
“Whitening” and the E-race-ure of Difference in Jorge de Lima’s *Poemas Negros*

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At the First Brazilian Regionalist Congress, in Recife in 1926, Gilberto Freyre introduced the idea that the uniqueness of Brazilian civilization resulted from the “commingling” of the three races: African, Indian, and European. He argued that miscegenation had produced an essentially homogeneous population, despite the nation’s vast geography and diverse cultural origins. The fact that this diversity had its roots in violent colonial domination and slavery was erased by Freyre, in an ahistorical analysis which emphasized “fraternization” and “seduction”—not genocide and rape—in the relations between blacks, whites, and indigenous peoples.

With the publication of Freyre’s *Casa-Grande e Senzala* in 1933, his model of harmonious multi-ethnicity became the dominant reading of Brazilian nationhood. At an historical moment when intellectuals were struggling to define “national character”—and were especially preoccupied with accounting for the African presence in Brazil—Freyre’s model provided what Thomas Skidmore calls “a sympathetic insight into the intimate personal relations among the planter families and their slaves” (190-91). Freyre disavowed the exploitation of enslaved blacks, indicating instead the *willing contributions* of Africans: nutritional and medicinal practices, and the spiritualization and “sweetening” of the Brazilian “character.” Freyre’s thesis also contained the promise that the whitening effect of miscegenation would eventually subsume the remaining traces of ethno-cultural difference, yield-

ing a somewhat “tinged,” but essentially *Euro-Brazilian* populace.

At the same time that Brazilian intellectuals embraced Freyre’s model of race relations, major Brazilian poets began incorporating Afro-Brazilian themes in their work. The two poets who became most closely associated with Negritude in Brazil, Raul Bopp and Jorge de Lima, were, like Freyre, white northeastern men. Their representations of the “black experience” duplicated Freyre’s Eurocentric perspective, speaking from what I call the viewpoint of the *ioiô*, or “little master.” Like *Casa-Grande e Senzala*, wherein the history of slavery in Brazil is constituted through white male recollections of origin near the “senzala”—specifically, nostalgia for the availability of enslaved black women—much Negritude poetry centers on infancy in the “BigHouse.”

The white male authorship of canonical Brazilian Negritude poetry contrasts strikingly with the self-representations of African-American writers during the Harlem Renaissance—of the same period and often compared with Brazilian Negritude. I believe that this phenomenon is key to an understanding of the conspicuous scarcity of overt racial dissent and debate in twentieth-century Brazil.

Brazilian social critics Florestan Fernandes and Carlos Hasenbalg have shown that the non-overt nature of segregation has inhibited struggle and discussion on the question of unequal power relations. U.S. analyses of Brazilian slavery and African/European relations—notably, Carl Degler’s *Neither Black*

nor *White* (1971) and Thomas Skidmore's *Black into White* (1976)—have emphasized the subtle, insidious nature of racial stratification in Brazil, in comparison with the United States. While helpful in assessing the aftermath of paternalistic race relations during slavery and in the years following abolition, none of these works specifically considers the language of the dominant discourse which so effectively undermined radical modification of the status quo.

My intention is not merely to indicate the lacks—of a Civil War, a Civil Rights Movement, or of twentieth-century race-motivated uprisings—but I hope that my reading of white, male-authored, Negritude poetry will speak to the reasons why these events could not have occurred in Brazil. I will show how Freyre's paradigm of harmonious, multi-ethnicity was transposed—from theoretical to poetic language—in Jorge de Lima's "black poems." To the extent to which Lima's representations of pre-abolition society are considered authoritative, his discourse, together with that of Freyre, usurped the site of African-Brazilian self-constitution.

I

In Freyre's 1953 preface to the *Poemas Negros*,¹ he insists upon the authority of Lima's representations of "blackness." He ascribes Lima's preeminence as the "major Negritude poet" to his white, male northeastern origins. Because of Lima's status as an *observer* of Afro-Brazilian culture, he is uniquely qualified to represent black subjectivity. The "genuine" quality of Lima's "black poems" is attributed specifically to his distance from the scene of plantation violence: "poesia que não é de indivíduo pessoalmente oprimido pela condição de descendente de africano ou de escravo" (Freyre 344).

Freyre devalues the work of other white male writers of the period on the grounds of

their non-northeastern origins. He refers to southeastern Modernist intellectuals as "cosmopolitas pouco sensíveis aos característicos mais *profundos* da vida, do passado e da paisagem das nossas várias regiões; geômetras que desconhecem as *intimidades* de nossa paisagem humana" (344, emphasis mine).

In contrast to these literary "tourists," Lima is distinguished as the most apt spokesperson for "our" sentimental recollection of African slavery:

[Lima] é bem do nordeste. Não lhe falta o contato com a realidade afro-nordestina. E há poemas seus em que os *nossos* olhos, os *nossos* ouvidos, o *nosso* olfato, o *nosso* paladar se juntam para saborear gostos e cheiros de carne de mulata,² de massapê, de resina, de muqueca, de maresia, de sargaço. . . . (345, emphasis mine)

In his repetition of the first-person plural possessive pronoun, Freyre addresses a reader who, like himself, is white and male, and was born in the "afro-northeast." In privileging this prototype of Brazilian subjectivity, Freyre subsumes the experience of slavery in the *ioiô's* nostalgic recollections of his infancy in the *Casa-Grande*..., fed and cared for by sexually "available" enslaved black women. Freyre calls the pre-abolition northeast the "centro da cultura mais harmoniosa e caracteristicamente nossa" (346), and cites Gonçalves Dias' *saudosismo* as the original representation of "our" longing for that era.

Freyre is preoccupied with distinguishing multi-ethnic Brazilian origins from the slave society of the United States. He states that class prejudice in Brazil is often mistakenly identified as racial prejudice: "embora também aqui existem preconceitos de cor confundidos com os de classe" (344). Freyre

argues that while in the United States "Africanness" has only been articulated in folklore, in Brazil it has not been excluded from the "banquete literário" (346). He expresses thanks that there is no "black poetry" in Brazil like that in the United States, which he defines as "poesia crispada quase sempre em atitude de defesa ou de agressão; poesia quase sempre em dialeto meio cômico para os brancos, para os ouvidos dos brancos" (347).

He describes the Brazilian literary canon as "uma zona de poesia mais colorida pela influência do africano: um africano já muito dissolvido em brasileiro" (347). So "dissolved," it seems, that Afro-Brazilian voices have been completely dissociated from black bodies and incarnated by white males—presumably according to the "difusão de sangue" so frequently observed by Freyre.

Freyre writes that in Brazil there is no "domínio exclusivo de uma tradição étnica, social ou de cultura sobre as outras" (347), and "O que há de africano se confunde, se mistura quase fraternalmente, com o que existe de europeu e de indígena" (347). He obscures objective power relations, indicating that white males are uniquely qualified to speak for blacks, due to the "transfusion" of culture (346). In a metonymical gesture, he replaces African genealogy with *proximity* to blackness. Lima's authority to speak stems precisely from his origins in the *Casa-Grande*: "sua experiência de nordestino de banguê nascido e criado *perto* dos últimos 'pombais negros' de que falou Nabuco" (emphasis mine, 347). Freyre associates the dissemination of "black experience" with food and sex, emphasizing the relationship of writing to black women's bodies and the food prepared by those women for white consumption: "o verbo faz-se *carne* neste sentido: no de poesia agro-nordestina ser realmente a expressão *carnal* mais *adoçada* pela influência do africano" (emphasis mine, 346). Of Lima's poetry, he states, "Seu

verbo de poeta se torna *carnalmente mestiço* quando fala de 'democracia,' de 'comidas'" (emphasis mine, 346). In characterizing the principal Afro-Brazilian "themes" as black women and food, Freyre reiterates his privileging of the *ioiô* perspective in constituting pre-abolition society.

II

In further prefacing my reading of Lima's poetry, it is significant to consider the extent to which Lima's projections of Afro-Brazilian subjectivity continue to be considered authoritative—and the degree of calculated effort expended in justifying this displacement. While Jorge de Souza Araújo's *Jorge de Lima e o Idioma Poético Afro-Nordestino* (1983) is certainly not representative of all contemporary criticism on Brazilian Negritude, his thesis is interesting because it so faithfully duplicates the ideology espoused by Freyre in his 1953 "preface." Like Freyre, Araújo takes pains to establish Lima's authenticity, and does so by inscribing Lima into a genealogy of "true" (white) Negritude poets.

Araújo meticulously reads black Brazilians *out* of the nation's "afro" literary canon. He describes Brazil's first recognized black poet, Domingos Caldas Barbosa, as an "improvisador de modinhas" (62), who copied white speech and behavior, forgetting his African ancestry. Machado de Assis' obfuscated representation of race is not problematized by Araújo, but rather indicated as the proof of his disavowal of African descent. Bernardino Lopes, Cruz e Sousa, Gonçalves Dias, Silva Alvarenga, and Tobias Barreto were, according to Araújo, opportunists who took up the pen in order to ingratiate themselves into white society. In their identification with whites—Araújo emphasizes their "mockery" of white speech—they were deafened to the "lamentos das senzalas" (61). Of Gonçalves Dias, Araújo states that while some of his

poetry addressed "slave themes," it did so "de forma pouco viril" (64)—a criticism which centers more on the poet's manhood than on his work.

In representing black poets as men who "esqueceram-se dos motivos poéticos existentes no seio do elemento escravo entre nós" (65), Araújo trivializes difference and universalizes the legacy of Afro-Brazilian enslavement. He erects a lineage of white, male northeastern writers in the place of their African-Brazilian contemporaries:

Para Renato Mendonça, arrimando-se na opinião de Sílvio Romero, Trajano Galvão é que seria precursor, juntamente com Castro Alves, Celso de Magalhães e Melo Morais Filho, da poesia do negro no Brasil. . . . Daí vem a confirmação de que o branco deu tratamento mais autêntico à questão do negro que o próprio elemento negro, em vista da necessidade que este tinha de ascender socialmente. (65)

Gilberto Freyre and Souza Araújo compulsively emphasize the authenticity of Lima's "afro" voice. Their preoccupation suggests the critical place of Lima's work in maintaining the dominant representation of race relations in Brazil. In considering certain representative "afro" poems, I will attempt to elucidate the racial "thesis" articulated by Lima, an understanding of which should shed light on the nature of twentieth-century race discourse in Brazil.

III

Much has been written about Lima's numerous poetic "phases," ranging from the sonnets and *alexandrinos* of his early years, to his Christian poetry, children's

stories, modernist, regionalist poetry of the 1940s, and his epic poem, the "Invenção de Orfeu," published in 1952.³ The work I will discuss, Lima's *Poemas Negros*, published in 1947, together with certain of his earlier poems which contain Afro-Brazilian themes, are characterized by many of the preoccupations which run throughout his work: sin and redemption, the poet's infancy in Alagoas, and the legitimation of the African presence in Brazil.

In Lima's Afro-Brazilian poems, the *mucama*, or black female house slave, is an active sexual agent, inciting the desire of Master and Mistress alike. In "Essa Negra Fulô," she is "brought" (not captured) from Africa to care for the *Sinhá*: to *catar cafuné*, rock her hammock, and generally pamper her. When the *Sinhá* accuses the *mucama* of stealing a bottle of perfume and sends the *Sinhô* to whip her, she disrobes and seduces him instead:

O Sinhô foi ver a negra
 levar couro de feitor.
 A negra tirou a roupa.
 O sinhô disse: Fulô!
 (A vista se escureceu
 que nem a Negra Fulô.) (58-63)

Not only is the Master not the villain in this scenario, he could hardly even be called an active participant. His vision is "darkened" by the *mucama*—as though placed under her spell. Since *fulô* identifies an African ethnic group white Brazilians found particularly attractive, the refrains, "Essa Negra Fulô!" and "O Fulô! O Fulô!" draw the reader's attention to her physical desirability, and further obscure the violent conditions under which she performs this "seduction."

In "Madorna de Iaiá," the *mucama* who serves the *Sinhá*, massaging her scalp, rocking her hammock, and telling her stories

from Africa, creates a lazy, decadent, luxurious atmosphere which disarms the *Sinhá* and arouses her sexuality. The *mucama's* attraction to her Mistress is represented as a conscious desire:

Mas que cheiro gostoso tem Iaiá!
Que vontade doida de dormir...
Com quem? (15-17)

In her altered state, the *Sinhá* removes her shirt, and "opens herself completely," "se abre toda," under the fully conscious gaze of the *mucama*. The *Sinhá*, like the *Sinhô* in "Essa Negra Fulô," has no agency in the encounter. Her desire results from the hypnotic state induced by the *mucama*:

Iaiá está na rede de tucum.
A mucama de Iaiá tange os piuns,
balança a rede,
conta um lundum
tão bambo, tão molengo, tão
dengoso,
que Iaiá tem vontade de dormir...
Com quem? (1-7)

In "Essa Negra Fulô" and "Madorna de Iaiá," white men and women come under the spell of the "irresistible" *mucama*. But the most common perspective from which black female sensuality is depicted is that of the *ioiô*. In "Zefa Lavadeira" and "Banho das Negras," the *ioiô* spies on bathing black women through a window in the *Casa-Grande*. While he is aware that this intrusion is a sin, and expresses his fear of being caught and punished, his "tininess" and the distance from which he speaks obscure recognition of power relations under slavery.

Lima's *ioiô* perspective is not merely a manipulative tactic for deproblematizing his subject matter. It is illustrative of the fixation on childhood evidenced throughout his work. Lima's nostalgia for the time

when he was cared for by black female servants is, however, thoroughly compatible with the populist sensualization of African women as a means for disavowing their exploitation. His burgeoning sexual desire for black women conflates with the nostalgia of hegemonic portrayals of pre-abolition national origins.

Lima dedicates the poem, "Ancila Negra," to Celidônia, the "companheira e babá" who cared for him during his childhood bout with asthma:⁴

Há ainda muita coisa a recalcar,
Celidônia, ó linda moleca ioruba
que embalou minha rede,
me acompanhou para a escola,
me contou histórias de bichos
quando eu era pequeno,
muito pequeno mesmo. (1-7)

He describes the night of her "demise":

Há ainda muita coisa para recalcar:
As tuas mãos negras me alisando,
os teus lábios roxos me bubuiando,
quando eu era pequeno,
muito pequeno mesmo.

Há muita coisa ainda a recalcar
ó linda mucama negra,
carne perdida,
noite estancada,
rosa trigueira,
maga primeira. (8-18)

That his *babá* becomes "carne perdida" signifies the speaker's awakening sexual desire for her, and her subsequent "fall from grace." He suggests his responsibility for her "death":

Há muita coisa a recalcar e
esquecer:
o dia em que te afogaste,
sem me avisar que ias morrer,

negra fugida na morte,
 contadeira de histórias de teu
 reino,
 anjo negro degradado para
 sempre,
 Celidônia! Celidônia! Celidônia!
 (19-25)

This call of the *ioiô*, to his now absent *babá*, characterizes Lima's voice throughout much of the "poesia negra." In describing the "noite estancada" on which Celidônia "dies," the speaker indicates his perpetuation in this "moment":

Depois: nunca mais os signos do
 regresso.
 Para sempre: tudo ficou como
 um sino ressoando.
 E eu parado em pequeno,
 mandingando e dormindo,
 muito dormindo mesmo. (26-30)

While the relationship of the *ioiô* to his *babá* is recurrent throughout the *Poemas Negros*, in "Ancila Negra," Lima explicitly articulates his fixation with this theme. In the repetition of "recalcada" and "estancada," he acknowledges his compulsive return to a specific "moment" in their interaction: his awakening desire for Celidônia, the recognition of his sin, and the expiation of that sin through the destruction of her body.

In "Pai João," Lima describes an enslaved black man's mutilated body. He disavows white agency in that mutilation by naturalizing the black man's suffering:

Pai João vai morrer.
 Há uma noite lá fora como a pele
 de Pai João.
 Nem uma estrela no céu.
 Parece até mandinga de Pai João.
 (26-29)

As in the rape of black women, which Lima rereads as the *mucama's* "seduction" of her "Master," Lima suggests that the black man's

torture and death result from his own *mandinga*, or "witchcraft."

In the dismemberment and fetishization of "Pai João's" body, his history is further destabilized:

A pele de Pai João ficou na ponta
 Dos chicotes.
 A força de Pai João ficou no cabo
 Da enxada e da foice. (14-17)

Unlike black women, black men are not the acknowledged objects of white male desire. Like black women, however, their bodies are indicated as the sites for sin and the expiation of that sin through martyrdom.

The white speaker obscures power relations by referring to the black enslaved man as "father." This "naming"—the association of Pai João with Christ the Father—also serves to inscribe the "African presence" into a discourse on Christian sin and redemption: a preoccupation which characterizes the *oeuvre* of Lima's writing. On a third level, the speaker's declaration of his inheritance from black men establishes his aptitude for voicing black subjectivity, illustrating what Freyre calls the "transusão de sangue": the absorption of African subjectivity into the bodies of white males.

In other "black poems," Lima objectively appropriates what he considers "Afro-Brazilian diction." This mimicry has been conventionally identified as a faithfully executed replication of the "sensuality" and "rhythmic character" of black speech, reminiscent of the "tastes and smells of the senzala" (Freyre 346), in a cadence which approximates that of the *cantigas de trabalho* 'work songs' and the *batucadas* 'drumming' of Afro-Brazilian religious rites.

"Bicho Encantado" consists of a dialogue between two blacks who discover a starfish washed up on the beach. Lima represents their naiveté in seeking to identify their find:

Este bicho é encantado:
 não tem barriga,

não tem tripas,
não tem bofes,
não é maribondo,
não é mangangá,
não é caranguejeira.
Que é que é Janjão? (1-8)

The speaker is unable to place the starfish within his limited field of experience. His companion, equally ingenuous, concludes that the "bicho"—he lacks the vocabulary for specifying it—must be the bearer of a bad omen:

E a estrela-do-mar que quer me
levar.
.....
E a estrela-do-mar que quer me
afogar.
.....
E a estrela-do-mar que quer me
esconder.
Babau! (9, 17, 25-26)

"Poema de Encantação" further exemplifies Lima's mimicry of "rhythmic" Afro-Brazilian speech:

Arraial d'Angola de Paracatu,
Arraial de Mossâmedes de Goiás,
Arraial de Santo Antônio do
Bambé,
vos ofereço, quibebê, quiabo,
quitanda, quitute, quingombô.
Tirai-me essa murrinha, esse gogô,
esse urufá,
que eu quero viver molecando,
farreando, tocando meus ganzás!
(1-6)

Inhabiting the black male body through the appropriation of what Lima takes to be his "dialect," the poet represents him as a childish figure who wishes simply to play, act mischievously, and "shake his rattle."

This playfulness is an aesthetic tool for trivializing the subjugation of black men in Brazil. But it is also reminiscent of Lima's

childish perspective in "Zefa Lavandeira," "Banho das Negras," and "Ancila Negra." The mischievous *ioiô's* desire for black women is inseparable from Lima's infantilization of black subjectivity.

In "Retrato do Vinte," Lima represents a mulato playing music and dancing in the street:

O cabo mulato balança a batuta,
meneia a cabeça, acorda com a
vista
os bombos, as caixas, os baixos e
as trompas. (1-3)

As elsewhere, Lima erases the threat of radical difference by rendering the black man as a carefree prankster. But in this poem, he makes an objective reference to the process by which the "little white master" has incorporated traces of blackness and is thus an authentic spokesperson for "Black Brazil." In the center of the plaza, the bust of Dom Pedro "overhears" the mulato's rhythm and is, therein, "Africanized":

Dom Pedro espia do alto.
(As barbas tão alvas
tão alvas nem sei!) (15-17)

Lima's reference to traces of African genealogy in the body of the white patriarch—the "transfusão de sangue"—is a means for underlining his own authority in "speaking" for blacks.

IV.

In Jorge de Lima's "afro poetry," the rape of enslaved black women is displaced by the representation of their aggressive sexual agency. The exploitation of black men is naturalized: their bodies are the site for the redemption of white sin. Pre-abolition power relations are e-raced in Lima's appropriation of black subjectivity. This mimicry, as I have indicated, is not really a departure from the *ioiô* perspective, which pervades the *Poemas Negros*. Lima's mimicry of black

dialect sounds a lot like "baby talk," too. Whether the subject is his incestuous desire for black nurse maids, the rape of enslaved women by their "Masters," or the torture inflicted on black male bodies, Lima's child-like voice represents his attempt to obfuscate the problematic facets of his "Afro-northeastern" origins.

It is possible that Brazilian racial hegemony was established through precisely such mimicry of the "other(s)." The replication of Freyre's sociological model in Lima's writing made it accessible to a wider audience, and was thus instrumental in the further dissemination of the Freyre "paradigm." Because racial ideologies emphasizing harmonious coexistence coalesced at the time Jorge de Lima's Negritude poems were written, and because his representations of "Africanness" have been conventionally read as authoritative, his work is a key to understanding the dominant discourse on Brazilian slavery and the superficially benign nature of race relations in twentieth-century Brazil.

Notes

¹ Freyre's preface to the 1958 edition of Lima's *Poemas negros* was originally published in *O Jornal* (Rio de Janeiro, November 22, 1953).

² Here, as elsewhere in Freyre's writing, food and black women are metonymically equated, e.g., "carne de mulata."

³ See the articles by José Américo de Almeida, Luís Santa Cruz, and João Gaspar Simões in Lima.

⁴ See Souza Araújo 148.

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