

## **Not Just Color: Whiteness, Nation, and Status in Latin America**

Edward Telles and René Flores

In the growing academic literature on race and ethnicity in Latin America, the primary focus of research has been on the marginalized: usually Afro-descendants (blacks and mulattoes) or indigenous people, and sometimes mestizos or mixed-race persons. While ideas of whiteness and white privilege are often implicit in this work, whiteness has rarely been directly studied, even though white persons are presumed to be at the top of the region's racial pigmentocracy. Instead, this study turns the analytic mirror directly onto the dominant white group rather than any of the subordinate groups. Since the early colonial period, whites have been the dominant status group and whiteness has represented power, wealth, privilege, and beauty in virtually every part of Spanish and Portuguese America, while Afro-descendants and indigenous persons have been at the bottom of the social structure. In the Spanish colonial system of *castas* and ever since, whiteness has been an asset in many areas of social life, though it is not as regulated or as rigidly defined today. In social interactions today as in the past, persons deemed white have been bestowed with formal and informal privileges, social deference, and positive attributes.

As in the United States and in many parts of the Western world, whiteness has long represented modernity and progress for many Latin American nations. For individual Latin Americans, it is used as a form of social capital that symbolizes and often entitles its bearers to privilege and status. In her ethnographic study in Rio de Janeiro, Robin E. Sheriff finds that local whites seek to preserve their whiteness through practices such as prohibiting children from

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