What makes a white man white? Definitions teetering between color and class among white men in Rio de Janeiro

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This paper discusses how whiteness is perceived and described by upper-middle class men self-identifying as white in Rio de Janeiro. In part one I present a brief history of the role played by whiteness in the formation of Brazil as a nation and the specific characteristics of Brazilian color classification with particular attention for the relationship between class and color. In part two I explore the main methodological problems related to the study of whiteness within the framework of Brazilian research on whiteness and French sociological analysis of the upper-middle class and aristocracy. In particular I focus on the relationship between researcher and interviewee when the latter is part of a dominant group and the foci of the investigation concern his/her dominant position. I then discuss interviewees' efforts to give definitions of whiteness, their silences and laughter, and the different types of answer they offer. Class appears as a privileged language for giving concrete content to whiteness: while class is described as something more tangible and objective, whiteness is perceived by these men as elusive and impossible to put into words.

Keywords: Brazil, racism, whiteness, class, methodological issues.

Introduction

In this article I present data gathered through an ongoing research project on whiteness and masculinity among upper-middle class white men in Rio de Janeiro.

The position of upper-middle class white men can be considered one of socio-economic privilege, given the analyses that the social scientific literature of the last fifty years has produced about the social groups subject to various forms of domination, exploitation, and socio-economic and cultural exclusion in the history of Brazilian society: black and indigenous people, women, and the poor.[1] This research aims to study racism, sexism and their articulation through an examination of the social group that is located in the privileged position within each of these two systems of social relations: white men. In Brazil, class is a highly relevant element for defining whiteness and masculinity. By choosing to study upper-middle class white men, I aim to focus even more closely on the element of privilege that characterizes these two

social positions. By upper-middle class, I refer to individuals belonging to what are defined as the A-B classes (ABEP 2011), representing the top of the social pyramid.[2]

A study of upper-middle class men who identify themselves as white can aid in an effort to understand the mechanisms of racism by analyzing how the privileged condition of whiteness is constructed from within this condition. The central aim of this investigation is to understand how the privilege characterizing the condition of whiteness takes on legitimacy.

In this paper I will examine in detail one specific aspect of this research: how whiteness is perceived and described by the men I interviewed, and in particular how class appears as a privileged language for giving concrete content to whiteness. I will not put too much focus on the intersection of class, gender and color in definitions and experiences of whiteness, as this has already been addressed elsewhere.[3]

A brief history of racism and whiteness in Brazil

Brazil gained independence from Portugal in 1822, and became a Republic in 1889, one year after the abolition of slavery. In the process of the formation of the Brazilian nation, the European-descended oligarchy that governed the country experienced a powerful inferiority complex in relation to the Old World, who was considered more civilized and mod-

ern (Garcia 1993). In the second half of the nineteenth century, this feeling of inferiority also found expression through racist ideas and theories of European origin that spread through Brazil (Skidmore 1974, Azevedo 1987, Seyferth 1989, Schwarcz 1993). The European-descended oligarchy blamed all the nation's ills, from economic backwardness to poverty and tropical diseases, on the descendants of African slaves and on the *mestiços*,[4] who constituted the overwhelming majority of the population and were considered to be biologically degenerated and therefore socially and culturally inferior.[5] In keeping with the racist ideology, only a nation with a white population was considered capable of achieving modernity and expressing a strong national identity.

In order to overcome this situation, a political project was developed between the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century aimed at 'cleaning' the nation of blacks and *mestiços*, those segments of the population that were considered to be and treated as inferior and degenerate. The idea was to progressively whiten the population until it became homogenous in terms of color, (Seyferth 1989 and 1991).

The theory of *branqueamento* expressed, at the political and cultural level, a common perception among Brazilian society's ruling classes that the descendants of African slaves represented a liability for the

future of the Brazilian nation, a burden from which the nation must liberate itself. From a political point of view, the theory of *branqueamento* was practiced through two different moves: the establishment of a ceiling on the number of Africans entering Brazil (despite the fact that, for almost three centuries, Africans had been enslaved and transported to Brazil by force) through the passage of an 1890 decree that prohibited Africans and Asians from entering Brazil without authorization from the National Congress (Vainer 1990); and, at the same time, the promotion of immigration by those European people considered at each historical moment to best serve the requirements of the population whitening project (Seyferth 1989 and 1991). Between the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, different national groups – Italians, Portuguese, Germans, as well as Japanese – immigrated to Brazil, thanks in part to institutional support. Brazilian authorities saw these groups as white people whose men would be willing to engage in sexual relationships with black women in order to produce progressively whiter progeny (Seyferth 1991). This theory and practice of *branqueamento* clearly illustrates the degree of violence characterizing Brazilian society's conceptualization and treatment of the population descended from African slaves in the years following the abolition of slavery.

In the nineteen thirties and forties, during the Vargas government, institutional actors were particularly concerned that social groups of diverse national origins identify with the Brazilian nation. To this end, the valorisation of *mestiçagem* – understood as cultural and 'racial' mixing – functioned as an effective paradigm to conceptualize social relations among individuals of diverse origins as occurring harmoniously. Although the ideal of *branqueamento* remained deeply rooted in Brazilian culture, *mestiçagem* was now viewed by elites as a distinctive and positive element of the Brazilian nation.[6] As in other Latin American countries, historical mixing between indigenous, Portuguese and African peoples and cultures began to be recognized as a positive element in the creation of a national culture and identity.[7] During the forties, the phrase 'racial democracy' spread, used to describe the idea of Brazil as a country without racial prejudice or discrimination, a representation that has subsequently come under strong criticism (Guimarães 2002b).

Despite these changes, in the twentieth century being classified as white continued to imply in the dominant discourse an identification with modernity and wealth as well as culture (in the sense of institutional education) as well as beauty and intelligence, whilst on the other hand being classified as black meant identificaiton as poor, culturally backward or, at best, closer to the

ludic spheres of life (music, sport, and dance). Black people remained at the bottom of Brazilian society's social and economic pyramid. What was produced was a combination of the valorisation of *mestiçagem* and the reproduction of the social mechanisms that had historically discriminated against black and indigenous populations.

This valorisation of *mestiçagem* was and still is often woven together with the belief that, since all Brazilians are 'racially' mixed, there are no 'true' whites or blacks and there could therefore be no racism (the same attitude is also present in Mexico, see Morena Figueroa 2010). Many Brazilians believe that discrimination in Brazil is based exclusively on class; that is to say, that black people are not discriminated against because they are black, but because they are poor (Guimarães 1999 and 2002c).

Lastly, it must be noted that the ideology valorising whiteness (identified here with European origin) brought with it the tendency for African- and indigenous-descended people to prefer color terms that are closer to white when classifying themselves by color or, in other words, the tendency to avoid self-identifying as black (Silva 1994). In fact, in contrast to the polarized black/white system of the United States, Brazil has a color classification system, termed a *continuum*, that privileges nuances and indistinct color categories. In official sta-

tistics, there is a specific category, pardo – literally meaning 'brown' – that refers to people whose parents are of different colors.[8] The possibility for people to move themselves along the color *continuum* is also enabled by the relational and situational character of individuals' color classifications in Brazilian society, and by the importance of class and education in defining an individual's color.[9] In more recent years, however, this *branqueamento* tendency has strongly decreased and various instances of claiming black identity have emerged (Sansone 2003). In addition, Brazilian society today no longer negates racism to the degree it did in the past, but rather seeks to fight it through, for instance, the promotion of public policies for racial equality. One of the most relevant of these policies was the implementation of affirmative action measures to help black students in accessing public universities (Santos and Lobato 2003, Steil 2006). The latest population census data (2010) reflects this change: the percentage of the population that defines itself as black or *parda* surpassed the white percentage, reversing the tendency of the last few decades.[10] If in the past the valorisation of 'racial' mixing produced a homogenizing logic that functioned to reproduce *branqueamento* (whitening), today the valorisation of 'racial' mixing may also appear as a ground for defining black identities.

Studying whiteness

This research project builds on the theoretical framework of studies on racism and of critical whiteness studies that developed in the 1990s in the USA.[11] Although they focus on questions raised in the Anglo-American context, studies in this field offer several lines of approach for studying the theme of whiteness in the Brazilian context.[12] Rather than being taken as a self-evident fact related to physical traits,[13] whiteness must be deconstructed, treated as a process whose characteristics must be analyzed according to the cultural context and historical moment: by whom and how is a white person defined (Baldwin 1984, Frankenberg 1999 and 2001). It is necessary to reveal the multiple points of view from which whiteness can be perceived: generally it is invisible to those who are considered white, but visible to those who are considered black or non-white (Morrison 1992, Frankenberg 1999, Ahmed 2004). In societies shaped by racism and by experiences of European colonization, the condition of whiteness involves access to a series of social advantages that are perceived by their beneficiaries but often not consciously recognized as such, or at any rate their beneficiaries do not consider the consequences of whiteness for those who do not share their privileged position (Harris 1993, Frankeberg 2001, Brander Rasmussen et al. 2001a and 2001b). Whiteness dis-

tinguishes itself as the expression of a structurally privileged position, even though some people identified as white do not enjoy the same privileges of whiteness. It is thus fundamental to analyze how whiteness can be shaped by other variables: class, nationality, gender, sexuality, and religion (Frankenberg 1999 and 2001).

Although a true field of whiteness studies has not yet developed in Brazil, there have been some significant contributions.[14] Studies on whiteness (Silva Bento 1999, Piza 2000 and 2003) have confirmed the data already produced by investigations of forms of racism, that from both aesthetic (identifiable with European ancestry) and social (as status indicator) standpoints, whiteness represents a resource capable of materially guiding social relations as well as biographical pathways. These data demonstrate that, despite a widespread tendency to identify with a color category that privileges the indeterminate, people's lives are still governed by the black/white opposition as far as social relations and values are concerned. Guerreiro Ramos, perhaps the first Brazilian scholar to critically address the condition of whiteness in Brazil, also focused on the central role of this opposition. He argues that 'what in Brazil is called the 'the *negro* problem' is the reflection of the social pathology of the 'white' Brazilian' (1957, 192). According to Guerreiro Ramos, whites are a mi-

nority in Brazil despite the fact that 'on an ideological level, whiteness is a dominant criterion of social aesthetics' (1957, 172). The whiteness he refers to is defined according to European criteria, and these criteria do not match the majority of the individuals who define themselves as white. In the face of this situation characterized by contradictory moves – the desire to identify as white knowing that one does not correspond to the social aesthetics of European whiteness – white people react by making excessively frequent reference to their European origins or by focusing on the study of black people, in relation to whom their whiteness is confirmed. Guerreiro Ramos therefore focuses on a white subject who feels imperfect when compared to a European white person, the Brazilian subject's point of reference. In addition, Guerreiro Ramos notes how white appears as an invisible 'racial' position in the face of the extreme visibility of the position of black. Guerreiro Ramos drew attention to this feature when he pointed out that, in common language in Brazil, the identification of an individual by color was applied only to black people: '*preto, negro*' (literally black, negro). In these terms, 'human color loses it contingent or accidental character and truly becomes substance or essence' (1957, 194). In a shrewd move, the Brazilian sociologist invites readers to 'translate into white' the terms in which the subject is 'the

black' in order to draw attention to the disparity in the substantivised use of these two colors. The expression white does not in fact function on the level of language in the same way that black does. The expression 'white' is, in contrast to that of 'black', insufficient to represent the plurality of facets that comprise the subjectivity of a white individual, who therefore deserves to be designated not solely by his or her color. And despite this invisibility on the level of language, the social condition of whiteness functions as a kind of passport that allows individuals to automatically access a series of privileges.

In addition to critical whiteness studies and Brazilian research on whiteness, it was also extremely useful for my research to read studies on the upper middle class and aristocracy in France, especially work by the ethnologist Le Wita and Bourdieuian sociologists Pinçon and Pinçon-Charlot, where they reflect on their object of study itself and the challenges inherent in the specificity of this object (studying a dominant group). Given that whiteness and upper middle class status both enjoy the solidity of a dominant position, these studies represented a fertile terrain for me to reflect on many of the issues that emerged in the course of my investigation. The common challenge in researching Parisian aristocratic and upper middle class families and the whiteness of upper-middle class men lies in

the difficulty of leading the interview, the sensation that something in the interviewees' accounts is taken for granted, thus producing disorientation for the researcher; there is a 'we' in the interviews that is neither explicit nor defined but nonetheless always present.

The research context and interviewee demographics

Rio currently has a population of approximately six million residents, 3,500,000 of which are whites and 2,500,000 of which are *pardos* and blacks.[15] So far I have interviewed fifteen men who define themselves as white, ranging from 45 to 58 years old.[16] These men are residents of the Zona Sul neighborhoods, an area developed around the coast which is the wealthiest and the most prestigious urban region, boasting the best services and quality of life. The Zona Norte is the less culturally, architecturally and commercially prestigious area with a noticeably lower quality of life, although it does exhibit internal variation. Both of these zones contain favelas, areas occupied by citizens who cannot afford to live in the city's neighborhoods, where the houses sprout up haphazardly and lack standard access to water, electrical, gas and sewage services; favela residents are almost always cut off from state-provided health and educational services as well. In relation to the demographic composition of the areas in terms of color, the percentage of *pardos* and

black people in the Zona Sul is only 16% of the population, while white people constitute 84% and, in some neighborhoods, as much as 93% of the population (Garcia 2009, 184). The Zona Sul is therefore especially homogenous in terms of the color of its residents, although this does not include the people who work there.

The majority of the people I interviewed are freelance professionals- a photographer, a designer, a writer/ entrepreneur, but there are also state employees (medical doctors, university professors, researchers at medical research institutes), an architect/engineer, and an employee of a private company that operates in the financial sector. All the interviewees held university degrees and some held doctorates. Although the men I talked to have been living in Rio for several years, they are not all originally from the city; some of them spent periods of their childhood/adolescence in other regions of Brazil or abroad. The most significant difference between interviewees is the socio-economic position of their families: participants can be divided between those coming from a family in which the parents – typically the father – attended university and enjoyed an already solid socio-economic position, and those coming from a more disadvantaged family who subsequently achieved upward mobility. An initial analysis of the data reveals that the difference in their families of origin does not appear to have produced sub-

stantially different modes of perceiving whiteness.

The men I interviewed all come from families that they identify as white or *misturadas* (mixed). Some of them stress the foreign origins of their parents, grandparents or great-grandparents (Spanish, Portuguese, Lebanese or Italian). In some cases, the ancestors' origins are defined in terms of color: for César, his Portuguese mother is proof of his whiteness, João defines the Spanish origins of a part of his family as *moura* (Moor), Alberto speaks of his family as including Jewish forced to convert to Christianity, and he defines his sister as *morena* (dark). None of them is currently in a stable relationship with a black woman or man, but a few of them had brief relationships with black women when they were younger. Not all of the interviewees have children, but those who do define the children as white. While many identified their family of origin as *misturada*, none of them defined their immediate family as such. The mixing paradigm therefore refers to the past and (familial and national) origins, but not the present or future.

With the exception of a few rare cases, all their current and childhood friends are white. These men share the experience of having lived their childhoods and adolescents in settings where black people were present but almost always in the capacity of service workers (cleaning women, gardeners, nannies and servants). In some cases interviewees recall enjoying forms of emotional intimacy with black people (playmates, nannies and servants) even though they rarely experienced equality with any black children or adults. During their childhoods, some of the interviewees played together with children from different social-economic strata (both higher and lower), but in adulthood their regular interactions are with people who share their social class. At the time I interviewed them, only two of the men lived in buildings that hosted black residents, who at any rate represented an exception in relation to other residents identified by interviewees as white. Many of the interviewees reported that, in the course of their daily lives, the only black people they meet occupy subordinate positions.

Frankenberg uses the phrase 'social geography of race' (1993, 43) to refer to the way that people perceive and narrate the physical landscapes where they grew up or live in terms of their social relationships with people of other colors or social classes. What emerges in the accounts of these men is a social landscape where whites and blacks only meet within clearly codified circumstances in which the white occupy hegemonic positions and the black subordinate positions. This picture corresponds to the statistical data about the color of Zona Sul residents and demonstrates that, at least in the more well-off neigh-

borhoods, the valorisation of *mestiçagem* has produced not a more egalitarian social fabric but rather a situation in which racism exists alongside a discourse that negates its existence.

Interview process: whiteness as research object and methodological challenge

My access to the men I interviewed was affected by my social position in terms of color, class and gender, specifically the fact that I consider myself and am considered a white, middle-class woman as well as by the fact that I live in the Zona Sul during my stays in Rio. As a white, middle-class woman, multiple degrees of identification existed between me and my interviewees, and it was mainly my interviewees who identified me as similar to them. As a woman, in contrast, I was placed in and experienced myself to occupy a social position opposite that of my interviewees (Ribeiro Corossacz 2010).

I made contact with my interviewees through various channels: through friends, relatives, acquaintances and by asking the interviewees themselves to point me toward a white male resident in the Zona Sul who would be available for interviewing. The definition of white man was therefore provided by those who indicated people I could interview. This point is worth noting because one of the aims of my inquiry is to understand exactly how interviewees define 'white man' in a society where, as a result of the historic valorisation of mixture, such an act of naming is currently considered complex.[17]

I began the interviews with an introduction in which I outlined the themes I hoped to address (whiteness and masculinity in well-off classes). I took a biographical approach and asked the interviewee to recall some moments of his life (childhood, adolescence, adulthood) with a focus on his own color and that of the people he interacted with. I deliberately chose to never ask my interviewees, 'what does it mean *to be* white?', because I considered this phrasing to push respondents toward a static, permanent formulation of what can be, in the interview or the course of daily life, experienced as a dynamic process or condition open to change. I instead took an approach that could allow the interviewees to talk about their own experiences and definitions of whiteness, asking them 'How would you *define* a white man? What *makes* a white man white?'.

With respect to this, the main feature of the interviews was the gap between researcher and interviewee: while I did not take for granted what constitutes whiteness, my informants did. This generated a communicative gap that in some cases led to non-communication, the impossibility of responding to my questions about the definition of whiteness and of white people.

Even the word 'whiteness' (*branquitude* or *branquidade*) was new to my interviewees, and it is in fact a word and concept that is rarely used in Portuguese. I would like to point out that this communicative gap was also a result of the fact that my informants saw me as sharing in their position of whiteness, and found it strange that I would be posing a question such as, 'what makes a white man white?' because they considered me as occupying the same social position of whiteness that they did. The majority of my interviewees had never asked themselves questions that exposed their whiteness as a social position, and they expected the same behavior from me. If the researcher had been black, their reactions would likely have been different: the implicit message that I often received during the course of the interviews was, 'how can you ask me that, when you yourself are white?'. On the other hand, the fact that I considered myself and was considered white may have helped my interviewees to talk about racism because they felt they were among equals and it became easier for them to name racism. I had the impression that my interviewees did not feel themselves to be judged because I was perceived as white myself.

The answers to my questions about whiteness are mainly characterized by silence, laughter, the need to take time to think, the feeling of extraneousness in relation to the object they are being asked to reflect on. Pinçon and Pinçon-Charlot say about silence that 'every interview produces information, even when it comes down to observing the refusal to speak' (2002, 40); however on the level of data interpretation it is very difficult to read this refusal to answer or difficulty in speaking. It is therefore necessary to locate it within a context that goes beyond the interview itself, without disregarding the interview. By analyzing the discourses that revolve around these silences, I have been able to draw nearer to their meaning. While still taking into account the silences, I have worked to relate them to other moments of the interview in which the respondent expressed his vision of the place whites and blacks hold in Brazilian society and/or his own life.

Leading the interview was therefore a challenging and difficult experience. Pinçon and Pinçon-Charlot call attention to the intellectual and emotional labor required of the researcher in establishing a dialogue with interviewees of dominant groups about issues he or she knows to be considered 'delicate' or problematic. The two scholars write that 'in many cases the interviews, sometimes so arduous and difficult to get started, are concluded on the initiative of the researcher who is exhausted by the attention required and the tension imposed by the situation' (2002, 53). In some cases, according to them, the researcher

engages in a kind of self-censoring: 'The challenges do not come exclusively from the interviewees: the researcher's own self-censoring may also represent an impediment to the productivity of the interview' (2002, 51). Although real self-censoring did not occur in my case, the further I progressed with the interviews the more I experienced the sense of the difficulty that my respondents underwent in answering my questions about whiteness. Playing back the recordings, I realized that my questions were often preceded by extensive preambles and the request, 'would you please make an effort and try to answer this question: what makes a white man white?'.

The words to say it

There's no doubt that blacks exist in Brazil, but you cannot say the same thing about whites. The invisibilisation of white Brazilians in public discourse, along with the valorisation of *mestiçagem*, is the traditional form of representing racial relations for which Brazil is known internationally (Sovik 2010, 15).

Sovik calls attention to the invisibilisation of whites in public discourse and, I would add on the basis of my research, the same is true in the so-called private (by which I mean individual) discourse that develops through an ongoing modulating interaction with public and collective ones.[18] The invisibilisation of white people is the invisibilisation of whiteness as a set of privileges and

conflicts. In order to understand this characteristic of whiteness, I would like to recall Frankenberg's definition of whiteness as an unmarked marker (1993), that is to say, an empty signifier indicating 'racial' positions that exist but are also transparent, impossible to name, but which are nonetheless defined as the norm and normality.[19] The definition of whiteness as an unmarked marker clearly foregrounds the difficulties inherent in studying whiteness among white people, as highlighted in the previous pages. This difficulty was evident also in the perception on the part of my interviewees about what makes a legitimate research object. Some of them suggested that I investigate the favelas populations or moved their conversation onto Black people or the working class on the grounds that they were considered more interesting anthropological subjects and because the interviewees found them easier to talk about.[20]

During the interviews what emerged was not only the difficulty my interviewees experienced in talking about their own color, but also their difficulty in talking about the color of the people they interacted with. Color is a piece of information that is commonly left out, and when I insisted through direct questions the responses I received often revolved around class instead of color. Frankenberg defines this behavior as a discursive repertoire based on color evasion (1993, 142), or in oth-

er words a way of thinking about the color variable shaped by the attempt to dodge the issue of color-based inequalities in the society in question. This discursive repertoire can be linked to a discourse that appears to be anti-racist ('color is not important to me'), or an expression of the logic of racial democracy according to which there are no differences of color in Brazil, only differences of class. In my research, when this discursive repertoire based on color evasion is enacted by white people, the tendency to not think about or contemplate one's own color visibly co-exists alongside the ability to identify the meanings and implications of Others' colors, the color of blacks.

The responses I received to the question 'what makes a white man white' were naturally quite varied, not only in terms of content but also in the way people answered; furthermore, the same person often gave different definitions in the course of the same interview. Some of them answered that they could not define a white man, alluding to the fact that there is no difference between white and black people (Fernando).[21] Several answered by referencing what they view as a self-evident fact, or, in the words of one man, an objective fact (Luis): a white person is anyone who is white, who has light-colored skin (Julio, César). Some of them pointed out their European heritage (João, Luis), others referred to themselves (Alberto); others viewed whiteness as a situational aspect, that is, something shaped by context, making reference to experiences abroad (in the USA and Australia, Julio and César) where they felt less white. These responses suggest a perception of whiteness as something that is not intrinsic to the person but is rather produced by historical-cultural factors. Other interviewees found it almost impossible to answer the question (Pedro), while still others considered whiteness to be a social attribute rather than a physical trait (Carlos, Mauro).

During the course of the interview, even those respondents who had not initially related the definition of white to social position went on to reference classification criteria for whiteness that relate to social class, in particular to a position of social accomplishment. Going over the transcripts, I notice that every respondent at some point during the interview formulates the condition of whiteness in socio-economic terms, some through the category of class itself. This link between class and the color white also emerges in their answers about self-classification, bringing the relationship with class to the center of their perception of whiteness. The overlap between class and color is one of the aspects that characterize Brazilian society; it is thus not surprising that even whiteness is conceptualized through the lens of class. However, it is necessary to understand what

content class brings into the experiences of whiteness for the people I interviewed.

How would you define a white man? What makes a white man white?

Well…(laughter). Unfortunately here in Brazil white is the guy who has a car, a job, who works in an office, who has a chance; things are starting to change, but it's tough, for instance you hardly ever see a white policeman, they are almost all black, *pardos*, it seems like there's a stereotype, it's the same in the Comlurb (TN: all of them are black).[22] You never see a black person at the bank counter, you don't see them in lawyer's offices or in public relations jobs. It's coming to an end, it's a slow process because it comes from education, but now with affirmative action things will change. A lot of people are opposed to affirmative action. (Carlos, 52 years old, writer and entrepreneur)

The definition of white man that Carlos offers paints the picture of a Brazilian society divided along the color line: on one side the white people who 'have a chance', who can gain easy access to privileged positions; on the other side the black people who instead occupy the most disadvantaged positions in the job market. Carlos' words suggest that the white person enjoys a fun-

damental privilege ("has a chance"), which is difficult to change because it is rooted in education and thus linked to social condition. Unlike other interviewees, Carlos focuses on the present, mentioning the policy of university admissions quotas for self-defined black and *pardos* students as a tool to transform this privileged condition associated with whiteness.[23]

The idea of whiteness as a kind of universal pass also emerges in the account by Mauro, 54 years old, graphic designer:

What do you think it means to be considered white in Brazilian society, in Rio?

Well, it's like I told you, I don't make this distinction, but I see that people who are white, it's like they have a certificate of qualifications for life, you'll have…, unless you mess up a lot, unless you're the kind of person who never applies yourself…

Mauro uses the image of a certificate of qualifications, something which functions like a document that publicly establishes individuals' skills at the moment when they take their places in society (although he uses the term 'life' giving this experience a much broader connotation). In some ways the idea of a certificate of qualifications brings to mind the concept of public and psychological wage that Du Bois uses

in 'Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880' to describe the situation of white workers in comparison with that of black workers. According to Du Bois, this is a kind of symbolic wage in the sense that identifying with whiteness carries with it a series of advantages that apply even to those in the lower social classes, and are therefore not necessarily economic. Whiteness is therefore described as an advantage, even though Mauro does not view it in these terms:

> So do you think we could say that the fact of being considered white is an advantage?
>
> It's strange, I'm not sure you'll be able to understand, or if I'll be able to say something that makes sense: I don't think that being white is an advantage, but I think that being black is a huge disadvantage. I don't think that being white is an advantage, actually the job market is really competitive, here in Rio there are so few positions, just being white doesn't guarantee you anything.

In this excerpt we see an eloquent shift that allows us to understand the mechanism through which the perception of whiteness is constructed. Although Mauro just described the condition of whiteness as akin to having a certificate of qualifications for life, he now overturns the situation: by focusing on the situation of black people, Mauro effectively erases the advantages enjoyed by white people as if the disadvantages faced by black people were not the direct result of the existence of advantages reserved for white people. Similarly Silva Bento writes that 'the recognition of a black lack is part of whiteness, that is, the entirety of the features that define the identity of a white person; however, the other side of the coin, that is a recognition of white privilege, is not part of whiteness' (1999, 28). This mechanism through which the white person, in a manner of speaking, steps offstage and leaves the black person to take the leading role is very common and involves a missing or partial awareness of the consequences of one's own whiteness, which takes the form of an inability to express what it means to be classified as white. In Mauro's case, one sees a person who is able to perceive some of the consequences of being identified as white, but who at the same time is reluctant to recognize all of its implications. This also functions as a form of defense; later in the interview Mauro states that he does not believe that being white gave him advantages in his life.

Pedro, 49 years old, a researcher in a prestigious research institute, offers another kind of response. Pedro is one of the interviewees who displayed the most difficulty in giving content to whiteness.

- If you had to choose, what features would you say make a white man white?

That's a hard one…From my point of view…It's…(pause). I know that people who…(hesitation) who have, a whole…That is, historically we live in a privileged situation, right? It's always been that way in Brazil, because of the entire history of Brazil.

In this response, Pedro carries out a shift that allows him to identify with whites and to acknowledge a privileged condition that is deeply rooted in Brazil's history as the distinguishing characteristic of whiteness. As with other interviewees, Pedro references Brazilian nation-building in order to give content to whiteness, identifying the origins of the privileges that white people enjoy in this historical past.

In her ethnography, Le Wita refers to Barthes' definition of the bourgeoisie, which struck me as particularly useful for understanding some of the facets of whiteness in my interviews: 'the bourgeoisie is the social class which does not want to be named' (Barthes 1994, 219). In the same way one could say that white is the color that does not want to be named. Barthes' definition is fitting for the way it highlights this aspect, which he defines as the defection of the term bourgeoisie; this refusal to speak the word does not, however, mean that they are not conscious of

their bourgeois status. A similar situation can also be observed in the case of whiteness: it is not named as such – the word produces disorientation and a mix of curiosity and discomfort – but the interviewees know that they constitute part of a category which they view as something taken for granted. What struck me about the interviews is precisely this two-fold tendency to not speak about whiteness per se while at the same time being conscious of occupying this position perceived as normal, or, one might even say, natural. This seems to be a typical trait of dominant groups in that they are accustomed to seeing – and defining – other groups as specific while considering their own social positions to be self-evident, taken for granted, inherent in their own family histories and biographies (Guillaumin [1972] 2002 and Le Wita 1988). Like upper middle class and aristocratic status, whiteness expresses a dominant position of which its occupants are simultaneously aware and yet not aware. What emerges from the interviews is precisely this strange balance between the perception of one's own privileged position and the simultaneous refusal to develop a full awareness of the consequences of it.

Conclusion

The social universe that emerges from analyses of the biographical narratives of my interviewees is one in which relations with people identi-

fied as black are limited to subjects occupying a subaltern position. In some cases there are black class-mates or friends, but they are exceptional. During the interviews, the men reference mixing as a characteristic feature of Brazil, but this mixing does not appear in the narrative mapping of their social lives. In order to understand how the social separation of color-based social groups can coexist with the valorisation of mixing, one must take into account the combination of the valorisation of mixing on one hand and the deeply rooted valorisation of whiteness (the ideology of *branqueamento*) on the other. This separation between color-based groups also helps us to understand the difficulties faced by my interviewees when responding to questions about whiteness.

Despite the Brazilian tendency to avoid clear cut color definitions, the main characteristic of the men I interviewed is that they are sure of their social position as whites: they are subjects who do not have to prove their whiteness. Although they all recall their foreign familial origins, the interviews show that they have family histories in which their relatives always identified themselves as white. At the same time, however, whiteness appears as a fleeting object in the definitions they offered.

Although my questions offered a constructivist approach to the definition of a white man and whiteness, some responses revealed how physical features (white skin and straight hair) are sufficient for the definition of whiteness. For other respondents, in contrast, whiteness appears in the interviews as a set of privileges rooted in class or Brazilian history, but seldom as a privilege in itself that is reproduced in the present. whiteness is like a privilege that one inherits, but interviewees do not take into account the possibility that they might decide what to do with this inheritance. Through this perspective, interviewees are able to avoid feeling personal complicity with the system that grants these privileges, that is to say, with racism; they are able to see themselves as occupying a passive position even while acknowledging their privileges. As Ahmed (2004) points out, acknowledging the privilege of whiteness is not in itself sufficient cause to leave it behind. The central issue that emerges regards the perceived legitimacy of their own privileged social condition. Legitimacy can here be understood as a synonym for inevitability. Talking about inequalities of gender, class and race, Acker notes how visibility is related to legitimacy: 'legitimate manifestations of inequality tend to be either invisible or to be seen as inevitable' (2004, 206).

It is additionally important to note how, in the excerpts examined here, the register of class represents a device to omit not only color but also gender. In these excerpts, there is a subject who introduces himself as neutral and describes a world in

which sex difference remains unnoticed. This discursive modality reveals how the combination of whiteness and masculinity allows these men to identify themselves with the norm, thus producing a discourse that is doubly dominant.[24]

The men I interviewed tend to define their social position by class, failing to consider the fact that each one of them also perceives himself to be white. The tendency to use class as a marker for defining their own whiteness takes on additional meaning when one considers the historic Brazilian tendency to consider class more relevant than color. For interviewees, class seems to represent the only register through which it is possible to name the advantaged position from which they come and in which they live. While class is described as something more tangible and objective, whiteness remains elusive and impossible to put into words. Speaking of class becomes a way for these white men to reproduce the hegemonic character of whiteness and its invisibility, which, however, only functions as such for white people.

Acknowledgements

Endnotes

[1] For example, see Hasenbalg 1979; Hasenbalg and Silva 1992; Guimarães 1999 and 2002a; Paixão 2003; Araújo and Scalon 2005; Bruschini, 2007. The texts cited here are only a few examples of an extensive literature that focus on the position of the most discriminated social groups. However, through a comparison of the quantitative and qualitative data, the figure of the upper-middle class white man is revealed as enjoying the greatest level of privilege of both social and economic status. This privilege is the result of the combination of racism, sexism and class inequalities understood as social and cultural systems.

[2] According to a recent research, the A class comprises 82,3% Whites and 17,7 Blacks. http://www.bbc.co.uk/portuguese/noticias/2011/11/111116_saude_negros_brasil_mm.shtml, accessed 23/11/11.

[3] Additional aspects of this investigation (the choice to work on whiteness and the social construction of masculinity) are addressed in Ribeiro Corossacz 2010 and Ribeiro Corossacz 2010a. In another forthcoming article I examine how the intersection of class, color and sex shapes some of my interviewees' experiences of whiteness.

[4] Translated from the French métis, this was a racist term used to indicate those born from sexual relationships between mainly Portu-

guese men and indigenous women or between Portuguese men and African slaves.

5 Please see Ribeiro Corossacz 2005 for a more extensive discussion of the debate surrounding the statute of 'racial' groups that comprise the Brazilian population between the eighteen and nineteen hundreds as part of the national identity formation process.

6 See Wade (2001, 2005) for an analysis of the inclusive and exclusive aspects of *mestiçagem* (mestizaje) as a nationalist ideology and a lived process in other Latin American societies.

7 In his analysis of Brazilian colonial history, Freyre (1933) contributed significantly to the affirmation and diffusion of the image of Brazil as a country whose national identity is founded on the valorisation of *mestiçagem*, negating the violent character of Portuguese colonialism.

8 However *pardo* is not used by Brazilians in everyday life color classification.

9 Multiple authors have studied the characteristics of the color classification system in Brazil, including Pierson [1942] 1971, Nogueira [1955] 1998, Harris and Kottack 1963, Sanjek 1971, Silva 1994, Telles 2003, Sansone 2003.

10 http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/nov/17/brazil-census-african-brazilians-majority.

11 In developing this research, certain texts on racism were especially useful to understand whiteness: Guillaumin [1972] 2002, Tabet 1997, Sherover-Marcuse 2011. For an introduction to critical whiteness studies, see Frankenberg 1999, Nayak 2007, Twine Winddance and Gallagher 2008. One must also recall that the black feminists were the first to recognize whiteness as an element of racism and to outline its characteristics (Lorde 2007).

12 Sovik defends the use of the category 'whiteness' 'to understand the Brazilian discourse about racial relations' (2004, 364). Ware also supports the idea that whiteness, identified as social prestige, allows us to locate racism in Brazil in relation to that of other countries (2004, 8).

13 Most people think that whiteness is related to race, and consider race to be a biological fact, that is to say, an objective fact rather than a historical and social fact.

14 According to my investigations, the following authors have addressed whiteness: Guerreiro Ramos 1957, Silva Bento 1999, Rossato and Gesser 2001, Piza 2000 and 2003, Norvell 2002, Carone and Silva Bento 2003, Sovik 2004 and 2010, Cardoso 2010, Huijg 2011.

[15] These statistics date from 2007 and are drawn from the Rio de Janeiro government website www.armazemdedados.rio.rj.gov.br.

[16] The interviews were carried out in 2009.

[17] In relation to this point it bears noting that under no circumstances did my color categorizations of the informants diverge from the categorizations given by the people who indicated them to me, or from the self-classifications of the interviewees themselves. There was therefore a correspondence between the three points of view, which lead me to believe that a rather unanimous consensus exists when identifying a certain kind of white person, one occupying a middle class position.

[18] I would like to point out that invisibilisation is not the same as invisibility: white people are visible, especially to non-whites, but they tend to not be represented as whites because of the discourse about *mestiçagem*.

[19] Frankenberg also highlighted the risks and limitations of the definition of whiteness as an unmarked marker: 'The more we scrutinizes it, however, the more the notion of whiteness as unmarked norm is revelead to be a mirage or indeed, to put it even more strongly, a white delusion' (2001, 73). On whiteness as an unmarked marker, see also Frankenberg 2004.

[20] This (often unconscious) perception about what makes a legitimate research object is shared by the researchers who have often chosen research objects that are problematic in terms of social and institutional dynamics.

[21] The names are pseudonyms.

[22] Comlurb is the municipal company in charge of urban sanitation in Rio de Janeiro.

[23] In Ribeiro Corossacz 2007 and Ribeiro Corossacz 2010, I examine the potential effects of university affirmative actions for black and pardo students on the perception of whiteness in the public discourse.

[24] In Portuguese, the question 'what makes a white man white' does not require the word 'man', seeing as adjectives are made to agree with the gender of the subject. Nonetheless, the word 'branco' is still used, which is at once masculine and supposedly gender neutral.

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