Whitening and racial ambiguity: racialization and ethnoracial citizenship in contemporary Brazil

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ABSTRACT

Recent policies to redress racial inequality in Brazil, including affirmative action and the protection of Afro-Brazilian land rights, have generated fierce debates about the character of race and racism in Brazilian society. In this article, I critically examine an assumption structuring these debates: that Brazil is characterized by a special tolerance for ethnoracial ambiguity that is threatened by these initiatives. Drawing on ethnographic research on conflicts between Afro-Brazilian communities and Brazil's spaceport, I argue that an everyday imperative to social whitening shows how this ethnoracial ambiguity has been skewed toward one racial pole. Affirmative action policies do not eliminate ethnoracial ambiguity, but have helped to change the force of the everyday whitening that structures it. In this critique, I aim to clarify the nature of ethnoracial changes in Brazil, as the ideology of 'racial democracy' has lost the hegemony it held during much of Brazil's twentieth century.

KEYWORDS

Brazil; race; citizenship; quilombos

What distinguishes the Latin situation is that, rather than being seen as one of white supremacy's many faces or as a legacy left by colonialism, this compulsion to whiteness is presented as proof positive of Latin antiracism. (Nascimento and Nascimento 1992)

Introduction: whiteness and race politics in Alcântara

It was in the (northern hemisphere) summer of 2001 when I arrived for the first time in Alcântara, Maranhão, a peninsula in the border region between Brazil's northeast and the Amazon. A beginning doctoral student in anthropology from the USA, I was seeking a site for my ethnographic dissertation research project. After much scouring of the Brazilian media and scholarship, I became fascinated by this equatorial area, where rural, predominantly Afro-Brazilian people were involved in a land conflict with the hub of Brazil's satellite launch program.

Across the bay from the state of Maranhão's island capital, São Luís, Alcântara is the home of some 18,000 people living mostly in small horticultural and fishing villages that
surround an urban nucleus of about 5,000. The inhabitants are mostly descended from
the Afro-Brazilian and mixed-race peasantry that formed during the nineteenth century
as the slave-based cotton economy established in the eighteenth century began its
demise (Almeida 2006; Assunção 1996; Beckert 2014; Furtado 1959; Viveiros 1999).
With the decline of the cotton economy, free villages created from the broader slave
society spread throughout Alcântara and were mostly able to lay claim to the best
coastal land. In the 1980s, however, the Brazilian Air Force forcibly expropriated the
land of some 1,500 coastal villagers to build a spaceport, consigning the now displaced
inhabitants to newly built inland villages, termed agrovilas, which lacked sufficient land
to sustain their livelihood (Almeida 2006; Mitchell 2008; Nunes 2011; Pereira Junior
2009). The condition of the people in the agrovilas, combined with other unfulfilled gov-
ernment promises, has led to a simmering land conflict that has stymied plans to
expand the spaceport. Mobilizing around a clause in Brazil’s 1988 constitution that
grants inalienable land rights (propriedade definitiva) to remanescentes das comunidades
dos quilombos, literally, ‘remnants of escaped-slave descended communities,’ the
remaining coastal villages have tenuously held onto their land. Nonetheless, even
though the villagers have won state certification as quilombolas, they still have not
won official land title.

When I first arrived to explore Alcântara in 2001, I knew no one and understood little
about life there, but I gradually came to realize that the conflicts there reflected many
aspects of the complex politics of inequality, race, and development in Brazil – exactly
what I wanted to study (Mitchell 2010, 2013, 2015, Forthcoming). I would go on to
spend 2004–2006 living in Alcântara to write my dissertation (Mitchell 2008), developing
many close contacts then and in numerous subsequent trips. But in those first days, I
walked the rutted cobblestone streets of the peninsula’s town center alone, trying to
make connections. One early day, my shirt dripping with sweat, I stopped into a little
store for some shade, a cold beer, and, if lucky, some conversation. I met a local electrician
drinking a soda. We struck up a conversation, and the electrician (I pseudonymously call
him Walmir) became the first of many lasting friends I would make in Alcântara. He
invited me to lunch the next day (and while still finding my way around town, I regularly
eat in the house of his in-laws).

Due principally to the redistributive measures of the early twenty-first century Worker’s
Party national governments, the region has more recently experienced some economic
gains (Neri 2012), but in 2001, it was grindingly poor by Brazilian standards. Through
pooling extended-family resources, however, the household was better off than most of
its neighbors. During this lunch hour, Walmir’s father-in-law, who worked the ovens at
one of the town’s bakeries, would sit watching TV news, as his wife, a school teacher,
cooked for the family, and now, for me. I usually brought with me some meat or fruit
(over the protestations of the family), and prohibited from helping cook (a task principally
carried out by women in the region), I would sit talking with members of the family. During
one such session, the dominant Globo Network’s national midday newscast examined
quotas for university admissions for Afro-descendent Brazilians, raising the issue of affir-
mative action then being introduced in Brazil, a source then and now of enormous
controversy.

Walmir asked me what I thought:
'I think that it’s a good idea, an important step in confronting inequality and racism,’ I offered, somewhat hesitantly, because I wanted to know my friend’s thoughts rather than voice my own ideas. So, I quickly continued: ‘What do you think?’

Because of their appearance, Walmir and his family would be considered unambiguously black in the USA, as well as in many middle-class spaces in Brazil, which tend to be much lighter skinned than poorer spaces (Telles 2014). And while I knew that racial classification is very different in Brazil than it is in the USA and that in Brazil’s census of 2000, only 6.2 percent of Brazilians had classified themselves as preto or black (Melo 2012), I was surprised by Walmir’s answer:

‘I’m against it,’ he said. ‘I don’t think that blacks (negros) should get more advantages than whites (brancos) like us get.’

I did not have an immediate response, but Walmir must have noted the confusion in my face, for Walmir, who like most Brazilians was familiar with US racial categories from US popular culture, quickly continued:

Man, we’re not racist like the US. Here things are not so clear-cut (não são bem definida). You think I should call myself negro to fill quotas?

Four important elements of Walmir’s response reflect much of Brazil’s everyday attitudes about race, attitudes also reflected in many scholarly works on race in Brazil. Walmir was asserting: first, that his self-identification as white was evidence of racial ambiguity (‘não são bem definida’); second, that this ambiguity was proof of non-racism; third, that this racial ambiguity and non-racism could be undermined by a quota system that might encourage him to identify as black rather than white; and fourth, that whiteness was a preferred category that racial ambiguity allowed him to claim.

Before I consider the scholarly literature, I want to consider Walmir’s answer more closely. Walmir rightly understood that the US ‘one-drop rule’ is a unique cultural formation which distinguishes white from black by a simple calculation of ancestry and that it has racist origins in US plantation society and the subsequent Jim Crow racial order (Davis 2001; Wright 1994). If we step back for a moment from US or Brazilian classificatory systems, we can see that for Walmir to identify himself as white is no stranger than for him to identify himself as black. These are cultural forms of identification developed out of specific histories of racism: black and white are culturally constructed poles on a color continuum, neither one logically more appropriate than the other outside of one of these classificatory frames.

The kind of racial whitening that Walmir engaged in, I term ‘everyday whitening’, to distinguish it from the well-known project of national whitening that was a matter of national policy in Brazil around the turn of the twentieth century. As slavery declined throughout the 1870s (to be finally abolished in 1888), Brazilian elites, well aware of the ‘scientific’ racism then dominant in international scholarship on race, worried that Brazil’s racially mixed character doomed it to backwardness, and embraced a policy of embranquecimento (whitening) to aggressively ‘whiten’ the nation through immigration and racial mixture. Such ideas fell into disrepute in the 1930s as the valorization of racial mixture and ‘racial democracy’ became the dominant national conceptualization of Brazil’s racial character (Andrews 2004; Borges 1993; Cunha 1985; Guimarães 2012; Hanchard 1994;
Schwarcz 1999; Skidmore 1993). But the kind of everyday whitening embraced by Walmir has long outlasted Brazilian national policies favoring national whitening.6

**Ethnoracial citizenship and racialization**

In studying the conflict between Brazil’s quilombo movement and the project to expand the spaceport in Alcântara, I often encountered such articulations of whiteness among people who would not be considered white, not only in the USA, but also in other parts of Brazil. On its own, this is not a novel observation. Since at least the mid-twentieth century, scholars have noted the contextual variance of racial classifications and the existence of categories such as ‘brancos da Bahia’ (‘whites of Bahia’) for people who would not be considered white in São Paulo (Azevedo 1966; Degler 1986; Pierson 1967).

In this paper, however, I am not concerned with the contextual variance of racial categories, but how and why an inclination to whiteness remains under-examined and the implications of whiteness’s invisibility for scholarship and social policy.7 In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Brazil initiated several affirmative action policies and also acted to recognize the land rights of escaped-slave communities (Quilombos), actions undertaken to mitigate racial inequality (see French 2009; Htun 2004; Telles and Paixão 2013). I label these different initiatives as ‘ethnoracial citizenship’, since they offer a model of citizenship and social inclusion for historically excluded groups, which is based on the ethnoracial grounds of their historical exclusion.

Critics of these initiatives insist that they threaten Brazil’s tolerance for mixing and ambiguity and will consequently turn Brazil into a country divided into antagonistic races – a position that I call the ‘racialization thesis’ (DaMatta 1997; Fry et al. 2007; Kamel 2006; Maggie 2005; Risério 2007). In an interview with the major Rio de Janeiro daily, O Globo, to take one of many examples, Peter Fry, the British-born, Brazilian-naturalized Federal University of Rio de Janeiro anthropologist, and a major critic of Brazil’s ethnoracial citizenship, claimed:

> When the state establishes race as a criterion for the distribution of rights, it will tend to strengthen the belief in races and, as a consequence, racism. The path back to a non-racist ideology becomes more difficult. In every place in the world where States took the path of racializing legislation, the consequences were disastrous. South Africa and Rwanda are perhaps the most extreme and terrible examples. I hope that a strong ideology of mixture wins out over the long-term, but I’m not optimistic about it. (Cited in Trigo 2005)8

This is a surprising critique from someone who wrote, as recently as 2000 that ‘the history of the black movement in Brazil has largely been the history of not-resoundingly successful attempts to construct a black identity to which people of color would feel impelled to adhere’ (Fry 2000, 103). Yet, the perspective is shared by a variety of scholars, both critics and enthusiasts of an apparent racialization of consciousness following on the heels of changes to legislation. The government, according to this analysis, is inadvertently succeeding where Brazil’s black movements failed again and again during the twentieth century. Brazil, which (along with Latin America and the Caribbean more generally) since the 1930s has occupied the corner of ambiguity and fluidity in a triangular iconography (Ribeiro 2005) of race relations traditionally marked out with the USA and South Africa at the other corners, is apparently becoming less ambiguously racialized, giving up its
morenos, cafuzos, and caboclos⁹ and its culture of racial ambiguity for something more like the supposedly polar categories of blacks and whites that we know from the USA.

Walmir’s claim was similar to Fry’s. He was doing more than simply identifying himself as white: he was also asserting that this identification was proof of racial ambiguity and therefore of non-racism. This interpretation, which is common in Brazil and in Brazilian scholarship, ignores the sociocultural and political forces that encouraged Walmir to identify as white rather than black. The policies I am referring to here as ethnoracial citizenship have not eliminated ethnoracial ambiguity, but have instead added sociocultural and political forces that encourage identification with the black racial pole in addition to those historical forces that have encouraged selection of the white pole. It is only because whitening is a generally ignored sociocultural force that the fully visible quotas for non-whites in Brazil’s prestigious federal universities seem to threaten Brazil’s sense of racial ambiguity and non-racism.

The racialization thesis overlooks the force of everyday whitening, the everyday self-identification of mixed-race people as white, thereby ignoring or underestimating Brazil’s ethnoracial inequality.¹⁰ There is nothing ambiguous or embracing of mixture in Walmir’s identification of himself as white. Brazil, against defenders of the racialization thesis, is already racialized – even though this is a frequently hidden racialization. If ethnoracial citizenship is changing everyday racial subjectivities, it is more likely changing the polarity of Brazil’s dominant racial poles, black and white, creating institutional incentives for people to identify as black – institutional incentives that once mostly only existed for identifying as white.

### Ambiguity and Brazilian racism

The scholarship I review in this paper is mostly from 1996 to 2007, when Brazil’s policies of ethnoracial citizenship were first being developed and then implemented. The racialization thesis has become a common trope in Brazil, particularly among those opposed to ethnoracial citizenship, and it has gone largely uncontested even by defenders of ethnoracial citizenship. The scholarly debates surrounding the topic have cooled, or have settled into an ‘equilibrium of antagonisms’,¹¹ to use Gilberto Freyre’s phrase. In placing emphasis on the significance of everyday whitening, I hope to provide insight into how this debate might be once again taken up, once that equilibrium breaks, as eventually it must.

Brazilian social scientists have often compared Brazilian and US racial systems, arguing that Brazil acknowledges racial mixture but that the USA, with its infamous one-drop rule, does not (for an elaboration and critique of the history of this comparison, see Mitchell, Blanchette, and Silva n.d.). In his scathing critique of contemporary race politics in Brazil and of Brazil’s implementation of ethnoracial citizenship, for example, the Bahian scholar Antonio Risério decries what he sees as the Americanization of Brazilian race relations:

> Brazil is the country of chromatic richness [riqueza cromatica]. Very different from what one finds in the United States, where the existence of mestiços of blacks and whites is not socially recognized. (Risério 2007, 18)

> ‘In Brazil,’ he writes, unlike the United States, ‘we acknowledge our ancestors’. (Risério 2007, 83)
Brazil’s most famous living anthropologist, Roberto DaMatta, makes a similar observation in his book of short essays on the USA entitled, *Tocquevilleanas: notícias da América*. Writing of a US racial system that he sees, by contrast with the Brazilian one, to require purified racial categories, DaMatta writes:

The reaction that almost every Brazilian has to this mode of classification is nearly always negative. Habituated to read themselves as mixed, the majority refuse to classify themselves irrefutably in a category, considering it narrow or imprecise for what each person considers themself ethnically or culturally. (DaMatta 2005, 144)

We have here two clear and influential statements of the position that I want to consider. Brazil, especially in contrast to the USA (the place that is frequently cast by critics as the origin point of Brazil’s ethnoracial citizenship), has a tolerance for mixture, ambiguity, and flexibility, which Peter Fry characterizes as making possible a ‘deracialization’ of individual identity (2005, 195). These claims are made in the context of struggles over ethnoracial citizenship, which is cast as threatening this deracializing and mixture-embracing ambiguity. Again, I draw attention to this scholarship both because of its influence on debates on ethnoracial citizenship in Brazil and because it echoes the claims of Walmir and many others I encountered in my fieldwork.

**Whitening and ‘sociological intelligence’**

Debates over ethnoracial citizenship began in the mid-1990s, as the ideology of ‘racial democracy’ that had been dominant in Brazilian nationalism since the 1930s began to suffer from scholarly attacks as well as from Brazil’s black movements (Andrews 1996; Collins 2015; Guimarães 2001; Pinho 2010). In 1996, as those debates were intensifying, the administration of President Fernando Henrique Cardoso sponsored a seminar in which prominent Brazilian and US intellectuals compared multiculturalism and racism in Brazil and the USA.

For Peter Fry:

The issues at stake at the Brasília seminar on multiculturalism … reveal serious contradictions that lie at the root of Brazilian society. On one side is a strong commitment to ‘liberal democracy,’ which, however much contradicted by the realities of patronage, corruption, nepotism, prejudice, and sheer violent power, remains an ideal to which many still aspire. On another, not so different from the first, is an appeal to ‘tradition,’ to ‘Brazilian sociological intelligence,’ which evokes the specificity of Brazilian society caught between the ‘ideals’ of democracy and the ‘tradition’ of hierarchy and ambiguity. And on yet another is a demand for radical change, a casting off of ‘tradition,’ the formal recognition of distinct ‘races’ and the introduction of temporary measures to alleviate the inequalities between them. (2000, 103)

Fry’s usage of the phrase ‘sociological intelligence’ comes from an article by Roberto DaMatta, published in the collection of essays in Portuguese that emerged from the 1996 seminar (Souza 1997).

DaMatta, another participant in the seminar and a master of the illustrative story, uses an anecdote to begin his analysis of what he sees as the contrasting forms of racial classification in Brazil and the USA. Although I depart from DaMatta in his interpretation of the event, his anecdote was, and remains, an almost perfect distillation of some of the key
divergences in Brazilian and US racial perception that help us illuminate this article’s key claims.

In 1968, DaMatta tells us, a group of Brazilian students on a cultural exchange program sponsored by the US State Department came to Harvard, where he was working on his doctorate in anthropology. At one seminar the Brazilian students attended, two African Americans spoke of the struggles, successes, and hopes of the US Civil Rights Movement. As DaMatta recalls, the Brazilian students challenged the two Americans with provocative questions and comments, telling them that

the apparent modification of minority rights did not affect the problem’s core; the structure of capitalism, founded in the exploitation of labor [and] that to change race relations, it would be necessary first to change the whole ‘system’ through revolution.

He writes:
After around thirty minutes of ideological impasse, one of the [American] black lecturers decided to get more forceful and said more or less the following, with a hard glare towards the audience of Brazilians: ‘It’s curious that you demand so much of our system. The fact is that we are working with what we can to change racial relations here. You, who call yourself a racial democracy, are much worse, in practical terms. Just look: in a group of approximately eighty Brazilian students, I see only seven or eight Blacks. The great majority of you are white. Where is this racial democracy that you’re supposed to have?’ (1997, 69)

This story could easily be replicated today. As Hellwig (1992) has shown, during the twentieth century, mainstream African-American thought in the USA went from a high regard for Brazilian ‘racial democracy’, as a model of integration to be emulated by the USA, to a broad suspicion of Brazil’s hidden racism and weak sense of racialized political consciousness and solidarity.

But the crux of the story for DaMatta lies in the reaction of many of the Brazilian students, who told DaMatta after the seminar that they were disturbed by the conversation:

I soon discovered that the Brazilians were perturbed by the following problem: who were the blacks [negros] that the Americans had found among us? Because, as one of the students told me, with the exception of one or two people, ‘there weren’t any blacks [pretos] among them’. (1997, 70)

For DaMatta, this story revealed the ‘heart of the problem’: a fundamental difference in the ways in which US and Brazilian society classify ethnoracial variations. For DaMatta, this difference is characterized by the Brazilian embrace of mixed and ambiguous categories and the US insistence on pure and closed categories:

Although there exist ‘mulatos’ and ‘mestiços’ in the United States, just like in Brazil, in Brazilian society, these *mestiços* enjoy explicit cultural and ideological recognition, while, in the American case, they are submerged as ‘whites’ or ‘blacks’ (negros). The result is that the American system relies on the distinction and compartmentalization of ethnic types and groups that are self-contained, contrasting, autonomous and socially coherent – that is, without mixture. There, the system is repulsed by ambiguity, by the ‘more-or-less’ or the middle term. That way, either you are ‘white’ or you are ‘black,’ ‘Hispanic,’ ‘Jewish,’ ‘Italian’ or ‘Irish’ etc. In Brazil, the classificatory system privileges and values the middle term and ambiguity, tending, in principle, towards a functioning based in hierarchy and gradualism. (1997, 71)

It is important to note that this is not a facile defense of racial democracy. DaMatta is specifically pointing to a form of Brazilian racism that, while thriving on ambiguity, is rooted in ideas about hierarchy. He brilliantly compares, even if too simply (Mitchell,
Blanchette, and Silva n.d.), a US system based on exclusion (‘separate but equal’) to a Brazilian system based on proximate hierarchy (‘together but unequal’). But what is crucial for our purposes is that DaMatta, like many analysts of race in Brazil, locates the difference between US and Brazilian racial systems as rooted in differing classificatory systems, one (the USA) based on discrete categories and the other (Brazil) based on ambiguity.

Although he does not specify it, I presume that in DaMatta’s understanding, the students, disturbed at possibly being identified as black, actually identified themselves as mixed. After all, he uses this anecdote to illuminate his analysis of Brazilian race relations’ rootedness in the embrace of mixture, contrasted to a US system dominated by purity. It is this distinct Brazilian ‘sociological intelligence’ (1997, 73) that is apparently so potentially offended by racialized governance’s need to establish sharp racial categories.

Peter Fry, drawing on Burdick (1998), writes:
To be able to exist at all, the [black] movement was obliged to argue for a black identity in Brazil that would include all those who were not white. As John Burdick has so brilliantly shown, this particular affront to what DaMatta called Brazilian sociological intelligence alienated many people who were sympathetic to the antiracist cause but reluctant to abandon their identities as Brazilians or as morenos for what appeared to them to be the exclusiveness of blackness. (2000, 105)

If we consider this in a principally classificatory frame, as DaMatta and Fry do, what is offensive to the Brazilian ‘sociological intelligence’ is that a closed unitary category, ‘negro’, should supplant an explicit belief in racial mixture that people consider the cornerstone of Brazilian culture. While many Brazilians certainly emphasize the importance of racial mixture, of mestiçagem, DaMatta and Fry are also misjudging what this ‘sociological intelligence’ finds offensive. What they and many others understand to be an embrace of ambiguity actually functions instead, strangely to be a disavowal of blackness, but not of whiteness. So, it is a peculiarly selective embrace of ambiguity that is extolled, one that hides the privileging of one pole (whiteness) as it resists any acknowledgment or privileging of the other pole (blackness).

Consider the following example:
For weeks before and then during the 2006 World Cup, frenzied Brazilian newspapers and even Brazil’s president Luiz Inácio ‘Lula’ da Silva questioned if the seemingly excessive weight of the great Brazilian striker Ronaldo would put the national team at a disadvantage. Brazil’s dedication to soccer and to the lives of its stars is near-universal and Ronaldo has often been the object of that attention. Just over a year prior to the World Cup, in May of 2005, racism in professional soccer and among its fans was the subject of headlines in Europe. So it should seem peculiar that Ronaldo’s reference to himself as ‘white’ in his public statement condemning racism barely registered among Brazil’s soccer-crazy media and populace. The Folha de São Paulo reported that Ronaldo, who is featured in the Brazilian Encyclopedia of the African Diaspora (Lopes 2004, 585), condemned racism and said that he could not understand it, explaining: ‘I, who am white, suffer from so much ignorance. The solution is to educate people.’

Touching then, on the matter that would take on such a pressing concern to the Brazilian media’s sociological intelligence just over a year later, Ronaldo said that for him: ‘It’s something else, much worse … people call me fat’. (Rangel 2005).

Aside from some limited discussion among intellectuals and activists, the story died just as quickly as it had sprung up. In Alcântara, shortly after the 2006 World Cup, I found people entirely uninterested in Ronaldo’s characterization of himself as white, though
they were deeply interested in the fate of the national team. Why, if Brazilian sociological intelligence truly embraces the racial middle term, was not Ronaldo’s characterization of himself as ‘white’ something that people were particularly interested in?

The social unease that the racialization of law creates for many Brazilians does not exist because people with a mixed biological heritage might be identified by the ambiguity-erasing term ‘negro’ – as Fry and DaMatta suggest. ‘White’ is just as ambiguity-erasing as is ‘black’. Rather, the ‘sociological intelligence’ of many people informs them that: (1) the problem is not using an ambiguity-erasing term, but that some people are being called upon to identify with ‘black’ rather than ‘white’, where ‘black’ is a color designation associated with slavery from which most Brazilians have tried actively to distance themselves as individuals, even as eugenic programs of ‘whitening’ sought to do the same on a national scale (Skidmore 1993, 44; Schwarcz 1999) and (2) that by being pressed to identify as one or another color, they are limiting their ability to position themselves strategically depending on context.

In actual practice, vernacular Brazilian racial forms have not simply favored middle terms and deracialization, as defenders of the racialization thesis argue, but rather a racialization in the direction of whiteness – a racialization that is rendered invisible by the invisibility of the very category, white. It is impossible to know what the long-term effects of ethnoracial citizenship in Brazil will be on ethnoracial subjectivity. But it will not be the racialization of a deracialized populace. While Walmir and others of his generation in Alcântara frequently engage in everyday whitening, in my ethnographic work, I have found that young people in Alcântara far more often identify as quilombolas and as black (Mitchell n.d.). The Brazilian populace has long been racialized. But the pull of institutional racializing incentives may, in some instances, be changing direction from white to black.

‘White’ as an under-analyzed cultural category

The meaning of ethnic terms is constructed in opposition to one another and within a system of power relations (Wilmsen 1996, 4). But understanding the ways in which ethnic terms lend each other value and meaning in Brazil is particularly complicated because: (1) ethnic designations are to a considerable extent contextually variable, (2) ‘whitening’ tends to be read as ‘deracialization’, and (3) blackness is often unmentioned or censored in everyday speech in Brazil (Sheriff 2000).

I would like this article to be read as an intervention into debates over Brazil’s ethnoracial citizenship but it is also a call for more careful ethnographic consideration of socio-historically specific manifestations of these categories. ‘Branco’ (white), like ‘negro’ (black), has extraordinary contextual variance in Brazil (for further elaboration of these categories see the paper by Sullivan 2016 in this volume). For example, Alcântara and the broader Baixada Maranhense, where I have carried out most of my own ethnographic work, is a principally rural area populated mostly by the descendants of enslaved Africans and Tupinambá. In Alcântara, a strip of communities along the peninsular coast carry the self-designation ‘terra de caboclo’ (land of caboclos). Caboclo is, like all ethnic designations, a complicated term. The first two definitions of caboclo in my 2001 edition of the Dicionário Houaiss16 read:
Brazilian savage [selvagem] that had contact with the colonizers; individual born of an índia and a branco17 (or visa-versa), physically characterized by brown [morena] or copper-tone [acobreada] skin and straight, black hair. (2001)

So Caboclos are, according to these definitions, the brown-skinned products of the mixture between ‘savages’ and ‘colonizers’ or ‘Indians’ and ‘whites’. Read in the first case as the products of cultural mixture, expressed in colonial terms, and in the second case, of biological mixture, both renderings are ideologically loaded and rendered in culturally specific racist terms.

While for the Rio de Janeiro-based editorial staff of Dicionário Houaiss, caboclos may be unambiguously brown-skinned (morenos or acobreados), in the Baixada Maranhense, people often designate the caboclos from the terra de caboclos communities as ‘white’. When we would travel through the terra de caboclos, a few of my closest associates in Alcântara’s quilombo movement pointed out to me on various occasions: ‘Look they’re all white here’.18 Many people from the terras de caboclo also referred to themselves as ‘white’ when they were in Alcântara. Their ‘local whiteness’ is the product of a local contrast to the mostly darker skinned people in neighboring communities. Yet, while in the nearby state capital, São Luís, the same people would probably not refer to themselves as white.

On the other hand, in much of the Amazon region, branco (and blanco, in Spanish) contrasts not with black, but with índio. While in the Baixada Maranhense, this contrast is mostly made in terms of color and territory, in the Amazon, it is a cultural distinction: all those who are not culturally identifiable or self-identified as ‘Indians’ are frequently called white. In the Madre de Dios department of Peru, for example, where I have also conducted fieldwork, Andean Quechua-speaking migrants to the Amazon – people who in many cases speak only limited Spanish – are often locally referred to as ‘white’, in contrast to the self-designated ‘Indians’ living in the Amazon. And in the Brazilian Amazon, caboclo communities are referred to as ‘white’ in contrast to self-identified ‘Indians’. One community leader whom I interviewed in the Amazonian state of Roraima, where I have done some research, is the descendant of people who migrated from Brazil’s northeast to the Amazon during the rubber boom of the turn of the twentieth century. During the interview, he commented to me ironically that although he was phenotypically ‘black’, and had learned to consider himself ‘negro’ through association with the black movement, when he met with the ‘Indians’ further up the river, they unfailingly called him ‘white’.

Yet, despite its important and slippery character, and its tendency to masquerade as a deracialized term, the category ‘white’ in Brazil remains under-analyzed in literature by both Brazilian and foreign scholars.

One article that has been discussed widely in and outside of Brazil, and that began to impact these debates during the period that controversies over ethnoracial citizenship were developing, and just as genomic data from the human genome project were beginning to impact the human sciences, is Retrato Molecular do Brasil (Molecular Portrait of Brazil) (Pena et al. 2000; see also, Santos and Maio 2004a; Santos and Maio 2004b), which appeared in Ciência Hoje (Science Today), the popular science magazine published by the Brazilian Society for Scientific Progress (SBPC). Written by a team of geneticists from Brazil’s Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais led by Sérgio Danilo Pena, the article reported on research into the ‘genetic origins’ of ‘white’ Brazilians (see Alves-Silva et al.
Carvalho-Silva et al. 2001), using molecular genetic evidence (mitochondrial DNA and the Y chromosome) from 200 self-identified ‘white’ men from four of Brazil’s major regions (north, northeast, south, and southeast). The findings were generally taken by the popular media to reinforce the notion of a mestiço Brazil, often associated with intellectuals such as Gilberto Freyre.

The authors write:

The results obtained demonstrate that the immense majority (probably more than 90%) of the patrilines of Brazilian whites is of European origin, while the majority (approximately 60%) of the matrilines is of Amerindian or African origin. (Pena et al. 2000, 23)

While there are very good reasons to be cautious of the ways in which such genetic data are interpreted, most importantly, their increasing use in the reification of racial and ethnic categories, these data indicate both the gendered character of Brazilian racial mixture and the strongly mixed character of Brazil’s ‘white’ population.

Particularly striking for our discussion is how uneasily these data coexist with the assertion that, as DaMatta put it: ‘In Brazilian society … mestiços enjoy explicit cultural and ideological recognition, while in the American case, they are submerged as “whites” or “blacks”’ (1997, 71). While there is clearly a valorization of mestiçagem in Brazil, this mixture coexists with the residue of a history of nation building based around the idea of national whitening, one that has created enormous pressures for racially mixed people to identify as ‘white’. Mestiçagem lives side by side with everyday whitening, leading so much of a racially mixed population to identify with the racialized and reified term, ‘white’. Although debates over the racialization of law in Brazil have generally cast such laws as undermining an ideology of mixture, less obviously, and perhaps more significantly, they undermine this often unmentioned ideology of whitening and many of the incentives to whiten associated with it. Indeed, the men in the study self-identified as white, not as mestiços, doing so I presume because people in their genealogical history had responded to these incentives to whiten.

**Conclusion**

Institutional incentives to everyday whitening have long existed in Brazil. As Andrews notes (2004, 50),

Living in Pernambuco in the 1810s, Englishman Henry Koester pointedly contrasted the status of free Afro-Brazilians to ‘the degraded state of the people of colour in the British colonies … . In Brazil, even the trifling regulations which exist against them remain unattended to. A mulatto enters into holy orders or is appointed a magistrate, his papers stating him to be a white man, but his appearance plainly denoting the contrary’.

The practice of such everyday whitening has long outlasted Brazil’s turn of the twentieth-century project of national whitening. Although popular forms of racial identification do allow for some strategic and contextual variability (Fry 2005; Moutinho 2004), that such everyday whitening has, over the long-term, resulted in a national reification of whiteness is laid bare both by the kinds of whitening that Walmir engaged in and by genomic studies that show how a mixed population has over time been whitened.

As critics of Brazil’s ethnoracial citizenship argue, this is certainly changing. Between the 2000 and 2010 census, those identifying as pardo (brown) grew from 38.5 percent to 43.1
percent and those who identify as \textit{preto} (black) went from 6.2 percent to 7.6 percent (Guimarães 2012; Melo 2012; Telles 2006, 89). Moreover, as Francis and Tannuri-Pianto’s research has shown, the quota system at the University of Brasília has encouraged applicants’ reclassification as non-white (2013). In July 2014, I spent a day with Walmir’s young nephew, who, unlike his uncle, proudly calls himself \textit{negro} and a \textit{quilombola}. Just before completing this article in January 2016, I returned from Rio de Janeiro, where a working-class shopping mall on the city’s north side was strewn with posters advertising a \textit{Miss Belaça Negra} (Miss Black Beauty) contest. A new kind of negritude has certainly come to Brazil. In this paper, however, I have argued that critics of Brazil’s ethnoracial citizenship are mistaken in seeing in this a loss of a deracializing ambiguity. Brazil’s racial order has long been undergirded less by a deracializing ambiguity than by the pull of everyday whitening.

Ethnoracial ambiguity exists as both a Brazilian sociocultural trope and reality, but that reality is far more complex than indicated by the trope. Brazilians often contrast their racial system with the United States’ one-drop rule, where any African ancestry marks a person as Black regardless of phenotype or social position. In Brazil, on the other hand, racial positioning is more ambiguous and someone phenotypically of mixed race can, in certain contexts, self-identify as white – as Walmir’s experience indicates. But those choices are not free floating: historically, social forces have exerted considerable pressure for mixed-race people like Walmir to identify as white rather than as black. The racial ambiguity in Brazil has been skewed toward whiteness rather than blackness. Ethnoracial citizenship does not seem to be erasing ethnoracial ambiguity, but rather has shifted its polarity: causing mixed-race people to identify, in some cases, as black rather than the former skewing to whiteness. To understand how Brazil’s racial order is changing, we need to understand better how that everyday whitening is declining, while blackening is increasing, and what those changes might bode.

\textbf{Notes}

2. According to one 2002 study, the median monthly per family was just $100BRL (less than $50 USD) (Forum/DLIS Alcântara 2003, 32), although many families lived principally from fishing, gathering, and swidden horticulture, mitigating that low income to some extent.
3. The possible choices for race or color in the Brazilian censuses of 2000 and 2010 are \textit{preto} (black), \textit{pardo} (brown), \textit{indígena} (indigenous), \textit{amarelo} (yellow or Asian), and \textit{branco} (white). Neither \textit{preto} nor \textit{pardo} is used much in people’s everyday discussions of race or color in Brazil. In keeping with a long-standing demand of many of Brazil’s black movements, numerous researchers today group the \textit{preto} and \textit{pardo} categories as black, or \textit{negro}. Many allied to Brazil’s black movements also prefer to use terms such as \textit{negro} or Afro-descendant, which are less linked to phenotype and thus group more people together than \textit{preto} or \textit{pardo}. I return to a discussion of this census at the end of this paper.
4. This and all other translations from the Portuguese, of ethnographic and scholarly material, are mine.
5. This was not true in the villages of Alcântara’s interior at the time. Until 2006, when they benefited from the Workers’ Party government’s massive rural electrification program, \textit{Luz para Todos}, there was almost no electricity, and no television in rural areas of the peninsula.

7. There is a growing body of scholarship that examines the force of this everyday whitening in Brazil, but its implications for Brazilian debates about race have been little discussed (see Carone, Bento, and Piza 2002; Dávila 2003; Dennison 2013; Norvell 2001; Pinho 2009; Sovik 2009; Stam and Shohat 2012; Twine 1997).

8. Although I criticize Fry’s ideas here, in particular, the idea that the law is producing new kinds of racialized citizens (see especially, Fry et al. 2007), I do so because I highly respect his scholarship even when I don’t agree. Fry’s collection of essays, A Persistência da Raça (The Persistence of Race, 2005) is easily one of the best books on comparative race relations which I have ever read and it deserves to be taken very seriously. I write this here because Fry (and colleagues, such as the also excellent anthropologist Yvonne Maggie) has sometimes come under ad hominem attack in Brazil, particularly for opposition to ethnoracial citizenship. Although I argue against the racialization thesis here, I do not want to contribute to those attacks.

9. Famously, a 1976 national survey found more than 100 color terms in use when people were asked an open-ended question about their color. However, as Silva (1987) and Telles (2006) have both shown, the majority of Brazilians use very few terms to describe people’s color. People use many terms in Alcântara to describe their own and others’ color, but by far, the most common term is the hyper-ambiguous, moreno.

10. I have recently encountered another scholar making a similar point. Da Costa, in an ethnographic analysis of affective aspects of Brazil’s race politics, notes that ambiguous racial identifications ‘are situated within the myriad meanings of race/colour and hierarchical places denominated for certain peoples in society’ (2014, 5).

11. Gilberto Freyre famously argued that the ‘potential of Brazilian Culture lies in the wealth of antagonisms in equilibrium’ (1933, 415).

12. On the role that the USA plays in these debates, see Ferreira da Silva (2010; Mitchell forthcoming; Mitchell, Blanchette, and da Silva n.d.; Pinho 2005; Sansone 2003; Seigel 2009).

13. Although I consider DaMatta and Fry together here (and Fry cites DaMatta’s ideas approvingly in this context), they are very different thinkers and I do not intend to blur those differences.

14. Although a strong favorite to win the 2006 World Cup, Brazil lost to France in the semi-finals, but Ronaldo went on to break the world record for career World Cup goals scored, with a career total of 15.

15. Similarly, in 2010, Brazil’s young star Neymar, who is clearly phenotypically Afro-descended, said in an interview with the Estado de São Paulo newspaper that because he is not black (preto) he had never suffered racism (Racy 2016).

16. The Dicionário Houaiss is today generally regarded as the most complete dictionary of Brazilian Portuguese.

17. The Portuguese language requires that the words ‘white’ and ‘Indian’ be gendered, but it is no surprise that the editors of the dictionary chose to gender ‘Indian’ as ‘female’ and white as male.

18. It is important to note that despite the general ethnic divisions in Alcântara, with people generally lighter skinned in the terras de caboclo and generally darker skinned in the terras de preto, throughout the region, there is mixture and intermarriage. Many of the people in the ‘white’ terras de caboclo looked ‘black’ to me.

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