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## Coal to Cream: A Black Man's Journey Beyond Color to an Affirmation of Race: A Review

Veta Smith Tucker

*Grand Valley State University*

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*Coal to Cream: A Black Man's Journey Beyond Color to an Affirmation of Race.*  
by Eugene Robbins. New York: Free Press, 1999. 269 pages

## Review

In America, race has been constructed as a polarity of extremes with people defined as 'black' clustered at one pole and people defined as 'white' clustered at the opposite pole. Despite the presence of a rainbow of colors between poles, the racial constructs of 'black' and 'white' constitute the defining elements of American racial identity. This racial opposition generates an elaborate politics of psychological and social segregation, so that when laws enforcing segregation were overturned, the effects were curious though predictable. Rather than diminishing the barriers separating blacks and whites, the termination of segregation laws actually gave greater force to the psychological impulse to segregate.

Certainly, historical experience and contemporary life belie the logic of rigid racial barriers between blacks and whites. Many blacks and whites have ignored and crossed social boundaries. Nevertheless, despite the large number of boundary crossings and the long history of such crossings, these exceptions seem to reinforce, not undermine, the fact of racial opposition. Consider the transgressive dimensions of black/white friendships, courtships, marriages, and adoptions. The stigma attached to these interracial crossings exposes the enduring power of racial opposition in America today.

This complex racial baggage is what Eugene Robbins carried with him to Brazil when he moved there to become South American bureau chief for the *Washington Post*. Robbins found that the items packed in his American racial suitcase were unsuitable for Brazil's racial climate. Surrounded by an unfamiliar racial atmosphere, Robbins was forced to examine the content of his American racial identity. What he found became the impetus for his book, *Coal to Cream: A Black Man's Journey Beyond Color to an Affirmation of Race*.

Veta Tucker is an associate professor of English and African/African American Studies at GVSU.

In Brazil, Robbins found a racial utopia which he described as a “non-racial color blind Promised Land,” “an ideal racial society,” “a new world” where he could shed the stigma of blackness and inhabit a non-racial identity. His initial reaction was a sense of liberation, a sense of racial weightlessness, which he wanted his American readers to feel as blissfully as he did. He creates tantalizing images of a multicolored Brazilian paradise, describing it as “a benign racial anarchy with an absence of friction—an absence of solid walls—where the categories he’d grown up with that were so much a part of his being—the categories black and white—just tended to melt away” (110). This near mythic evocation of racial paradise charms the reader. When Robbins asks, why can’t Americans turn their backs on race and embrace the raceless future that already exists in Brazil, (122) the question stirs the reader’s impatience with America’s racial backwardness.

Before assuming a new, raceless identity, however, Robbins is compelled to reflect on the origins of the racial categories that had both nurtured and confined him his entire life. As he journeys deeper into Brazil and other South American cities, another journey unfolds in which Robbins looks back to the polarized American racial landscape that had shaped his ‘raced’ identity: 1950s Orangeburg, South Carolina where Robbins grew up in the heart of segregation, attending segregated schools till high school; 1960s Ann Arbor, Michigan where Robbins attended the University of Michigan, submerged himself in white relationships, and dated only white women, much to the dismay of his mother; 1970s San Francisco where he began his career as a journalist at the *San Francisco Chronicle* and lived a double life typical for nouveau black professionals, residing in an urban black neighborhood and working in an all white corporate culture; 1980s Washington, DC., “Chocolate City,” where he joined the *Washington Post* and shifted his living arrangements so that both his home and work environments were predominantly white, but where he came face to face with vocal blacks who

expected a loyalty to race that he wasn't inclined to give. This frustrating game of racial shifting, which professional African American readers will recognize, had left Robbins off balance.

Being black or white was not just physical, it was political. It was less a matter of race than racial identification. And, most important, it involved choosing sides. Well, I was tired of choosing. I was tired of feeling under such constant scrutiny, sorted and categorized by whites, judged and sentenced by blacks. The whole idea of racial identification being the defining factor in one's life seemed wrong to me, oppressive and wrong, and there had to be a better way. I was fed up with the assumptions that black people made, fed up with suspicion and paranoia and seeing the world as us on the one side and them on the other. I was fed up enough with America to just pack up the family and leave. So that's what I did. (25)

Yet, for all its promise, Robbins could not accept Brazil's gift of racelessness without coming to terms with the 'raced' identity he had been socialized to adopt as an African American.

Blending penetrating observation with intense self-examination, Robbins eventually discovers the common contours shaping race on three continents. He guides the reader through Peru, Chile, Argentina, Paraguay and Colombia as well as Brazil. He opens the reader's eyes to Brazil's famed celebration of carnaval and the practice of macumba, Afro-Brazilian religion, and he gives the reader an insider's view of Brixton, London's "black metropolis on the other side of the Thames" (212) before returning the reader to America.

In Brazil, he learned that the most important social and psychological distinction was color.

What Brazil made me think about was color. I had thought, all my life, that I knew what skin color meant, which was, specifically, that it didn't mean anything at all except as a broad indicator of the more important category called

race. In Brazil, though, it was race that meant very little and color that seemed to mean everything. (105)

In the United States, however, the most important distinction was race and the social and psychological barriers built on race.

When we speak of race in America, we speak in the terminology of color—we say black and white and yellow and red and brown—but we don't really *mean* color at all, not the way they mean color in Brazil. What we really mean is racial identification, in the sense of group identification. We mean people who share a history, a culture, who share a status in society, who even by and large share a political point of view—people who are assumed to share these things. . . even if reality doesn't bear these generalizations out. We see race as something absolute and immutable, and we recognize no in-between. (29)

Since race appeared to be indeterminate for Brazilian personal identity and social relations, Robbins resolved to discover what color actually determined in Brazil. Searching for the meaning of color in Brazilian life led Robbins away from the affluent areas of Rio deeper into the favelas, the slums, and areas surrounding big cities like Brasilia where, to Robbins' surprise, the color of the population did not reflect the multicolored

paradise of Rio's beaches. In the favelas of Jacarezinho, Mineira, Rocinha, Planaltina, a different racial pattern emerged. Instead of a brilliant multicolored democracy, in the slums "the people were predominantly black, poor, hassled by the police, neglected by the powerful, and marginalized by the economy" (102). Gradually, Robbins developed the ability to see the social fabric structuring Brazilian lives. With its pockets of black life teaming with crime, corruption and poverty, Brazil looked more and more like America with one commanding difference: "no one ever mentioned race" (102).

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Ultimately, Robbins understood that America was, indeed, capable of becoming another Brazil. Late 20th century conservative politics calling for a 'color-blind' society and 'race-free' social policies could lead America to a Brazilian destination where race could be abandoned. On the surface, this appeared to be an ideal solution for racial inequity. However, when Robbins realized that racial abandonment was the goal of only one color group, this solution lost its appeal. Although blacks in Brazil could and did abandon blackness to become 'white,' this one directional movement did not erase the stigma of blackness for those left behind. Brazil's apparent racelessness was achieved by granting the trophy of whiteness to dark skinned individuals

based on their attained class status. In this arrangement, whiteness retains its racial potency and its allure; it simply becomes transferable as a lifetime bonus to as many dark ones as can afford it.

Robbins' closing insights are instructive for the contentious debate on race currently taking place in America.

I came to understand that structuring a society so that black people didn't "have to be" black didn't seem to do much good for black people at all. That, in fact, it seemed to do them harm, to hold them down—worse, to deny them even the awareness that they were being held down, to deny them the language to talk about it and the anger to do something about it. (159)

With no sense of race, black Brazilians had "no sense of themselves as joined, embattled, mutually reinforced" (180). This sense of shared identity was part of the weight that Robbins carried as an African American—the weight that he wanted so much to leave behind. Once Robbins understood that it was the collective African American cultural embrace that he must abandon to inhabit a non-racial (meaning 'white') Brazilian identity, he rejects Brazil's racial utopia and sets his sights on returning home to America where race mattered—where blackness was more than a color—where blackness was, indeed, a source of "heartache and struggle" but where he belonged to a large family with whom he could share heartaches and struggles. Robbins leaves Brazil with a renewed appreciation for blackness as a racial "identity—an impulse—a shield—a refuge" (260).

Robbins' decision to retain his African American racial identity would mean that he would have to bear the heavy weight of blackness, but he no longer thought of it as dead weight that held him down. Finally, he understood it as ballast that held him up. His South American odyssey had taught him what "race" was worth and how to shoulder it with pride and purpose. 