

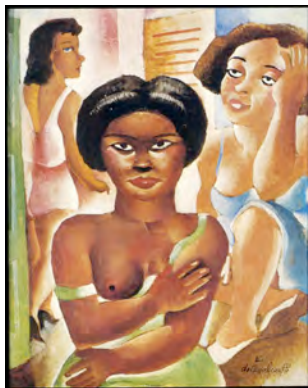
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Visualizing Resistance in the Art of Rosana Paulino and Women of the African Diasporas

In striking contrast to the art history of the United States, which has traditionally avoided depictions of the nude black female,<sup>1</sup> several of Brazil's most celebrated painters, such as Emiliano Di Cavalcanti, Tarsila do Amaral, Lasar Segall and Candido Portinari have brazenly exposed black females throughout their oeuvres. Di Cavalcanti became famous for his numerous paintings of *mulatas*, one of many appellations for the black woman in Brazil,<sup>2</sup> which he created throughout his long career. In almost all of these images, the subjects stare directly at the viewer with heavy "bedroom" eyes – often while in a state of undress – sending a clear message of their (or Di Cavalcanti's) purposes.



Di Cavalcanti, *Mulatas*, 1927



Di Cavalcanti, *Samba*, 1925

In his painting *Mulatas* from 1927 and *Samba* from 1925, Di Cavalcanti places black women directly in the center of the plane, as the tops of their garments fall off their shoulders, exposing their breasts. *Mulatas* suggests the interior of a brothel. Two other women appear to be waiting idly for a customer in the background. The one on the right wears a nightgown and rests her head on her hands, while the other, looks back and towards the viewer, dressed in lingerie

and high heels. The title of the latter work, *Samba*, indicates its scene is a festival or party that includes the dancers, guitarist and onlookers that populate the image. To elicit further sensuality, the artist inserts a topless black female that flanks the central figure on her right. In a similar fashion to the prostitutes in *Mulatas*, she wears only a loosely tied sheet of white cloth around her hips along with high heels. In the hands of Di Cavalcanti, black women appear overtly sexual and assertively so. Whereas, white male European artists, such as Edouard Manet and Pablo Picasso, employed black bodies and cultural forms as peripheral indicators of sexuality, Di Cavalcanti leaves little room for subtext. Similar to Jezebel-like stereotypes, he foregoes nuance for explicitness. In doing so, the figures' lustfulness imbues the paintings, suggesting that it is what defines *Mulatas*.

This treatment to Di Cavalcanti's subjects speaks to long-held notions of black women's sexuality in Brazilian social thought. As is the case the case for much of the Americas, Brazilian notions of hypersexualized black women or the Jezebel stereotype originated during slavery "when white slave owners exercised almost complete control over Black women's sexuality."<sup>3</sup> The formulation of this character was indispensable for white society, as it justified the sexual exploitation of black women and reinforced social, political and economical hierarchies.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, through pervasive reiteration, the black female became the personification of an abstraction of reality. In other words, the bodily acts of *enforced* slave functions, i.e. rape, to satisfy an owner's sexual desires or supply him with more slaves, became social expectations. Indeed, Brazil's renowned social scientist and purveyor of the myth of racial democracy,<sup>5</sup> Gilberto Freyre, once reminisced about "the mulatto girl who picked chiggers off us and tickled our feet. And the Jezebel who initiated us in physical love on a squeaking canvas cot, making us feel real manhood for the first time."<sup>6</sup>

Because of this fabrication of the “Jezebel,” Paulino and many black women artists interrogate the socio-cultural meanings and consequences of the stereotype, which reduces its subjects “to creatures that are all body, without mind or soul.”<sup>7</sup> Such a focus on the corporeality of black women works to generate false notions about the physical presence of black women. Further, the intersectionality of black women’s subjugation – primarily comprising gender, race and class – renders black women vulnerable to sexual exploitation and assault, just as they were during the slavery era. As noted in her explication of the “culture of dissemblance,” Darlene Clark Hine avers, “virtually every known nineteenth-century female slave narrative contains a reference to, at some juncture, the ever-present threat and reality of rape.”<sup>8</sup> For many black women today, these conditions persist, coupled with prejudiced notions that sexual violence is never against their will.<sup>9</sup>

In view of these circumstances, the following discussion explores Rosana Paulino’s artistic responses to the stereotypes of black women’s sexuality and physicality in Brazil and their ramifications. Furthermore, Stuart Hall’s theory of articulation proves useful, as Paulino’s thematic (and sometimes formal) elements relate to those of several Black women artists, including Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons and Renee Cox. He refers to articulation as “the form of the connection that can make a unity of... different elements, under certain conditions. It is a linkage, which is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, it is strategic essentialization, or the inadvertent joining of different persons due to specific social and historical circumstances, that provides a cogent way for these artists to connect as black women.

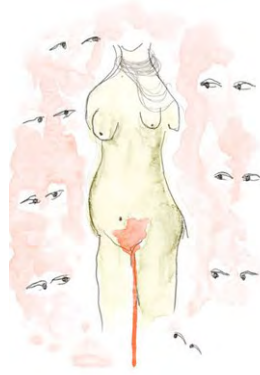
## THE “EYES” HAVE IT

In works by Rosana Paulino, Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons and Renee Cox, the artists investigate staring as an act loaded with power, whether done to objectify, judge or confront. In their works, allusions to staring often bring specific physical components of black women into focus. Their breasts and buttocks have historically been viewed as signifiers of sexuality and to support pseudo-scientific determinations that black women are sub-human or animalistic.<sup>11</sup> In addition, the following works address the hyper-visibility of black women, as it is “directly linked to vulnerability, lack of power, and the potential for sexual exploitation.”<sup>12</sup> Not only does the stare produce adverse psychological effects, its motive has the potential for physical and violent harm. In other words, if society views black women’s bodies as hypersexual and available, that perception is a probable motivation for rape, the repercussions of which rarely do justice to black women. Effectively explaining the dire implications of the Jezebel and other like-minded stereotypes of the “bad black girl,” Kimberlé Crenshaw avers:

...Black women are essentially prepackaged as bad women within cultural narratives about good women who can be raped and bad women who cannot...The very representation of a Black female body at least suggests certain narratives that may make Black women's rape either less believable or less important. These narratives may explain why rapes of Black women are less likely to result in convictions and long prison terms than rapes of white women.<sup>13</sup>

Due to these ramifications, black women artists recognize that the Jezebel stereotype functions to justify sexual exploitation and violence before and after the fact. That is to say, because this characterization hypersexualizes black women, an assailant can either imagine his victim desires

sexual activity (when she does not), or that he is free to “invade and violate a black female body with no fear of retribution or retaliation” afterwards.<sup>14</sup>



**Paulino, untitled**

Tackling these issues of victimhood, an untitled illustration by Rosana Paulino depicts the torso of an armless nude figure with ropes around her neck and a trail of red blood that descends from her genitalia. Additionally, eight sets of eyes surround the figure, ogling her from top to bottom. In Brazil, many black women contend with societal views similar to those in other African diasporas that deem their identity as tantamount to that of a whore.<sup>15</sup> They often avoid classification as *mulata* because it is synonymous with prostitute or professional showgirl.<sup>16</sup> Partially due to the imagery of black women in the media to encourage sexual tourism and advertise Carnival, an ethno-racial identity is conflated with licentiousness (whether or not that is actually a characteristic of a prostitute or showgirl). Disturbingly, this association also stems from the promulgation of racial democracy, leading people to presume interracial sex (and/or the resultant offspring) is proof of racial egalitarianism in Brazil. Thus, proponents of the myth contend that the intimacy afforded to black women through sexual intercourse negates racism.

Nevertheless, Paulino’s work refutes any notion of fair treatment toward this victim of violence. Her lack of arms suggests an inability to protect, clean and cover her body. This detail

also alludes to the Combahee River Collective's assertion that they, as black women, "do not have racial, sexual, heterosexual or class privilege to rely upon, nor do we have even the minimal access to resources and power that groups who possess anyone of these types of privilege have."<sup>17</sup> Both they and Paulino, illustrate the reality that black women generally do not have a social quality that can aid them in the many everyday challenges they face. In addition, the rope around the figure's neck could represent thoughts of suicide, while it also calls to mind the brutal floggings of female slaves, wherein they "were stripped of their clothing and publicly whipped...[thus compounding their degradation by being] forced to appear naked before male whippers and onlookers."<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the eyes that populate the background do not come to the figure's aid. Bodiless and faceless, they leer at the victim turning her into a spectacle. By not depicting anything more than the eyes of the onlookers, Paulino's scene suggests an interrogation, and one that is of the woman rather than her assailant or circumstances.



Campos-Pons, *When I Am Not Here/Estoy Allá*, 1996

Formally similar to Paulino's nude is a Polaroid™ from Cuban artist Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons' series, *When I am Not Here/Estoy Allá*. Like Paulino's image, Campos-Pons combines her nude torso and numerous gazing eyes in the background and foreground. Her work differs mainly in the direction the artist's body faces, which is away from the viewer. This

gesture disallows sexualization of the imagery that the eyes suggest one might be inclined to envision. Nonetheless, while the image calls to mind voyeurism and violation, the artist also complicates the message via a noteworthy detail: the eyes that populate the foreground are painted onto her body.

The presence of this feature makes it possible to consider contradictory, yet related, implications. Perhaps the eyes signify the status of black women as objectified and under surveillance on a daily basis, wherever they are. Alternatively, because the eyes look back at the viewer, they are in effect calling (mis)interpretative stares into question or serving as a protective shield. In either case, Campos-Pons' work speaks to feelings of vulnerability that many black women feel, particularly when they are aware that their bodies unintentionally suggest sexual connotations.

In addition, Jamaican-American artist Renee Cox visually and optically confronts the viewer in *HOTT-EN-TOT*, the title of which refers to the aforementioned sexual exploitation of Saartjie Baartman. In brief, Baartman, a young South African woman, was exhibited before British and French audiences from 1810 to 1815. Viewers paid money to stare at her nude figure as a physical oddity, sexual object and “proof” of Africans’ inferiority due to the size of her breasts and buttocks. Upon her death, at the age of 27 or 28, French anatomist George Cuvier dissected her body to allow for a medical examination of her genitalia. Cuvier aimed to find the cause of the alleged “deviant lasciviousness of the African woman’s sexuality.”<sup>19</sup> Following that inspection, Musée de l'Homme in Paris put Baartman’s skeleton, genitalia and brain on display until 1974, approximately 160 years after her death.<sup>20</sup> Finally, in 2002, after an eight-year campaign, the South African government received her remains to ceremoniously lay her body to rest.<sup>21</sup>



Cox. *HOTT-EN-TOT*, 1994

Cox boldly identifies with Baartman's tale in her photograph, in which she wears visibly fake oversized breasts and buttocks as she stares directly into the camera. Cox's image is a pointed exaggeration that illustrates how black women's bodies are perceived in the popular imagination. She visualizes a notion of inflated abnormality, that not only contrasts from normalized standards based on white women's bodies, but also from her own black female body. The fact that she must wear appendages to approximate this fantasy, underscores this essay's overall point that the stereotype is aberrant, not Saartjie Baartman, Renee Cox or any other black woman.

Furthermore, Cox looks nothing like the real Baartman, or even a Khoikhoi woman,<sup>22</sup> to whom the syllabic title refers. The artist saw no need to change her hairstyle or facial features to simulate Baartman's appearance. All that is necessary for her to perform the role of a "Hottentott Venus" is prosthetic breasts and buttocks. In a sense, Baartman amounted to her body parts in the eyes of her European viewers. Almost 200 years later, Cox identified with this experience. As implied through the artist's use of her own body, Cox, as a black woman, recognizes a similar process of fragmentation and perversion of herself to that experienced by Baartman and expressed by Paulino and Campos-Pons.



In conclusion, the discussed works exemplify the contention that since the slavery era, the stereotypes of black women as sexually aberrant and available Jezebels in Brazil and beyond have had real-world, material consequences. Paulino, Campos-Pons, Cox and several other black women artists, continually and creatively find ways to interrogate these notions within themselves and their culture. Viewed as explorations of societal distortions of character and bodies that foster sexual exploitation, their artwork broadens the concerns of art historical discourse as it broadens art historical discourse on black women's art.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> See Collins p. 38.

<sup>2</sup> *Mulata* is a mixed-race woman, partially of African descent. See Santos p. 100 and p. 414. She quotes Lorena, a light-skinned black woman, who stated, "...the *mulata*; it is not everybody who still uses that classification anymore. I really think that it is an aspect of racism. I learned very early, since my childhood that I was Black." To complicate matters, Santos also explains, "many [African-descendant women] do not consider themselves Black because they have light skin (they can be classified as brown, *morena*, *mulata*, etc). This way of thinking makes these women vulnerable because they often (or rarely) think about themselves as victimized by racism and racial inequalities." Also, see Soong for a list of the 134 terms Brazilians used to describe themselves in a 1976 study conducted by Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE).

<sup>3</sup> See West.

<sup>4</sup> See West and hooks 1981

<sup>5</sup> The racial democracy myth claims Brazil is a racially egalitarian nation, namely due to the prevalence of miscegenation that has produced a large *mestiço* (mixed-race) population.

<sup>6</sup> See Freyre, *Casa Grande e Senzala* p. 289. In addition, Freyre did not coin the term racial democracy, but he popularized the notion of Brazil as a racial egalitarian nation.

<sup>7</sup> Dorothy Hammond and Alta Jablow quoted in Harris 1998 p. 33.

<sup>8</sup> See Hine p. 38.

<sup>9</sup> See Crenshaw p. 368-374 and Kennedy.

<sup>10</sup> Hall quoted in Patterson p. 20.

<sup>11</sup> See hooks 1992 p. 62 in which she refers to Sander L. Gilman's text: "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature."

<sup>12</sup> See Collins p. 53.

<sup>13</sup> See Crenshaw p. 369.

<sup>14</sup> See hooks 1992 p. 116.

<sup>15</sup> See Santos p.113.

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<sup>16</sup> See Caldwell p. 60 and Gilliam p. 64.

<sup>17</sup> See “The Combahee River Statement.”

<sup>18</sup> See hooks, 1981 p. 37.

<sup>19</sup> See Collins p. 16.

<sup>20</sup> See Mbeki.

<sup>21</sup> See Mbeki.

<sup>22</sup> See “Khoikhoi.” Hottentot is a (derogatory) term used by white people in South Africa to denote a Khoikhoi person. Khoikhoi is the Southwest African ethnic group from which Baartman was likely a descendant. Sharpley-Whiting 1999 p. 17 states her ethnic affiliation is unconfirmed.

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