Body, Black Aesthetics, Racial Belonging: Identity construction and empowerment among Brazil's Black youth

Introduction

This article aims to outline an identity movement in spiral ascension among Brazil's Black youth, which emerged from the surfacing of Hip-Hop in the country, by the end of the 1980s, among young people of São Paulo's poor neighborhoods. Since then, this movement has expanded all over the country, also reaching young people with higher education and of middle class. In addition to conceptions of racial

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belonging this movement brings out at once, but not necessarily together, the exalting of an African-Black aesthetics and style, the valorization and pride of Black peoples' history and culture, and notions of empowerment. It has

emerged as a form of amusement as well as contestation among poor young people without access to leisure or cultural equipment. In recent years this movement has gained new contours, creating or expanding opportunities of visibility and socioeconomic mobility for many of its members.

They named themselves "Tomba-mento Generation", meaning attitude, causing an impact but also re-signifying the expression 'tombou' that trivializes the

violent death of Black teenagers, both male and female in urban spaces, usually by police forces, and has been reinventing the way of doing politics. Unlike the formal Brazilian Black movement of the 1930s, 1960s,1980s or 90s, which met in associations headed by prominent leaders, the people taking part in "Tombamento Generation" today despised conventional forms of organization and use tools they know how to manipulate such as the internet and social media. These tools have become channels par excellence of their actions, causes and ideas; they adopt discourses and attitudes towards the deconstruction of normativities of gender and sexuality; they proudly display curly and bulky hair as a sign of affirmation – often in vivid colors, transforming the body in to a political instrument and 'place of multiple discourses to sculpt history, memory, identity and culture' (Irobi 2007: 900).

Particularly noteworthy in this movement is the prominence of Black women, both in blogs and YouTube channels – which congregates thousands of followers and attracts the attention of the media and other sectors of society – or leading cultural productions or networks of entrepreneurship, although they cannot be seen as a leadership in the strict sense of the term. Women are also the potential target of most of the racist attacks that are increasingly filling social networks.

The use of Black aesthetics as a way of confronting hegemonic powers and standards is not something new in the context of Brazil's Black movement.

In the 70s and 80s, inspired by conceptions of the African American Black Panthers and in solidarity to the struggles for colonial liberation in African countries during the 60's and 70's, many Brazilian activists adopted, at that time, Black Power hairstyles as well as African-style tunics, using their hair and body as expressions of contestation and Black identity. As argued by anthropologist Nilma Gomes,

> Hair and body are thought through culture. In that sense, kinky hair and black body can both be considered symbolic expressions and support of Black identity in Brazil. Together, they enable social, cultural, political, and ideological construction of an expression created within the black community (Gomes 2012:2).

However, the emphasis of "Tombamento Generation" on aesthetic issues – in which one can point to a certain influence of the Congolese *sapeurs* –, although betting on the body as a locus of social demands and identity affirmation, and the tendency towards isolated actions raise criticism and distrust by part of the formal Black movement, which accuses these young people of not delving into militancy and academic studies. Such a position is justified in an article published in blog *Blogueiras Negras* (blogueirasnegras.org), one of the compasses of the Black youth, which states:

> The youth in combat to racism, sexism and LGBTfobia has been making efforts to stop being indoctrinated by oppressions of class, race, sexuality and gender. To "Tombamento Generation" political transgressions really

matters: to us, being out in the streets with our colorful kinky hair, wearing paintings that bring back elements of African culture, listening to black music is, on its own, a transgressing attitude that has impact over this historic time (Rocha e Soares 2016).

Body and Contestation

The body has always occupied a central spot in the Black cultures of the diaspora. Stuart Hall (2003) states that it has been used as if it were, and often has been, the main cultural capital of Black people. 'We have worked on ourselves as on screens of representation.' (Hall 2003:342). Costa (2006:117) reminds us that 'to the enslaved who was excluded from the bourgeois civil world organized around dialogue, the body itself remained a means of manifestation and communication'. The Nigerian playwright Esiaba Irobi (2007) goes even further pointing out what he calls the 'episteme of the body', present, according to him, in African societies and diaspora.

Emphasizing the power of the body as a place of multiple discourses, Irobi argues that the human body is the main source, place and centre of physical or transcendental perception and expression, being an essential instrument to develop, articulate and express all ideas and art, given that it is possessed of memory and can be a locus of resistance. (Irobi 2007: 900).

During the slave trade, enslaved Africans arriving in the "new world" had their heads shaved by their masters, losing not just their freedom, their families, and their home but also losing a piece of their identity. Ayana Byrd

and Lori Tharps state that "[g]iven the importance of hair to an African…[t]he shaved head was the first step the Europeans took to erase the slaves culture", and to gain some of this individuality back enslaved Africans took their own steps to replace the combs, herbal ointments, and palm oil used in Africa for hairdressing, taking advantage of what was available to them. Nevertheless, they recognized that hair was an essential part of identity (Byrd & Tharps 2009 cited by Brisbon 2009:4).

In Brazil, the process of culturally stripping the enslaved African and his descendants was not different. In slavery society, the enslaved had its place demarcated, being instituted the parallelism between the dark skin and inferior social position (Fernandes 1978). After slavery, this demarcation remained in Brazilian society. The contempt for Black people and mestizos workers, added by attributions of negative qualities and stereotypes of African descendants borrowed from European racialist theories generated a situation of racial, educational, social and pay inequalities which continued until date.

At the beginning of the twentieth century the republican enlightened elite devised a nation-based project on cultural and aesthetic ideals of the great European centers, since, according to the view of these intellectuals, the white race was the only one capable of producing culture (Santos 2002). In this process, Brazil has imagined itself white, adopted and privileged French

manners and fashion, and elected Caucasian features as a model of beauty (that is fair skin and eyes and straight hair, preferentially blond). On the other end, Black people and their cultural practices and knowledge were associated with barbarism, ugliness, incivility and other negative aspects. The Black body seen as an object-body during slavery became a rejected body in the republican regime.

In a society that has always been extensively mixed racially, excluding and with fluid and changeable ethnic markers like Brazil, seeking an approximation to the idealized white model as a way of being accepted and integrated, and to minimize the exclusion was the path adopted by many Afro-Brazilians, either by smoothing their hair through chemicals or hot irons and combs, or by distancing themselves from/ or disguising physical and cultural elements and characteristics that might associate them with their African ancestry.

> The history of the social rise of the Brazilian Negro is thus the story of his assimilation to the white patterns of social relations. It is the history of the ideological submission of a racial stock in the presence of another that becomes hegemonic. It is the history of a renounced identity, in view of the circumstances that stipulate the price of recognition to the Negro based on the intensity of his denial (Souza 1990: 23).

Ambiguously we have a country with a white European imagery, that is in fact Black and biracial (Gomes, 2012). According to 2010's Census, 50.7 percent of the population declared itself as Black and 'pardo'(mixed race). The set

of these two groups is recognized as the Black population by the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística- IBGE (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics), responsible for the census. Also, in an ambiguous way the myth of racial democracy prevailed in the country until recently. However, behind a proclaimed model of perfect racial *convivence*, hides subtle and violent forms of racism and exclusion.

The identity of the Black Brazilian is developed amidst this dual and ambiguous atmosphere. The process of construction of identity, as pertinent studies point out, is relational. It occurs when in contact with others and depends on something exterior to itself to exist. This process, according to Tomaz da Silva (2004:15), is also linked to social and material conditions, and has the body as "one of the sites involved in the establishment of the frontiers that define who we are".

In this way, kinky hair and black bodies, in Brazilian society, are vehicles of the racial conflict and tension that pervade society. They can be places of assimilation, as well as contestation and resistance. They represent a socially and culturally rejected body. These traumatic experiences lead many Blacks to a denial of themselves, low self-esteem and, in many cases, depression (Silva 2016:15). According to Nilma Gomes (2012) "a black person's hair, seen as "bad", is the expression of the racism and the social disparity that fall upon that person. Seeing black people's hair as "bad" and

white people's hair as "good" expresses a conflict. Therefore, modifying the hair may mean an attempt from the black person to leave a place of inferiority or to introject it. It might also represent a feeling of autonomy, expressed in bold and creative ways to wear their hair" (Fig 1).

Boldness and creativity in the cuts and hairstyles, as well as the defense of hair without the use of chemicals, smoothing or even products to 'tame' the volume, has been one of the main weapons of the "Tombamento Generation" to impose itself and to show that there are other patterns of beauty outside of the universal white model. The quest for beauty references in an idealized African aesthetic has been the way to confront the hegemony of European beauty standards. More recently, this attitude has become an instrument of economic empowerment. Pinho (2004) posits: "The black body, full of an [A]fricanness previously seen as negative, primitive and associated to ugliness and stench, is reinvested of an [A]fricanness re-signified to inspire pride and beauty. This way, Africa is rewritten in the body" (110).

Public Policies and Female Protagonists

Some determining and conditioning factors are linked to this insurgency of racial valorization. Public and cultural policies with differentiated characteristics and scopes, implemented mainly from the first term of president Luis Inacio Lula da Silva, in 2003, in response to demands and long-time struggles of Black movements strengthened

and helped to boost and to give visibility to the "Tombamento Generation". Among those, a national law made the teaching of African and Afro-Brazilian history and culture mandatory in schools; income transfer programs were instituted, which allowed the poorest sections of the population greater access, among other things, to computers and the Internet; racial quota policies were implemented in public universities and student financing led to an increase in the number of Black students in higher education over a period of ten years.

In 2004, Black and biracial students aged 18 to 24 years old in higher education accounted for 16.7 percent of all students, jumping to 45.5 percent 2014. It should be noted that despite this rise the percentage of Black students was still below the level of 47.2 percent held by white students ten years earlier, in 2004.

In this effervescent universe of the "Tombamento Generation", young Black women play a crucial role, and they also spread their action into the sexist Hip Hop environment. In May 2015 Facebook launched the series 'Empoderadas' (facebook.com/programaempoderadas), created and produced by two filmmakers with the purpose of giving visibility to Black women from different areas that have the potential to serve as inspirational models of empowerment to other women. On YouTube, there are at least 10 channels led by young Black girls who use this media both to talk about aesthetics and to present makeup, hairstyles, and turban mooring as well as

to address social, gender and racial issues, creating spaces of formation and production of knowledge, for a specific public.

They were the ones, for example, to take to the streets what became known as "March for Kinky Pride", parades that took origin in individual social network posts with the intuit of exalting the beauty of curly and voluminous hair, in reaction to the dictatorship of straightened hair bombarded at women through advertising by the cosmetic industries. Although they emphasize questions around aesthetics, these marches generally occupy symbols of financial capital on public spaces, such as is the case of Avenida Paulista, or places where the elite congregate and wherein Black people are not usually welcome (Fig 2).

These movements of aesthetics and identity affirmation ended up generating small businesses and networks of entrepreneurs that have made possible the social and economic rise of participants of the "Tombamento Generation". Such business do not exist physically but has spread through the social media: they sell fabrics, turbans and jewelry, in addition to self-produced literature for courses on Black history and culture. Recently, there was a surge of small theatre companies composed of young Black actors and actresses in which they privilege stories focusing on the universe, cultures and lives of the Black population, grounded in the experiences of Africans.

The web has also been the instrument used to disseminate literature known as "marginal",

which focused on racial themes and the reality of the urban peripheries. A poetry recital that began in bars gave way to modest publishers, through which some groups and individuals commercialized their productions, ignoring the circuit of the great publishers, who in turn did not recognize their work as literature. Not to mention vloggers or digital influencers that congregate thousands of subscribers.

The world of Hip Hop concentrates many of the "empowered" boys and girls who stimulate other young people and seek to increase their self-esteem and racial belonging. One of these empowered individuals is rapper Karol Conka, whose songs revolve around feminism, racism and empowerment. She is considered one of the icons of "Tombamento Generation ", and one of her music video, 'Tombei', which lends name to the movement of the youth, reached five million viewings on the Internet. Conka was chosen to take part in the opening show of the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro.

In the same successful path of Karol Conka two other young Black rappers, Emicida[1] and Evandro Fióti, recently launched their own brand of clothes at São Paulo Fashion Week which is considered the most important fashion event in Latin America. Inspired by the bantu philosophical principle 'Ubuntu' (I am because we are), he took to the catwalk Black models, Black power hairstyles, and plus-size models to emphasize the diversity of Brazilian society in a remarkably white environment (Fig 3&4).

Such visibility and exposure, however, has its negative consequences. A growing wave of racist attacks is spreading on the Internet, targeting exponents of the "Tombamento Generation" movement. According to Paulo Rogério Nunes, a researcher from the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University, who coordinates a project that maps initiatives from young people producing innovation and technologies for the combat of online racism, the Internet has come to prove that Brazil is one of the most racist countries in the world. Data from SaferNet, an institution that monitors violations of rights in the network, indicated a total of 469 thousand reports of racism cases in ten years. Last year alone, there were 55,000 complaints.

To Paulo Nunes, social networks reflect the offline world. "There is no way to separate the racism committed in digital networks from the system of racial oppression that exists in Brazil outside the virtual world."[2] However, he sees a positive aspect in these attacks. According to him, racists attacks destroy the myth of racial democracy, a flag that the Black Brazilian movement carried alone for a long time, since it was believed that the Brazilians were not racist.

Despite these attacks, which undoubtedly leave psychological sequels to their victims, the "Tombamento Generation" does not seem to be willing to give up the potential of the Internet, which not only allows them to shout out against imposing a unique model of beauty as it has provided the means to overcome the exclusion and disadvantage of the Black population in Brazilian society.

Conclusion

This article approached a movement of racial valorization and empowerment among the black Brazilian youth, self-denominated "Tombamento Generation". Drawing from the internet and social media, young Blacks have taken actions and attitudes that aim to affirm and value racial identity. The movement, with a strong emphasis on aesthetic issues but without neglecting discussions about gender, racism and racial inequalities, has paved the way for the social and economic mobility of several of its members who seek to be a kind of mirror in which other will inspire to change their lives.

Notes

1. The name "Emicida" is a fusion of the words "MC" and "homicidal", because of his constant victories in improvisational battles through rhymes. Later, the rapper created a connotation of acronym for the name E.M.I.C.I.D.A. (in a free translation, While my imagination composes? Computer? insanities [I] master [the] art.)

2. 'A Internet chegou para provar que somos um dos países mais racistas do mundo'. An interview with the newspaper El País in June 15th, 2016. Retrieved on October 23, 2016 from http://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2016/05/10/politica/1462895132_579742.html

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Figure 1: Curly and bulky hair proudly displayed

Figure 2: Kinki hair taken to the streets in rallies

Figures 3: Rapper Karol Conka and her look "tombamento"

Figures 4: A fashion show of rapper Emicida