

## Problematizing miscegenation: the fact/fiction of race in contemporary Brazil

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“Miscegenation is also genocide”

*Banner held by protesters during the 2017 Black Conscience March in São Paulo, Brazil.*

The “World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance”, held in 2001 in Durban, South Africa, was a turning point for Brazil. The country’s representatives released during this conference an official recognition of the existence of racism within Brazil, and the commitment to implement policies for the reduction of racial inequality. As a result, there has been an explosion of debates in the country regarding race. From popular media outlets to the intellectual arena, discussions about racial identity, racial inequality and the realities of racism have become progressively more common in the public and academic spheres. At the same time, and while in some other countries the past few decades have witnessed concerted efforts to remove race as a category from State use and institutional contexts, often substituting it with the category ethnicity, in Brazil the tendency has been the opposite, towards an increasingly explicit use of race by the State in public policy. Together with this, the process of social mobility and the enhanced purchasing power of its population, particularly the emergence of the so-called lower middle-classes, has also meant an increase in commercial products explicitly targeted at non-whites, such as “black” beauty products and services, with an increased “black” aesthetic being more recognised and incorporated into mainstream

popular culture, such as internationally recognised soap-operas.

In this “explosion” of race, one thing that has caught our attention is how miscegenation<sup>1</sup>, while still being heralded as a “natural” characteristic of Brazil’s population and history, is becoming increasingly considered as a “problem.” This can take the shape of explicit, discursive questioning by sectors of organised Black Social Movements, or of State practices that aim to identify the rightful beneficiaries of affirmative action policies.

By analysing how miscegenation is presented as “a problem”, and how this features centrally in how race is enacted locally in contemporary Brazil, we follow M’Charek’s (2013) argument, who stated the need to go beyond the dyad of considering race either as a fact to be acknowledged or as a fiction to be contested. Instead, we should consider it as both, a relational object in which the boundary between what is seen as “biological” and “social” is neither stable nor given, extending beyond the somatic body. Similar arguments regarding race that go beyond the somatic body were put forward by Oracy Nogueira (1955) in his classic description of Brazil’s system, according to which an individual’s racial classification is based on a context-dependent evaluation of the absence and presence of phenotypical marks deemed to be of African, Indigenous or European ancestry, as

<sup>1</sup> The term miscegenation is commonly used in Brazil and as a synonym for admixture and *mestizaje*, without any negative connotation.

well as other markers of status, such as characteristics of clothing, educational level, and manners. This system meant that individuals' racial classification could change depending on the space and contexts in which they spend their lives.

As we will argue, in the case of contemporary Brazil, part of the issue regarding how miscegenation features as "problematic" is closely related to establishing which individuals could benefit from certain affirmative action policies. In this process, while there is a need for removing some of the ambiguities involved in this racial classification and defining what would be "verifiable" criteria regarding racial classification, there are still concomitant uses of race as both a social construction and a biological/physical reality.

### Miscegenation as a problem: whitening and its after-effects

The history of considering miscegenation as a problem in Brazil can be traced to the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. On the eve of the abolition of slavery (in 1888), local intellectuals and politicians worried that the soon to be freed ex-slaves would be a threat to social order, with inborn tendencies towards crime and vagrancy and unsuited to salaried work. In its early years as an independent Nation (1889), and under the influence of scientific racism, the existing Brazilian population, mostly of African or admixed origin, was seen as inferior to Europeans and as a hindrance to Brazil's imagined future as a civilized, European land. Scientific racist ideas were adapted to local conditions, such as the widespread levels of already existing admixture, to produce several alternative courses of action for the country. These ranged from fully substituting the local population with European immigrants, a position argued for by writers such as Nina Rodrigues, who considered that miscegenation resulted in the degeneration of successive generations, given that the worst traits from both progenitors were inherited by their offspring, to more optimistic views, such as those espoused by Sílvia Romero and João Batista de Lacerda, who considered the possibility

of attaining a whitened country through successive crosses between European immigrants and the local, already mixed population. While the minutiae of these arguments is too extensive for this paper<sup>2</sup>, what interests us at this particular moment in history is this latter "redemptive" view of admixture and its ties with a wider ideology that considered a white(ned) future as the goal which Brazil should aim for.

This whitening process, which for many decades in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries had as its concrete effect the establishment of policies that promoted the arrival of European immigrants into the country, resurfaces in contemporary perspectives that view miscegenation as a problem. Take for example the text in the protesters' banner we referred to at the beginning of this article, with the saying "Miscegenation is also genocide". As part of the discourse of a radical wing of the organised Black Social Movement, this banner did not go unnoticed by the local and national press. The use of the word "genocide" is common in activists' actions to call attention to the high rates of violent death suffered by non-whites, particularly young males. Not so common in public discourse is the direct association between those violent deaths and miscegenation, an association that in the banner was linguistically achieved by the use of the adverb "also". In a country with a long-standing national narrative of being thoroughly admixed, where 46.7% of its population identifies itself as

<sup>2</sup> At the risk of oversimplifying complex historical and socio-political processes, we could argue that Brazil has experienced three moments regarding how miscegenation was considered. From the late nineteenth century until about the early 1930s, influenced by ideologies of racial determinism, it was perceived as something the nation had to overcome through its "whitening". In the 1930s cultural turn, *mestizaje* became valued to the point that it was transformed into a national symbol of major prominence, as featured in Gilberto Freyre's work, in particular in his book *Casa-Grande & Senzala*. Over the last two decades, it was increasingly portrayed by black movement activists and intellectuals as supporting notions of "racial democracy" that prevailed in the country throughout most of the twentieth century (for more detailed and nuanced overviews, see Fry, 2000; Guimarães, 2012; Maio & Santos, 2010).

mixed, choosing in census polls the intermediate category *pardo*, and where a third of current marital unions are between people who classify themselves in different census categories (Censo Demográfico de 2010), this equation prompted a public outcry and clashes over the legitimacy of such a statement. One such confrontation took place in the pages of the Brazilian newspaper, *A Folha de São Paulo*, between anthropologist, Antônio Risério, and Elisa Larkin Nascimento, widow of the influential Black intellectual and activist, Abdias do Nascimento, and current director of the Foundation in charge of providing continuity to his activism for black people's rights as well as managing his archives.

Risério's comment on the issue, published first, associated the banner with the Black Movements' adherence to scientific racism ideas that abhorred inter-racial unions: such unions would inevitably lead to the extermination of Blacks. While Risério acknowledged the existence of racism in Brazil and the dangers of an idealised portrayal of miscegenation as necessarily propitiating harmonious race relations, an accusation that is often thrown at the work of Gilberto Freyre (1933) for painting a rosy-eyed picture of master slave relations, he nevertheless considered the sentence in the banner as a good example of how the Black Social Movement was throwing out the baby with the bathwater. By lumping together all individuals who recognised themselves as admixed as annihilated, either in the metaphorical sense through their embracing a racial identity other than blackness, or in the literal interpretation of having their blackness wiped out by the presence of non-black genes, Black social movements ignore not only the history of individuals who self-identified with intermediate categories beyond a position of submission to whites, but also the historical processes through which Brazil's population became admixed not only as a result of violence and rape. Citing Abdias do Nascimento's work as one of the inspirations behind the banner's message, Risério brought attention to the fact that miscegenation is a *fait accompli* in Brazilian everyday life, both in terms of genetic admixture as well as ideologically, in terms of social relations.

Meanwhile Larkin Nascimento, in response to Risério's reading of Abdias do Nascimento's work, argued that the phrase in question referred to the effects that the ideology of whitening had on Black identity. Using Abdias do Nascimento's own personal and family trajectory, she pointed out how the on-the-ground processes of miscegenation in Brazil historically involved a high degree of symbolic violence, in the shape of white supremacist theories that attempted to annihilate Blackness, as well as physical violence, such as forced non-consensual unions between non-white women and white men. Larkin Nascimento reminded readers that the concept of race her late husband used was not one that considered it a biological reality, but rather a social construction, which classifies individuals based on the evaluation of phenotype. As such, considering miscegenation as genocide is seen by Larkin as being part of a wider contemporary discourse of affirmation of Black identity, problematizing the notion of miscegenation as a neutral description of its population and history, arguing rather for an idea of a construction that leads to the suppression of black identity in favour of a whitened version of Brazil.

What was at stake in these two readings of the same banner is the degree to which it referred merely to miscegenation as a social construction or whether it also mobilized certain ideas about biological admixture. As we will point out in the next section, these two ways of understanding miscegenation, as a socially constructed phenomenon based on the evaluation of external phenotype and/or as a biological reality, also feature centrally in one of the other contexts in which miscegenation appears as a problem in contemporary Brazil: the implementation and control of who should benefit from affirmative action policies.

### **Fraud and affirmative action policies: race as a social fact, race as biological fiction?**

Affirmative action policies targeting the reduction of racial inequalities started to be implemented in Brazil in 2002, when several

universities established entry quotas for blacks for higher education entry exams. A well-established demand of organised Black Social movements, the implementation of quotas was justified in order to redress the unequal access to Brazil's public higher education system, with more self-classified white students gaining access than their fair share from the general population. This situation, deemed to be a consequence of previous unequal access to quality primary and secondary education, resulted in a homogenized student body and less economic opportunities for non-whites, given that a university diploma was essential for access to better paid jobs. These initial actions regarding university entrance exams were progressively widened to include programmes and policies aimed at reducing disparities in health outcomes, in the field that came to be known as Black Population Health (Creary, 2018; Maio & Santos, 2010).

Over time, racial quotas for university entrance exams, after the Supreme Court ruling in favour of their constitutionality in 2012, were extended by law to be implemented in all public universities, and were progressively broadened to encompass not only undergraduate but also post-graduate courses, as well as in federal public service selection procedures in 2014. Initially, quotas were reserved for individuals self-identified as *Negro*, a term that would include not only those who identified themselves with the census category black (*preto*), but also those self-identified with the intermediate census category brown (*pardo*). Over time, the targeted groups were broadened to include individuals coming from indigenous groups and *quilombo* runaway slave communities.

While several questions and criticisms were raised during the period prior to the implementation of these measures, we will focus on one of the issues raised: in a country with a long history of fluid, situational and ambiguous racial classificatory practices, where intermediate racial categories are part and parcel of the everyday reality of race, what criteria could be established to determine who could be considered black? What was the most adequate way to identify potential beneficiaries? While the majority of institutions

adopted self-identification as the main criteria to be applied, some institutions attempted to create third-party verification procedures.

The University of Brasilia, for example, established a commission that evaluated candidates' photos in order to decide who had the right to compete for a place within the places reserved for blacks (Maio & Santos, 2005). However, after a few controversial outcomes, such as an episode in which a pair of identical twins found themselves in the incongruent situation of having one of their statuses as black confirmed while the other was denied the right to benefit from affirmative action, it seemed that in the mid to late-2010s, the issue had been settled: most, if not all institutions had adopted self-identification of would-be students as black or brown, following census categories, as the way in which potential beneficiaries of these measures can be identified.

As the system expanded throughout the country and beyond university undergraduate courses, a series of allegations of fraud appeared on national media, identifying candidates accused of being whites who self-identified as brown to benefit from these policies. Adding to this, there was growing pressure from within sectors of the organised Black Social Movement meant, to the point that the once unthinkable idea of establishing nationwide "verification committees" became a reality. In 2016, the Federal Government published guidelines for the creation of such commissions at every institution. These commissions would verify a candidates' self-declared race, with each institution making sure that the criteria being applied was clearly established in the public call for employment. The issue at stake was to differentiate lighter brown individuals from whites who attempt to cheat the system for their own benefit, declaring themselves to be brown when they were socially recognised as whites.

Within this context of needing to verify a candidates' racial self-declaration, the following criteria were published in a 2016 offer of public service employment in the Instituto Federal do Pará (IFPA), a higher education institution in the North of Brazil. As established by the already existing government guidelines, candidates were

to be assessed by members of a commission, and classified according to their skin tone and other facial and bodily characteristics. A points system classified these elements, with skin overruling the rest: if a candidate was considered by the three members of the commission to have brown or black skin, there was no need to meet any of the other criteria. If the candidate's skin colour was deemed to be white by some members of the commission, then the candidate's other features were to be determined and classified with a yes/no answer:

"platyrrhine nose, dolicocele (sic) skull (<74.9, with 4/5 width-length relation), jaw prognathism, thick lips, oblique and white teeth, purple mouth soft tissues, narrow forehead, tight curly hair, scarce facial hair, and pronounced zygomatic arches"

Each of these criteria, when deemed to be present in a candidate's appearance by the evaluating commission, received 12.5 points, with a candidate gaining their right to benefit from quotas with a score of 62.5 points. The idea behind this points system is that while skin colour overrules the other criteria, there should be a significant presence of what was thought to be markers of non-whiteness. Five out of ten criteria met meant that the person with a light skin colour had an appearance sufficiently admixed to be socially recognised as non-white and benefit from quotas. This classificatory table, nevertheless, ended up not being applied, after it became publicised and criticised in local and national media for being too closely related to how scientific racism classified subjects. As in the case with most other commissions established across the country, what was evaluated was a candidate's general appearance, without in fact any explicit detailed description of which criteria were being applied to reject or accept a given candidate.

Alongside this experience of the IFPA, a growing number of universities in Brazil established "race classification boards". With broad support from the Black Movement, who are behind the push to establish stricter criteria to

avoid candidates "frauding" the system, these commissions had to classify individuals based on the evaluation of their external phenotype, with the argument that only those candidates who were recognised by others as black could legitimately self-classify as such<sup>3</sup>. In some cases, along with the more general appearance of candidates, for those with an intermediate phenotype, whose classification within the brown group is not considered to be clear to the commission members, they are requested to narrate episodes in which they were discriminated against due to their racial status. The credibility of such episodes then becomes the basis for their acceptance or rejection as beneficiaries of the quota system.

Based on arguments that the procedures would be imprecise, subjective, and vague, candidates who had their self-identification as non-whites denied by such commissions contested their exclusion from the quota system in court. Some candidates even obtain reports from medical doctors, such as dermatologists or plastic surgeons, to certify that their skin colour and appearance is indeed compatible with their self-declaration as brown. There are also instances in which geneticists and anthropologists have been called upon to provide reports that could confirm a candidate's identity as non-white. Given anthropologists' key role in legal processes of land demarcation for indigenous and runaway slave communities, it is understandable that candidates attempt to obtain such reports for their own legal procedures. Some judges themselves consider that an anthropological report could help escape the subjectivity of how to classify a candidate within a certain racial group<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> We have no time in this essay to develop the argument, but it is important to mention that, while defended by segments of social movements, the existence of "race classification boards" generates discomfort for many scholars as well as some social movement activists. In particular, some similarities are evident between their classification procedures and those used during the strongest moments of scientific racism (Bailey & Peria, 2010; Lehmann, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> <https://g1.globo.com/distrito-federal/noticia/candidata-do-df-ganha-na-justica-o-direito-de-se-dizer-par-da-em-concurso-publico.ghtml>

While the example of the IFPA's detailed racial criteria could be said to be an isolated episode, there is an aspect behind its publication that also forms a strategy used by candidates in court and often accepted by judges: the idea that there is a certain, measurable and objective way to assess whether an individual can be considered non-white or not, and that imprecise criteria have no room in public selection processes where transparency and impersonality are central values. In the case of the IFPA table, the criteria resembled scientific racism manuals that classified human bodies in terms of measurable and quantifiable characteristics, such as skull ratios, and jaw shape that are not necessarily part of the repertoire used to determine someone's position in the everyday social construction of race. Other criteria present in the table, such as oblique and white teeth, or purple soft tissues of the mouth, while generally associated with African ancestry, are hardly elements that in everyday life, and by themselves, would place individuals in a given category. Rather, they are factors that confirm a more general reading of a person's appearance, rather than determining it, as is the case with skin colour or even hair. The case of hair is interesting for its centrality in pushing someone towards being classified as non-white. This is particularly so given how hair appears together with ideas about general beauty and particularly feminine beauty, which are, in themselves, strongly racialised. Hair is seen as a strong marker of non-European identity, and in some cases overrules skin colour. The presence of tight curly hair, deemed to be a marker of African ancestry, can shift a person's social classification from white, particularly in middle and upper-middle class spheres, and move them to the non-white category. This particular combination even receives a specific term in some regions of the country: *sarará*.

Most of the activists and intellectuals who argued for the establishing of mechanisms to curb fraudulent self-descriptions would never claim that race is a biological reality, but rather, a socially constructed phenomenon located in the reading of an individual's external phenotype. However, the need to verify someone's

self-declaration lead to establishing objective criteria for racial adscription. This is particularly the case given that most quotas established by law have to do with access to public services and job selection procedures. When combined with some of the principles behind public service, such as impersonality, and clarity, this resulted in examples of clear biological criteria for racial classification which surreptitiously resurfaced. The drive toward judicial procedures initiated by activists to combat fraud, and continued by candidates in their ensuing actions for a judicial resolution to the rejection of their case, for those rejected by the established commissions, has led to an about face in a short period of time regarding how the Brazilian Supreme Court considers the issue. While in 2012, during the Supreme Court ruling on the Constitutionality of university entrance quotas, one judge argued that self-declaration should be sufficient and that it would be hard to justify the existence of a "racial court", five years later in their 2017 ruling on the constitutionality of quotas in public service job offers, the final text considered the use of subsidiary criteria for third-party classification, in addition to self-classification, to be legitimate.

### **Concluding remarks: Brazil as a diverse nation, or miscegenation not just as a problem**

"The world's largest variety of hair types can be found in Brazil. We tested over 10 thousand Brazilian women and found 8 different existing hair types. That is a portrait of miscegenation. Brazil is a global cosmetics lab. When we talk about skin colours, there are around 66 different types worldwide. We found 55 of these in Brazil. In India, we found 41, in Spain, 25. Brazil is very rich in diversity"

*Laurent Attal, L'oreal Executive Vice-President for Research and Innovation, on the occasion of the inauguration in 2017 of the research centre the company set up in Rio de Janeiro.*



While we saw that in contemporary Brazil, miscegenation can be seen as a “problem” that requires either intervention in terms of identity (a discourse exemplified by the “miscegenation is also genocide” banner), or a practical question in terms of classificatory criteria and procedures to circumvent the ambiguity resulting from intermediate racial categories in Brazil, this story is only one of the many dimensions of the ongoing narrative about racial identity in the country. In fact, the view that considers miscegenation to be what we could call an “asset”, or a key characteristic that can be seen if not in positive terms, at least in neutral ones, has also returned in recent years, or rather, had never left the public sphere. This view has also resurfaced in areas that focus on genetic and biological variety, re-emphasizing a long-established view of the country as a unique case in terms of its genetic and physical diversity (Wade *et al.*, 2014). The cosmetics industry is one that was quick to latch onto the view of Brazil as a miscegenated nation and to take advantage of this, both in terms of research, as we can see in the quote of L’oreal’s vice-president for research and innovation. It also markets its products for consumers of such products, employing a wider variety of models with different skin tones and hair textures, or in the use of slogans such as “developed specifically for Brazilian skin”, which paradoxically turns this diversity into a single model that would represent the “ideal” Brazilian as admixed, an expression often used when referring to the “beauty” of the Brazilian woman, accompanied by a photo of any famous actress that, in general, has an intermediate skin colour and hair texture. This vision of the genetic potential of Brazil as a result of its historical admixture processes is also found in biomedicine, for example in the expectations that international bone marrow donor registries have of the Brazilian registry undergoing a process of expansion. Given the high level of admixture found in the Brazilian population, this may help identify rarer alleles that could enable recipients with these allele combinations to find a matching donor.

The representation of the country as a haven for genetic diversity, resulting from its population history, is not necessarily denied by activists that argue for the public use of the racial category “Black” as inclusive of those who self-declare themselves as mixed. However, while this narrative about admixture is not denied, it is also not central in their view of how the Nation should construct its future history.

Timid initiatives from the field of social activism, such as the group Nação Mestiça-Movimento Pardo-Mestiço Brasileiro (*Mixed Nation: Brazilian Brown-Mestizo Movement*), founded in the northern State of Amazonas, have attempted to embrace such admixed identity openly and advocate for its enduring centrality in how the Nation should represent itself and how they should feature in the country’s future. The key issue in this process of rethinking and re-enacting what miscegenation entails is how the different ‘biological’ and ‘social’ elements that compose race appear and reappear both in explicit and implicit ways, in the intersection between ideas about bodily and biological diversity, in the readings of individual bodies’ racial identity, and in Brazil’s national history and narratives regarding Nation.

While there is a multiplicity of discourses and ways of considering race in contemporary Brazil, we should also be aware of how these partial visions of what race “is”, when put together, constitute a broader picture in which certain ideas become, over time, more prominent than others. We are acutely aware that this “explosion” of race and the ways in which miscegenation is either seen as a “problem” or an “asset” is a process that is rapidly unfolding as we write. At the same time, and although one could point to an emerging, more “restricted” way of considering race, in which the State engages with racial classification and a certain criteria to define what race is, we should also pay attention to ways in which race was conceived in the past. The recurrence of 19<sup>th</sup> century criteria for classifying bodies, or how mid-20<sup>th</sup> century ideas about Brazil being “the” land of admixture still appear in contemporary discourses, reminds us that when it comes

to ideas about race, one set of ideas is not integrally substituted by other. Rather, before our very eyes, a complex process of sedimentation in which new (or not so new) narratives and practices about race overlap and/or intermingle with those of old “strata” is unfolding, at times erupting like a powerful volcano that spills over into multiple dimensions of contemporary life.

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