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INTRODUCTION

Creating a People and a Nation

> [N]ations are constituted largely by the claims [they make for] themselves, by the way of talking and thinking and acting that relies on these sorts of claims to produce collective identity, to mobilize people for collective projects, and to evaluate peoples and practices.[1]
>
> Craig Calhoun

GILBERTO FREYRE AND THE MYTH OF *MESTIÇAGEM*

The history of nationalism and national identities is a history of myth-making. This book reconstructs the story of how one myth of national identity became history. Brazilian national identity, like many other national identities, was constructed from local society up as well as from the State down. The combined and often conflicting efforts of the powerful and the less powerful forge peoples and nations over decades and centuries. Elites who wish to construct nations consciously seek to create a cohesive sense of national identity, solidarity, and allegiance to an articulated set of myths, rituals, and symbols. They pursue progress through order, and that order and progress hinge on the success of their attempts to impose homogeneity and uniformity. Despite their best efforts – and their power – often the plans of the nation-builders fail, either in part or in whole. The less powerful – especially the so-called masses (*o povo*) – quite often without setting out to do so create and shape their own myths, rituals, and symbols that sometimes reach a wide audience resonating with hundreds of thousands – even millions – of persons they have never met nor seen. This complex and dialectical process of the conscious and unconscious construction of peoples and nations through the emergence and evolution of a shared set of myths,

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rituals, and symbols is the focus of this book. A generation ago, Benedict Anderson brilliantly described this process as the creation of "imagined communities."[2] *Becoming Brazilians* charts the emergence of an "imagined community" – what Brazilian intellectuals would call an *imaginário nacional* (national imaginary/collective imagination) – the creation of a people, and a nation, in twentieth-century Brazil.[3]

Since the 1930s, the most important national myth that has bound people together in Brazil is what the anthropologist Roberto DaMatta has called the "*fábula das três raças*." This fable of the three races – what I call the myth of *mestiçagem* (miscegenation) – asserts that Brazilians share a common history of racial *and* cultural mixing of Native Americans, Africans, and Europeans.[4] Although he did not invent this myth, Gilberto Freyre's exuberant and optimistic vision of *mestiçagem* has been its most potent and influential version. As Peter Fry has concisely noted, Freyre declared that all Brazilians "whatever their genealogical affiliation, were *culturally* Africans, Amerindians and Europeans."[5] Even those Brazilians who are not biologically *mestiços* are cultural hybrids. In Freyre's own oft-quoted words, "Every Brazilian, even the light-skinned fair-haired one, carries with him in his soul, when not in body and soul ... the shadow, or at least the birthmark, of the Indian or the Negro."[6] All Brazilians, regardless of the color of their skin, carry with them shadows in their souls, traces of Europe, Africa, and the Americas in their cultural, if not their biological, DNA.[7] This is the essence of the Freyrean vision of Brazil, *brasilidade* (Brazilianness), and Brazilian national identity in the twentieth century. This book is a sort of cultural history of the Freyrean myth of *mestiçagem*.

Before the publication of Freyre's monumental *The Masters and the Slaves* (*Casa-grande e senzala* in the Portuguese original) in 1933, many Brazilian and foreign intellectuals had recognized this mixing, but very few viewed this *mestiçagem* favorably.[8] By the 1970s and 1980s, nearly all Brazilians, at some level, shared this belief – it had become something of a "master narrative of Brazilian culture."[9] When queried about race or ancestry for surveys, most Brazilians tell the questioners they are "Brazilian."[10] Today, when 200 million Brazilians enjoy the music of Ivete Sangalo or participate in *carnaval*, or experience the exhilaration of their national team (*seleção*) winning (or losing) a World Cup, they resonate with some of the fundamental markers of Brazilian national identity – ones that are all profoundly shaped by the Freyrean vision of *mestiçagem*.

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FIGURE I.1 Gilberto Freyre, 1967
Source: Photo By Jack Riddle/*The Denver Post* via Getty Images

GILBERTO FREYRE AND *CASA-GRANDE E SENZALA*

Sophisticated social science research has shown that this cultural mixing in Brazil has been widespread and deep.[11] People of all skin colors take part in cultural practices and activities that emerged out of European, Native American, and African societies. Perhaps most visible are the

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profound African influences that permeate the cultural lives of Brazilians of all hues – from *candomblé* to *capoeira* and *carnaval*. In the words of one writer, "some Euro-Brazilians are more culturally Afro-Brazilian than some Afro-Brazilians." African influences pervade all facets of Brazilian culture and society, leading one scholar to observe that the dominant narrative in Brazil is that no one is really white![12] As Edward Telles has shown with sophisticated statistical and analytical rigor, miscegenation is not "mere ideology" in Brazil. Race mixture has been taking place for centuries, and continues, and represents a significant reality in the daily lives of Brazilians.[13] The influence of Freyre permeates nearly every nook and corner of contemporary Brazilian culture. Even those who vehemently reject Freyre's ideas must grapple with ways to contend with their power and influence. This book traces the emergence, maturation, and then (partial) decline of this Freyrean vision of *mestiço* nationalism, this imagined community of *mestiçagem*, of racial mixture and cultural convergence, from the 1930s to the 1990s. This book is a brief history of the most powerful narrative of Brazilian identity in the twentieth century.

Decades of sustained and devastating critiques of Freyre's notion of "racial democracy" offer paradoxical testimony to his continuing power and influence on Brazilian identity.[14] The vast literature attacking racial democracy has rarely been accompanied by a rejection of Freyre's most important assertion – that the essence of Brazil and Brazilians is this mixture of races and cultures.[15] In the decades following the publication of *Casa-grande e senzala*, Freyre gradually made stronger and more sweeping claims that the widespread mixing of races and cultures had provided Brazil with a form of racial democracy, a society without the racial prejudice and discrimination sanctioned by law and custom in the United States and South Africa (for example).[16] Ironically, Freyre did not create the term "racial democracy," and it apparently does not even come into use until the late 1940s and the 1950s.[17] Since the 1950s, this Freyrean view of racial democracy has been repeatedly attacked by scholars in multiple fields of study. While many have argued that racial democracy is some sort of false consciousness or a smoke screen fabricated by the elite to hide the racism in Brazilian society, I agree with those who have shown that few Brazilians (especially those who are darker and poorer) believe that Brazil is a racial democracy. They are fully aware of the racism they confront in their own lives, but cling to racial democracy as an ideal to aspire to – for all Brazilians.[18] At the same time, the most sophisticated sociological surveys demonstrate that

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a majority of Brazilians cling to the Freyrean vision of *mestiçagem*.[19] While Freyre's vision of *mestiçagem* and racial democracy are interconnected, the former does not inevitably lead to the latter (although many, many writers conflate the two in their critiques of Freyre). One may fully embrace the notion of mixing without believing it produces racial democracy.[20] I agree with Hermano Vianna's observation: "I never believed that to value *mestiçagem* was synonymous with defending the idea that we live in a racial democracy."[21] This book is *not* about what I see as Freyre's naïve and untenable claims about racial democracy in Brazil, but rather about how the "fable of three races" becomes so deeply embedded in popular culture and the *imaginário nacional*.[22] The myth of *mestiçagem* has been more powerful, widespread, and enduring than the myth of racial democracy.

Mestiçagem, however, is a protean concept.[23] It allows those who wish to emphasize the cultural and racial diversity of Brazilian identity to highlight the contributions of the African and Indian to Brazilian culture. Brazilian music, cuisine, arts, language, and even sports offer for them daily evidence of the importance of non-European peoples and cultures to the formation of Brazilian society. At the same time, *mestiçagem* can also provide a means for those who wish to de-emphasize the African and Indian heritage of Brazilians by highlighting the waves of European immigrants as an even more powerful contributor to the cultural and racial mix that is Brazil today. In this version, mixing becomes the means for whitening (*embranquecimento*) Brazilian culture and biology. This vision of *mestiçagem*, combined with racial democracy, has been a powerful alternative to the blatant expressions of white supremacist ideology that became so potent in other societies such as the United States.[24] In a sense, these two very different visions are two sides of the same coin of *mestiçagem*. As the following chapters show, these two very different visions, both accepting *mestiçagem* as central to the national narrative, are reshaped by different regions of Brazil for their own purposes. In effect, one sees *mestiçagem* as whitening while the other sees it as darkening Brazil.

In the following chapters, I analyze how and why the tens of millions living within the political boundaries of Brazil (and many more residing beyond those borders) in the twentieth century gradually come to see themselves not only as *brasileiros*, but *brasileiros* a la Freyre.[25] I argue that only in recent decades has Brazil finally become a nation, that is, a people within a defined set of political borders bound together by their attachment to a common set of myths, rituals, and symbols.[26] For much of

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the twentieth century, Brazilians forged "a culture in search of nation."[27] The rise of the new technologies of radio, film, and television – the emergence of new visual and aural cultures – made possible the creation of this "imagined community" in twentieth-century Brazil (and in other nations as well). The following chapters dissect the ongoing and constantly evolving process of "becoming Brazilians" in the twentieth century. At the heart of this analysis is the very notion of what it means to be "Brazilian" and how that identity evolves and shifts across most of the twentieth century – and continues to shift in the twenty-first. Gilberto Freyre's work provides the framework for the conceptualization of the Brazilians as a singular people who compose their own nation.

I do not pretend to demonstrate definitively the many ways in which the technologies of mass communication have fostered the enormous reach and power of the myth of *mestiçagem*. In this long, interpretive essay, I lay out what I believe are the key features and processes in the creation, diffusion, success, and eventual decline of this vision of Brazilian identity. The principal goals of this essay are to offer an interpretation of twentieth-century Brazil and stimulate others to discuss, debate, challenge, and engage in much more detailed studies of the many facets of the historical trajectory I describe in this book. I am certainly not the first to notice the importance of the new technologies for the emergence of popular culture in twentieth-century societies. Latin Americans, especially Brazilians, have not only created dynamic music, art, literature, film, and television, but they also generated a very stimulating and innovative body of work about popular culture. Scholars in many countries over the past thirty years have produced a large literature on nationalism and national identity, and a seemingly endless number of books and articles have discussed Brazilian identity in the twentieth century. In more recent decades, a vibrant group of writers have shown how central citizenship, in its many facets, is to contemporary societies and to efforts to cultivate democratic politics – in Brazil, or elsewhere in the world. In this book, I bring these diverse stories together to show how the consolidation of a vibrant cultural nationalism constructed around the myth of *mestiçagem* from the 1930s to the 1980s set the stage for the rise of a dynamic civic nationalism that has fostered among tens of millions of Brazilians a vital conversation about their origins, who they are today, what they would like to become, and where they will go in the twenty-first century.

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CONSTRUCTING MYTHS, RITUALS, AND SYMBOLS

Brazilians built an extraordinary narrative unity around an exceptionally flexible sense of identity. The construction of this narrative took place over many decades across two centuries. In 1822, Pedro I's famous "Cry of Ipiranga" announced the creation of an independent Brazil free of Portuguese colonial rule. Much of the story of Brazilian history – and the Brazilian people – in the nearly two centuries after Pedro's cry (*grito*) is the long (and never-ending) struggle to create a people and a nation out of an idea – to make real the newly proclaimed nation in that cry for independence.[28] The great challenge for the State in constructing the Brazilian nation from the early nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century was in many ways geographical and technological – how to reach all those peoples living within the enormous, fluid, and ill-defined political boundaries of Brazil.[29] Before becoming Brazilian, one must first become aware of the very notion of something called Brazil. The challenge for all Brazilian nationalists was not only to create myths, rituals, and symbols, but also to make the millions of peoples of African, Native American, and European descent – and their descendants – aware of those myths, rituals, and symbols. In the terminology of Ernest Gellner, the State had to foster the nationalism that precedes the creation of the nation. Even more so than most nations, Brazil faced the daunting challenge of scale in a country of truly continental dimensions.[30] I believe that the process of the creation of this set of shared myths, rituals, and symbols does not reach full fruition until the second half of the twentieth century *after* the emergence and expansion of the technologies of mass communication – radio, film, and television. As Eric Hobsbawm once observed, "The common culture of any late twentieth-century urbanized country was based on the mass entertainment industry – cinema, radio, television, pop music."[31]

The 1930s have long been seen as a critical turning point in modern Brazilian history with the rise of Getúlio Vargas and the increasing ability of the Brazilian State to extend its power into the vast interior of the country. At the same time, the central government begins systematically to create school curricula, museums, holidays, and national symbols to overcome the long history of regionalism and fragmentation that had characterized Brazilian society, culture, and politics since (at least) independence.[32] The rise of radio in the 1930s, and then film in the 1940s and 1950s, produces a powerful shift with the emergence of popular culture, especially popular music (samba, in particular), *carnaval*,

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and soccer (*futebol*) as shared national experiences.[33] Post-1930 Brazil is a fascinating mix of the efforts of the State to impose an increasingly unified vision of "Brazilianness" (*brasilidade*) as a diverse set of regional symbols, music, dance, and popular culture is eventually broadcast and spread across more than 8.5 million square kilometers of national territory. The expanding mass media bring the local and the regional into the national arena – and into regular contact with each other. New technologies produced (and continue to produce) an accelerating interactive intensity of people, places, and symbols from 1920s to the present.

An expanding scholarship over the past twenty years has persuasively argued that region and nation are mutually constitutive, and Brazil is an excellent example of these processes of interaction and mutual construction.[34] A history of nation-building is more than the story of centralizing authority and the State; it involves a complex process of constant integration and differentiation among regions and nation. Instability and contingency characterize an ongoing and never-ending process, a constant shape shifting if you will. The imaginings of the people who at some point in time see themselves as part of a community – regional or national – are never completely fixed or static. Region and nation, in these terms, are "cognitive arenas of struggle." Rather than just fixed spaces, they are "landscapes of action, of meaning, and of experience."[35] Rather than antagonistic and exclusive, the region-nation-building process in Brazil has largely been mutually reinforcing and interdependent. The emergence of regions in Brazil "was not just parallel with the new nationalist sentiment, but a reaction to it and another face of it."[36] Eventually, a relatively select set of myths, symbols, and rituals comes to be seen and experienced as defining features not of particular regions, but of Brazil as a whole. In many ways, the regional narratives that emerged in the early twentieth century offered competing visions of Brazil, visions that made claims to authenticity, power, and hierarchy.[37]

As new technologies (telegraphy, telephony, radio, cinema, television) draw more and more locales into an ever larger community, the interplay among the local, regional, national, and international intensify. Earlier generations of writers often portrayed this process as largely unidirectional – the top-down imposition (beginning with Vargas) of the State dominated by elites who sought to force the Freyrean vision of Brazil on the masses. The influence and agency of the majority of Brazilians disappear in many of these accounts.[38] I argue that this process of nation-building was not entirely State directed, nor driven simply by the desires and choices of individuals or groups.[39] The result, as with all complex

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cultures, is a constantly evolving mix of cultural traits that are always "hybrid," to use the terminology of cultural studies.[40] The focus of this book is on how a select group of defining features that became emblematic of national identity in the twentieth century emerged, flourished, and then were powerfully questioned and challenged. Their emergence was not foreordained or completely imposed from above, but arose out of a complex, protracted, highly contingent, and constant process of exchanges and conflicts among constituencies from all sectors of Brazilian society (and beyond).[41] As Prasenjit Duara has observed, nationalism "marks the site where different representations of the nation contest and negotiate with each other." He goes on to assert that "we find a polyphony of voices, contradictory and ambiguous, opposing, affirming, and negotiating their views of the nation."[42] State power and voices "from below" are constantly in a conflictual and evolving relationship that continually refines and reshapes notions of identity – local, regional, and national.[43] As in many countries, this polyphony of voices created an ongoing and unending conversation about the nature of Brazilian identity. Gilberto Freyre's portrayal of *mestiçagem* gradually became the dominant narrative (the dominant voice) among the contending narratives in this conversation. Intellectuals, like Freyre, frequently played the role of cultural mediators in this process.[44]

The emergence of radio and samba from the 1930s to the 1950s initiated the creation of what has been called a "culture industry" in Brazil creating for the first time a shared national popular culture. The Modernists in the 1920s and 1930s played a central role in this technological and cultural shift. The so-called folkloric, popular culture of pre-twentieth-century Brazil and the supposed erudite, cosmopolitan culture of the elites had never been separate, yet they blended and reconfigured in increasingly creative and powerful ways with the rise of mass media technologies. "The symbioses between radio and literature, cinema and theater, and theater and television," as Renato Ortiz has argued, "were constants." As he has also written, the idea of traditional cultures that defined the "popular classes" gave way to products, images, and festivities associated with cultural industries and the "masses."[45] The intervention of the State into the cultural arena in the same decades stimulated the creation of a "mass culture" (*cultura de massas*) in Brazil, but it was not until the 1960s and 1970s that a truly national community became possible. The conversation and debate about Brazilian national identity has been a long struggle over the very nature of what is deemed Brazilian culture.[46] First with film and then, more importantly, with the

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emergence of television after 1970, the technology was in place that truly stitched together the pieces of the national territory and Brazilian society to create the quilted mosaic that is Brazil today in the midst of this ongoing and never-ending conversation.[47]

Brian Owensby has argued that in a society that largely excluded Brazilians from civic citizenship and full political participation, popular culture offered sites of "unofficial citizenship" where "people could avoid entanglements with a politics that so often excluded them." Through samba, *carnaval*, and *futebol* (among other sites), to "be Brazilian ... is to rise to a moral plane above the pettiness, corruptions, and exclusions of politics."[48] Brazilians, in this sense, confront the negatives of politics and its flaws with the positives of participation in popular culture. In effect, Brazilians have forged an increasingly rich cultural citizenship over decades in the absence of a strong civic citizenship.[49] From the 1930s to the 1970s, this growing and vibrant popular culture spawned contending forms of cultural nationalism and identity. The 1970s, largely because of opposition to the military regime that took power in 1964 and instituted brutal repressive measures, mark a turning point in the emergence of a civic nationalism and a struggle for citizenship in Brazil. These two powerful forces – civic and cultural – converge in the 1970s and 1980s, with television, *futebol*, and popular music as the principal vehicles facilitating the convergence. The process of becoming Brazilians – of creating one people and one nation – reaches its climax under the military regime in the 1970s and 1980s, culminating with the mass mobilization of Brazilians through the process of re-democratization, national elections in 1989, and the impeachment of President Fernando Collor in 1992. In the "direct elections now" campaign (*diretas já*) in 1984, and the impeachment of President Fernando Collor in 1992, tens of millions of Brazilians rallied around "their" flag, national anthem, and other national symbols to claim their "rights" as Brazilians.[50] They fully and forcefully assumed their civic *and* cultural identity as Brazilians.[51] Nation and State finally converged more than a century and a half after Pedro's declaration of independence in 1822.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the military regime put into place many of the conditions for the consolidation of a shared national culture (extending State power and mass communications effectively across all of the national territory), and the climax of this sense of national belonging comes, ironically, with the massive mobilization of millions of Brazilians *against* the military regime in the 1980s. In one of ironies of Brazilian history, at the very moment that this modernizing project to create a sense

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