HIDING THE REAL UNDER THE FORMAL: THE SECRET POWER OF
WHITENESS IN BRAZILIAN CONTEMPORARY ART

By

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A thesis submitted to
the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

MASTERS OF ARTS

Department of Sociology and Anthropology

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Hiding the Real under the Formal:
the Secret Power of Whiteness in Brazilian Contemporary Art

Abstract

This thesis examines concepts of national, cultural, and racial identity in the Brazilian contemporary art world. My interest in this subject is grounded in my belief that culture — including contemporary visual art — can be a key site in the political struggle to transform power relations. Utilizing theories and methods from both anthropology and sociology, as well as drawing on social and political history, art history and criticism, I explore the contradictions between the Brazilian rhetoric of non-racism in the concept of *democracia racial*, and both the productions and structure of the nation's contemporary art system. Using the Voice Centred Relational method to analyse a series of interviews conducted with Brazilian contemporary art professionals, I argue that "whiteness" has hegemonic status in both the structure and productions of this art system. Drawing on Michael Taussig's notion of the "public secret" and various theories of "whiteness" as an "unmarked marker," I seek to demonstrate how Brazil's contemporary art productions, and the attitudes of white elites who work in the system, uphold the "public secret" of the reality of difference, and white "exemption" from that which is "different" or "other," through various means of appropriation, "masking," and exclusion.

For Maria Thereza Alves, *Wado*.

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Introduction

This thesis examines concepts of national, cultural, and racial identity in the Brazilian contemporary art world. It is a work of cultural studies, combining theories and methods from both anthropology and sociology, as well as drawing on social and political history, art history and criticism. More specifically, it is a study of white elites in the Brazilian context, but with implications for all of us living in so-called multiracial and post-colonial (or neo-colonial¹) societies. It looks at how difference is attributed to racial categories — despite the Brazilian rhetoric of *democracia racial* — and how this attribution is both a “public secret” and hegemonic. This thesis, then, is both a deconstruction of the ways “whiteness” marks artistic practise in Brazil, and what American studies professor Ruth Frankenberg would call a “critique of white complicity with the reproduction of racial domination along a continuum from conscious to unself-conscious enlistment” (Frankenberg 1997: 20). As such, I hope my study will be useful not only to artists and arts professionals working in and with Brazil, but also to students and researchers of race relations and identity politics in Brazil and elsewhere.

I came upon my thesis topic in a roundabout way after a number of years spent working as a critic in the international contemporary art world, during which time I developed a strong interest in issues of globalization and the new trend of

¹ Some theorists, such as Sherif Hetata, prefer the term “neocolonialism” to reflect the idea that the former colonial masters still exert the same hegemonic powers economically, socially and politically. Where the official political apparatus once supported the colonizers, today the capitalist system does the same (Hetata 1998: 273-90). In this thesis, I use the conventional term “colonial” to reference both the historic period of European colonization of the Americas, Africa, and elsewhere, as well as the contemporary “internal colonization” of populations within nations in these lands. In my view, the latter is not simply a function of capitalism, but involves deeply rooted ideas of racial difference, which this thesis addresses.

international biennials. From the mid-1990s onwards, in places such as Johannesburg, Istanbul, and Kwangju, biennial curators made great efforts to present contemporary art from developing countries alongside works of art from the major European and North American centres. These efforts were frequently praised by critics and the curators themselves as encouraging “south-to-south” communication and putting an end to Western cultural hegemony. Some of these exhibitions did indeed open up new and productive conversations about colonialism, race and representation, and related issues. Yet after attending many of the shows and working closely with some of the artists and curators, I began to wonder if a lot of these acclamations were not mere platitudes masking colonialistic “business as usual.” First, who were these exhibitions for? The second Johannesburg Biennale, for instance, was geared solely towards the visiting art professionals and privileged white locals. And second, what did “south-to-south” communication really mean, if the same small handful of critics, curators, and artists represented the developing world at every exhibition and panel discussion? Moreover, I questioned why the representatives from Latin American nations seemed to be uniformly fair-skinned (Budney 1998: 94).

Along these lines, the Brazilian contemporary art scene was particularly intriguing. Brazil, after all, has a long and distinguished history of modern and contemporary art, beginning with its Modern Art Week in 1922 which launched the renowned *antropofagia* movement (see Chapter II). Then there is the influential international São Paulo Bienal, which began in 1951 and continues today. Yet while Brazil, along with Mexico and Cuba, is one of the largest producers of contemporary art in Latin America, the structure and institutional practices of its art system remain widely unexplored and misunderstood. Notably, although a great deal of information currently exists on issues of race and representation in contemporary art within

Canada, the USA, the UK, and South Africa, very little exists about Brazil (in English or Portuguese).

As a tourist destination, Brazil is famous as a “multiracial paradise” — witness the throngs of multihued samba dancers on the postcards of Carnival parades. In fact, the Brazilian approach to diversity is very different than ours in North America: there, the ruling concept of *democracia racial* purports a position of “colourblindness” on both official and popular levels (see Chapter I). Likewise, within the international contemporary art world, the idea persists of Brazil as a haven of racial reconciliation and affinity, and as an “Other” to the West itself. Certain artistic, critical, and curatorial practices by Brazilians have reinforced this myth, such as the utilization of *antropofagia* as the main theme to São Paulo’s 1998 Bienal. Meanwhile, studies that employ racial categories demonstrate that the extreme discrepancies in living conditions experienced by the Brazilian population correlate strongly to skin-colour, and that the black² population is systematically disadvantaged as measured by demographic and socioeconomic indicators such as infant mortality, life expectancy, social mobility, labour force participation, and income distribution (see Chapter I). What’s more, these discrepancies are replicated in the elite field of contemporary art, where “representation” is arguably *the* key concern. For, despite the fact that no legal segregation has prevented blacks from full

² In the Brazilian census, a distinction is made between *pretos* (blacks) and *pardos* (browns, mulattoes, or mestizos) (see Chapter I). Abdias do Nascimento and Elisa Larkin Nascimento tell us that these distinctions have proved “so arbitrary and subjective as to be essentially useless, yet it leads those unfamiliar with the Brazilian demographic context to mistake the smaller *preto* group for black” (Nascimento and Nascimento 2001: 108). Thus, like the Nascimentos, in this thesis I use the term “black” to refer to both *pretos* and *pardos*. This term can also be used interchangeably with “Afro-Brazilian,” which corresponds to present-day Brazilian usage that tends to group *pretos* and *pardos* together under the heading of *negros*, *afro-brasileiros*, or *afro-descendente*.

participation in any Brazilian institution or industry since the Brazilian government abolished slavery in 1888, they are still extremely under-represented in contemporary art and other “high culture” activities. However, there are many black artists producing folk or “popular” art in cities and towns across the nation. Among them, many include in their work reflections on Western art history, social commentary and positions on contemporary issues, including racial and class identity, reflecting a “conceptual” approach to art-making that is similar to the one used by contemporary artists worldwide (see Chapter II). This begs the question of what is preventing these artists, or other darker-skinned Brazilians, from participating in Brazil’s contemporary art scene. Are there unofficial but systematic institutional barriers? Do the attitudes of those with power in the contemporary art system dissuade non-whites from participating? Is there a perceived need for affirmative action programs or diversity policies, much like the ones currently employed by the Canada Council for the Arts³ and other arts funding bodies in North America and the UK? If not, why?

I wanted to know more about how such an apparently thriving art system, in a nation that is not only considered to be the world’s fourth-largest democracy, but is also home to the world’s second-largest black population,⁴ manages to remain so clearly exclusive along the colour line. The limitations and constraints that are part of writing a Master’s thesis preclude the kind of extensive study that would be required to definitively answer this question. This thesis therefore examines only certain key aspects of the problem, particularly the discourse of those who are already

³ The Advisory Committee to the Canada Council for Racial Equity in the Arts was formed in 1989.

⁴ According to the census of 1980, of Brazil’s 119,000,000 people, 53,300,000 were Afro-Brazilians: 7,100,000 *pretos* (blacks) and 46,200,000 *pardos* (mulattos) (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, (IBGE) 1980, cited in Andrews 1991: 265). Nigeria, with an estimated 1980 population of 84,700,000, is the only country in the world with a larger black population than Brazil’s.

participating in the system. Specifically, I have set out to understand how Brazilian artists, critics, gallerists and curators — almost all white elites — explain their roles and practices within the contemporary art industry and how they account for the near total absence of non-white participants from this sector. I believe this inquiry is important, as it is the values, patterns of thinking, and practices of the white elites that have shaped the structure of the nation's art system, are written into its art history, and maintain existing ideological and institutional biases.

As an anthropology, then, my research project takes up Laura Nader's 1969 call for critical anthropological studies of elites (Nader 1969). Hugh Gusterson has noted that within the disciplines of anthropology, ethnography, and sociology, there seems to be a glass ceiling so that the upper reaches of the social system remain largely invisible or unscrutinized (Gusterson 1997: 115). But as Nader tells us, by focusing always on poor or powerless groups, anthropologists miss important questions and answers, since "the unit of interacting relationships... is larger than the tribe" (Nader 1969: 291). Thus, to explain why blacks do not participate in the Brazilian contemporary art world, it seems essential to focus attention on those who are currently participating: they are what Janet Wolff has called the system's "mediators" or "gatekeepers." As individuals, or as workers in the institutions they have helped build, they affect "*who* becomes an artist, *how* they become an artist, how they are then able to *practise* their art, and how they can ensure that their work is produced, performed, and *made available* to the public" (Wolff 1981: 40, emphasis in original).

My long-term interest in this subject-matter is grounded in my belief that culture — including contemporary visual art — can be a key site in the political struggle to transform power relations. That is to say, art forms do not passively reflect the beliefs and ideas of societies or individuals; rather, they actively (re)produce ideological meanings and thus reinforce them or challenge viewers' prior belief

systems, values, and ways of seeing (see Wolff 1981; and Blundell 2000, Chapter 5). As Wolff stresses, the political efficacy of art depends a great deal on the social circumstances in which it is produced. And “in a society where culture is restricted to a very small minority, or to the dominant group, then ... its transformative power is extremely limited, whatever the aesthetic convention prevailing” (Wolff 1981: 85). She claims that in such circumstances demands for cultural activism are “both meaningless and pointless” unless they are firmly linked to an analysis of the specific relations of culture, ideology, and society (Wolff 1981: 85). This thesis thus attempts to provide one foundation for such a link.

Foundations like these are necessary, because “identity politics” — or what Stuart Hall calls the “politics of representation” (Hall 1996a: 442-444)⁵ and Cornell West celebrates as “the cultural politics of difference” (West 1990: 256-267) — have not yet made an appreciable impact in Brazil. As West describes, the features of these politics include the following aims:

[T]o trash the monolithic and homogenous in the name of diversity, multiplicity, and heterogeneity; to reject the abstract, general, and universal in light of the concrete, specific, and particular; and to historicize, contextualize, and pluralize by highlighting the contingent, provisional, variable, tentative, shifting, and changing (West 1990: 257).

⁵ Hall’s understanding of representation is very similar to Wolff’s. He writes:

My own view is that events, relations, structures do have conditions of existence and real effects, outside the sphere of the discursive; but that it is only within the discursive, and subject to its specific conditions, limits and modalities, do they have or can they be constructed within meaning. Thus... how things are represented and the ‘machineries’ and regimes of representation in a culture do play a *constitutive*, and not merely reflexive, after-the-event role (Hall 1996a: 443, emphasis in original).

Such features are quite alien to Brazil's contemporary art system. The majority of white elites I interviewed could not articulate a Brazilian identity for themselves; rather they saw themselves as "international" or "universal" (see Chapter III). Having lost sight of their own privilege and the means by which they acquired it, they have also lost a sense of their own culture and of what their whiteness signifies and brings to them in Brazil. Yet, they have a culture, and I believe that their culture's productions — its ideology, language, and symbols — have as much a determining effect on their social order as does the economic system which so greatly favours them.

By looking at white elite attitudes towards blacks in art history, and towards the exclusion of blacks from contemporary art today, I hope to illuminate some of the subtle and not-so-subtle contradictions of elite discourse. At the same time, I also want to try to understand the ways in which white elites in the Brazilian contemporary art world may feel vulnerable, helpless, or burdened. Yet by focusing on the attitudes of these white elites, I do not mean to reiterate "a way of understanding the world that already has hegemonic status" in Brazilian society (Gusterson 1993:196). On the contrary, my goal is unabashedly activist: my intention is to show that the absence of black voices from the field of contemporary art is not a 100-year old hangover from Brazil's colonial past, but rather that exclusion and the denial of non-white participation are constitutive of Brazilian institutions of order and class domination in general, and its art institutions and art exchange systems specifically. By doing so, I hope to help open up a space for discussion of such issues as difference, standpoint, and equal opportunity that are currently absent from Brazilian art discourse.

Methodology

I have employed a number of methods to address my subject. In the early stages of research, I conducted an extensive review of relevant academic and non-academic literature on racial issues in Brazil, including the history of Brazilian racial thought, the writings of Gilberto Freyre, statistical and other quantitative data on the relationships between race, class, and standards of living in Brazil, current theories of Brazilian racial problems by American and Brazilian sociologists and historians, race-focused cultural studies approaches to Brazilian cinema and literature, and so forth. Most of this literature was found at the Carleton University Library (often through the Interlibrary Loans Department), but other material was specially ordered through the Internet, or purchased on visits to the USA, where Latin American studies are more common. I also conducted research into Brazilian art history, specifically into the birth of modernism and the *antropofagia* movement, as well as the work of 60s “radical” Hélio Oiticica. This research forms the basis of Chapters I and II.

Researching the current Brazilian contemporary art scene was rather more difficult to do in Canada. Through personal contacts in or from Brazil, I was able to identify some of the key players (artists, critics, curators, gallerists) and begin to make contact with them through mutual acquaintances or cold calls (phoning museums where curators worked, etc.). This led to the second stage of my research, which involved a field-trip to Brazil in March, 2002. I spent five days and five nights in São Paulo City during the opening events of the São Paulo Bienal, and five days and five nights in Rio de Janeiro, staying at the house of artist/organizer/art agitator Helmut Batista.

My original intent in Brazil was to conduct formal interviews only, but because so many people I interviewed were reluctant to comment directly on race and identity, and as other situations I found myself in proved too interesting to

ignore, I also worked as a “traditional” anthropologist, engaging in participant observation and recording numerical data. In total, I conducted ten formal interviews (two of them in New York City three months earlier). The participants included artists, gallerists, curators, and one visual arts philanthropist. Significantly, I was able to locate and interview one of the very few self-identifying black contemporary artists in Brazil (Marepe) in order to compare his views to those of the many white elites I spoke with. As Brazilian elites are usually very well educated and well-traveled, most of the people I interviewed spoke English quite fluently. Thus, all of my interviews were conducted in English save for my interview with Marepe, which we did in Portuguese (mine rather broken, but serviceable). As beginner’s luck is not always good, the recording device on my tape recorder did not properly function during most of my interview with Ernesto Neto, thus my analysis of that interview is based on my field notes and my memory of the hour we spoke together (see Chapter III for further information on interview participants and process).

When not conducting formal interviews, I collected numerous race-related stories from people about the São Paulo Bienal, including discussions of the work of Kara Walker, a highly political black American artist. I visited a number of commercial galleries, noting such features as atmosphere and accessibility. I attended the opening of an “alternative” exhibition of young and mid-career artists (Love’s House) in a semi-converted brothel in Rio, recording the statements of exhibitors, and counting audience members, tallying whites and non-whites. I had more than a dozen informal conversations with Brazilian artists, in which ideas about race and identity politics were expressed (and duly recorded in my notebook later on). All of this fieldwork forms the basis of Chapter III.

Upon my return to Canada, I emailed the artists of Love's House with a short survey about race, identity and identity politics in contemporary art (five out of eleven artists responded).⁶ I also began the arduous task of transcribing and analyzing my interviews and field notes (a mother-tongue Portuguese speaker transcribed and translated my interview with Marepe). Working on my own and with Andrea Doucet, I employed the "voice centred relational" method of analysis to my interviews. This method, which studies in depth the words, themes, and patterns of interview transcripts, and the relationship between respondent and interviewer/reader, greatly aided me in identifying and organizing the dominant and most significant themes, stories, and images (metaphors, analogies, examples) offered to me by those I interviewed. My explication of this process and my analysis of the interviews and other observations are found in Chapters III and IV. In Chapter IV, I link the analysis to what are known as "whiteness" studies and also to anthropologist Michael Taussig's theory of the "public secret." In my concluding chapter, I reflect upon what I have learned from this study, and elaborate directions for future research.

However brief, my field-trip to Brazil provided me with the opportunity to experience for myself the country's seductive atmosphere and the carefree attitude of elites which together create, as Brazilian sociologist Carlos Hasenbalg tells us, "an indistinguishable division between 'false consciousness' and 'falsity of consciousness'" (Hasenbalg 1985: 9). Trying to read through this experience, afterwards, has been the real challenge.

⁶ Due to the necessary limitations of this Master's thesis, I have not devoted a section to analysing these surveys. Rather, I used the responses I gathered as tests of and support for my analysis of the interviews in Chapters III and IV.

Chapter I

Race in Brazil

“Race,” of course, is not an objective condition. Nor is it a “mere” ideology or illusion that is better left ignored. As African-American Studies professor David Theo Goldberg explains, although discriminatory exclusions existed in Greek and medieval societies, these prejudices tended to be based on concepts of cultural, class, and gender superiority (Greek), or moral superiority (medieval), rather than perceived biological differences between whole sets of people. The concept of race dates more or less from the 15th century and was first politically and economically employed in the 16th century to justify the Spanish treatment of American Indians; indeed, some theorists argue that its invention is essential to the development of Western modernity (Goldberg 1993: 3, 14-21). Today, individual understandings of diversity and ways of enacting and enforcing racial thought differ from culture to culture, but the concept of race itself is now operational in popular and political discourse everywhere. As Frankenberg notes, since race was born out of earlier namings of supremacy, “it is not the case that an innocent racialness was corrupted by a later ranking of races, but rather that race and racism are fundamentally interwoven” (Frankenberg 1997: 9). So although race is a construct, so long as ideas of race are linked to inequalities in a given society, an understanding of these ideas is essential to developing consciousness of key economic, social, and cultural processes unfolding there.

Thus, I understand race as a historically constructed social classification that permeates the relationship between individuals and the social structure. Similarly, I understand both “black” and “white” to be politically and culturally constructed categories, which, as Hall describes, “cannot be grounded in a set of fixed trans-cultural or transcendental racial categories and which therefore [have] no

guarantees in nature” (Hall 1996a: 443). Rather, I use both of these terms as a way of referencing sets of experiences shared by groups of people, i.e. the racism and marginalization experienced by those with darker skin, and the privileges and racism belonging to those with lighter skin. Both “black” and “white” are organizing categories that function on a political level, and I believe they are both useful and necessary to contemporary politics of resistance in Brazil as much as Canada or in any colonial nation.

Yet questions of race in Brazil are particularly complex, as the nation has promoted a unique response to issues of diversity and identity that is markedly different from those of Canada or the USA and other colonial nations; this is its self-conception as a *democracia racial* (“racial democracy”) or “multi-racial paradise” which claims not to “see” the colour of a person’s skin and upholds the *mulata* woman as a national symbol. Such a self-conception began after 1888, when Brazil abolished slavery (and was the last country in the world to do so).⁷ Unlike the USA, which continued policies of segregation after Abolition, the Brazilian “Golden Law” abolished — with no compensation — all colour-based distinctions and restrictions, promoting instead fierce patriotism to a monolithic national identity.⁸

⁷ Brazil imported between nine and twelve times the number of slaves imported to the USA over the course of four hundred years to a total of approximately four million (mainly from what are now Mozambique, Angola, and the Gulf of Guinea) (Levi 1987: 5-6). At the dawn of the 19th century, two-thirds of the inhabitants of Brazil were African-born slaves or their descendants (Levine and Crocitti 1999: 122).

⁸ Unlike in the USA, Abolition in Brazil was not achieved at the cost of a bloody civil war, but was arrived at through a drawn-out, gradual process. In 1871, parliament passed the “Law of the Free Womb,” which “freed” all children born of slave mothers — although these children were still required to render service to the mother’s master until the age of twenty-one. And in 1885, parliament passed the “Sexagenarian Law,” which freed all slaves over the age of sixty-five. Yet the number of slaves was enormous: according to the 1872 census, there were still 1,510,806 human beings in slavery in Brazil that year, and the average lifespan for a male slave was only eighteen (Skidmore 1999: 69).

However, as Skidmore explains, it was not elite support for racial equality that prevented “Jim Crow”-style legal segregation from taking place in Brazil. White elites in Brazil saw themselves as vulnerable, because the nation’s non-white population far exceeded that of the USA as a proportion of the total population.⁹ Yet the already high rate of miscegenation (which had taken place throughout the four-hundred year period of slavery) made any proposition of enforcing segregation much too complicated. Thus, the nation’s policy makers hoped instead that further increased miscegenation, combined with the “naturally” high mortality rate for blacks, would eventually “whiten” Brazil to acceptable standards. Indeed, at the “First Universal Race Congress” in London, England, in 1911, the noted Brazilian doctor and anthropologist João Batista de Lacerda asserted with confidence that “in the course of another century the mixed bloods will have disappeared from Brazil. This will coincide with the extinction of the black race in our midst” (Skidmore 1999: 78).

Meanwhile, the Brazilian government began to promote itself as a “multiracial paradise” and contrasted itself overtly to the segregated USA. Many visitors in the first half of the 20th century, who were frustrated with the racist policies and racial tensions of the USA and were longing for more tolerant societies at home, were only too happy to confirm this rhetoric. For example, Theodore Roosevelt toured Brazil in 1913 and declared, “Brazil is absorbing the Negro race; there is no color bar to advancement, there is no social bar to advancement” (cited in Reichmann 1999: 2). And L.H. Stinson, an African-American physician, wrote, after a trip to Brazil: “There is absolutely no color line. The native Brazilians are mixed

⁹ The 1872 Brazilian census records 3,783,512 “whites,” 4,190,662 “mulattos,” and 1,956,304 “blacks.” The 1890 census records 6,306,923 “whites,” 5,934,241 “mulattos,” and 2,092,752 “blacks.”

Spanish, Portuguese, and Indians. Therefore some are dark, some bright and very fair [...] All attend the same churches and schools" (cited in Hellwig 1992: 44-46).¹⁰

However, as Lacerda's words attest, theories of scientific racism were still extremely widespread among Brazilian academics and elites throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These theories included social Darwinism (according to which blacks were an "incipient species"), and a strange version of polygenism (a theory of racial purity) that divided Brazil's large "mixed blood" population into "superior," "degenerate," and "socially unstable" types (Skidmore 1974: 53-58). All of these theories promoted the ideal of "whitening" Brazil to counteract the "damage" that had been done by miscegenation. The whitening thesis presumed two things: that the black population was becoming progressively less numerous than the white because of the blacks' supposedly lower birthrate, their higher incidence of disease, and their social disorganization, and that miscegenation was "naturally" producing a lighter population due to the superior strength of white genes and the tendency for people to choose partners lighter than themselves. The government, quite contrary to its rhetoric celebrating racial diversity and intermixing, tried to speed up the whitening process by actively soliciting European immigration for several decades. Every year from 1888 to 1910, tens or hundreds of thousands of immigrants from Italy, Portugal, Spain, Germany, and other European nations settled in Brazil. Most went to São Paulo and the southern states (see Skidmore 1974: 63-66; 1999: 71-73).

¹⁰ See *African-American Reflections on Brazil's Racial Paradise* (1992) (Hellwig, David J. (Ed.) Philadelphia: Temple University Press) for a comparison of early 20th century and contemporary black American perspectives on Brazil. W.E.B DuBois was an early promoter of Brazilian "racial democracy," but later reversed his position completely, after paying a visit to the South American nation.

In 1933, Gilberto Freyre set out to counter these prevailing racist theories. Freyre was a Brazilian anthropologist who had studied with Franz Boas in New York City. His much celebrated treatise, *Casa Grande e Senzala* (English title: *The Masters and the Slaves*) is a highly idiosyncratic and impressionistic social history of the slave plantation world of northeastern Brazil in the 16th and 17th centuries. It describes the multitudinous ways that African and mulatto slaves had influenced the lifestyles of the ruling planter class in food, clothing, and sex. It was in this book that Freyre gave name to the concept of *democracia racial*, defining and promoting the Brazilian nation as a unique *moreno* 'meta-race' composed of a mix of Portuguese, African and Indian cultures or "blood." According to historian Thomas Skidmore, *Casa Grande e Senzala* "turned on its head" the question of whether generations of miscegenation had irreparably damaged Brazilian society. Freyre attempted to render these racist theories obsolete by pointing to "insufficient diet, impractical clothing, and disease too often undiagnosed and untreated (especially syphilis)" as the real villains. He quoted extensively from studies by previously unknown Brazilian scientists to show how environment and cultural experiences shape the characters of populations, regardless of race, and also to prove that "the Indian and the Negro" had actually made important contributions to a healthier diet, a more practical style of dress, and better standards of living for white Brazilians (Skidmore 1974: 191).

It is difficult to overstate the importance of *Casa Grande e Senzala* to the development of the Brazilian national identity. First, it appeared at a time when the social sciences were not yet established in Brazil. Until the end of World War I, there were no higher faculties in the nation's universities except law, medicine, and engineering (Skidmore 1974: 56). Only a tiny minority of elite men attended university; most of these were still enthralled with the "get rich quick" mentality of the New World, and studied law in order to advance their careers in politics and business. Freyre's book signaled a new, more sophisticated kind of intellectuality in

the nation. Following on the heels of a powerful modern art and literature movement that was launched during Modern Art Week in 1922 (see Chapter II), and which had greatly bolstered the nation's literary identity, *Casa Grande e Senzala* received widespread acclaim as the first scholarly examination of Brazilian national character. The fact that its prognosis was as "optimistic" as the whitening thesis contributed considerably to its popularity, while at the same time it relieved the readers' shame over the nation's racial "impurity" (Skidmore 1974: 191).

Freyre followed up his first success with two equally popular sequels, *Sobrados e mucambos* (*The Mansion and the Shanties*) (1951) and *Ordem e progresso* (1959). In 1962, Brazil celebrated the 25th anniversary of the publication of *Casa Grande e Senzala* with a commemorative volume containing sixty-four essays written in tribute to the book's "influence on the modern culture of Brazil," and in which Freyre is acclaimed as "a genuine culture hero" (Skidmore 1974: 274). In the course of my research, I have noted that even though contemporary writers rarely refer directly to Freyre's original research, he is invariably cited as the main source of the nation's self-identity and racial ideology. Although *Casa Grande e Senzala* was published nearly seventy years ago, no subsequent writer on the subject has had remotely comparable influence: it is as if popular analysis of race issues in Brazil began and ended with his book.

Based on the image drawn by Freyre, today Brazil claims to be a highly — even radically — assimilationist society, by which in comparison the multiculturalism of Canada would be a lesser form of essentialist society (and where South African apartheid was highly essentialist). According to this theory, where Canada acknowledges the "differences" between people's ethnicities or "races," modern Brazil sees only countless shades of white, beige, brown, etc., which are in

any case irrelevant.¹¹ Skidmore calls Brazil, along with most of Latin America and the Caribbean, “multiracial” rather than “biracial,” meaning that its media and government employ more than two racial categories (whereas in North America and Europe, media and politicians tend to view race in terms of black/white or at least white/non-white) (Skidmore 1992: 3). Indeed, the categories used in Brazilian census today are *preto*, *pardo*, and *branco* (“black,” “brown,” “white”), but in everyday language people employ many more descriptive categories.

In 1976, the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), which is responsible for census-taking, recorded 134 different terms people used to classify their skin colour. Several of these expressions described physical attributes beyond skin colour, and many terms, when used by others, would be considered pejorative — for instance, *crioula* (little servant or slave; African) or *agalegada* (an often derogatory term for a Galician; features considered gross or misshapen). A sample of the other terms used by people to describe their skin colour demonstrates the misgivings Brazilians have about classifying themselves in the broad terms of race that we employ in North America. Some of the terms used by Brazilians include: *alva* (pure white), *alva-rosada* (white with pink highlights), *avermelhada* (reddish, with blood vessels showing through the skin), *baiano* (Bahian or ebony), *bugrezinha-escura* (Indian characteristics), *burro-quando-foge* (“burro running away,” implying racial mixture of unknown origin), *cabloca* (mixture of white, Negro, and Indian), *cardão* (thistle-coloured), *cor-de-café* (tint of coffee), *cor-de-canela* (tint of cinnamon), *morena-castanha* (cashewlike tan), *morena-fechada* (very dark, almost mulatta), *pouca-morena* (dusky), *quase-negra* (almost Negro),

¹¹ These concepts of “assimilationist” versus “essentialist” societies are taken from *Apartheid and ‘Democracia Racial’: South Africa and Brazil* (1995), by Brazilian anthropologist Luiz Ribeiro, whose work is very critical of South Africa’s approach to racial issues, but very accepting of his own country’s.

roxa (purplish), *sarara* (mulatto with reddish kinky hair, aquiline nose), and *verde* (greenish) (Levine and Crocitti 1999: 386-390). By contrast, in 1990, the IBGE allowed Brazilians to choose from only five categories, and as a result the population was listed as 55.3 percent white, 39.3 percent brown, 4.9 percent black, and 0.5 percent Asian (no statistics for Indians were provided; see also footnote 4, p. 4). Complaints ensued about the lack of choice in the census (Levine and Crocitti 1999: 386).

Yet as many critics have pointed out, such a system does not point to a “colourblind” society, but rather a highly race- or colour-conscious culture. These race or colour differences have consequences, too — despite many elites’ claims to the contrary, racial differences are not irrelevant in Brazil, but correlate highly with social and economic stratification.¹² Indeed, some critics of the Brazilian system argue that despite the official rhetoric of colourblindness, the binary system of “white” and “black” still underlies the spectrum approach to colour-classification. These critics claim that spectrum approach actually encourages Brazilians of African descent to distance themselves from “blackness” or “Africanness,” precisely because

¹² According to Teresa Caldeira, a recent study by PNUD (Programa das Nações Unidas para o Desenvolvimento) shows that Brazil has the world’s greatest economic inequality after Sierra Leone, measured by the ratio of the average per capita income of the richest 10 percent and of the poorest 40 percent of the population. While in the majority of developed nations and all other major Latin American nations, the income of the richest 10 percent is on average up to ten times higher than that of the poorest 40 percent, in Brazil it is almost 30 times higher (PNUD-IPEA 1996:1, as cited in Caldeira 2000: 47-48). The top (fifth) quintile accounts for 61.7 percent of the income distribution, while the lowest (first) accounts for a mere 3.3 percent. The second, third and fourth quintiles account for 6.5, 14.5, and 17.9 percent respectively (DIEESE, Departamento Intersindical de Estatística e Estudos Socio-Economicos, 2002). In real terms, this means that the “middle-class” Brazilian family (of which there are proportionally very few) might live on approximately CAD\$1,000 per month (Scheper-Hughes, 83). By contrast, according to a World Bank Report, 40.9 percent of the Brazilian population lives in poverty, or below US\$60 per month (World Bank, HRO 1993:2).

blackness is still highly stigmatized (Nascimento and Nascimento 2001: 106-119; Reichmann 1999: 7-10). With this in mind, Brazilian sociologist Carlos Hasenbalg calls *democracia racial* “undoubtedly the most powerful integrative symbol created to demobilize blacks and legitimate the racial inequalities prevailing since the end of slavery” (Hasenbalg 1985: 7). A closer look at Freyre’s theory will show why and how this occurred.

Democracia Racial as Myth

Skidmore, Hasenbalg, and Reichmann are just a few of many critics who argue that some profoundly disturbing subtexts underlie Freyre’s utopic fantasy in *Casa Grande e Senzala*. These subtexts, which are intrinsic to what they all call the “myth” of *democracia racial*, have helped create a double standard in which prejudiced conceptions of blacks and concealed discriminatory practices coexist with a polite racial etiquette. Such dissimulation occasionally becomes transparent: “Brazilians Deny Racism That They Know Exists” (*Brasileiro não assume racismo que afirma existir*) was the title of a report by Datafolha, a Brazilian polling institute, on a survey it conducted in 1995, in which 89 percent of those self-identifying as whites agreed that whites harbor racial prejudice, but only 11 percent of the whites admitted to being prejudiced themselves (Reichmann 1999: 5). Reichmann observes that whites may frown upon racism “even while refusing to share an elevator with a darker-skinned person” (Reichmann 1999: 4).

How did *Casa Grande e Senzala* contribute to this situation? First, its author glossed over white responsibility for the sufferings of blacks before Abolition. While Freyre blamed the crime of slavery for much of Brazil’s social woes, he portrayed Brazilian slaveholders as relatively benevolent, writing that slavery in Brazil “proceeded more slowly and was less cruel in character than in Spanish America or among the English in North America. And there were creative aspects to be set over

against the destructive ones” (Freyre 1933: 177). Of course, this “myth of the friendly master” has now been proven absolutely false, as revisionist scholars have collected ample evidence demonstrating that the treatment of Brazil’s slaves equaled the level of dehumanization recorded anywhere else (Skidmore 1974: 217; Levine and Crocitti 1999: 121-124). Yet many Brazilians still nurture this belief, and it conveniently buttresses current abdications of white responsibility.

Second, Freyre appropriated black identity in a way that was both absurd and patronizing. Writing about the “warm bonds” experienced between white children and their black wet-nurses, Freyre insists that “every Brazilian, even the light-skinned fair-haired one, carries about with him on his soul, when not on soul and body alike — for there are many in Brazil with the mongrel mark of the *genipap*¹³ — the shadow, or at least the birthmark, of the aborigine or the Negro” (Freyre 1933: 278). This “cordial” appropriation of black identity and culture, which is intrinsic to the concept of *democracia racial* and to Brazil’s national character, continues to be used by white elites to avoid social polarization and conflict. For example, Reichmann recounts attending a meeting with a progressive organization engaged in a women’s rights campaign in Rio de Janeiro in 1998. “I asked if there were any black women involved in the project,” Reichmann states, “The surprised response from a woman who looked just like me (I am of Irish/German background) was ‘But we are all black!’” (Reichmann 1999: 5-6).

Third, and perhaps most important to my thesis, although Freyre ostensibly set out to counter the “whitening” theory by claiming African blood was not a scourge but an asset, his argument was still based on a premise of European

¹³ The translator’s footnote in the English rendition tells us that *jenipapo* is defined as a “dark stain on the body of children, in the inferior dorsal region, held to be a mark of mixed breeding” (Freyre 1933: 278).

superiority that would, eventually, subsume the negative elements of other races. Although he stressed the social rather than biological construction of cultures, he maintained that slavery had “deformed” black Brazilians, impeding them from being fully able to enjoy the fruits of post-Abolition free labour. According to Skidmore, this notion “served to reinforce the whitening ideal” even while it claimed to counter it, as it laid the blame for black Brazilians’ inferior socioeconomic position on black Brazilians themselves, insinuating that blacks needed to become more like whites before being able to escape from their economic and social miseries (Skidmore 1974: 192).

Today, more than 100 years after Abolition, the racial inequalities in Brazil are marked. According to historians Robert Levine and John Crocitti, in terms of race Brazil remains one of the most residentially segregated nations in the world (Levine and Crocitti 1999: 352). Black women and men also have the lowest incomes nationwide: in cities in 1994, black men’s salaries averaged 2.9 minimum salaries and black women’s 1.7 minimum salaries, compared to white men’s 6.3 and white women’s 3.6. In the rural Northeast region, black women earned on average a shocking 32 percent of the minimum salary (Bento 1999: 110; Nascimento and Nascimento 2001: 111).¹⁴ Blacks also have significantly lower average educational levels. In 1980, illiteracy rates for individuals 15 to 64 years of age were 14.5 percent for whites and 36.5 percent for *pretos* and *pardos*. At the other end of the educational pyramid, 4.2 percent of whites and only 0.6 percent of non-whites had achieved a college or university diploma (Silva and Hasenbalg 1999: 54-55). Finally, the average life-expectancy of blacks is more than six years less than that of whites, even taking into account differences in income and educational levels. And while regional

¹⁴ The source for this data is the IBGE 1994. Here, “black” refers to both *pretos* and *pardos*.

differences in infant and child mortality rates are enormous, these rates are significantly higher among blacks in all regions (Nascimento and Nascimento 1999: 117; Global Justice Centre: 46).

For my study, which focuses upon the elite industry of contemporary art, it is important to note that racial inequality in the Brazilian labour market is persistent and cuts across all fields. One 1988 labour market analysis concluded that more than half of the black labour force is concentrated in predominantly low-paying, manual occupations. Only about 13 percent of black workers are employed in nonmanual services, compared to a figure of 24 percent for whites. Significantly, whites earn about twice as much as blacks in the higher paying nonmanual service-sector jobs (Bento 1999: 110). Very few statistics exist regarding participation of blacks in professional positions such as medicine, law, engineering and so forth, or in other positions of authority such as Congress, the Foreign Office, church hierarchy, the military or police; I have found no statistics regarding the participation of blacks in the fine arts. However, a 1991 study that analyzed life histories collected from São Paulo workers in different occupations verified that discrimination in the workplace is greatest in those occupations where blacks must interact with the top echelons of management or with important white clients. This difficulty persists on a smaller scale with regard to obtaining high-level positions that involve supervising other workers (Castro and Guimarães 1999: 89). Sociologist Maria Aparecida Silva Bento reports that black women are particularly vulnerable to discrimination in professional or elite occupations. She argues that this is largely because, in body-conscious Brazil, great importance is placed upon physical appearance in these fields, and Brazilian standards of beauty are based on a European physique (Bento 1999: 116).

Yet Brazilian media and politicians still rarely debate diversity, affirmative action, reverse discrimination, colour-blind equal opportunity, and difference. Hasenbalg cites two reasons for this: the collapsing of race into class by elites and the

relief of white guilt, both results of the whites' "monolithic" acceptance of the myth of *democracia racial*. He explains:

First, once racial democracy and its corollaries — the lack of racial prejudice and discrimination — are accepted, manifestations of prejudice against blacks are attributed to class differences rather than race. Consequently, inequalities between whites and blacks are not perceived as racial in origin, but as the result of class factors. The perspective is common among educated Brazilians and has been held by some analysts of Brazilian race relations even though it does not explain the inferior status of nonwhites more than nine decades after abolition. Second, the official race ideology produces a sense of relief among whites, who may exempt themselves from any responsibility for the social problems of nonwhites. (Hasenbalg 1985: 9-10)

Black activists, on the other hand, have been denouncing the myth of racial democracy since its very inception.¹⁵ But the first black Brazilian political organization, the Frente Negra Brasileira (Brazilian Black Front), was not formed until 1931, and was disbanded only six years later when the Estado Novo, (the right-wing dictatorship of Getúlio Vargas), banned all political parties. Collective racial mobilization remained weak in the 1940s and 1950s, although blacks were being actively recruited into the Brazilian Workers' Party (Partido de Trabalhadores Brasileiros, PTB), the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB), and the Social Progressive Party (PSP). Then, during the horribly oppressive right-wing dictatorship of 1964 to 1985, political organizing of any kind was violently suppressed and any discussion of race was explicitly considered subversive and could result in detention and torture. Only with the beginning of the political opening of the late 1970s, (a period known as the *Abertura*), did a revitalized black consciousness begin to emerge. It first took the form of study groups and cultural organizations, dedicated to consciousness raising

¹⁵ In 1918, the black São Paulo newspaper *O Alfinete* wrote that "[T]he equality and fraternity of peoples... which the Republic implanted as a symbol of our democracy, is, as concerns the blacks, a fiction and a lie" (cited in Andrews 1991: 139).

and celebrations of Afro-Brazilian culture. The first national-level black political organization since the 1937 banning of the Brazilian Black Front came with the Movimento Negro Unificado (United Black Movement, MNU) in 1978.

The MNU and other black activist groups have been making limited headway. By engaging in opposition-party politics, leaders from these groups have successfully lobbied for state-level councils to address Afro-Brazilian affairs in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. The Centre for the Study of Labour Relations and Inequality (Centro de Estudos das Relações do Trabalho e Desigualdades, CEERT) has organized unionists against racial discrimination and trained teachers to counteract racial stereotypes. The Geledes Black Women's Institute has initiated programs to bring discrimination cases to court and to advocate for black women's health rights. Some activist groups have begun to organize transnationally as well as nationally, working in particular with other Latin American and Caribbean nations to discuss identity and discrimination issues. Black organizations have also appealed to the United Nations to broadcast the hypocrisy of Brazil's racial democracy, and in 1995 won their campaign to have UNESCO's Commission on Human Rights' Program of Action to Combat Racial Discrimination assign a Special Rapporteur to investigate racism in Brazil (Reichmann 1999: 14-20). Very significantly, in 1995 the black movement successfully lobbied to have November 20 declared a national day of Afro-Brazilian commemoration, marking the 300th anniversary of the death of Zumbi dos Palmares, a black slave who led a successful rebellion against the colonial slaveholders. And the Landless Workers' Movement (MST) has also made headlines internationally, drawing attention to the importance of land reform for the disenfranchised black workers of rural Brazil.

Yet these political activities remain confined to a tiny proportion of the black populace, and they have had almost no white support. On a popular level, and in the

daily lives of most black Brazilians, very little has changed since Abolition in 1888, and few collective efforts are being made to achieve change. Skidmore states:

Visitors to modern-day Brazil, especially North Americans, often ask why Afro-Brazilians have done so little to protest their plight. Why have they (aside from a very small band of militants) not demanded intervention to counter discrimination? The question reveals a basic misunderstanding of the dynamics of Brazilian race relations, which have proved remarkably stable because all the actors — blacks and mulattos, as well as whites — have believed in key elements of ... the “Myth of Racial Democracy” (Skidmore 1999: 209).

The myth of racial democracy has impeded blacks from organizing themselves politically in at least two ways. First, since this myth denies racial difference, black Brazilian movements have needed to *reaffirm* racial difference in order to both reclaim Afro-Brazilian culture and to refute the official national myth that black poverty and social exclusion are unrelated to racial discrimination. But as Reichmann explains, this is no easy task:

The construction of the *negro* as a political subject has required the coupled acts of self-affirmation as citizen (Afro-Brazilian contributions to national culture and religion) and of strategic exit (social exclusion as common ground for solidarity at the margins)... To assert citizenship *as* exit is a tall order for anyone and is perhaps unacceptable for those who have lived a life without rights (Reichmann 1999: 11, emphasis in original).

Second, according to Skidmore, the construction of the *negro* as a political subject has also — ironically — been inhibited by the absence, since 1888, of any form of legal segregation or other form of official discrimination. Very simply, this absence means that “[t]he kind of parallel nonwhite institutions, such as produced by United States segregation, are missing in Brazil” (Skidmore 1999: 209).

With its innumerable categories to describe identity, the 1976 census clearly demonstrates the lack of collective identity among Afro-Brazilians. It is precisely this

lack of collective identity that has inhibited the potential for political action. Yet there is reason for blacks to assume a collective identity. As Reichmann, Nascimento, and others explain *pardos* often try to avoid the social stigma of being considered “black;” however, many studies have now shown that *pretos* and *pardos* display strikingly similar profiles in terms of income, education, life expectancy, etc., and both are consistently much worse off than whites in all categories. As Nelson do Valle Silva tells us, “the analysis of blacks [*pretos*] and *pardos* together appears to be a sensible approach to the study of racial discrimination in Brazil” (Silva 1999:68).

In effect, the myth of *democracia racial* maintains a powerful hold over the imaginations of many Brazilians, particularly the white elite but also, to a different degree, many blacks. Hasenbalg calls the myth a “cult” (Hasenbalg 1985: 9) and T. Lynn Smith claims that its tenets have assumed the character of commandments: “(1) Under no circumstance should it be admitted that racial discrimination exists in Brazil; and (2) any expression of racial discrimination that may appear should be attacked as un-Brazilian” (cited in Hasenbalg 1985: 9). This can make research with Brazilian participants particularly frustrating, and has in fact greatly limited studies on racial relations.

Problems with Researching Brazil

Following Freyre, a handful of Brazilian social scientists continued research into Brazilian society, racial politics, and race relations. Many of these researchers have approached race through what Hall calls an approach of “economism,” whereby racial issues have no determining or structuring force in their own right, but simply mirror the economic foundations of society (Hall 1996b: 417). There were the so-called “racial revisionists” of the 1950s and 1960s, like Florestan Fernandes, who argued that Brazil’s “racial dilemma” was a hangover from the days of slavery, which came into conflict with capitalist development and would be eliminated by a

transition to modernity (Fernandes 1969). Thales de Azevedo, another revisionist, even claimed that class conflict was *replacing* race conflict, and that the Brazilian system of racial classification necessarily subordinated race to class (Azevedo 1953). According to American sociologist Howard Winant, even a series of very negative reports on race relations in Brazil made by UNESCO researchers beginning in the 1950s, and which documented widespread racism and the persistence of the ideology of “whitening,” still described race epiphenomenally, as a manifestation of some other, more fundamental social process: class (Winant 1994: 131-33). However, this is not surprising, as Fernandes and other revisionists were contributors to the UNESCO reports.

Beginning in the 1970s, a “postrevisionist” or structuralist approach to race began to emerge. These authors, including Anani Dzidzienyo, Nelson do Valle Silva, and Carlos Hasenbalg (whose work I draw on extensively in this chapter), looked at the way the Brazilian social order had maintained racial inequalities without encountering significant opposition. According to French sociologist Michel Agier, these researchers were the first to approach racism as having a determining or structuring force in its own right, connected to, but not subordinate to, economic issues (Agier 1995: 245). They argued that racial inequalities are both structural and linked to a formidable racial ideology, one that “achieves *without tension* the same results as do overtly racist societies” (cited in Winant 1994: 136, emphasis in original). According to Reichmann, Hasenbalg and Silva were the first Brazilian scholars to undertake statistical studies that convincingly disaggregated class variables from the effects of racial discrimination, supporting activists’ claims that racial stratification was not merely an epiphenomenon of class or the result of a “culture” of poverty (Reichmann 1999: 29). Yet some more recent critics argue that on the whole, the literature on race in Brazil still suffers from a series of debilitating problems, including: “a neglect of the discursive and cultural dimension of race, an exaggerated

belief in the omnipotence of [white] elites where racial management is concerned, and a tendency to downplay the tensions and conflicts involved in Brazilian racial dynamics” (Winant 1994: 138).

But beyond any perceived inadequacies of existing theories, there are other impediments to making sense of racial relations in Brazil. In his paper “Fact and Myth: Discovering a Racial Problem in Brazil,” Skidmore notes that until fifteen years ago there were virtually no quantitative data with which one could study the topic. The national census did not include race or skin-colour as a category between 1890 and 1940. Until 1976, there were no data by race or skin-colour on income, education, health or housing. Discussion of racial relations was therefore largely based on the “soft” data collected by anthropologists and historians, who used laws, travelers’ accounts, memoirs, court records, anecdotes, religion, folklore, art and other such sources. However, most of this research has avoided the contemporary reality, with historians focusing largely on the period of slavery, and anthropologists emphasizing the African “survivals” (elements of Afro-Brazilian culture that show continuing influence of some “pure” African origins). According to Skidmore, the reason for the lack of quantitative — or even contemporary qualitative — data is twofold: first, the “colour continuum” approach to diversity logically nullifies any race-based studies of contemporary Brazilian society; and second, despite the official or asserted lack of a “colour line,” Brazilian society has always been based on a clear belief of white superiority (though not white supremacy). He argues that the lack of data collection has allowed the myth of racial democracy to flourish despite overwhelming evidence of race-based inequalities.

Although more quantitative data have been collected since 1976, Skidmore points out that no social scientist has yet produced any comprehensive, well-documented overview of Brazilian race relations, and that, furthermore, since a small flurry of data collection twenty-five years ago, very little effort has been made

to generate new data. He therefore advocates a vigorous research agenda for sociologists that includes: 1) the demographic profile by race, 2) studies of recent changes in socioeconomic stratification by race, 3) collection of evidence for differential access to education, especially secondary and university education, by race, 4) analysis of variations by race in access to health care, employment training, government pensions, subsidized housing, labour courts, and civil and criminal justice, and 5) studies of the effect of race in the labour market (Skidmore 1992: 18).¹⁶ Skidmore is obviously primarily concerned with quantifiable studies that will have policy relevance. He is skeptical of the ability of anthropologists to produce such studies "because it is not what they are trained to do nor what they are most interested in" (Skidmore 1992: 19). However, he does see a vital role for anthropologists in developing the field of research in race relations. In particular, he cites discourse analysis as an important pursuit, to illuminate the mentalities (both elite and non-elite) with which Brazilians construct and reproduce ideas of race. Along these lines, I hope that my thesis can contribute to research into race relations in Brazil by bringing to light some of the ways that "whiteness" is constructed and normalized by white elites, and how this mentality poses itself in relation to "blackness" or the "other."

¹⁶ Skidmore, an American, developed this tentative list with the collaboration of Brazilian researchers Carlos Hasenbalg, Luiz Felipe de Alencastro, Elza Berquo and others. Collaboration between outsiders and Brazilians is, according to Skidmore, the key to successful research. This is a view I strongly agree with.

Chapter II

Brazilian Art: History and Structure

The history of contemporary art in Brazil follows a course parallel to the development of the concept of *democracia racial*, and in some cases the art world even anticipated Freyre's ideas.¹⁷ Whereas *Casa Grande e Senzala* was published in 1933, by 1928 the artistic world had already taken up the poetic concept of *antropofagia* (anthropofagia, or cannibalism) as a way of portraying modern Brazilian identity. *Antropofagia* conceived of Brazilians as a new, exotic mix of black, Indian, and Portuguese races that would selectively devour the ideas of Europeans in order to create a uniquely Brazilian culture, much like Freyre's notion of the "meta-race." The movement had a profound effect on the artists, writers, and poets of the 1920s and 1930s, and then again on the artists and musicians of the 1960s, as seen in the work of visual artist Hélio Oiticica and his circle, and in the music of Caetano Veloso, Gilberto Gil, and others from the *Tropicália* movement. Today, a number of high profile visual artists are indebted to the anthropofagist movement, including Ernesto Neto and Beatriz Milhazes, both of whom I interviewed in the course of my research.

In this chapter, I argue that the theory of *antropofagia* is dependent upon the white appropriation of black and Indian identities very similar to the way that Freyre appropriated black identity when he wrote that "every Brazilian ... carries about with him on his soul, when not on soul and body alike ... the shadow, or at least the birthmark, of the aborigine or the Negro." Moreover, I argue that this appropriation

¹⁷ However, despite the similarities between Freyre's 1933 notions of national identity and those of the modernists in the late 1920s, it must be noted that Freyre himself agitated against the cosmopolitanism of the modernists, arguing for a cultural, economic, and social policy of regionalism in his Program of the Regionalist Centre of 1926 (Ades 1989: 136).

was essential for the marketing of Brazilian art, and that it has historically served to further the marginalization of blacks from the contemporary art world, while at the same time masking or denying this marginalization. I also argue that despite the claims to cultural and racial inclusiveness inherent in the theory of *antropofagia*, the Brazilian contemporary art world nevertheless functions within a larger system of categorization of the visual arts that is heavily race-dependent and segregating. That is, my argument is that what divides a work of art that is classified as *arte contemporânea* from another work of art that is classified as *arte afrobrasileira* is sometimes no more than the colour of the artist's skin. This chapter, which is based upon research I conducted both prior to and during my trip to Brazil, will provide the necessary context for the discussion of my fieldwork in Chapter III.

Antropofagia and Brazilian modernism

It is important to begin by underlining that radical appropriations of black and Indian cultures did not begin in the twentieth century with the anthropofagists or the writings of Gilberto Freyre. In the visual arts and literature, Brazilian elites had been “cannibalizing” others for two or three centuries already. Indeed, from the first days of their arrival in Brazil, the European colonists displayed an intense — if perverse — fascination for the so-called “primitive” cultures of their black slaves and all Indian people they encountered. In “The Mulatto as Artist and Image in Colonial Brazil” (1996), Tania Costa Tribe notes that painted and engraved images of black and mulatto slaves by white artists were common by 1800, and were usually portrayed as “idealized, contented figurines, documented and catalogued according to external details like their attire and occupation and devoid of individual expressions of emotion” (Tribe 1996: 68-69). In *Three Sad Races: Racial identity and national consciousness in Brazilian literature* (1983), literary historian David T. Haberly comments on the phenomenon of white male writers depicting black women as

hyper-sexualized, presumably in order to imply “greater desirability and the superior sexuality of white males” (Haberly 1983: 11-12) — so common was it in the 17th century that Haberly calls it “a national daydream.” At the same time, literary portrayals of Indians were increasing, focusing less on their “cannibalistic” rituals and more on their perceived “nobility” or “purity.” By 1822, the year of Brazilian independence, the Romantic idealization of the Indian had become the “fundamental Brazilian symbol” in national literature (Haberly 1983: 15).¹⁸

The spark that would culminate in the Anthropofagist Manifesto came one hundred years later, at the Municipal Theatre of São Paulo in São Paulo City in 1922, when a group of young Brazilian poets, painters and critics organized the *Semana de Arte Moderna*, or Modern Art Week. The goal of this one-time event was ostensibly to free Brazilian arts from the restricting (i.e. Romantic)¹⁹ forms officially sponsored by the Brazilian Academy of Letters and the Academy of Fine Arts. Significantly, as historian Darrell Levi remarks, the organizers — nearly all white elites who had been living for extended periods in Europe — were people who had discovered modern art and “*rediscovered Brazil*” in Europe, and not at home in South America (Levi 1987: 132, emphasis added). According to participant Mario de Andrade,²⁰ Modern Art Week thus became a schizoid combination of “ferocious

¹⁸ By this time, of course, most indigenous people in Brazil had been annihilated, assimilated, or pushed beyond the limits of Portuguese settlement.

¹⁹ Romanticism is a term loosely applied to a main European literary and artistic movement of the 18th and 19th centuries. It involved a revolt against the prescribed rules of Classicism, and its aims included a return to nature and to belief in the goodness of humanity; individualism; the development of nationalistic pride; and the exaltation of the senses and emotions over reason and intellect.

²⁰ The poet and novelist Mario Andrade, no relation to either the poet Oswald de Andrade or the equally well-known poet Carlos Drummond de Andrade, was mulatto. This is worth noting because, as Skidmore states, “mulattos were not common in high artistic circles” (Skidmore 1999: 102).

nationalism” and “modernist internationalism” (Levi 1987: 132). On display in the theatre was an eclectic assortment of paintings and sculptures which merged Futurist²¹ celebrations of technology and industry — symbolized in paintings by the city of São Paulo itself²² — with Primitivist²³ renditions of the supposedly “picturesque simplicity” of rural life in a tropical country.

The Brazilian painter Tarsila do Amaral did not take part in Modern Art Week, as she was still living in France at that time. Her work, however, was to become key to the development of Brazilian modernism. In 1923, while living in Paris and studying with Fernand Leger, she painted the “groundbreaking” and now famous image *A Negra* (*The Black Woman*) (Fig. 1). This canvas depicts in a Cubist-Primitivist style,²⁴ a large, bald, naked Black woman, with exaggerated thick lips and severely slanted eyes, seated cross-legged with one massive bare breast hanging pendulously over her crossed arms. Behind her is a background composed of wide, straight, and very “modern” stripes, along with a stylized banana leaf. As curator Fatima Bercht writes, this image “brings to mind the Afro-Brazilian wet

²¹ Futurism was an artistic movement that developed in Italy immediately prior to World War I. The Futurists aimed to portray the dynamic character of 20th-century life by glorifying danger, war, and the machine age.

²² São Paulo was already the largest and most industrialized of Brazilian cities.

²³ Primitivism was an early 20th century modern art movement that sought to replicate or “return to” the “naivety” of the so-called “primitive” art that was then making its way from colonial expeditions to the market, and was also a deliberate attempt to reproduce the “innocence of vision” and expression found in the drawings of children and psychiatric patients. (See Clifford 1988a for a critical discussion of “modernist primitivism”).

²⁴ Beginning in France in the early 20th century and made famous in paintings by Pablo Picasso, Cubism was characterized by a focus on geometrical shapes and the attempt to depict an object as if being viewed from multiple angles at the same time. It was, in fact, related to the Primitivist movement, as its originators were highly inspired by the geometrical shapes of many African sculptures they had seen.

nurses often employed by families of European descent throughout Brazil” (Bercht 1993: 53) — the wet nurses who, Freyre argued in 1933, gave all white Brazilians claims to black identity.

One year after its completion, *A Negra* became the symbol of the *Manifesto Pau-Brasil* (Brazil-Wood Manifesto), a literary and artistic movement founded by Amaral’s future husband, Oswald de Andrade, who shortly after would write the anthropofagist manifesto. *Pau-Brasil* took the 16th-century exportation of Brazil’s first cash crop, Brazil-Wood, as metaphor for a desired new culture based upon the exportation of Brazilian ideas and styles. This “celebration” of the dual nature of Brazil, with its modern industry and tropical “simplicity,” was the direct forerunner to *antropofagia*. A number of artists produced works for *Pau-Brasil*, including Amaral, Emiliano Di Cavalcanti and Lasar Segall. These artists invariably represented the nation’s “simplicity” through images akin to *La Negra*, pictures of “the *caboclo*, black people of ... the interior” (Damian and Mehrrens 1999: 313). The artist Vincente do Rego Monteiro used a different symbol to represent “simplicity;” he is known as “the first Brazilian modern painter to depict Indian themes” (De Sá Rego and Harrison 1960-87: 8). Haberly calls this period “modernist ‘neo-Indianism’”²⁵ and explains that rather than offering new propositions, this 20th-century “Indian fever” was directly influenced by its 19th-century predecessor (Haberly 1987: 130). But as forerunner to the *antropofagia* movement, *Pau-Brasil* anticipates an important theme not present in 19th-century Indianism; that is the idea of exportation to a global market.

Amaral, daughter of a wealthy landowner and coffee grower in São Paulo State, had become a high-fashion socialite in Paris. She was very much aware of the

²⁵ I believe that the field of literature, which is Haberly’s subject, was much more influenced by Indianism than were the visual arts, which seemed to gravitate towards images of black people, with some exceptions.

European vogue for primitivism and the exotic, and marketed herself correspondingly. According to her biographers, “she admired and played the music of Erik Satie, was Paul Poiret’s customer, and bought Rosine’s perfume, Perugia’s shoes, and Martine’s furniture,” yet European visitors to her *atelier* would be offered simple black bean dishes or *canja*, a rice and chicken soup of peasant origin, because “such a menu was a metaphor for Tarsila’s influences” (Damian and Mehrtens 1999: 311). The year she completed *A Negra*, Amaral herself wrote about her work:

I want to be the painter of my country. How grateful I am for having spent all my childhood on the farm.²⁶ The memories of these times have become precious for me. I want, in art, to be the little country girl from São Bernardo, playing with straw dolls, like in the last picture I am working on ... Don’t think that this tendency is viewed negatively here [in Paris]. On the contrary. What they want is that each one brings the contribution of his own country. This explains the success of the Russian Ballet, Japanese graphics and black music. Paris has had enough of Parisian art (Lucie-Smith 1993: 42).

Amaral’s words reveal an eagerness for both critical and commercial success, and demonstrate that she was, like countless other artists of her day, feeling the ideological effects of the commercial gallery system, which was by now firmly entrenched in Paris and whose historical development is completely entwined with the development of avant-garde art and all its issues of “newness” and “authenticity”.²⁷ Market-savvy, Amaral was — in my opinion, disingenuously — carving herself a suitable identity as “Other” to Europe, finding her inspiration in the servants and other poor people who lived on or near her father’s plantation.

Given Amaral’s social and historical context, this kind of appropriation should come as no surprise, yet neither was it as innocent as Amaral made out when

²⁶ The “farm” was, more correctly, a plantation.

²⁷ See Cynthia and Harrison White (1965), *Canvases and Careers: Institutional Change in the French Painting World*. USA: John Wiley and Sons, Inc.

she depicted the process as childlike, like “playing with straw dolls.” As Deborah Root describes, appropriation happens when “particular kinds of images of colonized cultures are carefully and habitually maintained as sources of what gets called ‘inspiration’” (Root 1996: 19). The anonymous, naked black woman is one such motif that recurs throughout Western art history, and Amaral, like other white artists, bought this “muse” wholesale. We must remember that this occurred under the influence of a French society that was at the time ravenous for exotic cultural goods. This appetite had existed for a very long time, but in the 19th century it had developed into a sense of entitlement. Root explains:

Nineteenth-century colonialists believed that the art and artifacts of people across the globe were by definition for the taking, precisely because the Westerners’ supposedly greater, scientific perspective entitled them to bring the arts of all other cultures under their purview (Root 1996: 22).

Of course, the early 20th-century European and Brazilian avant-garde did not value “primitive” art for scientific purposes. Precisely the opposite: this art appealed to them for its supposed power to undermine the existing social order with its emphasis on rationality. “Primitive art,” as it enters into the modern, generally stood for a wider human tradition with an emphasis on inborn creativity, spontaneity, the pre-rational and the unconscious. Yet, there was rarely concern displayed for the welfare of the real people from whom this art (or its styles and ideas) was taken. In fact, as Raymond Williams explains, as far as the “primitive” relates to ideas of the “popular” or “folk,” this influence within the avant-garde did not always correspond to concerns for global equality or to socialist revolutionary tendencies. Indeed, it was at times very compatible with extreme forms of nationalism, such as those informing German and Italian Fascism (Williams 1989: 58).

In Brazil, this marriage of primitivism and nationalism culminated in the *antropofagia* movement, which did not merely *imply* the artists’ connections to

“primitive” Brazil, but *claimed* it outright. Perhaps this happened in response to a conscious or unconscious realization that one may legitimately “sell” something only after “owning” it completely. Thus, in 1928, five years after *A Negra* was painted, and two years after he had returned to Brazil with Amaral, his new wife, Oswald de Andrade penned his poetic rant, *Manifesto antropofago*.²⁸ He had been inspired by another of his wife’s paintings, *Abaporu* (“man who eats” in the language of the Tupi-Guarani). In this manifesto, he called for his nation’s cultural emancipation from its former colonial ruler, Portugal, and from the rest of Europe, particularly France. In language at once aggressive and capricious, Andrade proclaimed his desire to abolish the passive consumption of European culture, professing the superiority of Afro-Indigenous myths and symbols. Modern Brazilian culture, he announced, would “return” to its “cannibalistic” ways, selectively consuming the cultural products of European “Others” to produce a dynamic, truly original Brazilian civilization. In this antagonistic yet somewhat tongue-in-cheek poem, the cannibalism of Indigenous people serves as the model for a new relationship between Brazil and the outside world, one in which foreign influences would be devoured and digested by Brazilian artists in order to create a new and formidably independent Brazilian culture. As Natives in the past were supposed to have eaten only men deemed brave or powerful, Brazilians would eat only those concepts considered strong and original enough to be worthy.

In Brazil and internationally, the *antropofagia* movement is today celebrated for its “anticolonial” character. The standard reading of the *antropofagia* movement claims simply that it highlighted Afro-Indigenous myths and traditions as superior to the Christian ones because they were without the double standards of morality and

²⁸ The *Manifesto antropofago* was published in the inaugural issue of a modernist literary magazine, *Revista de Antropofagia*.

repressed sexuality that artists saw in the patriarchal Catholic behavior, and that *antropofagia* pointed to the "out-of-placeness" of European ideas in Brazil using inversion, humor and parody as subversive anti-colonialist strategies (Buarque n.d.). Issues of appropriation of black and indigenous identities by the white elites who formed the anthropofagist movement are strangely absent from art history and criticism. Yet I believe the standard reading of *antropofagia* is severely truncated: a complete reading would reveal *antropofagia* to be an essentially European modernist movement, but one which unfolded in a South American nation where black and Indian people were subject to internal colonization. This definition requires that we view "Europe" as a project extending beyond geographical borders; such a reconfiguration allows us to critique the supposition that Andrade and his colleagues represented all Brazilians (or were in solidarity with all Brazilians) and to question their claims to the images and languages — even the very identities — of such groups as Afro-Brazilians and Tupi Indians.

After all, it must be remembered that the *Manifesto antropofago* was written only forty years after the abolition of slavery in a country with the second-largest black population in the world, and where indigenous peoples were being inducted into aggressive programs of assimilation and their homelands systematically destroyed. Andrade, of Portuguese descent, was the godson of Brazil's President, Washington Luis.²⁹ As a member of the nation's ruling white elite, his claims of radical "Otherness" from European culture are highly questionable. Furthermore, with its roots in the ideas and values of the international (i.e. European) avant-garde, *antropofagia* shares its derivation in the same massive colonial campaigns that made

²⁹ Washington Luis Pereira de Sousa (Republican Party) was President of Brazil from 1926-1930. His successor Julio Prestes won the nation's presidential election in 1930, only to be immediately ousted by a military-backed Liberal Alliance coup led by wealthy landowner Gétúlio Vargas, who was to rule Brazil until 1945, and then from 1950 until his death by suicide in 1954.

possible the collection and appreciation of so-called “primitive” art objects by the Fauves, Cubists, Surrealists and other groups. I want to make clear that this is not the same old accusation of Latin America’s “derivative modernism” (Amor 1996: 247), the idea that only Europe met the conditions for avant-garde movements and that other claims to modernism are simply cheap imitations. The extreme disparities in wealth, education, and political power existing in Brazil were not an impediment to modernity, but were rather necessary conditions of it; the difference was, in Europe, these disparities were less perceptible because the exploited and disenfranchized were generally living in distant, colonized countries, and could therefore be more easily forgotten or ignored.

Andrade’s manifesto was thus both new and not new. Its newness was not that it appropriated Indian and black identities (Indianist literature and *Pau-Brasil* had already done so) but that it did so overtly and “packaged” the appropriation as a total Brazilian identity for sale to the world. It is so total that even Andrade expressed his personal indignation for Europe not having recognized contributions to its civilization by the indigenous cultures of the Americas: “We want the Carahiba revolution. Bigger than the French Revolution. The unification of all efficacious rebellions in the direction of man. Without us Europe would not even have its poor declaration of the rights of man.” Yet in reality, the Brazilian avant-garde did not consult any blacks or Indians about the *antropofagia* movement, nor did they encourage their participation in it. It would require another forty years, and a whole new visual language, before Hélio Oiticica would bring the legacy of *antropofagia* into the *favela* (shantytown), where black Brazilians actually lived.

Hélio Oiticica and *tropicalismo*

As an historical footnote, it may be worth mentioning that after a decade of painting scenes of *caipiras* (peasants) and other aspects of Afro-Brazilian culture,

Amaral divorced Andrade in 1930 and embraced communism.³⁰ She continued to paint scenes of the rural poor, but used these images to lobby for social change; she even spent time in prison for her efforts (Damian and Mehrtens 1999: 314-15; Ades 1989: 136). However, the Brazilian art world quickly lost interest in *antropofagia*, and for the next twenty-five years it followed a course through abstraction³¹ and constructivism³² very similar to trends in Europe and the USA. Then, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, against the background of growing military dissatisfaction with a series of reformist leaders,³³ the artistic milieu began to show signs of change again. Having already experimented with optical-kinetic work as part of the

³⁰ Amaral's conversion to communism coincided with the world economic crisis of 1929, the foreclosure of her father's coffee plantation, and the loss of most of her inherited fortune (Damian and Mehrtens 1999: 314).

³¹ Abstract art does not depict recognizable scenes or objects — indeed, it rejects the traditional European conception of art as an imitation of nature — but is made up of forms and colours that exist for their own expressive sake. From the 1930s to late 1950s, Abstraction dominated the art worlds of Europe and North America.

³² Constructivism first manifested itself in Russia shortly before the Revolution. There, and later in Europe and Brazil, Constructivist artists aimed to make art a detached, scientific investigation of abstract properties such as picture surface, construction, line and colour. Many also wished to apply this art to the social and industrial needs of the time, integrating it with architecture and experimenting with industrial and fashion design.

³³ President Getulio Vargas, who was in power from 1930 to 1945, and again from 1950 to 1954, was a relatively popular yet conservative leader, who allowed the status quo of vast inequalities in income to remain unchanged, yet ordered certain reforms in labour law and education to benefit the poor, such as the introduction of a minimum wage. In 1954, confronted by an imminent military coup, he committed suicide. Following his death, Brazil saw a number of reformist presidents, including Juscelino Kubitschek, who emphasized heavy industrialization, Janio Quadros, and Joao Goulart. During 1963 and 1964, Goulart moved steadily towards the Left, supporting Labour unions and attacking multinational corporations and the imperialist activities of the USA. On April 1, 1964, the military ousted him and drove him into exile in Uruguay; this "revolution" was condemned by students, progressive intellectuals, and labour officials, but welcomed by the middle and upper classes who stood to benefit (Levine and Crocitti 1999: 225-229).

Concrete, then neo-Concrete³⁴ movements in Brazil, Lygia Clark, Lygia Pape and Hélio Oiticica began to bring elements of the psychological and social into what had previously been purely formal endeavors. These artists felt close to the youth movements and counter-cultural movements of their day, and Oiticica in particular became inspired by popular culture. Hence, in the early 1960s, he began to create a series of fabric structures/performances in peculiar collaboration with the people living in the Mangueira *favela* of Rio de Janeiro. These works, called *Bólides* and *Parangolés*, were self-consciously indebted to the anthropofagist movement. Indeed, they were not only inspired by the bodies of and culture of black Brazilians, but literally incorporated the bodies of black Brazilians so that there was “total incorporation... of the body in the work and the work in the body” (Oiticica in conversation, cited in Brett 1993: 102).

Hélio Oiticica (1937-1980) was the son of an entomologist and the grandson of a philologist and anarchist leader. A professed anarchist himself, as well as homosexual and a heavy drug user, critics and art historians have pointed to Oiticica’s “Neitzchean” and “Dionysian” sensibilities (Asbury n.d.); yet his work still fits — if somewhat uncomfortably — within the cerebral and analytical movement of Conceptualism, which emphasizes ideas over objects or images. Frustrated with the limits of neoconcretism in the early 1960s, Oiticica began making what he called *Parangolés* after seeing the nonsense- or ghetto slang- word written on a box-like structure that probably served as a street person’s home. These *Parangolés* were, typically, brightly coloured and oddly shaped capes, which he then had residents of

³⁴ The Concretist movement began in Brazil in the early 1950s. It rejected the role of subjectivity and expression in art, in favour of “objectivity,” geometrical abstraction, and the use of industrial materials. Neo-Concretism, which shortly followed Concretism, rejected the “serial forms” of Concretism in favour of organic forms, and it allowed for experiments with subjectivity and expression, as well as the participation of the viewer (see Amaral 1993: 90-93).

the *favela* wear in their samba parades during carnival (Fig. 2). Historian Guy Brett calls these capes Oiticica's most original invention:

[They are] simultaneously a Concretist structure; a painting in which 'support' and 'act' are fused; a poetic recycling of many everyday, and often worthless, elements; an abstraction of Rio de Janeiro's *favelas* [...], whose reality the artist knew firsthand; the emanation of a person (the Capes were often inspired by particular friends); a 'sensuality tester,' as Oiticica once called it; and a means of utterance (Brett 1993: 103).

For Oiticica, these projects were an escape from his upper middle class background: he claimed upon entering the *favela* (a place where most people of his class would never go, except perhaps as teenagers for parties, for sex, or for drugs), that "my bourgeois conditioning which I had been submitted to since I was born, undid itself as if by magic" (Asbury n.d.). He studied samba himself, and by 1965 had advanced to *passista* (lead dancer) (Ades 1989: 352). Around that time, he also began to recycle elements of life in the *favela* for his installation works in galleries and museums. For example, a series of works titled "Homage to Cara de Cavalo" was made as a tribute to a friend and "outlaw" from the *favela*, a man who was shot and killed by police while attempting a home burglary. Oiticica described this work as an homage to "individual social revolt: that of the so-called bandit." He explained further that "besides a great sensibility lies a violent character and many times, in general, crime is a desperate search for happiness" (Asbury n.d.). In another work, he incorporated the text "*Seja Marginal seja Hero!*" ("Be Marginal be a Hero"). As art historian Michael Asbury explains, "the hero in this case is not a working class hero in the Marxist sense where there is a sacrifice of life for a greater cause. He is someone who celebrates life through the adversity he finds himself in" (Asbury n.d.).

Like the anthropofagists, Oiticica was interested in creating art that was essentially Brazilian and not a reflection of the dominance of art practice in the centres of Europe or the USA. In order to do this, he correspondingly drew his

resources from black culture, including both its poverty and its perceived greater sensuality. Oiticica used the real bodies of black Brazilians, rather than painting their likenesses, and because he often performed his work in the real social site of the *favela*, he is regularly cited as Brazil's most "radical" artist — somebody deeply connected to the social questions of his day and whose work was a quest for "liberation." Curator Catherine David writes that "within the adverse political, social, and cultural conditions in Brazil in the sixties, Hélio Oiticica proposed a modern and alternative model of cultural intervention capable of surpassing social and historical determinations" (David 2000: 111). And Oiticica also saw his work as akin to an anarchist revolution in Brazil; he viewed his performances as a "total experience of life and as a transgression of all preestablished social and cultural models" (David 2000: 111). On occasion, he would bring his black *favela* world into direct contact with the white elite world of contemporary art. In 1965, one year after the military coup d'état, he was invited debut his *Parangolés* in the exhibition *Opinião 65*, at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro. When he arrived at the exhibition's opening reception, accompanied by his friends from the *favela* dressed in *Parangolé* capes and banners, they were all refused entry to the museum. Although Oiticica was by then a very well-established artist, museum officials were completely unprepared for the form his participation took that night (Asbury n.d.).

Oiticica called his own work *tropicalismo*, and it was very much tied to the groundbreaking music of the *Tropicália* movement, a great many of whose musicians were black and from the impoverished northeast state of Bahia.³⁵ This musical movement mixed influences ranging from bossa nova to blues to North American

³⁵ The leading musicians of the *Tropicália* movement were Gilberto Gil, Caetano Veloso, Rita Lee, Maria Betânia, and Gal Costa, all of whom are still alive and producing music.

rock to produce a very “light” and carefree sound, yet its lyrics were often sharply political. Many of these musicians, like Oiticica, experienced censorship and threats from the military government after the coup of 1964; Oiticica, Veloso and Gil all went into voluntary exile for several years from the late 1960s onwards.³⁶ Yet a great difference exists between the work of Oiticica and the musicians’ work: this difference lays partly in the question of audience, or who the work was produced for, because while Oiticica and the musicians may all have been inspired by notions of cultural “cannibalism,” the popular nature of music and its easy accessibility via the radio meant that the vast majority of Brazilians could participate in the music. Oiticica’s main audience, on the other hand, was still the white, elite and sheltered art world that denied him access to the museum on his own opening night — it is unlikely that the tiny middle class, let alone the “masses” of the *favela*, would have cared at all what went on inside the museum.

Thus, despite acts like “crashing” his own opening, and despite the artist’s undoubtedly sincere claims of anarchism, Oiticica’s work is nonetheless problematic for its appropriation of black bodies and even black misery in service of his personal success in an elite industry. The artist did not actually assume an empathetic solidarity with the people from the *favela*. Although he claims to have instantly shed his privileged upbringing “as if by magic,” I would argue that the vantage point from which he viewed the *favela* and its inhabitants always remained the romantic and, indeed, objectifying position of *flaneur*. Like the dandies of the late 19th century in Paris, Oiticica claimed his solidarity with the *favela* inhabitants to be one of mutual marginalization between artists and the poor. He wrote that upon entering the *favela*,

³⁶ Oiticica spent over a decade in New York City, where he worked on written projects and films. He died at age 43 in Rio de Janeiro. Veloso and Gil went to London, UK.

“marginalization, which already exists naturally for the artist, became fundamental for me; I understand it now as the *total ‘absence of social place’*” (David 2000: 111, emphasis added). Yet I would contend that, on the contrary, the *favela* inhabitants experienced no such “absence” of social place; rather, their positions in the social order were destitute and very fixed. Indeed, the only successful “transgression of all preestablished social and cultural models” were Oiticica’s alone, as the *favela* inhabitants would have been dancing samba with or without the artist’s presence. This is not to say that Oiticica’s work did not present any challenges to the established art world or to the elite in general — the incident at the museum shows otherwise. But I believe that the radical possibilities of this artist’s practise have been seriously overrated by the art establishment, both in Brazil and internationally. This constant exaggeration of Oiticica’s radical potential undoubtedly contributes to the fact that, as far as I am aware, in the twenty-two years since the artist’s death, no critical study of his work has been written that seriously interrogates the power relationship between him and his subjects/models/friends, especially in relation to the historical sense of entitlement that white Brazilians have felt to the bodies of black Brazilians. A history of this sort is long overdue.

Yet I see no signs of this history being written any time in the near future. Instead, there is currently a climate of celebration around Oiticica’s work, as seen in his fall 2002 retrospective at New York’s New Museum.³⁷ The artist’s “rediscovery” in the last five years has come about as part of the international art world’s current interest in “postcolonial” studies and issues of globalization. Within this context, the

³⁷ *Hélio Oiticica: Quasi-cinemas*, July 26 to October 13, 2002, at the New Museum for Contemporary Art in New York City. The exhibition was co-organized and presented by the New Museum of Contemporary Art, the Kölnischer Kunstverein, and the Wexner Center for the Arts.

previously marginalized³⁸ Brazilian artist has been elevated to hero status. In 1997, his work was showcased at Documenta, in Kassel, Germany, arguably the world's most prestigious contemporary art event, and his work was also used as a point of departure for discussion at the 1998 São Paulo Bienal, for which curator Paulo Herkenhoff chose *antropofagia* as the overall theme. All of the artists I interviewed cited Oiticica as the main (if not only) artist to bring issues of Brazilian "culture" into his work, yet it is remarkable that his actions of "inclusion" have not been followed by any change in the structure or racial make-up of the Brazilian art world itself — and remarkable, too, that nobody sees fit to comment upon this irony. Clearly, more than thirty years after the Oiticica's "crashing" of the museum opening in Rio de Janeiro, it is still fair to argue, following literary historian David T. Haberly, that participation in the field of contemporary art in Brazil is practically a "declaration of whiteness".³⁹ This chapter will therefore conclude with an outline of the larger art world's structure in Brazil, which helps make such segregation possible.

Arte popular, arte afro-brasileira, and arte contemporânea

Official Brazilian ideology may be "colourblind," but the nation's variegated art world clearly is not. Similar to Canada, with its contentious history of separate exhibition spaces for contemporary art, Inuit art, and Indian art, Brazilian art is

³⁸ That is to say, the "international" art world, i.e. that based in the major centres of North America and western Europe, paid much less attention to Oiticica's work when the artist was still alive.

³⁹ Haberly notes that with the nation's extremely low literacy rates, and poverty rates high enough to preclude most people's financial ability to purchase books, reading a literary work is an act of social self-affirmation for members of the upper class. Furthermore, he says, "the education and intelligence required to read a work of literature ... are part of the prejudice-based cultural and genetic definitions of race". He also notes the narrow circularity of literature: "Those who consume literature are, to a surprising extent, its producers as well" (Haberly 1983: 5).

classified into distinct categories based on the artists' racial identities and the artworks' perceived relevance to the nation's contemporary culture. In 2000, the *Associação Brasil 500 Anos Artes Visuais* published a series of books on art to accompany an enormous exhibition in São Paulo that marked the nation's "quincentenary."⁴⁰ Nelson Aguilar, Chief Curator, divided the art into the standard three categories of *arte contemporânea* (contemporary art), *arte afro-brasileira* (Afro-Brazilian art), and *arte popular* (popular or folk art),⁴¹ and hired a team of expert curators, conservators, anthropologists, and critics to assist in the production of both the exhibitions and the catalogues. The catalogue texts reveal that these artistic categories can be defined according to both who produces the art and who consumes it, although none of the categories are fixed. As a group they reflect the prevailing ways that race, class, and geography intersect in Brazil, very much at odds with the myth of *democracia racial*. I refer to these catalogues here because they are emblematic of the way certain ideas or ideologies remain unexpressed or invisible.

To begin, the catalogues define folk art as "pure" art (with no utilitarian function), created by poor people for a market outside of their own community (including both Brazilian and foreign tourists, but I also saw many "popular" art galleries in residential neighbourhoods in São Paulo City, where locals presumably

⁴⁰ Across Brazil, the Quincentenary was met by protests by blacks and Indians who staged a "counter-commemoration" of the anniversary in order to remind the world of the slavery and bloodshed that accompanied Brazil's "discovery." According to various international news agencies, riot police fired rubber bullets, tear gas and stun grenades at some 15,000 demonstrators on April 22, 2000, arresting 140 protestors and injuring eight Indian leaders clad in traditional costumes. The demonstrators included 2,000 black activists who demanded that the government officially recognize the land ownership rights of blacks occupying communities originally founded by runaway slaves. About 3,000 of these communities, historically known as *quilombos*, currently exist in Brazil (Callender 2000).

⁴¹ The exhibition took place at the Parque Ibirapuera from April 23 to September 7, 2000.

shop for art for their homes). Emanuel Araújo, who is himself an eminent Afro-Brazilian artist and curator, explains that the styles and forms of folk art can be transmitted through “ancestry,” thus “black or mestizo artists would find in their works the solutions more or less proximate to their more remote origin” (Araújo 2000: 38). Indeed, a large number of folk artists describe themselves as *caboclo* (backwoods race and culture of mixed Indian heritage), or are followers of *candomblé*, the syncretic mix of Yoruba religion and Catholicism prevalent among blacks in the nation’s northeast “drought polygon.” And as curator Lina Bo Bardi explains in “Why the Northeast?”, the majority of folk artists come from Minas Gerais or Bahia, both regions heavily populated by individuals of African and aboriginal heritage. Bardi thus prefers to label the field “popular art” rather than “folk art” precisely because of the revolutionary potential of popular culture in this desperately poor region, where the activist groups define themselves defiantly as *Negro* (Bardi 2000: 240).

Next, there is *arte afrobrasileira*. According to anthropologist Kabengele Munanga in “Afro-Brazilian Art: What is it, after all?”, this class of art is made for members of the artist’s own community, and may or may not have some utilitarian function (this does not mean, however, that outsiders to the community do not also consume it). Munanga writes that “the first form of real Afro-Brazilian art is a ritual, religious art,” but that in a country so heavily influenced by African culture, the lines between Afro-Brazilian art and contemporary art can be very thin (Munanga, 2000: 105). However, for a work of art to “deserve and keep its attribute and designation ‘Afro,’” it should display certain colours and symbols, motifs and iconography consciously derived from remembered or inherited African sources, or it should display other elements such as monumentality, repetition, and a disproportion between represented body parts. Munanga stresses that Afro-Brazilian art is not determined by biology; the artists need not be black — others may genuinely

participate in its production for “political, ideological, or religious reasons, or simply because of the aesthetic emotion” (Munanga 2000: 108).

Finally, there is contemporary art, which apparently defies definition. Upon opening the catalogue to this section, I was initially struck by the absence of a foreword or essay offering even a provisional definition for the category. Instead, the book’s writers launch directly into their particular histories, spending not a word on delineation. These histories, unlike the histories of Afro-Brazilian or folk art, engage modernist terms like “progress” and “trajectory.” Eventually, I realized that the absence of definitions followed a certain logic, after all. It does not mean that contemporary art practise is so vast as to be impossible to define; on the contrary, definitions for the field have likely remained unwritten simply because the producers and consumers of the work are almost always one and the same: white elites who live in urban centres. In other words, the boundaries of contemporary art in Brazil continue to be as “unmarked” as whiteness itself, which is “invisible” or amorphous because it has been imposed as “normal” (Frankenberg 1997: 6).

My reading of this situation is informed by the notable omissions, contradictions, and exceptions to the standard definitions. Particularly, several black artists whose work to my eyes appears as “contemporary” as any examples of *arte contemporânea*, appear to have been “ghettoized”⁴² to the category of *arte afrobrasileira*, presumably because of the colour of their skin. For instance, the black

⁴² I used the word “ghettoized” because there is, I believe, a further subtext of perceived value in this system of categorization: art classified as *arte contemporânea* is valued for its contribution to the present and even the future, whereas works classified as *arte popular* and *arte-afrobrasileira* are valued mainly for their perceived display of connections to the past. Indeed, the latter two categories appear to be the focus of study mainly for anthropologists, ethnologists, and, occasionally, historians, whereas *arte contemporânea* is promoted and debated by “critics,” whether curators or journalists or cultural studies professors.

artists Emanoel Araújo (b.1940) and Rubem Valentim (1922-1991) have both produced several bodies of work, in painting and in sculpture, that fuse the formal concerns of Concretism with the rhythms and spiritual values of Candomblé. Both artists' productions are highly informed and conscious of their place within Brazilian and international modern or contemporary art discourse. As the black art historian and anti-racist activist Maria de Lourdes Teodoro writes, "Valentim's language is reminiscent of Kasimir Malevich, Naum Gabo, Piet Mondrian, Max Bill, etc., as with other Brazilian Constructivists and neo-Concretists like Lygia Clark" (Teodoro n.d.: 118). In fact, it would be hard to describe the difference between the white sculptures of Valentim or Araújo (Fig. 3) and those of Sergio Camargo (1930-1990) (Fig. 4) or between Valentim's abstract paintings from the 1960s (Fig. 5) and those of Alfredo Volpi from the 1950s and '60s (Fig. 6). All of these artists are concerned with geometry, symmetry, abstraction, colour and rhythm: all of their work is essentially "art about art," none of it more "contemporary" than any other. Yet the black artists' works do not appear in publications of the most important collections of Brazilian contemporary art, such as the Colección Cisneros,⁴³ or in the major textbooks of Brazilian and Latin American modern and contemporary art.⁴⁴ It is as if their themes

⁴³ *Paralelos: arte brasileira da segunda metade do século XX em contexto* was an exhibition of works from the collection of the Fundación Cisneros, on display at the Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo from March 23 to June 16, 2002.

⁴⁴ See Ades 1989 and Rasmussen 1993. A slight exception to this trend was the Guggenheim Museum's blockbuster exhibition *Brazil: Body and Soul* (October 19, 2001 to May 29, 2002), which presented a full range of Brazilian art and artefacts from the 18th century to the present day. Here, the curators included the work of artists they describe as "masters who fall outside of the conventional historical (often Eurocentric) categories of art," (Sullivan 2001) including black artists Arthur Bispo do Rosario, Mestre Didi, Ronaldo Rego and Valentim. Although the exhibition itself was not clearly divided into sections, the catalogue still classifies these artists separately under the category of Afro-Brazilian art.

and concerns are not perceived to be of general relevance in the “trajectory” of Brazilian art history.

Even more startling in the *arte afrobrasileira* catalogue is the inclusion of the work of black artist Rosana Paulino (b. 1967), whose highly conceptual photographic productions meet none of Munanga’s criteria for *arte afrobrasileira*, save perhaps for “repetition.” In Paulino’s work, formal portraits (head shots) of black women are photocopied and transferred onto fabric inside embroidery frames. Then, either their mouths or their eyes are crudely and deliberately stitched over with black thread, so that each woman’s image is either “blindfolded” or “gagged” (Fig. 7). To me, these images speak of the long history of violence against black women, and the work itself is executed in a fashion reminiscent of certain highly conceptual photo-based works by American feminist contemporary artists of the last two decades, such as Lorna Simpson. Indeed, Paulino’s work is more engaged with contemporary issues of feminism and identity politics than any white artist, male or female, to be found in the *arte contemporânea* catalogue. Thus, I can only assume that she has been categorized (and marginalized) as an Afro-Brazilian artist because her images are of black people and because she herself is black.

Very few attempts have been made in Brazil to integrate *arte afrobrasileira* with *arte contemporânea*. In 1980s at the Museum of Modern Art (MAC) in São Paulo, the exhibition “The Aesthetic of Candomblé,” brought together the work of Brazilian artists of Japanese, Jewish, Italian, and Afro-Brazilian origin who have taken Candomblé as a point of departure for their work.⁴⁵ Lourdes also tells us of two other exhibitions, “Armadilhas indígenas” in 1992, and “A Mão

⁴⁵ The artists were: Maria Argentina/Minoru Naruto, Jacqueline Terpins, Xico Chaves, Bene Foneles, Genilson Soares, and Rubem Valentim. From this group, I know only the work of Valentim.

Afro-brasileira,” both also organized by the MAC, although she does not tell us if the artists involved were likewise representative of Brazil’s “multiculturalism” (Lourdes n.d.: 118-119). Valentim himself once said that “Brazilian art can only be an authentic poetic product when it results from the syncretisms of non-verbal semiological acculturations derived from the formative cultures of our national identity (White-Luso-Black-Indian) and blended with the cultures brought more recently by the various nations other than Brazil, that Continent-country common to all” (1976, cited in Lourdes n.d.: 117-118). This statement, I believe, belies a desire for Brazilian art and artists to share a common conversation, rather than being confined to speak from within distinct categories that very rarely converge. However, as long as his work and the work of other black artists remains separated from that of the white Brazilian artists’ work, this shall not come to pass. And as we shall see in Chapter III, there are few signs that the system is changing. During my travels, I repeatedly asked the artists and curators I met if they knew of any black contemporary artists: almost all of them replied “No, not one, there are none.” Only when I reminded them of the Bahian contemporary artist Marepe would they nod their heads and concede, “Well, maybe one or two.”⁴⁶ I have therefore concluded that the maintenance of these distinct categories of *arte afrobrasileira* and *arte contemporânea* is an instance of a white elite culture attempting to preserve itself through what Roland Barthes calls “inoculation,” where “difference” is treated as a controlled substance: “to be enjoyed in small doses, always under conditions of moderation and restraint” (Sandoval 2000: 88-89). How the professionals of the

⁴⁶ In fact, during my travels in Brazil, I was told of only two black contemporary artists: Marepe and Edson Barrus. In New York, curator Fatima Bercht also suggested that Efrain Almeida and Luiz Hermano are also black; however, their names were not mentioned to me by anyone in Brazil.

contemporary art world explain this system and their roles within it is therefore the focus of my next two chapters.

Chapter III

Interviews and Fieldnotes

In this chapter I describe and analyze the interviews I conducted with Brazilian artists, gallerists, critics and curators in New York, São Paulo, and Rio de Janeiro, combining insights from these more formal discussions with the notes I took as a “participant-observer” at exhibitions in Brazilian galleries and museums and in the homes of Brazilian art world professionals. The topics I address are wide-ranging, and deal with both the art world’s structure and economics, as well as individual perceptions of the nature and role of art, identity, and personal or collective struggles.

It is important to note that when I first conceived of this thesis topic, I wanted to focus my interview questions strictly towards eliciting from my mostly white participants their explanations for the nearly complete absence of blacks from Brazilian contemporary art. But as the interviews progressed, especially in Brazil, I found it increasingly difficult to ask straightforward questions about race and identity — the subject is so foreign, nearly taboo among Brazilian elites, that I risked causing serious offense, or so I felt. In other words, as I steered our conversations towards explicit discussion of racial identity, identity politics, equal opportunity, and related topics, many participants evaded direct responses, failed (sometimes, I thought, deliberately) to pick up on my cues, or answered in curt, one-word responses that very clearly intoned their desire to put an end to my line of inquiry.

As an “insider” in the business, where my conversations with the participants were made possible largely through my position as director of a contemporary art gallery in Canada and writer for magazines known to the participants, and/or through introductions by mutual friends, I was not willing to totally jeopardize my relationships with these people. I also came to feel that silences, misunderstandings, ellipses, evasions, and changes of subject were likely as telling as direct answers and

clearly expressed opinions.⁴⁷ In fact, the tendency of many elite Brazilians to attempt to explain their society and all its profound inequalities — clearly divided along racial lines — while rarely broaching racial issues may very well be an important factor in the nation's lack of democratic change. This idea will be explored further in Chapter IV, using Michael Taussig's concept of the "public secret."

Arranging and Conducting the Interviews

In total, I conducted ten formal interviews (two in New York, and eight in Brazil) with contemporary art world professionals from a range of backgrounds and perspectives:

1) Fatima Bercht, a white curator and writer originally from São Paulo, now Chief Curator of El Museo del Barrio in New York City, introduced to me by a mutual friend;

2) Ana Linneman, a white artist originally from São Paulo now living in New York, introduced to me by Bercht;

3) Alexandre Gabriel, a white public relations manager and salesperson for the lucrative Galeria Fortes Vilaça in São Paulo, whom I met at an opening there;⁴⁸

4) Isabella Prata, an extremely wealthy white art philanthropist and organizer in São Paulo, whom I met at the Galeria Fortes Vilaça;

⁴⁷ See Albert Hunter (1995) "Local Knowledges and Local Power: Notes on Ethnography of Local Community Elites" and Susan Ostrander (1995) "'Surely You're Not in This Just to be Helpful': Access, Rapport, and Interviews in Three Studies of Elites" for more on the difficulties specific to interviewing elites.

⁴⁸ In fact, I phoned the Galeria Fortes Vilaça on my third day in Brazil, and made an appointment to speak with one of the owners, Alessandra Vilaça. But upon my arrival at the gallery, I was shepherded into an office by Gabriel, who explained that Vilaça was too busy to talk to me. Similarly, I have tried several times to make contact with the extremely wealthy São Paulo gallerist Luisa Strina, who represents Marepe, but she has not replied to any messages I have left by telephone and email.

5) Marepe, a black artist from Bahia, to whom I introduced myself on the opening night of the São Paulo Bienal;

6) Helmut Batista, a well-traveled white artist, publisher, gallerist and “art agitator” in Rio de Janeiro, whom I first met in Italy in 1995;

7) Ducha, a young white anarchist artist in Rio de Janeiro, and a good friend of Batista;

8) Laura Marsiaj, a white gallerist new to the market in Rio de Janeiro, introduced to me by Batista;

9) Ernesto Neto, an internationally acclaimed white installation artist in Rio de Janeiro, to whom Batista introduced me at Ipanema beach; and

10) Beatriz Milhazes, an internationally acclaimed painter in Rio de Janeiro, of ambiguous racial identity, introduced to me by close mutual friends from Australia.

The interviews took place in a range of business and domestic settings. For example, I spoke to Alexandre Gabriel in the office of Galeria Fortes Vilaça, surrounded by ringing telephones, a uniformed maid, and a security guard, and I met with Beatriz Milhazes at a busy restaurant during her lunch break from work in her studio. But my interview with Helmut Batista, who hosted me in Rio, took place at the edge of the swimming pool in his girlfriend’s backyard, and I interviewed both Ducha and Ernesto Neto in our bathing suits at Ipanema beach. Interviews ranged from forty-five minutes to two hours. With the participants’ consent, the interviews were recorded on a portable cassette player. I also took notes during the conversations, particularly to gather correct spellings of names, places, and institutions.

Upon returning to Canada, I transcribed the interviews myself (save for Marepe’s, which was conducted in Portuguese and transcribed by a paid professional translator, and Neto’s, which had not been fully recorded). I then analyzed all the

interview transcriptions using the voice-centred relational method, a labour-intensive yet extremely useful way of reading interviews developed and elaborated by feminist scholars over the last two decades.

The Voice-Centred Relational (VCR) Method

The VCR method, also known as The Listening Guide, is a method of reading or “listening” to the voices of interview participants in order to gain a better understanding of their particular meanings and sense-making processes. Originally developed in the late 1980s and early ‘90s by the Harvard Project on Women’s Psychology and Girls’ Development,⁴⁹ this method has since been refined and reformulated in various ways by numerous feminist researchers, including education professor Lyn Mikel Brown (Brown, 2001), psychologist Niobe Way (Way, 2001), psychologist Deborah Tolman (Tolman, 2001), and sociologists Andrea Doucet and Natasha Mauthner (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998). Practitioners of the VCR method join the two feminist goals of trying to understand women’s and girls’ (and increasingly boys’ or men’s) lives as they describe them “in and on their own terms” and trying to develop greater reflexivity as researchers by making explicit and central the relationship between the researcher and participant during the interviews (Mauthner and Doucet 1998: 120-21; Tolman 2001: 132). I view this method as both

⁴⁹ See L.M. Brown, D. Argyris, J. Attanucci, B. Bardige, C. Gilligan, K. Johnston, B. Miller, R. Osborne, M. Tappan, J. Ward, G. Wiggins, and D. Wilcox, *A Guide to Reading Narratives of Conflict and Choice for Self and Relational Voice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Graduate School of Education, 1988); Carol Gilligan, Lyn M. Brown, and Annie Rogers, “Psyche Embedded: A Place for Body, Relationships, and Culture in Personality Theory,” in A.I. Rabin, R. Zucker, R. Emmons, and S. Frank, eds., *Studying Persons and Lives* (New York: Springer, 1990); Lyn M. Brown and Carol Gilligan, *Meeting at the Crossroads: Women’s Psychology and Girls’ Development* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992); Jill M. Taylor, Carol Gilligan, and Amy Sullivan, *Between Voice and Silence: Women and Girls, Race and Relationship* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995) (as cited in Mauthner, 2002: 248-49).

subject-centred and materially grounded since, as Mauthner and Doucet describe, it represents an attempt to “keep respondents’ voices and perspectives alive, while at the same time recognizing the researcher’s role in shaping the research process and product” (Mauthner and Doucet 1998: 119).

While my own study of elites in Brazil does not share the same kind of activist purpose as many of the projects by the researchers cited above — it is not the welfare of my interview participants that directly concerns me, as they are not, as a group or individuals, marginalized in critical ways — the VCR method is appropriate to my study for two reasons. First, its basis in relational ontology can help make sense of a study of race and racism, where “blackness” and “whiteness” are as much social constructions as lived realities, and in Brazil hinge a great deal on class status, geography, cultural and political affiliations and other factors. Second, its focus on the researcher’s reflexivity is, arguably, particularly important in a study with expressly political (anti-racist) purposes, where — appropriately or not — I began with the assumption that implicit or explicit racist attitudes and beliefs likely operated among many of those I was going to interview. A systematic effort to locate the effects of this assumption in the proceedings of my interviews, and to second-guess it whenever possible while reading the transcribed interviews, opened new ways of reading and interpreting my participants’ opinions and attitudes. In effect, it made me more careful in my interpretations and added an unforeseen complexity to my observations.

The VCR method entails reading and “listening to” the interview transcripts at least four different times and in different ways. The first reading (really two readings) has two components. First, I read for the “plot” of the narratives being told to me by the respondents. This includes the main events described by the respondents; how and why they made certain career choices; their principal professional struggles; and the “protagonists” of their stories, including both institutions and key professional

and familial relationships. I also took note of recurring images, words, and metaphors, and I looked for any contradictions in their narratives. In the second “reader-response” component of this first reading, I focused on my own intellectual and emotional responses to what these individuals were telling me, including both my responses during the actual interviews and those I experienced while reading and re-reading the transcripts. I noted my sympathies, confusions, frustrations, and failures to follow up with more probing questions. I also reflected on how my understanding of my respondents’ attitudes and beliefs might be affected by the fact I am a middle-class Canadian who was raised in strongly mixed-race and mixed-income settings, with an ensuing set of ideas about racial and class issues, some of which I’ve fought for, but some of which I’ve without doubt absorbed unconsciously. With a few of my respondents, such as Fatima Bercht, Ducha, Marepe, and Helmut Batista, I was able to openly explore and compare national, cultural, and personal differences around these issues.

In the second reading of the interview texts, I looked for the first-person voice, or voice of the “I.” This represents an attempt to stay close to the respondents’ views and perspectives and to recognize each person’s sense of agency and/or powerlessness. I noted where and how the respondents used personal pronouns such as “I,” “we,” or “you” when talking about themselves, signaling potential changes in how they perceived and experienced themselves. By seeking out the “I”s, I was also more clearly able to see the questions to which respondents answered immediately “I don’t know” and/or “I don’t feel comfortable talking about this.” This is important, as I will argue in Chapter IV, since such inability or unwillingness to speak plays a large role in the maintenance of public secrets.

In the third reading of the interviews, I read for relationships between respondents and blacks (Afro-Brazilians and/or African Americans), respondents and other Brazilians as a group, and respondents and North Americans and/or

Europeans as a group. Here, I deviate from the majority of published VCR readings, which tend to focus in the third reading on the *interpersonal* relationships of the participants. However, as the participants in my study were not being asked to talk so much about their personal lives, but about class and race issues, the structure of the art world, and other more “public” issues shaping their day-to-day activities, their relationships with partners, lovers, friends, or family were usually of little relevance to my study. Instead, I chose to focus on what we might call primary “conceptual” relationships in order to determine if and how lines were drawn, categories made, difference and sameness described or denied, in terms of racial, class, and national identities. In other words, the relationships they described were often as much relationships with ideas, ideologies, classes, and nations as with actual persons; yet these, too, can be highly personal relationships.

In the fourth reading of the interview texts, I placed the respondents’ self-accounts within the broader social, political, cultural, and structural context of their lives. I listened for places where their ideas and opinions seemed contained by, or contradicted, the “myth” of racial democracy and its criticisms. I tried to understand the particular motivating forces in each person’s work life, and compared these with the visions of racial (and class) equity that the critics and activists are fighting for. In many respects, this fourth reading extends through all of Chapter IV, where I situate my research in relationship to Taussig’s theory of the “public secret” and whiteness studies in general.

Three of my interviews were read in collaboration with Andrea Doucet as part of an interview exchange. This process of sharing readings and interpretations highlighted the relational nature of interpreting other people’s words and ideas; i.e. Doucet was able to draw out themes and issues from my interviews that I had remained deaf to, and at times she interpreted my respondents’ words in a different fashion than I had, enriching the analysis I was then able to make. Yet with or

without the help of an interpretive community or partner, reading interviews according to the VCR method is extremely time-consuming — I spent approximately six hours with each one, *after* transcription, taking notes, underlining and circling words, rewriting portions, making lists, discussing ideas, and so forth. The process brought to light a number of important patterns, themes, and subthemes that I may have otherwise overlooked. For example, the recurring theme of struggle, and the different ways struggle was described by various participants, emerged only after several readings. Significantly, the process also led me to take note of the differences between the individuals, and not just the cultural similarities. This focus, which speaks of the method's foundation in psychological studies, is not exactly a hallmark of traditional anthropology. My hope is that it has led me to a more nuanced and “thicker” description of my subject-matter.

A Study of Elite Attitudes

My interviews with Brazilians entailed in part a test of the critiques of the “myth” of *democracia racial*. Would I see for myself that Brazilians are incapable of discussing the existence of racism? Would I find both structural and ideological mechanisms of denial working to maintain racial inequalities? During my interview with Fatima Bercht three months before my trip, she warned me of as much: “Some Brazilians will not know what you are talking about.” And indeed, bringing the rest of my interview participants to openly discuss racial issues was by far the most challenging aspect of the interview process. With about half the participants, I found that we were able to talk our way *around* or *through* ideas of race, but we were not able to stay directly on the subject for very long. Discussing class issues was easy, on the other hand, and a number of participants were highly critical of Brazilian class stratification. At times, I found myself wanting to see Brazil the way these individuals did: as a nation deeply troubled along class lines, but with a racial attitude

substantially more inclusive and sophisticated than ours in North America. So I kept having to remind myself of a conversation I'd had one year earlier with an upper-middle class Brazilian graduate student in Canada. Responding to my questions, he told me frankly that the race riots in the USA seemed archaic to Brazilians since colour issues were old-fashioned and ought not to still be a problem in any "first world" nation. By contrast, he explained, Brazil was not at all racist — although there *had been* racism during the days of slavery and that was why so many black people were still poor in 2001. Then he said, in order to demonstrate how colour was simply not an issue in the Brazilian imagination, "In Brazil, we don't say the words 'black people' — we say 'people from the *favela*.'" In this tautological exchange, class and race slid smoothly into one another, class providing the alibi for race in his admission of racial inequality.

What I discovered in Brazil was a system in which race and class issues cannot be extricated from one another, but where issues of inequality cannot be reduced to economics. The superiority of whiteness is coded and reproduced at each node of the nation's "ruling relations," what Dorothy Smith describes as "text-mediated and text-based systems of 'communication,' 'knowledge,' 'information,' 'regulation,' 'control,' and the like" (Smith 1999: 77). This includes the ruling relations of contemporary art, such as established art history, contemporary criticism and curatorial practices, the education system, the commercial gallery system, and so forth. The coding is disarmingly subtle, only sporadically overt: in general, it is possible to assert that contemporary art in Brazil is primarily conceived of as an activity for individuals who have nothing cultural at stake, whose own identities (both racial and class) seem to render them "invisible" and "abstract" them from their nation's social and political realities. Indeed, the contemporary art world, with its pretensions towards utopic conceptions, actively supports the maintenance of the Brazilian "irreality" that so many critics have described. Of course, among the

individuals I interviewed, a few were highly conscious of the racial and class injustices of the Brazilian system, and everybody found the current art system to be inadequate. However, only Marepe, the sole black artist I interviewed, identified the social, political, and cultural domination of Indian- and Afro-Brazilians by whites as a significant or even interesting problem for the art world.

In a research report of this size, it is not possible to develop case studies or to present full analyses of each interview. I have decided instead to present my findings according to the main themes that emerged, all of which have relevance to the absence of blacks from the contemporary art system, and gradually build a picture of this system and its challenges. In this way, I hope to create a portrait of the Brazilian art system that represents my thesis succinctly yet acknowledges and respects the diversity of opinions and attitudes among those with whom I spoke.

Class Matters: the formation of the artist in Brazil

Most Brazilian contemporary artists do not have degrees in fine art, but are graduates of architecture schools instead. This fact is not well-known outside of Brazil, but all of my interview participants spoke to me of this, and a look at the biographies of Brazilian artists confirms it. Of the artists I interviewed, only the youngest, Ducha (b. 1977) and Marepe (b. 1970), had received degrees in fine art. Ernesto Neto initially studied architecture and began his art career by attending evening classes at Parque Lage, an unstructured, relatively experimental, and free “drop-in” school taught by artists in Rio de Janeiro. Likewise, Beatriz Milhazes graduated from media communications, and then also attended Parque Lage in the evenings. Ana Linneman studied graphic design, and Helmut Batista’s background is in publishing. It was explained to me by Alexandre Gabriel, Milhazes, Neto, and others, that until ten years ago, there were no decent art schools in the nation, only very conservative programs that taught in the classical style, emphasizing drawing

and painting of still lifes and nudes — hardly the stuff of contemporary art in the late 20th (or 21st) century. Those who wanted to study art tended to go abroad, but generally not before completing an undergraduate degree in architecture: for example, the well-known artist Valeska Soares completed her degree in architecture in Brazil, then obtained an MFA from the Pratt Institute in New York City.

Young Brazilians who want to launch their careers as artists at home generally have had only two possibilities. First, they could apply to one of the annual art salons in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Bahia, Belo Horizonte and other regions. These salons, which Gabriel (of the Galeria Fortes Vilaça) describes as “very French,” are juried by professional art critics, gallerists, and art instructors. Otherwise, aspiring artists can use their personal connections to make contact with a contemporary art dealer, gallerist, or curator. Linneman, for instance, who had a gallery representing her in São Paulo years before she even decided to become a professional artist, explained that she had been able to do this because “I am, like you know, completely well connected.” Until Batista and others established Agora in Rio five years ago (see p. 70), there were no artist-run centres or equivalents with mandates to provide alternative exhibition possibilities for young artists.

Today Brazilians recognize a few good art schools in their nation, generally programs in federal universities. But this does not necessarily mean a real increase in opportunities for young people. As Gabriel explained, some of the federal universities offer excellent programs and are completely free, but “you need to have a very good background” to get into them. It is easier to be accepted to a private university, but these charge tuitions of about US\$6,000 per year, or more than CAD\$10,000, which is prohibitively expensive for most Brazilians. What kind of “good background” does one need to enter a free, federal university? In fact, one would likely have to have attended the right private schools for all prior education, as Gabriel had. From first

grade through high school graduation, these “are the same kind of price” per year as the private universities.

Here is the first lesson about Brazilian art: a highly elite industry, with extremely limited accessibility, it is for the most part self-perpetuating and closed. A high proportion of my interview participants had family ties to the art world long before they began their careers: Neto’s father was a friend of artist Lygia Clark, Milhazes’ mother was a professor of art history, Linneman’s friends were artists, writers, and musicians, and Bercht’s family was close to the Leirner family as she was growing up. The Leirner family, which may be the best example of the Brazilian art world’s self-perpetuating nature, includes Sheila Leirner (mother and curator), Adolpho Leirner (father and one of Brazil’s biggest collectors), Jac Leirner (daughter and world-famous artist), Nelson Leirner (uncle and famous artist), Felicia Leirner (aunt, artist, and art instructor), and more. A look through the catalogues of the São Paulo Bienal from 1951 until today reveals the recurrence of a few elite family names from generation to generation. Members of the families de Mello, Pinto Alves, Filho, Mesquita, Carvalho, Buarque de Holanda, and Leirner have always held powerful positions at the Bienal as architects, directors, curators, artists, advisors, ministers of culture, collectors, and so forth.

Certainly, class background and family connections can play a large role in the success of a young artist or visual arts professional. Many of my interview participants told me that family support was essential. Linneman said:

Most of the contemporary artists in Brazil, they come from upper middle class and you know the family has some money behind them. I would have my doubts about a person who basically has no money, how this person does.

Milhazes told me that many of her friends from her early twenties have now stopped making art because they had no financial support from their families:

Ninety percent stopped, or they went to another career, another left, literally left! Because, what you gonna do? But ... I had my family, people helped me in different ways, because they loved me, and so my father — my father's a lawyer, and he says, 'okay, it's great,' and so they always give me support.

Ducha said, "Brazil is a poor country, but the artists come from good families, and they travel to New York and Europe, and they all know the cultural production from outside, from the rich countries." And Batista put it bluntly, "Most artists are from the 'A' class." Only Bercht, who after twenty-two years in the USA is likely attuned to North Americans' discomfort with questions of class, denied this scenario. She told me instead that "the majority of artists in Brazil come from the middle class. Mm... lower middle class or middle class." However, from what I could see in Brazil, this simply isn't true.

Is class then the main reason for the exclusion of black Brazilians from contemporary art? Many of my interview participants, including Neto, Batista, Linneman and Prata, thought this was probably the case. They responded similarly to Bercht, who told me:

The majority of African Brazilians, the descendants of Africans, you know, ah, they are poor. And therefore they have no access to high school, and if they do high school, they are not supported to continue into fine arts, and then if they make it, unless their vocation is so strong, and the person has this urge, like Marepe, this person has this urge to be an artist, it's not... If you went through all this struggle to come out of poverty, you don't want to be poor by choosing a career in a recognizably unendowed profession. There are cases of success, of commercial success of African Brazilian artists, um, but I think there are very few because of the way that discrimination is tied to economics.

As anthropologist Teresa Caldeira notes, this manner of rationalizing the exclusion of blacks from cultural activities has historically been one of the most common ways used to differentiate the poor by non-academics and academics alike: "They are considered to be closer to the necessary, preoccupied only with surviving, and lacking other concerns such as appearance and style" (Caldeira 2000: 68). Caldeira reminds us that this is not unique to Brazil; for example, there is a long tradition in aesthetic

studies, including work by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, that maintains poor people have no aesthetic perception because they focus only on need (Caldeira 2000:68).

Of all those I interviewed, only Marepe, whose father was white-collar working-class, voiced a different opinion. He said that there are many black artists, like him, making art in Bahia, and that their art is “contemporary” even if it is linked to Afro-Brazilian culture. His own success is an anomaly: in 1988, at age eighteen, he had the good fortune to win an award at a national competition in which three thousand artists were invited and sixty chosen. In this case, the critics and curators giving the award “understood the critical text of what I was writing, as well as the work.” He is now represented by the Galeria Luisa Strina in São Paulo, and he is able to make a modest income from his art. However, most of his fellow artists from Bahia are not so lucky. At times, their work is used in exhibitions, but the artists themselves are not invited to enter the contemporary art circuit. Marepe explained, “Many (critics and curators) go (to Bahia) to see the work, and they take the work, but not the artists also. That’s how it is, understand? Artists end up staying only there, in Bahia. In truth, it’s a very closed system.” Indeed, there were other artists from his region with work in the 2002 Bienal, but they had not been able to make the trip to São Paulo for the exhibition. He described this rare participation of the Bahian artists, most of whom were painters, as “a certain novelty for the Bienal.” At root of this problem, he explained, is not only economics, but a “language” problem that divides south from north, white from black: “There is, as you said, a language that is to one side, [...] artists that are more marginalized... A language (in use in the art world) that makes it much more difficult to break into the institution... Many things.”

Linneman explained that this “language problem” was the legacy of modernism, which is, like the art world itself, “basically a circle very much closed in on itself”:

First I think that contemporary art in Brazil is completely formed by modern art. In the end, [...] what people were very interested in, basically, the whole achievement of modern art, which was basically to detach itself from the world and be abstract and to establish its own language... [In] the seventies and eighties, all these things were *pure* movements in art. They were done by people who don't have to worry about markets, who don't have to worry about society.

Isolation and Exclusivity, or the "Lack of Infrastructure"

Just as Brazilian artists almost always come from the "A" class, the public for contemporary art is extremely small. When I asked Linneman "Who goes to see contemporary art?", she replied simply, "The artists." Then she elaborated: "Maybe not just the artists, but the group, you know, the whole system of art. There are the artists, there are the critics, there are the curators, it's all done for, you know, it keeps itself." Ducha explained his reason for taking art to the street was to finally bring art "near the people." He said, "The people don't know Ernesto Neto, the people don't know me, the people don't know Hélio Oiticica ... Maybe somebody knows Picasso, sometimes the people knows the Beatles."

It is not hard to see why the general public is not flocking to art galleries. First of all, they are — even in Canada, and at the best of times — intimidating spaces for the uninitiated. But the Galeria Fortes Vilaça is nearly impenetrable, with an armed guard pacing the clean white steps leading up to the door (it is the only gallery I've ever seen that employs a maid to serve coffee to staff). The entrance to the Galeria Luisa Strina, which is located in a posh shopping district of São Paulo, was literally invisible behind a protective black wall. And the contemporary and modern art museums I visited in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro were for the most part empty — most of them charge admission fees equivalent to CAD\$10, which is obviously far too costly for the majority of the nation's populace. Yet even at the opening of the exhibition "Love's House," organized by Agora throughout the rooms of a hotel in a lower-middle class neighborhood of Rio, I counted only four or five black individuals

in attendance (including one child), out of an estimated 400 people crowding the halls.

I spoke with Isabella Prata,⁵⁰ who directs E(x)tra Arte Contemporânea, a non-profit promotion agency and exhibition/event space. In her opinion, Brazil's biggest problem is that even most wealthy people pay little attention to contemporary art. Her intention is to change this and to develop a community of collectors, so she and her business partner bought a mansion in what she described as "the richest neighborhood in Brazil," not far from the Parque Ibirapuera in São Paulo. Since late 2001, they have been using this house to display and promote contemporary art, fashion, and music. Prata talked to me at length about the "cultural poverty" of her country, describing the viscous cycle in which underfunded museums cannot afford to collect contemporary art, and the resultant poor quality of their exhibitions drives potential wealthy patrons away from making contributions,⁵¹ so the museums continue to suffer from underfunding. She said that prior to the 1970s, things were much better, "but then the Left side, the *gauche*, it started saying that, you know, the museum is something for rich people." She confirmed this thesis with a friend who was sitting with us, then immediately changed it. "But that's not exactly the problem," she corrected, "The problem is money [...] Brazilians get money and put their money in Switzerland [...] The government takes the money for themselves and, yes, lots of corruption. So we never have money for culture. People never pay taxes."

Marsiaj and Milhazes were particularly despondent about Brazil's "cultural poverty." Both lamented the lack of high cultural resources. Marsiaj said, "We don't have good museums. The children here they don't have the habit to go to the

⁵⁰ Several Brazilians told me that Isabella Prata is the wife of the owner/publisher of *Vogue* Latin America, but I have not been able to confirm this.

⁵¹ According to Prata, the rich do spend money on art, but they collect Old Masters instead of investing in contemporary productions.

museum. And my daughter, if she wanted to see Monet, she can't. Because we don't have Monet, we don't have a lot of stuff." Milhazes explained that even with a mother who taught art history, the real "world of art" had seemed unattainable to her growing up in Brazil. She said:

I saw the first Matisse painting alive when I was twenty-three years old. I was already thinking to show my work, you know, at a gallery. But I had not seen (a Matisse) — I always saw his work by reproduction. So ... I have like my mother, but it was ... to see Matisse (laughs), it was totally different!

In her opinion, Brazil's economic difficulties left aspiring artists with no "structure" to work in:

Because if you decide to be an artist in Brazil, you might go to this school or that and then to university. Afterwards, you have like five galleries, three museums, and that's your whole world, you know? And so like it's not really strong enough for you to feel your way to be an artist. To be an artist in Brazil is still something very strange.

All three women — Prata, Marsiaj, and Milhazes — conceived of contemporary art as a knowledge and activity that comes from up "high;" in other words, as a purely elite pursuit, European in origin, and requiring extensive funding. When I asked Prata if it was a problem that contemporary art was confined to the elite, she did not seem to know what I was talking about. Immediately, she stressed the need to make her visitors — all residents of Brazil's "richest neighbourhood" — feel comfortable in her space: "They come, they drink something, they watch a film ... and they feel comfortable." Marsiaj, perhaps quite naturally for a commercial gallerist, spoke about art primarily as decoration for the homes of the rich, as opposed to a practise that reflects and shapes culture. She said, "My biggest challenge here is to open, to be open-minded, working in this way, to show the people how nice it is to live with art."

Despite the fact that nearly everyone — Bercht, Linneman, Milhazes, Neto, Batista, Ducha, and Marepe — cited Oiticica as one of Brazil's most important

artists, only the latter three expressed a concern with expanding their audiences to the non-elite. Batista found the attitude of people like Prata and Milhazes baffling. He fervently agreed that in Brazil “the whole infrastructure is missing,” describing, as they had, the lack of access to art magazines, catalogues, and information from both abroad and other cities in Brazil, the poor quality of art schools, the lack of experimental curatorial practices, and the absence of funding for less established artists. But he explained that when he moved back to Rio, after fifteen years in Europe, he was shocked by the art world’s obsession with prestige and money, and by Brazilian artists’ lack of initiative. He said:

[In Brazil], the galleries are always something untouchable. I mean this hierarchy ... you can really feel it ... The social distance (between art galleries and museums and many aspiring artists) makes something that you, uh — “I want to be a part of it,” you know? It’s like the dream, the art world must be rich, you know? And rich people can buy, and things like this, no?

To counter this attitude, he and a small group of artists his age established the very first artist-run centre in Brazil, called Agora. They opened it in Flamengo, which Batista called a ‘B-class’ neighbourhood, and funded it by securing monthly payments of 100 reais (about CAD\$90) from thirty or so ‘A-class’ patrons who were given artists’ editions in exchange for their donations. Their goal was “to put into question” the established art system and its procedures, to expand the audience for art, and to provide exhibition opportunities and educational resources for younger artists. Unfortunately, as soon as “the big money came in,” his partners simply began showing their own art work, and “the vision (of Agora) was lost.” In protest, Batista resigned from the project, and now concentrates on his own curatorial and publication projects under the name of Capacete.

Ducha, who described his work as “producing experiences,” made fun of Prata’s conception of art as commodity, even though he was at the time represented in an exhibition at her space. He laughed about the show, saying: “The works are

sold with an orange ball!”⁵² But he was torn between his desire to “sabotage” the art system from within, and his growing fear that this system may never change. Then, in a strange inversion of class and race identification, he described his feeling of isolation in the art world as akin to living in a “ghetto”:

The contemporary visual arts in Brazil, it's like a ghetto. It's a very small ghetto. I don't like any ghetto, and I don't want to be inside the ghetto. I'm on the outside, and — ha! — I produce some experiences for the ghetto, and I produce some experiences for other people (laughs). It's a kind of apartheid, too (laughs). But when we started talking, (I told you that I work) in three or four different ways. And I have to separate, because, I must be *schizofrenico*, totally, and I have to be a borderline, because the line is important.

I asked him what this “line” was, and he replied, “I'm finding it. Sometimes the line is very clear. But sometimes it's hard to... Now, I'm in problems with the line.”

Ducha's distress was echoed differently by Milhazes' description of a kind of loneliness. Lamenting her lack of audience in Brazil, she idealized the art audiences of North America and Europe. She explained that elsewhere, “art is part of the life of the city, and here not. It is sophisticated there. Of course, there is high class everywhere, the who's who, the art world, you know that. But, it's like, you have *people* there.” I thought about her painting each day in her beautiful studio, next-door to a botanical garden in an uppercrust neighbourhood of Rio. I asked: “So what does that feel like? How does it feel to arrive at a certain level of success as an artist here, and you spend a lot of time with galleries and with collectors, and there are no ‘people’?” She shrugged, and replied, “For me, I can manage well, I think [...] What I really have is *outside* Brazil.”

If Milhazes is, in the end, indifferent to her isolation in Brazil, almost abstracted from certain realities of her life there, Marepe alone did not dwell upon any sense of cultural poverty. He agreed that it is difficult to be an artist in Brazil,

⁵² He was referring to the traditional practise of placing a round red or orange sticker on the corner of paintings that have been sold.

because “there is no support system [...] and even more so in Bahia, in the northeast.” He noted that access to information and materials was much more difficult in Bahia, and his criticism of the “southern” art world was similar to Batista’s. He said:

There is a kind of ignorance in this fact, maybe, for example, the value of the work. Sometimes it is determined by the material, by the value of the materials (it is made from). Not by the quality of the work itself, right?

But he did not look for support and company in the same places as most others. He told me that, as a student at the Federal University of Bahia, he was “dissatisfied with the information I was given.” Thus, “I had to go to the street [...] It was the street that taught me much. And living... even my salvation in the world.” Indeed, it is the “poor” materials and popular culture of the streets of Bahia that provide the foundation for his work in sculpture, installation, and performance, and it is the people of his hometown who make up the audience for a great deal of his productions. In what we might call Marepe’s “art from below,” Brazil’s so-called “cultural poverty” has provided him with an opportunity for a practise that is experimental and, as he describes, “spiritual.” He said, “The fact of not having money ... I think that helped me also. It was a positive factor, even. That way, I had to discover new materials, to try to find a solution.” Only once did he hint at feeling isolated. I asked him if he knew the work of Cherokee artist Jimmie Durham or the black American artist David Hammons, both of whom work with approaches similar to his. He did not. I described some of the difficulties these artists have faced in their careers, and this led us into a discussion of the reception of Marepe’s art in the south of Brazil:

JB: It is a discussion among different people in the United States. But they, ah, frequently it’s difficult -

M: Difficult -

JB: To have a discussion that was -

M: *That you would want to have.*

JB: Because many in the art world have an idea of what art is that is different.

M: Yes.

JB: Art is something “high,” for example.

M: *If it is art*, for example.

JB: High, no?

M: Yes, *refined*.

It became clear to me, from both Marepe’s words and the words of others, that despite his measure of success, there are many in the Brazilian art world who do not find his approach to art-making interesting. When faced with the “poor” quality of his materials, the “content” of his work does not strike them as relevant, and this can make it hard for Marepe to have the kind of discussions he would like to have.

Preferred Ways of Seeing: Form vs. Content

I had often been perplexed by the lack of “content” in Brazilian art, as it frequently seemed to me to be overly preoccupied with formal concerns. Where for the last twenty years, a great deal of contemporary art in North America has engaged with pressing social and political issues of race, gender, history, and so forth, Brazilian art has remained much more abstract; i.e. it is art about art, rather than art about life. I have not been alone in this evaluation. “O Fio da Trama/ The Thread Unraveled” was a group exhibition of 21 Brazilian artists, curated by Bercht at El Museo del Barrio in the fall and winter of 2001/02. Ken Johnson, a *New York Times* reviewer, wrote quite favorably about the show, but he expressed surprise at its fixation on form:

(T)he Barrio's exhibition is subdued, focused, elegant, and colourless [...] One might expect a larger metaphor to emerge — something to do with the raveling and unraveling of multicultural society, say — but it doesn't. You might detect a South American flavor in the works of a few artists [...] But most of the work in the show looks more international than regional, and most of the artists focus more on materials, procedures and personal poetics than broader social or cultural visions (Johnson 2001).

Both Bercht and Linneman indicated that this review had disappointed them, and complained quite rightly that there was no reason why Brazilian art should not be "international." But I was also surprised at the lack of engaging content in the exhibition: "O Fio da Trama" struck me for the most part as a collection of minor experiments in minimalism. A great deal of the work was white or in subdued earth tones, and this added to the "home decor" effect. After learning more during my visit to Brazil, I wondered at first if the history of architectural training had produced this obsession with form. Indeed, in Brazil it is generally not viewed as a "lack" at all. Linneman described the Brazilian emphasis on form and materials as a "pure" and "utopic" practise, and she struggled to explain to me what her own work might mean: "I try to make things do what they don't do usually, you know, that's what I kind of like. In a way, it's about meanings of things, of materials, you know, of objects and of procedures, activities, you know." Bercht, proud of the Brazilians' talent for form, for their use of materials in three dimensional work, and their ability to "finish" or "accomplish" their sculptures, nevertheless insisted that there was a larger meaning behind the objects and images in her show: "I think the majority of the works are about transcendence." She bristled at the reviewer's description of the show as "colourless," insisting that "there is an enormous amount of colour in white, and in the diversity of the white, there is enormous diversity."

It was the words of gallerist Laura Marsiaj that gave me a strong clue as to the root of this societal penchant for the formal and ephemeral. Marsiaj, who was a psychologist before opening her gallery, was clear about her preference for the

whimsical, somewhat abstract line drawings and photos of Brigida Baltar (which depict the artist in the countryside, “collecting mist” in glass jars and bottles) to the socially grounded performances and installations of Marepe. She said, “When I see Baltar’s work, *it’s very mental* and I like it very much. I prefer to see Baltar’s work than Marepe’s work. This is my kind of life, of seeing.”

Marsiaj’s preference for the “mental” in art was strongly echoed by Milhazes, who is currently the top-selling Brazilian artist both at home and internationally. Her paintings, which incorporate floral, ribbon, and other patterns into geometrical abstractions, have been described by some critics as “carnavalesque,” implying a strong connection to Brazilian popular culture and, by association, to the black body (Fig. 8). Indeed, Milhazes told me that Tarsila do Amaral was one of her greatest influences: “(Amaral) had exactly the connections that I would like to have about painting, because she was very connected to the naive painting, countryside, things that you can find in the countryside in Brazil, very, very, very, like, cultural stuff.” A writer in England’s *Frieze* magazine even claimed that Oiticica’s influence is clear in Milhazes’ “restless juggling of references to life beyond the picture plane” and noted that Milhazes is scheduled to publish in late 2002 an artist’s book of screenprints accompanied by a selection of lyrics to twelve Brazilian songs (Higgie, 2002: 62-63). Yet Milhazes herself was quick to reject attempts to link her work to cultural, social, or political issues, including feminism, firmly insisting that her work is about form and nothing more:

It’s a little fake when people try to be like that, you know, like making statements, or women’s lib or things like that... I remember when I started showing, some women’s group came to me and they said my work’s got a lot of stuff — it used to have a lot more, like I used elements from dresses and things, it was very female. Still is, but now it’s much more abstract painting. And so, like, uh, they come to me and they found, it was like political like totally to say like ‘*I am*’. And it was very difficult to place, like that’s not because of the political reasons that I am doing it, you know. It’s like, I’m a

woman, I'm very interested in the women's fields, in the women's rights and whatever, but it's not a flag for being a woman, my work. *It's about geometry.*

Batista thought otherwise of Milhazes' work, and the work of other successful artists of his own generation or slightly older. We spoke of the biomorphic forms Neto uses in his large installations of sand-filled nylon, which are reminiscent of the shapes in Amaral's paintings from the *antropofagia* years, and of some of Lygia Clark's sculptural objects;⁵³ of Milhazes' brightly coloured, "carnavalesque" abstractions; of Adriana Varejão's baroque "tile" paintings, that seep with life-like raw intestines from the edges and behind; and of Tunga's very "primal" sculptures that incorporate wood, metal, hair and other "raw" elements. He said:

They fit perfectly into this cliché (of) how Europeans see what Brazilian art should be [...] I mean, if you look at those elements that they work with, that they treat, it is absolutely what you supposed Brazilian art could be or should be because of the nature, because of the tropical thing, because of the parrots, because of the beautiful sea, the beautiful women.

He did not think this work was meaningless, but he was frustrated in a general way with his generation's unwillingness to explore the deeper elements of Brazilian culture in its art, such as the military dictatorship that they all lived through. In his opinion, his peers were overly engaged with formal issues:

It's like, very formal thinking, very formal, very "white cube"-oriented thought and wishes and desires [...] People really think they have to buy their work, that's the only way they can make art, if you can actually sell it in some way, or if you can put it into four white walls.

He was excited about the possibilities of the younger generation, including Ducha, as this group seemed intent on questioning the established art system.

Yet Batista was uncharacteristically reserved on the subject of Marepe's work. He called Marepe "an outside case" in the Brazilian art scene, and stated that, as far as he knew, there was no movement of black Brazilian contemporary artists. Part of

⁵³ In our conversation together, Neto cited Oiticica and Lygia Clark as his greatest influences.

the problem, he thought, was the lack of information, because of the lack of communication between the southern art centres and Bahia: “We know about Marepe not through art magazines, of course, but because he really came here and showed the work in Rio.” Batista also suggested that the current economic climate in Brazil, which he says makes travel for Brazilians hard and discourages immigration to the country, made the creation of *any* movements more difficult. He then compared Marepe’s possibilities today to those of Brazilian artists in the 1960s, idealizing the practices of the latter: “Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark, they are from this generation where Brazil is still a place where people go. So they have no European traditions in their artworks, they are pretty unique.”

This leap from Marepe’s work to Oiticica’s happened more than once in my conversations with Brazilians. Perhaps it is because both artists work(ed) in the streets and with elements of Afro-Brazilian culture. Marepe, too, named Oiticica when I asked him if Afro-Brazilian culture often entered the world of contemporary art: “He was an artist whose work was very linked up with the question of blacks, really, of slums, of samba [...], although he was not black.” Yet Marepe drew no lines between “European” and “non-European” traditions, stating simply and eloquently that “any language that does not get stuck is contemporary,” and that what all good artists do is, like him, to “try to open possibilities with different materials, with languages, *to speak of that about which I want to speak.*”

Marepe’s account of his practise was very different from Linneman’s and Milhazes’. He described his work as a “conversation” and repeatedly stressed the importance of street culture to his art, and of the real, not metaphorical or formal, connections between the objects he produced and the people and culture of Bahia. For a series of works he showed in 1996, he took photographs of vendors’ stalls in his hometown, then reproduced them exactly — making only subtle changes, such as the addition of dead rats to demonstrate the efficacy of the rat poison he was “selling.”

When I asked if this work constituted a performance, he said, “No. It is not a performance [...] because the object itself is impregnated with information about the owner.” He continued, “(This work) generally has the characteristic of being very precarious [...] It reveals the state of poverty (of Bahia). *The material is tied to a history, not only in the present, also in the past, of blacks.*” He spoke of his work as creating “bridges” between the context of its exhibition and the reality of people’s lives in Bahia, what he called “the domestic universe,” as well as Afro-Brazilian history and street culture, and the nature of “work” or labour itself. Much of his work takes place in outdoor, public spaces in Bahia, and involves the participation of passers-by, friends, and family. He documents these events or productions, and sells the photos and other, smaller “samples” of these events through his gallery in São Paulo “to pay for the work itself.” The work, in other words, is often what take place in the northeast, and Bahians thus constitute his most important audience. He said, “Showing [my work] in Bahia is more complicated than here [in São Paulo] ... because it has much more information... The people know it better ... even with the information given to people here. *There*, they discuss it.”

Identity, Geography, Memory

Marepe spoke often and warmly of the place he is from, Bahia, calling it, humorously, “the tyrant of all Brazil.” For him, Bahia represented not only family, particularly his parents, but also history — both the history of Brazil and its beginnings in colonialism, and the history of “the people,” *his* people, Afro-Brazilians. He described Bahia as a region that both suffers from and is preserved by its isolation. His job as an artist is to “build bridges” from Bahia to the rest of Brazil and the world; in a sense to translate between the concerns and language of “the people” and that of the “critical world,” which is the one that is

archived and institutionally preserved. When I asked him if identity issues were important in Brazil, he replied “For me, yes; for me it is particularly so”:

Because I think I have the background to do something about it [...] I can use my skills to make my work using the resources of my place, my reality. That is to say, I think this pleasure has more problems, yeah, more social problems, principally around the question of memory. *We do not preserve those things that are of the people*, even though they are preserved by reality.

He spoke repeatedly of the “walls” dividing cities and regions in Brazil, and the “walls” that kept black artists from participation in the contemporary art world. His feelings about these walls were mixed. On the one hand, he “protested” these walls, which represented the racism of the south against the north, white against black; but he also thought that the walls — indeed, poverty itself — may have helped preserve the culture of Afro-Brazilians in Bahia. He asked, “If all of Brazil was equalized economically, maybe today there would not be a different culture in Bahia. Because then it would be a culture like this one [in São Paulo], understand?”

In the 2002 São Paulo Bienal, Marepe’s ambivalence about metaphorical walls translated into an actual wall. For his ambitious artwork, an old, painted cement wall, about 2 1/2 metres high by 6 metres long, had been very carefully excavated from the front of the shop Comercial São Luis in his hometown of Santo Antonio de Jesus and carried by truck thousands of kilometres to São Paulo. The shop had begun as a bakery in 1941, then expanded into a grocery store, then into a kind of department store. Marepe told me, “History says that the whole city (of Santo Antonio de Jesus) grew from that store.” The wall was hand-painted with the shop’s slogan: EVERYTHING IN THE SAME PLACE AT THE LOWEST PRICE (Fig. 9). Marepe said he brought the wall to the Bienal “to create a discussion about commerce, art and commerce [...] for a mega-institution in which you spend a lot of money.” The wall also pays homage to the black artists of Bahia, many of whom are employed as sign painters: “I was (also) dealing with the question of being an

anonymous artist in a store [...], which is linked to the work I did before with the street vendors.” But as well as bridging the differences between “walled off” worlds, Marepe’s work also serves to protect the place and people he comes from. “The wall in truth, helps. It’s a private space, a protection, no? That which is yours...” he told me, and he defined his work as a type of “people protector,” using the word *guardagente*, which is a play on the word *guardaropa*, “closet” or, literally, “clothing protector.”

Where Marepe’s sense of identity as black and Bahian was very strong, most individuals I interviewed had trouble articulating any clear “Brazilian” identity for themselves or for the art that is currently being produced in Brazil. Bercht and Linneman described their identities to me as very “international,” but noted that in different regions of Brazil there are different cultures. By way of example, Bercht explained that in the north “they have a completely different sense of time than we do.” Linneman noted that other regions produced more “popular” art than contemporary art. Gabriel expressed his clear disdain for North American-style identity politics simply by rolling his eyes when I noted that I did not see much discourse of that kind in Brazilian art. When I mentioned that the *New York Times* reviewer of “O Fio da Trama” had cited the show’s lack of “metaphors,” he laughed and said the reviewer must have been hoping for “crafts.”

Indeed, it seemed that the white Brazilians I spoke with were highly mistrustful of my attempts to locate their identities vis-à-vis Brazilian politics or popular conceptions of Brazilian culture (whether simply “Latin” culture or Afro-Brazilian culture). Just as Linneman and Bercht described identity as contingent upon geography, Batista explained that in fact there is a real, geographical “disconnect” between cultures, peoples, and politics in Brazil, and that this has profound psychological implications. The nation is so large, he explained, that “whatever happens up there in Bahia, there is no way you can feel it here [...]. We

don't feel it on our skin." In fact, it seemed that the white Brazilians by and large did not *want* to "feel it on their skins" but desperately wanted to feel themselves elsewhere: *outside* Brazil, in the realm of the *international*, or what many called the *universal*; to be, like the fervid title of one Brazilian contemporary art catalogue, *Ultramodern*.⁵⁴ Milhazes spoke repeatedly of her need and desire to travel, to be a part of the "international" scene. Marsiaj insisted that artists cannot both represent the "local" and also have relevance to larger audiences. She said:

You can't be very *localizado* — how do you say — because if you are very into the local culture, you don't have universal lecture [...]. I think it's very good if you do such a kind of work that *everybody* can understand. And I think if you are [...] into representing the nuances of your culture, sometimes you lose the general.

When I pressed her, she conceded that Marepe succeeded in both "representing his culture" and having "a universal effect" — as evidenced by the fact that "he sells in Germany, no problem" — but shortly afterwards she told me that his issues of identity nevertheless struck her as "boring stuff."

As Frankenberg notes, in societies dominated and ruled by whites the term "universal" is often a stand-in for "whiteness," thus in research such as mine what is at stake is "the 'revealing' of the unnamed — the exposure of whiteness masquerading as universal" as well as "examining how white dominance is rationalized, legitimized, and made ostensibly normal and natural" (Frankenberg 1997: 3). In Brazil, where explicit discussions of race are frowned upon, this becomes more complex. Here, geography takes on a larger, racially-bound significance. In her study of fear, crime and segregation in São Paulo, Caldeira speaks of the slippages between racial and geographical classifications, where the prevalent image of "the

⁵⁴ Aracy Amaral and Paulo Herkenhoff (1994). *Ultramodern: The Art of Contemporary Brazil*. Washington, DC: The National Museum of Women in the Arts.

criminal” among whites is the *nordestino* — someone from the northeast, which encompasses the states of Bahia, Sergipe, Alagoas, Pernambuco, Paraíba, Rio Grande do Norte, Cereá, Piauí and Maranhão. But the term *nordestino* is also a substitute for “non-white,” so that one women Caldeira interviewed made a special point to stress that the men who had robbed her, although *nordestinos*, were actually white, which made the robbery so much more shocking (Caldeira 2000: 32-34).

For Batista, the tragedy of this geographical “disconnect” is not so much that identity politics remain undiscussed in contemporary art, but that his own generation is utterly disinterested in the recent history of the military dictatorship and refuses to take collective responsibility for their actions. He contrasted Brazil with Chile and Argentina, where there were well-known resistance movements opposing the dictatorships:

If you take Argentina, which is not even 30 million people, 80 percent live in Buenos Aires, and if you go to the streets in Buenos Aires, everybody knows about you. But if people go out to the streets of São Paulo, we here in Rio, we don't even care, or we don't even know. And then Brasília is really a thousand kilometres away [...] so whatever they do in Brasília, we don't even know.

Batista was angry that his peers lived through the dictatorship “without thinking about it”:

Now they just look at it in a romantic way: “Ah! All the musicians went to London! [...] Hélio Oiticica went to London!” But there is no relationship to what *really* happened. We just know we had it, but it looks like a novella. We look back: okay, some people were killed, but nobody knows who and how and how bad it was, because nobody actually ever talked about it.”⁵⁵

Later, he said, “Brazilians have a very short memory.”

⁵⁵ Batista's family also went into exile in Europe during the dictatorship, because his father spoke Russian, and in those days “that was enough.” He was three years old when he left in 1966, and returned in 1975, only to leave again on his own for Europe at age eighteen.

In fact, Batista's peers in the art world likely benefited — at least economically — from the dictatorship, because the military junta that seized power in 1964 supervised a transfer of the national income from the poorest 40 percent to the richest 10 percent of the population (Scheper-Hughes 1992: 283). Like "Reaganomics" did in the 1980s in SoHo, New York, such economic trends tend to benefit contemporary art, as the wealthy "leisure class" gains so much more disposable income with which to purchase artworks, supporting the system of private galleries that fuel the rest of the art world. By contrast, in those many areas of Brazil where increasing poverty led to forms of protest, "military police officers were heavily implicated in the disappearances, tortures and deaths" of suspected subversives and squatters. In the northeast, particularly, democratization has been painfully slow, and "has yet to challenge the local presence (of thuggish civil police) and the fearful psychological hold of the military police over the poorer populations" (Scheper-Hughes 1992: 223).

This intertwining of history, geography, and identity is rather grim material, and my questioning of it produced a variety of responses from my white participants. Bercht strongly agreed that there is a great need for a discussion of race and identity in Brazil, stating:

I think in Brazil there is a very big need of analyzing our values, in terms of our race relationship. To acknowledge the history that's behind this relationship today. And also to challenge the notion that there is no racism in Brazil. I don't know. It's like one of these myths, that official mythology.

However, she noted that "a lot of these people (activists) are inspiring themselves in a model that's imported, and therefore I think it is very colonialistic." She did not want to say which groups she was referring to, but according to Reichmann, it is still common for left-wing Brazilians to oppose the Movimento Negro, which has similarities to the Black Power movement in the USA in the 1960s. The result is that both left-wing and right-wing whites in Brazil are thus opposing the black movements (Reichmann 1999: 20-23). Linneman, on the other hand, argued that in Brazil

identity politics are “too sophisticated from the social point of view” because blacks in Brazil are already overwhelmed by bigger priorities, such as getting plumbing for their homes. She asked me how I would propose to have a discussion with blacks about identity, when the question is “completely proposed for the white middle class.” Prata’s only concern was that protest activities would dissuade potential investors from spending money in Brazil. During my time in São Paulo, I had not been reading the daily newspaper, and Prata informed me excitedly that “there’s a revolution nowadays in Brazil.” The day before, some workers in the Movimento dos Sem Terra (Landless Movement) had stormed the President’s house in the countryside. Of course, the military had been sent in immediately and had already removed them, but Prata laughed incredulously: “Can you imagine, sleeping in the President’s bed?!”

Both Ducha and Milhazes had rather more convoluted feelings towards this subject. Ducha was excited about the work of Edson Barrus — the only other black contemporary artist I heard of while in Brazil — whose current, ironical project is to breed a “mulatto dog.”⁵⁶ He also told me that all the artists with whom he was showing in Prata’s exhibition were white, but that one of the organizers of the show was a young black woman. While he was there installing, he’d spoken with her in detail about the racism she faced, and how she was often badly treated in the homes of “aristocrats” and in restaurants. But then he said, “but the reverse is true, because if I, I’m white, if I go to a *favela* in the suburbs, and I am just walking in the *favela*, I can have troubles.” I asked him, “But don’t you see a difference between the discrimination of white against black and the discrimination of black against white?” He paused for moment, then conceded, “Yes, it’s different.” Yet, like Batista, Ducha

⁵⁶ See Edson Barrus, “O tropicalismo, que tenha sido responsavel pelo mulato...” in *Item: Revista de Arte*, (pp. 94-97), n.5. Rio de Janeiro : Espaço Agora/Capacete, fevereiro 2002.

was more concerned with issues of art's commercialization in the capitalist system, and he found my questions of race perplexing and somewhat amusing. He asked me, "(In Canada) how do you speak of the *mixture* (of races)?" and I had to admit that we did not, which made him laugh.

It was most difficult to speak of racial issues with Milhazes, whose own race is very ambiguous. One Brazilian described her as a "typical *carioca*" (girl or woman from Rio), meaning that she was *morena*, "tan" or of Ibero-Arab heritage. Yet non-Brazilians had described her to me as black before I met her, and I, too, thought that in our "biracial" culture, she would likely be identified as black, albeit somewhat light-skinned. In any case, at a certain point we began discussing a show she had recently had in Alabama, and here I found the conversation difficult to negotiate and evaluate. She told me that she had been amazed to be "treated like a movie star there," with interviews on television, a cover page story in the newspaper, and 400 people at her lecture. For reasons she did not explain, she had expected the opposite: to be "held by police at the airport!" In Alabama, she saw for the first time the remnants of racial segregation in the American south, and this moved her a great deal: "I never been in a place similar, where they have like water for black, water for white [...] I was shocked." She compared the USA to Brazil, saying "We don't really have a racial problem here. We have, of course, but it's not really this kind of, like, it's more economical, you know?" The Americans' attempts to grapple with its racial history fascinated her, but she thought that delving too deeply into history, and passing judgments on the past, could also be dangerous:

It's like when people move to Germany, and people talk about Nazis, they don't know the issues. [...] It's really heavy [...] We should be careful. Because in a place where they develop such a horrible stuff, (we) should be careful, because you never know what will go... And so, like, [...] it's pure preconception. We are so, we are acting as Nazi as they used to be.

Tentatively, I began trying to ask her if she thought her warm reception in Alabama had been related to their “preconception” of her as a *black* artist, but each time I attempted to, I was cut off:

BM: I think (Alabama) will always be a very right place, conservative in a strange kind of way.

JB: So when you went to Alabama, were you received as -

BM: But they didn’t have any, any, any — just the opposite.

JB: Did they ask you questions about race in Brazil?

BM: Nothing. Nothing political, anything about it.

JB: Yeah. What -

BM: I was really expecting totally different, totally the opposite.

It is difficult to convey the tension I felt in our brief transaction, and it may have been simply mine — after being warned not to be too “Nazi” in my interrogations. At any rate, I felt compelled to change subjects.

The Case of Kara Walker

If some black North Americans are now growing weary of race-based identity politics,⁵⁷ white Brazilians, apparently, have always been wary of its pitfalls. Bercht wanted to discuss the works of American abstract painter Martin Puryear and Brazilian pop artist Antônio Dias, both of whom in their respective nations were

⁵⁷ Shelby Steele, a black American writer and research fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, has recently denounced the affirmative action programs that benefited him as a young person, claiming they have created a culture of permanent “protest identity” among black Americans. He also denounces black-studies in academia because it lacks a research methodology of its own, which in his opinion means “it could never be more than an assemblage of courses cobbled together from ‘real’ departments, and [...] it could never have more than a political mandate — a perfect formula for academic disrespect” (Steele 2002: 33-42).

important figures in the 1970s, and who, Bercht pointed out, are both black, although many people do not know this. She asked:

[B]ut by being abstract, are they less African Americans? I don't think so ... I'm afraid when people are looking for [stereotypical] signs [...] If you see a cowry shell, the colours of the rastafarian flag, the map of Africa, the self-representation of peoples of colour...

She continued:

And what I think has happened, and I don't want this to happen in Brazil, is that before, uh, there is a discussion of what artists are doing and understanding (in) their work, and, what really is the language (they're using), there is this tendency to come with a label [...] So you have something very complex, right? Then you suddenly have this label that will make it very small [...] It narrows it down, yes! [...] So you see, you know, *get any famous, important African American artist that has dealt with questions of Africanness*. Uh, Kara Walker, for example. Okay? Do you want to see her work *just* as an African American woman? Or isn't she above all a contemporary artist, and *because* she's an artist she has decided to deal with certain issues? And these issues are very important, you have to deal with questions of identity.

Kara Walker (b.1969) is a black American artist whose work addresses the legacy of racial stereotypes from the Civil War era. The stark black silhouettes she produces of ridiculous and salacious "pickaninny" figures, pasted directly onto white walls, are often accompanied by texts she has written that "perform" her wonder and anger at the psycho-sexual, socio-political ramifications of slavery (Fig. 10). That is to say, her work is decidedly *not* about "Africanness," although it is very explicitly about identity. Mostly, it addresses the historical and contemporary *white* imagination of blacks. Walker has been extremely successful in the USA and internationally, becoming in 1997 the youngest person ever to win the coveted MacArthur Foundation Fellowship. Partly because her work is so well known, it became a point of departure for conversations about identity politics with a number of my interview participants.

Linneman and I spoke at length about identity politics, as she was quite sure class differences in Brazil precluded any possibility of them. She told me:

If there is like a racial conflict or a racial discomforts, you know, you would think that a racial conflict — a racial conflict, I mean, or a racial discomfort — would be brought up from the side that's feeling uncomfortable. But it doesn't seem that it's an issue, because I think that as it's very, you know, intertwined with the class issue, there is still class issues to be resolved and they are much, much, much more important... [...] I really don't know how you extend the discussion of identity when there are like much more fragmented issues to be resolved, and that's how people can have plumbing in their houses.

I asked her if she knew of any contemporary black artists, critics, or curators in Brazil, and she replied "No. Absolutely not anybody. Nobody. No, no."

So, I asked, if race issues need to be addressed from those who are experiencing troubles, and if black people, "because they are poor," are too busy to address these issues, "What would happen, for example, if Kara Walker had a show in a gallery in São Paulo?" Linneman replied that a show by Walker might get a decent reception only with the proper preparations: "I don't know. If it's contextualized, you know? If she goes to the Bienal, when you go and try to understand [...] It's just not something that the people there would produce." She reflected on this for a moment and explained, "Because I think, you know, to be in a situation of producing art you have to have some critical system operating, you know... and I don't know anybody."

Over two hundred artists had works on display in the 2002 São Paulo Bienal, and they came from every continent in the world. It was held, as always, in the Bienal Pavilion, a structure of stadium-like proportions in Parque Ibirapuera. Each artist in the exhibition was allotted a large amount of space, for example, an entire, closed-off room of 36 or 64 metres squared, or 10 to 12 metres of wall or floor space in a common area. Touring such an enormous event is very tiring, as the process of looking and reflecting becomes, with each new display, increasingly repetitive and

mindless — like window shopping, or an assembly line inspection. At the opening of the Bienal, which was crowded with thousands of visitors, it was especially difficult to identify who had made each work, as the tiny white labels stating “Artist, Country, Title, Date” were for the most part thoroughly blocked by well-dressed, overheated bodies. However, to my great surprise, there was one label I could not miss, and that was Kara Walker’s, located on the wall outside the private room of her installation. For the 2002 São Paulo Bienal, Walker had been sent as the official representative of the USA, and her didactic panel was over six feet tall and four feet wide. The panel gave us the full title of the installation, in both Portuguese and English, *Slavery! Slavery! presenting a GRAND and LIFE LIKE Panoramic Journey into Picturesque Southern Slavery or “Life at ‘Ol’ Virginny’s Hole’ (sketches from Plantation Life)” See the Peculiar Institution as never before! All cut from black paper by the able hand of Kara Elizabeth Walker, an Emancipated Negress and leader in her Cause*. The artist’s biography told us that Walker’s silhouettes “represent stereotypes taken from mass-media historical pornographic novels about the antebellum American South. Regarding stereotypes as a form of culturally sanctioned paranoia, Walker fantasizes in her art about what types of events can occur when this form of insanity moves into the world.” Her installation was gorgeous, and I was thrilled to see her work there, but I wondered why Walker was the only artist in the whole Bienal whose art was so heavily contextualized. I thought there was no mistaking the panel’s message: this presentation is about the USA, *don’t think for a moment it could be about Brazil*.

Shortly after I viewed her installation, the lights went out in her room and did not come back on for another three days — a rather normal occurrence in the chaotic Bienal. At the time, I could find nobody to answer my questions about why that panel was there, and its significance in relation to Linneman’s comments grew larger in my mind. Back in Canada, I spoke to Michael Jenkins, a curator at the Brent

Sikkema Gallery in New York City, which represents Kara Walker. He did not know for sure, but he presumed the panel had been the decision of the installation's curator, Robert Hobbs, who "happens to be" a white man from International Arts & Artists in Washington, DC. He also told me that when the Brazilian television crews covering the Bienal had arrived in Walker's installation, they had wanted to speak first to the curator, but Walker — suddenly conscious of the fact that this would mean a white man on television representing a black woman's work — had insisted that she do the interviews herself.

It is possible that Walker's didactic panel — the only one of its kind in the entire Bienal — was simply another example of American (USA'ian) largess in international cultural promotion. Regardless, I could not help feel that it functioned to let the Brazilian audience "off the hook," so to speak, and able to "escape the real," which means of course to escape their own history and perpetuate the fantasy that slavery in Brazil was kinder and gentler than in the USA, as well as the idea that, in Brazil, nothing lingers from that period — save for the unfortunate, apparently solutionless, "class differences."

Linneman — who was always of two minds about the role of art in society — described the Brazilian art world's desire to escape the real, strikingly, as a sort of social utopianism. She wondered where on earth they could take it to next:

Modernism in Brazil was completely evolved, it achieved that kind of image, you'll always think, you know, it can't go further. That's the maximum formalist, you know. But then at the same time, you know, there's a moment that it begins to be just form, you know, it doesn't mean a thing. *That moment really means you start to think about a perfect world, like if you can imagine if they can do that in art, maybe they can do that in society, and you begin to think* (laughing) *that's utopia!* You know, and how? But you know, it's only a moment. And then, what do you do after that? So, in a way, it gets very awkward, because you know there is a moment I *do* feel you have to start to incorporate everything else back, you know: the world *is* there.

On the other side, Marepe — who regularly “incorporates everything else back” in what he calls his “poetics of survival” — smiled broadly when I brought up Kara Walker’s name:

M: She is wonderful, no? I participated in an exhibition in Bahia that Kara Walker was in two years ago. It was called “Quietude da Terra.”

JB: I thought it was interesting, because I understand in Brazil it is very difficult to talk about racism. The impression is that everyone says “It does not exist.”

M: No, it does.

JB: People say, “It exists, but not in the art world, not here!”

M: No, it exists.

JB: I thought that the work of Kara Walker here was very important.

M: *It was perfect.* I am proud to have known her.

And, for a brief moment, I felt grounded again: the world *is* there, and my questions about race were fixed, however contingently, in reality.

Chapter IV

Hiding the Real Under the Formal

"There was a clear awareness that the real was hiding under the formal. The people knew the formal was not serious. There was no way to participate, the Republic was not for real."

— Historian Jose Murilo de Carvalho, writing about the character of the early Brazilian Republic (cited in Andrews 1991: 133)

"[Th]is negativity of knowing what not to know lies at the heart of a vast range of social powers and knowledges intertwined with those powers, such that the clumsy hybrid of power/knowledge comes at last into meaningful focus, it being not that knowledge is power but rather that active not-knowing makes it so."

— Anthropologist Michael Taussig on the "public secret" (Taussig 1999: 6)

The privilege of being white is certainly not limited to Brazil. In fact, it is very nearly universal. However, the way that Brazil attempts to grapple with this problem — largely through denial, or by shuffling the issue to one of "class" — is different from liberal attitudes of "multiculturalism," "equal opportunity" or "affirmative action" that Canada and the USA variously tend to advocate (or sometimes simulate). Emilia Viotta da Costa has blamed the continued hegemony of whites in Brazil partly on the system of traditional paternalism and clientelism (what some people call corruption, others call friendship, or the elaborate and onerous system of *jeitos*, which could be understood as either bribes or favours) that pervaded Brazilian society during the transition from slavery to freedom, and continues today (cited in Hasenbalg 1985: 7; see also DaMatta 1999: 295-297; and Levine 1999: 402-407). Under this structure, most important transactions were facilitated by wheel-greasing or the granting of favours, and social mobility thus depended upon the patronage of white elites rather than, say, market competition. After Abolition — a legislation that we must remember came from Pedro II, the liberal-minded king of Portugal, and was not supported by the majority of Republicans, especially in the states of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro — this culture of *jeitos* in effect eliminated the need for a

formalized system of racial segregation. After all, access to power was still managed by those who had access to it before Abolition. What this means is that the myth of *democracia racial* was easy to promote, since the emancipation of blacks posed no threat to the social positions of elites. Or, as the black Brazilian activist and poet Abdias do Nascimento wrote:

Abolition was a facade: juridical, theoretical, abstract. The ex-slaves were driven to the brink of starvation; they found only disease, unemployment, complete misery. Not only the elites, but all of Brazilian society closed the avenues through which blacks might have survived; they shut off the possibility of a decent, dignified life for the ex-slaves. They created a fabric of slogans about equality and racial democracy that has served to assuage the bad national conscious. (Nascimento 1968/1999: 380).

This, in part, is what Carvalho diagnosed as “the real [...] hiding under the formal.”

Just as the report by Datafolha predicted (“Brazilians deny racism that they know exist”), my conversations with contemporary art world professionals in Brazil did not unearth an industry-wide interest in identity issues or racial equity; nor did my interview participants try too hard to disprove the racism of their society. On the contrary, most of them skillfully elided the whole question of racism even while they affirmed its existence. In this chapter, I will argue that this public denial of what everyone “knows exists” constitutes what anthropologist Michael Taussig has termed a “public secret”: “*that which is generally known, but cannot be articulated*” (Taussig 1999: 5, emphasis in original). I believe this concept can help us to understand the ways in which white elite Brazilians explain or justify the significant power imbalances between whites and blacks in their country. Indeed, the notion of the “public secret” can help clarify how whiteness in Brazil (and elsewhere, too) has been made to miraculously disappear, and how, as Frankenberg explains, its “characterization as an unmarked marker is itself an ‘ideological’ effect that seeks to cover the tracks of its constructedness, specificity, and localness, even as they appear” (Frankenberg 1997: 16). More specifically, Taussig’s theory can help us to make

sense of the structure and function of the Brazilian contemporary art industry, with its history of appropriation of black culture and black bodies, its simultaneous dearth of identity politics, and the near complete absence of black artists. To confront these contradictions is, as Taussig tells us, to “struggle with ambiguity,” which he calls, after Hegel, “the labour of the negative” (Taussig 1999: 107).

Unmasking the Secret

Taussig’s book *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative* (1999) is an attempt to come to terms with what happens when something precious — a monument, spiritual practise, or item of faith — is despoiled. His analysis is based largely on ethnographical treatises written by others — studies of an anarchist village in Spain under Franco, and turn-of-the-century accounts of South American tribes — but his inspiration comes from his experience living in Colombia in the early 1980s, when people “dared not speak the obvious” (Taussig 1999: 6). Then, as today, the military and police regularly set up roadblocks or pulled people off buses, ostensibly to search for drug runners — though the military and police themselves were far more likely to be involved in drug running. In towns and hamlets in northern Colombia, inhabitants referred to “the law of silence” when civil liberties were suspended and mutilated corpses regularly appeared at roadsides, courtesy of the paramilitary killers who were working in collusion with the regular military forces. Taussig writes:

We all “knew” this [the collusion between military and paramilitary forces], and they “knew” we “knew,” but there was no way it could easily be articulated, certainly not on the ground, face-to-face. Such “smoke screens” are surely long known to mankind, but this “long knownness” is itself an intrinsic component of knowing what not to know, such that many times, even in our acknowledging it, in striving to extricate ourselves from its sticky embrace, we fall into even better-laid traps of our own making. Such is the labor of the negative, as when it is pointed out that something may be

obvious, but needs stating in order to be obvious. For example, the public secret. Knowing it is essential to its power, equal to the denial. Not being able to say anything is likewise testimony to its power (Taussig 1999: 6).

Colombia is an extreme example of how knowledge of the public secret is essential to survival. However, Taussig argues that this “negativity” of knowing what not to know is crucial to the everyday functioning of societies everywhere: “Wherever there is power, there is secrecy, except it is not only secrecy that lies at the core of power, but public secrecy” (Taussig 1999: 7). The power of the public secret functions in such a way that “you don’t exactly ‘keep’ a public secret so much as know how to be kept by it” (Taussig 1999: 121). For example, as Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* demonstrated, in modernity we have all been “kept” by sex, the secret which is spoken of *ad infinitum* as *the* secret, and the equation of “knowledge = power” transforms into an awareness of the power of *not* knowing (Taussig 1999: 50). Of course, the public secret is not limited to sex, but extends to all kinds of political and cultural phenomena throughout the ruling relations of any society:

So we fall silent when faced with such a massive sociological phenomenon, aghast at such complicities and ours with it, for without such shared secrets any and all social institutions — workplace, marketplace, state, and family — would founder (Taussig 1999: 6-7).

Taussig’s analysis converges upon the examination of an elaborate ritual of the now extinct indigenous Selk’nam people of Tierra del Fuego, and of the writings of several anthropologists who did fieldwork with them from 1832 to 1924.⁵⁸ On the largest island of this southernmost tip of South America, every few years for months or more, initiated Selk’nam men would gather in “the Big Hut” to adorn masks and paint their bodies black, red, and white in order to represent (or, Taussig stresses, to *become*) certain spirits. The community’s women and children served as witnesses of

⁵⁸ These include the young Charles Darwin and Martin Gusinde, a Catholic missionary who had trained as an anthropologist in Austria.

this performance and, upon the men's exit from the hut, would hail them by singing "Here come the spirits!". The witnesses were threatened with death — and not infrequently killed — if they intimated in any way that these were not *real* spirits but performing men, their kinsmen. The origins of this ritual, according to the male initiates, lay long ago in that Other time, when women were said to have ruled Isla Grande and used the powers of sorcery and shamanism to keep the men in check. One day, in frustration and anger, the men rose up against the women, killing them all except for the youngest girls. From that day on, they maintained their own position of supremacy not through real sorcery but — as they openly admitted to the anthropologists — by *tricking* the women into thinking they possessed magic and supernatural powers (Taussig 1999: 101-117).

Taussig, like the original researchers, questions whether the women actually believed the men or not. One anthropologist recorded that around 1909, a rumour circulated that some women on the north end of the island "suspected something of great deceit," and so a group of men smeared themselves with ashes, and stood outside the Big Hut making faces and obscene gestures until it was clear that the women would stay inside their huts and not attempt an "uprising." Taussig asks of the men's behaviour: "And could anything be more calculated to undermine the men's secret?" (Taussig 1999: 122-123). Martin Gusinde, Taussig's main source of information about the Selk'nam, concluded that the men did not believe, but the women did. Other anthropologists were certain that the men's threats to kill were real, but left hanging whether or not the women truly believed. And still others were certain that the women *did* believe, even if the women *also* knew the "spirits" were simply their husbands and brothers in disguise. Taussig surmises that "whatever belief is, conceptually, in these matters, it is inseparable from danger and beyond our or anybody else's determination of its realness or its fakeness" (Taussig 1999: 124).

As for the men, it is also not so clear that *they* did *not* believe. While they admitted to the anthropologist to deceiving the women, and while they believed their charades were successful and that the women truly believed, the men, in painting their bodies to look like the spirits, believed too that they were imitating what women did in that Other time, when women had all the secrets and the power. Thus when a shaman entered the Big Hut he had to “switch off” his powers so that a woman shaman’s power would not connect up with his and discern the secret occurring inside. As Taussig comments, this behaviour of the men makes the notion of a simple hoax seem far away (Taussig 1999: 125-126). Furthermore, Gusinde, who had access to the Big Hut and participated in an initiation ceremony, describes the rite of passage as truly terrifying for young men. Led into the Big Hut, they were stripped naked, painted, and forced to undergo painful sexual play (grabbing of the genitals) conducted by adult men dressed up as spirits and wearing masks. Only after an hour or more were the young men ordered to remove the spirits’ masks. With a great deal of shock, often accompanied by anger, did the young men realize that the “spirits” harassing them had all along been men, indeed, their fathers, friends, and other relations (Taussig 1999: 128-130). However, instead of disappointing the young men, or negating their belief in the spirits, this ritual of unmasking served rather to reinforce their belief in the spirits’ power. In other words, the immensity of the revelation of the public secret actually strengthened it and made it more necessary to upholding their belief. Taussig writes that modern western or Enlightenment notions of illusion and representation, or the binary juxtaposition of “myth” versus “reality,” are unable to explain this phenomenon:

[N]otions of illusion or representation seem to me not only inadequate but may actually mystify the task of understanding how unmasking can have an effect quite opposite to what one might generally assume; that instead of dissipating the reality suggested by the mask, that its wearer is not a man but a spirit, unmasking instead adds to what we might call “the reality” of the spirit

or of the nether realms of which the spirit is an element [...] it's not really a secret that is transgressed but a pseudo-secret, a public secret (knowing what not to know) which, like all public secrets, cannot in the final analysis be exposed yet insists we keep trying, thereby provoking a storm of theatricality in which the unmasking of deliberate deception stokes the fires of spiritual plenitude (Taussig 1999: 149).

So, if *democracia racial* is the myth — like the spirits dancing outside the Big Hut — what exactly is the “secret” that keeps Brazilians? As Brazilian anthropologist Luis Ribeiro points out, attempts to “unmask” racism have historically had little effect:

Speakers at almost every meeting of Brazil's black movements feel compelled to hammer on the issue [of the myth of *democracia racial* versus the existence of racism] again and again [...] Even recent (or not so old) articles still come out with titles such as Skidmore's (1991) “*Fato e Mito: Descobrimos um Problema Racial no Brasil*” (Fact and Myth: Discovering a Race Problem in Brazil) or Hasenbalg's (1994) “*Entre o Mito e Os Fatos: Racismo e Relações Raciais no Brasil*” (Between Myth and Facts: Racism and Racial Relations in Brazil). Such titles show that the “myth” is still very much a problem for it is thought to “cover up” the “naked fact” of racial discrimination (Ribeiro 1995).

Ribeiro never clearly states whether or not he believes that racial discrimination in Brazil is a “naked fact,” but he is very certain that Brazil is qualitatively different — and better — than South Africa, where statistics on economic disparity between whites and blacks are virtually identical to Brazil. Like other Brazilians, he believes it is possible to both acknowledge the existence of racial discrimination and yet value and uphold the “myth” of racial democracy “as a promise and vision of citizenship and equality in the future” (Ribeiro 1995). Whether or not this is the case (and I think it is not), there is some truth to his argument: discourse has not been allowed to progress beyond the “unmasking” of racism, the idea being that “exposure” of this discrimination will make it disappear. As this does not seem to have yet worked out, my question is, then, what if the secret is instead the *power of race* — i.e. the power of that which is “different” and white “exemption” from the danger of that which is “different”? It is a subtle but sharp

distinction, undoubtedly the flipside of one coin. But if this were to be “unmasked” in a society so enthralled by the idea of *democracia racial*, what next? Perhaps the people would be left without a Republic.

Black into White, or the Labour of the Negative

My interviews revealed the predicament that white elites in the Brazilian contemporary art world, by and large, feel both “cultureless” and denied of a proper “place” for their cultural expressions and productions. As I have explained, most of the white participants had trouble articulating an identity for themselves as Brazilians, preferring to see themselves as “international,” or aspiring in their productions to the “universal.” They clearly felt a deficiency between what they perceived to be available to them at home, and what they felt they deserved, which is what they thought came easily to their (white) colleagues in Europe and North America: public acclaim, better opportunities and institutions, and more money. Prata described the “cultural poverty” of Brazil, referring to white people’s lack of interest in and support for contemporary art. Marsiaj complained that Brazilians “don’t have a Monet, we don’t have a lot of stuff.” Milhazes and Batista both argued, in different ways, that the lack of infrastructure for contemporary art made it very difficult for them to maintain practices or make livings in Brazil. While this situation angered Batista and inspired him to build alternatives, it merely saddened Milhazes, who admitted “What I really have is outside Brazil.” Like Milhazes, many participants expressed their feelings of loneliness in Brazil, or at least admitted to a sense of isolation. Ducha described the contemporary art world as a “ghetto.” And Linneman, when asked who the audience was for contemporary art, spoke of it as a purely self-perpetuating and closed industry: “There are the artists, there are the critics, there are the curators, it’s all done for, you know, it keeps itself.” Only Marepe, the sole self-identifying black artist, spoke of his strong feelings of

connection to family, place and history. Although he desired to establish ties between his culture and that of southern Brazil, he also saw his work also as a kind of “people protector” and feared the loss of Bahian culture to the “cultureless,” moneyed South.

Clearly, these comments demonstrate that whiteness in the Brazilian art world exists as the “unmarked marker” explicated by Frankenberg. In reference mainly to North America, she describes this status as “whiteness as norm, as transparency, as national/natural state of being” (Frankenberg 1997: 16-17). In Brazil and elsewhere, educated white people at times claim “colour blindness,” but it is more common that whiteness simply “disappears” into national, ethnic, or cultural namings. Being white, and especially being white and male, is taken for granted as “normal,” and the privileges that come along with whiteness are likewise experienced as “normal,” not as advantages (Wellman 1997: 321). However, the interviews I conducted make evident that in the contemporary art world in multiracial Brazil, with its tropical climate, economic disparity, and lingering feudalism,⁵⁹ whiteness in the imagination of many in the Brazilian contemporary art world has taken on an additional, more melancholy, quality: *that of lack itself, or being deprived of what white people deserve*. Not many of the white art world professionals I interviewed expressed much irony about this; i.e. the real lack (of food, water, and shelter) of so many of their countryfolk were of little concern or relevance to their struggles (“Can you imagine, sleeping in the President’s bed?!”). Nor did they express much interest in understanding the historical roots of either their nation’s “class” or racial imbalances, or their own sense of deprivation as artists and art professionals — Batista, and

⁵⁹ Agier points out that master-slave relationship between whites and blacks in Brazil is continued today in the preponderance of blacks (especially women) employed as domestic servants in white homes. Here, it is possible to see the continuance of what Freyre described as the intimate and cordial relationship between slaves and their masters — which, today as yesterday, is maintained so long as the slave stays in his or her “place” (Agier 1995: 248).

perhaps Bercht, excepted. But this also makes sense: Barthes, in his *Mythologies*, reminds us of the intimate link between consciousness of history and consciousness of identity. He calls the estrangement and privation of history one of the main figures in the rhetoric of supremacism, as it deprives the colonizers of any responsibility for what has made them what they are and what they will become (Sandoval 1997: 88-90). Thus Milhazes expressly warned against prying too deeply into history or passing judgments: “We should be careful [...] We are acting as Nazi as they used to be.” Batista stressed that this attitude was endemic among elites, and described the phenomenon in his candid way: “Brazilians have a very short memory.”

This condition, or this “curse,” of whiteness as “norm” but also beyond or below “norm,” as absence itself, makes for a profound tension in contemporary art production. On the one hand, we see that participants in the Brazilian contemporary art system are enraptured by the formal, which means not only the quality of workmanship of their art objects, but also the academic or conceptual nature of Brazilian art, its lack of significance beyond the confines of art discourse itself. Marsiaj called this kind of artwork “mental,” and opposed it to Marepe’s “boring stuff.” As Linneman explained, this fascination with the formal has a strong directional quality — it moves *away* from Brazil — because it is a studied attempt to escape social realities, “to detach itself from the world and be abstract.” Or, as Bercht said, “the majority of works are about transcendence.” Thus Marepe’s work, which plays with the social realities of black people — not “blackness” as some mystical or essential quality — seemed to bemuse the white Brazilians I met, if it even registered at all. Some art world professionals I spoke to had simply not heard of him. Others, when I asked if they knew of any black artists in Brazil replied “No, there are none,” but would quickly concur if I mentioned his name, “Ah, yes! There’s Marepe” — and Ducha even brought up Edson Barrus independently. Only Bercht demonstrated any real interest in what black Brazilian artists might have to offer

Brazilian art or Brazilian culture overall. However, even she had to refer to a book on Afro-Brazilian artists in order to remember the names of any black artists who were not already in her show “O Fio da Trama.”⁶⁰

So it is a profound paradox that art by white Brazilians has never been more interesting or successful — even to Brazilians themselves — as when it utilizes black culture, and even black bodies. The aspects of this culture that historically have been chosen are stereotypical and are highly sensual and grounded in place (the countryside, poverty, samba, the *favela*): surely this is the opposite of “mental”! Over the last century, these moments of “blackness” have erupted from under the surface of an otherwise formalistic facade of constructivist, abstract, ephemeral, architectural practices, only to be quickly submersed again (and these moments are easily submersed as they have not been produced by black artists who would persist). Even today, as Batista pointed out, the most successful Brazilian artists are dependent upon elements of popular or black culture to promote their work both at home and abroad. Yet, rather than pursue this aspect of her work with me, Milhazes more or less denied her inspiration, even as she profits considerably from it. She allows critics to write about her work in relation to samba and carnival parades, but informed me earnestly, “*it’s really about geometry.*” There was undoubtedly some masking at play in our conversation, our mutual illusion. Yet I am also sure that Milhazes firmly believed what she said to me. This, then, is the labour of the negative.

Indeed, the labour of the negative is at work not only in Milhazes’ work, but was also the driving force in Oiticica’s and Amaral’s practices. What these artists have done is take the social and cultural realities of black Brazilians and make them signifiers for something else — as I see it, for white potential, for what whiteness in

⁶⁰ Marepe was in this show and, as I have stated, Bercht also suggested that two other participating artists, Efrain Almeida and Luiz Hermano, are also black. I have not been able to verify this information.

colonial society lacks but could perhaps become: connected to land, history, the body, and the spiritual. Nonetheless, their methods have instead achieved the opposite, namely, further abstraction and distance from “the real.”

Here, “appropriation,” although accurate, is perhaps too simple or shop-worn a descriptive term for the process I am describing. We might better understand *antropofagia*, the *Parangolés*, and other moments of Brazilian art through Taussig’s notion of mimetic repression, whereby the Euroamerican colonizer draws upon the imputed “savagery” or sensuousness of the Other in order to *lose himself in* and *become* the Other and thereby *repress* the Other (Taussig 1993: 65-97). According to Taussig, this process is recurrent in Western, capitalist, colonial society, and serves as a way of warding off the “danger” posed by indigenous people, blacks, Jews, and others who have been or currently remain outside of what Frankenberg calls the “national/natural state of being.” Drawing on the theories of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Taussig argues that racism is not side-effectual to modernism, but is “a manifestation of what is essential to modern civilization’s cultural apparatus, namely continuous mimetic repression — understanding mimesis as both the faculty of imitation and the deployment of that faculty in sensuous knowing, sensuous Othering” (Taussig 1993: 68).⁶¹

Barthes described this process similarly as “identification,” another figure or pose in the rhetoric of racial domination. Like Taussig, he argues that in any culture, what is truly Other is “a scandal which threatens” or “a deceptive snare, a lure threatening to ambush with its duplicity the sense of self on which citizen/subject secures its own forms of humanity” (Sandoval 1997: 90-91). Chela Sandoval

⁶¹ This argument parallels mine in Chapter II, when I explain how *antropofagia* is in fact a colonialistic movement, and not “Other” from Europe at all. I argue that this is not an accusation of “derivative modernism” but rather that modernism itself is dependent upon the extreme disparities of wealth, education, and political power as such existed in Brazil, then as today.

describes Barthes' explanation of what happens when the colonizer enacts the pose of identification:

Consciousness must draw itself up, comfort, and 'identify' itself [...] through a comparing and weighing operation that seeks to equate all varying differences with itself, the better then to either brush them aside as unimportant or to assimilate them. This figure thus calls up a colonizing consciousness incapable of conceiving how real differences in others can actually exist, for everything can be seen only as the self — but in other guises (Sandoval 1997: 90).

Barthes predicts that the "good citizen/subject" is left with only four responses when faced with the "sublimely and horrifically other": he can either blind himself, ignore the other, deny the other, or *transform the other into himself* (Sandoval 1997: 90-91). As I see it, this transformation of black into white in Brazilian art is the fourth option, mimetic repression. Following Barthes' theory, such mimesis reduces confrontations between whites and blacks, "same" and "other," as it reduces the other to mere sameness. At this point, locations where the "Other" threatens to appear "in full view" are transformed through the figure of identification "into mirrors in which the good citizen/subject can see refracted only more versions of itself, though gone astray" (Sandoval 1997: 90). Of course, identification can be extended to become "exoticism," so that the exoticized other can be perceived as pure "object." In this way, "difference is then relegated to the limits of humanity and can no longer threaten the 'security of home'" (Sandoval 1997: 91).

So, what happens when the perceived greater sensuality of blacks, their "savagery," is harnessed and mimicked by whites? Like Taussig, Barthes speaks of a kind of sensuousness in this very project, claiming that supremacism "seduces" perceptions of difference. Both describe how this sensuous project serves to "disenchant" the threatening, enchanted world of the other. And here, Taussig's description of the Western capitalist world as "disenchanted" parallels the description

by many of the white Brazilians I interviewed of their identity as “cultureless.” He writes:

Unlike the mimeticized world, this disenchanted one is home to a self-enclosed and somewhat paranoid, individualized sense of self severed from and dominant over a dead and non-spiritualized nature, a self built antimimetically on the notion of work as an instrumental relation to the world within a system wherein that self ideally incorporates into itself wealth, property, citizenship, and of course “sense-data,” all necessarily quantifiable [...] This latter feature might spell trouble for the mimetic faculty — accumulating sensation as private property and hence, like all commodities, incomplete without its necessary dose of abstraction that allows of general equivalence (Taussig 1993: 97).

So, in those moments when Brazilian reality tries to surface from under the formal, the realities of black life in Brazil have been “abstracted” and made either “exotic” or “equivalent” to white. In essence, they have been “disenchanted” — made safe or distant, but most importantly, *consumable by and for whites*. This means that real social differences, and real cultural differences, are never truly confronted or engaged with, because potential for real encounter has been transformed into yet another good, experience, or idea for whites to collect and consume. Thus the “public secret” of the power of race, difference, and white “exemption” from that which is considered “different” is maintained, and whiteness is able to remain unexamined.

Meeting the Gaze, Confronting the Terror

Historically, whites have not only avoided looking at themselves, what they really cannot see or do not want to see is the black gaze upon whiteness, such as Walker’s exploration of pickanniny imagery (white fantasy): “Get any famous, important African American artist that has dealt with questions of Africanness,” said Bercht, failing to see that Walker’s work is not at all about “Africanness.” Yet as Frankenberg, bell hooks, and others explain, it is common for whiteness to be viewed clearly and critically by non-white people (Frankenberg 1997: 4; hooks 1997:

165-179). Indeed, Frankenberg notes that “haole, pakeha, ghost, gringo, wasiku, and honky” are just some of the names given to white people by non-whites to “mark” their difference (Frankenberg 1997: 4). But hooks explains that her white students routinely react in shock and rage when black students talk about whiteness, and that this amazement that whites, too, can be watched with a critical, ethnographic gaze is itself an expression of racism. She states:

Often their rage erupts because they believe that all ways of looking that highlight difference subvert the liberal conviction that it is the assertion of universal subjectivity (we are all just people) that will make racism disappear. They have a deep emotional investment in the myth of “sameness” even as their actions reflect the primacy of whiteness as a sign informing who they are and how they think [...] Even though the majority of these students politically consider themselves liberals, who are antiracist, they too unwittingly invest in the sense of whiteness as mystery (hooks 1997: 167-68).

However, hooks continues, far from being “invisible” to blacks, whiteness has taken many forms in the black imagination, the most crucial being as the figure of terror. This figure of whiteness as terrorizing has its roots in the history of slavery, but continues through many forms of domination by whites today. hooks explains that so long as this refusal to meet the gaze of blacks continues, so will the terror. And like Taussig, with his example of Colombia, she cites terror as precisely the tool which maintains the “public secret”:

In contemporary society, white and black people alike believe that racism no longer exists. This erasure, however mythic, diffuses the representation of whiteness as terror in the black imagination. It allows for assimilation and forgetfulness. The eagerness with which contemporary society does away with racism, replacing this recognition with evocations of pluralism and diversity that further mask reality, is a response to terror, but it has also become a way to perpetuate the terror by providing a cover, a hiding place (hooks 1997: 176).

In Brazil, this terror has been institutionalized. Agier explains how since the publication of Freyre’s treatise, the myth of racial democracy has progressively taken hold as an imposition: “the social, or even institutional, prohibition of speaking

about racism or racial prejudice” (Agier 1995: 251). As Batista repeatedly stressed when I spoke with him, the military regime played no small hand in reinforcing the nation’s inequalities and its state of “irreality”: after it seized power in 1964, it wrote a ban on racist speaking into one of its Institutional Acts, transforming “the fact of knowing how to avoid discussing (race)” from a dearly-held custom into law (Agier 1995: 251). So, when black movements in Brazil make accusations of racism or lobby for affirmative action programs, intellectuals and the media rally to defend the status quo. One opponent of an affirmative action proposal “explained” this defense by arguing:

What we must not do is seal a pact with the crime of discrimination, or acknowledge its existence... It is preferable that we continue coexisting with covert and illegal discrimination, however widespread it may be, than to allow the government to acknowledge it officially — since any recognition would imply a recognition of discrimination (Raquel de Queiroz in the *Diario de Noticias, Jornal do Brasil*, 1968, p.4, cited in Guimaraes 1999: 144).

Clearly, we see here that the recognition of discrimination, rather than discrimination itself, is taboo! This effectively censures any criticism of the system, or rather, it pulls the rug of reality out from under the feet of critics and ensures that claims of racism will be subsumed into the system without effecting change. Here, my mind returns again to the young graduate student’s “innocent” tautology: “In Brazil, we don’t say the words ‘black people’ — we say ‘people from the *favela*.’” What could be more terrifying than that?

Conclusion

When I began this research, I wanted to know why almost all of the Brazilian artists I knew in the contemporary art world were white, despite the myth of *democracia racial*, which has strongly shaped the international perception of their nation as a “multiracial paradise.” This led me to the study of whiteness itself, of how white art professionals in Brazil talk about their practices, identities, and society. I know that my “ethnographic gaze” upon white Brazilian culture will be met with resistance and even anger by some who read it. Without making apologies for my work, I want to stress that this project has also been about “displacing” my own whiteness, not only as a white anthropologist “reversing the anthropological gaze,” but also as a white art world professional. As such, I understand the discomfort of confronting “the other” — and of being confronted by my own “otherness,” which means at times being excluded, but also being accountable. This can be challenging when the world that we have inherited (and it is “our inheritance,” after all) has been presented as “natural” and “normal.” It is easier, psychologically, socially, and politically, to accept it as such and simply go about our “normal” business.

There is a play on words in my title, “Hiding the Real Under the Formal,” for the *real* (pronounced “hay-ow”) is also the Brazilian form of currency.⁶² In the minds of the white Brazilians I spoke with, economics had more to do with racial inequality and the absence of blacks from contemporary art than did any racism, historic or current. Similar attitudes can be found elsewhere. One (white) Canadian I spoke with about my research even derided my central question: contemporary art is elite, obscure, and stuffy, he said, why would blacks, or any poor people, *want* to

⁶² Instituted in 1994, the *real* began on par with the US dollar and now is worth about US 50 cents.

participate? I can understand that the profound class inequalities of their nation can seem overwhelming to thinking Brazilians, and that how blacks “can get plumbing in their homes” might seem a more pertinent question to ask than the one I am asking here. But I believe this focus on economics is nonetheless a smokescreen to distract us all from some very hard and necessary questions about white culture, white power, and white accountability, which simply cannot be disentangled from any discussion of class in Brazil as much as elsewhere. Similarly, I understand the question posed by my white Canadian colleague (an anthropologist, no less) as an attempt to maintain white privilege to remain “invisible” and “unscrutinized” — he was not interested in being what some people have called a “race traitor”! Despite the difficult and discomfiting nature of “revealing” the myth, I believe that the myth of racial democracy — regardless of any “utopic” intentions — will always pose a hindrance to any attempts at progressive change in Brazil. But to point only to the existence of racism is not enough — we must actively destabilize whiteness by examining and questioning it.

In *Defacement*, Taussig explains that “it is the task and life force of the public secret to maintain that verge where the secret is not destroyed through exposure, but subject to a quite different sort of revelation that does justice to it” (Taussig 1999: 3). He criticizes those critics who maintain a firm line between fact and fiction, and take it as their job to “deconstruct” their object of study (like a cadaver) in order to expose the truth or logic behind the fiction. In *Mimesis and Alterity*, he argues that through this practise, what should be a preamble to investigation was at some point (during the 1980s) converted instead into a conclusion — e.g., “sex is a social construction,” “race is a social construction,” etc. Likewise, “*racial democracia* is a myth.” He protests:

Nobody was asking what's the next step? What do we do with this old insight? If life is constructed, how come it appears so immutable? How come culture appears so natural? If things coarse and subtle are constructed, then surely they can be reconstructed as well? To adopt Hegel, the beginnings of knowledge were made to pass for actual knowing (Taussig 1993: xvi).

So this study of whiteness is an attempt to take the next step, to problematize positionality, which is, as Guyatri Spivak explains, when radical possibilities can surface. She explains that "what we are asking for is that the hegemonic discourses, the holders of hegemonic discourse, should de-hegemonize their position and themselves learn how to occupy the subject position of the other" (cited in hooks 1997: 178). Or, to take it one step further than Linneman, who said, "you know there is a moment I *do* feel you have to start to incorporate everything else back, you know: the world *is* there" — what we need to do as whites is to incorporate *ourselves* back, and see *how we are in the world*. And of course by doing so, white Brazilian art world professionals could help free both themselves and others from the public secret that holds Brazilian whites and blacks — unequally — in its terror.

With this in mind, Marepe's claim that his work is a kind of "people protector," a *guardagente* of Bahians and black culture, is intriguing. What he seemed to be proposing was a politics aimed at cultural diversity without inequality. The way that he described it to me, by making visible the struggles of his people, he is also "saving" or "preserving" their difference. By this, he did not mean that he hoped his works would be preserved in the archival sense — in museums, as folklore or as remnants of a vanishing, "primitive" culture. On the contrary, Marepe laughed when he spoke of the irony that "the people" (Bahians) themselves were able to preserve their culture partly because the contemporary institutions in Brazil were ignoring it. Whether or not it is true that the poverty of Bahia has saved Bahian culture from being assimilated into the "cultureless" south, I am drawn to Marepe's way of negotiating the terror of Brazil. How is it that he conceives of his work as both an

opening to the world and also a wall to keep “whiteness” out? Perhaps Marepe has discovered that by “unmasking” Bahia himself, he is able to re-enchant it and thus preserve its secret. He understood, if others did not, that Bahians are more than capable and ready to partake in this conversation of contemporary art. “*Any language that does not get stuck is contemporary*,” he said. My hope is that one day his colleague Rosana Paulino can break out of the *arte afrobrasileira* box she has been put in, and that her currently blindfolded and gagged black women will take part in this contemporary discussion.

Directions for Future Research

There are many avenues one could pursue from this initial study, not all of them “academic.” It is important that curators and critics from outside Brazil try harder to scratch beneath the Brazilian art world’s surface, to initiate further discussions about race and identity in South America, to research and interrogate Brazilian art history, and to make efforts to invite black Brazilian artists abroad, where they might have more opportunities to have the discussions they would want to have. At the same time, I believe that it is important that we do not deny the dominant — although no longer always hegemonic — “whiteness” of contemporary art internationally. There are still plenty of opportunities and reasons to write and curate in ways to displace whiteness at home as well. Indeed, I have had conversations with aboriginal artists in Canada who are tired of always speaking to each other about their situations. What may seem like a form of politeness on the part of whites — “Oh, I really have no right to speak about these issues” — is in fact a way of avoiding accountability and refusing to participate in change.

Beyond this, I see many reasons to continue the research I have begun in this thesis in a comparative study of colonial nations. Such projects could even shift away from the cultural studies approach I have taken and function in ways that would have

the policy relevance Skidmore advocates. For example, it would be useful to study the various approaches taken by government art funding agencies and public art institutions in “neo-colonial” nations such as Canada, the USA, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, and others — as well as Brazil and other Latin American nations — to compare the effects of various “affirmative action” or anti-racist policies. How have these policies (if they exist) been brought about and how have they affected the racial make-up of the population of professional contemporary artists? How could nations and institutions learn from each other in order to further the democratization of their cultural debates?

Similarly, a much more extensive study of the Brazilian contemporary art system could be made, using the methods of Institutional Ethnography which were developed by Canadian sociologist Dorothy Smith (see Devault and McCoy 2002; Campbell and Gregor 2002). In this case, the researcher could take as a starting point the “standpoint” of young black artists in Bahia or elsewhere, and carefully work her way “up” the ranks of the art system, interviewing those who occupy key roles in the ruling relations that have effect on the artist: art instructors, art school administrators, gallerists, art journalists, museum curators, officers of culture at municipal, state, and federal levels, and even collectors. The benefits of this approach would be that more specific contradictions of institutional practises and policies in Brazilian art could be mapped out. This could be very useful for those who would lobby for change to that system. Of course, it would be extremely time-consuming and would require gaining access to individuals holding key positions in museums and government, which would not be easy.

Moving away from art somewhat, I am also intrigued by Batista’s horrified fascination with the “genius” of the Brazilian military dictatorship, the way that it was able to repress the remembrance of history, and how it miraculously disbanded so as to apparently avoid the social upheaval that other nations, such as Chile and

Argentina, are experiencing. Brazil and South Africa — with their nearly identical statistics on racial inequality, and their similar dictatorial timelines (for what was Apartheid if not a dictatorship?) — are obvious choices for comparison. For, whereas the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa is all about exposing the “public secret” of white terror against blacks, Brazil is firmly keeping its mouth shut. How do citizens of these countries — both white and black — differently or similarly talk privately about history, identity, and the future, in relation to the repressive regimes that are now, at least on the official level, vanquished? What are some of the impediments to progressive action in both countries? If they are similar — perhaps, gross economic inequality and overwhelming debts and obligations to the World Bank or IMF — how do the processes of talking or not talking aid or thwart progressive change? This subject could be especially relevant to pursue now that the left-wing Lula — a former shoe-shine boy from the northeast — has been elected President in Brazil, much to the chagrin of the USA: a time of both hope and fear.⁶³ It also might bear pointing out that studies of these extreme examples can, once again, help us to understand how public secrets around colonialisaton, political repression, and institutionalized racism might function in Canada. Indeed, in the experiences of some Canadians — such as, for example, those living on reservations near Saskatoon, Saskatchewan — our nation’s policies and practices have been no less extreme.

⁶³ The fear is not only that right-wing international trading partners or right-wing parties in Brazil will try to destabilize the current government, but also that Lula’s Workers’ Party (PT) will not pay adequate attention to racial politics, as the PT has a past history of ignoring racial issues and underfunding programs to combat racial discrimination (Reichmann 1999: 16).

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ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Tarsila do Amaral, *A Negra*, 1923, oil on canvas, 100x80cm., Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo.

2. Mosquito of Mangueira wearing Helio Oiticica's *Cape 6 (Parangolé 10)*, 1965, and dancing with *Glass Bólide 5 ('Hommage' to Mondrian)*, 1964. Photo: Mauricio Cirne

3. Emanuel Araújo, *Templo de Oxalá*, 1991, painted wood, 220cm., Private Collection.

4. Sergio Camargo, Large Relief No. 3/39/69, 1964, wood, 200x100cm., Collection Anna Mathilde Penteadó Millan, São Paulo.

5. Rubem Valentim, *Composição 1960*, oil on canvas, 1960, 45x29.5cm., Collection Adolpho Leirner

6. Alfredo Volpi, *Formas piramidais (ampulhetas)* [*Pyramidal Shapes (Hourglasses)*], mid-1950s, tempura on canvas, 86x58cm., Collection Cisneros.

7. Rosana Paulino, *untitled*, 1997, transferred Xerox and thread on canvas, 31.3x31.3x1.1cm. each. Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo

8. Beatriz Milhazes, *Minhas crianças* [*My children*], 1999, acrylic on canvas, 178x177cm., Collection Marta and Rubens Schain, São Paulo

9. Marepe, *Comercial São Luis - Tudo no Mesmo Lugar pelo Menor Preço* (detail), 2002, 225x600x25cm.

10. Kara Walker, *Slavery! Slavery!* (detail), 1997, cut paper and adhesive on wall, 11 feet 8.5 inches x 85 feet. Collection of Peter Norton Family Foundation.