No Laughing Matter
Race Joking and Resistance in Brazilian Social Media

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Foreword

Studying race relations in Brazil represents a particular challenge, especially for black researchers. The myth of ‘racial democracy’ has been ideologically disseminated within our borders as an epistemological project that has served (and continues to serve) the hegemonic financial and academic power both within Brazil and in the international context. If in Brazil racist beliefs of colour-blindness, or racial neutrality, have postponed the effective understanding of contemporary power and exploitation relations, outside the country past renowned intellectuals have contributed to disseminate the fallacy that racism in Brazil would be a mild force when compared with the scenario found in other Afrodiasporic countries.

Nonetheless, the reality regarding Brazil’s racial groups has always been quite different from the picture drawn based on the principles of the so-called ‘racial democracy’. Starting from interpersonal relations and advancing towards what can be measured in the micro and macro-economic level (e.g., employment level, access to fundamental rights, exercise of full citizenship, and including the right to life itself). In effect, despite the effort fostered by Brazilian elite to disguise or even hide the country’s ingrained racism, it does not pass fully unnoticed thanks to numerous social science studies and the distinctive role played by social activism, as this book unveils.

Finding that in Brazil we live in a sort of twofold or threefold society, paraphrasing the intellectual and quilombola Beatriz Nascimento, reflects and coalesces first with W.E.B Du Bois’ concept of the ‘second veil’, and second with Charles W. Mills’ epistemology of white ignorance, among other parallels found in the critical production of counter-hegemonic intellectuality of other black thinkers, indigenists, feminists, and anti-colonialists. Thus, unveiling the explicit and implicit connections between the manifestations of humour and language with the relations of power and oppression in contemporary digital communication platforms is a necessary endeavour.

However, as it has happened and continues to happen in other areas of everyday social interactions, the knowledge about the social dynamics on the internet in general, and on social media in particular, also suffers from a particular form of racial blindness, fuelled with an aggravating factor: the perception that this digital technology is neutral. The loss of the political facade of digital technology has led techno-utopians to strongly believe in the web’s revolutionary aspect. From the defence of a libertarian utopia in John Perry Barlow’s ‘Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace’ that mistakenly believed that cyberspace would not reproduce geographical borders,
patriarchal societies, racism and classism (although it was already dominated by white male American) to how the GAFAM oligopoly (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon and Microsoft) defines itself as the utmost symbol of freedom on the web (at the same time that they give in to and support local authoritarianism, from the US to China), the criticism of technocentric essentialism on the web as if it was somehow detached from the reality in the offline context needs to be done.

Having said that, what I call double opacity comes into play: how hegemonic discourses make both the social aspects of technology invisible and the debates about the primacy of racial issues in different spheres of society - including technology, recursively.

Thus, I can notice that Luiz Valério P. Trindade has challenged this double opacity throughout his extensive track record of publications, from the analysis of the social representation of black Brazilians in printed pieces of advertising to the construction and dissemination of racist discourses on social media. The combination of this solid scholarship now converges in No laughing matter: race joking and resistance in Brazilian social media, which represents an essential study that innovatively explores specific aspects of vicious racist humour in the daily lives of many black Brazilians, and women in particular as the predominant target of this pernicious practice.

The supporters of the social media ‘filter bubble’ (as coined by Eli Pariser), tend to believe that what composes each user’s virtual environment is determined solely by who you are and what you do (i.e., your interactions). But it fails to take into consideration that behind user’s interactions, powerful algorithms are determining and managing these ‘filter bubbles’, as I advocate in my publications. In effect, social media platforms help in creating online communities, but they also enable the clash of distinct world views, ranging from social transformation to the inhuman horror of racism. The myriad of viewpoints in some cases is separated by a big gap of humanity. That is to say, certain social groups who are unable to accept the social advancement of the ‘other’ because such achievements might offset their own privileged social position.

The increase of racist hate speech on social media in Brazil, as reported and skilfully analysed by Trindade in this book, is mostly based on users’ engagement with the pervasive centuries-old legacy of colonial thinking that has been responsible not only to naturalise racism in contemporary society, but also to reinforce, perpetuate and conceal it in a variety of ways (e.g., cultural manifestations such as popular songs and race joking, in advertisements, in textbooks, political discourses, soap operas, and movie productions).
Currently, it is possible to notice that the symbolical meaning of the ancient *quilombo* communities as distinctive spaces of resistance are mirrored in the establishment of several online communities led by black Brazilian women aiming to challenge Brazil’s ingrained racism. Moreover, in this book, Trindade brings to light the many practical and symbolical achievements reached by black Brazilians as a result of demands raised by the organised black movement, the strong political significance of female Afro hairstyle and the social transformations fostered by these initiatives.

Language is capable of constructing, solidifying or challenging political and social designs not only through texts but, in the current digital society, also through ‘memes’ and pictorial images that allow us both to understand the ever-changing dynamics of contemporary society and search for ways to promote social and behavioural change. And it is also true that in today’s social media platforms, human interaction is performed by an immense number of nodes of interconnected users and mediated (or controlled) by powerful corporations. This aspect represents just a simple reminder of the relevance of understanding the mechanisms and motivation behind the construction and dissemination of racist hate speech in the online environment and challenging this practice, as revealed by the present work.

The upward social mobility of a new generation of black Brazilian women, despite their overall challenging lived experiences of racism and historical disadvantaged racial hierarchy position, contributes to transforming the fabric of Brazilian racial relations. Even facing the challenging intersectionality dimensions of race, class, gender, place of origin, religious affiliation, amongst others, the resistance movement against Brazilian ingrained racism brought forward by black women, and evidenced in this book, plays a decisive role in paving the way towards an improved future ruled by more egalitarian racial and gender relations in Brazil and beyond.

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To Martha. The strongest black woman I have ever known.
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To pay tribute to people who have proved important in supporting me over a long academic journey is quite challenging because there is always the risk to, inadvertently and unconsciously, leave some names behind. Thus, to avoid this undesirable mistake, and also to avoid writing a prolonged exposition with a long list of names, I have instead decided to keep it simple, but still meaningful.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all my friends both in Brazil and abroad with whom I have had the privilege to share ideas, thoughts and moments. I also thank my academic mentors and supervisors, who have been demanding to extract the best of me and also extremely inspiring, and my peers both during my masters’ in Brazil and doctoral studies in England. Within that, I also express my gratitude to my interviewees in Brazil for their time, availability and for sharing their invaluable reflections during my fieldwork trip for data collection. Moreover, I thank the anonymous reviewer for dedicating precious time in critically assessing the manuscript and providing insightful comments and suggestions for its improvements, and for Tarcízio Silva for writing a tremendous preface. My gratitude also goes to Vernon Press for believing in this project when I submitted the proposal and for its staff who have always been very professional and courteous to my contacts. And, finally, my gratitude to my family in Brazil and in Italy, including the invaluable support of my wife Giulia. Please, feel all genuinely embraced.
Introduction

For a long time in the international arena, Brazil has been known as a singular example of a harmonious post-racial society, or the so-called ‘racial democracy’. This ideology implies the existence of racial equality, egalitarian opportunities to all individuals, independently of the race, and that any instability in the system is due solely to class inequalities. Nevertheless, far from depicting the real lived experiences of inequality faced by black Brazilians, the belief in this ideology also results in other negative impacts.

First, the belief in the ‘racial democracy’ blurs people’s perceptions concerning the unequal upward social mobility opportunities experienced by black people and fuelled by racial prejudice. Second, it prevents society from raising constructive debates about racism and overshadows efforts towards the implementation of social policies aiming to tackle this phenomenon. The inner logic is ‘since racism is not a pressing issue, there is no need to discuss it’. Third, ‘racial democracy’ foments the fallacious idea of meritocracy regarding successful upward social mobility. Nevertheless, the proponents of this ideology completely disregard that, oftentimes, the starting point for most black Brazilians is from a very disadvantaged position in comparison to whites. Consequently, the upward social mobility achieved by the two racial groups tends to be considerably different.

In combination with the belief in the ‘racial democracy’, since the beginning of the twentieth century, the whitening ideology has become an ingrained element in Brazilian racial relations. This ideology is based on a contrasting dualistic dynamic. On the one hand, it praises and promotes whiteness as the ultimate symbol of a Eurocentric beauty standard, modernity, social development and material and intellectual progress. On the other hand, blackness has constantly been associated with many negative attributes such as backwardness, ugliness, and lack of moral traits and cleverness, among others.

Hence, over time, the combination of ‘racial democracy’ and the whitening ideology has been shaping Brazilian racial relations and influencing people’s discourses regarding race. However, whilst social conventions tend to ‘regulate’ and restrain the enactment of racist discourses in everyday social circumstances, race joking offers a convenient escape route. Given the fact that it represents a socially acceptable form of communication, it also allows people to freely convey racist ideologies without sounding blatantly racist. After all, it is ‘just a joke’. This scenario coalesces with the paradoxical circumstance known as ‘racism without racists’, meaning that the act and its negative impacts
are capable of being identified and acknowledged by society, but the agent is absent.

With the emergence of major social media platforms in the early 2000s and its exponential growth rate and popularity in Brazil, a different social phenomenon has also emerged. This disruptive digital technology has enabled the proponents of racist ideologies to disregard any social convention and unleash their discriminatory discourses in the online environment without any crise de conscience.

Two major drivers are fuelling such attitudes. First, a false belief that online anonymity bestows users with implied permission to mock and/or offend anyone in the online environment. Second, an illusory perception that the online environment is detached from the offline environment and, consequently, that users cannot be held accountable for their attitudes. Moreover, there is evidence revealing that once their racist discourses become subject of news articles, the users take at least one of the following four actions: 1) delete the original post, 2) shift their profile status from public to private, 3) delete the account, and 4) claim that it was ‘just’ a harmless jest.

Within this context, from the mid-2000s onwards, major social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp and YouTube have become a breeding ground for the construction and wide dissemination of racist discourses against black people. Such discourses are oftentimes conveyed through race joking and the preferred target are upwardly mobile black women. Furthermore, due to its networking capabilities, social media platforms enable these individuals to accomplish three things: 1) disseminate their discriminatory ideologies towards a wide audience, 2) disregard any conventional social distance\(^1\) that might exist between themselves and the victims, and 3) engage an increasing number of like-minded users which, consequently, amplifies the reach and reverberation of their hateful voices in ways not seen in the offline context in Brazil.

Having said that, the new generation of upwardly mobile black women seems to be upsetting certain pre-established perceptions and limited social roles. As they achieve social progress through better tertiary education, engagement in professions requiring specialised skills (e.g. journalism, medicine, law, engineering, etc.), they become the target of racial discourses. Their achievements undermine the ingrained belief that their ‘legitimate’ social

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\(^1\) It is important to explain that, in this book, ‘social distance’ stands for the degree of proximity or distance between people but regarding previous relationships either in the online environment or the offline. In other words, it refers to the idea of strong or weak bonds which, respectively, implies short social distance and big social distance.
space is restricted only to subservient positions, and they threaten the achievement of the desired ‘whitened’ Eurocentric national identity.

The interplay of the belief in the existence of a ‘racial democracy’ and the aspirational fully whitening of Brazil fuels racist discourses. Once embedded in humour statements, they become socially acceptable and grant the ‘it was only a joke’ excuse for the proponents of white supremacy. As they are enacted and disseminated on major social media platforms, the technology becomes a sort of modern-day pillory for inflicting public virtual ‘whipping’ on ‘trespassers’ of social spaces associated with white privilege and, consequently, racism is perpetuated and reinforced in Brazil through this disruptive digital technology.

Nonetheless, despite this picture, it can also be observed that social media is becoming an important arena for resistance manifestations, especially led by black women. Indeed, black women have had a highlighted role (although historically not always appropriately recognised or acknowledged) in resisting racism and enslavement since colonial times. The same has happened in the abolitionist movement in the late years of the nineteenth century, and it continued this way throughout the twentieth century both in organised groups and through emerging influential agents of social change.

Yet, what can be observed is that in the current scenario, social media platforms have allowed the agglutination of initiatives. Moreover, given the fact that this technology enables the amplification of black women’s voices, this aspect composes a significant difference in comparison to previous organised black movements. It means that social media is enabling ordinary black women to have their voices heard and convey their specific anti-racist narratives. Within that, these women speak the same ‘language’ of other equally oppressed black women that might experience similar circumstances of racism both on social media and in the offline environment. Consequently, this emerging leadership empowered by social media is contributing to inspiring other black women to deconstruct their whitened minds, ‘becoming’ blacks just like them, and ultimately, challenging Brazil’s enduring ingrained racism, sexism and social inequalities.

**Data and Methodology**

Facebook is currently the world’s leading social media platform with over 2.1 billion monthly users; Brazil represents its third-largest market with 130 million monthly active users, and the second largest in terms of the time users spend on the platform daily (Kemp, 2019). Consequently, given the considerable reach and popularity of Facebook in Brazil, it represents a suitable source of primary data. Moreover, the emergence of a social media platform with this reach and exponential growth rate encourages us to reflect on “the ways in which race and
ethnicity connect to, are affected by and are enacted” in this environment (boyd and Ellison, 2007, p. 222). The online search for gathering spontaneously generated textual data was conducted in Brazil during the summer of 2016, driven by a set of 131 keywords in Portuguese related to racial insults and racist jokes selected from previous studies addressing both topics (Fonseca, 1994; Guimarães, 2003; Dahia, 2008; 2010; Machado and Muniz, 2013). This process led to the identification of a series of 217 publicly available Facebook pages and 224 news articles addressing 42 cases of racism on Facebook within the timeframe 2012-2016. In complement to that, I have also interviewed eight social actors in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, including policymakers, leaders of non-governmental organisations, and individual social activists. It is relevant to highlight that, although the data is publicly available, the study safeguards users’ privacy and no personal identification is disclosed, what conforms with best research practices suggested in previous studies (Zimmer, 2010; Salmons and Woodfield, 2013; Kosinski et al., 2015).

The study adopts a qualitative approach in the investigation of the embedded meaning of race joking, and the data was explored in an iterative process to allow the emergence of key concepts (Potter, 1996; Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002; Lichtman, 2010). The data were analysed applying critical discourse analysis because it contributes towards unveiling a system of social and racial relations that evolves, and it is shaped by the context where they are created and reproduced (Arango, 2013). Moreover, language and discourse are not just descriptive but, in fact, a form of social action and, as such, are capable of being systematically interpreted and explained (Fairclough, 1989). Finally, critical discourse analysis allows the social researcher to examine how shared meanings, beliefs and ideologies are created and reproduced through people’s discourses (Starks and Trinidad, 2007).

**Organisation of the book**

As the title of this book suggests, my study develops a critical sociological analysis of race joking (also called derogatory or disparagement humour in the literature) as a convenient vehicle to convey racist ideologies against vulnerable social groups on social media. Indeed, it takes into consideration that race joking is no laughing matter since it can bring a series of negative impacts in people’s lives. However, the book also brings to the surface the resistance initiatives fomented by black Brazilians (especially women) in the very same arena where they have been belittled and subjected to new types of lived experiences of racism. In other words, the present work aims to bring a balanced and innovative view about the enduring phenomenon of racism in Brazil, in the sense that, on the one hand, it reveals contemporary forms of bigotry whereas, on the other hand, how the phenomenon is being challenged
as well. For this purpose, the present book (which is derived from my PhD thesis in Sociology at the University of Southampton) has been organised into six major chapters.

The Introduction brings an overview of the subsequent six chapters; and moreover, it summarises the key findings and the main arguments developed throughout the book, it explains the methodology applied in the research, and also presents the major conclusions.

As for Chapter 1, there is an old Brazilian adage, whose authorship is attributed to the musician Tom Jobim in the early 1960s, stating that ‘Brazil is not for beginners’ (Castro, 2008; Holanda, 2012). Certainly that, strictu sensu, no country is for ‘beginners’ as such, and each one holds its specificities and unique characteristics that make them what they are. In fact, putting it simple, Tom Jobim’s adage conveys the need to revisit a country’s key historical milestones in order to make sense of how and why society operates in particular ways. Without this review, chances are that to understand its modus operandi, one might miss important elements needed to unpack their embedded meaning.

With that in mind, more than a historical account of key aspects concerning the formation of Brazilian society, the chapter develops a profound critical analysis of the core ideologies that have guided the country’s social and racial relations to date. For this purpose, Chapter 1 develops a robust and necessary contextualisation of the social condition of black Brazilians, including bringing to the surface the negative legacies inherited from the colonial society and three-and-a-half centuries of slavery history which, to date, still influence their current lived experiences of racism and discrimination.

The subsequent Chapter 2 brings to light the evolution of black resistance to racism and discrimination. It develops a thoroughly historical journey spanning over four centuries of history, however, with a dedicated focus on four major aspects: a) the enduring legacy of Quilombo dos Palmares as the ultimate symbol of resistance to racism and enslavement, b) the emerging voice of black Brazilians, c) the political significance of Afro hairstyle as a tool to challenge hegemonic Eurocentric beauty standards and also to establish a clear political position, and d) a discussion addressing the contemporary achievements and challenges faced by black Brazilians and the organised black movement. Furthermore, this chapter also addresses the major historical milestones regarding the organised anti-racism movement in Brazil and discusses how the

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2 Title: It is not that funny. Critical analysis of racial ideologies embedded in racialized humour discourses on social media in Brazil
current online initiatives are empowering many black women and enabling them to have their voice heard among a wide audience.

Chapter 3 addresses three intertwined topics that, combined, also contribute towards the better understanding of the Brazilian social and institutional context surrounding racism on social media platforms. It starts with an important discussion regarding the key disparagement humour theoretical concepts, what makes race joking ‘funny’, and the major characteristics of Brazilian racist humour. The second section introduces the major aspects that have contributed to turning social media platforms into a convenient breeding ground for people to distil varied forms of bigotry and racist discourses in Brazil. And, finally, the third section brings an overview of the Brazilian anti-racism legal landscape. It aims at addressing the paradoxical context that, despite the existence of several legal anti-racism mechanisms, the practice is still very active and, data reveal that the trend has been on the rise, rather than decreasing.

As for Chapter 4, it aims to discuss the four major elements that compose the anatomy of racism on social media, which are: a) the target of the discourses, b) the proponents of racist discourses, c) the long life span of racist discourses on social media that can reach around three years, and d) what the title of certain online communities reveals to us regarding their nature and scope. The detailed critical analysis of these topics is important because it reveals a clearer and more robust picture concerning the dynamic of racist discourses on social media platforms. Moreover, the chapter also explores the dynamics of sexism, in combination with race and class, affecting the lived experiences of racism faced by black Brazilian women, which contribute to turning them into the predominant target of racist discourses on social media.

The following Chapter 5 focuses on unveiling the embedded meaning of several race joking posts circulating on social media in Brazil. The critical analysis resorts to the key theoretical framework extensively discussed in Chapter 1. Hence, the analysis establishes a clear dialogue with those key theoretical concepts and reveals the strong manifestation of colonial legacies shaping Brazilian contemporary racial relations, and how society constructs legitimate national identities and perceives blackness. Furthermore, the chapter also explores the decisive role played by social media in enabling the proponents of white supremacist ideologies to disseminate their beliefs, engage like-minded people, and reverberate their voices in ways not seen in the offline social context.

Having said that, the analysis of the data has revealed five salient derogatory discourses against black women. Briefly, they encompass the following set of themes: a) challenging the legitimacy of social improvements achieved by upwardly mobile black women, b) the reinforcement of a series of negative
stereotypes, especially associating blackness with delinquency, c) disregarding blacks’ educational level, d) black Brazilians are treated as laughable subjects, and e) delegitimising demands for greater racial equality.

Conversely, in **Chapter 6**, the aim is to investigate the anti-racist narrative being enacted also on social media. Whilst data reveal the increasing trend of enactment of racist discourses in the online environment, it is important to understand which resistance initiatives are being fomented by black Brazilians. The development of this analysis has revealed the emergence of four major discursive strategies employed by black Brazilians aimed both at deconstructing ingrained racist ideologies and, simultaneously, empowering black women in particular. They comprise: a) Afro hairstyle as an important symbol of resistance and empowerment, b) the role played by discourses praising black beauty, c) sharing lived experiences of racism to empower black women, and d) encouraging blacks to take effective legal actions against their offenders.

Finally, the **Conclusions** weave together the historic milestones and theoretical framework discussed in Chapters 1 to 3, with the critical analysis developed in the subsequent Chapters 4 to 6.
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