



THE

BRAZIL

READER

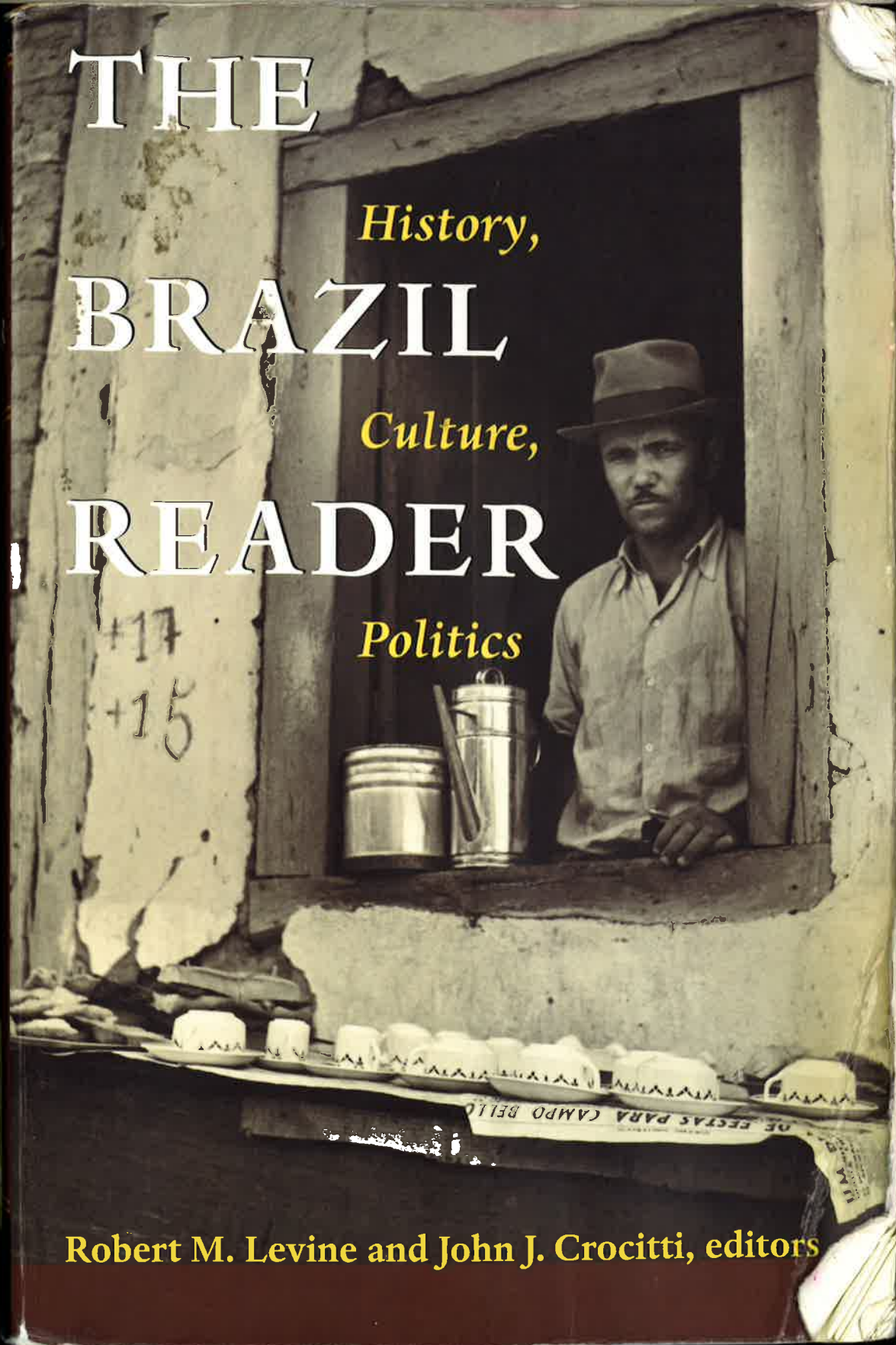
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Robert M. Levine and John J. Crocitti, editors



read, "Kaingang Indians. Dressed
er, Brazil and Her People of Today

Brazil:

Study in Black, Brown, and Beige

Leslie B. Rout Jr.

The late Leslie B. Rout Jr. centered his academic career by specializing in Latin American diplomatic history, but as an African American and a jazz musician who liked to travel and visit places other than libraries and archives, Rout published a few articles in the mid-1960s on his personal experiences in Brazil. His first person narrative sheds revealing light on the myths and attitudes about race in Brazilian society.

If you're like me, you've probably read Gilberto Freyre or Frank Tannenbaum, or watched a couple of CBS reports. . . . Perhaps you've talked to a Brazilian or two. If you've done any of these things, you know already that "no racial problems exist in Brazil." Maybe the Brazilian you talked to was more discreet. He would then have informed you that there is less racial discrimination in Brazil than any place else in the world.

As the story is usually told, unlike the Anglo-Saxons who set up shop at Jamestown or Plymouth Rock, the Portuguese gentlemen who migrated to the New World had significantly fewer qualms about "night-time integration." The result was that in addition to the obvious black slaves and white masters, there appeared an increasing myriad of colored persons who were part of both, but not really of either. Accordingly (and this is in keeping with the legend), the Brazilians adopted the converse of the formula adopted by the Anglo-Saxons. Where the English settled, any measure of Negro blood made you a Negro. In Brazil, any discernible quantity of white blood made you at least a *pardo* (mulatto). Ultimately, it was probably very much a question of what one could get those higher up in the pecking order to believe.

In today's United States of America, where racial troubles can no longer be swept under the carpet, the Brazilian legend exercises a peculiar influence. For Afro-Americans, such as this writer, Brazil beckons as a kind of tropical Shangri-la. As a friend once put it, "Man, after I make my pile here, then I'm splitting for coffeeland where I can enjoy it." Others wonder how a nation that maintained slavery until May 1888, where illiterates possibly outnumber literates, and where political democracy can hardly be said to have taken giant strides, could do what the "gringo Goliath" could not: satisfy the hopes and aspirations of its non-white citizens.

This story really begins the second time I saw Walt Disney's *Saludo Amigo*. There was José Carioca and lots of samba, and seemingly a country where the living was easy rather than hectic. Then there was *Black Orpheus*, lots of samba and a plenitude of Carnival. More important, Orpheus, although a lowly *bondes* (streetcar) driver, seemed to possess a peculiar kind of personal security. In the land of the Anglo-Saxon, without identification signs as big as life, Senator James Brooke of Massachusetts and/or Congressman William Dawson of Illinois are like George Washington Jones of Birmingham, Alabama: "Niggers" to be kept in their place. Afro-Americans in the land of Uncle Sam are acutely aware of their dependence on "Whitey," lock, stock, and credit card. Orpheus was black like me, and so poor he could hardly have afforded a free lunch. Yet, his view of himself as a functioning member of the Brazilian body politic gave him a kind of quiet support black Yankees cannot achieve, Cadillac or no Cadillac, education or no education. Orpheus felt he belonged; Afro-Americans do not believe they do.

In June 1961, the Paul Winter Sextet, of which I was a member, won the Intercollegiate Jazz Festival held at Georgetown University. As fortune would have it, somebody in Washington, D.C., noticed that the six members of the group were split even-up—three blacks and three whites. Could you have dreamed of a better combination to send on a government-sponsored tour of Latin American colleges and universities? A seven-month tour was dropped into our laps. Secretly, I resolved that if Brazil resembled the land of Orpheus, Carioca, Tannenbaum, and Freyre, it must eventually open its arms to a new immigrant—me.

Arriving in Porto Alegre (May 1962), the first thing I tended to notice was that *brancos* in Brazil found nothing strange about fraternizing with Negroes. One saw *pretos* and *pardos* frequently, but as my Portuguese

was limited to such terms as *macanudo* (and the usual unprintable terminology you always seem to learn first), it was nearly impossible to communicate with them. Exceedingly noticeable on the campuses of the universities and in the theaters was the absence of Negroes at sextet concerts. Whites I questioned assured me that although the concerts were free, most Afro-Brazilians were of the lower economic classes, and rarely attended affairs where middle- and upper-class *Senhores* predominated. Previous experiences in South America had convinced me that some kind of class system would be found everywhere. The explanations given were logical, but in my opinion, insufficient. Somehow or another, I had to meet a few *pretos* and get their side of the story.

Jazz musicians meet their counterparts wherever they seem to go in the world, and with the music as a medium, friendships are forged. Through Cepú, a black tenor saxophone player I met in a Rio nightclub, I finally met some *pretos* who spoke English. Speaking directly to the gentlemen (both of whom were musicians), I remarked that none of the black members of the sextet had encountered any incidences of discrimination in Brazil. One of the Brazilians smiled and said, "Things are not as they seem; they are more subtle here. . . ." This was to be inkling number one, you might say.

In this regard, probably the most interesting character I would meet was a young Negro from Omaha, Nebraska, named Bill Waters. Waters had decided to take one year off, go to Brazil, and see whether he wanted to move there permanently. When I met him, his stay in Rio had exceeded ten months. He stated that while he liked Brazil, it had not been the racial nirvana he'd hoped to find. Indeed, he was amazed at the ease with which the black members of the sextet moved among Rio's social elite. He later confided in me that he felt certain that the prestige of the Department of State opened doors otherwise hermetically sealed. At the time, I was enjoying myself to such a degree that Waters's reservations seemed sour grapes. The whole issue reemerged about three months later when Bill stopped in Chicago on his way to Omaha. Having just returned to the United States, I threw a small party and invited Waters. Afterwards he remarked, "You know, Les, I saw more integration here tonight than I saw in twelve months in Brazil." What he really meant was miscegenation, and secretly I had to admit that while everywhere in Brazil one sees *pardos*, I had seen precious little intermingling on a social level. Admittedly, it was the *pretos* you saw pushing the brooms, but the

witness of my own adventures as a musical diplomat in Sambaland were a kind of insulation against the other reality. Bill was a great guy, but . . .

Two and one half years would pass before I could again travel to Brazil. This time, there would be no fanfare or ballyhoo. Under the guise of traveling graduate student doing dissertational research, one Les Rout would continue to investigate whether or not Brazil was where I wanted to belong. Fortunately, my Portuguese had come along and I had maintained contact with about half a dozen Brazilians I'd met the first time around. The years 1962-1965 had convinced me that racial discrimination in the land of the free and home of the brave would end in 2965 at the earliest. Hopefully, the Brazilians had more satisfactory answers. Boarding the jet, I could already hear João Gilberto singing "*Samba da Minha Terra . . .*"

There is the oft-told tale about the astronauts who landed on Mars and were approached by one of its thirty-eyed, forty-legged, three-foot-high inhabitants. Despite their obvious disparity, the astronauts and the Martians got along fine. However, the latter cautioned the space travelers about one thing: "We don't want you messin' around with our females, you dig?"

There were times in Brazil when it occurred to me that I must have resembled an astronaut. For example, there was the time in late July 1965, when I attended a theater in Porto Alegre, in company with a fair young Brazilian girl of German parentage, whom I shall call Karen. There were, I believe, two shows that night. There was one on stage, and there was Karen and I. Probably everywhere except maybe New York and Paris, when black boys appear in polite society with attractive blondes, eyebrows go up a few inches and there is some gnashing of teeth. In Alabama, both of us would have been lynched. In Porto Alegre, they pointed their fingers, wagged their tongues, and murdered us with their eyes. Never was I so happy to have the houselights dim and the play begin! At intermission, it started all over again, however. The man sitting directly in front of me turned around so many times that I can still see in my mind where the moles were on his face. As for Karen, within five minutes she had been frightened out of her wits. After we joined a large group in a nightclub, she still could not relax. She agreed to dance with me only reluctantly, and then only after she had taken time to gauge the impact this event would have on the other customers. Violence? Naked force? There is nothing quite like social pressure to bully reluctant parties into line.

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Later that night, while reflecting on what had been a most unpleasant experience, I imagined myself calling Karen on the phone and hearing the maid answer—"She is not here. She just went out to visit all her remaining friends in Porto Alegre. She should be back in five minutes."

One might argue that despite its population of 800,000, Porto Alegre is hardly a center of cosmopolitanism. This is correct, but matters did not seem to be remarkably different in that haven of the hip, Rio de Janeiro. Still sharply in focus is the November evening on which I performed as special guest artist at the Boate K-Samba, for the Club de Jazz e Bossa Nova do Rio. Friends introduced me to a sparkling *branca* who taught Latin in a local private school. As is often the case when boy meets girl, boy asks girl if he might see her on another occasion. The young lady enthusiastically agreed to have dinner with me the following evening. Just before leaving the club with friends, this Afro-American again confirmed the date of the engagement with the Brazilian *branca*. Here is an approximation of the conversation that followed the next day:

He: "When may I come for you?"

She: "I am sorry, it is impossible."

He: "Well, how about lunch tomorrow?"

She: "That also is impossible."

He: "What about dinner tomorrow evening?"

She: "That is out of the question. I am sorry."

He: "Well, is it possible for me to visit you at all?"

She: "Unfortunately, there are problems . . . that also is impossible."

Checking with friends later, I discovered that the young lady was not married, had not come to the club with another man. I had not forced her to accept my invitation or attempted to embarrass her. Assuming that I did not appear to be the previously described astronaut, did not have leprosy or trench mouth, the readers must pardon me if I chalked this experience up as another pigmentation misadventure.

Reflections

Although these events took place about four years ago [in 1964], it was literally impossible for me to write about them until now. Quite foolishly, I had assumed that there was a land of Oz, that there really was a "somewhere over the rainbow." My journey to Brazil had put me eyeball to eyeball with grim reality. Black boy, you can run, but you cannot hide!

Some may conclude from what I have written that neither *pretos* or [sic] most *pardos* can aspire to greatness in Brazil. This is hardly the case. Among the more celebrated *pretos* and/or *pardos* (and here, I include everyone whom I would conceive as being considered a Negro if they were in this country) are Pelé (Edson Arantes), the soccer star; such personal friends as Jair Rodrigues and Lenni Andrade, vocalists; Raul de Santos ("Raulzinho"), musician; and Antenor Carlos Vaz, artist. It is not my intention to denounce all whites as being deluded or racist. People are people all over the world. Gradually, the hate and disillusionment subsided. Eventually, it became possible to make some kind of reasonably objective comparisons:

First. In the United States of America, the installation of the Jim Crow system forced mulattoes and blacks together. Mulattoes did not prefer things that way, but they were unable to force any significant change in the situation. Thus, while "light" Negroes and darker ones remained at odds for many years, the inability of parlaying lightness into privilege brought about a black unity that would not have been possible in 1900. If you question this supposition, take a good look at [the light-skinned Harlem Congressman] Adam Clayton Powell. Considering that God supposedly draws good from every evil act, one might say that "Whitey" did us a favor.

In Brazil, the official ideology is "Brazilianization," or more accurately, amalgamation of the races. The general impetus, however, is toward "whitening" the nation. The *pardos*, therefore, distinguish themselves from the *pretos*, for they see themselves as farther along the lightening process than their "brothers." A *preto* might consider himself as marrying "up," if he could forge an alliance with a *pardo*, but a lighter-skinned female would be considered as marrying "down." Indeed, animosity between *pardos* and *pretos* seemed very strong in Brazil. One might well ask if some kind of race war occurred in Brazil, which way would the *pardos* go? It has also passed through my mind that possibly the cleverest way to keep nonwhites divided would be to perpetrate a system whereby *pardos* yearn to become lighter, and *pretos* yearn to become *pardos*.

Second. From an economic standpoint, the Afro-American appears much more prosperous in general than *pretos* or *pardos* in Brazil. This is a simple reflection of the fact that the United States of America is a richer nation than the United States of Brazil. In neither nation can it be argued

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point, the Afro-American appears an *pretos* or *pardos* in Brazil. This is a United States of America is a richer il. In neither nation can it be argued

that nonwhites had an equitable share of whatever there was to get. However, migration to the northern urban areas and three major wars since 1917-1918 have put Afro-Americans in a position where some of the funds that came their way could be invested or used to buy property.

Most amazing to this observer was the almost total absence of Afro-Brazilians in the business world. In the industrial south of Brazil, where miscegenation is far from a virtue, one hardly expected to see *preto* bank executives. But even in the northern areas, *preto* or dark *pardo* bank or office clerks were as rare as [Charles] de Gaulle supporters in the State Department. Apparently, the *brancos* owned everything. *Pretos* and *pardos* might sing, dance, and play soccer, but the mysteries of commerce were somehow beyond their grasp.