

Whiteness on Display: The Contested Meanings of Dia da Raça in the Vargas Era

Branquitude em evidência: os significados disputados do Dia da Raça na Era Vargas

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Abstract: This article delves into the Dia da raça, a largely overlooked holiday instituted during the Vargas era in Brazil. Although traditionally grouped alongside other commemorative dates of the Estado Novo regime, Dia da raça has received scant attention in historical analyses, despite its significant racial implications in a period characterized by evolving concepts of race. Contrary to historical narratives that suggest a governmental shift away from pseudoscientific “whitening” ideologies towards a multiracial embrace from the 1930s onwards, this article posits that the racial ideologies of the Vargas era were multifaceted and occasionally contradictory. Specifically, it scrutinizes the holiday Dia da raça as a lens through which to examine the nuanced, often conflicting agendas regarding race during this period. While previous scholarship has primarily emphasized the Estado Novo’s valorization of racial mixing under the ideology of racial democracy, this study highlights the centrality of whiteness within these celebrations. By tracking various iterations of Dia da raça, I argue that the holiday exemplifies how the Vargas regime propagated a racial inclusiveness narrative while subtly reinforcing white supremacy. This article thus contributes to understanding the layered and complex nature of racial constructions during the Vargas era by emphasizing the often-unspoken normative status of whiteness in the national discourse.

Keywords: Race; Vargas Era; Whiteness.

Resumo: Este artigo investiga o Dia da raça, um feriado amplamente negligenciado instituído durante a Era Vargas no Brasil. Embora tradicionalmente agrupado ao lado de outras datas comemorativas do regime do Estado Novo, o Dia da raça recebeu pouca atenção nas análises

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históricas, apesar de suas significativas implicações raciais em um período caracterizado pela evolução dos conceitos de raça. Contrariando narrativas históricas que sugerem uma mudança governamental das ideologias pseudocientíficas de “branqueamento” para uma aceitação multirracial a partir da década de 1930, este artigo propõe que as ideologias raciais da era Vargas eram multifacetadas e ocasionalmente contraditórias. Especificamente, examina o feriado Dia da raça como uma lente através da qual se pode analisar as agendas nuançadas e frequentemente conflitantes sobre raça durante este período. Enquanto estudos anteriores têm enfatizado principalmente a valorização da miscigenação pelo Estado Novo sob a ideologia da democracia racial, este estudo destaca a centralidade da branquitude dentro dessas celebrações. Acompanhando várias iterações do Dia da raça, argumento que o feriado exemplifica como o regime Vargas propagava uma narrativa de inclusividade racial enquanto sutilmente reforçava a supremacia branca. Este artigo, portanto, contribui para a compreensão da natureza complexa e estratificada das construções raciais durante a era Vargas ao enfatizar o status normativo, muitas vezes implícito, da branquitude no discurso nacional.

Palavras-chave: raça; Era Vargas; branquitude.

Introduction

STUDENTS FROM the federal capital’s educational units lined up in military formation before entering the elegant Rio Branco Avenue in downtown Rio de Janeiro. Young women from the *Faculdade Nacional de Filosofia* wore long dark skirts and bright shirts; platoons of young boys carried other boys—their heads in mock bandages—on stretchers; another squad, of older students, wore military-style garb and gas masks, these last two groups a stark reminder that the country was now at war with the Axis. A large group of authorities including the dictator Getúlio Dornelles Vargas and members of his cabinet watched the procession perched on the steps of the *Biblioteca Nacional*. A group of young girls, maybe too young to be part of the spectacle, watched the steady stream of marchers protecting their heads from the sun with newspapers. This was not a parade honoring Brazilian Independence (on September 7), the proclamation of the dictatorial *Estado Novo* (in early November), or Brazilian workers, an occasion in which Vargas traditionally delivered a speech at São Januário Stadium. Rather, on that bright September 4, 1943, the *Estado Novo* celebrated a now long-forgotten date: the *Dia da raça*.¹

Until very recently, historians have mentioned the holiday only in passing among the many other dates instituted during the Vargas era, despite its striking nomenclature in a time when the meanings and ramifications of the concept of race were subject to critique

1 Agência Nacional, “Desfile Escolar do Dia da Raça, com a presença do Presidente Getúlio Dornelles Vargas, Rio de Janeiro, RJ,” September 4, 1943, BR RJANRIO EH.0.FOT, EVE.2781, RJANRIO.

and redefinition.² It was during the *Estado Novo* that, as Angela de Castro Gomes and Hebe Mattos explain, the nation became “nationally and officially *mestiço*, celebrating the Day of the Race next to Labor Day, Independence Day, and other dates.”³ Although historians such as Gomes attribute it to the *Estado Novo*, official celebrations for the *Dia da raça* predate the dictatorial phase of Vargas’ rule (which lasted from 1937-1945). Instead, the holiday’s meanings—like the meanings of race and racism—evolved throughout the 1930s.

While the sometimes oversimplified periodization of Brazilian history shows that, from 1930 onwards, the government abandoned the pseudo-scientific “whitening” ideologies of the *Primeira República* (1889-1930) and embraced multiracialism and *mestiçagem*, scholars have argued that the articulation of racial ideologies during the Vargas era—commonly subsumed under the moniker “racial democracy”—was multifaceted, polyphonic and often contradictory.⁴ As multiple studies have shown since the 1980s, at the same time as it paid lip service to racial inclusion, the Vargas regime violently clamped down on unsanctioned ethnic groups, religions and cultural practices, placing immigration restrictions, embracing antisemitism and aggressively repressing Afro-Brazilian religions and cultural practices.⁵ As it, the Vargas regime. Despite these facts, the official ideology of “racial democracy” celebrated a “particularly Brazilian brand of racial inclusiveness... a history of widespread racial and cultural mixture, and [the] absence ... of laws that discriminated on the basis of

2 See a brief discussion about the holiday in DÁVILA, Jerry. **Diploma of Whiteness: Race and Social Policy in Brazil, 1917-1945.** Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.

3 MATTOS, Hebe M.; GOMES, Angela de Castro. Sobre apropriações e circularidades: memória do cativo e política cultural na Era Vargas. **História Oral**, p. 6, p. 121-143, 1998. It would take until 2024 for a historian, Alexandre Fortes, to assess this claim and critically examine the *Dia da raça* at length. See FORTES, Alexandre. **The Second World War and the Rise of Mass Nationalism in Brazil: Class, Race and Citizenship.** New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2024. p. 71-80. I would highly recommend reading Fortes’ analysis in conjunction with this article.

4 Fortes places great emphasis on Paulina Alberto’s claim that after 1930 a state ideology “affirmed the place of black Brazilians in a nation imagined as racially inclusive,” alongside what he asserts is an oft-repeated sentence by Ângela de Castro Gomes that the Estado Novo “buried the ideas of eugenics and whitening,” (the missing reference in Fortes’ book means I cannot verify the accuracy and context of the original Gomes quote) as two historiographical works that were particularly influential in producing the misapprehension that the Vargas era moved beyond the whitening ideologies so prevalent before 1930. *Ibidem*, p. 69-72.

While I could not locate the specific Gomes quote that Fortes cites, the author does claim, for instance, that the *Dia da raça* showed that the New State “adopted a stance against prejudices...” See GOMES, Angela de C. **A invenção do trabalhismo.** Rio de Janeiro: Editora FGV, 2005. p. 223.

5 On antisemitism in the Vargas era, see the classic CARNEIRO, Maria L. T. **O anti-semitismo na era Vargas: fantasmas de uma geração (1930-1945).** São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1988. On repression of Afro-Brazilian religions, see OLIVEIRA, Daniele Chaves Amado de. **A umbanda fora das páginas policiais: os intelectuais umbandistas e a imprensa (1930-1950).** Ph.D. Dissertation – Universidade Federal do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, 2022. OLIVEIRA, Nathália Fernandes de. **A repressão policial às religiões de matriz afro-brasileiras no Estado Novo (1937-1945).** 2015. Master’s Thesis, Universidade Federal Fluminense, Niterói, 2015. NEGRÃO, Lisias Nogueira. Umbanda: entre a cruz e a encruzilhada. **Tempo Social**, v. 5, n. 1-2, p. 113-122, 1993. ISAIA, Artur Cesar. O outro lado da repressão: a umbanda em tempos de Estado Novo. *In*: ISAIA, Artur Cesar (org.). **Crenças, sacralidades e religiosidades: entre o consentido e o marginal.** Florianópolis: Editora Insular, 2009. p. 123-137. VALLE, Arthur. O sagrado em exílio: objetos sacros afro-brasileiros em degredos institucionais. *In*: NETO, Maria João; MALTA, Marize (org.). **Coleções de arte em Portugal e Brasil nos séculos XIX e XX: coleções em exílio.** Lisboa: Casal de Cambra, 2018. But perhaps the most notorious case of government antisemitism, infused by rabid anticommunism, was the *Estado Novo*’s treatment of Olga Benário, a pregnant Jewish communist operative sent to die in a Nazi concentration camp. See MORAIS, Fernando. **Olga: a vida de Olga Benario Prestes, judia comunista entregue a Hitler pelo governo Vargas.** São Paulo: Alfa-Ômega, 1986.

race.”⁶ The ideology has long been the object of scholarly inquiry, particularly whether it was “myth or reality.”

This article builds on historiography that has suggested that racial democracy and other correlate ideologies elsewhere in the continent was *both* myth and reality.⁷ I will show, by following the evolution and various iterations of the *Dia da raça* holiday, that racial constructions in the Vargas era encompassed a series of related phenomena that represented distinct and occasionally conflicting agendas.⁸ While historian Alexandre Fortes’ excellent examination of the holiday shows that, contrary to what historians have hitherto stated, “an examination of sources ... fails to uncover any such tie between [it] and the celebration of miscegenation or blackness,” I will also show how the holiday sheds particular light on the centrality of whiteness under Vargas as the unspoken norm.⁹ By transforming the *Dia da raça* into a major national civic date, the government’s ideologues pushed a particular interpretation of the concept of “race” itself that implicitly centered whiteness and allowed the regime to trumpet its own racial progressivism while not seriously challenging structural white supremacy.¹⁰

6 ALBERTO, Paulina L. Of Sentiment, Science and Myth: Shifting Metaphors of Racial Inclusion in Twentieth-Century Brazil. *Social History*, v. 37, n. 3, p. 261-296, 2012.

7 To put it succinctly, this debate concerns whether the lack of legal racism and segregation (such as in the United States) meant that Black Brazilians could be successfully incorporated into the nation or whether the discourse of racial harmony was in fact a smokescreen that exempted the state from addressing *de facto* day-to-day racial discrimination. Recent literature has found that both angles were true to a certain extent. While racial democracy *did* allow the state to remove itself from addressing racism it *also* offered a discursive base upon which Black Brazilians could claim national belonging and denounce racism as unpatriotic. See ALBERTO, Paulina L. **Terms of Inclusion: Black Intellectuals in Twentieth-Century Brazil**. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011. ALBERTO, Paulina L. HOFFNUNG-GARSKOF, Jesse. ‘Racial Democracy’ and Racial Inclusion. In: ANDREWS, George Reid. DE LA FUENTE, Alejandro (ed.). **Afro-Latin American Studies: An Introduction**. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018. p. 266.

8 Examining Vargas-era school textbooks, historian Dorval do Nascimento, for instance, has found that during the Vargas Era “Em um nível, realiza-se certa ruptura com as abordagens racialistas que caracterizaram, até então, os estudos sobre o povo brasileiro e o destino do país, ... [mas] Em outra dimensão, e concomitante a essa, permaneceram esquemas representacionais e discursivos que organizavam os grupos humanos a partir de suas características fenotípicas.” Anthropologist Olívia Maria Gomes da Cunha equally found contradictory racial ideologies in the regime’s approach to race. See NASCIMENTO, Dorval do. *Raça, ciência e nação em livros escolares na Era Vargas (1930-1946)*. *Afro-Ásia*, v. 44, 2011, p. 168. CUNHA, Olívia M. G. Sua alma em sua palma: identificando a ‘raça’ e inventando a nação. In: PANDOLFI, Dulce Chaves (ed.). **Repensando o Estado Novo**. Rio de Janeiro: Editora FGV, 1999. p. 257-88.

9 FORTES, op. cit., p. 71.

10 As a sidenote, this article is part of a scholarly trend to de-center the work of sociologist Gilberto Freyre and its extensive ramifications in examining the formation of racial ideologies in twentieth-century Brazil. That is, while not denying Freyre’s importance and influence, and while I have opted to deliberately sidestep a discussion of his oeuvre, it is nevertheless necessary to highlight that many of the decisions taken by government agents in the Vargas era may have been informed by Freyre’s works which, as scholars have shown, were indeed read by government bureaucrats, particularly those in cultural, historical and statistical agencies and organs. For a thorough treatment of the author, see EAKIN, Marshall. **Becoming Brazilians: Race and National Identity in Twentieth-Century Brazil**. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017; for an overview of scholars de-centering Freyre and on government bureaucrats reading the author, see GRAHAM, Jessica Lynn. **Shifting the Meaning of Democracy: Race, Politics, and Culture in the United States and Brazil**. Oakland: University of California Press, 2019. p. 23-24, 153-55.

It is also worth noting that while Freyre was undoubtedly important, other scientists had been championing *mestiçagem* well before him, and from within important institutions in Brazil (unlike the Baylor and Columbia University-trained Freyre). Curiously enough, works that overemphasize Freyre often ignore these other scientists, and vice-versa. Foremost among these scientists was Edgard Roquette-Pinto, the director of the prestigious *Museu Nacional* since 1926. His arguments regarding *mestiçagem* were made in conferences and published at least a full five years before Freyre’s *Casa-grande e senzala*. This not to speak of many Black intellectuals who articulated ideals of racial inclusion well before the Vargas Era, as shown by Paulina Alberto. Sueann Caulfield has also remarked that in the 1920s and 1930s, “analyses by a *wide range* of intellectuals ...

By examining the *Dia da raça*, this article thus proposes that whiteness must be taken seriously in critical assessments of the affordances and limitations of Brazilian racial ideologies. While much of the literature has focused on the selective appropriation by the Vargas government of non-white cultures and histories to make a “mixed” nation, it has yet to thoroughly engage with the often-unspoken normative status of whiteness. As Fortes compellingly shows, the holiday “was the window in which the results of the process of physical and cultural *whitening* of the citizenry were on display.”¹¹ This article further argues that the concept of “raça” in the official interpretation of the holiday referred to “the people” at large, but in a way that reflected the white gaze of policymakers and norms around health, civic behavior, and education that were implicitly racialized. Moreover, by examining the systemic ways that white racial norms were projected in the holiday’s commemorations, I contend that the regime’s implicit racialization of the concept of “people” held *whiteness itself* as the ideal to which the nation should aspire. The difference between *whitening* and *whiteness* is not merely semantic, as the first refers to a process through which authorities tried to lighten the nation’s skin tone—mostly through European immigration—and the latter refers to whiteness as a “race” defined by specific characteristics. It should be noted that while English language studies on “whiteness” in Latin America are a relatively novel scholarly endeavor, and historians have yet to systematically study whiteness (particularly whiteness in the Vargas Era), Brazilian studies on *branquitude* have been flourishing in the last decade.¹² The *Dia da raça* is thus a prime opportunity to more openly center whiteness in discussions of mixture and national character.

Early Versions of the Holiday

LIKE MANY a protofascist regime of the period, Getúlio Vargas’ government was quick to set up civic dates designed to celebrate national greatness and character shortly after its “revolutionary” takeover in October 1930. These occasions, marked by triumphant music directed by the government’s favorite composer Heitor Villa-Lobos, parades by schoolchildren

[concluded that] the miscegenation that had previously been understood as the result of the natural immorality and promiscuity of women of color became instead evidence of a tradition of interracial intimacy, a ‘soft’ form of slavery and a legacy of racial harmony” (emphasis mine). See ROQUETTE-PINTO, Edgar. Nota sobre os typos antropologicos do Brasil. *Archivos do Museu Nacional*, v. XXX, 1928, p. 303-31. ALBERTO, op. cit., 2011. CAULFIELD, Sueann. *In Defense of Honor: Sexual Morality, Modernity, and Nation in Early-Twentieth Century Brazil*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000. p. 146.

11 FORTES, op. cit., p. 80.

12 See TELLES, Edward; FLORES, René. Not Just Color: Whiteness, Nation, and Status in Latin America. *Hispanic American Historical Review*, v. 93, n. 3, p. 411-449, 2013. See, among many others, the influential BENTO, Cida. *O pacto da branquitude*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2022. Bento wrote one of the earliest discussions on the difference between *whiteness* and *whitening* in 2002. See BENTO, Maria Aparecida Silva. Branqueamento e branquitude no Brasil. In: CARONE, Iray; BENTO, Maria A. Silva. *Psicologia social do racismo: estudos sobre branquitude e branqueamento no Brasil*. Petrópolis: Vozes, 2002. p. 25-58. While Barbara Weinstein has effectively examined the regional basis of whiteness in São Paulo, this article also shows that whiteness was also emphasized by the federal government in Rio de Janeiro, ostensibly the center of national ideologies of mixture during the Vargas era. See WEINSTEIN, Barbara. *The Color of Modernity: São Paulo and the Making of Race and Nation in Brazil*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2015.

and military regiments, and the general pomp and circumstance of a self-described revolutionary regime, promoted the “political religion” of Vargas’ rule.¹³ In the federal capital Rio de Janeiro, celebrations for these civic dates usually took place at the São Januário stadium (then the largest in Brazil) or down the dignified Rio Branco Avenue, surrounded by stately and architecturally eclectic Belle Époque buildings such as the National Library and the Municipal Theater.

As historian Jerry Dávila examines in *Diploma of Whiteness*, these dates of youth mobilization dotted the new government’s nationalist calendar. A choir program, developed by Villa-Lobos after a 1932 educational reform, became one of the cornerstones of the *Varguista* parades, with hymns “nationalistic even by the high standards of the 1930s.”¹⁴ Participants rehearsed for the events with up to six hours a week of musical education and drills, which involved up to 40,000 students when held at São Januário stadium. These civic holidays also had racial implications. For instance, the official musical program a 1937 hymn titled “The Rejoicing of a Race” exemplified the regime’s new racial ideals. It had African and *mestiço* choruses, with the former being far less sophisticated than the latter. Its director, Villa-Lobos, interweaved African and Indigenous elements into his compositions, but “with the vantage of a white man looking on African and indigenous cultures as [...] vestiges of the past.”¹⁵ That is, the regime’s official music program was, in the eyes of its director, “an instrument for the European acculturation of non-white students, [forming a] bridge between an undisciplined African past and a white and ordered Brazilian future.”¹⁶

The *Dia da Raça* celebration was not an original fabrication of the *Varguista* intelligentsia. Instead, the origin of its first iterations in Brazil can be traced to the homonymous holiday in Spanish America, where the *Dia de la Raza*, or *Fiesta de la Raza*, often celebrated October 12, was hailed as the “date of the discovery of the Western hemisphere.”¹⁷ Spanish American celebrations on Columbus Day dated from the nineteenth century but expanded in earnest after World War I, when “humanitarian and pacific [Latin] America should serve as an example to the world.”¹⁸ Argentina officially instituted *Dia de la Raza* festivities in 1917, followed by Venezuela in 1921, Chile and Cuba in 1922, and

13 GENTILE, Emilio. Fascism as Political Religion. *Journal of Contemporary History*, v. 25, n. 2/3, p. 229-251, 1990. DÁVILA, op. cit., pp. 160 et seq; for a classic work on comparisons between the Estado Novo and the Fascist and Nazi regimes, see LENHARO, Alcir. *Sacralização da política*. Campinas: Papyrus, 1986.

14 DÁVILA, op. cit., p. 160.

Villa-Lobos’ music was a key component in *Dia da Raça* celebrations, for example, in 1936, when concerts he conducted in honor of the occasion were broadcasted by radio. See Segunda temporada de concertos no Teatro Municipal. *Jornal do Brasil*, Sep. 11, 1936. For a study on how radio promoted regime politics in the Vargas era, see MCCANN, Bryan, *Hello, Hello Brazil: Popular Music in the Making of Modern Brazil*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.

15 DÁVILA, op. cit., p. 162-64.

16 Loc. cit.

17 RACHUM, Ilan. Origins and Historical Significance of Dia de La Raza/Origenes y Significacion Historica Del Dia de La Raza. *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies/Revista Europea de Estudios Latinoamericanos y Del Caribe*, v. 76, p. 61-81, 2004.

18 BIRKENMAIER, Anke. Entre filología y antropología: Fernando Ortiz y el Día de la Raza. *Antípoda. Revista de Antropología y Arqueología*, v. 15, p. 197, 2012.

Mexico in 1928. The Brazilian press noted the Spanish American occasion regularly from the late 1910s through the 1930s. The *Jornal do Brasil*, for instance, reported as early as 1918 that the Argentine president Hipólito Yrigoyen attended *Dia de la Raza* celebrations at a traditional *porteño* theater in the company of his ministers and foreign dignitaries including the Brazilian ambassador.¹⁹ The following year, the “Spanish colony” in Buenos Aires threw a gala ball in honor of the occasion.²⁰ Similar parties took place that same year in Santiago’s Municipal Theater, with the Chilean president in attendance, and in the Paraguayan capital Asunción.²¹ As Anke Birkenmaier notes, “it was not so clear to what race the parties in these countries referred to.” Did the occasion celebrate Iberian heritage, Indigenous communities, Afro-Latin Americans, or the *mestizaje* concept so prevalent, for example, in Mexican national ideology?²²

In the interpretation of the Brazilian *Junta Sulamericana de Esforço Christão* (connected to the organization now known as the World’s Christian Endeavor Union, founded by US clergyman Francis E. Clark), which started organizing celebrations around the date in the late 1910s, the Day of the Race was about the evangelization of “a branch of the Iberian race, glorious in its traditions, that established itself in this part of the world, but which needs elements of spiritual and moral life that only the word of Christ can provide.”²³ Encouraged by the *Junta Sulamericana*, Evangelical churches in the cities of Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Curitiba (Paraná) and Salvador (Bahia), among others, held celebrations in honor of the *Dia da Raça* in 1919, totaling eighteen participating organizations.²⁴ As benefitted a religious organization, these celebrations consisted of reading biblical passages, sermons, and other texts written by evangelical leaders. By its own estimate, the *Junta Sulamericana* had 110 participating organizations and over 5,000 members in Brazil.²⁵ Compared to the scale of the celebrations promoted by the government in the Vargas period, these early, evangelizing commemorations of the *Dia da Raça* appear to have been small affairs.

Even though the *Junta Sulamericana* was one of the early promoters, people of Spanish descent also celebrated *the Dia da Raça* in Brazil. In Porto Alegre, for example,

19 “O SENHOR Irigoyen assiste a festa do ‘Dia da Raça’”. *Jornal do Brasil*, Oct. 13, 1918.

1918 was the first relevant hit found by Hemeroteca Digital Brasileira’s search function, but there may have been even earlier instances, as the software struggles to search older publications with uneven print, paper, and preservation quality.

20 A FESTA da raça. *Jornal do Brasil*, Oct. 8, 1919.

21 A FESTA da raça promovida pela colônia hespanhola. *Jornal do Brasil*, Oct. 9, 1919. A COMEMORAÇÃO do descobrimento da América. *Correio Paulistano*, Oct. 14, 1919.

22 BIRKENMAIER, op. cit., p. 197; for the Mexican *mestizaje* ideology, the traditional reference is VASCONCELOS, José. *La Raza Cósmica, misión de la raza iberoamericana*: notas de viajes a la América de Sur. Paris: Agencia mundial de librería, 1920.

23 Original: “*ramo da raça ibérica, gloriosa em suas tradições, que se estabeleceu nesta parte do mundo, mas que necessita de elementos de vida moral e espiritual que só o evangelho de Cristo poderá proporcionar.*” In: CULTO evangélico: o Dia da Raça. *Correio Paulistano*, Sep. 30, 1919.

24 CULTO evangélico: o Dia da Raça em São Paulo. *Correio Paulistano*, Oct. 18, 1919. CULTO evangélico: o Dia da Raça no Rio de Janeiro. *Correio Paulistano*, Oct. 21, 1919. CULTO evangélico: escolas dominicaes. *Correio Paulistano*, Oct. 27, 1919. CULTO evangélico: o Dia da Raça na Bahia. *Correio Paulistano*, Nov. 11, 1919. CULTO evangélico: o Dia da Raça em Santa Catarina. *Correio Paulistano*, Dec. 1, 1919.

25 CULTO evangélico: o esforço cristão na América Latina. *Correio Paulistano*, Oct. 12, 1919.

the *Sociedade Espanhola de Socorros Mútuos* organized a celebration in 1921 with music, speeches, poetry, and a “raffle of valuable objects.”²⁶ A similar program would mark the *Sociedade’s* celebration eight years later, in 1929.²⁷ Adding another wrinkle to the *Dia da Raça’s* early days, in 1924 the Portuguese government instituted a holiday with the same name on June 10.²⁸ The Portuguese celebrations would make the occasional appearance in the Brazilian press in the next decade alongside the Spanish American festivities.²⁹

First Iterations of the Dia da Raça in Rio Grande do Sul

THE INCORPORATION of the *Dia da Raça* as a government-sponsored affair may have started in Vargas’ home state of Rio Grande do Sul. At least in Porto Alegre, October 12 became a banking half-day already in 1933.³⁰ The next day, the newspaper *A Federação* dedicated its front page to the *Dia da Raça* with the headline “*Pelo aperfeiçoamento e vigor da raça*” (“For the Improvement and Vigor of the Race”) The first column (“*Eugenia e raça*,” “Eugenics and Race”) credited state intervenor Flores da Cunha (chosen by Vargas to rule the state in 1930) with the idea to dedicate a week of the year “*ao culto prático da Raça*” (“to the practical cult of the Race”) an expansion of a day-long celebration in Montevideo. The language echoes the Spanish American *Dia de la Raza*, which was about affirming Latin America as an example for the world, asserting that

We are, thus, in our own eyes – as if an affirmation of life, enthusiasm and fate, before the total bankrupt disenchantment of Europe.

In this optimism that is partly health, freedom, possibility, abundance – and in part suggestion – we believe that we possess the key to human evolution; and we feel, in our ethnic depths, the gestation of a new destiny for the world. (...)

The idea embedded in this name – **day of the race** – is the same idea of this embryo of wonders.³¹

This unsigned article goes on to argue that a day, or even a week of the race is not enough, as any wavering led to “the invasion in our borders of the European pessimism, anarchy and disenchantment.” Thus, the Week of the Race should extend to 365 Days of the Race, creating “the palingenesis of a new civilization in a new world (...) a heroic and difficult, skillful

26 O DIA da Raça. **A Federação**, Oct. 4, 1921.

27 O ‘DIA a Raça’. **A Federação**, Oct. 11, 1929.

28 O DIA da Raça, a 10 de Junho. **A Federação**, May 27, 1924.

29 For example, in June 1936 the *Jornal do Brasil* reported that the Federation of Portuguese Associations would host *Dia da Raça* celebrations in the grand hall of the *Real Gabinete Português de Leitura*, “*no dia da raça, no dia da colônia, no dia destinado a glorificar Camões, o poeta glorioso da raça.*” See O ‘DIA da raça’. **Jornal do Brasil**, Jun. 10, 1936.

30 OS BANCOS e o ‘Dia da Raça’. **A Federação**, Oct. 11, 1933.

31 EUGENIA e raça,. **A Federação**, Oct. 13, 1933. Emphasis in original.

In the original:

Nós somos, pois, aos nossos próprios olhos – como que uma afirmação de vida, de entusiasmo e de fé, em face do total desencanto falimentar da Europa.

Neste otimismo que em parte é saúde, liberdade, possibilidade, abundância, – e em parte sugestão, – acreditamos que possuímos a chave da evolução humana; e sentimos nas entranhas étnicas, a gestação de um novo destino do mundo. (...)

*A ideia que se engasta na expressão – **O dia da raça** – é a ideia mesma deste embrião de maravilhas.*

and drastic work of eugenics.” Such an endeavor did not solely consist of “flocks of children moving, bands of music or festive flags,” but a collective endeavor of all educators, activists, and government members, aware of the moment’s solemnity.³²

Despite the newspaper’s lofty claims, the pictures on its cover were mostly of children parading and waving flags, duly dressed in their school uniforms—white shirts and dark pants or skirts. In the pictures at the bottom of the front page, the students appear to march around a football field. The claim that the *Semana da Raça* would create Latin America’s civilizational palingenesis notwithstanding, the pictures and other articles mostly reduce such an endeavor to cultivating students’ interest in their own physical fitness. A column signed by one of Getúlio’s nephews, Manuel Vargas Neto, claimed that sports were the “rational preparation of future generations,” referencing the “glistening virile teenage bodies in the sun” of ancient Greece, and crediting Rome’s downfall to its physical and moral decay brought about by the abandonment of sports.³³

Other articles extolled the *Semana da Raça* celebrations in various *Gaúcho* cities and announced tournaments in football and basketball hosted by the state’s Military Brigade. In the city of Antônio Prado, for example, four hundred students from three different schools heard a speech from the mayor emphasizing the need for physical education and flattering the state government, followed by hosting the flag and singing the Brazilian Flag Anthem and the Independence Anthem. A mass at the city’s Catholic church and acrobatic demonstrations at the city’s gymnasium rounded out the festivities.³⁴ Another piece on the same page also extolled physical education as a “factor in the formation of character.” The author, Frank M. Long, a US educator trained at Columbia University’s Teacher’s College, argued that the personal discipline instilled by physical education in youth “helps the mind continue to make good choices.”³⁵ While it is unclear whether Long wrote the piece specifically for the newspaper or whether it was translated (with or without) his permission, the intellectuals in the *Gaúcho* government were in dialogue with wider, eugenics-inspired global trends. For instance, a Brazilian delegation in Berlin attended a Day of the Race celebration held by the Nazi regime in Berlin in 1933.³⁶

By the 1930s, Brazilian eugenicists “sought an alternative path that would steer clear of the negative, deterministic stereotype of alleged racial instability in Brazil,” with

32 Loc. cit. In the original, respectively, “*a invasão, sobre os nossos limites, do pessimismo, da anarquia, do desencanto europeu*”; “*a palingenesia de uma civilização nova num mundo novo [...] uma obra heróica e difícil, hábil e drástica de eugenia*”; “*bandos de crianças que se agitam, de bandas de música ou bandeiras festivas*.”

33 VARGAS NETO, Manuel Nascimento. Cultura física. **A Federação**, Oct. 13, 1933. Originals: “*reabilitação dos desportos, como preparação racional das gerações futuras*”; “*corpos viris de adolescentes brilhavam ao sol*.”

34 A ‘SEMANA da Raça’ em Antônio Prado. **A Federação**, Oct. 13, 1933.

35 LONG, Frank M. A educação física como fator na formação do caráter. **A Federação**, Oct. 13, 1933. Long appears to have been a scholar of progressive education and trained in Columbia University’s Teachers College. See LONG, Frank M. **Desirable Physical Facilities for an Activity Program**. Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1933 apud BURR, Samuel Eagle. **The Study of a Transitional Period in a Public School: A Case Study on the Introduction of Progressive Practices**. 1938. Dissertation (Doctor of Education), University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, 1938. p. 28.

36 FORTES, op. cit., p. 75.

multiple intellectuals showing “ambivalence between [the] acceptance and rejection of scientific racism.”³⁷ This was a significant departure from the thinking of other prominent eugenicists such as Renato Kehl who proposed forced sterilizations of “degenerates” and criminals and reproduction control, going as far as praising, in 1929, German eugenicists for their “courage” and openly defending “race hygiene.”³⁸ Moving past the fatalistic racial degeneration beliefs, arguably the most influential of Brazilian eugenicists, Edgar Roquette-Pinto, argued that “the *racial problem* does not exist in Brazil. Blacks, Indians, mestizos or whites, all have the same social standing, which depends only on their degree of instruction or wealth.” That is, after arguing that the Brazilian racial mixture did not produce a degenerate type, Roquette-Pinto made the logical leap of concluding that the economic disadvantage of Brazilians of African descent was a social phenomenon, not a racial one—and thus one that could be fixed. For Roquette-Pinto, anthropology proved that Brazilians “need to be *educated*, not *substituted*.”³⁹ A robust education program for youth would be at the core of such an endeavor.

The awareness of global intellectual and political trends was also explicit in an article by Erico Veríssimo (later to become a celebrated author) where he expressed enthusiasm for athletic demonstrations at schools and reinforced the need for discipline: “look at Italy. Fascism’s dominating trait is discipline. It is the same in Germany. With or without Fascism, Brazil needs discipline and order.”⁴⁰ Both Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany saw education reform, and specifically physical education, as a key element of discipline and nation-building. In Italy, the 1921 Program of the National Fascist Party determined that elementary schools should “physically and morally shape Italy’s future soldiers.” In Germany, the 1930s school curriculum “center[ed] around physical training, including defense sports.”⁴¹ As Alcir Lenharo shows in the classic *Sacralização da política*, the belief that physical health was essential to the Brazilian people precisely because of their racial ambiguity undergirded

37 SOUZA, Vanderlei S. *et al.* Arquivo de Antropologia Física do Museu Nacional: fontes para a história da eugenia no Brasil. **História, Ciências, Saúde-Manguinhos**, v. 16, n. 3, p. 766, 2009.

38 STEPAN, Nancy. **The Hour of Eugenics: Race, Gender, and Nation in Latin America**. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991. p. 158-9.

39 ROQUETTE-PINTO, op. cit., p. 322, quote from 331. For an overview of the debates about eugenics in this period, see SOUZA, Vanderlei S, Por uma nação eugênica: higiene, raça e identidade nacional no movimento eugênico brasileiro nos anos 1910 e 1920, **Revista Brasileira de História da Ciência**, v. 1, n. 2, p. 146-166, 2008. TAMANO, Luana Tiek Omena. O primeiro Congresso Brasileiro de Eugenia (1929): as discussões em torno da eugenia no Brasil. **Tempo**, v. 28, n. 3, p. 31-55, 2022. SOUZA, Vanderlei Sebastião de. A eugenia brasileira e suas conexões internacionais: uma análise a partir das controvérsias entre Renato Kehl e Edgard Roquette-Pinto, 1920-1930. **História, Ciências, Saúde-Manguinhos**, v. 23, n. suppl 1, p. 93-110, 2016. See also MAIO, Marcos Chor; SANTOS, Ricardo Ventura (org.). **Raça, ciência e sociedade**. Rio de Janeiro: Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil: Editora FIOCRUZ, 1996. SCHWARCZ, Lília Moritz, **O espetáculo das raças: cientistas, instituições e questão racial no Brasil, 1870-1930**. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1993. On these debates in Latin American more widely, see WADE, Peter *et al.* (org.). **Mestizo Genomics: Race Mixture, Nation, and Science in Latin America**. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014.

40 VERÍSSIMO, Érico. Cultura física como fator de ordem e disciplina. **A Federação**, Oct. 13, 1933.

41 This is not to state that the *Gaúcho* program was directly inspired by Nazi/Fascist regimes, but that they belonged partook in the same wider trend of emphasizing physical education as a means to the “betterment” of the people. HORTA, José Silverio Baia. A educação na Itália fascista: as reformas Gentile (1922-1923). **Revista História da Educação**, v. 12, issue 24, 2008, p. 179-223. WUNDERLICH, Frieda. Education in Nazi Germany. **Social Research**, v. 4, issue 3, 1937, p. 351.

the physical education programs of the Vargas Era. Physical improvement would forestall pessimistic predictions about the future of the (mixed) Brazilian race.⁴²

In the federal capital, a strong emphasis on physical education in school curricula to “combat vices and illnesses, [elevating] the race” dated at least from the 1920s, when *Recifense* educator Antônio Carneiro Leão directed the *Carioca* school system (1922 to 1926).⁴³ As Jerry Dávila found, Carneiro Leão’s Department of Education introduced physical education to Rio’s schools in 1923. In the following year, the department produced a documentary titled *Pela grandeza da raça* (“For the grandeur of race”) “that showcased twelve thousand students performing calisthenics,” clearly connecting physical fitness to eugenicist ideals of racial improvement.⁴⁴ A 1933 federal secondary education law made physical education mandatory in all high schools in Brazil.⁴⁵ Lenharo shows that, beneath a layer of platitudes, specialized publications in the *Estado Novo* revealed the regime’s consistent concern with bodily health and the belief that “educating” the body would develop the “spirit.”⁴⁶ While early iterations of the *Dia da Raça* were about whitening the national population, they were informed by the general belief that the national “race” (as a stand-in for “people”) could be improved through education.

The Contested Meanings of Race Under Vargas

IN SOME WAYS, the state recognition that “race” existed in the first place—and was worthy of a holiday—itsself represented a break from the racial ideologies of the First Republic (1889-1930), whose official racelessness, theoretically reflecting the radical egalitarianism of liberalism, increasingly became a “racial silence” that made room for ideologies of scientific racism and white supremacy. Fearful of a population dominated by Brazilians of African descent, authorities had tried to promote a tsunami of white blood to “dilute” the predominantly African blood of the Brazilian people, in hopes of eventually “whitening” the nation.⁴⁷

42 LENHARO, op. cit., p. 78.

Lenharo also tracks articles in the *Estado Novo* press in the late 1930s that described Nazi Germany’s physical education programs in glowingly positive terms (p. 81-2).

43 ARAÚJO, Maria Cristina Albuquerque de. Antônio de Arruda Carneiro Leão. In: ALBUQUERQUE, Maria de Lourdes, et al. (ed.) **Dicionário de educadores do Brasil, da colônia aos dias atuais**. Rio de Janeiro: Editora UFRJ, 1999. p. 67 apud DÁVILA, op. cit., p. 33.

44 DÁVILA, op. cit., p. 48.

The relationship between eugenics and physical education is well documented. See STEPAN, op. cit., p. 178. **Pela grandeza da raça**, Documentary, A. Botelho Filme, 1924.

45 DÁVILA, op. cit., p. 33, 48.

46 LENHARO, op. cit.

47 One of the finest examples of this logic is intellectual Oliveira Vianna’s essay published in the first volume of the 1920 Brazilian census’ official publication, and thus representative of the federal government’s policy and rationale at the time. Vianna confidently proclaimed white supremacy and the inevitable disappearance of the Black race based on old, cherrypicked data. The 1920 census was the only one in the series since the Empire to not include racial classification, so the statistics provided by the census he was writing for had absolutely no data to support his claims. See VIANNA, F. J. O povo brasileiro e a sua evolução. In: **Recenseamento do Brasil**, v. 1. Rio de Janeiro: Typographia da Estatística, 1922, p. 320-34. On the Old Republic, see also FISCHER, Brodwyn; GRINBERG, Keila; MATTOS, Hebe. Law, Silence, and Racialized Inequalities in the History of Afro-Brazil. In: FUENTE; ANDREWS, op. cit. For whitening as a project initiated in response to the graduate abolition of slavery, see ALBUQUERQUE, Wlamyra, **O jogo da dissimulação: abolição e cidadania**

Instead of publicly adhering to such ideals, the Vargas regime ostensibly brought what might be described as the logic of racial nationalism into official state policy, thereby taking away a key element that drew Black Brazilians to two of its major political competitors in the 1930s, the *Partido Comunista Brasileiro* (PCB) and the far-right *Integralistas*. As historian Jessica Lynn Graham has shown, the Brazilian communists in the 1930s had recognized that antiracism had to be a key component of any political agenda. In response, driven in part by its anticommunism, the *Estado Novo* tried to outmaneuver the PCB by asserting a new brand of democracy in the absence of markers usually attributed to liberal democracy. The regime took upon itself the mantle of promoter of racial equality, stealing the thunder from the communists. For instance, when celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of abolition in 1938, the regime promoted Black music, particularly samba. As explained by the propaganda minister Lourival Fontes, this aimed to “establish, in a broad and general way, the integration of the [B]lack race into the great common project of constructing our nationality.”⁴⁸

Yet, in another sense, the *Dia da Raça* celebrations in the early 1930s carried the torch of the First Republic’s whitening ideals. While much of the scholarship has contrasted the Vargas era’s racial policies to the earlier whitening projects, seeing the new regime as a harbinger of mixture, perhaps this break has been overstated.⁴⁹ As Lenharo notes, the *Estado Novo*’s idealized Brazilian “did not exactly correspond to the *mulato* ... Subtly, the desire for whitening enters the picture.”⁵⁰ That is, just because the regime selectively incorporated elements of Black culture into the mainstream in the 1930s does not mean that it automatically celebrated nonwhite Brazilians themselves. This was clear when, in 1933, a confederation of college students organized athletic competitions among students from “all of the institutions of higher education in the Federal Capital” and from the most prestigious college units in São Paulo. Listed were the *Faculdade de Direito* (law), the *Escola Politécnica* (engineering), the *Escola Superior de Mecânica e Eletricidade* (a rigorous technical school), and the Medical School, in honor of the *Dia da Raça*.⁵¹ The participants in these *Dia da Raça* events say much, as the participating schools catered to the *crème de la crème* of São Paulo’s most traditional families. For example, the Law School cultivated a century-long symbiotic relationship with the state’s wealthiest, most powerful, and overwhelmingly white citizens.⁵²

negra no Brasil. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2009.

48 **A Noite**, Mar. 31, 1938 apud GRAHAM, op. cit., p. 161-2. This is not to imply that the PCB gave up on organizing around the racial question, as shown by historian Edinaldo A. Oliveira Souza in his study of Juvenal Souto Júnior, a Black union activist and the party’s only elected representative in the state of Bahia after the end of the *Estado Novo* in 1945. See SOUZA, Edinaldo Antonio Oliveira. “Herdeiro das gloriosas tradições de luta dos homens e mulheres da sua raça”: trabalhadores, política, classe e raça na Bahia no pós-Segunda Guerra Mundial. **Revista Mundos do Trabalho**, Florianópolis, v. 15, p. 1-16, 2023.

49 As persuasively argued in FORTES, op. cit., passim.

50 LENHARO, op. cit., p. 78.

51 CAMPEONATO acadêmico de atletismo. **Jornal do Brasil**, Oct. 10, 1933.

52 Higher education in Brazil historically promotes the reproduction of the ruling elites, who have until recently held a near-monopoly over admissions to the best universities. This has been particularly egregious in Law schools such as the one in São Paulo, one of the first two in Brazil (est. 1827). The Brazilian *Bacharel* culture, as Antônio C. Wolkmer describes it, produced “*profissionais da lei que, valendo-se de um intelectualismo*

In one of the most transparent proposals for what the “race” in the holiday’s title referred to, the Portuguese ambassador, Martinho Nobre de Melo, wrote to the *Associação Brasileira de Imprensa* (ABI) in 1936, outlining his vision for a *Dia da Raça* shared between Portugal and Brazil. Responding to the ABI’s “felicitations” on occasion of the Portuguese *Dia da Raça* in June, Nobre de Melo proposed a common holiday for both countries, on the same date. This joint celebration would “transcend the narrow bounds of a colony or nation to include (...) the shared trunk of a common race. It would celebrate the “purest racial communion of two great peoples from the same Lusitanian root,” perfectly adapted to conditions in Europe and in America.⁵³

Conspicuously absent from Melo’s vision of the “great peoples” was, of course, the enormous contingent of Brazilians of African and Indigenous descent, exploited, enslaved, and/or killed with direct participation of the Portuguese. Neither did Melo acknowledge that, by the 1930s, even the “foreign” blood in Brazil was not overwhelmingly Portuguese as it had been of yore, having been well diluted by Italians, Spaniards, Germans, and even considerable numbers of Japanese and Middle-Easterners.⁵⁴ The ambassador’s letter also suggests that Brazil and Portugal were somehow more than just “nation” and “colony,” but partners in the construction of the great Portuguese race. Such an idea foreshadowed one of the last grand projects of the Portuguese Empire—*Lusotropicalismo*. Simply put, the element of *Lusotropicalismo* of interest here was the claim that Portuguese imperialism was somehow “better” and more humane than that of the other European powers, as the Portuguese Empire would be “multicultural” and “multiracial” thanks to the Portuguese colonizers’ willingness to miscegenate with their colonial subjects. Down the line, this ideology provided the Portuguese Empire with arguments to resist the independence movements of their remaining African colonies since they were cast as constitutive elements of Portugal itself, not mere “colonies.” That is, undergirding the ambassador’s proposal was a commitment

alienígena [...] ocultavam, sob o manto da neutralidade e da moderação política, a institucionalidade de um espaço marcado por privilégios econômicos e profundas desigualdades sociais. WOLKMER, Antônio Carlos. **História do direito no Brasil**. Rio de Janeiro: Forense, 2010, pp. 85-86 apud SOUSA, Mônica Teresa Costa et al. Do bacharelismo tradicional ao bacharelismo do século XXI: a deselitização da graduação em direito e o agravamento da crise do ensino jurídico no Brasil. **Arquivo Jurídico**, v. 3, n. 1, p. 79-104, 2016.

53 A comemoração do Dia da Raça em Portugal e no Brasil, **Jornal do Brasil**, June 16, 1936. In the original, respectively “*transcende[r] os estreitos limites de uma colônia ou de uma nação para abarcar [...] (o) tronco inicial, da raça comum.*”; “*mais pura comoção racial dos dois grandes povos oriundos do mesmo tronco luso.*”

The Portuguese community in Rio would continue to celebrate the *Dia da Raça* with Brazilian authorities. In 1944, for example, the occasion was marked by a ceremony at the *Real Gabinete Português de Leitura*, in downtown Rio de Janeiro. Fifteen years later, President Juscelino Kubitschek attended a similar celebration at the same location, photographed by the *Agência Nacional*. AGÊNCIA NACIONAL, “Comemoração do Dia da Raça com a inauguração da estante Afrânio Peixoto no Real Gabinete Português de Leitura, Rio de Janeiro, RJ,” June 10, 1944, RJANRIO; Agência Nacional, “Presidente Juscelino Kubitschek de Oliveira (1956-1960) fora do Palácio do Catete: preside solenidade comemorativa do Dia da Raça, Real Gabinete Português de Leitura, Rio de Janeiro, RJ.,” June 11, 1959, BR RJANRIO EH.0.FOT, PRP.6958, Arquivo Nacional, Rio de Janeiro (doravante “RJANRIO”)

54 LESSER, Jeffrey, **Welcoming the Undesirables: Brazil and the Jewish Question**. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995. LESSER, Jeffrey. **Immigration, Ethnicity, and National Identity in Brazil, 1808 to the Present**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. LESSER, Jeffrey. **Negotiating National Identity: Immigrants, Minorities, and the Struggle for Ethnicity in Brazil**. Durham: Duke University Press, 1999. LESSER, Jeffrey. **A Discontented Diaspora: Japanese Brazilians and the Meanings of Ethnic Militancy, 1960-1980**. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.

not only to celebrating Brazil's European heritage but also an effort to whitewash the role of Portugal in the history of slavery and thus the Brazilian racial makeup.⁵⁵

While government officials lacked a particularly coherent idea of what race stood for (or strategically exploited and instrumentalized its blurry meanings) and the Portuguese ambassador left Afro-Brazilians firmly out, the Black community had been actively articulating its own vision to be “included as full nationals.” As Paulina Alberto has shown, Black thinkers and activists in the 1930s and 1940s demanded “compensation for their real and symbolic exclusion while proposing their own ... interpretations of what it meant to be a black or African Brazilian.” Black thinkers particularly appreciated the Vargas regime's immigration restrictions and the measures that prioritized the hiring of Brazilians over foreigners, which meant that “once prized immigrants [were now] identified as interloping foreigners, and people of color ... placed at the forefront.” Moreover, the message of racial inclusiveness and harmony proved fertile discursive ground for Brazilians of African descent to denounce everyday racist practices as unpatriotic and un-Brazilian, a strategy that Black intellectuals had engaged in even before Vargas came to power. The official government promotion of racial harmony offered grounds upon which to make claims for Black Brazilian's effective inclusion into the national corpus.⁵⁶

In May 1935, the *Jornal do Brasil* notified in a small article that “a group of republicans” would host a celebration at the *Passeio Público* celebrating the abolition of slavery and remembering the “contribution of the Black race in the formation of our people” on the thirteenth of that month. The occasion, to take place beside the *Baiano* abolitionist poet Castro Alves' bust, would also celebrate José Bonifácio, princess Isabel, José do Patrocínio, and others. All institutions and people were encouraged to attend.⁵⁷

Listed as the person to contact for interested parties was a Dr. Amaro da Silveira with an address in downtown Rio. There is a good chance that he was an attorney, since the honorific “Doctor” applies to Brazilian lawyers since before independence. His address at Av. Rio Branco, 50, would also make sense for an attorney—and particularly one of African descent or at least one involved with Black activism. It was close to the most

55 One of the foundational texts of Lusotropicalism is FREYRE, Gilberto. *O mundo que o português criou: aspectos das relações sociais e de cultura do Brasil com Portugal e as colônias portuguesas*. Rio de Janeiro: José Olympio, 1940. For more on Lusotropicalism, see FERREIRA, Ana Paula. Lusotropicalist Entanglements: Colonial Racisms in the Postcolonial Metropolis. In: OWEN, Hilary; KLOBUCKA, Anna (eds.). *Gender, Empire, and Postcolony: Luso-Afro-Brazilian Intersections*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014, pp. 49-69. See also WILLIAMS, Daryle. *Culture Wars in Brazil: The First Vargas Regime, 1930-1945*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2001, pp. 247-49.

56 ALBERTO, op. cit., 2011, pp. 11, 54, 129.

57 O DIA da raça negra. *Jornal do Brasil*, May 7, 1935. The original: “*concurso da raça Negra na formação do nosso povo*.” On the relationship between republicanism and abolitionism, see, among others, AZEVEDO, Elciene. *Orfeu de carapinha: a trajetória de Luiz Gama na imperial cidade de São Paulo*. Campinas: Editora da UNICAMP/Cecult, 1999. SILVA, André Drumond Mello. *Sem rei e sem escravos: o republicanismo e as linguagens políticas do abolicionismo no Brasil*. 2015. Dissertation (PhD in History) – Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte, 2015. For an overview, see DOMINGUES, Petrônio. *Cidadania levada a sério: os republicanos de cor no Brasil*. In: DOMINGUES, Petrônio; GOMES, Flávio dos Santos. *Políticas da raça: experiências e legados da abolição e da pós-emancipação no Brasil*. São Paulo: Selo Negro Edições, 2014.

important judicial buildings and next to the historically Black neighborhood known as “little Africa,” which the *Estado Novo* would dismantle a few years later to give way to one of Vargas’ biggest vanity projects, a large avenue crossing Rio named after himself.⁵⁸ The article’s assertions of national belonging (“our people”), and the symbolic festivities next to celebrated public figures, affirming the importance of Black contributions to Brazilian history, find echo in the claims of Black intellectuals in the same period.⁵⁹ Tellingly, the mainstream newspaper titled the article covering the event held by the Afro-Brazilian community “The Day of the *Black Race*” (emphasis mine), implying that the *Black* race and the “race” with no descriptors, commemorated in the “official,” government-sponsored holidays, were somehow different.

The Centrality of Whiteness

AS THE 1930s progressed, the government-sponsored celebrations of the *Dia da raça* became increasingly grandiose as the Vargas regime became more consolidated and adopted more of the trappings of European totalitarian governments. In 1936, for example, celebrations included parades by both public and private school students in Rio. One columnist listed schools from Rio and São Paulo, remarking how well-dressed students from all of the schools were, including the Federal Government’s model school, *Colégio Pedro II*, the *Carioca* elite private Catholic school *Santo Inácio* (whose students apparently rode horses) and, representing higher education, the *Faculdade Nacional de Filosofia*.⁶⁰ The musical program that students would perform, defined by Heitor Villa Lobos—named to head the *Superintendência de Educação Musical e Artística* (SEMA) within the Ministry of Education four years earlier—, was comprised of the national anthem, the Flag anthem, the Pan-American anthem, and the *Canto do Lavrador*.⁶¹

The increasing emphasis on the *Dia da Raça* and its public demonstrations, centered on education programs and student parades, reflected beliefs in Getúlio’s very inner circle. A 1935 personal letter from Oswaldo Aranha, one of the most influential politicians of the Vargas period and one of the president’s closest allies, reinforces Brazilian authorities’ tendency at the time to use “race” as a synonym for “people” (“*povo*”). Writing from Washington D.C., where he was the Brazilian ambassador to the United States, Aranha explained to Getúlio that the people in the United States did not express feelings, “a form of ... moral inferiority in this frigid country,” where love, hate, imagination, longing (“*saudade*”) and even enthusiasm, which “bother other

58 O DIA da raça negra. *Jornal do Brasil*, May 7, 1935.

See GONÇALVES, Rafael; BAUTÉS, Nicolas. Cidade Nova, Praça Onze e a abertura da avenida Presidente Vargas: do apagamento à ressurgência e enquadramento da memória da ‘Pequena África’ do Rio de Janeiro. In: DUARTE, Ana Lúcia *et al.* (org.). **Transições metropolitanas e centralidades nas cidades brasileiras no breve século XX**. São Paulo: Annablume, 2019. pp. 119–54.

59 See ALBERTO, op. cit., 2011, passim. For a passing mention of the *Dia da Raça* in relation to the *Paulista* Black press, see DOMINGUES, Petrônio José. ‘A redempção de nossa raça’: as comemorações da abolição da escravatura no Brasil. *Revista Brasileira de História*, v. 31, n. 62, p. 19-48, 2011.

60 CARVOLIVA, Agenor de. Semana do espírito. *Jornal do Brasil*, Sep. 13, 1936.

61 EDITAL n. 229. *Jornal do Brasil*, Sep. 30, 1936.

racas and particularly ours has not entered this world.” Nevertheless, the ambassador finds that the US people, through their inventiveness, created machines to fabricate happiness, listing the automobile, the radio, air conditioning, and others as the “precursors to the happiness machine.” This evaluation of the local character contrasted heavily with how the ambassador viewed Brazil: “a warm, sweaty and lazy country,” a language that clearly evokes, in style and form, the depictions of the Brazilian national character sketched by Gilberto Freyre in his influential 1933 work *Casa-grande e senzala*. But, more importantly, Aranha reinforced the Vargas regime’s emphasis on education programs as, he explained to Getúlio, the “vitality of [the US] race” derived from moral standards of behavior nurtured by “good diets, gymnastics, civic culture, rigorous hygiene.”⁶²

In 1936 the celebrations clearly ballooned into a much bigger affair than in previous years, as shown by the many public calls published in the *Jornal do Brasil* for events in honor of the occasion. The *Superintendência de Educação de Saúde e Higiene Escolar* announced that 1600 students would perform physical activity exercises at the Fluminense Football Club stadium. These public calls came from various *superintendências* within the federal Ministry of Education, announcing events organized in collaboration with, for example, the São Paulo *Cruzada Pro-Infância*, which announced its “*Dia da Raça – Dia da Criança*” programming with the phrase “*Nação forte é a que tem filhos fortes*,” connecting children’s physical health with race and nation-building.⁶³

A strong emphasis on motherhood and childrearing was a hallmark of the Vargas Era. In the president’s view, “no issue more closely connected the perfection of ‘the race’ and the progress of the nation than maternal and child welfare,” values reinforced in the 1934 Constitution’s mandate that the State should “support maternity and childhood ... [and] reduce infant mortality and morbidity.”⁶⁴ In the *Estado Novo*’s 1937 Constitution, unilaterally enacted by the regime, it was the Federal government’s exclusive responsibility to determine directives for the “physical, intellectual and moral formation of children and youths,” which were “the object of the State’s special care.”⁶⁵

One signal that the dictatorship considered race and child welfare connected is the fact that much of the celebrations were organized by the *Superintendência de Educação Elementar*, charged with developing the school program for children’s formative years. In one of its short press announcements regarding the 1936 holiday to the *Superintendência*, the Federal Education Department found it necessary to finally clarify what the “race” referred

62 ARANHA, Oswaldo. [Letter]. Recipient: Getúlio Dorneles Vargas. Nov. 11, 1935. GV c 1935.11.11, CPDOC - FGV, available at <https://docvirt.com/docreader.net/CorrespGV2/6405>; for a translation of Freyre’s most influential book, FREYRE, Gilberto, **The Masters and the Slaves: A Study in the Development of Brazilian Civilization**. New York: Knopf, 1946.

63 EDITAL n. 310. *Jornal do Brasil*, Oct. 8, 1936. EDITAL n. 160. *Jornal do Brasil*, Oct. 8, 1936.

64 OTOVO, Okezi T. **Progressive Mothers, Better Babies: Race, Public Health, and the State in Brazil, 1850-1945**. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016. pp. 166-68.

65 BRASIL. **Constituição dos Estados Unidos do Brasil de 1937**, artigo 15, parágrafo IX; artigo 127. Available at http://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/constituicao/constituicao37.htm.

to in the holiday name. As the department saw it, the sense of the word race, as celebrated in the *Dia da Raça*, was “fundamentally moral,” and referred to the qualities of the American people, whose fraternal spirit was based in the ideals of justice, patriotism, sovereignty, freedom, and peace. The holiday, thus, would celebrate “the great American patriots,” particularly those connected to Pan-Americanism, such as Alexandre de Gusmão, Monroe, and Bolívar. This interpretation has similarities to that of the Spanish American celebrations in its emphasis on continental solidarity, while not partaking in the rehabilitation of European colonialism proposed by the Portuguese ambassador in the previous year (granted that they might have done so if given more space). Yet again absent was any mention of the role played by Black or Indigenous peoples.⁶⁶ Race was being recovered in a eugenic sense in reference to health and strength of the national organism, and in that “positive” tone, there was little interest in pointing out the nonwhite groups.

Image 1: Authorities at the *Dia da Raça* celebrations (1939)



From left to right: Francisco José Pinto, Chief of the Military Cabinet (1st, in glasses and uniform), Valdemar Cromwell do Rego Falcão, Labor Minister (3rd, hat in hand), Gustavo Capanema Filho, Education Minister (6th, bespectacled), Getúlio Vargas (8th), Eurico Gaspar Dutra, War Minister and future president (12th, in uniform), and Henrique Aristides Guilhem, Navy Minister (13th, in white uniform).⁶⁷

66 EDITAL n. 321. *Jornal do Brasil*, Oct. 11, 1936.

67 AGÊNCIA NACIONAL. *Comemoração do dia da raça com a presença do presidente Getúlio Dornelles Vargas, Rio de Janeiro, RJ*. May 30, 1939, BR RJANRIO EH.0.FOT, EVE.2600, ANRIO. Authorities identified in the archive's notations.

All images analyzed in this article are from the Fundo Agência Nacional (archival code “EH”) at the Arquivo Nacional in Rio de Janeiro.

Although Brazilian authorities began to coordinate the *Dia da Raça* celebrations prior to Vargas' dictatorial *Estado Novo*, it was during this period that the commemoration greatly increased in scale, gaining not only more participants but also an overtly militaristic tone in the 1940s. The presence of high-level authorities and Vargas himself, documented through photographs by the official "news" (and propaganda) division of the *Departamento de Imprensa e Propaganda*, the *Agência Nacional*, show that the parades grew in political importance. Pictures taken by the *Agência Nacional* for the 1941 parade show Vargas surrounded by other politicians on an elevated tribune, shaded from the sun by a striped canvas roof from which flower bouquets hung. In one of the pictures (image 1), Vargas is surrounded by the chief of his military cabinet, the labor minister Valdemar Cromwell, the education minister Gustavo Capanema Filho, his war minister (and later president) Eurico Gaspar Dutra, and others. In front of a smiling Gustavo Capanema are two young white girls wearing their Sunday best, presumably daughters of Vargas' all-white entourage.

As documented by the series of pictures, the dignitaries watched over a long succession of uniformed students. One of the shots, taken with a wide angle lens and looking inland at the very end of the Rio Branco Avenue (the photographer had their back to the *Baía de Guanabara* which, before the 1960s Flamengo landfill, came very near downtown Rio) shows a group of young men in sharp white jackets with black pants and military-style hats passing by the Monroe Palace, which housed the Federal Senate,⁶⁸ with the top spire of the National Library just visible in the background. Another picture (image 2), taken at a similar angle, shows a group of young women in hats and knee-length dark dresses over white long-sleeved shirts carrying flags. In the far-right of the background, easily identifiable by its position, sheer height, and the unmistakable shape of its roof, is the "signature building of the *Estado Novo*, celebrated within Brazil and abroad as the pinnacle of cultural change": the Ministry of Education and Health building, a modernist skyscraper designed by a crack team of modernist architects that included Oscar Niemeyer and Lucio Costa (who would jointly design Brasília years later), influenced by Le Corbusier. Its construction spanned the entirety of the *Estado Novo*, and its design laid bare the contradictions of a regime that simultaneously embraced both tradition and modernity, and both repressed and employed avowed communists such as Niemeyer himself.⁶⁹

68 Demolished in the 1970s. The site is now an underground parking lot beneath the barren Mahatma Gandhi square.

69 WILLIAMS, op. cit., pp. 15-16.

Image 2: Marchers at the *Dia da Raça* (1939)

At the far left (behind the tree line) is part of the Monroe Palace. Center-left is the Rio Branco Avenue Obelisk, gifted by a civil contractor to the city of Rio de Janeiro on occasion of the urban reforms in the early twentieth century. Towering to the right is the Ministry of Education and Health building, later renamed as the Gustavo Capanema Palace.⁷⁰

Photographs taken by the *Imprensa Nacional*, an *Estado Novo* propaganda organ at the 1941, 1943 and 1944 festivities show that the events celebrating the date became more militaristic and, in the case of 1941, with an aesthetic strongly evocative of fascist performances. In one of the photographs (image 3), taken with flash by nighttime, a white young man receives in athletic attire a flaming torch from a uniformed man, surrounded by a large group of men in uniform and suits, in front of a Romanesque statue.⁷¹ Just peeking over the torch holder's shoulder is Gustavo Capanema's bespectacled observing face. The name of the event (which archival notations indicate was part of that year's *Dia da raça* celebrations), the *Corrida da chama da juventude* (Race of the Flame of Youth), indicates the values reinforced by such a ceremony. The runner's hawkish features, with his hair combed back and a somber expression, are suggestive of what the event's organizers wished to promote: the cult of the virile body, of the desirable specimen, even, celebrated in the trappings of classical culture.

⁷⁰ AGÊNCIA NACIONAL, BR RJANRIO EH.0.FOT, EVE.2600, ANRIO.

⁷¹ Fascist Italy relied strongly on Roman symbols and rites. See GIARDINA, Andrea. The Fascist Myth of Romanity. *Estudos Avançados*, v. 22, n. 62, p. 55-76, 2008.

Image 3: A runner prepares (light tank top with letter M) for the *Corrida da chama da juventude*, closely observed by Gustavo Capanema (bespectacled, over the runner's shoulder), 1941⁷²



An earlier picture in the series shows Capanema to be surrounded by a coterie of what appear to be government officials in double-breasted pinstripe suits and hats. With an almost stoic expression and a dark overcoat, the education minister is clearly the guest of honor, occupying the center of the frame and drawing the viewer's gaze. The next pictures show the runners racing through an empty street in downtown Rio and then lighting a pyre with their torches. The 1941 newspapers registered that the *Corrida da chama da juventude* was only one part of the holiday celebrations that year, which closed off many streets in Rio's downtown. The pyre pictured was in front of the War Ministry, and the runners were ten representatives from each of the schools in the *Universidade do Brasil* (nowadays known as the *Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro*).⁷³ Thus, the advent of the *Estado Novo* in 1937 did not significantly alter the meanings behind the *Dia da raça* demonstrations, which continued to amount to little more than a celebration of the scions of the economic and political elites who studied at the "schools of power."⁷⁴ The "race" that the sons—all of the students pictured were male—of

72 AGÊNCIA NACIONAL. *Corrida da chama da juventude em comemoração ao dia da raça no Rio de Janeiro*. Sep. 5, 1941, BR RJANRIO EH.0.FOT, EVE.2672, ANRIO.

The M on the runner's chest indicates that he was possibly a member of the Medical School at the *Universidade do Brasil*.

73 FESTA maravilhosa da raça brasileira. *A Noite*, Sep. 4, 1941.

74 CARLOTTO, Maria Carmez. *Universitas semper reformanda?* A história da Universidade de São Paulo e

the wealthy (and overwhelmingly white, or at least white-passing) families showcased was anything but representative of a Brazil that was predominantly poor, rural, and of significant African descent.⁷⁵

Parades became bigger and even more militaristic after Brazil entered World War II in 1942. The next year's spectacle—the most extravagant pictured in the *Arquivo Nacional's* collection—included a large variety of marchers, such as groups of young boys carrying other boys with bandaged heads on stretchers, uniformed young women from the *Faculdade Nacional de Filosofia*, and even a platoon of older students in military-style garb and gas masks. Compared to the 1939 edition, a much larger group of authorities watched the parade, perched on the steps of the National Library building. Out of the seventy-six pictures in the series, only three foreground Brazilians of African descent, which contrasts with the racial composition of Brazilian troops actually sent to Italy, two thirds of which were *Pardo* (27.3 percent) or Black (5.3 percent) soldiers.⁷⁶ In one of the pictures in the series, of the audience on a tall building's sill, overlooking the parade, a Black man, poorly lit and just out of focus, appears to look at the camera. Behind him, dozens of other men watch the parade under U.S. flags, with the scenic Guanabara Bay in the background and marchers in white passing by the Rio Branco Avenue obelisk.⁷⁷

In a second picture, a young Black man stares at the camera as he plays a drum in the first row of squad of students in white belonging to the *Associação Promotora da Instrução*, judging by the words emblazoned in one of the shirts. A second Black man follows in the third row, also staring at the camera, carrying a Brazilian flag. The fourth prominent Black student stands amidst the audience, possibly after having paraded himself (judging by his uniform), surrounded by white children, including a group of girls, in dresses and cross-legged on the ground, holding newspapers to protect their heads from the sun (image 4). The overall disproportional number of white students in the parades, with few Black students peppered in, is reflected in the words of a Black student who took part in the parades, interviewed by Jerry Dávila: “It meant ‘race’ in quotation marks, because what ‘Brazilian Race’ is there?... It is a totally erroneous concept ... It was just in the heads of the Estado Novo ideologues.”⁷⁸

o discurso da gestão à luz da estrutura social. 2014. Dissertation (PhD in Sociology) – Universidade de São Paulo, São Paulo, 2014, chap. 4.

75 In 1940, 71.6% of the Brazilian population was rural. Agricultural activity was in frank decline since the 1929 economic crisis. The Brazilian census, performed that same year, indicated that 35.84% of the population self-identified as Black or Brown (*preto ou pardo*). For more on rural decline, see CARONE, Edgard. **O Estado Novo (1937-1945)**. Rio de Janeiro: Difel, 1976. pp. 6, 8-12. For the race figures and the Census' methodology, see INSTITUTO BRASILEIRO DE GEOGRAFIA E ESTATÍSTICA, **Recenseamento Geral do Brasil de 1940**, v. 2: Censo demográfico, População e Habitação. Rio de Janeiro: Serviço Gráfico do Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 1950. pp. xxi, 1.

76 As historian Francisco Ferraz shows, these figures mostly reflected the overall demographic structure of Brazilian society at the time as ascertained in the 1940 census. See FERRAZ, Francisco C. A. “Todas as falhas e virtudes desse povo”: considerações sobre a composição racial da Força Expedicionária Brasileira. **Antíteses**, v. 13, n. 25, 2020, p. 265-66.

77 AGÊNCIA NACIONAL, op. cit., p. 242-277.

78 DÁVILA, op. cit., p. 163.

Image 4: Spectators at the *Desfile escolar do Dia da Raça* (1943)⁷⁹



As in the 1935 letter he received from Oswaldo Aranha, Vargas' speech during the closing ceremonies of the 1938 *Semana da Pátria e da Raça*, transmitted by radio, also proposed an interpretation of "race" as a stand-in for people. The Brazilian people, Vargas proclaimed, was "welcoming and hospitable, tolerant by nature, accustomed to practicing Christian solidarity" noble characteristics that the current circumstances demanded be mobilized "for the benefit of the culture and physical vigor of the race." It was necessary for "men of vision" to collaborate with the government to prepare the next generations. The celebrations of *Pátria e Raça*, thus, should be the "unequivocal demonstration of our efforts for the elevation of the cultural and eugenic level of youth, source of the reinvigoration of national energies and assurance of the nation's progress."⁸⁰

79 AGÊNCIA NACIONAL, BR RJANRIO EH.0.FOT, EVE.2600, ANRIO.

80 VARGAS, Getúlio; D'ARAÚJO, Maria Celina Soares de (ed.). **Getúlio Vargas**. Brasília: Câmara dos Deputados, Centro de Documentação e Informação: Edições Câmara, 2011. pp. 384-86. Here the regime's use of "Eugenic" might lead to confusion. Brazilian scientists employed "eugenics" as a concept that implied in racial betterment

The *Estado Novo* ideologues, in naming the occasion *Semana da Raça e da Pátria*, execute a double move. As Vargas' speech illustrates, the holiday's meaning, and particularly emptying of the "racialized" (i.e., based in supposedly innate biological differences between races) content of the word "race," firmly excluding Brazilians of African and Indigenous descent, show how the Vargas regime's racial construction was fundamentally and perhaps deliberately ambiguous. On the one hand, emptying the term of its pseudo-scientific meanings of racial difference indirectly made race-based discrimination unviable and illegitimate. By placing "race" right next to "*pátria*," the regime's ideologues created an implicit connection between the two concepts—the homeland and race were indissociable, and to be part of the nation was to be a constitutive element of its "race." While this could be understood to imply a duty to contribute to the nation's greatness and a break with the liberal First Republic's full-fledged subscription to scientific racism and racial whitening, the regime's *Dia da Raça* festivities specifically showed upper class white people as the epitome of the Brazilian "race," collapsing the meaning of race and biology again to mean an exclusionary normative whiteness as the racial ideal for the nation.

Moreover, the Vargas regime could use the shroud of its non-racialized approach to "race" to deny the existence of racism, even though *de facto* racial discrimination remained rampant. The fact that the holiday displaced white supremacist ideals of racial whitening from official discourse did not automatically make it "anti-racist"—for its emptying of the word "race" also erased the contributions of Brazilians of African descent to the national "race" that the regime pushed. It was a project that did not have the ambition to upend (or significantly alter) racial and social hierarchies. That is, the *Dia da Raça*'s seemingly contradictory nature—a holiday celebrating race that centered whiteness—reflects how Vargas' governments could both trumpet its own racial progressivism while not seriously challenging structural white supremacy.

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not necessarily through racial whitening.

In the original, respectively: "*acolhedor e hospitaleiro, tolerante por índole, habituado a praticar a solidariedade cristã*"; "*em benefício da cultura e do vigor físico da raça*"; "*demonstração inequívoca do nosso esforço pelo levantamento do nível cultural e eugênico da mocidade, fonte de revigoração das energias nacionais e penhor seguro do progresso da pátria.*"