

The Bolsonaro Election, Antiblackness, and Changing Race Relations in Brazil

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Abstract

We apply the concept of antiblackness and a Deleuzian approach to sociopolitical events to analyze Jair Bolsonaro's 2018 election in Brazil. Historically, Brazilians turned from overt expressions of antiblackness to subtler forms of racial prejudice, what Sérgio Buarque de Holanda (1956) called the "cordial man" who practiced a "gentlemanly" form of white supremacy. Recently, however, cordial racism has eroded in favor of more virulent and explosive manifestations of antiblackness that fueled the sociopolitical climate that enabled Bolsonaro's rise to power. We examine the antiblack backlash against race-conscious laws and policies implemented during the Workers' Party era (2002–16), showing a gradual shift toward more overt expressions of antiblackness that Bolsonaro wielded to political effect in his 2018 campaign.

Keywords: Brazil, race, blackness, affirmative action, Bolsonaro

Jair Bolsonaro, Brazil's extreme right-wing president, was sworn into office on January 1, 2019. Within hours, he began to implement the campaign promises that had so energized his electoral base. On Twitter, he announced a rollback of major policies setting aside land for indigenous peoples and descendants of runaway slaves: "More than 15% of national land has been demarcated as indigenous and quilombolas. In reality, fewer than a million people live in these isolated areas of Brazil, and they are exploited and manipulated by nongovernmental organizations. Together, we're going to integrate those citizens and take care of all Brazilians" (Savarese 2019).¹ On the second day, Bolsonaro attacked the programs that fostered upward mobility for millions of Afro-Brazilians, calling them damaging to national unity. Racial strife in Brazil, he suggested, stemmed not from his rise to political prominence but from policies enacted under the center-left Workers' Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores, or PT), his principal political rival (*Jornal Nacional* 2018). Effectively denying the ways everyday race-based discrimination shapes the experiences of millions of Afro-Brazilians, Bolsonaro claimed under his government every Brazilian would be treated equally.

The period leading up to Bolsonaro's election saw a spike in expressions of racial hatred. For example, a swastika appeared on the chalkboard in the classroom of a black female sociology professor, Odara Dêlé, in São Paulo. Under the symbol was written, "*Preta, galinha do caralho*" (Negro, damn whore).² Not only is such a blatant expression of racism and sexism relatively uncommon in Brazil, a country that favors "cordial discrimination" (discussed below), this attack was also significant because the perpetrators referenced Bolsonaro himself. Just days earlier, students had chanted "Long live Bolsonaro!" at the professor from the back of the classroom. This was but one of many events during the campaign in which Bolsonaro supporters attacked and threatened blacks in the name of their candidate. The Department of Public Safety

reported 142 racial assaults in January–August 2018 in São Paulo alone, a 37 percent increase from the same period in 2017 (Henrique 2018).

As Jaime Alves and João Costa Vargas (2018) noted immediately after the presidential race: “It is clear from the results of the latest Brazilian elections that anti-black hatred remains an effective symbolic and practical political tool.”³ Building on their assertion, we focus on politically motivated cultivation of antiblackness in the years leading up to Bolsonaro’s campaign, in which race and racism were an intrinsic, albeit not always visible, part of the far-right discourse against progressive PT policies. Applying the concept of antiblackness and the Deleuzian approach to sociopolitical events, we argue that Brazilian politics have become a fertile site for open and violent expressions of deep-seated antiblack racism. We further examine the emergence and content of specific antiblack discourses that arose in retaliation against the relatively progressive policies of the PT.

Antiblackness as Foundational Ideology

Antiblackness refers to the “structural, long-duration antiblack disposition that calls into question the possibility of full black integration and citizenship” (Vargas 2012, 9). Racial anxiety and antiblackness have defined all stages of Brazil’s nation-building project (Farfán-Santos 2016; D. Silva 2007; Smith 2016; Vargas 2018). While the United States followed a “separate but equal” policy post emancipation, Brazil encouraged racial mixing, albeit with the same aspiration for whitening present in the United States and with the goal of eliminating blackness, or obliterating the racial subalterns (D. Silva 2007). In the twentieth century, in a widely recognized attempt to whiten the population, Brazil subsidized the immigration of over four million white Europeans. Brazilian national identity would not, indeed could not, include blacks as equal participants in

the nation (D. Silva 2007; Davis 1999).

Yet throughout the twentieth century, Brazil worked to project a positive multiracial image. The anthropologist Robin Sheriff (2005, 114) writes: “Brazil’s race relations, both past and present, have been publicly constructed through the ideology of *democracia racial*, or racial democracy, a set of beliefs and discourses that maintain that racialized prejudice and discrimination are especially mild or even nonexistent in Brazil.” Openly celebrating the mixture of native, European, and African heritage—while diligently working to obliterate blackness—was part of the construction of Brazil as a racial democracy. As many scholars have noted, such supposed inclusiveness and appreciation for the unique cultural contributions of Africans and Afro-Brazilians coexists with virulent antiblack racism. Brazilian society has long lived with what Jennifer Roth-Gordon (2017, 6) calls “a comfortable racial contradiction”: despite ubiquitous racial inequality and notions of white superiority, Brazilian society maintains a “national disdain for racial prejudice and a denial of structural racism” in everyday Brazilian life.

One manifestation of this silence about race is that all arguments about prejudice default to class, not racial, bias. Brazilians often claim that police violence against blacks or workplace discrimination against dark-skinned employees results from poverty or lack of education (*falta de “educacao”*), euphemistically attributing low status not to racial hierarchies but to lack of social capital. Researchers, similarly, have often adopted a class-based approach over one that makes race the central framework for analysis (Alves 2018, 17–20). Despite widespread race mixing and the complexities of class, race *is* an important indicator of privilege: research has shown that when class is held constant, Brazilians’ attitudes are shaped by the perceived race or skin color of others (cf. Telles 2014; Roth-Gordon 2017). In Brazil’s racial hierarchy, *brancos* (whites) are at the top, *morenos* or *pardos* (brown or mixed-race people) in the middle, and

pretos or *negros* (blacks) at the bottom (Davis 1999, 3).

Our understanding of antiblackness draws on several propositions. First, antiblackness refers to the asymmetrical relationship between blacks and nonblacks in a racial positionality that “renders humanity unattainable for the Black” (Vargas 2018, 27). As an overarching principle, it fulfills “the empire-states’ desire to police and contain its so-called dangerous classes, among whom . . . blacks occupy a unique position” (2). Second, antiblackness is often implicit and unrecognized, existing below the level of consciousness (Alves 2018; Vargas 2018). Finally, although black people are engaging with politics more than ever before, they face constant threats to their humanity in their daily lives (Vargas 2018, vii).

Given that virulent antiblackness is foundational to Brazilian society and national identity, policies enacted by the PT administration, addressing admission to public universities, hiring in the public sector, and labor laws, did improve the material conditions of Afro-Brazilians, but could not meaningfully challenge the underlying antiblackness. These policies are exactly the ones Bolsonaro and the far right would target as racist lawmaking that favored some Brazilians over others. Ironically, however, these policies only scratched the surface of inequality before generating harsh backlash.

Antiblackness and Understanding the Event

In keeping with the theme of understanding current events through an anthropological—but not necessarily ethnographic—lens, we believe Bolsonaro’s election can only be analyzed as part of a larger, evolving, and fundamentally rhizomatic cultural and political sphere where antiblack racism is operative. Within a Deleuzian perspective, “events” are not only the direct result of historical processes but also carry generative potential for the near and distant future. Thus, the

event of Bolsonaro's election has rhizomatic connections to other events, both past and yet to unfold. Gilles Deleuze (1990, 52) discusses events as singularities, or "turning points and points of inflection; bottlenecks, knots, foyers, and centers; points of fusion, condensation, and boiling; points of tears and joy, sickness and health, hope and anxiety, 'sensitive' points."

Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of rhizome, based on a stem that grows horizontally underground, enables us to visualize how reactions to racially inflected policies in Brazil emerged, as propagations of antiblackness by adventitious shoots. Like offshoots of a single rhizome these reactions are never isolated but always bound together through essential anthropological connections. This metaphor helps us map fragmented cultural terrains as interconnected across many planes at local and global levels. "Any point of a rhizome can be connected to any other, and must be"; "a rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, science, and social struggles" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 7). We seek to take apparently independent examples (semiotic codes) and relate them directly to rising antiblackness through the multivocal, woven discourses and genres of the rhizome. Thus, the expressions of antiblackness analyzed here are shaped by the wider, interconnected context of recent political and cultural developments.

We examine how different pieces of race-related legislation acted as points of inflection that took on powerful political meanings in Brazil, and how current expressions of racial hatred are tied to the past and are generative of the future. Antiblackness is only one of many possible lenses through which to interpret the election. As Alves and Vargas (2018) noted: "There are other logics and forms of hatred at play: against women, non-Evangelical Christians, LGBTQ people, and Indigenous people. Yet antiblackness is a critical feature of a social contract that

intersects with, energizes, and shapes the appeal of Bolsonaro's multifaceted antidemocratic and exclusionary agenda. The rise of Bolsonaro may be an unexpected political event, but it is fueled by a founding hatred of Black people and fear of a Black nation. This specific hatred and fear has little to do with Bolsonaro, and is indeed an original and organizing element of the Brazilian polity." For this reason, we have chosen antiblackness as critical to understanding the continued, and rising, political polarization in Brazil.

Our engagement with antiblackness is rooted in and stems from our long-term observations of racial inequality, racial prejudice, and racial politics in the cities of Rio de Janeiro and Salvador. Antonio José Bacelar da Silva was born and lived in Bahia for most of his life. He began researching the black movement in Salvador in 2009 as part of his interest in exploring the social movements challenging racism. During the 2014 presidential election, he conducted ethnographic fieldwork with black candidates and voters in Salvador. Funded by a postdoctoral Wenner-Gren grant, this twelve-month project explored political messages with a racial appeal. Erika Robb Larkins has conducted fieldwork in favelas (shantytowns) in Rio since 2006, focusing on the intersection between structural violence and armed conflict. In 2014, she turned to researching police and private security agents, who were vocal critics of the PT policies and would later become key members of Bolsonaro's electoral base. During our interactions and discussions with research subjects, we both encountered firsthand the kinds of backlash and antiblackness described here. We have engaged with this issue through analysis of scholarly research, documents, and print and social media, drawing on our long-term participant observation as scholars of Brazilian social relations. We both followed intently the enormous circulation of political and racial discourse on Twitter, Facebook, and Whatsapp between 2014 and 2019 as the political situation became more polarized.

Fomenting antiblackness was critical to Bolsonaro's election. To understand why requires situating recent expressions of racial hatred within the context of social change in Brazil over the past two decades. In what follows, we map the "rhizomatic becomings" of racial hatred by outlining how PT policies directly challenged inequitable racial hierarchies, particularly in the areas of education and domestic labor. The backlash against these policies can be directly linked to the success of Bolsonaro and allied politicians, including Wilson Witzel, Rio de Janeiro's new governor. Finally, we look at antiblackness in the wider context of US-Brazilian relations.

Educational Policy Changes

Since Brazil's return to democracy in the mid-1980s, black activists have successfully fought for affirmative action and welfare laws, most of which were enacted during the PT administrations (2002–16). Lula's administration was the first to meaningfully address racial inequality nationwide (Schwarcz 2019; Paschel 2016). Affirmative action and racial equality policies "spread like wildfire under President Lula" (Paschel 2016, 132). In fact, the Secretaria Especial de Políticas Públicas de Promoção da Igualdade Racial (SEPPIR; Special Secretariat for Public Policies to Promote Racial Equality), was created to coordinate racial-equality policies. Furthermore, Laws 10.639/03 and 11.645/08 made content about Afro-Brazilian and indigenous history and culture compulsory in the curricula of all public and private schools. This mandate aimed to disrupt decades of white hegemony in the education system by forcing curricula nationwide to give greater weight to Afro-Brazilian and indigenous experiences and contributions; it demanded recognition of historical processes that rendered black subjects as nonhuman. It was especially significant that the private schools attended by Brazil's (white) middle and upper classes had to adopt new curricula that broadened discussion of Brazilian racial

diversity as a step toward ending prejudice. Unsurprisingly, one of candidate Bolsonaro's central platforms was denouncing racism in Brazil as a form of "fake news." The far right portrayed discussions of racial inequality in educational settings as "cultural Marxism" and called for their elimination.

Other policies enacted under the PT challenged structural barriers that hindered black and indigenous students from obtaining higher education. After fifteen years of affirmative action in higher education under the PT, the percentage of black- and brown-skinned Brazilians graduating from postsecondary institutions increased from 2.2 percent in 2000 to 9.3 percent in 2017 (Brito 2018). Three PT-backed policies drove this increase: *Reestruturação e Expansão das Universidades Federais* (REUNI, Restructuration and Expansion of Federal Universities) to expand Federal Universities, *Programa Universidade para Todos* (PRO-UNI, University for All Program) to provide college scholarships, and quotas for college admissions, based on race and income/public-school attendance.⁴ According to Ministry of Education data, PRO-UNI gave 8.7 million Brazilians who otherwise could never have dreamed of taking a college course access to public and private colleges by facilitating training and awarding scholarships.

Beginning in the mid-2000s, racial quotas were officially implemented for civil service jobs and public universities nationwide, and by 2012, the quota system became enshrined in Law 12.711. All federal public institutions of higher education were required to reserve a percentage of admissions according to racial and socioeconomic criteria, aligned with demographic factors based on local census data.⁵ The legislation opened access to Brazil's prestigious, tuition-free public universities, which formerly had been restricted to elites who could afford private K–12 schooling that prepared their children to pass the highly competitive and exclusionary college entrance exams.

Quotas were controversial because they required Brazilians to talk openly about race, racial difference, and unequal access to opportunity. At several institutions throughout the country, disputes about who was considered as black (and therefore eligible for affirmative action spots) were resolved by highly controversial panels of experts who would rule on an applicant's racial eligibility. Because racial classification in Brazil is far more complex than the hypo-descent (one-drop) paradigm historically used in the United States, and due to documented cases of "racial fraud," racial identification rapidly became a divisive and polemical issue (A. Silva 2019, forthcoming), especially since the protection of white privilege in higher education was at stake.⁶

Resistance against racial policies in education began with expressions of resentment toward the college quota system. One common strategy was to highlight the difficulty of determining applicants' racial identities as a way of challenging the need for policies that addressed racial disparities. Armed with discourses of meritocracy and Brazilian nonracialism, the popular magazine *Veja* (which has long been highly influential in shaping middle-class public opinion in Brazil), published a story about admissions at the University of Brasilia (UNB) entitled "Race Does Not Exist: Identical Twins Alex and Alan Were Considered White and Black by the Quota System" (Zakabi and Camargo 2007). UNB was one of the first public universities to adopt the quota system, and during the initial implementation, candidates were required to submit a photo to determine phenotype. When two "identical" twins sent in photos, one was considered eligible and the other was rejected. The photo on the *Veja* cover showed little apparent phenotypical difference between the twins, but one wore a white T-shirt (indicating he had been classified as white), while the other wore a black shirt.

In the article, the authors borrowed language from Martin Luther King Jr. to paint the

quota system as inherently racist: “It is a sign that Brazil is taking the dangerous path of trying to evaluate people not by the content of their character, but by the color of their skin” (Zakabi and Camargo 2007, 82).⁷ The authors further asserted that race-based policies were inappropriate for solving Brazil’s problems, an idea that quickly gathered steam among quota opponents. The basic premise of the antiquota arguments is that policies recognizing the racial exclusion of blacks are arbitrary and therefore based on imagined structural racism, a position that invalidates the experiences and struggles of black activists. Another challenge against quotas came from Brazil’s Democratas (Democrats Party), which filed a lawsuit against UNB in 2009, claiming quotas were unconstitutional (Rosenn 2014). They argued that forcing people into racial categories was un-Brazilian and racist. Bolsonaro’s statement that all Brazilians should be treated the same embraced a similar rhetoric in that it ignored the very well-documented racial disparities in Brazil and their power to shape the lives of Afro-Brazilians.

Since the passage of national affirmative action legislation in 2012, opposition has escalated from the disdain expressed in the *Veja* article to extreme political polarization and overt expressions of racial bigotry. Caroline Baranzeli (2014) analyzes several reactions to affirmative action in Brazil, including a well-known graffiti scrawled on a wall in front of the Law School of Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul in 2007, reading “*lugar de negro é na cozinha do RU*” (Blacks’ place is in the kitchen of the campus cafeteria).⁸ Popular objections to quotas were voiced through appeals to stereotypes of black and indigenous people as undeserving, lazy students who wanted to be handed admission rather than earn it. Arguing for a color-blind meritocracy system, quota opponents continue to call for an overhaul of the basic schooling system through equitable funding. This, they argue, would reduce disparities in public university admissions.⁹ A blog entry entitled “Exército Anti-Cotas e as Vagas no Ensino

Superior Brasileiro” (The Anti-Quota Army and the Securing of Spots in Brazil’s System of Higher Education; figure 1) exemplifies incipient militarization of the quota issue (Beier 2012).



Figure 1: “The Anti-Quota Army”

Tensions around quotas have led to scapegoating and hostility that positions black college students as cheaters who are unable to cope with the rigors of college work. Brazilians who oppose racial quotas suggest that blacks are “getting away with something” and violating commonsense values, such as studying hard to get into college. There is an obvious commonality between antiquota arguments and antiblackness in that both overlook the rights of blacks; in other words, a conversation about education becomes a lightning rod for the expression of antiblackness. Thus ethno-racial reforms become one node in the racially charged, rhizomatic structure of Bolsonaro’s campaign rhetoric, which stoked racial conflict and constructed imaginary threats to white privilege in order to secure votes.

Domestic Labor Policy Changes

In 2015, Dilma Rousseff signed the constitutional amendment of 2013, prohibiting discrimination against domestic workers, the vast majority of whom are black women. In a direct challenge to the conceptual underpinning of antiblackness, wherein the racial subaltern have no rights to legal protections, the legislation mandated that domestics receive standard employment benefits, including unemployment insurance, family leave, and insurance for job-related injuries or illnesses. But domestic workers' new rights catalyzed a new conservative political identity that combined dissatisfaction with leftist politics with open expression of antiblack sentiments that had previously been suppressed in daily exchanges. Many employers rejected their responsibilities, complaining about paying even minimum wage and portraying labor rights for domestic employees as entitlements. They have adopted strategies to skirt the new laws, such as hiring multiple part-time, non-benefits-eligible maids. While Silva was doing fieldwork in Salvador (2013–2015), middle-class interlocutors often lamented the changes caused by domestic workers' new legal status. A common theme was that the labor laws would make hardworking middle-class families “vulnerable” to lawsuits brought by “unscrupulous domestics and their lawyers,” who would not think twice before extorting money from “honest heads of household who make incredible effort to pay their maids.” Subsequently, mainstream media began to use the new laws to construct domestic workers as a political threat. Another *Veja* cover is instructive here (see figure 2).



Figure 2: “She can decide the elections”

The display text reads, “She can decide the elections. Northeasterner, 27 years old, high school student, a monthly salary of 450 reais [approximately \$169] Gilmar Cerqueira represents the voter who will tip the scales in October” (Duailibi and Cabral 2006).¹⁰ The piece reinforces stereotypes of domestic workers as black and poor but, importantly, also links them to regional identity and erroneously suggests their labor rights empower them to shape the nation’s electoral future. Here, a connection is drawn from a PT policy to a political threat located in the Northeast, home to the largest Afro-descended population in Brazil.

Polarization and Regionalism

During the 2018 elections, Bolsonaro’s conservative supporters in the South and Southeast grew increasingly hostile toward the Northeast, Brazil’s poorest and blackest region. The overt backlash against Northeasterners had been building for years; in fact, Northeasterners were

trolled in social media after Rousseff's win in 2014. As PT candidate Fernando Haddad challenged Bolsonaro in 2018, images portraying the Northeast as a dangerous place of leftist resistance to Bolsonaro circulated widely. Northeasterners have long been characterized as stupid, poor, and even violent, but this scorn and distaste formerly simmered just below the surface.

Regional divisions can be linked to the growth of São Paulo's industrial output between 1950 and 1989, when more than three million Brazilians left the North and Northeast seeking work. Significant urbanization, industrialization, expansion of consumer markets, and diversification of the social structure produced unequal distribution of wealth and hierarchical patterns of domestic relations. Boasting sixteen million inhabitants by the late twentieth century, São Paulo came to epitomize the paradox of industries, skyscrapers, and high-tech offices juxtaposed with favelas.

Nordestino—technically denoting someone from one of the nine states of Northeast Brazil—is a multivalent term that can imply low socioeconomic status and marginality (i.e., proximity to crime and violence). Because the Northeast is Brazil's most "African" region, every comment about it inevitably carries indexical connections to blackness. According to Barbara Weinstein (2015, 6), Brazil's southern and southeastern elites have always cast the Northeast as a hindrance to development and modernity, even though its resources and labor force quite literally constructed the modern nation. Regional identity, she argues, became a racialized category through recourse to innate or natural characteristics to explain the contrasting trajectories of Brazilian regions.

Whereas the Northeast has always been constructed as black in order to highlight the South's whiteness, the shifting political climate in recent years has added another layer of

complexity. Starting immediately after the 2014 election, which Rousseff narrowly won largely due to strong support in the Northeast, and continuing through the 2018 election campaign, a new form of anti-Northeastern prejudice emerged, one that collapsed regional identity and race with disdain for leftist politics. Bolsonaro supporters cast the Northeast as the red heart of the country, the natural home of an imagined radical black left opposed to their own emergent political identity shaped around conservative family values, vehement (but uneven) opposition to political corruption (inaccurately and disproportionately pinned on the PT), frustration over economic stagnation, devotion to hardline policing, and nostalgia for the military dictatorship. This polarization is, of course, not unique to Brazil, but part of a worldwide trend seen in the election of Recep Tayyip Erdogan (Turkey), Andrzej Duda (Poland), Viktor Orbán (Hungary), Donald Trump (United States), and others (Schwarcz 2019, 226–27). All these politicians embrace anti-intellectualism; anti-journalism; return to a patriarchal society, hierarchy, and order; a police state; and attacks on women, gays, transsexuals, and any other minorities they blame for the moral degeneration of their nations. In the Brazilian case, we argue this nostalgic return to “*valores da terra*” (nativism), family, traditions, et cetera, hinged on a foundation of antiblackness, expressed through vocal opposition to alleged entitlements such as affirmative action, connected symbolically to the Northeast and its imagined residents.

This new conservative political subjectivity first manifested in widespread instances of political protest. As political polarization grew in Brazil during the 2014 campaign leading to Rousseff’s reelection, two opposing groups emerged. The divide continued into the political crisis that culminated with her impeachment in 2016, Lula’s arrest before the 2018 election, and Bolsonaro’s election in October 2018. These two sides drew on various symbols, including two stereotypical foods, *mortadela* (bologna sandwich; figure 3) and *coxinha* (deep-fried shredded

chicken in dough; figure 4). These foods and their imagined consumers became icons for the Brazilian cultural and racial divide.

CUT e MTST farão ato na porta do fórum na hora do depoimento de Lula



Figure 3 (top): “Mortadelas” and Figure 4 (bottom): “Coxinhas”

Mortadela has always been derogatorily associated with poor, black, squatter, northeastern, uneducated, unintelligent, leftists who vote for the PT. Meanwhile, coxinha—traditionally a popular food across the race and class spectrum—has recently been reconstituted as a middle-class delicacy (along with *empadinhas*). Thus, during the political crisis, coxinhas

came to signify white, elite, educated, “smart,” right-leaning voters for the Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB) who imagined themselves as defending the nation from corruption and decline. Meanwhile, mortadela was associated with leftist PT voters. In 2014, politically conservative coxinhas voted for the PSDB (Amorim 2014). They later shifted to Bolsonaro’s far-right PSL party.

By the 2018 elections, the food-laden mortadela/coxinha identities had to some extent faded into the background. But these endpoints on the left-to-right political spectrum reveal important racial connotations and connections. The growing racial and political polarization took the form of opposition between Bolsonaro supporters, who cloaked themselves in the national colors of yellow and green (*verde* and *amarelo*), versus PT voters, who continued to adopt the party’s color, red (evoking communism). Drawing on regional stereotypes, PT voters were linked to blackness. As Roth-Gordon (2017) has pointed out, “white, hardworking, and prosperous South (or Southeast) is often contrasted with lazy, backward, and blacker Northeast” (see also Caldeira 2002; Weinstein 2015). Right-wing criticism of the left began to be expressed even more strongly through an idiom of anti-northeasternness. Given the Northeast-blackness connection, this progression must be recognized as linked to increasing antiblackness.

Regional and racial antagonism flourished as Bolsonarismo gained strength. With about 95 percent of the polls reporting in the first round of voting on October 27, a runoff election was called between Bolsonaro (PSL) and Haddad (PT). The first-round results showing strong support for the PT in the Northeast mapped political polarization even more strongly onto a geographical divide, with Bolsonaros, mainly from the Southeast, launching vehement attacks against the people in the Northeast on social media and in the press. Between the initial and runoff elections, social media posts included derogatory messages, curses, and calls for the

Northeastern states to separate from the rest of Brazil (*Extra* 2018). A red/green regional map of Brazil went viral on social media and became one of the most talked-about memes. In the map, Bolsonaro's smiling face was superimposed on the green Southeast while in the red Northeast a zombie, representing the Northeasterner's savage inferiority, posed as a threat (Souza 2018).

Policies against racial discrimination and racial exclusion have undeniably advanced everyday discourse of race and nation and produced material gains for Brazil's racial subalterns. Yet there have also been clear, consistent, and often violent, attempts to unmake the Brazilian racial justice project. One of the most foundational manifestations of antiblackness in Brazil is the long tradition of state-sponsored violence against Afro-descended Brazilians with near total impunity. Every day, dark-skinned youth across the country suffer extrajudicial execution by police. (Statistics demonstrate that in Brazil police both kill and are killed at among the highest rates in the world; Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública 2017.) Antiblackness underlies the development of a necropolitics of state-led violence in poor communities (Mbembe 2003), where residents can be killed without consequence precisely because they are constructed as disposable "no-bodies" (Alves 2018). This was reinforced in the March 2018 killing of Marielle Franco, which set off a new wave of violence against black activists. Franco, a black social activist and community leader who was elected to municipal office in the city of Rio de Janeiro, the second largest constituency in Brazil (after São Paulo), was killed by hitmen who fired thirteen bullets at her and her driver. Franco was from Maré, one of Brazil's best-known favelas. Her ascension to political office is directly attributable to the antiracist policies implemented under the PT. As a black, lesbian, single mother from a favela, *and* a college graduate and prominent politician, to some she represented the progress toward inclusion fought for and won during the PT years. As her murder suggests, however, to others, she represented a threat to the establishment. While

Franco clearly embodied a number of intersecting identities that threatened traditional white patriarchal power, it is important to underscore that Afro-Brazilians could perceive her murder and the state's failure to act in catching her assassins as evidence of a return to hardline necropolitics not only in favelas but also in the halls of government.

Franco's death sparked a wave of protests across Brazil and globally, as she was quickly transformed into a potent symbol of black resistance. While some voices from across the political spectrum expressed outrage and horror at her assassination, others simultaneously recast her as a racialized political enemy, reflecting the increasing political polarization. Following her death, supporters proposed renaming a road in her memory. They created a mock street sign bearing her name and glued it over the existing street sign (Junqueira 2018). But in an attempt to quell her impact as a symbol of resistance, state senate candidate Rodrigo Amorim (a member of Bolsonaro's political party) and Wilson Witzel, the soon-to-be governor-elect of the state of Rio, publicly destroyed the temporary Marielle Franco Street sign (*Agência Brasil* 2018; *O Estado de São Paulo* 2018). The clear message was that leaders like Marielle Franco, fighting for socioeconomic advancement for Brazilian blacks, were not worthy of recognition under their rule.

Given the widespread belief that Franco was killed by members of the *milícia* (off-duty police officers, firefighters, and soldiers who operate extralegal extortion rackets and whose violent crimes Franco was investigating as a lawmaker), the slow progress in the investigation sends a powerful message of tacit approval for state violence against blacks, a long-standing and tragic police practice in Brazil. Her case suggests that racial violence—even when it garners worldwide attention—will go unpunished. As Renata Nader, the head of Amnesty International in Brazil, emphasized, the premeditated murder of a human rights advocate is not about silencing

one individual; it is an attack on all humanity, an attempt to interrupt the struggle for rights.¹¹

Conclusion: Bolsonaro, Trump, and the End of Political Correctness

Much as Trump's election did in the United States, Bolsonaro's rise to power enabled more open expressions of antiblackness. Although racial prejudice has always existed in Brazil, social norms have dictated it not be overtly articulated. Now, however, the latent antiblackness that has always simmered just below the surface in Brazil, underpinning institutions and social relations, appears to be rapidly manifesting. Emboldened racists apparently feel they have an ally in Bolsonaro, creating the possibility for significant changes to race relations in Brazil moving forward.

Since Bolsonaro's victory, political pundits and scholars across the globe have sought to understand how a promising country, recently hailed as a strong democracy poised to take its place on the global stage, could have so quickly reverted to an uncivil pseudo-democracy with strong authoritarian overtones. What happened to the shining promise of Brazilian modernity encapsulated in its hosting of the World Cup and the Olympic Games? Many internal and external observers have answered this question by interpreting current developments in Brazil as part of a global ascendancy of the extreme right. This has largely been the perspective of the mainstream English-language news media, which after initially decrying Bolsonaro's extreme stances against women and members of the LGBTQ+ community, have reduced him to a kind of amped-up Trump; one notable article in the *Guardian* even called him the "Tropical Trump" (*Guardian* 2018).

In the lead-up to the election, associations between Bolsonaro and Trump ricocheted around Brazilian mainstream media, drawing the attention of political commentators and social

media users. Close to the election, the Brazilian mainstream media outlets published editorials on how Bolsonaro was faring internationally, often comparing him with Trump because of their shared expressions of misogyny, racism, and authoritarianism (*Revista Exame* 2018). Meanwhile Bolsonaro's challenger, Fernando Haddad, stated to columnist Monica Bergamo with regard to the "friendly" relationship between Trump and Bolsonaro: "Trump needs us to be neoliberal so that the US can reestablish its protagonism on the world stage, displacing China. That is crazy, since the US is critiquing neoliberalism while we are left with no option but to embrace it." (Bergamo 2018).¹² No doubt Bolsonaro wants to fashion himself after the US leader in an attempt to cultivate legitimacy. And so are his followers, as a political banner displayed on inauguration day suggests (figure 5).



Figure 5: "Bolsonaro 17"

Bolsonaro and Trump appear to be finding common ground on a number of policy issues as well. For example, on November 27, 2018, after talks with Jared Kushner, Congressman Eduardo Bolsonaro, the Brazilian president's son, donned a "Trump 2020" hat and affirmed his support for transferring Brazil's embassy to Jerusalem (*Times of Israel* 2018). Both leaders have

eschewed the anti-climate-change policies of their predecessors.¹³ There are media reports that the leaders will “exchange sons,” appointing their respective offspring as ambassadors to the other country.

Specific to race relations, the shared ideological positions and stylistic traits of the two leaders merit attention for what they might reveal about new and emergent forms of antiblackness in Brazil and beyond. Bolsonaro’s and his followers’ admiration for Trump draws on long-standing dynamics of the US-Brazil relationship (Burns 2019). As Erika Robb Larkins and Bryan Pitts (2019) note, the veneration of many middle- and upper-class Brazilians for the United States and Europe evolved from Brazil’s nineteenth-century racist aspirations for a “purer,” whiter, and more civilized nation. The expression *complexo de vira-lata* (mutt complex), refers to the inferiority complex that Brazil suffers when measuring itself against the “whiter,” more powerful countries in North America and Europe. As we have shown, many Bolsonaro supporters now voice their racist and classist sentiments far more shamelessly, “and they have found an affinity in Trump’s disdain for people of color, immigrants, and Muslims and his veneration of ‘Western Civilization’” (Larkins and Pitts 2019; see figure 6).



Figure 6: “Bolsonaro: Make Brazil Great Again”

Both Bolsonaro and Trump claim that they are not racists, but rather that they eschew political correctness. But their alleged style of “shooting from the hip” or “telling it like it is,” often on their preferred social media platform of Twitter, masks racism as honesty and paints objections to it as political correctness. Critiques of the social policies that have historically worked to level the playing field on the basis of fairness and equality are like dog whistles that energize the respective base of each politician.

From a Deleuzian perspective on events as generative, Brazil’s 2018 elections were certainly part of multiple shock waves of crises, fractures, and tensions in other locations. However, we caution against drawing broad equivalencies between the forms that extremism is taking in the United States or Europe versus Brazil. If an anthropological perspective can bring anything to the conversation at this moment, it is to offer a window into the ways global and local processes are inextricably intertwined; the ways in which events are both past and future. We have shown how the event of Bolsonaro’s election fits within larger and longer-standing

nodes of antiblackness in Brazil. Taking a slightly longer view of the event, we have traced in Deleuzian fashion how some of the discourses of antiblackness that Bolsonaros would wield as political weapons were circulating in embryonic form far earlier.

In conclusion, we argue for the critical importance of reconsidering new manifestations of racial resentments in terms of what they mean for the lives of black Brazilians now and in the future. In other words, the study of inequality and social justice initiatives, as well as the elite's deep-seated need to maintain their privilege and the status quo, demands a rethinking of how emerging structures and institutions will shape politics and people's lives in today's Brazil. Even though we believe the PT did not go far enough in addressing the brutal consequences of antiblackness in Brazil, their race-conscious policies did begin to transform Brazilian society in important ways—which is exactly why they were so threatening. The resulting, unprecedented levels of explicit antiblackness are important both for what they teach us about the backlash against progressive policies and for their terrifying implications for what is to come.

If the events of the recent past are at all indicative of what will unfold, we predict ongoing and persistent denial of racial inequality and concerted attempts to undermine all programs that counter structural and institutional racism. At worst, we fear widespread violence against black activists, academics, and anyone who demands that violence in Brazil be understood in racial terms. However, in recent years powerful forms of black activism have also emerged that have successfully challenged old structures of power through legal, political, and nonviolent direct action and achieved significant concrete and symbolic gains. Even if these gains are currently threatened, courageous voices will continue to fight for a more racially just Brazil.

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¹ Eduardo Bolsonaro (@BolsonaroSP), “Reunião hoje de manhã com Jared Kushner @jaredkushner que é um dos mais importantes conselheiros da Casa Branca e grande empresário - além de ser genro do Presidente Trump @realDonaldTrump ,” Twitter, November 27, 2018. <https://twitter.com/bolsonarosp/status/1067507960333692929>.

² In Brazil, both *preta/preto* and *negra/negro* mean “black” and can have negative connotations. We translated *preto* as *Negro* because “negro represents, in both a historical and cultural sense, the central signifier around which the panoply of negative notions of blackness coalesce” (Sheriff 2001, 48).

³ *Folha de S. Paulo* newspaper described a white law student who celebrated Bolsero’s victory by pledging to kill anyone in a red shirt (associated with PT supporters) and, particularly, “all those niggers.” Jaime Alves and João Vargas (2018) conclude: “In private discussions, public events, social media, and news broadcasts, this man’s perspective is not an anomaly, but rather a widely shared and defining sentiment in Brazil. It is not new, nor is it about to go away.”

⁴ In Brazil, low-income students come disproportionately from notoriously bad public schools while wealthier, predominantly white students attend better private schools. Thus, public school attendance is a way of mapping class.

⁵ The quotas included only students who completed all three years of high school in public schools.

⁶ Some Brazilians claimed “blackness” based on ancestry rather than phenotype to further their careers through the quota system.

⁷ “Ele é o sinal de que o Brasil está enveredando pelo perigoso caminho de tentar avaliar as pessoas não pelo conteúdo de seu caráter, mas pela cor de sua pele.”

⁸ See Ali Kamel’s book, *Não Somas Racistas: Uma Reação aos que Querem nos Transformar numa Nação Bicolor* (2006), which harshly criticizes the introduction of US-style affirmative action policies into Brazil’s higher education system and the state sectors.

⁹ The Bolsonaro administration recently reduced federal higher education funding as part of a plan to privatize the university system. Obviously, this will directly affect poor, mostly black, students.

¹⁰ Also see Makhoul (2009)

¹¹ Rede TVT (@redetvt), “Especial Marielle Franco: Cap.3 - Impunidade e negligência definem a investigação,” Twitter, December 28, 2016.

<https://twitter.com/redeTVT/status/1078790997235003392>.

¹² “Ele [Trump] precisa que nós sejamos neoliberais para retomar o protagonismo no mundo, e tirar a China. Está havendo, portanto, um quiproquó: os EUA negam o neoliberalismo enquanto não nos resta outra alternativa a não ser adotá-lo.”

¹³ It is unclear whether Trump’s overtures toward Bolsonaro are built on anything more than affection for a politician who appears to be crafting himself in the Trumpian image (Larkins and Pitts 2019).

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