

Circulation of ideas and cultural appropriation in the black diaspora

Circulação de ideias e apropriações culturais na diáspora negra

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Abstract *This paper investigates the exchange and circulation of ideas in the black diaspora, particularly in the O Exemplonewspaper, mapping and discussing the ethnic-racial and gender representations constructed in the narratives produced by the editors of this newspaper during the campaign for the construction of the “Mãe Preta” (Black Mother) monument. The aim is to analyze how the newspaper’s editors appropriated texts that circulated in other newspapers about the “Mãe Preta” monument campaign, adapting them to their own interests and giving them new meanings. Through a Cultural Studies theoretical approach, the black press is considered to be a cultural artifact that not only informs but also produces discourses and representations that contribute to the formation of black subjectivities and identities.*

Keywords: *Cultural Appropriations; Ethnic-Racial Representations; Black Press*

Resumo *Este artigo investiga o intercâmbio e a circulação de ideias na diáspora negra, particularmente no jornal O Exemplo, mapeando e problematizando as representações étnico-raciais e de gênero construídas nas narrativas produzidas pelos redatores desse jornal por ocasião da campanha para a construção do monumento à “Mãe Preta”. Busca-se analisar de que forma os redatores do jornal se apropriaram de textos que circularam em outros jornais sobre a campanha ao*

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monumento da “Mãe Preta”, adaptaram-nos aos seus próprios interesses e lhes atribuíram novos significados. A partir da abordagem teórica dos Estudos Culturais, entende-se a imprensa negra como um artefato cultural que não apenas informa, mas que também produz discursos e representações que contribuem na formação de subjetividades e identidades negras.

Palavras-Chave: *Apropriações culturais; Representações étnico-raciais; Imprensa negra*

This study investigates the exchange and circulation of ideas during the black diaspora in the black press newspaper *O Exemplo*, in Porto Alegre, during the campaign to build a monument to honor “Mãe Preta” (Black Mother) in the 1920s. It is based in an interdisciplinary perspective that articulates the Cultural Studies and Cultural History theoretical fields, and in methodological terms is a cultural analysis that operates with the concepts of cultural appropriation and representation.

From a cultural history perspective, we used the concept of cultural appropriation as presented by Roger Chartier (2002), to understand the processes of meaning construction attributed to cultural texts, which according to him are not absolute or unique, but are related to the different ways in which different subjects interpret the texts they read and to the multiple meanings and significance assigned to them, making reappropriations, challenges, or resistance possible. Therefore, we seek to assess how editors of the *O Exemplo* newspaper appropriated texts that circulated in other newspapers about the construction of the “Mãe Preta” monument, and adapted them to their own interests and gave them new meanings.

Based in a theoretical approach of Cultural Studies, we appropriated Stuart Hall’s (2000) discussions about representation. For the author, the cultural representations contained in the language not only “speak about”, but are part of the things that speak of, since things do not have an intrinsic or essential meaning. By considering this statement, we can infer that we build the meanings of our surroundings by using systems of representation. Thus, we highlight that this study seeks to investigate the power of representations in the *O Exemplo* newspaper.

As for the process of encoding and decoding language, Hall (1995) also presents three positions of reception or decoding: the *hegemonic position*, where the receiver’s decoding is equivalent to the encoding of the transmitter; the *negotiated position*, which partly modifies the intended meanings of the hegemonic culture, where the receiver accepts the definition conveyed by the message, but adapts it locally and even opposes it partially; and the *oppositional position*, which creates meanings that are opposite from those broadcast by the dominant culture. According

to Éric Maigret (2010), Hall rejects the idea of a correspondence between the moment of production and the reception of media messages, and sees no reason for a message to be automatically decoded as it was coded. It is this theoretical direction, of the different reception or decoding positions from the dominant culture, that we developed in this study to analyze the circulation of ideas and cultural exchanges in the black press. Therefore, as we have indicated, we intend to examine how columnists of the *O Exemplo* newspaper decoded the texts about “Mãe Preta” that circulated in the press outlets in Central Brazil.

Exchange of ideas in the Black Press

We emphasize that the circulation of ideas of the black press in the USA, the major press outlets in Rio de Janeiro, and the Brazilian black press regarding ethnic and racial issues in the early twentieth century was analyzed by authors such as José Antonio dos Santos (2011), Micol Siegel (2007), Paulina Alberto (2011) and Amílcar Araújo Pereira (2013).

José Antonio dos Santos (2011), in discussions about the African diaspora, argues that in the 1920s, the editors of the southern black press established transnational exchanges with the American black press, with copies of the *Chicago Defender* from the USA traded for copies of *Clarim da Alvorada* from São Paulo. In the same direction, Pereira (2013, p. 149) notes that “since 1920 and also in the 1930s, the circulation of information in the black diaspora has expanded significantly.” According to the author, the 1920s was a time of great cultural exchange between the African-American and the African-Brazilian black press, at a time when the Americans were interested in race relations in Brazil, and at the same time, they exchanged references about the fight against racism.

In this direction, Micol Siegel (2007) and Paulina Alberto (2011) pointed out that in the early twentieth century, the Brazilian press transformed into a space for intense appropriations and debate, showing how important it was to the circulation of ideas.

Siegel (2007), using a transnational perspective, investigated the exchange of information that occurred during the campaign for the “Mãe

Preta” monument in Brazil during the 1920s, analyzing the cultural exchanges between the African-American press at the *Chicago Defender* and the Brazilian newspapers *A Notícia* (RJ) and *O Clarim d’Alvorada* (SP). According to him, the proposed construction of the “Mãe Preta” monument started in the USA, when “the Daughters of the American Confederacy proposed the construction of a statue for Mammy in Washington D.C.” (Siegel, 2007, p. 314). The author points out that almost three years later, in 1926, the campaign was extended to the press in Rio de Janeiro, in the newspaper *A Notícia*, through its editor Cândido de Campos, who defended the construction of a monument to “Mãe Preta” as a way to celebrate the racial mix in Brazil contributed to the specific character of racial brotherhood in the formation of a Brazilian national identity.

According to the author, after the newspaper *A Notícia* José Correia Leite, founder and editor of the São Paulo black press *O Clarim da Alvorada* accepted the proposal, and thanks to Robert Abbott, editor of the African-American newspaper *Chicago Defender*, the campaign to build a monument to “Mãe Preta” in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo also had repercussions abroad, “pointing out the marked difference between the Brazilian racial harmony and the American racial antagonism” (SIEGEL, 2007, p. 332). Among the São Paulo black press, the author notes that “the Afro-Brazilian writers found the discourse of national fraternity to be appropriate for their demands for inclusive citizenship [...] and used it in an anti-racist direction” (SIEGEL, 2007, p. 325). Finally, the author concludes that the campaign in Brazil to build a monument to “Mãe Preta” in the 1920s, helped change the discourse about race in Brazil, adopting the rhetoric of racial harmony a decade before Gilberto Freyre. However, Siegel (2007) argues that in the period of the 1930 Revolution, the mobilization of the monument construction was abandoned and the idea was only resumed in the early 1950s, when the “Mãe Preta” monument was inaugurated in Largo Paissandú in the city center of São Paulo, near the Nossa Senhora do Rosário church, becoming a landmark for the black community of São Paulo.

However, Paulina Alberto (2011) in her doctoral dissertation, later published as a book called *Terms of Inclusion: Black Intellectuals in Twentieth-Century Brazil* argued that white proponents of the “Mãe Preta” statue in Rio de Janeiro echoed nationalist reformulations of national identity and publicly defended a mixed national identity in 1926. In the same vein as Siegel (2007), the author also argues that the “Mãe Preta” monument campaign was the beginning of an important shift in how the Brazilian elite thought about race, making it possible to imagine Afro-decedents as an integral part of nation. Furthermore, she argues that the monument was a tribute to the popular ideal of racial brotherhood.

For Alberto (2011), while whites journalists defended the notion of racial tolerance and praised the passivity of “Mãe Preta”, the journalists of the São Paulo black press used the idea of the monument to symbolically highlight the contributions of blacks to nationality. According to Alberto (2011), both the idea of different races, white and black, and the ideal of miscegenation, were political strategies used by the São Paulo black leaders to affirm the belonging of black Brazilians in a racially and culturally inclusive nation, while at the same time preserve their right to a distinct identity as black descendants of Africans. For the author, “together, these ideas helped Afro-descendants find spaces for inclusion and to denounce persistent racism” (2011, p.120). From these analyzes, we ask the following question. How did the ideas that were spread during the campaign for the construction of the “Mãe Preta” monument in the newspaper *A Notícia* in Rio de Janeiro (RJ) and in the newspaper *O Clarim da Alvorada* in the black press São Paulo appropriated by the leadership of the newspaper *O Exemplo*? Before contemplating this issue, we organized a brief presentation of the newspaper *O Exemplo* to contextualize its importance in the black community of Porto Alegre.

O Exemplo newspaper (1892-1930)

O Exemplo was the first newspaper in the black community of Porto Alegre (RS), produced by a group of black youths who met in a barber

shop located on Andradas street, in the city center. This group of Afro-descendants that started the paper included Arthur de Andrade, Marcílio Freitas, Aurélio Bittencourt Júnior, Sérgio Bittencourt, Alfredo de Souza and Esperidião Calisto.

As poet and black activist Oliveira Silveira said, the newspaper *O Exemplo* had a 37 year history of publications (1892-1930), with some interruptions, dedicated to the black and the low income community.³ Given this data, we recognize that the newspaper was an alternative space for the production of meanings and representations about the memories and identities of Afro-descendants in Rio Grande do Sul, where the editors reaffirmed their collective memories and their social and cultural practices. Therefore, as a bearer of references to the Afro-Brazilian memories and identities, the *O Exemplo* newspaper is an important part of Afro-Brazilian heritage.⁴ Regarding the format and the periodicity of *O Exemplo*, Maria Angélica Zubaran says that:

It was a four pages weekly newspaper, released on Sundays, with modest circulation and sold by the editors themselves at the newspaper's headquarters or through semi-annual subscriptions. After a few years of existence, in the late nineteenth century, between 1892 and 1897, *O Exemplo* began to run again in the early twentieth century, on October 5th, 1902 and remained in operation until 1905. After a period of interruption, it reappeared in 1908, and remained in circulation until 1911. Its final phase begins with its rebirth in 1916 and final closing in 1930 (2008, p.166).

As for the reception of this newspaper by the black population, we can say that it worked through subscriptions and also had the support of a “sponsor group”, which used their own financial resources, as needed, for the paper's maintenance. Considering the newspaper's circulation period, about thirty-seven years, it seems to have reached significant receptivity in the black community.

³ Manuscripts of Oliveira Silveira under the guardianship of his daughter Naiara Oliveira Silveira.

⁴ *O Exemplo* was a four pages weekly newspaper, released on Sundays, with modest circulation and sold by the editors themselves at the newspaper's headquarters or through semi-annual subscriptions.

Thus, we consider the newspaper *O Exemplo* as an extremely relevant research source for the study of Afro-Brazilian memory, history, and culture from the perspective of Law 10.639/2003 and the expansion of heritage preservation policies. As Sandra Pelegrini (2007) noted, as of the second half of the twentieth century, there was a gradual extension of the idea of cultural heritage, which now covers the memories of broad social segments, particularly of ethnic groups and minorities whose cultural goods were previously excluded from the list of cultural heritage items that were worthy of preservation.

Circulation of Ideas and Cultural Exchanges in *O Exemplo*

This analysis aims to demonstrate the cultural exchange and circulation of ideas between the newspaper *O Exemplo* and newspapers from central Brazil, and to map the most recurrent ethnic-racial and gender representations built on narratives produced by the editors of this newspaper during the campaign for the construction of the “Mãe Preta” monument in the 1920s. Particularly, it is an investigation of the multiple cultural appropriations and cultural pedagogies that the Afro-descendants journalists published in *O Exemplo*.

In an article entitled “Mãe Preta”, published in *O Exemplo* in May 1926, writer Mário Rodrigues supported the campaign begun in *A Notícia* of Rio de Janeiro, and congratulated journalist Cândido de Campos for the initiative, demonstrating the exchange of ideas between this Rio de Janeiro newspaper and *O Exemplo*. In his narrative, Mário Rodrigues described “Mãe Preta” as “self-sacrificing”, with gestures and attitudes that displayed a “heroic patience” and was an “example of resignation and sweetness,” of “purity and altruism,” and an “empire of happiness” (*O Exemplo*, p. 1, 26 May 1926).

Writer Leandro Pierini also described “Mãe Preta” as sweet and submissive in an article entitled “Mãe Preta” in May of 1928 that circulated in the newspaper *A Notícia*, in Rio de Janeiro (RJ). According to Pierini,

“we will achieve this goal. There is no doubt. We will concretize in bronze or eternal granite the loving and submissive figure of Mãe Preta.” In this sense, in the direction pointed out by Hall (1997), the representations of “Mãe Preta” although idealized, remained stereotyped in the Porto Alegre black press, because the image of humility, kindness, and submission continued in the manner typical of representations of the “noble savage” conveyed since the late nineteenth century and repeated in the novels and American films during the twentieth century. On the other hand, these racialized representations of “Mãe Preta” not only represented her terms of her essential characteristics, but also reduced her to her essence, the submission and fidelity to the families of their masters and white ladies, as seen in the following narrative:

In the home she was patience and kindness. She had affection and love for the family that owned her. She had the worries and anxieties about her young master or little lady like their legitimate mother, and was dedicated to them with the resigned and reverent submission of affectionate and simple beings (*O Exemplo*, p. 1, 13 May 1928).

Not only did it naturalize the submissive and subservient work of “Mãe Preta” and to present her service to her white masters as natural, the narrator builds a scenario of fraternal race relations between “Mãe Preta” and her masters, concealing the power hierarchies that marked these relationships, as demonstrated in the recent historiography of slavery in Brazil. In the following excerpt, “Mãe Preta” is also represented in *O Exemplo* as naturally resigned to her world of deprivation and as helpless before the “hardships of captivity.” She naturally supported martyrdom and pain:

She was a slave. She underwent all of the trials, all of the martyrdoms, and all of the hardships of captivity. Because of that she should be evil and perverse, full of hate and against the enslaving race. However, she was not. Above all, she knew how to love and wish well someone who would deny her right to be free. She worked and suffered. Through the pain she gained dignity, becoming grand and heroic, supporting martyrdom and winning the veneration of Brazil (...) This Brazil will know how to

perpetuate the memory of Mãe Preta in a dignified and eternal moment.
(*O Exemplo*, p.3, 13. May 1928)

In this sense, in the context of race relations in Brazil in the 1920s, the narratives in defense of the construction of the “Mãe Preta” monument had a pedagogical purpose: to build a monument to symbolically honor the memory of those who, like “Mãe Preta,” supported the martyrdom of captivity with passivity and submission, pointing out inferior roles for the bodies of black women. As pointed out by Nilma Nile Gomes and Shirley Aparecida de Miranda (2014), the hierarchy scenario that articulates gender and race focuses directly on the bodies and teaches how to position them among the rules that produce the body of the man as normal and the body women as dependent and subordinate.

It is interesting to note that other documentation, in addition to the newspaper pictured here, point to the permanence of the social condition during the slave period among black women in the early decades of the twentieth century (RAGO, 1997). Statistics from official documents and police authorities portray a large number of black and mulatto women working in jobs as maids, laundresses, cooks, and confectioners. One can understand that the designation of black women for domestic service may be associated with the long period of slavery our country experienced, and also due to the “subsequent social marginalization after abolition” (GOUVEA, 2004, p. 230).

On the other hand, as Alberto (2011) points out, passivity and submission of “Mãe Preta” were attributes that white intellectuals were interested in emphasizing, after the disenchantment with foreign migrant workers who in the early twentieth century began to protest against their employers during the strike movements. In this sense, the intellectuals and white politicians who supported the idea of the “Mãe Preta” monument claimed that the monument would serve pedagogically as a model of submission and fidelity for workers of African descent.

However, the narratives of “Mãe Preta” in the newspaper *O Exemplo* also revealed what Hall (1995) calls the negotiated position of appropriating the hegemonic narratives, where the receiver adapts the message

and even opposes it partially. The image of “Mãe Preta” was appropriated by editors of *O Exemplo* to criticize the racial prejudice and the lack of black rights in Brazilian society at that time. In the narrative constructed by Mario Rodrigues, “Mãe Preta” was represented as “wronged by petty prejudices of race, proscribed by laws, and without rights” (*O Exemplo*, p.3, 13. May 1926). In this sense, the idea was that the “Mãe Preta” monument would mean the recognition of the nation’s debt, not only to “Mãe Preta”, but also “to Africans who once - in a very recently past! - Who, in the fields, sustained with an iron hand the economic wealth of Brazil and African women, whose “opulent breasts (...) made the splendor of many destinations” (*O Exemplo*, p.3, 13. May 1926). The idea was produced that the construction of the monument acted as a “debt of gratitude” of the nation towards the Afro-Brazilians, which implied the recognition of the “injustices” committed against blacks, particularly in the labor market, where in the competition between whites and blacks, blacks were often ignored in favor of immigrant workers.

As pointed out by George Reid Andrews (1998), both in the cities and in the countryside, immigrants were the preferred labor source, and this persistent preference for European and Euro-Brazilians directly affected the Afro-Brazilians who began to increasingly resent the severe restrictions of the Republic to their popular political participation, leading the black community to express feelings of discontent and to think of ways of participating politically. In this sense, Alberto (2011) points out that the rhetoric about black labor contribution in the 1920s was a response built by Afro-descendant to the discrimination in the labor market and the preference for European migrant workers, continually represented as good workers, while national workers were represented in a negative, pejorative, and prejudiced manner.

In November 1926, *O Exemplo* once again wrote about the “Mãe Preta” monument, printing on the front page, under the title “The Monument of National Gratitude,” the speech of the Representative from Rio Grande do Norte, Georgino Avelino, addressed to Speaker of the Lower House, urging him to support the initiative of the newspaper *A*

Notícia to build a monument to “Mãe Preta.” The speech was reproduced with a small introduction by *O Exemplo* who presented it as “the sentiments of our people.” In the speech, Representative Avelino builds the notion of a “Brazilian race” that is “new and thriving,” and formed by the integration of “foreign races” which led to a “typical and particular physiognomy of the nation.” For Georgino Avelino:

It was at the point of activity, made up of farms and mills, these centering points of men of various colors and heights, habits, languages, and ideologies that the spirit of the three alien races for the first time generated the soul of the new Brazilian race, which imprints its typical and particular physiognomy on our collective evolution. (*O Exemplo*, p. 1, 7 Nov.1926).

We reproduce below the front page of *O Exemplo* with the report “The Monument of National Gratitude” referring to the “Mãe Preta” monument.



Figure 1 - Cover of *O Exemplo*
Source: *O Exemplo* - Nov 14 1926

Representative Avelino added the idea of a new Brazilian race, the notion of a Brazilian spirit in which the three races - white, black, and indigenous - coexist without hierarchies, thus already anticipating the notion of racial democracy in the mid-1920s :

The differences in the social hierarchies where the various ethnic groups are distributed in different proportions were annulled by the unalterable definition of the Brazilian spiritual type, in whose countenance, whites, blacks and savages are recognized as condensed into an indissoluble ancestry. (*O Exemplo*, p. 1, 7 Nov.1926)

It is worth noting that the historical context of the 1920s was also marked by the presence of an emerging cultural nationalism post World War I, due to the participation of immigrant workers in labor movements demanding better working conditions, and the protests of the Modern Art Week in defense of a national culture, which together contributed to boost nationalist pride among Brazilian thinkers, who began to rethink the relationship between the racially diverse population and the national identity. Among these intellectuals Oswald de Andrade stands out, who in his “Cannibalistic Manifesto” portrayed the modern Brazilian culture as the result of native’s capacity to cannibalize and digest the foreign influences and produce a new and authentic national identity. In this context of an emerging nationalism, politicians such as Representative Avelino began to relativize the importance of immigrant labor and to value the work of the “black race,” as shown in the following excerpt:

The integration of the black race in Brazil’s history did not only occur because the abolition of slavery brought us to a policy of equal rights. We incinerated the documents regarding slavery, but we accept with subordinate satisfaction that claim that the Brazilian industrial boom comes from the Italians, the Germans, and the Spaniards who work with us to raise the standard of our work and our production, when the riches are still basically the ancient cultures that Brazilians established with the help of a friendly and faithful slave. (*O Exemplo*, p. 2, 14 Nov.1926).

In the narratives built around the construction of the “Mãe Preta” monument, gender differences were added to ethnic and racial differences in the representations of “Mãe Preta”. Hall (2000) argues that the visible fact of ethnic and racial difference also manifests itself in sexual difference, and he also highlights the importance of gender studies as movements that have generated great impact on academic and social spheres, enabling them to question concepts that are considered universal, especially those that define what is “proper” for men and women. Bianca Guizzo (2011) also emphasizes the contribution of Gender Studies to relativize, create tension, and discuss issues related to differences attributed to women and men, considered by many scholars as something “naturally” given, and not culturally constructed.

However, the most frequent gender representations of “Mãe Preta” that circulated in *O Exemplo* kept the sense of naturalized femininity, associating black women to roles and attributes regarded as feminine, such as maternity, sweetness and delicacy. While the black man was associated with labor, the black woman was given the role of motherhood and reproduction of the species, even if they kept the same work routine alongside the enslaved men in the sugarcane and coffee plantations in Brazil, between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. In order to discuss such representations we think it important to include the words of Rachel Soihet (1997, p. 367), a gender researcher aligned with critical theories. We understand that women from low income classes (but free) and black women (slave and free):

[...] did not adapt to the characteristics that are considered universal to women: submission, modesty, delicacy, fragility. They were women who worked a lot, mostly not legally married, who fought in the street, and used profanity, fleeing, to a large extent, the stereotypes attributed to the weaker sex.

However, one can observe that the “Mãe Preta” monument was reinterpreted by the editors of *O Exemplo*, who selected a visual image for “Mãe Preta” that was different that the traditional artistic rendering.

While the dominant image of “Mãe Preta” was represented only with a white child, the image that circulated in *O Exemplo* adds the image of black children, who are positioned at the feet of “Mãe Preta,” while the white child is being breastfed. Therefore, in the black press, memories of “Mãe Preta” are symbolically constructed which are associated with the memories of the pain and suffering of black mothers, who were required to feed the children of their white mistresses, and leave their own children without nourishment



Figure 2 - Mãe Preta

Source: *O Exemplo* 13. May 1926.

Concluding Remarks

In the context of race relations in Brazil in the 1920s, newspaper editors at *O Exemplo* appropriated the narratives of the national campaign for the construction of the “Mãe Preta” monument that was disseminated in other newspapers, particularly in *A Notícia*, from Rio de Janeiro while both reproducing and negotiating hegemonic meanings. Accordingly, they not only adapted the hegemonic narratives about “Mãe Preta” to include criticism of ethnic and racial prejudices, but also the monument’s symbolism with the contributions of Afro-descendants to the Brazilian identity, whose members had worked side by side to build the greatness of Brazil, highlighting the positive contributions of the black presence to nationality and to create tension for the whitening ideology.

On the other hand, journalists from *O Exemplo*, by representing Brazil as a place where blacks and whites, through their shared relationship with a symbolic black mother, were brothers, they anticipated the idea of a racial democracy, which was built in a more systematically fashion in the 1930s. Therefore, as already pointed out by Seigel (2009) and Albert (2011), the meanings of race were being negotiated and redefined in the 1920s, as well as evidence of the exchange of ideas between the newspapers.

In this sense, we agree with Stuart Hall when he says that in the black diaspora there was appropriation, co-option, and selective rearticulation of ideologies and cultures, along with the preservation of African traditions (Hall, 2003). Hall argues that in the cultural logic of the diaspora there are no pure cultural forms, but only hybridized forms, a mix of ideas, confluences of more than one cultural tradition, and negotiations between dominant and subordinate positions. Thus, on the one hand, the campaign for the “Mãe Preta” monument records a continuity with the hegemonic representations of gender shared by the dominant media of Rio de Janeiro and by the black press in São Paulo, and on the other hand, there is the construction of new projects that referred to the needs of social inclusion and the protection of rights for the Afro-descendant community. Also, the visual representation of “Mãe Preta” in the white

press of Rio de Janeiro was negotiated and redirected by the black press of Porto Alegre to include among its imaginative representations the suffering of “Mãe Preta”, who had to abandon her own children for the sake of another person’s children.

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