

INTRODUCTION

There are too many things we do not wish to know about ourselves.

—James Baldwin (1993, 88)

Introspection as Entry Point

ON OCTOBER 28, 2018, MORE THAN FIFTY-SEVEN MILLION BRAZILIANS elected former army officer and congressman Jair Bolsonaro as president. His rise to power could be interpreted simply as a swing to the right in the electoral democracy that was established in 1985 after more than twenty years of military dictatorship. However, the eighth presidential election of the democratic period was no ordinary business. It represented a major rupture of the political order established by the 1988 constitution. After all, Bolsonaro was well known for his far-right and authoritarian politics. Between 1997 and 2018, in his seven terms in Congress as a member of the Chamber of Deputies, Bolsonaro distinguished himself through his homophobia, misogyny, racism, and support for the brutal human rights violations that took place during the military dictatorship (see Hunter and Power 2019). Riding on a strong antiestablishment sentiment, especially against the Workers' Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores, or PT) and its leader and former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (hereafter Lula), Bolsonaro built a heterogeneous movement that included evangelical churches, the military, neoliber-

als, and sectors of the judiciary and the media. His election was a significant moment of crisis in which “the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear” (Gramsci 1971, 276). Bolsonaro was and remains the morbid symptom of a complex process of democratic decay.

It is in such moments of historical crisis that academic books proliferate, trying to advance authoritative explanations about events and processes that are by nature complex and contingent. As a disclaimer, I should state from the start that this is not one of my objectives. Fearing the possibility of disappointing some of my readers, I would like to make clear that my goal is not to explain all the “causes” of the conservative revolt in Brazil and of Bolsonaro’s rise to power. They are too complex and difficult to untangle and demonstrate in a single study. This book does not consider in detail several factors that have played a significant role in the rise of the far right in Brazil, including evangelical churches (see Camurça 2019; A. Goldstein 2020), social media and digital platforms (see Davis and Straubhaar 2020; Santos Junior 2019), and the partisan alliances between the media and horizontal agencies of accountability in the “Car Wash” anticorruption operation (see Albuquerque and Gagliardi 2020; Campello et al. 2020; Damgaard 2019), just to name a few. I have a more limited, although no less imperative, purpose. To explain it, I deploy introspection as a critical tool to uncover and understand not only my identity and scholarship but also the historical processes that are the subject of this book. As Patricia Pinho (2009) observed, feminist approaches have long argued that the disclosure of family memories and personal experiences can advance the theorization and understanding of racialized and gendered forms of privilege. It is with this goal in mind that I present this prologue as an examination of my personal experiences and subjectivity.

Because whiteness and middle-class identity are the subject of this book, in it I interrogate the identity of a dominant social group. Brazil’s overwhelmingly white middle class was a key protagonist of Bolsonaro’s rise to power, and I claim that the intersection of race and class is central to understanding the country’s process of democratic decay. I also argue that the media have played an important role in constructing and consolidating whiteness as an identity for generations of middle-class Brazilians. My analytical perspective derives not only from my academic background but also from my experiences as a white middle-class subject and as a member of networks of middle-class friends and families. When witnessing with dismay the political crisis that started in 2013 and that culminated with Bolsonaro’s 2018 rise to power, some questions struck me as particularly puzzling: How could the Brazilian middle class, including people in my family and friendship networks, support with

such enthusiasm a political leader who was so openly authoritarian? What was the source of their anger and resentment? What went “wrong”?

The more I thought about these questions and interrogated my own life, the more I understood that I should not have been surprised. My privileged position as a white, middle-class man in a hierarchical and deeply unequal society could have served me well in understanding the nature of the conservative revolt in motion. However, the ideological power of whiteness lies exactly in how it renders itself invisible. In Brazil, as in many other contexts, white people do not feel they belong to a group and tend to exercise their privileges while silent about racial matters (Corossacz 2018, 1–2; Sheriff 2001; Sovik 2009, 15). Even when their research focuses on race, white Brazilian scholars do not interrogate whiteness and define racism as a problem that Black people face, therefore neglecting the involvement of white people in the creation and reproduction of racial inequality (L. Cardoso 2020). The goal of this section is to break this silence by relating my life trajectory to the conservative backlash that took place in Brazil and to develop the analytical perspective adopted in the book.

My parents were born and raised in Pocinhos, a small city in the state of Paraíba, in Brazil’s Northeast. The Northeast is a heterogeneous region, with significant internal social differences, but it is generally characterized by a semiarid interior, rural economies, widespread poverty, and domination by traditional oligarchies, especially landowners (T. Araújo 2004). The Northeast was originally the economic and political center of Portuguese colonization, but it was later marginalized by a process of industrialization and urbanization concentrated in the Southeast, especially in the main metropolitan areas of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. As millions of *nordestinos* (northeasterners) did throughout the twentieth century, my father migrated south to escape poverty and search for better opportunities, settling in the periphery of Rio de Janeiro. My mother later joined him. Both had little education and resources, and my father engaged in many low-paying, manual jobs to provide for the family.

As recent migrants from the Northeast, my parents were part of a marginalized group that faced discrimination and structural obstacles. In the Southeast, Brazil’s wealthiest and most populous region, lower-class and less-educated *nordestinos* are often not considered racially white even when identified as lighter-skinned, since they are commonly assumed to lack refinement, intellectual capacity, and civility (Roth-Gordon 2017, 19; Weinstein 2015, 10). Research among middle-class residents of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro has shown that southeasterners often construct the Northeast as racialized, highlighting the backwardness and Indigenous roots of *nordestinos*

(Corossacz 2018, 45–48; O’Dougherty 2002, 170–82; Schucman 2014, 143–44; Weinstein 2015).

By the time I was born, my parents and siblings had already gone through a process of “whitening” by achieving middle-class status. The family’s social mobility occurred in the 1950s after a friend with good political networks helped my father get a job in an agency of the federal government. My father’s trajectory therefore illustrates the centrality of patronage in the formation of Brazil’s middle class in which a recommendation by a *pistolão* (well-connected godfather) plays a central role in allowing aspirants to get access to middle-class jobs (see Owensby 1999, 80–88). His situation further improved when he volunteered to work in the construction of Brasília. By becoming a civil servant and a pioneer in the construction of the new capital, my father enjoyed some benefits, including the ability to buy a spacious apartment in the heart of the city with a subsidized price. After he retired early due to disability, he and my mother became small business owners by starting a store that sold bedding, towels, and clothing, among other items. With my father’s pension and earnings from the store, my parents were able to give me and my three siblings a comfortable middle-class life. Even though he only had few years of schooling, my father forced me to take private English classes, arguing that it would be important for my future. We all went to private and expensive Catholic schools that provided a superior education when compared to most public schools.

Access to private schools allowed my brother and me to pass the entry exam for public universities. Our trajectories exemplify one of the key mechanisms of “social closure,” a concept coined by sociologist Max Weber to describe the “process by which social collectivities seek to maximize rewards by restricting access to resources and opportunities to a limited circle of eligibles” (Parkin 1979, 44). As discussed in more detail in chapter 1, Weber highlighted the role of the college diploma in creating a privileged stratum that can then demand respectable remuneration and, above all, claim monopoly over social and economically advantageous positions. Such social closure mechanism acquires specific traits in the Brazilian context, playing a significant role in the creation of inequalities. Historically, the children of families who can afford private and expensive elementary, middle, and high schools had much greater chances of entering public universities in Brazil, which are free of charge and of better quality (Bernardino-Costa and Blackman 2017, 375–76; D. Goldstein 2003, 95). Social groups who have benefited from this pervasive but invisible mechanism sometimes recognize its injustice. For example, in her research among middle-class residents of São Paulo, Maureen O’Dougherty (2002,

210–11) recounts that her informants recognized the irony that access to the best universities first requires studying in private schools. As a result of this paradox, higher education has historically tended to exclude lower classes and Black communities (Cicalo 2012, 238–39).

Another important mechanism of social closure that has characterized much of my childhood and adolescence has remained invisible for too long. It is only now, after the dramatic events of the last decade, that it has become clear to me how such a mechanism is central to the formation and reproduction of Brazil's middle class. Having once being northeastern migrants themselves, my parents' new middle-class status enabled them to hire women, mostly from the Northeast, as domestic workers. Their cheap labor allowed my parents to devote themselves to their store, generating the income that would grant me and my siblings access to social closure mechanisms that defined middle-class status, such as private education. From the beginning, my future life potentials were determined by the exploitation of the labor of our *empregadas* (domestic workers).

The oppressive and racist nature of the institution of domestic work has been inscribed in Brazilian architecture. As it is often the case, our apartment building had a service area and a service elevator where *empregadas* were expected to circulate. Only their middle-class employers and their families were allowed to use the “social” elevator. Our maid lived in a tiny bedroom located in the service area of our apartment, near the laundry room and behind the kitchen. These small rooms are hidden from sight and often lack windows and ventilation, indicating the authoritarianism that permeates Brazilian domestic life (P. Pinho 2015, 107–8). Segregated quarters for *empregadas* can be traced back to the nineteenth century, when the gradual and slow collapse of slavery led to the replacement of enslaved women by free domestic servants (Graham 1995, 18). However, the living conditions for both were similar. Such spatial segregation continues to this day, although significant changes in previous architectural patterns have taken place (see Caldeira 2000, 268–70; Holston 2008, 278). Despite these modifications, the daily life of middle-class Brazilians continues to reproduce racial and class distinctions. As James Holston (2008, 278) observed, the spatial practices of everyday middle-class life contribute to reinforce broader patterns of inequality, since the presence of asymmetrical systems of circulation in apartment buildings “perpetuates a pervasive regime of social differentiation.”

Several scholars have argued that *empregadas* are central to understanding the formation and identity of Brazil's middle class (Caldwell 2007, 69–70; Corossacz 2018, 78; D. Goldstein 2003; Owensby 1999, 107–8; Ramos-Zayas

2020, 192). However, despite its centrality, domestic work has been largely neglected as a field of study. According to Patricia Pinho and Elizabeth Silva (2010, 92), such shortage of analyses “is intimately connected to the very ubiquity of the presence of maids in Brazilian homes. The ordinariness of having a maid to do the everyday chores of cleaning, cooking, and looking after children renders invisible, and thus unspoken, the power relations between maids and the families for whom they work.” My life and scholarship trajectories are no exceptions. For too long, I have failed to recognize and interrogate the presence of these women in my life. For too long, I have tried to analyze Brazilian media and political systems by largely ignoring the oppressive social conditions of domestic workers, as well as the ways in which such conditions enable middle-class formation and reproduction.

The disclosure of the role and place of domestic work in my private and professional lives is quite troubling for me. For a long time, I have identified myself as a progressive, as someone committed to social justice causes, but I now recall key moments when private interactions in my network of leftist friends demonstrated the grip that whiteness had on all of us. I remember going to a dinner in the house of a friend who had been a contemporary of mine in the student movement during our college years. I remember noticing a woman who came to the dining room to clean the table while we were chatting nearby in the living room. Her facial expression was sad, and I wondered why she was working that late at night. Her presence was not acknowledged, and she was never introduced. She was invisible. At that moment, the unspoken became suddenly loud, unsettling me. However, it did not last long. We soon went back to our conversations and to the pleasures of middle-class socializing.

These memories point to the fact that whiteness is not restricted to the realm of right-wing politics. Indeed, whiteness is ubiquitous and often shapes progressive politics. During her fieldwork in Rio de Janeiro, Donna Goldstein (2003, 30–31, 75) was troubled by how middle-class Brazilians, including those who self-identified as progressives, never addressed the division of labor in their own households, revealing how their privileges were taken for granted. Other scholars have reported similar findings (Kofes 2001, 217–25; Pinho and Silva 2010, 99). Even feminists have had a strained relationship with the issue of domestic work, since they often ignored the role that migrant women’s cheap labor has played in the increase of middle-class women’s participation in the labor force and in other celebrated female achievements (Melo 1989; Owensby 1999, 108). As Creuza Oliveira, president of the *Federação Nacional das Trabalhadoras Domésticas* (FENATRAD, National Federation of Domes-

tic Workers), put it in an interview, “We exercised and exercise a fundamental role in the independence of middle-class white women, because we care for her home and children so that she can study and act in the labor market or in politics” (quoted by Gillam 2016, 1053).

As the memories of my introspection suggest, mechanisms of social closure, such as those determining access to higher education and the availability of cheap labor for domestic work, have been historically essential tools in determining middle-class status and white identity in Brazil. What became new, especially after 2013, was the increasing resentment and political activism of the of the white middle class. I recall being part of a group in the messaging platform WhatsApp that included family members from all over the country. The rage and hate with which some of my family members reacted to President Dilma Rousseff’s reelection in 2014 became particularly memorable. Continuing twelve years of dominance of the PT in presidential elections, Rousseff won reelection by a narrow margin (3.3 percent of the valid votes). As in the previous three elections, the bulk of support for the PT came from the Northeast. I was shocked when reading WhatsApp messages from family members in the aftermath of that election. One of them wished for Rousseff’s death. Others expressed outrage about the voting choices of the Northeast. One meme circulated by a relative suggested that a wall should be built around the Northeast and that the other regions should secede from it. My surprise came from the fact that the parents of this relative had immigrated south from the Northeast, as my parents did, being *nordestinos* themselves. Did this relative consider that such a wall would have prevented his parents’ migration and his own entry to middle-class status? Apparently, he saw no contradiction between the meme and his own family history.

At the time, I fully understood dissatisfaction with Rousseff and the PT. After all, the 2014 election took place in a context marked by a major economic slowdown and by continuing corruption scandals. However, I was unable to grasp the intensity of the hate and why some family members would circulate stigmatizing messages about *nordestinos*, a group that included their own parents. From that moment on, several of my family members started to support and join a mass movement demanding Rousseff’s impeachment, which would take place in 2016 through a parliamentary coup. Continuing their engagement with the conservative revolt, they also supported Bolsonaro in the 2018 presidential election.

By circulating a meme that stigmatized the birthplace of his parents and by joining the emerging conservative movement, my relative was asserting his whiteness and his middle-class identity, despite the racialized and marginal

roots of his ancestors. His anger and resentment took me by surprise, even though I had been alerted that a backlash was coming. Between 2011 and 2013 I took a pause in my academic pursuits to work at the Ford Foundation office in Rio de Janeiro as their new program officer for media rights and access. I was put in charge of a portfolio of grants aimed at supporting social movements, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and academic institutions that were in the frontlines of the struggles for media reform and freedom of expression. In that capacity, I had the privilege of working closely with social justice activists and learned a lot from them. I recall several episodes from that period that pointed to the looming conservative revolt, and which I largely ignored. For example, in the beginning of 2013, before the massive demonstrations that shook the country in May, the Ford Foundation organized a meeting of all grantees working on issues of racial justice. The goal was to identify the main priorities for future work in the area. Participants soon identified the genocide of Black youth by the hands of the state forces (see Alves 2018; C. Smith 2017) as one of the pressing issues. But one intervention in particular caught my attention. Economist Marcelo Paixão, then a professor at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, argued that the progressive forces needed to be ready for the upcoming “cultural war.” Responding to puzzled faces in the audience, he went on to explain that the term referred to the backlash that would soon emerge against race-conscious policies implemented by the PT, especially affirmative action for college admission. He suggested that the Black movement and the foundation needed to prioritize work on media and communication so that counternarratives could be built and disseminated. I was impressed that an economist was so attuned to the need of building consensus and of controlling the narrative about social policies, but I largely failed to fully grasp the importance of his recommendation and was taken by surprise by the conservative revolt when it emerged in 2013.

The origins and makeup of this revolt, especially in terms of the role played by media representations in feeding it, are the theme of this book. I argue that policies implemented by PT administrations threatened to erode important social closure mechanisms that have defined middle-class status and white identity in Brazil, generating widespread anxiety. As discussed in more detail in chapter 3, these policies include affirmative action for higher education and the expansion of labor rights for domestic workers. As I also argue next, the mirrors of whiteness provided by the media played an important role in this key historical moment.

Perseus's Shield and the Mirrors of Whiteness

I've been thinking that if this diary is ever published,
it's going to make a lot of people angry. Here are
the people that, when they see me coming, go
away from their windows or close their doors.

—Carolina Maria de Jesus (2003 [1960], 70)

In this book I analyze the formation, identity, and increasing political mobilization of Brazil's white middle class. I claim that the middle class was the key protagonist of the conservative movement that emerged in 2013 and that culminated with the 2018 election of Jair Bolsonaro. I examine the historical configurations of whiteness and middle-class identity in Brazil and argue that racial and class formations have been closely connected in the local context where being middle class has almost always implied being white in both material and symbolic senses. I also contend that the creation and reproduction of class and racial hierarchies require a specific culture, or pattern of representation, and that the media play a significant role in circulating compelling narratives about these hierarchies. More specifically, I maintain that the Brazilian media offer their audiences "mirrors of whiteness," or spheres of representations that allow white people to legitimate their power while softening or hiding the wretchedness of the inequalities and injustices that such power generates.

As discussed in more detail in the next chapters, the Brazilian media have played this important role in many ways. The political economy of media industries has led them to identify the middle class as a target audience and to build content and programming around its social perspective. Journalism has steered middle-class subjects through tumultuous historical periods and, in the process, redefined their identities. The media have also enhanced the dominant position of whiteness by framing recent socioeconomic changes in ways that established a status panic for many middle-class individuals, spreading anxieties and resentment. This book advances the analysis of the media's role as mirrors of whiteness by developing two detailed case studies: an analysis of representations of domestic workers and white subjectivity in the telenovela *Cheias de Charme* and an analysis of the newsmagazine *Veja*'s coverage of affirmative action for access to higher education.

By arguing that the media provide mirrors of whiteness to their audiences, my intention is not to adopt a reflection theory of representation, according to which the media passively reflect reality. Scholars in the field of cultural studies have long questioned approaches that attribute a reflexive role to

communication processes. Stuart Hall (1997, 24–25), for example, asserts that even mimetic processes of representation rely on socially constructed systems of concepts and signs that actively create meaning. Similarly, Raymond Williams (1990, 95–97) contends that cultural theories that define art as a reflection rely on the persuasive physical metaphor of a reflective surface, but by doing so they suppress the actual material and imaginative work that characterizes all cultural practices. Thus, the media do not passively reflect whiteness in the same way the looking glass reflects the face of the looker. Media representations always involve the active construction of meaning in which the substance of what is reflected is affected by the work of the institutions and individuals involved in the creative process.

I take the mirror analogy as a productive analytical tool that goes well beyond the mimetic reflections that occur in glass surfaces. Feminists have long deployed the analogy to examine and deconstruct gender hierarchies and power dynamics, as the case of Virginia Woolf illustrates (see Deppman 2001). In her writings, Woolf emphasized the ways in which mirrors induce women to reflections of self-doubt, pain, and humiliation, generating feelings of guilt about themselves and their bodies. She invited readers to confront the tyranny of the mirror by realizing how it demands conformity to society’s aesthetic standards and how it “mercilessly castigates any who deviate from the norm” (36). Thus, the mirror works as an analogy of the constraining authority of the patriarchy and the repressive “lookism” of society. Woolf also highlights how male confidence requires a mirror image that projects others as inferiors, generating a feeling of innate superiority. In such looking glasses, the role of women is to magnify, since their inferiority works to confirm men’s superiority (36).

Critical approaches to race and ethnicity have also used the mirror analogy to address white identity and its relation to Blackness. In an essay originally published in 1965, James Baldwin (1998) argued that the sight of Black bodies works for white Americans as a “most disagreeable mirror,” since they evoke an appalling oppressive and bloody history that white people would rather not be reminded of. As Lawrie Balfour (1998, 353) explains, Baldwin invites his white readers to look not only in the mirror but at it, by realizing that Black degradation affirms their very confidence in the value of being “American.” For Baldwin, color has worked in America as a curtain that allows white people to justify unspeakable crimes not only in the past but in the present. By not admitting to this history, white people commit a crime to themselves, living in a state of heightened personal incoherence. Even though they are aware that the history they have fed themselves is mainly a lie, they remain unable to release themselves from it (Baldwin 1998, 723).

Inspired by these and other insightful analytical perspectives, I suggest that the Brazilian media offer their audiences mirrors of whiteness that perform important ideological work. Media representations project a notion of white superiority in a relational manner: the representation of the dominant white subject is part and parcel of the representation of the “other.” Several scholars have argued that the analysis of whiteness should not be restricted to those considered white and that its relational position to Blackness is particularly important (Morrison 1993; Nayak 2007, 743; Silva, Leão, and Grillo 2020; Ware 2004, 16).

Carolina Maria de Jesus’s epigraph in the beginning of this section illustrates this point. Carolina was a poor Black woman who raised her family in a favela (shantytown) by scavenging in the streets of São Paulo.¹ She started to write a diary, even though she had few years of schooling. Her first diary narrated the suffering and despair of her daily life as a single mother in a favela, trying to feed her three children. After she was “discovered” by journalist Audálio Dantas, Carolina published her first diary in 1960, which gave her a national and an international notoriety (Jesus 2003 [1960]). The following year, she published her second diary, which narrates her life after she became a well-known public figure with the publication of her first book (Jesus 1997 [1961]). The lines used as the epigraph above show that Carolina predicted that the publication of her first diary would be received with anger. Why would that be the case? Carolina bases her expectation on the disgust and rejection that the sight of her condition as a poor and Black woman often generates in others. Although she does not specify the identity of the onlookers, the passage is a clear reference to the tendency of affluent and middle-class Brazilians to express disgust over Black bodies (see P. Pinho 2015) and over the bodies of the poor (see Mendonça and Jordão 2014; Silva and López 2015). Carolina knew that her writings would break an important though unspoken tenet of whiteness: the monopoly of narrative authority by affluent and educated white people in publishing and literature.

Throughout this book, I use passages from Carolina’s diaries as epigraphs to introduce my own analysis. My goal is not to take her writings at face value or to suggest that they represent the plural and diverse condition of Blackness in Brazil. After all, Carolina’s diaries have their own problems, including frequent disparaging comments about northeasterners and Roma people. Moreover, despite numerous passages in her diaries that refer to racial hostility and discrimination, Carolina often praises white Brazilians for their lack of racist or prejudiced attitudes. For example, on the same page where she laments the assassination of Patrice Lumumba, the Congolese icon of African independence movements, Carolina writes, “I think I should be happy because I was

born in Brazil where there is no racial hate. I know that the whites hold power. But they are human beings and the law is the same for everybody. If one could compare all the whites in the world, Brazilian whites would be the best” (1997 [1961], 120). On the day of emancipation, May 13, she wrote, “A sacred day for blacks who now live tranquilly among whites. Today is a day when we blacks in Brazil should proclaim, ‘Long live the whites!’” (145–46).

The fact that some of Carolina’s writings fail to problematize whiteness should not come as a surprise. As I have already noted, the ideological power of whiteness lies exactly in how it renders itself invisible. Moreover, the fact that she praises white people for the emancipation of enslaved Black people is rooted in well-established patterns of representation. Brazilian whiteness has a long tradition of portraying emancipation as a compassionate act. Newspapers of the period represented the abolition of slavery in 1888 as a gift of benevolent white masters (Schwarcz 1987, 198). Such framing was reinforced by contemporary cultural productions, such as the enormously popular telenovela *Escrava Isaura*, aired by TV Globo in 1976–1977 (Halperin 2020). But despite critical readings that one can offer about passages from Carolina’s diaries, the fact remains that her publications represent a rupture of whiteness and its mirrors by asserting her Blackness and her identity as an impoverished and marginalized woman who can produce literature. By writing about the hunger and the misery of the daily lives of mostly Black favela residents, Carolina caused inconvenient distortions in traditional images of national identity. She highlighted the linkages between Blackness and poverty in a nation that celebrated “racial democracy.” Not surprisingly, her fame was short-lived, and she was forced to move back to the favela and to scavenge again after her later books failed to attract an audience. According to Robert Levine (1994), Carolina’s tragic fate was the result of her self-assured personality and of the ways she confronted prevailing social values. In her public appearances, Carolina often expressed herself assertively, breaking common assumptions about the subalternity of Black women. Critics blamed her for failing to adjust to the middle-class life that the success of her first book had enabled. Journalists often expressed contempt for her new publications and deployed patronizing and racist frames to describe her personality and her work. As Levine notes, “the ways in which Carolina’s blackness was harped on by many of her critics cast light on the social expectation in Brazil that in order for a black person to be accepted, he or she must conform to white norms” (1994, 82). Carolina simply did not fit the patterns of representation that characterize whiteness. The image of an assertive Black woman who problematizes poverty and marginalization had no place in the mirror reflections that white Brazilians project to represent themselves, others, and society at large. As Schucman (2014,

132) observed, white people's fears are heightened when they encounter Black individuals with self-determination.

The centrality of Carolina's work to contemporary debates on race and whiteness in Brazil became evident with the 2021 publication of a new edition of her diaries. The publisher's decision to maintain idiosyncrasies of the original text, including spellings that do not conform to the norms of the cult language, generated major controversies. In the introduction to the new edition, writer Conceição Evaristo and Carolina's daughter, Vera Eunice de Jesus, explained that their goal was to keep Carolina's writings free of the usual interferences. For some critics, however, the decision reduced Carolina to the status of an uneducated *favelada* (slum dweller), denying to her the right to have the texts revised by third parties before publication, a common practice in the literary world.² Such controversies suggest that Carolina's work and legacy will continue to guide debates about literature, gender, race, and Brazilian national identity.

While the mirrors of whiteness refuse to reflect certain types of Black and brown bodies, including Carolina's, it is important to stress that they do not require the absence of such bodies. On the contrary, the presence of the "other" in media representations often reinforces the dominance of the social perspective of white people. Toni Morrison (1993) brilliantly illustrates this aspect in her analysis of whiteness in American literature. She uncovers the many ways by which allegorical and metaphorical representations of what she calls "American Africanism," the nonwhite persona, work to build images of whiteness and Americanness. As Morrison puts it, "Explicit or implicit, the Africanist presence informs in compelling and inescapable ways the texture of American literature" (46).

Thus, Black and brown bodies often play an important role in the construction of whiteness as an ideological perspective. We can paraphrase Woolf's feminist approach (see Deppman 2001) to assert that white confidence requires a mirror image that projects nonwhite people as inferiors, generating a feeling of innate superiority. In such looking glasses, the role of Blackness is to magnify, since their inferiority works to confirm white's superiority. As George Lipsitz (2018, 161) explained, the possessive investment in whiteness entails embracing people of color and their culture in condescending and controlling ways.

Critical whiteness studies can therefore shed new light on how to interpret media representations of racial and ethnic identities. Research that relies on quantifying the number of Black and brown bodies on the screen can reveal important aspects of white supremacy. For example, Luiz Campos and João Feres Júnior's (2016) analysis of the racial composition of telenovela characters

from 1985 to 2014 finds that white actors account for 91 percent of all characters in TV Globo's melodramatic series. However, this type of analysis does not allow a proper investigation of whiteness, especially in terms of its relationship to the "other." Thus, even when the number of characters with Black and brown bodies increases, the ideology of whiteness can be strengthened, rather than weakened. Subaltern groups can gain more media visibility, while reinforcing the hegemony of whiteness. As discussed in the next chapters, this became a particularly vital analytical problem in Brazil when scholars started to analyze media representations of the groups that had been lifted out of poverty, the so-called "new media class" or "new class C." Such studies failed to scrutinize the extent to which the representation of emergent groups was reflected by the mirrors of whiteness.

The analogy of the mirror helps us understand another element of Brazilian whiteness: its historical fear of Blackness (Alves and Vargas 2020; Azevedo 1987; Schucman 2014, 124–36). How do white Brazilians cope with such fears and anxieties? The mirrors of whiteness are an important part of the answer. The reflections projected by the cultural surfaces supplied by the media and other institutions have allowed middle- and upper-class Brazilians to eradicate the guilt and the pain associated to their implication in the creation and reproduction of inequalities and injustices. Such spheres of representations work for middle-class Brazilians as a bronze shield worked for Perseus in the Greek myth of Medusa (see Foster 2003). Perseus, the son of Danaë and Zeus, is induced by a suitor of his mother to kill Medusa. It is a difficult task, since anyone who looks at Medusa's horrific face is immediately turned into stone. Perseus is able to kill Medusa by looking at her reflection in the shield that was given to him by Athena, rather than by staring directly at her. After beheading Medusa, Perseus continues to use her head as a weapon, since it retains its ability to turn onlookers into stone. The myth centers on the power of the gaze and the capacity of representation to control it (181).

Western cultures have portrayed Medusa as a monstrous and ambiguous creature that is both bestial and human, with snaky hair, leonine head, bovine ears, and boarish tusks (Foster 2003, 182). A particularly troubling aspect of the myth is how terribly unjust Medusa's fate is. She was once a beautiful priestess to Athena, the virgin goddess of wisdom and battle. Poseidon, the god of the sea, decided to humiliate Athena by raping Medusa on the steps of Athena's temple. Athena cursed Medusa for betraying her and transformed her into a monster, so that no man would want her. Medusa is blamed for her own rape and doomed to a horrendous destiny. Athena exiles her to an isolated island, where she must fend for herself.

The myth of Medusa can be deployed as an allegory of racial relations in

Brazil. As Medusa, the history of Black Brazilians is marked by an original, violent, and unjust act of expropriation and abuse, rooted in slavery. When Black people face a destiny of deprivation and marginalization after the formal end of servitude, white people blame them for their own condition and leave them to fend for themselves. White Brazilians cannot look directly at Black and brown bodies without being reminded of their own implication in that unwarranted and brutal history. Instead of looking directly at them, as they were forced to do when reading Carolina Maria de Jesus's diaries, white people look instead at reflections of Blackness that are projected in Perseus's shield. These reflections allow them to eradicate, even if only momentarily, the awareness, guilt, and fears that the sight of Blackness triggers in them. By projecting Black and brown bodies as inferior, submissive, or naturally inclined to do manual work, the mirrors magnify and confirm white people's own sense of superiority.

Book Overview

In chapter 1 I introduce the analytical perspectives and the concepts deployed in the book to investigate the conservative revolt in Brazil, including the role of media representations. The chapter presents the field of critical whiteness studies as a theoretical foundation that allows the examination of whiteness as both a location of structural advantage and as a standpoint from which white people look at themselves, at others, and at society. I then advance research on whiteness by demonstrating its intrinsic connection to middle-class identity in the Brazilian context and by identifying key elements of its local formation from the legacies of slavery to the myth of racial democracy. Combining Marxist and Weberian approaches, in this chapter I define the middle class as both a structural position and as a status group that relies on social closure mechanisms. Such mechanisms allow the white middle class to restrict access to resources and opportunities to its members, while excluding "outsiders." I argue that when political and socioeconomic changes erode the effectiveness of these mechanisms, a status panic emerges among middle-class publics, propelling them to action. I conclude the chapter by examining the role of the media in this dissemination of anxiety and resentment. It defines media representations as "mirrors of whiteness," which allow white middle-class Brazilians to legitimate their power while softening and often hiding the inequalities and injustices that such power generates.

In chapter 2 I analyze the historical context and contours of the conservative revolt led by the white middle class. I start by identifying advances and setbacks in Lula's reformist policies with a focus on the unprecedented decline in poverty and inequality levels during his presidency (2003–2010). I then

present a critique of the concept of “new middle class” that has been widely used to describe the more than thirty million Brazilians who were lifted out of poverty during Lula’s administration. This concept had many harmful consequences. For example, it led the PT and its leaders to conceive of recent socioeconomic changes as both structural and sustainable, as they failed to realize that the formerly poor remained trapped by underlying conditions that prevented their full incorporation into the middle class. I then examine key historical events that established a process of democratic decay in Brazil, including the 2013 massive wave of protests, the 2016 unconstitutional impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff, and the 2018 election of far-right leader Jair Bolsonaro.

In chapter 3 I analyze how some social policies of the PT era (2003–2016) threatened to eliminate social closure mechanisms that are central to whiteness and to middle-class identity in Brazil. I focus on three such mechanisms: availability of cheap labor for domestic work, access to higher education, and monopoly of social spaces related to leisure and consumption. I argue that policies implemented in the PT era, such as the extension of labor rights to domestic workers and the establishment of affirmative action for college admission, caused a relative erosion of these social-closure mechanisms. As a result, anxiety and resentment spread, establishing a significant status panic among members of the white middle class. Such unrest, in turn, played an important role in the rise of the far right and in Brazil’s process of democratic decay.

Chapters 4 and 5 advance specific case studies about the role of media representations in feeding middle-class resentment and in shaping the conservative revolt. In chapter 4 I present the results of a textual analysis of the telenovela *Cheias de Charme*, broadcast by TV Globo in 2012. This popular TV series is often praised for portraying three domestic workers as protagonists. I demonstrate, however, that representations of middle-class families and maids in the telenovela reinforce historical traits of Brazilian white identity. The show frames domestic workers, especially dark-skinned ones, as individuals who are naturally positioned to take care of manual work, including domestic chores. *Cheias de Charme* also reinforces the association between whiteness and generosity by promoting the trope of the benevolent and friendly *patroa* (female employer). This pattern of representation allows middle-class subjects to justify their reliance on the cheap labor of domestic servants while projecting an image of themselves as generous. Finally, *Cheias de Charme* ridicules the ways in which the previously poor, including domestic workers, started to occupy social spaces that the white middle class used to monopolize, trivializing major social problems that characterize their social condition, such as child labor and sexual harassment.

In chapter 5 I analyze news coverage of affirmative action in higher education by the magazine *Veja*, Brazil's leading print media outlet, from 2006 to 2012. The results identify an overwhelmingly negative treatment of racial quotas for college admission that denied the existence racial inequality and racial discrimination. *Veja* also projected white fear by insisting that reparatory policies would create an artificial process of racialization that was poised to generate conflict, violence, and totalitarian political tendencies. Finally, I point to the ways in which *Veja*'s overwhelmingly white staff adopted whiteness as an ideological perspective. Such standpoint contributed to disseminate anxiety and resentment about racial quotas among readers and to build a significant status panic among middle-class subjects.

In the epilogue I summarize the book's main findings and highlight the ways in which the concept of the mirrors of whiteness illuminates conservative revolts in Brazil and elsewhere. I also point to some of the limitations of the study's design, identifying new paths ahead in the study the links between media, whiteness, class, and the rise of the far right. I argue that not only is it imperative to recognize the ambivalences of whiteness and middle-class politics but it is also equally vital to develop a more nuanced understanding of its contradictions and ambiguities. I conclude by insisting that the effective engagement of white middle-class Brazilians in antiracist and social justice struggles requires the articulation of a new political and social imagination that can challenge anti-Blackness and the mirrors of whiteness.

Writing this book is not only an academic endeavor but also a political one. As Pinho (2009) explained, the study of whiteness and of racial representations, including those disseminated by the media, are important strategies in the fight against racism and other injustices. I answer her call for action by engaging with these key antiracist strategies. I analyze how television fiction and news stories have worked as mirrors of whiteness, legitimating the power of the white middle class while softening and often hiding the wretchedness of the inequalities and injustices that such power entails. Hopefully, by doing so, this book will contribute to advance social justice in a period marked by democratic decay and by the rise of resentment and hate, especially against oppressed groups.

