Racialized Boundaries: Women’s Studies and the Question of “Difference” in Brazil

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The reason racism is a feminist issue is easily explained by the inherent definition of feminism. Feminism is the political theory and practice that struggles to free all women: women of color, working-class women, poor women, disabled women, Jewish women, lesbians, old women – as well as white, economically privileged, heterosexual women. Anything less than this vision of total freedom is not feminism, but merely female self-aggrandizement. [Smith 1998:96]

If feminism is to remain true to its original emancipatory, utopian vision, then it can neither afford to ignore the structural power relations which produce differences as inequalities, nor the implication of the individual woman in racialized power relations. [Weedon 1999:177]

This paper examines the racial politics of feminist knowledge production in Brazil and provides a comparative analysis of Women’s Studies scholarship in Brazil, the United States, England and Canada. A discussion of the notion of “difference” and how it has been evaded in Brazilian feminist discourse is central to my analysis. Unlike feminist scholarship produced in the United States, Britain, and Canada, most Brazilian feminist scholarship has failed to address and analyze the significance of race and racial differences in the constitution of gender and women’s identities. Moreover, as this paper seeks to demonstrate, the failure to examine the intersection of race and gender in Brazilian feminist scholarship has been complicit in the perpetuation of racial and gender domination in the country.

**Gender, Race, and “Difference” in U.S. and British Feminist Theory**

The past three decades have been marked by a noticeable increase in U.S. and British feminist work seeking to deessentialize female gender identity. In many ways, current trends in the study of gender are indebted to critiques by U.S. women of color, black women in Britain, and third world feminists. African American, Latina, and Asian American feminist scholars have made major contributions to understanding the multiple axes of oppression which impact the life experiences of U.S. women of color. Similarly, the theoretical contributions of feminist scholars and activists of Caribbean, African, and South Asian descent in England and Canada have led to reconceptualizations of womanhood which underscore the impact of historical and cultural factors on the constitution of women’s identities and social experiences (Bannerji 1995; Bryan 1985; Carby 1983; Mama 1995; Parmar 1990).

Since the late 1970s, feminists of color have challenged unitary models of gender and called for views of womanhood which take race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality into account. The emergence of third wave feminism during the 1980s and 1990s challenged the unitary gender paradigms which were developed by white middle-class feminists during the 1960s and 1970s. Estrangement from
mainstream feminism prompted U.S. feminists of color to reflect on the differences, rather than the assumed similarities and commonalities between women. Disenchantment with the models and discourses that were being developed by white middle-class feminists caused women of color to use their own experiences of alienation and discrimination to develop alternative conceptualizations of gender and feminism (Anzaldúa 1987; hooks 1984; Hull et al. 1982; Sandoval 1991; Wallace 1979).

U.S. feminists of color have long argued that feminism's exclusive focus on gender as the source of women's oppression fails to establish connections between sexism and other forms of domination (Alarcón 1990; Lorde 1985; Sandoval 1991). They have also noted that a primary focus on gender negates and erases other aspects of women's identities and experiences, including race, sexuality, and class. Feminists of color have further argued that mainstream feminism has inadequately addressed differences within the category "woman" and the ways in which womanhood is constituted in relation to women of other races, ethnicities, classes, and cultures, and not just in relation to men.

Scholarly work by U.S. women of color has contributed to our understanding of how female gender identity is constructed within the U.S. context. Much of this work has explored how gender differences are constituted in and through social relations, both within particular ethnic and racial communities and in relation to other segments of the population. Since the late-1970s, African American and Chicana feminists, such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Patricia Hill Collins, Deborah King, and Chela Sandoval, have argued for the existence of distinct and multiple forms of consciousness among U.S. women of color. Anzaldúa's (1988) notion of the "conciencia de la mestiza" (mestiza consciousness), Collins' (1991) formulation of African American women as the "outsider-within," and King's (1988) conceptualization of "multiple jeopardy" share a common concern with the multiple positionalities of U.S. women of color. Furthermore, all of their approaches highlight the importance of locating gender analysis within local contexts and in ways which account for the social, cultural, and historical specificity of women's experiences and identities.

The critiques of feminist theory developed by U.S. women of color during the 1970s and 1980s began to have a visible impact on feminist theorizing during the late-1980s and early-1990s. While still limited, a greater concern for the impact of racial, ethnic, and cultural differences on the construction of gender began to surface in the work of white feminist scholars (Butler 1992; Eisenstein 1995, 1996; Frankenberg 1993; Spellman 1988). The move to deessentialize gender and women's identities also led to a debate about the role of "difference" in both U.S. and British feminist theory during the early-1990s.

**GENDER, RACE AND THE QUESTION OF "DIFFERENCE" IN BRAZIL**

One of the central concerns of my research on race and gender in Brazil has been to examine the relevance of feminist theory produced in the U.S. and Britain to the analysis of race and gender in Brazil. However, before examining the relevance of U.S. and British feminist theory, it is first necessary to explore the origins and development of Women's Studies and feminist scholarship in
Brazil. My discussion of Brazilian Women’s Studies seeks to problematize the absence of race in most research on Brazilian women and examines alternative conceptualizations that have been developed by black feminists. The lack of sustained attention to the relationship between race and gender in Brazilian feminist scholarship has largely been due to the development of the field of Women’s Studies in Brazil. Unlike feminist scholarship in the United States and Britain, where discussion of race has increased in recent decades, Brazilian feminist scholars have been much slower to incorporate the study of race within Women’s Studies and feminist theory. Moreover, although the formal establishment of Women’s Studies in Brazil, during the early-1980s, took place when critiques of feminism by U.S. women of color began to gain a wider audience, these critiques appear to have had little, if any, impact in Brazil. Instead, the work of U.S. women of color has not been widely translated into Portuguese and their critical insights regarding the racialization of gender and women’s identities have not influenced the agenda of Women’s Studies in Brazil.

It is also important to note the extent to which critiques of feminist essentialism by black Brazilian women have gone unheeded by the majority of Women’s Studies scholars in Brazil. Although Afro-Brazilian feminists have attempted to address the specificities of black women’s lives since at least the early-1980s (Carneiro and Santos 1985; Gonzalez 1982), their critical insights regarding the intersection of race and gender have not been made central to the research objectives and priorities of Women’s Studies. Instead, if and when the issue of racial difference has been addressed, it has largely been done by black feminist scholars and activists (Bairros 1991; Bento 1995; Carneiro 1995; Figueiredo 1994; Gomes 1995; Lima 1995). As a result, most research within the field of Women’s Studies continues to portray Brazilian women in monolithic terms and fails to address the significance of race in the lives of both black and white women. The lack of integrated research on race and gender has meant that the life experiences of Afro-Brazilian women have rarely been examined or explored. A related consequence has been the lack of theoretical and empirical scholarship on how whiteness and racial privilege operate in the lives of white Brazilian women.

While the absence of race in most studies of Brazilian women has largely reflected both the positionalities and priorities of white feminist scholars, it has also been due, to the challenge of sustaining anti-racist politics in the country. The development of anti-racist organizing faced strong ideological and at times overt political suppression in Brazil during most of the twentieth century. In many ways, a historical absence of public discussion about race and racism has resulted in the discursive erasure of the realities of racial domination. The field of Women’s Studies has been impacted by, and in some ways complicit with, these

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1 The first university Research Center on Women was founded at the Pontifica Universidade Catolica (PUC, or Catholic University) in Rio de Janeiro in 1980 and by 1991 at least twenty research centers focusing on women and gender had been established in public and private universities across Brazil. The first feminist anthologies, Perspectivas Antropológicas da Mulher (Anthropological Perspectives on Women) and Espelho de Venus (Venus’ Mirror), were also published during the early-1980s. While both texts explored questions of gender and feminism, race was not considered.
macro-level political and ideological struggles over the significance of race in Brazil.\(^2\)

Brazilian feminist scholar Sandra Azerêdo has roundly criticized her feminist colleagues for failing to address the relationship between gender and race. Drawing on Donna Haraway’s (1991) notion of “situated knowledge,” Azerêdo has argued that a partial perspective has characterized Women’s Studies in Brazil. She notes that, by prioritizing gender and failing to address racial differences, Brazilian feminist scholars have foregrounded the concerns of white middle-class women and silenced the voices and experiences of non-white women. While criticizing the partial perspective of white feminists, Azerêdo has noted that partiality is not problematic in itself, however “the problem is when it is taken as being representative of a totality that will supposedly lead to greater objectivity” (Azerêdo 1994: 216). She further notes that recognizing the extent to which a given view of gender has been partial is essential to “establishing a more productive dialogue with other partial visions of the question [of gender]” (Azerêdo 1994:216).

Azerêdo’s critique of Brazilian feminist scholarship was decidedly influenced by her experiences as a graduate student in the United States. She notes that her exposure to the work of U.S. women of color and her interaction with white feminist theorists who recognized the centrality of race in the constitution of gender made a marked impact on her views of gender and women’s identities. However, she argues that similar conceptualizations have largely been absent in most Women’s Studies scholarship in Brazil.

Political and scholarly work by black feminists in Brazil has underscored the ways in which universalizing discourses on womanhood have pervaded most studies of Brazilian women. A number of black feminists (Bairros 1991; Carneiro and Santos 1985; Gonzalez 1982) have argued that the failure to address the relationship between racial and gender domination has obscured white women’s complicity in maintaining white privilege and reinforced the subaltern status of black women. During the early 1980s, research by the late Afro-Brazilian anthropologist Lélia Gonzalez (1982) attempted to address the specificities of black women’s lives within a larger anthology on Brazilian women entitled *O Lugar da Mulher* (The Place of the Woman). In her analysis, Gonzalez criticized the use of gender and class in studies of Brazilian women and noted feminist scholars’ tendency to “neutralize” the problem of racial domination. In contrast to studies which denied the salience of race in Brazilian women’s lives, Gonzalez argued that black women experienced triple oppression as a result of gender, racial and class domination.

Sueli Carneiro and Thereza Santos’ book *Mulher Negra* (Black Woman) was published in 1985 and remains the most comprehensive statistical analysis of the status of Afro-Brazilian women. While noting the marked increase in studies of Brazilian women during the United Nations Decade of Women (1975-1985), Carneiro and Santos argued that the “variable of color was not incorporated in this theoretical production in a systematic way such that black

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\(^2\) While recognizing the inadequacy of conceptualizations of gender which fail to address race, I am aware that open discussion of race and racism was severely circumscribed in Brazil until the early-1980s.
women could benefit from the studies in question” (1985:5). In their attempts to provide a quantitative and statistical profile of black women’s occupational and educational status, Carneiro and Santos faced the inadequacies of statistical information in Brazil. This was due to the absence of racial data in the 1970 national census and the limited amount of information on race that was collected and tabulated for the 1980 national census. Moreover, inconsistencies in the collection of data by race in the 1950, 1960, and 1980 censuses contributed to the lack of adequate quantitative information on the black population. Notwithstanding these obstacles, Carneiro and Santos’ study offers an impressive profile of black women in the São Paulo metropolitan area.

In addition to presenting a rare statistical analysis of black women’s socioeconomic position, Mulher Negra also provides a basis for understanding how the divergent socioeconomic profiles of white and black women have lead to tensions and conflicts, rather than unity founded on shared femaleness. Carneiro and Santos found that white women were the greatest beneficiaries of the occupational diversification which took place from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s.\(^3\) They further argued that white women had clear advantages in terms of access to education, the occupational structure, and income attainment which resulted in quantifiable differences between the status of white and black women. According to Carneiro and Santos:

The marked inequalities between black and white women anticipate the political and ideological tensions which are caused by them, placing white and black women in political conflict much of the time, in spite of their shared feminine condition. [1985:40]

The statistical data presented in Mulher Negra, provided support for Carneiro and Santos’ assertion that Brazilian feminists’ attempts to combat forms of sexual discrimination which affected women in general was misguided and inadequate. Carneiro and Santos argued that attempts to generalize about all Brazilian women’s experiences resulted in essentialized views of womanhood which denied the diversity of women’s experiences and led to homogenized notions of a “hypothetical feminine identity.” As they observed:

The feminist discourse about women’s oppression stemming from gender relations which form the basis of the patriarchal ideology does not account for the qualitative difference that this type of oppression had and still has in the construction of black women’s feminine identity. [Carneiro and Santos 1985: 42]

\(^3\) The so-called “Brazilian miracle” was a period of state-led economic growth which was orchestrated by the military regime from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s.
Presentation of the *Manifesto das Mulheres Negras* (Manifesto of Black Women) during the *Congresso das Mulheres Brasileiras* (Congress of Brazilian Women) in July 1975 marked the first formal recognition of racial divisions within the Brazilian feminist movement. As the U.N. Year of the Woman and the beginning of the U.N. Decade of Women, 1975 was an important moment of political mobilization for Brazilian feminists. However, as the Manifesto of Black Women suggested, any presumed unity between Brazilian women of different races was open for debate. The manifesto stated:

…black Brazilian women have received a cruel heritage: to be the objects of pleasure of the colonizers. The fruit of this cowardly crossing of blood is what is now acclaimed and proclaimed as ‘the only national product that deserves to be exported: the Brazilian mulatta.’ But if the quality of the product is said to be so high, the treatment that she receives is extremely degrading, dirty and disrespectful. (cited in do Nascimento 1978: 62).

By calling attention to the specificities of black women’s life experiences, representations, and social identities, the manifesto underscored the impact of racial domination in black women’s lives. Moreover, by unmasking the gendered aspects of racial domination and the racial aspects of gender domination, the manifesto also underscored black women’s victimization by long-standing practices of sexual exploitation.

A concern for the differential status of white and black women began to be more clearly articulated by black women who were active in the feminist movement during the late-1970s. Reflecting on the 1979 National Encounter of Women in Rio, black feminist Lelia Gonzalez lamented:

Our participation caused contradictory reactions. Until that moment, we observed a series of comments that were markedly leftist, that listed a series of demands in terms of the struggle against the exploitation of women, of the working class, etc. The unanimity of the participants in terms of these demands was absolute. But when we began to speak about racism and its practices in terms of the black woman there was no longer unanimity. Accusations were made that our comments were emotional, by some … but representatives from the poorest regions understood us perfectly (most of them were *mestiças*). All of the uproar caused by our position pointed to two main issues for us: political lag (principally of groups that consider themselves to be more progressive); and the necessity of denying racism in order to hide another issue: the exploitation of black women by white women. [Gonzalez 1982: 100-1]

Gonzalez’s comments highlight the role which race has played in shaping relationships between white and black women. She notes that during the 1979 Encounter of Women white feminists with seemingly progressive and leftist orientations denied the salience of race and its impact in black women’s lives.
Her comments further suggest that white women were reluctant to address the issue of race because of their own complicity in racial domination.

While, on the surface, it seemed that black and white women should be able to unite and make common cause around their experiences and oppression as women, differences between them became sources of conflict and division within the larger women’s movement. Differences in the social experiences and social location of black and white women led to divergences within the feminist movement during the late-1970s, and many of these divisions have continued up until the present. While a number of black women had turned to feminism seeking solace from the sexism that they encountered in black organizations, they soon found that race was a source of fissure which prevented white and black women from making common cause around a presumably shared sisterhood. Reflecting on racial divisions within the feminist movement, Afro-Brazilian feminists Sueli Carneiro and Thereza Santos have noted:

As a result of these conflicts, black and white women faced each other in the space of the feminist movement in a conflictual and untrusting manner which resulted from the different historical, political, and ideological references which determined their different points of view on common problems. [Carneiro and Santos 1985:48]

The legacies of gender and racial domination which resulted from slavery and their reconfiguration in post-abolition Brazil, have led to different social experiences and social locations for black and white women. As a result of these different social experiences and social locations, presumably common problems and issues, such as sexuality, reproductive health, and paid labor have held different significance for black and white women. Recognition of these differences caused black women in the feminist movement to challenge generalized notions of women’s oppression which failed to account for the qualitative difference that patriarchal ideology “had and still has in the construction of the black woman’s feminine identity” (Carneiro and Santos 1985: 42).

In attempting to address the racial dimensions of female gender oppression, black feminists have focused on issues such as birth control and reproductive health. They have been concerned by high rates of sterilization amongst poor women and noted that most poor women are black. In so doing, their efforts to combat female sterilization have called attention to the relationship between race, gender, and class. Black feminists have also argued that white feminists’ tendency to focus on the sexual division of labor fails to address the racial division of labor. Calling attention to the combined impact of the racial and sexual division of labor has provided additional insights into black women’s positioning at the bottom of the Brazilian socioeconomic structure.

Black feminists such as Lélia Gonzalez (1982) and Luiza Bairros (1991) have also linked the apparent liberation of white feminists to the continued subordination of black women. They have noted that black women’s domestic service in the homes of white families has allowed white women to enter the paid
labor force in increasing numbers. Gonzalez also criticized the feminist movement for being oblivious to the sexual exploitation experienced by black women, particularly those who work in domestic service. In a 1982 publication Gonzalez argued:

The exploitation of black women as sexual objects is something that is much greater than the Brazilian feminist movements think or say. These movements are generally led by white middle-class women. For example, “senhoras” still exist who seek to hire pretty young black women to work in their homes as domestics. But the main goal is to have their sons be initiated sexually with them. This is just one more example of economic-sexual superexploitation—in addition to perpetuating myths about the special sensuality of black women. [Gonzalez 1982: 99-100]

In arguing for a greater voice within the feminist movement, a number of black feminists have noted that making black women’s issues a sub-theme under the rubric of women’s issues is insufficient. Given their calculation that approximately 44% of the national population was black and that, as a result, nearly 50% of the female population was also black, Afro-Brazilian feminists such as Sueli Carneiro and Thereza Santos urged that the “variable of color should be introduced as an indispensable component in the effective configuration of the Brazilian feminist movement” (Carneiro and Sanots 1985: 41). However, noting white feminists’ reluctance to address the issue of race, Carneiro and Santos argued that such an omission “means that, as black women, we must privilege the racial question over the sexual question. This is also because the oppression of black women in Brazilian society does not originate in biological differences, but in racial ones” (Carneiro and Santos 1985: 41).

“Difference” and Structures of Inequality

Research by Afro-Brazilian feminists such as Lelia Gonzalez, Sueli Carneiro, and Teresa Santos has provided important insights into the structural dimensions of black women’s subordinate status in Brazilian society. Their work also offers a basis for understanding how structural conditions have resulted in qualitative differences in the life experiences of black and white women. By calling attention to the structural causes of differences between women, their work underscores how power relations have shaped white and black women’s lives, social positions, and identities. Although these insights have not been fully explored by feminist scholars in Brazil, the work of British, U.S, and Canadian feminists is useful in analyzing the ways in which differences among Brazilian women are tied to larger structures of inequality, particularly those resulting from practices of racial domination.

In the U.S. feminist scholars such as Maxine Baca Zinn and Bonnie Thornton Dill have noted that differences among women must be seen in terms of their connection to racialized power relations. Zinn and Dill have argued that race and class differences are significant, not as individual characteristics but as “primary organizing principles of a society which locates and positions groups
within that society's opportunity structures” (1996:322-323). British scholars Mary Maynard and Avtar Brah have also challenged feminist theorists to examine the power relations which constitute differences among women. Maynard's (1994) work emphasizes the need to address how power differentials translate difference into inequality and subordination. She further advocates shifting the focus of analysis from difference alone to the social relations which "convert this difference into oppression" (1994:20).

Along similar lines, Avtar Brah has argued that discussions of difference can result in dead-end conversations unless the constitution of difference is fully explored. According to Brah:

> The key issue then is not about 'difference' per se, but concerns the question of who defines difference, how different categories of women are represented within the discourses of 'difference', and whether 'difference' differentiates laterally or hierarchically. [1992:140]

Recent work by Canadian feminist scholar Himani Bannerji (1995) has also addressed the structural basis of differences between women. In her critique of the trend toward a discursive view of difference, Bannerji has argued that the “refined particularism and individualism of the politics of ‘difference’” avoids “naming and mapping out the general organization of social relations” (1995:73). She notes that, the failure to specify social relations forecloses the possibility of developing a social explanation for how differences are constituted. As Bannerji has observed:

> Without a materialist and historical view of consciousness, without a theory of a conscious and transformative relation between labour, self and society, the notion of self or subjectivity remains unconnected to social organization or history in any formative or fundamental sense. [1995:80]

By linking notions of difference to relations of power and inequality, Bannerji’s analysis highlights the importance of understanding both the construction and content of difference.

Patricia Hill Collins’ (1991) work provides an engaging conceptualization of the relationship between structure and discourse grounded in her investigation of African-American women’s lives. Collins’ analysis calls attention to the relationship between discursive relations and material conditions in the production and reproduction of gender, race, and class domination. Moreover, her analysis highlights the ways in which cultural representations of African-American women have served to justify prevailing structures of inequality. Collins argues that representations of African-American women have been essential to the “political economy of domination fostering black women’s oppression” (1991:67). By combining analysis of political economy and cultural representations, her work underscores how discourse and structure intersect in maintaining gender and racial domination in the U.S. context.

Collins’ conceptualization of controlling images links cultural representations to structural forms of inequality. She notes that controlling
images of African-American women “are designed to make racism, sexism, and poverty appear to be natural, normal and an inevitable part of everyday life” (1991: 68). Her work also calls attention to the ways in which cultural representations naturalize, and thus obscure, power relations. Her analysis of controlling images of African-American women is particularly relevant to the examination of cultural representations of Afro-Brazilian women. I have employed the concept of controlling images in my research on Afro-Brazilian women’s social identities and social location. Much like Collins, I argue that controlling images of Afro-Brazilian women, such as the *mulata* and *mãe preta*, are tied to racialized and gendered forms of structural inequality. These controlling images serve to obscure and naturalize historical and contemporary practices of racial and gender domination. They have also been used to maintain Brazil’s national image as a “racial democracy.”

**MAKING WHITENESS VISIBLE IN BRAZIL**

Silence about race and racism in the Brazilian feminist movement and in Women’s Studies scholarship has obscured the impact of racism in women’s lives and in their relationships with women of different racial groups. While black feminists have made major in-roads into the feminist movement since the 1970s, a lack of self-reflection on the part of white feminists is still pervasive. As a result, raising the issue of race continues to be seen as the responsibility of black women and many white feminists have not come to terms with their complicity in racial domination.

In an attempt to address the impact of dominant racial beliefs in feminist organizing, a number of black feminists have urged white women to begin to reflect on their racially privileged status and how it influences their interaction with non-white women. Black feminist Sueli Carneiro has further noted that:

> To the extent that white and black women admit that we live in a racist country and that we are all racists and that there is an interest in overcoming this collective sickness, then we can sit and negotiate. The worst thing about racism in this country is that people act in racist ways in an unconscious and hidden manner, without realizing it. [cited in Azerêdo 1994:216]

Brazil’s national image as a “racial democracy” has made the task of making whiteness and white racial privilege visible an extremely daunting one. However, as an increasing number of U.S. scholars have noted, understanding the role of whiteness in societies with deep-seated racial divisions and inequalities is crucial (Frankenberg 1993; Spellman 1988; Weedon 1999). I would urge Women’s Studies scholars in Brazil to follow the lead of their colleagues in the U.S. and England and begin to investigate the meaning and power of whiteness in Brazilian society. Critical analysis of the functioning of

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4 For a more complete analysis of controlling images of Afro-Brazilian women, see Caldwell (1999).
whiteness as an unmarked, yet socially powerful, category of identity is key to unmasking and challenging the invisibility and supremacy of whiteness in Brazil.

While examination of Afro-Brazilian women’s identities, experiences, and political activism is an important step toward understanding the dynamics of race and gender in Brazil, alone it is insufficient. The other side of the racial spectrum, namely whiteness, must be analyzed in order to more fully understand how processes of racial and gender domination operate in contemporary Brazil. In addition, given the prevalence of “intermediate” racial and color categories in Brazil, it is important to highlight the relationship between color and gender, especially with regard to the identities and experiences of mixed-race women. However, in my view, an emphasis on color alone will not suffice. In order to more fully understand racial and gender dynamics in Brazil, the extreme ends of the color/race spectrum must be analyzed (i.e. negra, branca), in addition to those in the middle ranges (i.e. mulata, mestixa).

Earlier in this paper, I stated that the field of Women’s Studies in Brazil had been impacted by and complicit with macro-level political and ideological struggles over the significance of race in Brazil. The impact of these struggles in the field of Women’s Studies is evident in the invisibility of race in most research on Brazilian women. Women’s Studies scholars’ complicity with the status quo or official ideology of “racial democracy” is also evident in their failure to address the issue of race and its role in structuring women’s experiences and identities.

In her recent book, *Feminism, Theory and the Politics of Difference*, British feminist scholar Chris Weedon has highlighted three common responses by white feminists to the question of racism. The responses outlined by Weedon draw upon critiques of U.S. feminism by black feminists Audre Lorde and bell hooks and are relevant to the analysis of Women’s Studies and feminism in Brazil. Weedon describes the first response as a “liberal refusal to see racialized difference” (Weedon 1999:155). She notes that implicit in this response is the assumption that racism is an “individual rather than a structural phenomenon that pervades all social institutions and practices” (Weedon 1999:155). The reduction of racism to an individual phenomenon is a common practice in Brazilian society. This reduction is evident in everyday attitudes and operates on a linguistic level through the hegemonic use of the term *preconceito* (prejudice) rather than *racismo* (racism) in both official and popular discourses. The reduction of racism to the practices and preferences of individuals serves to obscure institutionalized forms of racial discrimination which pervade Brazilian society. The dominant view that racism is individual, rather than social, also permits Brazilians to opt out of self-classification as racists, while recognizing that racism exists. As the 1995 study *Racismo Cordial* (Cordial Racism) found, a large percentage of Brazilians recognize that racism exists without admitting to practicing it themselves (Turra and Venturi 1995).

The second common response to racism described by Weedon is a “disabling sense of guilt which often leads to inaction” (Weedon 1999:155). Weedon argues that in order to move beyond guilt white women must address

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5 It is also interesting to note that the phrase “preconceito de cor” (color prejudice), and not “preconceito racial” (racial prejudice), is used in the title of Turra and Venturi’s study.
their own racial privilege and recognize their role in perpetuating racist social relations. As Weedon notes, the role of white women in perpetuating racist social relations can happen actively as well as passively through the failure to take racism seriously and challenge its consequences.

The third response described by Weedon is to see racism as a “black” problem rather than as one that is fundamental to the lives of white women. Weedon notes that this view of racism fails to recognize that it is grounded in “a binary relation of difference in which whiteness is the dominant term” (Weedon 1999:156, original emphasis). Since racism functions by privileging whiteness, white women’s failure to question their racial privilege leaves intact the binary oppositions on which racist discourse is founded. A failure to question the ostensibly natural character of white privilege also obscures the fact that the meanings of whiteness are “discursively produced within hierarchical power relations” (Weedon 1999:156). As Weedon notes:

The main lesson of black feminism and feminisms of colour for white women is that they must take responsibility for racism. To refuse to acknowledge racialized difference, even for the best of motives, is an inadequate response, as is the tendency to see race and racism as black problems. To recognize the social and cultural status of the category ‘white’, which most often seems natural to white people, involves conscious effort on the part of white women. [1999:176]

Weedon argues that a fourth response is possible, but notes that it is less common that the other three. This response involves “conscious recognition of racism as a structuring force in both the material practices shaping societies and the production of individual subjectivities, whether white or of colour” (Weedon 1999:156). Weedon suggests that this response requires conscious problematization of white privilege by white women and acknowledgement that racism has both individual and structural dimensions.

Making race, whiteness and white racial privilege visible is one of the keys to addressing racial differences and inequalities amongst Brazilian women. It is incumbent upon scholars in the field of Women’s Studies to begin to acknowledge and critically analyze the intersection between race and gender. Neither the intellectual, nor the political objectives of Women’s Studies can be achieved as long as Brazilian women are treated as a monolithic category, or conceptualized in ways which render a large portion of the female population invisible.

Until now, a reluctance to acknowledge and grapple with the racial implications of gender and gender domination has limited the intellectual scope and political relevance of Women’s Studies in Brazil. In seeking to address the invisibility of race in scholarship on women and gender in Brazil, feminist scholars have much to gain from examining struggles over the importance of race within feminism in the U.S. and England. As mentioned earlier in this paper,
the academic and political critiques and interventions by women of color have been instrumental in redefining the character of feminism in recent decades.

I would like to conclude by drawing upon the critical insights of African-American feminist Barbara Smith. Smith’s comments during the National Women’s Studies Association’s conference in 1979 are as relevant to Women’s Studies in Brazil today as they were to U.S. feminist scholars over twenty years ago. In her speech, “Racism and Women’s Studies,” Smith argued that the U.S. women’s movement needed to deal with racism “fundamentally, organically, and nonrhetorically” (Smith 1998:98). She further noted that white women have a materially different relationship to racism than white men. As she observed, “They get less out of it and often function as its pawns, whether they recognize this or not. It is something that living under white-male rule has imposed on us; and overthrowing racism is the inherent work of feminism and by extension feminist studies” (Smith 1998:98).

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