

Afrodiasporic Solidarity vs. Eugenics, Nationalism, and Social Policy in Brazil

Gracyelle Costa Ferreira

IN 2020, DURING the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, former Brazilian president Jair Messias Bolsonaro made several controversial statements about the virus and took considerably disputed action during an unprecedented time. He was staunchly against quarantine, face masks, and vaccinations, even stating that only the elderly, ill, and “weak” people needed to be concerned about the virus. In one interview, Bolsonaro remarked, “Some will die, sorry, that’s life.” Indeed, nearly 700,000 people died in Brazil, with Black Brazilians disproportionately affected, a disparity that reveals practices implemented under Bolsonaro’s government, similar to eugenics, as noted by Robert Wegner and Vanderlei Sebastião in “Eugenia, Biopoder e Políticas da Morte em Tempos de Pandemia” (2020) and in my article “The Captain’s Social Policy” (2024).

In the face of government neglect, Black people in favelas organized self-managed initiatives to protect against the virus. Sonia Fleury and Palloma Menezes in their article, “Pandemia nas favelas: entre carências e potências” (2022), and Ana Carolina Assumpção in her article, “Black Women Who Move Mountains: Responding to Crisis in Rio de Janeiro’s Complexo do Alemão” (2022), discuss how actions involving food donations, family support, mitigation of virus transmission, distribution of cleaning supplies, medical consultations, and educational initiatives on virus prevention were commonly carried out by collectives, associations, and social movements within the favelas in Brazil, such as those in Rio de Janeiro, including the neighborhoods of Maré, Rocinha, and Cidade de Deus.

In the Americas, Black workers have built their collective practices of solidarity and protection since the beginning of the African diaspora.

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These Afro-diasporic expressions of mutual care include quilombos, Afro-religions, funds for the purchase of manumission, Catholic Black brotherhoods, and so on. These forms of self-care present during the colonial period took on new forms in the twentieth century, such as trade unions, clubs, Afro-Brazilian religious practices, associations, and others.

The present-day contrast between the actions of the state and those carried out by the Black community is not new. At the beginning of the twentieth century, this contrast was also evident in the social policies institutionalized by the Brazilian state and the Afro-Brazilian response to them. As in other countries, workers in Brazil developed their own forms of labor organization—in societies and later in trade unions, as well as mutual aid initiatives to protect themselves during strikes and in cases of illness. Sometimes, this effort was led by Black workers, such as the dockworkers at the Port of Rio de Janeiro. The port, railway, and maritime sectors were marked by unionization and other forms of collective action, establishing important precedents of self-determination. These were the first groups in the twentieth century with a significant Black presence to have social protection (albeit limited) regulated and institutionalized by the state.

The social policies enacted by the state, as we will see, did not have the same objectives as the initiatives of Black workers. The institutionalized social policies, for health care, nutrition, social assistance for families, and others, were strongly influenced by eugenics. Social policies are understood here as institutions, services, and programs established through social and labor legislation aimed at the working class. These social policies were also influenced by racist, sexist, and ableist conceptions, such as eugenics.

Francis Galton (1822–1911) created the notion of eugenics. Eugenics is often immediately associated with the practices of Nazi Germany during the Holocaust or those developed in the United States, as exemplified by the Buck vs. Bell case in 1927, but these examples limit the definition of eugenics. These experiences shocked the world by explicitly implementing mass compulsory sterilization policies targeting Jews, Romani people, Black people, people with disabilities, and other

groups considered “undesirable” in genetic and social terms, but implicit eugenic policies and practices have been overlooked. By instrumentalizing science and politics, Brazilian eugenics policies sought to “perfect” humans by accelerating their “evolution” through the hereditary transmission of “desirable” characteristics. Essentially, white

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people without disabilities would be considered the only representatives of desired humanity.

Conceptualizing eugenics is a challenging task, but one indisputable fact remains: eugenics is based on the racist, classist, and ableist idea of hierarchizing human beings as superior or inferior. Nancy Stepan and Pietra Diwan note in their books, *A hora da eugenia: raça, gênero e nação na América Latina* (2005) and *Raça pura: uma história da eugenia no Brasil e no mundo* (2022), respectively, that these notions often justify biological, genetic and social interventions aimed at “improving,” stimulating, or limiting the reproduction of groups or individuals deemed as “fit,” “unfit,” or with “undesirable” characteristics, and are associated with institutional forms of discrimination and inequality.

Eugenics manifests itself in different forms. It can be categorized into at least three types: positive, negative, and preventive eugenics. Positive eugenics encouraged the reproduction of “fit” groups; negative eugenics was dedicated to reducing or stopping the reproduction of the “unfit” to prevent the hereditary transmission of “undesirable” characters. As Weber Góes remarks in his 2018 book, *Racismo e eugenia no pensamento conservador brasileiro*, both positive and negative eugenics were influenced by the genetic theories of Gregor Mendel (1822–1884) and Jean-Baptiste Lamarck (1744–1829), which highlight the ability to pass down characteristics acquired by an organism during its lifetime (2018).

Preventive eugenics is based on the premise of French neo-Lamarckism, a school of thought popular in the early twentieth century, which reinterpreted Lamarck’s ideas. This form of eugenics was concerned with enhancing the population in the long term through social and environmental interventions that targeted different aspects of daily life. This reinterpretation offered Latin American eugenicists hope for the “improvement” of their populations in future generations. Although some instances of compulsory sterilization occurred, as Diwan and Munareto note in “Desafiando conceitos rígidos” (2024), this was not the predominant form of eugenics in Latin America (Stepan, 2005).

In Brazil, during the early twentieth century, eugenicists focused on the gradual “improvement” of the population through public initiatives such as motherhood campaigns, education to promote rational nutrition and dietary practices, and public hygienics that followed scientific standards circulated in eugenics intellectual circles. Though these standards (influenced by neo-Lamarckian principles) informed policies on education, child-rearing and dietary practices, social legislation, hygienics, sexual education, and moral behavior, they disregarded and delegitimized the cultural, religious, and historical practices of Afro-indigenous communities across Brazil.

Historical documents from Brazilian and US archives, such as the Arquivo Nacional, Biblioteca Nacional, and the Rockefeller Archive

Center, show the influence of eugenics on social policies related to rational nutrition and dietary practices, specifically those implemented by SAPS (Serviço de Alimentação da Previdência Social), which operated from 1940 to 1967 and focused on workers and their families in Brazil, including dockworkers at the Port of Rio de Janeiro.

Eugenics and Social Policies in Brazil

Brazil was the last country in the Americas to abolish slavery, yet it established its first Eugenic Society in Latin America with the Sociedade Eugênica de São Paulo, founded in 1918 by Renato Kehl, a prominent physician and advocate of eugenics. This society, much like the Liga Brasileira de Higiene Mental, established in 1923, and the Comissão Central de Eugenia, founded in 1931, was primarily composed of lawyers, physicians, and psychiatrists who worked diligently across various sectors, including healthcare systems, social security, public mental health institutions, maternity and childcare assistance programs, and judicial institutions.

As in other Latin American countries, Brazil's elites promoted a national identity based on racial mixing of the Black, Indigenous, and white races. Gilberto Freyre in *Casa-Grande e Senzala* (1936) was a preeminent intellectual who defended this premise. His "culturalism" suggested "racial harmony"—a "racial democracy" through "mestizaje"—claiming that compared to United States there was no racism in Brazil. However, in practice, the mestizaje in Brazil meant assimilating non-white groups into "whiteness." Marcelo Paixão in his work *A lenda da modernidade encantada* (2014) notes that Freyre's "cultural-

His "culturalism" suggested "racial harmony"—a "racial democracy" through "mestizaje"—claiming that compared to United States there was no racism in Brazil. However, in practice, the mestizaje in Brazil meant assimilating non-white groups into "whiteness."

ism" was a tool for the eugenic project, since the mestizo was understood as a transitional figure toward the ideal of whiteness, achieved through cultivated appearance and behavior.

This racial discourse significantly influenced the policies of President Getúlio Vargas, who, during his first term in the 1930s, led an authoritarian administration that was cunning in its understanding of the complex relationship between class and race in Brazil. Positioning itself as a representative of all classes and races, the government aimed to address social issues while preserving existing hierarchies. To this end, it combined a discourse

of “racial harmony,” inspired by Gilberto Freyre, with authoritarian control and repression, targeting workers and their families with social policy.

During the 1930s and 1940s, the state promoted European immigration while restricting groups deemed “racially incompatible,” such as Africans, and implemented social and labor reforms to construct the “Brazilian worker.” The 1934 and 1937 Constitutions (Art. 121, § 6; Art. 151) expressed eugenic and racial principles, limiting the percentage of immigrants allowed to enter the country annually, influenced by figures like Oliveira Vianna and eugenicist Renato Kehl (Stepan, 2005). The focus was on motherhood, childhood, and the family; the work of the Legião Brasileira de Assistência (LBA) and, in some way, also that of the Serviço de Alimentação da Previdência Social (SAPS) reflects these eugenic influences.

As Marcelo Paixão argues in “A lenda da modernidade encantada: por uma crítica ao pensamento social brasileiro sobre relações raciais e projeto de Estado-Nação” (2014), national identity in Brazil could have some Afro or Indigenous elements, but should predominantly be white. The state used the working-class laborer as its chosen figure to propagate this ideal. This worker was expected to have a family, refrain from alcohol consumption (a “racial poison”), follow a rational diet, engage in cultural activities—preferably those provided by the state—and exhibit exemplary behavior.

The popularity of eugenics, especially preventive eugenics, among Brazilian intellectuals, doctors, and jurists manifested itself in the social and labor legislations established by the Brazilian state in the first half of the twentieth century, which specifically targeted workers from the transportation sector. Railway workers, maritime workers, and port workers were among the first to access the country’s pioneering institutional social policies through the Eloy Chaves Law (1923–1926). This law established CAPS—Caixas de Aposentadorias e Pensões Retirement and Pension Funds for these three groups of workers. CAPS were funds that provided social insurance, including pensions, retirement benefits, and healthcare to workers and their families. Workers, employers, and the state contributed to these funds.

As Angela de Castro Gomes explains in “A Invenção do Trabalhismo” (1988), alongside repression, social

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rights and social policy under the Vargas government were fundamental in consolidating an ideological conception of a modern Brazil and in attempting to discipline the Brazilian worker. In 1933, President Getúlio Vargas expanded the social security system of CAPS by establishing the *Institutos de Aposentadoria e Pensão* (IAPS), or Retirement and Pension Institutes, thereby extending these services to a broader range of workers. Similar to CAPS, the IAPS funds were financed through mandatory contributions from private employers, the state, and workers, with a portion reinvested into benefits and services to workers and their families. However, in the new program, the state took on a more prominent role, both in funding and in directly managing these funds and service provisions.

The project of racial “improvement” of the Brazilian people was pursued through labor and social policies aimed at guiding the poor, working (and Black) population on health, hygiene, sexual education (including advising pre-marital exams to prevent the transmission of diseases), alcohol prevention, household care, notions of motherhood and child-rearing, and rational nutrition—all following scientific guidelines inspired by preventive eugenics.

One of the services funded by CAPS and IAPS resources was SAPS—*Serviço de Alimentação da Previdência Social* (Social Security Food Service); it was one of the main services the state used to disseminate resources that promoted the “rational” nutrition of Brazilian workers. It operated in Brazil’s Black workplaces, households, and communities with one driven mission.

SAPS

President Getúlio Vargas created the *Serviço de Alimentação da Previdência Social* in 1940 in Rio de Janeiro, the former capital of Brazil. The initiative was designed to provide meals for workers and their families at low prices, with several units across the country, including a central restaurant in downtown Rio that served meals daily. In 1948, a SAPS unit was also inaugurated in *Pequena África*, the heart of Black workers and culture in Rio. From 1940 to 1967, SAPS units expanded nationwide, becoming an essential part of Brazil’s welfare system during a period marked by widespread hunger.

Marcela Fogagnoli, in “O SAPS e a boa alimentação” (2011), explains how SAPS provided workers and their families with access to affordable food through meals offered in restaurants and subsistence stations, which sold fresh produce. To complement these two main fronts, SAPS offered services such as an economical nutrition consultation office, canteens, school breakfasts for children, education, a cinema, a record library, food assistance, a reading room, a music room, clubs, sewing

courses (for workers' daughters), job placement, social assistance, and a division of home visitors. For children, SAPS organized activities like the 4-H (Head, Heart, Hands and Health) program in the United States, known in Brazil as 4-E ("Espírito, Educação, Esforço, Êxito"). Professionals such as dietitian-nutritionists, home visitors, nutritionists, and social workers were all part of SAPS's team.

In another article by Fogagnoli, along with work by Marlene Cidrack, we learn that SAPS was part of a broader set of public initiatives influenced by preventive eugenics (Fogagnoli, "Almoçar bem é no SAPS!": os trabalhadores e o Serviço de Alimentação da Previdência Social (1940–1950)," 2010; Cidrack, "Escola Agnes June Leith: formação e práticas curriculares de visitadoras de alimentação (1944–1966)," 2010). This influence was institutionalized through key legislation, such as Decree-Law 3709 (1941), which stipulated that SAPS should promote rational nutrition within the workplace, publicize the influence of nutrition on the improvement of the nation's race, and educate workers' families about the detrimental effects of the then-prevalent dietary practices.

Nutrition, therefore, served as both a means to enhance "the race" and to boost worker productivity, a national priority in a country striving for economic development. As a result, SAPS was not solely focused on addressing hunger. It also intended to guide the population's behavior



Workers Dining at SAPS, Primary Source: Arquivo Nacional, Brazil. Access
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and reinforce racial and social norms, particularly those associated with the standards of whiteness, which were viewed as the ideal for national progress otherwise impossible via preventive eugenics.

It is no coincidence that, in the 1930s and 1940s, initiatives like SAPS explicitly engaged with preventive eugenics. The Brazilian Federal Constitution of 1934, under Getúlio Vargas, stated in Article 138 that “it is the responsibility of the Union, States, and Municipalities, according to their respective laws . . . to promote **eugenic** education.”

The official SAPS bulletin circulated explicit references to eugenics. The *Boletim SAPS* (1944–1950) was a periodical focused on providing workers with updates on the service in general, nutrition tips, and scientific articles on the subject. Distributed free of charge, it was produced by a team of specialists, including physician-nutritionists, nutritionists, and social welfare experts. One of its notable columns, titled “Noções de Alimentação,” or “Notions of Alimentation,” was written by João José Barbosa, a technical nutritionist at SAPS. Barbosa, who was also a professor of Child Nutrition and Infant Dietetics at a public institution in Rio de Janeiro, likely taught the SAPS Nutritionists course. He explained:

The poorly nourished individual does not die from this cause, but something far worse happens to them: from being a man, they become a sub-man; poorly nourished races degenerate into sub-races. [. . .] History is full of examples of decadent or stagnant racial groups that, upon migrating to new lands, acquired the characteristics of great peoples that had once distinguished them. The revitalization of certain European peoples, particularly Iberians and Italians, in the lands of America is a good example of this. In well-constituted races, on the other hand, the number of offspring is generally small, because the survival of these few is practically guaranteed by a high standard of living in general and dietary standards in particular. **Thus, we have just observed the principal aspect of the importance of nutrition from a socio-eugenic point of view.** From a biological perspective, it is important to remember that alimentation is the only act that our organism demands daily and intensely throughout life. In fact, the refusal of food almost always constitutes the first symptom of illness, both in adults and, especially, in children (*Boletim Mensal do SAPS*. Ano 1. Número 1, Novembro de 1944, p.7–26. My emphasis).

The author explicitly uses the term “social-eugenic” to reveal the influence of the eugenic conceptions regarding the role of food in race, national identity, and progress in the first half of the twentieth century. This SAPS technical report illustrates how science and the state were engaged in the improvement of environmental factors, such as nutrition, as part of the project of nation. At that time, eugenics was considered the most advanced expression of science.

Scientific community, such as hygiene physicians, engineers, lawyers, nutrologists, and pharmacists and judges were mobilized to implement eugenics-based policies in nutrition, as well as wage public health campaigns, institute housing programs, shape immigration, and more. The traditional knowledge of Black and Indigenous populations regarding nutrition, health, and caregiving practices has historically been discredited and viewed as backward by the state-sponsored scientific community.

João José Barbosa discusses the biological role of alimentation in keeping human beings alive. When Barbosa further explains the “social-eugenic” role of alimentation, he ties it to racial improvement by emphasizing the importance of living conditions and dietary standards



SAPS Girls' Sewing Club. Rio de Janeiro, 1949. AIA Photograph Collection. 1949. Series 2, Brazil. SAPS Administration. Rockefeller Archive Center.

for “efficient” reproduction. In other words, he highlights the interplay between the social and the biological.

SAPS operated within the framework of Brazil’s racial policies, including the ongoing project of racial whitening. This was evident in the initiatives like the 4-E clubs, which taught practices related to food, hygiene, etiquette, and childcare. These clubs were designed to teach the best use of food, hygiene practices, table manners, childcare, and even courses like handicrafts and sewing, inspired by Eurocentric conceptions of the ideal household, to children, adolescents, and housewives.

This intersection between the theory and practice of eugenics is directly reflected in the work of the home visitors.

Home visitors, who worked alongside nutritionists, visited workers’ neighborhoods and homes served by SAPS, including those in favelas where Black people were and continue to be the majority. They provided families with practical guidance on aspects of daily life, including rational nutrition, food selection, health, hygiene, childcare, cooking, sewing, and gardening. The primary focus of home visitors was educating workers’ spouses, with the aim of enhancing their knowledge in



Miss Virginia Ortiz, nutritionist in Rio, and Mrs. Eunice Peregrino, head of Division of Home Visitors of SAPS. Rio de Janeiro, 1949. AIA Photograph Collection. 1949. Series 2, Brazil. SAPS Administration. Rockefeller Archive Center.

areas like motherhood, childcare, and food preparation. All of these activities were supervised by the Division of Home Visitors of SAPS.

In 1945, the head of the SAPS Technical Section, Dr. Luís de Brito, published an article in the SAPS Bulletin titled “Nutrition of Workers in the Rocha Neighborhood: Results of a Survey Conducted by SAPS.” The survey with the families was not conducted in a single visit, but in at least three, to gain the trust of the interviewees, most of whom were women. To conduct surveys, home visitors would go to the workers’ homes and collect information such as name, nationality, age, profession, workplace (of the housewife and the “head of the family”), number of children, and the racial background of the individuals.

These visits took place in different neighborhoods of Rio de Janeiro, such as São Cristóvão, Rio Comprido, and Rocha, which was designated as a working-class neighborhood. In the Rocha neighborhood, for example, more than 400 families were interviewed. During the



SAPS Home Visitor, 1945. “The work of the visiting agent, whose merit is enhanced by its purposes and its effects on the formation of a healthy population, is commendable. Much of the success of the efforts carried out by SAPS is owed to these workers dedicated to promoting proper nutrition.” Primary source: Boletim do SAPS, 1945. Biblioteca Nacional.

interviews, the visitors also had the opportunity to propose strategies for the rational and economical nutrition to the families. SAPS was concerned with mapping the economic, hygienic, housing, and nutritional conditions of the family.

The portrait above supported analyses such as those by Luís de Brito, who positioned SAPS's work as part of a national project:

The nutrition of communities is indeed a major social issue, as it is linked not only to individual interests but also to national expression. Among the issues related to the individual are healthy balance, work capacity, and resistance to fatigue, which impact productivity levels, both quantitatively and qualitatively, in addition to the genetic influence of nutrition. As for its national scope, of great collective significance, it is clearly defined by the crucial role nutrition plays in strengthening racial type, in preparing a strong population, knowing that underfed communities are inferiorized and march towards their complete annihilation. (*Boletim Mensal do SAPS*. Ano 1. Número 10, Agosto de 1945, p.4. Free translation.)

As documented in the *Boletim do SAPS*, the partnership between Brazil and the United States led to many SAPS professionals receiving scholarships for research and internships in the United States, particularly during World War II. Because of this, SAPS was significantly influenced by US institutions such as the American International Association for Social and Economic Development (AIA) and the Coordination of Inter-American Affairs (CIAA). Established in 1940, the

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AIA was a private organization focused on promoting economic and social development in peripheral countries in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. Its activities spanned areas such as health, education, and agriculture. The AIA was dissolved in 1944 and replaced by the CIAA, which focused on fostering economic, scientific, and security collaboration between the countries of the Americas. Nelson Rockefeller, a key figure in the Rockefeller Foundation during the 1930s and 1940s, also

served as the director of the AIA and as coordinator of the CIAA. The agency maintained its relationship with SAPS even after Vargas' presidency (Claiton Silva and Rômulo Andrade, "O SAPS e a cooperação técnica entre Brasil e Estados Unidos (1945–1950)," 2022).

In 1945, AIA provided \$100,000 to SAPS. These funds helped establish the School of Home Visitation Service, based on the "Home Economics Extension Service," known as Home Demonstration. Home Demonstration was created in 1914 by the U.S. government to provide practical guidance to families in the U.S. Home Demonstration agents offered instructions, particularly to women, on subjects like nutrition, childcare, dietetics, social work, hygiene, cooking, sewing, and gardening, emphasizing rational methods for promoting health and well-being, and included the 4-H clubs.

Home Demonstration was inspired by Home Economics. In fact, it was a kind of practical model to apply the Home Economics method, which was created at the end of the nineteenth century by Ellen Richards, an American chemist (the first woman to attend the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)). According to Danielle Dreillinger in her book, *The Secret History of Home Economics* (2021), Ellen Richards did not condemn eugenics. In fact, she proposed her own interpretation to improve humanity through home economics in the present, not just in the future.

Richards called this approach "euthenics." Brazilian eugenicist Renato Kehl proposed the same term "eutenia" (euthenics) to define practices akin to preventive eugenics. In the preface of Richards book published in 1910, *Euthenics: The Science of Controllable Environment*, she states: "Eugenics is the hygiene for the future generation. Euthenics is hygiene for the present generation. Euthenics precedes eugenics, developing better men now, and thus inevitably creating a better race of men in the future."

Home Demonstration techniques, inspired by Home Economics, were crucial for SAPS to develop a Home Visitation protocol focused on nutrition, hygiene, and childcare orientation. Studies by José Bezerra ("O processo de gênese do saber em alimentação e nutrição: emergência, divulgação e aplicação social," 2009) and Marlene Cidrack (2010) consequently point out that the orders and instructions given by home visitors in Brazil were based on concepts of childcare, hygiene, and eugenics learned during their training courses.

Eugenics influenced various fields of knowledge in Brazil, including medicine, nursing, social work, and nutrition. SAPS may have had its own training courses for

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John Benjamin Griffing, president of AIA in Brazil; James G. Maddox, assistant director of AIA (NY), Miss Virginia Ortiz, nutritionist in Rio, and Mrs. Eunice Peregrino, head of Division of Home Visitors of SAPS. At left, Miss Rocilda Pimentel a SAPS' professional. Rio de Janeiro, 1949. Primary source: AIA Photograph Collection. 1949. Series 2, Brazil. SAPS Administration. Rockefeller Archive Center.

home visitors and nutritionists, but it was not the only institution in Rio de Janeiro offering such programs.

Pacita Aperibense's research, "A Escola Anna Nery e a formação de enfermeiras, assistentes sociais e nutricionistas na Universidade do Brasil nos anos 30/40 do século XX" (2009), explains that in 1921, the Rockefeller Foundation supported the establishment of a nursing school in Rio de Janeiro. The Escola de Enfermeiras do Departamento Nacional de Saúde Pública was created within the broader context of the Brazilian public health movement, which was heavily influenced by hygiene reforms. In 1923, it was renamed the Escola de Enfermeiras D. Anna Nery. In 1937, Carlota de Queiroz, a physician and the first woman elected as a federal representative, played a key role

in integrating the Anna Nery Nursing School into the Universidade do Brasil (now the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro), which was responsible for both the Nursing and Social Work programs. Years later, in 1948, the nutrition course was integrated into Anna Nery. Josué de Castro, who had implemented the nutrition course at SAPS, was invited to become the first director of the Nutrition program at Universidade do Brasil, then the country's first federal university.

In 1967, following the dissolution of SAPS, professional nutritionist training continued under the Ministry of Education. By 1962, this evolved into higher education, eventually leading to the establishment of the modern School of Nutrition at UniRio (Universidade Federal do Estado do Rio de Janeiro) in 1979.

Indeed, through articles from the *Boletim do SAPS* and other sources, it was possible to identify that some of the authors, such as João José Barbosa and José Paranhos Fontenelle, also taught at institutions like the Escola Técnica de Assistência Social Cecy Dodsworth. Barbosa wrote “Noções de Alimentação” and other articles in the *Boletim do SAPS*, making recurring references to eugenics. Fontenelle taught Hygiene at Cecy Dodsworth and published *Compêndios de Higiene* in 1918. In its second edition, released in 1925, he incorporated discussions on eugenics.

Founded in 1944, in Rio, this school trained nutritionists and social workers under the Secretary of Health and Welfare. Initiated by Clementino Fraga, an important physician in the field of public health, who was part of the eugenics movement in Brazil, the Escola Técnica Cecy Dodsworth aimed to shape social welfare according to eugenic principles, as recorded by one of its first social workers, Maria Esolina Pinheiro (1985).

These fields of knowledge, closely linked to health, were profoundly influenced by medicine, particularly social medicine. Nutritionists, social workers, and nurses were often seen as assistants to physicians, and all three professions were predominantly composed of women, many of whom were white and from the middle class. Initially, social visitors or home visitors were few, but over time, they were either trained or replaced by higher-educated professionals. These roles played a key part in shaping social policies and welfare related to care, food, and housing, which were heavily influenced by the eugenic ideologies of the era.

The influence of eugenics around SAPS remained after Vargas was removed from office. Number 53 of the *Boletim Mensal do SAPS*, published in October, 1950, documents that the Director of SAPS, a military man, Gen. Humberto Peregrino, spoke to workers

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on the inauguration of a popular restaurant in Goiânia, a city in the state of Goiás: "I can assure you that very few are the administrators who understand the social, economic, and eugenic reach of the SAPS work and are interested in obtaining its benefits for the administrative field where they work." In other words, while some scholars believed that eugenics had come to an end, the eugenic influence remained strong before and after Getúlio Vargas, during and after the Second World War.

During this period, the Black population in Brazil grappled with racism in a society that often regarded them as mere transitional figures. In response, Black Brazilians sought to assert their identity and survive through social clubs in favelas, samba schools, and religious

practices such as *candomblé* and *Calundus*. These social practices remain crucial in understanding Black communities' resistance against the state's policies—which constantly demanded their erasure with the gradual whitening of the Brazilian population—and the autonomy of those communities, which was maintained in face of that threat.

Black Workers and Self-Protection in the Early Twentieth Century

The collective forms of organization, based on mutual care and support, contributed to the reconstruction of Black identities, furthering the concept of "Amefricanidade" as articulated by Lélia Gonzalez ("Primavera para rosas negras: Lélia Gonzalez em primeira pessoa", 2018). Examples of mutual care from before emancipation include Black confraternities, quilombos, funds for purchasing freedom, *esusus*, *zungus*, collective housing, Afro-Brazilian religious practices, and extended families beyond blood relations.

In Rio de Janeiro, the port area is known as the most significant site associated with the arrival of enslaved Africans to the Americas, earning it the name *Pequena África* (Little Africa). In 2017, the Cais do Valongo was recognized as a World Cultural Heritage site by UNESCO. In the nineteenth century, Black port workers in Rio, both free and enslaved, were primarily from ethnic groups such as the Bantus, Minas, and Nagôs from Bahia, the latter being of Yoruba descent. The Minas were known for their collective funds, which included money for

purchasing manumissions. These funds resembled the *esusu* system from Niger, a type of economic cooperative or savings club that occurs in the African diaspora under various names, such as the Rotating Savings and Credit Association, as noted by William Bascom in his article “The Esusu: A Credit Institution of the Yoruba” (1952).

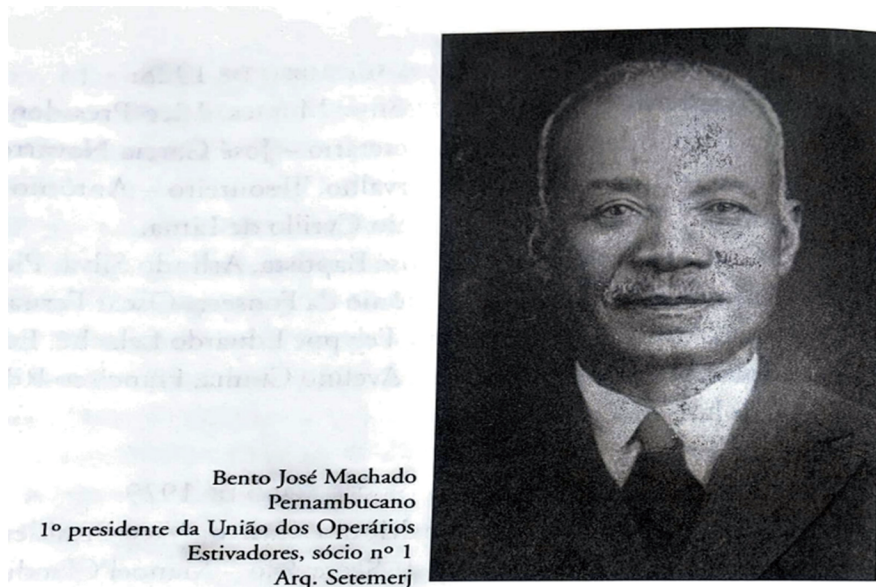
These cultural and economic practices also found expression in the Black confraternities which provided spaces for celebration, care, and honoring the deceased. Many Black port workers in Rio were members of these confraternities, which also sometimes collected funds for manumission. Despite the Catholic church’s encouragement of devotion to Black saints, this was more than mere “syncretism”; it was a subversion of Catholicism into Afro-Catholicism. Furthermore, the Rio’s port area also hosted Zungus, which were collective spaces led by Black women for living, eating, and celebrating, inspired by Afro-Brazilian traditions.

In “Tradições negras na formação de um sindicato” (2000), Maria Cecília Velasco e Cruz asserts that these forms of organization were fundamental in laying the foundation for the emergence of collective worker movements in the early twentieth century, specifically in the port area of Rio. As she explains, professions such as railway workers, maritime workers, and port workers had long been associated with the Black population in Brazil, even before emancipation in 1888, and these Black workers were deeply embedded in Afro-diasporic networks.

Black workers in Rio not only contributed to unions but also took on leadership roles, particularly during strikes. Black port workers and stevedores, for example, were key figures in unions like the União dos Operários Estivadores, founded in 1903, and the Sociedade de Resistência dos Trabalhadores em Trapiche e Café, founded in 1905. These unions were not exclusively Black but were marked by significant Black leadership, which led to tense negotiations with employers, based on racism, according to Kit McPhee in “Um novo 13 de Maio” (2014).

Trade unions played a crucial role, as Luiz Almeida shows in *Estivadores do Rio de Janeiro* (2003), with union funds supporting housing for workers and fostering cultural aggregation, such as with Rio’s port workers around samba and religion. The life of dockworker Mano Elói (1888–1971) is an example of the connection between unionized Black workers, samba, and Afro-Brazilian religiosity. Elói, a prominent figure in Rio’s port and samba scenes was simultaneously associated with the port union Sociedade de Resistência dos Trabalhadores em Trapiche

Furthermore, the Rio’s port area also hosted Zungus, which were collective spaces led by Black women for living, eating, and celebrating, inspired by Afro-Brazilian traditions.



First President of the Union of União dos Operários Estivadores (1903). Almeida (2003).

e Café from 1910. He was also an ogã, a significant role in Candomblé rituals. Elói practiced *jongo*, a cultural dance manifestation with roots in Black Brazilian communities, with Bantu-inspired elements.

Like many Rio port workers, Elói lived in Morro da Serrinha, a favela in the northern zone of Rio. In 1947, Mano Elói and a group of Black port workers, along with samba artists such as Aniceto de Menezes e Silva Junior, known as “Aniceto do Império,” Silas de Oliveira, Sebastião de Oliveira (“Sebastião Molequinho”), and João de Oliveira (“João Gradim”), founded the Escola de Samba Império Serrano in Serrinha, a prominent Carnival institution that continues to thrive today. In 2001, Império Serrano honored the Sindicato da Resistência. Arrantes (2015) notably highlights the significant similarities between the statutes of carnival associations and those governing workers’ unions, for example, those statutes that addressed collective organization and solidarity, organizational structure, commitment with the group, collective identity etc.

Carnival and samba are among many expressions of Afrodiasporic solidarity in Rio. Through music, the living conditions of the Black population were denounced, but also other possibilities of life were and are sung and celebrated. These practices, including communal systems of care and Afro-Brazilian religious practices, confronted state efforts to undermine the long-term survival of Black communities. They also expanded the concept of family beyond the nuclear model, which offered care and nourishment in times of hardship.

Historically, Black Brazilians have faced persistent state efforts to erase their racial identities and struggled with a society that often



Mano Elói (1888-1971): dock worker, ogã, and sambista.

viewed them as transitory figures. In the first half of the twentieth century, organized movements like the Frente Negra Brasileira (established in 1931) and the Teatro Experimental do Negro (founded in 1944 by Abdias Nascimento) emerged as powerful forces for racial equality, workers' rights, literacy, and political representation. However, these movements faced severe repression under Getúlio Vargas's dictatorship (1937–1945).

As Magali da Silva Almeida explains in “Desumanização da população negra: genocídio como princípio tácito do capitalismo” (2014), the state and its elites heavily repressed cultural and political movements that advocated for Black collective action and representation. This repression was connected to the construction of ideal worker model, as the state sought to eliminate forms of resistance that challenged its vision of a disciplined workforce. This idealized Brazilian worker was envisioned as disciplined, hygienic, and detached from leftist political ideologies, adhering to the rational and scientific standards of nutrition, healthcare, and welfare inspired by preventive eugenics that were prevalent at the time.

One of the most concrete examples of this conflict between the state's goals and the Afro-Brazilian community was the strategic placement of a SAPS restaurant in Pequena África—the port area of Rio de Janeiro, a place where zungus, samba, and Black worker organizations flourished. The state's presence, such as the placement of one of the SAPS restaurants, exemplifies the tension between what the Afro-Brazilian community had developed to survive and the state's imposed vision for their lives. The community's long-standing food practices, rooted in cultural traditions, clashed with the state-driven ideals of hygiene, discipline, and standardized nutrition. The presence of the federal initiative in this neighborhood represented a clash between what the population had developed to live and survive and the state's proposal for their lives.

The Struggle of the Black Community Remains Alive

With the largest Black population outside of Africa, Brazil has a collective responsibility to address racism and seek reparations. Yet, the Black population continues to suffer the repercussions of racism, as institutions—contaminated by the contemporary rise of the far right—persist in utilizing eugenic frameworks. In “Connecting Black Women's Stories of Survival and Struggle” (2022), Silva, Smith, Machicote, and I explore forms of eugenic discourse in Brazil in recent years. The impact of COVID-19 on the Black population is yet another chapter in this ongoing struggle.

Black collective forms of organization based on mutual care, including those efforts carried out in Rio's favelas during COVID-19, have contributed to understanding the resistance and autonomy of Black communities in Brazil. These forms of Afrodiasporic social protection remain fundamentally different from the state's institutionalized policies. They represent a broader struggle, not only for survival but for collective celebration of our existence. The expression of freedom and hope within the Black diaspora underscores its commitment to a future built horizontally and collectively, while continuously confronting an attempt at extermination based on racism. 🌐