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To be Black in Brazil

When the Proud Boys descended on Washington D.C. to protest the election in the United States, on December 12, 2020, they were not constituted by people with power, who benefit from the Trump administration and his economic policies. They were members of the working class, who laud Trump and, despite everything to the contrary, believe he is their champion. They believe in a white genocide conspiracy, in that interracial mixing, nonwhite immigrants, racial integration, low fertility rates, a woman's right to choose, and even land confiscation policies are all parts of a greater plot to overthrow white dominion. In D.C., they burnt down an African-American church, they vandalized other structures, they stabbed people on the streets, all while representing elements of white rage in the United States in the most extreme fashion. For many, they consider groups like the Proud Boys the most dangerous elements of the society and the true racists. Until we had the insurrection of January 6, 2021, in which ordinary, everyday citizens tried to overthrow the government. These citizens were also white, but members of the Republican Party, even if considered its fringe elements, who believed it was their right and duty to recreate the Republic in the way they saw fit. They were clearly racists, but it was one of their many biases on display. However, in these two outlier scenarios, these acts are exemplar of some of the worst aspects of compounded white rage and racism in the U.S. today.¹

This is not to deny the specific violent acts against individuals, or quotidian acts of racism, erroneously mislabeled, I consider, as “unconscious bias,” which whites perpetuate and get away with, which often is far more dangerous. These acts fall under the purview of systemic (pervasive) and institutional racism (norms in organizations), whether they are as simple as a white administrative aide, with only a high school degree, who human resources officials take seriously when s/he complains about the tone her Black boss uses when s/he speaks to her/him, and reprimands that boss. It may be that Black people are never promoted in a company to certain positions, or gain salaries beyond a certain level; or it may be the enforced silence in the workplace because making a complaint about racism is dismissed, and one is dubbed a troublemaker. Yet, these are examples are from the United States, Brazil is another story.

In contrast, within Brazil, the actions of the Proud Boys and the January 6th insurrectionists would seem ridiculous. To go and set fire to a church of “Pretos” (Blacks) and “Pardos” (Browns), why would a white Brazilian do this, especially when they have “*um pe na cocina*” (a foot in the kitchen), they most likely would think? The kitchen, of course, is the rightful, and for the most part in the society, even to this day, one of the only freely allowable domains for Black women. Basically, this saying for white Brazilians affirm that they each have an unnamed, Black ancestress and, when they compare their society to the United States, they invoke and celebrate their mixed-race heritage, their *metisçagem*, in order to deny racism

¹ Note that I use the term communal, since I am not referring to acts against individuals, i.e. police violence, macro and micro-aggressions.

as the motivating factor in oppressive State and institutional policies.² The systemic ways the State kills the poor (who often happen to be darker in the Brazilian spectrum of color identification), confiscates land of the descendants of enslaved populations and indigenous peoples, and businesses limit access to basic employment and economic mobility for these groups is not seen as racist policies by the general public, but attempts to maintain social control and social harmony. In this short paper, I will attempt to contextualize Brazilian racism. Because of its brevity, I will generalize at times, and make leaps across time, as I will also address the roots of modern racism, which I trace to Enlightenment discourse to explain why I add a third modality to this focus. I posit that any inquiry into the effects of racism must also consider its pathological terrain in the way that it is enacted against peoples that have been named Black, African, African-descendants, Negros, or a hyphenated Afro- (nationality or region), to also understand from where its affective ideologies derive.

Recent Background

In 1991, Brazil changed its racial classifications on the census to *Branca* (White), *Amarela* (Yellow), *Parda* (Brown), *Preta* (Black), and *Indígena* (Indigenous). Before, there were over 200 categories of color self-identification such as *morena-clara* (light skin mixed woman), *sarará* (blonde, light skin mixed woman with African features), *cor de tãnjura* (dark skin woman with long hair like indigenous), and the list goes on. Color was used instead of race in this system of self-identification because no one wanted to be labeled Black, *ser Negro* or *ser Preto*. To be Black in Brazil means that one does not have any white ancestors.³ The one drop rule so prevalent in the United States, which considers a drop of African ancestry as denoting Blackness is the opposite in Brazil. A drop of white ancestry signifies that one is no longer Black, *Negro* or *Preto*, as these terms are loaded with social pathologies. Since people who are Black and Brown, are also poor, they are essentialized and stereotyped in the most offensive ways. They are considered filthy, stupid, degenerate, liars, thieves,⁴ criminals in general, and fit only for employment undertaking the basest tasks in the society. Options for mobility are limited, and only with spectacular talent may one become a football player, a television or film star (often portraying stereotypical roles), or a singer, but even Afro-Brazilian singers are not the most popular. However, employment for most Afro-Brazilians is often limited to seamstresses, caterers, food vendors, construction workers, security workers, street sweepers, and doormen; for the more upwardly mobile, teachers, workers in NGOs or public educational/community programs, artists, journalists, academics, nuns and priests. Of course, one role that is not often spoken about is police officer, as many of the poor become police officers, because this is one of the few positions that will guarantee a salary beyond the minimum wage. Since poverty and Blackness go hand-in-hand in the nation, these modalities often align with a lack of education, substandard living conditions, little to no access to health resources, poor sanitary conditions, and such other social ills.

The 2010 census was the first in which the white population fell below 50% to 47.7%, 43.1% identified as mixed race, 7.6% as Black, 1.1% as Asian, and 0.4% as Indigenous.⁵ In a recent *Time* (magazine) article (Dec 2020), it states that 56% of Brazilians identify as Black,

² I will discuss the narrative surrounding this celebration of mixed identities further in the essay.

³ Marshall C. Eakin, *Brazil: The Once and Future Country*, St Martin's Press, 1997, p. 15.

⁴ Cheryl Sterling, *African Roots, Brazilian Rites: Cultural and National Identity in Brazil*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p. 147.

⁵ Brazil Demographics Profile. Web. https://www.indexmundi.com/brazil/demographics_profile.html.

but we must question what that signifies.⁶ Since Blackness is such a coded identity, choosing to call oneself Black also signals a level of political consciousness. Afro-Brazilians who deliberately identify as “Negra/o” (the terminology they would use) are choosing a political identity as Black and a stance against the racist policies of the Brazilian state. Since this is a political stance, it may have nothing to do with their actual appearance. The *Time* article also states that 18% of the Congress is Black and 4.7% of the executives in Brazil’s 500 largest companies are Black; however, these statistics also must be understood under an oft repeated axiom, “money whitens”, and how these people actually self-identify. Hence, maybe to the rest of the world, more of these individuals may appear Black or have visible Black heritage, but they do not identify as such.

The IBGE - Brazilian Institute for Geography and Statistics has also highlighted the "acute income disparity" in the nation, with the richest 10% of the population having over 44.5% of total income, compared to just 1.1% income, for the poorest 10%. During his administration, Luiz Ignacio Lula da Silva (Lula) (2003-2011) began a social welfare program, *Bolsa da Familia*, aimed at combating poverty and promoting education. For the first time, the government addressed the structural and institutional aspects of racism within the country creating affirmative action policies. In 2012, quotas were created for federal funded public universities, which mandated that 50% of the spaces be given to students from public schools. Out of that 50%, 25% of the spaces were reserved for low-income students and, even further, subdivided between the Black, Brown and Indigenous students. As a result, however, students who previously would never have identified as Black or Brown, began identifying as such to gain spaces within Federal Universities.⁷ By 2014, affirmative action policies were extended to federal public employment, mandating that 20% of federal civil servant positions be given to Black or Brown self-identified candidates.

The election of Jair Bolsonaro represented for Afro-Brazilians a set back with all of these gains and, particularly for social and political activists, a simultaneous re-entrenchment and ramping up of a deliberate execution campaign carried out by the Brazilian State. Famed post-colonial theorist, Achille Mbembe, calls this *necropolitics*, the politics of death.⁸ In the most reductive explanation, necropolitics is the right to kill, and is tied to the extraction of resources, and brutal attempts to fix peoples into categories based on their value to the State for purposes of subordination and control. Such policies are carryovers from the colonial state and the transatlantic slave economy, where the control of land and the human beings, who worked the land magnified individual and national wealth, prestige, and sense of superiority. Bolsonaro’s contempt for Afro-Brazilians and the indigenous are well documented and encapsulated in this statement he made in 2020, “Com toda a certeza, o índio mudou, tá evoluindo. Cada vez mais o índio é um ser humano igual a nós” (With all certainty, the Indian is evolving. More and more, he is becoming a human being like us, my translation). He slated *quilombo* territories (lands belonging to descendants of the enslaved who escaped slavery) and indigenous lands, i.e. rain forests, for development due to the abundance of mineral wealth they contain. Resultingly, his policies displaced and deterritorialized Afro-Brazilians and

⁶ Ciara Nugent and Thaís Regina, “How Black Brazilians Are Looking to a Slavery-Era Form of Resistance to Fight Racial Injustice Today.” *Time*, December 16, 2020, <https://time.com/5915902/brazil-racism-quilombos/>.

⁷ Federal Universities are free of charge and are known to provide the best education in the country. Spaces in them are limited and it is highly competitive to gain entry. Hence, crossing race lines here gives an advantage because of the reserved space.

⁸ Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” *Public Culture* vol. 15, no. 1, Winter 2003, pp. 11-40.

indigenous populations, and hastened climate change. He has limited affirmative action policies and authorized an anti-crime bill that allows blanket force by the police, giving them full authority to kill. And while in global reportage, this seems like a new policy, it is not. It has, at times, either been an official or unofficial aspect of policing in Brazil. And his Covid-19 denial policy, combined with the precarious living conditions and socioeconomic environments under which Afro-Brazilians live, resulted in even more deaths among them.⁹

Due to the ubiquity of violence from the State, protest movements like the *Frente Negra* during the 1930s, *Movimento Negro* during the 1970s, and the present day *Quilombo* (land rights) movement have been born. What is new is the documentation of Afro-Brazilian deaths. Just in Rio de Janeiro alone, where the per capita income is \$4000, in 2019, the reported violent death rate was 5,980, and out of that number, those who died from the intervention of State agents was 1,814,¹⁰ around 80% of these people were Afro-Brazilians. Between 2017 and 2019, the police killed 2,215 innocent children and youth in their raids, around 69% of them were Afro-Brazilian.¹¹ Rather than addressing and ameliorating the deep income disparity, which causes violence, the State has an even more violent response, and blames the poor, who are again most often Afro-Brazilians for their poverty. It becomes a horrific cycle where violence breeds more violence and white identifying Brazilians do not protest against these State sanctioned killings, even when they see the deaths of innocent children and young people.

While for the most part, many white Brazilians now acknowledge that racism exists in the nation, but depending on the individual, of course, and I would say for the majority, such an admittance is the extent of their support for institutional transformation. There are multiple reasons for this and just to name a few:

- a. the years of multiple dictatorships have left behind a population steeped in fear, who do not want to be seen by the government as social instigators;
- b. the white middle class is also in a precarious economic position and will never agitate to change the system as they benefit, at least economically, from Afro-Brazilian outsidersness;
- c. white Brazilians overall think that Afro-Brazilians deserve the treatment they receive because they believe the anti-Black, anti-poor, anti-violence discourse is correct;
- d. or even, they simply accept the social, economic, and racial hierarchy as natural, while still admitting to the racism within the society.

However, across the board in societies where whites have the dominant power against Blacks (especially when that power manifest economically) there is a punishment regime in place and a sense that Black peoples deserve such punishment. There seems to be intrinsic judgements

⁹ Paulo Ricardo Martins-Filho, et.al., “Racial Disparities in COVID-19-related Deaths in Brazil: Black Lives Matter?” *Journal of Epidemiology*, vol 31, no. 3, 2021, pp. 239-240.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7878714/>

¹⁰ Instituto de Segurança Pública, Séries Históricas Anuais de Taxa de Letalidade Violenta no Estado do Rio de Janeiro e Grandes Regiões, Coordenadoria de Estatística, Março de 2021.

<http://www.ispdados.rj.gov.br/Arquivos/SeriesHistoricasLetalidadeViolenta.pdf>

¹¹ Portal Geledes. Junho 28, 2021. <https://www.geledes.org.br/em-tres-anos-policiais-mataram-ao-menos-2-215-criancas-e-adolescentes-no-pais/>

that Black peoples are at fault in any situations where conflict ensues or should be in subordinated positions. While these sentiments may not always be admitted to, they imbue a sense of a naturalized way of being, a natural hierarchy that is taken for granted, which allows whites to continue to exercise control over darker peoples and their resources. Although the exercise of control is structural and institutional and may be addressed with changes in policy or through legal means, the thought patterns and almost instinctive reactions from which they arise are visceral, inchoate, and fear based, just like the violent reactions of the Proud Boys, January 6th insurrectionist, police officers who pull out guns and kill, or choke or brutalize Black people causing their deaths, or the vigilantes/ordinary individuals, who see Black people walking, jogging, or just living life and decide that these people must have criminal intentions. These responses are pathological, as the spectral conflation of *Blackness* and *badness* have been implanted into peoples' psyches for hundreds of years.

Past Ideas

When did people become Black? And when did Blackness become negative? When these nomenclatures were first used is difficult to say. We may never know. If we go to Biblical text, purportedly the Queen of Sheba stated that "I am Black, *but comely*" (Solomon 1:5, emphasis mine). However, that is the *King James Version* and it was published in 1611, when European nations were already steeped in the profitability of the transatlantic slave trade. We do know that Africans did not identify themselves by skin color; they simply identified themselves as people – and so Akan peoples from today's Ghana, called themselves *Abibiman*, which translates to "human being"; Yoruba peoples from today's Nigeria did not see themselves as Yoruba, as they were subdivided into individual States, and used the term *olùkùmí*, which translates to "my friend", to refer to each other; the Agikuyu people in Kenya may be called "children of the scared tree," but in fact it is better to call them "children of God". These are just minor examples of how a society's definition of itself morphed in its encounter with Europeans.

The transatlantic slave trade actually began when the Portuguese landed in what became Senegal in 1441 and they took 11 people back to Lisbon as slaves. From that historical juncture, they began the infrastructure of enslaving human beings in a commercial enterprise that ultimately would benefit European and western development, and which launched the capitalist age.¹² Even though it is not reflected in today's Portuguese economy, the country became extremely wealthy from the trade and the envy of other nations. However, when Africa and Europe met this time on African soil, they were more or less equal in development. Over the next 300 years, with the "discovery" of the new world, the age of exploration, expansion of transatlantic slavery, and European colonization, and in the process European nations, gaining and taking free labor, other people's knowledge, technology, and (mineral) wealth, from all around the globe, western development began to outpace the rest of the world.

From 1441 until the early 1700s, the slave trade went relatively unchecked, except in the form of slave revolts, rebellions in the new world, or warfare on the African continent. In tandem, Europeans reinvented their cultures and as the colonies also became sites to export their excess populations, criminals, and prisoners of wars, it allowed for even further revisioning of themselves as evolved, highly civilized, arbiters of culture, purveyors of truth, enlightened thinkers, governed by reason, science, legal strictures, philosophical thought, and

¹² This is in contrast to the Romans who were the first to create a system of chattel slavery, and slavery within the Muslim world.

the love of beauty; rather than as peoples, who were building their societies from the destruction and desecration of others. These “others” in that three hundred-year period were invented to different degrees, as savages, lacking the knowledge of God, brutal, non-intelligent or just plain stupid, cannibalistic, overly sexual, lazy, prone to criminality and drunkenness, untrustworthy, unnatural, and a host of other negative conjurations. While most people recognize these labels as stereotypes attached to most people of color, these conceptualizations of character persistently cling to how Black people are perceived. These racist perceptions, however, when articulated by Enlightenment thinkers became enshrined as knowledge, and the foundation to justify western imperialism and domination. Rousseau’s *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1755) provided such an example, in which he wrote:

Negroes and Indians are so little frightened by the wild beasts they may meet in the forests. Knowing the adversary capable of defending himself, the lion or tiger will not attack, unless impelled by great hunger. All the senses of the primitive man are keener. Thus, one must not be surprised to learn that the Hottentots of the Cape of Good Hope sight ships with their naked eye just as far as the Dutch can see them with their spy glasses. . . nor [should one be surprised] that all these primitive races can go naked without experiencing pain, can sharpen their appetite with pimento, and can drink European liquors like water.

If Rousseau ever had concourse with a person who is of African (descent) or indigenous to the Americas beyond the topical, we do not know, but somehow he came to the conclusion that Africans had diminished brain capacity, and the indigenous person was equally primitive. While he may not have supported slavery, he like others of his ilk only championed European superiority.

In line with the growth of scientific knowledge, the first person to classify races based on skin color was Carolus Linnaeus in his text, *Systema Naturae* (1735). Linnaeus created a hierarchy in which he insisted existed *homo monstrosus*, monstrous human beings who were part of nature, and were placed at the bottom of this hierarchy. *Homo africanus* were the next on this evolutionary chain and *homo europaeus* was considered the most developed.¹³

Americanus	Red, choleric and straight	Straight, black and thick hair; gaping nostrils; [freckled] face; beardless chin	Unyielding, cheerful, free	Paints himself in a maze of red lines	Governed by customary right
Europaeus	White, sanguine, muscular	Plenty of yellow hair; blue eyes	Light, wise, inventor	Protected by tight clothing	Governed by rites
Asiaticus	Sallow, melancholic, stiff	Blackish hair, dark eyes	Stern, haughty, greedy	Protected by loose garments	Governed by opinions
Africanus	Black, phlegmatic, lazy	Dark hair, with many twisting braids; silky skin; flat nose; swollen lips; Women [with] elongated labia; breasts lactating profusely.	Sly, sluggish, neglectful	Anoints himself with fat	Governed by choice [caprice]

The last of these thinkers I will cite is Comte de Gobineau whose treatise, *The Inequality of the Human Races* (1853-1855),¹⁴ had direct impact on Brazilian society and influenced

¹³ The Linnean Society of London. Web. <https://www.linnean.org/learning/who-was-linnaeus/linnaeus-and-race>.

¹⁴ Arthur de Gobineau, “*An Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races*” (1853-55). Web.

their race policy post-slavery. Gobineau posed that there were really three races, white, yellow and Black, but I will confine the quotations of his work to how he describes Blacks and whites:

The negroid variety is the lowest, and stands at the foot of the ladder. The animal character, that appears in the shape of the pelvis, is stamped on the negro from birth, and foreshadows his destiny. His intellect will always move within a very narrow circle. He is not however a mere brute, for behind his low receding brow, in the middle of his skull, we can see signs of a powerful energy, however crude its objects. If his mental faculties are dull or even non-existent, he often has an intensity of desire, and so of will, which may be called terrible. Many of his senses, especially taste and smell, are developed to an extent unknown to the other two races.

The very strength of his sensations is the most striking proof of his inferiority. All food is good in his eyes, nothing disgusts or repels him. What he desires is to eat, to eat furiously, and to excess; no carrion is too revolting to be swallowed by him. It is the same with odours; his inordinate desires are satisfied with all, however coarse or even horrible. To these qualities may be added an instability and capriciousness of feeling, that cannot be tied down to any single object, and which, so far as he is concerned, do away with all distinctions of good and evil. We might even say that the violence with which he pursues the object that has aroused his senses and inflamed his desires is a guarantee of the desires being soon satisfied and the object forgotten. Finally, he is equally careless of his own life and that of others: he kills willingly, for the sake of killing; and this human machine, in whom it is so easy to arouse emotion, shows, in face of suffering, either a monstrous indifference or a cowardice that seeks a voluntary refuge in death.

We come now to the white peoples. These are gifted with reflective energy, or rather with an energetic intelligence. They have a feeling for utility, but in a sense far wider and higher, more courageous and ideal, than the yellow races; a perseverance that takes account of obstacles and ultimately finds a means of overcoming them; a greater physical power, an extraordinary instinct for order, not merely as a guarantee of peace and tranquility, but as an indispensable means of self-preservation. At the same time, they have a remarkable, and even extreme, love of liberty, and are openly hostile to the formalism under which the Chinese are glad to vegetate, as well as to the strict despotism which is the only way of governing the negro.

The white races are, further, distinguished by an extraordinary attachment to life. They know better how to use it, and so, as it would seem, set a greater price on it; both in their own persons and those of others, they are more sparing of life. When they are cruel, they are conscious of their cruelty; it is very doubtful whether such a consciousness exists in the negro. At the same time, they have discovered reasons why they should surrender this busy life of theirs, that is so precious to them. The principal motive is honour, which under various names has played an enormous part in the ideas of the race from the beginning. I need hardly add that the word honour, together with all the civilizing influences connoted by it, is unknown to both the yellow and the black man.

On the other hand, the immense superiority of the white peoples in the whole field of the intellect is balanced by an inferiority in the intensity of their sensations. In the world of the senses, the white man is far less gifted than the others, and so is less tempted and less absorbed by considerations of the body, although in physical structure he is far the most vigorous.

We can speculate and say that what these thinkers wrote may have only been read among the literati and the elite of their time. However, the affective relationship of dominant and dominated, which these treatises justified, was cultivated and allowed to become lived habitus, which grew in the day-to-day actions and thoughts of white westerners in relation to the rest of the world around them. Today the ideations of thinkers like these are taught in academies around the world as the apex of knowledge of formation, without critically engaging with their personal racism, the racism in their works, and its effects in our known world. These issues

address levels of complexity of knowledge transmission and subliminal codings of racist perceptions that enter into the realm of the psychoanalytic, which are beyond my knowledge to explore. However, in the movement of Europeans to the sites of slavery or colonialism, they came with presumptions of superiority and the right to rule. From 1441 to what is now 2021 is a 580 year span of the systemic inculcation of the ideals of white supremacy, to such an extent that most people in the world, however they identify, believe in the superiority of whites (on some level) and that is a manifestation of the pathology that has to be rooted out.

Brazil was the last nation in the western hemisphere to end slavery in 1888. Depending on location in the country, white Brazilians found that they were outnumbered by their African and Indigenous population at ratios from 1 to 5 up to 1 to 9, and they conceived of the policy of *embranquecimento* (social whitening), to shift the demographics of the nation. This policy was directly influenced by Gobineau's conceptualization of the races. Officially, *embranquecimento* promoted immigration from European countries and banned immigration from African nations (at that time African descended peoples in the Northeast of the country were traveling back and forth between Brazil and West Africa, and educating their children in places like Lagos and Ouidah). *Embranquecimento* also came with an imperative for the Black population, in that they were told that they would have to whiten, to participate as citizens in the country, as the State and the elite saw them as backwards.¹⁵

The Brazilian State sought to modernize and saw its failures to do so as the fault of this excessive Black, poor, and ignorant population. This population could only better itself generationally by whitening, and so, miscegenation was also promoted to create a mixed population that would evolve away from the backwardness of Blackness to the light of whiteness. Even though *embranquecimento* as an official immigration policy only lasted from 1888 to 1911, the discourse and ideal of social whitening still lives in the Brazilian psyche. This mixed-race population led Gilberto Freyre to call Brazil a racial democracy. Although this ideal has long been debunked and the Brazilian constitution of 1988 outlaws racism, it does not define what racism is, or what acts constitute racism.¹⁶ The pathology of racism within the Brazilian State becomes even more complex because the State will always deny targeting Black people, and say they are working against violence and criminal behaviors. And since only a little over 7% of Afro-Brazilians actually call themselves Black, and most Brazilians admit to some mixedness, the complexity of identification becomes mindboggling. However, if there is one factor that must be remembered from this article, it is that the Brazilian State and its agents do believe the violence they are perpetuating against its Black and Brown citizens is justified and the right course of action, and many Brazilians believe it to be too.

Unfortunately, many other people believe anti-Black violence is necessary, because they do not want to admit, "we are scapegoating Black people because we cannot admit to the fear in our own selves, and we don't want to give up the power we have because it is enjoyable and profitable to have power." Hence, justifications always arise in attempts to show how, "they (Blacks) must deserve this treatment somehow." To end, racism as pathology has to be explored at the psychoanalytical level, but not from the Black person's point of view as is often done, but by examining white peoples pathological behaviors, in needing to rule and punish people of darker hues, and addressing from where this emanates. Uprooting the

¹⁵ Sterling, *African Roots, Brazilian Rites*, pp. 36-43.

¹⁶ Constitution of the Federative Republic of Brazil, Biblioteca Digital da Câmara dos Deputados, Centro de Documentação e Informação Coordenação de Biblioteca 3rd ed, 2010.
<https://www.globalhealthrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Brazil-constitution-English.pdf>.

beliefs that fuel racism, I believe, will help us to face its systemic and institutional manifestations and transform them.