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**THE COLOUR-BLIND SUBJECT OF MYTH  
OR WHERE TO WATCH AFRICA  
IN TELEVISION**

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## The colour-blind subject of myth or where to watch Africa in television<sup>1</sup>

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### Do They understand Us?

I start the adventure of this text while a book recently published by an Afro-North-American author on the Black movement in Brazil still echoes in my mind. In it, a statement can be read, where the author regrets the fact that no racially divided Christian churches, in the modalities of South African, pre-Zimbabwe Rhodesia or the United States, existed in Brazil (Hanchard 1994: 83). The supplementary assertion that "Afro-Brazilians [...] did not develop parallel institutions" of the kind Afro-North American did and that Candomble was not to be considered as such had appeared much earlier, in the opening pages of the book (Ib: 18). To the amazement of the reader, it is also suggested there that to look at *quilombos* or at African institutions as a source of reference and strength is a "backward glance" (ib. 164ff.), the kind of glance towards an already lost Euridice that decided Orpheus's death in the Greek myth. Paradoxically enough, he regards himself as an *African-American* and, as such, by definition and even if unaware of it as he seems to be, he is linking a commonality to a common *past* and betting plausible a common present on the basis of that shared past.

To this, it should be added that these opinions, on the part of the author I am quoting, can only be derived from the wrong perception that Africa, or quilombos, are facts of the past. This, in its turn, must surely emanate from the peculiar and quite exceptional experience of the Afro-North-American population where the author belongs, distinct from all other African people in the New World. Not only Africa continues to unfold with great vitality, every day, on both sides of the Atlantic, in the Southern Hemisphere, but also maroon populations continue their struggle for their rights to the land. Only in Brazil, they are hundreds of such communities already mapped and many more appearing every year as the outcome of new surveys and continuous research (see Leite 1991, and Carvalho 1995). The author's bias can only be explained by his own experience, as a citizen of the United States of America, and his inability to make the necessary shifts of mind in order to penetrate an alien world (Perhaps, even, we could guess, an ideologically interested reluctance, on his part, to concede a real difference, to acknowledge the possibility of a radical alternative in this other world).

Well within this line of argumentation, when I say an "Afro-North-American", the double hyphenation, the duplicated emphasis on the predicate, is a confessed maneuver on my part to point at the specificity of the experience of the African contingent in the US, and

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to the common amount of history they share with the White in this country. That is, a history of a peculiar type of capitalism, of enshrinement of the market, of a derived strong belief in war and violent means, of endorsement of an externally aggressive state machine, of an overall belligerent, anti-pacifist national character, and of the ultimate validation placed on individual achievement and the obtainment of unlimited profit.

To continue with the story of the very same day I approached this article for the first time, I want to tell that I also received a phone call from Edith Jackson, an African-North-American scholar from SUNY preparing a book on African Diaspora in Argentina. She had read an article I wrote on what I called the "re-ethnification" of Argentina, alluding to the introduction of Afro-Brazilian religious genealogies into a country where African presence had, as generally accepted by historians, mysteriously faded away (Andrews 1980; Segato 1991). But she could not understand, as much as we talked, that this claim to belong to an "African lineage" on the part of my Argentine informants did not refer to an "African ancestry" based on a commonality of blood, in North American terms, but invoked, as its basis, a commonality in belief, that is to say, a philosophical community. There was no way I could convince her that the white priest that appears in my article saying "I am black" did not simply "look white", like the main character of the film "The Imitation of Life", but was, in North American terms - not to say in fact, because what "a fact" would be in this case?"- white.

I have seen times beyond count in Brazil, and in Argentina now, white people willingly bending to the floor - in the submissive bows that rituals prescribe - in front of black persons. And I can even tell, for example, that the part of Brazil that had more forcefully expanded into the so-perceived white countries of Argentina and Uruguay in the latest years and by the spontaneous "opting out" of ordinary people, is the Black part. Black Brazil is seen by many as a source of Religion, where Art, well being, Philosophy, therapeutic knowledge and civilizing potential come with it. And Black is also a exporting force, trading South, though informally in most cases, the whole paraphernalia related to the cults. Peter Kloehn's photographs (being exhibited during this conference) are the best testimony of the strength of this Brazilian expansion towards the River Plate basin countries. They show the expansive potential of Afro-Brazilian Culture and the ability of its brokers, as evidenced by the highly elaborated altars, shot at newly formed cult-houses of Montevideo and Buenos Aires, where twenty years ago there were none.

Even if Michael Taussig (1987) were right in explaining this fascination and allocation of power to an "other" simply in terms of a mirroring and panicking world divided by oppression and colonization, we must seriously ask ourselves if we are going to map it out, to explain it out, discarding this power altogether only because, up to now, no one had the necessary ability to produce a plausible rethoric to translate it into the pragmatics of politics. The strength of African culture in Brazil and of its derived institutions has to be stated well beyond and in spite of the concupiscent reveries that come out from a dirty prose like Gilberto Freyre's, who, after his deceitful proclamation of a "racial democracy" for the country, has forever cast a shadow of doubt upon me and whoever comes forward to assert the African strength in Brazil on its own right.

So, do these examples have anything to tell specifically about racism? Is there any less racism in Brazil than in the US?. My answer is no, but, once again, racisms, in the US and Brazil, are different. Not different in intensity or quantities - variable which seems to be the only one scholars and social critics, with very few exceptions, are able to conceive.

But different in the cognitive operations they imply. In this sense, I would like to place this statement and the reflection that follows in the line of Kwame Appiah's enquiry on "racisms" (Appiah 1990), but in my case not by identifying the philosophical premises that lie behind differently motivated discriminations, but unearthing a differential "ethnic knowledge" encoded there and triggering off specific acts of exclusion. These examples can - and must - teach us something for the implementation of local strategies. They tell us not only how different could be the "politics of difference" in both countries but, indeed, how different they *are*.

I want to leave these two events showing Michael Hanchard's and Edith Jackson's difficulties in understanding other "African" experiences in the continent as a kind of vignette, a leit-motive that will recur glossed into the analysis that follows.

### **Reviewing hegemony in television**

What is African America (now in the very generic sense)? Where can it be seen? The following exercise is intended to demonstrate how intricate may be locating Africa. The two counterpoised television situations I will refer to have to be understood as a parable staging two very different ways of finding Africa in the New World, one from Brazil, the other from the US. They constitute an expressive allegory devised to reveal the contrasts between them.

The usual literature on race in TV assumes that observable race coincides with relevant social group for identification and results from searches that follow "visible" parameters. However, even this, as simple as it may seem, cannot be said without a degree of uncertainty - is Michael Jackson a "black singer" today? Aren't many members of the cast of Black Entertainment Television light enough as to be considered white were them to be watched in Latin America? However, analyses continue to focus basically on how many blacks are in the cast, what types of roles they play, what amount of stereotypy is present in the portrayal of black characters; how many derogatory ethnic labels are uttered; how segmented are the audiences according to colour lines. In the overall majority of the cases, quantitative methods are involved to characterize trends in the media in relation to race (See, for example, on Black presence in the cast and types of role in Brazil: Leslie, 1992 and Ferreira da Silva 1993. For similar issues in the U.S. see, as paradigmatic of this analytical genre: chapters 2, 4 and 13 in Greenberg 1980; McNally 1983; and, for a review of the basic literature: Berry 1982)

But, it may be that not all elements relevant to the verification of group affiliation can be actually "watched", or "heard", or in the least "counted", but have to be unearthed by a hermeneutics mediated by the public, by means of an understanding of reception. And most studies do not take into account the freedom of the audiences to "perceive". An example of this may be brought by the cases of *The Cosby Show* in the US, and one Brazilian popular soap-opera whose Afro-Brazilian audience I had the opportunity to join, day by day, during field-work in Brazil: the 'novela' *Agua Viva*. I bring these two cases here as emblematic and illustrative of the difficulties for tracing a line of colour whereby the resulting racial domains remain consistently associated with a recognizable set of cultural traits. In the American case, despite an all-black cast, White culture shows to be

pervasive. In the Brazilian case, despite the absence of black characters as such, a Black story seems to cast its spell over the drama. If, in a strict sense, they do not prove anything, these two cases can, nevertheless, be recalled to represent a given national society's prevalent myth to live by, and can help us to interrogate the place and the meaning of Africa in the New World. Later, I will discuss the benefits of analyses of this kind to render a racial politics able to succeed outside the US.

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### **North America: The all pervading White paradigm and the meaning of Blackness**

In the book *Enlightened Racism. The Cosby Show, Audiences, and the Myth of the American Dream*, the authors set for themselves the task of finding out "how American society thinks about race in the post-Civil Rights era" (Jhally, Sut and Justin Lewis 1992), and they found in *The Cosby Show* (TCS) a propitious locus for that inquiry, a revealing media narrative to shed light on the matter. The study counted on funds granted by Bill and Camille Cosby themselves who, despite financing the project, did not impose any constraints on its conclusions. Nevertheless, besides the importance of giving the Cosby family the recognition they deserve, this is relevant here, because it guarantees that my contention on the show, initially inspired by this book, will not be considered in any way biased to suit my main thesis. However, I want to make clear that I will draw from one specific characteristic of the show: to be staged by an all black cast but narrate a myth which is meaningful for the whole of the society, and notably for Whites.

The *Cosby Show* is a comedy presenting the everyday life of a family, the Huxtable. It began in 1984 and "it has become the most successful TV show in recent history, [...] It topped the annual ratings lists year after year in the second half of the 1980s, and, although it has been displaced from the number one spot in the 1990s, it retains an enduring place in the world of prime-time television" (Jhally and Lewis 1992: 1). Its peculiarity resided on the fact that the Huxtables are a post civil-rights, upper-middle-class, sophisticated and highly functional Black family, whose parents are liberal professionals - a gynecologist and obstetrician the father, a lawyer the mother- with one of the children studying at Princeton (the older daughter) and an established habit of finding leisure in purchasing expensive works of art and travelling in Europe. They, we could say, represent the elite of the country, in terms of income and education. The patterns set by the show for family life style and educational trends do not differ in the slightest from White standards.

Most problems TCS addressed have the characteristic of been common to the whole of the North American society, like sexism and inter-generational conflicts, and it systematically avoided problems that are specifically black (Downing 1988: 60). The relation of the characters with the few white that interact with them was "personal, totally transcending 'race'", "with none of the false friendliness or the eye-avoiding tension that normally pass for race 'relations' in the United States" (Ib.: 62). Above all, the culture it represented and the aspirations it expressed did not differ minimally from white aspirations. Of course this was revolutionary, since it started an "age in which black actors no longer have to suffer the indignities of playing a crudely limited array of black stereotypes"(Jhally

and Lewis 1992: 131), and of course it was "healing": "Cosby's wit [...] is fundamentally a healing wit directed always to the construction or reconstruction or reaffirmation of caring human relationships" (Downing op.cit. : 66). But, there is the need to add, it was certainly not *universal*, as it is suggested: "*The Cosby Show* [...] appealed to the *universal* themes of mobility and individualism" (Gray 1995: 89) Much at the contrary, the myth that underpins the series is a very specific one: it is a white middle class myth of individual achievement. "It is a separate-but-equal inclusion. In this television world, blacks and whites are just alike save for minor differences of habit and perspective [...] In this televisual black world, African Americans face the same experiences, situations, and conflicts as whites except for the fact that they remain separate but equal" (Gray op.cit.: 87). "The Huxtable family is *universally* appealing, then, largely because it is a middle-class family that *happens* to be black" (Ib.: 80). This is, evidently, the hegemonic, all pervading myth, in the US, where there seems to be no room for an alternative myth or an alternative reading of the tale. This seems to be confirmed by Dowling's words: "Because social class mobility and success are important components of dignity and cultural perception in the United States, the class position of the Huxtable family is likely to convey a positive message about black dignity" (Dowling op.cit.: 68). We are led to conclude that, within the hegemonic ideological frame of the North American nation, there seems to be no open avenue left towards any assertion of dignity for the black and poor, or for black dignity within alternative mores. "America", as a set of national values stamped by its Anglo-Saxon, white, foundation, has definitely taken over.

I cannot avoid recalling Werner Sollors's critique of the role of ethnicity delimiting - artificially, he believes - North American literary lineages:

In an article in *Center Magazine* (July/August 1974), Nathan Huggins observed: 'Despite what one may suspect, an Afro-American and the grandson of a Polish Immigrant will be able to take more for granted between themselves than the former could with a Nigerian or the latter with a Warsaw worker'. It is, ironically, because Americans take so much for granted among themselves that they can dramatize their differences comfortably. Ethnicity is thus constantly being invented anew in contemporary America (Sollors 1986: 14)

In other words, this is a unified society, unified by a single myth of upward mobility for all, which can safely play out the existence of separate territories just because that unifying myth exists. Based on his erudite knowledge of American "literatures" and applying Barth's views on ethnicity - where content is of no relevance but borders are what counts - to the U.S., Sollors contends that

...ethnic groups in the United States have relatively little cultural differentiation, that the cultural *content* of ethnicity [...] is largely interchangeable and rarely historically authenticated. [...]. From such a perspective, contrastive strategies - naming and name-calling among them - become the most important thing about ethnicity.[...]. A series of recent slurs, often hurled by some ingroup speakers against people who threaten the fixidity of mental boundaries based on race,

scolded blacks as Oreos, Asians as bananas, Indians as apples, and Chicanos as coconuts - all with the structurally identical criticism "they're white inside!". The warning had no specific cultural content but served as an interchangeable exhortation to maintain boundaries (Ib.: 28)

Therefore, according to this author, descent - black and white, before and after the Civil Rights era - is a peremptory and unified principle in the US, while an ideology of consent, in the sense of free choice, prevails in all other areas of social life. This is inverted, he says, in cases like Brazil and Cuba, where most areas of social life are pre-determined, but descent depends on consent. In a context like the North American, ethnic politics within a unified ideological field must mean of necessity competition for the same resources, and not the conflict between diverging views on resources. This is true for a society where hegemony, in Gramsci's terms, is totalizing, and where, despite the appearances, diversity, in the strong sense of diverse conceptions about resources, their production, usufruct and the values referring to them, has been overridden. Even religion, which usually plays the role of warranting diversity in this strong sense of content, has been largely homogenized behind the façades of ornamental diacritics: "in the United States of America [...] a particular form of Bible interpretation has served as a rationale for the whole country as well as for many ethnic groups"(Sollors, op.cit: 39). Individual dropping out is the only available road to escape.

Ironically, it is a Brazilian actress (Sonia Braga) and character (Mrs Westlake, the Math's teacher of the Huxtables only son, Theo, a Brazilian woman married to an American) who voices the myth-for-all at the series:

At one point Mrs Westlake is describing her previous jobs as a waitress and a taxi driver, and in the course of doing so turns to Theo: 'I didn't mind. I was in America. I knew that if I worked hard I could be whatever I wanted. That's why I make you work so hard. I don't like it when I see children take education for granted . That is why I'm tough.' Here are combined the American Dream, the Protestant Ethic, a middle-class view of education and discipline, all in the mouth of one of Brazil's most popular screen actresses, Sonia Braga. (Downing op.cit.: 53)

Undoubtedly, the "meritocratic mythology that fuels the American dream" (Jhally and Lewis: 97) is the strongest regulatory force and most foundational architecture lending life and sense to this comedy, and also explaining its success among all audiences. Jhally and Lewis reflect: "Perhaps white people do not actually see the "Huxtables as a black family at all. Perhaps they see them as white - or as some shade of gray in between.[...] We discovered that many white people do not view the Huxtables as only black [...] most members of our white audience saw the Huxtable family as simultaneously black *and* white". (Jhally and Lewis op.cit.: 98). Most of the respondents, indeed, saw the Huxtables as "just like 'us' " (Ib. 46 ff.). However, it is extremely significant here that, in the survey they made among black audiences, the authors found that, among them, they were seen as unquestionably black: "Overwhelmingly, the Huxtables were seen by black viewers as 'really black'". Colour was determinant and, at the most, the sense of culture was kept, for some respondents, in "the mannerisms, the 'tone'and 'feeling' of black life[...] the 'structure

of feeling'of the group" (Ib.: 53-54). Gratitude was expressed "for giving back ourselves"(Ib.: 48 ff.). This means, plainly, I understand: for giving them legitimacy within the American Myth. The utopian thinking emerging here is: to remain racially black, but to become culturally white.

"This tells us something about the nature of modern racism. The blackness that many white people fear or regard as inferior is no longer simply a function of skin pigmentation; blackness is seen, instead, as the cultural category that appears to bind most black people to certain class positions, to stunt their capacity for upward mobility [...], this neoracism is the only way to explain why the Huxtables have made it in the United States where most black people have not" (Ib.: 110). Through awkward ways, we are delivered back into the trap of some kind of formulation of a "culture of poverty", where, by means of the action of the overpowering rhetorics of the myth of individual achievement and unlimited profit, poverty is the only thing left for the sake of culture to the black. I return to my question: where is Africa, then, in the US? Shall we accept to equate once and for all Africa with poverty? Is there nothing left to "africannes" outside material deprivation? Is there anything whatsoever in between this and its assigned reversal of a minority-within-a-minority of achievers in White terms? Is politics to be reduced merely to a struggle for a share in the profit? Is this not the shipwreck of Africa, left over by the American myth?

To find an alternative, to find a true territory of culture, we have to find an alternative myth, with an alternative set of values. And produce, from it, a carefully articulated alternative rhetorics. Its heroes will have not merely to get to achieve and conquer, but will have to be able to contest the meaning of achievement and conquest. This myth will not be an encapsulated, solipsistic myth, because none of the working myths are, but a living one: a myth in relationship, a negotiating, conversational platform. I contend that myth, or several of them, do still exist, making the Afro-American world truly diverse and diverging, and speaking of a lively Africa.

It is here where my politics and the one formulated by Hanchard find their true divide. He says, about Brazil: "...many of the working poor do *not* have a 'hidden transcript' [...], that is to say, a strategic agenda of private, ideological interests that contradict public articulations of either consent or material compliance with dominant actors in a given society" (Hanchard op.cit.: 71). I believe a statement like this could only arise from the fact that this author, despite criticizing the leaders of the Brazilian Black movement for their "culturalist" outlook in detriment of a real immersion in what he calls a "cultural process", he himself incurs in a total disregard of the "cultural process" at work in the Brazilian milieu. American organic intellectuals of the Black movement like Hanchard, and Brazilian black intelligentsia turning to them for a program of action had unfortunately turned away from local cultural sources, where culture means much more than a "culturalist" perspective or its "cultural process" counter-proposal by Hanchard:

Culturalism is defined as the equation of cultural practices with the material, expressive, artifactual elements of cultural production, and the neglect of normative and political aspects of a cultural process. Within culturalist politics, cultural practices operate as ends in themselves rather than as means to more comprehensive, heterogeneous set of ethico-political activities. In culturalist practices, Afro-Brazilian and Afro-Diasporic symbols and artifacts become reified and commodified; culture becomes a thing, not a deeply political process (Ib.: 21)



This is well in tune with Hanchard's dismissal of Afro-Brazilian cultural institutions altogether to which I referred earlier. And one is left wondering what, in this case, would be the content of the "cultural process" or the "culture of a deeply political process" he refers to. One is also led to suspect that the thesis would be the plain transference of Afro-North-American slogans, strategies and objectives to Brazil.

Hanchard's view of "culture" does not differ much from the very "culturalism" he rejects. The problem with the leaders of the Afro-Brazilian movement is not, as Hanchard suggests, that they value too much Afro-Brazilian cultural symbols but, I believe, that they value them too little, unable to hear the voices that resound in them as inspirational for a national politics of Africa in Brazil. As Hanchard says, culture has been taken no more than in an emblematic fashion in an effort to counteract the constant appropriation of African symbols by the whole of the Brazilian nation and their consequent nullification for a political identity:

In the attempt to reverse this process of symbolic depoliticization, Afro-Brazilian activists of the 1970s attempted, and were often successful in, infusing new meanings into old Afro-Brazilian symbols and cultural practices [...]. The consequences of the infusion of new, racially charged meanings into national discourse were ambiguous. Although this infusion did lead to new expressions of solidarity and organization among Afro-Brazilians, it resulted in the use and appropriation of cultural practices as ends in themselves rather than as means to broader, more comprehensive ethico-political activities (Hanchard 1993: 59)

But the thing is not re-"appropriating" the culture, in a new act of cannibalism, but, after we accept that there *exist* some sound Afro-Brazilian traditions - and, let me warn the numb that this here is an understatement charged with ironic overtones - the very thing is, through a honest act of "hearing" and dialogue, to become able to learn what do they have to say. In other words, the move should not be to "infuse" new meaning in them but to look for what do they mean and where could lie a *possible* politics within them. And what I find is that Hanchard himself falls back into the same emblematic view of culture he criticizes, where symbols constitute an ornamental, epiphenomenal secretion but not a possible language to convey an alternative political discourse, a source of knowledge, an ontological disposition, and a value in itself. Conversely, I have been led to believe that there is a political commentary in the particular instrumentalization of myth by a consenting group of people in a given moment of history. Myths, cryptically, metaphorically, are put to talk. Any politics, to become plausible and get to involve that group must be able to "hear" and draw from the *parti-pris* myths convey when put at work in the course of interaction. In other words, myth does not merely "identify" or set boundaries, but formulates the very array of contents of the category "identity" in any given case, however engaged this contents may be within a broader context. I believe that an effective Afro-Brazilian politics should of necessity involve the coinage of at least some of the Afro-Brazilian mythical messages (spoken with the lexicon provided by tradition but referring to a present situation) into a political rhetorics.

In Brazil, the very problem of exclusion has produced that parts of the population

which cannot even aspire to participate in "modernity" or be fully engulfed by its myths, continue to build up their own forms of sociability, alternative modes of access to and distribution of (here better described as "sharing") resources, as well as an idiosyncratic channeling of desire towards its satisfaction. So, hegemony, as a unified field shaping desire and designing its avenues is not totalized as in the US. In this sense, some parts of Brazil, those fully engaged in a quest for modernity, can be said to be a periphery of the technologically developed world, but there still is an *other* culture (where "other" does not imply a fix set of enclosed contents). This *other* culture becomes interpreted as a "culture of poverty", defined by lack, only when seen from the perspective of the centers that control the market rules or as part of a periphery craving for signifiers of modernity. However, although the peripheralization of the radically *other* world is a growing reality, it is also true that, as long as there remain autonomous enclaves not fully engulfed by the inexorable logic of the market, there will also be alternative myths, with an outlandish (from the market's point of view) perception of resources and exotic notions of what to do with them - some would like to describe these notions as "dysfunctional beliefs", because seen, again, from the so-believed paramount and unescapable logic of the market. In this perspective, "globalization" is the name given nowadays to this twofold process of simultaneous engulfing and peripheralization.

In other contexts, "creolization" is also, sometimes, applied in this sense, to describe an intermediary stage of this process of assimilation and loss as a fact of nature, a proto-biological fact of hybridation, thus depoliticizing the discourse about the engulfing and peripheralizing ruled by the laws of the market. Still, even some Post-colonial writing implies this idea that periphery is the only available space (geographical, cultural, ideological) for otherness.

On the other side of the picture, the hegemonic forces oppose a mechanism of "othering". This "othering" push can be better understood as a countervailing, evicting pressure applied to the new groups that aspire to a place in modernity and the goods available through the market economy. The result of this "othering" strategy transforms them in an always "lacking", defective, and demonized periphery. Anthropological discourse, specially in the positivist, non reflexive varieties that abstain from repatriating the critiques they seem to apply to "others", takes part in this process. And, as a whole, it is very important to perceive that this "othering" process is not a real production or acceptance of "otherness" but a mechanism of self-defense on the part of hegemonic groups.

This kind of reasoning leads us to perceive that the reduction of Africa to the colour black, so characteristic of the U.S. as emblematically represented by the Cosby show, is the outcome, at the same time, of a final escalation of White supremacy and of the globalization/peripheralization of blackness, as opposed to a radically *other* (although conversing, dialogical) African myth. Correspondingly, facing the "othering" pressures of the hegemonic discourse, the Cosby's politics retains only blackness as a platform for claiming, but the claims themselves turn "white".

Cornell West (1993:17ff.) has aptly described the "nihilism" of North-American blacks, and has also dated it to the post-civil rights era inclusion of African-North-American in the market. His description of the lack of meaning and purpose, as well as of the self-destructive drive that has installed itself among poor, marginalized - newly peripheralized, in my own vocabulary - Black North Americans is touching. But,

unfortunately, he falls short from analyzing this strange and very telling coincidence between the timing of an unprecedented access to opportunities on the part of Black Americans, and their embrace of nihilism in concomitance with the loss of a truly alternative set of mores. An analysis of this kind would certainly raise painful doubts about the true character of the achievements brought about by the struggle of the sixties, but would nevertheless lead to important, unavoidable questions as regards the kind of ideological commitments and compromises that came together with the new opportunities. Without a thorough examination of the myth lurking behind the jobs, professions, privileges, responsibilities and obligations now embraced by the Blacks, no Black American activist is fully entitled to address Brazilians in the patronizing tone adopted by Hanchard, lest the self-destructive nihilism so well described by West reach us to the farthest corners, where the experience of periphery has not yet fully taken over.

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### **Brazil: The all pervading Black paradigm and the meaning of Whiteness**

As the allegory of the Cosby Show is expressive of the removal of any African or truly ethnic content from the quality of blackness, my follow-up of a Brazilian prime-time soap opera, the "novela das oito" *Água Viva* ("Living Water"), as received by the members of the Afro-Brazilian cults, can help us, as a literary device, to illuminate an opposite and symmetrical view of the ubiquity of the African myth in Brazil. The "reading" of the *novela* I will refer to is extracted from a questionnaire I applied during field-work among xango cult<sup>2</sup> members of the city of Recife, after I realized how differently they perceived the story from the way I did (see Segato 1994). It is my intention here to contrast it with the Cosby Show to produce competing parables on the places assigned to Africa in the U.S. and Brazil.

So, let us now turn to lively cult-houses in Brazil where people, most of them black but not all, sit at their sofas, every evening, to watch soap-opera. Their rumoring, in the TV room and beyond, designs a parallel script that can be threaded upwards to its source: a myth. Behind the television characters, a shadow drama takes place, and the whole performance turns into one more re-enactment, in a new setting, of the structural relationships among the deities of the Candomble pantheon. Behind the double screen of the actors' bodies and their embodiment of the characters, the profiles of the Orixas of the Afro-Brazilian myth become transparent. In the eyes of the people of the cult, the Black, Afro-Brazilian world of relationships overimposes itself on the white cast and characters, re-structuring the drama. The soap-opera script becomes an overdetermined script, to such extreme extent that, as I will show, the resolution borders the uncanny.

In fact, in due time, I started to realize that, as the story unfolded, the audience besides me started to associate every one of the characters of the soap-opera as the embodiment of one *orixa* of the pantheon. The kind of relationships in which she or he

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2. An Afro-Brazilian religious tradition very similar to the Bahian candomble.

engaged and the place occupied in a family network was used to test the association until a certain point, where no more doubts were kept. This was not surprising, since the people seemed to be just applying the usual procedures so characteristic of the Afro-Brazilian universe. There, it is part of the philosophy to believe that every single human being, black, white, yellow or whatever, approaching the cult from any social environment, is accompanied by an *orixa* that stamps his or her personality profile and behaviour to the adept, also called "child-of-saint". This is why the deities work as psychological labels or personality descriptors and, in this sense, the cult has an universalistic philosophy leaving no one excluded. The story in the TV seemed to lend itself perfectly well to this established practice.

A blond girl coming from a wealthy family, though abandoned at birth, was adopted by a rich household to become the **protegee** of a foster father: she was **Oxum**<sup>3</sup> (the character of Maria Elena, played by actress Isabela Garcia). There was also a cold hearted and scheming mother, of good appearance, polite manners and round face, who used the privilege of being a mother to manipulate her son in her own interests: she was **Iemanjá**<sup>4</sup> (the character of Lourdes, interpreted by Beatriz Segall). There was also a good man, with a tired and somewhat slow mien, exempt from evil intentions and outside all disputes, who attempted to resolve conflictive relations and make them more harmonious: **Orixalá**<sup>5</sup> (the character of Edir, interpreted by Claudio Cavalcanti). And, above all, there were the characters of the central triangle of the story, showing not only how myth is constantly re-issued in all possible instances, but also, as we shall see in this particular case, its impressive predictive efficacy.

In the center of the plot were two brothers in permanent conflict with each other: the younger one, Nelson Fragonard (interpreted by Reginaldo Farias), and the older one, Miguel Fragonard (Raúl Cortez). To an old fight for the inheritance left to them by their parents was now added a dispute for the same woman, Ligia (interpreted by Betty Faria). In the eyes of my audience companions, family roles, usual behaviour and personality profiles allowed to identify Nelson as a **son of Xangô**, Miguel as a **son of Ogum**, and Ligia as a **daughter of Iansã**.

Here, a quick outline of some of the personality traits displayed by these three saints in the mythical accounts that circulate in the temple houses of Recife and

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3. **Oxum** was the youngest daughter of **Iemanja**. However, **Iemanja** betrayed her husband **Orixala** with a higher rank deity who rules over human destiny, **Orunmila**, and it was from this union that **Oxum** was born. Despite **Oxum** not being his legitimate daughter, she knew how to win **Orixala**'s favors for herself and became the **orixas**' father's preferred child.

4. Among the Afro-Brazilians, the notion of motherhood unfolds into the two contrasted categories of "legitimate" motherhood and foster motherhood. This opposition is particularly well elaborated and, within that perspective, **Iemanja** represents the legitimate mother and, as such, is depicted as the one who enjoys the biologically endowed privilege of being a mother but shows neither the generosity nor the care so characteristic of **Oxum**, the foster mother. **Iemanja** is seen as egotistic and detached, and is said to have the false quality of the sea: looking at its quiet surface one may believe it is calm, but behind this appearance the depths may be turbulent.

5. Although the mythological family is structured by terms arising from the Portuguese Brazilian patriarchal family, all the relations in it are subverted and, among them, the position of the father is depicted as a weak position. In fact, **Orixala** is said to have a weak health and a weak will, being generally soft and tolerant and never striving to impose his points of view on others. So, though he has authority, he never exercises it.

recognizable in the actual behavior of their children-of-saint (more details about the personality of the "saints" may be found Segato 1995 a, and an interpretation also in 1995 b). It is part of **Xangô's** nature to have an unbelievable capacity to win everything and lose everything. He shifts with great ease from the possession of incalculable fortune to begging in the streets. He is a tireless flirtatious, charming and attractive. He also has a lyricism, an interior gracefulness and a magic, the latter closely associated with his charm, his acknowledged power of instantaneous seduction. He triumphs and conquers on the basis of supernatural aid, never on the basis of loyal competition and sustained effort. He is also extroverted, lively, inclined to the pleasures and facilities of good life; a master in the art of escaping from difficult situations. He wastes energy and dissipates efforts in the pursuit of ends as diverse as inconsequential. He is quarrelsome and explosive, temperamental. His disputes are sudden, but also fleeting. **Xangô** is also the **orixá** of doubt, of suspicion and, therefore, as they say, scientific spirit, research, investigation: he is no fool. He is a "smart guy" and, above all, cheerful, fun-loving, talkative: wherever he is, there is no boredom nor routine discipline. The theme of his life is his dispute with his older brother, **Ogum**, with whom he contrasts in everything but in strength and masculinity.

As opposed to **Xangô**, **Ogum** is serious, rigorous, hard-working, disciplined. For him, everything works on the basis of order, of concentrated efforts that lead to the almost obsessive ends he plans to reach on a long-term basis. **Ogum**, as they say, is never distracted from his objectives; he is one-track minded. And while the muscles of someone possessed by **Xango** dissipate his or her energies casting punches upwards, randomly to the air, **Ogum**, although showing the same strength, consistently discharges his muscular tension always on a single point fixed in front of him: he attains everything through a rationally applied effort. While **Xangô** is troublesome, **Ogum** is a struggler. While **Xangô** is a fine swordsman, **Ogum** is a soldier. While **Xangô** acts on the basis of inspiration and good luck, **Ogum** makes plans. However, **Ogum** inevitably loses to **Xangô**: magic results always more effective than hard work; a trick, a spur of sudden cunning is more efficacious than trained intelligence applied to undertake a rational plan; inspiration is, inescapably, more decisive than method. Such is the mentality of the cult people in Recife. Finally, in this constant challenge, in this tight rope which is the life of the sons of **Ogum**, a bloody end is expected for them, a death by accident or murder.

These two brothers live in a permanent contention. One of them deserves trust, the other one is granted favour. **Xangô**, by trickery, snatches the crown owed to **Ogum** for his primogeniture, and becomes a clumsy king, a king without the airs of a king. Later, also, he steals his woman, **Iansã**. **Iansã**, who was **Ogum's** wife, abandons him for **Xangô**.

**Iansã**, in turn, is imperious, determined, courageous, almost masculine in her autonomy of will. According to the members, some places **Iansã** enters, **Xangô** does not dare to pass by<sup>6</sup>. **Iansã** neither makes easy concessions to anyone nor tries to please. She is beautiful but not vain, she is attractive but is never intentionally charming. She is a unwavering woman and holds a commitment until the very end. **Iansã** is a warrior saint, who stands up to any obstacle and undertakes any sacrifice to reach her own victories or

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6. This is an allusion to the fact that **Iansã** commands the spirits of the dead while **Xango** does not even dare to go into the dead's room. In fact, as they say, **Iansã** is in charge of the most awesome, dangerous task.

those of her allies. She does not withdraw from a challenge. Thus, although **Iansan** finally agreed to marry **Xango** (but not before he had used various ingenious and flattering artifices in order to convince her), she never agreed to co-habit with him at the same home. Their tastes were different, and she was not willing to change her own in order to adapt<sup>7</sup>. **Xangô, Ogum** and **Iansan** fitted as perfectly in Nelson, Miguel and Ligia, respectively, as hand in glove.

Nelson and Miguel did not get along. They had fought in the past because of an inheritance. At one point, Nelson had lost everything and was now living in a boat, where he worked only when necessary, taking tourists for sightseeing along the Guanabara Bay. He had those bewitching eyes so touching and so typical of all **sons of Xangô** and, at the same time, due to a certain looseness and gentleness of his gestures, the moving appearance of a charming scoundrel transpired in him. He was not evil, but inconsistent. However, his power of seduction announced that success awaited him. Every one could know, in the television room, that he had the marks of a winner's destiny. On her part, Ligia fell for his charm, but did not surrender. Surrendering did not belong to her nature.

Opposite to him was his long-time enemy, his older brother Miguel. A surgeon, serious, harsh, meticulous. His slim but tough body, always tense, evidenced the discipline of his habits. His look was direct, frank, prompt, always fixed in its focus. The look, I later perceived, of the **children of Ogum**. Thanks to hard work, his wealth had only increased, but he was not happy. After a few episodes, his first wife died in a boat accident. As a widower, he met Ligia recently divorced and, not without persisting tirelessly after this objective, succeeded in marrying her. They married, but she had fallen in love with his brother.

Let us examine now, making use of the terms used by the members, the character of Ligia, who, according to the **xangô** people, was a **daughter of goddess Iansã**. She was a "yes-yes, no-no" woman: direct, determined, fearless, enterprising, imperious, and, sometimes, unpleasant. A woman "who fights and wins", active; a proud, "don't touch me because you might get burnt", woman. She "has a style", a mother-of-saints told me once. She married Miguel, being in love with Nelson, because, very much like **Iansã** for **Xangô**, she could not put faith in the latter. She fell in love with Nelson, but did not give in. And she remained, always and everywhere, in control of herself.

At this point, only a few chapters were still to go before the soap-opera ended, and the characters kept confirming the expectations set upon them by the gods who, as we well knew, shaped them. However, a surprise was waiting for me. Something that, for sure, I had not dared to imagine. As anyone else in the TV room except myself could have expected, Miguel Fragonard, **Ogum's son**, died abruptly, murdered in the last week of the drama. No one could have predicted it by means of sheer deduction, only the myth: the expected bloody death of a **son of Ogum**. This left me bewildered: myth possessed an efficacious logic, prospective and prescriptive, oracular. It happened this way: an unsuspected, long time estranged character appeared from total oblivion to shoot him. Old quarrels, impossible to guess. An out-of-the-blue, perfectly arbitrary solution to bring about

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7. The difference in taste refers mainly to the fact that **Xango** is very fond of eating ram (ram is his main sacrificial food), while **Iansan** fiercely abhors ram and may become ill even for coming in contact with a rope holding a ram or by smelling this animal's odor. Her hatred started when she discovered the treacherous character of this animal, and this event is narrated in a myth.

the desired end. Thus, **Xango's** magic spell, his superhuman fortune triumphed once again: Nelson won **Iansan**, **Xangô** got Ligia. With time, it had become impossible for me to distinguish them.

I witnessed the TV melodrama's saturation by the African myth. The rhetorics of the African plot had pervaded completely not only my reception of that story but my apprehension of real characters as well, casting a permanent spell on them. The theme of this myth revealed itself to extend well beyond its motives and characters, into a commentary of its own inclusiveness, its own overpowering strength. By the time of the closing episodes, a statement could be read in the tricky smile of an old priestess: "you see, we knew it all. We always know it all", whose necessary predicate was its colour blindness. The stronger, encompassing myth, African or Anglo-Saxon, must be, of necessity, colour-blind, larger than impersonators and circumstance. In America, to make achievers of all colours act "white", in Brazil to put charmers of all colours to act "black". If the "white" myth behind the *Cosby* show enacts the universality of the "white" reward for good behaviour and effort, the "black" myth behind Brazilian screens performs the universality of human personalities, and dwells on their relationships, drives, affections and destinies.

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### **Reading politics in a religious codex: encompassing as an alternative for exclusion in Brazil.**

Looked from the perspective I wish to emphasize, these two cases represent exactly mirrored situations, one being the reversal of the other. In the US, the TV comedy with an all-black cast comes to be comfortably watched by a white public to the point that some voices are raised to warn us that we may be watching the white characters of the American myth played by black actors. The mark has become too tenuous in discourse. Conversely, in Brazil, an all white cast (at least for Brazilian standards, though this would not probably be so in the North American perception) performs, in the eyes of an Afro-Brazilian audience, an episode of black mythology. If the first myth speaks to us of individual achievement and the goal of profit and consumption, what is the subject of this second myth telling us? What are the propositions it put forward?

First of all, good or bad as it may be, it proposes a relational paradigm for life<sup>8</sup>, where the strength and quality of mutual ties charged by affect - and not a stable reference to principles, rules and goals - shapes life and directs its course. In this myth, relations are at the center of the scene, constitute an end and a value in themselves, and the first and foremost finality of life. Life is there to relate, and the deities of the pantheon offer a chart for reading those relationships.

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8. Here, I use the idea of a relational paradigm for life introducing a difference from the way Roberto da Matta applies this notion to understand Brazil, since da Matta (1995), working within Louis Dumont's model, considers the Brazilian relational order as intrinsically hierarchical. In the case of the Afro-Brazilian myth, though the inescapability of a structure of relationships is stated, the hierarchical dimension (patriarchal, generational, meritocratic, etc.) is dismantled and treated with "irony" (Segato 1995 b).

However, as I warned at the start, this inversion between the colour of the actors and the colour of the myth that reads them plays here no more than an allegorical role. I put them together to count on them as a discursive artifact able to talk about the place of Africa in the North American and Brazilian cultural universes, as well as on the complex relationship between Africa and the colour black. (If, usually, the colour black performs as a signifier for African origin and allegiance, this is not always necessarily the case and, in fact, sometimes, this perception can be even seriously misleading). In the American case, supremacy is exerted by a white myth. In the Brazilian example, it is a Black myth that lures and haunts, transpiring behind the images. These two myths are overwhelmingly present, in their own social territories. What does this mean? It means that, in Brazil, the presence of Africa, with its Black models for human behaviour, remains unyielding, ever present, stronger than the circumstantial façade of white impersonators. Even in the modern environment of mass media, the *orixas* are able to provide a chart, a working explanation of what happens and why, and forecast what may be expected as an outcome. The syntony of the public with the "novela", within the horizon of their beliefs, is ultimately proved by the successful anticipation of the resolution of the drama. This has consequences that affect not only the audiences to which I have referred so far, but raise important questions about the people in the production line of TV dramas, and the source of the myth they may be living by, even unknowingly. That, I contend, is what no racial politics in Brazil can fail to contemplate.

What the Afro-Brazilian audience formulates here, in an inversion reminiscent of classical deconstruction, is that reality is not what it looks like, that Black is the encompassing term in Brazilian society and that, despite the proverbial virulence of Brazilian white racism, black is not at all the weak but the strong term in racial duality and conflict. In effect, the allegorical content of this parable reveals that, in Brazil, Black stately *engulfs, contains and predicts* white, proclaiming, in the cryptic tongue of culture, that white *is* black in Brazil. This, indeed, can be perceived and becomes relevant when we compare Brazil with the U.S., where, despite Hanchard's and others's arrogant style (see, for example, some contemporary views of African American intellectuals on Brazil in Hellwig 1992), Blackness, though struggling with heroism, unfortunately continues to be no more than a defeated partiality *in all fields* without exception and, even so, from that position, validates and enforces the "white" myth. In fact, if it is legitimate to speak of African North Americans as a minority within the nation (referring not merely to its size but to the amount of influence it has in shaping the culture of the nation), to use the idea of minority would not be so adequate for Brazil, where the applicability of the term minority should at least be discussed.

Afro-Brazilian religious precepts inscribe an African monumental codex for Brazil. That is, the most stable repertoire of images that make for a truly alternative myth, and the forms of conviviality they enforce spread far, towards society at large, well beyond the niches of orthodoxy where they are constantly reproduced. It is a capilar, informal, and fragmentary impregnation. But it is there. In my vocabulary, the enclaves of orthodoxy preserved by the most conservative temple-houses guarantee the non-peripheral kind of alterity whose space is receding in the US, after the strategic take over of black enclaves by the market economy and its own, inexorable, precepts. Nihilism, as Cornell West has argued, took the place of older forms of hope, solidarity, and conceptions about resources, when the latter were not fully controlled by the market economy.



However, as I have contended elsewhere (Segato 1995 b), the philosophy and the politics espoused by this "other" codex cannot be racialized and transformed into a racial politics, though this should not be understood as an indication of weakness, as Hanchard does, but as a consequence of greatness and strength. Paradoxical as it may seem, the philosophy contained in this codex resists racialization because it perceives itself as bigger than race and aspires to universality. Its recent process of expansion towards new, "white" territories in Argentina, Uruguay, Spain, Italy and Portugal, proves this aspiration well founded (See Segato *ibidem* and 1991). Significantly, it perceives itself as *encompassing White*. All Whites are seen, sooner or later, knowingly or unknowingly, to be subject to its logic.

The "encompassing", universal element of Afro-Brazilian culture is inscribed in the religious "codex" as a precept for inclusiveness, preventing, as I said, the racialization of this very codex as well as hindering the participation of the bearers of the African tradition in Brazil in any politics based on an ethnic divide. I interpret this inclusive determination as a text expressing the perception, on the part of Afro-Brazilians, of three historical processes that are very characteristic of the Brazilian formation. The first is the syncretic, pan-African substratum that must have begun constituting itself inside the slave-ships during the very journey from Africa to America, and continued in the New World structuring an African environment in Brazil along the lines of artificially architected religious "nations"<sup>9</sup>. In this recreation of Africa in Brazil, openness to individuals of *any* origin was and continued to be the rule and, also, the clue to understand the survival and gradual expansion of the whole system. The second speaks of the thoroughly mixed breeding that forms the basis of contemporary Brazilian population, including the elites, as regards their racial composition, that is to say, the perception of the formation of Brazilian society through massive mixigenation. The third speaks of the deep mingling and penetration of the European environment of the landowners by Afro-Brazilian culture, mingling that took and continues to take place in the intimacy of so-called white households, starting early in life and long ago in history with the socialization of white children by Black nurses. The popular voices that speak in the Afro-Brazilian codex take notice of these three processes and transform to their advantage the ethnic, biological and cultural mergings that took place in history, turning them in a fundamental piece of their philosophy, as evidence of the strength and scope of the African presence in Brazil.

However, I need to emphasize that it is not the fact of these multiple mergings what is at stake here, but its perception and transcription into an encoded knowledge. Charles Lemert, in an article investigating "the dark side of self", reports an American case that can be considered very close to the Brazilian experience. A white, middle class, American male discovered in therapy a black caretaker who played the role of a mother-figure in his childhood: "David came to realize that, if he had an emotionally satisfying relation with an

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9. Besides the regional varieties of the Afro-Brazilian cults, there is also an organization in "nations" that invoke roots in different African societies and exhibit, as evidence of that origin, some words, ritual practices or songs. Truly, the guidelines along which the African religious world in Brazil was architected is recognizably Yoruba (Nagô), but diacritic marks evoking a link with the Gege (Ewe), Fanti-Ashanti, Angola, Congo or Ijesha worlds are emphasized to create an idea of a plurality of nations that persist. However, the affiliation to any of these nations is open to anyone and there is enough transit of people across their borders to prove that their main role is to give organizational parameters for the formation of communities but not to create a sense of essentialism in ethnic identity.

adult in his family of origin, it had been with Annie [...] Annie was, in effect, David's mother. David is white. Annie is black". So, Lemert wonders: "If Annie was David's mother, in whatever sense, in what sense is David White?" To conclude: "This is a question about which our culture does not permit us to talk. For David to consider that in *some* sense he might think of himself as something other than white, perhaps even black, is a thought that contradicts strong-we claims at their foundation" (Lemert 1994: 110). And it is at this last point that the difference with the Brazilian environment is detected: in the script that captures the experience and, thus, in the particular form experience enters political discourse (Scott 1992). In fact, I argue, the African codex in Brazil does talk of this "dark side" (literally and metaphorically) of the white self by appointing it the tutelage of an African deity, by encompassing it within African tradition, by offering it engagement in an African religious genealogy. The problem is that, within the North American cultural climate, the self will have to produce, sooner or later, a "narrative of conversion" (Sollors op.cit.: 31). That is, opting eventually into a clear and exclusive identity affiliation, either within a strong-we position (identified with whiteness and universality) or a weak-we position (identified with an ethnic mark) will be mandatory. While in Brazil this option is not mandatory or even meaningful and the possibility of a permanent ambiguity will remain open. In fact, the "dark", African self will constantly and explicitly aspire to particularity and universality *simultaneously*. The model is not mechanical, stands ubiquity and focus on transits. Moreover, though in Brazil the strong sense of self of the White is impeached by the African codex, Blacks do not imitate the movement of the White self into a concretion but simply undermine the pretension of "purity" in ethnic identity, challenging the blood principle and all racial determinations (Segato 1995 b).

In this way, the philosophy of the Afro-Brazilian religious "codex" can be said to avoid the pitfalls of what Anthony Appiah calls "intrinsic racism", with its "moral error" (Appiah 1990:12) and its fallaciously restrictive "familism". In Brazil, religious genealogies open to all and anyone through a ritual vow, together with the universal value attributed to the orixas to speak about human personality and predict behaviour create a sense of community and solidarity at hand for all, independently of origin. Supported by these two pillars, this philosophy counterpoises a true alternative to White racist essencialim, setting itself free from the trap the latter poses to a Black sense of self. .

As regards to the "White" elites, their apprehension of these intermingling with the Black component has important consequences, to the extent that it can be maintained that white racism in Brazil is not, as in the U.S., the outcome of a barrier that separates and excludes "We" from "Them", that is to say, a discrimination of two mutually exclusive cultural, ethnic, social territories with its political and economic implications. "Racism" in Brazil, denominates a quite different cognitive operation, whereby a great proximity, intimacy and even identity has to be exorcised - hence the extreme virulence and passion it sometimes involves, always on individual basis and never as a confrontation of a community against another so characteristic of the U.S. racist behaviour. It is the outcome of an I/thou, intimate interracial relationship that was there, continues to be lurking at the background of "white" self formation, and it has to be repelled. Racist hatred, in Brazil, is the outcome of the horror caused by this very private secret carried in families: the twilight memory of the black great-grandmother, the violently repressed oedipal love for the Black wet nurse. Racism in Brazil is a purge that starts from the inside of the "white"being, a fear of being contaminated somewhere. It has to do with intimacy, with relatedness, not with

ethnic distance, alien fear and a sense of otherness. "Whiteness" in Brazil, as our parable stages, is fully impregnated by "blackness". "Whiteness", in Brazil, as a sign of safe, uncontested status, is never fully achieved, never certain (this is convincingly argued in Carvalho 1988). Whiteness, and the shameless contempt for social justice that it personifies, is not strong but weak, as a consequence of an endemic uncertainty as regards its basis for identity. This involves a kind of complexity that requires an adequate politics able to touch the Achilles' heel of such structure. A structure leaning more on a psychological and status based, pre-modern (patriarchal) organization, than on a territorial, modern, contractual one. It is this fear of being the same that has to be exposed, taking further the banner of sameness as a political slogan.

My analysis takes us, undoubtedly, close to Gilberto Freyre's classic thesis of 1933, also supporting the idea of a Brazil, in his terms, fully contaminated by the African presence. A White Brazil that hides a black spot, a mark of Africa in the skin, concealed somewhere. A Brazil where Black and White do not estrange each other to the extent they do in the U.S. This thesis's ultimate meaning was identified with an attack on modernity and modernizing forces (Needell 1995), and this proximity seems confirmed by the observation by Ricardo Benzaquem de Araujo (1994: 133) that, in Gilberto Freyre's account, with the modernization of the economic forms of exploitation and the transformation of the traditional slave-owning household, the "casa grande", in the modern wealthy mansion, the "sobrado", "the less patriarchal they grew, the more *excluding* they became, turning into a more conventional type of aristocratic domination, founded on difference but also, and mainly, on separation". Therefore, the entrance into a full modernity, here, becomes related to a particular kind of race relations that follow the apartheid pattern. The pre-modern, traditional system, as known in Brazil, was and continues to be marked by interpersonal hierarchical relationships. They are based on different assumptions and work according to a different system of rules.

In fact, in the Freyrian model, Brazilian traditional arrangement for race relations appears opposite to the "modern" American landscape, where two social groups with clear borders compete for resources of various kinds. In the former, power is exerted amidst promiscuity and intimacy ("excess" in Benzaquem de Araujo's vocabulary); in the latter, in open confrontation. However, there are several substantial differences between my contention here and what could be perceived as neo-Freyrism. Though I will not enumerate them all, two are the most relevant for the scope of my present argument. The first has to do with the fact that I do point at the existence of a virulent racist attitude and feeling in Brazil against people of black colour, while suggesting an interrogation of the complexities and ambivalences of the subject of such feelings and attitudes. My focus is on a critique of the kind of mental and affective processes that are at stake, and my contention is that the cognitive, psychological operations at work in Brazil are of a different kind and embedded in a different structure of relationships than those in the U.S. But my ultimate end takes me far apart from Freyre's in that I place this whole comparative exercise to the service of a formulation of an adequate politics to fight racism in Brazil. Any politics, in order to efficaciously target on Brazilian racism, will only result from awareness of this difference and therefore demands adequate examination of the peculiar processes that lie behind the Brazilian form of racism.

The second difference between my thesis and that of Freyre and the neo-Freyrians is that I contend that the people identified with the Black enclaves of the Afro-Brazilian

religious orthodoxy are themselves claiming that their culture encompasses White culture. The scope and pervasiveness of the African culture in Brazil, according to my interpretation, is inscribed in the Afro-Brazilian religious codex itself. Though I seem to confirm Freyre's idea of Brazil as thoroughly impregnated by Black presence, this is not understood as a "benign", conceding trait on the part of the land-owning elite, but a revindication of Black discourse by itself, and for itself. Accordingly, my point here is that what I found in the field of the Afro-Brazilian religions is that the agents of Black culture themselves raise this point, thus changing the ideological sign of this kind of politics: the actively inclusive, engulfing pole is Black agency, they have historically deployed this strategy for cultural survival, and they have succeeded. If an equivalent of the American "soul food" of the Southern Black is absent in Brazil, in the sense that the whole of the population eats from it - as Peter Fry, 1977, has pointed out -, this is not the outcome of a process of expropriation and cannibalization of Black symbols by Brazilian society at large but, much to the contrary, the result of a strong African presence that has invaded and conquered the White cultural space in an irreversible process. Any wise politics for a racially fair society in Brazil, I argue, has to take advantage from this precedent. Either we take this piece of popular wisdom and translate it into political discourse, into the stuff of which slogans are made of, or anti-racist politics will never mobilize anyone beyond a disengaged handful of American trained Black intellectuals, whose political imagination has gone astray from their cultural and social basis.

### **Reading the allegory: flaws North and South.**

Returning to our original allegory of reversal, where American Blacks are trapped in the White myth and Brazilian Whites are trapped in the Black myth, we can address it with a final interrogation. What do these episodes suggest? As regards Brazil, what does an audience seeing a white cast as engulfed by African deities deliver, as a text, for us to read? As regards the US, what an all black cast entangled in the Anglo-Saxon dream of achievement and tidiness tell us?

We may think, it is true, that in their process of subjectification, in their emergence as subjects in a given history, Brazilian Blacks, by rendering race irrelevant, disavow blackness. It is also true that, disavowing blackness, they also disavow defeat - the painful defeat of an enslaved people<sup>10</sup>. In fact, what the foreign eye witnesses in distress, is that Blacks in Brazil seem to stage for themselves the act of serving, yielding and conceding as an act of "giving": a joyful and voluntary act that angers, more than often, the foreign witness, who remains unable to understand. Brazilian Blacks, we may say, disavow the act of forcible exaction to which they were and continue to be subjected. And indeed, as many have accused, the myth fueling the engine of this obliteration is the myth of "racial democracy" as coined by Freyre - however, as I argued, Freyre's is not the only available transcript of this idea, since another version, more radical and exempt from Freyre's abusive bias, is found in the traditional "codex" of the Afro-Brazilian cults.

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10. Confirming this idea, Carvalho (1987: 52 ff.) reports that, contrasting with what happens, for example, among the Saramaka and other Maroon societies, there is an evident and significative omission of the slave past in the religious discourse of the Nago cult in the traditional temple houses of the city of Recife.

It may also be held true, however, that African North American disavow class and their share in a particular kind of profit derived from a very particular kind of victory and domination in an everyday progressively unequal world. What they stage for themselves is the act of profiting and achieving not only as an innocent but also as a valuable act. A share in the profit is becoming more and more the sole target of their politics. The myth that fuels the engine of their own kind of obliteration is the myth of meritocracy and its necessary counterpart, the unchecked belief in universal availability of resources for upward mobility, despite the unequal world.

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