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978-0-521-15534-2 - Three Sad Races: Racial Identity and National Consciousness
in Brazilian Literature

David T. Haberly

Excerpt

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Introduction

The Brazilian poet Olavo Bilac declared, in the second decade of the twentieth century, that the music of his nation was the “loving flower of three sad races” (“*flor amorosa de três raças tristes*”) (1964:263). Bilac was in many ways the epitome of *fin de siècle* Brazil – diligently superficial in his literary creations and in his cultural judgments, fervently if fuzzily patriotic, and resoundingly bourgeois in his attitudes toward art and society. His dictum was hardly the product of a radical consciousness, and it was widely accepted by his contemporaries as both deeply poetic and profoundly true. Most Brazilians, then and now, would unhesitatingly extend it to describe the nation’s literature as well as its music.

Two discrete concepts coexist in Bilac’s summation of this national consensus: the multiracial nature of Brazilian culture, and the sadness inherent in the national soul. The Portuguese, in Bilac’s interpretation of Brazil’s musical – and cultural – history, sang songs filled with nostalgia for the homeland they had left behind. The Indians joined in to mourn the world the white man had taken from them. The Africans, brought to Brazil in chains, wept for the freedom they had lost.

But Bilac was not referring simply to the first decades of Brazilian history, for the theme of national sadness – an existential sense of suffering, of exile, and of loss – survived the assimilation of the Portuguese, the virtual disappearance of the Indian, and the abolition of African slavery; by Bilac’s day, it was deeply embedded in the consciousness of the independent Republic. One decade later, in 1928, Paulo Prado suggested that this sad-

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ness was fundamental to the national character, subtitled his *Portrait of Brazil (Retrato do Brasil) An Essay on the Sadness of Brazil*.

The idea that Brazil – and Brazilian literature – is the end result of the interaction of these three racial groups is even more of a commonplace in the national consciousness than this conviction of sadness. It must be admitted, moreover, that the idea is firmly based, at least for literature, upon reality: Of the six major figures studied in this volume, four are nonwhite.

The multiracial character of Brazilian literary history, however, goes far beyond genetics. As we shall see, much of Brazil's literature has been preoccupied with an anguished search for a viable racial identity – a search that has been both personal and national in scope. In this endeavor, Bilac's two themes of race and of suffering have been joined again and again; the most emotional example, perhaps, is Guilherme de Almeida's 1925 description of the nation as a "cross in whose shadow / three races crossed and mixed, three different bloods dripped from three crucified victims" (1952:191).

This Brazilian tradition is particularly striking when set against the generally optimistic North American belief in the inherent viability and perfectibility of social and cultural institutions. And, despite the essential similarity of the racial backgrounds of the United States and Brazil, Americans have illogically but decisively defined themselves and their nation in terms of the white majority alone. American literature, with pitifully few exceptions, has been written by whites, for whites, and about whites. Non-white characters have been marginal at best, serving only to highlight the white heroes or heroines, the only conceivable national symbols.

The gap between this American tradition of whiteness and optimism and Guilherme de Almeida's tortured vision of three victims of different colors is the result of contrasting definitions of the nature of race and of the function of literature. In the United States, racial identity has been simply and clearly defined as almost entirely a question of genetics. Although there is some evidence that this ancestry-based system of racial classifi-

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cation has been applied to Indians and to other minorities, its operation can best be understood in its application to black Americans.¹ A black, in the American tradition, is a person with at least one African ancestor – however convoluted the family tree.² The genetic basis of racial categories in the United States can be clearly seen in American English: The term “mulatto” has traditionally been applied to individuals with one white and one black parent; the now obsolete “quadroon” (one black grandparent) and “octoroon” (one black great-grandparent) were even more mathematically precise.

The far more complex Brazilian system operates in a very different way, but a system of racial categories, equally founded upon prejudice toward nonwhite peoples, does exist.³ Briefly stated, this system functions on several distinct but closely interconnected levels. Simple genetic ancestry, the single focus of the North American system, is but one level. Equally important in Brazil are physical characteristics associated with race – skin pigmentation, hair color and texture, and the contours of the nose and lips – and such cultural patterns as dress, religion, education, and speech. All three levels – ancestry, somatology, and culture – form a continuum, founded upon prejudice-based value judgments, that ranges from African or Indian to European, from ugliness to beauty, from barbarism to civilization.

The racial identity of any individual – his or her position on the continuum – is not necessarily fixed and immutable, as it so often is in the United States, but is constantly redefined by the perceptions of others, perceptions that can vary greatly from region to region and within different social settings. As an American sociologist sums up the system, race is in the eye of the beholder:

Socially, color or race is a continuum running from black to white and so perceived by members of Brazilian society and, while the continuum is firmly anchored at either extreme, the intermediate categories are flexible in that they are variously defined by different persons and may be variously applied by different persons to the same person. Thus, evaluation of color in the intermediate categories is partly idiosyncratic and personal. [Saunders, 1972:144]

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Each Brazilian, therefore, whatever his own feelings about the reality of his racial background, daily presents himself for careful inspection and classification by those he meets. And even the elite, very sure of its own whiteness, has tended to view the national population as a whole as nonwhite and, therefore, inferior.

This conviction of national inferiority does not depend upon statistics (the very subjectivity of racial categories in Brazil makes census figures on race highly unreliable) but upon perception and, ironically, upon the elite's need to justify its own privileged position.⁴ If one group within Brazil is to define itself as genetically, somatically, and culturally superior, it must believe implicitly in the inferiority – that is, the nonwhiteness – of most of the rest of the population. And yet this justification of superior status, however comforting in personal terms, has had profoundly negative effects upon the Brazilian elite's vision of the nation and its future possibilities, a vision clouded by feelings of pessimism, of frustration, of alienation. For the elite, Almeida's Calvary expressed the reality of this vision: The Indians and Africans have been tortured by whites, but are also crucified by their own inferiority; and the whites themselves are tormented by the knowledge that they are condemned to share their land with beings viewed as hopelessly and permanently inferior.

Within the context of this interplay of individual pride and national despair, literature has had a very special function for the Brazilian elite, a function that is quite alien to the American conception of the purpose and nature of literary activity. The goal of the white literature of white America has been to reach as many of the nation's readers as possible, to create a broad-based national culture, to elevate the level of that culture, and – not entirely incidentally – to sell a great many books.

Literature in Brazil, on the other hand, has been almost exclusively the creature of the elite. The proportion of the Brazilian population classified as minimally literate has not changed greatly over the last half-century, and the proportion of Brazilians who are active consumers of literature – the cultural elite of the nation – probably remained constant, from 1822 to at least 1950, at

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less than 1 percent.⁵ As Brazilian society is structured, moreover, this cultural elite, set apart by education and inclination, as well as by the financial ability to purchase books, is also the political, social, and economic elite of the nation. And the very act of reading a literary work, for upper-class Brazilians, is therefore an act of social self-affirmation, since that action and the abilities it presupposes are proof of membership in the elite.

The consumption of literature is not merely a ritual of class distinction, however, but a declaration of whiteness as well: The education and intelligence required to read a work of literature, after all, are part of the prejudice-based cultural and genetic definitions of race. And nonwhites who somehow manage to become consumers of literature thereby whiten themselves, in their own eyes and in the eyes of others; this phenomenon is an integral part of the process Carl Degler has called “the mulatto escape-hatch” (1971:224–5).

A further peculiarity of the Brazilian literary tradition is its narrow circularity: Those who consume literature are, to a surprising extent, its producers as well. The classic example of this identity of producers and consumers is Tobias Barreto, a non-white intellectual from Pernambuco, who wrote and published an erudite and highly specialized philosophical journal in German; Barreto was also almost the only Brazilian reader capable of wading through this esoteric publication. What might appear to us an absurd exercise in futility, however, was for Barreto a vital affirmation of cultural whiteness, concrete proof of his intellectual and social superiority. Although Barreto’s case is clearly an exaggeration, it does symbolize the ritualistic nature of literature in Brazil. The creation of a literary text is an act even more refined, even more aristocratic, even more whitening than the consumption of literature, and most consumers of Brazilian literature have attempted seriously, generally during adolescence, to perform this highest ritual of social and racial self-affirmation.

Because, once again, the cultural and genetic components of the racial continuum define intelligence, literary ability, and education as inherently white traits, nonwhites who produce texts of

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merit have some real possibility of moving themselves along the continuum toward the escape hatch of perceived whiteness. In the case of the great mulatto novelist Machado de Assis, for example, some of his white contemporaries appear to have been fully persuaded, by his talent and culture, that he was literally white.

In less extreme cases, however, we do find a general tolerance of nonwhite writers of talent, at least before about 1900. Recognition of the progress of such writers along the racial continuum, after all, in no way negated the harsh and instinctive prejudice that is as much the basis of race relations in Brazil as it is in the United States; the achievements of those of mixed blood could always, in the final analysis, be explained away as the triumph of white genes over African or Indian genes. This system, in fact, was severely tested only once in nineteenth-century Brazil, in the case of João da Cruz e Sousa, a figure whose racial origins and appearance placed him irrevocably at the extreme black end of the continuum.

The creation of literature, however, is more than merely a ritualistic declaration of whiteness and elite status. As I have suggested, most educated Brazilians have traditionally endeavored to produce literary works – primarily poetry – during adolescence. Such efforts are seen as entirely natural, as well as laudable, because of the almost universal conviction that although literature may presuppose inborn talent and a vocation, it is above all the result of some sort of creative crisis, a by-product of the kind of suffering, marginality, and alienation considered typical of the passage from youth to maturity. The creative crisis, though most common during adolescence, may nonetheless occur at any stage in life. Old José Bonifácio de Andrada e Silva, the “Patriarch of Brazilian Independence” and as tough a political in-fighter as the nation’s history has seen, published a little book of poems while exiled from the land he had helped make free. Exile also moved Dom Pedro II – emperor of Brazil from 1841 to 1889 – to turn his hand to verse (1898).

This, then, is the ultimate irony of Brazilian literature: Literary creativity is public proof of genetic and social superiority; it is

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also, simultaneously, the result of a private crisis of misery and alienation. By logical extension, great texts presuppose uncommon suffering. The idealized, even sentimentalized, image of the tragic writer was a Romantic commonplace throughout Western culture; Brazilian literature of the nineteenth century had more than its share of brilliant young poets who suffered greatly – or who convinced themselves that they suffered greatly – and who died in their late teens or early twenties. The tradition of the creative crisis of sorrow and exile, however, can be traced back to the seventeenth century in Brazil, and has survived into our own time.

This tradition helps explain Brazilian acceptance of a handful of nonwhite writers as central figures in the nation's literature. If one accepts the hypothesis that literary creativity derives from suffering and alienation, and if one also accepts Brazilian ideas and expectations about race, it is only reasonable to conclude that nonwhiteness itself can be viewed as a supreme creative crisis of physical misery, psychological exile, and social marginality.

The relationship I have noted between literature and the relatively brief creative crisis of adolescence, and between literary achievement and the far more profound and enduring creative crisis of nowhiteness itself, not only serves to define the origins and nature of the production of individual writers, but also, by extension, determines the character and the purpose of Brazilian literature as a whole. Brazilians have always tended, even in this century, to look at their nation and its culture in terms of the model of human psychological and physical development, defining Brazil itself as an adolescent – weaned from Portuguese colonialism, but still dependent upon external influences and not yet ready to stand alone as an adult member of the family of nations.

Critical to this self-definition of Brazil as an adolescent is the widespread recognition of the lack of a clear-cut, fully accepted racial and national identity, and the complementary conviction that such a single, unifying identity can and must be found. This conviction has been particularly intense in Brazil precisely be-

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cause the culture that gave birth to the nation, that of Portugal, has appeared to possess just such an identity, forged by the Reconquest and by maritime expansion. A single text, the *Lusiads* of Luís de Camões – the product of the poet's long exile from Portugal – has seemed to Brazilians to provide Portugal with a supreme national text, an act of self-definition that has both expressed and reinforced that vital unity and identity.

The Portuguese identity, however comforting to white Brazilians, has generally been rejected since the early years of the nineteenth century as part of the colonial childhood of the nation; its loss is a major factor in the sadness and frustration of the Brazilian elite. The lack of the sort of coherent and cohesive self-image Brazilians attribute to Portugal has been a major factor, moreover, in the definition of Brazil and its culture as adolescent, filled with uncertainty and self-doubt. Yet the adoption of any unifying identity that is entirely white would serve only to deny the reality of the nation. Such a self-image could not be truly Brazilian. At the same time, the racial prejudice that allows white Brazilians and those who manage to be perceived as members of the elite to justify their own superior status inevitably leads to profound disquiet about the implications of any national identity that is less than totally white.

This paradox is the crux of the creative crisis of Brazil-as-adolescent, the source of the anguish and alienation that have served to form the nation's literature. Brazil's writers, by definition themselves the victims of personal misery and marginality, have ironically been charged with a central and heroic role in the formation of a new national identity; it has been their function, and their responsibility, to fuse their own creative crises with the psychological crisis of the nation in order to present possible solutions to the paradox, to point out possible pathways to maturity and self-confidence.

This book is not intended as a literary history of Brazil. Although the authors studied are arranged in chronological order, and are linked to the schools and movements to which they belonged,

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any student of Brazilian literature will note that some major writers, particularly those of the twentieth century, are excluded or mentioned only in passing. My purpose, rather, is to present and analyze the solutions to the Brazilian paradox – the possible national and racial identities – that appear in the works of six of Brazil's greatest and most influential writers during the period from 1840 to 1940. All of these poets and novelists wrote *about* Brazil, but their function and their importance to the nation's literature and its readers go far beyond mere description. They also quite literally wrote Brazil itself, creating a series of very different possible Brazils, diverse images of the nation's past and future – of whites, of blacks, of Indians, and of various combinations of Bilac's "three sad races" – to be placed upon the continuum and evaluated by the perceptions and prejudices of their readers in a literary replication on a national scale of the process of examination and categorization through which the racial identity of individual Brazilians is daily defined and redefined.

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From Indians to Indianism

When Pedro Álvares Cabral discovered Brazil for Portugal in April of 1500, his literal-minded scribe, Pêro Vaz de Caminha, was moved by the beauty of a new land and a new people to set down a poetic vision of infinite fertility and innocence. Caminha was struck, almost at first glance, by the apparently inexhaustible abundance and goodness of the land – and by the fact that what he saw appeared to serve no useful purpose (Cortês, 1967:251).

Caminha viewed the natives of this land in the same terms – as inherently and potentially good, but desperately in need of development. The Indian men, he noted, were uncircumcised, “all just as we are” (Ley, 1947:47), and he took this as fundamental proof that Brazil’s inhabitants had not been sullied by contact with the circumcised enemies of Iberian Catholicism, Moslems and Jews. “My opinion and everyone’s opinion is that these people lack nothing to become completely Christian except understanding us; for they accepted as we do all they saw us do, which makes us consider that they have no idolatry or worship” (Ley, 1947:58).

This pious zeal coexisted with a strong but repressed sexuality. In Caminha’s detailed descriptions of Indian women, his attention repeatedly focused on their genitals; the Portuguese word he used, *vergonhas* (literally, “shames”), sums up the conflict of cultural patterns that both perturbed and excited him. “One of those girls,” he wrote, “was all colored from head to toe with that paint they use; and surely she was so well-formed and so rounded and her shameful parts (about which she felt no