

ABDIAS DO NASCIMENTO (1914–2011)
“THE MYTH OF RACIAL DEMOCRACY” (1968)

Now that eighty years have passed since the abolition of slavery in Brazil, it is opportune to look objectively at the results of the law of May 13, 1888. Are the descendants of African slaves really free? Where do Brazilian blacks really stand in relation to citizens of other racial origins, at all levels of national life?

More than ten years ago, a reporter from a prominent Rio de Janeiro magazine asked various persons of color to respond to these questions. But the interviews were never published, although the questions obviously remain valid and hold the same significance, because since then nothing has changed in the way blacks live in this country.

The abolitionist campaign stopped abruptly in 1888 Abolition was a façade: juridical, theoretical, abstract. The ex-slaves were driven to the brink of starvation; they found only disease, unemployment, complete misery. Not only the elites, but all of Brazilian society closed the avenues through which blacks might have survived; they shut off the possibility of a decent, dignified life for the ex-slaves. They created a fabric of slogans about equality and racial democracy that has served to assuage the bad national conscience. Abroad, it presents our country as a model of racial coexistence; internally, the myth is used to keep blacks tricked and docile.

There was a phase during which the condition of blacks awakened the interest of scholars, especially in the Northeast. But although sincere, the intellectuals dealt with black culture as ethnographic material for their literary and academic exercises . . . [when, instead], the situation of blacks cried out for urgent practical action to improve radically their horrible existence . . .

It is a characteristic of our racial democracy myth that it accurately defines a “pathology of normality . . .” There is no exaggeration here. We remember that Brazilians of dark pigmentation number nearly thirty million. Certain apostles of “whitening” would like to see the extinction of the Negro as an easy way to resolve the problem. . . . The white portion, or the less-Negro population, would continue to monopolize political power, economic power, access to schools, and to well-being, thanks to the legacy of the wretched “Golden Law,” which Antonio Callado has correctly dubbed, “The Law of White Magic.” Under the law of white magic, the black is as free as any other Brazilian. In practice—without any white or black magic—the Negro is simply this: a racial pariah consigned to the status of a subaltern.

Why should the Negro be the only one to pay for the onus of our “racial paradise”? I stand corrected. The Indian, as well, has been treated in the same way. According to a study by the federal government itself, practices to liquidate indigenous peoples have been employed in the [current] decade of the 1960s. Another mask yanked off the face of our vaunted Brazilian humanism, tempered with compassion and Christian spirit . . .

It is imperative for human dignity and a civic duty for Brazilians to struggle—blacks and whites—to transform the concept of racial democracy into reality. The Negro should organize to take up the promise deeded to him by history. This should be done without messianism, without hatred or resentment, but firmly and steadfastly in pursuit of the just place to which we are entitled. The Negro should create pressure groups,

instruments for direct action. In the process, we will encounter our qualified leaders. Only through dynamic organization will the Negro obtain equality of opportunity and the status of a better life . . . not only for Brazilian blacks, but for all Brazilian people.

Naturally, anything directed against the status quo runs risks. But Negroes run risks from the instant of their birth. Do not fear the label of “black racist,” because the product of intimidation is docility. It is enough for us to know that our cause has integrity, and follow our conscience as democrats and humanists. Our historical experience shows us that antiracist racism is the only path capable of extinguishing the differences between races.

Taken from Abdias do Nascimento, “The Myth of Racial Democracy,” in *The Brazil Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, eds. Robert M. Levine and John J. Crocitti (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 379–381.

CORNELIUS DE PAUW (1739–1799)
RECHERCHES PHILOSOPHIQUES SUR LES AMÉRICAINS (1768–1769)

General View of the Americans

When the Spaniards, on their discovery of the new world, disembarked at St. Domingo, then called Haiti, they were surprised to find a race of men, of whom sluggishness was the principal characteristic: after eating and dancing the better part of the day, they spent the rest in sleep, without thought of tomorrow. The greater number had neither reflection nor memory, went almost naked, and often intoxicated themselves with tobacco.

The surprise of the Spaniards increased, when, penetrating farther into this new world, they found that the men had no beards, their bodies hairless, like those of eunuchs; that they were almost insensible to the passion of love; had milk, or a kind of milky liquid, in their breasts; that they could not, or would not carry weights; and that the men and women were universally tainted with the venereal disease: such throughout the laziness of the men, and their hatred of labour, that extreme want, to which they were often subject, had never induced them to cultivate the earth; trusting all to nature, and utter strangers to industry.

As the most ancient histories agree in representing every race of men rising gradually out of savage life to the first rudiments of arts, and of society, there is just reason to believe that the first men were thrown on this globe without other notions or advantages than those which are found in ordinary savages; containing in themselves the elements of perfectibility, they were at a mighty distance from the attainment: in their creation, brutal and unenlightened, they owe to themselves their manners, their laws, and their sciences. They had no common model, no fixed rule of conduct; accordingly, they have differed very much, as well in the means of attaining to civilized life, as in the institutions on which their civilization depended: climate has governed them full as much as reason . . .

There are people, who, it should seem, can never emerge out of infancy, or a state of nature. The Eskimo, the Greenlanders, will not have towns, or (which is the same thing) a cultivated soil, while the present position of the globe remains the same with respect to them. The Negro will never be civilized so long as he dwells under the Line, exposed to the greatest heat the earth knows.

The Europeans who pass into America degenerate, as do the animals; a proof that the climate is unfavourable to the improvement of either man or animal. The Creoles, descending from Europeans and born in America, though educated in the universities of Mexico, of Lima, and College de Santa Fé, have never produced a single book. This degradation of humanity must be imputed to the vitiated qualities of the air stagnated in their immense forests, and corrupted by noxious vapours.

Curious as this fact may seem, it is attended by another much more so; the Creoles both of South and North America come to a maturity of intellect, such as theirs is, more early than the children in Europe; but this anticipation of ripeness is short-lived, in proportion to the unseasonableness of its appearance; for the Creole falls off, as he approaches puberty; his vivacity deserts him, his powers grow dull, and he ceases to think the very time that he might think to some purpose: hence it is commonly said of them, that they are already blind at the time that other men begin to see.

Taken from Cornelius de Pauw, *A General History of the Americans, of Their Customs, Manners, and Colours*, trans. Daniel Webb (Rochdale: T. Wood, 1806), 1–2, 6–7, 17–19.