In 1943 a map titled “Brazil . . . A Stepping Stone for Invasion . . . East or West” sounded the alarm that Adolf Hitler reportedly planned to use Brazil to attack the United States. The map of the Americas, Africa, and Europe included two-way arrows that showed how close both Vichy-controlled West Africa and the Cape Verde Islands were to Natal, Brazil. Another two-way arrow began in Natal, swept into the northern South American countries, and pointed directly toward the United States. The full spread map and its ominous title communicated a clear message from the US Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs, the publisher of the booklet, to the US public. The booklet, *Brazil: Introduction to a Neighbor*, relayed the importance of the South American giant—with its convenient geographic location, huge German population, and five thousand miles of largely unprotected coastline—to US safety and interests during the war. Just as the two-way arrows on the map suggested, the significance of this relationship was also felt in Brazil; however, whereas the United States’ wartime influence on Brazil is well known, the reverse is a generally forgotten story in US history.

If Brazil’s wartime influence on the United States is overlooked, so, too, are the racial issues at play in the Brazil-US alliance. During the Second World War and the 1930s, which had been a tumultuous and polarized decade, Brazilianian and US authorities regarded each nation’s racial image as a critical component in the efforts to solidify their alliance and, relatedly, to create goodwill between the multiracial citizens

**Introduction**
of both countries. With so much at stake, including a possible Nazi occupation of the Americas, these racial considerations took on a sense of urgency and contributed to a prominent twentieth-century trend: the unsteady replacement of nationalisms that openly excluded people of color with those that emphasized the theoretical inclusion of all races. Although this multiracial nationalism manifested differently in Brazil and the United States, in both countries the doctrine not only helped mainstream the acceptance of racial pluralism but also construed it as patriotic. *Shifting the Meaning of Democracy: Race, Politics, and Culture in the United States and Brazil* is a transnational and comparative study that explores and seeks to explain this historical sea change in official US and Brazilian nationalist ideals.

This book analyzes the co-constitutive emergence of racially inclusive nationalisms as Brazilian and US state doctrine between 1930 and 1945 in relation to blacks, who were, according to census data, the most populous nonwhite racialized group in both nations at the time. It probes
why and how this shift occurred, the modes through which it was expressed, its explicit relationship to notions of democracy, and the role of and consequences for US-Brazil relations. Indeed, political nationalism in these countries was tightly linked to ideas of democracy, even in Brazil during the Estado Novo dictatorship (1937–45). As a result, this study exposes the new, inclusionary ways in which Brazilian and US political conceptions became racialized during the Great Depression and World War II. Because of the significance of democracy, I refer to the articulations of inclusive, race-based nationalism as “racial democracy,” an extremely common term in Brazilian literature and one, I contend, that pertains to the United States as well. This study assesses the international forces that most significantly precipitated racial democracy’s newfound utility to the US and Brazilian states during this period: communism, fascism (especially Nazism), and World War II.

The stock market crash of 1929 and the Great Depression generated many skeptics of capitalism and the system of government considered to be its natural partner—liberal democracy. This environment was ideal for leaders and advocates of movements that challenged capitalism, liberal democracy, or both. Fascist and communist groups seemed to be the biggest winners; their attacks on the economic and political status quo drew support from multitudes of disaffected and disillusioned people in Brazil and the United States. In Brazil the Far Left and Right grew polarized: large numbers of partisans began to clash fatally in the streets, justifying a repressive national security law in 1935. In the United States, the 1930s was the heyday for communists and “fellow travelers,” and contrarily, the fascist-like, anti-Semitic messages of Catholic priest and radio host Father Coughlin also produced a huge following. Protests against the political and economic establishment from the Left and Right set up a unique labyrinth of political rhetoric that authorities in both countries had to navigate.

Heightened black activism in Brazil and the United States meant that politicized black populations influenced these political phenomena. The situation was dire for blacks in both countries during the Great Depression, as they were among the most economically vulnerable groups, trapped in low-paying jobs and kept out of many industries even when the economy had been strong. In the United States, the national average for black unemployment in 1932 hovered around a whopping 50 percent, and many African Americans doubted that traditional black rights organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) held real potential to ameliorate their
situation. Black radicalism grew significantly, and communism attracted many adherents, especially in black urban hubs like Harlem. Afro-Brazilians were also drawn to the Left and Right. José Correia Leite—a black activist and journalist—made it clear that Afro-Brazilians were not immune to the national politics at the time. Leite recalled that in those days, “you were either communist or fascist,” and he stated that both political movements had taken “blacks to their death or to jail.” Blacks had grown weary of a government that, since the formation of the First Brazilian Republic in 1889, largely had disregarded their political, social, and economic rights. For example, similar to blacks in the US South, many Afro-Brazilians were excluded from participating in electoral politics because of the bitter combination of literacy requirements and the state’s refusal to address black demands for improvements to the school system that was failing them. Instead of investing in Brazil’s black workforce, states like São Paulo heavily invested in European immigrants. Thus, like distressed and frustrated citizens in all corners of the globe, large numbers of Brazilian and US blacks agitated for alternative economic and political models in an effort to redress their various grievances, including racial inequality.

This book argues that the struggle that occurred between the US and Brazilian states, black activists, the Left, and the Right was in part a theoretical tug-of-war over the meanings of democracy. Typically this was not how the struggle was framed. Political leaders, antiracist activists, academics, and average citizens alike tended to construct the conflict as one of triple opposites: communism versus fascism versus democracy. This study examines a parallel rhetorical dispute that was taking place. In this debate, communists and fascists were opposed not to the idea of democracy per se but to liberal democracy, loosely characterized as a Western-style capitalist form of representative government. Those who denounced democracy from the Left and Right, then, customarily did so to attack this Western-style liberal democracy. In fact, fascists and communists frequently claimed to be genuine democratic movements themselves—“nonliberal democracies”—defending their own particular interpretations that usually excluded Brazil and the United States.

Democracy was arguably the most popular and widely interpreted political term during the 1930s and World War II. According to eminent political theorist C. B. Macpherson, this was not the case in the fifty-year era before the First World War, when democracy went hand in hand with the liberal capitalist state and its principles of individual rights and freedom. The Bolshevik Revolution and its notion of proletarian democracy
helped diversify the concept of democracy after World War I. In those decades following the war, democracy was perceived as “a good thing—so much so that everyone claim[ed] to have it.” Democracy became “ambiguous . . . with different meanings—even apparently opposite meanings—for different peoples.” That said, the prominent political viewpoints of this study’s period did share a baseline definition of democracy as the system of government that best fulfilled the needs of the people and promoted their well-being. Best was the operative word here, as all parties asserted superiority in their ability to provide the most fruitful political, economic, and social conditions for their people. The ambiguity and disagreements between them rested on their values and on what scholar Bernard Crick described as “democracy as a set of institutional arrangements or constitutional devices.”

It is important to clarify that this study does not present fascism as democratic, nor does it validate Hitler’s attempts to democratize Nazism. Although leading political theorists like Macpherson, Chantal Mouffe, and Ernesto Laclau have argued that democracy can exist in forms outside of the liberal framework, it is clear that none of them would classify fascist states—and especially the Third Reich—as democratic. For instance, Macpherson, who had been greatly troubled by the rise of Nazism, contended that a nonliberal regime can be deemed democratic only if it has the “moral” objective “to provide the conditions for the full and free development of the essential human capacities of all the members of the society.” Mouffe, Angela Davis, Charles Mills, Carole Pateman, and Michael Hanchard are among those who theorize about the historical failure of Western democracies to meet such a moral standard for all races and genders, but such criticisms never translate into support for the notion of a Nazi democracy. Again, the inclusion of fascists in this study is not an endorsement of their democratic claims; rather, my intention is to assess and acknowledge their impact on the racial democratic debate.

As national, class, gender, ethnic, and racial definitions of “the people” clashed, the question of who constituted “the people”—that is, which groups should benefit from democracy and how—distinguished political rivals from one another. From the 1930s through the end of World War II, an obsession with the racial characteristics of the people emerged. The international community urgently prioritized and openly reconsidered the racial benefactors of a truly democratic society. This book examines the ways that the democratic war of words in Brazil and the United States often turned on the issue of race, as the racial criteria
of democracy became one of the key elements that differentiated the Left, Right, and center.

Communists and fascists were among those who highlighted race to frame their own democratic formulations. Especially in the 1930s, communists argued that racial equality was a key feature of any real democracy and pointed to discrimination in the United States and Brazil as proof that those societies were undemocratic. As chapter 2 assesses, communist racial democracy led anticommunist authorities, even racist ones, to defend their governments with more inclusive language. The rise of fascism in the 1920s and particularly the ascension of Nazism in the 1930s also began to alter the global discussion about race and democracy. Fascism focused the spotlight of democratic debate squarely on questions of racial and religious rights, tolerance, and equality. Of course, European fascism’s impact on US and Brazilian racial democracy was most radical during World War II, especially after both nations declared war. In chapter 5 we see that the Axis powers used the United States’ racial record to call out its democratic hypocrisy. After all, racial illiberalism should have been anathema to a liberal state, particularly one in which abolition legally transformed the formerly enslaved into free and equal citizens. Blacks also took advantage of the war and its racial politics to advance their own equal rights agenda. This book also shows how Brazil, in the unique position of being an Allied dictatorship, relied upon its reputation as a racially tolerant society to justify its alliance with liberal democracies. Here the Estado Novo (New State) took advantage of the Allies’ anti-Nazi, antiracism rhetoric to portray Brazil as a democracy.

In both Brazil and the United States, communism, fascism, black activism, and World War II created a complex ideological landscape that rendered racial inclusion as democratic and nationalist, and racial exclusion as undemocratic and unpatriotic. In this climate, I contend that US and Brazilian authorities articulated multiracial nationalism to ward off the undemocratic accusations and to prove that their governments were true democracies. Authorities deemed their accusers a threat to their political power at best and subversive elements that endangered the nation’s entire political system at worst. Therefore, official racial democracy—propagated largely to mediate, control, and guard against these perceived threats—emerged as a national defense strategy for the Brazilian and US states. By the state, I mean federal-level government and its agencies, governmental bodies like Congress that had national reach, and the Brazilian state police that helped create and maintain the
Estado Novo. I do not suggest that the state was a monolithic entity or even that authorities acted with the same objectives; instead, I try to describe how influential authorities and agencies were a part of a major trend, not yet absolute, toward racial democracy in both countries.

The relationship between the United States and Brazil, driven by the Good Neighbor Policy and World War II, further stimulated their official advance of racial democracy and influenced the ways that both countries produced and circulated it as international propaganda for national security purposes. The Good Neighbor Policy, which Franklin D. Roosevelt announced during his first inaugural address in 1933, set out to tighten the bonds between the nations of the Western Hemisphere. In part, Roosevelt promised to reverse US intervention in Latin America and to spearhead programs of cultural exchange. The Good Neighbor Policy was particularly important during World War II, when Brazil would become arguably the United States’ most critical ally in the region. Brazil also relied upon the US financial support it earned in exchange for its wartime partnership and cooperation.17

This book argues that officials in Brazil and the United States worked together to construct and legitimate one another’s racial and democratic images largely to tighten their wartime alliance. The two states largely carried out this work by collaborating on cultural productions. Such messages of racial democracy precipitated a rise in the presence of black culture and multiracial nationalist rhetoric in state cultural productions, including government-issued literature and state-produced film and radio. In part, cultural propaganda broadcast visual and verbal representations of the national community’s racial composition and specified that many races and cultures were included in and accepted as part of the nation. These states also placed an official stamp of approval on once disparaged black cultural expressions, marking them as authentic national culture. However, authorities simultaneously limited the ways in which blacks themselves could represent the nation. For instance, the states commonly employed white cultural mediators in lieu of black performers to transmit black culture as a sign of racial democracy.

US and Brazilian officials and nonstate actors deployed essentially four (often interacting and coexistent) forms of racial democracy. These categories do not necessarily reflect the intentionality of the historical actors examined in this book. However, they were not preordained, nor did I produce them arbitrarily. Rather, these four classifications became clear to me while I researched the functionality of racially inclusive
democratic discourse in the historical documents. I was quite surprised by the heterogeneity of voices articulating racial democracy and the multitude of the often contradictory positions they endorsed. I soon realized that the debate did not revolve only around the case for or against racial democracy. In fact, even among those who claimed to be its champions, there was no consensus about what a racially inclusive democratic society should look like. Thus I developed these four categories to analyze this rhetoric in the aggregate, identifying common threads of thought and offering deeper meaning and some structure to a cacophony of racial political ideals.

The first category, *racial realism*, was advanced by those who acknowledged that racism existed in their societies and pushed for practical, concrete steps toward racial justice. Racial realists fought for tangible change that would bring about greater equality, articulating racial democracy as a goal, not as a fact. Most realists argued that the eradication of racism was necessary to realize true political democracy and to protect national defense interests. Black activists working within and outside of the state typically were the most ardent advocates of racial realism.

*Racial denial* was the variant of racial democracy contrary to realism; its spokespersons clashed with the realists and denied that a problem of racial prejudice existed. Denialists took this stance in order to fend off the dangers they identified in accusations from the Left, the Right, and black activists that racism was endemic to their societies. In opposition to the realists, denialists expressed racial democracy as a current truth, not a work in progress. Realism was more common in the United States and denial more common in Brazil, but both categories had proponents in each country.

*Racial dissuasion* was the use of racially inclusive language to dissuade blacks from joining any movement considered a national threat, including communism. Racial dissuaders also discouraged blacks from engaging in actions that undermined the state by exposing racial prejudice. In order to steer them in the desired direction, dissuaders often tried to convince blacks that supporting the political status quo was in their best interest. Dissuasion typically was not a stand-alone category; it usually functioned in tandem with realism or denial.

*Racial obstructionism* was the effort to obstruct racially inclusive messages. Unlike advocates of the other categories, many obstructionists were against any expression of racial democracy. The staunchest racists who spoke unabashedly against black inclusion—particularly in
places like the US Deep South, São Paulo, or Rio Grande do Sul—were prime examples. Other obstructionists may have subscribed to a form of racial democracy yet blocked and removed realist messages about the problem of racism from the public sphere. This type of obstructionism was common in Brazil, especially during the Estado Novo dictatorship when the political police confiscated literature, burned books, and imprisoned the “subversive” opposition. Racial realists were silenced routinely as a result. In fact, the Estado Novo’s 1937 ban of political parties largely demobilized the nation’s most successful and organized black rights organization, the Frente Negra Brasileira. In the United States, anticommunist crusader Martin Dies precipitated the downfall of antiracist state cultural materials and projects.

In creating these categories, I have borrowed heavily from the words and frameworks that the voices I researched deployed in their formulations. Yet just as no agreement prevailed as to what a racial democracy should be in the 1930s and 1940s, not all the historical actors that appear in the following pages would have embraced these classifications. Again, the categories are purposefully broad, not to oversimplify or collapse complicated and multidimensional phenomena occurring in two nations but to establish enough room for the complexity and nuance that existed within them.

A central premise of this analysis is that from 1930 to 1945, the Brazilian and US states privileged what I refer to as non-action-oriented forms of racial democracy. Action-oriented realists did not speak in glittering generalities like their non-action-oriented counterparts; they specified economic, social, and political inequities that frustrated blacks’ quest for freedom, pressuring the state to enact measures that would reduce or eradicate them. These realists advanced a proactive antiracist agenda, not a passive one. I contend that action-oriented realists had a difficult time moving the state past verbal commitments to racial pluralism because of the latter’s prioritization of the national security concerns outlined. This is not to suggest that there was no action inherent in official language of racial democracy, but rather that authorities did not focus on utilizing “coercive state power”—such as legislation or substantial social policy enforced by the state apparatus—to explicitly tackle the problem of racial inequality. Contemporaneous realists such as Afro-Brazilian leader Abdias do Nascimento expressed their frustration with what they perceived as a failure to pursue antiracist praxis. Nascimento complained that during the 1930s, cultural racial democracy incorporated blacks into society as ethnographic material
when their struggle for freedom “cried out for urgent practical action to improve radically their horrible existence.”

The action-oriented and non-action-oriented binary of this analysis speaks to linguistic turn scholarship and its emphasis on the power of discourse and language to make race. As theorist Robert Young has warned, the linguistic turn’s focus on racial difference as a scientific fiction, or as only a set of manufactured and illogical criteria and concepts, led many to define racism primarily as a set of falsehoods that should be tackled on the rhetorical level. Accordingly, freedom was to be claimed through realigned and more egalitarian representations and language of human difference. “What [this literature offers] as emancipation,” Young concludes, “is not equal access to economic resources but the pleasure of disrupting dominant and oppressive meanings.” In other words, for Young this form of liberation was problematic in that it could be disconnected from the tangible material changes that would improve the quality of and possibilities for black lives.

Young’s argument has strong analytical parallels with this book. Indeed, despite the emergence of more racially inclusive rhetoric, the general defeat of action-oriented racial realism during this period left much work to be done in the eradication of racial inequality for subsequent generations. However, rhetorical change had its benefits, and racial democracy did create new nationalist attitudes in the United States and Brazil that future antiracists were able to utilize to their advantage.

**Racist and Exclusive Nationalisms**

In order to illuminate the historical circumstances that helped make the shift from racially exclusive to racially inclusive nationalisms possible, I will provide a short sketch of these transitions in Brazil and the United States. The discussion of the former focuses on but is not limited to the state, whereas the summary of the latter more fully includes the non-state actors that pressured the state to adopt racially pluralist rhetoric. Although earlier transformations around the ideals of race and national identity took place in both nations, particularly in relation to abolition, this overview concentrates on the twentieth century.

In the early part of the century, racist nationalism was dominant in the United States. Racist nationalists were strongly informed by US Anglo-Saxonism, which Reginald Horsman has described as the belief in “the American Anglo-Saxons as a separate, innately superior people who were destined to bring good government, commercial prosperity,
and Christianity to the American continents and to the world.” Inferior races were “doomed to subordinate status or extinction.” Even early twentieth-century leaders who rejected Anglo-Saxonism, including “melting pot” advocate Theodore Roosevelt, often advanced a form of racist nationalism. At its inception, the melting pot comprised various white ethnic groups; people of color were excluded from the mix. Segregation laws, which the US Supreme Court validated in the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* case, exemplified the state’s active marginalization and exclusion of people of color from a nation defined as white.

Racist nationalists, especially Anglo-Saxonists, believed that the fate of the nation depended on the maintenance of the United States’ white heritage. Nonwhite races were labeled threats to the broader national good, possible antagonists capable of derailing the country’s divine destiny by contaminating society with their inherent inferiority. Anglo-Saxonists, many of them nativist agitators, also opposed the immigration and naturalization of Eastern Europeans, whom they placed on the lowest rung of the so-called white races. Anglo-Saxonism dovetailed anti-European racism with xenophobia against Europeans of a “lesser stock.” This mentality strengthened and was strengthened by the popularity of scientific racism and social Darwinism, which categorized and ranked all human races as well as justified racial and ethnic discrimination. Much of the Latin American intellectual elite did not subscribe to such Western pseudoscientific reasoning wholesale, but these ideas certainly were influential. At the turn of the century, Raimundo Nina Rodrigues made a huge impact on Brazilian scientific racism as a pioneer in the fields of criminal anthropology, medical law, psychiatry, and anthropology, among others. Nina Rodrigues’s groundbreaking studies echoed North American and European thought with his theses on indigenous and black inferiority, the ability of blacks to psychologically pollute the more advanced white upper classes, and the ways that miscegenation led to degeneration. As the twentieth century progressed, however, the Brazilian elite adopted a more nuanced perspective. Nancy Stepan shows that during the interwar period, Latin Americans rejected the racial and hereditary focus of the Mendelian eugenics most popular in Anglo-Saxon countries, adopting in its place a neo-Lamarckism that prioritized environment and amelioration through hygienic and sanitation reforms. Nevertheless, these Latin American eugenicists were still concerned about degeneration and “beauty and ugliness, purity and contamination, as represented in race.” These preoccupations led even neo-Lamarckian eugenicists to argue for the exclusion of those degenerative
elements, racialized as mestizos, indigenous, and black Brazilians. Such ideas about who should and should not be included in the nation’s populace provided “scientific” reasoning for authorities that pushed racist policies.

Most of Brazil’s early twentieth-century elite had accepted the theory of Aryan supremacy yet, unlike Nina Rodrigues, simultaneously disavowed the bleak belief that racial mixing necessarily led to degeneration. Their hope and assertion was that through miscegenation, racial progress would occur. The Brazilian elite contended that Brazil was whitening or that continued racial mixing and increased European immigration would eventually whiten Brazil’s people of color. Europeans were thought to be more energetic and industrious than Brazilians, and whitening supporters also hoped that their temperament would rub off on local populations. The government even recruited and subsidized the voyages of cheap European immigrant labor. Proponents of branqueamento, the whitening process, predicted an Aryan Brazil in a few to several generations, insuring a “civilized” future for the nation.28 If they usually avoided explicit racial language, Paulista regionalists encouraged this tendency to link civilization with whiteness when they insisted that São Paulo—the most common destination for European immigrants—was the epicenter of Brazilian modernity.29

The Brazilian state demonstrated its opposition to black immigration many times. Shortly after Brazil’s monarchy was overthrown, the provisional government’s immigration law admitted noncriminal foreigners able to work, except Africans and Asians.30 In the early 1920s, many authorities decided to revisit the issue after being alarmed by several developments. The Chicago-based Brazilian American Colonization Syndicate planned for US black immigration to Brazil, and rumors spread that land developers in the state of Mato Grosso were recruiting US blacks for this purpose. Opponents of black immigration caused such a scandal that the government reneged on the concessions that had been offered to the developers, and two congressional deputies introduced a controversial antiblack immigration bill. The bill would have outright prohibited “human beings of the black race” from entering Brazil. Of the 113 deputies in the Chamber, 94 voted to advance it to committee for debate. Deputies against the bill and black campaigners like Evaristo de Moraes, all appealing to a patriotic sentiment of racial tolerance, managed to defeat it. A similar and unsuccessful proposal emerged two years later when US black newspaper publisher Robert Abbott, who had traveled to Brazil in 1923, planned to arrange for black cotton farmers to
immigrate to Brazil that same year. Brazilian authorities eventually chose to act more discreetly, mandating their consulates in the United States to deny visas to blacks. Conveniently, this option protected Brazil’s long-standing reputation as a racially cordial society, especially in comparison to the blatant racism of US policies.31

Asian immigration caused dissension and controversy in Brazil as well. Japanese immigrants began to arrive in 1907, inciting heated debates inside and outside political circles. Much of the agricultural sector championed the immigration of the Japanese, who were respected by landowners for their perceived agricultural knowledge, while others vehemently disapproved. Immigration of the Chinese was completely out of the question because of their alleged vices and lack of energy, both of which were viewed as contagious.32

In the United States, anxieties about national progress and unity also greatly shaped immigration law around the turn of the century. Before the 1921 Johnson Quota and 1924 Johnson-Reed Immigration Acts, European immigration to the United States was relatively open, but many restrictions existed on immigration of other groups, especially Asians. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 outlawed the immigration of Chinese laborers, and in 1907 Japan agreed to limit the number of Japanese immigrants to the United States. (This explains why Brazil became a destination for Japanese immigration that same year.) In 1917 Congress passed an immigration act that created a “barred Asiatic zone” that broadly excluded Asians from admission. The 1921 and 1924 immigration laws echoed these policies by declaring Asians ineligible to immigrate based on their prohibition from naturalized citizenship, which had been upheld in the Supreme Court. The 1924 law also discriminated against Southern and Eastern Europeans, although they were marked as assimilable ethnic white nationalities and never had their access to citizenship or immigration denied outright. Furthermore, as Mae Ngai shows, the law and the implementation of border patrol policies at the Mexican border permanently branded Asian and Mexican immigrants and their offspring as “aliens.”33

One distinction to make between US and Brazilian immigration policies is that the United States had a protective approach to its racial heritage, whereas the Brazilian elite typically had a corrective stance to theirs. Unlike their counterparts in Brazil, US policymakers and other influential thinkers saw immigration not as the solution to their racial concerns but as a menace to the nation’s larger white majority population. However, both states unabashedly relied upon immigration law to
protect or increase the white character of the nation. In this attempt to racial engineer Brazil and the United States, authorities considered people of color a threat to national well-being and progress.

**THE MOVE TOWARD INCLUSIVE NATIONALISM AND RACIAL DEMOCRACY IN THE INTERWAR PERIOD**

Alluding to Benedict Anderson’s canonical work, Thomas Holt has written, “nations are not imagined at one moment, once and for all, but must be periodically reimagined, even reinvented, often at moments of crises, precipitated by the need to determine who belongs and who does not.”³⁴ The Brazilian and US reimagining of their racial-national identities was a result of many moments of crises that came to a head in the 1930s and during World War II. One of these major events was the First World War, which left a deep mark on the interwar generation.

As the first decade after World War I, the 1920s was a particularly active period during which major developments and changes occurred in racial ideals, political beliefs, nationalism, and cultural tastes. Micol Seigel has written that the war “spotlit global racial relations and questions of racial justice as the Allies’ rhetoric of democracy . . . caught on the snag of their own racially stratified societies.” The black Brazilian activist José Correia Leite remembered that the democratic framing of the First World War helped arouse black desires for a better life. The 1920s did prove to be a seminal period for Afro-Brazilian racial consciousness and activism, and the black press grew as never before in the nation’s history, most notably in São Paulo. By the mid-1920s, Brazil’s black press was more emphatic in its call for civil rights. The newspaper *O Alfinete* signaled this trend in 1918 when its director wrote that the racially harmonious “symbol of our democracy” was “a fiction and a lie.”³⁵ A growing number of black Brazilians challenged the traditional narrative of racial harmony, which both ignored racism and embraced whitening, to push for one that exposed their struggles and supported their demands.

In the 1920s many blacks fought for public recognition of their critical role in Brazilian history, and they also founded important black social, political, and educational organizations. In cities like Rio de Janeiro, Porto Alegre, and São Paulo, Afro-Brazilians campaigned to erect monuments to the Mãe Preta (Black Mother), the famous wet-nurse figure who breastfed the nation’s elite children during slavery. At times with, at times without white co-advocates, these black activists and journalists deployed various rhetorical strategies to lobby for the
creation of the Mãe Preta statues. Some framed the Mãe Preta as the nation’s symbolic mother, who sacrificed for white and black children alike. Others downplayed the notion that she embodied multiracial Brazil, insisting that she represented modern Afro-Brazilians generally or black women specifically as well as their myriad contributions to the country’s formation. Many blacks also used the Mãe Preta as a way to shame the nation for its practices of racial prejudice, such as the policy to replace Afro-Brazilians with European immigrant labor.36

São Paulo’s Centro Cívico Palmares, named after the famed seventeenth-century quilombo (Maroon society), also demonstrated black organizing during the interwar period.37 Founded in 1926, the Centro adopted a holistic approach to serve Afro-Brazilians, opening a library, an educational theater program, and a medical clinic. The Centro’s leadership developed a relationship with politicians to better fight for the issues important to racially conscious Afro-Brazilians. It also led protests against the Civil Guard for its refusal to hire blacks.38 These forms of activism sent a strong message to politicians that they should not turn a blind eye to racial injustice if they hoped to attract black support.

US blacks fought to install a more racially inclusive and equitable post–World War I order domestically and globally. A group of US blacks decided that if the peace negotiations in Versailles excluded the racial question, they would be an illegitimate affront to the aims of the conflict that supposedly made the world “safe for democracy,” President Woodrow Wilson’s wartime mantra. They joined forces to send a representative to France, who worked with the Japanese to put forth a doomed proposal to add a racial equality amendment to the League of Nations covenant, which the United States did not support.39 Although the unsuccessful amendment was a sign of intense resistance to their cause at home and abroad, US blacks remained resolved to make action-oriented racial democracy a reality. These events foreshadowed greater racial political campaigns in the decade to come, as did the ways that blacks were reinventing themselves.

US blacks used their actions and words of resistance to disabuse society of the misconception that acts of intimidation would easily subdue their demands for respect, freedom, and equality. In 1925 Alain Locke coined the term New Negro to label his generation of blacks, a generation that was vehement in its racial pride and confidence. The New Negro jettisoned the docile and subservient depiction of blacks that had been prominent during slavery. New Negro women and men could be found in any region of the country, but many associated the movement