



REPRODUCTION/AUGUSTO STAHL, MINA ONDO, C. 1865



REPRODUCTION/AUGUSTO STAHL, MINA BARI, C. 1865

ICONOGRAPHY

# Portrait in black and white

Image of the Brazilian Negro was forged with the arrival of photography in the 19<sup>th</sup> century

CARLOS HAAG

*Published in February 2007*



REPRODUCTION/ALBERTO HENSCHEL, PORTRAIT, C. 1870

f, referring to slavery, Castro Alves asks God, in *O Navio Negreiro* [The Slave Ship], “whether so much horror in the eyes of the heavens is true”, it is no surprise that sociologist Muniz Sodré, in the article *A Genealogy of the Images of Racism*, uses a horror figure to illustrate his view of the Negro point of view of our society: “Dracula is not reflected in the mirror, hence, he is imageless. He is the opposite of the identity normalized by the petit-bourgeois culture. In the society of the image (a near-anagram of magic), of the devices of sight, the subject only exists if it appears in the “mirror”, that is, if it has the sociocultural conditions to have a publicly recognizable image”. It is worth recalling that the Count, as well as photography, are “children” of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

“The perception of those days about photography is that it is not merely a form of ‘representing’ the world, but of “making the world visible””, analyzes Maurício Lissovsky, a photography historian from the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. In the mid-1860s, in Brazil, the photographic portrait had become an object of desire for whites and blacks. “In the case of these latter, whether born free or freedmen, by having themselves portrayed like the whites, in the European fashion and with codes and behaviors borrowed from the other, it was an attempt to tread a path within a demanding racist society”, observes Sandra Koutsoukos, the author of the doctoral thesis “In the Photographer’s Studio: representation and self-representation of free, emancipated and enslaved blacks in Brazil in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century”, defended in October, at Unicamp, under the orientation of Iara Lis Schiavinatto.

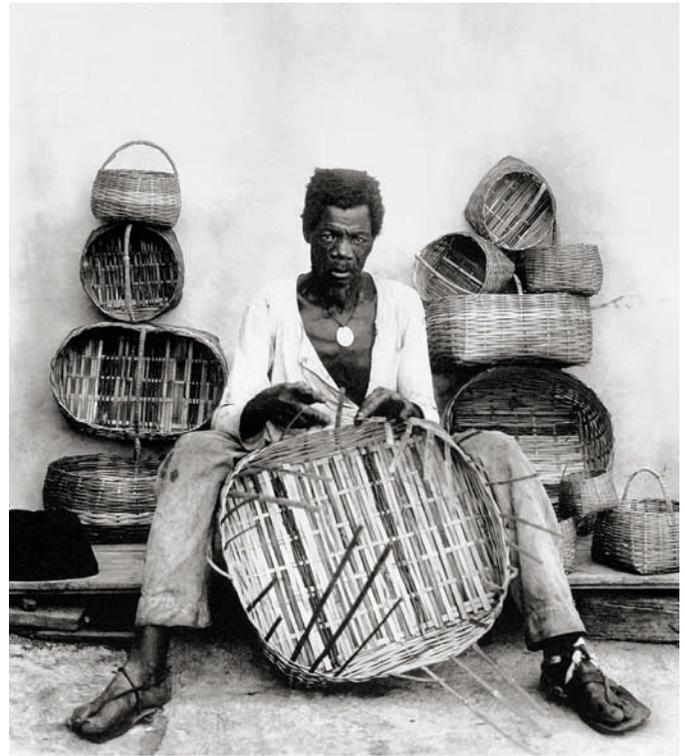
The research “unveils the invisible” present in images of blacks with top hats and their wives with parasols, wet nurses and their white “children”, as well as the controversial “types of blacks”, as in the images by the photographer Christiano Júnior, who advertised himself in the *Lammert Almanac* as the owner of “a varied collection of costumes and types of blacks, something very appropriate for those leaving for Europe”. Exhibiting half-naked black men and women (adored by the racist ethnologists), cataloged by their African origin, or in scenes produced in the studio of their work on the streets and on the farms, the images called the attention of Sandra, who saw that it was “necessary to look at what was being framed in the photos, as well as to discover what remained outside”. But “Dracula” does not appear in the mirror. So, what is there to see?

After all, as anthropologist Manuela Carneiro da Cunha observes, in ‘Slave Look’, being looked at, “in a portrait, one can be seen and one can offer oneself to be seen, alternatives connected to the relationship between the portrayed and the portrayer: if the portrait of the master is a form of a visiting card, the portrait of the slave is a postcard, where the slave is seen, but is not offering himself to be seen”. In one, we have the preservation of the image of a singular worthy person, someone who, by ordering a photograph, allows himself to be known, and is splashed over the paper as he would like to be seen, as he sees himself in the mirror; in the other, a generic picturesque character, the professor goes on. “In my studio, I discovered that, in spite of





REPRODUCTION/ UNIDENTIFIED PHOTOGRAPHER



REPRODUCTION/MARC FERREZ, BASKET MAKER, C. 1899

being taken to the photographer's studio and posing, whether at work or as a backdrop for his master, the slave and the freedman "offered themselves to be seen" and "showed" themselves, and that they were, perhaps as much as the whites who posed for their photos in private studios, the subjects of those portraits", is Sandra's analysis. For the researcher, in almost all the images, there are the eyes staring at the lens, directly at the photographer, giving the image a voice. "Many were not intimidated before the weird machine and would give their personal contribution by means of their expression, the suffering look that looks at us and seems to tell stories. The luxury or the staging did not disguise their condition of being a slave or a freedman. If the slave's body was a property, his personality was not."

"Photography is a marvelous art, an art that excites the most astute minds. And an art that can be practiced by any imbecile", complained the great French portraitist Nadar. Posterity's good fortune. If it took a long time to be discovered (only in 1839), it reached Brazil quickly, the following year, brought by Abbot Compté, a pupil of Louis Daguerre, the inventor of photography. Before Rio, the Frenchman was said to have been to Bahia, the pioneering spirit of

which is well presented in the recently-launched Photography in Bahia, organized by Aristides Alves, and which brings 215 images taken, from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to 2006, by 107 professionals from Bahia and abroad. (Another excellent source is *O negro na fotografia brasileira do século XIX [The Black in Brazilian Photography of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century]*, by G. Ermakoff, from Casa Editorial, 306 pages, R\$ 130.) Incidentally, until the arrival of photography, the eye of the 1800's was a foreign eye, linked to the tradition of Franz Post, and, later on, of Frenchmen, Germans and Swiss who painted the everyday life of the tropical court, always preferring the exotic side of Indians or Blacks in a constant state of happiness and strolling through the streets of Rio, as we see in Debret and Rugendas. The Daguerreotype was expensive and required lengthy poses of up to 60 minutes.

**Illiterates** - In 1854, André Disdéri, of France, created a process for small-sized portraits (9.5 cm by 6 cm), prepared on albuminated paper, which, being cheap and quick to shoot, were a revolution in a country of illiterates with few possessions who would like to see themselves immortalized like the noble owners of

the portraits. The cost of a dozen *cartes de visite*, as they were called, was the same as that of a single daguerreotype and could be offered as a souvenir to friends and relatives to produce family albums. "It was the democratization of the self-image for less favored social groups. With the *carte de visite*, photography was to become a technique available to all, an object of desire and status, a merchandise for exchange", Sandra notes. The newspapers were full of advertisements for studios that sought clientele according to their prices and their ability to "give nobility" to the photographed, whether by their technique or by the trappings that they had in the salon which would adorn the surroundings of the person photographed. "Photography gives the poor black the opportunity to distance himself from reality, to project himself according to an idealized image, to represent himself. The need to record social climbing requires the assimilation of the current codes. Hence the repetition and the uniformity of the poses and accessories in the portraits."

The studio, says the professor, acts as a dressing room and a stage, where the photographer is the director and the client, even though participating in the construction of his scene, the character.



REPRODUÇÃO/BAUER SÁ, CADEIRA 2, 2004

A photo, even at the cost of going without items important for survival, was visual proof for them, for friends and relatives that the fight was worthwhile. “The moment required that, besides being free, the person born free or emancipated should appear free to the others, using symbols to indicate their condition.” Details like wearing shoes were indicative of the new status of freedom. Gilberto Freyre, in *Sobrados e Mucambos* [The Mansions and the Shanties], tells how blacks, “dressed in the European fashion”, were attacked and ridiculed in the streets for their “daring”. Likewise, many slaves were taken to the studio to play as extras in their masters’ portraits and, their humiliation (“but not their attitude”, the researcher stresses), ensured that the master’s power was recorded. The staged photos, with blacks reproducing their labor in the studio, were souvenirs (whose sterile scenic organization, Sandra notes, was trying to pass off the idea of “civilized slavery”) and ethnographic objects, made in order to sustain racist theories.

In these, “evidence” was sought of the inferiority of the Blacks and likewise they acted as a basis to countersign the ideal of “civilized slavery”, the researcher

notes. “In spite of the sterility and the order portrayed, the condition of being a slave was not hidden; rather, its essence was exposed.” There was also a market for photos of wet nurses, bringing to their bosom the white child that they were breastfeeding. “In this kind of photo, they tried to pass on an idea of harmony and affection, in a period in which the use of wet nurses was being condemned by medicine”, Sandra observes.

**Moods** - In an advertisement in the *Journal do Commercio* [Trade Journal], of 1875, a defense was made of Nestlé Cream of Wheat, “the true wet nurse”, which, the ad claimed, “would free the child from contagion by ailments inoculated from the alien milk, corrupted by the bad mood of any wet nurse”. Modernity called for changes, but mothers were reluctant to give up the privilege of “using” the Negress to feed their children. The photos were an attempt to “hold back” the clock of the new times. In these photos, the researcher reckons, the force of expression in the look of the photographed, obliged to dress herself with enforced luxury, is even more striking.

“They are reminders that, for there to be a black wet nurse, there has been a

black baby that was often separated from its mother to enable her to bring up the master’s child.” The invisible becomes visible. “The social use of the slavery of the African peoples created in Brazil an aesthetic for the useful exterior of the Black’s body. The slave masters, as professionals in the business, knew the details of their servants teeth better than that of their daughters’, as happens with present-day breeders of thoroughbred horses. Even today we are not free of certain averted looks”, analyzed the anthropologist from Unicamp, Carlos Rodrigues Brandão, in his article *The Black Look*. “In newspapers and magazines, the blacks are more body than face, more type, and even more performance than person. In a country where there are millions of ‘pure’ blacks, it is the white face, whatever it is, that is seen. The blacks and mixed races are almost all the country’s criminals, for almost all the photographs of criminals are of mixed race and blacks.” In Brazil, the image of the Black as a physical machine is strong, something complex in a country that has learnt to despise manual labor. Blacks are the ones who work, the ones who are sensual (even when revealed as sportsmen), the ones that love parties, observes Paulo Bernardo Vaz, a professor from the Social Communication Department of the Federal University of Minas Gerais and the author of a study about the image of the Black.

“The visual flow that shows the Black suffering, taking a beating, robbing, or exhibiting his sensual body reupdates socio-historically constructed meanings that suggest crystallizations that typify the Black in a form that does not favor positive self-esteem. It is the external look that shapes the Black into a pejorative representation that can affect his identity construction. After all, who wants to be identified with a subject that lives in suffering?” For Vaz, the communication media offers the Black the contradictory opportunity to be someone else and not himself. “The ‘other’ represents the ghostlike threat of dividing the space from which we talk and think, it is the fear of losing one’s own space. Primitive fear, comparable to children’s nightmares. The ‘other’ ends up becoming Dracula, without a legitimate image”, analyses Muniz Sodré. Transylvania, like Haiti, may also be here. ■



REPRODUCTION/PIERRE VERGER, PORTRAIT, 1950S