

Racial Malleability and the Centrality of Whiteness
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Abstract

In this paper, I explore the flexibility and instability of race not just as it has changed over time and across places for various racial groups, but also as it is constructed interactionally, in moment-by-moment negotiations of racial difference. By this I mean to challenge both “folk” and academic understandings of the fixity of racial categories and racial identities, interrogating how individuals engage in various daily practices – including language – to constantly shift their own racial appearance and the racial appearance of others. I draw on multiple sources of data, including U.S. based examples as well as my own research on the daily practices of well-known Brazilian rappers and poor male rap fans living in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, to illustrate how these shifts can be productively analyzed as shifts towards and away from whiteness. Synthesizing scholarly studies of the colonial context and the transnational eugenics movement of the early 20th century, I propose that the concept of racial malleability is critical to 1) taking seriously the social construction of race and the centrality of whiteness 2) understanding how and why individuals continuously transform their bodies through aesthetics, consumption, and language, among other social practices and 3) making sense of enduring racial ideologies that continue to privilege whiteness and denigrate nonwhiteness.

Introduction

In this talk, I will argue that bodies are not merely *racialized* (or given racial meaning) but remain *racially malleable* (constantly shifting towards and away from whiteness) through daily practices that alter how bodies are racially perceived.

Excerpt 1: “*Eu sei dos meus direitos*” [I know my rights]

1	Mano: <i>O cara agarrado- eu falei, ‘Vou botar</i>	Mano: The guy was clutching- I said, ‘I’m going
2	<i>advogado. ‘Tô fazendo meu segundo</i>	to get a lawyer. I’m doing my second
3	<i>ano de advocacia da Universidade</i>	year of law school at Gama Filho
4	<i>Gama Filho e pá. Sei todos dos direitos,</i>	University and all. I know all of my rights,
5	<i>eu sei dos meus direito (?). Eu moro aqui</i>	I know my rights (?). I live here
6	<i>na comunidade e a menos de cinqüenta</i>	in the community and less than fifty
7	<i>metros da minha casa eu não sou</i>	meters from my house I am not
8	<i>obrigado a mostrar documento. [...]</i>	obligated to show my documents. [...]
9	<i>E aí o sargento, ‘Não, ‘tá</i>	And then the sergeant [said], ‘No, it’s

10	<i>certo.</i>		okay.'
11	Cachaça: <i>Caralho.</i>	Cachaça:	Shit.
12	CW: <i>Porra.</i>	CW:	Damn.
13	Mano: <i>Não, é que eu 'tô certo não.</i>	Mano:	No, it's not that he thinks that I'm right.
14	<i>Porque eles pensam, eles pensam que</i>		Because they think, they think that
15	<i>'todo mundo que mora aqui é favela. Aqui</i>		'everyone who lives here is ghetto. Here
16	<i>não tem um intelectual, não tem um</i>		there isn't an intellectual, there isn't an
17	<i>oficial, não tem um sargento</i>		official, there isn't a sergeant,
18	<i>Não tem nada. Aqui só tem o quê?</i>		There isn't anything. What is there here?
19	<i>A classe de burro.' E não é isso.</i>		The class of idiots.' And that's not right.
20	<i>Aqui tem pessoas bem educadas.</i>		There are very well educated people here.

Excerpt 2: “*Periferia é periferia*” [Periphery is periphery]

1	CW: <i>Deixa eu ver [o aparelho]. Deixa eu</i>	CW:	Let me listen [to the walkman]. Let me
2	<i>mariar. Deixa eu mariar. Não. Deixa</i>		check it out. Let me check it out. No. Let
3	<i>eu mariar. Só pra mim criticar.</i>		me check it out. Just so I can make fun.
4	Bad Dog: (?) <i>Não, tem nada pra tocar aí.</i>	Bad Dog: (?)	No, there's nothing good playing.
5	Smoke: <i>Cho ver, cho ver, cho ver.</i>	Smoke:	Lemme see, lemme see, lemme see.
6	CW: <i>Porra, tá com uma marra de</i>	CW:	Shit, you have the attitude of a
7	<i>playboy fudida heim.</i>		fucking <i>playboy</i> , huh.
8	[...]		[...]
9	Bad Dog: <i>Tá me confundindo com quê?</i>	Bad Dog:	You are confusing me with what?
10	Smoke: <i>Playboy.</i>	Smoke:	<i>Playboy.</i>
11	CW: <i>Daqui a pouco tu tá usando</i>	CW:	Soon you'll be wearing your hair
12	<i>topetinho aí.</i>		with a little forelock.
13	Smoke: <i>É.</i>	Smoke:	Yeah.
14	Bad Dog: <i>Sou é 'periferia é periferia.'</i>	Bad Dog:	What I am is ' periphery is periphery .'

15	<i>rapá.</i>	man.
16	[....]	[....]
17	<i>'Periferia é periferia, Racionais no</i>	'Periphery is periphery, Racionais on
18	<i>ar, filha da puta, plá plá plá.'</i>	the air, son of a bitch, uh uh uh.'

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See also:

Chris Rock - Message for White Voters (Jimmy Kimmel Live): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EDxOSjgl5Z4>