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Who Gets to Call It Black? Practicing Decentering the United States in Film Programming

Blackness, one could say, is the main connector between a set of references as American as Audre Lorde, Nas, or Christopher Harris and myself, a Black Brazilian curator who obsessively ponders the power of programming films for diverse audiences. Through my work I have engaged in multiple conversations within the African Diaspora, and those conversations also helped shape my worldview. I see my work as a result of many experiences and discourses, for I believe that one's identity surpasses the confinements of national borders. My views on Blackness and Black film draw from and respond to Latin American histories of racialization, the American experiment, Caribbean authors, the Afropean paradigm, and contemporary African criticism on West's idealization of Black ancestry.

     Having said that, I must make it clear that my emotional and intellectual investments reside particularly in the tensions and debates within the Diaspora. My work is committed to revising the rules that govern the relation between center stage and background. I am interested in presenting film in places—particularly Black spaces—open to broadening the conversation.

     Thirty years ago, Stuart Hall redefined the questions we ask around Black culture. I wish to play on his original query—"What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?"—and bring to the conversation a different set of

reflections.[1] Following Hall, my work emphasizes how economic power plays a determining role in who gets to speak and to be heard when it comes to defining "Black" film. Film programming is by no means outside such power dynamics, and that truth motivates me to write here to programmers and scholars in general and to Black Americans in particular.

My work has helped me forge an international network, particularly with racialized people, and I observe a lack of curiosity on the part of Americans regarding anything beyond the boundaries of America. That is to be expected to a certain extent, given the power of the United States to relentlessly blast narratives of destined greatness. What sometimes leaves me frustrated is seeing Black Americans dancing to that same tune. The myth of American exceptionalism leads Black Americans and I to encounter the world differently. We see and acknowledge one another on the basis of a shared experience—Blackness. But I am nevertheless left with the impression that I am more interested in them and know infinitely more about them— including their films—than they care to know about us. By "us," I do not mean just Brazilians but rather people who are Black *and* from the African Diaspora but *not* American. This feels particularly true when it comes to the voices from Black Latin America. When interactions happen, their self-sufficiency permeates the relationship, as if Americanness grants people— including African Americans—a sense of fullness.

Contemporary film programming is missing a real, mutually apprecia-tive exchange between Black Diasporic filmmakers and American audiences. With few exceptions, those who have more power have been given a bigger share in shaping what understandings around Blackness have been exported throughout the Diaspora.[2]

Centering American perspectives on Black film is problematic on multiple levels. The one I wish to highlight here is the commodification of Black culture. When programming Black film, we must embrace our prac-tice with an understanding of such material that expands beyond the realm of Americanness. Such vision represents a valuable weapon to fend off the never-ending buying-and-selling of our existence. After all, it is more difficult to commodify a whole culture when one cannot classify it as easily.

Film programmers interested in Black film must engage in a practice that decenters the United States within Black film culture. Decentering the United States must be a continuous act, for there is no finish line. However, decenter-ing the United States also should not be turned into a competition. It requires both a collective deprogramming of internalized discourses and asking oneself repeatedly to be curious enough to look beyond what is easily accessible.

I myself have a long road to travel to decenter American media from the ways in which I perceive Black creations. *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*

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1   Stuart Hall, "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?," in *Black Popular Cul-ture*, a project by Michele Wallace, Discussions in Contemporary Culture, no. 8, ed. Gina Dent (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), 21–36.

2   The international dominance of the English language certainly contributes to this dynamic. However, attributing such massive power exclusively to language oversim-plifies a complex problem.

(NBC, 1990–1996) taught the teenage me that it was cool to be Black.[3] Spike Lee's films likewise gave me words to define racism. Justin Simien's *Dear White People* (2014) helped me find a voice to reflect on whiteness. An unconscious positive bias toward Black America's cultural production carried into my programming practice and critical thinking. However, in recent years I have become more alert to that partiality and try to translate that awareness into action, which includes forging closer ties with my fellow Black Latin Americans, seeing myself in their lives, perspectives, discourses, and histories.

Those ties were critical to assembling the film retrospective "América Negra: Conversas entre as negritudes latino-americanas" (Black America: Conversations around Blackness in Latin America), which screened thirty-five films from ten countries in May and June 2021.[4] Above all, this retrospective represented an effort to build a collection of imagery that did not privilege the United States. The project was sponsored by NICHO 54, an institute working for the promotion of Black Brazilians in the industry for which I serve as the head programmer.[5] We elected to ask ourselves a simple question, which became our guiding premise: What would arise if we were to decenter the United States as an interlocutor and narrator of Black lives?

Gazing upon Black Latin America from Brazil, we learned about the similarities shared by numerous countries from the region. One example is the impact of so-called scientific racism on Argentina and Brazil, where genocidal motivations generated strategies for erasing Blacks from both countries after they became independent nations in 1816 and 1822, respectively.[6] Among these strategies were starvation, army drafting, sponsored immigration of white Europeans, and miscegenation as a way to "secure superiority of white blood."[7] In Brazil, such language was not hyperbolic. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Brazilian academics were concerned with how a country that they perceived as backward would assimilate into modernity. A leading voice from that time was the anthropologist João Batista de Lacerda (1846–1915). Speaking in 1911 during the First Universal Races Congress, de Lacerda's lecture "Sur les métis au Brésil" ("On the Mestizo in Brazil") outlined how "vices of [the] Negro were inoculated in the white race, as well as in the mestizo race." He further claimed, "Within a century, Brazil's mixed-race population shall have quite a different appearance from the current one. After a given period of time, the streams of European immigration, which daily intensifies and increases the white element of our population,

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3   *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* premiered in Brazil when I was fourteen years old, on March 19, 2000, on SBT, a network channel.

4   The full line-up, as well as a complete set of information about each film, is available at SALA 54, Institute NICHO 54's streaming platform. See https://www.sala54.com.br/programacao/.

5   For a broader understanding of the institute's initiatives, please refer to its official website: https://www.nicho54.com.br/.

6   Miriam Victoria Gomes, "La presencia negroafricana en la Argentina. Pasado y permanencia" [Black-African presence in Argentina: Past and permanence], *Bibliopress*, no. 9 (October/December 2002): 2.

7   *Revista do Instituto Histórico de São Paulo* [São Paulo's historic institute magazine] (São Paulo, 1904), 53–54. All translations are my own.

will ultimately suffocate the elements within which could persist some traces of the Negro."[8]

During "América Negra," audiences also became familiar with musical traditions from the Caribbean portions of Venezuela and Colombia that an uninformed viewer might easily identify as Brazilian, were it not for language differences. We further discovered that racial profiling in Ecuador bears astonishing similarities with that of Brazil. We saw similar reflections in the stories of Latinx Black women. Lastly, we recognized a shared approach to genre as a tool to reflect on Black experiences.

Through the power of film programming, "América Negra" helped audiences identify differences between their experiences as well. Putting different films in conversation allowed viewers to better understand the peculiarity of our point of view. Black Brazilians make up the majority of the nation's population, a unique feature in relation to both the rest of Latin America and the United States.[9] Watching the calls for acknowledgment from Afro-Mexicans, Afro-Peruvians, and Afro-Bolivians gave us as Black Brazilians a broader context for our struggle for recognition and reparations. While race-based affirmative action has existed in Brazil for the last two decades, Afro-Mexicans were only acknowledged by the state in 2015 and accounted for in the national census in 2020. Afro-Bolivians are still rendered invisible to the national discourse, and Afro-Peruvians are perceived as phenomena exclusive to Chincha Alta, a city 124 miles south of Lima.

Once "América Negra" made room for different conversations to happen, it became possible for viewers to consider other starting points, ask fresh questions, and bring new takes to old topics. It only took us programmers demonstrating greater curiosity to keep our hearts open while investigating the Diaspora. "América Negra" did not intend to offer a definitive take on Latin American Blackness; rather, its goal was to showcase voices committed to the broader reality of the Diaspora.

This is a call I would like to make to every programmer working with Black film in its multiple definitions: I call on you to decenter the United States as the natural provider of Black narratives. Once a programmer commits to curiosity about Black life beyond Americanness and translates that curiosity into their practice, they contribute to a less shallow, more nuanced approach to Black representation.

My goal in writing this essay is to stir up some energy within my fellow programmers, especially Black film professionals based in the Global North. We do not always get a chance to speak to one another, so consider this essay the start of a conversation. It does not aspire to be prescriptive but to ask what films we are missing, what perspectives we are ignoring, and what paradigms we keep reinforcing. Film programming cannot sponsor a definition of Blackness merely on the terms of its opposition to whiteness, and slavery

8 João Batista de Lacerda, *Sur les métis au Brésil* (Rio de Janeiro: Museu Nacional, 1911).

9 For a comparative history of racialization in Brazil and the United States, please refer to Daniela Fernanda Gomes da Silva, "O som da diáspora: A influência da black music norte-americana na cena black paulistana" [The sound of the Diaspora: The influence of Black American music in the Black scene in São Paulo] (MA diss., Universidade de São Paulo, 2013), 60–97.

should not consume so much of our screen time—the reality of it already does. We must approach the supposed binary between positive and negative representation with extreme caution. White terror has served as the plot of many great films, but there is so much life outside of it.

Above all, the collective enterprise of defining Black film should encompass voices from radically different backgrounds. The *Black* in *Black film* can be both palpable and ethereal. It comes in a plethora of languages—literally and metaphorically. That is the perspective in film programming I want to continue to share. I hope you do too.

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