

## Representations of black people in Brazilian museums

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### Abstract

This article investigates the different ways Brazilian museums have represented the issue of blackness. Concerning current exhibitions, three main aspects are considered: the silence and exaggeration of the race issue in museum exhibits; the representation of passivity of the black population in historical narratives, and, the over exposition of the suffering and humiliation of the black population during slavery. The main argument developed is that Brazilian racial democracy discourses involve discrimination at many different levels, since racism is reproduced by the intertwinement of narratives that were produced in different historical periods. It is important to notice that new narratives are not free from those which preceded them, and that old practices of discrimination survive within new representations of blackness.

### Introduction

According to García Canclini, Latin American museums are the last cultural institutions that are still mainly financed by national governments. Other cultural practices, like theatre, film making and editorial services have become autonomous from state subsidies and survive, in great part, due to the market (Canclini, 1990). In the Brazilian case, his assertion is correct because, not only are museums public institutions that still depend on the government's financial support, they also play the role of disseminating narratives that make up a large part of the nation's identity.<sup>1</sup>

The main objective of this article is to analyze the representations of blackness that we find in some Brazilian institutions. Although many people across the broad political and ideological spectrum in Brazil have considered race to be a non-issue, new social movements have denounced racial democracy as a false ideology and have promoted black identity. Thus, constructions such as racial democracy and miscegenation have been challenged and denied by new black movements, which try to transcend them and to create new representations of blackness. The new politics of identity is present in museum representations in many and different ways. Yet, in order to understand better racial discrimination (a phenomenon which is not subsumed here under the label of politics of identity) this article will raise some issues of collective memory. As it is important to analyze not only new social movements and their representations, but also the intertwinement of old and new narratives about race relations, the discourses that have been produced by official institutions such as public libraries and national museums may help to enlighten this debate.

I will first consider the issue of racial democracy for Brazilian people. Following that I will analyze the intertwinement between Brazilian black movements and the politics of representation. Then, focusing on national museums and other public institutions, I will analyze the different ways by which museums refer to blackness and which can be shown to provoke discrimination, despite their claims to the contrary. My argument is that because museum narratives either silence or exaggerate the race issue, they operate by means of denials and the use of stereotypes. Besides this, they also create foundation myths and historical heroes that downplay the role of black people in the building of the nation. Finally, I emphasize the fact that contemporary narratives of slavery reproduce subordination

because they give currency to images in which black people appear as tortured and humiliated.

### **Brazilian racial democracy at stake**

The Brazilian nation has defined race in different ways, according to different historical periods and situations. The concept of race is a social construction that supposes differences between groups of human beings to be fixed and natural (biological and hereditary), limiting each individual member of the group to a fundamental type. The concept has mostly served dominant groups who wish to mark off other groups as inferior. In Brazil, the concept of race has been used to discriminate against black people, from colonial times, when blacks who came from Africa were enslaved, to the beginning of the new millennium, when blacks are still discriminated against and confined in the lower levels of the social hierarchy. Nevertheless, the concept has also served subordinate groups, who tend to resist the stereotypes that constrain their actions.<sup>2</sup> Thus some elements of the Brazilian black movement have adopted a strict concept of race in order to strengthen their self-esteem.

In the recent decades, there has been an increasing emphasis on the defence of black identities not only amongst new social movements, but also amongst intellectuals. The development of new Afro-Brazilian museums, which endorse the creation of a positive image of blackness, may be seen as a part of this movement. It is not only that some researchers have argued that race relations has become a political issue; there has also been a growing emphasis on how social groups can build their own identities separately from white values and beliefs (Risério, 1981; Guimarães, 1999, 2000, 2002; Nascimento, 2003). Yet, there are those authors who argue that the strengthening of a black or Afro-descendent Brazilian identity is the result of an imperialist politics, which imposes a United States of America (USA) classification system on Brazil, ignoring the fact that the process of miscegenation in the nation cannot be merely identified with false ideology.<sup>3</sup> However, although the accusation of an imperialist practice is overstated, political actions against racial inequality in the USA have had a profound impact on the Brazilian black movements. In many cases, the social movements of both countries have been intertwined.

This debate about US influence does not have a simple answer for, on the one hand, we have to consider, that despite all the advances achieved through the intersection of black politics and the American civil rights movement, the USA continues to face racial segregation; the formation of ghettos and the spread of social inequalities continue to generate problems (Massey and Denton, 1994). On the other hand, it is not enough to analyze racial democracy as constitutive of social practices without acknowledging that the myth of racial democracy is accompanied by practices of racial discrimination.

Some authors try to escape the racial versus non-racial issue by arguing that the existence of high levels of miscegenation is the key aspect for understanding the formation of Brazilian identity. Racial democracy, they argue, is not a false ideology or a mere lie. The anthropologist Peter Fry has stated this position with considerable insight and such arguments warrant our serious consideration (Fry, 2001). Africa is not an abstract construction to Brazilian people; it is present in traditions, costumes, religious rituals, foods, body movements, motherhood, music, dance and sounds we find all over the country. There are also authors who, in comparing United States and Brazilian race relations, attribute lower levels of discrimination in Brazil to interracial marriages and the absence of ghettos. Undoubtedly we do find in Brazil common residential areas as well as an ambiguous, fluid, situational and inconsistent classification of people based on skin colour (Telles, 2003: 103-135).

Sansone, who agrees that Brazil has racism without the category of race, has argued perceptively that Brazilian people can be racially identified and discriminated as 'black' in certain situations, and not in others (Sansone, 1997, 2004). The conclusion is that as race is a social construction, it has been used for different groups and for different purposes. I would argue, however, that the crucial aspect here is that racial discrimination is a manifestation of a deeper more unconscious configuration of attitudes. People are not free to use the concept of race as they please. People are contradictory in their practices; they say what they

do not mean, they do what they do not say. Narratives about the nation are contradictory in themselves.

In Brazil, it is important to note that there are high levels of interracial marriage and that these unions are not necessarily associated with diminished levels of racial prejudice. A white woman who marries a black man may be prejudiced and may discriminate not only against him, but also against his relatives. By the same token, we can recognize that the influence of African culture in Brazilian everyday life is immense, and that it is much stronger than in the case of the USA. Yet, although the African influence is ubiquitous in Brazil, and although, to some extent, it involves both whites and blacks, many studies have revealed the social repression of African cults, which are considered by educated people as grotesque, obscene and primitive. African influence is present in religious practices such as *umbanda* and *candomblé* and these religions accept everyone, without discriminating against people according to race. To this day, followers of Afro-Brazilian religions may feel embarrassed at publicly confessing their faith to a wider public. Some conceal their religious practices and beliefs whilst publicly observing Catholic or Protestant religious rites, which are free from discrimination (Maggie, 1992; Assunção, 1995; Ferreti, 2000).

Therefore, I would like to emphasize that it is not simply the case of people acting with discrimination in one case and not in the other according to their free will. Brazilian citizens, despite acting with prejudice against black people, affirm that race is a non-issue for the nation. As we have seen, in the case of race, there are deep-rooted and contradictory beliefs and traditions, which are characteristically Brazilian and which allow racial discrimination. Any serious movement against Brazilian practices of racial discrimination has to depart from the long historical process that constituted these practices. It is necessary to consider the possibility that our practices are not as free and arbitrary as they seem to be and that they are constituted in great part by accumulated experiences. I now turn to some constitutive aspects of the relation between blacks and whites throughout history in order to better understand how racial discrimination is present in the everyday lives of Brazilian people.

It is important to observe that Brazilian racial discrimination is not only the result of the appropriation of the concept of race by some interest groups, but also a manifestation of a profoundly unconscious configuration of attitudes. Brazilian people discriminate against dark-skinned people while proclaiming their openness to racial diversity. Therefore, it is necessary to consider the deep-rooted construction of Brazilian identity, and it is for this reason that it is important to analyse those collective narratives that have been reproduced by official institutions.

### **Politics of memory in the Brazilian context**

In the Brazilian academic field, few researchers have investigated the meanings of museum exhibitions.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, three things can be said with certainty. First, more than 80% of Brazilian museums are public institutions which are mainly subsidized by the government. Secondly, Brazilian museums continue to be visited by a very small part of the population, that is, by those who belong to the more educated and affluent segments of society. Thirdly, it is difficult to find any significant popular manifestations of a questioning of the contents and social implications within museum exhibitions (Santos, 2001). One might even wonder whether Brazilian citizens are at all concerned with the fact that the authorship and intentions behind museum narratives have their own social effects. In recent years, however, some small changes can be observed, so that it is possible to say that this scenario has been gradually modified.

In 2003, the inhabitants of different shanty towns of Rio de Janeiro joined forces to rescue the history of their communities (Arruda, 2003; Oliveira, 2003). This movement was responsible for the writing of the history of several poor communities and, consequently, allowed their inhabitants to demonstrate pride in their past. Moreover, in informing the wider society that they do indeed have a past, these poor people have influenced public opinion about their abilities and potentialities, lessened practices of discrimination against themselves, and made a big step towards the achievement of legal rights over the land they occupied in the past. These initiatives show that inhabitants of poor neighbourhoods are increasingly

aware of the power that flows from the building of their own history and collective memory. Cultivating their own history and memory has also led to new demands for public subsidies, since these people require financial support in order to build their narratives and institutions.

The creation of the Afro-Brazilian Museum (Museu Afro-Brasileiro da Universidade Federal da Bahia), in Salvador, is part of a growing movement for the creation of a black identity in Brazil. The Museum represents a sign of great changes, since it reveals a new image of the black population to a greater public. In 1982, the Museum was opened, as the result of an agreement between Brazil and several African nations. It had the support of a number of official organizations: the Ministry of International Relations, the Ministry of Education and Culture, the State government of Bahia, the city government of Salvador and the Federal University of Bahia. Pierre Verger (1902-1996), a French intellectual and a prominent public figure in Brazil, was responsible for the striking and different content of the new exhibition (Verger, 1987). Six years later, Verger also contributed decisively to the creation of the Museum Casa do Benin. This Museum was designed by the well known architect, Lina Bo Bardi, and was, in conception, very close to the Afro-Brazilian museum created in Salvador.

Pierre Verger was a photographer and ethnologist, who lived most of his life between Salvador and African nations and who made important contributions to cultural exchange between Africa and Brazil. He exerted a profound influence in the cultural life of Salvador until his death. In 1988, the Foundation Pierre Verger was established and a rich collection of photographs, documents, and material culture, gathered from his journeys between the two continents, was assembled.

The collection of the Afro-Brazilian Museum, therefore, consists mainly of artefacts originating from or inspired by African culture and by objects of the Afro-Brazilian religion. There, we also find remarkable sculptures of the deities of *candomblé* made by Carybé, who was an Argentinean painter who lived in Salvador for many years and who felt himself to be a part of the African-Brazilian world of religious rituals.

The museums that were created in Bahia can be understood as precursors of a growing social movement, in which those who claim a new black identity have played a decisive role.<sup>5</sup> These new museums have struggled for public support in order to strengthen a new image of the black population in the public sphere. They are very different from other Brazilian museums that exhibit artefacts related to black culture.

The museums of Catholic brotherhoods are also rather different from conventional museums. During the era of slavery, Catholic brotherhoods were created in different parts of the nation. They were officially recognized organizations, which provided a respite from racial oppression and offered emancipation for old and sick slaves. They provided opportunities for education and improvement in the situation of the black population. Nowadays, as we enter the museums of the remaining Brotherhoods, we find a complex narrative, since although these institutions exhibit the images of an official history, they also value the African origin of the black population. In Rio de Janeiro, for example, there is a Brotherhood called 'Irmandade de Nossa Senhora do Rosário e São Benedito dos Homens Pretos,' which organizes the Museum of Black People (Museu do Negro). The Museum functions in precarious conditions at the back of the building where the old Brotherhood was celebrated. There we find not only a replica of the mausoleum of Princess Isabel and her husband, the Count D'Eu, but also sculptures and paintings of ancient African-Brazilian heroes, *atabaques* and other musical instruments. We see, side by side with each other, objects of torture that were used during slavery and portraits of eminent black people, such as artists, intellectuals and political leaders. This little museum exhibits the intertwinement of narratives that have tended to be seen in opposition in recent times.

### **Narrative and discrimination I: silence**

In Brazil, important national institutes have no traces of black culture as a differentiated contribution to the nation. The National Library (*Biblioteca Nacional*) and the National Museum of Fine Arts (*Museu Nacional de Belas Artes*, MNBA), two important Brazilian institutions, do not have separate sections or classifications that demonstrate the artistic or literary production of black people. It is as if they are blind to the race issue. Faced with works

of art or literature, the visitor does not have any sense of an author's race or colour. The visitor is given no indication of who were black or white writers, politicians or artists. In the National Library, for instance, the great Brazilian writer Machado de Assis (1839-1908), as well as André Rebouças (1833-1898), the renowned engineer and journalist who was active in the Abolitionist movement, appear as two important Brazilian intellectuals without any reference to their race. There is no section in the Library devoted to the organization, classification and exhibition of the works produced by black people.

The Portuguese Royal Family arrived in Rio de Janeiro in 1808 and created, amongst other important institutions, the Royal Library. It became public in 1814, and during the imperial government it became a National Library. The Library is one of the largest in Latin America and comprises, besides rare works from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, all books and newspapers published in Brazil. The National Museum of Fine Arts was created in 1937, during the government of president Getúlio Vargas. Yet the museum houses collections that were assembled with the arrival of a French artistic mission in 1816, which was responsible for the establishment of the Academy of Arts and Crafts, after the style of European art academies. To this day, the museum has a rich collection of paintings by foreign artists, who left their impressions of the nation in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Museum also has the most comprehensive collection of nineteenth-century Brazilian paintings and some important paintings by twentieth-century artists. Both the National Library and the National Museum of Fine Arts express the formation of the Brazilian nation during the time of the imperial government and bear the imprints of European patterns. There is no reference to any artist's race or colour in these collections.

In the United States, there is a long tradition of preserving the history, culture and art of people of African descent. The New York Public Library recognized the issue of race in the first decades of the twentieth century. In 1926, the personal collection of the black scholar Arturo Alfonso Schomburg was incorporated, by the New York Public Library, into the section called Division of Negro Literature, History and Prints. To this day, the Schomburg Center is a national research library devoted to collecting, preserving and providing access to resources documenting the experiences of people of African descent throughout the world. Despite being a public and national library, this institution separates the works of black scholars from those produced by white ones.

The Association of African American Museums (AAAM) provides a large amount of support to all professionals and institutions committed to the protection, preservation and dissemination of the art, culture and history of Americans of African ancestry in the United States of America. The Association's mission is to provide its members with services such as training for boards of directors and museum managers, professional ethics, collections management and museum security. In addition to all this the Association acts as an informational clearing house for anyone who is interested in African American museums.<sup>6</sup>

The silence about race in Brazilian national institutions is symptomatic of, and expresses, the idea that literature and art are universal attributes of the human kind and that they do not depend on cultural or racial traces. Yet, there were early attempts to constitute an African Brazilian view of art, history and culture which were never incorporated by those institutions. Abdias do Nascimento, for example, was the founder of the Brazilian Black Front, in 1931, creator of the Experimental Black Theatre, in 1944, a guide for several generations of black artists, organizer of the National Black Convention, in 1950, and founder, in 1968, of the Museum of Black Art (Museu de Arte Negra). He was born on 14 March 1914, in Franca, São Paulo; he became a Federal Congressman in 1983 and Senator in 1997. He was honoured Teacher of the University of the State of New York, in Buffalo, and received honorary doctorates from the University of the State of Rio de Janeiro and from the Federal University of Bahia. In addition to his political achievements, he was an artist, a painter of more than 60 works and a prize winning playwright. Despite his public standing, he was unable to gather the support necessary to create institutions devoted to the preservation of black culture.

It is undeniable that there is a struggle for recognition amongst artists. Art museums have evaluated African sculptures differently, depending on historical periods and nationality. However, social movements have been responsible for changes in the recognition awarded to the art and artefacts of black people. In Brazil, many objects associated with prohibited Afro-



Brazilian rituals were, until the 1980s, confiscated by police forces. Consequently, religious images of African origins, guns, utensils used to hide drugs and other police trophies were displayed side by side. In the city of Salvador the City Museum (Museu da Cidade) claimed the rights over several Afro-American objects that were under the control of the Police Museum and, in so doing, temporarily won the battle for recognition.

Thus, collections dedicated to the strengthening of racial identity are gradually achieving support from public institutions. Yet, to this day, Abdias do Nascimento has not succeeded in transforming his private collection, consisting of his own paintings and canvases, sculptures and illustrations by several black artists, into a public one. He has found that there are immense obstacles to obtaining financial aid to support the opening of his collection to the public. Although the collection also includes documents and photographs of black movements in Brazil, it has only received recent financial support from the Ford Foundation, a North-American organization. Thus, regardless of the charisma and power of this black political leader, a man who has occupied a unique role in the articulation of the African 'diasporas' in Brazil, his collection has failed to attract a subsidy from the Brazilian government for proper preservation and exhibition.<sup>7</sup>

Recurring attempts to form a collection committed to black culture, such as that reported by Abdias do Nascimento, suggest that it is not really possible for national institutions like public libraries, art galleries and national museums to claim that race is a non-issue. In ignoring the race issue, they have praised a certain type of work, which, despite being praised 'regardless of race issues', has excluded several artistic manifestations which were selected by blacks as artistic productions. These institutions established the patterns of what would be great art and great literature and based on them they excluded important works of art from the collection that represents Brazilian artistic production. These are institutions which tend to reproduce the values and judgments of the European nations, whilst ignoring many artistic manifestations of African origin.

### **Narrative and discrimination II: exaggeration**

Since the 1930s, mulatto and black people have been celebrated as the main creators of the nation's soul; we find their presence cherished in popular music, sports, food and carnival festivities. If we take popular culture or sports, race is a clearly a significant issue. Today we find the association between Brazilian nationhood, miscegenation and images of samba, carnival and football is established in many museums.

When the capital city was transferred from Rio de Janeiro to Brasília, in 1960, the former headquarters of the Republican Government was transformed into the Republican Museum (Museu da República). The permanent exhibition, 'The Republican Adventure,' (A Ventura Republicana) of this important museum was created in the year of 1996 with the intention of providing a more democratic narrative for the nation. Its curators, Gisela Magalhães and Joel Ruffino dos Santos, did not reproduce historical discourses based on political heroes. Rather, they emphasized the participation of indigenous, black and hinterland people in the building of the nation, trying to redeem those who had been previously excluded from history. However, they have only exhibited images of black people in one section named 'The Street'. There, we can find and read the following words quoted from the famous anthropologist Gilberto Freyre: 'The Brazilian people are black in their sincere expressions'.

Despite the good intentions of their creators, the permanent exhibition of the Republican Museum reinforces the division between a white elite constituted by politicians and the black population made up of popular musicians, religious leaders and football players. In contrast to the silence about race in the case of institutions such as the Public Library or the National Museum of Fine Arts, we find, in this case, an emphasis on race. Unfortunately, black culture is only shown on the displays when the narratives are about the 'streets'. The strategy of promoting popular manifestations of black people has not avoided discriminatory practices, since these manifestations are associated with stereotypes and a hierarchy of values.

### **Narrative and discrimination III: the myth of origin**

The National Museum of History (Museu Histórico Nacional) was created in 1922 with the mission of institutionalizing and promulgating the history of the nation, although this has been subject to variation over the years. In its first 40 years, the narratives of the historical museum celebrated heroes and events of the political and military history and honoured members of the Brazilian elite. The celebratory version of history, with its myths and heroes, was replaced, in 1969, by a narrative that emphasized political events, and, in the 1980s, after the military dictatorship, by a narrative that privileged economic development. The current permanent exhibition, *Colonization and Dependency (Colonização e Dependência)*, was inaugurated at this time. Here, the exhibits show a sequence of economic processes: the great navigations of the fifteenth century; the slave-dependent sugar, cotton, tobacco, coffee plantations and mining; and industrial production. Despite the different emphases on either political or economic events, all the narratives created in the museum reproduced an evolutionary perspective on events that extended from the year 1500 to the present day.

One of the museum's main tasks seems to be the preservation of the past in a world that has lost the capacity for transmitting values and customs. Museums not only make the past their object, but also foreign cultures, treating both the past and the culture of the 'other' as unfamiliar realms. Because the objects in a display entail a sense of authenticity, museums have the capacity to use them in order to formalize their narratives. They have been closely associated with the constitution of different kinds of knowledge and collective memories, without making clear to the public that the exhibition of selected objects always involve an arbitrary construction of the 'other', and that such a construction implies a relationship of power.<sup>8</sup>

In the case of national museums, we find one major historical discourse that establishes the discovery of the nation in the year 1500. This date has become a founding mark for the nation and its population. In the year 2000, an event of great significance, the 'Exhibit of Rediscovery, Brazil +500' ('Mostra do Redescobrimento, Brazil + 500'), celebrated the arrival of the Portuguese in the Brazilian territory. Presented at the Parque do Ibirapuera, in São Paulo, this exhibition was thought to be the largest art exhibition ever mounted in Brazil, for it gathered together fifteen thousand works of art and received a record number 1.8 million visitors. The exhibition provided a democratic narrative of the nation, incorporating the art of whites, blacks and indigenous people. It observed the cultural diversity of the Brazilian people, one of the nation's triumphs in comparison with other peoples and nations.

However, against this official history, intellectuals and representatives of social movements have denounced the idea of the 'discovery' of the nation in the year 1500, on the grounds that it suggests that the 50 million inhabitants, who already lived in the territory that was 'discovered,' only began to have a real existence after the European arrival. Moreover, the official celebration did not denounce the genocide of native inhabitants, which had been committed in the period following 'discovery' (Carvalho, 1999).

The choice of the year 1500 implies that the Brazilian nation was constituted by the Europeans, who were the civilized people, by an indigenous population, who were primitive people and by blacks who were an enslaved population. The choice of 1500, therefore, also erases black people's African past, since blacks enter Brazilian history as slaves. The white population has a past, they are a part of the European civilization, but native people and blacks have had their previous inheritances, traditions and customs, which are as legitimate as the European ones, despised or wiped from the record.

A few Afro-Brazilian museums, such as the one at Salvador, in trying to strengthen the image of black people, have broken with the idea of the year 1500, as they celebrate Africa as the myth of origin. As they do so, they build a new identity not only for those who consider themselves of African descent, but also for the rest of Brazilian society, since they modify the imagery of 'who we are'. These initiatives are few and in sharp contrast with most Brazilian museums, whose narratives ignore new versions of history and the African cultural inheritance.

### Narrative and discrimination IV: history

There is a dynamic relation between historical narratives and collective memory, since historical narratives may become part of the collective memory of a nation. They can be either transmitted through generations by oral tradition and face-to-face encounters (Connerton, 1989) or they may be formalized by public institutions. Schools, commemorations, monuments and museums develop a prominent role in the consolidation of the collective memory of a nation. Therefore, in analyzing objects and narratives found in contemporary museums, we need to study them as places of history and memory.<sup>9</sup>

The presentation of history by official institutions has served as a political instrument for different groups. In the United States, the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH) was founded in 1915, with the mission of promoting, researching, preserving, interpreting and disseminating knowledge about black history and culture. Since then, several institutions have assumed the role of telling the story of African Americans, as well as preserving art and culture, based on the African-American point of view. These American institutions try to legitimate a certain interpretation of historical events, aesthetic judgments and values within American society. On the website of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History, for instance, we read that its founder, Dr. Carter Godwin Woodson, asserted that the role of his own people in American history was neglected or misrepresented. Thus, cultural struggles were established at the beginning of the twentieth century and African-American leaders committed their lives to researching the African American past defending their own version of national and world history.

Brazil had a constitutional monarchical system of government from 1822, the year of its independence from Portugal, until 1889, when the Republic was proclaimed. The Historic and Geographic Brazilian Institute (IHGB) was founded in 1838, during the time of the imperial government. Under the influence of the ruling political elite the Institute disseminated a historical perspective which was intended to keep the territory of the nation unified, fighting against the various separatist movements that emerged in several regions (Guimarães, 1988). So far as the Institute's historians were concerned, neither blacks nor the native people were considered to be a part of the civilizing project of the nation. It is undoubtedly the case that the Republican movement sponsored alternative histories and created new myths, but, as I have already suggested, the incorporation of the black population continued to be a problem for a nation which wanted to build its image from European patterns.

The Imperial Museum (Museu Imperial) was created in 1940, during the dictatorship of Getúlio Vargas, with the aim of recollecting, organizing and exhibiting valuable historical and artistic objects relating to the period, its events and heroes, of the imperial regime. The Museum takes the form of a theatrical reconstitution of the imperial family that conveys a somewhat luxurious atmosphere for a palace that was once described as very simple and modest summer residence. It reproduces the official history of the nation; thus Princess Isabel, one of the members of the imperial family, is cherished as the person who issued the important emancipation decree of 1888. It is only in this connection that we find that slavery enters the narrative with its abolition attributed to an act of the Princess Regent of the Imperial Brazilian government.

Even Afro-Brazilian Museums, such as those inaugurated in the cities of Sergipe and Recife,<sup>10</sup> still cherish the role played by Princess Isabel and the Brazilian elite in the process of emancipation. Nevertheless, there are other, alternative, historical interpretations that stress the *quilombos*, or redoubts, where runaway slaves protected themselves, as the great image of the resistance of black people during slavery. The historical narratives about the most important of the *quilombos*, the Quilombo of Palmares, and its leader, Zumbi, are important symbols for those who fight today against racial discrimination; the preservation of a certain past is always a weapon for those who live in the present.

Official history has selected the 13<sup>th</sup> of May, the day when Princess Isabel signed the Lei Áurea, as the symbolic mark of the end of slavery. However, black movements have selected the 20<sup>th</sup> of November, the day of Zumbi's death, as 'Black Conscience Day'. The celebration of Black Conscience Day started in 1978, on the initiative of the Unified Black Movement (MNU), a political organization against racial discrimination which originated in the



1970s and was strengthened in the course of the following decade. In 1996, the City Council of Rio de Janeiro approved a law that declared a holiday on the 20<sup>th</sup> of November. Groups such as the MNU are not only creating their own symbols, but also offering a new interpretation of the history and collective memory of the nation. As Black Conscience Day starts to be recognized as a national day, the representation of race changes the representation of the nation by adding to its iconography.

The point can be illustrated by reference to a monument. Black Conscience Day is remembered as the one on which Zumbi, a black hero who fought in 1690s against the colonizers, died. Blackness is commemorated through the anniversary of his death. The 20<sup>th</sup> of November is now a state holiday and has been defended as such by the black movement against the official day that celebrates the abolition of slavery during the Empire. A monument, erected in downtown, Rio de Janeiro, in 1986, that is during the last days of the state government of Leonel Brizola, celebrates the National Day. It is located in Praça Onze, a former headquarter of the old black schools of samba, which is also close to the avenue where, today, the samba schools parade. It takes the form of a large head of a Nigerian man, which is the replica of a small statue that can be found in the British Museum.<sup>11</sup>

### **Narrative and discrimination V: painful memories as instrument of domination**

Although memory and the idea of freedom often appear intertwined, for it is because of memory that it is possible not to repeat past mistakes, memory can also entail forgetfulness or domination. Some investigators of the Holocaust and other traumatic events have argued that traumatized individuals become the symptom of a history that they do not entirely possess.<sup>12</sup> Those who suffer traumas are stuck in the interior of the event, and consequently are not capable of seeing it from a distance. Traumatic events are forgotten because they are beyond the acceptable suffering for human beings. In other words, he who lives a traumatic situation cannot incorporate it and, therefore, a traumatic situation is not part of the group of experiences that can be transmitted to others. In cases of extreme suffering, human beings may have their egos destroyed and, consequently, they are incapable of comprehending the full meaning of what has happened to them.

Seventy-five per cent of the slaves who were brought to Brazil died within the first three years. The slave trade, the attempt to reduce men to the level of animals and the humiliation and torture suffered by the black population were traumatic in their effects; these things left their marks on the victims. When history is made by traumatic situations, it unfolds as if it is without witnesses. Slaves, therefore, even if they had had access to the means of communication in their own time, were not able to transmit the horror of their experiences to following generations. If the history of slavery has not been told and transmitted by slaves, who are its authors and what is its meaning?

When we visit and observe those Brazilian national and historical museums that narrate slavery we see black people in forced labour along with the many objects that were used to torture and humiliate them. As we look for images and objects associated with black people in the National Historical Museum, we find a great wooden maquette showing black slaves working side by side under the oppression of a black man holding a whip; we discover portraits that were used to classify slaves according to their facial traces, and we encounter images and objects of torture. In the cold environment where these objects are shown, they not only explain, but also neutralize the terror that was lived by slaves. How to show the pain of those who were forced to labour, were whipped, were separated from their families, treated like animals and submitted to all sorts of vileness? Slavery, in the museum showcases, appears to be a result of certain types of production: the large sugar and cotton plantations and mines. It is very difficult to explain terror without justifying it and, as we do this, rather than bringing past memories to the present, we provoke the more complete forgetfulness of what has happened (Bataille, 1995). These narratives of slavery hide a wound, and as such they represent an impediment to those who might try to give a better account of what has happened.

But besides creating a narrative about what cannot be said in words, images and objects, the museums are also spaces in which people search for social identification. Victims of traumatic experiences maintain compulsive and self-destructive behaviour

throughout generations, caused not by the acknowledgment of what took place, but by the absence of the full comprehension of what they suffered. The compulsory remembrance of traumatic episodes can be a tool of domination, since it reproduces traumatic situations and compulsive behaviour in the present. When painful memories are forced to the surface, the domination repeats itself because the sufferers may be too fragile to react.

Once we take into account the fact that slavery was a traumatic experience for generations of black people, it is easier to understand that the repetitive imagery of black slaves being beaten, humiliated and injured by masks, chains and other instruments of torture has the power to reproduce those very same feelings of pain and shame in individuals of the present generation. The Brazilian imagery of the black population in chains is so widespread that it does not raise reactions against torture, as it should; it has lost the capacity for raising indignation. Two famous images, which can be readily recognized by every Brazilian citizen and which were executed by the famous artists Jean Baptiste Debret and Johann Moritz Rugendas, illustrate the point. There, we see black slaves being beaten. These images are preserved in a museum that was created in 1972, the Museu Chácara do Céu. Formerly an old residence of the successful entrepreneur of the institution's name, the museum assembles a rich collection of works of art, among them several drawings and illustrations by important European painters who documented the city of Rio de Janeiro during the nineteenth-century. However, the promotional material to be found at this museum's internet web site shows the two pictures mentioned above.

Given that one of the roles of national museums is to confer on Brazilian citizens the collective feeling of belonging to the nation, we can conclude that this feeling of 'nation-ness' can be reproduced in different ways. National museums represent images of black people in a way that any person would be ashamed of being identified with. As humiliation continues, subordination reproduces itself in the present. Brazilian visitors who today enter the Imperial Museum or the National Historical Museum will try to find their inheritance and will look for objects that represent themselves. White visitors will find themselves represented by the political elite of the nation and black visitors will find themselves represented by slaves. It is necessary for those who identify themselves with enslaved people to free themselves from those images, and one of the ways they have to achieve this freedom is to break with the images that have been forged for the nation.

Things can be different. Elsewhere, in the Afro-Brazilian Museum of Salvador, for instance, we see neither the objects of torture nor images of black people being beaten, which are so common in national museums. There we see a great variety of objects that make part of the everyday of the black population, such as domestic utensils and religious images. Almost all of them have close links with those objects one can find in African regions. It is not by chance, therefore, that when the influence of the black population is stronger in the organization of the museums, the objects that are chosen to be put on display are those which strengthen its self-esteem.

### **Concluding remarks**

As we analyze the discourse of racial democracy that is present in national institutions we realize that it weakens the self-esteem of large part of the population. While the Public Library and the National Museum of Fine Arts are blind to colour or race, the Republican Museum associates black people with sports and popular culture. Historical narratives ignore the African origins of the black population and stress their passivity during slavery. Objects, such as drums, *atabaques*, *agogós*, as well as Afro-Brazilian religious images, do not receive the same treatment as those originating from the European culture. The heroes of the 'nation without race' are chosen amongst white intellectuals and politicians who constituted the ruling elites. Moreover, rituals of domination continue to be reproduced through images that represent the black population in humiliating situations.

People 'without race' hold power and govern the nation and black people provide the soul of the country with their 'sincere expressions'. In so far as race is considered, cultural production represents people who occupy the lower social status. Race is a construction that has been used to keep the privilege of a few. Racial democracy works in so far as blacks

improve their skills in music and sports and whites in politics, business, industries, law and other prestigious and powerful activities. These two themes belong to one great narrative of racial democracy, the narrative of the nation.

It is not surprising, therefore, that black movements are choosing a different historical narrative to understand the past. Their new versions of 'who we were' are not separated from 'who we are'. These narratives are neither a mere intellectual project, nor a version of history that is accomplished by a small elite. New African-Brazilian museums stress a positive image of black people. Rather than showing nude slaves being beaten, these institutions exhibit the artistic production of black people throughout history; they respectfully display their sacred and religious objects and rescue the importance of objects of African origins for the whole Brazilian population. These museums display the injustices of slavery without emphasizing images of humiliation.

The initiatives that first took place in Bahia have achieved a broader acceptance in other parts of the country. In 2003, on the Black Conscience Day, the state and the city government of São Paulo officially supported the project of a new Afro-Brazilian Museum. Emanuel Araújo was appointed curator of the new museum. There is a dispute within the nation about which will be the most important museum of black culture, since different governments are now interested in supporting the project. Araújo is a black man who is a very important painter and has been highly praised as a former director of the Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo, a prestigious museum of fine arts. Araújo has declared that the new African-Brazilian museum will be a centre of reflexive thinking. The institution will aim at the preservation of black memory and at the construction of black people's cultural history in order to promote their self-esteem (Jornal Estado de São Paulo, 21 November 2003).

In 2001 Araújo curated an important temporary exhibition that was inaugurated in the National Museum of History, entitled 'Para Nunca Esquecer: Negras Memórias, Memórias de Negros.' There we could find the intertwining of 'black memories' and 'memories of the blacks.' Under the first label, the author assembled images of torture during slavery, and under the second, objects, paintings and sculptures that represent the artistic production of black people. There was a clear attempt to interlace both the history of racial discrimination and the political, social and cultural contribution of black people. The past, in this case, was exhibited as part of a legacy that needed to be overcome.

In conclusion, as far as the constructions of blackness are concerned, different claims must be considered. The way I see it, the new proposals cannot completely ignore past configurations, since they are part of the present. The Brazilian population is highly mixed, black and mulatto people constitute the majority of the population, and African influence can be found in every corner of the nation. In a nation constituted by the idea of racial democracy, new social movements based on black identity will have to enlarge the boundaries of what blackness means. The new representations of blackness in African-Brazilian museums, therefore, may be understood as part of the enlargement of democratic rights and, certainly, as responsible for the construction of new narratives about the nation and their people.

## Notes

1 I thank José Neves Bittencourt, Mario Chagas, Elisa Larkin Nascimento e Luiz Henrique Sombra, respectively director of the Centro de Referência Luso-Brasileiro of the National Historical Museum, researcher of the Museum of the Republic, curator of the collection of Abdias de Nascimento and photographer, for the information that helped in the interpretations developed in this paper.

2 That the definition of race is a historical and conflicted construction is acknowledged by many contemporary authors. See, for instance, Stepan's assertion that racial distinctions are not timeless; they have constantly been renegotiated and experienced in different ways and in different historical periods (Stepan, 1991:13).

3 See, for instance, Bourdieu and Wacquant's critique of the imposition of the US racial dichotomy white and black on the Brazilian perception of a continuous of coloured people (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2002).

4 For studies that analyze the interrelationship between power and Brazilian official representations, see Abreu, 1996; Gonçalves, 1996; Santos, 2003; Williams, 2001.

5 For a survey on a recent group of measures to combat racial inequity, which includes affirmative action policies designed by the Brazilian government, see Heringer, 2003.

6 There are many important museums, historical houses, research centers and electronic pages in the United States that have the objective of preserving the history of the black or African American community. See the Association of African American Museums, Baltimore, MD; African-American Civil War Memoria, Washington, DC; Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA; Anacostia Museum, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, Birmingham, AL; Booker T. Washington Monument, Tuskegee, AL; Boston African American National Historic Site; California African American Museum, Los Angeles, CA; Chattanooga African American Museum, Chattanooga, TN; The Delta Blues Museum, Clarksdale, MS; The Frederick Douglass Museum and Cultural Center, Rochester, NY; Frederick Douglass National Historic Site, Washington, DC; Hampton University Museum, Hampton, VA; King-Tisdell Cottage, Savannah, GA; Mary McLeod Bethune Council House National Historic Site, Washington, DC; Museum of African American History, Detroit, MI; Museum of Afro American History, Boston, MA; National Civil Right Museum, Memphis, TN; National Underground Rail Road Museum, Maysville, KY; River Road African American Museum, Gonzales, LA; Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York, NY.

7 According to Elisa Larkin Nascimento, Abdias's wife and curator of the collection, also member of the Afro-Brazilian Research and Studies Institute (IPEAFRO), despite many attempts to exhibit a rich collection of paintings, photographs and documents, they never received appropriate support to open the collection to the public (interview December 2003).

8 During the 1990s a considerable number of studies on contemporary museums were published. See, for instance, Hooper-Greenhill, 1992; Pearce, 1992; Samuel, 1994; Bennett, 1995; Macdonald and Fyfe, 1996; Gonçalves, 1996. On the intertwining between the rise of modern museums and nation states, see Gillis, 1994 and Boswell, 1995. For key texts on ethnographic studies about collections, see Stocking, 1985 and Clifford, 1988.

9 The borderline between history and memory has been the subject of many contemporary studies. See the classic study of Maurice Halbwachs on memory and its recent appropriations by authors who work with cultural history (Halbwachs, 1968; Nora, 1984; Hutton, 1988).

10 Museu Afro-Brasileiro, Sergipe, was created in 1996, and the Museu da Abolição - Centro de Referência da Cultura Afro-Brasileira, Recife, was created in 1957 and inaugurated in the 13th of May of 1983.

11 The whole monument measures 7m high x 4m on the base. The head is about 4.5m high. Since the time of its erection, the monument has been damaged with graffiti and by other protests.

12 On the relation between history and trauma, see, among others, LaCapra 1994; Caruth 1995 and 1996; Wood 1999.

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