

***Racionais MC's* and N.W.A.: Bridging the Gap, Embracing Race, and Reclaiming Brazilian Rap's Blackness**

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Abstract: Notwithstanding the already established prominence of scholarship on rap music produced in the United States, Brazilian scholars rarely refer to American studies. Furthermore, a few comparative studies between Brazilian and American rap lyrics do exist. This study takes a step toward filling such a gap. While examining dominant scholarship on rap in Brazil, I demonstrate how Brazilian scholars render blackness invisible in their approaches to rap. Through a comparison between N.W.A.'s and *Racionais MC's's* lyrics, in which I highlight some of rap's aesthetic and rhetoric devices that both groups share, I ultimately reclaim the place of blackness in Brazilian rap.

Keywords: *Racionais MC's*; rap; race; N.W.A.

It is rarely, if ever, in the interests of “insurrectionary knowledges” (such as hip-hop) that the historians of chronicles of “culture,” as constituted by the knowledges of semiotics, anthropology, or literary theory, have spoken.

Russel A. Potter (1995)

As rap music advanced towards becoming a worldwide marvel, local and regional expressions across the world developed independently of its origins in New York, thereby generating unique culturally embedded products. In Brazil, the development of rap found fertile ground in the outskirts of São Paulo. It is undeniable that Brazilian rappers draw heavily from American hip-hop music; however, it is also true that local issues, musical tradition, and cultural developments have shaped and determined the idiosyncratic nature of Brazilian rap. Drawing from Paul Gilroy, Russel A. Potter reminds us that “cultural formations which move across multiple borders are nonetheless treated as isolated national phenomena” (19). Thus, it is no surprise that, when rap finally found its way into academic circles as a subject of scholarly interest, Brazilian and American rap have been seldom compared. Although a consistent corpus of literature discussing several of the main issues regarding

this production from a variety of angles has been available over the last decades in hip-hop's birthplace¹, Brazilian scholarship on the subject rarely refers to American rap research.

In what follows, I try to make a contribution to such a comparison by examining rap's artistic features and the scholarship on this type of music/poetry in an effort to reclaim Brazilian rap's blackness.² I present a few examples to show that current scholarly approaches to Brazilian hip-hop neglect blackness and racial issues given that Brazilian rap developed, through its own idiosyncrasies, as a truly Brazilian national product. I demonstrate that, despite such a circumstance, blackness is nevertheless at the very core of Brazilian rap. I also argue that this scholarly omission, based solely on local characteristics, may conceal possible connections to the legacies of the racial democracy myth in Brazil. I will support the conclusions I draw with an analysis of excerpts from N.W.A. and *Racionais MC's* focusing mainly on N.W.A.'s track "Fuck tha police" (track 2) and *Racionais MC's*' tracks "*Qual mentira vou acreditar*" (*Sobrevivendo no inferno* track 9) and "*Fórmula mágica da paz*" (*Sobrevivendo no inferno* track 11).

According to Paul Dixon:

Essentially a response to racist theories of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, racial democracy viewed widespread miscegenation in Brazil as a positive phenomenon, a sign of a healthy societal openness. The practical manifestation of this ideology was an institutional "color blindness," perhaps most obviously demonstrated in Brazil's collection of census data. Between 1890 and 1940 the government did not bother to collect racial information on its population. Prejudice, if it existed in Brazilian society, was usually regarded as having a basis in class-consciousness rather than race. (2010 39)

Dixon, however, does not mention that "enshrined in that mythology is the masking of an exclusion that strategically displaces and marginalizes Afro-Brazilians from political power" (Afolabi 2009 1). Many other scholars argued that a "deterioration of 'racial democracy' as the primary ideology for explaining color in Brazil" (Dixon 2010 39) occurred. Although I do not deny such a possibility, and even though scholars have refuted and discredited the *existence* of a racial democracy, the *myth* of racial democracy is still exercised not only in society in general but also in some parts of academia; after all, the exclusion of Afro-Brazilians remains a serious issue. The "complete" transition between acknowledging the non-existence of a racial democracy, when it happens, and actually acting and promoting social and scholarly practices that embrace a more accurate configuration of Brazilian society remains to be achieved.

Racionais MC's's released production ranges from 1988 to present day. This period coincides with what Dixon calls the deterioration of racial democracy in the years following the transition to the democratic government in Brazil after over roughly two decades of what is being called today *Empresarial-militar* dictatorship. The (unsuccessful) imposition of racial democracy, as one interpretation for Gilberto Freyre's work, upon Brazilian society, both as an ideology and as a practice carried by the dictatorship, left deep material and symbolic consequences. One of them is the assumption that there was ever a generalized belief in the existence of a racial democracy and then a subsequent shift, which even scholars discuss.³ Another is the negation of the existence and operation of racist practices in everyday life, which are professed and imposed by many people, as a product of the victims' imagination. "*Racistas Otários*," released in a compilation in 1994, sheds light on *Racionais's* take on the deterioration of racial democracy.⁴ A five-minute-long rap illustrates the daily racial persecution in order to demonstrate the gap between the advances in the legal system and the everyday reality of Black⁵ people fifty years after the criminalization of racism in Brazil. The lyrics ostensibly mock the idea of racial democracy, claiming that "Os sociólogos preferem ser imparciais / E dizem ser financeiro o nosso dilema / Mas se analisarmos bem mais você descobre / Que negro e branco pobre se parecem / Mas não são iguais" (track 12). Bearing such a posture in mind, I move forward with the analysis.

Ever since scholars in Brazil started introducing rap as an academic subject, they faced rejection, skepticism, and even mockery. Although some of the barriers have been overcome and studies dealing with such a musical production can now be easily spotted in academic circles, non-acceptance of the validity of studying rap remains an issue. One of the reasons for the resistance to contemplating rap as a legitimate field of study is the uncertainty regarding the place of rap in the scholarly discourse. Thus, scholars in a variety of disciplines—ranging from communication studies, musicology, history, the social sciences, philosophy, and anthropology to literary studies—have approached the subject.

In the United States, a very similar process occurred. Pioneers in the study of rap faced the same skepticism Brazilian scholars encountered. Tricia Rose's recounting of a meeting with the chairman of a department of music in the United States in the spring of 1989 characterizes well how academia tended to deal with the matter. According to her, the chairman casually announced that she must have been "writing on rap's social impact and political lyrics, because there is nothing to the music" (Rose 62). Rose's response to such a biased and disdainful take on rap was to suggest "that perhaps the music was more complicated than it seemed to him, that a number of approaches to

sound and rhythm were being explored in rap” (63). Indeed, Rose’s suggestion concerning rap’s artistic complexity has proven to be accurate.

Today, books and scholarly articles abundantly address rap not only for its social impact and political lyrics, but also for other elements, including the artistic innovations rap has to offer. However, the fact that a variety of fields of study have incorporated rap does not necessarily translates into a full understanding of rap in Brazil. In the United States, scholars disproved from the beginnings the biased eurocentric⁶ approaches to African-American artistic production, including rap. In contrast, in Brazil such a posture is yet to be developed. The eurocentric approaches that appear to be the norm in Brazilian scholarship pose a serious theoretical problem. Not only are they generating and promoting a gradual dissociation of rap from blackness, but they have also been strengthening their basis rapidly and establishing themselves as a respected and undisputable canon within the disciplines.

Tommy J. Curry categorically sums up the issue of eurocentric approaches to hip-hop culture: “Hip-hop scholarship has been no less aggrandized among the bastards postcolonial enlightenments suckling at the bosoms of white disciplines” (x). Curry, sharing the tone of Tricia Rose and others, denounces the way “white disciplines” approach rap and hip-hop culture. What is interesting about this discussion is that while scholars in the United States contested eurocentric approaches that ultimately aimed at diminishing African-American artistic production, in Brazil, now that rap has also become part of the academic spectrum of subjects, the eurocentric approaches in fact serve the purpose of presenting rap in a positive way. In other words, they are the means that “elevated” rap to a whitened and therefore more “noble pantheon.” Such a practice is probably a result of the make-up of Brazilian society where

within the context of social democracy, overt racial conflict, legal separatism, and identity politics are readily viewed as “un-Brazilian,” and socioeconomic class remains the most common (and accepted) way to interpret inequality. (Roth-Gordon 2009 70)

Such a posture is reflected, to some extent, in Brazilian academic circles. Considering that the racial democracy myth remains deeply rooted in both everyday life and, as I argue here, in academic circles as well as the fact that the number of Black scholars in Brazil is drastically low in comparison to whites, it is no surprise that eurocentric approaches are not only accepted and desirable, but also the norm.

When approaching rap as a scholarly project, without disregarding completely interdisciplinary prospects, every discipline will favor their own standards and their specific analytical tools. Musicologists will concentrate on either lack or manifestation of musicality, the social sciences will

address social impacts of rap, and literary critics will analyze the poetic possibilities. Although they will always acknowledge the fact that they are considering only a fragment of what rap may be in totality, they understand that such a practice will not prevent them from achieving a better understanding of what rap is. Probably the most positive effect of rap across the disciplines is the challenge to scholars' conceptions of language. While the most severe side effect is, perhaps, the dangerous result that "the slow chipping away, the endless deconstruction of hip-hop should make it not what it 'is', but what we, the academic elites, the moral intelligentsia, think (want) it to be" (Curry x). Furthermore, the dominant approach across the disciplines shares another common trait. In their fragmentary approach to rap's constitutive elements, one of these elements is systematically erased: blackness is consistently rendered unimportant or nonexistent.

Ricardo Teperman, one of the few Brazilian scholars who consider scholarship on rap produced in the United States, undoubtedly contributes to a better understanding of the evolution of rap in Brazil with his monograph. Nonetheless, his book is a revealing document of how the dominant model of Brazilian scholarship remains addressing rap under the preconceived notions of white disciplines. Teperman interprets *Racionais's* lyrics within a context of class struggle:

As letras do Racionais atacam a perpetuação da desigualdade, o racismo, a violência policial e outras mazelas da sociedade brasileira. E o fazem assumindo um posicionamento claro numa estrutura de classes, em franca oposição ao que eles próprios entendem como classe dominante. (78)

It is very common to make such a "color blinded" assumption, which aligns itself to society's general practice as described by Roth-Gordon:

While the press and public have lauded rappers' attention to socioeconomic inequality and conditions of daily life in Brazil's social and geographic periphery, there has been overwhelming disdain for their direct discussion of Brazilian racism. (2009 70)

However, in a society in which whites comprise the majority of the dominant class and Blacks comprise the majority of the "lower" class, it is an unrealistic, albeit widely accepted,⁷ practice to dilute Black people's struggle in Brazilian society as a whole. His chapter "*RAP é música?*" is another example of how dominant Brazilian scholarship remains addressing rap under the preconceived notions of white disciplines. As interesting and informative as the chapter is in the quest to uphold and endorse rap's place among musical expressions, it still fails to escape presenting rap in comparison to established genres, which usually have their quality measured by eurocentric musical theory. The result is a tendency to incorporate rap into the universe of any (good) popular music dignified by dominant

musical theory, thus providing it with a sense of universality and ultimately depleting rap of its blackness.⁸ Such an analytical practice goes along with the phenomenon of invisibility described by Tricia Rose:

For many cultural critics, once a black cultural practice takes a prominent place inside the commodity system, it is no longer considered a black practice—it is instead a “popular” practice whose black cultural priorities and distinctively black approaches are either taken for granted as a “point of origin,” an isolated “technique,” or rendered invisible. (83)

In the specific case of rap, Tricia Rose believes that the last one of the above-mentioned possibilities is “a virtually impossible position to take” (83). However, given the way dominant scholarship is shaping the understanding of Brazilian rap, rendering blackness invisible is quite a genuine risk. In Ricardo Teperman’s opinion Walter Garcia is “talvez o principal especialista em Racionais na Academia” (77).⁹ I would include the name of Jorge Nascimento in the list. Nascimento is a Black scholar who has published several articles on *Racionais* from a somewhat peripheral position from the Federal University of *Espírito Santo*¹⁰ since 2006. In fact, in 2015, when Teperman’s book came out, Nascimento had just about the same number of published studies on *Racionais* as Garcia. Teperman, however, ignores his works completely. It is interesting to notice that, in 2015, Roberto Camargos published his study *Rap e Política: percepções da vida social brasileira* and, although he addresses *Racionais MC’s* production, he does not mention Garcia’s work. Such a conjunction of facts may be a coincidence, but it surely reinforces the belief that each discipline carries out a fragmented approach to rap, since, while Camargos takes on rap from the Social Sciences, Garcia from Literary/Music Studies, and Teperman does it from the perspective of Musicology. Therefore, they either were unaware of each other’s work or chose to ignore it for some reason.

Although Garcia rarely refers to scholarship produced in the United States, thus considering rap solely as a local phenomenon, Teperman may not be wrong on his assertion of Garcia’s place within scholarship on *Racionais MC’s*.¹¹ Hence, it is not incongruous to affirm that Garcia’s studies can be seen as the dominant model of Brazilian scholarship on *Racionais MC’s*. After all, Garcia’s well-presented arguments promote, along the lines of dominant scholarship on rap in Brazil, a steady and systematic dissociation of *Racionais’s* raps from racial issues and blackness. Ultimately, Garcia’s articles constitute a masterly conceived and dexterously executed effort to translate *Racionais’s* rap to a new audience, that is, making it more attractive to academic circles by continuing “the already double[d] history of ‘white’ appropriation, commodification, and dilution of black artistic expressions” (Potter

4). However, this effort, by necessity, fails to live up to what Cornel West describes as “the challenge to examine black cultural expressions as more than mere documentary, political protest or exotic appeal” (xii).

As an example, we can examine Garcia’s articles “Elementos para a crítica da estética do Racionais MC’s (1990-2006)” published in 2013, and “Sobre uma cena de ‘Fim de semana no Parque,’ do Racionais MC’s” published in 2011. In the latter, anchored in notions borrowed from Western music theory and overlooking the fact that “toda a história da música negra é marcada por situações conflituosas com a ‘boa música’ da sociedade branca” (Paz Tella 61)” Garcia goes as far as to present parts of the lyrics in music notation, a clear attempt at demonstrating the quality of the construction and, ultimately, that rap does deserve a place among academic subjects. Yet, as Potter reminds us, “African-American¹² music is fundamentally *at variance* from ‘Western’ music, with its obsession with the precise reproduction of written notation” (27). The first study proposes elements for a critical approach to aesthetics applied to *Racionais* by tracking common motifs also present in canonical names in Brazilian literature. Nonetheless, race is never addressed as an important element—not even in an analysis of a track entitled “*Negro Drama*” (*Nada como um dia após o outro* track 5) when, in the best-case scenario, Garcia mentions race tangentially.

In a more recent article, Guilherme Botelho, Alexandre Rosa and Garcia (“Três raps de São Paulo: ‘Política’ (1994), ‘O menino do morro’ (2003) e ‘Mil faces de um homem leal’ (Marighella) (2012)” acknowledge the unavoidable question of race present in “Mil faces de um Homem Leal”¹³ and recognize that the starting point of the video clip is “a valorização e a apropriação de lutas que negros e negras, pardos e pardas travaram no passado” (n.p.). Nonetheless, while the video clip depicts a history of Black people’s struggles and their particularities the article in fact reduces this history and incorporates it into a general understanding of political class struggle; as a result, Black people’s struggle is interpreted only as part of a (alleged) larger picture of a universal (and yet specifically Brazilian) class struggle.¹⁴

O rap e o clipe do Racionais MC’s se engajam na batalha pela memória das lutas revolucionárias que se posicionavam contra a ditadura e também contra o sistema capitalista, “abrindo a via para a construção de um regime alternativo, socialista.” Acrescente-se uma terceira frente de combate, contra a herança escravista de segregação racial e de superexploração do trabalho dos negros e das negras. (Botelho n.p.)

In the above excerpt, the authors miss the crucial point: the fight against slavery's legacy of racial segregation is not the third front, but the first one. It has always been the primary front line of combat for diasporic Black people regardless of any social or political struggle whites might have been going through at specific moments in History.¹⁵ The video clip mixes images of famous people who raised their voices against the oppression colonial whiteness has imposed on Black people. While the authors accurately point out the allusion to the Black Panther Party, they do not take into consideration that this, combined with the presence of Angela Davis, Muhammad Ali, and Malcolm X, should clearly indicate that the reference here is to the transnational nature of oppression Black people experience as one of slavery's legacy and not to localized political volatilities. Therefore, absorbing Black people's struggle into a localized struggle such as the resistance against the Brazilian dictatorship without considering the bigger picture of Black people's long-lasting fight, that was indeed re-signified,¹⁶ as the main issue being presented by *Racionais*, only serves the purpose of depleting, once more, black practices of their blackness. At the same time such an interpretation continues the tradition that Thula Rafela de Oliveira Pires exposes. Due to the deep dehumanization of non-white bodies "o reconhecimento de seus processos de organização e agência por democracia e liberdade, ainda que seculares e reafirmados em momentos de acirramento da violência e do arbítrio, não são entendidos nesses termos" (Pires 1057). In addition, for Black people, the kind of oppression suffered under dictatorial states, such as torture, lack of freedom of speech, was augmented¹⁷ by other practices:

A realidade de negros e negras era, em regra, permeada por "blitz", prisões arbitrárias, invasões a domicílio, expropriação de lugares de moradia (remoções), torturas físicas e psicológicas, além do convívio com a ameaça latente dos grupos de extermínio. Uma política criminal enraizada no colonialismo escravocrata, radicada principalmente nas favelas. (Pires 1063)

All the above-mentioned issues, which were a reality to white people as well and intensified against Black people during the authoritarian government, remain a daily reality for Black people regardless of the nature or form of the government at any given time. Furthermore, for Black people, the relation with the dictatorial government is a double-edged sword. Agents of the dictatorship targeted specific manifestations of blackness (such as the hair style to mention only one), while the role that Blacks had in the fight against the dictatorship has been systematically erased because most of them, unlike their white colleagues, are now regarded as common rather than political criminals.

The dictatorship resorted to the ideology of racial democracy to conceal the racially driven escalation of violence against Blacks as one of the many tools employed not only to enforce control

over the population but also to suffocate any attempt at propagating Black Culture in Brazil. According to Pires “houve no período da ditadura uma repressão orientada a neutralizar processos de articulação negra. Não por se tratar de uma mobilização política como outra qualquer, mas por colocar em xeque externamente a imagem que o Estado pretendia cultivar – de paraíso racial” (1062). However, the monitoring of political and cultural articulations of Black organizations also pre-dates the dictatorship, which shows once more that despite the importance of the authoritarian period in the history of Black people’s struggle it cannot be reduced to or interpreted as only a third front, especially in *Racionais*’s recreation of Carlos Marighella. Doing so amounts to erasing blackness once more from *Racionais*’s aesthetics.

It is impossible to list every instance in which the dominant scholarship erases, overlooks, or brushes off blackness and racial issues at present; however, the few samples I presented should suffice to at least initiate a deeper discussion on the matter.¹⁸ Although hip-hop crosses lines of race, gender, and social classes (Potter 10), in the case of *Racionais MC*’s race and blackness are central to every single rap they composed. It should be clear that blackness is rap’s main aesthetic element because “the racial dimension of hip-hop music is inescapable” (West xii). A stronger connection between Brazilian scholarship on rap and U.S. scholars’ studies on rap and the experiences of Black people in general is not only overdue, but also imperative because it promises to be very profitable in the quest to give back racial issues and blackness their rightful place.

Depriving rap of racial issues and blackness is a negation of Black people’s negotiation for their existence. According to Tommy J. Curry,

The negotiation of human existence with the world is not simply a retreat from the world, from the failures of that world, or its tragedy; rather, this negotiation is the fundamental expression of life, the living, the contradictions of human suffering that point out that philosophy must be an existentially rooted endeavoring to make life meaningful. Sometimes, if we are lucky, we get hip-hop as the product and grammar of this particular existence. (xii)

Language is one, if not the main, tool in “the negotiation of human existence with the world” (Curry xii) and, “given that hip-hop’s problematics of race and class take place on the level of language” (Potter 17) rap is indeed a poetic form that relies heavily on everyday speech and specific linguistic registers as raw material for the construction of the lines. Adam Bradley pointed out some characteristics of rap that can easily be detected in both Brazilian and American rap. “Most often, it expresses its meanings quite plainly” (xiii) and the reason for this lies on the fact that rappers “refresh

the language by fashioning patterned and heightened variations of everyday speech” (xiii). Using everyday language as a point of departure for poetic creation may not only result in innovating poetic forms using registers out of the mainstream, such as slang, but also in avoiding traditional poetic devices.

In order to better illustrate the innovative poetics of rap, I will start with two examples of poetic practices found in the following lines from N.W.A.’s track “Fuck tha police”: “Searchin’ my car, lookin’ for the product / Thinkin’ every nigga is sellin’ narcotics” (track 2). In addition to the obvious internal rhymes comprised of four verbs that end in “ing” (which are pronounced “in” as an elided “slang” version of the verb’s present participle ending in “ing” in mainstream grammar), the two lines present another rhyme in “product” and “narcotics,” two words that only rhyme when Ice Cube sings them. Some of the phonemes are either lost or changed and the result is a rhyme between two words that do not rhyme in a conventional linguistic register. This “linguistic slippage” (Potter 81) is a sample of both the way African-Americans developed their linguistic competence in English and two of rap’s rhetorical strategy: homonymic slippage and homophonic slippage. It is worth noting the complexity of the construction that prepares the listener to the repetition of the sound “in” and the actions their respective verbs present while straying the listener’s attention away from the most important rhyme (both in poetic and semantic terms) product/narcotics. This resource is part of a larger “plot” that I shall discuss later on.

In this excerpt “A gang is with whoever I’m steppin’ / And the motherfuckin’ weapon is kept in” (N.W.A. track 2), we have the same kind of rhyme built around the “in”-sound; however, each of the three “in”-words is from a different grammatical category. The first “in”-word (steppin’) is a verbal form, the second one is an adjective, and the third renders the rhyme even more complex by using the collocation of “keep” (here in the past participle) with the spatial preposition “in” (in its “mainstream” form, that is, it is not an elided form as opposed to the verbal ending “in” for “ing”). The rhyme is achieved in the combination of two words that are pronounced as one, another fine example of homophonic slippage. These examples speak exactly to what Bradley calls an innovative refreshing of language “by fashioning . . . variations of everyday speeches” (xiii).

Similarly, innovative poetic strategies in Brazilian rap may be even more likely to go unnoticed because, for some critics, the avoidance of certain conventional poetic devices seems to obscure the genuine poetic qualities of rap. For example, in Brazilian rap, hyperbaton is a rarely employed resource. The reason for this virtual nonexistence is probably that in everyday language people will not employ this figure of speech. Therefore, only when expressions have been amalgamated into everyday

language will hyperbaton show up in rap lyrics.¹⁹ The use of hyperbaton in traditional Brazilian poetry, however, can probably be traced back to baroque times. The first stanza²⁰ of Brazil's national anthem is a clear example of the importance this specific device claimed in the country's history. Even nowadays this figure of speech can be found abundantly in the works of poets who believe it can result in a more sublime or elevated poetic expression.²¹

In the battle to decide whether or not rap is poetry, the lack of hyperbaton may be a reason why some critics, accustomed to seeing hyperbaton as the gold standard of good poetic practice, feel that something is missing in rap or that rap is poor, poetically speaking, but they cannot quite identify what it is. The prescriptivism that rules conventional poetry is in complete dissonance with the freedom rap experiences. Jubwa reminds us that, in addition to being limited, the standard language “wants the words to come in this order, if the words don't come in this order, these people that live by this language and thrive by this language, won't understand what you're talking about” (Alim 2006 15). Jubwa's reasoning can be extended to critics who live by and thrive by conventional poetry. As the brief analyses of N.W.A.'s lines proved, rap has its own way of being poetry because it operates under a set of poetic rules of construction that very seldom are the same of what we understand by conventional poetry. To establish the fact that this also holds true for Brazilian rap, I will analyze the following lines from *Racionais MC's*' track “Qual mentira vou acreditar” (*Sobrevivendo no inferno* track 9) in which a similar situation that N.W.A. presents is depicted, in order to illustrate what Bradley has accurately pointed out: “Pô, que caras chato ó, / Quinze pras onze eu nem fui muito longe / E os homem embaçou. / Revirou os banco, amassou meu boné branco / Sujou minha camisa do Santos” (*Sobrevivendo no inferno* track 9).²² The lack of hyperbaton is just as blatantly obvious as the lack of number agreement. However, rather than being a deficiency, that “lack” of both conventional poetic and grammatical devices creates the artistic space in which the rapper refreshes “the language by fashioning patterned and heightened variations of everyday speech” (Bradley xiii). The word “*que*” comes in the plural form “*ques*” (pronounced as *quis*), and, as sociolinguistics has already noticed the way such constructions developed in Brazilian Portuguese, the plural expressed in the word “*ques*” in conjunction with the definite article “*os*” (before *homens*) will eliminate the need for the repetition. The displacement of the plural marker, an everyday practice for the majority of native speakers of Brazilian Portuguese, frees the rapper from adhering to the normative grammar, which would make the lines inauthentic and, as a result, completely ruin them. It is also worth noticing that, while rapping, Edi Rock elongates the duration of nasal phonemes in order to compensate for a missing syllable.

The disobedience to normative grammar does not prevent any listener from understanding the level of dissatisfaction which is in fact expressed “quite plainly” (Bradley xiii) with the inappropriate way law enforcement personnel harass Blacks²³ and disrespect their personal values and way of life. I refer to both the car inspection without probable cause and the subsequent profanation of, for many Brazilians, a symbol as sacred as a favorite soccer team’s jersey and the hat, which most interestingly are white. A clear example of “material inheritances—such as slavery—whose reverberations . . . can be and are felt in the everyday life of black diasporic cultures” (Potter 7). The episode is narrated through a complexly engineered combination of phonemes, especially sibilants, and their poetic possibilities. The above quote is a demonstration against the way society in general, and sometimes academic discourse, “participates in a moral and political condemnation of the symbols, language, and prose Black folk use to express their lives.” (Curry ix)

Jennifer Roth-Gordon understands the relation between politically conscious Brazilian rappers, such as *Racionais MC’s*, and American rap as an enactment of USA Civil Rights Era’s ideas that borrows racial notions of Black-White racial dichotomy (which would not exist in Brazilian history according to her) to shape and invent shared marginality in opposition to Brazilian official discourse of racial democracy. Despite governments’ effort to embrace racial democracy, Black-White racial dichotomy always existed in Brazil,²⁴ even before the Civil Rights movement and its undeniable influence over Black People around the world. As the contextual framework of the scene narrated in the above excerpt attests, it is necessary to bear in mind that police harassment toward Blacks in Brazil is a result of several historical processes directly connected to racial profiling. One of them is obviously slavery and its legacies, which Brazil and the USA share. Another one, which did not occur under the same circumstances in the USA, is a result of the authoritarian government’s public policies of criminalizing Blacks, which police forces enforced under the Brazilian army’s command.²⁵ The damage to Black people’s image was devastating and when the democratic transition started in the 1980s police brutality and harassment lingered into our days. In addition, “o contexto socioeconômico em que nasceram os Racionais é marcado por uma aguda crise social, caracterizada pelo aumento do desemprego e das desigualdades” (Mendes 2015 58). In a country and historical context in which educational opportunities to Black people were extremely limited²⁶ and (white) employers openly cited “boa aparência” as a requirement for performing the job, it is clear that the crisis affected Blacks more negatively. Therefore, for the police, a Black man driving a car during economically unfavorable times automatically means that he stole it.²⁷ What we see in the above-mentioned excerpt is a narration of the lingering effect of a process that started with slavery and is intensified in several instances of

Brazilian history repeatedly. In other words, a racist attack on Black people disguised as a routine police operation that allegedly targets anyone regardless of race. In the track the police officer argues that: “O primo do cunhado do meu genro é mestiço, racismo não existe, comigo não tem disso, é pra sua segurança,” (*Sobrevivendo no inferno* track 9) replicating the myth of racial democracy.²⁸

The rhetorical devices employed by N.W.A. in “Fuck tha police” (track 2) in order to play with listeners’ expectations are part of a higher goal. The track represents a trial where the police are the defendant and the members of the group are the judge and the witness. The whole track is a deliberate attempt at artistically inverting a social reality, which is one of the outcomes of the tensions developed throughout the lingering aftermath of slavery. The lyrics have been criticized, as raps often are, for the overuse of cursing and its rage against the police. The latter is an element that has, of course, been taken too literally, while the former is assumed to be only a way of gratuitously offending delicate ears. However, as Potter has pointed out, “ignorant of black vernaculars and the Signifyin(g) mode, many such listeners have reacted against what seems to them an obscene and violent discourse” (83).

Words such as fuck, motherfucker, and their variants are indeed abundant in the lyrics; nevertheless, assuming that they only express violence and obscenity overlooks the reasons behind these important word choices. The abundant repetition of the curse words promotes a sort of naturalization. Such naturalization comes to life when in comparison with the abundance of the N-word (and its variations) that stands in opposition to the scarcity of the word “white.” Before the verdict is pronounced, the word “white” occurs only two times. In neither occurrence is the word “white” racially loaded in a detrimental manner.²⁹ When referring to whites, Ice Cube employs “the other color,” therefore, just as whites are not allowed to say the N-word in public without facing consequences, the members of N.W.A. will not use the word “white” in order to refer deprecatingly to a race.

The proud affirmation of the N-word as a racial mark in opposition of the absence of the word “white” subverts and inverts the social prohibition whites face in relation to the N-word. In other words, in the track, now the word “white” (as a depreciating racial marker) is forbidden. The issue goes beyond that because N.W.A. exposes how racial markers represented in the use of specific words are an invention of whites and N.W.A will not play the same game. This specific rap achieves its higher goal when we remember that the whole track is an inversion of roles. This rap questions traditional notions of racial relations and overturns them.

Racionais’s track “Fórmula mágica da paz” (*Sobrevivendo no inferno* track 11) delivers one of the best depictions of how Black people experience the legacies of slavery. In fact, the track is a formidable

example of how racial issues and blackness cannot be extirpated from rap. In roughly ten minutes and thirty seconds, Mano Brown roams over the specificities of living as a Black person in a particular geographic scenario: the south side of *São Paulo*. Not only does he address the topic, but also the poetic intricate construction that relies heavily in the harmonic combination of background sounds with the rhymes generates a quite unique effect. A sort of humming sound with emphasis on variants of the Portuguese vowel “u” can be heard throughout the whole track, preparing the listener to what is probably the most beautiful³⁰ and meaningful part of the lyrics. The scene at the cemetery where women who share a common trait can be easily spotted: “durante uma meia hora olhei um por um / e o que todas as senhoras tinham em comum? / A roupa humilde / a pele escura / o rosto abatido pela vida dura / colocando flores sobre a sepultura” (*Sobrevivendo no inferno* track 11). The excerpt comprises the history of Black mothers’ struggle against what is probably the most painful material and symbolic inheritances that “are felt in the everyday life of black diasporic cultures” (Potter 7). The sonority of the excerpt is clearly based on the assonance of the “u,”³¹ which, aside from reverberating with the continuous background humming, imprints a gloomy tone to the scene. It is also imprinted in the humble clothing and the downcast faces, which are a result of an entire life of hardship. The tone the poetry sets is a perfect match for the situation being depicted: Black women gathered at the cemetery in order to visit the tombs of their deceased sons.³² The scenario is completely “black.” Everyone involved in the narrative is Black. Therefore, in addition to meaningfully erasing “the other color” (N.W.A. track 2) from the scene, the track refers to a practice of self-destruction as a group,³³ another legacy of slavery and its lingering results, which include the self-annihilation of Black people in a context of white dominant societies.³⁴ However, in spite of everything else, the ritual of burying the deceased and paying homage to them, an intrinsically human and humanizing practice, is the ultimate matter presented here. It is also clear that there are flowers as well, which reverberates with the conclusion drawn by the rapper: “Malandragem de verdade é viver” (*Sobrevivendo no inferno* track 11).

This examination of the above excerpts from N.W.A. and *Racionais* reveals the presence of blackness and racial issues as constituent elements that bring about poetic innovation that is specific to rap. The language, the crafting of language into poetic expression, the topics and characters narrated, are all an expression of black experience in the world created by the aftermath of slavery. The raps analyzed here depict the ways several transnational and transcultural aspects of the legacies of slavery shape Black people’s lives, and experiences, whether in Los Angeles or in São Paulo. Based on these shared experiences and on the impact of American hip-hop, rap has branched out into locally specific expressions of blackness. This examination has both established shared roots and identified

distinctive artistic features in order to demonstrate that Brazilian rap does not only participate in a specific artistic tradition but also is an independent art form in its own right. Yet, dominant scholarship still chooses to turn a blind eye to “blackness” as a fact and to the corresponding art forms as genuine artistic expressions.

The importance of the role eurocentric approaches have in elevating rap, as an academic subject, is undeniable and positive in several ways. In the case of Brazil, for example, the dominance of eurocentrism as a norm in fact reveals a problem that transcends the issue of rap. Why is dominant scholarship blind to the presence of blackness when “each performance by an Afro-Brazilian cultural producer is a dialogue with the Brazilian racial democracy” (Afolabi 2009 2)? One possible answer lies in the “virtually no theoretical development of the implications *democracia racial* contains for more contemporary racial politics” (Hanchard 1994 44). Because dominant scholarship on rap is unconcerned with the existence of racial issues and therefore unable to address it, ultimately this fact leads us to the dreadful confirmation that, although fiercely denied in public spheres, and in spite of the acceptance that a racial democracy does not exist, the *myth* of racial democracy is not only lively exercised in Brazil but also remains as the driving force behind social relations at all levels, including some academic circles. Although I approach with reserve the common idea that there has ever been a commonsense belief in the racial democracy I find Hanchard’s notions a potentially strong basis to provide some answers for the matter:

The subtle ideological shift from the commonsense belief that Brazil is a country without racial antagonisms to a qualified recognition of racial prejudices, discrimination, and subordination as a feature of Brazilian life, while maintaining the belief that relative to other multiracial polities Brazil is indeed a more racially and culturally accommodating society. (1994 43)

The thin line Hanchard draws between the actually multicultural composition of Brazil and the racial antagonisms is an important aspect for the discussion because while physical segregation does not exactly occur, race remains a determining factor to social places Black people occupy. In other words, in Brazil Black people and white people can share most of the public spaces, however in awfully different capacities. I concur with Hanchard that “there has been virtually no theoretical development of the implications *democracia racial* contains for more contemporary racial politics, in which the racial democracy myth itself has been refuted by even white elites at the level of the state and in civil society” (1994 44). As an ideology it served, in several historical periods, the purpose of undermining Black people’s legitimate claim that social inequalities are one of the legacies of slavery

and racism. However, as the historical process unfolded it became untenable to uphold such a discourse; therefore, the white elites had no choice but to publicly refute the existence of a racial democracy, but not without a suitable replacement. A potential reason for that is the fact that the *existence* of a racial democracy has been refuted, but the *myth* is just as alive, albeit sometimes concealed or denied, as racism. The “color blindness” with which dominant scholarship approaches rap is a replication of the practical manifestations of the ideology behind the attempt to impose a racial democracy, which, as I have been arguing, lurks virtually unnoticed in some academic circles even after scholars have discredited it.

Encouragement to pursue new and productive directions in academic scholarship comes – interestingly enough – from an emblematic rap by *Racionais* themselves. In “*Voz Ativa*” Ice Blue raps: “eles te mostram um Brasil que não existe / *escondem nossa raiz...*” (*Racionais MC’s* track 7, emphasis added). Although Ice Blue is referring specifically to TV, it is not out of place to apply these lines to academic activities. Therefore, before continuing with the same old scholarly inquiries that will neither provide new answers to old questions nor be able to adequately address new issues, we need to recalibrate our research strategies. Such a recalibration means that any examination of Brazilian rap needs to focus on racial issues and blackness not just as a social fact but also as the artistic core of the production, after all “no investigation of hip-hop inside or outside the United States can be complete without the discussion of the issue of race, its place in America, and the resulting appropriation and exportation of ‘blackness’” (Osumare 2007, 8). In the case of Brazil, “the implications *democracia racial* contains for more contemporary racial politics” (Hanchard 1994 44) must also come into play.

Notes

¹ Although it is not possible to verify exactly where and under what conditions hip-hop gestated, it was definitely born in New York.

² The pursuit of a conclusive definition for blackness remains a relentless and challenging duty for scholars. Therefore, here I work with the following operative definition: The term blackness not only refers to an intrinsic biological trait of people with African heritage perceived by others but also to the shared social and cultural practices and experiences directly related to colonial whiteness. Practices and experiences generated by – and developed as a response to or a side effect of – colonial whiteness’s agency, regardless of how such practices and experiences were/are appropriated by society in general.

³ Almicar Araújo Pereira demonstrated how African-American journalists started questioning the idea of Brazil as a racial paradise in the 1940s when they started to actually take the trip to Brazil in order to experience the alleged racial paradise. Pereira mentions the case of Ollie Stewart, who worked for *The Baltimore Afro-American* and was denied lodging by 11 hotels (2009).

⁴ 50 anos agora se completam
Da lei antirracismo na constituição
Infalível na teoria
Inútil no dia a dia
Então que fodam-se eles com sua demagogia
No meu país o preconceito é eficaz
Te cumprimentam na frente
E te dão um tiro por trás
“O Brasil é um país de clima tropical
Onde as raças se misturam naturalmente
E não há preconceito racial. Ha, Ha ...”
Nossos motivos pra lutar ainda são os mesmos
O preconceito e o desprezo ainda são iguais
Nós somos negros também temos nossos ideais. (track 12)

⁵ Following Haki R. Madhubuti’s steps I capitalize the word Black “when referring to people of African ancestry and of the African Diaspora” (3).

⁶ I employ the term in lower case on purpose and I do not claim to be the first one. A colleague called my attention to Audre Lorde’s involvement in this practice.

⁷ As Afolabi accurately pointed out, Brazil “is a country that has been able to maintain fantasy as reality through the myth of racial democracy” (2009 1).

⁸ The social and cultural practices and experiences (generated by–and developed as a response to or a side effect of–colonial whiteness’s agency) depicted aesthetically and thematically in rap.

⁹ Teperman’s criteria to grant Garcia such a position are not clear. Perhaps their shared interest in musicology is a factor; however, I prefer to not speculate any further because it could imply that I am questioning the importance of Garcia’s work, which I am not.

¹⁰ *Espírito Santo* is the least known of the four states that form the southeast region of Brazil.

¹¹ The fact that Garcia’s articles are widely more cited than any other scholar’s may speak in favor of such an assumption.

¹² I am fully aware of the fact that I am transferring “African-American” music to an “Afro-Brazilian” context.

¹³ The reference is both to the rap and to the video clip: *Mil faces de um Homem Leal* (Marighella).

¹⁴ During the XIII conference of Brazilian Studies Association held in Brown University in 2016, in a talk entitled “Bandido da minha cor” – O que o Rap tem a ver com a Ditadura,” Paulo Dutra presented a different interpretation for the video clip. For Dutra, the video clip constitutes an attempt at contesting and reinterpreting the official historical discourse that has consistently either erased or “whitened” (the case of Carlos Marighella) Black figures in Brazil. Racionais are less concerned with the dictatorship itself than with reclaiming Marighella’s condition as a representative of the black diaspora who occupied an important position in a white dominated world. For this reason, as an aesthetic resource, they filled their recreation of the takeover of “Rádio Nacional” with Black people only, erasing the whites. The paper shall appear as a chapter in a forthcoming book.

¹⁵ As stated in the lyrics of “*Racistas Otários*”: “Nossos motivos pra lutar ainda são os mesmos” (track 12). In addition, in a recent interview to *Le Monde Diplomatique Brasil*, Mano Brown stated that when they started composing: “Eu fiz o que era necessário para um época ... era uma prioridade de todos ... lutar pela raça ... a bandeira única” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gMT9cXizDYQ>)

¹⁶ I do not intend to mitigate the serious nature of the issue (the dictatorship), however, Black people's struggle clearly goes beyond it because it not only pre-dates the dictatorship but also continues a serious issue today.

¹⁷ That does not necessary mean to say that during the dictatorship the institutionalized violence and racism did not have their idiosyncratic and intensified practices and "a militarização da polícia e a banalização de direitos e garantias fundamentais ... fortaleceram a verve punitiva do Estado e, a despeito das narrativas hegemônicas, recaíram desproporcionalmente sobre os corpos não brancos" (Pires 1063).

¹⁸ Just to provide one more example, I refer to Roberto Camargos de Oliveira's (2015) monograph again. A glance at his working bibliography will reveal a massive lack of studies dealing with specific issues of Black people's experiences. Such a lack should explain why Camargo de Oliveira's award-winning study absorbs rap into broader societal issues scenario, totally disconnected from the reality of black experiences.

¹⁹ I detected very few cases when Racionais employ hyperbaton and the lines in fact sound somehow out of place.

²⁰ "Ouviram do Ipiranga as margens plácidas / de um povo heroico o brado retumbante." Reworded, the sentence reads: "As margens plácidas do Ipiranga ouviram o brado retumbante de um povo heroico."

²¹ In order to illustrate the general mainstream importance of hyperbaton more clearly, I refer to "Rima LIII," a poem by Spanish romantic poet Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer and a recent Portuguese translation of "Flannery's Angel" by Charles Wright. The first lines of Bécquer's poem, "Volverán las oscuras golondrinas / en tu balcón sus nidos a colgar," should suffice as examples. Reworded, the sentence reads: "las oscuras golondrinas volverán a colgar sus nidos en tu balcón" and the power of the imagery created by the use of hyperbaton is lost. In other words, hyperbaton is at the very core of the poetic construction. "Flannery's Angel" following lines: "Lead us to those we are waiting for / Those who are waiting for us. / *May your wings protect us*" (30, emphasis added) are translated by André Caramuru Aubert as follows: "Leve-nos até aqueles por quem esperamos / Aqueles que estão esperando por nós. / *Que possam suas asas nos proteger*" (30, emphasis added). The translation inverts the syntax of the last line for no apparent reason other than that, probably, employing hyperbaton became synonymous of good poetic practice in Brazilian literary history.

²² It is important to mention that there is not an official version of the lyrics. Based on the studio version of the track I transcribe the lyrics here in what would approximately be a more formal written version of the kind of language the rapper employs. (This article was finished before the publication of *Sobrevivendo no Inferno* as book)

²³ Jennifer Roth-Gordon calls attention to the parallels between this rap and L.L. Cool J.'s track "Illegal Search" (2009 76).

²⁴ Almirar Araújo Pereira's study comes to mind once again (2009).

²⁵ During the period the government placed both branches of state police (*Polícia Civil* and *Polícia Militar*) under Brazilian Army's authority.

²⁶ In the 1980s and 1990s affirmative action was not a reality in Brazil.

²⁷ Jennifer Roth-Gordon's interpretation of this part of the lyrics operates within the same line of reasoning I present here: "It takes only 15 minutes until he is stopped by Brazil's military police, who assume the car must be stolen and proceed with an illegal search" (2009 72). It is worth mentioning despite of what is prescribed in the legislation, such stops are not actually perceived as illegal by anybody in Brazilian society.

²⁸ Although N.W.A. also depicts what is commonly referred to as DWB, the social context surrounding their production is different in several aspects. If in Brazil the social economic crisis allied to the lingering dreadful image the dictatorship imposed on Blacks – within its ideal of rebuilding the nation – is the forefront cause behind the racist profiling that assumes the car to be stolen, in the USA that is not exactly the case. The demonization of Black males can be traced back to the times when the motion picture *The birth of a Nation* was released. In addition, a car is not exactly a commodity reserved to whites only, regardless of the economical panorama. Therefore, what is behind the illegal stops and searches has to do with the developments of race relations in the USA where there has never been an ideology of racial democracy. In addition, Black people reached middle-class status more often than in Brazil, nonetheless the demonization of Black males is so strong that, in spite all of that, a Black male driving a car means that either he is "up to something" (while in Brazil that Black male "already stole the car") or a drug dealer who can afford a nice car. The social and historical context is indeed different but, in both cases, the USA and Brazil, Blacks are presumed guilty by police personnel, which points to the realization that the real reason behind the illegal stops is racism.

²⁹ The two instances in which the word "white" appears in order to identify a person is side by side with the word "black" when referring to a white and a black police officer working as partners. Then, Ice Cube states that he "will swarm on any motherfucker in a blue uniform", which suggests that the words black and white are not applied in a derogatory sense. The "blue" uniform is the problem here. Only in the verdict is the word white employed as a derogative mark for white people.

³⁰ What turns the tragic scene into a beautiful one is the poetic construction of the rap.

³¹ In Brazilian Portuguese spoken in São Paulo, vowels in "non-stressed" position tend to weaken and therefore in the words "*rosto*," "*abatido*," and "*colocando*" the "u" sound is also pronounced.

³² The fact that the above mentioned comes immediately after the narration of the death of a young man allows for such an interpretation.

³³ “A gente vive se matando irmão, por quê? / Não me olha assim / eu sou igual a você.” (*Sobrevivendo no inferno* track 11)

³⁴ In H. Rap Brown biography *Die Nigger Die* a similar process is discussed in the context of American Society.

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