Decentering the United States in the Studies of Blackness in Brazil [*]

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ABSTRACT

The predominance of Eurocentric or US-centric perspectives in the social sciences has strengthened the notion that there is an exclusive model of modernity, experienced firstly in the economic centers of the world, and only later adopted in the 'peripheries.' This same logic can be found in studies of blackness in Brazil which have frequently characterized the black experience in the U.S.A. as the most 'modern within the African Diaspora.' In this article I develop a theoretical reflection which aims to overcome the centrality of the United States in the studies of blackness, recovering the notion of the African Diaspora as a multi-centered configuration. In order to do so, I examine the position of the city of Salvador da Bahia as an important center for the formation of the modern world, as well as for the construction of contemporary black identities.

Keywords: Blackness; Modernity; Bahia; World city; Roots tourism.

Between an African past and a U.S. American Future

The notion that the black experience in the United States is more "modern" than the one existent in Brazil is endorsed by the theoretical formulations of several Brazilian and U.S. American social scientists. Some scholars even contend that U.S. African-Americans should exchange their *blackness* – understood as a modern and politicized racial identity – for the *Africanness* (or *Africanity*) of Brazilian blacks, that is, their alleged capacity of retaining the "original African" culture (Walker, 2002). While Walker (*Idem*) explicitly argues for the trading of *blackness* for *Africanness,* and if Christmas (1992) is enthusiastic about the opulent "menu" of African traditions "preserved" by black people in Brazil, there are African-American authors who do not become excited with what they view as an "excess" of culturalism within Brazilian forms of blackness. In fact, some of these scholars go as far as recommending that Afro-Brazilians should be schooled in the modern patterns of U.S. blackness (Hanchard, 1994; Gilliam, 1992).

These varied perspectives hold in common the dichotomies tradition *versus* modernity, culture *versus* politics, and backwardness *versus* advancement, not to mention an (implicit) evolutionist notion of blackness. The abundance of material and intellectual resources in the U.S. academy explains, to a large extent, the widespread presence and hegemony of its ideas in Latin American academic settings. Coupled with that is the position of each country in the global configuration of power, which has a decisive effect on the expansion and distribution of ideas and theories. This unequal access to global currents of power explains, at least partially, the tendency of the social sciences to compare Brazil to the United States. As a consequence, even though Brazil has much more in common with other Latin-American countries, such as Cuba and Venezuela—which also engage in narratives of miscegenation and of the mythification of miscegenation—Brazilian racial politics is still predominantly compared to that of the United States.

Besides academia, contemporary Afro-Brazilian organizations are also heavily influenced by U.S. black social movements as well as by the U.S. American racially-oriented forms of contestation. Nonetheless, the type of multicultural society existing in the United States has been criticized for establishing "canned and commercialized identities of the ethnics as labeled consumers" (Segato, 1998), where the social value of the citizen and the consumer do not always converge. Relying on Bhabha (1992), Segato draws attention to the mandatory, and to a certain extent, pointless character of the U.S. regime of ethnicities to emphasize that the U.S. classification of "lineages as ethnicities" serves the purpose of maintaining the current ethnic boundaries, thus consisting of a liberal model of multiculturalism in which the idea of diversity is inert.

For philosopher Wendy Brown (1995), the proliferation and politicization of identities do not merely reflect moral or political choices, but a complex historical production that has constructed most of us as marginal, deviant or sub-humans. The very production of some identities as marginal is itself constitutive of the centrality and legitimacy of the center. For Brown, it is "disciplinary power" (as explained by Foucault, 1999) which produces social identities in a context of a liberal state. The best example of this regulated production of identities can be found in the U.S. welfare state which creates *welfare subjects*, subdivided by categories such as race, gender, age, etc. In that sense, political identity is produced not only *through* these categories, but *as* these categories, thus subduing political identities to political interest.

Brown describes the "wounded character of politicized identity's desire" (1995: 15), contending that the regulatory demands of the state encourage the formation of political identities founded on *injury*, thereby stimulating marginalized categories while reinforcing the bourgeois masculinist ideal of equality that has at its center the white heterosexual male. Thus, as long as equality is understood

within the confining mold of liberalism, politicized identities will not carry out a critique of capitalism. On the contrary, they will contribute to strengthening capitalism since they will be competing for the crumbs that fall from the table of the center of power.

Since the 1970s the discourses of the contemporary Afro-Brazilian movement[1] have revealed the great influence of the U.S. black movements. The attempt to adopt a bipolarized racial classification, pervasive in the United States, is one of the most emblematic examples of this hardly ever reciprocal exchange among Afro-Brazilians and U.S. African-Americans. This call for a binary racial classification, which opposes *blacks* and *whites*, and excludes the possibility of chromatic variation between the two ends, has certainly represented an attempt to combat the celebration of Brazilian *mestiçagem*, which is understood by the black movements as a "mask" employed to disguise racial conflicts.[2]

The claim on the part of Afro-Brazilian organizations for the implementation of a racial classification, which is believed to be the one existing in the U.S., has significant political consequences. There is a great controversy among scholars who work on the issue of Brazilian racial politics about whether or not we should adopt the U.S. racial binary classification. Such scholars as A. S. Guimarães (1995) and Hanchard (1994) contend that Brazil should be more inspired by the U.S. forms of racial classification, arguing that, akin to the U.S, skin color is a central racial category in Brazil.[3] On the other hand, there are scholars who take an opposite stand and argue against the endorsement of what they deem to be the "U.S. model of racial classification" (Fry, 1995; Segato, 1998). On the issue of the bipolarity claimed by the black movement, Fry (1995/1996) explains that this idea imposes an antagonism to what he defines as Brazil's "multiple mode of classification." This multiple mode allows individuals to be classified in different ways depending on specific situations. For Fry this makes possible a "de-racialization" of individual identity. It is a form of classification which is based on an interpretation of one's phenotype and not necessarily on his/her descent, thus confirming Oracy Nogueira's theory (1985) that in Brazil we give priority to *appearance* (*marca*) over *ancestry* (*origem*), when racially classifying individuals.

Ironically, the use of physical appearance—and above all skin color—to define who is black in Brazil is a consensus even among most Afro-Brazilian organizations. Despite the fact that the black movement claims that mulattos should self-identify as black, it demands that they have dark skin, contrary to what occurs in the U.S., where light-skinned Afro-descendants are classified as black and where the very expression "light-skinned blacks" does not sound like an oxymoron. It is understandable why the black movement in Brazil does not see light-skinned *mestiços* and mulattos as blacks since, ultimately, these individuals suffer infinitely less discrimination than those who are dark-

skinned. However, such forms of classification confirm the argument that, above all, it is racism that mostly determines an individual's "race." This also illustrates the difficulty in establishing classifications that favor *racial origin/ancestry* in a context marked by interpretations of *physical appearance*.

Several Brazilian scholars lament the fact that racial roles in Brazil are not as defined as in the United States, where British colonization implemented a drastic separation between blacks and whites. Even the expressions of racism vary between the two countries because of the different processes of colonization. In the United States the definition of ethnic groups is socially systematized, and whoever has the slightest black ancestry is considered black, for there "genetics have given way to a rigorously dichotomous racial fantasy" (Risério, 1995:103). In other words, African-Americans comprise the most biologically heterogeneous group in the U.S., but perhaps the most socially homogenous—at least apparently, since there are great internal inequalities within the group, mainly due to the generally overlooked but nonetheless striking class differences among blacks.[4] It is important to keep in mind, however, that the bipolarity (blacks versus whites) has not always been the standard in U.S. racial politics. Two censuses carried out in the late 19th century included the classifications "mulatto", "quarteroon" and "octoroon." Moreover, the designation "Latino/a", forged in the 1960s, brought significant changes for the U.S. system of racial classification.[5]

In fact, U.S. segregation itself has been a "model" for those generating the ideas that circulate in the black movement in Brazil. Anthropologist Kabengele Munanga, for instance, states that the promotion of a mobilizing ethnic and political awareness among the Brazilian black population is only possible through a self-definition based on African heritage, which for him includes history, culture, religion, and "race," and an unambiguous separation between whites and blacks. For Munanga, "This identity stems from one's color, in other words, from the reclaiming of one's blackness, physically and culturally" (1999:14). Thus, in this view, Brazilian blacks need to reaffirm their identity grounded on some sort of African past and with eyes set on a future that, in my understanding, is similar to the U.S. American present (or to what this reality is believed to be). It is then possible to affirm that the hegemonic project of the Afro-Brazilian movement is situated between an "African past" and a "U.S. American future." [6]

Anthropologist Rita Segato (1998) criticizes the Brazilian adherence to American standards, questioning whether the transnational identities emerging from the pressures of globalization are in fact representative of the forms of alterity that exist outside large influential centers. Segato argues that the United States has dictated to the rest of the world its own multiculturalist policies, but that Brazilians do not need to follow them. We can believe in other forms of producing subjectivities

related to Africa and in many different strategies for defending the reproduction of Africa in the New World. Fernando Rosa Ribeiro (1997) makes a similar critique when he states that there is a common thread running through most of the vast literature on race in Brazil: the explicit or implicit *comparison* to U.S. American society, which is almost always accompanied by a privileging of the U.S. American way of dealing with race. This comparative and evaluative perspective permeates the debates on the most varied themes of race relations in Brazil, where there are two distinct antagonistic and exclusionary discourses on the issue: the black movement's essentialist discourse, framed mostly by its deference to American blacks, and the academic discourse, predominantly anti-essentialist and anti-American.

In my view, while it is important to avoid falling into the trap of essentialism, the opposite is equally perilous, that is, thinking that, since black particularity is constructed socially and historically, any move toward recognizing commonality among contemporary black cultures would be wrong. Black particularity should be recognized and valued in any analysis of black identities because it is defined by cultural practices and political agendas that connect otherwise dispersed blacks. Thus, attempts to locate cultural practices that unite blacks scattered around the New World, Europe and Africa should not be considered cheap essentialism. Gilroy (1993) argues that the notion of diaspora is still utterly necessary for uncovering the ethical and political dynamics of the unfinished history of blacks in the modern world. It is, thus, still fundamental to weigh the similarities and differences among the diaspora's black cultures.

To value these connections, however, should not mean that identity politics should be the same for all blacks from different countries, or even within the same country. If it is already problematic to think of a common *past* for all blacks in the diaspora, it is even more complicated to believe that the *future* will be resolved everywhere in the same manner. The U.S. American black movements certainly achieved great victories during the Civil Rights struggle and through the establishment of laws such as Affirmative Action. But they also encounter great difficulties, and above all, they are situated within a very distinct context from the socio-racial reality of Brazil. It seems to me that the current situation in Brazil has neither the illusory comfort of the myth of an African past nor the equally illusory safety of the "multiracial" society of the United States. The formation of ideas of diversity, ethnicity, and "race," as well as that of the cognitive operations through which racism is propagated, occurs within the specific context of each nation. If black identities in the diaspora carry an important transnational dimension, there are also regional and national specificities which create specific forms of racism and, consequently, of identities that are formed to a great extent as a reaction to those forms of racism. We know that the process of building a nation is itself a process of defining "races,"[7] therefore public

policies and local strategies must be formulated according to these regional and national particularities.

Salvador da Bahia as a black "world city"

With the purpose of developing a theoretical reflection that may overcome the centrality of the United States in the studies of blackness in Brazil, it is necessary to recover the notion of the African diaspora as a multicentered configuration. Therefore, I examine the position of Salvador da Bahia as an important center of black cultural production in the development of black transnational relations in the American continent. I analyze the specific functions of Salvador as a black "world city" not only in the current stage of globalization—when Bahia has acquired the status as a "Mecca of Blackness", attracting an increasing number of African-American tourists—but I also look at its role in the formation of the modern world.

I contend that Bahia can be considered a "world city" because during the colonial period it was an urban space of central importance on a transnational scale. World cities are defined as centers of cultural and political power in the development of the modern world system; they have several meanings and a wide variety of roles, but they are, above all, contact zones where various groups meet and experience exchange and conflict (Quijano, 2000). Unlike "global cities" (Sassen, 2001), a concept that emphasizes the economic roles of megalopolises, world cities are characterized by their capacity to interfere in the global hierarchy of power concentration and production of knowledge, which Anibal Quijano (2000) calls "coloniality of power." Moreover, while the term "global city" is generally used to define the economic centers of the current phase of globalization, marked by the increase of financial capital since the 1970s, "world cities" have been central to the modern world since the early stages of capitalism.

Among the many black diasporic sites marked by a strong African cultural presence, Bahia has stood out for its immense legacy of Africanisms. In the 1940s and 1950s, anthropologist Melville Herskovits, delighted with the arsenal of African cultural "reminiscences" and "retentions" in Bahia, classified it highly on his "scale of Africanisms." Candomblé, musical rhythms, capoeira, and the palm oil-based cuisine are the main examples of African-originated cultural expressions which have been reassembled on Bahian soil and thus employed to characterize the state as "black" and "African."

In addition to the usual "stock of Africanisms" that assure the historical continuity with the "African Motherland," Bahia's aura of blackness has also resulted from the search and affirmation of ties to Africa through a movement that began in the 1970s, when the pro-independence struggles in the

Portuguese colonies in Africa occupied the news headlines, and when the messages of the U.S. soul music were becoming widespread worldwide. It was in this context that black movements in Brazil sought to strengthen their ties to Africa, although this occurred more in the realm of the imaginary and of cultural production than in the sphere of international politics or diplomacy. Afro-Brazilian cultural expressions were thus re-signified with the intention of reaffirming the connection to Mother Africa.

In addition to Africa and to the hegemonic United States, there are several centers which produce and emanate blackness within the international system of exchange of symbols, ideas, and images. Still restricted to a small sphere of influence, yet devoid of any trace of shyness, Bahia has emerged as a center of production of black symbols, slowly gaining significance and affirming its position along the routes of the black Atlantic. Bahia's position as one of the centers of the black Atlantic started during the colonial period, when slave trafficking definitively placed Brazil inside the networks of transatlantic commerce. Recent analyses have shown that Brazil's development occurred much more as a function of its relationship to Africa than to Portugal. Luís Felipe de Alencastro (2000), for instance, demonstrates that Bahia and Rio de Janeiro were more connected to Luanda and Benguela than to other Brazilian cities of the period. Bahia's ports were negotiating with foreign ships long before the official opening of the Brazilian port system. By the end of the eighteenth century, Brazilian merchants already had the upper hand in the slave trade, which began at that point to be managed from Bahia, and no longer from Lisbon.

The name "Bahia" has been used by both Brazilians and foreigners to refer to the city of Salvador da Bahia de Todos os Santos, the capital of the state of Bahia. Earning its name from the bay around which the Recôncavo is located, as well as from All Saints' Day, when it was christened by the Portuguese on November 1st, 1501, the city that emerged at that site became known as Bahia. For people living in both the interior of the state and the outside of the country, Salvador became known as "Bahia," according to Pierre Verger (1999a) "as if other bays did not exist." Based on this previously established designation, I take the liberty to use the name "Bahia" to refer to Salvador and the other black cities of the Recôncavo. Because of its moist and fertile soil, the region of the Recôncavo was one of the major sites of the sugarcane plantation economy in Brazil. It is, therefore, marked by a long history of slavery and its aftermath.

Due to the black majority of its population, travelers and explorers who visited Bahia during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries described it as a black city, nicknamed "New Guinea" and "Negroland" (Verger, 1999a). Later, Bahia also received the titles "Black Rome" and "Mecca of Blackness," designations that underscore its central condition in the network of circulating black people and symbols. The two latter terms clearly emphasize the character of Bahia as a world city,

firstly because they highlight its centrality within the black Atlantic—which, as we saw, is a system that allows for the existence of many centers in its diaspora configuration—and secondly, because it characterizes Bahia as a point of international convergence, contact, and interaction.

Throughout the nineteenth century, several black emancipated Bahians began participating in commercial trade with Africa. Among the many products brought from the Gulf of Benin to Bahia were the objects used in Candomblé. Red feathers, dyes, and fabric were some of the materials sought by Candomblé practitioners in Bahia, as well as the exchange of personal messages and religious secrets that connected people from both sides of the Atlantic. The transatlantic exchange, initially carried out by merchants, gained new mediators when researchers entered the scene. Pierre Verger became the best known of them, constantly carrying in his luggage gifts, messages, objects, and secrets.

As an interlocutor between Bahia and West Africa, Verger *pleased* the most purist of Candomblé practitioners, who were eager to reconnect with the original African source, and at the same time *displeased* the equally purist researchers, who believed that the legacy of "African survivals" in the New World should be carefully preserved, so that it could be discovered and mapped by their research. Melville Herskovits, for instance, was quite bothered by Verger's perambulations and for his transportation of traditions from one side of the Atlantic to the other, thus meddling with the pieces of Herskovits' giant puzzle—his laboratory of cultural retentions and survivals. Even now, Brazilian Candomblé priests and priestesses take their own journeys "back" to Africa in search of lost traditions. Concomitantly, religious individuals from the African continent, especially those involved in Bantu forms of worship, also travel to Bahia to find traditions that have been lost in Africa yet preserved in Bahia's Candomblés.[8]

According to Vivaldo da Costa Lima, the term "Roma Negra" ("Black Rome") resulted from the expression "Roma Africana" ("African Rome"), coined by Mãe Aninha, the founder of the *terreiro* (temple) Ilê Axé Apô Afonjá. The famous *ialorixá* (priestess) had declared to anthropologist Ruth Landes in the 1940s that Bahia was the African Rome, not only because of its great number of *Candomblé terreiros* but mainly because of its centrality within the transatlantic worship of the *Orixás*. The metaphor, inspired by the ialorixá's Catholic faith, expressed that if Rome was the center of Catholicism then Salvador was the center of *Candomblé*, and therefore an African Rome. The term was translated into English by Ruth Landes in *City of Women* as "Negro Rome" and then back-translated into Portuguese as "Roma Negra." [9]

The title "Mecca of Blackness" is also due in great part to Candomblé and not, as it might appear, to the large presence of Muslim slaves that once inhabited Bahia. A more recent term, it has been

promoted mainly by black activists and cultural producers from other states of Brazil who consider Bahia to be the main source of the country's African culture. Priests and priestesses in the Candomblés of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro frequently link the ancestry of their *terreiros* and their religious initiation to Bahian *terreiros* and *ialorixás*. The same is true for several *capoeira* schools, whose teachers associate their training with old Bahian *capoeira* masters as a way of legitimizing their practice. Similarly, the founders of the first *blocos afro*[10] have shared their knowledge of Afro-Bahian culture through offering consulting services for black cultural groups located in other Brazilian states. The aura of blackness surrounding Bahia, despite its early colonial origins, has been constantly and intensely re-elaborated. The 1970s witnessed the launching of the reafricanization process in the realms of Carnival, music, dance, and aesthetics, establishing Bahia as the "Mecca of Blackness" in the Americas, and thus re-updating its significance as a cultural center in the black Atlantic.[11]

Gilroy argues that the process that produced blackness generated its own specific contradictions. Thus, black music, black art, and radical black thought—whether political or religious—are expressions of the countercultural critique of the black Atlantic, which generated a counter-interpretation of modernity. This perspective has its own genealogies and can be historically mapped, reconstructing links and interlocking points. One of the main aspects of this counterculture is the fusion of ethics with aesthetics, stimulating a counterdiscourse that positions itself beyond the western presumption of duality between art and politics.[12]

In order to visualize Bahia in the black Atlantic it is necessary to consider it as both receptor and emissary of the objects, symbols, and ideas that circulate throughout these routes. The *blocos afro* provide a good example of this "two-way path," for they arose from the process of forming a contemporary international black culture, seeking African nations as historic-symbolic references. The *blocos afro*, as well as several groups that are producers of black culture, use symbols imported from the international arena in different ways, updating their meanings and modifying their messages. As happens elsewhere, processes of production of counter-discourses express the experience of alterity through the re-signification of elements drawn from a transnational popular culture.

The idea of Bahia as an exporter of supposedly preserved African elements is precisely what has attracted a growing number of black tourists from the United States. Since the 1970s, African-Americans have traveled to Bahia in search of "Africanness." What started as informal trips of friends has transformed, along the decades, into a structured market that includes travel agencies in Brazil and the United States. I call this phenomenon "roots tourism" because it is developed by people who travel to find their "African roots," whether these be located on the African continent or in countries of the diaspora with large black populations. The African-American roots tourists seek knowledge about

black cultures of the diaspora, and desire to establish a connection with other Afro-descendants. Many of them visit Bahia in order to experience up-close what they see as their "lost traditions." They can be regularly spotted—wearing Africanized clothing, braids, and turbans—in the rehearsals of the *blocos afro*, in *Candomblé terreiros* and other sites where Afro-Bahian cultural expressions are made public.

These black tourists come to Bahia with the intention of re-encountering their "African roots," which are believed to be not only in Africa but in all the diasporic sites where Africa has been reinvented. African-American writer Rachel Jackson Christmas, in describing her visit, depicts the "African pulse" that Bahia offers to African-Americans: "We felt the African pulse in the beat of samba, known as semba in Angola; swallowed it with the spicy food, made with nuts, coconut milk, ginger and okra also used in African cooking; witnessed it in candomblé ceremonies, rooted in the religion of the Yorubas of Nigeria; heard it in the musical Yoruban accent of the Portuguese spoken in the state of Bahia. (...) Today Bahians seem far more aware of their origins than African-Americans" (Christmas, 1992:253/4). [13]

Through their cultural production, the *blocos afro* exert a fundamental role in the new forms adopted by the contemporary black movement, shaping the image of their city and functioning as an important reference point for other black organizations in Brazil and the rest of the world. The aesthetic values, musical rhythms, and many other elements that comprise the *blocos*' narratives have certainly been influenced by discourses and symbols that crossed the black Atlantic, but it is crucial to note that just as they receive influences, the *blocos afro* also re-create, re-signify, and produce new elements that take part in the contemporary international black scene. The *blocos afro* are creating new objects of blackness that have a taste of the past, of tradition, of Africanness, directly corresponding to what is sought by the African-American tourists. Exactly because it is located within a transnational exchange of symbols, we cannot ignore the fact that Bahia does not only import elements of a universal black culture in order to incorporate and give them new meanings, but it is also part of a global black culture as a creator and exporter of black ethnic symbols. In this context, the city of Salvador has become a reference point of Africanness for blacks from other countries of the African diaspora. If, on the one hand, Bahia seeks modern black objects in the international market, on the other hand, it specializes in selling tradition.

The increasingly constant presence of "roots tourists" in Bahia can be considered one of the most important networks of circulation of black objects and discourses, for they confer the status of *modernity* and *ethnicity* upon the expressions of Afro-Bahian culture. Some expressions become more ethnic than ever because of the seal of approval provided by these tourists, thirsty for finding their roots. They bring in new forms of dress, talk, and thought that seduce many black Brazilians, while

several African-Americans explicitly state that they take such trips with the intention of exchanging their "modernity"—represented chiefly by the victories obtained in the realm of U.S. civil rights—for Bahia's African "tradition," found in Afro-Bahian cultural expressions.[14] An illustration of this belief can be found in the statement of an African-American tourist in one of her *roots-trips* to Cachoeira:

> "We [blacks from Brazil and the U.S.] have a great deal of things to exchange among ourselves. When we come to Bahia, we're here to learn about our own history and our common origin, because African traditions were able to survive here. But you also have a lot to learn from us, from our history of civil rights, 'cause in that sense, we're much ahead." [15]

Although African-Americans come to Brazil searching for their "past" and their "lost traditions," the very process of the "invention of traditions" is indicative of the fact that the construction of identities is inserted within modernity.[16] When a tradition is called upon, such as in the case of the "African traditions," it becomes evident that one is already, at least partially, external to this tradition. It becomes an object that needs to be reworked and re-invoked. The studies of the "invention of traditions," initially systematized by Hobsbawm and Ranger (1984) and Anderson (1989),[17] have shown that traditions are mostly created in the present, and reflect much more the interests of a given group than its supposed "cultural essence".[18]

Black movements in the Americas are situated in a context of emergence of new collective identities which are not necessarily limited to the model of the nation-state. Many of these identities, which were initially peripheral, have now moved to the center of the societies in which they were created and, frequently, to the international arena. These new identities have contested the hegemony of dominant identities and have demanded a space within institutional spheres, thus redefining the concept of citizenship and rights (Eisenstadt, 2000). Despite the fact that they frequently ground their discourse on tradition, these identities are modern, since they make claims for the reconstruction of personality, and of individual and collective means of conscious human agency. These conscious human actions are understood as capable of transforming individuals and society, and thus of establishing a new social order. Eisenstadt critiques the common-place understanding that equates modernity with the West, such as when the advent of Western influences in countries like India or China are perceived as the "arrival of modernity." I argue that an analogy can be drawn when, in Brazil, we consider *"U.S. forms of blackness"* as synonymous with "modern forms of blackness," vis-à-vis Latin American and African forms of blackness that are deemed "traditional." Despite the ideologies of purity, black diasporic cultural identities cannot be anti-modern because their very existence presupposes transnational networks that emerged together with the construction of the modern world.

The incorporation of supposedly "imported ideas" in a given culture does not have to be necessarily understood as mere imitation, since this process has made possible important innovations for those constructing their identities. The cultural projects of modernity are reinterpreted by groups when they elaborate their own discourses, thus constructing multiple modernities (Eisenstadt, *Idem*). This process has happened worldwide, and has disassociated modernity from Westernization, therefore rejecting the West's monopoly over modernity. I argue that this same kind of disassociation should take place in the studies of blackness in Brazil. It is about time we detach modernity and modern forms of blackness from the model of modern blackness prescribed by the United States.

In spite of its multicentrality, there is a hierarchy within the black Atlantic exchange of objects and symbols that cannot be ignored. Brazil imports black objects that have the aura of modernity and exports black objects that have the aura of tradition. Globalization is grounded more on vertical than horizontal exchanges.

> "Nevertheless, for now, in terms of the global flows of symbols and commodities based on international black culture, Salvador holds a peripheral position. In relation to the other centers of production and transmission of the majority of these symbols and commodities, Salvador is located on the extreme end of reception, in the vast hinterlands of the black Atlantic. The centers are located in the Anglophone world..." (Sansone, 2000b:14).

The main reasons for this asymmetry are Brazil's weak position within the world economy and the geography of power, and the U.S. and European dominance over the global circulation of scientific paradigms about "race," in a globalized system where Brazil still represents mostly a consumer periphery (Idem). Still, it is necessary to take into account that one of the main contributions of the theory of the black Atlantic system has been to reveal that the black diaspora does not have one exclusive emanating center of symbols, images, and ideas. In addition to the Egyptian and Ethiopian civilizations, and the "fundamental knowledge" of the "tribal" peoples of West Africa, there are other poles of Africanness, or at least of blackness, and they are located outside Mother Africa, or beyond the hegemony of the Anglophone world. Paths are being opened and the channels of communication and circulation are constantly being created in new directions. In the new routes that have been cleared by those who seek signs of blackness to build their identities, Bahia confirms its position as an emanating center of black culture in the African diaspora, re-updating a position that, as we saw, began as early as the colonial period.

The external radiation of Bahia as a black world city must therefore be examined through a world-historical perspective that takes into account the elements of continuity and rupture in relation to the

modern hierarchies of power, wealth, valorization, and recognition, analyzing how these elements affect the specific contexts of the distinct places in which black communities live. The study of transnational black relations should be concerned with how the global configuration of power interferes with the relationships between blacks who live in the superpower and those who live in the peripheries and semi-peripheries of the world.

For this very reason, when I analyze the relationship between Afro-Brazilians and U.S. African-Americans, I take into consideration the dominance of the United States as the main emanating center of blackness in the diaspora, and I bear in mind the unequal access to power between those in the center and those situated in the margins. On the other hand, I consider roots tourism to be a channel of communication and exchange that challenges, at least partly, the supremacy of the United States in the African diaspora, since it promotes the existence of alternative centers of blackness and Africanness. Consequently, Salvador da Bahia, situated in a Lusophone country of the Global South, reemerges as a "world city," expanding the map of the black Atlantic while at the same time challenging the hierarchy of its configuration. It is precisely this ability to disturb the coloniality of power that confirms its status as a world city.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article is to contribute to the study of blackness in Brazil, adopting a perspective that theorizes blackness in its many and varied versions, rejecting the notion that there is an exclusive – or more advanced - formula of blackness. The modern African diaspora is characterized by the existence of several radiating centers of symbols, objects, ideas and theories. If our theories succeed to go beyond unicentrality, our studies will make possible the replacement of hierarchical relations with more balanced dialogues.

The unicentraliy of black Afrocentric movements, that is, the belief in one center from which everything emanates, centralizes some experiences while marginalizing others. Therefore they run the risk of transforming into colonialist or even fascist projects since the belief in an exclusive center makes possible dominance and control (Davies, 1999).[19] Eisenstadt (2000) also points to the fact that very totalitarian orientations have evolved in many movements deemed "post-modern" or "multicultural". The policing brought about by "political correctness" is just one example. The solution to avoid totalitarianism is to defend a variety of paradigms and to remain open to the creation of new theories that take into account historical inequalities through radical analyses of power

relations. For such, it is necessary to get rid of the superficiality and Manichaeism that often reign over the uses of important expressions, such as multiculturalism, diversity, and multicentrality.

The inversion of values does not necessarily mean the transformation of power relations, since Afrocentrism, as an "immediate opposition" to Eurocentrism, does not remove the United States from its central hegemonic world position. That is, if the biggest heir to Eurocentrism is "U.S.-centrism", the latter is also the main beneficiary of Afrocentrism, since both use the same tools (media and market) to place the United States as the great emanating center of narratives (Davies, 1999a). One of the main results of this can be seen in the analyses of racism and racial relations in Brazil, in which U.S. society appears frequently as the "model" to be followed, as a place where blacks are more "evolved" both in terms of civil rights and because they constitute the world's largest black middle class.

Criticizing unicentralist theories, Gilroy (1993) argues that the black diaspora, instead of being centered around Africa as its motherland or on the United States as an exporting center of models of ethnicity, has several centers spread around the black Atlantic. Gilroy (*Idem*) maps out a multicentered black diaspora comprised of infinite variations of black culture. This notion rejects the reduction of blackness to mere ethnic or national traditions, thus combating both the paradigms of "ethnic absolutisms" and the centrality of the discourses produced in the U.S. The notion of the black Atlantic thus represents a new method for thinking about the African diaspora in its relationship with western thought, economy, and culture. One of the main contributions of Gilroy's theory is the alternative and liberating manner of understanding the "diaspora," conceived as something dynamic that allows for the emergence of counter-powers that have challenged territorial sovereignties and beliefs in absolute identities. Understood in such way, the concept of diaspora allows us to go beyond geography and genealogy, beyond nature and culture, because it rejects the belief in spontaneously-generated nationalities and racialities, thus providing an alternative to the metaphysical idea of a "race" that determines the culture supposed to be inscribed in the body or in the skin color (Gilroy, 2000:123). By conceiving the diaspora in its dynamic meanings of a network of multiplicity, communication, and interaction, black identities can become explicitly contrary to nationalistic thought or to ideas that invoke a single emanating center of blackness, authenticity, and truth.

The very idea of modernity entails the notion of a much more effective human agency, hence allowing for the existence of many possible futures. Human conscious activity is capable of transforming society, thus strengthening the belief in the ability of individuals and groups to realize utopias and construct common wellbeing. The very definition of "common wellbeing" is open to multiple interpretations in a context of modernity, and can be defined differently by distinct groups. Besides

strengthening the political sphere, another characteristic of modernity is the varied manner in which collectivities and collective identities get to be defined (Eisenstadt, 2000). While previously imagined as being delimited by national boundaries, collective identities have multiplied and expanded (or have had their expansion recognized) as beyond the limits of nations. Black diasporic connections are, in my view, an undeniable example of this transnational expansion.

Although I did not intend to wholly apply Eisenstadt's concept of "multiple modernities" to the study of the African diaspora, the idea that there are alternative forms of modernity developed beyond the West is particularly useful for the project of decentering the United States in the theories of blackness. Besides, the different lived experiences (in this case, of the various Afro-descendant communities in different parts of the diaspora) have made possible a variety of modernities within the Western world itself. The election of U.S. forms of blackness as the utmost reference for the studies of blackness in Brazil should be analyzed in connection to our own tendency as Brazilians to look at ourselves from a marginal standpoint: formerly at the margins of Europe, and currently at the margins of the United States. Undeniably, the analysis of the hegemony of U.S. American theories of blackness in Brazil should also take into account the tendency of the U.S. to narrate itself, and increasingly so, as the center of modernity in the contemporary world. However, if modernity has established the secularization of thought, why should we make sacred certain models and experiences to the detriment of others? It is imperative to insist on the recognition of the diversity of experiences within the African diaspora. If its commonalities ensure a relative unity, on the other hand, the dissimilar histories lived by Afro-descendants in different locations indicate the need for a wider and more balanced dialogue instead of a linear standardization.

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[1] I use the expression "black movement" to refer to the black organizations that emerged in Brazil especially since the 1970s, and which have mobilized and organized themselves around the idea of a "black race." I am not referring, therefore, to a black entity in particular, but to contemporary Brazilian black organizations in general.

[2] For a critique to the notion of racial democracy as a mask, see Peter Fry (1982, 1991, 1995, 1997, 2000).

[3] "The varying importance of color throughout Brazil's several regions, as well as its perception and categorization in the labor market, at home, and at work, demonstrate precisely that color is nothing more than the bodily mark of race, or to put it differently, its codification. The importance of color seems to vary specifically in function of the demographic percentage of blacks in each region and in each different kind of situation where they compete with whites" (Guimarães, 1995:57).

[4] On the topic of class disrupting racial affiliations see Hooks (2000), Gilroy (2000) e Appiah (1997), among others.

[5] I am grateful to historian Darien Davis for having shared this information with me.

[6] On the notion of a common African past, it is important to remember that Pan-African scholars were the first to widely circulate the idea that blacks all over the world share the same origin and therefore a common African past. However, even though they positioned themselves in opposition to Western thought, pan-Africanists adopted the same weapons of the West to create a "black/African culture" to be shared by all blacks in the Diaspora. The invented traditions, imported from Europe, offered a model of modernity for diasporic blacks.

[7] In the case of Brazil, the nationally idealized "race" is a "cross-breed" founded on the "fable of the three races" (da Matta, 1984). This Brazilian myth can be considered a paradigm of inclusion that emanates for both those who control the State and those who are oppressed by it.

[8] Members of ACBANTU (Associação Cultural de Preservação do Patrimônio Bantu – Cultural Association for the Preservation of Bantu Heritage), a Bahian NGO whose main objective is to contribute to the recovery of original Bantu traditions and carry on exchanges with similar entities

nationally and internationally, mentioned the trip by Angolans to Bahia in search of Bantu traditions that had been "lost" in Africa yet preserved in Bahia.

[9] Article by Andréia Santana in the newspaper *Correio da Bahia*, March 10th 2004.

[10] The *blocos afro* are black cultural organizations that emerged in Bahia the 1970s seeking to defeat racism within the sphere of Carnival. At present, they have surpassed the boundaries of Carnival, and have been producing new references of blackness.

[11] The construction Bahia's African and/or black image was also the result of the work of researchers and writers. On the significance of Gilberto Freyre and Jorge Amado in the formation of *baianidade* (Bahianness), see Pinho (2006). More recently, the black image of Bahia has also been strategically produced by the State Government (see Pinho, 2004).

[12] The music and cultural practices with African origins in the diaspora are bearers of both the utopia of a better world and of deep criticism of capitalism and the West. What is manifested in many forms and in many places of the Black Atlantic, then, is an interpretation based on the separation between politics and culture, stemming from European thought yet distant from the reality of the diaspora. The Caribbean, Africa, Latin America, and the United States contributed to the development of a transnational black racial identity. The urban context in which their cultural expressions were created favored the stylistic appeal on which local ethnic identifications are based. The creation and transnational exchanges of black ethnic symbols represent fundamental building blocks in the narratives and discourses on blackness with which black groups express their struggles and experiences (Gilroy, 1993).

[13] The idea that blacks in Bahia or Brazil have more awareness about their African origins is quite present in the imaginary of black activists in the United States, as can be noted in the comments of rapper M1, from the band Dead Prez, "When I think about Brazil, I think about black people talking Portuguese, you see? I think of Africnas, I think of Africa [...]. I feel that they are more closely connected to Africa. I see [them as] a step forward in the struggle of black people. In the spirituality of the people from there I see a great step forward in the resistance against colonial domination; in the understanding of Africa's importance, I see a strategy of less brain-washing than has been applied here (...)," Rap Internacional, Year 1, number 3, 2001.

[14] As mentioned above, the notion that the black experience in the United States was more "modern" than the Brazilian is also endorsed by several U.S. American theorists, e.g. Sheila Walker (2002).

[15] Statement collected in interviews with African-American tourists in Cachoeira, BA, in August 2000.

[16] One must therefore recognize the political meanings contained in the way in which traditions are conceived and the past is recreated. "The past continues to speak to us. But it is no longer comes to us as a simple factual past, for our relationship to it, like the relationship between a mother and a child, is always already 'post-separation.' It is constructed through the intermediation of memory, fantasy, narrative, and myth. Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, made inside the discourses of culture and history. They are not an essence, but a stance, where there will always be identity politics, position politics, which cannot absolutely guarantee a problem-free, transcendental 'law of origins.' (Hall, 1996:70).

[17] Respectively *The Invention of Tradition* and *Imagined Communities*.

[18] Despite being widely adopted by academia, the theory of the "invention of traditions" has been heavily criticized by some scholars, who mainly question the authority a researcher has to affirm the "veracity" or not of a given tradition. For anthropologist Charles Briggs (1996), for instance, a researcher does not have the right to take away a native's power of self-definition and the power to decide how he should act politically and culturally.

[19] With regard to unicentrism in black movements, Gilroy states, "We have seen that the authoritarian and proto-fascist formations of twentieth-century black political culture have often been animated by an intense desire to recover the lost glories of the African past. The desire to restore that departed greatness has not always been matched by an equivalent enthusiasm to remedy the plight of Africa in the present" (2000:323).