

## The Racist and Antiracist Traditions in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Brazilian Cinema

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### **Abstract**

The seminal study of race and Brazilian cinema is Robert Stam's "Tropical Multiculturalism". Since the publication of this groundbreaking book in 1997, there has been remarkably little effort by Brazilian film scholars or critics to deepen and build upon Stam's central claims or extend his analysis to the 21st century. In this article I hope to reverse this trend and invigorate more discussion and study of racial politics and Brazilian film. To this end, I detail the ways that Brazilian cinema continues to be complicit with white supremacy, highlight and analyze some of the most notable antiracist Brazilian films that have been produced in recent years, and underscore what is at stake for Brazilian society if cultural workers, such as filmmakers, do not reverse course and begin taking on racism in a much more intentional and sustained way.

**Keywords:** Robert Stam. Multiculturalism. Brazilian cinema. Antiracism.

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## As tradições racista e antiracista no Cinema Brasileiro do Século XXI

### *Resumo*

O estudo seminal de raça e cinema brasileiro se intitula “Multiculturalismo Tropical”, de Robert Stam. Desde a publicação desse livro inovador em 1997, tem havido muito pouco esforço por acadêmicos ou críticos de cinema brasileiros para aprofundar e construir sobre as afirmações centrais de Stam ou estender sua análise para o século XXI. Neste artigo espero inverter esta tendência e revigorar mais discussão e estudo da política racial e do cinema brasileiro. Para isso, detalho como o cinema brasileiro continua sendo cúmplice da supremacia branca, destaco e analiso alguns dos mais notáveis filmes anti-racistas brasileiros produzidos nos últimos anos e sublinho o que está em jogo para a sociedade brasileira se os trabalhadores culturais, como cineastas, não invertem o curso e começam a tomar o racismo de uma maneira muito mais intencional e sustentada.

**Palavras-chave:** Robert Stam. Multiculturalismo. Cineastas. Crítica.

## Las tradiciones racista y antirracista en el Cinema Brasileño del Siglo XXI

### *Resumen*

El estudio fundamental de la raza y el cine brasileño es intitulado “Multiculturalismo Tropical”, de Robert Stam. Desde la publicación de este libro pionero en 1997, ha habido muy poco esfuerzo por académicos o críticos de cine brasileño para profundizar y construir sobre las afirmaciones centrales de Stam o ampliar su análisis al siglo XXI. En este artículo espero invertir esta tendencia y revigorizar una mayor discusión y el estudio de la política racial y el cine brasileño. Para ello, detallo cómo el cine brasileño sigue siendo cómplice de la supremacía blanca, destaco y analizo algunas de las películas antirracistas brasileñas más notables producidos en los últimos años y subrayo lo que está en juego para los trabajadores de la cultura de la sociedad brasileña, como realizadores, no invertir el rumbo y empezar a tomar el racismo de una manera mucho más deliberada y sostenida.

**Palabras clave:** Robert Stam. Multiculturalismo. Cineastas. Critica.

## Mestiço Nationalism and Its Racist Legacy

To suggest that Brazilian filmmakers are agents of white supremacy can come across as an unnecessarily harsh or unfair statement until one fully grasps the cultural context that leads most Brazilians — including filmmakers — to be in cahoots with the racist status quo. As in most parts of Latin America, there is a stubborn refusal to acknowledge (let alone undress) racism thanks in large measure to mestiço nationalism, which emerged and took root in Brazil in the 1920s and 30s.

During the First Republic, opinion makers, the cognoscenti, and intellectuals tended to ignore and disparage all things native, i.e., the non-elite, mixed-race povo who make up the vast majority of the country. In response, Brazilian modernists crafted a multiculturalist project that “valorized the Brazil that defied European models.”<sup>1</sup> One of the leaders of this cultural movement was the sociologist, Gilberto Freyre. A student of Franz Boas at Columbia University, Freyre “declared official Brazil a ‘phony and ridiculous’ Europhile version that ‘hid’ the real Brazil.”<sup>2</sup> In his canonical book, *“The Master and the Slaves”* [*“Casa-Grande e Senzala”*] (1986 [1933]), Freyre made clear that the valorization of the “real Brazil” would not entail attempts to value the povo by, for example, addressing social inequalities. Instead, to entice the “phony Brazil” to take more interest in things Brazilian, he applauded limited aspects of black and indigenous cultures. The end effect was to give a more appealing hue to the racially hybrid nature of Brazilian society. Or in the words of Hermano Vianna, “Freyre’s great feat was to provide a positive theoretical color for mestiço culture, defining ‘things Brazilian’ as a combination — partly harmonious, partly conflictive — of African, Portuguese, and indigenous traits, the product of a historical encounter between ‘the big house and the slave quarters.’”<sup>3</sup>

What was most extraordinary about Freyre’s intervention was that it actually took hold of official Brazil. In 1930, the professional classes, urban proletariat, military, and manufacturing elite backed a revolution against the landed oligarchy that had controlled Brazil for centuries. Searching for a way to distinguish and legitima-

te the new regime, Getúlio Vargas and his Estado Novo regime espoused the modernists’ celebration and foregrounding of mestiçeness. Consequently, a few of the cultural products of the povo, which had been ignored or scorned by previous generations of elites and intellectuals, such as feijoada and samba, were embraced as the icons of nation. Perhaps most importantly Brazilians adopted as a foundational narrative of nation the idea that they were a mixed-race society — a fact to take pride in and celebrate.

One of the goals of the modernists was to topple Brazil’s Eurocentrism or what Freyre described as the reflex to “gulp right down … the detritus that comes to us from the US and Europe!”<sup>4</sup> On this score the modernists failed badly. As long as the povo were viewed as an indolent, immoral, racially inferior, subhuman class, then it was probably inevitable that this bigotry and hostility toward the people would undermine any potential anti-colonial impact of mestiço nationalism. Even in Freyre’s own texts, his valuation of select aspects of black and indigenous cultures was still racist. Whites gave all the prized institutions such as democracy, markets, and Christianity; Afro-Brazilians contributed dance and music; and native Brazilians a few foods and words to the Portuguese language. In “Cultures of Development” I describe how these sorts of stereotypes and inaccuracies would have been rectified eventually “had not mestiço nationalism become a tool for stifling antiracism. As Brazilians accepted Brazilianness qua mestico as a praiseworthy given, the corollary that took root was that Brazil was a racial democracy. In the global context of Nazi Germany and a Jim Crow US, it is understandable why mestico nationalism assumed this meaning. But unfortunately, as Brazilianness was equated with nonracism, it became taboo to even discuss, let alone critique, racism. To state or imply racial hierarchy existed was to effectively call into question the central narrative of nation. The ultimate effect was to thwart most anti-racist initiatives.”<sup>5</sup>

I first encountered this dynamic when I began conducting research on race in rural Brazil in 1992. Despite the fact that everyone on TV was white, the political and economic elite were white, most status-associated spaces—

such as private clubs—were white only, and crudely racist comments circulated unchecked (e.g., “Bananas are the favorite food of blacks.”), I was routinely questioned about how I had secured a grant to research what they viewed as a non-issue in Brazil. In order to make sure that I had fully understood that Brazil was a racial democracy, they would instruct, “Brazilians love the mix.” This, for them, demonstrated beyond any reasonable doubt that Brazil was not racist. Any subsequent attempts by me to return to the theme of racism were met with a combination of dismay, defensiveness, and condescension. If I insisted on questioning people in this small town further about racism, the conversation would abruptly end. At that moment, I felt that I was labeled either an ignorant foreigner or an imperialist trying to inappropriately impose a US perspective on Brazil.

The central point here is that Freyre and the modernists’ attempt to curb Brazilians’ adulation of North Atlantic civilizations in the end served, ironically, to harden these emulative tendencies. By helping to birth a narrative of a mestiço, non-racist nation, discussions of racism were quashed and white supremacy was allowed to smolder and become inflamed. This in turn meant that a deep disdain for “all things native” continued largely unabated. Subsequently, most Brazilians continued to look stupidly at things Brazilian and pine for the white societies of the north.

### **Brazil’s Cinematic Counter-Public**

One arena in Brazil where one would expect to find a break from some of these hegemonic discourses would be within its cinematic tradition. This is because unlike many other cultural mediums in Brazil, such as television and the press, Brazilian cinema has a rich history of critical thought. In the 1960s, the *Cinema Novo* movement emerged and revolutionized Brazilian film. Rather than focusing uncritically on certain aspects of the white elite or feeding into neo-colonial fantasies about an exotic, tropical paradise — the focus of Brazilian film in the mid-twentieth century — Brazilian filmmakers began to direct their attention to ordinary people and the challenges that they faced. *Cinema Novo* directors, like Glauber

Rocha, Ruy Guerra, Carlos Diegues, and Nelson Pereira dos Santos, sought out “the dark corners of Brazilian life—its favelas and its sertão—the places where Brazil’s social contradictions appeared most dramatically”<sup>6</sup>.

And yet despite the radical, more critical bent of Brazilian cinema, it has failed to muster a sustained reckoning with the discourses, memories, and symbols that sustain the racial order. Even more troubling, Brazilian films often reinforce the dominant ideology that Brazil is a non-racist society. In “Tropical Multiculturalism”, Robert Stam details and analyzes these tendencies in 20<sup>th</sup> century cinema as well as the important exceptions to this rule. The list of these latter, more anti-racist films include “*Ganga Zumba*” (1963), “*Xica da Silva*” (1976), “*Tenda dos Milagres*” (1977), “*Na Boca do Mundo*” (1977), “*A Deusa Negra*” (1978), “*Chico Rei*” (1982), “*Mato Eles?*” (1983), “*Quilombo*” (1984), and “*Cronicamente Inviável*” (1998). This critical race undercurrent has been carried forward in the 21st century. As Teresa Cristina Furtado Matos points out, “*Filhas do Vento*” (2004), “*Quase Dois Irmãos*” (2004), and “*Quanto Vale ou É Por Quilo*” (2005) “reflect on the different modalities of racism in Brazil, the play between its appearance and absence in Brazilian public life, and scrutinize racism’s various forms, subtleties, and effects.”<sup>7</sup>

One of the recent films that I would add to this antiracist, counter-hegemonic cinematic tradition is “*Casa Grande*” (2014). Much like “*O Som ao Redor*” (2012) and “*Que Horas Ela Volta?*” (2015), this film problematizes the contemporary iteration of the master class. However, what distinguishes “*Casa Grande*” within this subgenre is its consideration of race. The title alone puts the audience on immediate notice, much like Sergio Bianchi’s “*Quanto Vale ou É Por Quilo*”, that the social order must be understood as not merely a by-product of class but also of race. For a Brazilian viewer “The Big House” unambiguously evokes slavery and thus encourages the audience to see contemporary Brazil as a neo-slave society in which race plays a pivotal role.

Among the handful of films that critically examines the Senhor class, it is interesting how adolescent boys and young men represent the one faint, glimmer of hope for

change from above. Of the 15 million Brazilian consumers of Brazilian films, the overwhelming majority of them are white, urban, and economically privileged, and so perhaps this is an attempt by filmmakers to help their audiences to identify with a change agent. In any event, among these films only in *"Casa Grande"* is the young man's relationships and struggles complicated by race. For instance, one of the girls (Luiza - played by Bruna Amaya) who Jean (played by Thales Calvacanti) is courting is positioned as less economically privileged (largely prefer by having Luiza attend public school and preferring *forró*). Importantly, Luiza is also clearly racialized as nonwhite. In one scene she proudly declares to Jean's family and friends that she is "a daughter of a mulatto father and Japanese mother." In a society that still values whitening, such an audacious assertion of nonwhiteness, especially in a white, elite social setting, is boldly modeling antiracist, quotidian acts along the lines of "I'm black and I'm proud."

The filmmaker (Fellipe Barbosa) takes full advantage of Luiza's racialization to unsettle a number of racist stereotypes and discourses. In one scene, Jean mistakenly assumes that she lives in a favela not only because Luiza attends a public school but also, the viewer is led to believe, due to her color. This is a conclusion that many Brazilians of Jean's class would likely draw and so it effectively prompts Brazilian audiences to consider and examine their own racialized clichés and precepts.

In two separate scenes the film directly challenges the conventional critiques of affirmative action that circulate widely in Brazil, most especially in middle class and elite spaces. The pat, liberal argument against racial quotas is that they are unfair because they are non-meritocratic. Public policies and monies would be better spent, their reasoning goes, on improving the public schools so that there is a level playing field and the meritocratic ideal is not violated. In the context of this film, this argument is exposed as simply a maneuver to defend privilege and ensure the status quo. The children of the elite, at least as depicted in *"Casa Grande"*, are not harder working or more intelligent but simply hyper-privileged and thus able to leverage these advantages—such as attending

private schools—to gain unfair access to higher status universities. Moreover, the assertion that efforts should instead be focused on improving public education at the primary and secondary levels is shown to be a bait and switch ploy to end affirmative action rather than a sincere call to action for investing more resources and energies to improve the public schools.

To my mind the most powerful anti-racist critique in *"Case Grande"* is how it unsettles the racist binary imaginary that is so prevalent in Brazil. Over the past twenty years I have frequently resided in a favela in Rio de Janeiro called Babilônia. When elites learn of this—something I am now reluctant to mention because of what I am about to describe—I am then introduced to their friends and acquaintances as "The gringo who lived in a favela." It is true that I have spent time and lived in a favela but this is not the nomenclature that I would select for myself. My list might include "the North American who speaks Portuguese, knows a lot about Brazil, has two kids, is a professor, lives in Seattle, or practices Taekwondo," but never this. Yet, for many of the elite, favelas are envisioned as profoundly distinct from the white, modern, moral and nonviolent locales, which they imagine they inhabit. I have on more than one occasion heard the privileged describe favelas as a socio-cultural extension of Africa as opposed to their "European-like" neighborhoods. It is as if the elite imagine a journey from their space to favelas as a trip from modern to primitive, civilization to savagery, Europe to Africa. From this standpoint, then, a white North American who symbolically embodies the civilized pole of the social binary and actually ventures into and inhabits the space of the Other, is exotic, newsworthy and deserving the title favela gringo.

*"Casa Grande"* disrupts this imaginary without, to its credit, romanticizing or idealizing favelas in the tradition of "Black Orpheus."<sup>8</sup> The favela in question, Rocinha, is portrayed as the space of the mixed-race, working classes that more closely embody the values of morality, compassion, solidarity, and love than the world of the Big House. Indeed, in a direct challenge to elites' self-perceptions, it is the white, elite spaces that are exposed as unethical, lazy, financially unstable, spiritually bankrupt,

dependent upon domestic labor, riddled with sexual exploitation, and ensconced from the broader society that it disdains and fears. Reminiscent of "*Central do Brasil*" (1998), where the protagonists are only able to reclaim their humanity by leaving Rio de Janeiro for the sertão, in "*Casa Grande*" it is suggested that Jean's one shot at finding healthy relationships, genuine love, and an ethical community is by abandoning the big house for the favela.

### ***The Society that Race Built***

Despite the invaluable presence of films like "*Casa Grande*", it is important to keep in perspective just how exceptional such films are in Brazil. Most Brazilian films continue to have predominantly white casts in which whiteness is not problematized or critiqued but is portrayed as normative. In addition, the films that have nonwhite actors in lead roles tend to reproduce racist representations of nonwhiteness, and/or reproduce the myth of a mestiço, non-racist nation. Before elaborating further on the specific ways that 21<sup>st</sup> century cinema is complicit with white supremacy, it is useful to first consider what is at stake.

Measured by most metrics, Brazil is a deeply troubled society. Environmental plunder has been a constant since its beginnings over 500 years ago. Violence in most neighborhoods surged in the 1980s and is now higher than in many war zones around the world. In Rio de Janeiro, for example, the murder rate is 24 per 100,000 compared to 7 per 100,000 in Iraq – a country that is at war with ISIS. Moreover, the economy has been anemic for the past half of a century in which it has had an average growth rate of less than 2%. This is not enough growth to even keep up with population increases.<sup>9</sup> In the late 20th and early 21st century, a majority of Brazilians hoped and believed that liberalism — an unfettered capitalism, free press, and universal suffrage — would resolve many, if not all, of these problems. Clearly that has not panned out.

Among technocrats, there is an emerging consensus that the largest impediment to modernity in Brazil is its social inequalities. In short, it is believed that economic, civic, and political progress cannot happen until social dis-

parities are substantially reduced. To take one example, economists argue that human capital is foundational for economic growth because it underpins productivity. To bolster human capital, however, requires that tax monies be collected and dispensed in more progressive ways, i.e., taxes on the rich that are then invested in the infrastructure, health services and the schools that serve the general public. And yet, the political classes and large sectors of Brazilian society resist such investments because of how the povo are viewed: as in immoral, lazy, primitive, and intellectually subpar people who are therefore largely to blame for their marginalization.

It is important to underscore that this imaginary is not simply a by-product of class but also of race. Regardless of whether certain members of the poor and working classes are the direct descendants of slaves, they are symbolically linked to the senzala. That is, just as the elite are seen as an iteration of the big house, the povo are understood to be the descendants of what Euclides da Cunha once termed "our rude native sons." Consequently, whether it is stated or not, race is always present. Sometimes it is more obvious as when favelas are referred to as savage or Africa-like. Other times it is interwoven and coded within the discourses of class and poverty.

Despite the sociological realities of race and power in Brazil, most Brazilians continue to assert and believe that racism has little or no impact on them. As a twenty-something black teacher in Contagem, Minas Gerais once explained to me:

If I were to rank my problems from one to twenty, with one being the worst of all my problems, racism would be number eighteen or nineteen. Racism just isn't something I'm greatly concerned about. I have bigger problems, such as putting food on the table, getting into university, or getting a decent job.

This is a common response in contemporary Brazil, even among nonwhite Brazilians who are overwhelmingly concentrated in the poorer sectors of society. Brazilians, including the povo, tend to see race and class as separate issues (rather than intertwined) and theorize social

inequalities as anchored in class alone. Consequently, as in the case of the woman above, they often do not appreciate how one's capacity to get a job or put food on the table is enmeshed with race. Only a small minority of Brazilians understand how racism fundamentally shapes the labor market, social welfare regimes, taxation policies, housing and land rights, educational opportunities, and so forth, which make meeting even basic economic needs extremely precarious for most Brazilians. In short, the majority of Brazilians, including most poor people of color, do not believe that race underpins economic and social inequalities. And so even though Brazilians are confronted with a neoslave society, they fail to address one of its foundational pillars: racism.

### ***The On-Going Racist Traditions***

This then brings us back to Brazilian film. As noted above, Brazilian cinema has tended to contribute to a racist imaginary by uncritically idealizing whiteness, reproducing racist clichés, and/or reaffirming the myth of the non-racist, *mestiço* nation. It is important to note that most films continue to be white only or white dominated – this in a country where whites are at most 50% of the population. Equally problematic, the message of these white-dominated films tends to mirror Brazilian television, in which privileged whites are portrayed as the normative world to be coveted and if possible, emulated. In films such as "*Loucas pra Casar*" (2013) social inequalities and the challenges of ordinary Brazilians are completely ignored or glossed-over. The actors, décor, costumes, plot, and music often evoke a white, upper-middle class US milieu more than a Brazilian one.

More insidious manifestations of racism in Brazilian cinema are found in its critical tradition. That is, even among those films that forward a critique of the Brazilian social order in the spirit of Cinema Novo tend to bolster (rather than question) the racial status quo. One way this is done is by whitening the poor. Clearly there are many poor whites in Brazil but a disproportionate number of the poor are of color. One need only watch documentary films like "*Wasteland*" or "*Favela Rising*" in order to observe how only a tiny fraction of the collectors of re-

cyclables of Jardim Gramacho and residents in the favela Vigário Geral are white. And yet when the working classes or people from the poor neighborhoods and the sertão are the focal point of films, they are routinely whitened. Good examples of this are "*Que horas ela volta?*", "*O homem do ano*", and "*Central do Brasil*". All the central protagonists in these films are white: the maids, truck drivers, orphans, teachers, carpenters, letter writers, cops, assassins, and so on.

This may be a conscious strategy on the part of the director to generate empathy for the *povo* among Brazilian audiences – perhaps correctly understanding the latent racism of the Brazilian viewing public that is more apt to be sympathetic toward these people/spaces if they are seen as white or whiter. In any event, regardless of the intent or motives of the filmmakers, the consequences for racial politics are indisputable. In a society that tends to avoid race by conceptualizing social inequality as exclusively a class matter—as discussed above—these films reinforce this race evasive analysis of power. More concretely, when the domestic servants and their bosses are portrayed as white, such as in "*Que horas ela volta?*", the viewer is never pushed to consider how race may matter. The filmmaker effectively renders race a non-issue by whitening the poor.

Yet another way that racism is avoided is by invoking the *mestizo-nationalism* narrative. In this formula, nonwhite actors figure centrally in predominately white spaces but their racialization is treated as a non-issue. "*O homem que copiava*" and "*Tudo que aprendemos juntos*" are good examples of this move. In "*Tudo que aprendemos juntos*" the Afro-Brazilian actor Lazáro Ramos (who is also the star of "*O homem que copiava*") is a musician named Laerte, who is suddenly unable to play the violin in formal auditions. His performance impotency forces him to take a job teaching favela kids violin. One of the more talented and hardworking boys, with whom Lazáro forms a closer relationship, is killed by the police. This traumatic incident combined with Laerte's work in the favela—that culminates in an epic musical performance in commemoration of the slain boy—seems to rekindle the musician's ability or will to perform again. Rather

than using these characters to unpack social inequalities, police violence, or racism, the movie ultimately falls into a Hollywood-like narrative in which poor communities have “soul” that offer nourishment to the middle class or elites who are lacking belonging and meaning.

The film not only avoids critique by turning it into a spiritual journey for the violin teacher, the director seems especially concerned to direct the viewer’s analysis away from race. As the only black person in the all white world of classical music (as represented in this film), the audience is primed to consider how race may be a factor. But rather than using this set-up – black prodigy who is professionally paralyzed in an all white world – to address or consider race matters, the topic is never once broached. In a classic colorblind move, we are encouraged to see Laerete’s blackness and then instructed that this is sociologically irrelevant. For instance, in an opening scene Laerete freezes during a blind audition in which the judges cannot see the performer but only hear what it is being played – putative proof that race is not the issue, at least for the judges

The viewer is thus encouraged to see Brazil per official orthodoxy as a society where black men can work in all white professional settings or date white women, as Laerete does, without race ever being an issue. It is as if every interaction in Brazil was somehow a blind-audition and Brazilians only evaluate people based on their talents or the content of their character rather than as racialized subjects. The problem, of course, is that as a metaphor for the film, let alone Brazilian society, this is absurd. As countless researchers have found color influences whether one is seen as attractive, moral, hardworking, competent, criminal, and so on. People are not reduced to race but they are defined by it. And to pretend otherwise, especially in the context of Brazil, is to engage in ideological work. It is to suggest, per mestico nationalism, that Brazil is a racial democracy.

“O homem que copiava” is another, even better, example of this cultural work. The film revolves around a love story of an interracial, working class couple. Even though the film is playful and follows a traditional plot of a heist

movie, the film is not power evasive or avoidant of social issues. For example, the film does an excellent job of showing how exploited service workers are in Brazil – barely making enough to afford a beer once a week. And in one entertaining scene, one of the friends of the couple says that she does date guys who are poor or smoke (note that race is not mentioned). Despite the film’s sensitivity to alienating working conditions and social inequalities, when the young black man meets the white woman’s boorish step-father, there is no comment about his blackness – a highly unlikely outcome in Brazil where volumes have been published documenting how race plays a salient and explicit role in shaping perceptions of the desirability of sexual partners. In any event, these silences expose the director’s ideological agenda. As in *“Tudo que aprendemos juntos”*, the preferred reading is there are social inequalities in Brazil but that these injustices have nothing to do with race. This mestico-nationalist trope is conveyed by the fact that poverty and class are vigorously addressed but race is never raised despite the fact that at the center of the story is black man romantically involved with a white woman in all white spaces.

Finally, another way that racism is often advanced in Brazilian cinema surfaces in the subset of “favela” films. In this genre non-white actors predominate but unfortunately viewers are served up extremely racist caricatures of nonwhites and their spaces. Above I noted how favelas tend to be imagined as spaces of immorality, violence, and savagery. For those who hold these stereotypes, these films do not disappoint. One example is *“Cidade de deus”*. This film takes up as its subject life within the favela, City of God, which is portrayed as dominated by parentless, alienated, drug-addicted children who kill and commit atrocities without compunction. Despite the fact that there are thousands of favelas in Rio de Janeiro alone, all of which have their own particularities and unique features, most Brazilians assume that favelas are very similar. And so even if this film captures the reality of life in City of God – something which I doubt – most Brazilians will then take this to be an accurate representation of life in other favelas. This is why I have had a number of heated conversations with white, college educated Brazilians who consider this film to be an ethnographic-like

portrait of the realities of favela-life. When I tell them that "*Cidade de deus*" does not come close to capturing the reality of places like Babilônia—which has, at times, been terrorized by gang and police violence but is overwhelming populated by lower-middle class and blue-collar workers who hold steady jobs, struggle to ensure the best education possible for their kids, have satellite TV, indoor plumbing and laptop computers, routinely attend church, do not drink alcohol let alone use other types of drugs, and have no connection to gangs—these individuals become incredibly defensive.

In addition to reproducing this racist imaginary of urban, black communities, many "favela" films also encourage the militarized policing that is responsible for the war-zone levels of violence in poor communities. In the US, the white backlash to democratization has taken the well-documented form of mass incarceration. In Brazil this pushback against democratization has manifest instead in mass assassinations. Thanks to the neoslave attitudes and institutions in Brazil, favelas lack most basic social services, including policing. One consequence has been that gangs have been allowed to control and terrorize most poor, urban communities, as long as the violence was contained to these neighborhoods. The police are often in cahoots with the gangs but in those instances when they enter these neighborhoods, say to quell pitched battles that threaten to spill out of the favela or to collect their cut of drug revenue, they approach all favelados as criminals. According to Teresa Caldeira, Brazilians tend to see criminals as evil incarnate in which the only effective remedy is believed to be torture and murder. Consequently, extra-judicial killings of black and brown boys and young men by the police is legitimated and has become routine.<sup>10</sup>

Unfortunately Brazilian film too often feeds into this narrative of race, crime, and its remedy. Not only, as noted above in the discussion of "*Cidade de deus*", are favelas portrayed as spaces of violence, crime, and savagery, but also the idea that violence is the only solution is reinforced in films like "*Tropa de elite*". The ordinary police are portrayed as irredeemable corrupt, a sentiment held by many Brazilians, and so the hyper-militarized special forces

or the Elite Squads are held out as the lone hope for a solution. These uncorrupted units, as portrayed in the film, must enter, identify, and kill (rather than arrest) the culprits. The featured favela, which happens to be Babilônia, is represented as a war zone reminiscent of scenes from Hollywood films like "*Black Hawk Down*". Moreover, these necessary killings ultimately take a huge toll on the heroes, which is used to confirm that the "*Tropa de elite*" are ultimately good guys rather than psychopaths who enjoy murder. The first hero cracks under the pressure – he ruins his marriage and becomes addicted to drugs under the strain before he passes on the baton to his protégé but only after he has proven himself able to violate the law and moral codes by assassinating criminals. Unlike many of the films noted above, this film was widely popular in Brazil no doubt because it dovetailed with the widely-held narratives of criminality, its causes and solution. Unfortunately the end result of this narrative is to encourage and animate the mass murder of poor young men and children of color.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Haitian revolutionaries long understood that the ideals of the Enlightenment, liberty, equality, and fraternity, would only be actualized if antiracism was foregrounded. Unfortunately, this has been a lesson that has only been understood in certain counter-publics in the Americas but rarely by mainstream societies and Brazil is certainly no exception. The cold reality is that the progress that most Brazilians desire, a society that is ethical, fair, caring, and prosperous, will only be achieved once race is taken seriously.

Brazilian cinema has proven itself capable of addressing race and racism in a constructive and nuanced manner. Unfortunately such films are few and far between. Of course, not every film must be about racism, but it is dispiriting how often Brazilian films seem to go out of their way to avoid the topic. And even more problematic is how many directors are complicit with white supremacy by whitening the poor, generating caricatures of favelas, or reproducing the non-racist narrative of mestizo nationalism. The challenge, then, is to push Brazilian film-

makers to avoid these missteps and encourage more of them to look to and build upon Brazilian cinema's antiracist traditions. Film critics and scholars can play a crucial role in enabling this transformation but this will require that they too start taking this issue much more seriously.

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## Notas

1 Hermano Vianna, *The Mystery of Samba* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1999), 9.

2 Gilberto Freyre, *Novo mundo nos trópicas* (São Paulo: Martins, 1965), 31.

3 Hermano Vianna, *The Mystery of Samba* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1999), 43.

4 Hermano Vianna, *The Mystery of Samba* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1999), 61

5 Warren, Jonathan, *Cultures of Development* (New York: Routledge Press, 2017), 100.

6 Robert Stam, *Tropical Multiculturalism*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997) 180.

7 Teresa Cristina Furtado Matos, Na Boca do Mundo, *Revista Latinoamericana de Estudios Sobre Cuerpos, Emociones y Sociedad* (RELACES), 01 April 2013, 59

8 See Clauder Rocha, "Orfeu: Metafísica da Favela," *Jornal do Brasil* (October 24, 1959).

9 Jonathan Warren, *Cultures of Development* (NY: Routledge Press 2017).

10 Teresa Caldeira. *City of Walls*, (Berkeley: UC Press, 2000).

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