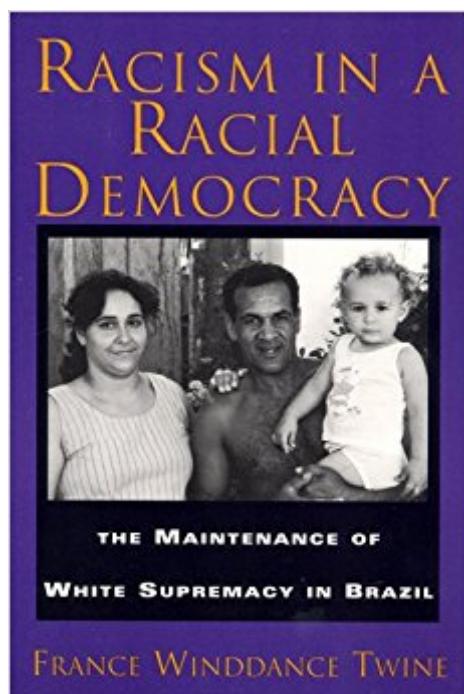


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# Racism In A Racial Democracy: The Maintenance Of White Supremacy In Brazil



## Synopsis

In *Racism in a Racial Democracy*, France Winddance Twine asks why Brazilians, particularly Afro-Brazilians, continue to have faith in Brazil's "racial democracy" in the face of pervasive racism in all spheres of Brazilian life. Through a detailed ethnography, Twine provides a cultural analysis of the everyday discursive and material practices that sustain and naturalize white supremacy. This is the first ethnographic study of racism in southeastern Brazil to place the practices of upwardly mobile Afro-Brazilians at the center of analysis. Based on extensive field research and more than fifty life histories with Afro- and Euro-Brazilians, this book analyzes how Brazilians conceptualize and respond to racial disparities. Twine illuminates the obstacles Brazilian activists face when attempting to generate grassroots support for an antiracist movement among the majority of working class Brazilians. Anyone interested in racism and antiracism in Latin America will find this book compelling.

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"A revealing and sharply observed dissection of how racism works 'on the ground' in Brazil." -- George Reid Andrews, author of *Blacks and Whites in Sao Paulo, Brazil, 1888-1988*"This wonderfully engaging study explodes the myth of racial democracy in a pathbreaking analysis of Brazilian style." -- Karen Brodkin, author of *How Jews Became White Folks*"Twine offers one of the most sophisticated analyses to date of the intransigence of Brazilian racism. Her nuanced account of the complex interplay of gender, race, and class is particularly exciting. This book will have a

powerful impact not only on the field of Brazilian racial studies, but on the whole burgeoning literature on the African Diaspora." -- Howard Winant, author of *Racial Conditions: Politics, Theory, Comparisons*

In *Racism in Racial Democracy*, France Winddance Twine asks why Brazilians, particularly Afro-Brazilians, continue to have faith in Brazil's "racial democracy" in the face of pervasive racism in all spheres of Brazilian life. Through a detailed ethnography, Twine provides a cultural analysis of the everyday discursive and material practices that sustain and naturalize white supremacy. This is the first ethnographic study of racism in southeastern Brazil to place the practices of upwardly mobile Afro-Brazilians at the center of analysis. Based on extensive field research and more than fifty life histories with Afro- and Euro-Brazilians, this book analyzes how they conceptualize and respond to racial disparities. Twine illustrates the obstacles Brazilian activists face when attempting to generate grassroots support for an antiracist movement among the majority of working-class Brazilians. Anyone interested in racism and antiracism in Latin America will find this book compelling.

With an established reputation as the most racially mixed country in the world, any number of books have touted Brazil's "Racial Democracy" as being the very paragon of the modern multicultural nation state (I have reviewed a couple of those books here on .com myself). Unlike the U.S., the Caribbean and much of the rest of South America, Brazil, alone has survived with its reputation as a non-racist nation remaining virtually untarnished. The fact that it has been able to do so, given that it is indeed a white supremacist run nation that has a predominately Mulatto population, seems on its face, convincing evidence of Brazil's unique ability to deal successfully with the complex racial realities of its slave-based past and its mixed-race present. Thus, given its racial makeup, its avowedly white supremacist power arrangements, and its unsullied reputation, one can understand why this author sought as her thesis to answer the question: How did Brazil succeed in dodging the bullet of racial strife while others like the U.S., the Caribbean, and much of the rest of South America and South Africa, did not? The answer, according to this carefully researched PhD thesis (turned into a full-length book), is that Brazil's "Racial Democracy" is little more than a carefully groomed national myth, a neatly woven together mental charade that hides a great deal more than it reveals about Brazilian society. That is to say, it hides from view many painful and unflattering deeper truths about how Brazil became a "stealth white supremacist nation" at the same time that it also became a predominantly Mulatto nation. And about how it has willfully "un-remembered" these facts and

then covered them up and erased them from the record books rather than face up to the consequences of a past that was ultimately responsible for the racial realities of contemporary Brazil. The real value of this book is that this author gives us the other side, the untold story of the Brazilian narrative of race. It is an unalloyed and brilliantly told story provided to the reader in reams of cross-Confirming and eminently believable details, mostly as recorded interviews. What we learn is that just beneath its "stage-managed" public persona, instead of being a racial paradise, Brazil is a seething racial cauldron: a virtual hothouse of deep-seated, race-sensitive psychologically driven horrors. And just like the racial horrors that lay on the substrate of U.S. racial troubles, Brazil's troubles too have their origins firmly rooted in slavery. In the subtext of the book, coiled unasked is the mother of all questions: How did Brazil become such a mixed-race culture? It of course is no secret as to us Americans how a nation engaged in slavery over several centuries becomes a mixed-race nation. It is accomplished in only one way: by having its white men engage in the kind of race-mixing at night that they pretend to so abhor during the day. So, according to this book, Brazil in fact did not dodge the bullet of racial strife at all. It simply buried it inwardly through a number of bizarre practices and psychological stratagems to cover them up, stratagems that would embarrass even a 1932 vintage racist USA: To wit, even today every level of class stratification in Brazil engages in some form of "whitening," mostly by "passing," or changing official records about family pedigree, or openly lying about it, and about the past ownership of slaves, or any evidence in the family tree of having a slave past. Parents, even of black children, are not required to bring their children with them when registering their birth certificates. As a result, even most blacks are registered officially as white. This artificial "inflation in whiteness" would be comical if it were not such an urgent and revealing aspect of how twisted Brazilian society really is. Also, like the role the prison system serves for the US, slavery in Brazil also is continued by other more modern means. However, in Brazil, it is not the prison system that accomplishes this task of updating slavery, but the adoption and exploitation of young black girls. Once adopted into wealthy white families, these girls work unpaid throughout their lives, ostensibly as extended members of the family when in fact they are more like indentured family pets. Most are not allowed to attend school or to get married and are never paid. Yet, many are referred to as Tia, sexually abused and exploited, often mysteriously ending up with un-fathered "white babies." Likewise, Blacks with only rare exceptions are blocked from taking examinations that would allow them to enter Brazilian Universities. They are excluded from professional jobs and from Brazilian social clubs, not to mention that they are not allowed to share in the nation's political power and economic wealth. At the same time Brazilians engage in the same kind of stereotyping of blacks that the U.S. made famous during its days of

legal Apartheid more than a half a century ago. And curiously even blacks believe the rough, mean-spirited and demeaning imagery about them perpetuated by the "white run" Brazilian media. And these are just for starters. The only positive side to Brazilian racism is the fact that only in rare instances, do Brazilians engage in violence and brutality against non-whites to defend their white supremacist prerogatives. There is also the isolated fact that poor whites do not engage in solidarity with upper class whites, preferring to cast their lot with non-whites. Against this societal backdrop of bizarre rules and practices, comes the familiar color-coded palette of racial meaningfulness with its spectrum running from white skin, straight hair and thin noses, to black skin, kinky hair and broad noses; one spells a direct route to wealth, power, and sexual beauty; while the other spells a life of grinding poverty and a slow-motion walk to an inevitable social death. How does Brazil keep the lid on this seething bizarre melting pot? As part of its national duty, any controversial aspects of Brazil's racial past (and present) is heavily censored and then quietly brushed under the national rug where it can be sanitized, cleansed and bleached into congruence with the national myth of "Racial Democracy." Like the U.S. Brazil has many anti-racist laws on its books, but as far as we know, no one has yet to be prosecuted for practicing racism in Brazil? Put simply, this author shows brilliantly how Brazil carries its own unique burden of guilt-free collective denial about the past on the only issue that makes Brazil unique among nations, the issue of race. Thus according to this author, the idea that Brazil is a harmonious multi-racial South American paradise is little more than a carefully nurtured Brazilian fairy tale. The truth about race relations in Brazil as told here is quite another story; and is a great deal less flattering than what must be recognized (even if somewhat after the fact) as, at best little more than collective Brazilian denial; or at worse, willful state sanctioned Brazilian propaganda. In point of fact, racism in Brazil is a deep structure psychological game, a consensual affair, a dance played out simultaneously at all class levels and within all gradations of colors as "The" national drama. It is a dance in which all of the rules are obeyed implicitly at all levels. Brazilians all learn their steps "by heart" through social osmosis and through whispers within the families and through unwritten and often unspeakable knowledge about the past. But despite the whispers, the feints, the bullying, the little white lies and the big black ones, everyone knows what is the truth: to be white, blond and blue eyed is to inherit the earth; to be born black is to inherit a terminal disease that leads to a slow walk to an early social death. The unwritten rules are enforced rigidly and with absolute social certainty. Exceptions are rare even in Vasalia, where at the writing of this book there was only one mulatto teacher in the public schools, only one black employee in the Vasalia bank; no blacks living on the prestigious "front streets" of Vasalia, etc. Two rules are inviolable in Brazilian society. The first is the Holy Grail of all racist societies. It is that the

ideology of "whiteness rules all." Whiteness, white values, white religion, white morality, white humanity all are to be accepted without question and without critique as the accepted basis of all universal norms. Whiteness alone occupies the pinnacle at the top of the color-coded societal hierarchy in Brazil. To be white is to be powerful, beautiful, have money and be sexually attractive. To be black of course is to be just the opposite. However, if you are black, or, a poor white, your station in Brazilian society is also set by whether or not you represent a threat to the white supremacist power structure. The most feared threat to this structure, the bugaboo of all white supremacist societies, and the one upper class Brazilian whites are on constant patrol against, is "black man on white women sex." This is one of the few areas where Brazilian white supremacy is exactly the same as it is in other white supremacist nations. Thoughts and ideas about race that threaten the established white supremacist social order are not to be tolerated. They are carefully, civilly, and informally put down, and censored via a host of psychological stratagems that all amount to applying pressure at the sight of the threat. After which, the threats are never allowed to gain any traction in Brazilian society. A perfect case in point are the anti-racist African militants who have tried to raise both the glaring issue of racism in Brazil and also raise Afro-Brazilian race consciousness. Unaccountably, they have failed in both instances. There is a deep-seated cross-class, cross-race consensus on maintaining the official denial that Brazil is not a racist country. And rather incredibly, this consensus continues to exist despite the realities on the ground of rampant racism in every corner of Brazilian society. It seems that willful blindness to institutional racism, to a long and uninterrupted history of racist practices, are integral parts of the Brazilian national identity, willful blindness and false consciousness. The myth of a non-racist Brazil has become vital to the nation's own view of itself and arguably to its internal stability -- if not indeed to its national mental health. However, it is easy enough to see that drowning and burying unpleasantries of the past via an enforced consensus of national denial is a short-term and a very much shortsighted strategy for racial healing, racial progress or even for preventing racial strife. At best, it has its own psychological costs; and at worse it exacts its own toll on the nation's mental equilibrium. Racial conflict in Brazil thus is not dodged so much as it is side-stepped through collective repression, and done so at a very high cost to the nation's mental well-being; and arguably it does so at the much heavier price of making a mockery of its most cherished national value: the desire to become a true racial democracy. Thus, this author tells us that the bullet of racial strife in Brazil is not so much dodged as it is deflected and repressed. As a result, strife and racial angst are pretty much restricted to the realm of psychology. Put another way, racial strife in Brazil "lives on" not in the violent streets of Rio, but in the heads and in the turmoil and tension and uncertainty it reeks in

Brazil's many mixed-race families, in the mind-boggling complexities of its cascading shades of color-coded meanings, in the jealously guarded insular all "white run" clubs and institutions; and in the way all factions (including those who suffer from it most) continue to rally around Brazil's national banner: the nation's so-called "Racial Democracy." What we discover here is that by being a "Racial Democracy" in name only, Brazil is no different than other white supremacist nations of the world. According to this book, Brazil's version of "racial Democracy" is little more than a hypocritically enforced consensus built around Brazil's white power elite. This consensus amounts to enforcing a "false consciousness" about how the post-slavery meaning of race in Brazil is to be framed. In Brazil's version of "Racial Democracy," all power flows in one direction only: upward to the small insular, incestuously interlinked class of whites making up the nation's ruling class. And in this predominately Mulatto nation, the white ruling class, which is more like a tight knit racist clique, is as genetically pure and as closed-off as was Hitler's Nazi party in 1944. Even today, in 2010, it remains a completely sealed-off part of Brazilian society: One that flaunts its power and guards its own lavish prerogatives jealously but not (as has been done in other racist nations) through the exercise of overt racial violence and brutality against non-whites."Stealth white supremacy" is the unwritten law of the land in Brazil. It alone rules the day in Brazil; and just beneath the nation's polished veneer of being a multi-cultural paradise, it remains the nation's main "calling card." Stealth white supremacy also is the nation's deepest and darkest secret. And as a consequence, has become Brazil's number one collective psychological dilemma.Pretending that there is no racism, when there is little else, is no mean trick for a nation to play on itself. Denial, pretense and hypocrisy have become Brazil's favorite delusional past times. It is this vigorous exercise in national self-deception, pretense and hypocrisy that this book uncovers with great skill and quite a bit of methodological deftness. It is also collective self-deception, pretense and hypocrisy that helps to seamlessly enforce, through white bullying (i.e., strategically playing the white power card) and the curious non-white faith, trust and confidence in Brazil's "Racial Democracy," that rules out the possibility of any serious "social reality testing" at the political level. Were such reality testing allowed, it would reveal what the rest of the world already knows about Brazil: that not only is it a profoundly racist nation, but that it is also a deeply flawed and cynical nation to boot, one that does not trust its own better instincts. The deep level of racial hypocrisy, given Brazil's background, is more than just a bit disturbing even to an outsider living in what we thought was one of the most racist countries in the world, the USA. With Brazil's bizarre racist behavior as a backdrop, the U.S. is beginning to look better and better.The author's numerous interviews of a random sample of citizens of Vasalia, has no shortage of subjects from both ends of the class and color spectrums who

willingly testify that Brazil is not a racist country. The mountain of indisputable evidence to the contrary is simply explained away with the same kinds of stereotypical rationalization that even the U.S. gave up on more than seventy years ago. But when the facts are all lined up. Brazil's consensus discursive flights of fancy, all designed to protect and defend the nation's reputation -- reality be damned -- do not accord with any of the known facts on the ground. Based on ethnographic data collected as a live-in researcher with a family in Vasalia Brazil, the author spent eighteen months interviewing and living among her subjects. Her research, which includes a cross-section of candid interviews, reveals that just beneath the mythical exterior lies a cynical, ultra race-sensitive, white supremacist society. One that, when all things are considered is more like 1932 vintage segregated USA, than a modern multiracial paradise. The beauty of this analysis is that the author dissects the context, subtext and pretext of her subject's messages. To do this cleanly and clearly, she invents a new vocabulary of meaning that greatly assists in mining the subterranean areas where most of the hidden messages and unspeakable nuggets of truth lie. Brazil has become a nation that does not like the truth of the implications of its racial past nor of the meanings attributed to race in the present. This is tough, excruciating but brilliant work! Ten stars.

Like a hot knife through butter, France W. Twine's book cuts through the myth of racial equality promoted by Brasilians the world over. Her scholarly analysis covers the whole society, from top to bottom. Having been hosted by a Brasilian family, Twine investigates and interviews a wide-ranging selection of White, Black and Brown Brasilians of every social level. Twine, a Black American, notes the glaring absence of Black and Brown people from the higher echelons of social, political and economic life in Brasil; she smoothly documents the relegation of virtually everyone of color to menial jobs and dependency on White employers for financial support. Twine writes of the ostracization often endured by interracial couples, along with the near-rabid attention given to everything European. Most notably, She describes the various tactics that Black Brasilians employ to rationalize the obvious--from claiming white heritage (no matter how black the skin) to simple avoidance to flat-out denial. Significantly, Black Brasilians tend to celebrate racial miscegenation, while White Brasilians strongly cling to the ideal of racial purity. Separate but equal indeed. The sad result is that these tactics do nothing but perpetuate white supremacy in a country that boasts one of the world's highest disparities in income distribution among its citizenry. Astonishingly, Black Brasilians are among the most insistent on denying the existence of racism, despite an abundance of evidence to the contrary. To her great credit, Twine does not condemn Brasilians for their cultural views or tactics--even when she is directly challenged and/or rebuked. She simply suggests that the

MYTH of racial egalitarianism in Brasil is powerfully effective: if you get people to believe that everyone is equal and throw in a pinch of variety (a smattering of poor Whites coexist with poor Blacks), then barriers to social mobility can easily be attributed to individual failings, rather than institutionalized racism. Finally, Twine makes clear that the status of Blacks and Browns in Brasil will never change until enough of them summon the courage to forcibly challenge the status quo--something unlikely to occur in a country that reveres everything White and denigrates African ancestry. Twine's gift for description, observation and analysis deserves no small credit for exposing one of most egregious examples of social justice denied.

You learn a lot of how people view themselves and others in Brazil. The book was new and it didn't have any marks or anything, just like it was promised.

Outstanding! Very well written and researched study of white racism and black acquiescence in contemporary Brazil. Outstanding!

The book contains the author's field observations about racism during her one year stay in a very small community. The book does describe many forms of racism in Brazil but the observations can not be generalized to our entire country. Brazil is a very large country and racism is expressed in different ways in different regions. But, definitely, racial democracy is a Brazilian myth.

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