "black characteristics" negatively, particularly in non-erotic contexts.

Hanchard effectively argues that the twin myths of racial exceptionalism (the idea that "Brazil is different") and racial democracy in Brazil, together with the maintenance of these myths by white elites, produce what he calls "Brazilian racial hegemony" (1994a:74). This racial hegemony impedes the black consciousness movement in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo and the development of a more general consciousness concerning racism and racial identity, discrimination based on race, and racial inequality.

Fry, on the other hand, rightly faults Hanchard for dismissing popular attitudes as merely expressions of "false consciousness." For Fry and many other anthropologists, taking such attitudes into account provides important clues to a more thorough understanding of people's discourses, practices, and behaviors. To dismiss them as misleading or irrelevant would be completely beside the point:

Another way to understand the problem is to take a more "anthropological" stance. When Hanchard and others describe racial democracy as myth, they do so because they understand myths to be false. They marshal the indisputable evidence on the existence of racial prejudice, discrimination and inequality in Brazil to debunk the "myth" of equality and harmony. Anthropologists, however, are more benevolent towards myths. They assume that they are not misguided untruths to be ex-

posed and denounced by superior Western knowledge, but rather ordered systems of social thought which enshrine and express fundamental understandings about society. [Fry 1995:7]

While my own ethnographic methods are consistent with many of Fry's anthropological concerns, tapping into the forms of shared consciousness among the popular classes, I am in many ways sympathetic to Hanchard's political project—one that delights in the public exposure and debunking of myths that function as ideological structures that mask racism. Underlying the Fry and Hanchard debate are two conflicting approaches to explaining the lack of racial consciousness among large portions of the Brazilian population, especially among the poorest, many of whom are dark-skinned and of partial African descent. Hanchard's approach adopts a neo-Gramscian position, emphasizing the hegemony of "racial democracy" as an effective ideology nurtured by Brazilian elites and functioning as common sense among the popular classes, impeding the rise of the black consciousness movement. Fry, rather than using "myth" in the ideological sense of the word as Hanchard does, employs "myth" as a category of popular consciousness that anthropologists ought to study in order to understand the (emic) perspectives of others.

Dismissing popular culture as false consciousness, as Hanchard's analysis implies, misses the expressions of resistance at play within them. But, to examine popular consciousness as disconnected from larger systems of power (race, gender, class, and sexuality)—as Fry seems to suggest—ignores much as well. Popular culture does not exist in a vacuum. I examine the form the myth of color-blind erotic democracy takes among low-income black women to illustrate how situations involving one particular form of interracial sexuality is fantasized about and played with. I seek to understand how everyday fantasies, discourses, and experiences of low-income black women inspire and constrain their approach to the issue of racial discrimination and induce particular racializing practices.

Using the notion of the black Cinderella, I examine one particular fantasy of interracial sexuality that involves the seduction of an older, richer, and usually whiter man referred to humorously as a *coroa*<sup>29</sup> (crown). This analysis suggests that blackness is valorized when it can be sexually consumed and calls for a more critical approach to analyzing Brazil's "color-blind erotic democracy."

By examining the fantasy of the black Cinderella within the broader context of everyday racializing practices as they are lived by low-income, dark-skinned women, I illustrate how it is possible for the actors to equate blackness with ugliness and yet to evaluate mulatas as ideal representatives of (black) sensuality. Further, I outline how experiences of racial discrimination are excused by these low-income women in particular contexts of interracial

sexuality, thereby nurturing an especially pernicious coded form of internalized racism.

### Brazilian Sexuality: History, Representation, and Scholarship

Brazil's "erotic paradise" has been celebrated in the historiography of colonialism and slavery, as well as throughout much of the more recent academic literature on sexuality in the 1980s and 1990s. It is also celebrated during Carnival and in the tourist brochures that present Brazil to the outside world. This celebration of Brazilian sexuality is intricately connected to the question of race because the major icon of "hot sexuality" in Brazil is the mulata, the mixed-race woman. Conversely, Brazilian understandings about race and color are intimately connected with Brazilians' representations of their own sexual history.

Gilberto Freyre, the extremely influential but controversial anthropologist/social historian trained at Columbia University under the guidance of Franz Boas, began writing about Brazilian race relations in the 1930s. Freyre described racial miscegenation between white male colonialists and indigenous females in the early days of Brazil's colonization and turned this unequal "love affair" into a celebration of interracial sexuality as well as into an argument for how Brazil was different and, indeed, morally superior to other New World countries such as the United States. Freyre not only described how Brazilians think, but also proposed a national ideology.<sup>30</sup> It is difficult, indeed, to separate Freyre the anthropologist/social historian from Freyre the intellectual ideologue. "The milieu in which Brazilian life began," Freyre wrote, "was one of sexual intoxication." He continued,

No sooner had the European leaped ashore than he found his feet slipping among the naked Indian women, and the very fathers of the Society of Jesus had to take care not to sink into the carnal mire; for many of the clergy did permit themselves to become contaminated with licentiousness. The women were the first to offer themselves to the whites, the more ardent ones going to rub themselves against the legs of these beings whom they supposed to be gods. They would give themselves to the European for a comb or a broken mirror. [(1946)1986:85]

His titillating imagery in which lascivious women of color "offer themselves to the whites" sets the tone not only for national ideology, but also for the underlying defense of *democracia racial*. Since he accomplished this in an era when biological theories of racism were fashionable, his writings were in their own time considered progressive, despite the absence of a critique of unequal power relations between the gendered, sexualized, and racialized subjects of his work.<sup>31</sup>

It was in the early colonial context, Freyre claims, that European men and "Indian" women began the widespread "mixing of the races." For Freyre, the Portuguese coloniz-

ers' inclination to idealize, in sexual terms, the dark-skinned woman (partially a result of the Moorish occupation of Portugal) fueled racial miscegenation and contributed to a lack of racial prejudice (at least compared to North American and European societies and other colonies at that time).<sup>32</sup> This attitude later extended toward slaves and, according to Freyre, created a less violent form of slavery in colonial and postcolonial Brazil than in other parts of the Americas. A recent biographical article about Freyre by the historian Jeffrey Needell (1995:57–58) suggests that Freyre's idealization of race relations in Brazil can be partly explained by his experiences of racism in the United States and his determination to contrast Brazil with North America.<sup>33</sup> Mutuality is coded in Freyre's writings. Freyre's blueprint of Brazilian sexuality requires critical analysis because of its historical context and because of his own (uncritical) position as an elite white male intellectual of his time. Freyre's concept of Brazil's racial democracy has been debunked in various ways by numerous scholars,<sup>34</sup> but his image of the sexualized slave, a seductress who is sexually insatiable and who uses her sexuality to enslave men, has found continued embodiment in everyday discourses, literature, and mass media that idealize the image of the mulata.<sup>35</sup> Freyre's depiction of an erotic democracy with its suggestion that "Brazil is different" is based on his uncritical and by now dated vision of master/slave sexuality. Nevertheless, his vision of master/slave interracial sexuality has played a key role in codifying both the idea of Brazil as a color-blind erotic democracy and as a racial democracy. This is important because the fantasy and practice of interracial sex (uncritically envisioned as a color-blind erotic democracy) distorts both popular and elite perceptions of contemporary race relations in Brazil. By fantasy, here, I mean the imagined possibility of crossing the class and color line in instances that are distinct from any actual measure of the frequency and direction of interracial unions. Few Brazilians can see themselves as racist in a highly conventionalized political economy of interracial desire. Mixed-race or black women (or idealized representations of such women) with certain "whitened" characteristics are appreciated for their beauty and sensuality, while the majority of low-income mixed-race and black women are barred from economic and social mobility. They are trapped at the bottom of several hierarchies at once—including that of race/color and class, even while they are exalted as hot, sexual mulatas. In contrast, the attractiveness of mixed-race and black men is not valorized to the same extent, indicating the complexity of the historical interaction of sexual, economic, and racial hierarchies in Brazil.<sup>36</sup> In fact, however, there seem to be many fewer interracial unions than most people assume. Hasenbalg et al. (1992) found that in Rio de Janeiro, "same-race" unions are more common than not: 55.9% of pairs are white-white, 14.5% are pairs where both partners are mixed race, and 6.3% are black-black pairs.<sup>37</sup>



It is interesting to note that after Freyre, discussions of race all but disappear from the scholarly work concerning Brazilian sexuality as if the topics, taken together, are just too difficult to address. Even though in the last 20 years there has been much groundbreaking work on sexuality in Brazil,<sup>38</sup> discussions of race are conspicuously absent from this scholarship. Despite the undisputed importance of Fry's (1982) and Parker's (1991) studies on sexuality in Brazil, their work reinforces the image of Brazil as an erotic paradise where gendered and racialized dimensions of the system, locations where inequality definitely exists, are downplayed or altogether ignored.

The absence of a concern with the politics of race in the contemporary accounts of Brazilian culture, as Skidmore observes, may be indicative of the taboo nature of this theme:

Brazilian scholars, especially from the established academic institutions, continue for the most part to avoid the subject of race, in virtually all its aspects, at least for the twentieth century. Indeed, Brazilians often regard non-Brazilians who pursue the subject as having misunderstood it. [(1974)1993:xi]

Talking about race with regard to sexuality in the Brazilian context becomes doubly troublesome. As is evidenced by the work of JanMohamed (1990) and others examining the relationship between race and sex under different colonial regimes and in postcolonial and diaspora settings,<sup>39</sup> it is clear that this taboo against bringing together discussions of race and those of sexuality has increasingly been broken down, yet this theoretical and topical move has been barely applied to Brazil.<sup>40</sup>

### The "Treasure Chest Coup": Female Fantasies of Seducing the Coroa

Many of the women I came to know through Graça believed that one of their best opportunities for "getting ahead" was their ability to seduce older, richer, whiter men, whom they referred to as *coroas*. The *coroa* is distinguished first by age and second by wealth or class, and only by implication as whiter—an older, richer, black person *could* be a *coroa*—but, in fact, the connotation of the word as used among these particular women is that the *coroa* is also whiter than they are.

In Felicidade Eterna, being a mixed-race or black female is not sufficient for being considered a hot, sexual *mulata*. The women in Graça's network rose in social status among their peers only when they proved that they could successfully seduce a *coroa*. A woman might thus be able to "overcome" her negatively valued dark skin or African characteristics by performing as a seductress. Given the low value these same women are apportioned in their everyday work situations, it is not surprising that they would value the art of seduction among themselves. To some extent, these women appear to adopt the dominant

elite ideology of Brazil as a racial democracy and erotic paradise, and they play with the various forms offered within their world, however imperfectly. They know that Brazil is not a racial democracy,<sup>41</sup> but they toy with the idea of an erotic democracy. The generally accepted equation is that a particular combination of white and black characteristics creates *mulata*<sup>42</sup> beauty, but it is white characteristics alone that can also qualify in another (higher) category of beauty. Purely African characteristics with no mixture of white characteristics are considered ugly. These categories defining beauty and ugliness turn sexual attractiveness into a racial matter.

The parables of upward mobility constitute a genre told by women among themselves. These narratives and the jokes surrounding them often include a woman, either black or mixed-race, who successfully seduces a man, the *coroa*, who is from a more fortunate background. In these stories, the woman is actively plotting and pursuing her goal. The successful woman does a *golpe do baú* (treasure chest coup).<sup>43</sup> The happy ending of the story is that the woman moves into the apartment of the *coroa* in a neighborhood that is not a favela and becomes comfortable or even wealthy. The fantasy is dependent on a *coroa* who is willing to be seduced. This is recognized as a realistic and legitimate, albeit rare, form of social mobility. It also serves to confuse the race issue because it is interpreted in fairy-tale terms: poor, clever, and seductive dark-skinned woman finds her rich, old, and white "crown." Gender, class, sexuality, and race, as well as beauty and age, are all intertwined in one story. Given the barriers preventing upward social mobility in Brazil, the promise of this fairy tale, with its magical solution, holds great appeal.<sup>44</sup>

In 1991, Graça told me that her friend Celia was on her way out of the favela, that she had found herself a *coroa* whose house she had been cleaning. Celia's employer had invited her to come with her children and live with him. For Graça and her friends, such cross-class/cross-color cases prove that white men who prefer dark-skinned women are "logically" not racist because they sexually desired dark-skinned women.<sup>45</sup> It did not seem to matter that Celia's partner-to-be was an elderly widowed man with grown children. They would be able to tease Celia mercilessly—working with the ageist assumption that an old man cannot satisfy a young sexual appetite—but would regard her story as a legitimization of Brazil's racial and erotic paradise.

This version of the black Cinderella includes seducing and capturing a whiter man. The fantasy is not entirely serious, however, since it is often mixed with humorous commentary related to his likely age, which the women associate with diminished sexual potency and the inability to satisfy the passions of the younger *morena* seductress. So, although at first glance the mixed-race and black women I refer to here seem easily, in both fantasy and occasionally



in reality, to cross racial and class boundaries, on closer inspection they are also ambivalent, making fun of the trade-off they would potentially be forced to make: receiving whiteness and wealth, but missing out on sexuality and passion. The adage I heard repeatedly in reference to coroa was, "The (only) one who likes old men is the walking cane."<sup>46</sup>

As a method of escaping from poverty, marrying or seducing a coroa is based on gendered and racialized values of attractiveness in an erotic market. Hence, men and women bring with them different sorts of capital to potential sexual encounters. Men's attractiveness is related to their economic well-being (although racial calculation is also important), and women's attractiveness is related to their beauty and sex appeal. It is important to highlight here that a coroa's money is a polysemic symbol embodying a culture of wealth. It refers to upper-class norms for behavior—including being well-mannered (e.g., not using crude language in public) and being "educated," the latter often implying what women living in the shantytown may perceive as the less macho attitudes of some elderly men, especially those from the middle and upper classes. The symbolic meaning of the coroa's money is important because poor women's fantasies of being crowned are not narrowly confined to the wish of escaping poverty, but are more broadly constructed as a means—should they be realized—of attaining a better life. Hence, low-income black women's desire to seduce a richer, lighter-skinned coroa cannot be equated with "false consciousness," but is rather based on mutual attractiveness, no matter how different and unequal the criteria for attractiveness are.

This is not to suggest that all women are seeking social mobility through a sexual partnership with their employers, of course, nor that all dark-skinned women are seeking out whiter partners.<sup>47</sup> But widespread discussion about the possibility of seducing a coroa illustrates conceptions of class as well as race and offers these women one of the few possibilities of social mobility available to the poorest, darkest-skinned segments of Brazilian society. It also empowers them in a culturally meaningful way, since the seduction requires a self-representation that emphasizes the heightened erotic powers of black sensuality. It is their black bodies, whose parts are described negatively in the context of African characteristics,<sup>48</sup> that they believe allow them the possibility, however remote, to manipulate their class situation.

The story of the coroa is interesting to consider in the context of age, class, sexuality, and gender, although it is actually race that is being socially weighed and sexually valorized. The coroa's whiteness, wealth, and class can make him attractive in spite of his age, and the seductress's darkness can make her attractive in spite of her race and poverty. Black female sexuality is valorized and considered erotic because it is suspended in a web of power relations that make it available in a particular way.<sup>49</sup> Blackness

becomes valuable only in specific situations where sexual commodification is the operational framework. Thus, the coroa story, in addition to reflecting an element of unequal gender exchange, also seems to reflect unequal racialized patterns of sexual exchange. This inequality has parallels inside same-race, same-sex, and same-class relationships.

In some sense, the coroa story is just one narrative genre illustrating a broader thematic subject among this group. For example, they were very open about the kinds of expectations they had of their partners and how they had to use their bodies as part of a broad strategy of economic survival.<sup>50</sup> Graça's 23-year-old neighbor, Marilse, depicts some of the taken-for-granted meanings embedded in the coroa relation when she discusses how she had to deceive a coroa into believing that he would receive sexual favors in return for his assistance (which he was able to provide because of his economic status) during the period of time her daughter Jessica was interned in a hospital.

My baby got sick and began to vomit—had a fever. My sister-in-law, who was spending a few days there, said, "Marilse, tomorrow we will take her to the doctor." My sister-in-law had a coroa who was giving her money. She phoned him and told him to come. When he got there he paid a private doctor to look at her. He got there and paid the bill and the doctor said, "Look, she has pneumonia and she has to be interned." And I was crying and everything. She was one year and two months old. He (the doctor) put her on intravenous, but didn't let us do anything. We could only come on the visiting day. The coroa who was with my sister-in-law was interested in helping. He was well-off and every day he would call there saying that he was the father of the girl—and asking how she was. . . . I told my husband that my brother had given me the money, but it was a lie, it was the coroa who gave me the money to pay (for the hospital). I was deceiving the coroa. I would speak with him and every day mark a time and that time would arrive and I would excuse myself saying I couldn't. He gave me all the money. Money to buy things. I rented a house with the money he gave me. [taped interview, 1995]

Marilse emphasizes that she was "deceiving" him because of the unspoken (and unfulfilled) expectation that the coroa would receive a sexual pay-off from her for his economic and intermediary (with the doctors and the hospital personnel) services.

It is perhaps no surprise that extremely low-income women with difficulty paying for decent medical care and who have negligible chances of structured economic mobility would consider trading their bodies for needed economic resources and that they would even pride themselves in their ability to succeed in surviving by attracting partners with economic resources. This particular theme is not unique to these women, but is rather part of the mainstream; economic mobility through marriage and/or sexual seduction is a favorite theme in Brazilian *telenovelas* (soap operas). In these *telenovelas*, the class-based motivation for seduction of a wealthy patron is a familiar scenario,<sup>51</sup>

but the role of race is usually left unmarked, since white actors are used in all roles. Pragmatic calculations of wealth certainly influence the survivalist sexual strategies of low-income women, and given the real economic and social status of whiteness, it too figures as one of the variables considered in evaluating a potential partnership.

### Race and Sexuality in Brazil

It is clear that rational economic calculation intersects with sexual desire in complex ways in communities like Felicidade Eterna where families are struggling with day-to-day survival. Here, the coroa story translates into the story of the "black Cinderella" in some interesting ways. First, it provides a grounded example of how an elite ideology celebrating Brazil's color-blind erotic democracy is correlated with a popular ideology visible in the fantasies of low-income women. It also provides an explanation of how blackness and black characteristics, which can be considered ugly in most situations, can in the context of commodified sexuality be eroticized and valorized. Further, this eroticization and valorization still leads many Brazilians to conclude that since interracial sexuality has never been regarded as taboo and "ideal partners" can be found among mixed-race individuals, then certainly Brazil cannot have the same sorts of racial problems found elsewhere. In its more extreme form, this relationship between race and sexuality provides the basis for the belief that Brazil is hardly racist at all. A reading of the latter kind ignores the way sexuality (acts and fantasies) is constructed through the prism of power, masking the inequalities associated with race, gender, and class.

The story of the black Cinderella—as told by Graça and her friends—is a story of hope told among low-income women. It has multiple meanings: one is that the way out of the favela is to seduce a coroa; the other, a more subtle meaning that I want to emphasize, is that the coroa, desiring his domestic servant, is *therefore* not racist. In this discourse, the intimacy of sexual relations and the willingness to take the low-income dark-skinned woman in as a companion are thought to neutralize the class exploitation and racism that exist in actual practice. The morena is said to use all of her sexual potency and innate sensuality in order to intoxicate the coroa. The seduction of the coroa is clearly a gendered, racialized, and sexualized popular vision of social mobility, but it is also a story of mistreSSHood. The tendency is to interpret the sexual desire of these men as a signal of a liberal, even enlightened racial worldview and not as part of a racially and economically skewed system. The fantasy creates a context in which these women participate in their own sexual commodification. In Brazil, it is widely believed that miscegenation and racism are contradictory, yet it is precisely their superficially uncomplicated coexistence that is part of Brazil's uniqueness.

### Hierarchies of Beauty

When Graça and Dalva, her white *comadre*,<sup>52</sup> are sitting around having a beer together and drinking a bit of "café,"<sup>53</sup> they exchange stories about their hopes for their children. In most of these conversations, there are recognized areas of agreement between friends. Black or African characteristics such as kinky hair and flat noses are considered ugly. Black is made beautiful in this context by the addition of white features, but whiteness has a high value by itself.

Dalva wants her two youngest daughters, who are white, to go to the Xuxa modeling school in Botafogo, a wealthy neighborhood in the South Zone of Rio. Xuxa, one of Brazil's symbols of beauty, has blonde hair and blue eyes and during the last ten years has hosted the most popular children's show in Brazil.<sup>54</sup> Although Graça and Dalva both live in Felicidade Eterna, these two friends are not exactly equals. Dalva has a white husband who works as a long-distance truck driver and sends home enough money monthly to keep Dalva's bar—an open window with a ledge serving as a counter—stocked with food and liquor and to maintain enough liquidity to give everyone in Felicidade Eterna credit until payday. Graça, who works as a housecleaner and is paid a subsistence-level daily wage, is economically alone and responsible for numerous children. In any case, Graça agrees that Dalva's daughters ought to go to the Xuxa school. Graça and Dalva implicitly agree that whiter means more beautiful, at least in regard to the categories established by the Xuxa modeling school. Graça's children could never enter the school, regardless of financial issues, because they are too black.

Although the major defining characteristic of their everyday discourses on race and color could be described as multiple and ambiguous, in specific situations degrees of blackness and whiteness were recognized and acknowledged as part of an accepted scale of beauty with black at the ugly end of the scale. In the Xuxa modeling school context, whiteness was openly recognized as more valuable.

Dalva told a story of how, during a previous period in her life, she had worked as the nanny in a private home in Rio's wealthy South Zone. At one point, her employers were overworking her by having her do chores outside of the realm of a nanny, despite the fact that in the household a domestic worker was present. In one moment of anger, when her employers were making unreasonable demands on her, Dalva told them, "I think you are mistaken [in cursing me and calling me ignorant] because your domestic worker is black."

There is a double meaning in Dalva's words, which Dalva herself explained to me. One is that there was a domestic worker already in the house and, as Dalva explained, "I am not her. I am blonde and I was hired as the *babá*." The second meaning is overtly racial, with Dalva meaning, *I am white and I don't do the work of a black*

person. Dalva was thus able to use her blond hair and white skin to protect herself from degrading treatment in a particularly bad work situation. A racist discourse allowed her to defend herself against her employers. She also relied on the common-sense understanding that it is darker-skinned people who do the dirty work.

Dalva had no reservations about telling this story to Graça. Women of all skin colors in Felicidade Eterna make constant reference to *aquele escurinho, aquele neguinho, mas gente finíssima* (that little dark one, little black person, but a very fine person). Blackness is often equated with bad character and is qualified by using the conjunction *but*.<sup>55</sup> In this construction, someone can be dark-skinned *but* a fine person at the same time. Dalva often cited her half-brother in this manner, describing his dark skin color, then referring to his fine character.

Dalva's mother, who lived a few shacks away from Dalva, refers to her German ancestry to explain her own white skin and blonde hair. One of her husbands was a dark-skinned black man and this explains the wide phenotypic gap between Dalva and her half-brother. Dalva's story, without any context, would provide an easy illustration of classic racist discourse. However, in checking out this interpretation with Graça later, I learned that *she* did not consider it racist *because* of the long history of interracial marriage in Dalva's family. Graça's interpretation, that interracial sex and marriage preclude racism, is paralleled in scholarly literature that argues for Brazilian exceptionalism.

### Two Kisses

In 1991, I accompanied Graça on a visit to one of her employers—white, male, and over 60 years old—whom she considered and referred to as a *coroa*. He was an elite gentleman, recently widowed, and he lived in the rich South Zone. Three of us, including Celia, Graça's friend from Felicidade Eterna who already had her own romance with a *coroa*, went to help Graça complete her duties in his apartment on this particular day. When we arrived, he greeted me with two kisses, one on each cheek, the traditional *Carioca* (native of Rio) greeting. I noticed that he barely said hello to Celia and neglected to greet either Celia or Graça with two kisses. When we left his apartment, he gave me two more courteous kisses. His neglect of Graça and Celia did not mean anything to me, since I had interpreted the greeting and good-bye kisses as part of a ritual of introduction.<sup>56</sup> For Graça and Celia, however, not being kissed took on a significance that is important to consider in light of the context within which they live: the absence of two kisses inspired Graça and Celia to speak directly about racism—something they seldom did. I followed up on their reactions in later conversations, attempting to understand why this incident provoked such strong sentiments, while other more racially charged occurrences

that had appeared more severe to me were dismissed as “not meaning anything.”

Graça, who is respected and regarded as a tough woman in Felicidade Eterna, rides a separate elevator in her employers' buildings, seemingly without complaint; she dresses in a separate room, uses a separate bathroom, and eats apart from those for whom she cooks and cleans. Significantly, this separation is normalized, while the omitted kiss is not. Distinctly unlike Ana Flávia Peçanha de Azeredo, the black Cinderella discussed by Fry and Hanchard, Graça abides by the segregating practices applied across classes, but somehow those practices are normalized while the evaded kisses are not. Why?

Graça often referred to this episode—the two kisses—as an example of racism among middle-class and rich people. Her experience of racism seemed to be profoundly felt in this particular moment of physical rejection. She viewed her employer's aversion to the two kisses (for her, an aversion to physical intimacy) as racist. Conversely, interracial physical contact, including sexuality, she viewed as proof of a nonracist attitude. Graça was able to bear the fact that her employer paid her a subsistence wage and subjected her to various forms of segregation, but she was seriously upset by the tangible physical distance that he emphasized when he refused to say good-bye properly.<sup>57</sup>

### Conclusions: Black Cinderella and Black Consciousness Politics

In this article, I have examined one particular fantasy of interracial sexuality among low-income, dark-skinned women living in shantytowns in Rio. In it, I have given voice to female perspectives concerning Brazil's erotic paradise and have argued that sexuality and race are intimately connected and ought to be analyzed together. In Brazil's carnivalization of desire, the ideal representation of the mulata is eroticized, exoticized, and celebrated, while real women of color are kept from mainstream economic advancement. Contemporary scholars of sexuality have avoided the connection between race and sexuality, thus preserving the notion that Brazilian sexuality guarantees an implicit color-blind erotic democracy.

Graça and her friends fantasize and tease one another about seducing older, richer, whiter men. In the process, they racialize their own bodies, approximating in certain ways the images of the hot, sexual mulata that form part of Brazil's self-representation as a racial democracy. Sexual discourses about black or mixed-race women are in this manner appropriated and reproduced by the women themselves. However, in both the rare discussion of racism by Graça initiated by her employer's physical avoidance of her and in the more mundane conversations among her friends concerning the taken-for-granted nature of black ugliness and white beauty, as well as in the everyday experiences of racism, there is evidence that suggests that the

underlying belief and thorough investment in the idea of a color-blind erotic democracy in Brazil actually contributes to the preservation of the myth of racial democracy among low-income black and mixed-race women. It prevents them, consequently, from joining a mass movement that challenges the racializing practices that reproduce racism in Brazil.<sup>59</sup> There is also evidence that underlying the stubborn defense of the myth of racial democracy by contemporary scholars such as Fry, an uncritical and inaccurate (Freyrean) vision of interracial sexuality is being maintained. Although the practices associated with interracial sex may be consensual in a legal sense, they are anything but egalitarian.

When the statistics concerning the "failure" of the black consciousness movement are read, they seem consistent with what Fry (1995) refers to as a "still highly assimilationist Brazil." Fry cites a 1986 survey on attitudes toward activism in São Paulo:

When asked what blacks and mulattos should do to defend their rights, 75.3 per cent of the black and mulatto respondents and 83.1 per cent of whites replied that they would prefer to see the formation of a movement composed of whites, mulattos, and blacks. Less than 10 per cent of each category thought that the problem should be addressed either individually or by an exclusively black movement. [1995:7]

Fry argues that facts such as these make Brazil "different," a point that attractively negates the possibility of reducing Brazilian race relations to a formula comparable to those in the United States. However, such an argument is also reminiscent of what Hanchard terms "Brazilian exceptionalism" with regard to race, an argument that he sees as having contributed to the racial hegemony that exists in contemporary Brazil. I have to agree with Hanchard's assessment. Embedded in the "Brazil is different" argument is a dated celebration of Brazilian miscegenation that uncritically supports the notion of a Brazilian color-blind erotic democracy. The fantasy of seducing a coroa held by low-income mixed-race women provides evidence of a pattern of erotic calculation that is neither democratic, nor egalitarian, nor idiosyncratic; rather, it is instead tied to the economic correlations of blackness in Brazil. The black Cinderellas of Felicidade Eterna were not interested in embracing a black consciousness movement,<sup>59</sup> in part, at least, because of their investment in the beliefs related to black female sexual allure and a color-blind erotic democracy.

It is time to bring a deeper comprehension to the nature of eroticized racism, rather than simply declare that Brazil is different. JanMohamed (1990:99) also suggests we explore race and sexuality together. He asks, "Why does the regular crossing of the racial border through racialized sexuality not enter the daylight of discursivity along with other supposedly hidden aspects of sexuality?" In Brazil, racialized sexuality occurs in specifically gendered and commodified patterns that are entirely taken for granted.

Unless we understand these constructions and recognize the prominent role that class, gender, and sexual power differentials play, we tend to either underestimate the significance of racism in Brazil (Fry) or overestimate the significance of the emergence of a black consciousness movement there (Hanchard). Many mixed-race and black women who might otherwise feel, and scrutinize, the pangs of everyday racism in their lives and enthusiastically enter into racial identity politics are instead caught at the edge of economic survival, tethered to ambivalent fantasies of social and, in a sense, racial mobility.

The idea that Brazil is a color-blind erotic democracy—that the power associated with gender, race, and class plays no role in sexual partnerships—helps to mask and normalize everyday racism and internalized racism in Brazil.

## Notes

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1. I place the word *interracial* inside quotation marks because I want to acknowledge that this is not a word that is used in Portuguese. More importantly, I want to highlight the socially constructed nature of "race" as it is used throughout this article.

2. I use the term *black* here because she often described herself as *preta*. *Morena* is the "polite" term used by people in the shantytown to describe themselves or others who may span the color spectrum from various shades of white to black, but usually denotes people of African descent.

3. The working title of this book, which is focused on the "black" humor of the women living in Rio's shantytowns, is *Why Are They Laughing? Violence, Sexuality, and Survival in a Brazilian Shantytown*.

4. See Goldstein (1992, 1994a, 1994b, 1996) for an analysis of the relationship between low-income women's sexuality

and the AIDS epidemic in Brazil and a discussion of the distinct kinds of information one can collect using different methods (i.e., individual interviews versus focus group interviews) of data collection.

5. Indeed, Brazil is closer to other parts of Latin America and the Caribbean in terms of its construction of race. It is only different when compared with the United States. Robert Stam (1997) has recently argued, however, that Brazil and the United States *are* indeed eminently comparable.

6. There are a number of classic articles in this field of racial categories. See Harris (1964a), Kottak (1963), and Sanjek (1971).

7. In the United States, one is legally either black or white, although this dichotomy is undergoing serious challenge and revision. The rise of identity politics and multiculturalism has challenged these constructions. Even the recent U.S. census is acknowledging more categories.

8. The 1980 Brazilian Census used four categories: black (preto), white (branco), yellow (amarelo), and mixed-race (pardo) (Harris et al. 1993), categories that avoid some of the multiplicity and the richness found in everyday discourse.

9. See Sheriff (1997) for a recent critique of these conventional understandings of racial classification in Brazil.

10. See also Goldstein (1998).

11. *Preta* and *negra* both mean black and are used interchangeably as race/color terms. Both words can be softened in Brazilian Portuguese by adding the diminutive-*inha*, in order to lessen the impact of calling someone black, which can easily be interpreted as insulting. Maggie (1988)—cited in Hanchard (1994a)—notes that *negro* is rarely used to describe friends or those one is directly in contact with. I found this to be true in Felicidade Eterna, although context made all the difference.

12. Hasenbalg (1985) and Silva (1985) have calculated the effect of race on socioeconomic mobility and social inequality and have documented the lack of upward social and economic mobility among nonwhites in Brazil. See also Andrews (1991). One recent calculation estimates that of a total population of 155 million, approximately 45% are black or mixed-race, and nearly 40% of the nonwhites have four years or less of schooling (Moffett 1996). The income of whites is, on average, more than double that of blacks, and blacks are almost invisible in the professions.

13. *Brincadeira* is the word used for joking and teasing.

14. Freud ([1905]1963), the first to consider jokes seriously, suggested that humor is an expression of socially unacceptable sexual or aggressive impulses.

15. Silva (1985) argues that lighter-skinned (mixed-race) people do not fare better in terms of socioeconomic mobility and social equality than darker-skinned people. What I mean here is that Graça and other low-income people still believe that lighter skin has significant advantages even if research findings conclude differently. See Shapiro (1996) for similar claims.

16. Twine (1998) and Shapiro (1996) both found evidence of such “whitening” discourses.

17. Speaking directly about race is often considered impolite. See also Sheriff (1997).

18. See Rebhun (in press) for a fascinating study of love in Northeast Brazil. Rebhun finds that women often use an economic idiom in describing their love interests.

19. JanMohamed (1990) suggests that racialized sexuality is a silenced topic. My own research on sexuality argues that women’s discourses on sexuality (Goldstein 1994c, 1996) are silenced by a prevailing “*sexo é bom*” (sex is good) discourse. Sheriff (1997) views the silence surrounding racism in Brazil as central to understanding the meaning of race in Brazil generally.

20. See Veja (1993:66–73).

21. The fact that a nonwhite was elected to this high government position is rare in Brazil. See Podesta (1993)—cited in Twine (1998)—who notes the extremely low numbers of elected black officials at the federal level. There is a similar dearth of black elected officials at the state and local levels.

22. Fry (1995/1996) is commenting on what he and other writers on Brazilian race relations have noted to be a plethora of terms used commonly in everyday conversation by low-income Brazilians. This multiple mode includes words that refer to mixed-race and/or mixed color such as *moreno(a)*, *morena clara*, *mulato(a)*, *mulato fechado*, *pardo*, *criolo*, *neguinho*, *pretinho*.

23. Fry (1995/1996) shows his projective test to a number of people whom he also asks to describe their own appearance. Two men who work in a garage describe themselves as negro.

24. Both are “polite” terms signifying mixed-race, and they seem to have been used interchangeably between Fry and his informants.

25. *Chato* means “lousy” in Portuguese, but together with “nose” is understood to mean a flat or wide nose, features culturally defined as ugly and associated with African descent.

26. Fry himself suggests that the survey presented in “A Cinderela Negra” is somewhat problematic because it does not reveal how the racial categories of the informants were determined. However, he uses the survey to make the point about “ideal” partners.

27. Leaving gender unmarked significantly skews this survey because, as I argue, *mulata* and *mulato* (female and male mixed-race persons) are in no sense equivalent in meaning or connotation. See also Corrêa (1996).

28. It is also present in scholarly venues. A white North American colleague of mine told me of an exchange she had with a Brazilian colleague when she revealed to him that she intended to study racism in Brazil. He asked her whether or not she had ever slept with a black man and suggested that because Brazilians form sexual unions across color lines (and the implication is that North Americans do not), racism does not exist there.

29. *Coroa* as used in this article and in this context refers to an older, richer, whiter man. The word actually means “crown” and refers to regal authority. The *Novo Dicionário Aurélio* (First Edition, Fifteenth Printing) notes its usage in slang as, “one passing from maturity to old age.” It also means tonsure or a bald spot on the head. The word seems to have different meanings in different contexts. Rebhun (forthcoming) finds that in Northeast Brazil, the common meaning of *coroa* is that of an older unmarried woman, while Fonseca (1992), whose research site was in Porto Alegre, found that

*coroa* referred to a married man who sustained a single mother and her children.

30. See Parker (1991:21–29).

31. Scholars tend to interpret Freyre in varied ways, depending on the focus of their scholarship. His works certainly contain contradictory images and interpretations of Afro-Brazilian women living within the slave/patriarchal system. Parker (1991) notes the ambiguity of Freyre's discussion of slave sexuality but interprets his work as promoting a generally positive perspective on the nature of sexual interaction and racial mixture. Hanchard (1994a), following the line of argument that began with black activist and scholar Abdias do Nascimento (1979), notes the absence of rape from Freyre's discussion of slave sexuality and calls into question the accuracy of his descriptions of consensual sex. This attention to Freyre derives from the general recognition that his work promoted the idea of racial democracy in Brazil (Skidmore [1974]1993).

32. See Harris (1964b).

33. Needell argues that much of Freyre's celebration of miscegenation "derives from an evocation of the sexual relationship between privileged white boys and *mulata* servants" (1995:69)—a relationship that Freyre boasts of having experienced firsthand. Freyre never emphasized rape as a central component of white plantation owner/slave miscegenation and instead suggested a level of mutuality underlying Brazilian sensuality and Brazilian color-blind erotic democracy.

34. In the 1950s, UNESCO sponsored research on racial democracy Brazil. While recognizing the existence of racial prejudice in Brazil, the researchers nevertheless maintained that it was relatively insignificant vis-à-vis class prejudice and discrimination. This is especially true of the North American researchers. See Wagley ([1952]1963) for one of the more significant anthropological publications derived from this research. See also Fernandes (1969), Fernandes and Bastide (1955), and Harris (1964a). Since these early researchers, there have been numerous others who have explored race as separate from class. For examples, see Andrews (1991), Hasenbalg and Silva (1988), and Silva and Hasenbalg (1992). See Winant (1994) for an excellent summary and interpretation of the race relations literature in Brazil.

35. Corrêa argues that the *mulata* has been created as a mythic figure in the Brazilian national imaginary; she is "desirable," "sensual," "pure body," or "sex."

36. The original construction of colonial "desire" in Brazil was between white landowners and their female slaves, a history that has certainly structured this difference. Black and mixed-race men are also trapped at the bottom of a number of hierarchies, but they are not exalted for their sexual appeal to the same extent women are.

37. See also Telles (1993).

38. See, for example, Fry (1982), Gaspar (1985), Muraro (1983), Parker (1991), Trevisan (1986), and Vainfas (1986, 1989).

39. See, for example, Brown (1998), Collins (1990), Gilman (1985), Hyam (1986), Stoler (1989, 1995), and Young (1995).

40. Only with Nestor Perlongher's (1987) *O negócio do michê: Prostituição viril em São Paulo* (The Business of the

*Michê: Male Prostitution in São Paulo*) does race re-enter scholarly discussions of Brazilian sexuality. Building upon the work of Fry, this ethnography examines the economies of desire (both literal and symbolic) within the world of male prostitution in São Paulo. Perlongher highlights the fact that the *michês* (males who prostitute for other males) are for the most part young, poor, and black or mixed-race, while their clients are generally older, richer, and whiter. His ethnography illustrates how racial discrimination functions in this particular world among both *michês* and clients. For Perlongher, the "business of the *michê*" is simultaneously a sexual, racial, and economic transaction. Perlongher's ethnography, while limited to one particular population, highlights the intersection of race, class, and sexuality and describes how power is inscribed in the construction of these relations. It also illustrates the situational nature of racial "Othering": in one situation prostitutes use their blackness to advertise their virility to whiter-skinned clients and thereby obtain higher prices, while in other situations, darker-skinned clients are viewed as less desirable because of their color. While Perlongher's work addresses race and sex together, it shares with Fry (and Parker) an almost exclusive focus on male sexuality. This fact clearly limits their usefulness in framing a broader discussion of sexuality in Brazil. See also Kulick (1997).

41. I say this here because there are other discourses, not within the scope of the themes addressed in this article, that show that there are strong moments of racial consciousness, such as in people's descriptions of interactions with the police. In these discourses, there is a strong sense that color is highly correlated with a lack of citizenship.

42. See Giacomini (1988) and Corrêa (1996).

43. "*Golpe do baú*" appears in the *Novo Michaelis* dictionary as "marriage for economic interest." The treasure chest coup refers to the fact that the woman is marrying or seducing for money. The English term *gold digger* refers to an equivalent scenario.

44. Twine (1996) finds that rural upwardly mobile Afro-Brazilian women are less likely than their male counterparts to perceive racism in their everyday lives, one of the reasons being their belief that they are romantically and sexually appealing to whiter men. Sheriff (1997) suggests that women are more reluctant to interpret others' behavior as racist than are men because they tend to encounter racism in intimate contexts that are charged with ambivalent emotions.

45. Twine (1996) encountered similar attitudes among rural Afro-Brazilian women in the northwest interior of the state of Rio de Janeiro.

46. The references to age with regard to sexuality in the shantytown reveal ageist stereotypes. Anthropologist L. A. Rebhun shared a joke from Northeast Brazil with me that illustrates a similar point and translates something like this:

A young woman went to bed with an old man (*velho*). She thought that since he was too old, he wouldn't manage a screw and that he would die before the first one. She says, "I am going to marry an old man (*velho*), kill him, and keep his money." Arriving in the room, the old man goes to change while she is smiling and thinking, "I am going to kill this *coroa*." A little bit later, the old man arrived with a hard dick with a condom on and some cotton in his ears and



a clothes pin on his nose. The woman got scared and asked what it all was. He responded that there are two things that make him really mad: the groans of a woman and the smell of burnt rubber!

47. In fact, according to Silva (1992), endogamous racial unions are most common throughout all regions in Brazil. There is also an overall pattern of darker-skinned men with lighter-skinned women prevailing as well. Using the PNAD data for 1980, he tested the hypothesis that there would be a "status compensation" in cases of interracial marriages, but found that this was not confirmed by the data, even in the cases where the man was of darker skin color than his wife.

48. It was only in 1996 that the first black magazine featuring black models appeared. See, for example, "Black, Proud and Brazilian," *Boston Globe*, September 21, 1996, A2.

49. In the context of male prostitution, black male sexuality is valued in the prostitute but not in the client (Perlongher 1987).

50. This broad strategy of economic survival also pertained to a complicated sexual interest in foreigners. See also Bourgois (1995) and Kuznesof (1991).

51. One telenovela that played during 1990–91, *Dono do Mundo*, depicted various versions of cross-class sexual transgressions, including the opening episodes in which the central character, a wealthy plastic surgeon, titillated by the alleged virginity of the fiancée of one of his employees, bets that he can "deflower" the future bride before her husband. Many of the subplots revolve around the way in which the poor characters strategize to use their beauty and sensuality in exchanges with the wealthy.

52. *Comadre* refers to the friendship resulting from Dalva's role as godparent to one of Graça's children.

53. Literally coffee, but this is Graça's reference to the mixture of coffee and *cachaça* (rum liquor) she usually drinks.

54. She is also one of the richest women in the world. See Simpson (1993) for a more detailed analysis of the Xuxa phenomenon. It is interesting to note that Xuxa's career was catapulted through her liaison with Pelé, the black soccer star, but her television show and modeling school lack a multiracial representation of Brazilian beauty (at least through the early 1990s).

55. Sheriff (1997) makes a similar point.

56. It did not occur to me at the time that my whiteness was the important factor in this interaction. I was introduced as her "white daughter" and also assumed by him to be another employer of Graça.

57. I want to add here the possibility that my presence and my interest in Brazilian racial inequality may have triggered Graça to view this situation as a serious case of racism. Obviously, the fact that he offered me the two kisses upon arrival and at departure provided a basis for comparing his behavior toward each of us.

58. By making this analysis, I don't mean to say that this is a permanent condition or that black consciousness politics are doomed to fail. I also don't mean to say that there is no organized resistance. This important theme cannot be adequately covered in this article. GELEDES, a black women's institute in São Paulo, for example, has worked hard specifically to raise the consciousness of black women, but has experienced

problems similar to those faced by the broader black consciousness movement.

59. The women in *Felicidade Eterna* had very little knowledge or interest in the *Movimento Negro* (Black Movement) even though they recognized that racial prejudice and discrimination exist in Brazil. For a thorough treatment of race, racism, and discourses of race among low-income black people in Rio de Janeiro, see Sheriff (1997).

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