

# **Comparative Study of Racism in Brazil and the United States**

Ariana Bedoya, Josh Paz, Marina Castro & Gleison Corretor

## **Introduction**

Although Brazil and the USA were colonies of European countries based on the exploitation of indigenous and African peoples, the way the relationship between these groups was established was different from the beginning. While interracial marriage was initially prohibited in some U.S. states until 1967, in Brazil there were records of marriages between Europeans and native or African women from the start of colonization, especially with native women, as in some cases, marriages between Portuguese men and indigenous women were used as tools for political alliances between colonizers and local tribes. The history of Portugal and England offers us clues to understand the reasons for these differing views on miscegenation.

Portugal had a long history of contact with different ethnicities due to its location further south in Europe and its maritime expansion; moreover, the Moorish presence in the Iberian Peninsula for centuries also left marks on Portuguese culture. England also dealt with peoples of different cultures throughout its history, but within its territory, these groups were European.

The colonization process also unfolded in different ways. Portuguese colonization in Brazil was marked by a scarcity of Portuguese women, which led to greater interaction and miscegenation with indigenous and African women. English colonization, on the other hand, attracted a larger number of European families, which reduced the need for miscegenation. Additionally, Puritanism in the US, with its emphasis on the separation between the "elect" and the "non-elect", contributed to racial segregation. Despite these historical differences, both Brazil and the United States developed racial hierarchies that privileged whiteness.

## **Colorism & One-drop Rule**

One of the largest differences between Brazilian and U.S. racial classifications is the One-Drop Rule in the United States. The One Drop Rule was a legal and social

doctrine in the United States that classified anyone with even a single ancestor of African descent as Black. This system essentially ensured that mixed individuals were denied the privileges of being white during this era in history. Additionally, in the infamous case Plessy v Ferguson, Homer Ferguson, a man who was only 1/8 Black was still legally classified as Black under Louisiana law. The lawsuit came to be because Ferguson attempted to sit in a "whites-only" train car and he was arrested. But, at the Supreme Court level, they ruled against him, upholding the constitutionality of racial segregation, citing the now infamous phrase, "separate but equal". This was a landmark case as it legitimized slavery at a government level and strengthened the already existing racial hierarchy.

On the other hand, Brazil never implemented an official One-Drop Rule, but instead colorism was present which is discrimination based on skin tone. Unlike in the United States, where race was determined by ancestry, in Brazil, it was based more on physical appearance. So, lighted skinned Brazilians with African descent had more access to social and economic opportunities. For instance, an infamous example of systemic racism in Brazil happened in 1911, when the Brazilian Naval Academy expelled nearly all of its Black cadets. For decades, Afro-Brazilians had served in the navy, but as Brazil attempted to have a more white and European identity, they wanted their military personnel to reflect that through a policy called *Branqueamento*.

### ***Branqueamento***

*Branqueamento* (whitening) in Brazil was a historical and social policy rooted in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that aimed at transforming the country's racial composition. After the abolition of slavery in 1888, Brazilian elites sought to change the racial makeup of the nation by encouraging European immigration with the belief that over generations, the population would become progressively whiter. This ideology was influenced by pseudo-scientific racial theories of the time, which associated whiteness with progress and civilization, while condemning Black and Indigenous populations as barriers to national development.

The Brazilian government actively subsidized the arrival of millions of Europeans, from countries such as Italy, Germany, and Spain. These new immigrants were given social

and economic advantages over Afro-Brazilians and Indigenous peoples, who were systematically excluded from political, educational and economic opportunities. Additionally, Afro-Brazilians were often denied land ownership and access to education, further maintaining these racial disparities. *Branqueamento* was not only a demographic policy but also a cultural movement. Brazilian media and literature often portrayed whiteness as idealized, while Blackness was associated with poverty. This ideology even extended to beauty standards, employment opportunities, and even self-identification where many mixed-race Brazilians wanted to "pass" as white to gain access to white-privileges. This mindset continues to shape racial dynamics in Brazil today, where social mobility can be linked to lighter skin tones. Although explicit whitening policies are no longer in place, the legacy of *branqueamento* remains, influencing racial identity, socioeconomic inequality, and representation in Brazilian society.

## **Miscegenation**

Diving into a social section of Brazil history, something that was deeply intertwined was the concept of miscegenation, the mixing of different racial groups. This process, which began during the colonial era, has resulted in a diverse and complex population. While miscegenation has often been celebrated as a symbol of Brazil's racial harmony, it's essential to acknowledge the underlying power dynamics and inequalities that shaped this process.

One of the most iconic and controversial representations of miscegenation in Brazilian art is the painting "A Redenção de Cam" (The Redemption of Ham) by Modesto Brocos. Created in 1895, this artwork portrays three generations of a family, each with progressively lighter skin tones. The painting's symbolism is complex and has been interpreted in various ways. Some view it as a celebration of Brazil's whitening process, a belief prevalent during that era that European immigration would gradually lighten the country's population. Others criticize it for reinforcing racist ideologies and perpetuating the idea that whiteness is superior.

But looking at the nuances, it's crucial to understand the historical context in which "A Redenção de Cam" was created. During the late 19th century, Brazil was grappling with the legacy of slavery and seeking to define its national identity. The concept of *branqueamento*

(whitening) was gaining traction, fueled by racist theories that promoted European superiority.

### **Impact, legacy & Myth of Racial Democracy**

The legacy of racism in Brazil and the United States persists in different ways, shaped by their unique histories and social structures. In Brazil, the myth of racial democracy suggests that racial mixing has led to a harmonious society, but this belief obscures systemic racial inequalities. Afro-Brazilians continue to face economic and social disadvantages, with lighter-skinned individuals often occupying positions of power and privilege. The ideology of *branqueamento* has left a lasting imprint, reinforcing the notion that Blackness should be assimilated or erased. Meanwhile, in the U.S., the legacy of segregation and the one-drop rule has created a rigid racial binary, where racial identity is often defined by ancestry rather than appearance. Although explicit segregation laws have been abolished, structural racism persists in economic disparities, policing, and access to education. Both nations have fostered racial hierarchies that privilege whiteness, and despite differences in their racial ideologies, the impact of these structures continues to shape the lived experiences of Black populations in Brazil and the United States.

A powerful representation of Brazil's racial ideology can be seen in Modesto Brocos' 1895 painting "A Redenção de Cam" (The Redemption of Ham). This artwork visually captures the prevailing belief in the benefits of racial whitening. The painting depicts three generations of a family: a dark-skinned grandmother, a mixed-race mother, a light-skinned father, and a pale-skinned child. The grandmother looks upward, as if thanking God for the apparent success of *branqueamento*. This painting reinforces the racist idea that Blackness is something to be overcome rather than embraced, directly contradicting the supposed harmony of Brazil's racial democracy. Similarly, Jean-Baptiste Debret's *O Jantar (The Dinner)* (1839) offers an earlier glimpse into Brazil's racial hierarchy during slavery. The artwork, a lithograph created during Debret's 15-year stay in Brazil, depicts an enslaved Black servant attending to a white family at dinner. While the image appears to show a peaceful domestic scene, it actually highlights the deep racial and social divisions of the time. The master's comfort and authority starkly contrast with the enslaved person's subservience, reinforcing the idea that even in intimate settings, racial

hierarchies were rigidly enforced. In more contemporary art, Flávio Cerqueira's sculpture *Amnésia* provides a striking commentary on the ongoing erasure of Black identity in Brazil. Featured in the Histórias Afro-Atlânticas exhibit at MASP (2018) and later at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, *Amnésia* portrays a young Black child with white paint poured over their head, stopping before fully covering their body. This visual metaphor speaks to the incomplete process of whitening—while Black identity has been historically repressed, it cannot be entirely erased. The sculpture forces viewers to confront Brazil's history of racial oppression and its lasting impact on identity and self-perception.

## Conclusion

The comparative study of racism in Brazil and the United States reveals how historical, social, and political factors have shaped racial dynamics in each country. Despite the differences in their racial classification systems—Brazil's emphasis on colorism versus the U.S.'s rigid one-drop rule—both societies have upheld racial hierarchies that privilege whiteness. While Brazil has long promoted the myth of racial democracy, this ideology has masked deep-rooted systemic inequalities, excluding Afro-Brazilians from economic and political power. Similarly, in the U.S., the legacy of slavery and segregation continues to manifest in structural racism, disproportionately affecting Black communities in areas such as education, employment, and criminal justice. Art has played a crucial role in exposing these racial ideologies and their consequences. Paintings like *A Redenção de Cam* illustrate Brazil's historical obsession with *branqueamento*, while *O Jantar* captures the stark racial divisions of the colonial period. More recently, Flávio Cerqueira's *Amnésia* critiques the ongoing erasure of Black identity in Brazilian society. These works, along with historical and contemporary analyses, demonstrate that racial inequality is not merely a relic of the past but a persistent issue requiring continued reflection and action. Ultimately, the comparison between Brazil and the United States challenges the notion that racial mixing alone can dismantle racism. Instead, it highlights the importance of acknowledging and addressing the systemic structures that sustain racial disparities. Only through confronting these histories and their lasting impacts can both nations move toward a more just and equitable society.