

BORDER/LINES

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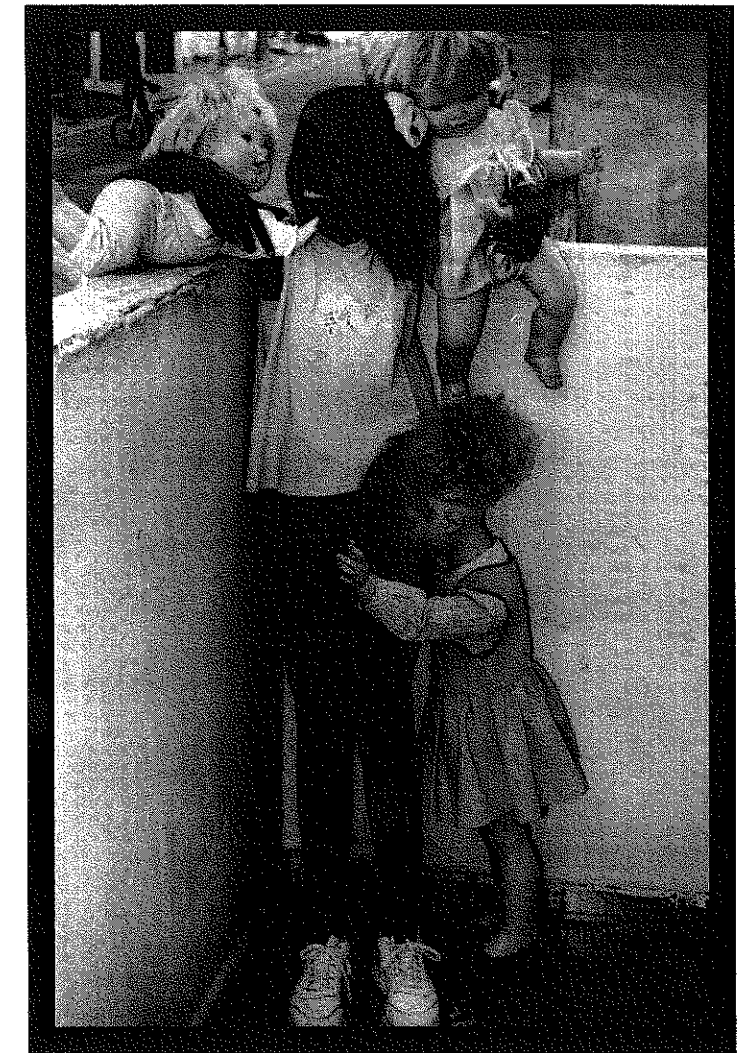
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by Marcia Cruz

translated by Michael Hoechsmann

black woman, white image



Professional training are still a reality for black people today. In the case of women, those who were chosen to work in the house of their masters as "mucama" under slavery have now been freed up to do the same job as domestic help.

Mirror, mirror on the wall...

To look in the mirror and to see the ebony colour of one's skin, the thick lips and the curly locks of hair is an eternal disillusion for many black women. This is because Brazilian divas have white skin, long and straight hair - blonde, at best - and thin lips. This European model of beauty, dictated by the elites many years ago, weighs heavily upon the self-image of black people. The ideology of "whitening" (making oneself whiter by adopting the attitudes of white people) affects men, women and children. A black woman journalist comments: "The first doll I was given by my mother was large and white, with blonde hair and blue eyes. At that time, I didn't understand anything about the difference in skin colour. I was just a girl who loved her doll and

In 1992, Benedita da Silva, a mayoral candidate in Rio de Janeiro and a federal delegate of the Worker's Party, narrowly missed becoming the first black woman elected as mayor to an important Brazilian city. Were it not for the colour of her skin, the situation would be considered normal; an analysis of the reality for black people in this Latin American country shows that the candidacy of Benedita da Silva is distinct.

According to the data of the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, Brazil is the second largest black nation in the world with 44.5% of the population of African descent. Nonetheless, these numbers do not symbolize full participation in society, and, 104 years after the abolition of slavery, changes with respect to the identity and valorization of black people are still very slow. Abolition did not facilitate the entrance of black people into the labour market or the political arena, nor did it even guarantee the rights and responsibilities of citizenship itself. Illiteracy and lack of pro-



called it my daughter." Black dolls have only recently appeared.

At the 10th Conference of Black Women in Brazil which took place in Sao Paulo in August 1984, Benedita da Silva spoke of her own anguish as a black girl: "I would like to tell you something very difficult. I once bathed myself in detergent because I wanted to whiten my skin. I did this because I thought that if detergent could whiten clothes, that it would do the same to my skin." Declarations such as this one reflect the reality of black women in Brazil. There are millions of people who do not see themselves reflected in society. They are not visible on television because to become models of beauty they must look similar to Xuxa, the queen of kids in Brazil - and now of all of Latin America. Very few Brazilian black women are photographed for either masculine or feminine magazines. Almost none are executive secretaries, lawyers or doctors.



White Communication

The impossibility of fleeing from colour through the mirror leads many people to disguise their black identity. In an article for *Retratos de Brazil* [Portraits of Brazil], the sociologist Clovis Moure stated that non-white Brazilians responded to the 1980 census using 136 different colours to avoid being labelled as black. According to Moure, the use of terms such as "chestnut, dark brown, sunburned, mulatto, brown," among others, shows how "Brazilians flee from ethical truth, seeking through symbolism to put themselves as close as possible to the model established as superior." Helena Theodoro Lopes writes in *Cadernos de Pesquisa* [Workbook of Investigation] 63 (1987) that "to affirm themselves as a person, the black person has to negate their identity, but

because they need their own personality, they live a total contradiction. . . To be black in Brazil is one of the most cruel things on earth, because it means living in permanent conflict within the family and in social, cultural and professional contexts. It is very difficult to come to an adequate resolution of this problem at a personal, social and professional level."

The media in general, but television in particular, reinforce the ideology of "whitening." Black women, who are almost never present in advertisements or T.V. programs, play a part only when the objective is to signify sensuality and to awaken the desires of the (male) viewer. To herald the opening of this year's Carnival programs on the Rede Globo, sculpted mulatta and black beauties were chosen. They appeared totally naked on the screen with their bodies painted in bright colours. Thus, on a national network it was once again reinforced that this is what black women are good for: to drive men crazy with their bodies; they are insatiable and they dominate the arts of pleasure. They are not humans, but objects. The black militant Vanderlei Jose Maria, who also participated in the 10th Conference of Black Women in Brazil, states that: "the entire European representation of romance, of romanticism, of passion and of love was always conceived with the white woman as muse. . . How do we look at black women? We look at them as erotic fruit waiting to be eaten."

Resistance

The barriers to active participation in society, independent of skin colour, do not mean that black men and women are not struggling against discrimination in Brazil. With Benedita da Silva and Gloria Maria (reporter at Rede Globo), singers such as Sandra de Sa, Lecy Brandao and Elza Soares, as well as many others, women have representatives who will help them sing, chant and revindicate their right to appear and to be - to be who they are in all of their colours.

Resisting and organizing have enabled the black population to develop mechanisms of participation to construct their own history. Among the accomplishments of the Brazilian Black Movement it is important to emphasize the changes to the Constitution. It is now against the law in Brazil to discriminate against either ethnic or racial groups or individuals who are part of these groups. Also, changes to the educational system have addressed the inequality of the sexes, the struggle against racism and all forms of discrimination. The history of black people must now be included in school curricula.

Knowing that the Constitution has laws guaranteeing the citizenship of black people does not mean that the struggle is over. Benedita da Silva argues that it is necessary to develop the consciousness of the black community. Says da Silva: "Our work continues, and moves on to the growth of black consciousness and the recovery of Afro-Brazilian cultural memory."

Marcia Cruz is a black Brazilian journalist who is currently freelancing.

Women's Radio in Mexico City*

by Sonia Riquer
translated by Pilar Riaño

*Presentation at the Union for Democratic Communications conference, "Feminism(s) and Cultural Resistance in the Americas," Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario, 7-10 May 1992.

The Aliade Foppa Centre for Alternative Communication in Mexico City may be contacted by fax at (5) 559-2301.

Alternative women's communication in Mexico is integrally linked with the feminist movement which emerged in the 1970s in our country, as in Europe and North America. Those who first opened the doors to feminism in Mexico were journalists, writers and academics. The first newspaper article on feminist demonstrations appeared in 1972. This report inspired a group of women to form the first feminist organization in the nation. From the beginning it was important to create new channels of communication for the new ideas, for the new images, and to combat the traditional images of women as housekeepers, good mothers or sexual objects. In this spirit emerged the first feminist publications, the first attempts at alternative communication. And radio in Mexico, as in the rest of Latin America, was the ideal medium to reach women who often did not know

how to read and who listened while doing domestic or manual work.

The first alternative radio programme for women in Mexico was produced in 1972 by Aliade Foppa. She is a very important woman for all of us, but especially for us in Latin America, who acknowledge her as one of the symbols of the Latin American feminist movement. She was a pioneer in communications and created FEM, the first feminist



magazine in Mexico. She created the first feminist radio programme and taught the first feminist courses at the National University. She was an art historian and a poet. She was a Guatemalan woman who was assassinated in 1980 by her government when she returned to her country.

Because of all this, the Aliade Foppa Centre for Alternative Communication was named after her. The centre has existed for three years

but the work of the women who constitute it has been going on for ten years. We work for a government-funded educational radio station. The first series of programmes we made was called "The Women's Cause." The series originally ran for six months. The interest of women listeners was so great that they put pressure on the station and the series lasted for six and a half years. We also produced a weekly news report for women, and we have extended our work into cinema, video and audiovisuals. I am very interested in discussing ideas about how we could extend our work on a low budget in alternative communication. Because alternative media exists in a marginal space, what we would like to achieve is autonomy and to have our own centre funded by our work.

Recently, with women in Germany, we organized an exhibition which gives an overview of women's organizations in Mexico City. Approximately sixteen organizations were represented, among them indigenous women, domestic workers, artists, communicators, lesbians and punk girls. This exposition was shown in Mexico and is now in Europe. We believe that alternative communication may help us to live in harmony, in a more democratic way.

