

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Racism and Race Mixture in Latin America

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This essay reviews the following works:

Rethinking Race in Modern Argentina. Edited by Paulina Alberto and Eduardo Elena. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016. Pp. xviii + 373. \$120.00 cloth. ISBN: 9781107107632.

Reimagining Black Difference and Politics in Brazil: From Racial Democracy to Multiculturalism. By Alexandre Emboaba Da Costa. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. Pp. vii + 233. \$105.00 cloth. ISBN: 9781137386335.

Racial Subordination in Latin America: The Role of the State, Customary Law, and the New Civil Rights Response. By Tanya Katerí Hernández. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013. Pp. vii + 247. \$35.99 paper. ISBN: 9781107695436.

The Color of Love: Racial Features, Stigma, and Socialization in Black Brazilian Families. By Elizabeth Hordge-Freeman. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015. Pp. ix + 311. \$29.95 paper. ISBN: 9781477307885.

Blackness in the Andes: Ethnographic Vignettes of Cultural Politics in the Time of Multiculturalism. By Jean Muteba Rahier. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. Pp. ix + 243. \$110.00 cloth. ISBN: 9781137272713.

Land of the Cosmic Race: Race Mixture, Racism, and Blackness in Mexico. By Christina A. Sue. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. ix + 234. \$24.95 paper. ISBN: 9780199925506.

Pigmentocracies: Ethnicity, Race, and Color in Latin America. By Edward Telles and the Project on Ethnicity and Race in Latin America. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014. Pp. xiii + 320. \$29.95 paper. ISBN: 9781469617831.

The study of race and racism in Latin America has been active for several decades. It has reached what some have called a “post-revisionist” stage, in which research has documented “the interaction of state entities, social movements, and intellectuals in the production of both esoteric and common-sense racial knowledge.”¹ A main feature of the earlier revisionist stage was its critique of supposed Latin American “racial democracies” through documenting racism and racial inequality. It is striking, therefore that, after many years of revisionist and indeed post-revisionist documentation of the operation of racism and the dimensions of racial inequality, all the authors of the books under review once again powerfully reaffirm these realities.

In a simple sense, then, these studies reinforce what we already know, both in terms of ethnographic and statistical data—although Edward Telles and his colleagues add some innovative and interesting aspects to the statistical picture by using a skin-color variable, and Paulina Alberto and Eduardo Elena focus on a country little studied in terms of race. The fact that scholars still feel it is necessary to assert that racism does operate, and describe how, may say something about the need to challenge the advent of globalized

¹ Nancy P. Appelbaum, “Post-Revisionist Scholarship on Race,” *Latin American Research Review* 40, no. 3 (2005): 215, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/lar.2005.0036>.

“post-racial” ideologies, which claim, against mounting evidence, that racial difference is now less important than it was, in a world in which a black man can be US president, antiracism is the default political position, and multiculturalism holds sway.² But it also says something about the tenacity of ideas of Latin American societies as mixed, the outcome of enduring processes of *mestizaje/mestiçagem*, and about the idea that mixture is, at some deep-rooted level, antithetical to racism, even if the undermining effect seems to be constantly deferred; both Alexandre Emboaba Da Costa (27) and Christina A. Sue (182) note that a characteristic of the racial democracy that *mestizaje* supposedly brings about is that it represents a future, aspirational state of affairs.³ A feature of post-revisionist scholarship on race in Latin America is a greater sensitivity to the constitutive tension in *mestizaje* between racial democracy and racism. This means that, while it is continuously necessary to highlight racism and its operation, we also need to attend to how it works in intimate conjunction with forces that tend to reduce racial hierarchy. How well these books address this tension is the subject of the latter part of this essay.

The societies under study here—mainly Brazil, Colombia, Peru, Mexico, Ecuador, and Argentina—are very varied. Census figures for indigenous and black populations are as follows: Brazil, under 1 percent and 8 percent (although another 43 percent identify as *pardo* or brown); Colombia, 3.5 and 11 percent; Ecuador, 7 and 7 percent; Mexico, 22 and under 2 percent; Argentina, 2.5 and under 0.5 percent. (Census figures do not exist for Peru, but estimates give figures of 45 and 5–10 percent.) The traction of ideas about racial democracy and *mestizaje* is equally uneven. In Brazil, racial inequality has been copiously documented and the state recognizes racism; in Mexico, there is less evidence and more disavowal (especially of antiblack racism); in Argentina, while the ideology of *mestizaje* has not historically made a major impact given the image of the country as predominantly white, the idea of the absence of racism is still prevalent. Yet in all the countries examined in these books, we can find a common pattern of heterogeneous and contradictory recognitions of racism and disavowals of it.

This pattern comes out most dramatically from the detailed ethnographic data on the personal, emotional, and experiential dimensions of racial difference and racism presented by Elizabeth Hordge-Freeman, Christina Sue, Lea Geler (“African Descent and Whiteness in Buenos Aires” in Albert and Elena), and, in one chapter of his book, Jean Muteba Rahier. This approach diverges from studies that, particularly in Brazil, have tended to focus on structural and discursive processes of economic and political exclusion, often with a focus on measuring the dimensions of racial inequality and the role of racial discrimination in creating and perpetuating it. Such studies tend to portray the contradictions and tensions of Latin American racial formations in terms of the hegemonic status of ideas of racial mixture and racial democracy, which in Rahier’s view (79) are “an ideological tool at the service of the white and white-mestizo elites” in Ecuador; these ideas figure as a simple mask covering the realities of racism and racial inequality. This view risks casting nonelites as victims of false consciousness or at best misrecognition. A more bottom-up, ethnographic approach is better at revealing the way these contradictions operate and how people engage with the simultaneous but partial realities of both racial hierarchy and the insignificance of race, which are simultaneously implied in the ideas and practices of *mestizaje*.

Telles depicted the contradictory tensions in Brazilian racial formations in terms of the coexistence of horizontal and vertical social relations: horizontal relations of interaction, mixture, and fairly equal exchange happened in the realm of friendship, the family, and the neighborhood; vertical relations of hierarchy and inequality occurred in the domains of work, education, health, housing, and politics.⁴ But the ethnographic data of the authors mentioned above shows that the tension also exists *within* the realm of kinship and the family—indeed it is in this domain that some of the main effects of racism take place. Structural approaches often deploy statistics that usually depend on classifying people into binary categories of “black” (or indigenous) and “nonblack” (or nonindigenous). This is a tactic needed to generate the statistical comparisons showing vertical relations of economic inequality and to allow researchers to control for class—always necessary in societies where race and class tend to coincide and many black and indigenous people are *de facto* poor. But this binary classification tends to hide the fact that racism and ideas about racial

² Alana Lentini, “Post-Race, Post Politics: The Paradoxical Rise of Culture after Multiculturalism,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 37, no. 8 (2014), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2012.664278>; Mónica Moreno Figueroa and Emiko Saldívar Tanaka, “We Are Not Racists, We Are Mexicans: Privilege, Nationalism and Post-Race Ideology in Mexico,” *Critical Sociology* 42, no. 4–5 (2016): 515–533, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920515591296>; Alexandre Emboaba Da Costa, “Thinking ‘Post-Racial’ Ideology Transnationally: The Contemporary Politics of Race and Indigeneity in the Americas,” *Critical Sociology* 42, no. 4–5 (2016): 475–490, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920515591175>.

³ I will use *mestizaje* to include *mestiçagem*.

⁴ Edward E. Telles, *Race in Another America: The Significance of Skin Color in Brazil* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

difference also operate on those people who define themselves as mixed (even if, in Brazil at least, these people are classed as black for statistical purposes). The ethnographic data on families show that ideas about racial hierarchy operate across a wide range of phenotypes and self-identifications. Hordge-Freeman shows this exceptionally well for Brazil and Sue for Mexico; Geler shows it in a different way for two Argentinean women who are phenotypically white—even *blanca teta* (tit white), to use the local idiom—but whose Afro-descendant ancestry, recently uncovered and reclaimed by them, was not only banished from the family history but also is disallowed for them as a legitimate source of identification.

The Scope of the Books

Most of the books deal primarily with antiblack racism; only Telles et al. and Alberto and Elena address anti-indigenous racism. Even in these two books, the opportunity to really compare these forms of racism and analyze their intersection is mainly foregone, and this opportunity remains to be exploited in the future.

Alberto and Elena's edited volume is a significant and welcome addition to the literature on race in Latin America in its extended interrogation of what Gastón Gordillo ("The Savage outside of White Argentina") calls the project of "White Argentina." In eleven chapters, historians, with a couple of anthropologists and literature specialists, challenge the exceptionalist view of Argentina, which depicts it as the only Latin American country where whiteness apparently engulfed indigeneity (often with violence), blackness, and *mestizaje*; estimates indicate that up to 85 percent of the population is "white." The existence of a "brown" Argentina—alongside the small but more familiar indigenous groups and the tiny self-declared Afro-Argentine population—is drawn out, mostly through the ambiguous figure of "*los negros*," the darker-skinned inhabitants of the provinces and the *villas miseria* (low-income peripheral urban settlements); the category includes migrants from Bolivia and Peru. *Los negros* are the traditional supporters of Peronismo and populism, who have been included in Argentina's homogenizing whiteness and even seen as having authentically national *criollo* roots, and yet, with this epithet, are also rejected by the middle classes and the elites as not quite white enough, vulgar, and erring on the wrong side of the symbolic divide between civilization and barbarism. Argentinean multiculturalism tends to acknowledge historical *mestizaje* and thus highlight the indigenous and African-descent past, but gives less room to present-day racial difference and the blatantly racist abuse directed at the *negros de mierda* seen by white middle and upper classes to threaten the status quo with their political mobilizations against neoliberal reforms (Alberto and Elena, 255–257, 309–311).

Da Costa's book takes an ethnographic approach while being oddly thin with the ethnographic detail. He focuses on the Orùnmilá Cultural Center (OCC) in the city of Ribeirão Preto, and we get a good sense of the center activists' discourse, plus an account of their activities in Carnival, on the local music scene, and in relation to the implementation of ethno-educational policy in local schools; but the treatment lacks the thick descriptions of Hordge-Freeman's and Sue's works. There is not much ethnographic sense of the everyday. On the other hand, Da Costa gives a penetrating account of Brazil's racial formation, using a decolonial perspective but with some emphasis on the messy mechanics of actually engaging with the state, and a nuanced appreciation of the dangers and opportunities presented by working with the state. Some of the best ethnography comes in his account of how Silvany Euclênio, an education race advisor appointed by the mayor after lobbying by the OCC, was systematically sidelined by the city administration and by many teachers.

Da Costa has a good account of "post-racial" ideology as a strategy of power to depoliticize race by highlighting mixture, racial innocence, racial democracy, racial exceptionalism, and the future transcendence of race. He describes well the dialectic of the "hyperconsciousness and negation" of race (borrowing from João H. Costas Vargas), in which Brazilians are acutely aware of racial difference and its social implications, even when it is not made explicit; but they will deny or minimize its importance—sometimes going to convoluted lengths—when challenged or when certain situations bring racialized difference to the surface. In fact, Da Costa gives us a better understanding of people's denial and minimization than he does of their awareness of race. He shows how teachers rejected descriptions of the school system as institutionally racist, saying they treated blacks well in their own schools (148); he shows that they were unaware of racist incidents in their schools because they didn't see them in the first place, or they were not alerted to them by the students, or they minimized them, assuming they were insignificant, or they believed it was inappropriate to make a big deal out of them. People in the city administration and in schools saw Silvany as tediously insistent on blackness; they thought that what she did concerned only black people and saw the ethno-educational project as just her pet project (151). This was reflected in the fact that, although in surveys many people say race-based affirmative action is necessary and worthwhile (an apparently unpredictable but politically correct response, which Telles et al. confirmed in their survey), in practice these teachers saw it as unfair and inappropriate

for Brazil. Despite this depressing picture, some teachers who had done the teacher-training element of the project reported that they had learned a lot about black and African history and racism in Brazil, and said they felt they had more resources for dealing with racial difference and racism in schools.

Tanya Katerí Hernández is a lawyer, and her book focuses ostensibly on what she calls “customary law” as well as written legislation pertaining to Afro-descendants in Latin America, with a particular focus on Brazil and secondarily Colombia. Customary law covers the broad terrain on which state agents enact social norms via the deployment of state resources, giving them the force of (unwritten) law. The informal racism of police officers or city housing officials are examples insofar as they are state employees who have the power to impose certain social conventions relating to, say, racial segregation. Hernández’s aim is to draw attention to the neglected ways in which the state regulates racial dynamics in Latin America and to challenge the image of the state’s “racial innocence” that emerges from the relative absence of formal laws enshrining racial hierarchy (17). Hernández’s book is pitched at an introductory level and is very welcome as an incisive overview of the subordination of Afro-descendants and of multiculturalist and antiracist legislation. The focus on the state is also helpful, although Hernández perhaps does not sufficiently acknowledge previous work that looks not only at formal laws but also at state policy (e.g., regarding immigration, health, education, census taking, etc.), which is not customary law because it actually written down (not always publicly, as in secret memoranda banning the immigration of blacks and Jews in 1920s Mexico).⁵ In fact, Hernández focuses quite heavily on this kind of social policy, and on written laws, and gives us less detail on customary law, defined by her as the unwritten practices of state officials. For example, in her account of changing census practices—seen as a state instrument of whitening—it seems that the Mexican state’s decision not to count blacks was explicit social policy, while the tendency of Puerto Rican enumerators to increasingly classify people as “white” was an unwritten customary practice enacted while using state resources (40–42). These kinds of nuances are not always clear in Hernández’s account, thus obscuring questions of structure and agency, and of how hegemony gets enacted through the diverse practices of state and nonstate institutions and agents.

Hernández’s depiction of racial inequality sometimes runs the risk of decontextualizing it. For example, she cites an online news agency report saying that, in 2001, 80 percent of Afro-Colombians lived below the poverty line (75). The figure looks impressive, but other 2003 data not only give a lower figure of 61 percent for Afro-Colombians but also, and more importantly, compare this to a figure of 54 percent for the rest of the population.⁶ The difference is significant, of course, but racial inequality always needs to be put in a wider context of general inequality. Hernández does this better for Brazil, where some studies have controlled for class in a rigorous way.⁷

Hordge-Freeman’s excellent ethnography interrogates families and bodies as sites of race-making in Brazil. Focusing on the women and some of the men of ten core families in a low-income neighborhood of Salvador, Bahia, she brings out in vivid detail the complex, strongly gendered, and affectively powerful ideas and judgements made about racialized appearance (skin color, hair type, nose shape, etc.) and the stigma attached to body capital categorized as black, which may deeply affect relationships and emotional dispositions within phenotypically diverse families. The verbatim material and the ethnographic vignettes provide a stunning account of the symbolic and affective power of race in Brazil, which while it affects black people most directly, implicates everyone: light-skinned children may also be victimized by jealous darker-skinned mothers or sent away to live with whiter adoptive families (107–111). The stigma attached to blackness means people acquire multiple coping strategies, including instances of resistance: they learn “racial fluency” (how to use color/race terms appropriately, including not using them) and they learn racial etiquette to avoid possible shame and slights. Hordge-Freeman notes that this etiquette is common in dealing with class differences, too; ensuring one has on clean underwear in case of an emergency admission to hospital is a shame-avoidance tactic familiar among “poor but respectable” white Britons. But she rightly

⁵ David Scott FitzGerald and David Cook-Martín, *Culling the Masses: The Democratic Origins of Racist Immigration Policy in the Americas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

⁶ César Rodríguez Garavito, Tatiana Alfonso Sierra, and Isabel Cavalier Adarve, *Raza y derechos humanos en Colombia: Informe sobre discriminación racial y derechos de la población afrocolombiana* (Bogotá: Universidad de los Andes, Facultad de Derecho, Centro de Investigaciones Sociojurídicas (CIJUS), Observatorio de Discriminación Racial, Ediciones Uniandes, 2009), 58.

⁷ Hernández also cites some dubious statistics, such as those comparing Afro-Colombians to “white Colombians” (75), which is questionable as few studies of Colombia have used a white category. The source is a Minority Rights Group report, which turns out to cite an online report by the Inter-American Foundation, which cites a 1995 newsletter by the Colombia Human Rights Committee. Her presentation of the data on Brazil is more robust.

observes that racial stereotypes inflect the experience of class inequality in powerful ways, such that black folk are hypersensitive to reputational factors.

Rahier's book is a collection of mostly previously published material, with two new chapters that focus on the politics of *mestizaje* and multiculturalism in Ecuador. As the vignettes of the title suggests, the book covers varied ground. It includes an analysis of Afro-Esmeraldan *décimas* (ten-line stanzas), in which he shows how Afro-Ecuadorians made this European poetic form their own through a process of creolization; an essay on the representation of Jews in Afro-Ecuadorian festive contexts, which shows how local blacks invert national ideologies by associating whiteness with the Devil and blackness with moral integrity; several essays on how blacks figure in representations and in the political order of the Ecuadorian nation as it has moved from "monocultural *mestizaje* to multiculturalism" (175) (one essay here usefully summarizes multiculturalist legislation in several Andean countries); and a couple of essays that include a focus on the intersections of gender and race, one of which resonates with Hordge-Freeman's work in its intimate and intriguing account of black women's ideas about their own bodies and sexuality. Rahier's overall message is that the dominance of whiteness and the marginalization and racialization of Afro-Ecuadorians in the nation—and their different status vis-à-vis indigenous groups—continue despite the turn to multiculturalism, which is in fact highly co-optative. His work adds to the small but growing literature on blackness in the central Andes—Ecuador, Bolivia, and Peru.

With its in-depth exploration of a particular location, Sue's rich and illuminating ethnography of Veracruz, Mexico, chimes nicely with Hordge-Freeman's, although the latter has a tighter focus. Brazil and Mexico are two countries that, especially during the middle decades of the twentieth century, made *mestizaje* a centerpiece of their national identities. Accordingly, although both ethnographies have "black" or "blackness" in their titles, both interrogate the middle ground of mixedness, which marks an interesting difference from Da Costa, Hernández, and Rahier, who tend to focus more on blackness. However, blackness and indigeneity have figured rather differently in these national identities, with Brazil according a much bigger cultural and institutional place to blackness, compared to Mexico, where indigeneity is given pride of place. The commonalities between the two countries are reflected in the striking similarities of Sue's and Hordge-Freeman's descriptions of the use of color/race terms, and the way mixed-race identities and families work as sites for the reproduction of common-sense racial hierarchies. (At the end of her chapters, Hordge-Freeman comments on similarities between Brazil and other parts of Latin America and the African diaspora.)⁸ The differences between the countries are evident in the greater tendency among Veracruzanos to marginalize blackness (following a national trend in which blacks may often be seen as non-Mexican) and to avoid identifying explicitly as "black" (*negro*)—a category that does not yet have the political valence it has acquired in Brazil. It may be that the playing down of racism, alongside the playing up of mestizo nationalism, are also greater in Mexico, although Da Costa's material raises doubts about this, as he emphasizes the negation of race in Brazil.

Pigmentocracies differs from the other books in several ways: it arises from a large multicountry comparative survey of Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, and Peru, coordinated by Telles, who is known for his research on Brazil and among Mexican Americans, and conducted by four teams, comprising mainly scholars based in the Latin American countries, although some are Latin Americans based in US universities. The survey methodology shows in a systematic way some things that had previously been shown qualitatively. A key finding was that the size of ethnoracial populations counted by censuses and surveys varies widely according to the questions asked and the categories used. Individual self-identification questions returned smaller indigenous populations in Mexico and Peru than questions about ancestry. This may seem predictable, but it is useful to reveal this in a systematic and comparative way, especially in Latin America, where the measurement of ethnoracial inequality is not only incipient in many countries but also beset by methodological and conceptual uncertainties about how—and indeed whether it is even meaningful—to classify people ethnoracially (especially if this means going beyond a simple division between indigenous and nonindigenous).

Another important finding is the systematic demonstration of the existence of ethnoracial inequality among indigenous, black, mestizo, and white people, although the survey only provides data on perceptions of discrimination (by color, class, and in some cases language) and does not measure the extent to which racial discrimination drives racial inequality. In Brazil, statistical data demonstrating the structural impact of

⁸ Oddly, Hordge-Freeman does not cite work that which shows similar patterns for Mexico; see Mónica Moreno Figueroa, "Historically Rooted Transnationalism: Slightedness and the Experience of Racism in Mexican Families," *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 29, no. 3 (2008): 283–297, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07256860802169212>.

racial discrimination were, in the 1980s and 1990s, arguably instrumental in changing government policy, which eventually admitted the existence of racism and took measures to combat it.⁹ *Pigmentocracies* has the potential to underwrite similar kinds of shifts in other countries such as Mexico and Peru, where data on racialized inequality are less common, but additional data indicating the impact of racial discrimination, similar to those generated by scholars for Brazil, would be very useful.

A further key and innovative finding of this project has been the use of a measure of skin color, which was employed alongside classification (by self and other) as white, mestizo, indigenous, mulatto/*pardo*, and black; the survey did not address hair texture, which as Hordge-Freeman and other ethnographers know is a vital racial signifier (alongside facial features). The skin color data showed that inequalities were more clearly associated with color than with ethnoracial identity (225–227). For example, in Mexico, Colombia, and Peru, self-identified mestizos and/or mulattoes were on average more educated than whites. But lightness of skin was associated more systematically with better education. This might mean that discriminators act on the basis of perceived color (not to mention other markers such as hair), creating a coherent association between color and social status, while self-identification responds to other influences, such as an aversion among the better educated to self-identify as white in countries where the national norm is a mixed person (225). We already knew that simple views of the dominance of whiteness are nuanced by the fact that in Brazil (especially in Bahia) some light-skinned people choose to identify as brown or even black for social reasons. *Pigmentocracies* reinforces this nuancing for Mexico (where, in addition, a significant group of whites in the north of the country had relatively low educational status) and for Colombia. As a member of the project team argues in a recent article, it may be that symbolic boundaries of whiteness are less rigid than the structural ones.¹⁰

The Balance between Mixture and Racial Hierarchy

These books all attest to a well-known feature of the racial formations they examine, which is, in simple terms, a contradiction between racial democracy and racial hierarchy. On the one hand, there are processes—whether these are “merely” ideas or involve more material practices is a key issue—that move toward racial equality and the erasing or minimization of racial difference (albeit these take place in a context of class hierarchy). These processes are often seen as integrally linked to *mestizaje*, cast as a positive equalizing force that crosses boundaries and erodes difference. On the other hand, there are processes, nearly always seen as ideological *and* material, that reproduce racial inequality and point up racial difference. Paradoxically, the phenomenon of *mestizaje* is seen as being also a vehicle for this second set of processes, which are apparently diametrically opposed to the first set. Instead of tokening an egalitarian exchange, *mestizaje* can enshrine hierarchical difference by being recast as *blanqueamiento* (whitening); and it only draws its meaning from the founding differences between blackness, whiteness, and indigeneity. As Rahier notes (66), any use of the idea of racial mixing, whether positive or negative, “is always preceded by a necessary—although highly problematic—reification of the concept of biological ‘races.’”¹¹

The various authors, however, address these contradictions in different ways. Rahier and Hernández talk in terms of a simple opposition in which the possibility of racial equality and positive views of *mestizaje* are simply an “ideological tool at the service of white and white-mestizo elites” (Rahier, 79) or are part of a blatant denial of racism, which is a “cloak” around the realities of discrimination (Hernández, 4). Although Rahier does not go into detail, this tool presumably works because the elites are dominant and are able to impose their worldview, despite resistance. For Hernández, the cloak of denial is effective because elites have made a point of portraying their countries as “racially innocent” (9) in comparison to the United States,

⁹ See for example Peggy A. Lovell and Charles H. Wood, “Skin Color, Racial Identity, and Life Chances in Brazil,” *Latin American Perspectives* 25, no. 3 (1998): 90–109, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0094582X9802500305>; Nelson do Valle Silva, “Updating the Cost of Not Being White in Brazil,” in *Race, Class and Power in Brazil*, ed. Pierre-Michel Fontaine (Los Angeles: Center for Afro-American Studies, University of California, 1985).

¹⁰ Graziella Moraes Silva, “After Racial Democracy: Contemporary Puzzles in Race Relations in Brazil, Latin America and Beyond from a Boundaries Perspective,” *Current Sociology* 64, no. 5 (2016): 794–812, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392115590488>.

¹¹ Rahier (67, 209 n 7) takes me to task for producing a general and “spaceless” argument about *mestizaje* as inherently entailing a conceptual space for whiteness, blackness, and indigeneity. In his view this shows a “profound disregard for the specificity of national contexts.” However, he himself argues that ideas of racial mixing “always” involve the reification of race. I agree that *mestizaje* varies greatly by place, but it also has some recurrent features. Rahier’s own material shows that blackness has occupied a specific conceptual space in Ecuadorian *mestizaje*, which he says “constructs citizenship in terms of whiteness and white-mestizonez and imagines blackness as a kind of non-citizenship, an otherness ‘within’”; see Jean Rahier, “Race, Fútbol, and the Ecuadorian Nation: The Ideological Biology of (Non-)Citizenship,” *e-misférica* 5, no. 2 (2008), <http://hemi.nyu.edu/hemi/en-e-misferica-52/rahier>.

where racial discrimination was once legally prescribed. As I noted earlier, these approaches tend to cast elites as simply cynical or as self-deceiving victims of their own rhetoric, while nonelites are either resistant (challenging but not necessarily able to overturn dominant structures of power) or they are plagued by false consciousness, misrecognizing the realities of racism, which are hidden from view by myths and ideologies of racial democracy and race mixture as a force capable of undermining racial hierarchy—myths that have no purchase on the realities of everyday life.

Other authors take a more nuanced approach, which encompasses the possibility that the egalitarian and inclusive aspects of *mestizaje* are more than just a lie, and that they resonate at some level with the realities of people's lives, while existing in complex and contradictory tension with the hierarchical and racist dimensions of *mestizaje*. This resonates with Telles's distinction between vertical and horizontal relations (although I argued above that this distinction cross-cuts the divide between family and workplace that Telles uses). It also chimes with Livio Sansone's statement that "color is seen [by low-income residents of Salvador, Brazil] as important in the orientation of social and power relations in some areas and moments, while considered irrelevant in others." These residents perceive a "soft" area of social relations (street corners, parties, the neighborhood, sports, and religion) and a "hard" one (work, marriage and dating, and interactions with the police).¹²

Da Costa, for example, acknowledges that Telles's approach suggests that "conviviality and interrelation are indeed aspects of the reality of race relations in society" (6) and states that "sociability and stratification do not exist as paradoxes—the former works to make the significance of the latter appear less so, an aspect central to the maintenance of anti-blackness and white supremacy" (7). However, he tends to see conviviality as a kind of ideological mask and, although he notes that the idea of racial democracy persists among many Brazilians, it is as a "future hope" (8) rather than some aspect of present reality. This means that any positive statement about racially harmonious interactions—such as those made by teachers he interviewed about social relations in the schools where they worked—inevitably appears as a manifestation of false consciousness and simple denial or misrecognition of racism.

Sue addresses directly the problem of false consciousness and rejects its assumption of a duped subaltern class. However, she still argues that people in Veracruz "turn a blind eye" when the realities of racial hierarchy contradict the national "ideology" and that they actively work to "silence, minimize and reframe" those realities (181), because in doing so they "achieve a sense of belonging to the national community," built on the three pillars of *mestizaje*, nonracism, and nonblackness (184). In these formulations, a conceptual divide remains between the "realities" of racism and the "ideology" of nonracism. Sue goes further when, citing Terry Eagleton—who said successful ideologies must communicate "a version of social reality which is real and recognizable enough"—she identifies "shreds of truth in ideological myths" (182), but these get a mere paragraph. The possibility that *mestizaje* can encompass inclusion as a lived, embodied *reality*—partial and interwoven immanently with partial realities of exclusion—gets short shrift.

Hordge-Freeman also tussles with the contradictions produced by mixture. The main emphasis of the book is on exposing the gendered racial hierarchies evident in ideas about bodies, beauty, family relationships, respectability, and spatial structures; she also shows that the people she worked with often reproduced racial hierarchies by evading and minimizing them (for example, attributing racism to older generations, rather than their own), although they were willing to talk about race with her. She outlines the "critical accommodation" by which, "rather than blindly reproducing racial hierarchies," people accommodated them with the "goal of ultimately challenging inequality" (73). For example, women tend to reproduce aesthetic standards that see light skin, straight hair, and a narrow nose as beautiful; these standards, oriented to whiteness, are internalized and naturalized. Yet in subtle ways, an alternative aesthetic is also enacted by women who want to look good and think they can achieve this by having slightly curly rather than totally straight hair or by adding synthetic extensions to disguise their "bad" hair, without approximating a "white" look. Also women who relax or even straighten their hair are not necessarily blindly reproducing a whitened norm and thus denying themselves; they may also be trying to get ahead in the job market, create a sense of self-worth, and challenge the simple equation of *boa aparência* (good appearance) with a white look. Another example is of a woman, from a family identified by Hordge-Freeman as antiracist, who plays with racialized language, calling herself and members of her family *torradinhos* (toasted) to accentuate their "beautiful" dark skin (206), explicitly discussing slavery past and present (a theme skated over by most,

¹² Livio Sansone, *Blackness without Ethnicity: Constructing Race in Brazil* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 52–53. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781403982346>.

except in relation to the distant past), and making ironic comments on white privilege. At the same time she commented on the desirability of straightened hair and of marrying a white man.

However, while alive to these contradictions, Hordge-Freeman explains them in terms of a dual dynamic of the internalization and contestation of hegemonic norms of whiteness. This seems fair enough in relation to ideas about beauty—the overwhelming consensus in Brazil that African hair is “bad” can only be an expression of racism and its internalization. But it does not envisage the possibility that *mestiçagem* can be experienced as *simultaneously* inclusive and exclusive. For example, Hordge-Freeman looks at the huge success of the Instituto de Beleza Natural, which offers treatments relaxing, rather than straightening, hair. It sells its services in terms of helping people improve their career opportunities and does not mention race at all. This “contributes to a racial ideology that silences any questions” of race and “exploits the racial anxieties of black women,” although it also allows these women to carve out a space to challenge racial hierarchies (95). But its success could also be due to the fact that it taps into the normative image of the mixed-race woman and into those “soft” areas of social relations where race really is experienced as not very important. Of course, these inclusive meanings are always already exclusive ones as well. The mixed-race woman is notoriously a site for the enactment of race and gender hierarchy; everyone knows that the world of work—in which the Instituto suggests that a woman with relaxed hair could achieve more—is actually a “hard” area. Inclusion and exclusion are immanent in each other. The point is that the Instituto is tapping into experiential, embodied realities, not just ideologies and myths.

Alberto and Elena argue that whiteness, as it developed in Argentina, is “markedly similar to the tropes of racial and cultural inclusion” associated with *mestizaje* (11). They note that criticisms of ideologies of racial democracy have portrayed it as an obfuscatory “myth” and say that the same critique is possible of “whiteness” in Argentina. However, they caution that debunking a racial “myth” should beware of replacing it with another “more foundational ‘reality’ of race” (12). Whiteness is not a simple “misapprehension or lie,” it is a “racial formation with profound contradictions [that] . . . grants broad inclusion by muting explicit discussions of racial and ethnic differences,” while also reinscribing those very differences (12). Thus Peronism included the popular classes, avoiding the explicit discussion of race and implicitly extending the embrace of whiteness to encompass them and their *mestizo* background. Yet not only did the visual imagery of Peronismo make fairly unequivocal references to a stereotypical dark-skinned plebeian (as Ezequiel Adamovsky’s essay shows), but also elite opponents of Peronismo lambasted the rank-and-file “negros” they associated with the movement. Both these tendencies were ideological and material realities.

Final Thoughts

All of these books include some reference to comparative frames—usually ones comparing Brazil with the United States, but also ones comparing Latin American countries. The emphasis tends to be on nonexceptionalism: Argentina, according to Alberto and Elena, is not an exception in Latin America but is a variant on a Latin American theme. Brazil is not an exceptional racial democracy, compared to the United States, but a variant on a hemispheric American, a black Atlantic, or a Lusophone theme. This is all to the good; comparisons are useful, but defining one case as exceptional tends to play to nationalist myth making. The balance between inclusion and exclusion—seen not as “myth” versus “reality” but as simultaneous realities immanent in each other—is not specific to Latin America; it is characteristic of liberalism generally. In Latin America, the pervasiveness of *mestizaje*—understood as material-semiotic phenomenon—in all its regional variants gives the balance a particular form, rooted in the intimacies of kinship and neighborhoods, which holds the key to the persistence of ideas of racial democracy in the face of decades of sustained critiques. Only by grasping racial democracy as a myth but also more than a myth can we understand its persistence. Hegemony operates by constructing realities that are at once material and semiotic.

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