

# A Bahian Counterpoint of Sugar and Oil

Global Commodities, Global Identities?

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## Abstract

This paper explores the effects of sugar and oil on identity formation or, more specifically, on the making of blackness and whiteness in the region surrounding Salvador, Bahia, where both commodities have had great impact, sugar from 1550 and oil from 1950, when drilling for oil began and a very large oil refinery was built. After comparing life under the economy of these two different commodities I connect them to the issue of a transnational black identity created across the Atlantic, drawing from a common past of slavery and a more recent past and present where racial hierarchies still penalize populations defined as black. This part of Bahia is emblematic for other regions of Brazil and other countries in which oil exploitation comes to substitute other mono-cultures (such as sugarcane, cocoa or small-scale fishing) while creating, often quite suddenly, a wholly different local economy, with new global connections, higher salaries, new conspicuous spending patterns, new values associated with certain forms of manual labour and technical skills, and an altogether new form of defining the nature of a “good job”.

**Keywords:** oil, blackness, identity formation, Bahia, globalization, black Atlantic

## Resumo

Este artigo explora os efeitos do açúcar e do petróleo sobre a formação de identidades, ou, mais especificamente, sobre a produção da negritude e da branquitude. O estudo centra-se na região do entorno de Salvador, Bahia, onde ambas as mercadorias exerceram e ainda exercem um grande impacto, o açúcar desde 1550 e o petróleo desde 1950. A perfuração de poços de petróleo desde o início da década de 1950 e, mais tarde, a construção de

uma enorme refinaria tiveram lugar em uma região até então dominada pela monocultura da cana e por engenhos ou usinas de açúcar. Após comparar a vida cotidiana sob a égide dessas duas diferentes mercadorias, estabeleço uma relação com a questão de uma identidade negra transnacional criada no Atlântico, baseada em um passado comum de escravidão e em um passado mais recente, estendendo-se aos dias atuais, em que hierarquias raciais ainda penalizam populações definidas como negras. Finalmente, tento equacionar tanto a hegemonia cultural que acompanha a economia de uma mercadoria global quanto um conjunto de singularidades que caracterizam esta região do estado da Bahia. Essa parte da Bahia é emblemática para outras regiões do Brasil e outros países em que a exploração do petróleo chega para substituir outras monoculturas (tais como a cana-de-açúcar), ao mesmo tempo em que cria, amiúde muito rapidamente, uma economia local completamente diferente, com novas conexões globais, salários mais altos, novos padrões de consumo conspícuo, novos valores associados a certas formas de trabalho manual e habilidades técnicas, e uma forma totalmente nova de avaliar o que é um bom emprego.

**Palavras chave:** petróleo, negritude, formação de identidades, Bahia, globalização, Atlântico negro

# A Bahian Counterpoint of Sugar and Oil

Global Commodities, Global Identities?<sup>1</sup>

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Sugar and oil are possibly the first and second key global commodities. There have been other such commodities, of course, including salt, iron, cocoa, coffee and cotton – and there exists a growing set of publications on the history and anthropology of the latter – but for a variety of reasons their impact on identity formation and large-scale ethnic or national projects has been less intense. As global commodities, moreover, sugar and oil can be seen as a sign of their times and a paradigmatic icon of power: the universal language of sugar and the technology used in its production was Portuguese, sometimes together with Spanish. Sugar became a commodity that characterized and in many ways represented the Portuguese empire and the era of Iberian domination of the Atlantic. From the beginning of oil drilling and its transformation into fuel at the end of the nineteenth century, the technical language – effectively a global commodity jargon – was and remains predominantly English and most of its existing technology has been developed in the US and the UK. Oil and the technology it enables have come to represent modernity, whose global language is English.

This paper explores the effects of sugar and oil on identity formation or, more specifically, on how blackness and whiteness are formed. It focuses on the region surrounding Salvador, Bahia, where both commodities have had a great impact,<sup>2</sup> sugar from 1550 onwards and oil from 1950. Oil drilling and later the construction of a very large oil refinery started in the early Fifties in a region that had previously been dominated by sugar cane plantations and

<sup>1</sup> My title is an oblique reference to Fernando Ortiz's classic book *Cuban Counterpoint of Tobacco and Sugar* (1946) in which he refers to tobacco as the engine of a 'soft' form of production and sugar the engine of a 'hard' form. The metaphor of a counterpoint between two 'opposing' commodities is also used by Barickman (1998) with reference to the Reconcavo region of Bahia.

<sup>2</sup> I thank the National Research Council (CNPq) and the Millennium Institute on Inequality based at IUPERJ, Rio de Janeiro, for the not exactly generous, but certainly much needed financial assistance towards this research project. I also thank my research assistants Washington de Jesus, Agrimaria Mattos, Evelim Sousa and Diogenes Barbosa.

sugar mills. After comparing life under the sway of these two different commodities I connect sugar and oil to the issue of a transnational black identity created across the Atlantic, drawing from a common past of slavery and a more recent past and present in which racial hierarchies still penalize populations defined as black. Lastly I try to combine both the cultural hegemony that accompanies the economics of a global commodity and the influence of the Black Atlantic (Gilroy 1993) with a number of singular feature that characterize this particular region of Bahia. At the same time, this part of Bahia state can be taken as emblematic of other regions of Brazil and other countries where oil exploration has superseded other monocultures (like sugar-cane, cocoa or small-scale fishing) while creating, often quite suddenly, an entirely different local economy, with new global connections, higher wages, new conspicuous spending patterns, new values associated with specific forms of manual labour and technical skills, and an altogether new form of evaluating what a good job is.

The research for this paper forms part of a larger project that combines both my current intellectual concerns: the history of Afro-American studies in Bahia starting from the late 1930s, a period that culminated with the visit of Franklin Frazier, Lorenzo Turner and Melville Herskovits to the region (1940-43) (Sansone 2011); and the long-term development in the area around Salvador, the state capital, of what I call a culture of inequality – the naturalization of difference (Tilly 1998) that makes life acceptable or at least tolerable in a context of excruciating inequality; in essence, a kind of social and cultural pact between the haves and the have-nots. This kind of culture develops over time and equally takes a long time to recede. Of course, along with the continuities, I also try to explore the ruptures in the experience of this rather unbalanced social pact. This pact follows a number of local rules specific to Bahia, but also displays similarities with other like pacts in the Global South with a history of entrenched inequalities, especially in other parts of Latin America and Africa – the region and the continent, respectively, with the highest GINI indices of inequality.

Studying the persistence of enduring and extreme inequalities, as well as the specific cultural forms and social strategies that these have worked to create, can provide new insights by focusing on the long-term history of specific regions, identified as open-ended and yet territorialized systems of opportunities. Highlighting the situation of this particular region of Brazil can

help reveal how such inequalities are constructed, kept in place and succeed in reproducing themselves across time and generations. Some regions may be especially crucial in this regard, including those that experience sudden transformations from monocultures to ‘mono-industries.’ The region in and around the Bahian municipality of São Francisco do Conde, 80km from the state capital of Salvador and part of the Recôncavo, is a case in point: home to around 25,000 inhabitants in 2000, it is interesting because of both its past history as one of the cradles of the sugar plantation society in Brazil, and its present situation with a very large per capita revenue from oil refining and transformation, combined with an extremely high Gini coefficient, indicating pronounced inequality.<sup>3</sup>

The research – carried out by a team consisting of myself and four senior undergraduate students – is based on fieldwork among two different though sometimes interrelated groups: 1. former workers of sugar mills and their children; 2. the first generation oil workers and their children. This field research has been supplemented by material from archives and accident records – for example, the log book from the Dao João plantation and sugar mill, which assumed a central place in our research project. In order to be able to describe the long period of time from 1950 to the present, we focused on two age groups, the older generation, now in the 60-90 age range, and the young generation, now aged 15-30. From January 2007 to January 2009, after two years archival research, compilation of oral histories, in-depth interviews and participant observation, our team conducted a questionnaire-based survey with a representative sample of 500 families, distributed across several districts of the municipality. The survey, which focuses on perceptions of inequality in relation to consumption, racial terminology, leisure and work/unemployment, will be analyzed elsewhere. The present paper concerns the qualitative dimension of our research, focusing on one specific plantation and sugar mill, which later became the centre of an oil extraction region, rather than plantation life in Bahia more generally or the oil industry in Brazil as a whole.<sup>4</sup>

3 See <http://www.ibge.gov.br/cidadesat/painel/painel.php?codmun=292920#>. For a more comprehensive overview of this region, also see the recent book edited by Caroso et al. 2011.

4 In Brazil there has been surprisingly little social anthropological research on sugar and less still on oil. With a few exceptions, such as the work of José Sergio Leite Lopes (1976) on one sugar mill in the state of Pernambuco, the small amount of research that does exist tends not to focus on a specific sugar mill

In many ways my research is a follow-up to the major Columbia/UNESCO project on race relations in Brazil (Chor Maio, Pereira & Sansone 2007), which carried out fieldwork on plantation society in the same region from 1950-53 (Wagley ed. 1953; Wagley & Roxo 1970). This period was when oil exploration first began in the region and plantation life was seen as the epitome of backwardness (*atraso*) in the state. In fact it was on a site just opposite the Dao João sugar mill and plantation studied by William Hutchinson (1957) and later Maxine Margolis (1975) that the recently founded National Oil Company, later renamed Petrobrás, built the first sizeable oil field in Bahia. Indeed the company named the site the Dao João Oil Field after the sugar mill – an action perceived at the time as a cultural provocation against the ruling plantation system. Of course, in these early years of open cultural and economic opposition to the world of oil drilling and refining from the world of sugar and alcohol production, nobody could really have imagined that ethanol production would lead to sugar cane becoming a major source of car fuel in Brazil only twenty years later, in the mid-1970s.

As well as comparing social and race relations and hierarchies in the sugar and oil periods, I also investigate the different systems of memory that sugar and oil have developed in the region. As I shall show later, the oil industry has had a huge impact on the system of memory and remembering. Here I am concerned with, firstly, the consequences of the arrival and development of the oil industry and, secondly, the impact of the revenue from oil royalties on family life, identity formation, religious life and notions of blackness.

In many ways, the study of how enduring and extreme inequalities come into existence is also a study of the different stages of modernity and their consequences for systems of domination and social hierarchy, as well as for the kinds of resistance generated in the process. In this project my assistants and I have isolated, for analytical purposes, three stages in the construction of inequalities, each of which is characterized by a main economic driving force:

A first period in which sugar cane and its memory system and culture determines local economics as much as its transnational connections – leading actors are important and well-known local families of capitalists who face

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or oil field. This largely stems from the fact that there are few written sources available for conducting such small-scale research, combined with the insufficient use made of ethnography and oral history.

constant shortages of capital – capitalists without capital;

A second period in which oil and its much more powerful memory system and culture quite suddenly becomes the driving economic force for a few decades – the single leading actor is (faceless) capitalism without capitalists;

A third period characterized by the high amounts of oil revenue received by the municipality of São Francisco do Conde (SFC), which enables an oil-fuelled populism – the leading actor is wealth without a social contract, as in most hydrocarbon societies (see Karl 1997 and Coronil 1997).

### Sugar as an icon of the past

Traditionally Brazilian historiography – which means mostly, though not exclusively, popular historiography – has taken sugar and alcohol production, especially in the North East of the country, to represent the past.<sup>5</sup> In this tradition, sugar is taken as an icon of *atraso* ‘backwardness’ – an economic under or sub-development involving an intrinsic absence of technology, innovation and modernity, as well as labour relations distinguished from their ‘modern’ counterparts by being centred on status (and hierarchy) rather than on the work contract: ‘patriarchal’ relations, as they are defined in this historiography tradition and in a literary genre that turned the *engenho* (sugar mill) and its plantation into its narrative core and whose most renowned and widely read interpreter in Brazil was José Lins Rego. In fact sugar enabled the first wave of globalization: it had a global market and technology and, in combination with slavery, created very similar working and living conditions across different regions of the planet. Historically the sugar economy has had a homogenizing effect on labour relations, technology and the world of finance and credit. It has also had an equally homogenizing effect on food tastes! As Sidney Mintz (1985) brilliantly demonstrated, in order for sugar to become a truly global commodity, a global taste for sugar had to be fomented: after all eating sugar at our modern levels of consumption is far from ‘natural.’ It was only when the diet of the British working-class started to rely heavily on

<sup>5</sup> See, among others, Manuel Diegues Junior. These kinds of popular historical accounts were widely read and were an important influence on the process of nation building in the period 1930–1960. For a critical review of this approach and its political implications, see B. J Barickman 1996 and 1998.

sugar (put in marmalade, teas, cakes etc.) that the demand for cane sugar stabilized and grew, at least until the arrival of sugar from sugar beet in Europe. For a long period of time and well into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including in Bahia, the most advanced contemporary technology was found in the sugar mills (S. Schwarz 1976), which created both capital accumulation and the proletarian condition.

When we interviewed the now aging former workers of the Dao João mills, we came across a specific blend of working-class culture, key elements of which included a constant desire for land, freedom of movement, house ownership, time for oneself, respect (men) and reputation (women), and a disposable income to spend on body care (clothes, soap, hair, etc.). The old former workers remember the mill and above all cane cutting with a mixture of nostalgia and trepidation. Their accounts emphasize the constant scarcity of food and how they had to spend time at the weekends and after work looking for other sources. The company gave no plots of land for the worker to grow their own crops (though the managers we interviewed stated that, on the contrary, all workers were entitled to a plot and that many grew tobacco, mostly for their own use). The nearby mangrove was the source of most extra proteins, yielding crabs, shells and some fish. The mangrove belonged to nobody or, rather, was seen to belong to everyone.

The attitudes towards property are also reminiscent of working-class culture elsewhere: the contested meaning of taking from the land and the mill (pillaging versus re-appropriation; poaching, fishing and ‘keeping’ or ‘nicking’ charcoal and molasses were considered by the workers as acquired rights and perks supplementing their salary, while by the owners of the mill they indicated an intrinsic lack of discipline and an inclination towards theft). Time was established by the mill siren, possibly one of the few clocks in the area, always in close coordination with tidal time: water transport, fishing and harvesting depended on the moon and tides. When recollecting the mill and plantation life, the memory of former cane workers is bitter-sweet: there was working-class solidarity and a sense of community, but also scarcity, hunger, bad health, sick and dying children, and in general little or no alternative.

In reassessing the fact that body practices were part and parcel of working class culture, our research has looked to capture how people felt about the body, beauty and fashion during the period. We heard that although fabric was hard to obtain, workers insisted on wearing clean clothes at the weekend. After

work everybody immediately washed and changed. People simply wanted to think of something other than the hot steam of the mill or the scorching sun of the plantation. Memories focus on the sweat and heat. Cleanliness seemed to have been a way to regain their humanity and maintain a reasonable living standard in the small and crowded houses that dotted the plantation and where the workers were ‘allowed to stay’ (without ever becoming owners). Cleanliness, together with an emphasis on orderly family life despite the poverty, was also a way of marking their distance from the large influx of temporary sugar cane cutters. These were hired just before the harvest to boost production and usually came from the drier inland region of the state. In the recollections of the former workers we interviewed in São Francisco do Conde, these seasonal workers were often depicted as a combination of very hard working people paid per production unit, tough or even violent men, simpletons and strike-breakers who the bosses used to dampen any unrest among the ‘regular’ local workers who lived on the plantation all year around. Cleanliness was pleasant, but was also a way to mark a position – close to city life and what people perceived as being *moderno* (in the popular Portuguese of Bahia, a word meaning both modern and young). A piece of soap was a welcome traditional present for a newborn or a recently married couple.<sup>6</sup> Fashion mattered too. Being abreast of fashion provided considerable status among fellow workers. Metropolitan fashion was mediated by the local seamstresses, who modelled their outfits (*modelitos*) on the magazines sometimes brought back by one of the local women working as housemaids in Salvador when they occasionally came back home (traveling to Salvador took one day by boat: today it is 90 minutes by bus). Sometimes dresses were copied from one that an upper middle-class woman had handed down to her housemaid. Men knew about fashion trends from colleagues at the mill or on the plantations who travelled to Salvador for work. These included the sailors working on the barges carrying sugar and rum.

Workers at the mill had their own cultural life and leisure activities. Samba (especially the local version of *samba de roda*), capoeira and a set of religious rituals combining popular Iberian Catholicism with Afro-Brazilian rituals were established elements of social life, especially from the 1950s when people started to perform samba and capoeira. These festivities often took place in the large courtyard inside the mill, in front of the house

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<sup>6</sup> Soap, of course, is yet another global commodity with local histories and meanings.

belonging to the owner's family, in particular on Saturdays, when even the mill owner's daughter had to join in the samba and show how good a dancer she was. Similarly the two 'priests' of what would now be called Umbanda and Candomblé houses were well-known and respected, and the mill owner would doff his hat when passing in front of one of these establishments. Interestingly, we were told that the same daughter who had to samba in the mill courtyard in order for the workers to admire her prowess was not allowed to dance samba in Salvador.

In fact the Dao João Mill, with its approximately one thousand workers, plus an additional thousand working in the cane fields, was the epicentre of modernity in the region: from the 1940s to 1969 when it went bankrupt, the mill had the largest grocery store and the only cinema in the nearby area. At weekends people came from the surrounding region to the small village just opposite the main entrance of the mill in order to party, listen to music, buy clothes and fabric, as well as simply hear the latest news and gossip. The mill had its own special railway, a port and a fleet of barges, plus the only trucks in the municipality, while hiring just about every skilled worker of the region.

My argument is that any intrinsic technological, political and cultural backwardness associated with the sugar cane industry cannot be taken at face value and has, in fact, to be understood as a cultural construct. In the 1970s when industrialization boomed around the development of the largest petrochemical plant in Latin America, located just twenty miles from São Francisco do Conde, both the haves and the have-nots, obviously for opposite reasons, had to represent the sugar plantation as a reminder of the past, rather than the harbinger of much of the present. The aim of this portrayal of the sugar world as backward was to prevent any material and symbolic claims based on slavery or the slave-master condition. As a matter of fact, soon after the mill went bankrupt in 1969, most of the rows of small houses occupied by the workers were rapidly bulldozed and the mill's machinery sold to another mill. The past had to be obliterated. Only a few of these houses, those sitting right in front of the mill entrance, were left standing and then merely because some of the most militant and resilient workers happened to live in them. It was among these former workers that we conducted most of our interviews. As I have explored elsewhere, slavery cannot be remembered with any intensity nor can it be transformed readily into heritage (sites) when its legacy is still alive in both popular and elite cultures (Sansone 2002).

## **Oil as an icon of modernity**

In people's memories, official publications and the academic literature on economic development in Brazil,<sup>7</sup> oil often represents modernity in contrast to sugar. More recently oil has also come to represent a new stage of capitalism characterized by a simultaneous growth of wealth and inequality. My argument is more complex and posits that in Bahia oil – through the state company Petrobrás – has made the transition to full-blown modernity a lot easier, yet it was not the great leveller it was announced to be in the 1950s (de Azevedo Brandão 1998, Costa Pinto 1958). Oil has caused a whole series of changes, but has also reinforced other tendencies. Here it will suffice to list a number of the changes that surfaced in the interviews with former workers:

1. For the first time in the region technical skills were highly valued on the labour market – skilled workers and technicians who had learned their skills in the mills as apprentices were lured into the oil industry by the much higher wages, and by a less hierarchical shop floor culture. Heavy manual work also acquired a higher status in part because of the fact that during its first decade in the region, the state oil company hired thousands of unskilled local labourers to build roads, ports and the refinery.
2. In contrast to the sugar mill and plantation workers, those employed by Petrobrás liked to display their blue overalls and metal-toed shoes soiled with mud and oil after the day's work. We heard a lot of stories of oil workers coming off the pier – where each evening oil company boats deposited those working on the several oil wells in the bay, just one or two miles offshore – and walking straight into a bar, wearing dirty overalls and their yellow safety helmets. The story goes that these workers would then pay for several rounds of drinks for every customer in the establishment. Mud and oil had to be shown and even had to be acted out, as it were, as a form of revenge against the haves. Conspicuous consumption was often a way to convey a message to the traditional town elite whose wealth had come from the sugar industry. For example we were told that one of these workers coming off the pier had once offered twice the price for a fish on sale in the local market, just for the sheer pleasure of taking it off the hands of

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<sup>7</sup> See, among others, the book *Os desbravadores*, a celebratory album of 50 years of the RLAM Refinery, as well as newspaper articles by Montero Lobato and the recent glossy book on the history of oil in Bahia, edited by Cid Teixeira (2011).

the mayor, a representative of the sugar industry elite, who, in an act of public generosity, had ordered the fish in question in order to give it to a poor elderly woman who was ill. Showing off their hard working bodies, as well as the money earned through this work, was a message from the new proletarian elite to the old political and economic elite (until 1972 all mayors had come from a few families of sugar mill and plantation owners).

3. Petrobrás also changed the structure of employment radically in gender terms by hiring men only, at least until a few years ago. In the sugar mill and plantation, women participated in the production process, particularly in the busiest months of the harvest and cane grinding. For the first time among the region's lower class, Petrobrás institutionalized the role of the housewife and the role of the *pensionista*: if the husband died, which occurred all too frequently over the first twenty years because of the very high rate of work accidents, the widowed housewife would receive the retirement benefit of her deceased husband. The latter entitlement was accompanied by general retirement rights (mostly unknown in the sugar industry), health care for the worker's entire family, and literacy and technical courses for the workers (from the 1980s Petrobrás increasingly hired only skilled workers and applicants with technical degrees). These benefits went hand-in-hand with a complex double process at the level of family life: on one hand, both the company and wives, as well as unmarried mothers, pressed for the formalization of fatherhood and the social benefits that came with it, a process that strengthened nuclear family ties; on the other hand, this process of formal recognition transformed what would have otherwise been single mothers into recipients of food and alimony, thereby forming a second and sometimes a third family for the oil worker to sustain.
4. Good healthcare for the workers and their families, something of which Petrobrás was proud, meant, as one widow of an oil worker told us, children stopped dying. In a very short period the health conditions of these people improved dramatically. It is worth emphasizing that this is the positive aspect of the golden years of Petrobrás which women tend to remember the best. Men, for their part, like to remember the new opportunities for learning skills and consuming goods. In Mara Viveiros's terms, oil industry men are recalled as *quebradores* AND *cumplidores* – they are the

- best providers available in the pool of marriageable men, but also the most extravagant, streetwise and promiscuous men in the region.
5. With a disposable income comes home ownership – as opposed to living in a house on mill land for which no formal rent is paid, but loyalty to the company is demanded (*morar de favor*).
  6. Promotion of literacy has a powerful effect on memory mechanisms and notions of rights.
  7. Formal and equalizing work relations, as opposed to caste-like relations. Trade unionism is possible and, at times, even stimulated by Petrobrás – only to be discouraged again during the military dictatorship of 1964–83.
  8. Disposable income – the ‘fridge generation,’ as the first generation of workers able to afford a fridge were known, uses conspicuous consumption to gain access to visible forms of reinforcing power.
  9. These economic and social changes are accompanied by the diversification, segmentation and specialization of religious experience. From the 1950s to the 90s, there is a shift from the monopoly exerted by the Catholic Church, associated with popular Iberian Catholicism and a cluster of relatively informal Afro-Catholic traditions whose rituals were performed on the plantation rather than in the town, to a situation involving what sociologists define as a religious market. This consisted of the Catholic Church, popular Catholicism, ‘properly’ established Candomblé houses and a variety of Pentecostal Churches. There is some evidence that two important steps were taken in the 1950s, both led by families of Petrobrás workers: the founding of the first chapter of the Pentecostal church Assembléia de Deus (Assembly of God) and the establishment of the first two candomblé houses, based on a model largely inspired by the main ‘traditional’ houses of Salvador. In terms of African-Catholic religiosity, we can observe a transition from informal and often mobile cult places to temple houses, matched by a shift from practices frequently defined as witchcraft (*bruxaria*), including by those holding the cults in high esteem, to what is referred to as religion or simply candomblé.
  10. Interestingly, in the interviews with retired oil workers, the expression *negro* – which has now become the accepted term to define people of African descent who wish to affirm their heritage – appears in their narratives only from the years following the implantation of Petrobrás in the municipality. This is a phenomenon that we are still exploring, but it is clear that

a certain degree of black pride comes from both oil industry trade unionism and some of the symbols associated with the oil industry itself. We can note how black oil workers are proud of calling oil *ouro negro* (black gold) and how readily they make the pun of Petrobrás & Pretobrás (*preto* being another term for the colour black).

Over the last two decades a new economic and social context has taken shape in the micro-region, generated by a combination of increasing oil revenues and an over-rich municipality, which sustains a relatively small local elite with high salaries and special benefits on one hand, and a mass of poor people dependent largely on the municipality for work, social benefits, welfare and favours, on the other. One of the reasons for choosing SFC for a research study into extreme inequality is precisely that the municipality is ranked first or second in Brazil in terms of the per capita wealth of the population (26,500 inhabitants in 2000) while also being a leader in terms of a poor Human Development Index. Because of the emphasis on decentralization embedded in Brazil's progressive 1988 Constitution, introduced after the military dictatorship, most of the extremely high revenue from royalties is kept by the municipality where the oil well or refinery is located, rather than being appropriated by the federal government, as occurred in the past. These large sums of money – which are still rising – are managed by a relatively small number of people who run the municipal council. In sum, a new local elite has become hugely empowered by this influx of royalties, turning this economic group into the third dominant power in the history of SFC, possibly the most powerful, surpassing the visible sugar barons (capitalists with little capital) and the invisible chiefs of Petrobrás (capitalism without capitalists). A new and more recent strand of inequality has been added to the traditional form.

This situation, a royalty driven economy and local elite, came into effect strongly from the late 1980s, the period of re-democratization during which Petrobrás suspended oil drilling and the exploration of wells in SFC (many wells were reopened in 2006, generating a renewed interest among young people for jobs in the oil industry). The company also limited its use of the territory to the large oil refinery – which yields most of the above mentioned royalties.

Despite this context of renewed inequalities, ravaging corruption scandals and a series of impeached mayors (mostly allied with conservative political

groupings in Bahia state), SFC was the Brazilian municipality with the highest percentage of votes for Lula's presidency in 2002, a staggering 93%!

## Memory

As stated earlier, sugar and oil are associated with different infrastructures – or systems – of memory. The world of sugar produces three sets of memory: from below, from top down and from the viewpoint of the communist party and its spokespersons. The first set tends to be individual-centred, if not individualistic. It is the expression of the illiterate, mostly proletarians *per se*, with a class consciousness only detectable between the lines: a conglomerate of personal accounts mostly concerning a dyadic relationship with a foreman or administrator. Among this group the memory of slavery and labour on the plantation and in the mill can sometimes be detected in various kinds of narratives and texts: samba lyrics, tales, proverbs, names of people and places, prayers and ways of celebrating the festivities of certain Catholic saints such as Saint Anthony and Saint Roch. There is also a considerable degree of silence. Even when stories of humiliation or resistance surface, these are mostly recounted in relation to specific individuals: for instance, violent reactions to a personal offence such as being yelled at by a foreman or administrator in the presence of fellow workers. The second set corresponds to the affluent population: this consists of a series of somewhat sweetened memories found in the more structured form of family albums, family genealogical trees, publications by local historians and anthropologists (some by self-taught ethnographers or historians) and various autobiographies or nostalgia-tinged novels ‘about the past.’ The third set corresponds to the memories of collective resistance found in articles published in *Momento*, the Bahian communist weekly newspaper fairly popular among sugar cane cutters and mill workers between the late 1950s and the early 1960s: in the interviews with workers and in their written testimonies, only the plural *we/us* form is used. In *Momento* these labourers are always addressed in the plural, unless the article dwells on cases of mistreated workers. The implication is that the will of the workers is positive when expressed in the plural.

Turning to the in-depth interviews, much of the resistance of workers in the sugar industry is clearly linked to individual actions and demands – mostly attempts to regain humanity by achieving ‘respect’ and even

individuality. When workers in the mill and the fields mobilize a collective identity, this is by and large masculine – *hombridade, de hombro a hombro* (shoulder to shoulder), as the ethnographer Camara Cascudo pointed out many years ago. Masculinity is the link between the mill owner and the skilled worker, and between the foreman and the sugar cane cutter. Breaching the tacit rules of respect, such as shouting at another man, not to mention threatening him with violence, especially in public, can provoke a (violent) reaction. Of course here we can also include an analysis of the role of honour in affirming (male) identity as well as the *persona* in a society marked by slavery.

Colour is part of the workers' narratives only in a few rare episodes. In most cases being working class is seen as less all-encompassing and limiting than being black – in the sugar cane fields in the past and today in the oil plants. Colour tends to emerge when we, as interviewers, encourage the topic, but not spontaneously. In the younger age group, who generally tend to be better educated and more often unemployed than their parents, the term *negro* is used more frequently and there is slightly more of an inclination to recognize racial discrimination as a fact of Brazilian society – possibly, as I argue elsewhere (Sansone 2003a), the result of a more 'mixed' social life and the greater chance of manoeuvring across different social and colour groups compared to their parents, who tended to be more 'local' and much less mobile in pursuit of their leisure activities. It should be stressed that the meaning of *negro* has changed over the last century, in this region and in Brazil as a whole, from a term seen as an imposition (something other people would call you) or a pejorative to an affirmative term now forming part of the person's self-definition. It seems that blackness becomes interesting as a factor in increasing self-esteem only when perceived as a choice rather than an imposition.

The memory mechanisms among Petrobrás workers contrast somewhat with those of the plantation and mill workers. Literacy, the trade union press, Sindipetro (a powerful and influential trade union), national advertising campaigns, company bulletins, the sheer existence of very conspicuous oil plants (as opposed to the ruins of the Dao João mill) and, over the last few years, even a project inspired and led by the company's national management to recover the history and memory of Petrobrás – the Projeto Memória, which attempts to turn a corporate culture into (national) heritage.

No wonder, then, that it has been a lot easier to gather material covering

the last fifty years of the region, an era dominated by Petrobrás, than the much longer period beforehand, dominated by sugar and alcohol production.

### **From popular culture to Afro-Bahian culture**

Cultural change has been a key part of our research. We can now turn, therefore, to examine when, how and why Africa and its colour terminology or trope entered the memory structures described above and the realm of cultural production or narratives about culture. After all the Black Atlantic – the feeling of a past and present shared by populations descending from different countries and regions across the North and South Atlantic – exists precisely because a set of common icons are remembered and reworked across different regions: the image of Africa, of course, but also ‘race,’ notions of beauty, soul, rhythm and sufferance or resilience (the collective memory of great injustice).

Echoing the findings of other researchers studying the decades immediately after abolition (Hebe Mattos 2005, Walter Fraga 2007), the memories of our informants – some dating back to the 1920s and 30s – reveal that the language of colour and race was avoided by workers and bosses alike, albeit for quite different reasons. The acceptable language between different social groups was that of class (worker versus foremen, administrators and owners) or of gender. Former workers remember with some pleasure, for example, that workers in those days could talk to the owner Dr. Vincente ‘man to man’ – though one might be mounted on a horse and the other holding a machete. Dr. Vincente was known to be tough but fair-minded, often adding a little extra money to the pay packet of particular workers while insisting that the amount given was the same official (minimum) wage for everyone.

We can begin by noting that the place of Africa in popular culture and narratives of blackness has changed: from implicit in the age of sugar to explicit in the age of oil. The founding of the two most important candomblé houses in the 1950s, and their strong growth from the 70s, played a key role in local people starting to remember and talk about Africa again. In fact what has been called the re-Africanization of Bahia is a process that began in the city of Salvador and that later reverberated through the rest of the state. Curiously, even though the Recôncavo rediscovered the Africa trope largely after a Salvador-centred model, this region is identified by many as

the source for many aspects of what became defined from the 1930s onwards as *cultura afro-bahiana*. The Recôncavo is home to the principle ingredients of Afro-Bahian food, clothing, percussion instruments, *samba de roda*, ship and canoe building, and *bruxaria* – in other words, the source of powerful herbs and their magic. Whatever the case, in SFC, as elsewhere in rural northeastern Brazil, gaining acceptance from the local elite and becoming part of the cultural milieu of the municipality has meant candomblé houses having to adapt to the structure, liturgy and even name of the ideal model represented by a select group of ‘authentic’ candomblé houses in Salvador, mostly those associated with the Nago/Yoruba nation. Several smaller and poorer candomblé houses are ignored by local politicians – and by their fairly generous, though unpredictable, system of support to cultural and religious groups – simply because they do not fit the ideal of the Salvador-inspired model. It is worth stressing that few of these houses ever join the official federation of Afro-Brazilian cults and that the two houses I have mentioned state in their official certificates that they belong to the Angola nation, even though they have both recently adopted Yoruba names.

The transformation of cultural forms and artefacts (which were not named but simply performed as custom) into ‘popular culture’ in the 1970s and ‘Afro-Bahian culture’ from the 1990s has its own particular agents. My investigation includes local and outside actors, agendas and agents in this cultural revolution. In the nineties, the municipality – able to pay better salaries than Salvador – attracted scores of school teachers and cultural producers from the state capital. Several of them were black activist or cultural entrepreneurs. SFC became well known across Bahia for its large open air concerts, Junina (Saint John) festivals and carnival – all very large events for such a relatively small town. The mayors and their staff became convinced that investing in culture was worthwhile: cultural creativity would put SFC on the tourist map and culture, now increasingly perceived as Afro-Bahian culture, was something that could be promoted. In 2005 on the eve of the local elections, the municipal government distributed thousands of free T-shirts printed with a short but poignant text: São Francisco do Conde, Cultural Capital.

This widespread change in the field of culture and identity relates, of course, to important changes in the intersection of colour, body, beauty and gender. Brazil as a country has tended to celebrate its mixture of races and phenotypical variety in popular culture, while also establishing over time a

complex pigmentocracy – with pure white European and pure black African at opposite extremes. In the Recôncavo, this classificatory spectrum does not hinge solely on colour per se, but on a combination of skin colour, hair type, lip thickness, nose and head shape and type of feet (people swear to me that some black people really have African feet: large, sturdy and with a flat heel). The *qualidade* – literally, the quality – of a person results from a combination of these traits and the bodily signs of manual or dangerous work, such as calluses, broken or dirty nails, scars and skin diseases (mostly fungal infections). Reading the social position of a person in the body in such way no easy task, and being able to do so makes you the ultimate Bahian. Fluency with these codes is, however, imperative in terms of fieldwork since asking too straightforwardly about racial discrimination can discourage an informant. However asking about the ideal husband, good hair, what a beautiful body is, or just love (which conjures up all these elements) has worked for me as an emic trigger: these are the kind of questions that people like to answer and that strike a familiar chord among most informants since this is the way people talk about ‘race.’ Of course, phenotype can be rather important in Brazil, where blond hair and blue eyes has long been associated with wealth and even modernity. In SFC, where white people represent a mere 7% according to the 2010 Census, most ‘whites’ are so by definition and colour/phenotype are more important in the domain of courtship and getting married than in the labour market, or in contacts with the police, as in parts of Brazil where the white population is higher. This is, of course, a system that has led to the creation of a racial habitus, one that is both specific to the region and that transforms and reinterprets images of beauty, ‘race,’ whiteness and taste, all of which may also come from further away. The system is neither static nor self-contained. Some major changes took place with the advent of the oil economy, as in the case of the blue collar workers described earlier, where, for the first time, the dirty body of the (black) working man was able to indicate a higher status. Other changes have occurred over the past two decades due to the (late) demographic revolution and the emergence of the ‘young generation’ as a new social group, accompanied by the popularization of the notion of ‘staying young and beautiful’ among the lower classes too. Another factor for change is what could be called the popularization of feminism, which has affected how the pool of marriageable men is construed: men are now increasingly important not just as providers but as ‘partners.’ These changes

have influenced the contemporary perception of citizenship, something that has also now become aestheticized in many aspects. Being a satisfied citizen also implies pursuing a lifestyle with a healthy body that can be perceived as beautiful and can experience pleasure.

### **Placing *negritude* in context**

The main distinguishing feature of São Francisco do Conde in comparison to other sugar growing areas (Bosma et al. 2007) or other regions where oil dominates the local economy (Karl 1997) is found in the domain of culture, religion and the language of race relations or racial hierarchies. It is here that the predominantly white elites have deployed strategies to maintain their position over a long time period in a situation where, from the abolition of slavery in 1888 to the present, there have been historically few and increasingly fewer 'white people' in the municipality.

However we can also identify 'global traits' at work in the domain of culture and identity in this region of Bahia. These include the kind of black (youth) culture now being created, which increasingly revolves around the aestheticization of blackness, associated with body practices and politics, and less around religious life (Sansone 2003). The latter, on the contrary, has constituted the basis of what has been called, especially in Salvador, Afro-Bahian culture. This is a culture centred on candomblé and its related cultural aspects (samba, African-derived cuisine and special clothing and costumes). Until roughly fifteen years ago, candomblé houses and their communities in SFC were basically the only sites and medium through which the memory of Africa and slavery was preserved, especially through complex genealogies and 'local' traditions centred on the 'religious families,' which mediated the present and a magical African past in a strongly hierarchical way. Local forms of black cultural production and performances of blackness, as well as young people's expressions of dissatisfaction with social inequalities, increasingly use the icons and language of what could be called a global black awareness or global black culture. Yet certain aspects of life seem to show a high degree of resilience to these global cultural flows, even if they are wrapped in the appealing and seemingly universal language of *negritude*. Highlighting these kinds of specificities helps us understand how local 'culture' functions as the lens through which people tend to read

global flows. Though I cannot explore the point into detail in this paper, the language of conflict and negotiation, even of young people, is still embedded in the relatively local tradition, dependent on the acceptance of extreme social inequalities and venting dissatisfaction indirectly. This helps avoid the creation of frictions beyond breaking point with the affluent local population – whether the sugar mill owners, Petrobrás bosses or, nowadays, the mayors and their immediate staff.

In ethnic studies there has often been a conflict between culturalist and structuralist explanations of the strategies adopted by ethno-racial minorities within the labour market, for example. Generally speaking, left-leaning scholars have opted for structure, whereas right-leaning scholars opt for culture. This is, of course, insufficient to deal with the questions raised by the complex relationship between economic change, social mobility and the ethno-racial position. In my research I try to escape this dilemma by focusing on the long-term processes responsible for shaping today's interethnic relations. In so doing I seek to avoid the pitfalls of presentism that come with blunt rational choice theory approaches to ethnic identity formation (Banton 1982),<sup>8</sup> looking for both continuities and ruptures. In many ways what today is called '(ethnic) identity' is a creation of modernity that can only take shape when and where the conditions for modernity and modernization are given (Gleason 1983). The conditions for modernity can, of course, exist even in the context of segmented and unequal access to the icons of the same, as well as to what is labelled as full-fledged citizenship – indeed this seems to be the case for Latin American modernity as a whole.<sup>9</sup> A good case in question is the relationship between negritude and modernity, a link explored intimately

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8 In many ways, I propose a theoretical approach that combines two classic attempts to identify transnational similarities within and across the different colonial styles and ecumenes of the Black Atlantic. Overall my aim is to dovetail the insights of Charles Boxer's analysis of the culture of colonization, which highlights the specificity of the Portuguese seaborne empire, exploring how it diverged from other empires and colonial styles, with Sidney Mintz's ethnography of commodities, focusing on their networks, power structures, economy and culture. In effect, this would offer a reconciliation of two contradictory tendencies:

1. The undeniably specific traits of the Portuguese colonial style, which produced a fairly similar culture of domination across a range of mutually distant locations, hinging upon an idiosyncratic combination of violence and intimacy.
2. The immanent brutality and ruthlessness of global commodities, which rupture the boundaries of the different colonial styles and 'culture areas.' Perhaps we can consider these two apparently contradictory tendencies as two influences that work to mediate each other.

9 See the recent work of sociologists Jessé Souza and José Mauricio Domingues.

by W. Du Bois and later Paul Gilroy. On the one hand, modernity at whatever stage has always created the conditions for identity formation – and the redefinition of past allegiances. On the other hand, we have to be careful about using contemporary interpretations of identity formation when analyzing past forms. Identities before the birth of identity (Hobsbawm 1997) and its canonization in the social sciences (Brubaker and Cooper 2000) were often voiced in very different ways: as ‘culture,’ ‘race,’ *campesino* instead of *índio*, African instead of black or *negro*.

My emphasis on the locality of identity formation does not, of course, undermine the fact that obvious similarities, continuities and exchanges in black versus white identity formation can be detected throughout the Atlantic World. Anti-national notions such as the Atlantic World (System), the African or Black Diaspora and more recently – and more accurately – the Black Atlantic have provided a method for reading antiracism and the struggle for emancipation as a transnational rather than national phenomenon, one that communicates across nations, colour lines and classes. As a method, however, the Black Atlantic is often presented in rather unilateral fashion, as a unique solution or as the sole source or method for explaining transnational similarities. My own belief is that the theme of the Black Atlantic works hand in glove with other factors and is often intertwined with other powerful collective representations and systems of memory. In the case of the Bahian Recôncavo, the influence of the Black Atlantic is mixed with the following:

1. The Portuguese colonial style and the transnational networks it created;
2. Catholicism, in its high-brow and popular versions, which produced a special Brazilian version of Baroque Catholicism – with a special emphasis on images as icons of both holiness and humanity, as opposed to what could be called the cult of the written word, which expanded with Bible-centred Protestantism;
3. The melodic tradition in music, which in Brazil is combined with what is generally considered to be the African influence on music making (percussion, along with call and response singing, have often been seen as key elements of ‘Africanism’ in music: see Lomax 1970);
4. The economies, labour relations and cultures enabled by the existence of global commodities – sugar and later oil. Each of these commodities developed through a certain ruthlessness in relation to ‘local’ cultures and

- mores by introducing global standards of quality, taste (in the case of sugar), price and technology.
5. Last but not least we can note the universal experience and culture engendered by both the working class and upper class conditions. In other words, the culture of the elites – on the sugar plantations, for example – displayed a series of common traits (e.g. how to dress and talk, what to read, how to treat slaves and servants, politeness, attitudes towards technology and manual skills) right from the very inception of the global sugar cane and alcohol circuits. Likewise slaves and, after abolition, free labourers in the fields and mills responded to the challenges of their working conditions in ways that have always been extraordinarily universal – suggesting that the proletarian condition can indeed produce a culture of work or waged labour that tends towards the universal.

The main contention of my paper is that identity formation processes are neither a-historical, nor inherently translocal (Handler 1994), even when they are subjected to the cultural hegemony of a global commodity such as sugar and oil. We have to be cautious about adopting the viewpoint of the Black Atlantic at all times, under all circumstances and very often as the only method for explaining or even merely referring to traits in popular culture among people of (part) African descent in the Americas. In fact, although identities – even those relating to the ‘great identities’ or transnational ethnic projects<sup>10</sup> – use icons that have always been translocal, such as Africa, or black and white, they are often related to specific localities and contexts. Even if we consider only those parts of the world where living conditions have long been dictated by the economics of global commodities like sugar and oil, there is NO international identity game with universally valid rules. The making of identities, especially the ‘great identities,’ always involves a transition between the global and the local, as well as between popular and high-brow uses of indigenous categories, or the native and the analytical.

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<sup>10</sup> I take this expression from the French Anthropology Michel Agier (2001) who speaks of the major ethnic projects, the ones that seem to benefit most from the forces of globalization. Not all ethnic projects benefit from the process, only those that are somehow exportable, because they are not inherently related to one specific territory, for example, through a genealogical system.

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