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Similarity in dissimilarity slippages in identity, race, place and belonging

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2018
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UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND

SIMILARITY IN DISSIMILARITY

Slippages in identity, race, place and belonging

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GUIDELINE

Masters in Fine Art (by Research)

Johannesburg, 2018

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ABSTRACT

The core of my work is the dialog about racial identity and the slippages of belonging. The notion of identity in my work is within the Brazilian context and within the parameters of race. My research process involves self-portraiture, juxtaposition, layering, reinterpretation, and repetition. I create multiple compositions of my own identity in order to complicate existing interpretations of blackness through text, and images.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two years, I have been researching about the issues of identity and race. As a mixed-race Brazilian, I have realized that my image is connected to not only a slavery past but also to an African past. In Brazil and in most of the African Diaspora, unlike European descendants, an African descendant in most cases does not know much about their ancestry. There is a vagueness in the past that kept me from the knowledge, narratives, and positive representations of my black heritage. My work is an attempt to fill historical, cultural and social gaps that prevented blackness from being a positive, valid, celebrated and possible identity.

I began painting self-portraits in my first year as an undergraduate student. I was interested in the idea of a standardized type of photograph that allows social identification of individuals (ID/Passport photos), and the potential that one image can



Image 1 *Exercício Diário, 2011*

have when translated into different mediums and, in the essence of the subject portrayed.

Turning my attention to photography, echoes of my previous reflexions came to me. I immediately returned to my first work with photography *Exercício Diário*[1], 2011,

[1] Literally translated: *Daily Exercise*.

a photo diary. Although back in 2011 I was not consistently thinking about multiplicity,



Image 2 *Dessemelhança Construída, 2015*

mixing, repetition, and identity nor race, I can still use all these words to describe this early work, as it was the first step of my self-portraiture exploration.

With the combination of photography/Photoshop, it is viable to produce many possibilities with one single image. Within a single frame of the photographic self-portraits that I have created, there exist visual multiples. The lines of the images'



Image 3 *Denegrir: Tornar-se Mais Negro, 2016*

layering become visible, and it is possible to see how the photos are combined/layered. The synthesis among these visually multiple/mixed photographic images, came with printmaking, more specifically linocuts. It is another way I found to translate multiplicity into images, I kept the same ID photograph/mug shot composition adding to it the typical texture of the linocut process.

The results from these experiments are three series: the photographic *Dessemelhança Construída*[2], the printed *Denegrir: Tornar-se Mais Negro*[3] and, in early stage, plaster sculptures *Máscara*[4], all of which are elucidating blackness and proposing



Image 4 *Máscara, 2015*

[2] Literally translated: *Dissimilarity constructed.*

[3] *To become blacker*, in a free translation of the title of the work. If we search the Portuguese verb "*denegrir*" in a dictionary, we will find that its literal meaning is to make something black; to become black. However, the way that it is most usually conjugated in everyday life is figuratively: to say unpleasant things that give people a bad opinion of somebody. My intention with these works is to think about the fluidity that is part of us and about concepts that shatter us daily.

[4] Literally translated: *Mask.*

discussions about distortions of "truths", fluidity of self-representation, racial identity and, specifically in the sculptural series, violent distortions of reality.

The purpose of this intentional artificiality of the resultant art piece is not to "find out" what is real and what is not, but to think about the encounter these images make possible.

GUIDELINE

Marked by a fundamental ambiguity, the category "brown" (or mixed-race) assumed various meanings over time in Brazil, as a transitory state between a black (negative) past and a white (positive) future of the Brazilian nation. The history we all learned through books and through images was created by white hands, as the historian Beatriz do Nascimento (1942-1995) says in the 1977 documentary called *"O Negro da Senzala ao Soul"*[5]*.* Bearing all that in mind, I attempt, through creative research, to show structures of power and, how some existences are invisible or understood only under fixed categories.

Throughout my research process, I was constantly trying to find a solution that could combine all the elements I am working with: identity, race, belonging, ancestry, multiplicity, repetition, and layering.

The file you have received was written based on academic modes: it stands on research, which means that before writing, I read and analyzed the work of sociologists, historians, anthropologists, artists, and curators.

I have made three decisions that guide the work. First, I decided to use footnotes as a way to present the content. Second, the work is printed on transparent paper and the pages are unbound. Thirdly, I made small interventions in some of the images within the dissertation.

Footnotes

To represent a shift of power and to indicate an alternative reading on the topic, I wrote and then erased the text leaving only the footnotes. The blank spaces and the footnotes are not just a representation. They are, in fact, the result of the wiped out of existing sentences, a deliberate gesture and an erasure of sorts.

[5] The documentary created by the Department of Journalism of TV Cultura of São Paulo in 1977. It shows how American soul music, its themes and its culture (gesture, clothing, habits, etc.) influenced the black youth of the late 1970s and served as a connector of a feeling of pride and belonging, which spurred political mobilization against racism and in favor of racial rights. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5AVPrXwxh1A Last accessed February 18th, 2018.

Footnotes usually cite references or comment on a designated part of the text above it. When the reader comes across the footnote in the main text of a paper, they look down at the comments right away, or continue reading the paragraph and read the comments below, and in other cases they do not read the comments at all. In academic writing, the footnotes support an existing text, and occupy a secondary role in the reading experience, in a similar way that the "other" or black subject occupies a marginal space in History. By deleting my text and only leaving the footnote, what once occupied a secondary or additional role, only supporting the main subject of the text, is now the focus of the work.

Transparency

The term transparency, as used in the humanities and in other social contexts, implies openness while communicating. It operates in such a way that it is effortless for others to see what actions are performed. However, the transparency I apply in my work, in a sense, pretends to be easily decipherable, and yet it is not. The transparent treatment relates to my process of layering and fluidity. The entire process seeks a more intuitive knowledge than an objective one, where images and words have the same value and complement each other. There is the intention to make the text not easy to read, as the information I am presenting is not part of the History as we learned it in school. It deals with hierarchies of power, and can/is interpreted in different ways, but because the pages are unbound, the reader has the possibility to move the page and make the reading process clear and, also because the pages are unbound, each page can relate to any other page according to the connections the reader decides to make. I suggest a path to follow but the reader is free to change it if they desire, whether it means to flip through quickly (ignoring the footnotes) or lifting each page to be able to read them, recognizing during this process that they are not as "transparent" as it appears.

Imagery

I use a varied range of images: images of my own work, family photos, images from other artists' works, as well as paintings and engravings from the Brazilian colonial period to present day. In some of the images that represent the colonial period, I made interventions to point similarities, and symbols used to represent groups of people and dynamics of power.

ERASED CHAPTERS

The chapters engage in fluid identities; the need for self; revisiting what "black heritage" means, and unmediated histories (without the European lens).

The artist Rosana Paulino (1967) believes that the dissertation process needs to be an instrument that helps the artists expand their comprehension, conceptually and technically, of the artwork they are producing. The writing process should not replace the importance of the artwork, but instead, make possible an amplification of meanings that can lead to the understanding of the work. This is especially important when the artist's life is closely linked to the construction of their work.

My research process finds resonance in theories, thoughts and working procedures present in other disciplines and poetic constructions. It is a dialogue between writing and the development of the practical work in the studio, materializing ideas through the production of text and images.

ERASURE AND REPETITION

In June 1954, the Johannesburg Non-European Affairs Department (JNEAD) occupied a new building at 80 Albert Street, east of Johannesburg CBD. The department was responsible for planning and regulating almost all aspects of black urban life, becoming a site where the movement of black lives was regulated and monitored over decades through what would be referred to as “pass laws”. JNEAD, also known as the Pass Office issued a form of internal passport designed to segregate the population in order to control the mobility of blacks in “white areas” during the Apartheid era.

The building is listed on the Johannesburg Heritage List, and from 1994 until February 2018 served as a shelter for abused and/or homeless women, their children, and teenage girls. It was run, from 2001 until its end, by Usindiso Ministries. Even though the shelter was officially closed, socially disadvantage and abused women continue to live there until this day.

I made a series of interventions at the site of the old Pass Office, and more specifically around two plaques labeled “City of Johannesburg non-European Affairs Department

Head Office". The plaques, which remain unchanged since the building's erection in 1954, flank the entrance of the building. During the intervention, which took place over a period of just over a month, I repetitively inserted images of myself around the plaques (and subsequently at the entrance to the building).

The images were created by layering the same self-portrait with a variety of other portraits, all of which are in the ID/passport close-up format. Through layering each and every portrait with mine, I present similarities across the board, but more importantly highlight the dissimilarities within each individual image. The repetitive wheat-pasting of the images, which outnumber the two permanent plaques and yet remain fragile and erasable in comparison, not only speak to ideas of resistance and multiplicities, but their ultimate disappearance speaks to the historical erasure of multiples of marginalised bodies. Through one interaction with a resident of the building, it was brought to my attention that the residents (women and children who mostly come from backgrounds of abuse) are currently being accused of hijacking the building, following the shelter's closing in February 2018, and they will probably be forced to leave their homes, having no place else to go, leaving the plaques unchanged and intact. This further adds an unexpected layer to the intervention and its extended meaning. The building has a continued history of violence towards people of colour, invalidating their humanity, their individuality, their basic needs, their struggles. A violence that just changed its form, but it is still affecting and oppressing their experiences. After one month of constant pasting, and another month following the end of the intervention, the paper posters are gone, but the "non-European affairs" stone signs remain intact.


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BURGEMEESTER VAN JOHANNESBURG
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