

**The subject, the other, and black political identities among Afro-Brazilians**

Author 1 (Corresponding Author)

Antonio José Bacelar da Silva

Center for Latin American Studies, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ, USA

Address: Marshall Building Suite 280, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona 85721

E-mail: [ajbsilva@email.arizona.edu](mailto:ajbsilva@email.arizona.edu)

Tel: 520-626-3317

Fax: 520-626-7248

Author 2

Alba Riva Brito de Almeida

Colegiado de Psicologia, Departamento de Educação, Universidade Estadual da Bahia, Salvador,

Bahia, Brazil

Keywords: Afro-Brazilians, racism, antiracism, blackness, racial consciousness, identity

## **Abstract**

*This study combines anthropology and psychoanalysis to explore the formation of black identities in Afro-Brazilians' antiracist struggles. Using data from long-term ethnographic fieldwork among black activists in Salvador and current observations of social media, we explore how various antiracist struggles have become discursive microsystems that organize individual identities into collective processes. Beyond analyzing Afro-Brazilian activism as a collective force, it is important to account for the differences between individual black subjects. Since it is through the other that the subject continually experiences itself, we listen to the individual that is embedded in the social field to demonstrate that the struggle between sameness and difference is at the heart of antiracist activism among Afro-Brazilians. As Afro-Brazilians embrace antiracist activism, their black political identities become dialogized, or defined by their position in relation to the other and recognition of how others perceive them in a country where skin color, not ancestry, determines racial difference.*

Over the past three decades, the black consciousness movement has gained adherents among Afro-Brazilians in Brazil's blackest city: Salvador, Bahia.<sup>1</sup> In 2018, 36.5% of the nearly three million residents self-identified as black, and 82.1% as either black or brown (IBGE 2018). A case study in the black struggle for equality, Salvador has recently witnessed a steep rise in black political subjectivation. Based on data from long-term ethnographic fieldwork with black activists in Salvador and current observations of social media, we explore the link between discourse about blackness and racial justice in Afro-Brazilians' intersubjective experiences of

antiracist struggles in Salvador. Drawing on anthropology and psychoanalysis, we argue that the struggle between sameness and difference is at the heart of their antiracist activism.

There is no such thing as a psychoanalysis of race. However, psychoanalysts have examined whether psychoanalysis may offer insights into the study of racial subjectivities and incorporation, reinforcing the paradox of the Symbolic as essential to the inscription of the black subject in the social Other.<sup>2</sup> In *Desiring Whiteness: A Lacanian Analysis of Race* (2000), Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks argues that race ultimately establishes a differential system determined by whiteness. Specifically, when placed in opposition to blackness, whiteness has the power to organize human difference according to a racial hierarchy. Brazilian psychoanalyst Neusa Santos Souza analyzed white superiority in *Tornar-se Negro*, stating that the Ego-Ideal is the product of normative-structuring experiences: The Ego-Ideal “is formed by images and words, representations and feelings that circulate incessantly between the child and the adult, between the subject and the culture. The model of Ego-Ideal offered to the black person . . . the model of normative-structuring identification with which he is confronted, is a fetishization of whiteness” (Santos 1983, 4; authors’ translation). Influenced by the fetishization of whiteness, the black subject is forced to deny anything that contradicts the myth of the myth of white superiority. Wilderson (2020, 103) refers to this dynamic as “social death.” For Wilderson, to destroy social constructs such as race, gender, and class one must first “assume one’s position (‘assume, not celebrate or disavow’)” and resist (combat) it.

In Bahia over the last three decades, the black movement has increasingly confronted the fetishization of whiteness, as sustained in a supposedly edifying Ego-Ideal. Instead they seek to position African and black culture as preeminent among Afro-Brazilians. Black resistance in Bahia has often taken the form of Afrocentric acts, symbols, ideals, and discourses aimed at

rescuing black identities and performativity in order to fight exclusion and inscribe these subjects in the social Other, as a third instance that supports the delimitation of radical alterity between subjects and permits the social alliance among black people. The recent explosion of affirmative movements marks a turning point in which blacks are beginning to insert themselves in society through a plurality of Afrocentric expressions anchored in their subjective point of view. Although the search for alternative imaginaries and possibilities is nothing new among black Brazilians, it has recently progressed rapidly and has reached an unprecedented level. The regimentation of discourses about modes of collective organization around urgent subjective needs characterizes the inscriptions of blacks in the Brazilian *polis* today.

We explore the formation of a black identity among Afro-Brazilian activists in Salvador, with an eye to how various antiracist struggles have become discursive microsystems that organize individual identities into collective processes. Beyond analyzing Afro-Brazilian activism as a collective force, it is important to account for the differences between individual black subjects. We do so by listening to the individual that is embedded in the social field, since it is through the other that the subject continues to experiencing itself. We argue that, as Afro-Brazilians embrace antiracist activism, their black political identities become dialogized, or defined and constructed in relation to and recognition of how others perceive them in a country where skin color, not ancestry, determines racial difference.

### **Psychoanalysis and anthropology: Shared structures of listening to the subject**

Transdisciplinary encounters are essential for integrating specialized knowledge among scholars in order to generate a broad view of the world which respects the polysemy and polyphony that structure experiences in different fields. Sensitive and differential listening allows us to capture

the subtle elements that permeate ever-changing social interactions. Homologous substantive areas of concern and questions motivate both anthropology and psychoanalysis, largely because convergent orientations exist in societies afflicted by deep cultural malaise. This article blends an anthropologist's ethnographic approach to situations of racial exclusion (or "social death") and black resistance with a psychoanalyst's clinical approach to black subjects' narratives about their suffering. As Mattei (2011) notes, psychoanalytic insights are increasingly being applied to understand social ills, which demands that psychoanalysts work from an ethical position as they intervene in society, guided by practices and knowledge that configure a position relative to the Other and accounting for each individual's subjective exigencies. Psychoanalysts thus must address the subjectivity of our time, in this case black resistance to antiblack racism.

In Brazil, anthropologists and psychoanalysts must usually act in spaces where public policies, or the absence thereof, call for attention and social interventions. Both are thus attentive to social and individual demands, as well as the preservation of minority rights. They often promote the identification and recognition of group identities that are subjected to all forms of structural violence. They also work to construct knowledge about power struggles that result in the domination of one identity over another, whether based on race, sex, gender, class, or other factors. In psychoanalysis, the subject is contextualized as a system that is open to intersubjectivity, meaning psychological relations between people, not only in past recollections, but also in present manifestations. Therefore, webs of social interactions and their constitutive effects on individual subjectivities must be examined. Linking the concept of the subject to language (Benveniste 1971) invites anthropologists to listen intently to the particularities of "half-saids," small print, slips and blanks in discourse, incomprehensions/misapprehensions, and

interruptions of sense that can mediate the web of relations among individuals engaged in collective and singular acts of speech.

The basic idea of psychoanalytic theory and practice is that the word materializes unconscious motivations. Subjective discursive realities are not governed or forged entirely in the consciousness. Intolerance for social differences is driven by a variety of unconscious factors and therefore can occur without the subject realizing or being aware of it. Understanding the power of words to illuminate meanings enables a wide range of possible ways to listen to racism and the way each individual perceives and reacts emotionally to it. Everything that an individual initially perceives as strange and intractable in themselves can be seen as a challenge to recognize, interpret, or resist its unconscious determinants. The crucial role of listening to someone's words in order to understand the world that person lives in was established by Freud and confirmed by post-Freudian psychoanalysts ever since the theoretical-conceptual-methodological framework of psychoanalysis was first constructed. Since 1889, Freud's clinical data have informed us about how the unconscious determines our behaviors, actions, and thoughts. The unconscious is an axiom, a principle, a hypothesis founded on the profound divergence between thought and being. It shows itself fleetingly and in a way that is incompatible with conscious rationalities or intentions. Here, the unconscious is understood not as preexistent, but as a potential product of the signifiers that govern our existence.

Psychoanalysts and anthropologists listen to the language of each subject and the effects of that language. They are interested in the idiosyncrasies of discourses about race taking place in therapeutic settings or social movements, at both collective and individual levels. With regard to this concept of listening, the anthropologist Xochitl Marsilli-Vargas (2014, 1) emphasized that "sound reception is not neutral; it always involves a particular type of ideological and practice

intervention. The listener, by focusing through a particular frame, creates a context, or more precisely a contextual configuration of reception that provides a unique interpretative lens.” In this sense, listening engages a resignification of the past and the present of the subject and the object, articulated in social realities.

### **Becoming black political subjects**

The discursive substrates of language convey the current subjectivity. Discourses with racist overtones prevail over individuals’ appropriation and expression of their place in the world. Colonialism inaugurated conditions and structural forces that had disastrous effects on black Africans, creating the foundation for racism, dehumanization of black people, and structural violence. The result can be seen today in the profound correlation of whiteness with economic and political privilege in Bahia, despite the prevalence of black culture there. The insistence of white Bahians on reclaiming their race-based privileges has recently reached extremes, as evidenced in a photograph that former *Vogue Brazil* style editor Donata Meirelles posted on Instagram during her birthday celebration in Salvador de Bahia (“Brazilian Vogue’s” 2019). Meirelles is mimetically dressed as a female slaveowner surrounded by her enslaved maids. Protesters described the scene as a “slave party” (Guy 2019), pointing out what they saw as evidence of the colonialism and structural racism present in the collective imagination of Brazilian whites and camouflaged by a supposed romanticism of colonial times.

As this incident makes clear, the facts of racism continue to be enacted in scenarios of the everyday psychopathology of social relations in Bahia and beyond. In this context, vehement protests against such manifestations of racism have been aimed at strengthening antiracist stances. In this context of expressing collective resistance against coercive forces, subjugation,

inequity, and lack of opportunities for many black subjects, Bahian blacks have voiced multiple counter narratives in community organizations, collective protests, and participation in the coordinated **governance** of social and political affairs (e.g., Caldwell 2007; Ickes 2013; Perry 2013; Mitchell-Walthour 2018; Paschel 2016). As Paschel (2016) notes, blacks throughout Brazil have begun to express their grievances and demands for redress. Language plays an important role in the different levels and forms of their outcries against black suffering. Language captures the nuances of subjective experiences as apprehended by collective voices. Even though the social world provides the fabric from which a subject is constructed, historical processes do not affect individuals uniformly. To quote Rodrigues (2014, 250), “the social world is symbolic and creates the individual subject, providing a matrix without which the formation of the subject would be impossible.”

The notion that an individual consciousness is imbued with the nuances of what people say and do, which turns it into collective consciousness, leads us to consider how we may recognize the transformation of individual identity construction into political awareness. The construction of political subjectivities is delimited by the ego-being-in-the-world through experiences with the other, forming the pragmatic parameters of a certain hermeneutic of the subject as a being of dialogic conscience forged in interactions with others. The Other provides the ethical and aesthetic contours of the subject’s existence in a variety of socio-cultural contexts. The individual is also collective. Linguistic anthropologists foreground Bakhtin's notion of dialogic consciousness, which is made whole by some external consciousness. The self does not exist until it is perceived by another through dialogue. Simply put, we see ourselves through the eyes of the other (Bakhtin 1990, 38). For Bakhtin, consciousness becomes embodied as a “voice” that is expressed through words and utterances. As we note later, thinking about



racial consciousness in terms of voice and dialogism helps us understand antiracist activists' different ways of relating to blackness.

Brazil has historically prided itself on the supposed lack of racial divisions between Brazilians, and many believe that Afro-Brazilians should not embrace a black group identity because almost all of them are a racial mixture of European, indigenous, and African peoples (Sheriff 2001). Recently, however, the Brazilian black movement has successfully amplified race consciousness among increasing numbers of Afro-Brazilians. In our research and clinical experience, we became very interested in the possibilities of Afro-Brazilians challenging racial discrimination and exclusion through antiracism. Author 2, a practicing psychoanalyst and professor of psychoanalysis at Bahia State University in Salvador, has witnessed an increased demand for therapy among members of the black community. In addition, they are likely to seek a black therapist knowledgeable about the entanglements of blackness and suffering, a therapist who understands the many ways antiblackness haunts black subjectivity on a daily basis. Author 2 has also noted a growing number of workshops throughout Salvador designed to provide a forum for discussing the effects of racism on the “black psychology”; to raise awareness within the black community of how issues of race and racism affect their mental health; and to promote the importance of seeking help from black therapists knowledgeable about the complexities and specificities of black suffering. As one example, a workshop entitled *Psicologia Preta: Como curar a negritude dos efeitos do racismo?* (Black Psychology: How to Cure Blackness of the Effects of Racism?) was announced on Soteropreta, a website focused on Afro-Brazilian culture in Salvador (Menezes 2018). Workshop moderator Luca Veiga examined the impact of racism on the mental health and well-being of the black community. Participants discussed the effects of colonization on the production of knowledge and of subjectivity. Drawing on scholarship by

black mental health experts such as Frantz Fanon and Wade Nobles, they discussed ways to treat the effects of racism on the subjectivity of black people. They explored concepts such as decolonization, antiblackness, and racial violence, in order to identify approaches to promoting mental health and the antiracist struggle in black communities. This framework, they argued, was useful for designing race-associated social, educational, and clinical interventions. The ultimate goal of the workshop, as posted in a web announcement, was to foster a clinical understanding of blackness that could assist the black community in “breaking free from the chains that bind them to perpetual servitude.” Some important questions emerge as mental health therapists respond to black clients’ demand for services grounded in specifications of race/color. Is there a risk of “imposture,” “non-comprehension,” or “lack of empathy” when white therapists listen to and try to understand the nuances of how racial identity factors into mental health? How essential are black therapists for helping members of the black community to find a path toward wellness? These are exciting questions for further investigation, but they are beyond the scope of this article.

### **The psychic body and social body**

O grande crime do racismo é que anula, em nome da raça, o indivíduo.

(The greatest crime of racism is that it annuls, in the name of race, the individual).

–Mia Couto

Problems stemming from being black in a racist society are one point of epistemological convergence between psychoanalysis and anthropology. The phenomenon of racism is marked by a heterogeneity of past and present social ties, as well as a shared malaise that manifests itself through compulsive repetition. In an ontological sense, being black has a certain integral,

uniform, and delimited existence in the social world, but in comprehending this singularity, each black subject is infused with a plurality of other consciousnesses.

To analyze the conscious-unconscious dialectic inscribed in a patient's symptoms, Freud examined the individual's surroundings, searching for the cause of their suffering, which in his theory sprang from a deep mismatch or rift between the individual's recognized or unrecognized motivations and their relations with the external world. At this point, recall the link between social structure and psychic structure in psychoanalysis, that is, the psychic body, or individual psychological apprehension of one's own body. Unconscious subjective content always emerges from the gaps in the state of consciousness, which is the place of cartesian certainty of existence: "I think, therefore I am," as Descartes ([1637] 2015) concluded. Gaps in the collectively organized existence are found in the impossibility of apprehending conscious "being" in the universality of "thinking." Jacques Lacan, a distinguished psychoanalyst and reader of Freud, subverts the cartesian aphorism, proposing instead "I think where I am not, so I am where I do not think" (Lacan 1966, 521); that is, introducing content that is part of the order of the unconscious into the cogito (thinking or awareness) reveals a separation between being and thinking, which seemingly occur in different places. Unconscious thinking determines the subject, and the reality of human identity is but a myriad of identifications with objects (as opposed to the subject itself) lost to history. The presentation of an identity as the effect of a reflexive consciousness allows us to interact with other contemporaneous subjects (consciousnesses), erecting a barrier to the social Other of racism.

On the other hand, the subject faces unconscious knowledge about the paradox of identity, both their own and other people's. For instance, under Brazilian affirmative action policies, a black person applying for entrance to a public university or civil service employment

is asked to self-identify their skin color on the application and later must appear before a race committee who confirms, based on phenotype alone, that the applicant is indeed black (Author 1 2019). The racial identity verification process in Brazil refigures the supposition of needing to know what one wants or desires, of weaving the knowledge of one's own suffering to configure an identity, and of being inscribed in a racial category. Culturally mediated social relationships are the medium through which we experience our own body. Our experience of our body is radically influenced by the linguistic fabric of memories and historical narratives that precede our birth. As Mikhail Bakhtin argues, human consciousness is never grounded in a single individuality (unitary wholeness), but instead is a social or dialogic construction. One's tendency to assimilate others' discourses is part of one's "ideological becoming position for itself within it" (Bakhtin 1981, 295–96). Author 1 has argued the production of consciousness hinges on the options available in the public space within which the voices circulate. For Bakhtin (1981, 342), these voices compete to determine one's relationship with the world. A widespread, deep cultural malaise stemming from a long history of antiblack racism marks the existence of each subject, not only as an individual being, but also as a dialogic effect of social exchanges. With the strengthening of the Brazilian black movement over the past three decades, black suffering has gained some social recognition and legitimacy through antiracist laws and policies. Of course, it is impossible to name all forms and all intensities of malaise, rooted in the ballast of racial prejudice and intolerance that give stability and substance to it; yet malaise continues insisting that it exists in the form of unrecognized demands.

### **The subject, the other, and identity formation**

In “Formulations on Psychological Causality,” Jacques Lacan (1966, 113) writes, "It is in the other that the subject identifies himself and is even experienced at first." For Lacan, the Self is founded on a specular relation; that is, one’s identification with one’s own image in the mirror. The mirror is best understood as the consciousness of the other. The tension between illusion and misunderstanding permeates this process of identification. Despite an individual’s repeated attempts to find parallelism, one-to-one correspondence, or complementarity between how they see themselves and how others see them, they can do so only incompletely through images that can be perceived, captured, or negotiated. The field of the imaginary, which corresponds to specular relations, is thus constituted by images. The imaginary is the topological space (set of signifying points) where the exchanges of recognition, consistency, and illusory unity experienced by the Self are rooted, since the body (the Self’s home) does not have an image of its own from birth. That image is built in relationship with the other. In this sense, the function of the specular exchange is to reflect discrete elements of the subject in unified images. These unified images end up constituting the Self.<sup>3</sup>

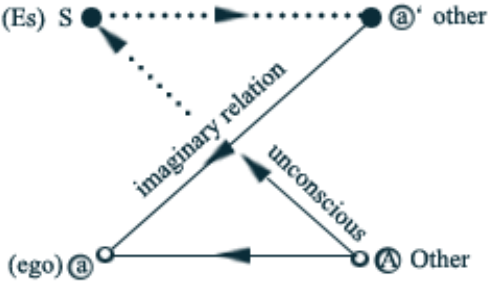


Figure 1: The L-Scheme (Lacan, *Écrits*, 1966)

The Imaginary axis intersects with the Symbolic axis, characterized by the relations of the Subject with the Other (A). Note here that the lower-case “other” refers to imaginary others (e.g., people I interact with and who see me in a certain way), whereas the capitalized “Other,” or

“big Other,” refers to the collective symbolic order or discourse structures that shape inter-subjective interactions (e.g., a particular racial ideology). The vectors (arrows) on the graph represent the constitution of the Subject by the Other and of the Self by likeness (image of the other). The Other of language is where the subject finds racial meanings (black, white, mixed-race, etc.); it is inherent to all speaking beings. The Other is where each subject lives and is unavoidably alienated in the overdetermination of the fiction of its trans-historical inheritance, wrapped in Symbolic coding (e.g., racial categorizations). Sometimes we verify that there is a kind of Symbolic efficacy in the construction of the noxious effects of colonization. This efficacy is consistent with the way in which a body is delineated with shades of ostracism, social exclusion, tensions, and fantasies. In this case, the image of the body that is translated in the Imaginary, the domain of the Other, etches obligatory traces of the image that the subject must give to their body (e.g., When I look at you I see the black race not the individual). In the case of racism, the image of the body takes on the value of a depreciated object. Fanon (2008, 84) sheds important light on the irresolvable contradictions of the human condition when he states, “as I realize that black is the symbol of sin, I begin to hate it. But I notice that I am black. . . . Either I ask others not to pay attention to my color, or rather, I want them to notice it. I then try to value what is bad—since I have unthinkingly admitted that black is the color of Evil.”

Singularity plays a role in setting up the interplay between the particular (specific modes of subjectivation) and the universal (symbolic order as an open system). The topological structure, which features the unconscious, always maintains an in-definition and the individual idiosyncrasies; that is, it can never be fully actualized. The unconscious is the part of the psyche that one is not fully aware of, but which influences one’s actions and feelings. The fact that the

Symbolic (e.g., racial ideologies) and its signifiers are ever-changing according to one's point of view results in malaise and struggles for redress.

### **Black consciousness in Salvador**

One of the trajectories of black struggles for redress in Salvador, and Bahia more broadly, has been the recovery of an African ancestry as a key component of a black identity. Afro-Brazilian history and culture reverberate throughout virtually all of Bahia, Brazil's blackest state. As Covin (1996, 44, 53) states, "Bahia has specific attributes, widely noted, related to African influences in the state. . . . Given its significance, it made little sense to stay, organizationally, outside the dominant Afro-Brazilian cultural forces in Bahia." Ancestry as an argument of affirmation constitutes a thriving and recurrent theme in the academic space of Bahia's public universities, where student political organizations invoke recognition and social inscription of language in order to heighten the social visibility of their struggle for redress.

Public universities in Bahia now have a considerable number of black students who gained access to higher education through affirmative action in the form of racial quota systems. Black student groups on university campuses have increasingly organized politically to promote public debates about historical losses due to racism, including the dominance of white scholarship. Increasingly focused on antiracism, students are demanding, for example, the expansion of Afrocentric knowledge in the curriculum. Many have embraced social media to spread the word beyond their campus. These students' search for African ancestry is related to the signs of malaise provoked by the manifestations of racism directed against the black population in Salvador. It is worth noting that this search is marked by two types of symptomatic events: the non-recognition or degradation of blacks in Brazilian society and the non-recognition

of a worthy identity formalized in respect for African origin. The search for recognition is based on both the recovery of African ancestry and the myth of origins. It is also based on the notion of an ontology of African identity in which black Brazilians engage with the theme of ancestry in order to construct culture as resistance. For these voices, which Brazilian society refuses to treat as full citizens, the closest thing they have to cultural pride is a connection to Africa. Agreeing with Covin (1996), we argue that the politics of culture is a way of transforming the thinking processes of black people who historically have been co-opted by the conditions of expropriation of their place, their cultural codes, their rights, their humanity. Culture politics becomes the canvas where each subject inscribes their own possibilities of organization. Culture also mobilizes the inscription of subjects into the social Other through the exhibition of atavistic symbols, the evocation of the archaic, and the use of dialects and ethnic language. Movements that affirm a collective identity are spread across several segments of the black movement in Bahia. These are clear attempts to converge all voices in one direction, homogenizing diverse understandings of blackness to institute a sort of unified form of resistance.

The re-reconceptualization of blackness is based on opposition to the reifying and essentialist ontologism that has objectified blackness since its origin in colonial times. The recentering of a humanist ontology in the debate on blackness seeks an integrative solution, as a way to redress failures of the modes of representation and subjectivation. Valdina de Oliveira Pinto (known as Makota Valdina), a spokesperson for religions of African origin and one of the leaders of Bahia's black movement against religious intolerance, famously said, "Não sou descendente de escravos. Eu descendo de seres humanos que foram escravizados" (I am not a descendent of slaves. I descend from human beings who were enslaved). After being initiated into the Afro-Brazilian religion of Candomblé, she changed her name to Makota Zimewaanga,



adding an African surname. Adopting African names became widespread among black activists throughout Bahia. We suggest that the processes of ascension of a critical consciousness open the way for each black person to re-identify themselves, based on narratives about the history of the black diaspora in Brazil.

In the previous examples, the unifying parameters of identity discourse would guarantee the recognition of the black Self and the other as equals in pain and resistance, as an inscription that seems to be sustainable and which can be represented by the equation  $A = A$ .<sup>4</sup> In the passionate reconstruction of African ancestry, the collective black identity ensures the relation of similarities and correspondences between one another. As a means of subjectivation, this identity deconstructs the trope of subjection to the tragic destiny of colonization. The archaeology of affirmation and uniformity become the basis for a struggle to overcome the renunciation and fragmentation of colonization. Carlos, an undergraduate at Bahia State University and a member of a group of black student activists on campus, posted the following comment on his Facebook timeline:

Black people suffer all the time even for forming an Afro group! God, what is the world coming to?

[In reference to the commission of crimes by the son of a white deputy] The issue has never been the age of this creature, but the color of his skin and his social position.

Would the same apply to a black man, aged 34 and from the outskirts of the city?

These examples are interesting because the words collectivize identifications based on the process of dehumanization to which all blacks were subjected. Suffering is portrayed as a shared and collective experience. As Brazilian psychoanalyst Christian Dunker (2015, 76) points out, “acts of recognition or ignorance transform the actual experience of suffering. . . . When

malaise receives a name and when I narratively articulate a form of suffering, I immediately become part of an invisible community.” The traumatic effects of colonization are felt collectively among black communities in Salvador and elsewhere. Pain, melancholy, and apathy are inscribed in the core vocabulary of black suffering. Speaking of collective traumatic experience is not without its problems, however, since one of the paradoxes of collectivity is the inevitable presence of forms of suffering that are defined by the search for structuring differences, even among peers. Thus, real understanding of collective trauma cannot happen without examining the traumatic psychological effects on individual subjects.

### **Collective and individual identities**

The paradox of identities lies in the fact that  $A \neq A$  and that nowhere is it possible to inscribe a universal sign that would erase the contingencies of differences between beings. According to both Bakhtin and Lacan, consciousness does not close in on itself. Rather than a delimited entity, it is porous, part of a complex system of relations where significations can be engendered regardless of the intention of the individual. Bakhtin emphasizes that the existence of the self depends on its being perceived by another, ultimately through dialogue. Part of one’s “ideological becoming” is a process of assimilating others’ discourses, which compete to determine one’s relationship with the world (Bakhtin 1981, 342). Consciousness can be thought of as “voices” expressed through language (e.g., words and utterances). In his work, Author 1 has used Bakhtin’s notion of a dialogic self to develop a close analysis of voice in Afro-Brazilians’ stories about race. He showed how black consciousness can be viewed as a relation of involvement (or an argument) between selves (or voices). Drawing on Bakhtin and Lacan, we next explore the nexus among race, voice, and consciousness in participants’ accounts of their

personal involvement in the black movement to show how they construct becoming *negro*.<sup>5</sup> We show that black consciousness is found within the domain of language, embodied as “voice.” More specifically, we demonstrate how the invocation of competing notions of race and blackness through the process of voicing is a key part of black activists’ construction of black consciousness. Recall that the subject is the result of social exchanges. It is formed in the imaginary image of the self then emerges in relation to the Other, infused with a multiplicity of viewpoints that are expressed linguistically. The perspective of consciousness as something given, as certain, does not hold. The existence of the conscious subject is predicted on the subject’s relation to the Other.

Author 1 has been interested in the significant shift in racial ideologies taking place in Salvador since the transition out of the dictatorship in the mid-1970s and early 1980s. His research has explored the ways in which black identity politics has been embraced in a range of local struggles, from collective land rights to affirmative action programs at prestigious public universities. More specifically, he has focused on how a black racial identity is socially constructed among Afro-Brazilians who have been waging increasingly visible struggles for redress. The following examples come from Afro-Brazilians engaged in those struggles (Author 1, Forthcoming). Their consciousness is “in between” but can be captured by an “I” voice and a singular interpretation. Racial identity acquires its greatest importance in the processes of subjectivation; that is, the naming of the “thing” that causes suffering. We begin with Pretinha, a college student at the time of the interview. She used reported discourse to recontextualize the ways in which the words of others had mediated her relationship with blackness since early childhood. Pretinha’s narrative explicitly articulated what we call, in Bakhtinian terms, “a dialogic understanding of being black” through a specific story/person/utterance that she found

memorable. In doing so, Pretinha staged a complex combination of voices to recount ways in which the words of others mediated her own relationship with blackness. Pretinha's polyphonic speech provided a central forum for her to engage with Brazil's public discourses of race, while simultaneously highlighting how these discourses influenced people's understanding of blackness. Pretinha marked *preta* (black) on the census form, and said she always thought of herself as *preta*. She had recently graduated from the Zumbi Cultural Institute. Zumbi was one of many NGOs in Brazil offering a combination of college preparatory classes and black consciousness-raising education. At the time of the interview, she worked as a community organizer along with other former students from Zumbi.

Pretinha: I grew up hearing that I'm negona (slang for a black woman), that as a black woman from the northeast, as people say, "You have to study if you don't want to clean white people's toilets, if you don't want to be used like a disposable cup." There is too much of that in the issue of racial identity.

Author 1: Who did you hear this from?

Pretinha: From my father, at home, my parents telling me that I was born to be a doctor and such, and that black women, for us everything is more difficult, for us to be careful who we will get to know, because a lot of men, mainly the non-black ones, use black women like disposable cups, a sex object, stuff like that. And the issue of self-esteem, too, there is plenty of that in elementary school, you know. When I was in elementary school, I often heard people sing "black girl from the boonies, you take a shower, you don't wash your vagina." It made me sad that my own classmates excluded me in a way because I was black, then at home I always heard, "You're a beautiful black girl." "Your hair is beautiful," and in elementary school, I did not see that.

Pretinha's narrative reproduced different voices that emerged and interacted in a contentious forum with public discourses of race. Linguistically marking the distinct participation of those voices in her speech, Pretinha used citation, exaggeration, parody, and other strategies to animate or report the multitude of voices that fed into her concept of blackness. Before she animated her parents' warnings regarding her education and relationships with men, she expressed annoyance at peoples' images of blacks by using the progressive aspect "ouvindo" (hearing) to say "eu cresci ouvindo isso" (I grew up hearing that) and "vulgarmente" (in vulgar terms) to characterize people's readings of blacks. Pretinha highlighted the various ways in which her parents' authoritative voices informed her relationship with blackness (e.g., "você tem que estudar para não lavar privada do branco" [you have to study if you don't want to wash white people's toilets]). She then proceeded to recount the relentless racist bullying from her classmates who sang "nega preta do bozó, toma banho, não lava o pó" (black girl from the boonies, you take a shower, you don't wash your vagina), and how her parents would offer verbal reassurance to help her cope: "você é uma negona bonita," and "seu cabelo é bonito" (you're a beautiful black girl; your hair is beautiful).

What is crucial to recognize here is that Pretinha brought various voices together and, acting on what she had come to know about race and racism, tried to dominate them with her reflexive voice—the voice of the narrator sometimes separated by only a hair's breadth from the voice of the others. Throughout her narratives, Pretinha claimed a position firmly grounded in her ability to critically reflect on different ways of constructing blackness; for example, "vulgarmente" (in vulgar terms), "tem muito disso" (there is too much of that), and "ficava triste" (it made me sad). Pretinha and other Afro-Brazilians I interviewed brought these voices together in their narratives to fulfill a common purpose; namely, to interrogate racist frameworks and their manifestations,

as well as how they are maintained and reproduced in everyday speech. They appropriate the cultural codes that carry traces of the first identifications inscribed in their subject—the possible organizations, emblems and beliefs, and references—all of which structure their reality. This is also clear in the following quotation from Ricardo, a light-skinned seventeen-year-old male who was a senior in high school. He attended regular school in the morning and Zumbi in the afternoon. At one point in the interview, he commented on the racial category language used in the Brazilian census. He said that if he had the option, he would mark neither *preto* (black) nor *pardo* (brown) but *negro* (a signifier of black consciousness) as his racial identity:

Let me put it this way: I don't consider myself black because people relate [the word] *preto* to the color of one's skin, and when they see me like [pointing to his arm] they don't see my skin color as black. They always see me as yellow, brown, dirt color, but not as black. . . . I'm a negro, but people think that only those who have dark skin are negros. No, to be—as Steve Biko said, “to be negro is not a matter of pigmentation but a result of a mental attitude.”

At the beginning of each interview, Author 1 asked participants how they would identify themselves according to the five official census categories: *preto* (black), *pardo* (brown), *branco* (white), *amarelo* (yellow), or *indígena* (indigenous). The large majority viewed themselves as *preto* while a small number described themselves as *moreno* (brown), which is not a census category. When prompted to choose a census category, they would respond "pardo," even though they objected to the use of that word as a race/color category. In fact, the overwhelming majority of Brazilians use *moreno* to refer to themselves and others. Ricardo's decision to use *preto* as his racial identity reflects his racial position in Brazil. Afro-Brazilians who are not dark enough to be perceived as black by other Brazilians typically do not self-identify as *preto*, but rather as *negro*.

Ricardo explained his choice by repeating a famous saying of Steve Biko that has become very popular in Brazilian black movement circles.

Thus, among the components of Ricardo's understanding about who he is, the color of the skin is not decisive for his antiracist stance. Beyond his nonrecognition of stigma associated with being symbolized as black (preto), he has political awareness of antiblack racism. Several comments in his statement attest to the fact that self-identifying as black is not one of the basic elements of the structure and dynamics of the antiracist psyche. Self-consciousness of a particular skin color is the part that we have direct access to because it mediates relations. I cannot base my antiracist consciousness solely on the color of my skin, because the speech of a subject and its subjectivation are also crossed by another logic that underlies its being in the world. This is the essence of  $A \neq A$ . In this sense, the subjectivation process locates each subject in its individual and unique experience with the Other. That is, in positing oneself as the "I" of discourse, the individual may transcend the collective experiences based on a sense of "we," a shared identity, and see oneself as an individual whose experiences might overlap with others in certain ways, but whose self-consciousness is critical in the process of becoming an antiracist. For antiracists like Ricardo, the understanding of collective racial consciousness is tied, above all, to the struggle for the realization of social justice. "Your cause is my cause," Ricardo implies. Racial consciousness encompasses the cause of the other. These examples seem to reinforce the idea that we are captured by innumerable possible identifications, all of which contribute to determining who the "I" of discourse can be. The political identities of Afro-Brazilians are constructed and reconstructed in a similar manner, guided by their relationship to others' perceptions of them, which are in turn deeply bound up with both racial mixture and

colorism. Most Afro-Brazilians who engage in antiracism are aware of Brazil's colorism and focus instead on fighting widespread antiblack racism.

### **Concluding remarks**

The  $A \neq A$  configuration originates in the most remote experiences that humans go through in their process of subjectivation, and it is rewritten throughout life. In terms of the logic of recognition, the voice that returns in the images of the representations of ancestry loses its prominence in face of the diversity of voices that multiply in the social body, actualized by the new insertions of Afro-Bahians and their antiracist stances across the color spectrum. The situation of  $A = A$  unravels into  $A \neq A$  in a movement of conjunction and disjunction, presenting differences that ultimately should be the target of listening for both anthropologists and psychoanalysts. Listening to these voices in the contexts of both clinical and ethnographic work is justified given the need to face the multiple nuances of black suffering. According to the L-scheme, the presence of colonial mentality and the impossibility of racial conciliation (in the sense of overcoming differences) did not influence individual Afro-Brazilians' subjective experiences of antiblack racism uniformly. This is due to differences in individuals' subjective experiences of, on the one hand, the residual exploitations of a colonial past and, on the other, the interactions with the eyes of the other within the particularities of Brazilian race relations. It is impossible for all Afro-Brazilians to agree on a common experience of suffering. Ricardo's words relate to the various meanings associated with skin color in Brazil, which push the black subject to a non-place in the system of white privilege and influence individual involvement in antiracist activism.



In this article, we have acknowledged that the attainment of race consciousness is predicated on significant formations that do not cease to produce meanings for the subject. Considering both individual processes of subjectivation and collective struggles for redress enables scholars to gain some knowledge about the processes of submission to power struggles that allow one identity to dominate another. Psychoanalysts, with their ethical commitment, form a *semblant* (like or resemblance) toward the construction of new loci in their practices and ensure a place for the subject of the unconscious, extracted from the scene of imaginary ideals that sustain great causes and institutionalized power. In their commitment to understand and solve human problems through research and practice, anthropologists constantly seek transdisciplinary collaborations, without which gaining knowledge about the complexities and particularities of the many ways of being human would be unattainable. In this article, we recognized two imperatives: to listen to the spoken demands of the subject in relationships with the other and to listen to the Other in order to understand the complexities and particularities of antiracist activism, and to approach both with a deep respect for identities and the right to difference.

---

<sup>1</sup> We thank the anonymous reviews whose suggestions improved and clarified this article. We are grateful to Michael McAndrew for his insightful feedback on an earlier version of this article. A sincere thank you to Edward Gervasoni for his diligent proofreadings of the manuscript. All study protocols were approved by the University of Arizona Institutional Review Board, Project No. 09-0026-02. All participants, identified using pseudonyms, gave informed consent, including consent to publish.

<sup>2</sup> The Other with a capital “O” refers to culture, including belief in the existence of God, myths, kinship structure, etc.

<sup>3</sup> This topological model, termed “L-Scheme” in Lacanian literature, is about what goes on in the psyche. As stated in a previous note, the Other denotes culture. “Es” in the image refers to Lacan’s concept of Id.

<sup>4</sup> Following Lacan (1961–62), we chose the notation  $A = A$  to express the logic that affirms the subject as “identical to herself” in the processes of collectivization.  $A \neq A$  denotes that the identity problem is intertwined with experiences of the mistakes, misunderstandings, and ambiguities of speech, all of which we can approach under the umbrella of identification.

<sup>5</sup> These accounts are taken from fieldwork by Author 1 in 2009–10.

## References

- Author 1. *Between Brown and Black: Antiracist Activism among Afro-Brazilians*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. M. 1981. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- . 1990. *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays*. Translated by Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov. Vol. 9 of University of Texas Press Slavic series. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Benveniste, Émile. 1971. *Problems in General Linguistics*. Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press.
- Braga, Ana Paula M. 2016. “Pelos trilhas de Virgínia Bicudo: Psicanálise e relações raciais em São Paulo.” *Lacuna: Uma Revista de Psicanálise* 2:1.
- “Brazilian Vogue’s Donata Meirelles Steps Down over Slave-Evoking Birthday Photos.” *Snobette*, February 14, 2019, <https://snobette.com/2019/02/brazilian-vogue-editor-donata-meirelles-resigns/>.
- Caldwell, Kia Lilly. 2007. *Negras in Brazil: Re-Envisioning Black Women, Citizenship, and the Politics of Identity*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Covin, David. 1996. "The Role of Culture in Brazil's Unified Black Movement, Bahia in 1992." *Journal of Black Studies* 27 (1): 39-55. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002193479602700103>.
- Descartes, René. (1637) 2015. *Discourse on Method*. Newburyport, MA: Philosophical Library/Open Road Web.
- Dunker, Christian I. L. 2015. *Mal-Estar, Sofrimento e Sintoma: Uma Psicopatologia do Brasil entre Muros*. São Paulo: Schäffer Editorial.
- Fanon, Franz. 2008. *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press.

- “IBGE: Salvador é a capital mais negra do brasil.” 2018. *Bahia Econômica*, November 19, 2018.  
<https://bahiaeconomica.com.br/wp/2018/11/19/ibge-salvador-e-a-capital-mais-negra-do-brasil-e-tambem-onde-esta-maior-desigualdade-salarial-entre-brancos-e-pretos/>.
- Ickes, Scott. 2013. *African-Brazilian Culture and Regional Identity in Bahia, Brazil*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.
- Guy, Jack. 2019. “Vogue Brazil Director Criticized over 'Slavery' Party.” CNN.com. Updated February 12, 2019. <https://edition.cnn.com/style/article/vogue-brazil-director-party-scli-intl/index.html>.
- Lacan, Jacques. 1961–62. “L’identification.” Lecture series. Accessed May 8, 2020.  
[http://www.valas.fr/IMG/pdf/S9\\_identification.pdf](http://www.valas.fr/IMG/pdf/S9_identification.pdf).
- . 1966. *Escritos*. São Paulo: Editora Perspectiva.
- Marsilli-Vargas, Xochitl. 2014. “Listening Genres: The Emergence of Relevance Structures through the Reception of Sound.” *Journal of Pragmatics* 69:42–51.
- Mattei, Lourdes. 2011. “Coloring Development: Race and Culture in Psychodynamic Theories.” In *Inside Out and Outside in Psychodynamic Clinical Theory and Psychopathology in Contemporary Multicultural Contexts*, edited by Joan Berzoff, Laura Melano Flanagan, and Patricia Hertz, 58–284. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Menezes, Jamile. 2018. “Psicólogo Lucas Veiga traz palestra sobre Psicologia Preta a Salvador.” Last modified October 30, 2018. <http://portalsoteropreta.com.br/psicologo-lucas-veiga-traz-palestra-sobre-psicologia-pretas-salvador/>.
- Mitchell-Walthour, Gladys L. 2018. *The Politics of Blackness: Racial Identity and Political Behavior in Contemporary Brazil*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

- Paschel, Tianna S. 2016. *Becoming Black Political Subjects: Movements and Ethno-Racial Rights in Colombia and Brazil*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Perry, Keisha-Khan Y. 2013. *Black Women against the Land Grab: The Fight for Racial Justice in Brazil*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Rodrigues, Márcia B. F. 2014. "Paradigmas para o Século XXI: Possibilidades de Aplicação do Paradigma Indiciário de Corte Psicanalítico às Ciências Humanas e Sociais." *Passagens. Revista Internacional de História Política e Cultura Jurídica* 6 (2):234–53.
- Seshadri-Crooks, Kalpana. 2000. *Desiring Whiteness: A Lacanian Analysis of Race*. New York: Routledge.
- Sheriff, Robin E. 2001. *Dreaming Equality: Color, Race, and Racism in Urban Brazil*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Silva, Antonio Jose Bacelar da. (2019). "Who Can Be Black for Affirmative Action Programs in Brazil?" Paper presented at the Latin American Studies Association Conference, Boston, MA, May 25, 2019.
- Souza, Neusa S. 1983. *Tornar-se negro: as vicissitudes da identidade do negro brasileiro em ascensão social*. Rio de Janeiro: Edições Gral.
- Wilderson, Frank B., III. 2020. *Afropessimism*. First edition. ed. New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation.