Racial Malleability and the Sensory Regime of Politically Conscious Brazilian Hip Hop

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R e s u m o

Ao examinar as práticas corporais de jovens pobres do sexo masculino afiliados ao hip hop politicamente consciente no Brasil na virada do Século XXI, esse artigo revisa os conhecimentos atuais sobre a “flexibilidade racial” no Brasil. Primeiro, discuto uma variedade de exemplos globais e históricos que mostram como o corpo é percebido como racialmente flexível, incluindo teorias eugênicas do Século XX e estudos dos contextos coloniais, nos quais as populações brancas e de cor foram submetidas a regimes sensoriais que potencialmente tiveram o poder de alterar sua aparência física. Logo, sugiro que os rappers brasileiros demonstram flexibilidade racial à medida que eles alteram a estética dos seus corpos, seus padrões de consumo e práticas linguísticas. Em uma era de alto intercâmbio comercial com os Estados Unidos e influência cultural norte americana jovens brasileiros pobres do sexo masculino utilizam da construção de conexões (contestadas) com os Estados Unidos e com a modernidade global para mudar sua aparência racial em uma escala onde a branquitude e a falta de branquitude se encontram em posições relativas entre si. [afro-latinos, Brasil, juventude, música, raça]

A b s t r a c t

Examining the bodily practices of poor male youth who affiliated with politically conscious Brazilian hip hop at the turn of the 21st century, this article reworks current understandings of the “flexibility” of race in Brazil. I first draw on examples from a range of global and historical contexts that show how bodies come to be understood as racially malleable, including 20th century theories of eugenics and studies of colonial contexts in which white and nonwhite populations have been exposed to new sensory regimes that could potentially alter their racial appearance. Next, I suggest that Brazilian rappers demonstrate racial malleability as they alter their bodily aesthetics, patterns
of consumption, and linguistic practices. In an era of heightened U.S. exchange and influence, poor Brazilian male youth draw on the construction of (contested) links to the United States and global modernity to shift their racial appearance on a scale of relative whiteness and nonwhiteness. [Afro-Latinos, Brazil, music, race, youth]

This article seeks to offer a new perspective on the “flexibility” of race in Brazil. I do not locate this flexibility within Brazil’s system of race and color classification (Harris 1970; Harris et al. 1993; Kamel 2006; Pierson 1942; Schwarcz 2001; Sheriff 2001); I do not attribute it to a “weak” racial consciousness or a “lack” of consciousness (Hanchard 1998; Twine 1998; Warren and Twine 2002; cf. Burdick 1998; Caldwell 2007; Conceição 2009; French 2009; Mitchell 1999; Reiter and Mitchell 2010; Santos 2010; Vargas 2006); nor do I interrogate its role in constructing a uniquely Brazilian form of racism, or racismo à brasileira (Silva 1987; see also Fry 2000; Fry et al. 2007; Maggie 2005; Sansone 2003; Silva 1998; cf. Guimarães 2006; Hanchard 1994; Vargas 2004). In order to rework how we think about race in Brazil, I draw on scholarship that falls outside of the U.S./Brazilian (or even Latin American) comparison that is, at this point, entrenched in these discussions. I turn instead to research on 20th century theories of eugenics and the various colonial contexts in which white and nonwhite populations have been exposed to new “sensory regimes” (Stoler 2002; see also Jacobs 2009) that could alter racial appearance and either facilitate racial assimilation into whiteness or threaten racial degeneration. I investigate experiences and understandings of Brazilian “flexibility” through this lens, introducing the idea that bodies are not merely racialized (or given racial meaning) but remain racially malleable through daily practices that shift how bodies are racially perceived.

To illustrate this flexibility, I draw on over 15 years of research with poor male youth who affiliated with politically conscious Brazilian hip hop at the height of its success in the late 1990s in Rio de Janeiro. This article shows how Brazilian rappers and rap fans play with the malleability of the racialized body as they alter their aesthetics, patterns of consumption, and linguistic practices. Through the development of a new sensory regime, these male youth foreground an active embodied stance against whiteness, while simultaneously constructing a kind of “modern blackness” (Sansone 2003; Thomas 2004). Appeals to racial malleability may include behaviors that heighten connections to the African diaspora, as well as ideas of “black pride” that attempt to make the body appear “darker” (Damasceno 1999; Pinho 2010; Sansone 2003). Set in an era of heightened U.S. exchange and influence, this research reveals how poor male youth in Brazil draw on the construction of (often contested) links to the United States and global modernity in order to shift their racial appearance on a scale of relative whiteness and nonwhiteness. Through this specific example, this article draws attention to the

Racial Malleability and the Sensory Regime 295
racial “flexibility” that all Brazilians demonstrate as they embrace daily practices intended to alter the racial meaning of their bodies.

“Diploma of Whiteness”: Racial Malleability in and beyond Brazil

Within the confines of the familiar U.S./Brazilian comparison, race is determined either by marca or origem (Nogueira 1985)—that is, by the whiteness or blackness phenotypically displayed on the body (Silva 1998), or by “blood,” biology, and known racial ancestry (Davis 1991). Yet the reading of racialized bodies has never been this self-evident or clear-cut. In her study of material consumption and culture in the U.S. antebellum South, Bridget Heneghan (2003) observes that white skin was unreliable as a sign of racial purity or the actual “whiteness” of the body, even among the wealthy. Instead, whiteness hinged on unceasing attention to the body and its “things.” White things, including material goods that extended the white body, signified whiteness through the demonstrated care lavished upon them: teeth needed to be brushed, houses needed to be freshly whitewashed, white porcelain tea cups needed to be kept clean, and free of chips or cracks. Only through the careful performance of these daily rituals and routines could people make a claim to true whiteness.

Along similar lines, in her pioneering work on race within colonial regimes, Stoler describes how daily acts such as clothing, language, and even posture conveyed colonial versus “native” sensibilities. When European children raised in the colonies acquired a tendency to rest on their haunches (instead of sitting on chairs), Europeans in the metropole actively worried about racial degeneration and loss of whiteness (Stoler 2002:120). Across the globe, then, essentialized notions of racial potential suggested that white people should demonstrate proper comportment and composure, but this did not guarantee that dangerous tropical environments or excessive and inappropriate contact with nonwhite people could not cause a loss of whiteness—as much for European colonial elites as for light-skinned poor people in the American South. Poor U.S. whites have long been described as white “trash”—a social category that marks the failure of some white people to live up to the social class standards associated with whiteness (Hartigan 1999, 2005; Wray 2006). Along similar lines in Brazil, Fischer (2004) finds that poor whites attempting to legally defend themselves in court in the mid-20th century, who did not possess state documents, legal employment, decent housing, or strong character witnesses, could also “sink” to the level of black people, becoming “quase pretos de tão pobres” (almost black because they were so poor)—a phrase first coined by Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil (1993) in the song “Haiti.”

The transnational eugenics movement of the early 20th century was, in fact, all about fears of a possible loss of whiteness. Backed by Lamarckian ideas that
environmentally based conditions were ultimately inheritable, nation states and individuals engaged in the active manipulation or “improvement” of the racial body. In order to help preserve racial purity, advertisers, popular magazines, academics, and state agents influenced by eugenic theories all offered instruction in behaviors of hygiene, health, lifestyle, and consumption (Cogdell 2004; Fender 2006; Rafter 2006). Under eugenic beliefs, self-improvement (of oneself and one’s family) was explicitly linked to “race betterment” (Dorey 1999), and racial degeneration or decline was always possible. Seemingly “white” people could knowingly and unknowingly lose their whiteness—based solely on environment, behavior, and bodily practices (Boddy 2005).

Racial malleability is revealed not only through a colonial or eugenic focus on the potential loss of whiteness for people of European descent, but also through assimilationist policies under which racial “others” could gain partial whiteness through proper training and discipline (Dávila 2003; Jacobs 2009). In fact, ideas about the inherent differences in racial “potential” combined with notions of racial malleability were often critical to the subjugation of nonwhite populations. Colonial regimes, missionaries, and nation states sought to “civilize” nonwhite subjects through explicit instruction of “manners and discipline in the comportment of the self and the practice of everyday life” (Burke 1996: 39; see also Dávila 2003). For example, as Jacobs (2009) vividly describes in her study of Australian and U.S. federal boarding schools, indigenous youth were indoctrinated into “white” behaviors in order to facilitate their assimilation into mainstream white society. White control included the introduction of racial others to new sensory regimes that would alter their physical appearance, their sensory experience of the world around them, and common sense notions about their bodies:

From the moment indigenous children arrived in the institutions, white authorities sought to abruptly scrub away the children’s prior identities and to immerse them in a new way of life. They carried this out by focusing on the children’s bodies, including their sensory experiences, and on closely monitoring and regulating the most mundane activities . . . The quotidian and the intimate became premier sites of colonization, not mere backdrops for more dramatic political and military events (Jacobs 2009:230; my emphasis).

In Brazil, national policies of assimilation, encouraged miscegenation, and whitening (Skidmore 1993), suggested that nonwhiteness was something to be feared and minimized, not just within the body politic but also within the individual Brazilian body. In the early 20th century, hot on the pursuit of “modernity” and armed with the racial logic of “soft” eugenics (including Lamarckian ideas on the importance of one’s environment), the Brazilian state actively embraced the idea that race could be improved through guidance in daily disciplines of health and hygiene acquired within public schools—resulting in what Dávila (2003)
describes as a “diploma of whiteness.” Racial improvement in Brazil—for the nation and for the individual—was thus not only possible but also practicable through instruction in “behavioral whitening: that is, discarding African and indigenous cultural practices” (Dávila 2003:27; see also Hanchard 1994). Dávila’s study also brings to mind the informal Brazilian classification of darker-skinned individuals as socialmente branco (socially white) due to their higher level of education and behavioral refinement.

The legacy of embranquecimento (whitening) continues to influence how Brazilians attempt to manipulate their racial appearance and “manage” the stigma of blackness (Sansone 2003; see also Pinho 2009, 2010). For example, studies have documented the ways that individuals seek to improve themselves through practices and procedures that alter the visual signifiers of race: this includes the use of skin lighteners, hair straighteners, and cosmetic surgery operations such as rhinoplasty, which offer an “alleviation of African traits” (Edmonds 2010:161) negatively associated with blackness. Segato similarly discusses a Brazilian’s capacity to achieve bodily whiteness through the elimination of the blackness that “impregnates” it (1998:147). Historically, black consciousness groups and some of today’s NGOs have endorsed and continue to teach daily hygiene habits to improve the self-esteem and opportunities open to Brazilians of visible African descent (Alberto 2011; Davis 1999; Dzidzienyo 1971; Jones-de Oliveira 2003; Nascimento and Nascimento 1992). This management of bodily appearance, hygiene, and manners all feed into the construction of boa aparência (literally, “a good appearance”)—a requirement that was at one time commonly mentioned in job advertisements to indicate a preference for whiteness that included not only physical appearance but also proper bodily discipline (Caldwell 2007; Damasceno 1999, 2000). The ability to speak standard Portuguese (Edmonds 2010:45) and to control o cheiro de negro, “black smell” (Pinho 2010:108), have also been critical elements of a “good” appearance and the sensory regime associated with whitening. As anthropologist Livio Sansone similarly notes, dark-skinned Brazilians manage more than their visual appearance when trying to reduce the effects of racism, “by speaking intelligently, being polite, looking attractive, and showing off status symbols” (2003:107–108). Indeed, individual attempts to achieve boa aparência, a sensory regime supported by the Brazilian state, allow us to think through Stoler’s provocative claim that race is “not really a visual ideology at all” (2002:84). Thus, we can begin to reconceptualize race as both malleable and constructed through various sensory modalities.

Consuming Modernity and Whiteness through Sensory Regimes

The notion of racial malleability is demonstrated not only within colonial regimes, eugenic theories, and other situations of enforced racial hierarchy, but also in the
circulation of commodities under global capitalism. Here, commodities and acts of proper consumption feed a preference for whiteness and a desire for bodily transformation (Burke 1996; Domosh 2006). Several important studies that discuss the construction of whiteness from the Andes to Papua New Guinea remind us that commodities help construct race through the ways that they alter bodies (Bashkow 2006; Weismantel 2001; Weismantel and Eisenman 1998). Just as soap, perhaps colonization’s quintessential commodity, spread cleanliness with its links to civilization and whiteness throughout the 19th and 20th centuries (Burke 1996; McClintock 1995), other commodities—from Heinz ketchup to Singer sewing machines—circled the globe with similar promises of racial improvement, offering “progress” through the purchase and use of U.S. products (Domosh 2006). The consumption of these goods thus defined specific sensory regimes, altering how bodies looked and—perhaps more critically—how people came to experience their own bodies.

Consumption helps create whiteness within and across national borders, as white wealthy consumers define themselves in relation to the racialized bodies of those who labor to produce goods and services for them and cannot afford such luxuries themselves (Seigel 2009). Along similar lines, O’Dougherty (2002) documents how trips to Disney World and U.S. shopping sprees became a rite of passage for whiter and wealthier Brazilian youth, particularly in the 1990s after the stabilization of the Brazilian currency. These goods and these transnational connections helped the Brazilian elite and middle class to establish themselves as “suitably modern” (Liechty 2002). At the same time, blackness represents the less cosmopolitan, more primitive/backwards, and financially impoverished Other who cannot consume (Sansone 2003) or who fails to consume “properly” (see Chin 2001). For many of the poor, dark-skinned youth of Rio’s social periphery, participation in hip hop culture seemed to offer opportunities to participate in modernity through daily acts of (global) consumption. Both Livio Sansone (2003) and Deborah Thomas (2004) document the rise of “modern blackness” in Brazil and Jamaica, respectively, where youthful black bodies could be fashioned, altered, and “made modern” through associations with global culture.

In Street Dreams and Hip Hop Barbershops, Brad Weiss (2009) offers another example of how bodily aesthetics and consumption patterns help youth in economically developing countries construct modern selves. Weiss describes how small but ubiquitous barbershops in urban Tanzania give their stores English names like Boyz II Men and Brooklyn Barber House and cover their walls and front doors with larger-than-life Dennis Rodman posters and glossy magazine cutouts of other African American celebrities. Through their participation in public rituals of hair care, poor East African youth display their ability to consume, as they simultaneously insert their bodies into a global “exchange” of aesthetics. The fashioning of racialized and gendered selves is critical to a person’s status as modern, and yet
commodities and acts of consumption do more than just alter a sense of self in the world: “They literally changed how bodies appeared, how they were ‘worked on and through,’ how they were fashioned, fragmented, abstracted, and calibrated to the seasons, or even, as some hoped, permanently transformed” (Weinbaum et al. 2008:18). In line with these studies, and with Besnier’s observation that consumption and the modification of bodies constitute critical sites for people’s “everyday engagements with modernity” (2011:232), I explore how rappers and rap fans play with the racial malleability of their bodies in ways that maximize their connections to U.S. blackness.

In what follows, I draw on an analysis of politically conscious rap lyrics, participant observation research, and interviews with rappers and rap fans to describe how consumption has become an important part of the sensory regime of modern blackness. I am interested in the ways in which poor male youth embrace daily practices—including consumption, aesthetics, and language—to work on their bodies both to influence how they are “read” by others and to alter their understandings of themselves. Focusing on modern blackness as a contemporary project of bodily and racial transformation, I ask: in what ways, and through what sensory modalities, do Brazilian male rappers attempt to change the racial appearance of their bodies? How have the media and the white upper classes responded to youth’s claims to modern blackness? And finally, how do these youth deepen our understanding of racial malleability through daily alterations to their appearance on a scale of relative whiteness and nonwhiteness?

Making Modern Blackness

During my fieldwork in Rio de Janeiro in 1998, the São Paulo-based rap group Racionais MC’s (The Rationals) catapulted to national success with their platinum album Sobrevivendo no Inferno (Surviving in Hell). Although the group had been around since the start of Brazilian hip hop in the 1980s, this album took politically conscious rap in Brazil to new heights, winning national MTV awards and launching the success of like-minded rap groups from Brasilia to Rio de Janeiro. Unlike the more commercially driven rappers that became successful after 2000, Racionais MC’s fill their lyrics with searing condemnations of Brazilian racism and socioeconomic inequality. Politically conscious rappers are especially influenced by U.S. civil rights-inspired themes and the U.S. black–white racial binary. This includes an embrace of the confrontational stance that Brazilians readily associate with U.S. race relations—a stance that directly contradicts the Brazilian preference for racismo cordial (cordial racism) (Fry 1995/96; Sansone 2003; cf. Hanchard 1994). Under the logic of racismo cordial, individuals downplay racial differences
that might lead to conflict or disagreement. As an example of this, one public high school student refused to honor my request for racial classification on a written linguistic survey that asked about various slang terms and ended with a section for personal information such as age, gender, and socioeconomic background. The light-skinned female youth bypassed the printed options that offered racial census categories to write in, “[Soul] Brasileira (o que importa a cor)” ([I am] Brazilian (what does color matter)). Her suggestion, that one either chooses a race or one chooses to be Brazilian, helps explain the nonconformist and anti-establishment stance of rappers who politically identify as negros conscientes (conscious black people) or negros assumidos (people who embrace a black identity).

Excerpt 1 provides an example from one of Racionais MC’s (1998) most famous songs, Capítulo 4, Versículo 3 (Chapter 4, 3rd Verse—referring both to the Bible and to the third track on their fourth album):

Excerpt 1: “Efeito colateral” (Collateral effect)

1 Seu comercial de TV não me engana
2 Eu não preciso de status, nem fama
3 Seu carro e sua grana já não me seduz
4 E nem a sua puta de olhos azuis
5 Eu sou apenas um rapaz latino americano
6 Apoiaído por mais de 50 mil manos
7 Efeito colateral que o seu sistema fez
8 Racionais capítulo 4, versículo 3

1 Your TV commercial does not fool me
2 I do not need status, or fame
3 Your car and your money do not seduce me anymore
4 Nor does your blue-eyed whore
5 I am just a Latin American guy
6 Supported by more than 50 thousand manos [black brothers]
7 Collateral effect that your system made
8 Racionais chapter 4, 3rd verse

In these lyrics, Racionais MC’s critique the whiteness of mainstream Brazilian TV and of Brazil’s most famous female celebrities (“your blue-eyed whore,” in line 4), and hint at the potential of racial solidarity among disenfranchised black male youth (“50 thousand manos”, in line 6). Politically conscious Brazilian hip hop’s bold rejection of cordial racism and assimilation, or whitening, is articulated most clearly in their embrace of a U.S. black–white binary and personified in the iconic male figures of the mano (black brother) and his rival, the playboy (white wealthy male youth). The polarizing nature of this perceived racial divide has been critiqued by Brazilian academics and the Brazilian public alike (Caldeira 2006; Sansone 2003). Rather than assessing the accuracy of these interpretations of Brazilian race relations, however, I am interested in interrogating how the bodily transformations associated with politically conscious hip hop merge an active embodied stance against whiteness and a strong desire to be understood as “modern,” with a sophisticated understanding of the possibilities of racial malleability.

This bodily transformation—and its relationship to race—is often explicitly addressed by rappers and rap fans. At one rap concert I attended in April 1998, I spoke with rappers before the show and then recorded the segments in between
songs, in which performers spoke directly to the audience either to introduce an upcoming song or to energize the crowd. In Excerpt 2, Mano Brown, the lead singer for Racionais MC’s, addresses his carioca (Rio de Janeiro-based) audience, predominantly other poor male favela youth, before singing one of their older and more well-known songs *Hey [Play]boy* (1990).

Excerpt 2: “Nós somos todo uma revolução” (We are all a revolution)

1 Nós somos todo uma revolução, só, falá mano?
2 A revolução da atitude, tá ligado?
3 Eu tenho um maior orgulho, morô? De usar minha bombeta, de usar minha jaqueta, morô, mano?
4 De cortar o cabelo assim, porque essa é minha vida, tá ligado? Eu não preciso usar topete para imitar playboy,
5 [gritos, aplausos] morô mano? Tá ligado, [ovacação] minha vida é essa, môro?
6 [white, middle-class male youth]

Here, Mano Brown describes the bodily aesthetics and patterns of consumption that define the sensory regime of the mano—a decidedly masculine form of modern blackness. Visually, these include either short or braided hair, baseball or ski caps, and oversized baggy clothing—all drawn from the imagery of urban African Americans as portrayed in popular culture. Indeed, the Yankees logo is highly valued on caps and clothing, not for its reference to baseball (a sport that is poorly understood and poorly regarded in Brazil), but because it is a common marker of hip hop fashion and blackness in the United States. These hairstyle and clothing preferences allow Brazilian male youth to stake a symbolic claim to participation on a modern, global stage (see also Sansone 2003:98). In Excerpt 3, Mano Brown continues to address his audience at the show and sets his bodily aesthetics and patterns of consumption in explicit contrast to the cultural practices he associates with black people who “sell out” through their embrace of whiteness. He warns his audience about what he views as a lamentable recent shift toward assimilation or whitening among favela youth.

Excerpt 3: “Paz entre nós” (Peace among us)

1 De lá pra cá mano? De lá pra cá, vários preto sold out. A lot of blacks straightened their hair, okay
2 se vendeu. Vários preto alisou o cabelo, morô? 3 brother? A lot of blacks started listening to
3 mano? Vários preto curtiu New Wave. 4 A lot of blacks turned into rock fans.
4 New Wave. Vários preto virou roqueiro. 5 A lot of brothers betrayed the nation okay brother?
5 Vários mano traiu nação morô mano? 6 But the thing is, rap is my life,
6 Mas então é o seguinte, porque o rap é a minha vida, 7 morô? É minha gíria, minha bombeta, meu estilo de vida. É o que eu sei fazer. É o que me deu força para tá aqui até hoje, morô?
7 vida. É o que eu sei fazer. É o que me deu
8 força para tá aqui até hoje, morô?
9 [white, middle-class male youth]
10 Paz entre nós. Foda-se os playboys!
10 Peace among us. Fuck the playboys!

1 We are all a revolution, that’s it, right brother?
2 The revolution of attitude, you know what I am saying? I take a lot of pride, okay? In wearing my cap, in wearing my jacket, okay, brother?
3 In cutting my hair like this, because this is my life, you know what I am saying? I do not need to have a wavy forelock of hair to imitate a *playboy*.
4 [shouts, applause] okay brother? You know what I mean?
5 I’m saying, [loud applause] my life is this, okay?
“Selling out,” according to these rappers, involves straightening hair to achieve what is commonly called *cabelo bom* (good hair, a key aspect of *boa aparência*), in contrast to *cabelo ruim* (bad or kinky hair)—the type of hair associated with people of African descent, as well as listening to white music, such as rock and roll or New Wave. In another rap song entitled *Pare de Babar (o ovo de Playboy)* (Stop Sucking Up (to Playboys), Rio rapper M.V. Bill (1999) sharply criticizes youth who look black but act white (“préto por fora, branco por dentro”) due to their participation in “white” sports such as surfing and their presence in “white” spaces such as expensive dance clubs. *Manos* and *playboys* are therefore not just set up as race and class opposites—poor black brothers versus white, wealthy male youth—nor do they illustrate a literal interpretation of a U.S. black–white racial binary. Poor *favela* youth can also be accused of trying to act like *playboys*, and the racial classification of these figures relies neither on U.S. narratives of ancestry nor on a Brazilian reading of phenotype or physical appearance. As just one example of this, *manos* and *playboys* are identified not by the natural texture of their hair but by the way they wear it. Embodying the *mano* entails a manipulation of various sensory modalities that alter one’s look, sound, and comportment.

Even posture and demeanor lend racial connotations along a white/nonwhite scale. The aggressive stance of the *mano*—most clearly expressed in Mano Brown’s parting shot in line 10 above, “Paz entre nós, Foda-se os playboys!” (Peace among us. Fuck the playboys!), is meant to signal his opposition to *playboys* and to whiteness, and yet the posture and comportment of a “racially empowered” *mano* is also juxtaposed with the *negro comportado/acomodado* (unassuming, assimilated, and well-behaved black person). In most cases, the album covers of politically conscious Brazilian rap groups showcase rappers in the tough, irreverent, “hard” poses that are typical of nonwhite American rappers. As Derek Pardue notes of Brazilian rap, “hip hop masculinity is about fashioning and displaying hard bodies and hardened faces” (2008:146). On the cover of his CD, M.V. Bill (1999) stands shirtless and unsmiling, displaying a muscular chest and a large tattoo. As with the aggressively cold and distancing stares Mano Brown is famous for, M.V. Bill’s physical posture is uncompromising and threatening in order to foreground the challenge he intends to pose to “the system.”

A nonconformist and irreverent stance can also be conveyed linguistically, and politically conscious rappers fill their lyrics with aggressive profanity and *gíria* (slang) that violates the grammatical and discourse rules of *a norma culta* (the standard language). Their linguistic “rebellion” can be read as characteristic of the lack of discipline often associated with nonwhiteness. In Excerpt 4, taken from the song *Diário de um Detento* (Diary of an Inmate) by Racionais MC’s (1998), Mano Brown narrates the voice of a criminal who has second thoughts about his life and his actions; the inmate’s voice is created through the use of highly nonstandard speech.
Excerpt 4: “Não tem pâ, não tem pum” (There’s no pâ, there’s no pum)

1 Não, já, já, meu processo tá aí
2 Eu quero mudar, eu quero sair
3 Se eu trombo esse fulano, não tem pâ, não tem pum
4 E eu vou ter que assinar um cento e vinte e um [lei contra homicídios]
1 No, it is done, it is done, my life is like this
2 I want to change it, I want to get out
3 If I take out [kill] this guy, there’s no pâ [sound word], there’s no pum [sound word]
4 And I will have to sign [plead guilty to] the 121 [law against homicide]

The use of sound words such as pâ and pum (representing gun shots) as lexical place holders (Roth-Gordon 2007b) is just one example of how rappers linguistically take up an anti-establishment stance that is intended to darken their appearance—in part by associating them with the sounds of criminality and in part by distancing themselves from the proper speech associated with Brazilian schools, “high” culture, and boa aparência.10 While Brazilian youth often cannot understand the lyrics of U.S. rap songs, they are aware that African American rappers fill their songs with slang and profanity to create a different “sound” from white entertainers (both musically and linguistically). Brazilian rappers—and the rap fans who embrace their lyrics and style through daily practices (Roth-Gordon 2012)—do not connect themselves to African Americans and U.S. urban ghettos through visual appearance alone. They draw on multiple semiotic practices of blackness that allow them to manipulate the racial appearance of their bodies.

Here, racial stigma is mediated through the construction of a racially empowered U.S. blackness that deliberately eschews Brazilian whitening and its implicit desire to rid the body of traces of Africanness. Through their bodily aesthetics, patterns of consumption, and linguistic practices, politically conscious Brazilian rappers embrace racial malleability to make bodies appear blacker, at the same time as they attempt to change the meaning of blackness (see also Sansone 2003). And yet, as will be discussed in the following section, the ability to create a recognizable sensory regime does not entail the ability to fully control its meaning, as is the case for hip hop worldwide.

Race Trafficking

When I met Rio rappers M.V. Bill and D.J.T.R. in 1998, before they had recorded and released their first CD, they eagerly described their chosen album title: Traficando Informação11 (Trafficking Information). They explained to me, “If you tell the truth around here, it is like you are a drug dealer.” The truths (or “information”) that rappers share include a critical perspective on Brazilian situations of inequality and violence and also introduce U.S. perspectives on race. The metaphor of trafficking playfully combines a tantalizing, illicit, and scandalous introduction of new sounds and ideas with a more sobering awareness of their inability to
completely control the terms of their own representation. Their portrayal of themselves as traffickers hints at the global and national hierarchies through which they are constructed as unauthorized and even dangerous citizens and consumers (an image they themselves play with, as discussed above). For example, their embrace of racial malleability through the construction of modern blackness is layered with, and sometimes built on, dominant interpretations that often work against their attempts to modify their racial appearance and manage the stigma of blackness. Tough angry young black men from the favela are easily read by the mainstream press and white upper classes as just another version of the lawless traficante (drug dealer) and dangerous marginal (now a common synonym for a poor black male criminal)\textsuperscript{12} who pose a threat to Brazilian society and need to be controlled.

The resentment provoked by politically conscious Brazilian hip hop includes not only a fearful and repressive reaction to their aggressive stance but also a direct rebuke of their importation or “imitation” of U.S. racial ideology. An understanding of their constant affronts to cordial racism helps to explain the controversy that ensued after the Brazilian MTV Music Video Awards in 1998, when Mano Brown made one of his first (and rare) public appearances in the mainstream media. Accepting one of two awards for their CD Sobrevivendo no Inferno (Racionais MC’s 1998), Mano Brown thanked his mother who, he said, “lavou muita roupa pra playboy pra eu tã aqui” (washed a lot of clothes for playboys so that I could be here today). His public criticism of the white middle-class and elite youth he refers to as playboys was in keeping with the lyrics he had just won awards for, but in this more mainstream setting, his remarks provoked public ire for the direct challenge he posed by explicitly referencing race and class boundaries (Roth-Gordon 2007a; see also Jabor 1998). As a result, this comment was deemed “the best phrase of 1998” by one journalist (Barcinski 1998:20) but was viewed as unnecessarily provocative and racist by many others (e.g. CT eMe 2009). In this context, I suggest that Mano Brown was treated as a “race trafficker”—someone who had illicitly and improperly imported U.S. racial conflict into Brazil (see also Bourdieu and Wacquant 1999).

This controversy evokes Brazil’s embrace of Soul in the 1970s—a historical moment commonly cited by many scholars and black organizations as critical to the start of current Brazilian racial empowerment groups (Davis 1999; Dunn 2001; Moura 1983; Nascimento and Nascimento 1992; Santos 2005; Silva 1988). In the era of Soul, poor Brazilian youth drew on African American styles of music, fashion, and bodily aesthetics—including the large iconic Afro they called cabelo black-power (black power hair)—to boldly proclaim their status as global players. In an article entitled “When Rio was Black,” historian Paulina Alberto (2009) describes how the consumption of Soul by disenfranchised youth provoked the shock and anger of many middle-class Brazilians at the time. Tracing the coverage of “Black Rio” by journalists, Alberto reveals a hidden racialized divide through which
white Brazilian rockers who consumed foreign music posed no inherent threat to themselves or others, but poor black youth who relied on “imported” style were deemed imitative, inauthentic, and dangerously un-Brazilian. For example:

For [Brazilian journalist] Tarlis Batista, soul was an ‘adhesion to musical formulas produced in an assembly line, abroad,’ and ‘could hardly suggest anything beyond the mere conformity of a simple people, unprepared perhaps to resist being bombarded with fads by the media.’ Batista concluded this after a conversation with a young black, who reportedly ‘barely knew the meaning of some of the English expressions he repeats to everyone: ‘I’m somebody,’ ‘White Power,’ ‘The Beautiful Black’—which Batista called ‘mere repetition of foreign words, with an incorrect pronunciation.’ (Alberto 2009:27)

Predating the situation I describe in the late 1990s, poor black youth’s participation in forms of global consumption of Soul constituted a challenge to the exclusive claims to modernity made by the Brazilian white elite and middle class (McCann 2002; see also Besnier 2011). Perhaps more importantly, public, media, and even scholarly reactions to Soul and politically conscious hip hop demonstrate the difficulty in demanding recognition for new (and competing) sensory regimes. As poor marginalized youth appeal to the globally powerful and modern status of African Americans and interpret U.S. racial politics, they attempt to reshape the racial appearance of their bodies, to redefine themselves as “modern” subjects, and, in so doing, to resignify the terms of blackness. Braided hair and afros attempt to rework the stigma of blackness in order to fashion “black is beautiful” bodies that outwardly reject whitening ideals. These bodies are not made lighter through acts of assimilation and the goal of boa aparência but are overtly manipulated to shape a “blacker” racial appearance. As I turn to discuss, poor male youth are aware of the dangers of trying to make themselves appear blacker; they often decide when to shift in and out of the sensory regime associated with modern blackness.

**Competing Sensory Regimes**

The rappers whom I knew well, including Rio’s M.V. Bill and D.J.T.R., explicitly viewed themselves as engaged in a struggle to raise racial consciousness and revalorize “black practices” in Brazil. However, they needed to balance their desire to reject whitening strategies and raise the prestige of blackness against dominant racial ideologies that associate whiteness with modernity while linking blackness with overall lack and inferiority (see also Sansone 2003). Thus, even with their anti-assimilationist and racially empowered stance, there were times when rappers felt compelled to not only use, but also encourage their fans to take up obvious strategies of linguistic accommodation and racial assimilation. My visit in 1998 to
their community radio station in *Cidade de Deus* (City of God), as they broadcast a live hip hop program, provided an elegant illustration of their awareness of competing sensory regimes. A visit to a community radio station most often entails a live interview, as I quickly learned, and D.J.T.R. took the opportunity to ask me to explain my research on air. As he introduced me to his audience, he began by describing in positive terms my interest in Brazilian Portuguese slang, as shown in Excerpt 5 below.

**Excerpt 5: “A nossa forma de falar” (Our own way of speaking)**

1. And she has come from far away, to do this- this study about this question, that is important and for us very interesting, right? To show that we also have our dialects, our own way of speaking, our way of communicating, and slang- it is very important for this. There are people who discriminate against slang, right Bill? But slang is important, because it is a way for us to communicate inside of our mini-society that is the community.
2. E ela veio de longe, e tá fazendo uma- um estudo em cima dessa questão, que é importante e pra gente muito interesa, né? Mostrar que a gente também tem nossos dialetos, a nossa forma de falar, nossa forma de comunicação, e a gíria- ela é muito importante pra isso. Tem gente que até discrimina a gíria, né Bill? Mas a gíria é importante, porque é uma forma da gente se comunicar dentro da nossa mini-sociedade que é a comunidade.
3. In other interviews that I had conducted, rappers had similarly affirmed their belief in using slang as a form of language that everyone could understand—as a show of solidarity and a lack of pretention, and as a way of affirming a shared motto: *Ninguém é mais que ninguém* (No one is better than anyone else). When I spoke with KLJay, the DJ for Racionais MC’s, he noted that the group only began to achieve success after they had “assumed” the language of the street (a theme that parallels their stance on “assuming one’s blackness”). This support for slang directly contradicts linguistic ideologies that uphold the prestige of standard Portuguese and simultaneously suggest that nonstandard speech, including slang, sounds impoverished, uncultured, and uneducated (see Roth-Gordon 2007b, 2009). Following D.J.T.R.’s lead, which accurately represented my respect for slang, I spoke at length praising *gíria* and claimed that it was linguistically sound and important. But to my surprise, D.J.T.R. concluded the interview with the following warning to his listeners, outlined in Excerpt 6.

**Excerpt 6: “A gíria é só pros de casa” (Slang is just for us at home)**

1. I just want to give some advice to the people on the other side [the listeners] who like to speak- a lot of slang. Unfortunately it is not our vocabulary that offers employment. It is not our vocabulary, on the level of slang, that gives- that puts food on our tables. So, slang is just for the *manos*. But when you want to try and- go after a job, man, use their Portuguese. Because if you don’t you will wind up without a job.
2. Eu só queria só dar um conselho pro pessoal do outro lado [os ouvintes] que gosta de falar- muito gíria. Infelizmente não é o nosso vocabulário que dá emprego. Não é o nosso vocabulário, a nível de gíria que dá- que põe comida dentro da nossa casa. Então, a gíria é só pros manos. Mas quando você for batalhar ai- correr atrás de emprego, cara, use o português deles mesmo. Porque se não você vai ficar sem emprego.
3. A gíria é só pros de casa.
While speakers do not always consciously manipulate their speech to construct modern blackness or a more socially acceptable *boa aparência*, this exchange illustrates an awareness that practices associated with blackness remain stigmatized, altering the body in ways that poor disenfranchised youth cannot afford. As these examples suggest (and as I have discussed elsewhere; see Roth-Gordon 2012), poor male youth constantly negotiate their presentation of self, evoking aspects of competing sensory regimes in order to manage their racial appearance vis-à-vis whiteness. This metalinguistic example hints at the awareness that youth possess about both the racial malleability of their bodies and the ways that sensory regimes organize racial meaning and mediate relationships to the body. The ability to “play” with sensory regimes (from *boa aparência* to modern blackness, and back again) does not suggest that one is always successful in the bid for a particular racial recognition or reading, nor does it suggest that all bodies are equally malleable. And yet the amount of time and energy dedicated to work on the body, found also in research by Besnier (2011) on the construction of “modern” bodies in Tonga, and by Edmonds (2010) on the importance of plastic surgery in Brazil, suggests that racial malleability matters to individuals, both in Brazil and beyond. This type of racial “flexibility” ultimately upholds a racial hierarchy that elevates whiteness and denigrates blackness, even as it never firmly locates individuals within it.

### Conclusion

Denise Ferreira da Silva has noted that, in Brazil, “[T]he ‘Other’ is the ‘Other-within,’ within anybody, any-body; any body is more or less black, more or less white, more or less both” (1998:228). This article suggests that we understand the daily practices of poor male Brazilian youth as work that is essential to the presentation of a more-or-less black body. In particular, I have explored how the aesthetics, patterns of consumption, and linguistic practices associated with politically conscious Brazilian hip hop allow youth to embrace different sensory modalities—and to construct new sensory regimes—in order to shift their racial appearance on a scale of relative whiteness and nonwhiteness. Racial malleability has been studied in terms of the changing racial classification of groups over time (e.g. Brodkin 1998) and, on the individual level, within the contexts of colonial regimes and the global eugenics movement, when whiteness was brutally enforced and white racial purity was threatened. The Brazilian context examined here throws notions of racial malleability into sharp relief and, at the same time, allows us to reinterpret Brazil’s long legacy of racial flexibility.

This article thus draws on the racial malleability of Brazilian bodies to foreground two conclusions about the ongoing construction of racial meaning. First, societies and individuals are actively, if not always consciously, involved in
organizing understandings of race through multiple sensory modalities. While folk and even scholarly accounts tend to rely on the visual signifiers associated most frequently with skin color, racial appearance has always been read through a much more complicated racial “calculus” (Harris 1970), as revealed in such common Brazilian expressions as boa aparência, socialmente branco, and quase preto de tão pobre. This observation suggests that anthropologists focus on a broader range of semiotic practices that constitute work on the body, including linguistic practices, consumption patterns, and bodily aesthetics. Second, racial appearance is never fixed—by marca or origem—but instead must be constantly negotiated through daily practice. The Brazilian lore that “we are all mixed” (DaMatta 1981) belies a racial reality (not only in Brazil) in which daily practices require individuals to position themselves—and constantly shift between—the opposing poles of whiteness and nonwhiteness. While I have attempted to shift some of the terms of the debate, I submit that Brazilian racial flexibility still has much to teach us about race and racism.

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Notes

1 Along similar lines, Pierson reports the common saying “Negro rico é branco, e branco pobre é negro” (A rich black person is white, and a poor white person is black), although he uses this to suggest that class, not race, “is the primary consideration” (1942:152). While a fuller discussion of the relationship between race and class is beyond the scope of this paper, I embrace these studies and common sayings to suggest that comportment that is often associated with socioeconomic class contributes to racial appearance.

2 The “one drop rule,” fears over interracial contact and miscegenation, and legalized racial segregation and exclusion in the United States, illustrate how blackness needed to be “managed” in the U.S. context as well, due to the risks it posed to white racial purity (Davis 1991; Haney-López 1996).

3 Sansone similarly documents that Brazilian politicians continue to “whiten” their photos in campaign materials (2003:109).

4 See also earlier studies on job advertisements from the 1940s that mentioned the desire for white employees explicitly (Nogueira 1985).

5 Transcription conventions are as follows:
   - Self-interruption; break in the word, sound abruptly cut off
   . Sentence final falling intonation

Racial Malleability and the Sensory Regime 309
Pardue (2011) describes the development of a parallel term for female rappers, the *mana*, but this was not commonly in use in Rio de Janeiro at the time of my research.

For additional discussions of “good” versus “bad” hair, see Caldwell (2007) and Jacobs-Huey (2006).

The expression *babar o ovo* (lit. “to suck the egg”) is perhaps more equivalent to the English expression “ass-kissing,” in that it makes reference to physical contact with another’s genitals.

In previous research, I have documented that these linguistic features are readily associated with *favela* residence, criminality, and blackness (see Roth-Gordon 2009).

See also Pardue (2008:44, 50) for a discussion of this term.

On the shifting understanding of “marginality” across Latin America, see Perlman (2004) and González de la Rocha et al. (2004).

See also *Capítulo 4, Versículo 3* (Chapter 4, 3rd Verse) by Racionais MC’s (1998).

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Racial Malleability and the Sensory Regime 311