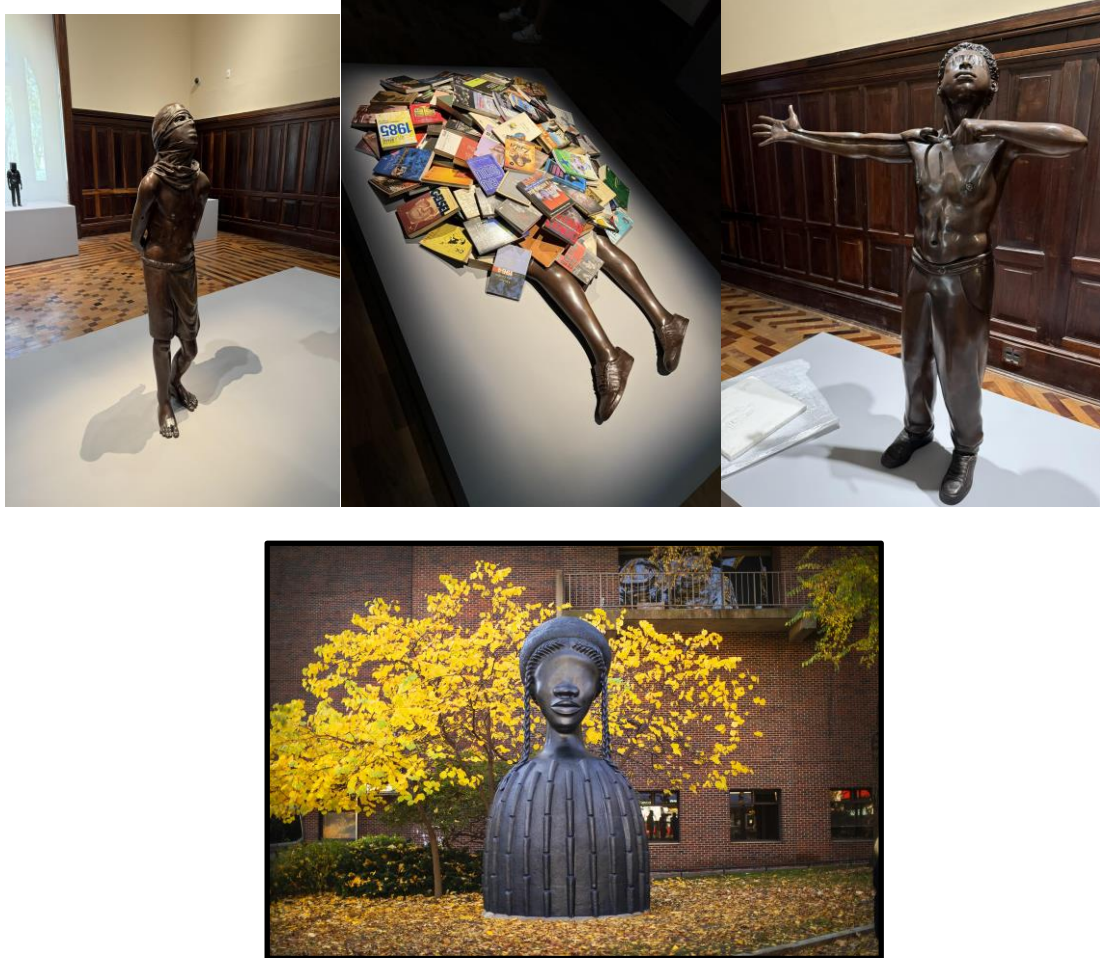


Blindness and Black Empowerment: Racial Resistance in Brazil and the United States

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Art and other cultural outputs have long served as powerful tools for racial empowerment and historical reckoning, especially for Afro-Brazilians and African Americans. *Brick House* by American Simone Leigh and *Desenho Cego* by Brazilian Flávio Cerqueira, both of which use bronze material and the motif of blindness to explore Black identity, are key examples of this phenomenon. In particular, the theme of blindness found in both works symbolizes self-empowerment and historical reflection, responding not only to contemporary racial crises in their respective countries, but making a statement about the struggles of the African diaspora around the world. Both *Brick House* and *Desenho Cego* use blindness as a symbol to confront the complex dynamics of Black identity and empowerment in the United States and Brazil.

Despite differences in racial ideology, both Brazil and the United States share histories of systemic racism that have profoundly shaped Black identity, social mobility, and self-perception. The transatlantic slave trade brought millions of Africans to the Americas, with Brazil receiving nearly forty of all enslaved people, while slavery in the U.S. became the foundation of the country's economy and society. Although slavery ended in Brazil in 1888 and in the U.S. in 1865, both nations failed to integrate formerly enslaved people into society, instead maintaining racial exclusion through different mechanisms. The United States institutionalized segregation through Jim Crow laws, which enforced racial hierarchies in education, employment, and housing, while Brazil promoted *branqueamento*, encouraging racial mixing and European immigration in an attempt to "dilute" Blackness. In the U.S., the rigid one-drop rule classified anyone with Black ancestry as Black, whereas Brazil's fluid racial categories often encouraged people to distance themselves from Black identity – and still do to this day.

Despite these different approaches, both systems have contributed to the erasure and marginalization of Black communities, fostering internalized racism and economic inequality. However, resistance movements emerged in both countries, from Brazil's quilombos and cultural expressions such as samba and Candomblé to the U.S. Civil Rights Movement and more recent Black Lives Matter Movement. These legacies of oppression and resistance continue to shape contemporary Black identity, setting the stage for artists like Simone Leigh and Flávio Cerqueira to engage with themes of racial invisibility, empowerment, and historical memory. While Leigh's *Brick House* demands public recognition of Black women's presence, Cerqueira's *Desenho Cego* exposes the psychological toll of racial erasure, demonstrating how art remains a powerful tool for not only confronting, but reclaiming Black identity in both societies.

Pulling from elements of our visit to the Museu de CEMIG (CCBB), we were formally introduced to the said power of art as a tool of expression, and as an echo of the social critiques that many Afro-Brazilians have declared over their years of progression. One artist in particular, Flavio Cerqueira, took physical renditions of the experiences of many Afro-Brazilian youth and immortalized them in sculpture form, depicting the hardship they endured in trying to achieve upwards social mobility. There are various sectors in which the works of Flavio Cerqueira and Simone Leigh (creator of *Brick House*) intersect, much like what their actual work represents: intersectionality within the black identity. *Brick House* by Simone Leigh provides an ambiguity in the identity of the sculpture, as it depicts a black woman but without eyes. The significance in this artistic

choice lies in Leigh's intentional enigma of who the woman could be. By doing so, she allows her sculpture to be representative of all black women - not centered to a specific culture, region, or background. Instead, the work is able to memorialize the work of all black women (with Leigh as a working artist herself), specifically those that came before us during slavery. *Brick House* also relies on traditional architectural influences from Africa and those utilized during modern slavery in the U.S., which properly allows *Brick House* to credit and celebrate all aspects of black culture. Overall, there is a haunting aspect to the sculpture that irrevocably brings in viewers, prompting them to question what the implications of its grandeur and marvel alongside its physical beauty and resemblance to a black woman are.

The works of Flavio Cerqueira work in the same way; alluring, showcasing skilled craftwork, and encompassing the experiences of black Brazilians. Before diving into the separate distinctions of his work, a significant element of his creation process is the material use of bronze to represent the skin of Afro-Brazilians. Cerqueira's *Amnesia* depicts a young boy pouring a bucket of white paint over himself, eventually dripping down his body. The message that is reflected has a connection to the prolonged theme of intentional attempts of whitening Brazil from as far back as slavery. In other words, the process of "branqueamento". Both Cerqueira and Leigh utilize their art to relay modern societal critiques while relying on sustained issues from historical Africa & early America (in the case of *Brick House*), and historical Brazil (in Cerqueira's *A Sculptor of Meaning* series). Intersectionality also appears as a feature of Cerqueira's work, in his sculpture *The Betrayal of the Gaze* (2017). The sculpture shows a child looking into their own reflection, holding up two lemons to their chest. Cerqueira notes this is symbolic of a common occurrence for queer children who hit a stage of life where they may ponder their gender identity or sexuality. This theme often goes unnoticed in Brazilian artworks, so there is a strong line of conformity that Cerqueira chooses to cross within his work. Overall, the work of Cerqueira and Leigh are exemplary of the use of art as a tool in revolution and societal change. By choosing to talk about systemic injustices and experiences through art, one is able to cement their existence - which in turn, allows them to be educative in the process of making change for the future.

This project, therefore, fits within a broader perspective that engages with global south theory, a body of thought that seeks to deconstruct power and knowledge relations established by the hegemonic centers of the global north. The global south, understood as the historically marginalized and colonized regions, calls for a reinterpretation of

dominant narratives, giving visibility to the voices and experiences of peoples who have been silenced by coloniality. Simone Leigh's and Flavio Cerqueira's works are part of this context, as their artistic practices serve as a counterpoint to Eurocentric discourses, challenging the racist and colonial paradigms that still structure contemporary societies.

Both artists, though situated in distinct cultural contexts, are engaged in the same struggle for the recognition of black identities, questioning the cultural homogenization promoted by the global north. Their works not only recover afro-descendant traditions and histories but also create space for the subversion of dominant narratives and the affirmation of new knowledge based on the experiences and wisdom of the peoples of the global south. This project highlights how the works of Simone Leigh and Flavio Cerqueia, through their artistic practices, challenge the power and knowledge structures of the global north, reaffirming the importance of art as a vehicle for resistance and empowerment for Afro-Brazilians and African-Americans.

The use of sculptures as a tool to reclaim narratives and confront social structures that perpetuate racism, highlights the importance of representation, not only in art but in public spaces, education and history memory. In placing black figures as monuments and in contexts of social criticism, they create spaces where black people can see themselves with dignity and power. In addition, their work links African-American and Afro-Brazilian lives. Despite the different historical pasts, both groups deal with the same battles against racism, exclusion, and lost culture. Simone Leight and Flávio Cerqueira show that art can connect people that share the same experiences of resistance and gaining power. Art is more than a form of expression, it is a means of survival, resistance and determination. Through sculptures, Simone Leigh and Flavio Cerqueira create visual narratives that challenge racial injustice while affirming the beauty and strength of black identity. Their creations are proof of the enduring power of art to not only reflect reality but to transform it. With their sculptures Leigh and Cerqueira claim that Black histories matter. Their work reminds us that representation is not only about visibility, but also the power to define your own image, tell your own story and rewrite a narrative where black people don't only be included, but central in the culture and artistic world.