Slippery stereotypes – hair and the aesthetics of race in Brazil

[Deslizes do estereótipo – cabelos e estéticas da raça no Brasil

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In this article I work with reflections and research results that I have presented at other times, including in previously published articles. In terms of the arguments and syntheses presented, I want to thank the generous reading by Vânia Zikán Cardoso and the suggestions of the reviewers of RIEB. Of course I am fully responsible for any mistakes.

Translated by Jeffrey Hoff.

ABSTRACT· Motivated by disputes between Blacks and Whites I analyze strategies to address racism in the 2010's. A study of Black women's hairstyles identified explicit modes of claiming race and questions if there has been a change of paradigms. Subsequent research in schools about the proper aesthetic reveals miscegenational ideals. Slips in the meanings of stereotypes display aesthetics in its performative dimensions, triggered either to exercise or confront racism. The examination of hairstyles reveals constant tension between change and permanence and a non-harmonious conviviality between racial concepts in Brazil. · **KEYWORDS** · Aesthetics; stereotype; racism.

RESUMO · Motivada por disputas envolvendo pessoas brancas e negras, analiso estratégias para lidar com o racismo nos anos 2010. Pesquisa junto a penteados de mulheres negras mostra modos explícitos de reivindicar a raça e faz pensar em mudança de paradigmas. Pesquisa em torno da estética adequada em escolas brasileiras evidencia o apagamento da raça. Os deslizes nos significados dos estereótipos expõem a estética em dimensão performativa, acionada para exercício ou enfrentamento do racismo. Vemos o constante tensionamento entre mudança e permanência e a convivência nada harmônica entre concepções sobre raça no Brasil. · **PALAVRAS-CHAVE** · Estética; estereótipo; racismo.

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I

Christmas was approaching and I was going to give two friends I had made during fieldwork a shiny liquid lip gloss. I gave each one a clear gloss because I had learned that women with "black mouths" do not like "dark" makeup on their lips. I also had to give a present to Karla, a woman with golden skin, wavy, blond hair, and a thin nose. Karla lived at the Morro do Cantagalo, a favela in Rio de Janeiro on top of the hill that separates Ipanema from Copacabana. She was regularly found on the sands of the Praia do Arpoador beach, and seemed to me to be a female version of the surfer immortalized in the song "Menino do Rio", by Caetano Veloso. The boy with golden skin, slick hair and "trunks body open in space" ["calção corpo aberto no espaço"], as the lyric goes, who we later learned the singer may have had a crush on, and who was interpreted by André di Biase in a film of the same name.

Quite content and feeling like I was on top of the logic of female funk taste, I gave Karla a "dark" gloss. She looked at me with disdain, a look that I was accustomed to receiving every time I made an improper comment or gesture, as if she was asking if I didn't know that people "of color" do not use dark lipstick and gloss. That was exactly why I gave her a "dark" red gloss, I began to explain before she raised the issue. Upset with my inability to understand what she was saying to me, Karla raised her upper lip and showed me her dark gums, thus resolving any discussion about whether she was a person "of color", as she said another time. Once again Karla disturbed me by referring to a practice common among buyers and sellers of enslaved Black people, of raising their lips to verify the health of their gums. With her gesture Karla presented the racial inscription on her flesh, a trait that just because I did not see it, does not mean that it did not exist or was not relevant.[2] Not by chance, on other occasions I had heard Karla say that she had "pele encardida" [tainted skin] or was "the color that the gringos like". Her "color" was visible. It was I who did not see it. If Karla could be

2 About the practice of verifying the oral health of slaves by examining their gums see Schnoor (2007) and Sousa (2019). For odontological procedures for lightening gums and the marks of race see Bolla (2007).

seen or classified as a White Brazilian (COSTA; SCHUCMAN, 2022), she was warning me that she wasn't.

This had taken place between 2007 and 2008, when I was doing fieldwork circulating through the metropolitan region of Rio de Janeiro and its surroundings, together with the network of relations articulated around Mr. Catra, the iconic singer of funk carioca, who passed away in late 2018. The mental image of the incident with Karla stuck with me for many years, appearing, and reappearing in different reflections. This time it came back to compose the tensions that inspire me in this text: for Karla to call herself "mestiza" – "the color that gringos like" or "have tainted skin" – did not erase her race, it did not annul the fact that she was "of color".

Since the 1950s we know that in Brazil appearance is crucial to our definition of racism and thus to our conceptions of race, as we can gather from the seminal essay by Oracy Nogueira (2007). This is true to the extent that for Brazilians, corporal appearance is crucial not only to perceptions of racism, but also to living with racism. And if what is fundamental in Brazil is the "mark" ["marca"], that which phenotype reveals, in the United States – the social reality that serves as a contrast to allow Nogueira to objectify us – the determinant is origin and descendance.

Expanding this argument, we can say that the phenomenon of "passing", the possibility to hide a "Black identity", can be considered as a problematic specific to the US reality, but not so much to Brazil, at least in our recent history. In the US, performances of Whiteness may be sufficient for a person to be seen as White, although they can be read as attempts to hide one's origin, placing the one "passing" under a permanent risk of having their Blackness discovered. In Brazil these performances more specifically seek to make ambiguity a form of racial agency, as Karla artfully did. But Karla also indicated to me, and here is where the destabilizing potential of her intervention resides, that if to be parda (brown-skinned) – for me refers to a census category – it can offer her an advantageous position on Brazil's racial map, her "race" is given by her origin and not by her appearance. There is something that defines her place in the world that is beyond visible codes, or the readily visible.

It is this tensioning, which appears to me to be constitutive of the ways that race is conceived in Brazil and of how racism operates among us, that I would like to explore in this article. I will use as a privileged entrance point different performances of race, paying special attention to those that appear to me to be stagings in response to what Lélia Gonzalez defined as "racism of denial", a racism that is defined by the denial of its own existence (GONZALEZ, 2019). This is a silent racism, but still real and which surges by "dictates of custom", as Lília Moritz Schwarcz argues (2012). It is a racism that belongs to the sphere of the private and that, according to Brazilian codes of etiquette, should be a private matter, as is the race inscribed viscerally within Karla as she exposed to me, and that is revealed by discussions about taste. Like those that guided our conversations in the field, in which *things*, more specifically consumer goods, were crucial participants.

It will be at the interface between taste and racism that I will construct my analysis about performances of race engendered by Black and White people and their hair in three relational contexts of investigation in Rio de Janeiro: one formed

by women belonging to a network of relations articulated around Mr. Catra; another articulated by university students; and a third constituted by elementary schools, their children, and their caregivers. I will reflect on stereotypes and aesthetics, considering the latter in its performativity. With a particular focus on hair, I will show that stereotypes gain flesh through diacritical signs, and that it is also possible to undo these stereotypes. My analysis focuses on different hairstyles and how they allow entering distinct modes of living and exercising racism and contemplates how hair can be used to denounce and confront racism. The performativity of aesthetics will thus be seen in the way that diacritical signs can be triggered both to exercise racism and to challenge it.

This article should thus be read as a continuation of the text "As políticas dos cabelos negros, entre mulheres: estética, relacionalidade e dissidência no Rio de Janeiro" (MIZRAHI, 2019a) in which I expand on Judith Butler's argument concerning gender (BUTLER, 1993), adding to the discussion about the materiality of bodies the problematic related to the materiality of objects (MILLER, 2013), to propose that the concept of performativity is useful for thinking of the production of our different senses of self. If gender is never a given, as Butler argues, and must be permanently reiterated through performative acts, these same acts depend on things – the clothes and corporal adornments with which we dress ourselves each day – to be concretized and have their effects guaranteed. Therefore, it is together with these consumer goods that we can reiterate not only our gender, but how we understand and position ourselves in the world. This brings me to the final proposal that I will develop in this article: like gender, race has a performative dimension. As we see, if the hairstyles that I called ambiguous, sought to establish a racial ambiguity to strengthen circulation through public space and help elude cleavages of race and class, Black hair strengthens circulation in another way, by claiming ethnicity, refusing invisibility, exposing Blackness, and denouncing cleavages of race and gender.

For a few years I have been considering the notion of aesthetics, conceptualizing it as a force, as something that produces effects on the world (MIZRAHI, 2014). This prevented me from reducing aesthetics to form and appearance, a concept that is quite far from the conception that separates the appreciation of form from ethics and was based on the notion of universal beauty. I also distanced aesthetics from its reification – differentiating it from style and avoiding using it to profile separate worlds or cultures – or to refer to what pleases the senses. Now, by exploring the relationship between aesthetics and performativity through a discussion about racial stereotypes, I want to show that if the reification of aesthetics can be useful for maintaining racial cleavages it can also serve to challenge them. My objective in this article is therefore to defend how an analysis of aesthetics and taste offers insights to the discussion about race and racism in Brazil, with hair being the special entrance point for this analysis. To do so, I will return to various articles I have written, which will require me to cite my own work[3].

3 In these previous reflections I also present the theoretical framework that has guided my discussions about aesthetics and taste as well as other studies involving hair.

I divide the text in seven sections. After this introduction, I present a synthesis of my research trajectory and how an investigation of aesthetics raised the problem of race. In the following section I present the evolution of Black hairstyles in the decade of 2010 and how they distanced themselves from ambiguous modes and approached more explicit modes of claiming race. In the following section I turn to contemporary literature about the problem of race in Brazil, highlighting works that explore the tension between miscegenation and Blackness. I then present new research about conflicts of taste involving the hair of Black and White children, which also occurred in the decade of 2010. Before concluding, I discuss stereotype and aesthetics and the dual possibility that diacritic signs offer to exercise and challenge racism.

II

In my research trajectory I have been accompanying peripheral aesthetic manifestations. When delineating my research field, my question was not focused on the problem of race, but was sought to consider aesthetics as form and agency. As we know since Alfred Gell (1998), aesthetics is not isolated in the world and what it does causes silent discourses to emerge that are related to divisions of class and race, and to gender. I was thus gradually inserted in the debate about racial relations, articulating racism, corporal aesthetics, and circulation through public space.

In the early decade of 2000 I accompanied the process of resignification of style that until then was known as the "calça da Gang", very tight female leggings that looked like jeans (MIZRAHI, 2011)[4]. Finding in girls who go to funk dances the authentic creators of this style, I followed these pants to dances, where I took inventory of female and male outfits, articulating these clothes to other aesthetic manifestations seen at these parties. My master's study was guided by these dances and the pants proved to be a stylistic mark of the funk wardrobe, precisely because their qualities suited the dances. They are an elasticized pants like athletic leggings, which could look like jeans and are apt to receive aesthetic interventions. They are tight clothing often embellished with glitter and embroidered to emphasize the sinuous shapes of bodies when dancing and conducting equally sinuous movements. The pants fit like a glove for a carioca funk party (MIZRAHI, 2019b)[5].

The youth that I accompanied at the funk dances raised the problem of strategies of self-presentation and their implications for their daily lives, a problematic that I examine in my doctoral studies. If I returned from these dances attentive to the powers of the body, my new interlocutors in the field warned me that more than

4 "Calça da Gang" literally means Gang pants. Gang is a brand name, but the term was widely used, even in the media, to refer to the style.

5 Carioca is the adjective used to qualify things or persons related to Rio de Janeiro. The core of my investigation was given by a weekly dance at a club in the Centro region of Rio de Janeiro, on Saturday nights and before holidays. The field work spanned 18 months, in 2004 and 2005.

"a good ass", what was important was hair. "Without hair" you don't go out not even to the corner.

My doctoral fieldwork was guided by the circulation of funk through the city. I followed the music along the network of relations of the Carioca funk singer Mr. Catra: in recording studios, in a more domestic environment, and in his movements through the city to give shows[6]. I began to accompany funk subjects, who were mostly Black and brown-skinned Brazilians, in their movement through Rio de Janeiro, entering and leaving the spaces – which were more or less centrally located, and more or less hegemonic. Racial ambiguity was critical in this new conjuncture. To ask about aesthetics and seriously consider the quest for ambiguity revealed the centrality of appearance and beauty to how my interlocutors lived with and confronted daily racisms.

In the next section we will see that the ways appearance and beauty are agencied in this circulation and change over time. However, the understanding that movement through public space contains an imminent risk of confronting racism is not attenuated. Along the temporal arc that I will trace, I present the evolution of hairstyles used by Black people – which accompany not only the passage of time, but also fashion – to note a gradual distancing from ideas of miscegenation that led towards more explicit ways of declaring race. Aesthetics shifted from being a determinant of ambiguity to something that makes a distinction. I understand that the three Black hair styles that I will present reveal a performative dimension of race and highlight the consequences of performativity for claims to Blackness.

III

Circulating through Rio de Janeiro with my funk girlfriends, I discovered what I would later call "ambiguous hair": a style composed fundamentally of human hair extensions that were neither straight like that of White women or tightly curled like that of Blacks. They told me that the intent was to produce a non-White appearance, but not one linked to what they understood to be a representation fixed in Blackness. They wanted to strengthen their circulation through the city, elude racism and class prejudice, and become visible by means of a certain invisibility. They used racial ambiguity as a form of agency, turning the ways they produce beauty and their corporal aesthetics into an index of the silent process with which racism is traditionally described in Brazil.

With these women I truly discovered another world and conducted an anthropology of friendship, as did Jean Rouch in his filmic ethnographies in African countries (GONÇALVES, 2008). In this way the knowledge produced resulted from the quality of the relationships that we established in the field and we were reciprocal sources of information, knowledge and curiosity. From this perspective, "normality", the norm provided by the hair of White people in contrast to which difference would be produced (KILOMBA, 2019), was only one of the components of the oscillation of meanings to

6 My doctoral fieldwork lasted 19 months, from mid 2007 until late 2008.

produce difference. My semitic hair, although it was not "straight and smooth", was also not sufficiently curly to serve as an ideal for them. It was too "soft" ["moles"][7].

Given that difference is always relational, the hairstyles that I discovered with my funk friends offered an entrance to conceptual worlds and also allowed an expansion of worlds (HOLLBRAAD, 2007). The ideal hairstyle or the type of hair that was appreciated was neither straight nor kinky, but had a particular type of curl; it would only form curls when washed and creams applied. It should also be "straight" enough so that the curls would temporarily come undone with "brushing". This hair could be innate or not, as in the case of the hair extensions, the "mega hair". As I have affirmed, the non-evident aspect of Brazilian racism requires attention to non-verbal discourses and makes appearance a central component in social relations, so that evaluations related to race and skin color can be better captured through aesthetics and taste; through a discussion about the adornment to be used (MIZRAHI, 2015, p. 34).

I gradually learned that the anthropology that I do can never be separated from the fact that I am a Jewish woman of White appearance, as well as the daughter of Turkish migrants, belonging to the Carioca middle class. I actively came to use my body – hair, personal taste, appearance – as an investigative device, placing it at the service of intellectual questionings produced by a particular sensitivity to the logics that govern Rio de Janeiro[8].

At the time of my doctoral fieldwork, the Black hairstyles I have described were not often seen, and were more associated to Black artists and activists. A decade later, the same was not true, with university spaces becoming a privileged environment for gauging the proliferation of Afro hairstyles, braids and turbans that accompanied a pulsating student activism. As I registered in conversations with a group of university women, they used their hair to produce an evidently non-White appearance, where difference was conceived in its radical sense, and the dual pairing White/Black was remade. They disassembled the gradation produced by the multiple forms of racial classification that accompany the nomenclature constructed for nuances of color in Brazil. They established a clear contrast with the more ambiguous form of producing beauty and dealing with racial and class prejudices that I encountered among my funk girlfriends (MIZRAHI, 2019a, p. 472-473). It is worth noting that today, some of these women have come to use braided hair.

But it was in the middle of the decade of 2010 – between these two research periods – when I found what I have designated as a third style, formed by synthetic braided hair extensions in colors such as green, blue, and pink, and I noted the destabilizing power of aesthetics on the landscape of the city. This hair style clearly expressed that it was produced by human hands. The extensions appeared to be used as an accessory, with no attempt made to hide their artificiality. If it took me

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7 For an example of how hair can be a problem for semitic women see Yee (2021).

8 On another occasion I contemplated with Mr. Catra the creative productivity of the non place occupied by the Jew, bringing to the conversation Kafka, Benjamin and Scliar, as well as Fanon, Gilroy, Baldwin (MIZRAHI, 2018a). In this article, it is more specifically Carlo Ginzburg's considerations about distance in his *Wooden eyes* (2002), catalyzed by the fact that the author is Jewish, which inspired me, an issue that escapes the scope of the reflections I make here and will leave to treat more deeply at another moment.

a long time to notice hair extensions in the funk world, with Blue, as I call a young university student who in the middle of the decade of 2000 showed them to me for the first time, this did not occur. Blue evidently used her hair as a technology through which she produced herself and had herself seen. She had blue hair that combined with an entire outfit that she put on the afternoon that I met her: blue jean shorts with white and dark blue stripes, Adidas slippers in navy blue with white details and a jeans jacket (MIZRAHI, 2019a, p.477)[9].

Accompanying this temporal range, I began to ask myself if a certain "progress" was underway in racial relations in Brazil. I questioned if what I saw as a certain hegemony of the most explicit ways of revealing Black identity, as made visible by means of Black hair, was an indicator that we had left a register in which miscegenation was the crucial form of addressing race in the country and had entered another, more specific to a concept of race thought of through descendance, shifting the value of appearance. The Afros, turbans and braids appeared to leave behind a time when invisibility was chosen as a strategy for social navigation. Els Lagrou has analogously affirmed that Indigenous peoples of Brazil had used invisibility as a "survival" strategy (LAGROU, 2021). Today, however, many Indigenous people make image an important arena of struggle, as attested to by the solidity of contemporary Indigenous art and investments in self-presentation of leaders such as Sonia Guajajara and Célia Xakriabá. With Lagrou we can contemplate the existence of coincident Black and Indigenous strategies to claim ethnic identity.

IV

In the 1990s Thomas Skidmore proposed that the way racism had been lived in Brazil indicated that the country was coming closer to US framings, while the US appeared to be heading to more nuanced forms of dealing with race (SKIDMORE, 1993). Skidmore understood that the definition of race in Brazil was thus freeing itself from the historical weight granted to phenotype and appearance and was heading to more progressive forms that, while they did not eliminate racism, appeared to contain a hope of evolution in social relations and forms of claiming race.

I let myself be seduced by this optimistic form of analyzing the problem of race in Brazil. At least this was what my field material seemed to say. The evolution of Black hairstyles I identified seemed to indicate to me that Brazil had left behind silent, indirect, and non-explicit modes of dealing with racial cleavages, which make them more difficult to be recognized. In fact, we as Brazilians had come to explicitly politicize aesthetics and bring racism to the center of the debate. Blacks invested in conflict and denunciation through Afro hairstyles, braids, and turbans, making them diacritical signs of claims of ethnicity and Blackness, destabilizing hegemonic spaces of the city, as *pop extensions* emblematically have.

However, a subsequent study conducted in schools that will be presented in the next section showed me a quite different situation, composed by the exercise of

9 Without greater elaboration, I note that the fundamental reference used in this discussion is to Latour (2002).

traditional forms of racism and a stubborn defense of miscegenation as a Brazilian racial ideal. This research indicated that Brazil has regressed in time. That is, following the provocation of Osmundo Pinho (2019), the obstinate concern for the national character that historically accompanied the discussion about racial democracy made it seem that twentieth-first century Brazil continued to be the same as that of the nineteenth century and could not be anything "but an improved version of Brazil of the twentieth century" (PINHO, 2019, p. 107). But, as João Vargas argued in his analysis of the *rolezinhos* of the decade of 2010, it is not possible to consider Brazil a racial democracy, given that "the modern Brazilian nation-state is incompatible with a complete Black presence" (VARGAS, 2016, p. 13-14). Brazil, according to Vargas, is governed by an anti-Black solidarity that places it on a continuum among different "nation states of the Black diaspora" (VARGAS, 2016, p. 16).

On the other hand, the interlocutors of Tiffany Joseph (2015) ask if the idea of racial democracy is only a myth. Upon investigating the specificities of *Brazilian racism* among migrants from Governador Valladares (MG), Joseph provides us access to statements by Brazilians who express surprise with racial realities that until then were unimaginable, appearing to them that race is more socially divisive in the US than in Brazil. At the same time, Joseph noted, studies continue to indicate "that the approach to race in both countries begins to converge". This coexistence between ideologies of miscegenation that erase race, and claims of Blackness that reiterate it, also appear in a recent appraisal by Mara Viveros Vigoya (2022) who observed that the failure of the "state multicultural project" can be identified in its "negligence" in the approach to racism. That is, however, it does not prevent an "anti-racist turn" from being exercised and that racism has come to be perceived as an important problematic for Latin America in a broader way. Analogously, Peter Wade (2020) defends that multi-culturalism did not weaken the ideology of miscegenation in the definitions of race in Latin America. Legislative reforms since the 1990s in different countries of the continent affirm the multicultural and pluri-ethnic character of the nation, without transforming the regimes that are founded on miscegenation. In terms of Brazil in particular, miscegenation reveals "a constitutive tension between equality and hierarchy" (WADE, 2020, p. 83). From Wade's perspective, miscegenation is not so much a process of homogenization, but as a concept, has always depended on the space that it granted to Blackness, Indigenousness, and Whiteness.

This tension between change and permanence – as found in the coexistence between more progressive forms of dealing with racism and the ideologies of miscegenation – is also present in Paulina Alberto's analysis of "shifting antiracism narratives" (ALBERTO, 2014). Produced by Black movements and intellectuals (1920-1980), these narratives indicate that strategies used to confront racism vary according to their epoch and the atmosphere of their time, allowing the circulation of more or less explicit discursivities. Alberto argues that denouncing racism was the objective of Black activists in all the periods that she analyzed, even if in each one of them they sought to create "a narrative of political advance" in relation to strategies adopted in the earlier period. The result of this would be elusive progress. Anti-racist strategies have changed to the degree that they need to accompany "the

then dominant discourses about race, racism and citizenship in Brazil" (ALBERTO, 2014, p. 407) and that required new political approaches.

In the following sections I will make evident that the situation of intolerance and enrooted defense of miscegenation and the erasure of race that accompanies it produces an atmosphere propitious to, or even requires an explicit claim to ethnic identity and Blackness that places straightened hair, and even "relaxed" hair, among fashions of the past. Afro hairstyles and braids mark a radical difference not only in relation to White taste but particularly to the ideal of miscegenated and a-racial beauty[10].

V

The description of the three hairstyles in section III focused on the relation between living daily with racism and the agencying of corporal aesthetics. It was from this perspective that I supervised a group of students to take this problematic to school. Caught by the COVID-19 pandemic and restrictions on circulation of people and things, we shifted the investigation to the digital field. Guided by gender and racial markers, we conducted a survey of journalistic production about schools and corporal aesthetics, with the central theme being school uniforms and hair (MIZRAHI et al., 2019).

As we said at the time, the research showed us the "paradoxical legacy" left by the decade of 2010 in Brazil. On one hand there had been progress, as seen in many protagonisms of gender, sexuality, race, and class. On the other hand there was a rise of the far right to the center of power and occupation of the Presidency by reactionary forces. I now return to this legacy to develop the nexus between racism and the constitution of taste, attentive to the conflict in ways of conceiving race.

In the material that I present below, miscegenation occupies a crucial place for concepts of beauty, the constitution of taste and for living with a racism that is manifest in an indirect and not evident manner. This taste is consonant with Brazilian racism, qualified by theories of racial democracy that have followed the ideas of Gilberto Freyre (2002). Together with the claim for a proper aesthetic, as we will see in the disputes that follow, taste emerges as an operator that allows concealing the racism that, as Kabengele Munanga (2019) affirms, is manifest in reaction to the diversified Brazilian phenotype. Taste thus supports the erasure of the "geography of Brazilian bodies" and helps defend miscegenation as a rhetoric of national character (MUNANGA, 2013, p. 544). It is a silent racism that is expressed by means of taste. Here, it is especially pertinent to think of taste as always being distaste (BOURDIEU, 1984). Taste, as we see, emerges as intolerance, intolerance of the taste of others. It is the expression of that which is not wanted (MIZRAHI et al., 2019, p. 163).

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10 Various researchers of race agree that the myth of racial mixing in Latin America and the concept of miscegenation that accompanies it hide the visibility and recognition of Indigenous peoples and Blacks in the region. The mestizo thus winds up being "all and nothing" at the same time (MEGA, 2021).

Through 22 news articles published between 2011 and the early months of 2020, we accompanied disputes over corporal aesthetics in various types of schools: private, public, military and civilian-military, in different states and regions of the country. The articles analyzed allowed monitoring the evolution of conservatism in Brazil during the decade of 2010. They show gaps between youth and their parents and school administrators. Disputes arose about suitable aesthetics for school space. Since then, there have been a scattering of other cases in the press involving hair and racism in schools. Schools, as Nilma Lino Gomes (2003) noted, are a propitious environment for investigating racism, given that it is where Black Brazilian children first experience racism.

In one of the cases analyzed a child had his registration renewal rejected because his mother did not respond to the request that she cut her son's "Black power" hair [as Afros are at times called in Brazil], which the school director described as, "kinky", "heavy", and "unsuitable". In two other cases, involving two military schools, kinky hair that was not straightened or was in an Afro style was a problem because it was not suitable to "military aesthetics". In another episode a girl came home crying because her teacher washed her classmates' heads, but not hers because the teacher did not want to touch her "tough" hair. In another case, the teacher sent a note to the mother saying that her son's hair is "pretty", but that she "would be happier" if he would use his hair "short or cropped", suggesting that they "trim" or "braid" it. The teacher concluded sending "kisses" and signed with her nickname.

Finally, one more case stood out. The school sent a note to parents accompanied by a photograph of a White girl, with green eyes and straight hair with bangs (Figure 1). Along with the image, it requested "collaboration": "so that our presentation be even more beautiful" and asking for "parents" to send their daughter with the hairstyle shown. The girl who served as a model for the hairstyle and the ideal of beauty is a young actress who in a telenovela aimed at children and youth played a character who mistreated her Black colleague at school.

Figure 1 – São Paulo's school causes controversy by asking parents to collaborate and send their children hairstyles like the child in the photo so that the year-end presentation looks beautiful (ESCOLA de SP..., 2015)

The disagreements that all these cases reveal are motivated by disputes about *proper aesthetics* for school space. The reaction of teachers and administrators is directly linked to hairstyle, revealing a strong link between racism and taste. An ideal of aesthetic normativity is observed, which is forged through a notion of a single and universal beauty. In this nexus, the last case presented, beyond its shocking reference to a racist character, is especially important to the degree to which it involves a series of meanings that we have highlighted. Instead of prohibiting children with kinky hair to enter a party without embarrassment, it offers the model with which all will be welcomed, given that they will contribute to the success of the

celebration. Instead of denying beauty to one "race", it attributes it to another. But if the ideal of beauty, as presented in the photo, is the straight, long hair of the White girl, it is Black hairstyles, the Afro used by Black girls and boys, that is its prototype. This is what I will now examine.

The demand for straight hair requires Black hair as a counter image and carries an ideal of racial democracy founded not only on miscegenation, but that leads towards a Whitening and the erasure of race. Here, the nuances that both Wade (2020) and Alberto (2014) highlight with each one of these notions – miscegenation and racial democracy respectively – are worth remembering. Because as Wade notes, miscegenation as a concept is ambivalent because it depends on data about Whiteness and about Blackness and Indigeneity. And as Alberto notes, we can consider the concept of racial democracy as a myth because of how it was appropriated by the ideology that emerged with the military governments in Brazil after the coup of 1964. It is not by chance that the same hairstyle suggested by the school discussed above is seen on the girls who were in a car in the Independence Day parade of 2020 next to Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro (Figure 2), the exponent of the national ultra-right and defender of the return to the ideas of the military regime.

Figure 2 – The hairstyle seen in the previous figure is the same as the girls with long, straight hair who accompany President Jair Bolsonaro, a representative of the ultra-right and defender of the military dictatorship, in a parade on Independence Day (BOLSONARO desfila..., 2020)

The car carries 8 children who we can risk concluding represent what is imagined as the "future of the nation". A nation whose population, according to the last census, was composed of 54% Black and brown people. Judging by the appearance of the children in the photo their representation is not contemplated in the image, which also does not contemplate sexual equity. In addition to all the girls having long straight hair, there are 6 girls and 2 boys with short, military style hair.

VI

Giralda Seyferth (2020) argued in a now classic text that what is distinctive in Brazil's racist ideology is the concept of a "superior mestizo". Certain mestizos would be better to the degree to which they would be apt to Whiten. This concept distinguishes us from the main dogma of racism, which affirms not only that the human "races" are unequal, but that Whites are superior, and all miscegenation would lead to degeneration, as emblematically illustrated by Gobineau's ideology. Differently, the idea of race in Brazil assumed a "peculiar" shape, making crucial the discretionary power of stereotypes when exercising racist discourse. It is not enough to establish maxims of inferiority with phenotypical traits, but these were more effective to the degree to which phenotype could presuppose socially disqualifying behaviors and moralities. In this conjuncture, mestizos are the main target of stereotypes, given that it is necessary to isolate any possibility of racial ambiguity.

This "superior mestizo" is also present in what Laura Moutinho (2004) designates as a miscegenation with a "civilizatory attribute". By problematizing what appeared to be an excessive emphasis on social class in the analyses of inter-racial relationships, Moutinho affirms that the attributes of status and prestige have implications for the problem of "color" in processes of social ascension that are not limited to economic aspects. In this nexus, physical beauty acquires a privileged place, as we can see in Moutinho's analysis of Freyre's *Sobrados e mocambos*.

Two points in her analysis are especially relevant to my objectives in this article. One refers to the fact that physical traits converted into a sign of prestige are of interest not only as a biological given, but to the degree to which they proved to be suitable to the taste and fashion of the time. Genetics was converted into a status symbol, but the body should be apt to receive the adornments that can be "converted into attributes of prestige".

> [...] it is not rare for escaped mulattos to be highlighted by a thick trunk like most Blacks, in contrast to the small feet and fine long fingers, as nearly all masters have. Long fingers as if they ask for the rings of a doctor or college graduate. (FREYRE apud MOUTINHO, 2004, p. 188).

If thin fingers were important to the degree to which they were suitable for the rings of a college graduate and doctor, "small" feet, were equally valued because they were apt to wear European style shoes:

> The relation of continuity with the Masters, the mark of "*noble*" ascendence, is registered in these two parts of the body: well-defined feet (long, thin and sinewy) as opposed to the primitive feet of the "Blacks" (sprawled, flattened, jutting out, with bunions, bumps, etc.). Feet that do not fit into European shoes and boots, exclusively rebel feet. Feet and their capacity to adapt to shoes, this is the main criteria (and attribute) of civilization. (MOUTINHO, 2004, p. 188).

This takes me to the second point to be highlighted in Moutinho's analysis: the

possibility that the same diacritical signs of "race" can be converted into elements of prestige or dis-prestige. It is for this reason that the "attributes of moral, social, intellectual and aesthetic order" that the children of masters inherited from their parents, distinguish them from the "children of the poor immigrants", who could have the physical attributes, but not education. It is precisely this nuance that would allow distinguishing miscegenations (MOUTINHO, 2004, p. 191). As Antônio Sérgio Alfredo Guimarães notes (1999), there is nothing "spontaneously visible" in traits like that of skin color, nose shape, thickness of lips, hair texture, but it is only at the core of a pre-existing ideology that these traits are used as indexes of a positive or negative value of the "races".

It is this oscillation in the meaning of the diacritical signs that interests me in a contemporary discussion about stereotypes. As we saw in the group of images presented in the previous section, the Afro is found as either a figure or background against which are produced either the claims of race, or the erasure of race, if we consider that Whiteness is a mode of claiming race and miscegenation an erasure of the racial component. If as a diacritical sign Black hair can be used as a stereotype against which we affirm the ideas of miscegenation, it is also used to claim Blackness, denying any attempt to think of race in ambiguous and non-dual modes. In other terms, it is because Black hairstyles are converted into a diacritical sign for the Blackness that racists reject, that hair poses a powerful challenge to this rejection.

As bell hooks affirms,

> [...] the issue of race and representation is not just a question of critiquing the status quo. It is also about transforming the image, creating alternatives, asking ourselves questions about what types of images subvert [...]. (HOOKS, 1992, p. 4).

As Ari Lima (2017, p. 15-33) reminds us, the recurring question in his family – "what to do with Marly's hair?" – emphasizes a gender distinction, to the degree that it is aimed only at his sister and never to the men of the family. It also raises "a monumental question" that Black people have asked since the abolition of slavery: what to do with self-image – the body, hair, consciousness, history – in a country that simultaneously "convokes and prohibits" the condition of the Black subject. In this conjuncture, Black hair, culture, and music are crucial for the production of an identity that is not given but sought by means of "creative manipulation" of the body itself and of image.

The "race question" thus emerges not only as a question of representativeness but above all of representation. Appearance serves a collective "disobedience" and as a means of subverting a certain representation of Blackness it is part of the political struggle to expand the frontiers of the image (HOOKS, 1992, p. 1-7).

This logic inspired Maxwell Alexandre, a Black artist from the Rio de Janeiro periphery, in his decision to bleach his hair in the tone known as "loiro pivete"[11]:

> For me blonde black is synonymous with power, since there is a stigma towards bleached hair in people with Black skin. To choose to be blonde, when one is Black, is to confront these stereotypes. That is: it is an affirmation of liberty against the judgement of the Black body. We must be what we want to be. To affirm this aesthetically is an exercise of liberty and power[12].

As a diacritical sign, the Black hairstyles and the "loiro pivete" [blonde thief] can be used to both exercise silent racism and to denounce it (in an explicitly visible way), or in the terms of Moutinho (2004), as attributes of prestige or dis-prestige. Black movements subvert the meanings contained in stereotypes, using the same signals to challenge the Brazilian racial hierarchy.

VII

I began this article by looking at an image that I have explored at other times. The moment when I gave Karla a lip gloss and how this provoked her to claim her race. The recurring appearance of Karla's gloss in my articles illustrates the anticipation in the ethnographic field of that which we do not know and that will only appear with the "imaginative recreation" that we conduct with our "data" through writing (STRATHERN, 1999). Under the effects of Karla's gloss I discussed gender (MIZRAHI, 2018b), prosthetic bodies (MIZRAHI, 2012) and non-fixed identities (MIZRAHI, 2015). But what this event certainly revealed – or allowed, thus "'finding' the unlooked-for" (STRATHERN, 1999, p. 3) – was the definitive way with which Karla had me see that race is a dimension that cannot be absent from our conversations or writing. Karla's gloss thus anticipated the expansion that I would conduct of the notion of "humility of objects" (MILLER, 1987), to speak of the silent way with which aesthetics act on the world (MIZRAHI, 2020). To ask about taste allowed me to access domains that may otherwise have remained hidden.

With Karla's gloss I recreate different "ethnographic moments" in my texts, reconnecting data produced in the field and in the office and thus produced new *data*. In this text, what it reveals is a surprising way of living race in which she did not exclude her origin by saying that she is miscegenated – Karla often used the prerogatives granted to her by being "the color that the gringos like". Or, as in Peter Fry's formulation (1996) for the particular case of Brazil, to consider herself she

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11 "Loiro pivete", which can be literally translated as "blonde street kid", refers to blonde hair used by young Blacks in the periphery, and which first appeared in Brazilian favelas. This style, as is common to the dynamics that guide taste in Brazil, underwent a trickle-up process (MIZRAHI, 2011; 2014), more specifically through its derivation in the bleached white (RIBEIRO, 2023).

12 See article in TAB Uol. "LOIRO PIVETE: Criminalizada desde o nome, estética platinada faz a cabeça dos jovens e se consolida na zona sul do Rio" (SOUPIN, 2020).

simultaneously triggered a multiple mode of racial classification and a dual "popular" mode. Moreover, Karla invested in both the code of the visible and of beauty – in phenotype and in appearance – and in that which escapes or could escape view.

While I began this article with this image, I will conclude with another, that of the artist who bleaches his hair to that of a "loiro pivete" to reaffirm his Blackness and challenge stereotypes. When blonde hair is on Whites it is the hair of a surfer and on Blacks it is that of a funkeiro or favelado (MIZRAHI, 2007)[13]. I thus present one more "juxtaposition", to the ethnographic data I add media data, as I did in throughout this text.

The juxtaposition of the images that Karla and Maxwell Alexandre offer us illustrate the impasse which I believe racial relations confront in Brazil today. Because Karla shows us that appearance – miscegenated and a-racial – and origin – Black – are not necessarily mutually exclusive in terms of conceptualizing race in Brazil. This allows us to problematize Oracy Nogueira's foundational proposal. But it does not mean that racism in Brazil is coming closer to functioning in the way that it does in the United States. Judging by the retrospective that hair allowed me to conduct, it seems that we are facing a type of tug of war. We see on one hand an intense movement to claim Black identity, as the use of kinky hair and turbans synthesize so well. We find styles that unequivocally claim race, both for those who look and for those who wear them, thus contributing to denunciations of racism. On the other hand, we witness a tenacious call to miscegenation and its renewed prestige, amid disputes over taste involving Black hair and White hair, like the conflicts in schools indicate.

The dominant discourses thus remain side by side with emergent ones. On one hand we see an evolution towards more ancestral modes of recognizing race, which make it visible and unquestionably explicit, avoiding any possibility of hiding racism. On the other hand we face a very traditional perspective about race in Brazil, which considers it as an inexistant problem and considers racial democracy to be a greater good that must be guaranteed. If changes in Black hairstyles led me to think that we were headed towards a change of paradigms, no longer defining race by phenotype but by descendance, the conflicts involving children and their hair in the same period had me note the coexistence of two antagonistic forms of operating racism and conceiving race in contemporary Brazil.

But this is not the same as saying that nothing has changed, as the writer Sueli Carneiro and the singer Mano Brown noted well in a recent conversation. She said: "The standard changed. And if Blacks are not smart, they'll get burned. [...] What happens today is: They are saying to us that it's going to be direct, head-on and objective. And violent" (MANO A MANO, 2022, 1:27:28; 1:26:41). And Brown reiterated: "there's no more accord" (MANO A MANO, 2022, 1:32:53). The distinct strategies for dealing with racism that the different hairstyles allowed me to accompany, signify not only changes in the mode of dealing with racism, but also in its modes of

13 Funkeiro refers to people who attend "funk" music parties. Favelado is a term, at times used disparagingly, to refer to people who live in favelas. Although favela residents often describe themselves as "favelados" with pride.

operating in Brazil. The prefix co, as in the "coexistence" mentioned in the previous paragraph, indicates a side-by-side existence, but not one based on tolerance, as the multiculturalist uses may have us believe.

If I had previously conceived of non-harmonic relations as ambiguous modes of producing relations – as in Strathern's "partial connections" (STRATHERN, 2004) – inherent to conflicts that are objectified through the taste that was transforming Rio de Janeiro (MIZRAHI, 2014), now what produces points of contact is stereotype, the operator that allows exercising racism and confronting it, functioning as a counter image to that which produces the representation. The result is a disturbing reality, marked by the concomitant existence of two framings and by the constant challenge that one exercises over the other. It is a conviviality between conceptions of race and Blackness that is not at all harmonious, in which diacritical signs have a crucial role. If on one hand these concepts are triggered to demand a return to miscegenation – by means of taste - by disdaining kinky hair, and thus exercising racism, on the other they are used to remove the ambiguity to claims to Blackness and exalt the kinks. Or to do as Maxwell Alexandre does. If a Black with blonde hair is for Whites a sign of the periphery, carrying all the meanings of want and absence normally associated to it, Alexandre will circulate in the hegemonic and White spaces with blond hair.

It appears possible to say that styles that challenge racism and forms of conceiving race vary with their time, and with the climate of their time, which is expressed through taste, fashions, and styles. An aesthetic *ambiance* allows or even demands the circulation of discursivities that are more or less explicit, offering specific routes for challenging racism, including stylistic ones, as we saw with the Black hairstyles used to confront the return of the erasure of race that accompany the ideals of miscegenation. With these new styles of Black hair we witness new political strategies and approaches for confronting the dominant discourses about race and racism in Brazil. The conflicts that we see, and the challenge made by one to the other, are perhaps the expression that in Brazil, more than a change of paradigms, we are witnessing the conviviality of both.

This is a non-harmonious conviviality that is expressed in antagonistic stylistic choices: the "Afrocentered" hair and the "miscegenated" hair. In the Afro used by the boy who could not renew his school registration, and the straight hair of the girl who provided the ideal of beauty for all the girls of the school we see the ironic elaboration of one style over another. The fact that both styles are contemporary speaks to us of a non-solution and a non-conciliation and of how the two schemes can coexist in Brazil today. The defense of racial democracy and the racism of denial appear to continue to be alive and active along with explicit claims to Blackness. Therefore, if it seems to be too soon to affirm that we are heading towards a change of paradigms, it also does not seem adequate to say that we are living at the limits of progress in Brazil. This seems to be the extra data that Karla and her gloss brought to this article, by calling my attention to the tensions that produce her *Black* self.

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