

ROSANA PAULINO: ART AS MEMORY-WORK

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‘Since the beginning of my career as a visual artist, some themes have driven my productions. Among them, the most constant has been the issue of visual representation of the blacks, especially black women in Brazilian society. It interests me to think of the shadows slavery cast on this population by creating a socially symbolic place for Afro-descendants. This site will be further consolidated by the construction of an imaginary place which will position black women between the domestic servant and the object of sexual pleasure. Thus, my works question the position occupied by African descendants in the Brazilian social fabric discussing elements such as the social-symbolic passing of the wet nurse to nanny, the maid to the housemaid. Furthermore, topics such as beauty models that do not fit the bodily reality of black women, role models or even the social and cultural invisibility to which we have historically been subjected are present in my work.’¹

— Rosana Paulino

Afro-Brazilians account for most people of African descent outside Africa. During the transatlantic slave trade, over ninety per cent of the ten to twelve million enslaved Africans were sent to the Caribbean and South America, with Brazil being the last country in the Western Hemisphere to abolish slavery in 1888. This was followed by a period of selective migration beginning in the early nineteenth century, which aimed to grow Brazil’s labour force by welcoming white migrants from European countries including Germany, Italy and Spain, and later, in the early twentieth century, Asian migrants, specifically from Japan. European and Japanese migrants were recruited to build Brazil’s economy after the abolition of slavery at the expense of providing equal economic mobility and opportunities for Afro-Brazilians. This blatant and deliberate discrimination has had a lasting impact that continues to this day.

The legacies of slavery and scientific racism against Black populations in Brazil, and the implementation of Eurocentric migration policies provided restricted upward economic mobility for some and established social hierarchies based on skin colour that favoured individuals of European and Asian heritage. This situation set up the complexities of understanding racial identity in Brazil. The long-standing tendency to describe skin colour instead of race and the normativity it defined was further realised through the censuses by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE). Established in the 1940s, these censuses have indoctrinated Brazilians to racially classify the population into five categories: *Branco* (White), *Pardo* (Multiracial), *Preto* (Black), *Amarelo/Asiático* (Yellow/Asian) and *Indígena* (Indigenous).²

This has led to a myriad of discriminations against Brazil’s Black population and created complex racial relations in a country where disparities and contradictions between the state’s proclamations of racial democracy and the realities of discrimination that continue to be directed at Afro-Brazilians and Indigenous people are starkly visible. The idea of a Brazilian national identity that situates ‘Brazilianness’ as fluid and inclusive racialisation finds its origins in the country’s history of *mestiçagem* (‘miscegenation’), i.e. the consensual and non-consensual sexual relations/marriages between Portuguese colonial settlers (who were primarily white

and male) and Brazilian women (who were Black and mostly enslaved).³ This ideal projection hides the actual repercussion of the phenomenon of *mestiçagem*, which has significantly contributed to furthering a national identity rooted in a whitening ideology, thus privileging those closer to whiteness while disadvantaging, obstructing and oppressing those who are more visibly perceived as far away from it.

Since the mid-1990s, Rosana Paulino's visual art practice has centred predominantly on the Black female body and its representation by depicting past and present narratives of Afro-Brazilian women's lived experiences. Using a range of techniques including sewing, collage, drawing, video and installation as well as working with varied materials, Paulino mines history to look at both her country's legacies of slavery and her own autobiography. Through a methodology self-described as employing processes of *refazimento* ('remaking'), Paulino reclaims Black women's representation and upends the notion of racial democracy and equality within Brazilian society. She seeks to return agency and dignity back to these women in defiance of a history that has persistently marginalised their experiences and silenced their voices, and that continues to wield a two-fold othering against them. This double othering, in Brazil as elsewhere, consists in what theorist Djamila Ribeiro, discussing artist and theorist Grada Kilomba, identifies as a positioning that defines the Black woman by exclusion, as neither white nor male, representing a double deficiency so that Black women are the 'other' of the 'other'.⁴

Paulino's work is motivated by an urgency to readdress and reinstate the dignity and agency of forgotten Black women, particularly by considering their representation or lack thereof within Latin American art histories and wider historical discourses, and by examining the situation that has led to such exclusions in the first place. In the context of Brazil, she considers the reverberations of the legacies of slavery, which, as it is widely known, was an exploitative and violent system based on the dehumanisation, extraction and use of the Black body to power North Atlantic capitalist enterprises. This has been particularly detrimental to Black Brazilian women who, as Paulino highlights in her artist statement, had to move within a complex social-symbolic passing that has forcibly cast them in historical roles that go from wet nurse to nanny, and in recent times, from maid to housemaid. As scholar Flávia Santos de Araújo points out:

In the so-called paradise of racial democracy, Brazilian black women's sexuality gains different contours within the discourses of *mestiçagem* and the establishment of its whitening ideology. In the absence of legal racial segregation, black women's bodies are manipulated and controlled by a patriarchal and racist ideology that also creates sexualized signifiers according to the laws of pigmentocracy. Those sexualized signifiers reinforce and perpetuate the idea that black women's sexuality and eroticism do not belong to their own bodies, but to a system that regulates the use of their bodies.⁵

Araújo aptly identifies in Paulino's projects the use of art to retrace the legacies of colonialism and scientific racism within the intersections of gender, race and nation.⁶ As slavery continues to silence Black participation in Brazilian society, in her multifaceted

artworks Paulino uses varied metaphors to explore how this silencing still impacts different generations and operates across spatial and temporal planes.

A recurring motif used by the artist across several bodies of work, for instance, is the prominence of lines to represent threads of meaning. Whether pencil drawn, strung with ribbons, wrapping objects in cotton, or stitched onto surfaces, these threads symbolise flows, connections or constrictions of bodies entwined in complex histories. In Paulino's artworks, lines can be read as a physical and metaphoric link connecting and interrogating historical facts and memories as constructs that are nonlinear.

In the monumental installation *Tecelãs* (Weavers, 2003), dozens of terracotta female figures and vessels become metaphors for how women continually reinvent themselves through processes of metamorphosis and transformation. Paulino learnt how to work with clay from her mother in childhood and has spoken of how she and her siblings were encouraged to play with the material and mould. As she recalls in an interview quoted by Patrícia de Nóbrega Gomes: 'We would spend the entire day making little turtles, little cows. Then we would put them in the sun to dry and later painted them and added little legs.' De Nóbrega Gomes observes 'Paulino goes on to say that her mother's investment in teaching all three of her daughters to work with the earth and to sew, among other lessons, shaped her aesthetic curiosity and senses'.⁷

Mounted on walls, the female figures are assembled as if they emerged from the vessels beneath them. They are part human and part insect, with their top halves identifiable as female due to pairs or multiple breasts but devoid of limbs, and their lower halves wrapped in white threads and in cocoon form. They bring to mind a hive that has sprung up from the earthen vessels laying at their base, on the floor. Here, clay is a central material that imprints traces of the maker-as-storyteller and through which experiences and wisdom are transmitted. It is as if Paulino was building a web of meaning interlinking the physical and spiritual, past and present, human and nonhuman and, importantly, connecting bodies to nature. Archives from past and present are reframed in her *art-works* as *memory-work* entangled with an image of *hand-work* (stitching, moulding) to create a woven or craft piece.

A tight narrative of retelling tangles the linear passage of time. As an artist, Paulino's approach to her subjects is akin to a materialist who is well aware of the fabrication of the past and the multi-threaded nature of the present, shot through with that past constantly there. She asserts the idea of feminine space continuing a long matrilineal line that sees women use subversive forms of stitching to make meanings of their own, using thread as their medium. As art historian Cynthia Garcia notes with respect to Paulino's work, 'to criticise the layers of violence and oppression perpetrated against women of colour, this resilient artist orchestrates ancient crafts traditionally associated with female work, such as handmade sutures sewn with coarse black thread stitched over eyes blinded by society's cynicism'.¹⁸ In other works, the gaze becomes a powerful tool for asserting the agency of the marginalised, forgotten and overlooked.

This can be observed, for instance, in *Parede da Memória* (Memorial Wall, 1994–2015), a significant piece on which Paulino had begun

working since she was a student and that took almost twenty years to complete. The artwork is based on the artist's selection of eleven passport-sized photographs of male and female family members across different generations, subsequently reproduced in a number of multiples totalling 1500. Drawn from family albums, some of these photographs are individually shot, others in sets of pairs. Some are of young children; others are of elders. While the originals are black-and-white passport photographs – hence of an intimate scale and size that can be easily held in one's hands – Paulino has painted some of them with bright watercolours in pinks, blues, yellows and oranges. Animated with these pigments, clothing and background acquire a feeling of contemporaneity, or certainly an aliveness is lent to what was formerly a simple personal image archive. *Parede da Memória* additionally draws on the materials and aesthetics of the *patuá*, a Candomblé Afro-Brazilian religious amulet, whose functionality as a small leather pouch is to keep seeds, drawings, texts of prayers, or other small objects. The images were printed onto soft cushion-like squares framed by embroidered borders of yellow and blue stitching. While in Afro-Brazilian traditions *patuá* are often used as talismans for bringing good energy (*axé*) or for protection, Paulino inverts the format of the amulet by making its usually private content (in this case, a small photograph) visible.

The 1500 images composing *Parede da Memória* are assembled on a wall in a configuration of nineteen rows and seventy-eight columns, arranged side by side with small gaps in between. In this choral ensemble, all the photographed individuals appear as if they were looking back at the viewer, producing the feeling of a profound collective return of the gaze. Through such an arrangement, Paulino also redresses the fact that historical archives have tended to anonymise Black people in generic ways by failing to name them or by describing them only with the obtuse categorisation of 'Black' – a Black man . . . a Black woman . . . a Black child . . . History does not bother to identify them nor find out who they were or where they came from. In *Parede da Memória*, Paulino presents a living archive that is a collective tapestry of memories. In so doing, she confronts and challenges Brazil's past when European epistemologies and power formed the basis for racist scientific and biological knowledge about the peoples and nature in the tropics, influencing religious narratives and continuing to serve as a justification for the suppression of African identity both locally and globally.

In her essay, 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book', Hortense J. Spillers offers a complex analysis of how the American grammar's symbolic system insistently marks Black women's flesh with a series of meanings that profoundly complicate their gendering and states:

Let's face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name. 'Peaches' and 'Brown Sugar' 'Sapphire' and 'Earth Mother,' 'Aunty,' 'Granny,' 'God's Holy Fool,' a 'Miss Ebony First,' or 'Black Woman at the Podium': I described a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth. My country needs me and if I were not here, I would have to be invented.

W. E. B. DuBois predicted as early as 1903 that the twentieth century would be the century of the 'color line.' We could

add to this spatiotemporal configuration another thematic of analogously terrible weight: if the 'black woman' can be seen as a particular figuration of the split subject that psychoanalytic theory posits, then this century marks the site of 'its' most profound revelation. The problem before us is deceptively simple: the terms enclosed in quotation marks in the preceding paragraph isolate overdetermined nominative properties. Embedded in the bizarre axiological ground, they demonstrate a sort of telegraphic coding; they are markers so loaded with the mythical prepossession that there is no easy way for the agents buried beneath them to come clean. In that regard, the names by which I am called in the public place render an example of signifying property *plus*. In order for me to speak a truer word concerning myself, I must strip down through layers of attenuated meanings, made an excess in time, over time, assigned by a particular historical order, and there await whatever marvels of my own inventiveness. The personal pronouns are offered in the service of a collective function.⁹

Both Spillers's text and Paulino's artworks trace these tensions of representation of Black individuals, particularly of Black women, that began with the transatlantic slave trade and its violent disruption/destruction of the familial bonds of Black people at large. The consequent systematic rupture between the Black female body and core aspects of womanhood (motherhood and sexuality) sowed a visible rift between white feminists' fights and those of Black feminists. Rather than demanding inclusion in white feminism, Spillers's call is to 'claim monstrosity' and turn to its radical potential for Black female empowerment. In the context of Brazil and in her artistic explorations bringing together autobiography, biology and historiography across different temporalities, Paulino is similarly calling for Afro-Brazilian women's empowerment by continually turning critical attention to the realities of how a colonial gaze was made Brazilian, and how it disavowed its own coloniality. In her ongoing interrogation of history and memory through the excavation of colonial practices that perpetuated mass extraction, scientific racism and violence on both Black bodies and land, these extreme imbalances and their extension from past to present demand action. The global model as we know it of how we as Black people are represented and have been conditioned to see ourselves requires reconsideration. A reckoning of both the physical and psychological is what Paulino is calling for in her poetical renderings and through an ongoing exploration of the tensions between race and identity in Brazilian society.

- 1 Rosana Paulino, 'Artist Statement', *Callaloo*, vol.37, no.4, 2014, pp.913–16.
- 2 See Claudia Travassos, Josué Laguardia and Priscilla M. Marques, et al., 'Comparison between two race/skin colour classifications in relation to health-related outcomes in Brazil', *International Journal for Equity in Health*, no.10, vol.35, 2011, available at <https://doi.org/10.1186/1475-9276-10-35> (last accessed on 6 September 2023).
- 3 Scholar Claudine Gay points to the need for Afro-Brazilians to rise up collectively to denounce racism in Brazilian society. The suppression of Black Brazilian voices, as Gay observes, is the result of a political climate that actively discourages racially defined political activity, alongside leaders in the society with an agenda that alienate and marginalise the country's Black populations. See Claudine Gay, 'Between Black and White: The Complexity of Brazilian Race Relations', *Origins: Current Events in Historical Perspective*, November 1993, available at https://origins.osu.edu/read/between-black-and-white-complexity-brazilian-race-relations?language_content_entity=en (last accessed on 6 September 2023).
- 4 Djamila Ribeiro, 'Black Feminism for a New Civilizational Framework', *Sur International Journal on Human Rights*, vol.13, no.24, pp. 99–103, 2016, available at <https://sur.conectas.org/en/black-feminism-new-civilizational-framework/> (last accessed on 23 August 2022).
- 5 Flávia Santos de Araújo, 'Rosana Paulino and the Art of Refazimento: Reconfigurations of the Black Female Body in the Land of Racial Democracy', *Africana Studies: Faculty Publications*, Northampton, MA: Smith College, 2019, p.80.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p.85.
- 7 Patrícia de Nóbrega Gomes, 'Movements and Stillness: Rosana Paulino's *Tecelãs* and Experimentations of The Flesh', *Lucero*, vol.25, no.1, 2020, available at <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5kk137f6> (last accessed on 9 November 2023).
- 8 Cynthia Garcia, 'Artist of the Suture: How Rosana Paulino became the first woman of colour with a retrospective at the Pinacoteca', *Newcity Brazil: Visual Art Culture of São Paulo and Beyond* [online magazine], 15 January 2023, available at <https://www.newcitybrazil.com/2019/01/15/artist-of-the-suture-how-rosana-paulino-became-the-first-woman-of-color-with-a-retrospective-at-the-pinacoteca/> (last accessed on 23 August 2023).
- 9 Hortense J. Spillers, 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book', *Diacritics*, vol.17, no.2, Summer 1987, pp.65–81.





Rosana Paulino, *Parede de Memória*, 1994–2015, acrylic patuás, cotton thread, paper, watercolor, variable dimensions, approximately 8 x 8 x 3cm each. Photograph: Isabella Matheus. Courtesy the artist and Mendes Wood DM









Rosana Paulino, *Tecalās*, 2003, faience, terracotta, cotton and synthetic thread, variable dimensions. Photograph: Isabella Matheus. Courtesy the artist and Mendes Wood DM





Rosana Paulino, *Tecerãs*, 2003, faience, terracotta, cotton and synthetic thread, variable dimensions. Photograph: Isabella Matheus. Courtesy the artist and Mendes Wood DM