BLACK TERRITORIES: IDENTITY, ETHNICITY AND POLITICS

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The current ethno-cultural diversity in southern Brazil is a result of the way in which the region was settled: the dislocation and extermination of the indigenous population during colonization; the regime of slave labour; the re-settlement of the area by European immigrants beginning largely in the late nineteenth century; and the internal relocations and migrations of these groups.

In studying the cultural anthropology of this region, both historically and in the contemporary situation, I have attempted to take into account interrelated processes which are being articulated on the local, regional, national and transnational levels, pointing to the emergence of what is referred to today as "multiple identities".[1] Such articulations of identity, which at once manifest heterogeneous and homogeneous dimensions, have created important new criteria in the realms of civil and social rights, through the influence that such multivalent significations and self-representations have taken on, both on the individual and group levels. This development, particularly in the south of Brazil, has heightened the relevance of current discussions on modernity, ethnicity and globalization.

In 1986, I undertook an area of research which had not been explored previously in Brazilian Anthropology, focussing on Blacks in the south of Brazil, and particularly in Santa Catarina. Using the concept of invisibility, I attempted to understand how and why blacks had been effaced in the literature and histories of the region.[2] At the same time, I researched the situation of contemporary Black communities in the south.[3]

In 1988, with the creation of a research centre (Nuer) associated with the Graduate Program in Anthropology at the Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, a study was undertaken attempting to understand the means by which ethnic frontiers had been produced, in relation to Black groups in both rural and urban settings in the south. Our researchers noticed that among the Black groups being considered, the most common explanation offered in describing their situations referred back to a common historical experience - the communal usage of lands, relationships of kinship, and religious beliefs, primarily.[4] In subsequent years, I was able to follow closely several cases which centred on the issue of Black territoriality.[5]

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[1] George Marcus, "Identidades Passadas, Presentes e Emergentes: Requisitos para Etnografias sobre a Modernidade no Final do Século XX ao Nível Mundial", *Revista de Antropolgia*, n. 34, p. 197-221 (1991). Portuguese translation by Denis Werner and Ilka B. Leite, UFSC).

[2] See I. B. Leite, *O Negro em Santa Catarina*. Research Report, UFS/CNPq (1987).

[3] Scholarly works on Blacks in the south of Brazil are few. The well-known history of European immigration to the south has led to the misconception that there are no Blacks in southern Brazil, or that the few who do exist are free from any racial prejudices. (1993, 1996.)

[4] See I. B. Leite (ed.) *Populações de Origem Africana em Santa Catarina: limites de diferenciação étnica*. Research Report. UFSC/CEAA/Ford Foundation (1988).

[5] I have advised the following master's theses in the PPGAS/UFSC program relevant to this

These case studies set the groundwork for comparative work, resulting in the development of a theory of ethnic appropriation strategies, which incorporated as well comparative findings from several studies in other regions of Brazil.[6]

The concept of a "Black territory" came about as a way to simultaneously treat the interrelated questions of identity, ethnicity and politics, while keeping in mind the need to distinguish the various agents in question. In this approach, ethnicity can be viewed as a symbolic representation acting on various levels, constituting and influencing group cohesion and persistence.[7]

My current research project, "Multi-ethnicity and Intolerance: Inter-ethnic Relations in Southern Brazil", aims to examine, through several interrelated endeavours, the role of discourses of ethnicity in the emergence of current cultural identities. Such cultural identities, in being claimed by certain ethnic groups, have been transformed into a political mode of discourse which serve to strengthen certain claims or demands for social rights. Germans, Italians, *gaúchos* (natives of Rio Grande do Sul) and others have come to deploy discursive strategies of self-affirmation in their dealings with the Brazilian state and in a certain competitive strategy vis. these other regional groups. This study aims to understand the interplay between certain contested territories and properties, ethnic intolerance and the particular ways that identities are manifested.[8]

The southern region of Brazil, which is the focus of this project, has played an important role in the construction of Brazilian national identity, as one of the most prosperous and developed regions of the country, inhabited, supposedly, by "white Europeans."[9] On the other hand, what helps to enforce this image is the invisibility of Blacks. This is attested to by the levels of social and spatial segregation which exist today. This situation is confirmed in my present study which has identified and mapped out certain Black territories. Such territories refer to areas inhabited by the descendants of Africans and *mestiços* which have been symbolically demarcated by social and cultural practices of exclusion/inclusion.[10] At present, there are more than one-hundred such areas in the

question. See Teixeira (1990); Martins (1991); and Hartung (1992).

[6] See, for example, P. Fry and Vogt (1981); Bandeira (1988); and several others which treat other regions of Brazil.

[7] See I. B. Leite (ed.) *Ethnic Identity and Space: Black Territories in Santa Catarina.* Research Report, CNPq (1990).

[8] To cite a few examples: Italian descendants adopted the *bombacha* (pants which are close-fitting around the waist and ankles); *chimarrão*, which is a tea, steeped in a particular method, taken from the gaucho tradition; and a separist rhetoric which conjures up the regional/ethnic distinction of southern Brazil while at the same time calls for the maintenance of Italian citizenship; young people of German heritage are forming rock bands funded by businesses who have a common interest in the dissemination of neo-Nazi propaganda; urban Blacks have adopted the cultural language of North American rappers as an expression of national and ethnic affirmation.

[9] There is a consensus in the literature in this point. See, for example, Ortiz (1990); da Matta (1981); Oliven (1990); and Cunha (1986).

[10] This work is being carried out through the ongoing study "Multi-ethnicity and Intolerance: Inter-ethnic Relations int the South of Brazil." (1994).

states of Rio Grande do Sul, Santa Catarina and Paraná. Such areas have much to reveal about the particularities of historical and extant inter-ethnic relations and their corresponding modes of ethnic categorization, which in practice have created clearly demarcated borders between inhabitants of a given area, based on the operative ethnically-defined criteria. In my most recent work, I have been emphasizing the importance of the presence of Blacks in the broader articulation of emergent identities.[11] The issues of ethnic invisibility, rights and representation, and the processes of transnationalization are crucial to the discussion I am proposing.

Brazilian national identity and the model of ethnic relations

The concept of Brazilian national identity was inspired by certain theories of race current in nineteenth century Europe. In Brazil, the first version that was developed came about at the end of the eighteenth century in concert with the movements for Brazilian independence from Portugal. The concept reached fruition during the period known as the First Republic (1889-1930). Rooted in Social Darwinian theories, Brazilian nationalist ideology sought to merge the political vision of the nation with an evolutionary vision that incorporated the inequality of races.

This discourse on national identity found in the *mestiço* - the person of mixed racial background - a potential "synthesis" for the entire colonial history of Brazil. It viewed the *mestiço* as a reflection of social reality, occupying an intermediate point in the hierarchy of social classifications. One notices the emphasis on nationality rather than race, despite the clear fact that the latter served as the fundamental basis for the construction of the former. In this theory, the *mestiço* was seen as the product of social backwardness and at the same time as the unit of evolution through which the ideal of "whiteness" would be achieved.[12] Drawing from a vast literature on the subject, various arguments were elaborated which correlated the factors of climate, race, and behaviour into a defence of miscegenation, as the inevitable path toward the creation of the ideal national type. The Brazilian, thus, was seen as the product of miscegenation, the route to which would be achieved via progressive racial "whitening," leading the nation along the upward path to social, psychological and biological evolution.

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[11] The recent volume, I. B. Leite (ed.) *Blacks in Southern Brazil: Invisibility and Territoriality* (1996), offers a further treatment of this subject.

[12] Célia M. M. Azevedo, *Onda Negra, medo branco: o negro no imaginário das elites - século XIX,* Rio de Janeiro, Paz e Terra (1987).

THE CONSTRUCTION OF BRAZILIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY:
THE TEMPORAL/EVOLUTIONARY MODEL

colonial process	transitional element	ideal national type
Europeans Africans indigenous groups	*Mestiço* (and regional subcategories*)	"white" brazilian
Miscegenation >>>	miscegenation with new >> European immigrants	final product

' *caboclos, gauchos, cafuzos*

Theories of race and ethnicity were successively reformulated by Brazilian intellectual elites, initially (during the period of Portuguese domination) with an interest in creating a new locus of power which would be free from the direct control of the European/colonizer states. These elites increasingly emphasized the role of miscegenation as the inevitable step in the evolution of the races, acknowledging progressive "whitening" as the formative process in the creation of Brazilian society, identifying it as the base of the nation itself. Through this means, the elites were able to overcome the notions of "inferiority and "impurity" which had been attributed to them (as people of racially-mixed backgrounds, according to the European models). They created, therefore, a self-representation which was not a simple derivation of European models, but rather a concept which inverted those very notions of "impurity," making such mixture the distinguishing factor of Brazilian identity.

Nationalist ideologies based on miscegenation and racial "whitening" not only predominated in Brazil, as Thomas Skidmore (1976) first observed, but in all of Latin America, according to Richard Graham (1997).[13] We are speaking however of a model which, after acknowledging the existence of miscegenation, went on to treat it as just one step in the process of evolution. At the same time, policies were established which promoted the immigration of Europeans (as members of superior races) with the aim of transmitting to the Blacks and Indians of Brazil the supposed "inherent" qualities of "whiteness," which would advance the nation in the scheme of biological, cultural and social evolution. Known as the "ideology of progressive whitening," or *embranquecimento,* this theory prevailed in Brazil well into the 1920's and '30's, exerting great influence over social practices and furnishing concepts which would guide the public policy decisions of Latin American nation states.

Social policies guided by this ideology, came in this way to operate through a concept of nationality which avoided the criteria of race and ethnicity and which held that to focus attention on such criteria would only foster social division. Not surprisingly, therefore, it was commonly denied that racial categories played any role in the social exclusion of certain groups. Since ethnic and cultural differences were always interpreted in the guise of nationality, this in fact came to facilitate certain practices of exclusion, concealed by this means under the mantle of Brazilian "racial democracy."

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[13] Thomas E. Skidmore, *Preto no Branco: raça e nacionalidade no pensamento brasileiro* (1976); Richard Graham, *The idea of race in Latin America, 1870-1940* (1990).

It is interesting to note that even today race and ethnicity are taboo subjects in Brazil when it comes to openly identifying oneself as a person of African descent. If on one hand, Africa has never ceased to be mystically venerated in Brazil, on the other hand one must note how it also has been transformed into national symbols, whitened through ideology, which has led to a certain overriding tendency to deny the existence of Blacks in Brazilian society as a distinct or distinguishable social group. This has made the political organization and mobilization of Black groups all the more difficult. The process can be summarized as follows:

1) Through negation: the treatment of racially categorized such as *morenos, escuros, mulatos, pardos*, (that is, various classifications based on a gradient of skin color from light to dark) as mere remnants of the past on their way to extinction. Such mixed groups are still thought to reflect a certain "backwardness," while demonstrating at the same time a certain level of progress through the "diluting" effect of miscegenation with Whites.

2) Through incorporation into popular culture: cultural practices of African or slave-origin are elevated to the level of national symbols, such as we see in *feijoada* (black bean stew - the national dish), *capoeira* and *samba* which have taken on the status of national symbols and have come to be associated with "modernity."

The research that I have been conducting in the south of Brazil has documented the outcome of certain aspects of this ideology: specifically, certain practices of segregation which have been ignored in part because they contradict the self-image that Brazil cultivates. The south, where my work is focussed, is an important example, mainly because it was the region where the policy of "progressive whitening" was carried out. Settled mostly between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by various European immigrant groups, it developed into an area with clearly demarcated ethnic boundaries. The current resurgence of ethnically-based discourses shows the after-effects of this immigration policy and reflects a current strategy adopted by many groups facing the new globalizing economic order, as a way to redefine the political debate and to assert the importance of national origin as a political category. Discourses based on ethnic and racial differences are resurfacing, mainly as a way to lay claim to new socio-political rights, such as the case of people of Italian heritage who are leading a movement for the creation of a new state in Brazil, called *Iguaçu*. Blacks and indigenous people, who were passed over in the first phase of settlement of the region, remain today in the position of socially marginalised minority groups.

Black territories
I approached the issue by studying the invisibility of Blacks in the cultural imagination of the south and the connection of this cultural ideal to segregation - a different kind of segregation from what one finds in cases where segregation is enforced by legal codes, as in South Africa or the United States.

Initially, data was collected from thirty two different sites where Blacks were living in the three southern states of Rio Grande do Sul, Paraná and Santa Catarina. Today, the number of identified sites has grown to over 100. There is considerable poverty in these areas and they function as veritable pockets of cheap manual labour for neighbouring residents of European background. There is however, a resolve within these groups to maintain themselves through internal cohesion and family ties, and through networks

of solidarity with other groups living under similar social conditions.

Through our work at the Research Centre (Nuer), we began, gradually, to see commonalties among such groups, leading me to approach them as *territórios negros* - distinct areas of Black habitation. The common pattern which has led distinct territories to arise points to a logic operating in both directions: on the one hand, to the condition of invisibility vis-à-vis the official legal and administrative systems of Brazil, which has allowed for the perpetuation of the myth of racial democracy; on the other hand, a condition of visibility - (insofar as internal and external security and control were enforced) based on stereotypes and prejudice. That is to say that ethnic boundaries are constantly being created and reinforced through criteria of inclusion and exclusion. Using this model to approach present-day inter-ethnic relations in the south of Brazil, we were able to uncover levels of segregation which rarely have been discussed in the contemporary academic literature.

Many questions emerged from this approach. For example: is the ideology of "whitening," with its emphasis on miscegenation as a form of integration, capable of producing a spatially-demarcated boundary? If so, what sort of boundary or barrier is this and how does it perpetuate itself in regional and in national/racial ideologies taken as a whole? This debate must also address how to understand the ways in which ethnic categories are constructed, and how they function on the local, regional and national levels. On the other hand, it is necessary to keep in mind the expansiveness and breadth of Brazil, taking into account distinct historical processes which were specific to certain regions. This calls for extreme care when attempting broad generalizations, so as to avoid the creation of further stereotypes.

Our work takes its methodological grounding from the ethnographic studies conducted in these areas, which have described the characteristics of these sites and their relationships with local, regional and national social structures. I worked at a site which was called until a few years ago, "The African Mountain." This site is located in an industrialized area in northern Santa Catarina and several graduate students from the Anthropology Department of the University of Santa Catarina conducted their fieldwork here and at nearby locations. As a result of this project, the Centre for the Study of Identity and Interethnic Relations (Nuer) was created to develop projects which would track these communities, their formation, their continued existence, and their dissolution. Furthermore, understanding the boundaries of these areas as contextual, dynamic, and in constant transformation led us to research other ethnic groups such as Azorians (from an Atlantic Island off the coast of Portugal), Italians, Germans and the regional subgroups such as *gauchos*, *caboclos* (backwoods people of mixed racial origin - the term still carries a certain pejorative connotation) and *cafuzos* (persons of mixed indigenous and African background). This broader investigation helped us to better understand the roots of ethnic conflict.

One of the basic conflicts in Brazil today centres around the so-called "Black land holdings" (*terras de negros*) which encompass: 1) lands belonging to descendants of runaway slave communities (*quilombos*); 2) lands acquired through inheritance (that is, properties that were willed to ex-slaves by their former masters); 3) lands acquired through long-standing occupation or "squatters' rights" (posse).

It is important to understand the issue involving Blacks and to distinguish it from that of

other "landless" people (*pessoas sem terras*) in Brazil. It is an issue which has only begun to be debated in Brazil and which has created uneasiness in several sectors of Brazilian society for two basic reasons: 1) It would imply a rethinking of Brazil's self-understanding and its concept of national identity, if these previously ignored ethnic and racial differences were to be acknowledged as factors to be incorporated as inherent elements of the national identity; 2) It also implies broadening the concept of citizenship, through the recognition of a new category of citizen who has a right to consideration and protection under the law. This concept of citizenship, however, strengthens at the same time the political force of ethnic and cultural distinctions and barriers.

The issue of land as a site of appropriation and expropriation, inclusion and exclusion, has become the central axis through which I am analysing the model of inter-ethnic relations in southern Brazil, looking at the ideology of "whitening," so as to determine the extent to which it has been the guiding force behind a specific regional process.

By calling attention to the significance of the patterns of spatial segregation and their basis in the current ethnic profile in southern Brazil, and by mapping out the ethnic boundaries in question, I have begun to unmask the mechanisms of social exclusion and, at the same time, to challenge the previous representations of Brazil as a tolerant, democratic, and racially-mixed country, free from racial segregation.

Therefore, there are two important factors to keep in mind: 1) The Brazilian national identity and the ideology of "whitening" are based simultaneously in theories and practices of integration and segregation. 2) The situation of "Black territories" demonstrates the principal mechanisms of inclusion/exclusion, the creation and reproduction of segregation.

At present, one of the most significant social issues in Brazil is the question of land tenure (as seen, for example, in the Landless movement (*movimento dos sem terras*), in political demonstrations, in occupations and usurpations of land, in politically-motivated imprisonments and even assassinations). In this process, and with the extremely high valorization of land by interests with sizable capital and political clout, it is very difficult indeed for Black groups, the majority of whom have no schooling or knowledge of the Brazilian legal system, to successfully defend the valid title to their properties or to maintain their rights to areas acquired through inheritance or long-term use.

On the other hand, in order to initiate the legal process which constitutionally guarantees them title to such lands, they must first differentiate themselves ethnically, separating themselves from the Landless Movement. It becomes in fact a juridical and political struggle in which, through the assertion of their slave heritage, through the assumption of an identity as "Blacks" per se, they have been able to pressure the state into recognizing their rights. At present there are five areas in which land title has been officially conceded by this means.

The process of adjudication therefore comes to revolve around a political debate in which Brazilian society and the Brazilian state must acknowledge ethnic differences (as has already occurred in the case of indigenous groups) and incorporate new subjects into a meaningful form of citizenship under the law.

One of the cases in which this model becomes most apparent is the courts and penal systems, which I am looking at right now. The Brazilian legal system is one of the spheres in which the ideology of whitening is perpetuated, as seen in the rulings of the judiciary which show an ambiguous and inconsistent approach to the question. Despite its supposed roots in a tradition of that is sworn to uphold the universality and neutrality of the law, one sees ample evidence of discrimination. I will cite two examples: 1) Despite the fact that a law prohibiting racial discrimination has existed in Brazil since the 1950's, one finds that the law in general is not enforced since lawsuits are viewed in terms of interpersonal offenses. That is to say that the structure (or the prosecutorial impetus) is not in place for the consideration of such cases in terms discrimination against a class of persons, (i.e., as racially-motivated offenses). One can contrast, for example, the statutes that have been enacted in recent years in several US cities which provide more severe punishment for "hate crimes," (i.e., for offenses committed against a person on the grounds that they are perceived to belong to a socially undesirable group - e.g. - as Blacks, Latinos, Asians, gays, or women, *per se* - allowing for a distinction in the law between these and other offenses perpetrated against a person as a non-specified individual). 2) In the era following the abolition of slavery in Brazil (post-1888), many former slave holders, in the absence of other heirs or as a gesture of compensation, left land to their former slaves in their wills. The legitimacy of such inheritances were very often ignored by the Brazilian state itself which proceeded to reassign such properties to European immigrants. At present there continue to be cases of murder and instances in which the official documents pertaining to land disputes somehow disappear where Black land rights are involved. On the part of the government, there has been no attempt at investigation or prosecution, and the offenders remain at large.

This problem has provoked a number of different reactions from various sectors of Brazilian society. More conservative groups maintain that a policy of compensation which guarantees certain rights to Black groups is racist and separatist. On the other hand, there are serious difficulties in defining exactly to whom these rights pertain in a country which sees itself as a multi-ethnic and interracial society.

In giving you this brief introduction, I want to conclude with some thoughts about the relationship between the land tenure problem and the issue of national identity. Finding a way to both affirm ethnic differences, while overcoming the social barriers associated with them, poses a challenge which must be overcome using the creativity and organizational skills of Black institutions and social movements in Brazil to rethink the question and to get beyond the simple reproduction of other extant models of political identity. This will involve understanding the racism of Brazilian society and finding non-segregationist models and practices through which it may be overcome.

I would like to conclude with a reference to Clóvis Moura, a Brazilian intellectual and activist, from a recent debate on racial relations in Brazil. He comes to the conclusion that Brazilian racism is so polemical that it ends up undermining (that is to say revealing) itself in the endless arguments that are put forward in an effort to efface it. For him the myth of the tolerant, democratic, religious and accommodating Brazilian, the affable gentleman (*homem cordial*), is only "a means of alleviating guilty consciences and of indefinitely shelving the question"(*"uma forma de aliviar*

consciências culpadas e adiar o assunto").[14]

Finally, it remains necessary to emphasize that today, at the end of the twentieth century, with the internationalization of capital and the accompanying process of globalization, that the concepts of race, ethnicity, and nationality persist as fundamental and theoretical bases in most debates involving culture, society and politics.

* * * English translation and the revision: Kelly Gallagher and Gabrielle B. Correa da Silva.

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[14] Clóvis Moura, "Racismo brasileiro: o discurso e a realidade", in Raízes da Liberdade. Revista do Congresso Nacional Afro-brasileiro, no. 1 (São Paulo, 1996).