

The Portrayal of Black Women in Brazilian Paintings

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Introduction

This project aims to understand the ways in which black women have been portrayed in Brazilian paintings, and how that relates to the ways in which they are seen in Brazilian society, through the question: **What are the ways in which black women have been portrayed in famous Brazilian paintings?** Through understanding and analyzing the ways in which black women are portrayed in Brazilian art, it is possible to create a better perception of Brazilian racism and racial formation. Brazilian racial history is very particular, due to the emphasis the nation gives to harmony and the pride it has on being a racial democracy. These ideas have affected the ways in which racial prejudice is portrayed.



Theory

Understanding how racial categories are formed is a crucial process in understanding the racial state of a society. This research is guided by the theory of Racial Formation, developed by Michael Omi and Howard Winant. This theory helps to understand different racial dynamics in a society. Omi (2015) defines the process of racial formation as the “socio-historical process by which racial identities are created, lived out, transformed, and destroyed.” (pg.109) Omi and Winant not only talk about how racial categories are formed in a society, but also who influences in their formation. Power is a crucial element used to give meaning to racial categories in a society. The impact and power of government in a society is an influential way in which a racial category is formed, but it is not the only way. Influential writers, slave owners, religious institutions, sociologists, scientists and long-established societal structures also influence on the formation of racial categories. The book *Casa Grande e Senzala* by Gilberto Freyre also guides this research on the understanding of racial formation in Brazil.

Discussion

In Brazilian society, racism has been masked due to a false belief that racial democracy exists. The problem of the concept of racial democracy is that it does not seek truth and justice, but simply wishes for harmony. When an ideal of racial democracy is believed by a society, those who might not agree are silenced. Harmony has been used as a mask, from colonization, to slavery, to the early 20th century, Brazilian literature tries to show a harmonious society, and hide the oppression and injustices that are prevalent in the country. *Casa Grande e Senzala*, a book considered as fundamental for understanding Brazilian society, portrays the idea of harmony even as it describes Portuguese slave owners.

Racial democracy and harmony are a political ideal that obscures lived realities and are not only present in the portrayal of black women in paintings but can be present in even more mundane things. When harmony is put in a pedestal and seen as more important than justice or true reconciliation, harmony becomes a mask, and not a reality. There is a need for a deep personal search to find out how each of us might be using this concept to hide prejudicial and false ideas about groups of people. True racial democracy and harmony can only be achieved through the process of justice seeking and uncovering of masks. That can be a hard process, but it is the only way to achieve that. There is a long road to real racial reconciliation and black women deserve to have their voices heard. It is important for black women to be able to tell their own stories and choose how they want to be portrayed, both in art and in society. My hope is that this research can stir a hunger for true racial democracy and reconciliation, and help give voice to black women, through the process of taking off masks from Brazilian paintings, and Brazil's false idea of racial democracy.

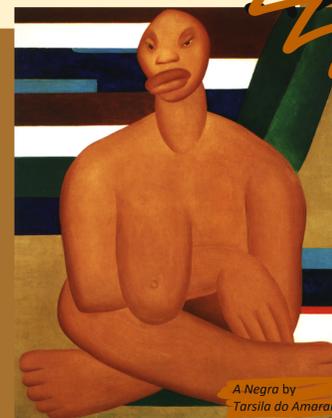


Literature review

Black women have always played a very important role in the formation of Brazilian society (Campos, 2008). Despite their influence and presence in Brazilian culture, racism and sexism towards black woman has been present throughout Brazilian history. Many times, this racism and sexism is masked due to the idea that Brazil is a society of racial democracy and harmony. (Freyre, 1933) The cruel marks of racism impact black women in the ways they look at life, their social relationships and themselves. (Leite, 2017). Research shows that the same problems of misrepresentation are also present in art forms. The space of art in Brazil has been traditionally “white spaces of control”, especially in the 20th century, where most influential visual artists were white. (Cleveland, 2009)

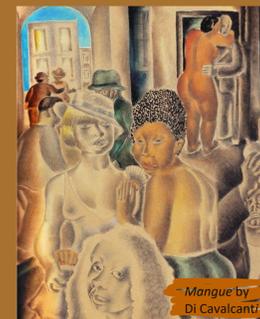
Method

The sample of this study was composed of 40 Brazilian paintings, collected through unobtrusive method. Open code was used to find themes in the paintings. Open codes, according to Thomas (2013) looks for concepts and categories to analyze the data set. (pg. 452) After finding themes in the data set, the codes were used to quantify the occurrence of those different themes in the paintings. The seven painters were chosen by the review of several Brazilian blogs and literature on the most famous and influential Brazilian painters of the 20th century.



Analysis

Four themes were determined that represent key aspects of the ways in which black women are represented in Brazilian paintings of the 20th century. Those four themes were decided after looking at the different codes used to analyze the data and careful observation of the choices the painters made to represent black women. The four themes are all very close to the ways in which black women are portrayed and said to act and behave in Brazilian literature and other forms of communication in Brazil.



Oversexualization: Fourteen paintings (35%) showed black women in a very sexual way. Throughout Brazilian literature, the oversexualization of black women in comparison to white women is very visible.

Poverty and hard work: Fourteen paintings (35%) show elements of poverty. Twelve (30%) show black women doing manual labor. Black women are often portrayed as poor and the maids in so many Brazilian forms of communication.

Mother figures: Eight paintings (20%) show black women as mothers. Although they are portrayed as mothers, only two of the pictures portrayed a male present on the paintings.

Happiness through adversity

Ten paintings (25%) show black women dancing and half of them show elements of poverty on the same painting. Many Brazilian writings use the fact that African slaves were a happier people to show why they were ideal slaves.



Conclusion

My hope is that, although limited, this research has shed a light into the detriments of the portrayal of black women by white artists that mask their prejudice and one-sided story with an idea that racial identity and harmony exist. I hope that through this research, more people can understand that even simple things, such as paintings, can reflect a bigger issue in a society, and needs to be taken seriously as it can both reflect and create false narratives of groups of people. I also hope that people can recognize that every system has some form of masked prejudice and racism that need to be uncovered so that groups of people in that community can have their voices heard and be able to tell their own stories.

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