Becoming Brazilians

This book traces the rise and decline of Gilberto Freyre’s vision of racial and cultural mixture (mestiçagem – or race mixing) as the defining feature of Brazilian culture in the twentieth century. Eakin traces how mestiçagem moved from a conversation among a small group of intellectuals to become the dominant feature of Brazilian national identity, demonstrating how diverse Brazilians embraced mestiçagem, via popular music, film and television, literature, soccer, and protest movements. The Freyrean vision of the unity of Brazilians built on mestiçagem begins a gradual decline in the 1980s with the emergence of an identity politics stressing racial differences and multiculturalism. The book combines intellectual history, sociological and anthropological field work, political science, and cultural studies for a wide-ranging analysis of how Brazilians – across social classes – became Brazilians.

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Becoming Brazilians

Race and National Identity in Twentieth-Century Brazil

MARSHALL C. EAKIN
Vanderbilt University
aos meus amigos brasileiros e brasilianistas
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.¹

Gilberto Freyre

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This book has had a very long gestation, and it has been nurtured along the way by numerous people across several continents, many of them without knowing it. The first book I ever read about Brazil was Gilberto Freyre’s *The Masters and the Slaves*. I vividly remember reading Freyre one scorching summer (1972) in a tiny one-room apartment (without air-conditioning) in Lawrence, Kansas, in between my freshman and sophomore years in college. Little did I realize that summer in the middle of North America that this thick volume was one of the most important books about Brazil, and that it would become one of the most important in my life. Enthralled, during those torrid Kansas summer days I slowly sweated my way through this brilliant, eccentric essay. Looking back, I realize that I barely had begun to understand what Freyre was saying. My lack of comprehension was countered by the enthusiasm the book generated in me for this “new world in the tropics.” Although I would take a very indirect path (through Central America), over the next decade I gradually became a historian of Brazil. Although my first writing and publications were on race and identity in early twentieth-century Brazil, for more than twenty years – from the 1970s to the 1990s – I studied and wrote primarily about the economic history of Brazil. Periodically, I would come back to my ruminations about Freyre and Brazilian culture, but it was not until recently that I finally returned to where I began. Over the years, as I researched, taught, and lectured about Brazil, I became intrigued at how the ideas and work of Gilberto Freyre became the central mythology that propelled the formation of Brazilian national identity in the twentieth century.
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MAP 1  Map of Brazil and Its Regions
Source: Beth Robertson, Mapping Specialists Limited