

## GRINGAIDAS: NOTES ON THE ETYMOLOGY OF 'GRINGO'

*GRINGAIDAS: NOTAS SOBRE A ETIMOLOGIA DE 'GRINGO'*

*GRINGAIDAS: APUNTES SOBRE LA ETIMOLOGÍA DE 'GRINGO'*

Thaddeus Gregory Blanchette<sup>1</sup> 

Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

**Abstract:** The present article looks at the historical etymology of the term *gringo* from its birth in the Iberian Peninsula to its common use today. Using bibliographic, ethnographic, and linguistic research, we seek to unpack some of the term's meanings within a Brazilian context, while highlighting their potential as an emic or analytical category that aptly describes an increasingly numerous class of people in today's globalized world. We argue that, despite its popular understandings and uses in other parts of Latin America, the term's use in Brazil recovers its original connotations of "funny-speaking foreigner", with no necessary connections to Anglo-American imperialism or whiteness. In this sense, *gringo*, in Brazil, is a term that – like Simmel's "fremde" – highlights "that which is not of us but is among us". The past 200 years of imperial encounters, however, have made the term increasingly applied to certain types of foreigners in Brazil: white Europeans or U.S. Americans.

**Keywords:** Gringo; Etymology; Brazil; Migrations; Otherness

**Resumo:** O presente artigo analisa a etimologia do termo *gringo* desde o seu nascimento na Península Ibérica até ao seu uso comum nos dias de hoje. Utilizando pesquisa bibliográfica, etnográfica e linguísticas, procuramos desvendar alguns dos significados do termo no contexto brasileiro, ao mesmo tempo em que destacamos seu potencial como categoria êmica ou analítica que descreve adequadamente uma classe cada vez mais numerosa de pessoas no mundo globalizado de hoje. Argumentamos que, apesar de seus entendimentos e usos populares em

---

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor at the Social Anthropology Graduate Program, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.  
Email: [thaddeus.blanchette@gmail.com](mailto:thaddeus.blanchette@gmail.com)

outras partes da América Latina, o uso do termo no Brasil recupera suas conotações originais de “estrangeiro de fala engraçada”, sem conexões necessárias com o imperialismo anglo-americano ou a branquitude. Nesse sentido, *gringo*, no Brasil, é um termo que – assim como o “fremde” de Simmel – destaca “aquilo que não é de nós, mas está entre nós”. Os últimos 200 anos de encontros imperiais, no entanto, fizeram com que o termo fosse cada vez mais aplicado a certos tipos de estrangeiros no Brasil: europeus brancos ou norte-americanos.

**Palavras-chave:** Gringo; Etimologi; Brasil; Migrações; Alteridade.

**Resumen:** El presente artículo analiza la etimología del término *gringo* desde su origen en la Península Ibérica hasta su uso común en la actualidad. Utilizando investigaciones bibliográficas, etnográficas y lingüísticas, buscamos desentrañar algunos de los significados de los términos dentro del contexto brasileño, al tiempo que destacamos su potencial como categoría émica o analítica que describe acertadamente una clase cada vez más numerosa de personas en el mundo glocalizado de hoy. Argumentamos que, a pesar de sus interpretaciones y usos populares en otras partes de América Latina, el uso del término en Brasil recupera sus connotaciones originales de “extranjero de habla chistosa”, sin conexiones necesarias con el imperialismo angloamericano o la blancura. En este sentido, *gringo*, en Brasil, es un término que –tal cual “fremde” de Simmel– resalta “aquello que no es de nosotros pero está entre nosotros”. Sin embargo, los últimos 200 años de encuentros imperiales han hecho que el término se aplique cada vez más a ciertos tipos de extranjeros en Brasil: europeos blancos o estadounidenses.

**Palabras clave:** Gringo; Etimología; Brasil; Migraciones; Alteridad.

DOI:[10.11606/issn.1676-6288.prolam.2024.218576](https://doi.org/10.11606/issn.1676-6288.prolam.2024.218576)

Recebido em: 09/11/2023

Aprovado em: 27/06/2024

Publicado em: 25/11/2024

*We're gonna show Russia under the Czars, the Communist Revolution, the socialist dictatorship and then the fall of Soviet Communism. And this is gonna be the backdrop of how the Russians immigrated to Brazil running from the revolution. Here they started distilling vodka and became enchanted with the Carnival of Rio de Janeiro. Shit, we used to talk about the kings of Portugal: about our stuff, Brazilian stuff. This is bullshit, making a living writing sambas about gringos that came to Brazil.*

*The Portuguese are gringos who came to Brazil.*

*And crioulos are also gringos, except they're black, you jerk. Indians are the only real Brazilians.*

- Four sambistas discussing themes for 2005's parade. (OLGA, 2005)<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> My translation. “Crioulo” is a somewhat pejorative term which indicates a black person born in Brazil. A “sambista” is a professional samba composer or player.

## 1 Introduction

In early 2001, shortly after defending my master's thesis, *Title* (BLANCHETTE, 2001), at the National Museum, I participated in three exchanges that brought home everything I had just written about the term “gringo”, its origins, and its contemporary meanings, at least in Brazil.

The first occurred while I was lunching one day in the Museum's cafeteria. A young housekeeping worker walked into the cafeteria and was greeted by the man behind the lunch counter with “Hey there, gringa! What are you doing down here today?” Both the housekeeper and the cafeteria employee were what U.S. Americans would call “black” and both were working-class, native-born Brazilians. When I asked the counterman why he called the housekeeper a gringa, his response was interesting: “I'm from Rio and she's from Pernambuco,” he said. “So she's not from around here and she talks funny. Here in Brazil that means she's a gringa. Gringos are people who don't talk like us.”

A few weeks later, I was at a party with two American university students and their Brazilian translator. The Americans were in town on a three-week junket to “learn about life in the favelas<sup>3</sup>” and were excited that they were in daily contact with people they described as “real Brazilians” (by which they apparently meant the poor). At a certain point in our conversation, I referred to the pair as “gringas” (after several times referring to myself as such) and was immediately corrected: “Oh, we're not gringas,” one of the young women said.

“Why is that?” I asked.

“Because I'm Mexican-American and she's Korean-American. We're not white.”

---

<sup>3</sup> Rio de Janeiro's ubiquitous shanty towns.

This statement was interesting from a Brazilian raciological perspective because both young women were at least as phenotypically “white” as me. They obviously presumed that “gringo” was a racialized term that presumably only applied to people who were “purely” white, unhyphenated U.S. Americans.

“But here in Brazil, you are gringas,” I said. “Any foreigner is a gringo here”.

The woman’s Brazilian translator and friend (a white, upper-class college student) then chimed in. “That’s true, but they’re not gringas like you’re a gringo. She’s *latina* and she’s a *japa*”, he said laughing ironically as he used the terms.

Finally, in early 2002, while enjoying a beer with some colleagues from the Museum’s Anthropology Department, I was treated to yet another mobilization of the term *gringo*. I was seated with Michael, a Swedish resident of Brazil roughly comparable to me in terms of build and coloration, discussing my thesis with two Brazilian-born colleagues, Célia (who had the same mentor as Martin) and Patricia<sup>4</sup> (who was being oriented by Giralda Seyferth, my mentor). I had claimed that, although Brazilians thought they could spot the gringos among them by looks alone, this wasn’t so easy. As Patricia got up to place our order, Célia turned to me and said “Oh, but that’s not true, Thaddeus. I could identify you as a gringo from a block away! You just don’t have the *jeito brasileiro*<sup>5</sup>. Now, Martin here, he could pass as a Brazilian, but not you...”

At this point, however, Patricia came back to the table and, not having heard Célia’s comments, broke into the discussion: “Of course, we can tell who’s a gringo and who isn’t. I mean look at Martin: there’s no way anyone could ever mistake him for a Brazilian. You blend in, Thaddeus, but most gringos are like Martin and are easy to spot.”

---

<sup>4</sup> My colleagues’ names have been changed to protect their identity.

<sup>5</sup> Literally “the Brazilian way”, a term which presumes that there’s some ineffable – though immediately recognizable – Brazilian essence that infuses people and activities that are truly Brazilian.

These three encounters illustrate some of how one hears *gringo* applied in Brazil. The uses may differ from each other but they are linked to the word's historical meanings from its first recorded use in the Iberian Peninsula up to today. The present article is an attempt to present some of these meanings within a Brazilian context while highlighting *gringo*'s potential as an emic or analytical category that aptly describes an increasingly numerous class of people in today's globalized world.

## **2 The etymology of “gringo”**

The etymology of *gringo* is complicated by several popular but false theories regarding it. Many Brazilians and Americans have told me, for example, that it originated in the phrase “green go”, the theory being that brave Mexicans taunted invading American troops with cries of “Green go [home]!” This story is apocryphal for two reasons: “gringo” was being used before the U.S. invaded Mexico and the U.S. Army uniform colors in the invasions of Mexico were not green but blue, gray, or khaki (a yellowish dust color).

Another explanation of the term's roots that one occasionally hears is that it refers to Robert Burns's poem “Green Grow the Rashes, O”. This is a theory proposed by British historian W.H. Koebel (1917) and repeated, with some skepticism, by Brazilian anthropologist Gilberto Freyre (1936, p. 60). I've also seen it on various websites of Scots and Scots-Americans. The theory proposes that British (or American) seafarers (or soldiers) singing Scottish poet Robert Burns's “Green Grow the Rashes, O!” were overheard by Chileans (or Mexicans). The song's chorus then became a nickname for the foreigners in much the same way as the English penchant for swearing things to Hell turned into the nickname for the British in Brazil: “godeme” (FREYRE, 1990 [1936], p. 61).

Though I've no doubt that English sailors and/or American soldiers sang "Green Grow the Rashes, O" (though probably not the Burns version but rather the popular Scottish pornographic song), this story is also apocryphal because "gringo" was in use long before the Americans invaded Mexico or the British became involved in Chile.

My favorite theory regarding the word's origins (the one I would have related before beginning my master's thesis) I heard from the professor of my American Foreign Relations course at the UW Madison, back in 1988. According to him, "gringo" referred to 19th-century American slang for dollars: "greenbacks". Unfortunately, however, the term was in use long before American dollars were green or even existed.

The most relevant work that I have found to date on the history and etymology of "gringo" was written by the Jesuit linguist Charles E. Ronan in 1964 and published in the somewhat obscure history journal, *Arizona and the West*. Father Ronan's article is only seven pages long, but provides a very well-researched etymology of "gringo". It's worth looking at this article in some length, given the fact that Ronan's work is not very well known.

According to Ronan, "gringo" was mentioned in Spanish literature as early as the 18th century and the Good Father cites Esteban Terreros y Prandos' *Diccionario*, compiled in the first half of the 1700s, as proof. Terrero's y Prando's definition of the word claims that "gringo" is "in Malaga, what they call foreigners who have a certain kind of accent which prevents their speaking Spanish with ease and spontaneity; and in Madrid, the case is the same, and for some reason, especially for the Irish" (apud RONAN, 1964, p. 24). Ronan also finds another early use of the term within a specifically Mexican context, claiming that Carlos Maria Bustamente's 1841 edition of Francisco Javier Alegre's *Historia de la Compañía de Jesús en la Nueva España* describes the members of the Spanish regiments sent to Mexico as "gringos" (apud RONAN, 1964, p. 24). In other words, then, the term's earliest recorded usages in Spanish refer to outsiders who speak either a foreign tongue or with an accent.

Ronan also uncovers two further possible origins for *gringo*, one which links the term to the Irish (following Terrenos y Prandos report that it was associated with those people in Madrid in the 1750s) and another to the English. In the first case, the word supposedly derives from *Erin go bragh*, the old Irish war cry of “Ireland forever”. In the second, it supposedly originates in Peru as a corruption of the English “to drink” (following Peruvian observations of one English travelers’ major past-times).

Finally, Ronan records that by the mid-19th century, *gringo* was being used in the Spanish-speaking New World to refer to foreign travelers and, in particular, to Europeans and U.S. Americans. Eventually, it seems to have become associated almost exclusively in some Spanish-speaking countries with U.S. Americans. Two dictionaries published during the first half of the 19th century, however, continued to define “gringo” as “a nickname given to a foreigner who speaks an unintelligible language” (RONAN, 1964, p. 25), while today’s most popular Portuguese dictionary (BUARQUE DE HOLANDA FERREIRA, 2000, p. 355) still defines it simply as “foreigner” (*estrangeiro*).

Turning to contemporary linguistic scholars, Father Ronan notes that many believe that “gringo” is a corrupted form of “griego” and comes from an ancient Spanish expression that to speak in an unintelligible language was to “hablar en griego” (speak in Greek). Other scholars, however, point to the 14th-century Spanish word *grysko*, which was a nickname applied to funny-speaking foreigners. A third theory is that the term originated in the Spanish *jerigo*, which also refers to spoken gibberish (*jerigonza*) (RONAN, 1964, p. 26-27).

If this theory is true, it has interesting ramifications, given that *geringonça*, in Portuguese, means something that is ill-made or haphazardly thrown together (though it is obviously descended from *jerigonza* – see X-8, 2005), and *degringolar* means “to tumble apart”. This latter term comes to Portuguese via French and, ultimately, Dutch and has been incorporated similarly into English as *degringolade*, (BUARQUE DE

HOLANDA FERREIRA,, 2000, p. 206; Rodrigues, 2005; Alphadictionary.com s/d). Being that the Dutch root for this word is the verb *crinkelen* or "to make curl", it also has possible connections to the Portuguese *gíria* ("slang") via the Greek word *gýroma* (curved or round – X-8, 2005). A more probable etymology for *gíria*, however, traces its origins through the Spanish *jerigo* and the French *jargon* to the Greek *hyerós* (sacred). Both *jargon* and *jerigo* – and by extension *gíria* – can thus be supposed to mean "the language of initiates or insiders" (idem, *ibid*). It is interesting, in this context, that Father Ronan also reports that the language of the gypsies was also known as "jerigonza" in 16th-century Spain (RONAN, 1964, p. 27).

Ronan's etymological analysis clearly states "gringo" in a complex of Spanish terms which associates it with outsiders speaking an unintelligible language and, in particular, gypsies. This combines perfectly with the analysis of the Portuguese roots of the term provided by anthropologist Gilberto Freyre, who cites Spanish historian Lucio V. Mansilla (apud FREYRE, 1990 [1936], p. 60) as proof of the theory that "'gringo' should not be considered an Americanism, given that wanderers in Spain, such as the gypsies, have been known as such since long ago". Freyre then goes on to state that Brazilian historian Pereira da Costa (idem, *ibid*) has confirmed gypsies were also known as "gringos" in colonial Brazil and then provides us with a hypothesis of how the term detached itself from gypsies and became linked to other kinds of foreigners:

With regards to "gringos" it is well that we remember that the gypsies were the first wandering merchants to become known in the remote backlands of Brazil, selling horses and slaves in particular. It is perhaps here that the term "gringo" originated in its more general sense as a designation for foreign or exotic wandering salesmen who had little familiarity with the language of the land...

That is how the term perhaps passed to English wanderers who, with their strange (to Brazilian ears) dialect and exotic (in the eyes of our colonial population) appearance, were the first foreigners to show up in Brazil in great numbers after the gypsies. (Freyre, 1936: 60).

Given the above, then, we can construct an idealized etymological history of the term "gringo". It begins in Spain and Portugal as a word for



social outsiders who use a strange dialect and have difficulty speaking Spanish or Portuguese -- in particular, the gypsies. The term passes overseas to the Americas where it becomes a synonym for any funny-speaking foreigner, including (at least occasionally) colonists and soldiers from the metropolis. After the independence of the Ibero-American colonies, the term shifted primarily to other foreign outsiders and the English, in particular, as they came to dominate the region's commerce. By the early 19th century, the term began to be used to describe other commonly encountered foreigners in general: Italians in Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay (RONAN, 1964, p. 28) and U.S. Americans in Mexico. Finally, by the second half of the 20th century, it had become exclusively associated in at least some countries (most particularly Mexico) with white U.S. Americans.

### **3     The symbology of “gringo”**

In terms of its symbolic use in Brazil today, “gringo” seems to be applied according to three main axes of signification. The first has to do with alterity, especially linguistic and national alterity. The second is linked to the perception of imperialism and the third has to do with relational familiarity. Through the intersections of these three axes, a hierarchy of “gringoness” develops whereby certain people are more likely to be called gringos than others.

Father Ronan claims that “Generally speaking, in Hispanic America, the word has reference only to foreigners, and not to their manner of speaking” (RONAN, 1964, p. 28, *idem*). It is notable, in this context, that as the 19th and 20th centuries rolled on, “gringo” seems to have had some preferential applications: not all foreigners are generally labeled by it, although any foreigner can be. I have often heard Brazilians call Chileans, Colombians, Argentineans, and even Mexicans “gringos”, however, and on

these occasions<sup>6</sup>, two explanations are generally given for this use: “they are foreigners” and “they don’t speak our language”. Even native Portuguese speakers from other lands are occasionally called gringos in Brazil.

“Gringo” can also be applied to Brazilians who speak with a different accent, however, and thus one can still find it being used in Brazil in a manner remarkably similar to its early modern meaning in the Iberian Peninsula, as an euphemism for “funny speaking/looking/acting outsider<sup>7</sup>”; a way of signifying what is not “us”. This is, of course, the sense in which the word was used by the lunch counter man at the National Museum when he matter-of-factly told me that “Gringos are people who don’t talk like us”. The term’s association with Americans, Canadians, and Europeans is reinforced by the fact that these groups speak non-Latin languages (“...foreigners who have a certain kind of accent...”) and also tend to appear exotic to Brazilian eyes.

Appearance is subordinate to national and linguistic alterity in this context and it would be difficult to say that “gringo” is an exclusively racialized term in today’s Brazil, though it often has racial overtones. Given that Europeans, Canadians, and U.S. Americans seem to preferentially attract the term and given that these peoples are generally imagined by Brazilians to be white, “gringo” often has a racial component, at least in terms of pure statistical occurrence. In her award-winning ethnography of carioca beach life, anthropologist Patrícia Silveira de Farias reports that her carioca informants also associate the term with whiteness (SILVEIRA DE FARIAS, 2006 134-139), as does anthropologist Marcelo Ferreira-Franco, who claims that “the stereotype of ‘gringo’, for cariocas and perhaps for Brazilians, definitely incorporates color as a variable... [They] never imagine or mention ‘black’ tourists” (FERREIRA-FRANCO, 2005, p. 3). The two

---

<sup>6</sup> Ironically enough, as I was finishing this article, Globo newspaper’s Sunday supplement, Revista Globo, published a cover promising “The stories of gringo players who have chosen Rio to live and who have ended up as the idols of carioca football”. The “gringos” referred to include two Argentineans, a Serb, an Uruguayan and a Paraguayan. The Uruguayan player is on the magazine’s cover. All the players are white. (Dalfon, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> Something similar to a *barbarian* as the ancient Greeks would use the word. According to M.I Finley, *barbaroi* was a word meant to establish a restrictive division with pejorative overtones based upon differences in idiom, religion and other customs between the Greeks and the rest of the ancient world’s peoples. (FINLEY, 1980, p. 127-128)

American university students I mention above obviously presumed that color, race, or ethnicity are *necessary* components of gringoness, with “real” gringos being understood to be what Americans would call “white”. The term does not seem to maintain a strict association with race and color on a practical level, however.

Black U.S. Americans are routinely called “gringos” in Brazil, for example, and Spanish-speaking Latinos with U.S. citizenship will often have the term applied to them as well. A person who is blond, blue-eyed with very pale skin is considered exotic in many places in Brazil and is liable to attract attention and use of the term while darker hair, eyes, and complexion can allow a foreigner to pass relatively unperceived, as long as they wear clothes which allow them to blend in and don’t speak. African American tourists on Copacabana Beach in Rio de Janeiro who speak English in public, who wear American football jerseys, and who walk with a distinctive roll will immediately be identified as “gringos” by Brazilian observers, for example, but can pass for Brazilian if they dress in clean t-shirts and jeans and keep quiet. I have also personally seen cariocas call Portuguese-speaking black Angolans “gringos” and when my wife, PhD Ana Paula da Silva, did fieldwork with (likewise black and Portuguese-speaking) Mozambican exchange students in Rio, she also observed native-born cariocas referring to her Mozambican interlocutors as “gringos”. If cariocas (and Brazilians) thus envision whiteness when asked to imagine a gringo, it is quite clear that in day-to-day life, they will happily apply the term to any funny-looking/speaking foreigner, independent of skin color.

A fascinating example of this can be seen in the term’s application to Chinese in Brazil. According to immigration scholar Li Zhang (2023), “gringo” – once hardly ever used in conjunction with things or people from China -- is increasingly being applied to Chinese as that nation increases its influence in Brazil. A brief search on Google for “‘gringo’ AND ‘chineses’” supports Li Zhang’s assertions.

“Gringo” is thus a term attached to alterity in Brazil but which is especially connected to linguistic and cultural alterity rather than simply race, ethnicity or color. I have conducted experiments in the field on several occasions which seem to bear this out.

I am a white, blue-eyed, middle-aged man of U.S. American birth and German ancestry. My hair is what my family calls medium brown and what many Brazilians classify as “blonde”. I am thus relatively physically exotic for Rio de Janeiro, the city where I live, and many of my Brazilian acquaintances will claim that I “don’t have the *jeito brasileiro*”, implying that this is some sort of spiritual or essential lack. If, however, I dye my hair and eyebrows black, put in brown contact lenses, and take care to dress as a middle-class, middle-aged urban Brazilian male professional (i.e. neutral colored dress trousers and blue short-sleeved dress shirt which are (crucially) impeccably cleaned and pressed, with clean and polished non-descript brown leather shoes), people on the street will presume I am Brazilian. On these occasions, if someone engages me in conversation, they will quickly pick up on my accent and will usually exclaim “you’re not from around here” (“*Você não é daqui*”).

Yet when I reverse the performance, cutting my hair in a mohawk, wearing worn and dirty high-top sneakers, a U.S. university t-shirt, and a pair of stained overalls, Brazilians will often approach me in English or French, immediately presuming that I must be a foreigner. What is interesting on these occasions is that as soon as I start to speak in my accented Portuguese, my interlocutors will express shock and often apologize by saying “Oh, I didn’t realize that you were a Brazilian. I’m sorry.” I’ll then be able to converse with them for a fair amount of time – or even indefinitely – without being publicly marked as a gringo.

In other words, when faced with visual conformance to local Brazilian physical and gender performance norms, an accent becomes immediately noticeable as a sign of alterity and the outsider status that is the essential component of “gringoness”. When local norms are flaunted, gringoness is

presumed, but speaking Portuguese can contradict the physical signs. Language, in other words, trumps physical appearance in both cases: linguistic alterity being highlighted where physical alterity is low and physical alterity being reduced by linguistic similarity.

“Gringo”, however, also has a certain preferential association in Brazil with imperialism. Although any foreigner can be a gringo, “true” gringos – the kind that populist politicians traditionally curse – belong to nationalities that are generally seen as taking advantage of Brazil. When protest rocker Raul Seixas sang *“Move out so the gringos can come in / This property is now up for rent...”* (SEIXAS, 1980), he was not talking about renting Brazil out to the Angolans or Mexicans as a solution to the national economic crisis. Ironically enough, the group one most often hears using “gringo” in this sense are the middle-class urban Brazilians who have had the most contact with the North American media.

Once again, however, the term is not essentially racialized when used in this politicized manner. To the degree that Northwestern Europeans and North Americans are generally understood as white by Brazilians, “gringo” often tends to be associated on a practical level with whiteness. Again, however, African- and other traditionally “non-white” Americans are often included in the use of the term, especially when they are seen as representing imperial interests. American President Barack Obama is thus understood by *Veja* magazine to be one of “the 10 famous gringos who owe everything to the internet” (LIMA E SILVA, 2010<sup>8</sup>) and ex-Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice can be described by Brazilian bloggers as an “afro-blacky gringa” (*“afro-neguinha gringa”*). (RESACA MORAL, 2008).

This use of “gringo” resonates in interesting ways with its popular North American usage as a quasi-racialized marker of white and/or

---

<sup>8</sup> “The 10 famous gringos who owe everything to the internet” was the original title of this article and is still the title of the link leading to it. Apparently, however, an editor at *Veja*, in a fit of political correctness, later changed the title to read “The 10 famous foreigners who owe everything to the web”. This edit demonstrates two things: first of all, that “gringo” is a synonym of “foreigner” and secondly that there may occasionally be discomfort among “polite” Brazilians regarding its use. It is also interesting to note that Cuban American columnist Mario Lavandeira and Singaporean American blogger Tila Tequila are included in the same list.

Anglo-American privilege<sup>9</sup>. The North American use of the term was, of course, foremost in the minds of the Mexican-American and Asian-American university students I met in Santa Teresa who claimed to not be gringas, though both were phenotypically “white” by Brazilian standards. Although the women apparently believed that their *heritage*<sup>10</sup> prevented “gringa” from being used to describe them, several other people in the bar referred to them as such. Their translator’s comment was quite interesting in this respect, affirming that the women were gringas, but that their deployment of other ethnic markers also made them liable to the labels *latina* and *japa*, two terms which are often generically applied in Brazil to people from Latin America or Asia. In other words, any foreigner can be a “gringo” in Brazil, but some foreigners can be other things as well.

#### **4 Gringo as a relational term**

Analyzing the first two axes of how “gringo” is employed in Brazil, we can see that it is a term that mobilizes a set of idealized physical, cultural, and political characteristics to compose a stereotype. Furthermore, these characteristics have idealized counterparts that map to an ideological configuration of a stereotypical “Brazilian:

##### *“Gringo” characteristics*

- Foreigner
- Does not speak Portuguese or speaks with an accent
- Citizen of an “imperialist” nation
- Light skin, eyes and hair

##### *“Brazilian” characteristics*

- Brazilian

---

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, the terms definition at the Urban Dictionary (2010).

<sup>10</sup> This is a U.S. American emic term which presumes an essentialist link between an individual and a given racialized and/or ethnicized understanding of history which is articulated via a *blood* connection. *Blood* is yet another American emic term that presumes the existence of material substance that permanently links all descendants of the same person. This concept has been thoroughly explored by anthropologist David Schneider (1968:22-26).

- Speaks Portuguese with the accent of the local population
- Citizen of a non-imperialist nation
- Dark skin, eyes, and hair

To the degree that an individual's actions and appearances correspond with more characteristics in one column than the other, he is more likely to have the label "gringo" or "Brazilian" attached to him by others.

There is one further characteristic of the word "gringo", however, which merits our attention, one which is not immediately obvious but which lies at the root of the characterization that "gringo" implies. Though the gringo is not *of* us, he's certainly *among* us. The term's contemporary popular use makes no distinction between tourists, businessmen, travelers, or immigrants. Historically, however, it has been associated with foreigners who have acquired a certain degree of *consistent presence*. Recall that according to Terrenos y Pando, "gringo" refers to foreigners who have an accent "which prevents their speaking Spanish with ease and spontaneity". This situation presumes that they at least speak Spanish to some degree. Gilberto Freyre's *mascate* theory postulates gringos that were savvy enough in their comprehension of native codes that they could wander around the backlands of 19th-century Brazil as itinerant merchants.

A gringo can thus also be seen as a foreigner engaged in a process of approximation with Brazil – a hesitant approach, appropriate to a "vagamundo" perhaps, but a definite drawing near.

In this sense, the Brazilian use of "gringo" can be seen as congruent with the concept of the *stranger* (*fremde*) as proposed by sociologist Georg Simmel in 1908. Simmel (1950) defines the stranger as that which is strange to us, but not alien. Not all foreigners, for example, are strangers: only those who combine movement and stability, distance and proximity. In the words of Simmel, being a stranger is "a specific form of interaction", different, but not *completely* different:

The inhabitants of Sirius are not really strangers to us, at least not in any social logically relevant sense: they do not exist for us at all; they are beyond far and near. The stranger, like the poor and like sundry

"inner enemies," is an element of the group itself. His position as a full-fledged member involves both being outside it and confronting it. (Simmel, 1950, p. 402-403).

The gringo– like the stranger – occupies a contradictory form of existence marked by simultaneous approximation and distance. In his interactions with us, he is proximate to the degree that he shares specific characteristics and sociability. He is distant, however, to the degree that we can only see that we share more general and common characteristics (SIMMEL, 1950, p. 405). At the two extremes of this scale, he stops being a gringo entirely. If he becomes too proximate, forging relationships that are congruent with our most intimate interests, he stops being “strange” and becomes a member of our family. If, on the other hand, he becomes too distant, sharing with us only the most common of general traits (a common humanity, perhaps) he becomes simply *alien* and is not seen as having any specific linkage to us whatsoever.

It is the simultaneously proximate and distant nature of the stranger which can give us insight into why “gringo” is preferentially attached to some groups in Brazil and not others. In the abstract, the term tends to be less applied to people who are considered to be either exceptionally strange (Asians, Africans) or familiar (Africans<sup>11</sup>, Latin Americans, and peoples of the Portuguese diaspora) in comparison with an ideological construction of Brazilianess. Though “gringo” may be used for any of these groups, other terms (*japa, china, latino, africano*, etc.) are more commonly employed.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, to the degree that a foreigner forges interpersonal relationships with people, things, and phenomena that are considered to be “Brazilian”, his level of gringoness will also decrease. For example, Charles Miller, the founder of Brazilian football and the white son of a Scottish father and an English-Brazilian mother, educated in England from

---

<sup>11</sup> Africans are seen as being a founding element of the Brazilian nation and thus familiar, c.f. anthropologist Roberto DaMatta's “Digressão: A Fábula das Três Raças, ou o Problema do Racismo à Brasileira” (DAMATTA, 1987). However, modern Africa is also seen as an exotic land which Brazilians in general know very little about. Africans can thus be valenced as either too distant or too familiar to be called “gringo” but are rarely valenced as both.

<sup>12</sup> In this context, it is interesting that there are two groups which are hardly ever called gringos: the Portuguese and the East Asians (Chinese, Japanese and Koreans).



age 10 to 20 (and later in life the English Vice-Consul in São Paulo), is never called a “gringo”, but rather as “a paulista descended from the English and Scots” (DUARTE, 1996: 214), “a young paulistan... the child of an English couple” (COUTINHO, 1990: 52) and even as “a Brazilian with an Anglo-Saxon name” (MIRANDA PEREIRA, 2000:16). Likewise, it is very rarely remembered that one of the most iconographic Brazilians in history, Carmen Miranda, was in fact born Portuguese. To call her a “gringa” would be an act bordering on heresy.

On a more mundane level, of course, we have the third example of the use of “gringo” with which I opened this article. In this case, the fact that I shared the specific characteristic of intellectual kinship with Patrícia (being that we were both mentored by the same woman) made her see me as less of a gringo than Martin. Meanwhile, Cecília – who has the same mentor as Martin – saw him as less gringo than myself.

## **5 Conclusion**

As we can see, then “gringo” is an identitarian classification which is subject to successive shifts and modifications. In some contexts, it is almost an accusation; in others, it can even become almost affectionate. Sometimes, it is used to refer to the entire non-Brazilian world, at least to the degree that it shows up on our doorstep here in Brazil; at others, it has a more specific application to certain kinds of strangers, most specifically those who are white and citizens of countries understood to be imperialist. But it is in its relational aspect, as a synonym of Simmel’s “stranger”, that “gringo” loses its emic qualities and becomes a useful etic tool. While “foreigner” has a specific legalistic discourse attached to it, one which is linked to the Nation-State through immigration and citizenship laws, “gringo” can be simply deployed to mark a vast array of agents who are not us but who share sociability with us. In this sense, then, the gringo is becoming an ever more commonly encountered type in a world marked by

increasing flows of human mobility and the disintegration – or at least re-imagining – of ethnic and national identity. The gringo is the stranger among us who is also, paradoxically, our neighbor.

“Gringo”, however, is also a term which indicates transition. The gringo engages us and, in this engagement, may in fact become so familiar that he becomes us. There is thus a bit of Levi-Strauss’ concept of the floating signifier in the nature of the gringo (LÉVI-STRAUSS, 1974). He is not of us nor are the things he brings, but we may use them and eventually make them our own, perhaps even forgetting – as Brazilians have forgotten with football – that they were once gringo.

## 6 References

BLANCHETTE, Thaddeus. **Gringos**. Masters thesis in social anthropology. PPGAS/MN/UFRJ, 2001.

BUARQUE DE HOLANDA FERREIRA, Aurélio. **Mini-Aurélio: O minidicionário da língua portuguesa**. Rio de Janeiro: Nova Fronteira, 2000.

COUTINHO, Edilberto. **Grandes Clubs do Futebol Brasileiro e seus Maiores Ídolos: Nação Rubro-Negro**. Rio de Janeiro: Fundação Nestlé de Cultura. 1990.

DALFON, Rogério. Bola Dividida. **Revista Globo**, v. 6, n. 34, p. 22-26, Oct. 10, 2010.

DAMATTA, Roberto, Digressão: A Fábula das Três Raças, ou o Problema do Racismo à Brasileira. *In*: **Relativizando: uma introdução à Antropologia Social**. Rio de Janeiro: Rocco, 1987. pp. 58-85.

DEGRINGOLADE. 2010. Alphadictionary. U.S., s/d. Available at: <http://www.alphadictionary.com/goodword/word/degringolade>. Accessed on: July 7, 2010.

Duarte, Marcelo. **O Guia dos Curiosos: Esportes**. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1996.

FERREIRA-FRANCO, Marcelo. E se o gringo for “negão”? Raça, gênero e sexualidade no Rio de Janeiro segundo turistas afro-americanos. *In*:

ANPOCS, 29, 2005. Anais do XXIX Encontro ANPOCS, GT 22. Caxambu, MG, 2005.

FINLEY, Moses I., **Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology**. Cambridge: Chatto & Windus, 1980.

FREYRE, Gilberto. *Ingleses no Brasil*. Rio de Janeiro: Livraria José Olympio Editora. 1948.

FREYRE, Gilberto. **Sobrados e Mocambos**. São Paulo: Editora Record. 1990 [1936]. BS1980.

GRINGO. **Urban Dictionary**. U.S. s/d. Available at: <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=gringo&defid=2017065>. Accessed on: July 7, 2010.

KOEBEL, William Henry. **British exploits in South America**, Nova York: Century Co., 1917.

LÉVI-STRAUSS, Claude. Introdução: A Obra de Marcel Mauss. In: MAUSS, Marcel. **Sociologia e Antropologia**. São Paulo: EDUSP. 1974 [1950].

LIMA E SILVA, Pollyane (ed.) "Os dez gringos famosos que devem tudo à internet". **Veja online**. Brazil, May 28, 2010. Available at <http://veja.abril.com.br/blog/10-mais/gente/os-10-gringos-famosos-que-dev-em-tudo-a-internet/>. Accessed on: June 30, 2010.

MIRANDA PEREIRA, Leonardo A. **Footballmania**. Rio de Janeiro: Ed. Nova Fronteira, 2000.

OLGA. "Samba na Volga". Brazil, 23.6.2005. **Webliterata** blog, Available at: <http://webliterata.blogspot.com/2005/06/samba-no-volga.html>. Accessed on: July 7, 2010.

RESACA MORAL. 2008. "Presente brasileiro não passa na alfândega americana". Brazil, March 16, 2008. Available at <http://www.ressacamoral.com/page/5>. Accessed on: June 30, 2010.

RODRIGUES, Sérgio. "Curiosidades etimológicas:degringolar". Brazil, Jan, 12, 2005. Available at: <http://veja.abril.com.br/blog/todoprosa/a-palavra-e/curiosidades-etimologicas-degringolar/>. Accessed on: July 7, 2010.

RONAN, Charles E. "Observations on the Word *Gringo*". **Arizona and the West**, v.6, n.1, p.23-29, Spring 1964.

SCHNEIDER, David. **American Kinship: A Cultural Account**. Modern Societies Series. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980 [1968].

SEIXAS, Raul. **“Aluga-se”**. São Paulo, Discos CBS 1980. 5 min.

SILVEIRA DE FARIAS, Patrícia. **Pegando uma cor na praia: relações raciais e classificação de cor na cidade do Rio de Janeiro**. Rio de Janeiro: Prefeitura do Rio de Janeiro, 2006.

Simmel, Georg. The Stranger . *In*: Kurt Wolff. **The Sociology of Georg Simmel**. New York: Free Press, 1950 [1908], p. 402-408.

X-8 **“Gíria e companhia”**. Brazil, June 13, 2005. Available at: <http://origemdapalavra.com.br/palavras/jerigonza/>. Accessed on: July 7, 2010.

ZHANG, Li. 2023. Futures Intersecting: New Indigenous Leadership, Post-Extractive Development Models, and Shifting South-South Geo-Politics. **International Conference The Future of the Amazon**, Oct. 2023, Santa Barbara. Presentation at the **Future of the Amazon International Conference**, Santa Barbara: The Orfalea Center, University of California Santa Barbara, Oct. 2023.