




## Article

# Promises and Pitfalls of Intersectional Politics: The Black Coalition for Rights in Brazil

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**Abstract:** Based on evidence collected in a collaborative research project, this article studies the Black Coalition for Rights created in Brazil in 2019. Compared to previous experiences of antiracist struggles in Brazil, the Coalition stands out for its decentralized organization, its ability to convey political content through adequate aesthetic forms, its capillarity in the domestic sphere, and its transnational articulations. Equally striking is its intersectional character understood as both the emphasis on the transversal character of racism and the stress of the interdependent character of social struggles against different forms of inequalities (with regard to gender, race, class, etc.). The Coalition has so far proven to be particularly successful in terms of its mobilization capacity, its public visibility, and its agenda-setting power. According to our preliminary findings, its success can be explained, to a great extent, by its ability to vocalize a broad set of political claims and, consequently, to fill the gap left by other civil society actors demobilized by the far right-wing backlash in Brazil and the pandemic. Since January 2023, in the context of a new progressive government, the Coalition has started facing difficulties in preserving its intersectional and socially encompassing character.



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## 1. Introduction

Cleavages and divides within progressive forces at the level of domestic and transnational politics demonstrate that intersectional collaboration capable of articulating struggles for justice focusing on different issues (gender, race, class, etc.) is both a necessity and a challenge for contemporary politics. To discuss this more general question, we study, in this article, a concrete case: the *Coalizão Negra por Direitos*, the Black Coalition for Rights (hereafter Coalition), created in 2019 in Brazil to fight against racism and sexism, as well as for democracy and social justice. (see <https://coalizaonegrapordireitos.org.br/>, accessed on 25 October 2023).

This political alliance emerged from the realization among different social movements that only a broad coalition of movements and initiatives would be able to contain the advance of the far right, particularly after the election of Jair Bolsonaro in 2018. Thus, the Coalition represents a paradigmatic case of the effort to negotiate divergences and incommensurabilities (apparent or substantive) in favor of the common goal of resisting and opposing the far right's attempt to abolish the institutional and legal achievements of previous years, such as policies devoted to mitigating social inequalities, laws and public policies to promote gender and racial equality, protection of the rights of LGBTQI+ groups, etc. The Coalition is also emblematic for its ability to successfully combine aesthetics and politics in its struggles for justice. Equally relevant is the capacity of the Coalition to integrate within its struggle diverse fields of political action from grassroots collectives to the parliamentary field and from the state level to transnational spaces.

In this article, we are particularly interested in understanding the reasons for the success of the Coalition to mobilize different sectors of Brazilian civil society, to create visibility for its campaigns, and to influence the political agenda in Brazil.

In addition to seeking to study new experiences of intersectional collaboration, this article, based on a joint research project the three authors have started, represents an experience of intersectional collaboration integrating both scholarly, political, and personal competences and the experiences of scholars and public intellectuals who are located in different racial, gender, and institutional positions within the global geopolitics of knowledge production.

The article is organized in three main sections besides this introduction and the conclusions. Section 2, which follows this introduction, offers an overview on the vast available literature that discusses racism and antiracism in Brazil, and Section 3 is an attempt to briefly contextualize the Coalition in the history of antiracist and particularly Black activism in Brazil. Section 4 analyzes the factors which have contributed to the constitution of this intersectional alliance and what are the main risks and contemporary challenges for the Coalition to preserve its intersectional character. The conclusion summarizes the main arguments developed in the previous sections.

The article builds on documentary research including newspapers, websites, and documents disseminated by the Coalition, and a broad review of the pertinent literature carried out in collaboration among the three authors.

## 2. State of the Art: Scholarship on Racism and Antiracism in Brazil

Given the centrality of racism and antiracism in the constitution of the nation and in the struggles for justice in Brazil, discussions on this subject have been present in the country for a long time both in political debates and in the academic agenda at least since the end of the 19th century. Correspondingly, the theme has a constitutive importance for the Brazilian humanities and social sciences.

Although an adequate review of the vast bibliography on the topic would go beyond the scope of this article, we want to briefly characterize the main cycles in the academic production on racism and antiracism in Brazil in order to insert current debates in a broader context.

Apart from a few exceptions, such as the essayist and physician Manoel Bomfim (1904), who understood racism to be the product of colonial and imperialist interests, the discussions that took place in Brazil from the abolition of slavery in 1888 until the 1930s were dominated by the axioms of scientific racism imported from Europe. The question that articulated the debates at this time referred to a supposed dilemma: how to build a progressive nation in the tropics on the basis of indigenous and Black populations who occupy, according to these racist theories, lower positions in the biological hierarchy? The solutions diverged between stimulating European immigration, combining it with restrictions on miscegenation so that “pure” Europeans would lead the country’s development process on the one hand; on the other hand was promoting miscegenation, which could—due to the alleged biological superiority of “Caucasians”—transform Brazil in a country of whites within a few generations (Nina Rodrigues 1935; Oliveira Vianna [1923] 1933; Romero 1906).

From the 1930s onwards, the debate diversified, and scientific racism lost its influence in favor of a culturalist interpretation inspired by the work of the German–American anthropologist Franz Boas (1969). Boas’ influence is evident in the oeuvre of Freyre, who believed that racism would disappear if Afro descendants continued “amalgamating” with other groups to form a Mestizo nation (Freyre [1933] 2011). Equally present from the end of the 1930s was the influence of the Chicago School, especially through the work of Donald Pierson (1942) who sought to understand racial relations in Brazil—which were apparently harmonious—in contrast to the “racial dilemma” prevailing in the United States.

Also of enormous importance is the UNESCO Project that, between 1951 and 1952, promoted a broad study of race relations in different regions of Brazil, with the expectation that the country that celebrated its racial diversity could serve as a stimulus and example to

a world still traumatized by the supremacist hallucinations that had led to the outbreak of World War II (Maio 2000). Contrary to what was expected, however, the studies developed under the auspices of UNESCO showed a Brazil marked by strong social inequalities among different ethnic–racial groups and in which racism was (and is) strongly rooted in both institutions and daily relations. In the subsequent years, this line of studies was improved and deepened, with emphasis on the work of Florestan Fernandes, a sociologist from the University of São Paulo who—together with his students, among whom were key names of Brazilian sociology such as Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Octavio Ianni—researched in depth how the nexus between class and race has formed the Brazilian social structure (Fernandes 1965).

With the instauration and hardening of the military dictatorship (1964–1985), studies on racism and antiracism suffered a clear ebb, only recovering their vigor at the end of the 1980s. Since then, the agenda of issues discussed has diversified profoundly, reflecting the diversification of the antiracist struggles themselves. The interest of US-American scholars on racial relations in Brazil was and continues to be significant, so a considerable part of the available bibliography on the subject was written by researchers based in the United States, many of them being African-American scholars. This interest, associated with the presence of US-American philanthropic foundations as sponsors of Black organizations in Brazil, led Bourdieu and Wacquant (1999) to identify in this cooperation an imperialist deviation, causing social relations in Brazil characterized by the existence of a continuum of skin colors to be interpreted on the basis of the White–Black dual model found in the United States (for a critical reconstruction of this debate: Costa 2016).

There is today a considerable accumulation of both qualitative and quantitative studies on racism and antiracism in Brazil as well as comparative studies mostly between the United States and Brazil (for an overview: Barreto et al. 2021). These studies cover mainly issues related to:

- Social inequalities studied both from the perspective of social structure analysis and case studies on discrimination and racism in institutions and everyday life (i.e., Paixão 2013; Moraes Silva et al. 2021). Combining strictly academic research papers with policy briefs developed at universities, think tanks, and research institutes close to the Black movements, research on racism and social inequalities makes up one of the most productive and internationalized fields of contemporary Brazilian humanities and social sciences;
- Political organization of antiracist struggles involving studies on local organizations in different Brazilian cities as well as transnational alliances and networks. This is also a classical and outstanding field of Brazilian social sciences, including both studies of historical forms of organization of antiracist movements (e.g., Bastide [1952] 1972) and more contemporary mobilizations (e.g., Rodrigues 2020);
- Analysis of different formats of public policies and legislation to combat racism. Studies on policies for overcoming racism and discrimination against Blacks have broadly increased in different disciplines, particularly law, political science, pedagogy, economics, and sociology (e.g., Feres et al. 2018);
- Rearticulation of Quilombo communities, i.e., settlements originally formed by enslaved persons who managed to escape from slavery (see Gomes and Reis 2016). This field of studies has particularly expanded since the 1990s, when various (mostly rural) Black communities started taking advantage of the correspondent dispositive introduced in the Constitution of 1988, by applying for legal titles to the lands in which they had lived for generations in precarious legal situations. Additionally, international comparisons including research on rural Black communities in other Caribbean and Latin American countries are available (i.e., French Hoffman 2009; Costa 2022a; Gomes and Reis 2016; Rios and Maciel 2021);
- Reconstruction and recuperation of Black intellectual history. The consolidation of this field is more recent and includes both research on biographies of outstanding Black intellectuals and the critical assessment of the relevant (and usually ignored)

contributions of Black scholars for Brazilian humanities and social sciences (e.g., [Guimarães 2022](#); [Rios 2022](#)).

Given its recent creation, comprehensive studies on the Coalition have not yet been published. Accordingly, studies which start from the experiences of the Coalition for analyzing the challenges of establishing intersectional collaboration are not yet existent. With this article, we search to fill this gap.

### 3. Black Movements in Brazil

Brazil received about 4,864,000 of the 10,702,000 enslaved Africans who disembarked in the Americas and the Caribbean between the 16th Century and the 19th Century and in 1888 was the last country in the region to abolish slavery. The Afro-descendant population corresponds to 56% of the approximately 203 million people living in Brazil today ([Florentino 2014](#); [Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística 2023](#)).

The resistance to racial oppression dates back to rebellions and the first Quilombos established in the 17th century. In and after this period, forms of cooperation involving Quilombos and indigenous communities, white workers, or freedmen emerged ([Arruti 2006](#); [French Hoffman 2009](#)). In the second half of the 19th century, political pressures made by a broad alliance, also including members of white and mestizo elites and international allies, led to the abolition of slavery. Social historians describe this abolitionist alliance as a transnational social movement *avant la lettre* ([Alonso 2021](#)).

Throughout the 20th century, different Black movements emerged. The most visible and long-lasting are the Brazilian Black Front (Frente Negra Brasileira, 1931–1937), the Black Experimental Theatre (Teatro Experimental do Negro, 1944–1968), and the contemporary Unified Black Movement (MNU), which was created in 1978 in the context of the struggles against the military dictatorship that lasted from 1964 until 1985 ([Guimarães 2022](#)). Since the 1980s, the antiracist struggles have enormously expanded and diversified, especially at three complementary levels:

- Transnationalization and pluralization: since the 1990s, Brazilian antiracist movements have increasingly cooperated with antiracist movements in other countries as well as with philanthropic and cooperation agencies (particularly the Ford Foundation) and international organizations (particularly agencies in the framework of the United Nations and the Organization of American States). Transnationalization of antiracist movements has gone hand in hand with pluralization of mobilization models as new repertoires of political incidence (digital activism, combination of research and activism, etc.), new alliances (e.g., Black women's organizations), and different forms of cultural engagement—such as hip hop and other afrodiasporic movements—have emerged ([Caldwell 2009](#); [Santos and Silva 2022](#));
- Institutionalization: between 1994 and 2016, the Brazilian state, at different levels of government, created various public agencies and policies for promoting racial equality and more visibility for Afro-Brazilian cultural repertoires. At the parliamentary and legal levels, important achievements are observed, particularly laws and judicial decisions reinforcing the expansion and consolidation of the rights of the Black population. Antiracist movements have also created new institutional formats including non-governmental organizations, and decentered collectives, among others ([Góngora Mera et al. 2019](#));
- Production and diffusion of antiracist knowledge: since 2003, thanks to quota policies and scholarship programs as well as relevant civil society initiatives such as training and mentoring programs, the percentage of Black university students has exponentially grown. Parallel to this, Black researchers created their own professional organizations and successfully established research institutes and some universities exclusively dedicated to critical race studies and Black cultures ([Gomes 2017](#); [Gomes 2021](#)).

### *The Black Coalition for Rights*

After the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff in 2016 and especially since 2019, when a far-right government led by Jair Bolsonaro came to power, the cycle of antiracist achievements has been disrupted, as public agencies and racial equality policies were dismantled (Rios 2021). The political losses suffered by the Black movement in the period between 2016 and 2022 are still visible. To fight against the conservative backlash, a group of 248 civil society organizations created the Black Coalition for Rights in 2019. The Coalition's manifesto of creation is signed by 197 "Black organizations" and 51 "partner organizations", although both groups also include—besides explicitly antiracist and Black organizations—feminist, anti-capitalist, environmental, cultural, and LGBTIQ+ movements as well as initiatives which articulate the interests of the inhabitants of peripheral urban areas, such as "A Rocinha Resiste" from the Favela Rocinha in the city of Rio de Janeiro or "Cooperifa-SP", which coordinates several cultural activities developed in the outskirts of the city of São Paulo (see [Coalizão Negra por Direitos 2019](#)).

Unlike the antiracist alliances that emerged in the 20th century, the Black Coalition does not have a formal organizational structure. It is based on the articulation of multiple decentered struggles. A rotating executive board ("secretaria operativa" in Portuguese) currently composed of 23 organizations searches to coordinate common activities: "This Coalition makes political incidence in our own name, based on the values of collaboration, ancestry, circularity, sharing of axé (inherited and transmitted vital force), orality, transparency, self-care, solidarity, collectivism, memory, recognition and respect for differences, horizontality and love" ([Coalizão Negra por Direitos 2019](#), our translation).

Although its main goal is to combat racism, especially against Black people, the Coalition seeks to address and make visible issues that go beyond the antiracist agenda, such as the fight against domestic violence and police brutality, the defense of democracy and the culture of rights, the fight against poverty and social inequality, and the protection of the environment and the climate.

Particularly successful has been its strategy of linking the fight against racism and the defense of democracy in Brazil at a time when democracy was visibly threatened by extreme right-wing forces under the presidency of Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2022). The connection between antiracism and democracy was importantly demonstrated in the Manifesto "While there is racism, there will be no democracy", published in June 2020 by the Coalition and widely disseminated via conventional and social media:

"There is no democracy, citizenship, and social justice without a public commitment to recognize the Black movement as a political subject that brings together the defense of Black citizenship in the country. There is no democracy without confronting racism, police violence, and the judicial system that disproportionately incarcerates the Black population. There is no democracy without guaranteeing redistribution of income, work, health, land, housing, education, culture, mobility, leisure, and participation of the Black population in decision-making spaces of power. There is no democracy without legal guarantees for Quilombos' territories, without respect for the traditional communities' way of life. There is no democracy with contamination and degradation of the natural resources necessary for physical and cultural reproduction. There is no democracy without respect for religious freedom. There is no social justice without fully meeting the needs and interests of 55.7% of the Brazilian population" ([Coalizão Negra por Direitos 2020](#), our translation).

Another initiative developed by the Coalition with great public repercussions was the request for impeachment of Jair Bolsonaro submitted to the Chamber of Deputies in August 2020. The request was justified by Bolsonaro's erratic policies to contain the COVID-19 pandemic, which, according to the request, constitutes crimes punishable by loss of mandate.<sup>1</sup> The Coalition's impeachment request against Bolsonaro, as well as 100 other requests submitted to the Chamber of Deputies, was never discussed in the legislative house. Nevertheless, the request was supported by numerous Black and non-Black artists and intellectuals, strengthening the antiracist alliance.



Equally effective was the Coalition's initiative for increasing Black representation in the legislative houses during the October 2022 electoral campaign. Under the slogan "Quilombo nos Parlamentos" (approx.: Quilombo in the Parliaments), the Coalition supported 120 candidates for different legislative houses—26 of them (18 at the state level and 8 at the federal level) were elected (Moncau 2022).<sup>2</sup>

The Coalition's international activities are equally noteworthy. Many of its most important press releases are also disseminated in Spanish and English, and the Coalition seeks to actively participate in transnational campaigns, as in the case of the cycle of demonstrations and activities within the Black Lives Matter movement. Through petitions and participation in events, the Coalition has also sought to take advantage of opportunities to denounce racism before international organizations, particularly within the United Nations body and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights.

As mentioned above, Brazilian Black movements have historically sought to expand their transnational alliances with movements from different regions of the world, particularly within the Americas, where Brazilian antiracist movements occupy a relevant geopolitical position, as documented in the pertinent bibliography (Saillant 2014). However, due to its political strategies and thematic focus on reinforcing discussions on the legacy of slavery and claims for reparations, the Coalition has shown greater potential than previous movements to expand the antiracist agenda not only in Brazil but also at the international level.

Besides emphasizing the inextricable nexus between antiracism and democracy, one of the discursive keys used by the Coalition to integrate previously irreconcilable expectations and aspirations is the reference to life, and particularly to life politics, presented as being in opposition to necropolitics, which was especially promoted against Black people—according to the Coalition—during the far-right administration led by Bolsonaro. Supported by left-wing parties and associations of Black mothers who lost their children and based, among other evidence, on the fact that Blacks are much more likely to die of diseases such as COVID-19 as well as of violence perpetrated by state agents, the Coalition submitted a constitutional complaint (Arguição de Descumprimento de Preceito Fundamental) to the Brazilian Supreme Court (STF) in May 2022. In the complaint, they characterize the human rights violation of Black Brazilians as genocide and ask the Court to mandate that the federal government adopt effective policies for changing this situation (Partido dos Trabalhadores et al. 2022).

The context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the failure of Bolsonaro's government to take care of the population's health conferred plausibility and dramaturgical force to the defense of life as formulated by the Coalition.

However, despite the catastrophic management of the pandemic, Jair Bolsonaro received almost half of the valid votes in the elections of 2022. In addition, far-right candidates and close allies of Bolsonaro were massively elected to legislative positions as well as to the government of key states of the federation, such as São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Minas Gerais. Apart from amplifying their parliamentary basis, far right-wing supporters of Bolsonaro have kept their mobilization power, as the so-called Brazil's Capitol of 8 January 2023 demonstrated. On this day, Bolsonaro's supporters invaded and destroyed the buildings of the Supreme Court, the Brazilian Congress, and the Presidential Palace in the capital Brasília. The mob called for a military intervention to overthrow the elected president Lula da Silva and bring Bolsonaro back to presidency (Nicas and Romero 2023). The Black Coalition for Rights was one of the few civil society actors able to immediately react to the coup attempted by Bolsonaro's more radical followers. The day after the frustrated coup, the Coalition, together with some trade unions and social movements, organized mass demonstrations to defend the rule of law and called for punitive measures against all organizations and persons involved in the anti-democratic insurgence (Rede Brasil Atual 2023).

The Coalition strongly supported Lula's electoral campaign for presidency in 2022. The campaign incorporated, to a certain degree, the vocabulary and antiracist claims raised

by the Coalition. In its first interactions with President Lula and his team, the Coalition tried to insist on the transversal and intersectional character of racism as expressed in the negotiations for Black representation in the ministries and in the letter the Coalition submitted during the 27th UN Climate Conference (COP27) in Sharm El Sheikh (Egypt) (Damasceno 2022). In the constitution of his government, Lula clearly tried to take racial representation into account. Among his 37 ministers, 10 declare themselves Black, while a single minister in Bolsonaro's government declared himself Black. Lula also created a new ministry for racial equity, and different exponents of the Black Coalition for Rights were nominated for relevant positions in his government (Adorno and Marín 2023).

However, at the time we concluded this article in October 2023, tensions between the Coalition and the Lula administration started becoming evident. One of the first clear confrontations refers to the encompassing campaign initiated by the Coalition for the nomination of a Black female judge for the Supremo Tribunal Federal (STF), Brazil's Supreme Court. In its 132 years of existence, the STF has had 171 judges, including only three female judges and three Black judges (Campaign Ministra Negra no STF 2023). It is up to Lula to choose two judges to make up the court. The first one chosen by Lula was Cristiano Zanin, a value-conservative white man whose main merit is having served as Lula's private lawyer. For the Coalition, as long as a female Black judge does not sit on the country's highest court, Brazilian democracy remains fragile and incomplete. Members of the Coalition also argue that recent crises, such as the pandemic and the explosion of police violence affecting much more dramatically the Black population, justify a campaign for a Black minister in the Supreme Court. According to Ingrid Farias (2023, our translation), a member of the Coalition, "a judge [in the Supreme Court STF] committed to the antiracist agenda is in a position to [...] respond to the way in which structural racism is organized in Brazil".

The campaign for a Black judge in the STF, however, has divided Brazil's progressive forces. For the more traditional trade-unionist left, choosing a Black woman for the court represents a betrayal of the working class and capitulation to neoliberal identity politics imported from the USA (for a critical assessment: Gomes 2023). The coalition, however, rejects the argument that the campaign for a Black judge on the Supreme Court is an identity claim, arguing that political subjects are always situated in social and cultural structures but that this fact per se does not reduce the scope of the political claims they make. Bianca Santana, one of the founders of the Coalition, aptly formulates this argument: "President Lula is from the Workers' Party, a worker is an identity. What are you going to tell me? That Lula or the PT don't do politics for everyone? They do politics for the entire Brazilian population, based on the identity of the workers. So, what the feminist movement does is to fight politically against any form of oppression based on the struggle of women. What the Black movement does is to confront racism, with the certainty that racism, capitalism, gender inequality and all forms of oppression go hand in hand. This confrontation based on the racial agenda that the Black Coalition for Rights is making is for the whole of Brazilian society. *It's a Black Coalition for Rights, not just a coalition for the rights of Black people*". (Santana 2023, our translation, our emphasis).

These tensions are, in fact, typical for cooperation between social movements and progressive governments, especially those which represent such broad social and political alliances as Lula's present administration. The support for Lula's government places the Coalition in a challenging position, navigating between antiracist radicality and political compromises. In more general terms, it involves balancing resistance and power, collaboration and cooptation, as extensively studied by researchers of social movements. (e.g., Lima 2021; Prevost et al. 2012).

#### 4. The Coalition: Achievements and Challenges

Based on a critical review of the available literature (e.g., Saeed 2009; Van Dyke and Amos 2017) on the criteria and factors for social movements and particularly coalitions of social movements to be successful, we argue that the Coalition has succeed at least at three

interrelated levels: mobilization, visibility, and agenda-setting. In relation to mobilization, the Coalition has showed an impressive ability not only to politically articulate a broad and plural set of organizations and movements but also to systematically include new participants and emergent topics into its initiatives. Its visibility in the Brazilian public sphere at both levels—the more conventional arena, such as newspapers, as well as within social media and alternative forums—has also permanently increased since its creation in 2019. Consequently, it has also been able to continuously improve its power to influence public debates and to make its claims discussed at the judiciary, legislative, and—more recently—executive levels in Brazil.

The discussion of the reasons for this success is a complex endeavor that requires extensive research not yet carried out in our investigation project. Nevertheless, the first evidence collected allows us to identify significant tendencies. Accordingly, the following main factors have determined the Coalition's successful trajectory so far: shifting national and international contexts, discursive suitability, and appropriate knowledge policy.

#### 4.1. *Shifting National and International Contexts*

The far-right-wing backlash in Brazilian politics epitomized by Bolsonaro's election as president in 2018 generated perplexity and sentiments of impotence among Brazil's progressive forces. In the national congress, the elected conservative majority unrestrictedly supported Bolsonaro's government in exchange for clientelist control of an important portion of the government's investments. In this context, the minority opposition, with rare exceptions<sup>3</sup>, was unable to contain the drastic cutback of social rights or to hinder legal changes which reduced protection of the environment and the rights of minorities (Nobre 2022).

At the executive level, Bolsonaro's administration continued and accelerated the political program of his predecessor, Michel Temer, who assumed the presidency after Dilma Rousseff's impeachment in 2016. Hence, Bolsonaro's government was characterized by "de-democratization", which implies the deinstitutionalization and delegitimization of demands articulated from minor sites of enunciation, as in the case of LGBTIQ+, feminist, and Black perspectives that have since joined the Coalition. (Rios 2021).

Due to this institutional context and the emergence of the health crisis associated with the spread of the COVID-19 virus, many civil society actors either demobilized politically or began to devote their attention to caring for the populations directly affected by the health emergency.

The Coalition, given its decentralized action and its strong reliance on digital activism, has managed to occupy part of this political vacuum, becoming a relevant reference for Brazilian civil society's resistance against Bolsonaro's authoritarian plan and also for denouncing the government's inability and irresponsibility to manage the health crisis and protect the population.

At the international level, the advance of antiracist struggles within the Black Lives Matter movement, especially after the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis in 2020, has opened up new spaces of resonance for the Coalition's actions. The Coalition adopted the slogan Black Lives Matter, both the original and its Portuguese translation, and has been using it to denounce police violence that disproportionately targets the Black population as a form of genocide (Coalizão Negra por Direitos 2021).

The domestic political context in Brazil has changed radically since Lula took power in January 2022 and also since the pandemic has partially lost its lethal force. It is still too early to know how these shifts impact the Coalition's agenda and modus operandi. However, some tensions have already appeared, as the case of the mentioned campaign for a Black female judge shows.

#### 4.2. *Discursive Suitability*

Although some of the organizations that make up the Coalition explicitly discuss what intersectionality is (e.g., Batista 2018), we did not find a definition of the term in the



documents and materials produced by the Coalition as such. Nevertheless, it is possible to deduce from its public declarations and political actions at least two complementary understandings of intersectionality. The first is linked to the affirmation of the structuring and transversal character of racism, i.e., racism is understood as a constitutive feature of social relations in Brazil and therefore permeates all political and social fields. (e.g., [Coalizão Negra por Direitos 2021, 2022](#)). Furthermore, the Coalition refers to intersectionality to stress the interdependence of the different social categorizations relating to class, gender, race and ethnicity that structure social inequalities in Brazil and globally, as summarized in the passage below:

“Brazil finds itself in front of a mirror that shows its ills. And the only possible counterpoint of hope to this white, old, rich, heterosexual and cisgender face, which occupies the top of the social pyramid and the majority of power spaces, is the transformative power of women, men, young people and LGBTQI+, favela and peripheral dwellers, inhabitants of Quilombos and riverside dwellers, prisoners and street people, Black men and women, who make up the majority of the Brazilian people.

We understand that the oppressions suffered by our people are related to a global capitalist-neoliberal, white supremacist and patriarchal system. Therefore, the articulation for liberation must take place beyond national borders, in dialogue and joint actions with transnational movements and territories in an internationalist perspective of recognizing such oppressions as part of a global political project” ([Coalizão Negra por Direitos 2019](#), our translation).

Based on our preliminary findings, we argue that the idea of intersectionality, taken in these two senses (transversality of racism and interdependence of different forms of oppression and social struggles), expands the scope of the Coalition’s audiences and reinforces its discursive persuasion at a time when other progressive movements had lost their ability to articulate and mobilize their audiences. In this context, the intersectional discourse constructed by the Coalition no longer represents only the voice of Black movements, as had been the case with other antiracist coalitions throughout the 20th century, but expresses the resistance of Brazilian democratic civil society to Bolsonaro’s politically authoritarian and economically ultra-liberal project. Thus, the intersectional discourse developed by the Coalition by emphasizing solidarity, the need for mutual care and the responsibility of the state to protect the population represented the most visible counterpoint to the racist, sexist, xenophobic, and social Darwinist discourse and practices employed by Bolsonaro and his followers<sup>4</sup>.

The Coalition is now confronted with the challenge of preserving the comprehensive and intersectional character of its discourses and actions in a context in which the common enemy of the progressive forces, if not disappeared, has lost institutional and political power. The resistance to the campaign for the Black judge on the Supreme Court STF within the Brazilian left itself, discussed earlier, expresses the Coalition’s difficulties in maintaining its profile as an intersectional alliance.

#### 4.3. *Appropriate Knowledge Policy*

The quality and consistency of the information and documents produced and disseminated by the Coalition are impressive for a decentralized alliance of social movements. Indeed, supported by a diverse network of organizations specializing in specific fields of activity (education, legal advice, public policies, etc.), the Coalition has been very efficient at gathering, analyzing, and translating into the language of both the mass media and social media the studies and arguments on which its demands are based. Following [Gomes \(2021\)](#), we distinguish three complementary types of antiracist knowledge which have emerged and expanded in contemporary Brazil:

1. “identity knowledges”, derived from discussions on affirmative policies that have given a “new visibility of the racial issue and the Black identity in literature, art, cinema, theatre, and academia”. ([Gomes 2021](#), p. 7);

2. “political knowledges”, referring to both knowledge generated by Black activists in various political spheres and technical knowledge about social inequalities, institutional and structural racism, and policies meant to overcome racial injustices;
3. “aesthetic-bodily knowledges” articulated by various movements and initiatives which “politicize the idea of Black beauty” and contribute to establishing Black aesthetics “as part of the civil and existential rights for Black women and men”. (Gomes 2021, pp. 8, 9, see also Gomes 2017).

Although the Coalition is more involved in the production, application, and circulation of “political knowledges”, it also assimilates and incorporates “identity knowledges” and “aesthetic-bodily knowledges” in its struggles, as shown among others by its vocabulary and performances in different virtual spaces and public demonstrations. The production and circulation of these different kinds of antiracist knowledge—frequently articulating aesthetics and politics—require adequate infrastructure, such as archives, meeting and exchange spaces, reproduction and diffusion techniques, etc., that are able to connect experiences developed in different social microspheres with broad audiences to provide resonance and political relevance to this knowledge. According to our own observations and some preliminary studies in contemporary Brazil, books have increasingly become a central tool for archiving and circulating antiracist knowledge in its different modalities. This has led to huge reconfigurations in the Brazilian book market characterized by Pereira and Pereira (2022, our translation) as “a new Black publishing prospect”. Accordingly, while until a few years ago, studies on racism and Black cultures were simply not published or relegated to alternative publishers unable to adequately distribute the books, today there is a growing presence of Black authors, both Brazilian and foreign, in the catalogue of leading publishers. Many of these authors make up the list of best-selling books in fiction and non-fiction, with sales figures that exceed hundreds of thousands of copies.

Although we have not yet found documents in which the Coalition formulates clear strategies for developing knowledge policies, its different initiatives show that it could profit from the expansion of infrastructure for the production and dissemination of antiracist knowledge to both justify and disseminate their claims and campaigns. To what extent the close collaboration between organizations and members of the Coalition—some of them are now in the first and second tiers of Lula’s administration—with the current government impacts the independency and broadness of the knowledge strategies adopted by the Coalition is still an open question. On one hand, access to state resources certainly increases the possibility of systematizing information and developing new relevant studies. On the other hand, the link with the state means that other rationalities and interests that do not necessarily align with the Coalition’s purposes have to be taken into account.

## 5. Conclusions

Based on the first evidence collected in a collaborative research project that the three authors are starting, this article has studied the trajectory of the Black Coalition for Rights created in Brazil in 2019. Seen in the light of previous experiences of antiracist struggles in Brazil, the Coalition stands out for its decentralized organization, its ability to convey political content through attractive aesthetic forms, its capillarity in the domestic sphere and its transnational articulations. Equally striking is its intersectional character, defined—as we have found—in two distinct and complementary ways: by Coalition’s affirmation of the transversal character of racism and by its emphasis on the interdependent character of both the various axes of social stratification (with regard to gender, race, class, etc.) and the respective social struggles to mitigate inequalities.

The Coalition has so far proven to be particularly successful in terms of its political mobilization capacity, its public visibility, and its agenda-setting power. The preliminary evidence gathered shows that the Coalition’s successes can be attributed to the shifting political context both nationally and internationally. Nationally, the authoritarian threat posed by the far-right government led by Jair Bolsonaro and the restrictions on political mobilization imposed by the pandemic have paradoxically created a favorable environment

for the Coalition to fill the gaps left by other movements and present itself as a spokesperson for democratic civil society as a whole. Internationally, there has been a significant increase in the public visibility of racism and antiracism in recent years, particularly since the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement. The Coalition's discourses contributed to giving it legitimacy as an encompassing political movement. Thus, starting from its central focus on racism, the Coalition has been able to address and promote political claims that go far beyond denouncing discrimination and racism. Equally important was the Coalition's emphasis on care and the politics of life at a time when Bolsonaro's government was ignoring the social suffering and deaths provoked by COVID-19.

The Coalition has also made use of a well-thought-out knowledge policy that allows it to both take advantage of and respond to the boom in the search for antiracist knowledge that has taken place in recent years in Brazil. The quality of the information it produces and disseminates and the persuasive force of the well-crafted arguments it develops has also contributed to giving the Coalition's actions political incidence.

The relevant questions that remain unanswered concern the future of the Coalition in a political context in which it is no longer the voice of opposition to a far-right-wing government that ignores the needs of the most vulnerable but an ally of a government that has very limited political space to promote social reforms and redistribute resources. Of particular interest to our research interests is whether the Coalition will continue to profile itself and to be recognized as an intersectional alliance which transversally connects different social struggles. Based on the tensions that already exist within the progressive forces in Brazil, we see a risk that the Coalition will lose its image as an intersectional actor and become recognized as the voice of an Afro-descendant "identity movement" whose interests may even be in conflict with the supposed needs of other subaltern groups.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> With more than 700,000 deaths, Brazil was one of most affected countries by COVID-19 worldwide. Health experts highlight that about 30% of these deaths could have been avoided and that the "excess of deaths" was particularly high among non-white Brazilians, especially in the first year of the pandemic (Colonia et al. 2023).
- <sup>2</sup> The number of Black candidates elected has been increasing consistently in the different legislative houses in Brazil in recent elections. Nevertheless, the number of Black representatives sitting in the Brazilian legislative houses remains far below the proportion of Blacks in the Brazilian population as a whole: while about 56% of the Brazilian population is Black, approximately 25% of the members elected to the National Congress (Chamber of Deputies and Federal Senate) in 2022 declare themselves to be Black. Most Black representatives elected in 2022 for the National Congress belong to right-wing parties (Santos 2022).
- <sup>3</sup> According to Nobre (2022, p. 121), besides minor achievements, "the only unified act of the opposition that had some effectiveness during Bolsonaro's mandate was the investigatory committee on federal government responses to the COVID-19 pandemic (the so-called CPI da Covid)". From May to October 2021, the Committee could make largely visible the omissions, failures, and tragic consequences of Bolsonaro's COVID-19 policy.
- <sup>4</sup> Several studies have tried to explain why many victims of racism, sexism, and classism have supported Bolsonaro. In a recent contribution, we (Costa 2022b) classify these explanations in three groups: economic (e.g., "squeezing middle classes", Gethin and Morgan 2021), cultural (e.g., "aspirational whiteness" and "injured whiteness", Pinho 2021), and ideological (e.g., increasing

right-wing offers in the “political market”, Fuks and Marques 2020). Although plausible and convincing, the existing studies and arguments for being based on stable and persistent cultural beliefs and political values do not explain how political positions change across time. In contrast, we assume that the adherence either to more progressive and antiracist discourses, or to (far-) right ideologies derives, to a great extent, from a contingent articulation of the intersectional situation of individuals or groups with their political choices. Accordingly, these groups “adhere to discourses and make political choices based on the power of these narratives to capture, in given circumstances, their anxieties, expectations, claims and aspirations.” (Costa 2022b).

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