

RACE IN THE OTHER AMERICA: Reflections on My Semester in Brazil

by JONATHAN MICHAEL SQUARE

R“RACE IN THE OTHER AMERICA” IS AN ALLUSION to a series of articles titled *Da Outra América* that Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre wrote during his stay in the United States. In these articles, Freyre often reflected on the similarities and differences between Brazil and the United States. In some respects, I am doing the inverse in this article. Rather than a white Brazilian musing over his sojourn in the United States, I, an African American, am recounting my experiences in Brazil. However, Freyre and I converge on at least one point—whether in Brazil or in the United States, race is never a simple matter.

My undergraduate coursework on the racial dynamics in the Atlantic world greatly shaped my interest in Brazil and the African diaspora. I entered the Latin American Studies program with the intention of studying race and slavery in Brazil, and my coursework at the University of Texas has greatly expanded my knowledge of Brazil’s racial dynamics. According to 2006 census data collected by the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE), the Brazilian census bureau, 6.9

percent of the Brazil’s populace self-identifies as black. However, if you consider *pardos*, a formal racial category for multiracial peoples, as Afro-Brazilians, as does IBGE, then Brazil is home to more than 92 million people of at least partial black ancestry—the largest Afro-descended population outside of Africa. As a graduate student in the Latin American Studies program at UT, I have focused my studies on the history and current politics regarding this segment of Brazilian society, which continues to constitute the bulk of the country’s population. I, however, learned the most about Brazil’s complex and tumultuous history of race relations during the semester that I spent as an exchange student at the Universidade Estadual de Campinas (UNICAMP).

UNICAMP, along with the Universidade de São Paulo, is one of the most renowned institutions of higher learning in Brazil and, by far, the best university if you, like me, study Brazilian social history. The Center for Research in Cultural and Social History (CECULT) at UNICAMP is home to several esteemed social historians, including Sidney Chalhoub, Robert Slenes, and Silvia Lara, with whom I studied. Yet, UNICAMP has not been a popular destination for American students studying

in Brazil; I was the only American studying there at the time! Despite its renown among Brazilian undergraduate and graduate students alike, I suspect most American students prefer the sun-soaked beaches of Rio de Janeiro and Salvador or the fast-paced urban life of São Paulo to the more subdued Campinas, which is located in the interior of São Paulo state—one of the most prosperous regions of Brazil, yet lacking the excitement of Brazil’s more popular destinations. I, however, chose to study in Campinas for the academic experience. Studying at UNICAMP gave me the opportunity to interact with scholars at one of the most respected institutions of higher education in Brazil and Latin America, strengthen my command of Portuguese, enrich my thesis research, and expand my general knowledge of race relations in Brazil.

While UNICAMP provided a rigorous academic environment, I learned more about race in Brazil off-campus than on-campus. Many friends and colleagues, many of whom are involved in the *movimento negro*, shared their firsthand experiences of living in a country plagued by an unspoken racism. Our frequent discussions regarding racial quotas in university admissions, financial and structural barriers to social ascension, and day-to-day racial discrimination provided me a deeper, more personal understanding of how race functions in Brazilian society.

My participation in the fourth annual Dia da Consciência Negra march in São Paulo gave me an even greater insight into the struggle of Afro-descendants in Brazil. The march has been held every November 20 since 2004, which coincides with the anniversary of the death of Zumbi dos Palmares in 1695. Zumbi was the last leader of Palmares, the largest

and longest lasting documented maroon community (or *quilombo*) in the Americas and a perennial icon of the *movimento negro* in Brazil. Today, November 20, which is an official holiday in some states and municipalities, honors the integral role that *afrodescendentes* have played in the construction of the Brazilian nation and highlights their continued struggle for full inclusion into the national body.

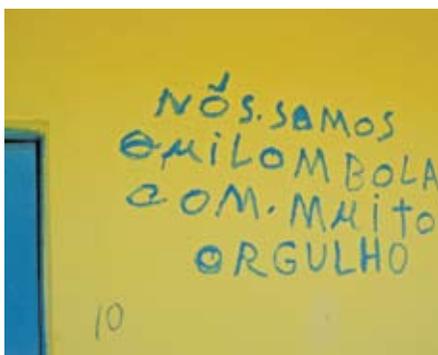
Afro-Brazilians’ continued efforts to gain a greater voice in the national political system are, in many ways, reflective of the *quilombos*’ current struggles to gain legal ownership of the lands they historically have occupied. When I returned to UT in the spring, I had the opportunity to deepen my knowledge of the history of *quilombos* and current racial politics in Brazil. I took part in a delegation organized by the UT Law School’s Rapoport Center for Human Rights and Justice that spent the semester studying the obstacles to the full implementation of a provision in the 1988 Brazilian constitution that guarantees the cultural and collective land rights of communities who self-identify as descendants of *quilombolas* (maroons). During spring break, the group traveled to Brazil and interviewed academics, governmental officials, NGOs, and activists with the ultimate goal of using the information gathered during the trip to draft a human rights report.

The most important part of the trip, however, was our visits to actual *quilombos*. First, we visited Sacopã, an urban *quilombo* that defies popularly held notions of what constitutes a maroon community. Sacopã is situated on one of the last forested tracts of Lagoa Rodrigo de Freitas, one of the priciest neighborhoods in Rio de Janeiro. The second

community that we visited was Gamboa de Baixo—whose residents do not classify their community as a *quilombo*, but rather as a black fishing community—in Salvador, Bahia. The neighborhood was literally chopped in half in 1961 when the Avenida do Contorno was opened as part of a municipal modernization project. Since then, the communities have been fighting for basic amenities and a better public perception. The last *quilombo* that we visited was São Francisco do Paraguaçu, which is located in the Bahian Recôncavo. The community recently has been the target of attacks by the conservative media who accused the community of fraud in their titling procedures and falsely identifying as a *quilombo*.

In many ways, the visit to São Francisco do Paraguaçu, which fell on my twenty-fifth birthday, was the pinnacle of my experiences in Brazil. After several of the community members performed a quick *samba de roda*, much to my surprise, one of the community elders pulled me into the circle and nearly fifty of the community’s residents sang “Feliz Aniversário” to me. Despite my shock, I was touched that they made an effort commemorate my—a stranger’s—birthday. There, in that community, I felt the sensation of being part of something greater, of being part of the African diaspora. We may not share the same language or culture, but we have a common heritage.

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Left to right: 1) A message written outside the home of a São Francisco do Paraguaçu resident; it reads “We are quilombolas with much pride.” 2) A group of student protestors at the Dia da Consciência Negra march. 3) Jonathan standing in front of one of many waterfalls at Iguazu Falls.