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The Largest Black Nation Outside Africa and its Racist Politics

Paulo Mileno

*I remember on the slave ship,
How they brutalize the very souls.
Today they say that we are free,
Only to be chained in poverty.
Good God, I think it's illiteracy;
It's only a machine that makes money.¹*

With a population of 209 million—and 54% of them being of African descent,²—Brazil is the largest black nation outside Africa, and the second largest in the world behind Nigeria.³ This history started in the 16th century when an estimated five to six million African captives were enslaved and brought to Brazil, a staggering number compared to the estimated 300,000 Africans taken to the United States.⁴ In 1888, Brazil finally abolished slavery, becoming the very last country in the Western Hemisphere to do so—almost a century after the 1807 Abolition of Slave Trade Act passed in the United Kingdom, and 23 years after the United States. In spite of this diverse demographic, and to add to this dishonorable history, starting January 1, 2019, Brazil will also be ruled by an openly racist president.

The Far Right's Ascent to Power

Brazil's president-elect Jair Bolsonaro, a supporter of civilian torture, has previously expressed nostalgia for the 1964-1985 military dictatorship period in Brazil. During the dictatorship, the color/race category was removed from the census, in an effort to paint the country as a post-racial haven.⁵ The dictatorship issued a decree forbidding any publications addressing racial issues, as those could be interpreted as “inciting hate or racial discrimination.”⁶ Moreover, state-sponsored espionage agencies “infiltrated entities dedicated to the study of black culture through lectures, meetings and symposia” in order to monitor any potential connection with international movements such as the Black

Panthers.⁷ Likewise, the *Bailes Blacks (or Bailes Soul)*, a mix of R&B, Blues, and Jazz musicians, were monitored for their ability to generate effervescence by bringing together a large audience of young Blacks who demonstrated self-esteem, and thus arguably had the potential to politically organize and recruit.⁸

Bolsonaro is on track to emulate this dictatorship-era politics and populist sentiments. Through aggressive discourse, he has regularly chastised those living on the margins of society, linked human rights activism to crime advocacy, bolstered a conservative vision of religion and family values, and pledged to rely on the military to maintain social order. Bolsonaro has clearly stated that if elected, he would: “not have a centimeter demarcated for indigenous reservation or quilombola” — quilombola being descendants of runaway enslaved Blacks.⁹ His rule thus is likely to usher-in a wave of state-sponsored violence targeting black, indigenous, and LGBTQ populations, as well as the poor: those who have historically suffered from discrimination and hate.

Bolsonaro’s declarations are rooted in a long Brazilian tradition of criminalizing and repressing expressions of Black life and culture — including samba, capoeira, or African-based religions such as *candomblé* — through laws.¹⁰ During the slavery era as well as post-abolition, public policies continuously aimed to prevent Blacks from fully participating in society. The 1824 *Lei Complementar à Constituição* forbade blacks to attend school.¹¹ Through the 1850 *Lei da Terra*, Blacks were not entitled to housing, in a clear reprisal to the *quilombos*.¹² Even long after the formal abolition of slavery, the 1941 *Lei das Contravenções Penais* (commonly referred to as *Lei da Vadiagem*), a vagrancy law, led to the imprisonment of numerous free Blacks.¹³

Bolsonaro’s appeal is widely due to his pledge to rid Brazil of the endemic corruption that has long plagued the country, thus creating a sense of security for some. Mano Brown, leader of Racionais MC’s — one of the main hip-hop bands in Brazil — recently discussed the racial and social context that led to Bolsonaro’s win:

I see no more class struggle. The fight is for comfort. The periphery is asking for security, voting for police, hiding inside church and behind pastor, and renouncing to claim what should be theirs. So, what would be the importance of Racionais today?

Should we talk about God, family? No. That's already the right-wing discourse in Congress. It blends homophobia, racism, a lot of things . . . We'll have to review the concepts. Take for instance the thinkers of the [hip-hop] movement: they are neutral. Because, today, you are "attacked" for talking about Lula. You get lynched on the internet . . . So everyone is too scared to talk. Today, the struggle of people is individualistic. I see no more class struggle.¹⁴

The Brazilian Left and its White Subjectivity

In 2001, the 5th UNESCO World Conference Against Racism (WCAR) was held in Durban, South Africa. There, through then-minister of Justice Dr. José Gregori, Brazil formally recognized the prevalence of racism and racial discrimination in the country:

Fortunately, the consolidation of the Brazilian democracy has fostered the discussion of questions that hinder the development of our common project of building a society which is just, inclusive and benefits everyone. Since its inauguration speech, President Fernando Henrique Cardoso has opened a new phase in the treatment of the racial question in the country: for the first time in our history Brazil's highest authority acknowledged the very existence and negative impacts of racism and racial discrimination. In the same token, he has established a political dialogue with the Brazilian Black Movement. In its 10th Report to the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, in 1995, the Brazilian Government recognized that discrimination persisted in a country that had already intended to be a racial democracy. We believe that by acknowledging the existence of racial discrimination, Brazil has taken a first step to overcome such problems. We still have a lot to do in this direction - and we have done- but Brazil is not yet the country that we want and deserve. We want a fair country without discrimination or prejudices.¹⁵

Post-Durban, the Black Movement largely supported the campaign of Workers Party's Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who won the presidential election and was sworn into office on January 1, 2003. Subsequently, the Secretaria Especial de Políticas de Promoção das Igualdade Racial (Special Secretariat of Policies for the Promotion of Racial Equality) was created, and Lula named

illustrious Black artist Gilberto Gil minister of Culture. In order to address historical racial and ethnic inequalities affecting indigenous and Black populations, affirmative action public policies and quotas were put in place.

Despite these small steps, the so-called progressive Left has by and large failed to deliver on their promise to build a durable, just society. Following the removal of Lula's successor, President Dilma Rousseff in what has been dubbed a legal, media, and parliamentary coup, the socio-cultural advances that the Left had conquered during its 13-years tenure in power—such as the inclusion of issues affecting the Black population in the public debate—began to crumble like a castle of cards, despite a fierce contest in the October 2018 presidential election. Moreover, until the Left confronts its own internal structural racism, it will be rightly perceived as a hypocritical and demagogic movement. Indeed, how would the Left appear credible in their claim to represent the “masses” and “workers” without specifically addressing racial and ethnic inequalities?¹⁶ Even in the face of an extremely polarized population and political instability, the Left has not been willing to address the issue of race within its own ranks: white candidates were by and large favored over Black ones, as the latter were largely restricted to running-mates positions. Only two leftist parties in the city of Rio de Janeiro, *Partido Comunista do Brasil*, and *Partido Socialismo e Liberdade*, made room for Black candidates.

In Brazil, to this day, family background largely determines access to education and work, as opposed to a perceived meritocracy. The affirmative actions policies and quotas, for instance, paled in comparison to the 1968 *Lei do Boi*, a law providing incentives to farmers' children to access higher education and eventually take over the family business.¹⁷ Likewise, degrees in medicine and law are particularly sought after by students whose parents are medical doctors or lawyers, and who will subsequently be able to join their family practice. At the other end of this system, inside prisons, the immense majority of the carceral population is Black, thus perpetuating the marginalization of Black children and families. The proportion of Black university students has stalled. In their 1997 album *Sobrevivendo no Inferno* (Surviving in Hell) Racionais Mc's addressed this cycle:

60% of young people in the periphery without a criminal record have suffered police violence
 Every 4 people killed by the police, 3 are black
 In Brazilian universities only 2% of students are black
 Every 4 hours, a young black man dies violently in São Paulo.¹⁸

In his monograph *O Genocídio do Negro Brasileiro: O processo de Racismo Mascarado*, scholar Abdias Nascimento deemed this process a genocide of Brazilian Blacks. As Nascimento argued at the second World Festival of Black Arts (FESMAN) held in 1977 in Lagos, Nigeria, this genocide is physical, spiritual, cultural and epistemological, much along the lines of what West African revolutionary Amílcar Cabral had argued a few years earlier:

History teaches us that under certain circumstances it is easy for strangers to impose their rule on a people. But it also teaches us that, whatever the material aspects of this domain, it can only be maintained with a permanent and organized repression of the cultural life of the same people, and can not definitively guarantee its implantation, except by the physical liquidation of a significant part of the dominated part.¹⁹

Recent data appears to support Nascimento's argument, including during the years 2003-2016, when the Workers' Party was in power. Indeed, the Brazilian police has been dubbed the world's most violent for its use of force, particularly towards Black citizens.²⁰ Amnesty International, in their 2015 report "You killed my son!": Homicides by Military Police in the City of Rio de Janeiro, established that in 2012 "over 50% of homicide victims were aged between 15 and 29, and 77% were black."²¹ The report further elaborates:

Publicly available information shows that, in the city of Rio de Janeiro, of 1,275 registered cases of killings by on-duty police between 2010 and 2013, 99,5% victims were men, 79% were black and 75% were aged between 15 and 29. The official narrative in police records consistently blames the victims, who are stigmatized by a culture of racism, discrimination and criminalization of poverty. Brazilian society typically legitimizes these deaths. The criminal justice system perpetuates the situation, by rarely investigating police abuses.²²

When Jayro Pereira de Jesus says that Black people demonstrate "white subjectivity," he means that the ideology of whiteness

is impregnated in the formation of sociability of the collective unconscious, in such a way that even Blacks end up justifying and legitimizing discrimination against other Blacks.²³ Consequently, security forces, whether of the state or the corporate world, also act in the same way, facing Black people as enemies to be persecuted and eliminated from society.

The Left's claim to represent the people, the masses, and the workers' struggle, amounts to a gesture of intellectual arrogance. Indeed, they do so while ignoring the historical and current plight of Black and indigenous populations, as well as the work these populations have undertaken for centuries fighting for their rights. Mano Brown, in a public rally in support of Fernando Haddad, the Workers' Party 2018 presidential candidate, was booed on stage while issuing a powerful critique of the Workers' Party's disdain for a large portion of Brazil's population:

If at any point communication is misdirected . . . We will pay the price for it. Because communication is of the essence. If you fail to speak the language of the people, you will lose. Speaking highly of the Workers' Party before a crowd of supporters is easy. But there is a crowd that is not here, that needs to be conquered. If not, we will fail miserably. And if we fail, we will have to face the consequences, one way or another. Right? (. . .) The issue is, we no longer serve the masses. If we are the Workers' Party, the people's party, we must understand what the people wants. And if you don't know what that is, go back to the base and you'll find out.²⁴

Black Resistance and Liberation

In the 1970s the Movimento Negro Unificado (MNU) was consolidated. The MNU is widely considered the most influential black organization in Brazil in the second half of the twentieth century.²⁵ It is at this point that the issue of Black resistance and liberation work arose in Brazil with more strength. A new generation of Black youth and scholars is breaking away from the White Left, and has started to organize. Some are promoting the theory of *Mulherismo africana* (Africana womanism), as developed by Clenora Hudson-Weems and Nah Dove, among others, as an alternative to mainstream White feminism.²⁶ This new generation of Black intellectuals includes Carla Muhammad, Aza

Njeri, Katiúscia Ribeiro, Naiara Paula, Emaye Ama Mizani, Ani Urasse, Luanda Maat and Morena Mariah. This generation recognizes itself as part of the African Diaspora, which has even triggered for some a name change. It should be noted that this generation was born around the 1980s, at a time when such figures as Abdias Nascimento and Molefi Kete Asante were developing their Quilombismo and Afrocentricity theories, respectively, and that their intellectual coming of age happened in the late 1990s and 2000s. Symbolically, it was also during that era that Michael Jackson came to Brazil. Many of us, who were teenagers at the time, remember this vividly. We heard loud and clear the King of Pop's cry: They Don't Care About Us! The powerful music video he recorded for this song, directed by Spike Lee, was shot in two symbolic, Black areas: the favela of Dona Marta, in the Botafogo neighborhood of Rio de Janeiro; and the Pelourinho district, in the city of Salvador de Bahia, home to the largest black population of the country. Our generation was thus armed with both an anthem, and a political ideology rooted in Black and pan-African thought. We are ready to respond to the threats and attacks lurking from the Right and its president-elect, as well as the lukewarm politics of the Left. We will fight to make sure we are not ignored, and our slowly gaining rights do not disappear.

*Tell me, what has become of my rights?
Am I invisible 'cause you ignore me?
Your proclamation promised me free liberty, now
I'm tired of being the victim of shame
They're throwing me in a class with a bad name
I can't believe this is the land from which I came.*²⁷

Notes

¹ Bob Marley and the Wailers, *Slave Driver*, (London: Island Record, 1973), <http://www.bobmarley.com/>.

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³ David Love, "Brazil, the World's Second-Largest Black Nation, Has Been Taken Over by an All White Male Cabinet — Here's What's at Stake for Its Afro-Descendants," *The Atlanta Black Star*, May 22, 2016, <https://atlantablackstar.com/2016/05/22/exclusive-brazil-the-worlds-second-largest-black-nation-has-been-taken-over-by-an-all-white-male-cabinet-heres-whats-at-stake-for-its-afro-descendants/>.

⁴ “Estimates Tables,” *Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*, <http://www.slavevoyages.org/assessment/essay> (accessed November 24, 2018).

⁵ Paulina L. Alberto, *Terms Of Inclusion: Black Intellectuals in Twentieth-Century Brazil* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 249.

⁶ “Decreto-Lei nº 510, de 20 de Março de 1969,” Câmara dos Deputados, accessed November 24, 2018, <http://www2.camara.leg.br/legin/fed/decllei/1960-1969/decreto-lei-510-20-marco-1969-376778-publicacaooriginal-1-pe.html>.

⁷ Marsílea Gombata, “Como a Ditadura perseguiu militantes negros,” *Carta Capital*, September 20, 2015, <https://www.cartacapital.com.br/revista/867/a-para-noia-nao-tem-cor-1121.html>.

⁸ Andressa Vasconcelos, “Ditadura perseguiu até Bailes Black no Rio de Janeiro,” *Black Panther DNA*, <http://www.blackpantherdna.com/2017/12/ditadura-brasileira-perseguiu-ate.html>.

⁹ “Bolsonaro diz que irá acabar com demarcações de terras e financiamento de ONGs,” *Istoé*, April 03, 2017, <https://istoe.com.br/bolsonaro-diz-que-ira-acabar-com-demarcacoes-de-terras-e-financiamento-de-ongs/>.

¹⁰ See: Vinicius Elias, “Social Exclusion, Candomblé, and the Origins of Samba in Rio de Janeiro,” *Culture Trip*, October 12, 2016, <https://theculturetrip.com/south-america/brazil/articles/social-exclusion-candombl-and-the-origins-of-samba-in-rio-de-janeiro/>; Thomas H. Holloway, “‘A Healthy Terror’: Police Repression of Capoeiras in Nineteenth Century Rio de Janeiro,” *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 69:4 (1989): 637-676.

¹¹ Adelson Silva de Brito, “Dez fatos sobre a escravidão que você vai continuar a ignorar,” *Correio Nagô*, January 16, 2013, <http://correionago.ning.com/profiles/blogs/dez-fatos-sobre-a-escravid-o-que-voce-vai-continuar-a-ignorar>.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Marcos Estevam Vasconcelos and Mateus Fernandes Oliveira, “O combate à ociosidade e à marginalização dos libertos no pós-emancipação,” *CES Revista* 25:1 (2011): 147-157.

¹⁴ Rafael Balsemão, “Hoje a luta das pessoas é individual. Eu não vejo mais luta de classe,” *GauchaZH*, February 05, 2018, <https://gauchazh.clicrbs.com.br/cultura-e-lazer/musica/noticia/2018/02/hoje-a-luta-das-pessoas-e-individual-nao-vejo-mais-luta-de-classes-afirma-mano-brown-cjd4ro6d7064k01kexrlfigt4.html>.

¹⁵ “Statement by his Excellency Dr. José Gregori, Minister of Justice of Brazil, at the General Debate of the Third World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance,” *The United Nations*, accessed November 24, 2018, <http://www.un.org/WCAR/statements/brazilE.htm>.

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¹⁷ Dr. Rosinha, “Lei de Cotas—A desinformação e o paralelo histórico,” *Geledés*, July 06, 2017, <https://www.geledes.org.br/lei-de-cotas%E2%80%8B-desinformacao-e-o-paralelo-historico/>.

¹⁸ Racionais MC’s, *Capítulo 4, Versículo 3* (São Paulo, SP: Cosa Nostra, 1997). Translation from Brazilian Portuguese my own.

¹⁹ Mario Pinto de Andrade ed., *Obras Escolhidas de Amílcar Cabral: Vol. I - A arma da teoria/Unidade e luta I* (Lisboa: Seara Nova, 1995), 221-233.

²⁰ See: Ludmila Outtes, “Polícia brasileira é a que mais mata no mundo,” *A Verdade*, May 24, 2017, <http://averdade.org.br/2017/05/policia-brasileira-e-que-mais-mata-no-mundo/>; Robert Muggah, “How did Rio’s police become known as the most violent in the world?,” *The Guardian*, August 03, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2016/aug/03/rio-police-violent-killing-olympics-torture>.

²¹ Amnesty International, “*You Killed my Son!*”: *Homicides by Military Police in the City of Rio de Janeiro* (London: Amnesty International Ltd, 2015), 7.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Jayro Pereira de Jesus is a Brazilian professor and theologian, who serves as president of the National Association of Theologians and Theologians of the African Matrix Religion, and director general of the School of Afrocentric Philosophy and Theology. To learn more, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XLFjMLv04gI>.

²⁴ Carolina Farias, “Em ato de Haddad com artistas, Mano Brown critica PT e recebe vaias,” *Notícias Uol*, October 23, 2018, <https://noticias.uol.com.br/politica/eleicoes/2018/noticias/2018/10/23/em-ato-com-fala-anticlimax-de-rapper-haddad-sugere-tratamento-a-bolsonaro.htm>. Translation from Brazilian Portuguese my own.

²⁵ Lelia Gonzalez, “The Unified Black Movement: A New Stage in Black Political Mobilization,” *In Race, Class, and Power in Brazil*, ed. Pierre-Michel Fontaine (Los Angeles: Center for Afro-American Studies, University of California, Los Angeles, 1985).

²⁶ See: Clenora Hudson-Weems, *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves* (Troy, MI : Bedford Publishers, 1995) ; Nah Dove, “African Womanism: an Afrocentric Theory” in *Journal of Black Studies* 28:5 (1998): 515-539.

²⁷ Michael Jackson, *They Don’t Care About Us* (Los Angeles: Epic Records, 1985), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QNJL6nfu_Q.

