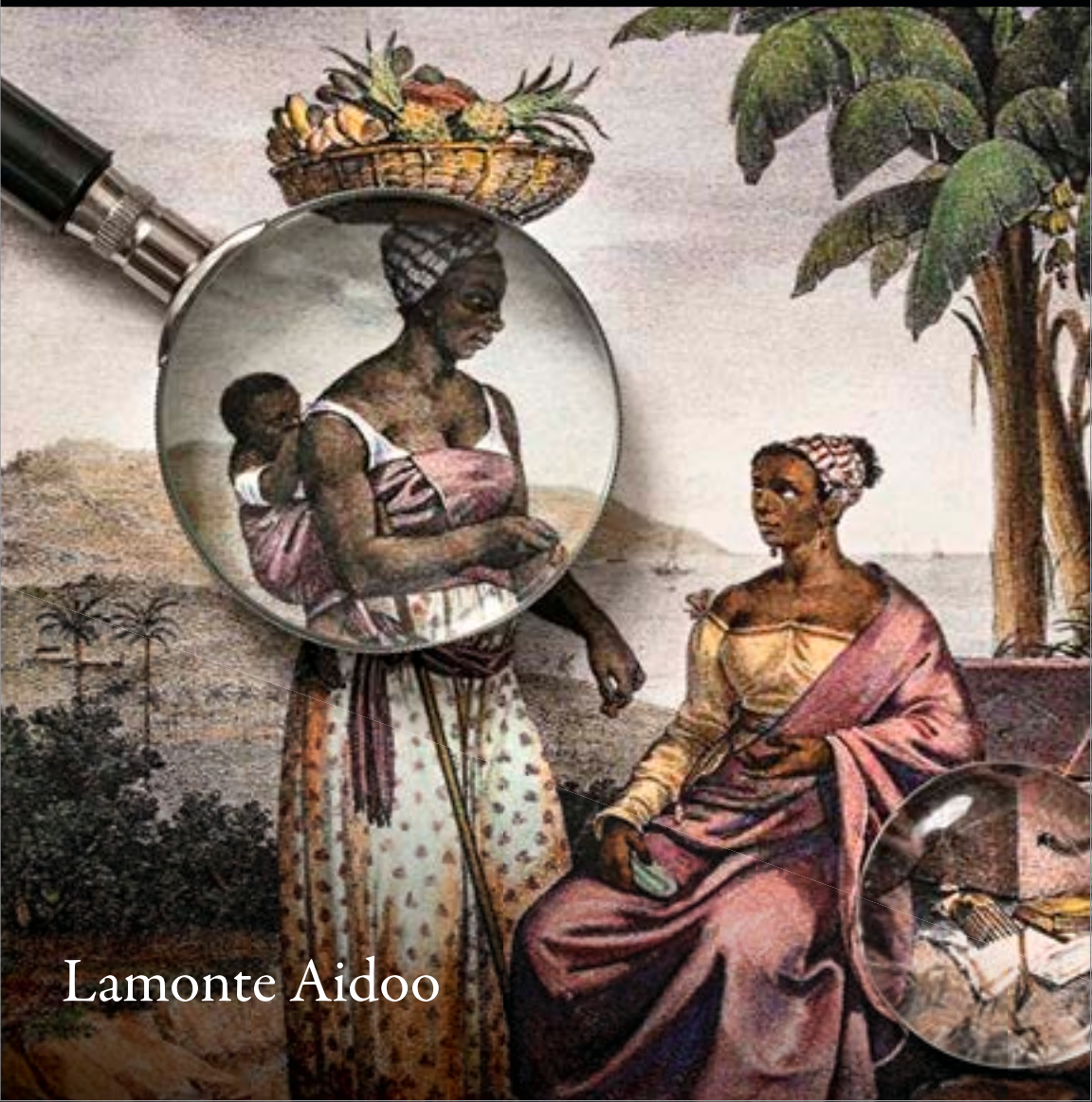
SLAVERY UNSEEN

SEX, POWER, AND VIOLENCE IN BRAZILIAN HISTORY



Lamonte Aidoo

Slavery Unseen

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Slavery Unseen

Sex, Power, and Violence in Brazilian History

LAMONTE AIDOO

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Whatever is unnamed, undepicted in images,
whatever is omitted from biography, censored in collections
of letters, whatever is misnamed as something else,
made difficult-to-come-by, whatever is buried
in the memory by the collapse of meaning under
an inadequate or lying language—this will
become, not merely unspoken, but unspeakable.

— ADRIENNE RICH, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966–1978*

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INTRODUCTION.

Secrets, Silences, and Sexual Erasures in Brazilian Slavery and History

Perhaps the pioneers in the slave's cause will be as much surprised as any to find that with all *their* looking, there remained so much unseen.—SOJOURNER TRUTH, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, 1850

[The slave] Luke was appointed to wait upon his bed-ridden master, whose despotic habits were greatly increased by exasperation at his own helplessness. He kept a cowhide beside him, and, for the most trivial occurrence, he would order his attendant to bare his back, and kneel beside the couch, while he whipped him till his strength was exhausted. Some days he was not allowed to wear anything but his shirt, in order to be in readiness to be flogged. . . . As he lay there on his bed, a mere degraded wreck of manhood, he took into his head the strangest freaks of despotism; and if Luke hesitated to submit to his orders, the constable was immediately sent for. Some of these freaks were of a nature too filthy to be repeated. When I fled from the house of bondage, I left poor Luke still chained to the bedside of this cruel and disgusting wretch.—HARRIET A. JACOBS, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, 1861

Slavery is not a single, uniform institution. There is not one slavery, but there are many slaveries. Each period and incident of slavery is shaped by its cultural, geographical, and social contexts, which determine the specific conditions to which slaves are subjected and the particular character of relations between master and slave. *Slavery Unseen* brings to the surface stories, testimonies, and

violations that were often endured in silence and behind closed doors, abuses of power that "remained unseen." In many instances these events were too vile, too unbelievable, "too filthy to be recorded," named, or included in official historical accounts. This book examines aspects of Brazilian slavery that ranged from the barbaric to the ludicrous: the rape of male slaves by their white male masters; white mistresses who exploited their slave women for sex and forced them into prostitution to support the household; formerly enslaved blacks who became slaveholders, tortured slaves, and campaigned against abolition; social whitening (a system of designating certain blacks as white, thereby controlling which blacks could participate in white society while restricting their marriage and sexual access to white women). By the late nineteenth century Brazilian whites would also resort to pseudoscientific theories to prove blacks' racial inferiority and would use medical studies to cast black men as homosexuals who preyed on white men.

Slavery as an institution was defined on the surface by differences that created a stark power differential: between free and enslaved, black and white, men and women, wealthy and impoverished, elite and marginalized. Yet slavery also depended on relationships of sameness that are less obvious in our traditional understanding, that is, relationships between men, between women, and between blacks. Those relationships served to sustain difference and inequality, as in the rape of male slaves by their masters, the sexual exploitation of female slaves by white mistresses, and black ownership of slaves. All of these relationships derived from and bolstered the overarching structures of white male supremacy.

The habitual focus on difference and heteronormative reproductive sex can cause us to overlook forms of sex and racial violence that do not fit neatly into these models. Each chapter in this book examines one of these less conspicuous relationships of sameness. Sex, violence, and exploitation that occurred in the context of sameness, though less widely known, had a profound impact on the lives of slaves and on how race and sexuality would come to be articulated in the aftermath of slavery. These same-sex relationships deviated from heteronormative reproductive sexuality, and yet they worked in tandem with those socially and religiously sanctioned forms of sex. Paradoxically, the master's right to rape a male slave derived from his white male heterosexual privilege over *all* bodies, while the white mistress's sexual exploitation of her female slaves was enabled by her relationship to that same privilege through her husband and father. By the same token, free blacks drew their privilege of owning slaves from the white master's power to free them and the white elite's authority to grant them official whiteness—which never included unfettered sexual access

to white women, demonstrating that the white male social hierarchy prevailed even when it was invisible.

Thus by considering relations of sameness within an institution invested in maintaining racial difference, we can observe how two men, two women, or two blacks sought to actively wield power over one another and reproduce inequality through physical violence, discrimination, exploitation, and sex with the ultimate goal of sustaining the social order even as they appeared to veer so flagrantly away from it.

The idea of widespread interracial sex was central to the construction of Brazilian racial exceptionalism and the myth of racial democracy. Sex and its traditional connection to intimacy and interracial reproduction were used to create a racially complex society and as an effective weapon of subjugation for the enslaved. Sex was attributed a transcendental meaning by many of the nation's white elite and racial theorists; that is, sex and reproduction had the capacity to erase barriers and served as proof that race could be and had been transcended. This conceptualization of sex and its connection to race was central to Portuguese colonialism and became the very basis of Brazilian racial exceptionalism and the myth of racial democracy.[1] The silencing and sanitization of the nation's history of rape, sexual violence, and abuse during slavery and its aftermath laid the foundation for an enduring legacy of erasure that then created the illusion of equality and racial progressivism, while in reality, solidifying an antiblack, racist system that preserved white male supremacy in Brazil's past and present.

The themes that form the heart of this book all revolve around power and control: the determination of the white elite, and even free blacks and mulattos, to maintain their base of power and wealth and unfettered domination over the black body—entrenched since the beginning of Brazilian slavery in the sixteenth century—as radical political, economic, and social changes mitigating against slavery swept across Europe and the Americas in the nineteenth century.

These mechanisms of white supremacy and the stories of the lives of Brazilian slaves presented here challenge our commonplace assumptions about what slavery was and how it worked. They reveal the many contradictions between the image of harmonious race relations that Brazil presented to the world during slavery and the unseen and oftentimes horrific sexual abuse and exploitation of slave men, women, and children. At the end of the nineteenth century these structures of white supremacy were surreptitiously folded into the Brazilian national identity under the guise of an exceptional national identity that cast Brazilian slavery as less malevolent, almost beneficent compared to other countries. These enduring structures and myths are part of what has made modern Brazil.

This book sheds new light on unfamiliar and obscured aspects of Brazil's

sexual and racial histories from the beginning of slavery in the 1500s through the early twentieth century. Throughout this book we will explore the myriad contradictions and anxieties that emerged during this time around race and sexuality. Elite white Brazilians were unprepared for massive social change after 350 years of reaping the benefits of slavery. They had established a racial, social, and economic order that depended entirely on the ownership and domination of slaves. One of the primary mechanisms of control employed by many slaveholders across the Americas was the sexual exploitation of enslaved women, men, and children, which will be explored at length in this book.

This conflation of sex and intimacy at the center of Brazilian racial exceptionalism suggested the consent of blacks to what was often in reality sexual exploitation and abuse. This book will explore the many meanings and strategic uses of interracial sex by white Brazilian slaveholders, politicians, writers, and scientists, revealing sex to be an apparatus that controlled many different aspects of Brazilian society, politics, and the economy.

Slave owners needed to retain control over women and reproduction in order to ensure constant replenishment of their slave supply. During slavery throughout the Americas, the status of the mother, whether free or enslaved, determined the status of the child. All children of slave women were born into inherited servitude. Thus sex was central to the perpetuation of slavery, and race, enslavement, and freedom were reproduced through women. Beyond reproduction, however, sex during slavery was a violent mechanism of power and control used to degrade, torture, and kill slave men, women, and children and to solidify white male supremacy.

In order to justify the longevity of Brazilian slavery and divert attention away from Brazil's position as the last slaveholding nation in the Western Hemisphere, members of Brazil's dominant class, including plantation owners, politicians, and intellectual leaders, needed to somehow rewrite the country's history of slavery, in particular the sexual abuse of slaves. The above quotes from Sojourner Truth and Harriet Jacobs about the "unseen" and "filthy" parts of slavery convey that some aspects of slavery and certain forms of violence were purposely concealed by both masters and slaves, as they were too unspeakable to put into words or commit to paper.

White elites were especially interested in camouflaging sexual violence of a taboo nature that fell outside the heteronormative. The trial records of the Portuguese Inquisition in Brazil reveal numerous instances of same-sex sexual violence against slaves, cloaked beneath language that denies the real nature of these events. Moreover, certain forms of sexual exploitation and violence went undetected because they were not recognized, legible forms of sexual violence,

such as the rape of male slaves by the master or sex between slave mistresses and their female slaves.

The title of this book, *Slavery Unseen*, refers to the difficulty of detecting and understanding the real conditions under which Brazilian slaves lived due to willful concealment by whites, lack of a vocabulary to describe what took place, and blaming slaves for their own victimization. In order for historical events to be better understood, people and their experiences must be seen, must be made visible. The language of victims is very different from the language of perpetrators, allowing, for example, for rape to be cast as consensual sex by the rapist. A language is needed that renders the experiences of slaves visible so that they may be understood and victims may be clearly distinguished from perpetrators. My goal in this book is to make violence against Brazilian slaves legible by renaming it, removing the exculpatory terms used by the Portuguese Inquisition, slaveholders, and the Brazilian government.

These acts of racially motivated sexual violence were committed with a cognizance that they fell outside the paradigm of commonplace forms of slave bodily exploitation and that by their very nature they would be undetectable. A master or mistress could confidently say to a slave about these deeds, "Who would believe you?" The unbelievability or unspeakability of certain forms of violence inflict shame and degradation on the victim while providing protection, invisibility, and omnipotence to the perpetrator, leaving these stories in the dark recesses of the historical archive.

The approach of this book is interdisciplinary in an effort to more fully examine the complexities of Brazilian slavery, race relations, interracial sexual violence, and the racialized and pathological constructions of male homosexuality in the late nineteenth century. The book draws on many original sources from the sixteenth through the early twentieth centuries, specifically from the regions of Bahia, Pernambuco, Pará, Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, and Minas Gerais, to reconstruct a detailed picture of racial relations in Brazil during and after slavery. Among the most important of these sources are confessions and denunciations from the Portuguese Inquisition from the sixteenth through the early nineteenth centuries. Narratives of sexual violence are culled from the very explicit, verbatim Inquisition transcripts of the trials of slaves who were accused of committing sexual sins. These cases clearly reveal that the accused were victims of cruel sexual violence committed by their white masters.

The stories of slave women and men found in the archives of the Portuguese Inquisition render a striking portrait of the obscured and unseen history of Brazilian slavery. These documents are invaluable, as after the Inquisition there was no further official recording of sexual crimes against slaves. These records help

us to piece together a history of sexual violence committed against slaves that extended well beyond the domain of the heteronormative. The cases presented in chapters 2 and 3 in many instances relate not only the story of a single victim or confessant, but also reports of other victims that point to the pervasiveness of same-sex sexual violence in the everyday lives of slaves. Yet, while these documents record stories of abuse, violation, and degradation, many of these testimonies equally show enslaved men's and women's resistance to slavery and sexual abuse as they risked their lives to tell their stories.

In Inquisition records the sexual violation of slaves was concealed by recording the occurrences in a vocabulary that made slaves culpable for their oppression and by portraying rape either as a sin committed by slaves or as consensual sex. These records would set precedents for how the rape of slaves would later be encoded in Brazilian law and for the pathologization of the sexuality of black men and women in Brazilian medical studies.

Though *Slavery Unseen* is not the first book to study same-sex relationships in Brazil, it departs from other studies in that it examines the role of nongenerative sex in shaping the history of slavery in Brazil, the construction of race relations, and the subsequent racialized pathological constructions of homosexuality that would emerge two centuries after the close of the Inquisition. I do not use cases of same-sex relations to examine sexual orientation or to document a genealogy of male and female homosexuality, but to understand same-sex sexual relations and violence committed by masters against slaves as a mechanism of reproducing gender, racial, and sexual inequality. In fact what appears on the surface as homosexual exploitation of slaves by their masters will be revealed, paradoxically, to be expressions of heterosexual norms that played a fundamental role in reinforcing white racial and sexual supremacy.

This book uses a narrative rather than statistical approach. It is virtually impossible to quantify how frequently enslaved men were raped and sexually abused, or how often slave mistresses engaged in sexual acts with slave women. During the Inquisition, as we will see in the first two chapters, both black and white Brazilians were skilled at keeping secrets, as they had strong reasons to do so. But at the same time, this was an era when important events such as the Inquisition trials were dutifully recorded and archived. The Inquisition depended on people watching others and reporting real, suspected, or imagined incidents of heresy, and then much pressure was put on the accused to confess their sins. The testimony of denouncers and witnesses, the confessions of the accused, and the sentences were all recorded by court scribes with an astonishing degree of voyeuristic detail in cases of sexual sins.

In recent years, a number of very important studies have used inquisitional

documents to examine the history of colonial Brazil and slavery.[2] These scholars have all argued for the importance of these documents in exploring the private lives of men and women in colonial society. Yet the use of Inquisition records and their validity as historical evidence have also been the source of much debate in the academic community, and I approach their use cautiously. While numerous historians, anthropologists, and cultural studies scholars have used and heralded Inquisition records as important historical documentation of early modern Catholic societies across the world, other scholars, such as historian Edward Muir and anthropologist Renato Rosaldo, have argued against their validity and use as historical evidence in cultural history and anthropology.[3] Though these scholars do not write directly about the reliability of inquisitional records as they pertain to the testimony of slaves, and though work questioning their validity in relation to the topic of same-sex sexual violence is sparse, the issues that they raise can also be validly examined in a context such as the present study.[4]

While Inquisition documents have been an invaluable source for historians and cultural studies scholars, discerning the voices and stories of enslaved men and women in these records is challenging. We must contend with their inherent silences and erasures, and acknowledge, as does historian Antoinette Burton, that "*all* archives are provisional, interested, and calcified in both deliberate and unintentional ways; that *all* archives are, in the end, fundamentally unreliable."[5]

While it is irrefutable that the records of the Portuguese Inquisition contain testimony by and about slaves, they are not direct first-person accounts but reports authored by the inquisitional court. The format of the proceedings was rigid and formulaic. The accused in most cases were not allowed to speak directly to the court. Their testimonies were dictated and recorded by a scribe in the third person as "he said," "she replied," or "he confessed." The accused were instructed to deliver a "whole," "truthful," and "full" confession and were threatened with punishment by the court and by God if they did not. The transcripts reveal that the inquisitors had prejudices and a priori assumptions about confessants, especially slaves, and often constructed their questions according to these presumptions. They often practiced what we would call today "leading the witness," posing questions to educe particular responses. The scribe may have recorded only what he deemed relevant to the case, distorting or discarding other information.

Thus, in the Inquisition documents we have multiple contending voices and discourses of the slave, master, court, and scribe. Historian John Arnold argues that Inquisition documents should be read within a heteroglossic framework,

recognizing that it is impossible to entirely disentangle these myriad and competing voices.[6] That slaves had little control over what was recorded in the trial transcripts points to a weakening of their voice in favor of the slave master and the court itself. And yet these transcripts paint a vivid picture of extreme violence against slaves. We can validly wonder what more was left out.

These testimonies were given in a climate of fear and intimidation. Slaves, particularly male rape victims and women who engaged in same-sex sexual activity, were wholly cognizant that they were exposing a crime or sin for which they could be severely punished, and that slaves had been murdered by their masters for exposing them. These fears may have conditioned the slaves' testimony.

I am not suggesting that all white masters and mistresses coerced their male and female slaves into nonconsensual sex. But while the surviving inquisitional archives cannot prove the exact extent of sexual violence against slaves, they unequivocally prove that it occurred and that it was often of a gruesome and taboo nature. The fact that sources are in some ways flawed does not diminish the importance of what they do reveal. Among the numerous competing voices, entrenched in discourses of criminality and sin, the stories and voices of slaves are present and can be heard if we are willing to listen.

Throughout the nineteenth century, many Europeans traveled to Brazil, establishing businesses and schools and living there for short or long periods of time. Some of these travelers were gifted writers and recorded their observations of the country and its people, including relations between slaves and slave owners, in published journals. The writings of travelers such as Charles Expilly, Adèle Toussaint-Samson, Maria Dundas Graham, Reverend Robert Walsh, and Henry Koster are quoted throughout this book not to validate their social and political opinions about Brazil as white Europeans—indeed some of their remarks are decidedly racist—but because they are a rich source of information regarding the history of slavery. The writings of Expilly and Toussaint-Samson are particularly revealing of the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality. They depict the daily lives of slaves in great detail, giving readers a complex and often disturbing picture of relations between the races and the suffering of slaves. They expose exactly the type of information that the Brazilian government sought to conceal from the eyes of the world. They provide a counternarrative, showing us the difference between, on the one hand, what Brazil wanted to believe about itself and how it projected itself internationally, and on the other hand, what outside observers actually witnessed. These European writers felt no particular affiliation with white Brazilians and therefore had no motive for disguising what they saw and experienced in Brazil. I also use period newspapers, medical literature (which addressed race and sexuality extensively),

the law, art, letters, memoirs, literature, and Senate and parliamentary debates, as well as writings in psychology, sociology, and anthropology, to piece together and interpret the history.

Many previous studies on race have examined Brazil's so-called racial democracy as a myth about harmonious racial relations, but most studies have not examined nongenerative forms of sex and sexual violence as fundamental yet concealed components of the myths of Brazil's exceptional slavery and racial democracy.[7] Here I move the focus specifically to the major role of nongenerative sex in shaping slavery, inter- and intraracial and intragender inequality, and the emergence of pathological and racialized studies of homosexuality. Interracial sex throughout Brazilian history will be exposed as a place of crime, violation, nation making, and myth. I have chosen to investigate "interracial sex" rather than "miscegenation" (*miscigenação* or *mestizaje*) in the interest of specificity and historical recovery. The term *miscegenation*, meaning racial mixing, has taken on innumerable meanings that work on ambiguous and conflicting assumptions. When we commonly talk about it in relation to Brazilian history, miscegenation works almost exclusively within a heteronormative framework—we think of it mainly as sex between black or indigenous women and white men. Miscegenation as it relates to Brazil's so-called racial democracy is also attached to interracial reproduction, which was claimed to prove racial harmony. The relatively benign term *miscegenation* has often served in Brazilian history to mask the true aims of racial mixing, which was engineered by whites to fulfill their purposes for power, control, pleasure, economic gain, reproduction, humiliation, and annihilation. This term has kept us from discerning the often-violent mechanisms that structured racial mixing and how sex between the races served as a catalyst for other forms of racial violence. The heteronormative workings of miscegenation and its connection to reproduction have also concealed forms of sex and sexual violence during slavery that had nothing to do with reproduction.

For some readers, some of the content of this book may be disturbing. I do not include the facts and stories of sexual violence here for their sensational value, but rather to unearth the lived experiences of Brazilian slaves and to show, in human terms, how the ever-present reality of sexual and racial violence and exploitation by the white elite broke enslaved people. Their stories and pain are brought to light throughout the pages of this book because they deserve to be told and warrant our attention. Sex in the universe of slavery was a weapon, a mechanism of torture, a calculated means of reproducing slaves and slavery, and the consummate form of annihilation. None of us today will ever be able to truly understand the extent of the atrocities, the day-to-day erasure

of humanity endured by enslaved men, women, and children. The discomfort that many feel when approaching questions of race and sex is a testament to their continuing significance today.

Though similarities and differences between slavery in Brazil and the United States are examined here, this is not a comparative study. Brazilian officials continually drew comparisons between Brazil and the United States during slavery and well into the twentieth century. The contentious racial history of the United States provided an important counterpoint for Brazil to construct its racial exceptionalism. However, contrary to nineteenth- and twentieth-century claims of racial democracy and exceptionalism, Brazilian slavery was no less brutal than in any other country.

The goal of this book is to read the story of Brazilian slavery against the silence, contradictions, shame, and concealment surrounding the black body. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot makes us aware, "The ultimate mark of power may be its invisibility; the ultimate challenge, the exposition of its roots."[8] Institutions change, but slavery has exercised an unrelenting hold on all Brazilians that has endured beyond the formal abolition of slavery. This book is an attempt to look back in order to move forward. It is my hope that these pages will unsettle but press toward greater understanding.

Notes

INTRODUCTION

1. Anthropologist Peter Fry has argued that "the myth of racial democracy coexists with the myth of the inferiority of the black." Peter Fry, "Estética e política: Relações entre 'raça,' publicidade e produção da beleza no Brasil," in *Nu e vestido: Dez antropólogos revelam a cultura do corpo carioca*, ed. Mirian Goldenberg (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Record, 2002), 304. Similarly, Peter Wade has asserted that it is in miscegenation "that racism and racial democracy coexist." Peter Wade, *Race and Sex in Latin America* (London: Pluto Press, 2009), 175.

2. James H. Sweet, *Domingos Álvares, African Healing, and the Intellectual History of the Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); James H. Sweet, *Recreating Africa: Culture, Kinship, and Religion in the African-Portuguese World, 1441–1770* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Wade, *Race and Sex*; Nicole von Germeten, *Violent Delights, Violent Ends: Sex, Race, and Honor in Colonial Cartagena de Indias* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2013); François Soyer, *Ambiguous Gender in Early Modern Spain and Portugal: Inquisitors, Doctors, and the Transgression of Gender Norms* (Leiden: Brill Press, 2012); Laura de Mello e Souza, *The Devil and the Land of the Holy Cross: Witchcraft, Slavery, and Popular Religion in Colonial Brazil* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004); Ronaldo Vainfas, *Trópico dos pecados: Moral, sexualidade, e Inquisição no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Nova Fronteira, 1997); Luiz Mott, *Escravidão, homossexualidade, e demonologia* (São Paulo: Editora Ícone, 1988); João Silvério Trevisan, *Devassos no paraíso: A homossexualidade no Brasil, da colônia à atualidade* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Record, 2007); and Amílcar Torrão Filho, *Tribades galantes, fanchonos militantes: Homossexuais que fizeram história* (São Paulo: Edições GLS, 2000).

3. For criticism of inquisitional trials as historical sources of evidence see Renato Rosaldo, "From the Door of His Tent: The Fieldworker and the Inquisitor," in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and G. E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); Edward Muir, book reviews of *Trent 1475: Stories of Ritual Murder Trial*, by R. Po-Chia Hisia, and *From Bishop to Witch: The System of the Sacred in Early Modern Terra d'Otranto*, by David Gentilcore, *Journal of Modern History* 67, no. 1 (March 1995): 182–85. Also see Martin G. Peggs, "Historians

and Inquisitors: Testimonies from the Early Inquisition into Heretical Depravity," in *Understanding Medieval Primary Sources: Using Sources to Discover Medieval Europe*, ed. Joel T. Rosenthal (New York: Routledge, 2014); and Carlo Ginzburg, "The Inquisitor as Anthropologist," in *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, trans. John Tedesechi and Anne C. Tedesechi (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).

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