

Woman from Bahia, and the Lack of Authority in Afro-Brazilian Women

The anonymous painting, *Woman from Bahia* (1861) is a portrait painting that was created at the time of Brazilian Independence. In it, an Afro-Brazilian woman - a Baiana - is depicted, and this work represents the dilemma of depicting Afro-Brazilians in art. Brazil was establishing their identity as a nation, and within in that nation lived many Afro-Brazilians – some freed, some not, some in the process of being freed – so artists of this time often commodified and tokenized these people, showing off the allure they have to foreigners in hopes of attracting them to Brazil in order grow their national identity. The woman in this painting is adorned in a navy-blue dress, and jewelry across her neck and head. She is seated stiff, in front of a plain background. There are no objects surrounding her, offering no allusions to any of the woman’s cultural background. There are some areas that are highly detailed, while others fall short in this aspect. These features in this painting make it an exemplary piece that highlights the commodification of Afro-Brazilian women, and how it is a result of the power imbalance between the artists and these women. In this paper, I will be analyzing and discussing the ways in which the artistic elements utilized in the painting *Woman from Bahia* (1861) was a reflection and tool in the commodification of Afro-Brazilian women of the time. I will be utilizing my own observations that I have conducted and the conclusions that I have made while examining and studying the painting in conjunction to Maya Jimenez’s article, “The Myth of the ‘Baiana’ in Nineteenth-Century Portrait Painting”. The article will complement my initial annotations of the painting, showing how the artistic elements are effective in helping the viewer separate these women from their specific cultures, taking away any sense of authority and agency from these women, as it was solely in the hands of the artists depicting them. I will be using Mario Barata’s “A Escultura De Origem Negra No Brasil” to highlight how this was done intentionally, and if allowed, Afro-Brazilians could have created their own identity without the interference of these

artists. Along with this, I will be discussing ideas from Erica Lorraine Williams' book, "Sex Tourism in Bahia: Ambiguous Entanglements," and how paintings from the late 1800s were successful in degrading Baianas, and the sentiment of stripping the authority away from Afro-Brazilian women was continued on into present-day Brazil.

This work first caught my eye at the beginning of the semester because of the figure depicted in it. I had never seen Black people depicted in historical portraiture painting in any of my other art history classes before, so seeing this piece was refreshing and I was ready to give kudos to the artist that created it, as well as other pieces that would relate to it. However, as I began to look more closely at the painting, I concluded that the creation of this painting was harmful to the image of Afro-Brazilian women. Numerous features of the painting highlight the lack of authority these women had while being painted. This is evident in the fact that the woman is seated in a poised manner, with her hands situated on her lap, staring off into the distance with a blank stare. She comes off as stiff because of it, and it looks unnatural. The clothes that she is wearing are also important to talk about. She's wearing a deep navy-blue dress and the style feels European in nature. Along with this, the jewelry that she is adorned with look generic and the average viewer would not connote this type of jewelry with the subject of the painting's cultural background. There are no signifiers to the woman's cultural background, whether that's the clothes that she wears or the jewelry, or even how the background of the painting may have been handled with significant objects to the figure. Instead, the woman in the painting sits in front of a white wall, one that has no embellishments or any interesting objects on it. The subject and the white wall are constrained by an oval framing that has been added. She is the only form rendered in this painting, and yet it appears like she is not rendered to completion. While her face is rendered beautifully and with much detail, her limbs seem sausage-like and without much

specification. The painting itself is uneven. There are parts of the figure that are rendered competently while other areas are shallow; the figure is so obviously African and yet there are no allusions to her historical background. Many aspects of this painting seem contradictory, however this was inevitable, as the painting highlights the uneven power dynamic between the subject and the artist. The ability to depict Afro-Brazilian women is solely in the hands of the artist, and these women were unable to have any authority in the image of themselves that was displayed to the world.

This sentiment is echoed in the photographic images that also depicted Baianas, the cartes de visite. These photographs are the opposite to *Woman from Bahia*, with the women in the pictures wearing their signaturing clothing. But even with this sense of cultural background, the women still have no power in how they are depicted, because now, their clothing in these photographs tokenizes them, making them the exotic beings of Brazil that attract foreigners. In Maya Jimenez's "The Myth of the 'Baiana' in Nineteenth-Century Portrait Painting", Jimenez touches upon this, stating, "... the carte de visite participated in the definition of the baiana as an Afro-Brazilian type. Because photography was utilized and incorporated into scientific and travel accounts, its supposed facticity served to legitimize, rather than counter, myths of Afro-Brazilian women as exotic and superstitious." It's interesting to see that in contrast to *Woman from Bahia*, this cartes do establish more cultural identifiers for these women, and yet, because these women are not in control of the photographs, they are commodified, and used as an attraction. It supports the idea that the power imbalance results in this commodification, and that *Woman from Bahia*, and other paintings like it, were pertinent in those results as well.

This power imbalance, of course, is the result of the slave trade, with many Afro-Brazilians still being slaves at the time of the production of this piece. These artists intentionally

did not receive any input because their authority was all that was needed when depicting these women. However, it is a fact that Afro-Brazilians were able to preserve their culture well. This is obvious through the cartes de visite, since the women wore clothes that were identifiably African. In addition to that, in Mario Barata's, "A Escultura De Origem Negra No Brasil", it's stated, "De todo o continente americano, sd em nosso pais (Bahia, durante muito tempo, e Rio) se conservaram, de maneira evidente, as técnicas e concepções plasticas africanas." Barata claims that Brazil is the only place in the Americas where African styles and concepts of art were preserved in its entirety. He continues in the next paragraph by stating that many museums and private collectors have trouble differentiating pieces that were brought to Brazil during the inciting times of slavery from pieces that were created by their descendants. This journal article was written 100 years after the date of creation of *Woman from Bahia*, and it highlights that even after 100 years, cultural preservation has been successful. It contextualizes the power imbalance, showing just how Afro-Brazilian representation during Brazil's growing national identity could have resulted in the humanization of these women. During the creation of *Woman from Bahia*, their cultural identity would have been just as strong as it would have been 100 years later, so if they just had the authority to convey themselves and their culture through art at this time, instead of the artists, they would have been able to create rich and meaningful art works that reflected their cultural identity during Brazil's national beginnings. Instead, it continues to echo the lack of authority that these women had and has evolved further into modern times.

When discussing *Woman from Bahia*, the main talking point is regarding how the artist depicted the woman how they wanted to. In a sense, they idealized the figure, with her now being seen as European by proxy after following Brazil's expectations. This conflicts with the imagery set forth by the cartes de visite, where they were sexualized and shown as purely exotic.

This dilemma highlights again how they were commodified, only seen in the way the viewer wants to view them. The viewers of these cartes de visite were primarily European men, and the use of these cartes was to attract them to Brazil. In a sense, the sensuality and how exotic these women were became a fantasy to these men, and because of this groupthink, these Afro-Brazilian women were tokenized. And this commodification is still being echoed today with sex tourism in Bahia. There is still a power imbalance, and a lack of authority for these Afro-Brazilian women. While exploring how the issues brought up with *Woman from Bahia* could be relevant to today, I found Erica Lorraine Williams' "Sex Tourism in Bahia: Ambiguous Entanglements". The text delves into sex tourism and sexual experiences that take place in Bahia. Within these nuanced conversations, Williams brings up the notion of sexual hierarchies and sexual attraction regarding the Afro-Brazilian women of Bahia, especially in the eyes of non-Black sex tourists. These findings are important in shedding light on the sexualization of these modern-day women, and I was able to relate it back the sentiments I've shared about the underlying reason *Woman from Bahia* was able to be created: the power imbalance and lack of authority inherent to Afro-Brazilian women.

There are two specific chapters which highlight how the lack of authority has evolved. The first is the chapter, "Racial Hierarchies of Desire and the Specter of Sex Tourism." In this chapter, Williams annotates stories that she has heard from white women that live in Brazil, and what becomes evident is how they feel like there is a hierarchy of desire, with Afro-Brazilian women being at the top, especially for sex tourists. However, although Williams does start off by highlighting the dismay of these white women, she soon turns the lens onto how the inherent implications these women have and how that negatively affects Afro-Brazilian women. Williams writes, "Merely moving through the sexualized touristscape forces Afro-Brazilian women to

negotiate propositions from foreign tourists, who assume that these women are sexually available. In some ways, Becky and other white foreign women are also presumed to be sexually available, but this assumption is not attributed to “innate” characteristics but rather is based on the assumption that white foreigners are seeking black eroticized bodies... One does not have to be a sex worker or a sex tourist to feel the effects of discourses regarding sex tourism. Becky’s story illustrates the common expectation that foreign men and women who come to Bahia for cultural purposes will be eager and willing to engage in intimate encounters as well.” These encounters of course highlight the lack of authority that is now innate in Afro-Brazilian women. They are viewed in one specific light and idealized by these tourists and other Brazilians, akin to the likes of how during Brazil’s independence, they were molded into the eye of the beholder, and idealized version of themselves.

In Williams’ chapter, “Moral Panics” she shifts attention to actual sex workers, and their anxieties surrounding their field of work. The stories that Williams’ shares once again hearken back to how other people’s idealization of them is pushed onto these sex workers. Williams writes, “She had had a foreign boyfriend who had started out as a client. For her, the defining factor that marked the man’s transition from client to boyfriend was that he no longer paid her for sex. He wanted to marry her and take her to Europe. However, Fabiana did not see this as an once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. She had significant reservations about traveling abroad with a client turned boyfriend: “I’m afraid to leave Brazil. I’m afraid of the cold, of language difficulties, of not having money to return.” Another sex worker, Lydia, shared a story of how a cafetina (madam) invited her to go to Spain. She was excited at the opportunity and got a passport. However, at the last minute, she refused to go, because she believed that Spanish men only liked to have sex without condoms, and she was not willing to subject herself to that kind of

risk overseas.” Again, these women were able to have some say in how they’re depicted, because they are sex workers that have consented to this type of acknowledgement, but at certain points they have to face the forced imaginations that their clients have and won’t be free of, because this commodification and tokenization of them and their bodies has been built up for centuries.

Williams’ work on the study of sex tourism in Bahia informs us of the power dynamics that were at play during the creation of *Woman from Bahia*, as we can draw comparisons between the two circumstances. As a whole, both the creation of the painting and this study of sex tourism highlights the lack of authority that Afro-Brazilian have in how they are perceived. They had no agency in the ways that they were depicted, instead a concoction of commodification and tokenization was presented to us as the ideal. This is important to know, because although it is admirable that during the creation of *Woman from Bahia*, artists wanted to depict the Afro-Brazilian women that were a part of Brazil’s growing national identity, there must be a critique of how these women were essentially exploited. *Woman from Bahia* is not just a portrait painting, instead it reflects the nuances that were relevant at the time of its creation, highlighting how Afro-Brazilians were both slaves and freed; how they were a part of Brazil and heralded, and yet at the same time still lacked agency.

In conclusion, the anonymous painting, *Woman from Bahia* (1861) is an essential art piece that through historical contextualization, commodifies women like the one depicted in the painting through the power imbalance between artist and subject, and the inherent lack of power that comes with it. This power imbalance originated due to slavery, and resulted in the commodification of these women, as showcased in *Woman from Bahia* and other paintings like these, where they were given ideals by the viewer and the artist of what it meant to be Brazilian. The cartes de visite also highlight the paradox regarding depicting Afro-Brazilian women, as it

informs us that even when these women had agency in how they dressed themselves, they were still commodified for the foreigners that were entranced by them. Conversely, these women were inherently seen as exotic and foreign, and these notions have continued to modern day, with the underlying notion of sex tourism in Bahia is the continued dehumanization of Afro-Brazilian women through sexualization and fantastical idealization. The conversations that I have brought up of course also brought along with it the answer to how to rectify the control that the world has had over Afro-Brazilian women. In the conclusion of her book, Williams writes, "I have learned that it is necessary to take seriously the voices and perspectives of sex workers rather than assuming that we speak for them and know what is best for them." I didn't exclusively talk about sex workers, but this sentiment still holds true, to combat the centuries of rewriting the stories of Afro-Brazilians, their experiences must actually be told by them.

Bibliography

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