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_A TURMA DO PERERÊ_: BLACKNESS-AS-OTHER IN A BRAZILIAN CHILDREN'S COMIC

Abstract

This paper evaluates the representations of Brazilian otherness through an examination of the pre-dictatorial children's comic, _A Turma do Pererê_ by Ziraldo. The series reveals much about the marginalization of blackness in Brazilian culture, following the adventures of Saci Pererê, a black one-legged mischievous character from Brazilian folklore, and his gang of archetypal Brazilian children and animals. Within the series, the main character's racial otherness goes unmentioned in lieu of frequent commentary on his physical difference. This approach is a reflection of a Brazilian cultural and social resistance to acknowledge racial discrepancies despite contrary evidence, and serves to reinforce the marginalization of the other in Brazilian society.
A TURMA DO PERERÊ: BLACKNESS-AS-OTHER IN A BRAZILIAN CHILDREN'S COMIC

Introduction: The Marginalization of Damaged Goods

Theories of marginality and alterity (Dangler, 2005; Douglas, 1966; Moore, 1990; Said, 1979), explain generally why and how some groups are seen as social and political outsiders. Among these scholars there is general agreement that while visible physical characteristics can initially help to mark a person as a polluted outsider, there need be no initial physical feature or factor that renders a person socially polluted. Such a designation and the factors that mark a person or group as ‘polluted,’ ‘unclean,’ and therefore ‘dangerous, can be socially created. The social historian R. I. Moore (1990) describes this process in 13th century Europe for Jews and ‘heretics’; Dangler (2005) for women in Medieval Iberia; Douglas for the interface between ‘pollution’ and ‘cleanliness’ (1966); Said for the development of “Orientalism” as a discourse and its impact on how the Middle East is seen and described (1979).

Adopting such prior scholarship on marginalization and alterity, this paper examines a specific depiction of Saci Pererê, a figure in Brazilian folklore who can best be described as “damaged goods.” A leprechaun-like character who hops around on his only leg and wears a bright red cap, Pererê is easily recognized as well by his deep black skin color. Portrayed as a mischievous spirit, Saci Pererê is blamed for disrupting domestic life by burning cooking beans, frightening animals, and causing weary travelers to lose their way. This characteristic of the other, as the folkloric trickster who mediates between ‘bad’ and ‘good’ is an important theme in much literature on alterity (Douglas 1966). Indirectly, the quality of being able to cause bad luck to others suggests as well
the quality of ‘agent,’ pointing to another theme in alterity literature—that those who are socially and politically marginalized can be actors, albeit often disadvantaged vis-à-vis within a larger power and status structure.

Visually marginalized by his skin color and physical disfigurement, the folkloric figure of Saci Pererê provides most immediately a model for Brazilian children that communicates, ‘blackness-as-other,’ a message denied by Brazilian academic intellectuals at the time and left completely out of Ziraldo’s narrative for his comic series, *A Turma do Pererê*. Published originally during the four years (1960-1964) prior to Brazil’s military taking over the country, certainly a whole cohort of children were potentially consumers of Ziraldo’s popular comic series. Ziraldo, a white, middle class Brazilian artist, represented Pererê as an exaggerated version of the Brazilian folktale, employing trickster magical powers and bodily difference to send the message that everyone should know how to use their differences or ‘qualities’ to their advantage.¹ Ziraldo’s portrayal of Pererê as physically different in ways culturally negative in Brazil—physically handicapped and black—blatantly othered Pererê visually but not verbally — in the story line itself. In the context in which the comic was created, talking about race, even if not in explicitly negative terms, was considered racist. The comic series as a mere visual representation of difference couched within the folkloric trickster actions of a non-human character allowed Ziraldo’s comic to remain within the lines of cultural acceptability.

In further developing these arguments, I will first provide a theoretical background on blackness in Brazil in the first part of this paper (“Blackness in Brazil: Academic and

¹ “Cada um deve saber usar as qualidades que tem” (*Turma* 1:7 1976, 65). Translations throughout this paper are my own. Original text in Portuguese is included in footnotes.
Social Constructions”) as developed and promoted by Brazilian and international academics. I then present findings from my analysis of five comic stories from the *Turma do Pererê* series², from which three representative themes were derived for the second part of the paper, which focuses on “Comic Book Representations”; “The Search for a Paternal Figure”; “Hierarchies of Difference”; and “Mãe-Preta as Sensual Sage”. In my elaboration of these themes, I illustrate particularly the messages conveyed about race, gender, and bodily disfigurement. Through analysis of these themes I conclude that the comic’s representation of race is indicative of Brazilian society’s broader approach to racial difference during the early 1960s. Images of race in the comic most served to reinforce the widespread marginalization of otherness in Brazil.

**Blackness in Brazil: Academic and Social Constructions**

Blackness in Brazil is notoriously difficult to measure due to a long history of racial mixing and the plurality of racial terminology. In a 1960 census, the *Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatísticas* reported that 38% of Brazilians declared themselves to be of a race other than white, divided between *preta, parda, amarela*, and indigenous. Those who referred to themselves as *parda*, or of mixed African, indigenous, and European heritage, were a significant majority of the non-white population (29%), while the black population was only 8.7% and the indigenous 0.2%. Brazilians identifying as non-white were in the statistical minority at the time of the publication of *a Turma do Pererê*, with those identifying simply as black creating an even smaller group within this minority. However, as this section illustrates, ‘fact’ is less

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² *A Turma do Pererê* was published in 43 issues between October of 1960 and April of 1964. It has since been reissued in a variety of collections for sale to the public. For example, it was reprinted in comic book format by Editora Abril in 1975 and 1976 and in a series of *Almanaques* in 1991.
culturally resonant than what people are disposed to believe. In this respect, a long history of representing Brazil as a “racial democracy” sets the stage for understanding representations of Saci Pererê as a deracialized comic book trickster.

As scholarship on alterity and marginality demonstrates, at some point in the othering of people, this status comes to be codified into law. This has not been the case for Brazil, where blackness has been informally othered: in place of a strict set of formal laws and justifying racial persecution, there are social beliefs and cultural norms that keep blacks “in their place”—a system that Farmer (2005) refers to as structural violence. Such an informal system of racism denies its marginalized victims the discourses and intellectual frameworks to change their social situation. Indeed, Brazil’s ideology of “racial democracy” has directly worked against even questioning racial inequities.

Intellectualizing Racial Democracy

In the first half of the 20th century, the concept of a “racial democracy” predominated in Brazil. Perceived as being free from the racism experienced in other countries with similar histories such as the United States, discrimination was attributed solely to class and gender differences. The controversial sociologist Gilberto Freyre supported this argument in proposing that due to a long history of miscegenation, whites, blacks, and people of mixed race were integrated into a highly stratified social system. In such a system, all Brazilians share a common cultural heritage of mestiçagem.
This ideology was a reaction to the movement of scientific racism that gained international popularity in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Several schools of thought proposed that the inferiority of non-white races could be proven through scientific analysis based on physical differences. Much of the trend was based upon the idea that there was an inherent genetic difference between whites and blacks that was permanent: blacks were connected to nature and seen as essentially primitive, while whites were tied to culture and were civilized. So-called scientific and ethnological evidence was also used to promote the theory of polygenesis, which asserted that blacks and whites had been created at different times (Hall 1997, 243). Great importance was placed on racial purity, and fears that racial mixing would lead to the degeneration of the white race were common. The movement’s followers rejected African heritage as a dangerous and polluting element, and believed that it had to be isolated in order to protect white society (Borges 1995, 59).

This racial approach originated in Europe and was embraced by the elite in Brazil, but was difficult to apply to a country with a pluralistic tradition of race that was rooted in miscegenation. If the majority of the Brazilian population had African heritage and said heritage had been proven inferior, this implied that Brazil as a country was also inferior. During this period, Afro-Brazilian elements of society were either seen as playing a passive or insignificant role, or condemned as corrupting influences.

In an attempt to reconcile the concept of scientific racism with the racial reality in Brazil, the elite placed great faith in the concept of ‘whitening’, which proposed that constant intermingling of the races would eventually dilute the black presence, creating a

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3 Thomas Skidmore specifically identifies the ethnological-biological school (based on the theory of polygeny), historical racist thought, and Social Darwinism as contributing to the form of scientific racism that was most widely accepted in Brazil (1974, 49-51).
general public with a lighter skin color. It was thought that Brazil’s racial issues were gradually being “solved” through miscegenation, which was further supported later on by the encouragement of European immigration following the abolition of slavery in 1888. In other words, “the legacy of the Portuguese libido would ‘solve’ Brazil’s race problem.” (Skidmore 1983, 105)

Freyre built upon this concept in his landmark work, *The Masters and the Slaves* (1933), which introduced a new way of thinking about Brazil’s ethnic and cultural heritage. Essentially a portrait of colonial plantation society in the 16th and 17th centuries, it focuses on the disparate elements of agrarian Brazilian culture in order to compose a complete portrait of its patriarchal structure. Divided into sections that relate the contributions of native Brazilians, the Portuguese colonizers, and the Africans they enslaved, it focuses on the hierarchical, cultural, and sexual interactions between these ethnic groups. More than seventy years after its original publication, *The Masters and the Slaves* continues to be cited as an important reference for both Brazilian and international scholars that both incites debate and is approached as a point of departure.

A sociologist from a wealthy Recife family, Freyre traveled and studied in the United States and Europe in his youth, most notably at Columbia University under the well-known scholar Franz Boas. Boas was best known for his work that separated the broad category of race into separate components of ‘heredity’ and ‘culture’, implying that primitivism was not necessarily connected to race, but was learned and could be unlearned as a culture (Borges 1995, 71). This was a break from previous thought, which had held that African heritage was more akin to a genetic stain that carried implications
of primitivism along with it: according to Boas’ theory, black ethnicity did not necessarily imply a cultural link to the primitive.

In *The Masters and the Slaves*, Freyre extended Boas’ work to a Brazilian context, redefining the racial differences between the Portuguese, the African slaves, and the indigenous Brazilians as cultural contributions. The Brazilian elite of the 1930s embraced his approach because it allowed them to reject the biological and scientifically racist doctrines that naturalized racial inferiority (Goldstein 2003, 79). In this new way of thinking about race, the figure of the *mulato* gained a new level of symbolism in embodying this newly accepted Brazilian national identity, affording new opportunities for many Brazilians of mixed race. However, this expanded role in Brazilian society was limited in scope by the *mulato*’s placement on a scale of racial and cultural hierarchy. As Thomas Skidmore has written, “The mulatto can be said to be the central figure in Brazil’s ‘racial democracy’, because he was granted entry – albeit limited – into the higher social establishment. The limits on his mobility depended upon his exact appearance (the more ‘Negroid’, the less mobile) and the degree of cultural ‘whiteness’ (education, manners, wealth) he was able to attain” (1974, 40).

A fierce traditionalist, Freyre adamantly rejected the changes that industrialism and modernization were inspiring in Brazil as corrupting forces, advocating instead for the preservation of the old ways and their physical manifestations such as colonial architecture. As a reaction to the *modernismo* movement that was gaining momentum in the southeast of the country, he helped to develop an opposing ideology of *regionalismo* based in Recife. This movement proposed the superiority of the colonial hierarchy of *os velhos tempos*.
While *The Masters and the Slaves* changed the way many Brazilians approached race, it was not necessarily based upon a universal experience of race relations in the country. Jeffrey Needell has suggested that much of Freyre’s contribution to the construction of a Brazilian national identity was in fact based on a search for his own personal identity and an attempt to reconcile his own inner conflicts. “Much of Freyre’s celebration of miscegenation derives from an evocation of the sexual relationship between privileged white boys and *mulata* servants. It is now evident that Freyre was generalizing from a crucial experience of his own.” (1995, 69) *The Masters and the Slaves* today is held up as a portrait of the mixed roots of Brazilian culture, but stemmed in fact from the experience of a single individual. Freyre’s personal history looms large in passages such as his description of the black influence on Brazilians, speaking of

the female slave or ‘mammy’ who rocked us to sleep. Who suckled us. Who fed us, mashing our food with her own hands. The influence of the old woman who told us our first tales of ghost and *bicho*. Of the mulatto girl who relieved us of our first *bicho de pé*, of a pruriency that was so enjoyable. Who initiated us into physical love and, to the creaking of a canvas cot, gave us our first complete sensation of being a man. (1947, 255)

Here the black woman cares for the physical needs of the offspring of the white master, nourishing them presumably at the expense of her own children. In addition to introducing them to an imaginary sphere of fantastical stories, she removes his parasites and later fulfills his sexual needs. Women of color service the white child’s body in every way. Eventually, “the white male child learns to look to servants of color for sensual gratification and sadistic pleasure. Power, penetration, and punishment are naturally arranged from the top down.” (Needell 1995, 70)
These are Freyre’s own personal memories of his formative interactions within the domestic sphere with people of color, and while they are likely shared by others of similar culture and social stature, they reflect his specific experiences with slavery. Nancy Scheper-Hughes has criticized Freyre’s sociological analysis’ focus on the casa grande for neglecting the reality of the senzala: “The world that the Brazilian slave master fashioned consisted of more than the bedroom and the nursery: it also encompassed the sugar fields and the boiling house where both Indian and African slaves sickened and died in great numbers” (1992, 40). In glorifying a miscegenation that for the most part occurred between indigenous and slave women and their Portuguese masters, Freyre largely ignored the social history of men of color, relegating their importance to the far margins of Brazilian society.

Questioning ‘Racial Democracy’

A series of UNESCO studies in the 1950s presented evidence that Brazil did not have a racial democracy: racial inequality and the parallel ideology of “whitening”—arguing that with continuing racial inter-breeding Brazil would become increasingly white and more socially developed—were widespread, making any claims about democracy and racial equity for blacks questionable. In his 1992 article “Rethinking Race in Brazil”, Howard Winant stresses the role played by these studies in the understanding race relations in Brazil by “dismantling the myth of a non-racist national culture” (174) through considerable empirical data that indicated high levels of race-based discrimination. What followed was an ideology of racial revisionism, in which the idea of racial democracy that had been previously accepted was reexamined.
Although racial revisionism attempted to back away from the Freyrean racial perspective on race, it attributed social discrepancies not to race but to class, claiming that Brazil had made the transition from race to class through the process of modernization. One of the reports on the UNESCO-funded research describes the social system that was observed in a rural Bahian village during the period: "the one and only inclusive system by which actual rank is established is that of class. Race is but one of several criteria which determine an individual's class and is thus but one of several criteria which will determine how the mass of other individuals will actually behave towards him." (Harris 1952, 63) Race is viewed as a social attribute that influences the way that an individual is received by society, but only through its contribution to a broader notion of class. Charles Wagley similarly comments: "race or color prejudice or discrimination is but one aspect of class prejudice and discrimination, and does not operate as a single factor determining the patterns of relationships as it does in the United States. Social class is more important than racial type, and nowadays the two are no longer coexistent." (1952, 140) While racial prejudice certainly exists, skin color is secondary to class in placement within the hierarchy of social structure. According to this discourse, blacks are marginalized by their socioeconomic status over the color of their skin.

Although significant disparities in income and future opportunities along color lines are revealed in the research conducted at the time, race was seen as a factor secondary to socio-economic status. Winant points out that in order to truly demonstrate that Brazil's dominant social issue had become class, "inequality levels would need to be demonstrated across racial lines- the fact that 100 years after the end of slavery blacks are
still overwhelmingly concentrated in the bottom strata certainly suggests that race is still a crucial determinant of economic success.” (1992b, 178)

Despite scientific proof to the contrary, both the widespread acceptance of racial democracy and the tendency toward “whitening” are still prevalent in Brazilian thought today. The scholar Abdias do Nascimento has pointed out that under the guise of racial democracy, “the black is as free as any other Brazilian. In practice... the Negro is simply this: a racial pariah consigned to the status of subaltern” (1999, 380). The romantic notion that racism is nonexistent in Brazil due to its multi-racial composition denies those who experience discrimination the ability to take action.

In *Black Into White: Race and Nationality in Brazilian Thought*, Thomas Skidmore suggested that following the invalidation of the overarching equality of a racial democracy, much of the country’s white elite had chosen simply to avoid the discussion of race. In denying the marginalization of non-whites, “the elite was able to avoid even considering the possibility that the socio-economic condition of the non-white could be due to anything other than the society’s relative underdevelopment or the lack of individual initiative” (1974, 217). Despite evidence of significant disparities, for the elite, race continued to be a non-issue that was frequently left out of the conversation.

Winant refers to this tendency to attribute differences to class over racial discrimination as class reductionism. This position on race relations in Brazil remains common even today. “Brazilian elites, both right and left, continue to dismiss the significance of the racial variable in political and cultural life. The long-standing tendency to subordinate racial dynamics to those of class is still easily observed across the entire political spectrum.” (1992a, 85) Those who protest this attitude are often
accused of “rocking the boat” or disrupting the racial peace. In defense of the racial democracy, in the past the elite consistently followed an argument that the only racial ‘problems’ in Brazil result from the agitation of those who claim there are problems, who are consequently labeled ‘unBrazilian’ (Skidmore 1983, 108). The idea that those who question racial equality are essentially unpatriotic implies that the notion of racial democracy has been accepted as national fact in the bedrock of Brazilian national image.

In her anthropological study of a community in a Rio favela, Donna Goldstein points out that ignoring historically structured race-based oppression makes it almost impossible to address formally (2003, 105). The dominant silence on social inequalities attributed to race is particularly damaging in Brazil in that it essentially denies non-whites the ability to mobilize towards change. As Anani Dzidzienyo emphasized, “the official Brazilian ideology of non-discrimination achieves without tension the same results as do overtly racist societies” (1971, 14). Racial discrimination in Brazil assumes formidable power by passing unrecognized, instead contributing to a system of structural inequality that is equally harmful in the long run.

**Comic Book Representations**

**Unmentionable Blackness-as-Other**

*A Turma do Pererê* follows the day-to-day adventures of Saci and his gang of friends, largely made up of anthropomorphized animals in addition to some indigenous children in the rural yet anonymous setting of the Mata do Fundão, each installment imparting a carefully crafted moral lesson to its child readers. Not reflecting national demographics of the period, of the eleven regular human characters in the comic, two are
identifiably black (Saci and his love interest Boneca), three are indigenous, three are white adults, and three are of recognizably mixed race (including Rufino, Saci’s perpetual rival). While most characters identified as black or mixed race possess obvious racial attributes such as kinky hair, Saci himself remains almost two-dimensional in his blackness, the color of his skin apparently coincidental to his identity.

In the stories of *A Turma do Pererê*, Saci’s mythical blackness goes virtually unmentioned in the text and plotlines, but his drawn image separates him abruptly from the other characters on the page. Tinted an inky shade, bald and habitually unclothed apart from his ever-present red cap yet without visible genitals, and with only one lower limb to stand on, he is an anomaly within the story. Human characters are identified through clothing: the girls wear dresses, and Tininim the indigenous boy is clad in a loincloth and a necklace of shells, and the adults are dressed in conventional garb. Other characters take the form of easily recognizable animals, native or otherwise common in Brazil. Saci does not belong to any of these categories, being neither completely human nor animal, positioning him for a marginalization that the author contradicts by providing him with the central role he plays in the stories.

Ziraldo’s general avoidance of the topic of race despite its obvious representation in the comic can be seen as a reflection of the racial approach at the time that the comic was originally published. A variety of skin colors (as well as animal species) are represented in *A Turma do Pererê*, representative of the idealized vision of Brazil as a racial democracy. If those who complain of racial discrimination are “unBrazilian”, those who embrace Brazil as a multicolored society with no racial conflict are the utmost patriots.
The Search for a Father Figure: "Um Pai Para O Saci"

The comic's commitment to the ideology of racial democracy is most apparent in the story "Um Pai Para O Saci" (Turma 1 No. 2: 3-13, 1975) in which Saci-Pererê's racial and mythical origins are explicitly laid out. The story portrays Saci as the offspring of the imagination of o povo brasileiro, a people made up of native Brazilians, African slaves, and Portuguese colonizers. This 'national identity' as Pererê's parentage replaced actual familial connections. Indeed, in the visual narrative, the turma gathers with brightly wrapped packages to give to their fathers for the Father's Day holiday. This is the only explicit mention of paternal connections for any of the characters--while they apparently have biological fathers with whom they maintain contact, their fathers do not play a role in the everyday lives of the characters.

Wishing to fit in to the assembled group, Saci hops along a path ruminating about the perfect gift for his own father--a tie, a single boot: "a pair of boots, no! A single boot! After all, Pererê's father ought to have only one leg as well!"; before realizing that as a folkloric character, he has neither mother nor father. Meanwhile, his friends have gone to ask Professor Nogueira, a sage and bespectacled owl who the group frequently consults, about the identity of Saci's father. The owl informs them that Saci was born in a completely different way than his friends: "Saci is the child of the imagination of the Brazilian people!".

The turma is then regaled with Saci's myth of origin:

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4 "A Father for Saci"
5 This story was published prior to Father's Day in 1975, which in Brazil falls on the second Sunday in August.
6 "par de botas, não! Uma bota! Afinal, pai de Pererê deve ter um pé só, também!" (4)
7 "O Saci é filho da imaginação do povo brasileiro!" (5)
Before the discovery of Brazil, the Brazilian Indians knew of a bird called Iaci laterê! It was a black bird that jumped from tree to tree, and perched on the branches on one leg! His head was covered in red feathers and he was a ventriloquist. This was how he made the Indian hunter get lost in the forest... and the Indian was unable to hunt properly! For the Indians, Iaci laterê was a mischievous protector of the animals. Later the black slaves arrived... and when they learned the stories of the land, they mixed everything up, and transformed the bird into a one-legged black boy. The birds red head became fiery red hair! And since he had already recast Iaci laterê in his own image, the old slave storyteller put a pipe just like his in his mouth! Then it was the Portuguese’s turn, who transformed the black boy’s red hair into a cap like those worn by the fishermen of Nazaré... Taking advantage of the fact that the slave, in his own language had already mixed up Iaci laterê’s name, he baptized him with the name of Matinta Pereira! Then they reorganized it all, and from the Portuguese, the blacks, and the Guarani Indian was born this magic boy that today we all call Saci Pererê. (7-8)8

In this creation myth, Saci’s origins follow the general path of the formation of the Brazilian nation with some minor adjustments. At its foundation is an indigenous interpretation of animal behavior, in which the existence of a bird with unusual characteristics is understood as the embodiment of nature’s collaboration in the face of human interference. Through the iconic old slave storyteller, slave culture transforms the mischievous bird into a boy, recreating him “in his image”. Last comes the Portuguese influence that outfits the character in a traditional accessory from old world maritime culture and reinterpret his title. The “magic boy” is the result of the “reorganization” and

8"Antes do Brasil ser descoberto, os índios brasileiros já conheciam um passarinho chamado Iaci laterê! Era um passarinho preto que pulava de árvore em árvore, e pousava nos galhos, com uma perninha só! Ele tinha a cabeça vermelhinha e era ventríloquo! Assim ele fazia o índio caçador se perder na floresta... e com isso o índio não conseguia caçar direito! Para o índio o Iaci laterê era um diabinho protetor da caça! Depois vieram os escravos negros... e aí, quando aprenderam as histórias da terra, misturaram tudo... e transformaram o pássaro num negrinho de uma perna só! Sua cabeçinha vermelha, numa cabeça de fogo! E já que tinha recebido o Iaci laterê com o seu jeito, o velho escravo contador de histórias botou um pito igual ao seu na boquinha dele! Depois foi a vez do português, que transformou a cabeça de fogo do negrinho num gorro de aquelas dos pescadores de Nazaré! ...E aproveitando que o escravo, na sua língua diferente, já tinha arrevesado o nome do Iaci laterê todo, batizou-o com o nome de Matinta Pereira! Depois, reorganizaram tudo e, do português, do negro e do índio Guarani, nasceu esse menino mágico que hoje nós todos chamamos de Saci Pererê!"
blending of the three cultures, much as the ‘magic’ of Brazilian culture springs from its miscegenation.

Saci’s creation does not adhere strictly to the historical chronology of Brazil, however: here the black influence precedes the Portuguese. While in the creation of the Brazilian national myth, the Portuguese colonizer is the primary influence in both appropriating the land from the natives and forcibly importing the African population, in the story of Saci-Pererê, the European influence seems tacked on as an afterthought. In the comic’s interpretation, the Portuguese influence seems to be added on at the end out of spite, for the purpose of facilitating the colonizer’s control over the imaginary realm that its subjects have created.

In the story, the group is stymied by Saci’s apparent lack of a physical father figure, but Alain spells it out: “is it possible that these three races have today become a single race? Three that are just one, understand?” The “father” of Saci is o povo brasileiro, who is shown on the final page of the story waiting in an enormous line to receive wrapped presents in honor of Father’s Day. O povo is drawn as men, women, and children of (literally) all colors (fig. 1) and in a variety of combinations: a brown-skinned country man with straight black hair emerging from underneath his hat holds the hand of a small child with blond hair and the same skin color. A pink skinned man with kinky black hair shakes Saci’s hand. A woman painted light blue holds a similarly colored bald and smiling baby. Behind them stands a man painted bright pink with lines for eyes, clearly meant to be interpreted as an Asian immigrant. A tall and thin mustachioed caipira (country bumpkin) type has his arm around a portly woman with massive breasts

9 “Será possível que essas três raças viram hoje uma raça só? Três que são apenas uma, entenderam?” (9)
with dark green skin. All of the figures here included in o povo brasileiro are smiling, pleased to receive a commemorative gift from their imaginary creation. This image exudes interracial peace and harmony, the visualization of a multiracial egalitarian society in which all members give value to a national folkloric creation.

The use of exaggerated candy colors in place of realistic skin tones in this image can be interpreted in several ways. In painting members of o povo brasileiro outlandish colors, Ziraldo could be poking fun at the broad acceptance of the notion of the country as a place where all races are equally embraced. Alternately, this gesture can be viewed as an extension of the reluctance to discuss race in any fashion, even in terms of the actual skin colors that Brazilian people possess. The concept of racial diversity is here depicted as an abstraction: the difference between green and pink skin is much less provocative than the difference between black and white skin, because it is removed from the realities of the racial marginalization that actually occurs in Brazilian society.

Despite the fact that research had debunked the concept of the racial democracy, this concluding drawing demonstrates that it was still accepted and promoted by a portion of the Brazilian population—at least by the portion to which Ziraldo pertained. The UNESCO-funded research of scholars such as Charles Wagley, Marvin Harris, Florestan Fernandes, and Thales de Azevedo demonstrated that there was indeed significant social stratification between the races, which they attributed primarily to the influences of class. In Ziraldo’s depiction, not only are Brazilians of all colors willingly embracing their role in the creation of a figure from national folklore, but they display no visible markings of class distinction. In the world of A Turma do Pererê, Brazil is represented as a smiling
multicolored nation whose members all stand on the same economic ground, none of whom are relegated to the status of economically marginalized other.

Hierarchies of Difference: “O Baile”

The story “O Baile”\(^{10}\) (Turma do Pererê 1976 1 No. 7: 54-65) illustrates the contrast between Saci’s approach to his own bodily disfigurement and how it is perceived by those around him. The two female characters in the series, the young indigenous Tuiuiu and Saci’s counterpoint Boneca de Piche, organize a dance in honor of the New Year. Saci’s group of friends as well as their rivals, led by his opponent Rufino, is invited. Throughout the series, the two groups are presented in opposition, frequently competing over the aforementioned female characters. Rufino, a boy with skin a shade lighter than Saci’s, sees the dance as the opportunity to ridicule his one-legged adversary and win over Boneca once and for all: after all, how can a one-legged boy dance?

After brainstorming ways in which they can possibly handicap the other attendants of the dance in order to place their friend on even ground, Saci’s friends attempt to discourage him from attending the event altogether in the hopes of preventing his embarrassment. His physical difference is emphasized as a source of shame and humiliation, and viewed as a reason not to participate in a social event.

Instead he shows up in a stylish white one-legged suit and his ever-present red cap, exceeding everyone’s expectations when cuts in on Rufino to dance with Boneca using his redemoinho, or tornado, his usually form of transportation in Brazilian folklore. In the final frame of the story, Boneca and Saci, an obvious pair of the same deep black

\(^{10}\)“The Dance”
skin color and each clad in red and white, are surrounded by the admiring crowd, the girls exclaiming their desire to dance with him next, and Galileu the leopard driving home the moral message of the story: everyone should know how to use their differences or “qualities” to their advantage (fig. 2). Saci’s “qualities” are the unusual quirks bestowed upon him by his folkloric past: the fact that he only has one lower limb is compensated by the fact that he possesses magical powers. What was viewed as a terrible setback in the social space of the dance is transformed into a redeeming attribute. The characteristic with the potential to marginalize Saci is subverted, forming instead the basis for popularity.

In Ziraldo’s drawings, Saci’s blackness creates a strong visual distinction between himself and the other characters that is only matched by his romantic interest’s identical color. In depicting such a clear racial contrast without verbal or narrative acknowledgement, the artist reinforces the tendency of the Brazilian elite to simply avoid discussion of racial difference.

The representation of race in this narrative simultaneously departs from the unspoken tendency during the period to promote racial miscegenation with the ultimate goal of ‘whitening’ the Brazilian race. The ‘correct’ romantic pairings in the comic are between a male and a female of the same skin color and similar overall appearance. As the ‘good guys’ in the narrative, Saci-Pererê and Tininim always end up their physical equivalents, despite advances by their rivals. If Ziraldo had chosen to depict the popular ideology of _embranquecimento_ (whitening) through the comic, Boneca de Piche would ultimately pair off with Rufino, who is identifiably mulatto, in the hopes of improving her social situation and the lot of their (potential) offspring. The case between Tininim and
Tuiuiu is somewhat less clear-cut: Tininim’s rival Flecha-Firme is inexplicably distinguished by his blue skin. Although his skin color is actually lighter than that of Tuiuiu’s, it seems to be more of an anomaly created by the artist than any reflection of a racial reality.

As a white man from a relatively well-to-do background, Ziraldo created a children’s comic that for the most part illustrated the tendency towards silence on racial matters typical of his social position during the period. While his illustrations posit obvious racial difference and otherness in the character of Saci Pererê, this distinction is carefully absent from this and most other stories. By contrast, his imperfect physicality is frequently mentioned, often serving as the theme of stories such as O Baile. At the same time, Ziraldo’s depictions of romantic partnership contradict the currents of ‘whitening’ that are often cited as accompanying the ideology of the racial democracy. Mirroring the elite’s approach to race at the time, the characters in the world of Mata do Fundão live a blissful existence unmarred by acknowledgement of racial difference, yet further complicated by the contradicting messages about romantic pairings that could potentially lead to miscegenation. In this story, the source of Saci-Pererê’s marginalization is his physical deformity, not the color of his skin.

*Mãe Preta: A Bearer of Sensual Knowledge*

The main female adult character in A Turma do Pererê is Mãe Docelina, Saci Pererê’s adoptive mother, a rotund brown-skinned woman reminiscent of the mammy figure in American culture. Perpetually in the kitchen creating her famous sweets and Brazilian snacks, she is typically dressed in a housedress and frilly apron with a scarf tied
around her head. Obviously of humble rural origins, she speaks in a markedly accented and often incorrect Portuguese. In the picture book *The Secret of Mãe Docelina*¹¹, published by Ziraldo in 2002, the connection between her exaggerated size and her Afro-Brazilian heritage is portrayed as one of her greatest attributes: "Mãe Docelina gives the impression of always having existed. What we know – and what is true – is that the grandmother and the great-grandmother of Mãe Docelina were also plump and round and that her great-great-grandmother came from Africa, in the time of the slaves."¹² In her oversized glory, Mãe Docelina further resembles the mães-pretas described by Gilberto Freyre in the 1930’s, who were former female slaves that had been pardoned and invited to take up residence in the casa grande, or plantation house: "granted their freedom, they would almost always round out into enormous black figures..." (1947, 369). These mães-pretas often served as surrogate mothers to white children growing up on plantations, sometimes serving as wet nurses as frequently assisting with day-to-day childcare activities. This relic from the period of plantation slavery idealized by Freyre has persisted up to the present day, as many Afro-Brazilian women still work as caregivers in middle and upper class homes and their marginalized position forms an accepted part of Brazilian society.

Kia Lilly Caldwell points out that the mãe-preta is frequently held up as evidence of racial and cultural fusion in Brazil: the fact that many white Brazilians were cared for as children by black women supposedly excludes them from racist tendencies, attributing to the myth of racial democracy (2007, 73). How could they possibly harbor negative

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¹¹ *O Segredo de Mãe Docelina*

¹² "A impressão que se tem é que Mãe Docelina sempre existiu. O que se sabe- e é certo- é que a avó e avó da avó de Mãe Docelina eram também gordonas e roliças e que seu avó mais antiga veio da África no tempo dos escravos." (7)
feelings towards blacks, having spent so much time in the company of a black woman who fed and clothed them? Additionally, she emphasizes the mãe-preta's position as a symptom "intergenerational patterns of economic subordination" (2007, 74). The black woman's role as caregiver in the white home is one of substitution for the legitimate white mother, and it is ultimately a relationship of economic exchange that is a vestige from the period of slavery. Prior to the first republishing of the Turma do Pererê comic, Anani Dzidzienyo pointed out that the relationship between mães-pretas and their employers is inherently problematic:

Although mutual affection might have existed, her role was firmly fixed and there was no question of her ever improving the unequal basis of her master and his peers. The existence of the mãe preta cannot, therefore, be said to confirm the absence of racial discrimination in Brazil — particularly when one remembers that, in this role, her instincts and feelings as mother to her own children, and to her own family life, were deliberately stifled. (1971, 10)

In serving as Saci Pererê's adoptive mother, Mãe Docelina fills the traditional mãe-preta role of surrogate caregiver, yet turns the cliché upon its head in accepting a mythological figure from Brazilian folklore with skin darker than her own into her home. With his mythical origins, Saci does not have biological parents at all, as opposed to being the offspring of white plantation owners, yet as a child still seeks out the reassuring warmth of a maternal figure.

Mãe Docelina appears infrequently in the stories of A Turma do Pererê, and plays a minor role in the narratives in which she is featured. With her head wrapped in a brightly colored scarf and her feet in modest slippers, her function in the stories is typically related to the production or serving of food. Through the written "speech balloons" in which she expresses herself, she speaks in a rustic vernacular distinctive
from other characters, leaving letters off the beginning and ends of words and switching letters. This way of speaking further connects her to the stereotypical image of the mãe preta, a slave woman who undoubtedly had little to no access to education that would polish her speech.

She plays a prominent role in the story “Pé-de-Moleque” (Turma 1976 1:7, 31-37) as the producer of the traditional sweet in the title. With a cloth-covered bowl in hand, she complains of Saci’s absence to Geraldinho: “what a naughty boy, my son! Every time I need him, he disappears!”13, asking him to bring the sweets she has prepared to Compadre Paulim José’s store for him to sell (fig. 3). Here the said sweets are a means to a more profitable end: “Compadre Paulim sells the sweets for me! I can make a little money!”14. Her speech is peppered with popular expressions such as “Virge Maria!” and she often refers to herself in the third person.

She offers Geraldinho, a rabbit painted a distinctive color of red, a carrot as a reward which he accepts with disappointment— he was expecting pé-de-moleque, the sweet that Mãe Docelina had prepared to sell (fig. 4). Moleque is a derogatory term for a young boy, which Câmara Cascudo defines as a “man without dignity, who doesn’t fulfill his responsibilities”15 (1954, 405). Pé-de-moleque, literally “boy’s foot”, is a kind of peanut confection, with a molasses base in the southeast and incorporating manioc flour in the northern regions of Brazil. Noticing his dismay at the healthy snack, she gives him a bag of this treat. The story goes on for several pages to show Geraldinho, initially reluctant to give some of his reward to his friends, learn the value of sharing.

13 “Ô minino danado, esse meu fió! Toda vez que eu preciso dele, ele some!” (31) It should be noted that my translation does not accurately reflect the character’s exaggerated style of speech.
14 “Compadre Paulim vende os doce pra mim! Dá pra eu ganhar uns dinheirinho!” (32)
15 “homem sem dignidade, que não satisfaç seus compromissos”
Saci-Pererê, Mãe Docelina's charge, does not appear in the story. This positions her as a neighborhood figure with a motherly attitude, but without a surrogate child to project it onto. In most of her appearances in the comic, Mãe Docelina is tethered to the domestic sphere, always shown just steps away from both her kitchen and the clothes line. Although she fulfills the image of the doting mãe-preta by her dress, her manner of speaking, and her full-bodied physical form, Mãe Docelina does so independent of a powerful patron, necessitating the sale of her sweets. In making pé-de-moleque for sale, Mãe Docelina is capitalizing on another negative image of blackness: The good and motherly black woman who sells sweets to passersby. Saci, her one-legged charge and mischievous, 'no account' young boy, is nowhere to be found—yet another image of blacks. Mãe Docelina creates a candy named after the missing foot of other poor 'no-account' black boys who physically resemble Saci-Pererê. Mãe Docelina, like Saci-Pererê, portrays the multileveled portrayal of racial stereotypes in Brazilian culture.

Several of the stories that feature Mãe Docelina tie her explicitly to an image of black womanhood, especially their knowledge of 'natural' medicine. Mãe Docelina frequently demonstrates interest in the Brazilian rural parasite, bicho de pé\textsuperscript{16}, immediately recognizing its signs in human flesh, and eager to share her extensive knowledge about its acquisition, symptoms, and eventual removal.

In the story "Tininim, the Loner\textsuperscript{17} (Turma 1975 1:2, 23-36), several pages are dedicated to the turma's attempts to discover what is wrong with Tininim, who is only interested in sitting alone on a rock, gazing dreamily into space, and absent-mindedly

\textsuperscript{16} The bicho de pé burrows into the human foot to lay its eggs, typically picked up by those who walk barefoot in rural areas of Brazil. It is notoriously difficult to remove once established in the foot. This parasite is rumored to be associated with domestic animals, especially pigs.

\textsuperscript{17} "Tininim, O Solitário"
scratching his big toe. After members of the group attempt to spy on his activities with the aid of elaborate costumes that will disguise them from view\textsuperscript{18}, Saci approaches Mãe Docelina for advice (fig. 5). What he initially believes are symptoms of loneliness or depression (spending hours in an isolated location, sighing, and groaning) are immediately recognized by Mãe Docelina as indicators of the presence of the parasite. “Listen my son... did you notice if Tinimim’s big toe is very round? Does he keep scratching his big toe on a rock and blowing on it with his eyes closed?”\textsuperscript{19} Mãe Docelina then whispers the secret of the bicho’s removal in Saci’s ear.

Bearing this knowledge, Saci returns to the turma to inform them: “according to Mãe Docelina, that little bug feels great... but when it bothers the foot it’s a real danger!”\textsuperscript{20} The details of the ailment are unclear, we only know that the parasite is good until it is bad,\textsuperscript{21} and therefore it must be removed. Tinimim is resistant, apparently still in the ‘good’ phase of the bicho’s occupation. “Don’t do it, Saci! It feels so good... a nice little itch... gee, Saci, don’t take it out!”\textsuperscript{22} Tinimim has been seduced by the gostosura of the itch that the animal causes, his face fixed in a mysterious expression of pleasure. Saci performs the operation, removing the insect with a pair of tweezers, which is illustrated as a small dark spot on the page (fig. 6). He proudly declares Tinimim’s ‘freedom’ from the animal, to which his friend responds, “and who says I wanted to be free?”\textsuperscript{23} The story ends with a drawing of the turma frolicking in the mud puddles of the pigsty where

\textsuperscript{18} Galileu the leopard goes as far as to disguise himself as Santa Claus, exclaiming “pra índio, Papai Noel não existe!” (31)
\textsuperscript{19} “Escuta, meu fi... Você reparou se o Tinimim tá com o dedão do pé muito redondo? Ele fica esfregando o dedão na pedra e depois fica soprando o dedo com o zoinho fechado?”
\textsuperscript{20} “segundo a Mãe Docelina, esse bichinho é um trenzinho muito bão... mas, quando azanga no pé é um perigo!” (34)
\textsuperscript{21} azangar is presumably a variation on the word zangar, which translates as “to anger, irritate, or annoy”
\textsuperscript{22} “Não faça isso, Saci! É tão gostosinho... uma coceirinha doce... puxa, Saci, não Tira!” (34)
\textsuperscript{23} “e quem te disse que eu escolhi a liberdade?” (35)
Tininim originally picked up the pest, in the hopes of experiencing the *coceirinha gostosa* for themselves (fig. 7).

Here, Mãe Docelina maintains the traditional knowledge that allows her to identify and remove (or instruct others how to remove) the parasite, most likely learned from her own experience and the stories of her family members. Saci implicitly knows that she, as a maternal black woman, is the one to turn to for advice on the treatment of an ailment that links the body to its natural environment. In its physical and somewhat sensual nature, the solution to this problem lies outside the domain of a character such as Professor Nogueira, the brainy owl who usually advises Saci and his group of friends. In passing her understanding of the *bicho* on to her adopted son, she perpetuates the informational chain of black knowledge of a parasite that simultaneously provides sensual pleasure and pain.

Mãe Docelina again refers to the *bicho do pé* in a later story that was published in the second *Almanaque do Turma do Pererê*, “Telejornal” (1991, 29-35). The story is written in the style of a television news journal, Jornal Mata do Fundão, a direct reference to “Jornal Nacional”, the long-running national news program on TV Globo. Each character plays a different role, with Saci acting as the main news anchor, Tuiuhiu and Boneca acting as intrepid girl-reporters interviewing a variety of subjects, and a series of commercials and public service announcements. Mãe Docelina appears in one such announcement, warning her “housewife and mother friends”24 of the dangers of the *bicho de pé* (fig. 8). Once again, the presence of the parasite is made known by a “dedão do pé muito redondo” and a pleasurable itching sensation. “CAREFUL” she warns, “you have

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24 “amigas dona de casa e mãe de família” (33)
to take it out. If not, it will get inflamed". For Mãe Docelina, the divulgation of this knowledge of the parasite’s behavior is of utmost importance to prevent later pain and suffering.

The character Mãe Docelina enforces several myths pertaining to the representations of black women in Brazilian culture, most noticeably those that refer to the figure of the mãe preta. Loving, motherly, and constantly devoted to all things food-related, she selflessly cares for Saci Pererê, subverting her historical position as caretaker of the white master’s children. Her preoccupation with and knowledge of the bicho de pé can be seen as a reflection of the black woman’s perceived connection to nature and sensuality in Brazilian culture. Through both image and narrative, Ziraldo alternately demonstrated an acceptance of racial attitudes of the period and subverted their messages, providing an intricate portrait of Brazilian blackness.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, the representation of otherness in Brazilian society of the 1960s through has been approached through the analysis of several stories from Ziraldo’s children’s comic, *A Turma do Pererê*. These stories demonstrate several views on otherness that were widely held during the comic’s period of publication, specifically in regard to the messages they convey about racial difference.

While the concept of Brazil as a racial democracy, in which people of all ethnic and racial backgrounds were treated equally, was academically discredited as early as the

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25 "COIDADO...tem que tirar! Se não, azanga!" (33)
1950s, this ideology retained its popularity with much of the Brazilian elite up until the 1990s. Ziraldo’s acceptance of this notion can be observed in the story “Um Pai Para O Saci”, in which Saci is identified as the offspring of the imagination of *o povo brasileiro*. The creation myth presented in the narrative proposes that Saci’s ‘magic’ originates in the cultural mixture that produced the Brazilian folklore from which he arose, much as racial democracy endorsed miscegenation as the essence of Brazilianness. Through the his depiction of the Brazilian people as a smiling multicolored crowd undistinguished by class markers on the last page of the story, Ziraldo demonstrated his acceptance of the notion that all Brazilian citizens were treated equally regardless of their race.

Stories such as “O Baile” emphasize the characters’ understanding of physical difference, yet focus largely on Saci’s physical handicap as opposed to his skin color. Despite the fact that Saci’s mythical and exaggerated blackness clearly distinguishes him from other characters, this racial difference goes unmentioned in the narrative. By contrast, great emphasis is placed upon the difficulties that Saci encounters with one leg, forming the basis for many stories and visual gags in the series. In visually depicting the character’s racial difference while choosing to avoid its discussion in the comic’s story lines, Ziraldo’s work reinforces a societal trend toward non-discussion of race. In a presumed racial democracy, the mere mention of racial difference was viewed as an indicator of racism.

*A Turma do Pererê* also perpetuates many stereotypes about black women in Brazil, particularly in relation to images of the *mãe preta*. The depiction of Mãe Docelina as an uneducated yet affectionate and maternal black woman who is eternally linked to the domestic sphere through her preoccupation with all that is food-related reflects the
perceived connection between the black woman, nature, and sensuality in Brazilian culture. Mãe Docelina is portrayed as the bearer of traditional wisdom about the *bicho do pé*, a physical ailment that links the body to its natural environment. As a link in the informational chain of black knowledge, Mãe Docelina is key in the reproduction of Afro-Brazilian culture. In her fixed role as a *mãe preta*, she serves as a symbol of the widespread acceptance of racial democracy, and can be seen as evidence of the “success” of racial and cultural fusion that was the bedrock of this ideology.

As a white man from a relatively well-to-do background, Ziraldo created a children’s comic that illustrated verbal silence on racial matters, even as he was designing visual representations of those silences. While Ziraldo’s illustrations posit obvious racial difference and otherness in the character of Saci Pererê, this distinction is noticeably absent from the storyline. By contrast, Saci Pererê’s imperfect physicality is frequently mentioned, often serving as the theme of stories such as *O Baile*. Mirroring the usual approach to race at the time, the characters—black, brown, and white—in *Mata do Fundão* live a blissful existence un tarnished by racial difference. In refusing to acknowledge racial differences in his comic book narrative, Ziraldo succeeds in further marginalizing blackness by leaving it out of the discussion. If the difference between races goes unspoken, it becomes exceedingly difficult to initiate social change, reinforcing the pattern of marginalization.
Figure 1: *O povo brasileiro* receives presents from Saci-Pererê in honor of Father’s Day. From the story “Um Pai Para O Saci” (*Turma* 1: 2 1975 3-10)
FIGURE 2: Dance scene from the story “O Baile” (Turma 1:7 1976 54-65)

FIGURE 3: Mãe Docelina asks Geraldinho to deliver her sweeta to the store for sale. From “Pé-de-Moleque” (Turma 1:7 1976 31-37)
FIGURE 4: Mãe Docelina rewards Geraldinho with a carrot, then a bag of pé-de-moleque. From “Pé-de-Moleque” (Turma 1:7 1976 31-37)

FIGURE 5: Mãe Docelina diagnoses Tininim with bicho-do-pé. From “Tininim, o Solitário” (Almanaque 2 1991 36)
FIGURE 6: Saci removes Tinimim's bicho de pé. From “Tinimim, O Solitário” (Almanaque 2 1991 36)

FIGURE 7: The turma attempts to attract their own bichos de pé. From “Tinimim, O Solitário” (Almanaque 2 1991 36)
FIGURE 8: Mãe Dccelina’s public service announcement on bichos de pé. From “Telejornal” (Almanaque 2 1991, 29-35)
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