“Race” in Portuguese: Representations of Race in Brazilian Literature

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Introduction

• In Brazil, notions about the history of race have shaped representations of Negros and Mulattos in literature and cinema. Representations of Afro-descendants changed from the middle of the nineteenth and twentieth century. Three periods are identified: the Emancipation Period (1850-1888); the Whitening Period (1890-1914); and the emergence of a Racial Democracy and Military Dictatorship (1930-1980).

• The Brazilian elite in each period strove to paint a portrait of harmonious racial relations, but development of an Afro-Brazilian consciousness began to emerge, paralleling the racial democracy theory.

• In the nineteenth century, racial mixing was seen as leading to degeneration and to Brazil’s backwardness. Subsequently, an ideology of “racial democracy” was followed by a denouncement of racism in Brazil.

• This study demonstrates how cultural representations of Afro-Brazilians are related to ideologies of race and concerns of the elite regarding apparently high rates of miscegenation.

Background

• Brazil had the largest slave population in the world.

• Slaves mainly worked in mining and sugar cane sectors.

• 35% of captured Africans involved in the Transatlantic Slave Trade were transported to Brazil.

• Approximately three million Africans reached Brazil.

• Slavery ended May 13, 1888; Brazil was the last country to abolish slavery in the New World.

• Brazil has the second largest Black population in the world, with Nigeria being the largest.

Significance of the Study

Studies of “race” in Brazil have been the domain of the social sciences. Representation of “race” must be taken into account in cultural products and literature. Dominant ideologies of “race” varied with time and location. The significance of this study is to provide another perspective of analyzing racial constructions through Brazilian literature and cinema.

Method

When conducting research in the humanities, one is limited to using secondary sources. I was often confronted with blind spots; often relying heavily on what was previously said about the theme of race in Brazil. To answer my research questions, I analyzed books, articles, and film that related to my topic. In contrast to other fields, I was required to step outside the realm of literature to analyze what historians and social scientists previously discovered.

Research questions:

• How are Afro-Brazilians represented in literature and cinema?

• What role did historical events and changing attitudes regarding miscegenation play in representations of Afro-Brazilians?

To answer my research question I used:

• Usage of interdisciplinary sources (history, literature, and film).

• Usage of library databases.

Discussion

Emancipation-Whitening Period (1850-1914)

• The importance of this period is to gain an understanding of how “race” is constructed in Brazil in contrast to different ideologies of race during slavery in the United States.

• The first half of this period marked resistance to racial mixing, while the second half regarded miscegenation as a “corrector” to Brazilian bl ackness.

• Miscegenation allowed the Brazilian elite to speculate Brazil’s future in terms of economics and political power.

Racial Democracy-Military Dictatorship (1930-1980)

• This period illustrated how the Brazilian elite perpetuated the idea of a racial paradise through a history of miscegenation, as a way to compete globally.

• This marked the beginning of Black movements that rebuke the discourse about a racial democracy.

• The rise of Embrafilme (Brazilian cinegraphic movement that incorporated Blacks) during the military dictatorship reinforced the belief of Brazil as a racial democracy.