



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

*Eugene Robinson*

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**Coal to Cream: A Black Man's Journey Beyond Color to an Affirmation of Race** Eugene Robinson

Eugene Robinson didn't expect to have his world turned upside down when he accompanied a group of friends and acquaintances to the beach at Ipanema in Rio de Janeiro one sunny afternoon. He had recently moved to South America as the new correspondent for the *Washington Post*, a position he had sought not only as an exciting professional challenge but also as a means of escape from the poisonous racial atmosphere in America's cities, which he experienced firsthand as a reporter and editor covering city politics in Washington, D.C. Black and white wouldn't matter so much, he thought, if he gave himself a little distance from the problem.

At first Robinson saw Brazil as a racial paradise, where people of all hues and colors mingled together on the beaches, in the samba schools, and at *carnaval*. But that day on the beach, his most basic assumptions about race were shattered when he was told that he didn't have to be black in Brazil if he didn't want to be. The society looked at people through a broad spectrum of colors, ranging from "white" to "coffee with milk" to "after midnight," and not as members of two rigidly defined races. Like most African Americans, Robinson had always recognized the existence of color gradations within the black community -- the members of his own family span the entire range from coal to cream -- but he never looked at color the same way after that encounter at Ipanema.

*Coal to Cream* is the story of Robinson's personal exploration of race, color, identity, culture, and heritage, as seen through the America of his youth and the South America he discovered, forging a new consciousness about himself, his people, and his country. As he immersed himself in Brazilian culture, Robinson began to see that its focus on color and class -- as opposed to race -- presents problems of its own. Discrimination and inequality still exist, but without a sense of racial identity, the Brazilians lack the anger and vocabulary they need to attack or even describe such ills. Ultimately, Robinson came to realize that racial identity, what makes him not just an American but a *black* American, is a gift of great value -- a shared language of history and experience -- rather than the burden it had sometimes seemed.

A penetrating look at race relations in the United States and much of the rest of the hemisphere, *Coal to Cream* is both a personal memoir and a striking comment on the times in which we live. At a time when many are calling for the abandonment of racial identity, Robinson cautions that we should be careful what we wish for, lest we get it.

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