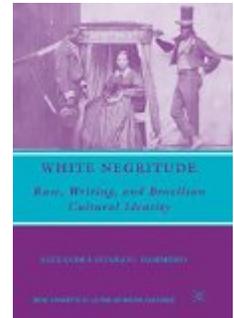


**Alexandra Isfahani-Hammond.** *White Negritude: Race, Writing, and Brazilian Cultural Identity.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. 208 S. \$80.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4039-7595-9.



**Reviewed by** Lorenzo Veracini

**Published on** H-Soz-u-Kult (February, 2010)

Alexandra Isfahani-Hammond has published a persuasive outline and contextualization of Brazilian “Race Democracy” advocate Gilberto Freyre. In a forthcoming book, I argue that settler projects use a variety of “transfers” in order to manage indigenous and exogenous alterity in their respective population economies, and that “transfer” does not apply only to people pushed across borders. This review of *White Negritude* contends that Freyre was indeed a master (discursive) transferist.

*Casa Grande e Senzala* (1933) proposed a reading of Brazilian race relations that in many ways remains paradigmatic. The specific conditions afforded by a tropical environment and the encounter between Portuguese colonizers and African slaves had produced a uniquely Brazilian synthesis. The master/slave dialectic had been upturned; the inherent antagonism and violence that should have accompanied that relation had been defused. This synthesis, Freyre argued, demonstrated among other things Brazil’s superiority to the United States. While this stance contributed to *Casa Grande e Senzala*’s reception and

career, Isfahani-Hammond suggests that it may also have prevented scrutiny – Brazilian race relations are still routinely construed – both in Brazil and in the US – as primarily an “antithesis” of something else. Freyre, the generally accepted reading goes, made the Afro-Brazilian a central character of the national narrative, recognized that the slaves were the true colonizers, framed *senzala* and *Casa Grande* in the same interpretative frame, and proposed a consistently non-eugenicist reading of Brazilian society and culture. Alexandra Isfahani-Hammond successfully problematizes this interpretation.

The main point in Freyre’s argument is that Brazilian slave masters identify with their slaves and, having assimilated their cultural traits, can therefore genuinely and authentically represent them. This identification is acquired, for example, via sexual (non reproductive and noncoercive) intercourse with black women. Afro-Brazilian “atmospheric” influences are thus transferred to the white masters in the unique context of the north-eastern Brazilian plantation complex (a self-contained social microcosm that is presented as the

epicentre of the Brazilian cultural experience). Isfahani-Hammond insists on Freyre's strategic disavowal of genetic hybridisation. Branquemento ("whitening") was one available possibility, an approach that advocated the progressive elimination of black genes through miscegenation and immigration policies that favoured Europeans. Freyre, on the other hand, developed more effective discursive strategies. This is where Isfahani-Hammond's argument is most convincing, and Freyre's "celebration" of Afro-Brazilian cultural traits is shown as ultimately seeking to "replace sociohistorical blackness with a discourse about blackness" (p. 7). In this way, a potentially destabilising oppositional agency is expropriated and circumvented. Despite its ostensibly non-racial determinants, Freyre's reasoning is shown to actually culminate in the "exclusionary resolution of Brazilian heterogeneity" (p. 14).

On the other hand, there were other possibilities. While the "Anthropophagic Manifesto" of Oswald de Andrade, for example, gave precedence to what is non-European (and produced an indigenising stance), Freyre goes the other way – he does not "eat" Europe as an act of contestation; on the contrary, he re-centres the white seigneurial Brazilian male as it "consumes" Afro-Brazilian culture, produces "white-authored" black discourse, and performs the "dual linguistic-genetic containment of Brazilian blackness" (p. 18). At the same time, and at the other end of the spectrum, Freyre needs to upturn visions of Brazilian society as degraded and demoralised by Africanisation and miscegenation. Being located at the centre, the Freyrean project needs to simultaneously battle on many fronts, constantly seeking to reject white democracy while containing black agency.

How does Freyre perform this expropriation? One crucial passage in this strategy – a contradiction aptly noted by Isfahani-Hammond – is a disappearing act by which an existence that is postulated in the realm of production is turned into an existence that is manifested in the realm of con-

sumption. On the one hand, Freyre "defines 'black people' according to their relation to the means of production; they are slaves or descendants of slaves", she notes; on the other hand, he "characterizes 'blackness' as a series of commodified traits that, in the course of plantation relations, are passed to the seigniorial elite" (p. 47). It is this slippage that allows celebration and disavowal of miscegenation at the same time. Freyre especially insists on the education of the young master and the influence that is most effectively transferred during a crucial formative stage (this is a recurring colonial fantasy of indigenised European-ness, from Kipling's *Jungle Book* to *Tarzan*). Isfahani-Hammond also pinpoints the intimate and specific location of the whole process: the "young European's ingestion of black breast milk suggests the consumable, nongenetic quality of mixed-raceness in Freyre's usage, and demarcates the site for incorporated blackness as the white body" (p. 48). Freyre's "Racial Democracy" is thus reconfigured as an egocentric fantasy.

At the same time, and this is one crucial contribution of her book, Isfahani-Hammond is able to locate comparatively the Brazilian (and Caribbean) "exclusionary" model of *mestiçagem/mestiçaje*. "Whereas the Caribbean/Brazilian response to rape as national origin is to rewrite it as an erotic encounter – provoked, moreover, by black women – in the United States this topic is negotiated by a typically puritanical silence", she notes (p. 38). Later, Isfahani-Hammond returns on the topic. In Brazil and in most of the Caribbean (and unlike in the United States, where the plantation era is repressed from memory), "the iconization of the plantation era is intrinsic to slavery's forgetting [...] through its recollection as 'enchanted' national origin", she concludes (p. 85). I would argue, however, that this is not primarily a matter of puritanical attitude: it is a silence that emerges from the systemic needs of a settler colonial project. In the colonial/postcolonial case, *mestiçaje* is a strategy for the containment of exogenous alterity through incorporation and supervision; in

the settler colonial case, *mestizaje* must be foreclosed. Repression and foreclosure, after all, are not the same.

That Freyre ultimately relies on a “transferist” strategy should be emphasised. One result of a succession of discursive transfers, for example, is that really existing black people (“sociohistorical blackness”, according to the terminology developed by Isfahani-Hammond) become dissolved into other categories. Freyre transfers the African slaves and the Indians. He repeatedly notes, for example, that the Indians are maladjusted to Brazilian conditions, unlike the African slaves, who are naturally better adapted (see p. 51). This, of course, is actually a double transfer where people that are exogenous to Brazil are understood as actually indigenous, and where indigenous people are denied their indigeneity, discursively replaced, and end up acquiring an “out of place” quality that dooms them to an irreversible alienation.

Transference of cultural practices by close contact allows whites to write “black”, a move that, besides the ultimate (albeit one step removed) indigenisation of the Euro-Brazilian, enables another transfer: the disappearance of the black by way of simultaneous incorporation and erasure. Black autonomous authorship (a voice that Freyre perceives as emblematic of US segregationism) is thus disqualified through transfer, together with mixed race authorship, a voice Freyre accuses of being intrinsically incapable of genuinely representing either race: not the manor, not the subaltern periphery, yet alone a synthesis or Brazilian ineffable heterogeneity. Isfahani-Hammond recognises this dynamic, and sees Freyre situating “himself as a seignorial figure who has equal domain in elite and marginal sites, displacing people of mixed European/African ancestry from the embodiment of hybridization and, therein, from the ability to narrate or speak about national identity” (p. 14). Freyre finally “transfers” the south of Brazil: a site

of degenerative modernisation, European immigration and influence, and, ultimately, Americanization. It is an alien and unauthentic locale; a source of foreign and therefore distorting stimuli.

At the end of a succession of discursive transfers, the white master’s claim is the last one standing. His proximity to black commodified bodies enables authentic linguistic and spiritual incorporation, something that is denied to everyone else. Only the specific conditions of the northeastern plantation and the intimate contact between masters and slaves could produce Brazil’s exceptional “Racial Democracy”: “[t]he social history of the plantation manor is the intimate history of almost every Brazilian”, Freyre concludes (quoted, p. 134). *Casa Grande e Senzala* is therefore exactly what the title says it is: a hierarchically organised dyad constituted by seigneurial manor plus the contribution that emanates from the slave quarters. Despite their contribution, indeed exactly because of their contribution, the autonomous agency of the slaves and their descendants is effaced, and the seigneurial manor remains the unique site of “genuine” Brazilian culture. Once the sequence of transfers is completed, Freyre’s “almost every Brazilian”, ends up reading like “every Brazilian who happens to be a white male seigneur who grew up in a plantation in the northeast of the country”. An exceptionally inclusive tradition is thus recast into an exceptionally selective one.

Freyre ultimately took a conservative turn and his assertion of “Lusotropicalism” and its singularity sustained Portugal’s imperialism throughout the 1960s and 1970s. He travelled to the African colonies in 1951 and 1952 where he recognised a number of “little Brazils”, which for him was a good thing. The colonial establishment of the Portuguese state took advantage of Freyre’s rhetoric and explicit complicity (see p. 163, n. 1). However, as Isfahani-Hammond illustrates, this evolution is actually much less discontinuous than the available literature is willing to acknowledge. While Freyrean notions of “racial Democra-

cy” have been used in various contexts and for different purposes, an underlying continuity should be emphasised: he coherently supported a seigneurial subjectivity against all its enemies, while at the same time expropriating and disallowing the cultural voice of Brazilian blackness. He consistently reclaimed a right to do so.

Freyre’s transferist strategy, however, is not unique. Settlers elsewhere also need to enact physical and discursive transfers against their indigenous and exogenous opponents in order to effectively claim local versions of “genuine” indigenising cultural authenticity. Freyre’s “creolization/indigenization”, Isfahani-Hammond concludes, “is nationalistic and anticolonial yet grounded in symbolically Africanized, white dominance” (p. 52). Settler indigenisations elsewhere are also nationalistic and anticolonial; settlers need to build independent nations and supersede their dependency on the motherland. Settler indigenisation, of course, is also grounded on an indigenised white dominance that effaces really existing indigenous peoples.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/>

**Citation:** Lorenzo Veracini. Review of Isfahani-Hammond, Alexandra. *White Negritude: Race, Writing, and Brazilian Cultural Identity*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. February, 2010.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=29725>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.