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6-20-2016

# Racial Conceptions in the Twentieth-Century: Comparisons, Connections and Circulations in the Portuguese-Speaking Global South

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## Recommended Citation

Gil-Riaño, S. (2016). Racial Conceptions in the Twentieth-Century: Comparisons, Connections and Circulations in the Portuguese-Speaking Global South. *History of Anthropology Newsletter*, 40 Retrieved from [https://repository.upenn.edu/hss\\_papers/29](https://repository.upenn.edu/hss_papers/29)

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**Keywords**

race, Lusophone, Brazil, Portuguese

**Disciplines**

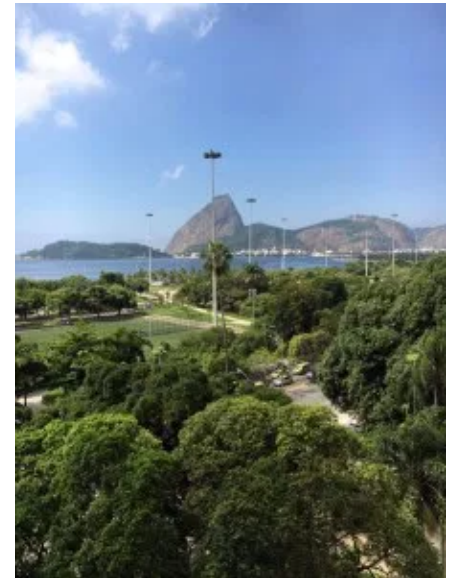
History | Latin American History

# Racial Conceptions in the Twentieth-Century: Comparisons, Connections and Circulations in the Portuguese-Speaking Global South

JUNE 20, 2016 / SEBASTIÁN GIL-RIAÑO AND SARAH WALSH / 0 COMMENTS

Rio de Janeiro, Hotel Novo Mundo, 5–7 April 2016

In early April 2016, during what will surely turn out to be a **notable moment in Brazil's political history**, scholars representing a variety of disciplines from across the globe met in Rio de Janeiro to participate in the workshop, “Racial Conceptions in the Twentieth-Century: Comparisons, Connections and Circulations in the Portuguese-speaking Global South.” The two-day workshop was characterized not only by the collegiality and enthusiasm of its participants, but also its commitment to illuminating the diversity of racial thought emerging from the Lusophone Global South.



The workshop's call for papers challenged scholars to explore, “the manifold connections, circulations, fissures, equivocations, and mutual transits between and across Lusophone racial epistemologies and the wider world, before and after the demise of the Portuguese colonial empire in the 1970s.” Specifically, the workshop sought to critically reassess the notion of Lusophone exceptionalism regarding race. Organizers Warwick Anderson, Ricardo Roque, and Ricardo Ventura Santos hoped that re-thinking this exceptionality would allow for a more fulsome exploration of scientific forms of racialization beyond the familiar Luso-tropicalist trope of race mixing popularized in Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre's masterwork, *Casa grande e senzala* (*The Master and the Slaves*, 1933). The workshop also proposed that a reassessment of Lusophone specificity might encourage new types of south-south comparisons and connections. The result was an astounding array of papers speaking to the complexity of racial ideas, discourses, and practices across the Lusophone Global South in the twentieth century.



Five papers were presented on the first day of the workshop. **Cristiana Bastos'** paper dealt with Donald Taft's 1923 monograph, *Two Portuguese Communities in New England*. Her paper demonstrated that American race science and racialism affected how Portuguese migrants were seen within a larger context of migration to the United States from a variety of less desirable European nations, such as Poland, Greece, and Italy. The theme of migration carried into **Pamila Gupta's** paper. Studying Goans in East Africa, Gupta's paper forced a major reconsideration of who belongs to the

Lusophone world, what constitutes diasporic communities, how individuals can maintain multiple identities simultaneously, and the importance of horizontal movement within imperial networks.

Much like Bastos's paper, Gupta's demonstrated that the term and idea of "Goan" fractured, depending on where each group settled. Delving deeper into the Lusophone world on the African continent, **Samuël Coghe's** paper considered a variety of ethnographic debates regarding the so-called Bushmen in southern Angola. Coghe highlighted the relative disinterest Portuguese colonial representatives had in this group in comparison to the rather robust study of Bushmen in other imperial or postcolonial settings. These papers in particular demonstrated the utility of, and need for more, transimperial studies of race, science, and migration not only in the Lusophone world but across the Global South.

The final two papers of the first day engaged specifically with the question of Lusophone exceptionalism vis-à-vis race mixing as theorized by Gilberto Freyre. **Ricardo Roque's** paper reflected on the work of Portuguese anthropologist António Mendes Correia in East Timor to show that Luso-tropicalism was not the only, nor was it the most popular, way of conceptualizing racial thought in the Lusophone world. Roque showed that the Portuguese anthropologist did not share Freyre's ideas about racial plasticity and the benefit of race mixing. Instead, Mendes Correia created a perhaps even more surprising theory suggesting all peoples in the Portuguese empire shared an affective connection. Rounding out the day, **Cláudia Castelo** discussed how Portuguese scholars responded to Freyre's first major work: *Casa grande e senzala*. Complementing the previous paper, Castelo examined two unique periods in which Portuguese scholars reacted to the book: the 1930s/40s and the 1950s/60s. She noted that the first period was characterized by relative skepticism toward miscegenation as positive while scholars in the later period, in the context of growing concerns regarding decolonization, embraced Freyre's work as a part of a move toward multiculturalism.

During the second day of the workshop, the papers focused on the science of race primarily within Brazil. Although Brazilian racial conceptions and race relations in the twentieth century have often been characterized as harmonious and democratic, these papers historicized and thereby complicated this premise in different yet mutually reinforcing ways. The papers also identified a commitment to interdisciplinary or even "holistic" analyses as a common and perhaps distinctive feature of Brazilian and Lusophone styles of racial thought. The papers on this day continued to provoke stimulating questions and discussions from the workshop participants. To encourage greater exchange between participants, the second day of the workshop also featured a technological innovation—translators in a booth who transmitted translations via a feed available on headsets. The quality of the translation was generally excellent and even offered a hint of the surreal.<sup>[1]</sup>

**Robert Wegner** opened the day's proceedings with an intriguing paper that traced the influence of rigid Mendelian theories of heredity on a group of Brazilian eugenicists from the 1930s. By demonstrating the eugenic connections between tropical Brazil and icy Scandinavia, Wegner called into question the predominant historiographic tendency to characterize eugenics in Latin America as a softer neo-Lamarckian counterpart to Anglophone and Nordic eugenic projects.

The day's second paper, by **Marcos Chor Maio**, demonstrated how the anti-racist research agenda of UNESCO's Department of Social Science in the 1950s was profoundly influenced by Brazilian social scientists' conception of the southern peripheries of the decolonizing world. By illustrating the impact of Arthur Ramos, a Brazilian anthropologist who acted as the Social Science Department's first director, this paper provocatively argued that, in the international context of UNESCO, Brazilian approaches to questions of race and human difference displaced the behavioral science methods arriving from the US.

The next paper, co-authored by **Rosanna Dent** and **Ricardo Ventura Santos**, moved the discussion forward into the Cold War period with a fascinating study of how early Brazilian human population geneticists attempted to blur the boundaries between the natural and human sciences and to geneticize the history of racial mixing in Brazil. Focusing on the pioneering work of Francisco Salzano and Newton Freire-Maia, this paper argued that the scientists' early collaboration to synthesize knowledge about Brazilian human biology first created the notion of Brazil as a unified, genetic nation, giving the “racial democracy” thesis a genetic gloss.

The following paper by **Ana Carolina Vimeiro Gomes** examined the transplantation of biotypology from Italy to Brazil in the 1930s and invited us to see biotypology not as a strictly bounded discipline but as a porous “trading zone” that enfolds multiple “medical and scientific meanings and social roles”. As a highly flexible field of inquiry concerned with the environmental patterning of biological individuality, biotypology was believed to have applications in domains including anthropology, education, criminology, physical education, etc. But perhaps because of this very flexibility, Vimeiro Gomes suggested, it was also easily displaced and absorbed by the emergent field of endocrinology in the 1940s.



The next paper by **Lorenzo Macagno**, transported us away from Brazil to consider the adaptation of Boasian anthropology to the former Portuguese colony of Mozambique. By focusing on the life of one of Franz Boas's little known collaborators and informants—the Ndau ethnographer Kamba Simango—Lorenzo offered an illuminating account of how Simango made use of Boasian conceptions of culture and race to develop a unique mixture of “particularist ethnic pride” and pan-Africanist universalist sensibilities.

The final paper of the day by **Jerry Dávila** concluded the workshop with an interesting note of contrast. While most papers addressed how actors in Brazil and the broader Lusophone world adapted theories from North America and Europe to their own milieus, Dávila's paper examined how Brazil sought to protect its cherished tradition of “racial democracy” from the perceived influence of US-style racism. By examining the emergence of anti-racist laws in the 1950s and the difficulties Afro-Brazilians faced in seeking to prosecute those whom they accused of racism, Dávila showed that the function of these laws was to protect Brazil's reputation rather than to diminish racism. Indeed, in many cases judges often made a priori appeals to “racial democracy” as a way to deny the possibility of racist acts in Brazilian society unlike the United States. “Racial democracy” was thus a potent mechanism for obscuring the systemic nature of racial discrimination in Brazilian society and one that drew strength from comparisons with the United States as well as South Africa.

These two days of papers offered provocative insights into the distinguishing characteristics of racial thought in the Portuguese speaking nations of the Global South. These works showed that scientific studies of human diversity in the Lusophone context were often invested in blurring disciplinary boundaries and crafting ways of knowing variously referred to as “integrated”, “ecological”, or even “holistic”. The workshop thus revealed how racial thought in the Lusophone world has often been highly pliable and characterized by a polyvalent mobility, encompassing

multiple and even contradictory political projects. Although the workshop's goal of comparative analyses encompassing the broader Lusophone world at times gave way to narrower discussions of national issues or of connections with Latin American countries, the workshop itself offered a dynamic and convivial space to reflect on how scholars can further map these transimperial and transnational connections as this project begins taking its next step towards publication.

[1] At one point, one of the workshop participants asked a very insightful question in Portuguese about the Swiss anthropologist Alfred Métraux and his role in Brazilian modernization studies. This insight was lost to or perhaps reinvented for the participants listening to the English translation who were treated to a stimulating discussion of subways in Brazil.