The "Audacity" of Visibility: Preta-Rara's Feminist Praxis

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Abstract

In this article, I examine the formidable array of artistic production and advocacy work by Preta-Rara, a feminist rapper from São Paulo, Brazil, especially her use of social media and her music, in which she mobilizes feminist discourses to challenge racist and sexist imagery of black women that proliferate in mainstream representations. Preta-Rara's self-expression through the visibility of her body directly contests traditional notions of the place and purpose of black women's bodies that have been reinforced and reconfigured through popular representations over the past century. I utilize Preta-Rara's own term *audácia* (audacity)as a way to understand the way she frames her own subjectivity, and further as a way to approach other black women performers' interventions in the public sphere. In this way, Preta-Rara herself provides a theoretical framework of *audacious* existence as a way for us to understand her choices and experiences. Using this lens, I illustrate the importance of Preta-Rara's use of her own body in her music and her social media profiles as a source of pride, an expression of joy, and a fount of artistic creativity. In this way, I use *audacity* to understand how Preta-Rara subverts expectations for her body to perform poorly paid manual labor, and instead uses her body as a site of cultural resistance that affirms herself and black women and girls who listen to her music and follow her activities on social media.

Keywords: Preta-Rara, Feminism, Brazil, Blackness, Rap, Performance, Social Media

Introduction

"*Dançar, dançar é um ato político!* Dancing is a political act!" Wearing a glittery black dress covered with silver stars, a beaming black woman in her early thirties bounds up and down a small stage, her enthusiasm infecting the eager crowd as they press towards her, singing, clapping, and swaying along. It is June 2017 and feminist rapper Preta-Rara is reveling in the unique joy of a hometown show in Santos, São Paulo. Adding to her enthusiasm is the thrill of sharing the bill with Nega Gizza, the woman who first inspired Preta-Rara with the idea that rapping was an option for a plus-size black woman. She begins her set by clearly laying out her agenda for the evening: "Hoje é para nós mulheres pretas. Vocês vão se sentir representadas. [Today is for us black women. You are going to feel represented,]" (Preta-Rara, concert).[1] The crowd cheers their approval and she moves into a song from her album *Audacity*. Preta-Rara's lyrics reflect her personal experiences and refer to an all-encompassing reality for black women in Brazil, making her songs resonate more widely. Her lyrics

and banter between songs focus on the female body as a source of power and pride, pointing out that feeling good in your own body is a radical act when society discourages it. "O corpo é meu, vou dançar, transar, gozar. [It's my body, I'll dance, have sex, and enjoy myself,]" (Preta-Rara, concert). Half singing, half chanting this phrase, the show is momentarily transformed into a rally for women's rights. Preta-Rara shouts, "Meu corpo! [My body!]" and the crowd loudly responds, "Minhas regras! [My rules!]"

In addition to her regular musical performances as a feminist rapper, Preta-Rara also administers a Facebook page followed by more than one hundred thousand users that calls attention to abuses suffered by paid domestic workers. The success of this page provided her the Internet presence necessary to launch her award-winning YouTube mini-series addressing everything from experiences of childhood racism to women in hip-hop. Preta-Rara also organizes a support group for plus-size women. She gives talks, including TEDx São Paulo in 2016 and again in 2017.[2] She travels nationally and internationally, and she constantly updates her social media profiles on Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat. In this article, I examine Preta-Rara's formidable array of artistic production and advocacy work, especially her use of social media and her music through which she mobilizes feminist discourses to challenge racist and sexist imagery of black women that proliferate in mainstream representations. Preta-Rara is the daughter and granddaughter of domestic workers and a former domestic worker herself. She has become an outspoken critic of the many injustices of paid domestic service in Brazil, a widespread and visible legacy of slavery in Brazilian society. Preta-Rara's self-expression through the visibility of her body directly contests traditional notions of the place and purpose of black women's bodies that have been reinforced and reconfigured through popular representations over the past century. I utilize Preta-Rara's own term *audácia* (audacity) as a theoretical framework to argue that Preta-Rara subverts expectations that black women perform poorly paid manual labor; instead, she uses her body as a site of cultural resistance that affirms herself and the black women and girls who listen to her music and follow her activities on social media.

This kind of affirmation is critical amidst current events in Brazilian society that consistently empower bigoted elites and disregard the safety and freedom of disenfranchised groups such as LGBTQ, black, and/or working-class Brazilians. The current crisis in Brazilian democracy culminated in a political coup in 2016 that removed a democratically elected leader and produced the subsequent election in 2018 of an extreme-right and authoritarian president.[3] These developments have meant heightened vulnerability for marginalized groups and increased threats to freedom of expression. In this context, being a highly visible black woman in control of her own narrative is a powerful act of

resistance against the real dangers of violence motivated by racist, misogynist and homophobic hatred. In this article, I focus on Preta-Rara as an important case study of the many black women using social media, music or other forms of creative expression to proclaim the value of their bodies in highly visible ways.[4] Preta-Rara represents the subversive potential of black women who create meaning around their own bodies, tapping into their consciousness of black womanhood on regional, national and transnational levels.

Because of her multiple roles as a musician, educator, activist and digital influencer, Preta-Rara's activities provide an example of the broad range of diverse media strategies used by black women to make themselves visible on their own terms, take control of the meanings attached to their bodies and sexualities, and create a new imagery associated with black womanhood. While Preta-Rara's identity as a musician is important and I do analyze some of her musical production here, I do not provide detailed analyses of her songs' musical elements. Rather, I pay close attention to Preta-Rara's visual interventions in music videos and her aesthetic choices as a performer and digital activist. In particular, I foreground Preta-Rara's intellectual contribution, from dialogues with other black feminist thinkers to notions of subject-making and self-representation of black women through her conceptualization and enactment of an *audacious* existence. Such knowledge production about gendered racialized bodies as expressed through social media content and artistic production constitutes an assault on traditional visual culture; it is an indispensable response to the elevated sense of vulnerability provoked by the current political crisis.

The material for this article comes from Preta-Rara's diverse creative and intellectual expression, including her Facebook pages, her Instagram account, and her YouTube channel. Preta-Rara's viral Facebook page "Eu Empregada Doméstica" has over 160,000 followers and her artist page has approximately 37,000 followers. Sometimes there is overlap in the content of these pages, but "Eu Empregada Doméstica" focuses on sharing first-hand accounts sent in by domestic workers, while her page as an artist includes information about upcoming events, photos and videos of Preta-Rara, and posts reacting to current events or providing affirmations about being a black woman in Brazil. Her Instagram account has over 85,000 followers and shares much of the same content as her Facebook page, especially photos of herself, but also images that share important information about her calendar. The videos on her YouTube channel include tracks from her album *Audácia*, the ten episodes of her web series, and a few vlog-style entries exploring particular topics—all have thousands of views each. I have been following these social media accounts since Preta-Rara's Facebook page went viral in 2016. From her photos, posts, videos and songs over the past several years, I have

collected examples that express Preta-Rara's black feminism through her *audacious* body politics and her concern with other black women and girls. Each example, described in detail below, has a different reach and purpose that will allow me to make my argument that Preta-Rara subverts dominant images of black womanhood, adding her voice to the conversation about what it means to be a black woman in the twenty-first century.

In the following section, I examine tropes of black womanhood especially as they relate to black women's bodies and sexuality. Then, I investigate meanings of *audacity* in Preta-Rara's feminist knowledge production and praxis, focusing on the importance of visibility. How do her aesthetic and attitude resignify images of black womanhood and what is the cost of such audacious anti-racist visibility and self-affirmation? In the following section, I pay close attention to black women's expressions of sexuality in Brazilian cultural production to illustrate how Preta-Rara and others flip the scripts about their own bodies. Finally, I explore how her dedication to improving circumstances for younger black women and girls ensures the lasting impact of her audacious interventions in Brazilian culture.

Black Women and Representation in Brazil

In "Racism and Sexism in Brazilian Culture," Lélia Gonzalez calls attention to three key figures associated with black women in Brazil: the *mulata* (mixed-race or mulatto woman of African and European ascendency), the *doméstica* (maid), and the *mãe preta*—literally "black mother," analogous to the US mammy figure (Gonzalez 224). The *mulata* represents the racial mixture that is characteristic of how the Brazilian population imagines itself, as well as the supposed sexual availability of black women, in this case specifically women with more "whitened" traits. *Mulata* as a category is a rejection of blackness, placing black women closer to a white standard (Corrêa 50). João H. Costa Vargas details how this rejection of blackness works through his concept of hyperconsciousness and concomitant negation of race in Brazilian racial formation. Through this configuration, discourses of racial mixing contend to eliminate the importance of race while maintaining a strong concept of blackness and whiteness in which whiteness is always more valued (Vargas). Several authors have noted that while qualities associated with blackness are usually denigrated, black women are "read" and valued as *mulatas* for their sex appeal (Caldwell, *Negras in Brazil*; Goldstein; Pinho *Mama Africa*; Williams). This sexual desire for black women is used to suggest an absence of racial discrimination, even though the sexualization of black women arises from gendered racial hierarchies. Imagining and portraying black women as sensual *mulatas* has justified their sexual exploitation. Furthermore, there is a clear

distinction between the idealization of black women as sexual objects and the valorization of white women as standards of beauty (Caldwell, *Negras in Brazil* 51; Williams 52-53).

If the mulata is hypersexualized, the image of the *mãe preta*, often imagined as a larger black woman with ample nurturing breasts, is asexualized. While the body of the mulata functions to provide sexual services to white Brazilians, the purpose of the body of the *mãe preta* is to lovingly care for the daily needs of children of the white household. In both instances, black women are reduced to their bodies and the services those bodies can provide. These two images of black womanhood, born out of the crimes of slavery and reimagined and refashioned over the past centuries, continue to impact how black women are viewed today in Brazil, in particular through the image of the black domestic worker. Whether a black woman is actually or presumed to be working as a cook or cleaner, her body is seen as available for service, for sex, or for whatever fantasies have been projected onto her. Gonzalez discusses the naturalization of the black woman as a sexualized mulata or as a domestic worker with the repetition of stereotyped representations in newspapers, on the radio, and on television (Gonzalez 226). Gonzalez suggests that this binary notion of mulata/domestic worker arises from the idea of Brazil as a racial democracy, a persistent belief that has underlined much of Brazil's social thinking throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century. The notion of Brazilian racial democracy asserts that Brazil's racial relations are marked by relative harmony due to the high degree of racial mixing. Gonzalez notes how this discourse lauds the sensuality of a Carnaval queen while at the same time masking the daily reality of black women, who are often assumed to be domestic workers, or bodies that function to serve the white population (Gonzalez 228, 230). As a dark-skinned woman, Preta-Rara does not fit the stereotype of a sensual mulata, yet she audaciously defies the asexualization of large, black women and refuses to use her body in service to anyone but herself.

In *Afro-Paradise*, anthropologist Christen A. Smith further develops Gonzalez's ideas of stereotyped perceptions of black bodies, investigating how blackness in Brazil (especially in the northeastern state of Bahia) is culturally appropriated and celebrated. Smith points to how this celebration is completely disconnected from the physical black body, allowing black people to be violently excluded from society. Scholars such as Patricia de Santana Pinho have noted this apparent contradiction in attitudes towards blackness (*Mama Africa*). However, Smith argues that both the appropriation of black culture and the violent exclusion of black people are two sides of the same coin and constitutive of the Brazilian nation. In "Putting Prostitutes in Their Place," Smith also mobilizes Gonzalez's arguments to analyze the case of Sirlei Carvalho, a black domestic worker who was beaten by white teenagers while waiting for a bus. The young men justified their actions by saying that they

believed Carvalho to be prostitute (Smith "Putting Prostitutes" 107-8). This situation is one of the potential violent consequences of the naturalization of black women as violable bodies ("Putting Prostitutes" 108). Smith connects the symbolic violence of racist jokes and grotesque representations of black women constantly displayed in popular media with the physical violence enacted on their bodies (for example, Sirlei Carvalho) arguing that these aspects cannot be separated. Representations of black women produced by Preta-Rara and other black women using YouTube and other social media platforms create visibility for their own talents and political beliefs and function as essential examples of cultural resistance against the racism and sexism that cause and allow not just the social exclusion of black women, but also the violation of their bodies.

Audacious Body Politics

Preta-Rara's notion of *audácia* encapsulates her approach to resisting racism and sexism by having the audacity to exist and be visible as a plus-size black woman in universities and beachfront condominiums, places thought to be reserved for whiteness. Preta-Rara exhibits *audácia* through her self-pride and appearance, through her angry denunciations of discrimination as well as by radiating joyfulness during her performances, photoshoots and daily activities. In short, *audácia* means being unapologetic for her blackness, for her bold aesthetic, and for her full range of human emotion. *Audácia* is about expressing oneself fully without worrying about causing discomfort to others and by often embracing discomfort in others to destabilize social norms. Through her audacious ways of being, Preta-Rara responds to how she is regarded in society with self-styling and self-imagery that challenges assumptions about herself, her body and her sexuality. In some instances, this comes in the form of creating a safe space for black women of varying body types and sexualities so that they may enjoy music, dance, and poetry. At other times, it takes the shape of loud and angry protestations against racism and other forms of discrimination when some individuals would expect her silence, shame, or self-doubt. In all cases, *audácia* is a strategy that Preta-Rara uses to resignify the experiences and values of black womanhood in Brazil and the black diaspora in general.

In interviews and talks, Preta-Rara has expressed her artistic and political interest in causing discomfort through her physical appearance (the use of bright color clothing, facial makeup and hairdos) to create a heightened visibility. See for example Figure 1 where she sports bright pink, purple and sky blue twists piled high on her head, matching purple sunglasses, sky-blue puff ball earrings, and purple lipstick. Her chin is proudly lifted upwards

Figure 1. Preta-Rara in 2017. Photo by Juh Guedes. Reproduced with permission from Preta-Rara's Facebook profile.

and she wears a big smile. This image perfectly reflects Preta-Rara's *audácia*. She explains that black women have been invisible in society and that her aesthetic is her way to finally be seen. This audacious occupation of space and insistence on visibility emphasizes the ways black women position themselves in opposition to expected roles of servitude. Consequently, she uses her appearance as a political act.

Visibility has an important history when it comes to the meanings of blackness and whiteness. In *Black Skin, White Masks,* Frantz Fanon memorably sets out how the acts of seeing and being seen can constitute a form of racialized violation. He describes moments when his blackness was publicly noticed by white strangers in France (Fanon 109-114). Through the enunciation of the phrase, "Look, a negro!" Fanon's subjecthood was produced through a white gaze as a fractured collection of stereotypes (Fanon 110). The novel experience of a black man connoted either being perceived as different at best or as sub-human and dangerous at worst (Fanon 112). Saidiya Hartman discusses practices of looking, spectating, and being seen during slavery in the United States. Hartman writes about the spectacle of black suffering on the minstrel stage and in slave coffles being led to and from the auction block, often accompanied by music and singing. The hypervisibility of black bodies served to make the spectacle of black suffering mundane; moreover, Hartman contends that this ritual was intended to transform that suffering into scenes of pleasure and enjoyment, thus minimizing the violence of the slavery. In Brazil, dances performed by black women, whether for spiritual purposes or otherwise, were also seen as a form of entertainment—with explicitly sexual connotations—, especially for foreigners (Williams 57).

It is important to note these meanings of visibility and hypervisibility of blackness to understand how Preta-Rara re-invests these practices with meanings that contest modern racism. She dances joyfully on a stage, not for the benefit of voyeurs or white entertainment, but for the pleasure she derives from moving her body in ways that make her feel sexy. Returning to the vignette that opens this article, we glimpse the important practice of black women creating safe spaces for themselves in opposition to daily spaces dominated by white supremacy. "Today is for us black women," Preta-Rara tells the audience, acknowledging the majority black women, including many

lesbian couples, and affirming that the space is meant for them. Through creating this space for black women, she rejects the stereotype of a happy subservient black caricature and replaces it with authentic and diverse expressions of joyfulness. This enjoyment comes from an exhibition of black talent that is based on radical self-love and a feminist commitment to body autonomy for women. The creation of these types of spaces is necessary to counteract the daily hardship of racism, sexism, homophobia, and fatphobia.

As a part of Preta-Rara's full acceptance of her physical beauty, she is vocal about the need to valorize black bodies that are also large. In an Instagram post (May 30, 2017) that shares two black-and-white photos of her wearing only short cut-off jean shorts and a brassiere, Preta-Rara states, "O que eu mais odiei no passado é o que eu mais mostro no presente, minha barriga. Foi tanto soco, beliscão eu passava o dia todo encolhendo ela e as vezes sentia falta de ar. Como a gente se maltrata por causa dessa merda de padrão imposto. Viva a Liberdade de ser quem você é! (What I most hated in the past is what I most show off in the present, my belly. I was always jabbing and pinching it, I spent the whole day sucking it in and sometimes feeling out of breath. How we mistreat ourselves because of bullshit imposed standards. Long live the Liberty to be yourself!)" To contest these standards, Preta-Rara formed a collective in her hometown of Santos, São Paulo called "Ocupação GGG" (XXL Occupation). The group of plus-size women meet to offer each other support and participate in public actions. For example, the women annually don their bikinis and participate in a photo shoot at the public beach in Santos. Through claiming this public space, the women of XXL Occupation assert their right to exist on the beach without being ashamed of their bodies, or on the bus without worrying about causing others discomfort. In the episode of her web series that features the collective, Preta-Rara describes being on a crowded bus and the only unoccupied seat was the one next to her, knowing that it was a combination of her skin color and her size that deterred her fellow passengers from sitting beside her.

Her recognition that her body provoked a sense of discomfort pushed Preta-Rara to use her body as a tool, rather than allow herself to feel excluded. In her investigation on the social construction of blackness in visual representations, Nicole Fleetwood argues that the black body is always already troubling to audiences because markers and meanings attached to black bodies force audiences to recognize blackness. In particular, she understands representations of black women in dominant visual culture as "excess flesh," building off Hortense Spillers's distinction between body and flesh (Fleetwood 109). Excess flesh refers to representations of black women always being in excess to standards of white womanhood (Fleetwood 111). Fleetwood uses this perspective to investigate black

women cultural producers who draw attention to the "troubling" nature of representations of black womanhood precisely in order to challenge them (Fleetwood 113). Stuart Hall has discussed how this strategy of playing on stereotypes of blackness in order to subvert them has been used by many black artists (274). I expand on Fleetwood's idea of excess flesh to refer to the literal largeness of Preta-Rara and other plus-size women performers. Their bodies and flesh are doubly excessive, both exceeding expectations of white femininity as well as exceeding expectations of feminine thinness, also connected to white beauty standards.

Through her performances, Preta-Rara appropriates the "troubling" nature of the visibility of black women's bodies to confront prejudices of race, gender, class, and body size that intersect to produce her as a body destined for servitude in the Brazilian social imaginary. She rejects this predetermination and asserts herself as a beautiful, talented, sexy woman confident enough to wear a revealing bathing suit on a crowded beach. In this manner, Preta-Rara engages in what Fleetwood calls "enacting excess flesh." Fleetwood writes:

> To enact excess flesh is to signal historical attempts to regulate black female bodies, to acknowledge black women's resistance of the persistence of visibility, and to challenge debates among black activists and critics about what constitutes positive or productive representation of blackness, by refusing the binary of negative and positive. (112)

Fleetwood demonstrates that enacting excess flesh does not imply a "positive" representation of black womanhood but can point to a more complex reading of black women's performances outside of victimhood while still recognizing the historical factors that have shaped notions of black femininity. Preta-Rara's double excessiveness as a large black woman allow her to enact her flesh in provocative ways that upset audience expectations about her social position. Her embodied experiences of rejection and violence by an unequal and discriminatory society push her to confront debates about representations of blackness.

One of the most obvious ways that black women exceed the norms of white womanhood is through their hair. Once again, Preta-Rara embraces this excess by allowing her hair to expand to its full potential, either wearing her hair loose in an unrestrained natural style or done up in twists or braids, frequently experimenting with multiple colors, from purple to blue to red. In her song "Cabelo Bom" ("Good Hair"), she inverts the common expression "cabelo ruim" (bad hair) to refer to thick, textured Afro hair. Hair is an essential aspect of how most Brazilians define racial categories for themselves and others, especially for women. It is common parlance to say "good hair" to refer to

long, straight or wavy hair that "swings" (Caldwell, *Negras in Brazil* 92). Somebody may have light skin, but "bad" hair or the "wrong" hair that betrays their African ascendance, undermining their ability to claim whiteness (Pinho, "White But Not Quite"). While studying cosmetic surgery in Brazil, Alvaro Jarrin found that although Brazilians celebrate the effects of racial mixing, African racial traits were rarely desirable when it came to the face or hair (543, 547). Even within families, racialized physical features including skin color, hair type, and nose shape can affect the way emotional capital is distributed (Hordge-Freeman). Each of these authors shows how white beauty ideals impact attitudes towards black women's hair, stigmatizing it as unattractive and "bad."

Preta-Rara's "Cabelo Bom" includes sounds of breaking glass, police sirens, and gunshots, giving it a combative feel. The lyrics accuse: "Cês querem nos matar, nos silenciar. (Y'all wanna kill us, silence us.)" The contributions of black women are erased from history books.[5] They are underrepresented in media, in professional fields, in academia, and in politics.[6] Black women are literally killed on a daily basis by police, by partners, by lack of access to adequate healthcare or by the slow wear of sadness and stress related to violence and loss of loved ones in their communities.[7] In this context, visibility becomes a political act. In a self-aware way, Preta-Rara's persona as a visible black woman with big, natural, colorful hair contests the erasure, marginalization and killing of black women. The angry tone of "Cabelo Bom" refers to these violent realities and posits black women's good hair as a defiant retort to this constant negation. "Você não suporta que nos lugares não passo despercebida. (You can't stand that I don't go unnoticed)," Preta-Rara sings, indexing her *audácia* to appear in places where black women ought to be invisible. She continues, "Me arrumo bem, me visto bem pra que todos me notem. (I get dressed up and done up so that everybody checks me out.)" She asserts her own beauty and unique style, intentionally making herself hypervisible. "Cansei de ser invisível nessa porra. (I'm fucking tired of being invisible)," she concludes angrily. Speaking at the end of the song, Preta-Rara reminds listeners, "Nosso cabelo é bom, certo. O duro é a porra do racismo. Meu cabelo é lindo, o duro é o racismo. Meu cabelo cresce em direção à minha auto-estima, sempre para cima. (Our hair is good, ok. What's bad is fucking racism. My hair is beautiful, what's bad is racism. My hair grows in the same direction as my self-esteem, always upwards.)" "Cabelo Bom/Good Hair" is a refusal to submit to invisibility, exclusion and death. It is a defiant ode to black women who unapologetically wear big hair, embracing its natural state and their right to occupy space with their bodies. In these bold enactments of excess, hair as a key feature of black women's bodies is an important symbol of audacious visibility.

As a result of Preta-Rara's decisions to draw attention to and celebrate her natural hair and large body, she has been the target of racist discrimination and vitriol online and in daily public encounters. In May 2017, posts and photos on Preta-Rara's Facebook page received a profusion of negative comments about her physical appearance. An overwhelming number of the comments reflected either a failure to understand how racism functions, or a disavowal of the existence of racism in Brazil, a longstanding tradition linked to the pervasive notion of racial democracy. One user Giovânia Costa commented, "Depois que inventaram essa merda de feminismo, qualquer trabuco sai ai se achando a gostosa sem ao menos ter o senso de feiura, slc [sê é louco]. É feia mesmo, não é pq é negra que tem que achar bonita. (After they invented that feminism shit, any old dog goes around thinking they're hot without even having an idea of their ugliness, smh [shaking my head]. She is ugly, just because she's black we don't have to think she's pretty.)" In such comments, Facebook users responded angrily and defensively to Preta-Rara's racial pride and demands for respect, apparently feeling incensed that what they deemed to be an analogous pride related to whiteness was not permissible. These severe negative reactions to Preta-Rara's presence, visibility, and outspokenness about racial injustice are an important aspect of her audacious practices. Oppression and anti-blackness are the other side of the coin to self-affirmation through visibility; discrimination is the price to be paid for *audácia* and an impulse for audacious practices in the first place. Preta-Rara is aware that she will anger and upset those who feel threatened by struggles for racial justice, but she chooses to maintain her appearance unapologetically, not only because that is how she wishes to look, but also because that is how she believes she can effect change in Brazilian society. Creating discomfort pushes people to reveal their prejudices and facing discrimination headlong shows to others that alternatives do exist. In the following section, I highlight how Preta-Rara and other black women audaciously express their sexuality in ways that shift national conversations about black womanhood, race and sexualized racism.

Sexuality and Audacity in Black Women's Cultural Production

Figure 2. Preta-Rara in 2017. Photo by Júlia Magalhães. Reproduced with permission from Preta-Rara's Instagram account.

In Joan Morgan's "Why We Get Off: Moving Towards a Black Feminist Politics of Pleasure," she advocates for full sexual autonomy for black women that includes a range of sexual expression not limited by the historic control and exploitation of black women's sexuality. As previously discussed, black women in Brazil are represented either as hypersexual (the mulata stereotype who seduces white men) or asexual (the *mãe preta* who exists only to nurture and care for white people). Many black women artists have sought to attain sexual freedom in their forms of expression, most notably women who are thinner, have lighter skin, and have straightened their hair, thereby approximating a white beauty standard. By contrast, black women like Preta-Rara who claim a right to freely express their own sexuality and call attention to and prioritize their own sexual pleasure reject this white beauty standard. In Figure 2, Preta-Rara emphasizes her own sexuality by appearing in a sensual photo wearing nothing but white lacey underwear. The photo is framed suggestively from behind, showcasing Preta-Rara's many curves. In this enactment of excess flesh, the photograph references a visual rhetoric of women's sensuality: soft lighting, provocative shadows, and sexy lingerie. However, instead of a standard, thin, white woman, Preta-Rara presents her audacious, large, black body as an object of desire. In this photo, which is one of a series, she affirms herself and her body as sensual, desirable, and worthy of pleasure. In addition to this affirmation, this photo, along with others like it that proliferate on her profile, presents a challenge to a white gaze that would reduce her to her body in its capacity to service others. She flips this objectification by using lacey underwear to foreground her own sexual desires and pleasure in her own body.

Preta-Rara further emphasizes her sexual autonomy in one of her YouTube videos in which she answers followers' questions about relationships. In 2018, after the success of her high-quality

web series released through her YouTube channel, she published several videos with a more traditional YouTuber format. In these, the creator of the channel speaks directly into the camera with minimal or no editing. The Q&A structure of the video also follows a familiar formula used by many successful YouTubers. In the video, Preta-Rara sits with a glass of red wine in her hand, wearing purple lipstick and eyeshadow that match her purple hair separated into long strands of tight curls. She also sports a pair of triangular black sunglasses and wooden earrings engraved with the expression "Foda-se" (Fuck You"). In addition to giving viewers advice about relationships, Preta-Rara divulges personal information about her own sex life and her process of self-acceptance. She discloses that there was a time when she felt comfortable having sex only with the lights off because she felt ashamed of her body as a large, black woman. This experience illustrates how dominant narratives about what constitutes sexiness can have strong effects on black women's confidence and their ability to take ownership of their sexual identities. Preta-Rara works to reverse this narrative in her own life and creates an image of herself on Instagram and YouTube as a large, black woman with an active sex life, and as someone who desires and is desired.

Preta-Rara also addresses her choice to post images of herself wearing bathing suits or underwear:

> Essa segurança, que algumas pessoas falam, "Nossa, Preta-Rara, você tem mega-segurança, né? Você tira foto de biquíni, tira foto de maiô, tira foto de calcinha e suitã." Não, gente, é uma construção diária mesmo. Então, tem dias que acordo e me sinto horrível, mas aí olho no espelho e falo, "Não. Sou bonita, meu nariz é bonito, meu corpo é bonito." E às vezes quando vocês vêem essas fotos, além de se aparecer, porque eu gosto sim de me aparecer, sim. Sabe por que eu gosto de me aparecer? Porque eu cansei de ser invisível nessa sociedade. E aí as pessoas tem que me ver. Em todos os lugares. Então, é para se aparecer sim, mas também para auxiliar na construção de novas auto-estimas. Sabe? Das mulheres se sentirem empoderadas também.
>
> This confidence, that some people say, "Wow, Preta-Rara, you're so confident, right? You take pictures in your swimsuit, in your bikini, in your bra and underwear." No, people, it's actually a daily construction. So, there are days when I wake up and I feel horrible, but then I look in the mirror, and I say, "No, I am beautiful, my nose is beautiful, my body is beautiful." And sometimes when you see those photos, besides showing off, because I do like to show off! Do you know why I like to show off?

> Because I'm tired of being invisible in this society. And so, people have to see me. Everywhere. So, it is to show off, but it's also to help in the construction of new self-esteems, right? For other women to also feel empowered. ("Relacionamento – Pergunta e Respostas!")

Again, Preta-Rara calls attention to two critical aspects of her audacious feminist practice: enacting excess flesh by occupying spaces typically reserved for white, thin, or conventional bodies, and actively helping other black women ascribe value to their bodies. Social media platforms provide a way for Preta-Rara to engage with other black women who may be undergoing similar processes of improving their relationships with their own bodies, avoiding tropes of hypersexuality or asexuality, and feeling in control of how they express their sexualities. This video allows Preta-Rara to speak candidly about her own audacious sexuality and inspire others to defy conventions related to their bodies and sexualities, "se a gente quer ficar com o boy, se a gente quer ficar com a mina, se a gente quer ficar sozinha (whether you want to be with a guy, be with a girl, or not be with anyone" (ibid).

Preta-Rara enacts her excess flesh as a large black woman in order to assert ownership of her own body and take control of how bodies like hers are represented, creating discomfort. She dares to display her sexual desires to contest mainstream white beauty ideals that dictate who has the right to desire and be desired. Control over women's sexuality (particularly black women's sexuality) has always been highly politicized. Regaining control over their sexuality in a body-positive, sex-positive manner is a radical way for Preta-Rara and others to defy a racist and exclusionary system. On one hand, feminist ideas and body positivity have become more widespread and have gained currency online. On the other hand, an equally visible backlash against political correctness and any form of increased liberation of women or people of color has emerged, and in fact is partially a result of this more visible circulation of feminist discourses that appears to threaten traditional hierarchies. In this context, women and people of color are more than ever under threat and simultaneously more than ever prepared to challenge the threat in the public sphere. In the next section, I examine Preta-Rara's dedication to influencing future generations as a part of her efforts to change the narratives about black womanhood in Brazil.

Black Girls and Black Dolls

Preta-Rara worked as a high school history teacher for six years in Santos and, despite deciding to make a full-time career of her passion for hip-hop, her interests in youth and education continue to permeate her work. A main concern for her as a public figure is to provide a positive image of a large,

black woman from a low-income background who is creative and confident in her body and her worth. This commitment is apparent in the themes of her music, especially the song "Falsa Abolição," and the web-series episode about childhood experiences of racism. The goal of providing a wider range of representations for black girls and young black women resonate with the wishes expressed by other black women YouTubers and cultural producers, in which they often speak about not wanting future generations to experience racism and low self-esteem as they did growing up. This shared vision for the future demonstrates the capacity of Preta-Rara and other women involved in similar work to shape intellectual discourses about race, gender and representation, both in Brazil and transnationally. Given the traditional lack of references for black girls in Brazilian society and the near absence of representations of black girlhood in popular media, this emphasis on recognizing black girls as important subjects in Brazilian society constitutes a further expression of Preta-Rara's audacious feminist praxis by making space for and giving visibility to black girls.

More than just a music genre, hip-hop has been characterized as a movement, as a unique culture with its own aesthetic, and even as a way of life for those most dedicated to it. In the late 1980s, rap music became known nationally in Brazil through the rising popularity of a group called Racionais MC's, consisting of four young black men from São Paulo (Gomes da Silva 168, 170). In the United States and Brazil, the early moments of hip-hop were characterized by a political consciousness in which young artists denounced racial injustice and poverty in their communities and nations (Gomes da Silva 168-69). Hip-hop then was a chiefly masculine space with very few women participants (Gomes da Silva 166). Women who did participate were expected to have a masculine aesthetic in order to fit into the masculine spaces of hip-hop culture (Gomes da Silva 166). Throughout the ensuing decades, women hip-hoppers have met with resistance from the male dominated and often misogynist hip-hop community, nonetheless women have continued to grow in numbers within the genre ("Cresce presença das mulheres"). In addition to the increasing influence of feminist discourses, especially in connection with racial awareness in the past few decades, many women in hip-hop are part of a movement of feminist rappers. Internationally, the formal elements of hip-hop are associated with political expression of marginalized groups. Because of this global appeal of hip-hop, feminist rap is a phenomenon not only in Brazil, but also in the rest of Latin America and the world.[8]

Within this context, Preta-Rara has established herself as a talented feminist rapper whose rhymes challenge sexist and racist expectations about black women and their bodies in Brazilian society. She began her career as a rapper in 2006 in the rap duo Tarja-Preta with Negra Jack. Through

this partnership, they created a music video for the song "Falsa Abolição" (False Abolition). The director of the video, Dino Menezes, posted it to YouTube in October 2013 and it has been viewed over 200,000 times. Shortly after the release of the music video, Preta-Rara pursued a solo career and her album "Audácia" (2015) includes a version of "Falsa Abolição" without Negra Jack. The visuals, lyrics, and participation of young girls in the music video show Preta-Rara's concern with future generations as part of her commitment to producing politically engaged content.

The music video for "Falsa Abolição" opens with images of white Barbie dolls against a black background. The dolls are unclothed and rotate eerily, some of them upside down and others suspended by their blonde hair. The slow rhythm and foreboding melody of the music combined with this disconcerting visual suggests a sinister side to a conventional toy for children. The lyrics begin, "Black girls don't play with black dolls. If we're all equal, why do you reject me?" and the sense of discomfort takes a more explicit form. The blonde dolls represent the difficulty even today for black people, including children, to see themselves represented positively in their daily lives. The absence of dolls with other skin tones reveals a significant discrepancy between the racial composition of the Brazilian population and dominant beauty standards. Many scholars have discussed this white beauty standard (see for example Caldwell, *Negras in Brazil*), demonstrating how it stems from whitening projects of the early twentieth century that imagine Brazil as a white nation to fit in with European ideals of progress and modernity. Cida Bento shows how the Brazilian elite's whitening project originates from a defense of their social, political and economic privilege in society. Imagining Brazilian society as white legitimated the exclusion of black Brazilians (Bento). When black Brazilians occupy spaces of privilege, it creates fear and discomfort. Silences surrounding whiteness and the role of whites in shaping racial relations in Brazil allow racial inequality to be framed in terms of economic factors. Blaming black Brazilians for their economic status is legitimated by negative representations (Bento). Reighan Gillam points specifically to the erasure of black girlhood in media and the dominance of representations of ideals of whiteness in television programs for children, particularly noting the connection between such ideals and standards of beauty for black girls. She gives examples of recent positive cultural manifestations of black girls that counter these negative trends. Gillam demonstrates the centrality of cultural practices for forging healthy self-esteem in black girls in Brazil. Preta-Rara highlights these practices to enact radical shifts of valuing black aesthetics and occupying spaces of privilege in future generations.

Because the "black as beautiful" aesthetic has not been valorized by the culture, there is a limited availability of black dolls with natural black hairstyles. Some scholars have suggested a

Figure 3. Still from the clip "Falsa Abolição," available on YouTube. Photography direction by Dino Menezes, Fabiano Keller and Michel Custodio.

connection between development of healthy self-esteem for black girls and the availability of black dolls (See for example Raynor). Despite some improvements in recent years, dolls with light skin and blonde hair are still more common. This problem is emphasized in the music video by repeated images of a black girl gripping a white doll walking listlessly through scenes of urban decay. Standing or walking slowly, her facial expressions register loneliness, bitterness, and disappointment. Here is a black girl who cannot find her reflected image positively. The feelings of rejection or inadequacy related to body, hair, and skin represented visually through her gait and facial expressions are a shared experience for black women and girls in Brazil. The black girl we see on the screen could be the protagonist from black author Geni Guimarães's short story "Metamorphosis" who violently attempts to rub the pigment off her legs after a dehumanizing history lesson at school about slavery. Or, she could be a young Preta-Rara, whose mother consoled her with the album cover of Alcione (a famous samba singer), showing her how grand, beautiful, and talented black women could be. A black girl experiencing rejection by a racist society is not an individual story, but one shared by all black girls who grow into black women. Preta-Rara and other women who struggle for gender and racial equality were all once that black girl and they dream of a future where that girl feels embraced by her society.

In addition to the solitary black girl with the white doll, Preta-Rara and Negra Jack invited a crowd of other women and girls to participate in the music video. Girls of a variety of ages stand alongside Preta-Rara to sing the chorus, some defiantly looking into the camera, others smiling nervously as they sing and sway to the hip-hop rhythm of "Falsa Abolição." This casting choice reflects Preta-Rara's interest in building a collaborative feminist community. Valuing collaboration over individualism, Preta-Rara and Negra Jack share the spotlight not only with each other, but also with women and girls representing a range of ages, body types, hair textures and skin tones. This inclusion further highlights the duo's commitment to challenging the norms that dictate which bodies belong on screen, especially through making visible most black bodies. Both collaboration and the celebration of a multiplicity of bodies and experiences are key aspects of Preta-Rara's feminist praxis.

Another result of the omnipresence of white beauty standards and rejection of black aesthetics is that, even when black dolls are made available, children may prefer to play with dolls that adhere to the dominant white beauty standard. The paucity of black dolls combined with the prevailing preference for white dolls characterize the symbolic violence produced by the social rejection of black people in Brazilian society. The images and lyrics of "Falsa Abolição" emphasize this multi-layered rejection, insistently asking with each refrain "Why do you reject me?" This rejection is evidenced by the continued exclusion of black Brazilians from positions of economic and social privilege in Brazilian society. Preta-Rara tells the story of being repeatedly turned down for positions after in-person interviews, interviews that she obtained only after removing her photo from her résumé. The young girl wandering through the video performs the experience of rejection that occur in all facets of life: rejected by employers, by universities, by neighbors, teachers, sales clerks, and even by family members.

In February 2017, the small business *Era uma Vez o Mundo* (Once upon a time there was the world) created a Preta-Rara doll. Jaciana and Leandro Malquiades created the business in 2013 with the intention of "creating representative toys for our children" ("A Era uma vez o Mundo"). The business recently released a selection of books and dolls (male and female), all based on black public figures. The significance of the Preta-Rara doll was not lost on her fans, as one commented on a photo of the doll posted on Facebook, "now black girls will play with black dolls<3" (Sara Donato). The creation of the doll in her image shows one tangible effect Preta-Rara has as a black woman, as an artist, as a plus-size model, and as an educator. Her interest in dolls, shared by other activists, underscores her commitment to the empowerment of future generations for the wider cause of improving social conditions for black women and men.

From Preta-Rara's time in the classroom to her inclusion of black girls in her music video to her partnership with the doll company, she positively influences black youth. The agenda of youth empowerment is critical to anti-racist and anti-sexist movements because it deals with the very survival and improvement of quality of life for future generations. Preta-Rara's work provides black youth with the necessary tools to defend themselves from the effects of racism in society.

Conclusion

In this article, I explored examples of the strategies that Preta-Rara uses to mobilize her own body to affirm herself and her sexuality in order to draw attention to social injustice and to provide positive representation of black women for current and future generations. This audacious approach to her work of uplifting herself, other black women, and younger generations of black girls reflects a radical departure from how black women are typically perceived and represented in Brazilian society. Even as Preta-Rara defies mainstream representations, she seeks to add her voice and the voices of many others to the growing chorus of black women past, present, and future who would affirm their right to exist in society. Thus, Preta-Rara theorizes her own existence as resistance and contributes to a diasporic, inter-generational knowledge production about black women's experiences. Preta-Rara's diverse activities parallel a wave of young writers and artists who use resources available to them to take a powerful and visible stance against racism in their country. Through these efforts, black women make themselves legible in ways that exceed the conventional imagery that has consistently reduced them to bodies that serve, either sexually or as domestic laborers. Given the complex history of the meanings attributed to black women's bodies and sexuality in Brazil, it is often a struggle for black women to be able to accept their bodies and express their sexuality in ways that defy expectations and make them feel confident in themselves. This process is challenging, it is important, and it is audacious. Taking advantage of as many media platforms as possible, Preta-Rara ambitiously uses her talents as a poet, a singer, and an educator to theorize resistance and strive for changes in representational politics for black women.

Notes

1 All translations from Portuguese are my own.
2 TEDx events are TED-style presentations not officially organized by TED Talks.
3 See for example *Democracia em vertigem* and Greenwald et al. There is an ongoing dispute in Brazil over the narrative of the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff.
4 Other examples include MC Carol, Gaby Amarantos, and Tia Má.
5 Despite legislation passed requiring schools to teach about black and indigenous history, there are still barriers such as lack of materials and resources and teachers with no training or knowledge about the content, and sometimes little or no desire to learn.
6 See for examples Araújo, Carneiro, Meneguello et al, and Silva.
7 See Caldwell, *Health Equity in Brazil*, Garcia et al, Oliveira, Roland, and Smith, "Facing the Dragon."
8 Examples: Las Krudas, Cuban feminist rap duo and Mare Advertencia Lirika, Zapotec feminist rapper

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