

**Alternative Temporalities:
U.S. Post-Racialism and Brazilian Racial Democracy**

*Sharon Stanley
University of Memphis
sastanly@memphis.edu
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Racial politics and racial identities in the United States and Latin America have long served scholars and activists in both countries as useful foils for each other. During the period of Jim Crow in the United States, Latin American academics, activists, and politicians proudly distinguished their own alleged lack of racial segregation and subordination from the byzantine, anti-black legal regime in the U.S. South. Indeed, as Tanya Katerí Hernández observes, “the deployment of strategic comparisons to the U.S. racial regime” functioned throughout Latin America to depict the region as racially innocent and therefore superior to its ostensibly more democratic, but really irredeemably racist, Northern neighbor.¹ Many advocates for racial justice in the United States also found this fantasy of Latin American racial egalitarianism attractive. No country was cited more frequently than Brazil as an example of a harmonious racial democracy that exposed the horrors and hypocrisies of U.S. racial domination.² Whereas the U.S. policed racial boundaries and established a harsh, bipolar color line via the notorious “one drop of black blood” statutes, Brazil, it was said, proudly embraced racial mixture (*mestiçagem*) as a founding principle of the Brazilian nation and rejected categorical

¹ Tanya Katerí Hernández, *Racial Subordination in Latin America: The Role of the State, Customary Law, and the New Civil Rights Response* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 9.

² See, for example, David Hellwig, *African-American Reflections on Brazil's Racial Paradise* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1992). While the myth of Brazil as a racial paradise was increasingly questioned by North American blacks during and after World War II, Hellwig devotes Part I of the book to examples of prominent U.S. black intellectuals, including W.E.B Du Bois and Cyril Briggs, singing the praises of Brazil's egalitarian racial relations.

racial distinctions in favor of a fluid “color” system rooted in phenotype rather than (imagined) biology. The depiction of Brazil as a tropical, multiracial paradise persists to this day as a kind of erotic fever dream in tourism marketing campaigns and in the Brazilian popular consciousness itself, even as it is widely recognized as a dangerous distortion of Brazilian history and the Brazilian present.

Such comparisons between U.S. racism and Brazilian racial democracy have fallen out of favor for very compelling reasons. First, the end of Jim Crow as a legal regime in the United States neutralized the foundational distinction between the two countries. Second, the very idea of Brazil as a “racial democracy” has been systematically debunked. Brazilians and U.S. observers alike now recognize that intense racial inequality marks nearly every sphere of Brazilian life, including education, employment, income, housing, health, mortality, and exposure to police violence and incarceration.³ In fact, according to many measures, Brazil fares even worse than the United States: “Comparatively, Brazil’s racial gap is far greater than the United States, because Brazil’s nonwhite population is less likely to be in the middle class and because of its greater income inequality in general.”⁴ Third, perceptions of racial identification may be converging in the two countries for a variety of reasons, most notably including the growing Latin@ immigrant population in the U.S. and the growing use of a *negro*

³ For a comprehensive analysis of racial inequality in contemporary Brazil, see Edward Telles, *Race in Another America: The Significance of Skin Color in Brazil* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004). For evidence from polling that a majority of Brazilians of all colors recognize that Brazil is not, in fact, a racial democracy, see Stanley R. Bailey, “Group Dominance and the Myth of Racial Democracy: Antiracism Attitudes in Brazil,” in *American Sociological Review* 69 (2004): 728-747 and Graziella Moraes Silva and Marcelo Paixão, “Mixed and Unequal: New Perspectives on Brazilian Ethnoracial Relations,” in *Pigmentocracies: Ethnicity, Race, and Color in Latin America*, ed. Edward Telles (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 172-217.

⁴ Telles, *Race in Another America*, 137.

category in Brazil to capture all Afro-descendant populations.⁵ Hence, the U.S. is adopting more features of a multipolar racial system while Brazil is adopting more features of a bipolar racial system. In the face of such developments, comparative scholarship on race in the U.S. and Brazil has definitively dismantled the simplistic antithesis between Brazilian racial innocence and U.S. racial guilt.

Yet comparisons between the two countries persist. Indeed, a growing number of scholars now see the debunked myth of Brazilian racial democracy as a useful warning for the post-Jim Crow United States. In his well-known three-way comparison of Brazil, the United States, and South Africa, Anthony Marx concludes by cautioning readers against any naïve celebration of the increasing “Brazilianization” of the U.S.: “Color-blindness in Brazil has been devastating for Afro-Brazilians; recent calls for such color-blindness in the United States, for instance by the Supreme Court, may also prove devastating to efforts at redress by African-Americans. What appears liberal is not.”⁶ Echoing Marx, Hernández notes that the very success of the U.S. civil rights movement in its struggle against statutory Jim Crow has placed the racial justice movement in the U.S. in a comparable position to the Afro-Brazilian movement—“struggling against racial hierarchy without formal legal discrimination as a target.”⁷ And the lesson from Brazil is simple: “Bluntly stated, a critical examination of the Brazilian ‘racial democracy’ delivers the powerful message of ‘don’t believe the hype,’ for a U.S.

⁵ These explanations are drawn from Thomas E. Skidmore, “Bi-Racial U.S.A. vs. Multi-Racial Brazil: Is the Contrast Still Valid?” in *Journal of Latin American Studies* 25.2 (1993): 373-386. But see also Peter Fry, “Politics, Nationality, and the Meanings of ‘Race’ in Brazil,” in *Daedalus* 129.2 (2000): 83-118, for a critique of the idea that racial identities and categories in Brazil and the United States are converging.

⁶ Anthony Marx, *Making Race and Nation: A Comparison of the United States, South Africa, and Brazil* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 273-274.

⁷ Hernández, *Racial Subordination in Latin America*, 172.

audience otherwise subject to the deceptive allure of ‘post-racial’ discourse.”⁸ Alexandre Emboaba Da Costa echoes Hernández’s warning and interprets “the Brazilian post-racial” as “one manifestation of a broader, interconnected post-racial and multicultural moment in the Americas.”⁹ Both Hernández and da Costa see the myth of Brazilian racial democracy as a specific instance of a hemispheric ideology of post-racialism that functions to silence dissent and obscure structural inequalities and persistent racial injustice. And their message is undeniably persuasive. We in the U.S. certainly would be well-advised to study the history of racial democracy in Brazil and heed its warnings before we embrace the narrative of a post-racial United States.

At the same time, though, there is something immediately peculiar about the use of the term “post-racialism” to refer to the Brazilian myth of racial democracy. The prefix “post” indicates a specific historical narrative: we have somehow gotten past, or moved beyond, or transcended an earlier “racial” period. Brazilian racial democracy makes no such claim. Quite the contrary, it insists that Brazil was *always* marked by harmonious racial relations such that racial discord and strife is fundamentally un-Brazilian. It would be more accurate to describe Brazilian racial democracy as a “never-racial” rather than a “post-racial” ideology. In contrast, the U.S. post-racial narrative does acknowledge a racist past, usually identified with slavery and Jim Crow, but claims a fundamental break from that past in which the country washed away its racial sins and redeemed itself. Never-racial and post-racial narratives are both examples of what Charles Mills calls “white time,” or a “White temporal imaginary” that protects extant

⁸ Hernández, “The Value of Intersectional Comparative Analysis to the ‘Post-Racial’ Future of Critical Race Theory: A Brazil-U.S. Comparative Case Study,” in *Connecticut Law Review* 43.5 (2011): 1437.

⁹ Alexandre Emboaba Da Costa, “Confounding Anti-Racism: Mixture, Racial Democracy, and Post-racial Politics in Brazil,” in *Critical Sociology* (2014): 15.

forms of white supremacy and white privilege in part by rendering them invisible.¹⁰ But the differences matter. For each story relies on a distinct method of self-justification, mobilizes distinct affects, and will ultimately require distinct methods of critique and resistance.

Brazilian Racial Democracy

Before we embark on a close comparison of the two narratives, we need to specify in much greater detail the content of each. I begin with racial democracy, and examine U.S. post-racialism in the next section. The social theorist Gilberto Freyre is typically credited with inventing the idea of racial democracy founded on *mestiçagem* in the 1930s.¹¹ Freyre offered his thesis that Brazil was “a peaceful ‘brown’ nation born of a cultural and racial fusion of Portuguese, African, and Native peoples in northeastern Brazil” as a deliberate rebuke to widely shared anxieties in post-abolition Brazil that the nation was doomed by its large black population and high degree of racial mixture.¹² Increasingly influenced by European and North American racial theories of white superiority and black inferiority, the Brazilian elite at the turn of the twentieth century fretted that Brazil might never enter the pantheon of modern, civilized nations. None other than Arthur de Gobineau, the French aristocrat and thinker widely perceived as the father of modern scientific racism, had condemned the country to racial damnation during

¹⁰ Charles Mills, “White Time: The Chronic Injustice of Ideal Theory,” in *Du Bois Review* 11.1 (2014): 27-42.

¹¹ Gilberto Freyre, *The Masters and the Slaves: A Study in the Development of Brazilian Civilization*, trans. Samuel Putnam, 2nd ed. (New York: Albert A. Knopf, 1966). It should be noted that original Portuguese title, *Casa Grande e Senzala*, is better translated as *The Big House and the Slave Quarters*.

¹² John F. Collins, *Revolt of the Saints: Memory and Redemption in the Twilight of Brazilian Racial Democracy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 9.

his year-long stint as a diplomat from 1869-1870, proclaiming that “not a single Brazilian has pure blood because the pattern of marriages among whites, Indians, and Negroes is so widespread that the nuances of color are infinite, causing a degeneration of the most depressing type among the lower as well as the upper classes.”¹³ Due to the sizeable Afro-descendant population, U.S.-style segregation and prohibitions on interracial marriage did not present plausible solutions to the problem.

Unsurprisingly, the Brazilian elite did not want to accept that their country had no viable future. Instead, they offered a significant modification to standard European and North American race theory. Whereas Gobineau and his acolytes fetishized racial purity and saw race mixture as necessarily degenerate and debilitating, Brazilian intellectuals and scientists emphasized the fluidity of racial categories and proposed that race mixture in fact facilitated a gradual whitening (*branqueamento*) of the Brazilian population, owing to the superiority of white biology and allegedly higher white fertility rates: “Based on the higher white fertility rates and their belief that white genes were dominant, these eugenicists concluded that race mixture would eliminate the black population, eventually resulting in a white or mostly white Brazilian population.”¹⁴ Thomas Skidmore highlights the tensions necessarily embedded in this modified version of European racism:

This was true, of course, only as long as one did not at the same time believe the current theories that condemned the racially mixed as degenerate. Fortunately for them, most thinkers simply ignored or glossed over this fatal objection. In other words, the whitening ideology was the Brazilian compromise. Obviously unable to claim white racial purity for any part of the country—unlike the North Americans—Brazilians seemed to accept the racist theory of Aryan (or at least white) superiority and then

¹³ Arthur de Gobineau quoted in Thomas E. Skidmore, *Black Into White: Race and Nationality in Brazilian Thought*, revised ed. (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1993), 30.

¹⁴ Telles, *Race in Another America*, 28.

promptly escaped the seemingly determinist trap by implicitly denying the absoluteness of racial differences. The whiter the better.¹⁵

Whether or not this view was truly coherent, it became the basis for Brazilian immigration policy in the early twentieth century.¹⁶ After the dissolution of the Brazilian Empire in 1889 (one year after abolition), the provisional president of the new Brazilian Republic immediately banned all indigenous African and Asian immigrants to Brazil. The Brazilian Congress similarly prohibited all black immigrants to Brazil in 1921. Alongside these bans, Brazil sought ways to incentivize European immigration, offering to cover transportation costs of European immigrants from 1851 to 1909. The province of São Paulo went even further, providing housing and subsidies for food and hospital care. These measures were successful: nearly 5 million European immigrants arrived in Brazil from 1851 to 1937.

Branqueamento was the reigning ideology and policy of race in Brazil when Freyre published *Casa Grande e Senzala*. Where *branqueamento* embraces *mestiçagem* for its capacity to expunge blackness and eventually achieve a white Brazil, Freyre celebrated *mestiçagem* for its own sake, not as a temporary waystation en route to a white Brazil but as the defining and eternal characteristic of the Brazilian nation. A former student of Franz Boas in the United States, Freyre essentially treated racial difference as cultural divergences precipitated by the environment, regarding “racial differences of habit, character, and attitudes to nature...as the cultural product of long-term climactic, economic, and ecological adaptations, miscegenations, conquests, and migrations,

¹⁵ Thomas E. Skidmore, “Racial Ideas and Social Policy in Brazil, 1870-1940,” in *The Idea of Race in Latin America, 1870-1940*, ed. Richard Graham (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 17.

¹⁶ My discussion of Brazilian immigration policy is drawn from Hernández, *Racial Subordination in Latin America*, 49-56.

adopting something like a folk ethnology.”¹⁷ Accordingly, in the preface to *Casa Grande e Senzala*, summarizing the book’s overall thesis, he suggests that “the miscegenation and the interpenetration of cultures—chiefly European, Amerindian, and African culture....have tended to mollify the interclass and interracial antagonisms developed under an aristocratic economy.”¹⁸ Freyre’s willingness to underscore the positive contributions of black and indigenous Brazilians to the nation sharply distinguished his account of *mestiçagem* from its earlier advocates. In fact, while *mestizaje* was a common nation-building discourse in other Latin American countries too, Freyre’s account differed in its emphasis not only on European-indigenous mixture but on the strongly pronounced African element in the Brazilian nation. Furthermore, insofar as he understood himself to be contesting *branqueamento*, he had explicitly anti-racist intentions. Freyre viewed it as a point of pride that Brazil had created a distinctive identity by blending the best cultural attributes of multiple races, and he further believed that this could only happen because most Brazilians instinctively rejected racial hostility and sharply distinct racial identities. In his words: “The absence of violent rancors due to race constitutes one of the peculiarities of the feudal system in the tropics[.]”¹⁹ For Freyre, then, his theory of Brazil was doubly anti-racist: it functioned as a rebuke of racism, and it also located anti-racism in the very core of Brazilian national identity.

Nonetheless, Freyre’s work is hardly free from troubling assumptions about the relative levels of civilization achieved by the different races, nor the specific

¹⁷ David Lehmann, “Gilberto Freyre: The Reassessment Continues,” in *Latin American Research Review* 43.1 (2008): 212.

¹⁸ Freyre, *The Masters and the Slaves*, xiv.

¹⁹ Freyre, *The Masters and the Slaves*, xii.

contributions of each. In *Casa Grande e Senzala*, indigenous and Afro-Brazilians are consistently treated as “backward” or “primitive” races:

Hybrid from the beginning, Brazilian society is, of all those in the Americas, the one most harmoniously constituted so far as racial relations are concerned, within the environment of a practical cultural reciprocity that results in the advanced people deriving the maximum of profit from the values and experiences of the backward ones, and in a maximum of conformity between the foreign and the native cultures, that of the conqueror and that of the conquered.²⁰

Freyre echoes these themes throughout his later work, extolling Brazilian cultural hybridity while propagating stereotypical and often patronizing views of Afro-Brazilians. For example, in a series of lectures delivered at Indiana University in 1944 and later published as *Brazil: An Interpretation*, he repeatedly praises Brazil’s unique, culturally hybrid architecture, cuisine, language, religion, dance, and folk customs. In the book’s preface, he explains his point of view as “a philosophy of Brazilian ethnic and social ‘fusionism’ . . .”²¹ Yet at the same time, his “celebration” of Afro-Brazilian contributions includes observations such as noting the Afro-Brazilian tendency to “reduce everything to dance—work and play alike[.]”²² Ultimately, despite his intention to valorize Afro-Brazilian culture, Freyre reduces it to highly stereotypical (and in many cases easily commodified) elements: *carnaval*, *futebol*, pagan religious practices, sensuality, ebullience, and closeness to nature.

All too predictably, then, the mythologized figure of the *mulata* plays a central role in Freyre’s paean to racial mixture. Freyre paints a lyrical picture of colonial Brazil as a passionately erotic site of ceaseless interracial liaisons, in which male Portuguese

²⁰ Freyre, *The Masters and the Slaves*, 87.

²¹ Freyre, *Brazil: An Interpretation* (Bloomington, IN, 1945), Preface, Amazon Kindle Edition.

²² Freyre, *Brazil: An Interpretation*, Lecture III.

settlers and slaveowners fervently pursued the exotic temptations of indigenous and African women. He describes the “domestic and conjugal life” of colonial Brazil as a “polygamous patriarchal regime” in which “the beds (usually, it would appear, made of leather) creaked beneath the weight of adulteries and forbidden intercourse....[and] the relations of the white masters with their slaves.”²³ He elevates the product of these “relations,” the *mulata* (black-white mixture) or *cabocla* (indigenous-white mixture) to the pinnacle of feminine beauty and ultimately to a kind of founding mother of the Brazilian nation: “Moreover, in our national lyricism there is no tendency more clearly revealed than one toward a glorification of the mulatto woman, the *cabocla* or Indian woman, the brown-skin or brunette type, celebrated for the beauty of her eyes, the whiteness of her teeth, for her wiles and languishments and witching ways, far more than are the ‘pale virgins’ and the ‘blonde damsels.’”²⁴ Needless to say, this trite depiction of “brown-skinned” women as irresistibly alluring not only for their physical beauty but also for their beguiling, seductive manner traffics in deeply problematic racial and gender tropes. It also throws a romantic veil over the unrelenting rape and sexual exploitation of native and black women in Brazil, and indeed throughout the Americas. Yet the so-called cult of the *mulata* continues to occupy a central place in Brazilian self-mythology, appearing in the popular imagination (and in the international imagination of Brazil) not as a symbol of the violent racial and sexual subordination that characterized colonialism and slavery but instead as an indication of Brazil’s sensual, intoxicating racial mixture.²⁵

²³ Freyre, *The Masters and the Slaves*, xlv.

²⁴ Freyre, *The Masters and the Slaves*, 14.

²⁵ For a devastating critique of the cult of the *mulata*, see Donna Goldstein, “‘Interracial’ Sex and Racial Democracy in Brazil: Twin Concepts?” in *American Anthropologist* 101.3 (1999): 563-578.

Freyre's construction of Brazilian racial democracy initially received enthusiastic support from intellectuals, authors, and even some Afro-Brazilian activists. For example, the first black political organization in the republican period, the Frente Negra Brasileira (FNB), formed in the 1930s, originally "emphasized the mixed origin of the Brazilian people, repudiated surviving African customs, and preached the necessity of educating the black masses to liberate them from prejudice and ignorance[.]"²⁶ Meanwhile, the novels of Jorge Amado depicted the Brazil of Freyre's dreams—racially mixed, sexually and culturally libertine, defiantly joyful and ebullient even in the face of poverty and government repression. At the very same time, the myth of racial democracy proved a useful prop for governments seeking to burnish Brazil's international reputation and quell racial conflict at home. Getulio Vargas, the revolutionary president of 1930 who claimed dictatorial powers in 1937 in the name of crafting a modern *Estado Novo* (New State), willingly ceded power in 1945, and then was elected again in 1951 and served until his suicide in 1954, shrewdly promoted multi-racial *Carnaval* troupes and *futebol* teams as symbols of the Brazilian nation. The military dictatorship (1964-1985) zealously embraced the myth of racial democracy, cultivating closer connections to Africa, promoting the legendary black soccer player Pelé as a Brazilian hero, and proclaiming in 1970 to the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination that "racial discrimination did not exist in Brazil."²⁷ Many black activists were censored and exiled during the dictatorship, as the military viewed their attempt to expose racial injustice as a threat to national security.

²⁶ Antonio Sérgio Alfredo Guimarães and Márcio Macedo, "Diário Trabalhista e Democracia Racial Negra dos Anos 1940," in *DADOS – Revista de Ciências Sociais* 51.1 (2008): 143. All translations from Portuguese are my own.

²⁷ Telles, *Race in Another America*, 41.

The power of racial mixture as a signifier for Brazilian racial democracy lies in its dual imagined function as simultaneous cause of and evidence of the lack of racism in Brazil. As cause, mixture “comprises the hybridizing force that mediates racial differences, blurs racial boundaries, defuses interracial conflict and brings people together.”²⁸ In other words, Brazil’s history of racial mixing rules out the possibility of categorical racial distinctions such as “white” and “black” because so many Brazilians see themselves and their fellow citizens as mixed. This is reflected in the census category *pardo*: “While white and black refer to the ends of the continuum, the census’s brown category (*pardo*) serves as an umbrella category for the various mixed-race terms used in popular discourse.”²⁹ In fact, in the most recent Brazilian census, conducted in 2010, a majority of the population identified as either *pardo* (43.1%) or *preto* (black, 7.6%).³⁰ Without categorical racial distinctions, the very foundation of racism dissolves—or so it is claimed. At the same time as racial mixture appears to erode the foundation of racism, it also functions as evidence that Brazilians cannot possibly be racist. In her interviews with Brazilian women living in shantytowns, Donna Goldstein finds that 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.”³¹ Accordingly, mixture produces a virtuous circle: a self-perpetuating antidote against racism, and therefore the fount of Brazilian exceptionalism in matters of race.

²⁸ Alexandre Emboaba da Costa, “The (Un)happy Objects of Affective Community: Mixture, Conviviality and Racial Democracy in Brazil,” in *Cultural Studies* 30.1 (2016), 25.

²⁹ Telles, *Race in Another America*, 81.

³⁰ Tom Phillips, “Brazil census shows African-Brazilians in the majority for the first time,” *The Guardian*, November 17, 2011. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/nov/17/brazil-census-african-brazilians-majority> (accessed February 9, 2017).

³¹ Goldstein, “‘Interracial’ Sex and Racial Democracy in Brazil,” 567.

Yet this happy tale of self-reinforcing anti-racism never convinced all Brazilians, and convinces very few today. In their examination of the newspaper column “Problemas e Aspirações do Negro Brasileiro” (Problems and Aspirations of the Brazilian Black) from the newspaper *Diário Trabalhista* in 1946, Antonio Guimarães and Márcio Macedo find many black authors pointing to existing racial prejudice in Brazil and attacking the “prejudice of not having prejudice” that lies at the heart of the racial democracy myth.³² In the 1950s, the Brazilian sociologist Florestan Fernandes lead a team of researchers sponsored by UNESCO to investigate the sources of Brazilian racial harmony—and found instead that no such thing existed: “Fernandes directly attacked racial democracy, calling it a myth, and concluded that Brazilian whites were hostile to and prejudiced against blacks.”³³ In the 1970s, black movement organizations, most notably the Movimento Negro Unificado (MNU) established in 1978, viewed the unmasking of the myth of Brazilian racial democracy as a core part of their political mission: “the denunciation of the ‘myth of racial democracy,’ as an important element in the struggle against racism, is one of the most pronounced characteristics in the black movement organizations created in the 1970s.”³⁴ The MNU’s founding manifesto of June 18, 1978, begins by proclaiming the existence of a wide variety of racial ills in Brazil: racial discrimination, marginalization, poor living conditions, unemployment and underemployment, police repression, sexual and economic exploitation of black women,

³² Guimarães and Macedo, “*Diário Trabalhista* e Democracia Racial Negra dos Anos 1940,” 148.

³³ Telles, *Race in Another America*, 42. For Fernandes’ original report, see Florestan Fernandes, *A Integração do Negro na Sociedade de Classes*. São Paulo, Brazil: Dominus Editora, 1965.

³⁴ Amílcar Araujo Pereira, “‘Por uma autêntica democracia racial!’: os movimentos negros nas escolas e nos currículos de história,” in *Revista História* 1.1 (2012): 112.

cultural appropriation, etc.³⁵ The manifesto ends calling “por uma autêntica democracia racial!” (for an authentic racial democracy) and “pela libertação do povo negro!” (for the liberation of the black people). Initially reluctant to relinquish the myth of racial democracy, even the Brazilian government eventually acknowledged the gravity of the problem of racial injustice. In 1995, President Fernando Henrique Cardoso met with black movement activists, created several government agencies tasked with analyzing and combatting racial discrimination in Brazilian society, and endorsed controversial race-based affirmative action policies. Over the next two decades, under the presidencies of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff, Brazil has made good on Cardoso’s word, implementing affirmative action programs in government hiring and contracting at the federal and local level and, most controversially, in numerous public universities and some private universities.³⁶ The myth of racial democracy, it would seem, has definitively died.

But such a rash conclusion misunderstands the power of myth. Factual refutation alone cannot so easily kill what has become a resonant image in the popular imagination, capable of rousing powerful affects. While strong majorities of Brazilians of all colors now recognize the existence of anti-black discrimination and even support programs like affirmative action, racial democracy lives on as “ideal and future hope[.]”³⁷

³⁵ Movimento Negro Unificado, “Carta de Princípios” (June 18, 1978), <https://movimentonegrounificadoba.files.wordpress.com/2013/10/carta-de-princípios-do-movimento-negro-unificado.doc>, accessed on February 12, 2017.

³⁶ For scholarly commentary on the controversial implementation of affirmative action in Brazil, see Stanley Bailey and Michelle Peria, “Racial Quotas and the Culture War in Brazilian Academia,” in *Sociology Compass* 4/8 (2010): 592-604; Joaze Bernardino, “Ação Afirmativa e a Rediscussão do Mito da Democracia Racial no Brasil,” in *Estudos Afro-Asiáticos* 24.2 (2002): 247-273; Ludmila Gonçalves da Matta, “Da democracia racial à ação afirmativa: a política de cotas para negros” in *Revista Jurídica da Faminas* 3.1 (2007): 59-72; Mala Htun, “From ‘Racial Democracy’ to Affirmative Action: Changing State Policy on Race in Brazil,” *Latin American Research Review* 39.1 (2004): 60-89.

³⁷ da Costa, “The (Un)Happy Objects of Affective Community,” 25.

Strong, positive emotions are still invested in scenes of interracial sociability, conviviality, and love, which may appear as prefigurations of the racial democracy to come. Brian Owensby locates beneath the descriptive falseness of racial democracy a genuine “integratory sensibility or will to unity[.]”³⁸ Peter Fry illustrates the powerful pull of this utopian imaginary when he tells the story of witnessing the police harass and insult his black friend in Rio de Janeiro, then entering a multiracial *botequim* (a sort of Brazilian pub) and feeling his rage dissipate and his optimism return:

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.³⁹

Racial democracy, then, endures as promise of the future, occasionally glimpsed in fugitive moments in the present, still deeply intertwined with the meaning of Brazil as unique and exceptional nation. And, as da Costa warns, even in this aspirational form, it can be used to castigate and discipline those who refuse to look optimistically toward the coming future: “Unhappy activists are killjoys, the obstacles to maintaining and achieving any semblance of conviviality, balance, and inter-racial harmony. They become the thorn in the side of positive attachments to the (future) promise of racial democracy.”⁴⁰ At this moment, Brazilian racial democracy and U.S. post-racialism do begin to bleed together, both walking the perilous tightrope between description and

³⁸ Brian Owensby, “Toward a History of Brazil’s ‘Cordial Racism’: Race Beyond Liberalism,” in *Comparative Studies in History and Society* 47.2 (2005): 343.

³⁹ Fry, “A Cinderela Negra,” in *Revista USP* 28 (1995/1996): 134.

⁴⁰ da Costa, “The (Un)Happy Objects of Affective Community,” 33.

aspiration, present and future, ideology and utopia. Let us turn, then, to the narrative of post-racialism in the U.S.

U.S. Post-Racialism

In reality, post-racialism is an umbrella term that captures a variety of different, but related, beliefs and narratives about racial progress in the United States. This makes it something of a moving target, and therefore difficult to capture in one pithy definition. Paul Taylor usefully warns against reducing post-racialism to its “idiot” version, as refutations of this version can all too easily be escaped by more sophisticated formulations.⁴¹ Nonetheless, “idiot post-racialism” is a useful starting from which to trace the development of more sophisticated narratives. This version of post-racialism consists of the claim that race is no longer a relevant sociopolitical category in the United States. To the extent that racism endures, it functions as a lamentable exception perpetrated by benighted individuals rather than a systemic feature of our sociopolitical life. Consider as an example the *Wall Street Journal* editorial board’s reaction to the tragic 2015 massacre at the Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina: “The universal condemnation of the murders at the Emanuel AME Church and Dylann Roof’s quick capture by the combined efforts of local, state and federal police is a world away from what President Obama recalled as ‘a dark part of our history.’ Today the system and philosophy of institutionalized racism identified by Dr. King no longer exists.”⁴² As

⁴¹ Paul Taylor, “Taking Postracialism Seriously: From Movement Mythology to Racial Formation,” in *Du Bois Review* 11.1 (2014): 9-25.

⁴² “The Charleston Shooting,” *The Wall Street Journal*, June 18, 2015. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/the-charleston-shooting-1434669812> (accessed February 14, 2017).

is evident in this quote, the post-racial narrative acknowledges and condemns systematic racism as an undeniable feature of U.S. history. The *Wall Street Journal*, in a rather unrepresentative moment, quotes President Obama in order to affirm him— institutionalized racism *did* exist, and it *was* shameful (“a dark part of our history”). Happily, though, the idiot version of the post-racial narrative treats this history as a museum exhibit, securely guarded from the present behind safety glass. We can gaze back upon the guilt of our predecessors without sharing in that guilt.

The fact that the *Wall Street Journal* turns to President Obama for its invocation of a shameful but triumphantly vanquished past also captures a characteristic element of idiot post-racialism in the U.S. The election of Barack Obama, a black man, as president in 2008 provided a perfect symbol of the country’s entrance into the post-racial end of history. His election spurred a veritable cottage industry of reflections on the post-racial meaning of a black president. The significance of Barack Obama was twofold. First, the simple fact that a black man could achieve the highest office in the country (and consequently in the world) refuted the idea that racism still thwarted opportunity. Accordingly, in an episode of *Fox & Friends* in 2013, the outraged hosts attacked Oprah Winfrey for suggesting that any of President Obama’s critics were motivated by racism. Steve Doocy proclaimed: “I don’t know that Barack Obama could have been elected president if he was living in a racist nation.”⁴³ Second, the significance of Obama’s election lay not simply in *a* black man achieving the presidency, but in *this* black man

Indeed, the *Wall Street Journal* is a reliable purveyor of idiot post-racialism. For another example, see James Taranto, “Obama’s Postracial America,” *The Wall Street Journal*, September 15, 2009. <https://www.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052970203917304574414923099147990> (accessed February 16, 2017).

⁴³ Steve Doocy quoted in Sarah Fruchtnicht, “Fox & Friends Slams Oprah: If Racism Existed Obama Wouldn’t Have Been Elected,” *Opposing Views*, November 21, 2013. <http://www.opposingviews.com/i/society/race/fox-friends-slams-oprah-if-racism-existed-obama-wouldn-t-have-been-elected-video> (accessed February 14, 2017).

achieving the presidency. For Obama carefully cultivated an image of himself as a post-racial figure: one who explicitly rejected excessive attachments to racial identity, preferring instead a universalist American identity, and one who avoided as much as possible explicit racial language in his rhetoric and his policymaking. Indeed, echoing the Brazilian valorization of miscegenation, he repeatedly reflected on how his mixed-race background allowed him a unique vantage point from which to consider the struggle for racial justice in the United States. During his first presidential primary, he told NPR in 2007: “In this history of African-American politics in this country there has always been some tension between speaking in universal terms and speaking in very race-specific terms about the plight of the African-American community. By virtue of my background, you know, I am more likely to speak in universal terms.”⁴⁴ President Obama’s universalism is characteristic of all varieties of post-racial discourse. The post-racial future-present invites us to appreciate what we have in common as shared members of a single polity, rather than warring factions in a polity fractured by race.

As Taylor suggests, this narrative is exceptionally easy to refute simply by reciting statistics that indicate the persistence of racial inequality and racial discrimination. And sure enough, academics and activists took to this task with gusto in the wake of Obama’s election.⁴⁵ Much like racial democracy in Brazil, however, a more sophisticated version of post-racialism can acknowledge that racism has not (yet) been vanquished, but insist that we should orient ourselves toward a post-racial future: “So,

⁴⁴ Barack Obama, interview by Steve Inskeep, *NPR News Morning Edition*, February 28, 2007. <http://www.npr.org/about/press/2007/022807.obama.html> (accessed February 14, 2017).

⁴⁵ See, for example, Julius Bailey, *Racial Realities and Post-Racial Dreams: The Age of Obama and Beyond* (Ontario, Canada: Broadview Press, 2016); Mark Ledwidge et al., *Barack Obama and the Myth of a Post-Racial America* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Michael Tesler, *Obama’s Race: The 2008 Election and the Dream of a Post-Racial America* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Michael Tesler, *Post-Racial or Most-Racial? Race and Politics in the Obama Era* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

postraciality is less a credible factual claim about contemporary conditions than a projection of their futurity. The ‘post’ here is what the future as a matter of fact and norm should amount to and look like.”⁴⁶ For Taylor, this “prophetic” post-racialism represents its most seductive version. What makes it seductive is that it does not simply rely on a utopian vision from nowhere, utterly alien to concrete historical conditions. Rather, it purports to draw on existing historical tendencies manifested in the very real racial progress that the United States has made. By consciously embracing these tendencies and seeking to magnify them in our personal, social, and political projects, we can turn post-racial dream into reality: “Prophetic postracialism does not claim to have provided an accurate description of the world as it stands. It claims to have identified and emphasized certain social tendencies that can be nurtured and developed in order to bring a new world into being.”⁴⁷ Taylor points to David Hollinger as his primary example of this most sophisticated version of post-racialism. Hollinger forthrightly acknowledges that “racism continues to be a problem for black people in the United States” but simultaneously claims that we are on an admirable trajectory toward “the loosening of attributed or chosen connections between an individual and his or her community of descent.”⁴⁸ This may sound distant indeed from triumphalist claims of the end of racism, but Hollinger’s vision of a future in which racial identities no longer claim intense allegiance is predicated on the notion that racism itself is gradually waning as the dominant force that inhibits opportunities across the board for black Americans.

⁴⁶ David Theo Goldberg, *Are we all postracial yet?* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2015), 57.

⁴⁷ Taylor, “Taking Postracialism Seriously,” 15.

⁴⁸ David Hollinger, “The Concept of Post-Racial: How Its Easy Dismissal Obscures Important Questions,” in *Daedalus* (Winter 2011): 175.

In both the “idiot” version of post-racialism and Hollinger’s prophetic version, there is a conceptual slippage between racial *identification* and *racism* as the object to be transcended. In the idiot version, the claim that racism has been transcended rapidly converts itself into a claim that there is no longer any good reason for individuals to attach themselves strongly to particular racial identities. At best, such identities should be entirely privatized, rather like an American version of French *laïcité* (secularism) applied to race instead of religion. Accordingly, those who traffic in idiot postracialism become enraged at political invocations of racial identity such as Black Lives Matter. For them, it is not police violence and brutality that has put race back at the forefront of our political discourse; it is “race hustlers” and “the racial grievance industry” who are trying to drag us out of our post-racial bliss back into the historical muck of racial conflict. Hollinger, of course, would say no such thing. But his eager anticipation of the coming future in which individuals no longer look to ethno-racial groups as the primary basis for identification and solidarity similarly posits continued racial identification as an obstacle to the promise of post-racialism: “Ethno-racial mixing and massive immigration have changed the United States, which continues to operate with an increasingly anachronistic ethnoracial system that assumes each group is an enduring, clearly bounded, color-coded entity.”⁴⁹ Hollinger’s use of the term “increasingly anachronistic” performs complex rhetorical work in this sentence. It allows him to disavow idiot postracialism, for he does not say that ethnoracial attachments are already anachronistic, and yet simultaneously to imply that fiercely politicized racial attachments lamentably refuse to be swept along by the progressive tide of history. What Hollinger has in common with the far less appealing accounts of post-racialism is the sense of an ever-

⁴⁹ Hollinger, “The Concept of the Post-Racial,” 180.

receding racist past. If the *Wall Street Journal* places this past behind safety glass, firmly and irrevocably severed from the present, Hollinger places it at one end of a fraying rope, the other end of which we hold in the present. And, happily, we have the power to yank the rope hard enough to split it in two.

Alternative Temporalities

In a recent article, Charles Mills proposes that the racialization of time has received insufficient attention, particularly when one considers the large and growing literature on the racialization of space.⁵⁰ Just as racialized representations of space (i.e. poor and rundown neighborhoods as “black” spaces and prosperous suburbs as “white” spaces) can be harnessed to particular political projects, so too can racialized representations of time. If the work of George Lipsitz has shown us how the racialization of space can serve to protect extant forms of white supremacy and white privilege, then Mills aims to reveal how a comparable lens of “white time” can have the same effect, largely by rendering invisible the very system of white supremacy that it protects.⁵¹ Mills targets one primary culprit in his article: the ahistorical temporality of normative philosophical theories of justice, particularly that of John Rawls. But he recognizes that “the applicability of the concept [of white time] is obviously far broader.”⁵² In fact, the concept proves a remarkably useful apparatus for exploring the representation of time in the myths of racial democracy in Brazil and post-racialism in the U.S. However, if each

⁵⁰ Charles W. Mills, “White Time: The Chronic Injustice of Ideal Theory,” in *Du Bois Review* 11.1 (2014): 27-42.

⁵¹ George Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place*. (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2011).

⁵² Mills, “White Time,” 29.

story serves as an example of white time, or what Mills also refers to as a “White temporal imaginary,” then it is important to recognize that each also provides a *distinct* example of white time.

Mills draws on Eviatar Zerubavel’s *Time Maps* to show how the very act of constructing a shared memory of the past as a diachronic unfolding toward the present is inevitably a highly political and contentious process. Different stories of the past serve different present purposes, and buttress the claims of some social groups while effectively silencing or pathologizing the claims of others—literally making them appear “out of time.” In *Time Maps*, Zerubavel describes two broad, divergent approaches to narrating the past of a particular collectivity:

Regardless of the specific form of historical narrative we use to help us impose some retrospective structure on the past, there are two basic modes of envisioning the actual progression of time within it. While one of them features essentially contiguous stretches of history smoothly flowing into one another like the successive musical notes that form *legato* phrases, the other tends to highlight unmistakably discontinuous breaks separating one seemingly discrete historical episode from the next, like the successive notes that form *staccato* phrases.⁵³

These two modes elegantly capture the primary temporal distinction between the narrative of Brazilian racial democracy and the narrative of U.S. post-racialism. Whereas racial democracy offers a continuous account of historical time, U.S post-racialism insists on a fundamentally discontinuous one.

In fact, Gilberto Freyre’s own meditations on historical methodology in his preface to *Casa Grande e Senzala* underscore the continuity of his historical vision.

Appealing to Johann Gottfried Herder’s account of time, he writes: “With this notion of

⁵³ Eviatar Zerubavel, *Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 34.

Time the past ceases to be dead in contrast with the present as the only living reality.”⁵⁴

This conception of a living past, one that forever feeds the present and the future, rules out the kind of historical periodization that characterizes the discontinuous narrative of U.S. post-racialism: “I have attempted a study of Brazilian patriarchal society and culture in which the social reality is seen as a constant flow of the past and the present into the future—a constant flow of time that never stops to allow for definitive sociological conclusions about rigid ‘historical periods.’”⁵⁵ For this reason, if Freyre wishes to portray the Brazil of his own time as irreducibly mixed and consequently harmonious, he must identify racial democracy as the spirit of Brazilian history itself, present from the very beginning. But what is the very beginning? What does Freyre mean when he refers to Brazil as “hybrid from the beginning”? When did Brazil begin? In fact, Freyre’s insistence on historical continuity strikingly projects *mestiçagem* and racial hybridity onto Portugal’s own pre-Brazil past:

In its ethnic and cultural indeterminateness between Europe and Africa Portugal appears to have been always the same as other portions of the peninsula. A species of bi-continentalism that, in a population so vague and ill defined, corresponds to bisexuality in the individual. It would be difficult to imagine a people more fluctuating than the Portuguese, the feeble balance of antagonisms being reflected in everything that pertains to them, conferring upon them an easy and relaxed flexibility that is at times disturbed by grievous hesitations, along with a special wealth of aptitudes that are frequently discrepant and hard to reconcile of the purpose of a useful expression or practical initiative.⁵⁶

Freyre unfolds this vision of Portugal in great detail in his lectures at Indiana University, describing Portugal (along with Spain) in his first lecture as “a mix of Europe and Africa, Catholicism and Islam” and “a transition zone between two continents....two climates,

⁵⁴ Freyre, *The Masters and the Slaves*, lix.

⁵⁵ Freyre, *The Masters and the Slaves*, lix-lx.

⁵⁶ Freyre, *The Masters and the Slaves*, 7.

two types of soil and vegetation, two races, two cultures, two conceptions of life, two ecological complexes—and between Euro-Africa and Hispanic America.”⁵⁷ As in Brazil, these encounters do not produce violent confrontation, except as occasional aberration. Instead, “amalgamation, accommodation, assimilation have been more powerful than conflict.”⁵⁸ Ultimately, then, the Portuguese have *always* possessed “a special capacity to maintain contradictions and even to harmonize them” and it is this ever-present capacity that represents the flow of the past into the present and the future in Brazil (which can be seen retrospectively, after all, as the future of Portugal).⁵⁹ Brazilian racial democracy and *mestiçagem* existed before Brazil even existed, then. A better illustration of historical continuity would be difficult to conceive.

Yet how can Freyre maintain the temporal continuity of racial democracy given the brutal history of African slavery in Brazil? Of course, Freyre’s depiction of early modern Portugal’s racial harmony is also an amnesiac chimera, but Brazilian slave society is his explicit focus in *Casa Grande e Senzala*, and therefore presents an even greater puzzle. For Freyre, Portuguese colonization of Brazil “was to rest upon the institution of the slaveholding family, the Big House, the patriarchal family....”⁶⁰ How can a system of racialized slavery possibly represent the transplantation of egalitarian and peaceful racial relations to the tropics? Despite Freyre’s ostensibly anti-racist intentions, frequent references to the cruelty and sadism of slaveholders, and insistence that he does not offer “a sentimental apology for the Luso-Brazilian feudalistic past,” he nonetheless

⁵⁷ Freyre, *Brazil: An Interpretation*, Lecture I.

⁵⁸ Freyre, *Brazil: An Interpretation*, Lecture I.

⁵⁹ Freyre, *Brazil: An Interpretation*, Lecture I.

⁶⁰ Freyre, *The Masters and the Slaves*, 31.

provides an account of a purportedly more humane form of slavery in Brazil.⁶¹ Indeed, the always-existing Portuguese affinity for blackness “from the very first years of colonization tended to mitigate the system [of slavery].”⁶² Freyre elaborates in a later chapter on the Negro slave:

But admitting that the influence of slavery upon the morality and character of the Brazilian of the Big House was in general a deleterious one, we still must note the highly special circumstances that, in our country, modified or attenuated the evils of the system. First of all, I would emphasize the prevailing mildness of the relations between masters and household slaves—milder in Brazil, it may be, than in any other part of the Americas.⁶³

Hence, it is precisely Freyre’s view of racial democracy as present from (before) the beginning of Brazil that allows him to see not rape but passionate “relations” in the sexual encounters of Portuguese masters with their African slaves. Freyre’s protestations aside, *Casa Grande e Senzala* does sentimentalize, romanticize, and falsify the brutality and inhumanity of Brazilian slavery. And his whitewashing of this brutality and inhumanity was no idiosyncratic feature of his personal account of Brazil—rather, it was one of the central props of the racial democracy narrative, as Tianna Paschel argues: “[R]acial democracy ideologies in Brazil, in great part, depended on these romanticized narratives of slavery.”⁶⁴ Thus, even the largest population of slaves in the Americas, hundreds of slave uprisings, and an astronomical slave suicide rate does not disrupt the fundamental, continuous identity of the Brazilian nation as racially mixed and harmonious.

⁶¹ Freyre, *The Masters and the Slaves*, xix.

⁶² Freyre, *The Masters and the Slaves*, xiii.

⁶³ Freyre, *The Masters and the Slaves*, 369.

⁶⁴ Tianna S. Paschel, *Becoming Black Political Subjects: Movements and Ethno-Racial Rights in Colombia and Brazil* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 36.

This makes a striking contrast to U.S. narratives of post-racialism. Of course, U.S. Americans also harbor their own delusions and historical omissions when we recall our history of slavery and segregation. I do not mean to suggest that we have reckoned sufficiently with the full measure of our white supremacist past. Quite the opposite, post-racialism distorts not only the present but also the past. For it must remember the past in such a way that it does not leave its legacy irrevocably stamped upon the present and, even worse, the future. A definitive rupture must always be possible, and post-racialism scours history for clear signs of epochal rupture. Past ruptures, even if not yet complete deliverance from racism, keep alive the hope of the last rupture. Hence “Emancipation” as the definitive end of slavery, and *Brown v. Board of Education* or the Civil Rights Act of 1964 or the Voting Rights Act of 1965 as the definitive end of Jim Crow, and finally, for some, the last rupture: Barack Obama’s election as President as the definitive end of racial history itself. In reality, none of these moments truly broke history in half in the way we conventionally remember them. Saidiya Hartman has shown how ambiguous “the end of slavery” truly was, how the ghosts of slavery continued to haunt the lives of “emancipated” slaves in the postbellum South.⁶⁵ Gerald Rosenberg has shown how little effect *Brown v. Board of Education* truly had on school desegregation in the South.⁶⁶ The Black Power movement showed how racial inequality, injustice, and *de facto* segregation persisted after the achievement of formal equality with the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. And we have already encountered the many scholars who have dismantled the myth of Barack Obama’s post-racial presidency. Thus,

⁶⁵ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

⁶⁶ Gerald Rosenberg, *The Hollow Hope: Can Courts Bring About Social Change?*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

post-racialism's acknowledgment of past racism can only ever be partial and circumscribed, lest it infect the present or damn the future. Yet even that partial and circumscribed acknowledgment absolutely controverts the historical vision of racial democracy.

In fact, post-racialism and racial democracy offer to their adherents distinct balms for the shame associated with racism. Racial democracy simply wipes that shame away entirely, erasing racism from Brazilian history. It offers the pride of national exceptionalism to its adherents, as Brazil stands out from other nations for its racially innocent history and its centuries-old celebration of *mestiçagem*. Post-racialism offers something different: redemption. The narrative of post-racialism is fundamentally a redemption narrative, in which racism appears on the historical stage as an acknowledged sin, for the very purpose of enabling present generations to celebrate their deliverance from that sin. In both racial democracy and post-racialism, the capacity to contrast the nation's racial innocence with the racial guilt of some Other is exceedingly important, for the absence of racism hardly warrants self-congratulation unless racism exists in some other place—or some other time. For post-racialism, racial guilt is projected backwards in time onto long-dead ancestors, but not outward in space. For racial democracy, that racial guilt is projected outward in space, above all onto the United States. Accordingly, adherents of post-racialism frequently charge anti-racist activists in the U.S. such as Black Lives Matter with “taking us backwards” or “being stuck in the 1960s,” whereas adherents of racial democracy in Brazil charge anti-racist activists with “importing race-talk, and even racism, from the United States.”⁶⁷ Consider, for example, the controversial 2006 book by Ali Kamel, *Não somos racistas* (we are not racists), a lengthy screed

⁶⁷ Paschel, *Becoming Black Political Subjects*, 74.

against the growth of affirmative action programs and anti-discrimination policies in Brazil. Kamel repeatedly suggests that these policies emerged from a misguided attempt by sociologists and anti-racist activists to project U.S. racial categories, and ultimately U.S. racism, onto Brazil: “The methodological key for that sociology was to import from the United States a terminology that was not our own, clothing it with new drapery.”⁶⁸ In fact, for Kamel, it is the advocates of affirmative action and other racially targeted policies that threaten to break Brazilian history apart, ending the up-until-now continuous epoch of harmonious racial democracy and ushering in a lamentable, U.S.-style epoch of racial division and mutual hatred.

Both narratives clearly fall into the ambit of Mills’ white time. For Mills, the white time of ideal theory “sidelines corrective racial justice as an issue in any way pressing or important” by starting from an imagined and deliberately ahistorical view of society as consisting of undifferentiated human beings who recognize each other’s humanity and strive to create the fairest possible polity for all citizens.⁶⁹ Whether projecting racism backwards in time or outwards in space, both post-racialism and racial democracy similarly remove from the present any need for corrective racial justice, and any enduring white complicity with racial injustice. Mills wrote “White Time” for a special issue of the *Du Bois Review* examining postracialism. Thus, he describes this approach to philosophy as “postracial through being aracial, while never conceding it was ever racial.”⁷⁰ Yet I would contend that by “never conceding it was ever racial,” ideal theory actually distinguishes itself from postracialism in precisely the same manner as

⁶⁸ Ali Kamel, *Não somos racistas: uma reação aos que querem nos transformar numa nação* (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil: Nova Fronteira, 2006), 20.

⁶⁹ Mills, “White Time,” 32.

⁷⁰ Mills, “White Time,” 32.

racial democracy. Consider Mills' elaboration: "White time recapitulates the aspirational postracial future not just in the present but in the past, so that the immanent realization of the abstract norm (raceless humanity, which is White humanity) is already waiting to be unfolded."⁷¹ Mills could well have written this sentence of Gilberto Freyre. By inscribing the postracial future into the past, both ideal theory and racial democracy abandon one of the central moves of post-racialism—its projection of racism into the past, and its corresponding promise of redemption from sin.

Why does this matter? Advocates of racial justice must shatter the lens of white time in order to promote a genuine consideration of the demands of corrective justice. Insofar as that lens casts history in a different light in each case, strategies to expose its distortions will also differ. In Brazil, because racial democracy tells a never-racial story, exposure of racism at any point in Brazilian history may be expected to have a powerful effect, so long as there is an audience willing to hear it. For example, one of Brazil's leading black activists, Abdias do Nascimento, in a well-known book excoriating the myth of racial democracy, devotes one chapter to exposing the brutal anti-blackness at the foundation of Brazilian slavery. He recognizes how the fantasy of a more humane slavery feeds the myth of Brazilian racial democracy: "The myth [of humane slavery] is yet one more of the countless manipulations that have contributed to the successful propagation of another myth: that of racial democracy."⁷² And so he systematically recounts the unmitigated oppression, sadism, sexual exploitation, and dehumanization that characterized Brazilian slavery. Those like Freyre (whom Nascimento repeatedly denounces throughout the book) who insist on a more humane Brazilian slavery, he

⁷¹ Mills, "White Time," 32.

⁷² Abdias do Nascimento, *O Genocidio do Negro Brasileiro: Processo de um Racismo Mascarado* (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil: Editora Paz e Terra, 1978), 52.

argues, do so from a position of willful blindness: “One cannot, however, obscure the brutal and racist nature of the slave system, except for those who have an interest in not seeing it.”⁷³ Nascimento’s critique derives much of its power from the historically continuous narrative of racial democracy. To the extent that adherents of this narrative follow Freyre in seeing Brazilian history as an unbroken unfolding of the mixed and harmonious essence of the nation, then a crack in this essence at any point in history threatens the entire narrative with collapse. For if racism defined Brazil before abolition, and the past lives on in the present (as it always does), then racism too must live in the present, and will endure in the future.

This suggests that the very ideological strength of racial democracy may also be its greatest vulnerability. One might be tempted to see the never-racialism of racial democracy as an even greater obstacle to corrective racial justice than the fantastical historical ruptures of post-racialism, since it banishes racism entirely from the grand sweep of national history. Post-racialism, one might think, at least prepares people to accept the plausibility of racism on national soil. Yet racial democracy, I would argue, is more vulnerable to rapid collapse. The entire house of cards trembles with the exposure of an individual epoch of racism, precisely because racial democracy denies the possibility of distinct racial epochs to begin with. My point is not that Nascimento’s work on slavery is single-handedly responsible for the death of racial democracy, of course. As Nascimento himself recognizes, people often choose blindness when it serves their interests. Nonetheless, the myth of racial democracy is under attack at every possible point simultaneously, with researchers persistently exposing both past racism and present racial inequality, and every one of these exposures is *potentially* fatal once it

⁷³ Nascimento, *O Genicídio do Negro Brasileiro*, 57.

finds a receptive audience. I would hazard a guess, though certainly this can only be speculative, that this vulnerability may have something to do with the surprisingly rapid transformation not only of Brazilian state policy on race but also of Brazilian public opinion with respect to these policies. Despite the vocal objections of opponents, it turns out that affirmative action has overwhelming support from slightly more than 80% of Brazilians, “with little differences across racial groups[.]”⁷⁴ Indeed, Brazilians of all racial groups strongly support a wide variety of racially targeted measures to improve the conditions of blacks, including “the teaching of black and African history, the protection of land rights of traditional black communities (*quilombolas*), and more rigorous laws to punish those who discriminate.”⁷⁵ One may expect more radically transformative policies that promote dramatic material redistribution, such as reparations, to provoke far greater hostility. Yet it is striking that we can find such high levels of support for racially targeted policies in the country of racial democracy.

Post-racialism, in contrast, has a ready-made response to the exposure of past racism. Yes, say the post-racialists, that was an ugly chapter of our history, but we have happily begun a new chapter. The critique of post-racialism must make a concerted effort, then, to connect past racism to present racial disparities, while at the same time exposing enduring racism today. Ta-Nehisi Coates’ widely read and discussed call for reparations in *The Atlantic*, whatever its faults may be, is an exemplary attempt to do this, as Coates meticulously traces the roots of the racial wealth gap in discriminatory housing

⁷⁴ Silva and Paixão, “Mixed and Unequal,” 198.

⁷⁵ Silva and Paixão, “Mixed and Unequal,” 198.

and lending policies, while also pointing to contemporary cases of such discrimination.⁷⁶ To combat the “dream of clean hands and clean breaks,” then, the critics of post-racialism must explode the myth of historical discontinuity, and reveal the shadow of the past still living in the present.⁷⁷ Furthermore, as Kevin Bruyneel has persuasively argued, this will also require us to rethink the simplistic and patronizing hagiography we have drawn around consensus civil rights “heroes” such as Martin Luther King Jr. Our insistence on representing King as a unifying and moderate figure who called for civil discourse, reconciliation, and the realization of the country’s own noble ideals “can easily foster an image of King as an advocate of post-racialist views.”⁷⁸ We must restore to King, and to other leaders of the anti-racism struggle such as Rosa Parks, the full measure of their radicalism, as well as the full measure of their critique of U.S. racism. For this critique is not so easily answered by mere formal, legal equality, and it does not allow King to be drafted so easily into “an uplifting and unifying reading of the American and global present and future.”⁷⁹ In short, the critique of post-racialism requires that we disavow definitive ruptures, whether heralded by new laws or heroic leaders.

It is in the process of confronting these critiques that racial democracy and post-racialism may grow closer together. As we have seen, the more sophisticated version of post-racialism acknowledges enduring racism but looks forward to the coming post-racial future and castigates those who hold us back by clinging to retrograde racial identities and grievances. Similarly, the more sophisticated version of racial democracy grants that

⁷⁶ Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Case for Reparations,” *The Atlantic*, June 2014. <http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2014/05/the-case-for-reparations/361631/> (accessed March 16, 2017).

⁷⁷ Lawrie Balfour, *The Evidence of Things Not Said: James Baldwin and the Promise of American Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 88.

⁷⁸ Kevin Bruyneel, “The King’s Body: The Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial and the Politics of Collective Memory,” *History and Memory* 26.1 (2014): 84.

⁷⁹ Bruyneel, “The King’s Body,” 91.

racism has always marred Brazil, but nonetheless locates a powerful aspirational form of racial democracy in the Brazilian character as the vehicle of its ultimate realization, also viewing strong racial identities as historically retrograde. When racial democracy and post-racialism both become a story about the *future*, rather than about the past and the present, it becomes possible to see them as nationally-inflected manifestations of the same underlying ideological structure, requiring similar (though by no means identical) strategies of resistance. Yet insofar as these aspirational futures nonetheless emerge out of very different original temporal narratives and their critiques, and necessarily bare the imprint of this less sophisticated parentage, they are likely to promise distinct balms to their adherents, and to harbor distinct points of vulnerability. While the temporal structure of these narratives may be similar, the content of their projected futures continues to differ in significant ways—but that is the topic for another paper.