Preface

This book began its life as a very specialized study of one capital city in Brazil's Northeast: São Salvador da Bahia de Todos os Santos, more commonly known as Salvador or, simply, Bahia. As I began to write, however, I soon realized that my initial framing was far too limited: this was not just a story of Bahian identity or regionalism in Brazil, two well-respected themes in Brazilian history to which I had intended to contribute. It was, rather, a story familiar across the Americas, even the United States. It was a story of making the local national and of using native elements to build a larger national identity. And it was a story familiar across the diaspora, one that spoke to the deep power of racial stereotypes and the difficult trajectory of Afro–Latin Americans in the larger visual register. I have written, therefore, a book that I hope speaks to these broader concerns, and a book that I believe expresses the larger trajectory of the Americas rather than of Brazil alone.

I have also written the type of book I like to teach. I place Bahia and Brazil firmly within the trajectory of Latin America, rather than as regions best treated apart. I show that ideas of race permeate everything, and I make Blackness, not just Indigeneity, a part of the conversation. I use a close case study to bring texture and life to larger regional trends, with vibrant images as primary sources. And I have tried throughout to write concisely in a language free from jargon and unnecessary complications so that students as well as specialized scholars may follow along.

Equally important to this book is my treatment of images as central to the argument itself. This too came gradually. I started off interested in the many tourist guides written within Salvador, works that I had...
discovered while writing my first book on racial thought in twentieth-century Bahia. But as I prepared to give a small talk on what I assumed might eventually make an interesting article, I realized that the fascinating part of the story depended upon the guides’ powerful illustrations. Why were some of the top cultural figures in the city wasting their time on these seemingly prosaic projects? And why did some of the most prominent modernist artists of the region join in? Why did Afro-Bahian religious leaders prove so sympathetic to these efforts? And why did the ideas and the images of these works read as so familiar? These guides, I realized, were about more than tourism: they were potent tools for crafting identity. Perhaps more importantly, they had been successful. Understandings of Salvador today, I argue, can be in large part traced to the tropes and patterns developed in the guides of the 1950s.

This focus on images has placed me in unfamiliar but exciting territory, as I am not an art historian. But I have brought art into the narrative because these images are critical to the work undertaken in the crafting of identity, and because Salvador has a particularly vivid and fascinating iconography that deserves more critical attention. Few outside of Bahia know much about this iconography, while those inside Bahia have often taken it for granted or viewed it as a particularly Bahian development. Yet placing this visual culture within the larger story of the Americas allows us to uncover broader parallels and showcases the way in which the visual world has both reflected and driven social change. This particular narrative has much to tell about how incorporation into a national symbolic realm may reveal disturbing limits and how ethnic and racial populations have been simultaneously included and excluded across the hemisphere.

The tension between inclusion and exclusion has deep parallels elsewhere. Descendants of African and Indigenous peoples all across the Americas have spent much of the twentieth century battling for inclusion and equal rights, an elusive outcome far from complete today. Yet the dynamic that has puzzled historians and frustrated activists is not only that progress in these arenas has failed to proceed in linear fashion but that it has advanced unevenly across legal, political-economic, and cultural spheres. More to the point, moments of cultural acceptance have not always mapped on to political and legal rights.

This dialectic—this critical disjuncture between national imaginations and political rights—is everything in the Americas. It makes up the central contradiction of the Americas, from US insistence on its
democratic foundations in the midst of slavery to Brazil’s celebrations of racial democracy in what has long been one of the most unequal countries of the world. This book captures this dichotomy in Latin America, where the gap between cultural inclusion and political rights has been particularly stark, and in Salvador, where this gap is key to any understanding of the city and of Brazil.