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**IMAGES OF THE BLACK MAN IN
BRAZILIAN POPULAR CULTURE**

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This essay explores the complex universe of images, stereotypes, values and ideas of black masculinity projected inside Brazil by means of various media texts, such as popular songs, magazine and newspaper articles, feature films, TV comedies and documentaries, literary novels, and so on.¹ As there is no clearcut code of political correctness governing the public diffusion of racialized and debasing stereotypes of people of color inside the country, the battle of images is extremely revealing, if taken together with other battles already started by the organized black movements, quite active since the last two decades. In other words, this conceptual blueprint can only make full sense if read in the context of other analyses, that take into consideration more 'hard' sociological indicators of the situation of people of color in the country, such as access to public resources, job opportunities, education, health, housing, political representation, etc.²

I. White Images of Black Masculinity

As there is practically no specific analysis of black masculinity in Brazil,³ I shall summarize very briefly some influential texts on the images of the black man in Brazil and trace the historical roots of some of the traits which, in my view, make Brazilian society quite unique in terms of the racial dynamics of gender and sexual relations. By doing so, I hope to lay the basis for a general conceptual framework which can be enlarged or modified, as this subject undergoes subsequent analyses, by myself or by others. Given the high ambiguity of race ascription and identification in Brazil, I also need to clarify that I am not dealing here with the mulatto or mestizo part of the country's population; what I am here calling blacks are the people whose skin color is dark to a point beyond any possible negotiation. Therefore, I deal here only with those who are commonly called blacks (in

1. This is a revised version of one section of the paper I read at the 45th Annual Conference of the Center for Latin American Studies at the Univ. of Florida, Gainesville, on Race, Culture and National Identity in the Afro-American Diaspora, in February 1996. I want to express my sincere thanks to the following friends and colleagues, who sent me materials, provided relevant information and offered me their comments: Lara Amorim, Edmeire Exaltação, Randal Johnson, Charles Perrone, Zuleika Porto, Leticia Reis, Sérgio Rizek, Helen Safa, Rita Segato, Amelia Simpson, Luis Eduardo Soares, and Leticia Vianna.

2. For a substantial analysis of race relations in Brazilian society, see Hasenbalg (1985 and 1995, and Silva, Nelson & Carlos Hasenbalg (1993).

3. I have just finished an extensive essay on black masculinity, laying the conceptual framework for a fuller understanding of some of the ideas and values I will discuss here (Carvalho 1996)

Brazilian Portuguese, **negros\as** or **pretos\as**).

One of the basis of this discourse, as far as it is represented by the Brazilian intellectual elite, is undoubtedly the work of Gilberto Freyre, *Masters and Slaves* (1963), in many senses a great piece of rhetoric mischief to disguise his own racism. He opens the book with a fantastic description of the Portuguese men as super-potent sexually, a bravado of virile men conquering women all over the known world: "The scarcity of man-power was made up for by the Portuguese through mobility and miscibility, by dominating enormous spaces and, wherever they might settle, in Africa or in America, taking wives and begetting offspring with a procreative fervor that was due as much to violent instincts on the part of the individual as it was a calculated policy stimulated by the State for obvious economic and political reasons" (1963:10). Later on he will argue that in fact the African man was not that virile, and actually had a very low sexual appetite and that is why he needed so many phallic cults, dances and orgies, whereas for the European sex was a much more easy and natural form of expression, and he could be excited without much effort (id:95). He even implies, contrary to the other great stereotype I shall be discussing later, that the genitals of primitive peoples (including Africans) were relatively small (id:98).

Historian Astolfo Serra, in *A Balaiada* (1946), rewrites this longlasting stereotype framed by G. Freyre. He claims that the Portuguese men were endowed with an "élan vital of reproduction"; their 'strong sensualism' was put in close contact with "the virgin nature and the immature land" that "transformed them, irresistibly, into a blind instrument of reproduction" (id:86). Moreover, "the mestizo blood rekindles the reproductive web of the lusitane-conquistador when confronted with the black element, so fecund and sensuous, and which awakens in the lusitane this racial and strange appetite, which, in the last resort, is the creative instinct of a cleansing race, in its cosmic desire towards purifying an impure blood, perpetrating itself into a new type" (id:87; translation mine).

Serra's argument (just one more among hundreds of Freyreans, who keep reproducing this discourse until today) invariably leads to paradox: on the one hand, he has to argue for the virility of the Portuguese men; on the other hand, this animalesque sexuality has to be explained as the result of forces external to the Portuguese character, whose main attribute, in the last instance, will remain as that of a civilizer. Thus, he introduces three culprits: firstly, nature itself, with its sex-like vegetation; secondly, the Indian women, running around naked and offering themselves eagerly and constantly; and thirdly, the blacks, with their orgiastic practices and their sensuality. One wonders what racist assumptions underlie this apparently well intentioned crave for miscegenation. So, the Portuguese raped women, dishonoured, exploited and abused of everybody and, in the last instance, are not supposed to be blamed for all that, because they couldn't help it: these were the conditions they had to face in order to put into practice their highly purifying mission! In spite of its prominent presence in fictions and essays on the country's origins written by the elite, the image of the lascivious Indian is not at all present in popular culture. All the excess of lust was projected onto the descendents of the slaves, mostly on the female figure of the mulata - herself the result of two lascivious characters: the Portuguese man and the black woman -, constantly explored by the media and other cultural forms and institutions, like samba and carnival.

This artifice of blaming the blacks for white lasciviousness is already present in one of the **roman maudits** of Brazilian literature, *A Carne* (The Flesh), by Júlio Ribeiro, of 1888. This erotic novel was heavily censored for almost half a century due to the explicit

sexual scenes which it described. The main female character, Lenita, feels sexually attracted by her cousin; one day she observes a bull mounting a cow; soon afterwards she watches a young black woman make love to a young black man. Lenita spies that love scene through the trees and it is after that experience of absorbing the "evolutionary chain of natural sex" (first the bull, then the black man) that she gives herself sexually to her cousin. *A Carne* then expresses in literary form the same trope present in Serra's essays: the proximity of the African code of sensuality arouses lust in the whites.

Now, as to Gilberto Freyre, he never states clearly his views on the black man. Most of the time he concentrates on the sexual relationships between the male master and the female slave. He certainly declares (and tries to explain) the Negro's "pathogeny", but he strategically obscures the ultimate source of agency: "Thus it was that the African became, decidedly, a pathogenic agent in the bosom of Brazilian society... The Negro *was* pathogenic, but by way of serving the whites, as the irresponsible part of a system that had been put together by others" (Freyre 1963:330). Irresponsible, but pathogenic... why wouldn't the white man be also described as pathogenic? He could, but he wasn't.

Now, Serra's and Julio Ribeiro's discourses (typical of hundreds of similar narratives) seem to take an opposite direction while compared to Freyre's; nonetheless, they were both constructed exactly to complement each other. On Freyre's side, all the miscegenation can only be the work of the white man, since he is the super-virile being; on the side of Astolfo Serra, the lasciviousness of the black woman reinforces the idea of miscegenation as something positive (for it is a reality which has to be explained in a way favourable to the elites), being the result of the encounter of a white man with a black woman. In other words, according to this ideological scheme, the country is becoming whiter all the time.

This leads us to the famous myth of racial democracy, which has been so central to the Brazilian self-image during the present century. As it should be already apparent, the original promoters of this ideology were not exactly black Brazilians, but white and mestizo members of the country's elite, all of them male. As I have just indicated briefly, what was defined as 'democratic' miscegenation was the result of the relationship between a white man with and a black woman (as a concubine, evidently, since white men would have their legitimate offspring with their white wives). Thus, the racial mixture the country proudly presented to the world - i.e., the accepted and praised form of miscegenation - was built under one ideological exclusion: that of the black man. The strategy behind the images I discussed above was precisely to make it inconceivable that a Brazilian mulato would have a white mother and a black father. Thus, although cruel and inhuman all along, the slavery system in Brazil affected the black male in a much different way than it did with the black woman. Uncapable, therefore, in this white-based imaginary, of the 'normal', or 'legal' sex that would be necessary to build a nation, the black man had to be depicted by two extremely opposite and semantically interrelated stereotypes: either an impotent, or a raper. In both cases, someone to whom was denied the modern process of subjection and citizenship. That was the source behind so much negative images of black masculinity we find in popular culture.

It is within this frame of meaning formulated by the white Brazilian elite and the actual social conditions of slavery and post-slavery poverty and deprivation that the black man had to construct his masculinity. Before we trace a voice which was produced directly by the black experience, let us first enlist these dominant images of the black man that were

projected upon him as a consequence of their widespread diffusion into various literary and popular discourses generated by this Brazilian white elite, and to which he had to respond, sometimes copying and reproducing them, sometimes reacting strongly, sometimes being defenseless, hardly being indifferent to them. I shall give later a few brief examples of these responses. First, a look at these basic stereotypes.

I.1. The **neguinho**

The first image which is projected nationally of the black man in a great part of the country's media is the idea of the harmless little black man, the **neguinho**: submissive, yielding, totally devoid of desire (including, most importantly, sexual desire) - a kind of semi-slave, dependent, mentally and psychologically, on the decision of the whites. In this general stereotype, an association is forced between lack of sexuality and low mental capacity. In the terms of Cornel West's classification of American racist stereotypes of black American sexuality (West 1993:83), the **neguinho** would be a child-like version of Uncle Tom; instead of an old man, as in the US, there is here a Brazilian touch of intimacy and seduction. This is most prominent in TV and film comedies, and they are a direct continuation of an image which is typical of slave days: the behaviour of the male domestic slave, usually the young man who would serve and do errands for the master, would play with his children, and so on. One can generalize, based on this emblematic figure, and state that in the popular imagination, a relationship between a black man and a white woman is asexual, especially whenever there is social asymmetry favourable to the white woman. The only kind of sexual relationship present in the common imagination between a white woman and a black man is a relationship of rape.

The great media image of the sexually harmless **neguinho** was the actor who played the role of Mussum in the comedy series "Os Trapalhões", on Globo TV. Mussum spoke a funny Portuguese, a mixture of baby talk and a wrong pronunciation, as if he didn't have standard adult command of the structure of the Portuguese language. This image is reproduced constantly in comics, stories, TV shows, and soap opera, and it is a powerful rhetorical tool aimed at demobilizing the impulses towards male assertiveness on the part of a young black man. Moreover, it forces the black man to be nice, smiling, uncritically supportive of the whites and, most importantly, not to pose a sexual threat to any white woman. The **neguinho** is the figure which obliterates the history of the slave regime - no resentment, no demands, no autonomy, no confrontation, but total obedience instead.

What is really behind this stereotype is a generalizing notion of subordination to structures imagined to be so powerful almost to a point of being defined as destiny. Depending on the situation, the **neguinho** becomes a part of the identity of any Brazilian man. In great urban centers, such as Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, the term is even used, mostly by middle class whites, as self-referential, similar to "I" or "one" (which would normally be translated as "a gente"), whenever the subject under discussion refers to structures which transcend the interfering power of individual volition, such as economy, politics, violence, law, and the like. Instead of saying: "I don't know what else to do", white middle class people when feeling impotent would say: "**neguinho** doesn't know what else to do". By the same token, whenever they feel potent enough to challenge the structures,

they would say: "I know what to do". There are also cases in which people use the expression to indicate a positive turn of events for oneself, such as: "neguinho está se dando bem" (**neguinho** is really doing fine). But here there is also implicit a lack of autonomy over one's own circumstances, in terms of not being a fully developed subject. What makes this stereotype analytically important is precisely the fact that anyone can occupy the place of the **neguinho** in discourse, regardless of one's skin color; and this opens for an understanding of the Brazilian society as a whole: somehow all social groups, classes, and skin colors manifest a chronic lack of citizenship, of full subjectification, and this fundamental national lack is allegorized in this **neguinho** figure.

The following song, quite anthological, because it was the winner of the first prize in the first TV Record Festival of Brazilian Popular Music in 1966, provides a moving and vehement denunciation of the way small black boys (**neguinhos**) were (and still are) treated in Brazil.

Arrastão - Edu Lobo & Vinicius de Moraes; singer: Ellis Regina

Upa neguinho na estrada
upa pra lá e pra cá
Virge que coisa mais linda
upa neguinho começando a andá
começando a andá começando a andá
e já começa a apanhar.
Cresce neguinho e me abraça
cresce e me ensina a cantar
Eu vim de tanta desgraça
mas muito te posso ensinar
capoeira posso ensinar
ziguizira posso tirar
valentia posso emprestar
mas liberdade só posso ensinar
patata tri tri tri tri tri patata
(Upa neguinho in the road
upa here and there
Heavens, what a pretty little thing
upa neguinho starting to walk
starting to walk, starting to walk
and he has already started to be beaten up.
Grow up, neguinho, and teach me
grow up and teach me how to sing
I have come from so much misery
but there is a lot I can teach you

capoeira I can teach
witchcraft I can take out
courage I can lend
but for freedom I can only wait)

This self-conscious effort at expressing sympathy towards the **neguinho** is, although moving, rather uncommon in Brazilian popular culture.

I.2. The **negão**

The other dominant image of the black man is exactly symmetrical to the **neguinho** as far as virility is concerned: it is the Big black man, the **negão** - physically strong and endowed with an exceptionally high sexual capacity and, as we shall see later, versatility. Similar images are certainly common in other parts of the New World; and they remind us, roughly, of the stereotypes of Bigger Thomas and Jack Johnson mentioned by Cornel West (id: 83). Nonetheless, the Brazilian **negão** is part of a code of racial and gender relations quite different from the American one and some of its attributes are part and parcel of the dynamics of this unique context. It should be remembered that both images, the **neguinho** and the **negão**, are still directly connected with that insidious myth of the foundations of Brazilian sexuality produced by essayists like Gilberto Freyre and Astolfo Serra. As Freyre hints at the ludicrous idea of a lack of sexual appetite and an atrophy of sexual organs on the part of Africans, the way is paved for the **neguinho** to appear; and as Serra blames Africans for stimulating the dormant lasciviousness of Portuguese men, it is at the **negão** (together with the sex appeal of the mulata) that he is getting at.

The **negão** is the great penetrator, filled with insatiable sexual desire and one who can either seduce or rape women joyfully. In another article (Carvalho 1994) I have analysed in detail one famous song that comments on this male-constructed 'happy rape'. There are new songs that have updated this same stereotype. The following one falls within the popular genre known as *pagode*.

Lá vem o negão - De Zelão - Grupo Cravo & Canela

Lá vem o negão cheio de paixão [tesão]
Te catar te catar te catar
querendo ganhar todas as meninas
nem coroa ele perdoa não.
Fungou no cangote da linda morena
te catar te catar te catar.
Loirinha, cafungada do negão
é um problema
loirinha, cafungada do negão
é um problema.

Se ninguém soube amar
pode se preparar chegou a salvação
só a alegria pode se arrumar
que chegou o negão
Mas se é compromissada
é melhor não vacilar
basta um sorriso, um olhar
para o negão te catar.
Vem negão, vem depressa
é um mulhierio a gritar
vem negão, a hora é essa
vamos deitar e rolar.
Na praia, na rua, no supermercado,
na feira é a maior curtição
as garotinhas já vem requebrando
pra ficar com esse negão.

(There comes the Big black Man
full of passion
to catch you, to catch you, to catch you
wanting to possess all the girls
even old women he doesn't let go.
He blew in the morena's neck
to catch you, to catch you, to catch you.
Little blonde, a sniff of the Big black Man
is a problem.
If nobody knew how to love
you may prepare yourself
salvation has arrived.
Only joy can solve
for the black man has arrived.
But if you are engaged
it is better not to hesitate
one smile, one single look
is enough for the black man to catch you.
Come, negão, come quick,
it's a crowd of women shouting;
come, negão, now it's the time
let's lie and roll around.
In the beach, in the street, in the supermarket,

in the local market, it's the greatest fun
the girls come already swinging the hips
in order to lie with the **negão**.

The *pagode* is defined mainly as light, apolitical dance music, one which aims precisely at opposing the radicalization of other styles of black popular music. This group is formed by blacks and is called Clove & Cinammon, a reference to the sub-title of Jorge Amado's famous novel *Gabriela*, a privileged key symbol to express the famous myth of Brazilian racial democracy. The group renders the song in a matter-of-fact style; the **negão** "catches" every female member of the species: old women, engaged ones, mulattas, blondes. Although in the recording they use the word *paixão* (passion), in public performances they sing, together with the public, the word *tesão* (sexual heat), a celebration of the sexual power of the black man. There is also an implicit meaning in the verb *catar* (to catch), which really means to possess sexually.

Of course, the **negão** is as much a dark skinned man as someone, like a mulatto, who can incarnate a position of high sexual performance. In this sense, it carries an affirmation of the black man and an exclusion of the white man. It also expresses the vulgar image of the *amor negro* (black love): essentially sexual, performatic, positively non-romantic. This song was one of the big hits of this year's (1996) Carnival. And in the actual street orgies, any man (including a white person) can enact this **negão** archetype by getting close to a woman who is dancing and then singing to her the song, putting himself explicitly or jokingly in the place of the **negão** who wants to "catch her". Ideologically, this group of black **pagode** singers express total assimilation to these models formulated by the whites and that is why they are criticized by the more politicized and confrontational black artists of the rap movement (to which I will return later) as "black men without attitude".

Apart from this image of a rapist, the hyper-sexual **negão** appears constantly in texts of various different origins about female desire. In Nelson Rodrigues's famous play *Bonitinha mas Ordinária* (Pretty, but Vulgar), of 1960, the female character, Maria Cecília, who has been raped by five black men and longs to meet the leader of the gang again, challenges her husband, who doesn't have sex with her, to rape her as they did: "You! You could do - you alone - what those five men did. But you don't have the courage. You're a coward" (Rodrigues 1966:221). Much more explicit, however, is the film version of the play, with the same name, directed in 1973 by Braz Chediak. Maria Cecília, played by Lucélia Santos, shows unequivocally her delight in giving herself simultaneously to the five men. The film came to confirm this supposedly generalized desire of the white woman of being raped by a black man. Obviously, both the text of the play and the script of the film were authored by white males.

Exactly twenty years after the film, another model, actress and TV presenter, Doris Giesse, a platinum blonde who pretends to be the really liberated woman, stated in an interview for a weekly magazine that her main sexual fantasy is to be raped by a black man. She has also posed for the magazine *Sexy Interview* naked, lying held by five naked black men, in a clear continuity of Lucélia Santos's sequence in *Bonitinha mas Ordinária*. Of course, lest we be mistaken, what we know for sure is that Doris Giesse is enacting the fantasies of some men about her desire; we are not in a position to confirm that she really is expressing her own fantasies - what we know for sure is that she is producing a media

statement meant to reinforce an already existing stereotype about blondes and black men. A man's (or a woman's) masculinity (or femininity) is a process that bears only indirect relation to another person's fantasies about how that particular man (or woman) performs as a man or as a woman. For instance, I have never come across any statement by a white woman who has been literally raped by a black man and who has expressed clearly, to everyone, that she liked it.

II. Voicing the experience of the black man

So far I have been discussing texts and public images of black men, some negative, other positive, but all of them produced by non-black men. I want now to turn to symbolic constructions created by black men.

One of the first challenges of the male black Brazilian is to overcome the position of docility and subordination, which we have seen expressed earlier with cruel humour in the stereotype of the **neguinho**. To meet the white man face to face is what is denied in all those images, which range from animality to infantility.

II.1. Romance denied

In order to explore the image of the black man, not as a **negão**, a rapist, a penetrator, or a lover in the mere sexual sense of the term, but as a significant other, i. e., as a possible amorous partner for a white woman, I would like to comment now on a feature film, quite remarkable, but which unfortunately never received the attention of critics and students of the Brazilian racial predicament. I am referring to *As Aventuras Amorasas de um Padeiro* (The Amorous Adventures of a Baker), directed by the black film maker Waldir Onofre, and produced by Nelson Pereira dos Santos. According to Antonio Zago (1981), Onofre was the first Black person ever to direct a feature film in Brazil.

In spite of its modest pretensions and the frugality of the resources available for the production, *As Aventuras Amorasas de um Padeiro* is one of the boldest frontal attacks ever attempted on Brazilian sexual racism. The film is a light comedy, on the brink of being classified within the genre of the soft porn of the 70's, a term that doesn't imply necessarily that the film be charged with explicit sexual images. It is actually quite innocent, if we remember the degree of explicitness so characteristic of Brazilian cinema. Before I give my reading of the film, let me show the synopsis which appeared in *Brasil Cinema*, No. 10, 1975, intended to give an idea of the content of the film both for the general public and for the distributors: "Raquel is a newly-wed disillusioned with marriage. Following the suggestion of some friends, already in her honeymoon she decides to live a more free life, especially since the husband, a professional very worried with his success, forgets his domestic obligations. An old Portuguese baker, lover of Donjuanesque adventures, is her first affair. The second is a painter, a mystical figure, almost a priest, with whom she forgets the Portuguese - who gets really mad, humiliated for having been changed for a 'swollen foot who lives by the seaside, a bloke that even has effeminate manners'. His anger reaches the point of denouncing her to the betrayed husband and they both prepare, with a

lot of show, to catch them in the act of adultery".

This synopsis itself is relevant for what we are discussing. It doesn't mention a factor that was crucial for the film's commercial disaster: the fact that the second lover is a black man! Now, here is my own synthesis of the story. In the suburbs of Rio de Janeiro a young white middle class couple marries and they go to their honeymoon. When she comes back, the woman comments with her female friends that things didn't go well and she doesn't feel satisfied. Her husband works as a car salesman and is basically boring and indifferent to her affective needs. One day she is walking in the streets and she starts to pay attention to some black bricklayers working on a construction site. She looks at those shirtless black bodies and feels sexual desire. In the meanwhile, the Portuguese owner of the local bakery madly desires the young woman, and after much insistence, she agrees to make love with him. The dissatisfaction with her husband increases and, in an attempt at doing something to fill her sterile domestic life, she decides to take acting lessons. In the school of dramatic arts she meets a very sensitive and intelligent man, a black actor, with whom she falls deeply in love. She solves her conjugal crisis (and also the extra-conjugal one, for now she can contrast the delicate manners of the actor with the gross approach of the Portuguese baker) by fleeing from the house and hiding with the actor in a hut by the sea. There, they dress in Elizabethan costumes and enact sequences of Shakespeare's plays, when he calls her "my Venus". This simultaneously serious and highly satirical love affair (which works, for her, like the real honeymoon) cannot be accepted by the men of the neighborhood. So, while the betrayed husband is drinking in a bar, being consoled by his friends, the Portuguese baker leads a big crowd to attack the hut and free the "correct" white wife from the spell of that devilish black artist. All ends in a farcical battle, when she is finally rescued and returned to her husband, with the Portuguese still dreaming of having her again some day.

I had the chance of attending the premiere of *As Aventuras Amorosas de um Padeiro*, in Rio de Janeiro, in 1976, and the filmmaker Tizuka Yamazaki told me of the instantaneous furious reactions the film received on the part of the distributors, to a degree that surprised the director and the producers. Many film theatres warned them, as soon as they saw the film, before its première, that they certainly would not show a film in which a pretty white woman leaves her husband because she fell in love with a black man. They argued they couldn't sell such a story (of, course, denying thus the right of the audience to evaluate the film). The film was hardly shown anywhere and this rejection is already highly meaningful. More like a rhapsody, the comic tone gives the story a sense of irreality and at the same time a greater proximity to real life than more allegorical narratives of marital frustrations frequently explored in many Brazilian films of that period.

In this apparently unpretentious plot, Raquel incarnates a double transgression for a white woman: firstly, she feels sexually attracted by a poor black man; and secondly (and here lies her major transgression) she falls in love (or rather, she exercises romantic love) with a black man. There is still another opposition worth exploring: she sees the blacks (as a category, therefore depersonalized) when she objectifies her sexual dissatisfaction; and she falls in love (resolving, thus, her lack of affection) whenever she meets the actor, someone that she identifies as being of her own kind. Moreover, the black man with whom she stays is an articulate person, an artist who seduces her in the same way that ordinary films and novels depict white men seducing women; the actor is sure of himself, and he represents a masculinity that is quite far from the racist role of the **negão** as the stud, the

penetrator. In other words, the actor is a black man, but the character he represents is not; he is a man, seen in her eyes as a universal embodiment of the male side of the species. It is the mere choice of a black actor, regardless of whether he was playing the character of a black lover or not, which the distributors could not take. Here lies, in my view, the revolutionary side of this otherwise soft-porn comedy about female sexual dissatisfaction. This film is a perfect test for the infamous Brazilian "racial democracy". To "deblacken" a black person, to universalize him\her and not to "whiten" him\her, as the perverse dominant ideology would want, that is the challenge posed by this apparently harmless comedy. According to critic José Carlos Avellar, "In filming *As Aventuras Amorosas de um Padeiro*", where one of the protagonists is a Bahian negro artist and marginal who lives in the suburb, who flies with a white lover and dreams of interpreting Hamlet, Waldir Onofre was not properly interested in discussing the problem of the black man who lives in the periphery of the great city, but rather in speaking indirectly of the narrow outlook of opportunities for the black intellectual in the artistic world" (1982:5).

As far as I know, there hasn't been any story like this one in the entire Brazilian filmography since 1975; the only other example I can quote of a love affair between a male black character with a female white is in the film *Na Boca do Mundo*, by the black director and actor Antonio Pitanga (1979), though told as a much more tragic and destructive relationship, which ends in the death of the black man.

Another film which remained quite forgotten is *Pureza Proibida* (Forbidden Beauty), of 1974, directed by Alfredo Sternheim (who is white), with the black actor Zózimo Bulbul in the main male role. In a recent interview for the documentary *A Cor do Sexo* (The Color of Sex) both artists discuss the problems they faced with the film, which tells the impossible and tragic love between a white novice nun and a fisherman. Sternheim said he chose Zózimo Bulbul for the male character exclusively because he regarded him as a good actor and not because of his color. So, whenever he showed the film in a Brazilian festival, he was immediately criticized for not dealing with the "racial question"; behind that criticism, he believed, was the difficulty of the supposedly progressive critics in accepting a black actor for a romantic role. What was disturbing about the film (as in the case of *As Aventuras Amorosas de um Padeiro*), was the black figure impersonating universal masculinity, transcending the restrictive niches of the **nequinho** and the **negão**. Zózimo also explained they had similar problems with the distributors, which even reached the federal censorship, due to this inter-racial amorous affair. So, in spite of having been commercially unsuccessful, perhaps *Pureza Proibida* represent the utmost attempt, up to now, at demolishing once and for all the negative images of the black man produced in Brazilian popular culture.

II.2. The black man fights back

Another tradition which is very Brazilian and whose cultural text and actual practice offers an alternative mirror of black masculinity is the *capoeira*, a mixture of dance, music, and martial art. *Capoeira* as a cultural form preserves the memory of the confrontation of the black man with the white as a slave holder; as such, it was developed as an anti-white institution and it is only in the last decades that the presence of whites in capoeira has become significant. The *capoeira* code of behaviour, probably more than any other traditional institution, brings pride and self-esteem for the Brazilian blacks.

An important theme of *capoeira* is the capacity of the Brazilian negro to resist and to fight against the slave holders:

Joga o negro para cima
joga o negro para baixo
você diz que dá no negro
no negro você não dá

Olha capitão do mato
veja que o mundo virou
foi ao mato pegar o negro
mas o negro lhe amarrou

(Throw the black man up
throw the black man down
you say you beat the black man
the black man you don't beat

Look bush-captain
pay attention how the world has turned upside down
he went to the bush to catch the negro
but the black man tied him up)

As time passes, more and more the capoeira art affirms itself inside the country, spreading constantly through academies of dance and martial arts and also being taught at schools. It is also expanding dramatically in the United States, with many important masters, such as Bira Almeida, now taking residence in the main cities, like New York and Los Angeles. The title of an article by African art scholar Robert Farris Thompson sums up this mingling of art and war in capoeira: Tough Guys do Dance. Among the various reasons Thompson enlists in order to stimulate people (more precisely men) to join capoeira, is the enormous sex appeal mastered by the capoeirista: "Bimba [a famous capoeira master of the past] had more lovers than he could handle, and one American

master had a lover who offered him a castle in Europe and unlimited American Express if he would leave capoeira for her. He refused" (Thompson 1988:140).

The white man who joins capoeira will learn to see Brazilian society from the point of view of the black man's historical experience, an existential movement which will imply a displacement and a redefinition of some dominant values, such as the Christian ethics of pacifism, an elaborate body language, a particular use of speech and control of verbal expressions, an emphasis on street wisdom and, above all, the almost sacred respect for a key symbol which is a synecdoque of an embrace of African culture as a whole: the musical bow, or *berimbau*. Even some rap musicians, who are also working on a new position of self-esteem for the blacks, tend to join capoeira, such as the leader of Cambio Negro, a leading rap band in Brazil.

As to rap, it is growing fast as a new form of black self-expression in Brazil, especially among the youth. Some rap groups of São Paulo, such as the Racionais MC, are working on the development of a strong and conscious counter-image to the submissive and frightened little black associated with the patriarchal regime depicted in Gilberto Freyre's *Masters and Slaves*. This new image of a belligerent black youth differs radically from the capoeira tradition in the sense that they only accept blacks in their midst. This conscious segregatory movement is something extremely new in the country and is, not surprisingly, challenging the white-dominated elite, who is forced to remake the image of peaceful conviviality between people of various skin colors in Brazil. The problem with these rap groups, however, at least for the moment, is their terrible misogyny. Mirroring themselves on the US rappers, they have managed to debase Brazilian women with a degree of hatred that has very few precedents in the entire history of Brazilian popular music. Here is an example.

Parte II - Aivaldo Pereira Alves & Edy Rock

Mulher de aliado meu eu considero homem
Não admito dando em cima
de mim ou de outros camaradas
São sem vergonhas não prestam
mesmo sendo compromissadas
Não criam vergonha na cara escória de safadas...
Em poucos amigos se pode confiar
Mulher então menos se pode contar
Não gosto, não tento, não penso,
não meço palavras pra falar
mestiça, negra ou branca
sempre sai uma vagabunda
Não se esqueça se você
ajoelhar então vai ter que rezar...

(Woman of a colleague I treat as a man
I don't accept them playing around
with me or with the pals
Even being engaged, they're shameless
with no shame in their faces, scoundrels, bitches...
One can trust only in a few friends
On women one can count on even less
I don't like, I don't try, I don't think
I don't weigh my words to speak
Mestiza, black or white
There always appear as a bitch
Don't forget, if you kneel down
you have to pray...)

III. The ideal of the inter-racial couple

Now, for all that I presented here, the strongest denial, in the context of the white-controlled audiovisual popular culture, has fallen upon the black heterosexual who is not interested in following the warrior model and who would simply like to realize fully his masculinity within the conventional male-female code of relationship.⁴ Here, the resistance to a black male image with exactly the same status of the image of a white male has been fierce. We have seen it illustrated clearly in the case of the film *As Aventuras Amorosas de um Padeiro* and, even more so in *Pureza Proibida*. The image of a black man as a romantic character infuriated distributors and even censors during the military dictatorship and, for all I know, has not been attempted again since then. We should therefore remember that the figure of the romantic hero (and heroin, for the same discrimination is suffered by the black woman) is an apt contemporary allegory for the struggle of every human being to achieve personally a position of universality within the human condition. The real challenge, therefore, in my view, for an absolutely non-discriminatory society, is to provide access to the universal position for everyone, regardless of particular markers of social class, gender, or racial differentiation.

Why shouldn't a black actor perform the character of male archetypes, such as Arthur, Hamlet, Siegfried, Tristan, Romeo, Ulysses, having as a partner a non-black actress? Here, I emphasize white partnership, that is, the interracial character of the couple, in order to make clear the universality of the role impersonated by the black actor/actress. Or, conversely, why shouldn't a black actress perform the role of Guinevere, Ofelia, Sieglinde, Isolde, Juliet, Penelope, having as partner a non-black actor? As to the alternative of an all-black cast in the romantic couple, it will again result of ghettoization of

4. In another text I have discussed at length the experiences of male and female black homosexuals, male and female black prostitutes and also black transvestites in Brazil (Carvalho 1996). All I can say here is that they all tend to be better than those of many black heterosexuals, both male and female.

the message and what I interpret as self-defeat, because no white audience will be touched by the story. If we think of the Greek tragedies, for instance, people from different parts mingled in plots that only to our modern eyes appear as exclusively Greek, or Aryans - i.e., blondes with blue eyes. There were, however, no concerns with 'ethnicity' in a contemporary sense. In his great study, *Black Athena* (1991), Martin Bernal shows us how Aeschylus, in his play *The Suppliants*, is trying to diminish the Egyptian element which is central for some characters, in order to depict an all-Greek scenario. Of course, in that period the reason was not racial discrimination against a multi-ethnic cast, but he tried at least to lessen the importance of some of the characters. It is not uncommon to find many sacred Renaissance paintings where black and white bishops and cardinals are all together, depicted in such a way as to imply that no special distinction existed among them on the grounds of their skin color. And most traditional stories were clearly multi-ethnic and multi-racial in the composition of their characters.

In *Tristan and Isolde*, for instance, we have a multi-ethnic couple, between a Breton and an Irish woman with all her markers of difference, such as her magical powers. Even the story of Parsival mingles Christians (Europeans) with muslims (Arabs), as new studies of the legend have shown. But the case which has become a real classic of inter-racial tragic love stories is the one of Othello and Desdemona. Othello was a Moor by origin, and as the tragedy unfolds, his moorishness (which was a mark of ethnic, not of racial difference) would be expressed by his dark skin color, so that twentieth century films and stage performances of the drama would depict this story as one of a black man - white woman fatal marriage, whereas black identity was not originally in focus. It was around the Enlightenment, and mainly throughout the nineteenth century, that European and American whites conflated all the main characters of myths and legends with a white cast, and from then on a deep and relentless process of omission and exclusion started to take place. So, as far as the romantic love story is a replacement and a continuation of old myths of individuation in contemporary life, it has become a firmly held privilege of white artists to embody the characters of this universal theme.

The idea of individual self-growth, which transcends particulars, if taken seriously as politics, can be used as a good standard to measure the degree of racism in complex societies, taking collective images of inter-racial couples as our reference, as I have tried to do here. Cinema has prevented blacks from exercising the universality of the romantic aspect. Even in American cinema, in spite of a strong civil rights movement more than three decades ago, rarely have I seen a black actor perform a romantic role, having a white actress as his counterpart, which was not intended as a commentary on his color.

Two American films, although very different from each other, equally conflate cast and character while focusing on cross-racial relationships, and point to the same impossibility. One is *Mandingo*, a historical reconstruction of plantation life in Louisiana (not surprisingly depicted as hell.; In this film, the black man (a Mandingo slave who was bought as a stud) is forced by his master's wife to have sex with her, who treats him strictly as an object of her revenge against her husband's infatuation with a black 'bed wench'. Although it was marketed as an interracial romance, one could hardly identify the utterly sadistic nature of all the three relationships narrated (husband-wife, husband-black girl, wife-black man) as enactment of a romantic couple's love life, since the theme is not love itself, but the racial barriers interposed.

The other film, that deals explicitly with contemporary conflicts of interracial relationships is *Jungle Fever*, by Spike Lee. Here, a married black man leaves his black wife for a white Italian-American woman, with whom he falls in love. However, their life together as a couple doesn't last long, due to pressure from his African-American community and from her Italian-American community, and he ends up returning to his former wife. Although it has been argued that the status of Italian-Americans have changed in the last decades, to the point of being now part of the dominant white majority, still the female character is strongly ethnicized and not intended to embody the mid-stream white woman (who would have to show an Anglo-Saxon behavior).

Guess who's Coming to Dinner, of 1967, is probably the only extant happy ending story of inter-racial marriage in American cinema. In it Sidney Poitier performs the role of the man in a inter-racial couple, but there the character himself was still constructed as a black, so the movement of transcendence had to stop at a certain point, and the issue became then framed as a "black issue", i.e., a specific conflict which doesn't reach a universal status: it was only addressed as a racial conflict and cast and characters were once more conflated.

The one American film I can remember in which a black man, performed by a black actor, transcends his segregated status in American society and is able to form a couple with a white woman (which represents, iconographically, the liberation from particulars of the couple as a whole) just as a man, and not as a black character, is George Romero's *Dawn of the Dead*. Anyhow, this apparently simple image of a man and a woman as partners or companions, regardless of their particular skin colors - had to appear in an exceptionally marginal narrative, sustained by a long sequence of almost unbearable scenes of horror; only in a situation of total crisis of civilization. Only after a long series of grotesque allegories of the American social system of capitalist and consumer greed, can the viewer forget momentarily the inter-racial nature of what seems to be the last living couple on earth. And even then, we don't know, in the end, whether they will be able to survive or not, as they fly in a helicopter trying to escape the living dead who chase them. They are the last couple on earth, and she is pregnant of a dead white man - so, they are not spouses, nor even lovers - but are condemned to stay together in order to survive.

If Hollywood insists in perpetuating, for more than seventy years now, the romantic and heroic roles in images of white men and women, refusing, therefore, to perform affirmative action in this area of social life misleadingly called 'entertainment', this means these images have a profoundly suggestive and mobilizing power. They are part of a modern type of social and ideological domination African-Americans like to call "white supremacy". It seems 'natural' that the great romantic (ergo, universal, which means superior) film roles should be played invariably by people like Robert Redford, Keanu Reeves, Tom Cruise, Michelle Pfeiffer, Meryl Streep, among other white stars.

Similarly, in Brazil the black man has to fight a huge battle for the control and production of public romantic images. As I stressed in the beginning, this battle cannot obviously be separated from other 'harder' social and economic battles; nonetheless, given the fact that Brazil suffers the bad consequences of the existence of one of the greatest media monopoly in the world today (the Globo network), the spread of positive, universal images of blacks, will certainly help to fight the harder battles just mentioned. While invoking the universal position, I am perfectly aware that it might be seen as a mechanism

of covering up the inequalities in class, economic and social status which the blacks suffer in Brazilian society. I have shown the black voice exposing openly the deep wound perpetrated against the descendants of slaves in Brazil. It is within this open conflict that we should try to overcome, not only the "fact of blackness", as Frantz Fanon put it (Fanon 1968), but also make it evident that what has been taking the place of universal subjectivity in Brazil (and in the Western world as a whole) is in fact a specific "fact of whiteness", which has to be framed in historical terms and highlighted in its ideological and symbolic limits in order to be democratically opposed and hopefully dissolved some day.

Luckily enough, Brazilian racial reality, in spite of all its injustices, is not one of total segregation (which is case in the United States in many areas) and whosoever manages to put himself or herself in a privileged place of speech, can speak for the nation as a whole. This has been achieved, already in the seventies, by Pelé, the soccer player. There are still some other black men who have also achieved this universal place of identification, and they are all singers. Within the universe of the so-called MPB (Brazilian popular music) Milton Nascimento and Djavan appear both as singers and composers and are not at all regarded as "black" musicians, which is the case with most samba players and singers. Even more extraordinary, in my view, is the position achieved by Vando, a singer of a popular romantic genre known as "brega". Although black, and not minimally endowed with the physical attributes which could put him as a kind of "sex symbol" (as it could be achieved, if the great media wanted, by actor Zozimo Bulbul), he managed, through his performances and compositions, to put himself in the position of the universal lover, and therefore transcend entirely the fixation of blackness given by his skin color. I insist on this point because, for the majority of the African-American audience, the fact of blackness is a point of honor and of political struggle - it is invoked as the basis from which a politics of race can be constructed. However, the question remains, both for Afro-Brazilians and for African-Americans, of how to transcend the ethnic partiality and attain universality. Hence the importance of the romantic allegory of the universal dilemmas of love.

Although stressing the political significance of interracial marriage, I hope my position will not be misunderstood, as if I am a speaker for the infamous Freyrean ideology of racial democracy. I feel as distanced from it as I am from the American model of segregation and ghettoization of ethnic groups. However, in spite of all its racial problems, Brazil still holds institutions that provide for the practice of racial integration, even if only in the realm of ritual and festival, when social and communal ideals are temporarily enacted and celebrated. The more spectacular example of this is, of course, Carnival, a social event which truly involves the entire spectrum of Brazilian society. There is nothing similar to it in the United States, and it calls my attention the silence of African-American scholars and activists who have observed Brazil on the Carnival experience of race relations.

Thus, the myth of racial democracy has to be recaptured in an universalistic way, for it was kidnapped to serve the interests of a white oriented dominant sector of Brazil society. And, instead of being attacked on the empirical grounds of what it has not yet achieved (which seems to be the constant position taken by numerous contemporary African-American scholars⁵), it should be treated precisely as it really is: a myth, a focal

5. See, for instance, M. Hanchard (1994) and the authors who write on the last part of David Hellwig's edited

point where to project one's ideals of the good life, of one's utopia. I still believe we should continue keeping alive the dream of integration, to demand its fulfilment. Anyhow, I have always understood that such was also Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream. In line with it, I held as important to focus on the denied part of racial integration in Brazil (and the U.S. too, of course): the full subjection of black people as expressed in interracial marriages and romance in the media vehicle.

I am perfectly aware that the challenge of the inter-racial romantic couple is certainly a profound one, for it implies a revolution in descent, in a Brazil charged with the prejudice of whitening, as in a United States charged with the one of segregation. In this sense, the odd couple of George Romero, put together with the fine and fleeting moments of the inter-racial love affair in *As Aventuras Amorasas de um Padeiro* and the tragic romance of the white nun with the black fisherman in *Pureza Proibida*, form a small gallery of media images where the black man has finally overcome the Fanonian "fact of blackness" and, what is equally important, his female counterpart has overcome her own (until now untheorized) "fact of whiteness". I wish this gallery to enlarge in the near future.

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