

Remodeling the portrait, reconfiguring the bodies: Blotting as a political-aesthetic gesture in the works of Rosana Paulino and Elian Almeida

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Abstract

The present paper tackles the issue of Brazilian visual memory in a discussion about the works of artists and researchers Rosana Paulino and Elian Almeida. More specifically, I discuss the strategies adopted by artists to revisit the representation of black bodies in critical fabrications that contribute to reconfiguring the gaze on Brazilian culture. From a conceptual point of view, the article discusses issues such as the role of archives, coloniality, and visual culture. Building upon the notion of blotting (*rasura*) in Leda Martins, I propose the notion of blotting as a theoretical apparatus to understand Brazilian visual memory. Finally, the paper aims to establish a conceptual category favoring the observation of the cracks, lees and erasures of visuality in the Global South.

Keywords

Memory, Visual Culture, Decoloniality, Art, Body.

Introduction

In 2019, the samba school Estação Primeira de Mangueira (G.R.E.S. Estação Primeira de Mangueira) presented a parade that became an instant classic of Brazilian culture. With the theme *História para ninar gente grande*, the refrain praises "women, tamoios, mulattos" and calls for "a country that is not in the portrait" (author's translation). The song underlines the erasure of marginalized bodies in the country (the black, the indigenous, and the poor).

Bearing the parade in mind, this paper discusses the following hypothesis: Afro-diasporic artists in Brazil employ practices of erasure, overwriting, and appropriation of colonial images and imaginaries, subverting them in favor of a look from those historically marginalized, a decolonial gaze. Such practices will hereon be encompassed by the notion of blotting. For the sake of this argument, this investigation draws attention to the works of Rosana Paulino and Elian Almeida. More specifically, the paper casts light on the artists' criticism of visual structures responsible for stigmatizing non-white populations.

Paulino and Almeida share not only an artistic commitment to practices described in this work as blotting but also present academic research in the fields of arts and visibility. For instance, Paulino holds a Ph.D. in Visual Arts (USP) and is a specialist in printmaking (London Print Studio), having developed extensive research on ethnic and gender issues in Brazilian society and culture. Elian Almeida, on the other hand, holds a degree in Fine Arts (UERJ) and is also a Film Studies student (Sorbonne). Almeida has drawn attention from the contemporary art scene with works that highlight tensions around black bodies in society. More importantly, they are both artists and researchers who: a. share a view on the history and memory of the Afro-diasporic populations in Brazil and; b. challenge the hegemonic (imperial) gaze when it comes to representing Brazilian culture.

From a theoretical and methodological point of view, this research builds upon the notion of erasure in Leda Martins (2007). In Martins' work, the term appears in a discussion about the production and performance of black female writers as a process of blotting (*rasura*) and deconstruction which, in the context of Martins' work, refers to the Brazilian literary canon and the "figurative vices of the black female persona in Brazilian literature" (ibidem, p. 64). Extrapolating the literary dimension and the representation of the feminine, I would like to propose the category blotting as a conceptual operator to think about the crossroads, another term employed by Martins and other black authors who think from Afro-Latin and Afro-Brazilian cosmologies (Martins, 2003; Anzaldúa, 2005, Rufino, 2009). Dislocating the concept towards the realms of visual culture, memory, and decoloniality the concept, and practice, of blotting (*rasura*) appears hereon as a paradigm of analysis and as a political-aesthetic apparatus.

Articulating politics and aesthetics through visibility, this argument stems from the notion of countervisuality, as proposed by Mirzoeff (2016). Mirzoeff proposes three distinct forms of visibility responsible for perpetuating global power structures over time. These forms are defined according to production models and historical moments, namely, "1. slavery on *plantations*; 2. imperialism; and 3. the current military-industrial complex" (Mirzoeff, p. 745). It is worth noting that, in this configuration, the populations of the so-called Global South are marginalized, controlled, and classified by visual apparatuses. After all, in Modernity, visibility plays a political role as a colonial/imperial technology responsible for the classification, segregation, and aestheticization of populations.

According to the author (Mirzoeff, 2016), the visibility of slavery on the *plantations* is characterized by the prism of the plantation's overseer. Such a general structure, however, would be accompanied by a series of other devices responsible for configuring visibility forms. One of these devices is constituted in the relationship between science and photography which, especially during the nineteenth century, supported a project of understanding and dominating nature with deep marks in the Brazilian imaginary. In the argument presented in this text, the relationship between episteme (knowledge) / technologies and art receives special attention in the section dedicated to the work of Rosana Paulino. Another relevant

aspect of the education of the gaze, especially in the contemporary world, is the binomial between media and the fashion world. In this case, the theme will be approached from Elian Almeida's point of view.

As admitted earlier, finding an epistemologically coherent model within the complex universe of Latin American cultures can be a challenging task. The notion of blotting (*rasura*) as a theoretical and methodological problem, hence, is also a conceptual starting point. The central question underneath this discussion is a more ambitious one: how to observe Brazilian (cultural) memory? In response to such a call, this essay will undertake a brief analysis of the historical-cultural context of Brazil, from the point of view of some formative elements of our visual culture, towards the works of Paulino and Almeida.

The socio-historical context and its gazes

A strategic milestone in understanding the issue of representation of minority bodies in Brazil, and specifically those of Afro-indigenous origins, is the proposition of Lélia Gonzalez around the issue of racism in Brazilian culture. Gonzalez, a woman of afro-indigenous background, emphasizes that racism is the main symptom of what she claims to be the "Brazilian cultural neurosis" (Gonzalez, 1984, p. 224). Gonzalez further points out that precisely because they share such neurosis all Brazilians, "and not only the black and brown people in IBGE" (1988, p. 69), are *Ladino Amefricans*. By extrapolating the "black and brown people of IBGE [Brazilian Census]" Gonzalez emphasizes the collective, therefore structural, dimension of such trauma, as opposed to a strictly individual understanding of the same problem. Thinking of slavery as a cultural trauma has been a recurrent concern for authors who discuss the issue of racism, at least since Franz Fanon's ([1952]2008) groundbreaking *Black Skin, White Masks*.

Now returning to Gonzalez, *América Ladina* (Ladin Amefrica), would be a territory that comprises and is constituted by individuals marked by the social experience based on violence and the complexity of colonial relations in the terms in which it was configured in the Ibero-American region. Regarding these conditions, it is imperative to recognize a social hierarchy based on the articulation between race and class, as underlined by Quijano (2005), and gender, as Gonzalez would add (1984).

Increasing one more layer to the discussion, I shall turn to Glissant (2008) and his account of the formation of the Americas. According to the Caribbean thinker, there are at least three general profiles of the migrants who arrived in the Americas during the period of the slave trade, formative years of the continent. The first of them would be the armed migrant, the one who arrives with all his furniture and economic power on the *Mayflower* (ship). The second category would be the *household migrant* who took their family photos and labor force to the North, in Glissant's words. Finally, the third category is the naked migrant. The latter would have arrived in the Americas "with the difficult and vanished country languages, progressively memory of his gods (he provided all the labor in the South)" (Glissant, 2008, p. 87). This category would be composed of migrants who were forced to leave their place of origin in slave ships along the slave route. As Glissant points out, the naked migrant was responsible for reconstructing several cultures in the South of the United States, the Caribbean region, Northeastern Brazil, and other countries described as an "area of creolization" (Glissant, 2008, p. 87).

Despite not mentioning native cultures, and the lack of methodological accuracy, Glissant's formulation presents a compelling allegory about the cultural formation of the Americas, or at least those areas of the continents most impacted by the slave trade. Regarding this issue, it is relevant to highlight two central aspects: the naked migrant is a category constructed in contrast to other migrants. There is, in Glissant's proposal (2008, p. 87), the perception of radical inequality in terms of class and race which is translated into cultural asymmetries. After all, the enslaved migrants were forced to depart from their original territories, their cultures were objectified, and had their link with their cultures weakened.

Beyond the issue of territorial displacement, these individuals were forcefully dispossessed of their religions, affective memories, and belongings (ibidem). As a consequence of such violent arrest,

individuals from multiple cultural and ethnic backgrounds were homogenized by the colonizer's gaze and forced to build a culture informed by two pre-conditions: the radical dispossession, which goes beyond the problem of material lack, and the need for a reconstruction based on traces of their languages and memories (ibidem).

On the other hand, to define Afro-diasporic culture in the Americas by the notion of absence would be a grave mistake. As Glissant himself (ibidem) acknowledges, this experience was responsible for a profound openness to contingency and an enormous capacity for assimilation responsible for radical innovations. Hence, the two elements proposed as secondary hypotheses: (a) expressions of countervisuality in Brazil are produced by Afro-indigenous cultures; (b) the historical dispossession suffered by vulnerable populations in Brazil prompts processes of re-appropriation and subversion of colonial archives and records. By colonial records, I refer here to both historical and everyday archives, since they are both responsible for the design of the colonial imaginary. The process of subversion of these archives and imaginaries I call blotting.

Given the centrality of afrodiasporic culture in Brazil, including among those who do not identify themselves as Afro-brazilians, it is relevant to think about how this historical experience contributed to the way of thinking, feeling, and seeing in the country. As Rosana Paulino (2011) observes, black women have a role agglutinating and central in the Brazilian social fabric. According to the author, "mothers of saints, healers, midwives, traders, then teachers, seamstresses, actresses, doctors, researchers, etc., *black women have been in the front line of the development of the black-descended population in the country* (Paulino, p. 82, *my emphasis*).

Following those lines, it is fair to consider that these women are also the ideal point of origin for a discussion about a Brazilian imaginary. In this case, it is relevant to extrapolate the strictly ethnic/racial dimension, since Brazilian culture is Afro-indigenous in its foundation. In other words, what is properly Brazilian, since the European invasion of Brazil, is the entanglement between the experience of the African diaspora in the Americas and the indigenous cultures.

Another relevant aspect, beyond the focus on Brazilian visual memory, is the authors' technical and thematic choices. Paulino operates through techniques such as collage and sewing applied to discussions about the colonial heritage in the contemporary experience. Almeida builds upon covers of the Brazilian edition of Vogue magazine in an intertextual game that seeks to repair transatlantic injustices. This ability to articulate the current experience by retrieving the past and questioning the official (visual) memory is a key element of the debate undertaken in this text. In this spirit, this study shall now address the work of Rosana Paulino.

Rosana Paulino and the sewing of the archive against itself

In *Plantation memories*, Grada Kilomba draws from an image of silencing to build her argument around the trauma shared by populations of African descent (2020). The author refers to what she calls the mask of silencing, a concrete device illustrated in Arago and Marin's lithograph (see Image 1). The device, Kilomba (2020) explains, has a dual function of torture: preventing speech and feeding. Furthermore, the illustration in question is a reminder that such silencing is a practice that goes beyond iron masks. As Fanon (2008) pointed out, colonized populations, particularly blacks, suffer from the pressure to internalize cultural codes, values, and, of course, a white aesthetic. In the author's terms, they are black skins with white masks, in short (Fanon, 2008).

In Brazil, Abdias Nascimento echoes Fanon by pointing out that black culture has survived despite the coercion of blacks, who were "forced to alienate their own identity by social pressure, transforming themselves culturally and physically into whites" (Nascimento, 2017, p. 153). Still, on the issue of the body, Martins (2003) also points out that for the people of the African diaspora and indigenous people

of Brazil, the body is a fundamental place for memory. This is because, on the one hand, orality and body performances are fundamental to such cultures, and on the other hand, the author points out that the narrative and poetic repertoires of these people have not echoed in Brazilian lyrics (Martins, 2003). White masks, after all.

Along the same lines, in a commentary on the work of Rosana Paulino, the artist and researcher Renata Felinto, notes that "for a long time, Brazilian society chose to feign a dissociative amnesia. *We never dealt with this colonial trauma*" (Paulino and Felinto 2021, online, *my emphasis*). Slavery appears, again, as a trauma. It also appears as amnesia, not by chance. As Mbembe (2002) indicates, issues such as selective amnesia, the strategic erasure of the archive, the selection of what should be remembered, as well as the exclusion of certain themes, are state projects.

In Felinto's argument (2021) lies another critical inflection: the extension of a certain experience through space and time. For Brazilians, this is a national trauma, felt especially violently by black populations that effectively experience the unfolding of this process by other means. In other words, this is not only a problem of the "black and brown people of the IBGE" (Gonzalez, 1988, p. 69).

Paulino's (2011) concern with the social group is pointed out by the author herself, who reflecting on her creative process states that

I come from a population that often uses elements such as fabric, paper-mache, clay, ribbons, straw, and others strongly linked to manual work in their cultural and religious manifestations, such as carnival, Candomblé, and Umbanda, for example, I started to add in my work materials that were or are often used in these groups, in order to determine the form that the work will take and thus reinforce its meaning (p. 21).

The excerpt above, by the way, is part of the author's doctoral thesis, emblematically entitled *Images of Shadows* (2011). Regarding the thesis, Paulino stresses that his original intention was to start from the engraving of Anastácia, the enslaved black woman (see Figure 2), and think "if and how the reflections of slavery reflect on black women descendants even today" (Paulino, 2011, p. 49). The colonial and slavery past, therefore, appears as a reflection, like a shadow that projects itself into the present of *negrodescendants* (Paulino's words).

Throughout the thesis, the author further discusses the image of black women in contemporary Brazilian society with a special interest in the symbolic heritage of this social group. More specifically, Paulino investigates the "way in which the *shadows cast by slavery* over this population are reflected on the black women still today, creating and perpetuating symbolic and social sites for this group" (2011, p. 29, *my emphasis*). In the excerpt, the author reveals an interest in dealing with contemporary Brazilian thought from symbolic and social places that are investigated through a visual perspective. Paulino also commits to a historical perspective, fundamental to a project focused on dealing with issues initiated by the slave regime. In another moment, also in the thesis, the artist will indicate that Anastácia's image was a starting point for her thesis. The recurrence of traumatic images appears to be symptomatic of an imaginary shared by the artists.

Figure 1 - Slave punishment.



Jacques Etienne Arago, 1839, Watercolor lithograph on paper, located at AfroBrasil Museum.

Noting the interest of Kilomba (2020) and Paulino (2011) in the illustration of a tortured black woman, I return to the theme of erasure. This notion, as the term suggests, presupposes an act of interference over the original document. Blotting (*rasura*) is an attempt to intervene in the accounts of history, to alter a document that cannot simply be superseded. From a temporal point of view, erasure is the practice of the crossroads, of the encounter between the past time, of the document and the present, of the performance and the re-inscription. An action that cannot be performed without some spilling of ink.

In the wake of this reasoning, the notion of crossroads appears as an ethical, aesthetic, and political imperative for a reformulation of education marked by colonialism. For Luiz Rufino, "the Pedagogy of the Crossroads *erases* the logic of a split world" (2019, p. 273, *my emphasis*). Again, crossroads and erasure emerge as central terms in the thought of authors who claim an epistemology that contemplates Afro-Brazilian knowledge.

Under the paradigm of the crossroads, principles and cosmovision meet and establish a relationship that, as Martins (2007) emphasizes, is not necessarily amicable. The erasure, however, configures itself as a gesture of affirmation. It is the operation of those who acquired the right to interfere in the writing of history belatedly, but who do not make a point of leaving their impressions on the fabric of the past in the present. Changing the past from the present is something especially plausible if taken as an ethical-poetic reference to Yoruba cosmology as described by Martins (2007), Sodré (2017), and Rufino (2009).

At this point, I emphasize that this is not specifically about the problem of representativeness, whose importance has been widely discussed in academic and media debates in Brazil. What I want to point out here is the embodiment of other ways of seeing and thinking about history in the art world and academia, based on the work of an artist-researcher. As commented above, in her work, as an artist and researcher, she contributes to the insertion of the experience of black women in debates about (continued) Brazilian colonialism.

I shall insist once again on the notion of blotting. Analyzing the production of black women in literature, Martins (2007) comments that

When we look at the literary production of Esmeralda Ribeiro, Conceição Evaristo, Míriam Alves, Elisa Lucinda, and Geni Guimarães, for example, it is not difficult to see that the fictional and poetic lyrics in their texts become a *privileged instrument and locus for a powerful and persistent blotting [rasura], discontinuity and deconstruction*, both of the innumerable figurative vices of the black female persona in Brazilian literature and the raising of an alternative voice in relation to racialism and sexism that permeate oblique discursive practices (p. 64, *my emphasis*).

Thinking from the field of literature with its concepts and metaphors, Martins (*ibidem*) indicates that the production of those women presents other voices that configure themselves as a *locus* for blotting, discontinuity, and deconstruction. Given Martins' position as a literature professor, it also seems fair to acknowledge the gravity of the terms cited by the author, namely: erasure, discontinuity, and deconstruction. The process of blotting, as previously commented on this paper, points to a socio-historical dimension of the place of black women authors in Brazilian literature. In other words, it is a form of writing that corrects the *status quo* of Brazilian literature. Regarding discontinuity, there is an emphasis on the historical rupture that the authors represent. Finally, a possible Derridean connotation of the term deconstruction deserves attention. Again, given Martins' background, this adoption seems deliberate. In this case, it is especially important to recognize that deconstruction is not exactly a gesture of undoing, but a symbolic re-articulation in which deconstructing is also reconstructing something in the symbolic order.

Thus, transferring the emphasis to the sense of sight, without disregarding the sensorial integrality of the gesture of looking, I intend to treat erasure as a category that brings with it the notions of discontinuity and deconstruction, understood in the sense of a re-articulation of the symbolic order by the Afro-diasporic sensibility in Brazil. Interestingly, Paulino and Almeida retrieve visual and material documents that are part of Brazilian colonial history, in Elian's case contemporary ones, and revisit them.

In the book *¿Historia Natural?* Paulino uses elements of 19th century naturalist iconography based on images of blacks and Indians photographed and illustrated by European scientists and artists. An emblematic case is that of the photographs taken by Auguste Stahl, a French photographer whose work in Brazil was highlighted as one of the twelve most important photographers working anywhere in the world at the same time " (Naef, 1976, p. 38).

Paulino's interest in Stahl's work seems to derive from the fact that the photographer contributed to the book *Viagem ao Brasil (Journey to Brazil)* (Agassiz, 2000). The volume in question is the result of an ethnographic investigation by Harvard University professor, and notorious opponent of Darwin, Louis Agassiz. Agassiz, a world-renowned scientist in the 19th century, was notable, among others, for defending the notion of racial purity, defending the thesis that the different races had arisen separately, having no common ancestors (Wallis, 1995).

In addition to Stahl, Walter Hunnewell also acted as a photographer in Agassiz's expedition to the Amazon and produced similar portraits to those created by Stahl under the scientist's guidance (see Figure 3). Such a body of works suggests the composition of an assemblage composed by a scientist from a prestigious American university and photographers. Such an assemblage was responsible for the creation of a visual archive of the *racas of Brazil* [sic] in the 19th century. It should also be noted that photography was an expensive and little diffused practice at the time, so the production of these images was in the hands of only foreigners and the white population of Brazil, having among its enthusiasts Emperor Pedro II himself (Schwartz, 1998).

For this paper, it is especially relevant to note that photography is a central element in Agassiz's work regarding the distinction between races. The author is even known for the way he orientates the portraits in which the photographed person appears, generally, in three positions: the front, profile, and back with arms resting on the hips (see Figure 3). The choice of nineteenth-century iconography

is emblematic of Paulino's interest in a discussion about a certain colonial imaginary in Brazil and an important current of nineteenth-century iconography linked to a racist project, such as the one undertaken by Agassiz. Regarding Brazil, the scientist is adamant in stating that those who "doubt the pernicious effects of race mixing and are driven by false philanthropy to break all barriers placed between them should come to Brazil" (Agassiz, 2000, p. 282). He argues that, upon encountering the Brazilian reality, the traveler would find that the mixture "erases the best qualities" (Agassiz, 2000, p. 282, *my emphasis*) of each of the individual races (as he understood the racial identities).

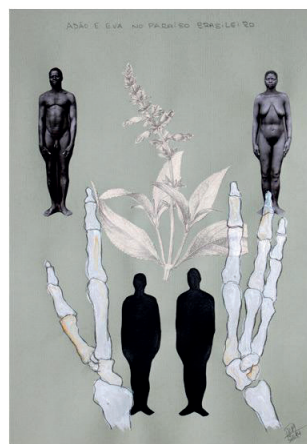
Rosana Paulino's work remakes and reconfigures Stahl's portraits and even Agassiz's book (see Figures 2 and 3). Naturally, this is not a revision or a specific criticism. In the sequence of photos below, it is possible to verify a direct relationship between the scientific photography oriented by Agassiz and Paulino's allusions.

Figure 2 - Photograph by Augusto Stahl, commissioned by Luis Agassiz



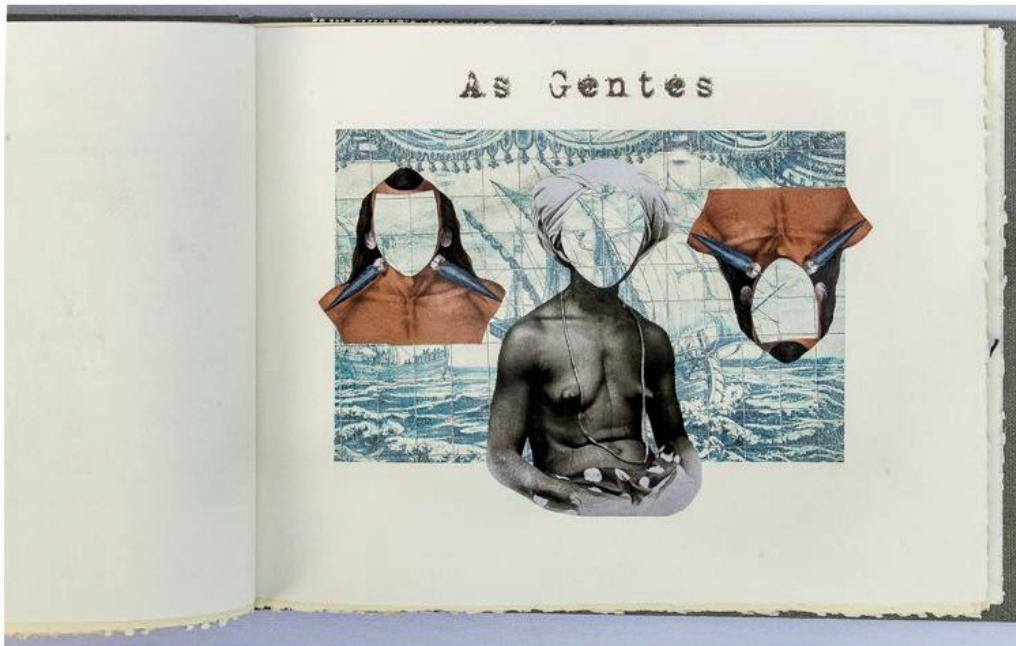
Louis Agassiz Photographic Collection, Pure Race Series, Africa Album located at Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University.

Figure 3 - Adam and Eve in the Brazilian Paradise



Adão e Eva no Paraíso brasileiro, 2014, collage, graphite and acrylic on paper, artist's portfolio.

Figure 4 - As gentes, Page from the book ¿Natural History?



Rosana Paulino, *¿História natural?*, 2016, artist's book, retrieved from Rosana Paulino's archive.

In *As gentes* (2016), the author brings a commentary on the objectification and dehumanization of non-Europeans in Brazil. In the montage, an indigenous body carries earrings and a feather necklace, and a black woman, whose bare chest serves as a support for a necklace, wears a white turban. There are, therefore, records of indigenous and African cultures on faceless bodies. In the work, the space of identity is filled by the colonial image that occupies the background. As if pointing to a colonial unconscious (Rolnik, 2019), Paulino unveils the fact that the greatest violence operated on colonized bodies is of a psychic order. In the Portuguese tiles depicting a caravel, coloniality occupies its symbolic and material place in Brazilian culture.

It is also notable that the critique is manifested by the inscription of minority bodies upon a colonial foundation (episteme?). Not coincidentally, culture is represented by an object, while the depersonalization of non-whites occurs through the absence of faces. Again, the white masks. Furthermore, the title of the work, highlights the idea of multiplicity (not synthesis), reminding Munanga, who points out that "contemporary black movements advocate the construction of a plural society, biologically and culturally" (1999, p.102). It is relevant to note that, in its original context, the comment refers to approaches that treat the *mestizaje* process as a kind of synthesis that would lead to the figure of the *Brazilian as a people*. We are *people*, Paulino's work declares.

This concern is reinforced by the artist when she lists several indigenous ethnicities spread over a page in which the only photographic element is a skull. As if using pseudoscientific photography against itself, Paulino indicates the universality/specificity of biology in contrast to the multiplicity of cultures. The skull is unique, although it could represent anyone. On the other hand, there are in the distribution of ethnic group names relationships of closeness and distance in a kind of network of territorial and cultural affinities.

Figure 5 - Natural history? Page from the book ¿Natural History?



Rosana Paulino, *¿História natural?*, 2016 artist's book, retrieved from Rosana Paulino's archive.

The plurality of physical types and cultures presented on the page also indicates Paulino's concern in thinking about the history of Brazilian visuality in its complexity. It is not strictly a matter of thinking about one group only, but rather thinking from that group. In this sense, the recurrent use of thread, embroidery, and sewing indicates, in addition to the author's concern with "elements of the female world" (Paulino, 2011, p. 25), a concern with the links, gaps, and ruptures of the social fabric. The expression social fabric (*tecido social*) names one of the artist's exhibitions.

Paulino's pieces reorder the Eurolatin gaze on Brazilian history, re-articulating elements such as photos and engravings of historical value, cultural references, and epistemological symbols (see Figures 4, 5). In the process I describe as erasure, Paulino also produces a new inscription of images in time. This occurs by visiting the past through the present, in a process that looks at colonial history as part of the everyday reality of vulnerable populations. In doing so, the author contributes with a document, the book itself, that allows structuring a horizon from other bases. In other words, *¿Natural History?* is not limited to criticizing the history told by some of the scientists and historians of the 19th century. Rather, it is about constructing another history book from which another horizon can be constituted. This operation is especially important if we recognize that another future is only possible through a reconfiguration of our experience of the past.

The chosen format, therefore, is relevant for at least two reasons. By listing images of indigenous, black, and Portuguese people in book form, Paulino organizes a collection of documents whose associations are strictly based on criteria defined by the artist herself.

Although it may seem trivial, remembering the argument of Sekula (1983) regarding the archive as an economic problem, one notices in Paulino's work the encounter with art as a space where it was possible to organize a kind of alternative compendium of Brazilian visuality. Her work, in addition to criticism, establishes a non-hegemonic look at the problem of colonization, and resumes, therefore, the right to look (Mirzoeff, 2016). Beyond this, Paulino claims the right to think about her social group in a project that depends on a reconfiguration of its bases, among them, the visuality itself.

Another important element, noted by Renata Felinto (2021), concerns the temporal structure on which Paulino's work is based. On *Geometria à brasileira* (2018) and *Geometria à brasileira chega ao paraíso tropical* (2018-2020) by Rosana Paulino, Felinto highlights that

We have suppressed the *circularities* and triangularities of the native and African populations' understandings of themselves and the world in the straight line of European art history. We have suppressed them to the point of making them invisible. However, it is not because they are not visible that *trauma* and pain cease to exist. They throb and bleed constantly. (paragraph 12, *my emphasis*)

The excerpt refers to works with an abundance of geometric shapes distributed over photographs of black female workers during the Brazilian Empire period (see Figure 7). Furthermore, Felinto (2021) points out that the circularity in Paulino's work is also the circularity of another relationship with the world, that of the original peoples and those with an African background.

It is also notable that the geometry, the straight lines, and the imported color composition overlap, in the image, the faces of the human types. These elements also interfere with nature, portrayed in a dull and colorless way that demands the botany of the explorers responsible for building a version of the history of Brazil as an object of scientific interest. Again, this time through geometry and botany, art and science intersect in a critique of coloniality. By exposing this mismatch between colors and shapes, Paulino seems to want to bring out the trauma latent, as Felinto says (2021). After all, a requirement of trauma treatment is precisely its emergence to a conscious level.

Felinto highlights two fundamental elements for this analysis. In the foreground, the notion of circularity and corporality that characterize Yoruba cosmology about time, with profound implications in black culture in Brazil (see Sodré, 2017; Machado, 2019). Equally importantly, the artist highlights slavery as a (collective) trauma.

Figure 6 - Geometria à Brasileira arrives in tropical paradise



Rosana Paulino, *Geometria à Brasileira chega ao paraíso tropical*, 2020, Digital Print, Collage and Monotype on Paper, located at Mendes Wood DM Collection.

In her work, Paulino seems to point to a past loaded with the present or still an experience of the present so marked by the colonial past that, therefore, looks at yesterday with the eyes of today. The author seems to demand from the spectator, from society, from history, in short, a return to a past whose

course needs to be dealt with. In linear temporal logic, an impossible task. We know, however, that Exu's time is not based on successive events (Sodré, 2017; Machado, 2019; Rufino, 2019). It is necessary to face our history from another look, as the works suggest.

In face of this, however, a question that imposes itself on the notion of erasure is: would this be a valid category to deal with a wide range of artistic manifestations or a phenomenon concerning Rosana Paulino's artistic oeuvre? Thus, aiming to broaden the space-time horizon of this debate, we follow the discussion about crossed times in the arts in a discussion about the work of an emerging artist: Elian Almeida.

The affective collection of Elian Almeida

Born in Rio de Janeiro, Elian Almeida (1994) has a degree in Fine Arts (UERJ) and studies Cinema and Audiovisual in Paris, where he lives. In his work, the artist discusses the place of the black body in society and the tensions arising from this condition. In the terms of the author himself, in an interview for (the website/magazine) *Made in Bed*, it is a work that discusses alterity and issues related to the "social performativity of the black body, the violence of the State, and decolonization" (Almeida, 2021).

Expressing a similar discomfort as that seen in Rosana Paulino's paintings, Almeida comments in an interview that "painters throughout the history of art have come to Brazil with a look of exoticism about the place and the bodies that inhabited it and continue to inhabit it" (Costa, 2021, paragraph 4). The discomfort, therefore, is revealing of a structure that has in visuality a key apparatus- of the colonial/modern project.

As described earlier, historically the field of visuality has been structured in a way that articulates racist structures (Mirzoeff, 2016). In this sense, Almeida's work is a striking expression of countervisuality. In other words, a visual production rooted in a point of observation that opposes the hegemonic gaze. Furthermore, especially when dealing with an Afro-diasporic production, it is also necessary to recognize in Almeida's work something that hooks (1992) describe as an "oppositional gaze". In addition to presenting a peripheral and counter-hegemonic sensibility in his works, Almeida evokes images that directly confront the historical representations of black people in Brazil. The artist not only criticizes and opposes the absences and distortions in the representations of his ethnic group but also educates the spectator's gaze.

In the series of paintings *Vogue Brasil*, the artist performs a kind of affective inventory of the Afro-diasporic culture in Brazil through the representation of women responsible for major contributions to the country's politics and culture. By the way, it is worth pointing out that, in the case of these people, it is especially inappropriate to separate the notions of politics and culture. After all, in the universe of Afro-Brazilian women, everything that is cultural is political.

Painting characters such as Ruth Souza (Figure 7), Beatriz Nascimento, Conceição Evaristo, and Lélia Gonzalez, among many other great intellectuals and artists, Elian reinforces the inscription of these figures in the national imaginary. Equally, in doing so, the artist produces images that start from these women to represent the history of black women in Brazil. In this sense, it calls attention to the fact that in Elian's productions, unlike in one of Paulino's paintings cited in this work (see Figure 4), the absence of faces does not indicate an erasure to be filled by coloniality.

As can be observed in the pieces from the series *Vogue Brasil* (see Figures 7 and 8) the artist establishes a game in which the figure is identified by elements that, at the same time, are capable of displaying both the honorees and the ethnic group itself. Examples of these elements are the multiple hairstyles identify both Ruth Cardoso (Figure 7) and Conceição Evaristo (Figure 8), and subtle costume compositions that reinforce peculiar elements of the artists and affiliate them, once again, to an Afro-diasporic (Brazilian) culture. About the costumes, I highlight the props used in the artists' hair, or the *baiana* costumes in Tia Maria do Jongo and Tia Perciliana. In all cases, striking elements of the characters

are platforms for the representation of the Afro-diasporic heritage that connects them to the ethnic group. Naturally, there are elements that are peculiar to each of the women represented, such as Conceição Evaristo's (almost permanently) haughty posture. But, again, would this really be a trait restricted to the writer? About this, the haughtiness of the female figures portrayed by Almeida is remarkable, which more than performing a tribute, seems to identify a cultural trait of the Afro-diasporic experience in Brazil.

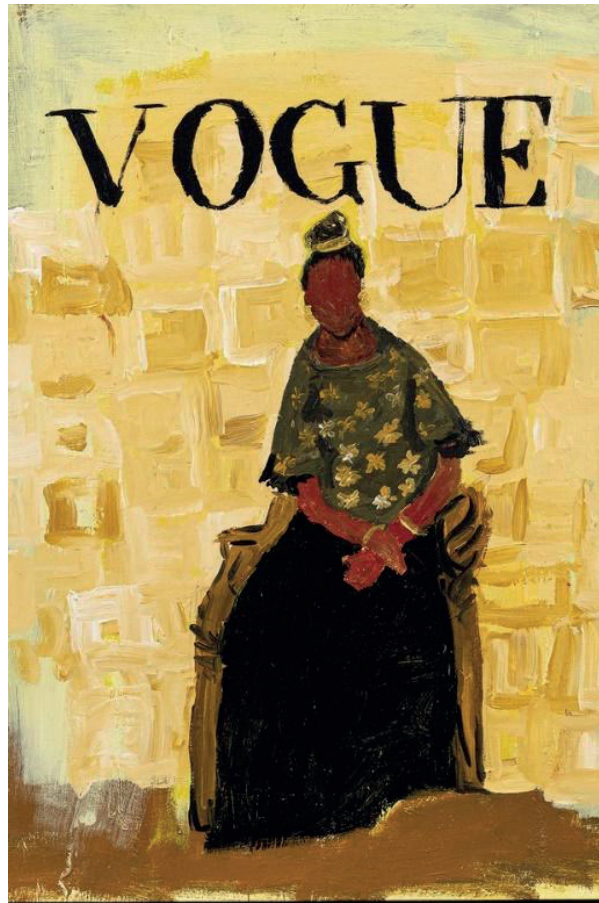
In line with the notion of blotting as an aesthetic and political operation, Elian makes the following observation in an interview with Bruno Costa (Costa, 2021), from *Vogue* magazine, "I don't make a cover, I appropriate and reinvent it because I think art is this. The artist problematizes and puts questions over what is happening" (paragraph 2, *my emphasis*).

In this essay, I shall focus on some images from the *Vogue* series, in which the artist explores covers of the magazine of the same name as a reference for a series of paintings that establishes a cross between different times in the history of Brazil, which, in turn, find in the inheritance of the slave structure a turning point.

The issue of temporality is highlighted both in the work and in the artist's speech. Regarding the choice of *Vogue* magazine covers as support for his interventions, Elian highlights that "the cover (...) represents a time marker" (Costa, 2021, paragraph 2). Both in her speech and in her work, Elian seems to reverberate the voice of Leda Martins, especially regarding the place of the black body in Brazilian cultural memory. More specifically, it is possible to draw a parallel between Martins' argument in *A fina lâmina da palavra* (2007) and the *Vogue* series created by Almeida. Such parallel becomes especially evident when, commenting on the writing of black women authors in Brazil, Leda Martins (2007, p. 65) argues that "it is in the very body of writing that this other Brazil is performed and installed, and that art is also seen as a craft of transfiguration, of rearrangement of memory and history".

Even more relevantly, it is possible to recognize that, beyond the affinity of positions and readings on Afro-Diasporic aesthetics in Brazil, there is a proper aesthetic affinity between Almeida's work and those treated by Martins (2007). In this respect, an emblematic case is Almeida's homage to Ruth Souza which inscribes the image of the Brazilian theater diva on a *Vogue* magazine cover. As if occupying a golden throne, Souza, portrayed by Almeida, has no distinctive features on her face, as if she occupied a historical place, a position of power belonging to black women, represented by Ruth.

Figure 7 - Ruth de Souza



Elian Almeida, Ruth de Souza (Vogue Brasil), 2021, acrylic on canvas, located at Galeria Nara Roesler.

At this point, there is an important distinction between the writing of Afrodiasporic women, discussed by Martins (2007), and the work of Elian Almeida. If in the first case, it is an inscription of the self, in which the very speech of those women acts as a practice of blotting (*rasura*) of the "figurative vices of the black female persona in Brazilian literature" and, I would add, in Brazilian culture, Almeida appears as a debtor of this tradition (Martins, 2007, p. 64). When dealing with the figurative vices of black personas, Martins (2007) seems to point to the very structure of hegemonic visuality, described by Ann Kaplan, as the imperial gaze (Kaplan, 1997). That is, a masculine, white, and hetero-patriarchal gaze. Echoing this debate, Elian Almeida pays homage to black women, including some cited by the author, such as Conceição Evaristo (see Figure 8).

Figure 8 - Conceição Evaristo



Conceição Evaristo (Vogue Brasil), 2021, acrylic canvas, located at Galeria Nara Roesler.
Source: Vogue Brasil, Galeria Nara Roesler (2021)

By blotting the hegemonic inscriptions of the representation of black women and its notorious erasure, Almeida extrapolates the dimension of protest, or of blotting as mere overwriting. Like the act of blotting (*rasura*) in Martins in the work of black women authors in Brazil, the erasure here is a gesture of opening, of the invention of another Brazil that gains materiality in the artists' fabrication. In the covers and pages created by Almeida, it is possible to see the bridge between Brazil as potency and the actual country, arranging apparently irreconcilable temporalities, such as slavery and (an unreached) civilized state.

Final remarks

Throughout the text, the notion of erasure was discussed as a concept and a praxis committed and responsible for the reconfiguration of the representations of Afro-indigenous peoples in Brazil, with special emphasis on the representation of black women. Taking as a reference the historical overview elaborated by Glissant (2008), the text recognizes the element of dispossession as a key aspect of the Afro-Brazilian cultural experience. However, the notion of blotting (*rasura*) is not absolute dispossession or erasure, it is rather the by-product of the violence metabolized by assimilation and adaptation. In this sense, a counter-hegemonic visuality in Brazil must also consider the conditions of dispossession and the struggle to reconfigure dominant structures characterized by the violent erasure, blotting, and overwriting of minorities (and minority cultures).

To blot the portrait, therefore, is not a mere gesture of overwriting, opposition, or negation of the image hegemonic or of the colonial imaginary. Therefore, blotting is not strictly countervisuality, but another aesthetic organization of the same colonial legacy from the perspective of the oppressed. In other

words, erasure is the insertion into the picture of those who are not in the picture. Thus, in dealing with blotting, I am referring to a gesture of imposition on the frame of the status quo. It is a movement of recognition of the status quo that simultaneously questions it and produces new representations and ways of looking at it. In this sense, it is an intervention that also depends on materiality as a form of inscription within the world.

Looking at Paulino's work, the erasure appears as a fracture of the order. There is no attempt at pacification or harmonization. The healing, in this case, would only be possible through the admission of the wound. A process of interference in the fabric of time that demands a sensitive and epistemological displacement about the very notion of time. There is no way out in linear time, warned Felinto when commenting on Paulino's work.

Nor would it be possible to create other memories, other histories, other *Brasis (Brazils)* from merely idealized references. When cutting out Stahl's photographs to compose his own book of Natural History, Paulino uses the vocabulary of the colonizer and his access to the devices of knowledge-power to express his discontent. In the criticism, besides an opposition, the countervisuality is configured in the rewriting of one's own story told through the hands of another.

For Elian Almeida, on the other hand, the erasure comes from a contemporary imaginary, a historical moment in which, despite the continuation of the slave structure, there is greater visibility of Afro-diasporic names and black feminism. This is thanks to figures such as Lélia Gonzalez, Leda Martins, Rosana Paulino herself, among others mentioned or not throughout this text.

In Almeida, the erasure also appears as a break in the order, but now it appears in lighter tones that point to open gaps within coloniality. In this sense, the reconfiguration of Vogue magazine covers, a notoriously colonial and elitist institution, is symptomatic. As is the fact that Elian himself has granted an interview to that magazine. In this case, the symptom can be immediately identified as an appropriation of art and protest by capitalism and by the hegemonic media. However, the same symptom can be interpreted as a displacement of the structures that make room for figures such as Almeida himself to tear up the daily order in the magazine.

Finally, it is necessary to recognize that the theme deserves further development in terms of systematization and possible expansion of the notion of erasure as a concept and possible applications to other cases. However, in this text, we hope to have fulfilled the goal of indicating a way to think about emerging political and aesthetic productions in the Global South, especially in Brazil. Equally, we intend to have contributed to a look at Brazilian culture motivated by authors who question the established order, even in the field of art, also dominated by a mostly white and masculine elite.

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