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Brazil and its African Mirror
Discussing 'Black' Approximations
in the South Atlantic

André Cicalo



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Research Network on Interdependent
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Brazil and its African Mirror

Discussing 'Black' Approximations in the South Atlantic

André Cicalo

Abstract

The article links reflections about Brazilian race relations with institutional transnational dialogues between Brazil and 'Africa'. I point out that although racial/cultural mixture and the 'brown' census category have traditionally reflected much of national identity in Brazil, Brazil today is increasingly spelling out its blackness, both on the national and international scenes. This is happening at a historical moment when programs of 'black' affirmative action and other differential politics in favor of Afro-descendants are taking off in the country, and also at a time when Brazil is expanding its geopolitical and economic interests in Africa, by and large under the name of 'South-South cooperation'. By my analysis, I suggest that while Africa is an interesting terrain for Brazilian geopolitical expansion and leadership in the South Atlantic, these transatlantic links may also represent a new frontier for the study of race relations in Brazil.

Keywords: Brazil | race relations | international relations

Biographical Notes

André Cicalo holds a PhD in Social Anthropology with Visual Media at the University of Manchester (UK). Previously he was a project manager in the development field in Colombia. He is presently a Post-doctoral Researcher for desiguALdades.net in Berlin working on a project on transnational dialogues between 'Africa' and Brazil. Among other work, he is the author of the book "Urban Encounters: Affirmative Action and Black Identities in Brazil" (New York: Palgrave MacMillan 2012), and the article "Nerds and Barbarians": Race and Class Encounters through Affirmative Action in a Brazilian University', *Journal of Latin American Studies* 44: 2 (May 2012), pp. 235-260. He is also the author of the ethnographic documentary film "Memories on the Edge of Oblivion", where he critically explores the scarce representation of slave memory in the urban landscape of Rio de Janeiro. At the moment, he is preparing a new project about the process of creation of slave heritage in the harbor area of Rio de Janeiro.

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1. Introduction

Since the end of the nineteenth century, Brazil has enjoyed international renown as a racial 'democracy' and a mixed-race country, due to its mixture of people of European, African and Amerindian descent. This history of race relations is to some extent reflected in the official censuses of IBGE (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics), in which Brazilians are conventionally divided into white (*branco*), brown-skinned (*pardo*) and black-skinned (*preto*) groups,¹ in addition to smaller numbers of indigenous and yellow (Asiatic) people. Although racial/cultural mixture and the 'brown' category have traditionally been considered to be rather representative for national identity in Brazil (Nobles 2000; Telles 2004), Brazil today is increasingly spelling out its blackness, both on the national and international scenes (Harsch 2004). This is happening at a historical moment when programs of 'black' affirmative action and other differential politics in favor of Afro-descendants are taking off in Brazil, and also at a time when Brazil is expanding its geopolitical and economic interests in Africa, by and large under the name of 'South-South cooperation' (Schläger 2007; Rodrigues 2010; Mantzikos 2010).

Copious literature has explored the historical and cultural ties between Africa and Brazil (Matory 1999 and 2005; Naro et al. 2007; Guerreiro 2000) and the symbolic role that the 'Mother' Africa still plays in Brazil (Pinho 2010; Segato 2007; Sansone 2002); other literature has focused on past and present international relations between these two realities (Saraiva 2010; Hurrell 2010; Captain 2010; Schläger 2007). A few authors (Alberto 2008 and 2011; Dávila 2008 and 2010; Saraiva 1993, Dzidzienyo and Turner 1981) have discussed how the history of Brazilian diplomacy in Africa has intersected with Brazil's history of race relations 'at home' until the 1970s or 1980s. However, other than some important references in Captain (2010) and Alberto (2011), there is little literature about more recent intersections between Brazilian race relations and Brazil's foreign affairs in Africa. The main goal of this working paper is to link these discussions from a diachronic perspective, giving continuity to other literature with reference to Brazil's race relations over the last decade. In this attempt, I show discontinuities and continuities with the past, at a moment when Brazil is experiencing growing international importance, and is making unprecedented efforts to fight social and racial inequalities at home.

In the first part of this paper, I analyze the history of Brazilian transnational relations with Africa, particularly from the 1960s, when Brazil started to develop a serious

¹ Figures from last Brazilian Census in 2010 show the following distribution: white 48%, brown-skinned 43% and black-skinned 8%. Indigenous and yellow people represent less than 2% of the population overall.

African agenda. I then highlight the use that politicians and diplomats have made of Brazilian *mestiçagem* between the 1960s and the 1980s to promote Brazil's geopolitical interests in Africa. By this means, I illustrate how ambiguities in diplomatic discourses have linked to the ambiguities typical of race relations and *mestiço* ideology in Brazil. This section will be important in understanding recent changes in Brazil's diplomatic discourses in Africa, which actually try to redress most of these ambiguities. In the second part of this paper, I discuss the shifting international situation that led the former President Lula (2003-2010) to reconfigure economic and political relations with Africa using a new language. I show that this language reflects the developments of Brazilian race relations over the last two decades, and that past discourses of a shared cultural 'Africanness' have been now superposed by the racial images of a shared, transatlantic 'blackness'.

2. Brazilian Racial Mixture and Bahia as a Link to Africa

Brazil is well-known as one of the countries in the Americas that has maintained solid connections with Africa since colonial times. This fact is due to a number of clear factors: (1) the largest proportion of the African slave trade was directed towards Brazil; (2) Brazil was the last American country to abolish slavery, in 1888; (3) some regions of Brazil are relatively geographically close to Africa in comparison to other countries in the Americas; (4) some African ethnic groups prevailed among slaves at certain times, favoring the survival and development of certain African traditions in Brazil; and (5) bi-directional trade and human flows persisted between the two shores of the Atlantic not only during slavery but also for a while after its abolition (Matory 2005; Alberto 2008). As a result, traces of Africa are consistently present in Brazilian folklore and national identity, as well as in the phenotypes and genetics of the Brazilian people (Pena et al. 2000).

Mário de Andrade and Gilberto Freyre were among several intellectuals who, from the beginning of the twentieth century, started to positively assess the black and African roots of Brazil. This reading, which took on nationalistic slants, came in reaction to eugenic views spreading from the late nineteenth century, which saw African genetic and cultural heritage as a problem for Brazilian development. Freyre (1961), in particular, celebrated how the Portuguese managed to create a new civilization in the inhospitable tropics, appropriating African and indigenous knowledge and mixing with these people to survive in a wild environment. This fact would explain why the Portuguese had been successful where other European colonial powers had failed. It would also explain why Brazil has traditionally enjoyed more harmonious race relations than the United States

and South Africa, which preserved rigidly-racialized systems for some time after the abolition of slavery.²

Despite some cultural continuities, economic and political ties between Brazil and Africa were interrupted until at least the first half of the twentieth century, achieving more institutional structure especially from the 1960s under the presidential mandates of Quadros (1961) and Goulart (1961-1964) (Alberto 2008: 84; Saraiva 2010; Dávila 2010). Seeing Africa as an opportunity for the expansion of the Brazilian economy, these presidents opened a number of Brazilian embassies in West Africa, and intensified diplomatic tours to the African continent. In their view, not only could Brazil take advantage of African raw materials and find new frontiers for the Brazilian market in Africa (Saraiva 1993: 221, 231), but Brazil was also the country that could ‘civilize’ Africa without de-culturalizing it, being the natural link between Africa and the West, two realities to which Brazil was deeply attached for historical reasons (Alberto 2008: 84).

Dávila (2010) points out that at least until the 1970s, Brazilian presidents and diplomats of Itamaraty, the Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, consistently exploited the image of Brazilian racial democracy and racial mixture (*mestiçagem*) to gather sympathy in Africa. Brazilian politicians and diplomats used Brazil’s African cultural legacy as a reason to convince African countries of the natural closeness between these two realities. This legacy was emphasized through the common Portuguese language and colonial past with some African countries. With countries such as Nigeria, Ghana and Benin, however, the legacy was explained by African traditions that had prevailed in Afro-Brazilian culture as a consequence of the black diaspora. Cultural contributions from these areas were especially visible in Afro-Brazilian food and the African-derived faith of Candomblé. Scholars contend that (white) Itamaraty diplomats used this common heritage to present Brazil as a country of ‘Africans of any colors’ (Dávila 2008: 512), or as ‘the main African nation outside Africa’ (Saraiva 1993: 225), trying to disguise the actual color differences existing between them and their African counterparts (Saraiva 1993: 232).

The inauguration of Brazil’s African Affairs politics was also accompanied by the creation of several centers of African studies in Brazil (Saraiva 1993), which also played a role in helping Itamaraty to flirt with African audiences. For example, Itamaraty invested in the creation of the Center of African and Oriental Studies (CEAO) at the Federal University of Bahia, and promoted the arrival of African exchange students at that

² However, Tannenbaum (1947) criticized Freyre’s view about the positive attitude of the Portuguese to racial mixture. For example, he discusses how Portuguese colonists in Africa did not mix with other ‘races’.

university. There was a growing view that Bahia, in the north-eastern region of Brazil, represented Brazil's umbilical cord to Africa, due to the significant presence of a black population and the survival of African-derived traditions in this area. As Minister Lauro Escorel Morães said in 1961:

Brazil's cultural policy on Africa will rely fundamentally on the University of Bahia and on this cultural ambience which combined with traditions in the field of Afro-Brazilian Studies... and resulted into the cultural and human contacts with the young African nations (in Alberto 2011: 240).

From that moment until today, Bahia has been officially promoted as a sort of showcase for African visitors and politicians, trying to convince them that, to some extent, they have never left home (Alberto 2011: 240).

3. The 'Transnational' Ambiguities of Brazilian Racial Democracy (1960s-1980s)

The discourse of Brazilian racial democracy, between the 1960s and 1980s, was marked by deep contradictions due to Brazil's racial inequality 'at home', which have nonetheless emerged even more strikingly in its official encounter with Africa.

One immediate contradiction is that Brazilian diplomats were white (Dzidzienyo and Turner 1981), and this color difference never passed unnoticed among their African counterparts. Quadros, during his presidential mandate, was the first Brazilian authority figure to realize the peculiarity of undertaking an African agenda without black professionals for African missions. This is also the reason why the first two black ambassadors that Brazil strategically chose for Ghana and Nigeria between 1961 and 1964 were not professional diplomats but a journalist (Souza Dantas) and an athlete (Adhemar Ferreira da Silva) respectively.³

A second contradiction is that, despite official celebrations of the Brazilian racial paradise even in the 1980s, some national and foreign thinkers began criticizing the myth of Brazilian racial democracy already in the early 1950s. Nogueira (1985 [1954]), Costa-Pinto (1998 [1953]), Bastide and Fernandes (1971 [1959]) and Azevedo (1975), among other intellectuals, showed that racism against black people was present in Brazil and could not be explained simply by the traditional argument of class differentials and the general rigidity of Brazilian social mobility. Azevedo (1975: 41-42), in particular, describes the clear discrimination suffered by black students and upper class people

³ For a discussion of this, see Dávila 2008.

from Africa in Bahia. Equally importantly, these authors highlighted the peculiarities of Brazilian racism, which was difficult to tackle due to its veiled nature and indirect manifestations. These studies had significant international resonance as they were funded by UNESCO, which had sponsored research to understand the 'secrets' of Brazilian racial democracy (Maio 1999).

A third controversial point is that this phase of official celebration of racial democracy coincided with its contestation by Brazilian black activists and intellectuals (Saraiva 1993: 234). Abdias do Nascimento (1979 and 1982) was one of the main black thinkers at the time who denounced that the official championing of racial democracy had the perverse effect of alienating black people from racial consciousness. As a consequence of this growing contestation, the advent of the military rule in Brazil in 1964 coincided with a phase of repression of the black movement, at least until the period of *abertura democrática* began in 1975. This period also coincided with intensive governmental efforts to censor those Brazilian films and other media (in Brazil and in Africa) that exposed the racial tensions and prejudice present in Brazilian society (Dávila 2008: 502, Alberto 2011). This phase of state-patrolled racial democracy eventually culminated in the withdrawal of the color question from the census of 1970, which led to strong reactions from black activists until its reintegration in the 1980s (Nobles 2000).

A fourth (apparent) incongruity of state-championed racial democracy is that diplomatic discourses systematically avoided mentioning the involvement of Brazil in the slave trade between Brazilian independence (1822) and slavery's abolition (1888) (Saraiva 1993; Dávila 2010; Alberto 2008 and 2011). In fact, there was a substantial lack of knowledge of African history and traditions, as well as little consideration about its relation to the diaspora (Dávila 2008: 509). Dávila (2008), for example, mentions that many of the traditions celebrated in diplomatic discourses (Candomblé, for example) were actually presented as part of popular folklore. They were, in fact, primarily understood as symbols of backwardness, without enjoying significant official consideration either in Brazil or in the African regions from where they originated.

Fifth, in spite of its identification with black Africa and the sympathies of Quadros for the decolonization process in Africa (Saraiva 1993: 221), Brazil gave substantial support to Portuguese colonization. In addition, Brazil kept important commercial links with South Africa, despite its official reprobation of the apartheid regime (Alberto 2011: 251). The ongoing loyalty to Portugal, in fact, had been inhibiting relations between Brazil and Portuguese colonies in Africa. However, the decolonization movement represented a strong force towards the empowerment of the black movement in Brazil and its role in social contestation (Larkin 1981; Saraiva 1993: 234).

Finally, official discourses of *mestiçagem* were contradicted by a parallel effort to champion Bahia as a 'pure' part of Africa, which had not been diluted through national racial mixture and had preserved its African specificities (Alberto 2011: 243; Dávila 2010). Not coincidentally, the 1960s and 1970s were a period of consistent re-Africanization of Bahia, especially through Yoruba⁴ use of Candomblé practices (Parés 2010), which had necessarily creolized with other traditions in Brazil. In this way, both in popular imagination and in political discourses, Brazilian blackness started a gradual process of simplistic territorialization and idealization specifically in relation to Bahia. While remaining a peripheral region in Brazil's political and economic life, Bahia nonetheless started to emerge as guardian of African-derived traditions and African purity in Brazil.

Although presented in terms of contradictions, these six points seem generally coherent with the nature of racial mixture in Latin America as theorized by Wade (2005), who posits the double nature of Latin-American *mestizaje*. On the one hand, according to Wade, *mestizaje* configures as a 'lived experience' in the everyday life of Latin-American people, who appreciate cultural and racial mixture as inextricable components of their identities. On the other hand, *mestizaje* also works as an imaginary 'puzzle', whose ethnic and racial tesserae are still distinguishable and hierarchically placed, with white-European at the top of the scale, and 'afro' and indigenous at the bottom. This theory of Latin American *mestizaje* can be easily used in Brazil, showing how ideals of mixture and separate uses of blackness have been perfectly compatible within the history of unequal race relations in Brazil.

4. Affirmative Action and the Re-discovering of Africa in Brazilian African Affairs

The process of decolonization of Portuguese colonies in Africa in the 1970s opened up new spaces for Brazilian-African relations without the interference of Portugal. In the 1980s and the 1990s, however, there was a substantial decrease in contact between Brazil and Africa, as the international economic crisis marginalized both Africa and Brazil in the international system (Ribeiro 2010: 75). This trend continued in part during the presidential mandate of Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995-2002), when Brazil attempted to strengthen its economy by reinforcing the neoliberal turn and establishing a dialogue with more developed partners (Lechini 2008: 64-65).

In spite of this decreased dialogue between Brazil and Africa, Cardoso's mandate saw significant advances in terms of racial equality in Brazil. Cardoso's government

⁴ The Nigerian ethnic group whose traditions are assumed to have greatly influenced the Candomblé faith and food, due to the high number of people of this group among the African slaves and their advanced political and cultural organization (Parés 2010; Alberto 2008; Matory 2005).

coincided with Brazil's preparations for the International Conference on Racism in Durban in 2001, where Brazil emerged as an international reference due to its declared commitment to fighting racial prejudice at home (Htun 2004). In addition, the period of incipient neoliberalism opened by Collor de Mello and consolidated under Cardoso favored the emergence of the Brazilian black movement and the consolidation of its transnational connections (Escobar and Alvarez 1992).⁵ The same Cardoso – albeit unsuccessfully – also invited IBGE to gather dark-skinned and brown-skinned people into a single black (*negro*) category, along the same lines as were supported by the black movement from the 1980s (in Telles 2004). In addition, Cardoso promoted a program of scholarships for promising Afro-descendant students who planned to undertake careers in the diplomatic service.⁶ Finally, it was under Cardoso's mandate that a law was passed in the State of Rio de Janeiro reserving university openings for black students, blazing the trail for black affirmative action in Brazil. This new scenario from the late 1990s led to an inversion of the trend, and Africa took on new importance in the eyes of Brazil. This process of identification with Africa also led to a clause in the 1988 Brazilian Constitution which established a procedure for ascriptions of untitled land to communities that claimed to descend from runaway slaves (Arruti 1997; French 2009); the recognition of such rights was then reinforced by the Brazilian ratification (in 2002) of the ILO Convention 169/1989 for the protection of the rights of indigenous and tribal people.

Brazilian-African relations grew dramatically closer during Lula's presidential mandate (2003-2010). From the time of his first mandate, Lula explicitly committed to improving relations with the African continent, carrying out an unprecedented number of diplomatic missions, generally followed by the ratification of economic and aid agreements between African countries and Brazil. As diplomat Jorge (in Ortiz, 2011) pointed out to the Brazilian media, Lula visited 25 African countries during the eight years of his mandate, while his Minister for Foreign Affairs, Celso Amorim, carried out 60 African missions, visiting 40 countries. This new phase, to which the new President Dilma Rousseff remains committed, has coincided with two interlinked phenomena on the international and national levels: the growth of Brazil's economic and political interests in Africa, and its domestic efforts to fight inequality.

⁵ Escobar and Alvarez (1992) discuss how the development of 'new' social movements based on 'identity' (instead of the traditional ones based on 'class') have become entangled with a framework of neo-liberalism and globalization that are also related to a process of democratization and the emergence of civil society in Latin America. They relate these conditions to a less pervasive presence of the state in disciplining social life, to the growth of the third sector (NGOs for example), and the development of transnational channels of political organization and funding.

⁶ Programa de Ação Afirmativa do Instituto Rio Branco – Bolsa Prêmio de Vagação para a Diplomacia, in: http://www.institutorio Branco.mre.gov.br/pt-br/programa_de_acao_afirmativa.xml. (Last access May 31, 2012).

On the international level, the recent emergence of Brazil as a world economic power has turned Africa into a strategic ally for the consolidation of its international leadership. In the context of economic expansion, Africa represents, more than ever, an appealing market for Brazilian products and a crucial reservoir of raw materials and fuel. For this reason, trade between Brazil and African countries tripled in size between 2002 and 2006 alone (Schläger 2007; Captain 2010), and PETROBRAS, the largest energy company in Brazil, is making massive investments in the African fuel sector, extending its reach from Angola to Nigeria, Tanzania, Mozambique and Benin to extract oil and produce bio-fuel.⁷ From a different perspective, Africa is increasingly crucial to Brazil in order for Brazil to achieve international prestige and leadership. In fact, while African countries hope to have their interests represented by Brazil at the international level (mainly before the IMF and the WTO), the support of these countries is indispensable for Brazil to establish a permanent place on the United Nations' Security Council (Saraiva 2010; Schläger 2007).

These relations between Brazil and African countries have grown in parallel to the intensification of Brazil's South-South (or 'horizontal') cooperation with Africa.⁸ This kind of cooperation, now widely encouraged by the UN (Valenzuela 2011) is built in opposition to traditional North-South ('vertical') cooperation, which until recently was the norm for peripheral and semi-peripheral countries in the world system. A crucial sector of exchange are programs of 'technical' cooperation, which represents 34% of Brazilian international aid to Africa, and especially serves lusophone countries such as Angola, Cape Verde, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau and São Tomé and Príncipe (Schläger 2007). These programs primarily include technical and professional training, actions to reduce HIV and hunger, peace-building processes (especially in Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau), and supporting research in technology and agriculture (Schläger 2007: 5, 9; Harsch 2004). In relation to this kind of cooperation, Saraiva (2010: 180) and Captain (2010: 191) stress the role of SEBRAE (Brazilian Micro and Small Business Support Service), EMBRAPA (Brazilian Agricultural Research Corporation) and SENAI (National Service for Industrial Training). Significant also is Brazil's participation in the construction and post-conflict reconstruction sectors in Angola, where most of the building contracts are held by the Brazilian company Odebrecht, which is also active in the areas of business and residential building. In addition, Brazil is emerging as a respected creditor before the IMF, with programs of financial cooperation in Africa, and credits mostly directed towards Angola (8% of Angolan GDP) (Schläger 2007: 7). A widely-held idea is that South-South cooperation between Brazil and Africa might

⁷ See: <http://tinyurl.com/biofuelsdigest> (Last access May 31, 2012).

⁸ As matter of clarification, the last decades have seen the growth of Brazil's South-South cooperation also outside Africa, especially with other Latin American countries.

be successful where previous efforts by more developed countries have failed, as Brazil and African countries share similar problems. In addition to this, Brazil is now increasingly seen as a point of reference for fighting social inequalities 'at home', deploying successful cash transfer programs such as the *Bolsa Familia* (Family Stipend), able to take millions of Brazilians out of poverty, and the *Programa 'Fome Zero'* (Zero Hunger Program) (Schläger 2007; Harsch 2004).

Brazil's domestic commitment to fighting poverty unquestionably represents an impressive credential for its process of moving closer to Africa. Having said that, as Captain (2010: 194) observes, Brazil's dialogue with Africa is also significantly intertwined with past and present issues of racial equality for Afro-Brazilians. Lula's presidential mandate, not by chance, coincided with the spread of black affirmative action and other measures in favor of Afro-descendants in Brazil. Amongst these measures, I will mention the wider implementation of racial quotas for university students, Law 10639/2003, which made African and Afro-Brazilian history and culture a compulsory subject in Brazilian schools, and the approval of the Statute of Racial Equality in 2010, which has consolidated the legal framework for the expansion of black affirmative action in Brazil.

Along with these innovations, Lula's mandate coincided with the growing movement to establish an institutional bi-racial (white/black) classification system, rather than IBGE's multiple-color classification system (white/brown/black). This logic would combine statistical data for *pretos* (black-skinned) and *pardos* (brown-skinned) people into a single black (*negro*) category, for two main reasons. On the one hand, this logic relies on the socioeconomic similarities observed between brown- and black-skinned Brazilian people (Hasenbalg 1979; Silva 1985), while on the other, it reflects black activists' aversion to the 'brown' (*pardo*) census category, which is seen as a form of whitening and as an obstacle to the formation of black consciousness in Brazil (Nascimento 1979 and 1982; Medeiros 2004; Telles 2004). The black movement, some researchers and a number of Brazilian authorities have actually lobbied for an official adoption of the bi-racial system in national censuses (Nobles 2000), a fact that would now convert Afro-Brazilians into half of the Brazilian population (*pardos* and *pretos* represent 43% and 8% of Brazilians respectively, according to the 2010 Census). Although never officially implemented in IBGE censuses, and in spite of its high contestation in public opinion,⁹ this bi-racial use of Brazilian color/race statistics has become fashionable in the social sciences (Jaccoud and Theodoro 2005) and in some media. It has also become fashionable in governmental institutions such as the IPEA (Institute of Applied

⁹ This bi-racial reading of the Brazilian race relations system, along with racially-based affirmative action, has been criticized for racializing Brazilian society and mixed-race identity, at the risk of undermining social cohesion (Fry et al. 2007; Kamel 2006; Folha Online 2008).

Economic Research)¹⁰ and in secondary IBGE reports that systematize official census data (Nobles 2000).

5. From Racial Mixture to 'Black' Brazil?

In the sections above, I have shown the ups and downs of historical relations between Brazil and Africa, and the aspects of transnational political economy that have significantly influenced these relations in their intensity and character. I have also shown that Brazil's identification with Africa has long relied on assumptions about the common cultural heritage between these two contexts, and on discourses of Brazil's 'Africanness' (Saraiva 1993; Dávila 2008). Aspects of this culturalist discourse remain to this day, as Lula confirmed when he called Africa 'one of the cradles of Brazilian civilizations' (Captain 2010: 190). Not by coincidence, the African countries with which Brazil has more intensely interacted are Portuguese-speaking, or other countries (i.e. Nigeria, Ghana and Benin) from which Brazil received a significant proportion of its slave population. An exception to this is South Africa, which is the only economy in Africa that could be somewhat compared to Brazil, and with which international relations seem more equal, not only at the discursive level (Schläger 2007). On the other hand, I point out that, despite the continued importance of these cultural links, Itamaraty's discourses about Africa now place less emphasis on Brazil's national miscegenation and racial harmony. Itamaraty, in its effort to address the contested ambiguities of Brazil's racial democracy, is instead foregrounding discourses of historical racial inequality. These discourses, which started making their institutional appearance under Cardoso, are now strategically projected onto Brazil's international politics.

The first pieces of evidence of this new trend were in Lula's official statement that Brazil has a 'debt' to Africa (Harsch 2004), and his apology to Africa for the role that Brazil played in the slave trade. Lula's visits to the UNESCO-promoted memorial sites of the diaspora, as well as his declarations held enormous diplomatic importance, so much so that Senegal's President, Abdoulaye Wade, called Lula the 'first black president of Brazil' (Folha de Pernambuco 2005). This attitude is in clear countertendency to earlier diplomatic approaches, which had promoted Brazilian-African relations by avoiding the problematic topic of slavery (Saraiva 1993: 226; Dávila 2008; Alberto 2011). As Amorim, the Foreign Affairs Minister from 2003 – 2010 clarified, the act of 'apologizing' to Africa is a symbolic one, but represents an unprecedented moment in the history of the relations between Brazil and Africa (Folha de Pernambuco, 2005). Under Lula, consequently, relations between Brazil and Africa have moved from the 'civilizing' discourse of the 1960s and the 1970s to the language of historic 'debt', international

¹⁰ See: <http://bit.ly/JvXj45> (Last access May 31, 2012).

development and South-South cooperation. In spite of some doubts raised about Brazil's neo-imperialist attitudes (Captain 2010; Schläger 2007), these transatlantic relations are now officially displayed at a level of relative equality and reciprocity (Ortiz, 2011; Saraiva 2010; Harsch 2004). In this way, at least in Itamaraty's discourses, Brazil presents itself less as the bridge between the poor, backward South and the rich, civilized North, and more as a partner that, jointly with Africa, can build a fairer path to development.

This new page in the history of the relations between Brazil and Africa also shows a change in the way that Brazil 'knows' Africa. As I pointed out above, Itamaraty's missions between the 1960s and the 1980s used Brazil's African heritage as a tool to seduce Africa. There was even the idea that Brazil had been able to preserve aspects of African traditions that had been lost in Africa, and that Brazil could tell Africa something about its own past. However, there was a substantial lack of knowledge in Brazil about Africa's history and reality (Dávila 2008). This process clearly shifted direction in the early 2000s. For example as an effect of the 'new' wave of black mobilization in Brazil and the process of affirmative action, Law 10639/2003 introduced the compulsory teaching of African and Afro-Brazilian History and Culture in the Brazilian school system. Law 10639/2003 was a clear reaction to the predominance of western epistemologies and history in the Brazilian curriculum and the need to re-discover Africa. The idea behind this law is that, despite Brazilian popular culture being imbued with Africa and blackness, these roots have not been sufficiently 'valued'. These cultural expressions, for example, had never reached the same level of respectability as European-derived knowledge and cultural forms, and not even the same recognition as the folklore of ethnic minorities in Europe (Sansone 2002: 252; see also Hall 1996).

Within this framework of national and official valorization of Brazilian blackness, Salvador da Bahia was chosen for the international launch of the Portuguese translation of the *Encyclopaedia História Geral da África*, promoted by UNESCO, in 2011, in close collaboration with CEAO and the Federal University of Bahia. The *Encyclopaedia*, which had previous versions in French and English, was translated by a Brazilian team and its objective was to provide the Lusophone world with a comprehensive account of African civilizations, culture and history. The event attracted the attendance of Brazilian and African academics and politicians, in addition to UNESCO officials, and made particular sense in the framework of Law 10639/2003. One of the main critiques of the implementation of this law, in fact, has been the significant absence of trained professionals for the teaching of African and Afro-Brazilian history and culture. Also in 2011, Salvador de Bahia hosted an impressive Afro-Luso-Brazilian Congress that gathered social scientists from all over the Portuguese-speaking world, under the

active coordination of the Federal University of Bahia and CEAO. In this way, Brazil is internationally emerging not only through its growing economy and its responsible political steps to tackle inequalities at home but it is also doing so through its growing respectability as a leader of the black South Atlantic.

Within this framework, it is understandable that the 'African'-related language of Itamaraty has started experiencing some changes. I have stated that, in the 1960s and 1970s, Brazilian authorities widely presented Brazil as a country of 'Africans of any colors'. In doing so, they were limited to emphasizing the country's cultural and racial tolerance, of which *mestiçagem* was both a cause and an effect. Similar declarations found some continuity with Cardoso when he publically admitted to having 'a foot in the kitchen' (some African ancestry). Lula and his Itamaraty diplomats, on the other hand, made a radical language change in their African missions, stating that Brazil is 'the country of the world that has the highest black (*negra*) population after Nigeria' (Harsch 2004; Ribeiro 2010). Even more emphatically, Lula's Foreign Affairs Minister, Celso Amorim (2003), used demographic data to declare that 'with 76 million Afro-descendants... [Brazil is] the second blackest nation in the world... and [consequently] the government is committed to reflect this reality in its foreign politics' (translation by the author). Such statements, more or less directly, convey an official image of Brazil as a 'black' country.

I observe that the Brazilian *Africanness* stated in earlier diplomatic missions and the Brazilian 'blackness' often championed today are somewhat different concepts. The 'blackness' discourse is, in fact, deeply influenced by contemporary Brazilian black politics. More precisely, it relates to the growing tendency to add together statistical figures for people classified in the census as brown- and black-skinned, a procedure that would have looked bizarre until the early 1980s, and which even today is controversial. By this means, the official discourses that are now used in Brazil's African Affairs superpose 'racial' slants on those discourses that had been more typically 'cultural' in pre-Lula times. This is not to say that definitions of Brazil as a 'black' country started circulating under Lula's presidential mandate. However, such declarations had normally previously come from Brazilian black activists and thinkers in reaction to the mystifying layers of the racial democracy ideology (Alberto 2011: 265; Nascimento 1979 and 1982). At the official international level, on the other hand, the definition of Brazil as a 'black' country was more typically heard from Nigerian authorities from at least the 1960s, when they tried to forge their own ideas of Africa's

continuities with Brazil (Saraiva 1993: 231-232).¹¹ What is really ‘new’, however, is the current use of this ‘black’ terminology in the context of Brazil’s foreign affairs.

A point that I should now emphasize is that this racializing logic relies on the ‘objectivity’ of Brazil’s demographic statistics about color/race. During Lula’s mandate, these statistics already showed that by summing IBGE figures for *pretos* and *pardos*, the Brazilian black population would rise to approximately half of the country’s total population (about 190 million overall in the 2010 Census). As a related fact, the 2010 census shows that the sum of *pardos* and *pretos* has finally passed the 50% threshold. The bi-racial reading of these census results has in fact encouraged some mass media to take a step further, stating that Brazil is now a black country in its majority.¹² Undeniably, this discourse of national blackness, objectified by demographic considerations, represents a good match for the Brazilian agenda in Africa, at the same time that it seems to distance itself from past uses of *mestiçagem* in Brazil’s foreign affairs.

In keeping with the historical processes and considerations presented in this paper, Itamaraty has decided to reserve ten per cent of its openings to black applicants in 2011, reinforcing Cardoso’s earlier initiative which had already introduced scholarships for promising Afro-descendant students willing to undertake careers in the diplomatic service. This decision displays, very powerfully, the intersections of debates about inequalities at the national and transnational levels. In fact, it recalls Quadros’ conundrum, in 1961, regarding setting an African diplomatic agenda without black Brazilian diplomats. Considering these recent policy changes, a crucial question is where Itamaraty will send its black diplomatic trainees. Sending them to Africa may strategically help to reinforce international links with countries on that continent. On the other hand, such a choice may also reinforce ideas of a crystallization and confinement of Brazilian blackness to Africa, instead of consecrating this blackness as an inextricable component of the Brazilian reality. These questions, I confess, are not completely new. Already in the 1960s, the President of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah, ironically concluded that the real evidence of Brazilian racial democracy would be the initiative of sending a black ambassador to a white country (Saraiva 1993: 224). If Brazil is a black nation, as Amorim (2003) declares, Nkrumah’s comment should no longer apply in theory. However, the question clearly remains and further research should contribute to its

¹¹ Saraiva (1993) posits that this kind of discourse from African authorities lies within the framework of a ‘culturalist’ construction of African-Brazilian connections. In my view, these declarations are more ‘clearly’ racial. In fact, they do not refer to the African-derived aspects of Brazilian culture that are enjoyed by people of any class and color in Brazil. They refer, instead, to the high number of Brazilians that can be considered as Afro-descendants due to color and phenotype.

¹² See the online magazine article: “Brasil: Censo ‘Revela’ Que Maioria da População Brasileira é Negra”, in: <http://pt.globalvoicesonline.org/2011/11/24/brasil-censo-populacao-negra/> (Last access May 31, 2012).

answer.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I have linked reflections on Brazilian race relations with present transnational dialogues between Brazil and 'Africa'. Without expecting to offer a complete analysis of a matter that would require a deeper interdisciplinary and transnational approach, I suggest the presence of a thriving field for potential research that awaits to be explored. My view is that while Africa is an interesting territory for Brazilian geopolitical expansion and leadership in the South Atlantic, these transatlantic relations also represent a new frontier for the study of Brazilian race relations in the present.

I first highlighted the fact that the dialogue between the two shores of the South Atlantic has been historically rich on the material and symbolic levels through history, interweaving with racial and racially-mixed aspects of national identity. In more recent times, I discussed the growing Brazilian interest in 'Africa', which coincides with a general attitude of asserting blackness 'at home' as well as at the transnational level. By doing so, I have suggested that there are continuities and discontinuities in the way that official discourses on race relations in Brazil intersect with the country's diplomatic and foreign agenda in Africa.

The transnational dynamics discussed in this paper should be further studied to understand what is really changing in Brazil's approach to racial inequalities. To this end, it is also important to keep our eyes open to how transnational affairs may influence race relations in Brazil. As a question for the future, I would ask whether foreign affairs with regard to Africa and Brazil's market ambitions may encourage Brazil to accelerate the process of including Afro-descendants in political and economic positions of power, in mass media and in the marketing of certain products 'at home'. Other questions relate to whether intensified aims to show the black/African components of Brazilian identity might lead to a certain essentialization and romanticization of blackness (and Africa), and its reductionism to Bahian traditional 'culture' and 'purity' (Alberto 2008 and 2011), as Pinho (2010) notes about the Afro-Brazilian tourist sector in Bahia. Other possible questions relate more directly to possibly mystifying aspects of an officially-stated blackness at the national and international levels. For example, one might ask how much the image of a state-championed 'unifying' blackness will replace the traditional myths of racial democracy and *mestiçagem*, disguising the internal inequalities in Brazil and abroad, or even disempowering the anti-hegemonic character of black claims

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Freie Universität Berlin
Boltzmannstr. 1
D-14195 Berlin, Germany

Tel: +49 30 838 53069
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e-mail: contacto@desiguALdades.net

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