ABSTRACT
This article presents some reports of women who attended the Treze de Maio, a black social club founded in 1903, and the power relations established during its existence in the city of Santa Maria, Rio Grande do Sul, in southern Brazil. However, it questions the presence of what Raymond Williams (2003) calls effectively lived culture and the representations of what would be the ideal patterns of behavior, aesthetics, and sexuality, which should be constantly watched, repressed, and denied.

KEYWORDS
black woman; black social club; lived culture; power; representation.

A black social club, its queens, and effectively lived culture

This article presents the discussion of partial results of an ongoing research focused on narratives and life stories of queens and princesses of beauty contests promoted by the Treze de Maio (Thirteen of May) Club as part of its black visibility project in the city of Santa Maria, amidst a racist, segregationist, and sexist society in southern Brazil.

We have analyzed some extracts of interviews given by black women who won beauty contests promoted by the Treze de Maio Club, the “Treze”, during its heyday, between 1960 and 1980: Alcione Flores do Amaral (70), Queen of Carnival in 1970; Célia Claro (69), Queen of the New Building Opening Festival in 1966; Izoete Soares Ribeiro (70), Queen of the Party in 1966. We have also analyzed the report of a Treze President, Maria Emery Santos Lopes (94). In the scope of this article, we articulate gender, social class, and power in order to carry out a cultural analysis whose bases are connected to reflections aligned with Cultural Studies, particularly Raymond Williams’ (2003) work on selective traditions.

We have chosen the notion of cultural analysis recommended by Williams, especially in the second chapter of The Long Revolution (2003), in which he distinguishes three levels of culture: 1) culture lived in a particular time and place, which is only fully accessible for those who live or have lived in that space-time; 2) recorded culture, from art to the most ev-
everyday events, i.e., the documented culture of a certain period; and 3) the culture of selective
tradition, a binding factor between lived culture and recorded culture at different times.

Williams (2003) notes that when the culture of a particular period no longer exists, or
is no longer a lived culture, the past survives, albeit in a more restricted way, in the docu-
ments left by and/or about that culture. And, through recorded culture, one can have a fairly
clear idea of the cultural heritage, general patterns of activity and values of such period.
However, there are selections permeating the survival of the culture of a particular period.
These selections (for example of what constitutes heritage and which are the actual standards
and cultural values) occur at the very moment this culture is lived, but also during its following
periods, gradually forming a tradition in a process of continuities and ruptures that take place
in each subsequent season.

It is very important to try to understand how a selective tradition works. To some extent,
the selection begins within the same period; certain things are selected from the whole
mass of activities, and are given value and emphasis. In general, this selection will reflect
the organization of the period as a whole, although this does not mean values and emphases
will be confirmed further along (WILLIAMS, 2003, p. 59).

Consulting documentary data on newspapers collections will provide an example of
such process, seeing that if lived culture is matched by the events that were going on at any
given time and place, the scheduling of what and who is news at the time these facts were
registered, that is, when they acquired news status, was already a first selection. Further-
more, when the search for records of these sources takes place, it will likely be guided by
the current purposes of the research that led to the consultation, thus establishing selective
tradition. “Theoretically, a period is documented; in practice, this documentation is absorbed
by a selective tradition, and both are different from lived culture” (Williams, 2003, p. 59).

For this reason, we have chosen to highlight and discuss these women’s reports as places
of continuous selection and interpretation of the traditions of effectively lived culture.

Presenting the reports and discussion of the lived culture data

The appeal to orderly behavior and manners as the desired images of black people
about themselves and their ethnic/racial group has a long history (GOMES, 2008). According
to Nilma Lino Gomes (2008, p. 143) it is in that social mirror that black Brazilian people see
themselves. The author points out they thus construct themselves as subjects immersed in
tension between a socially constructed image in a process of domination and the struggle
to build a positive self-image. Not allowing such social image to destroy one’s self-image is a
challenge.

Consequently, it is easy to understand the huge challenges faced by organizers in black
social clubs: their aim was to deconstruct centuries of negative and stigmatizing images of
black people, or build a self-image, “a new black”, according to Gomes (2008, p. 143).

Among the women interviewed for this research, reports of the rigid control over the
bodies of girls and boys are common, although stating different degrees, more severely di-

5 All quotes in this article have been translated from Portuguese by the authors.
rected at women. Hall directors, club directors and their wives controlled what to wear, how to wear it, how to behave, who could and could not enter the Treze, as explained Alcyone:

(...) I got from my mother, for Christmas, a strapless jumpsuit, bought at Elegância Feminina [Female Elegance], and there was a party here. And I wore the jumpsuit. I stood there on the sidewalk. Because the person at the door said to me: Alcione, you can’t come in! And I said: Why? Because you’re wearing a jumpsuit. And it was a dress party. So I went home, changed clothes, and then came back and got in to the ball. But, you know, this here didn’t really bother me. But, I hear, today, my friends saying, for example, that a person who was in the military, who came from Porto Alegre, and didn’t bring the suit. Men could only get in here wearing a full suit. Then a few years later, they broadened to a jacket, in one color and pants in another. And sometimes, even to popped collars, no tie, which became fashionable. But at that time, he came to Santa Maria, and only brought the clothes, it was a gala outfit of the quarters he belonged to, and could not attend that ball that was happening here. And he came and they didn’t allow him to come in. Then he went home, put on the quarters’ gala outfit and came. And still today he complains about that with much sorrow. I didn’t have that kind of feeling. (AMARAL, 2013. Interview granted to Giane Vargas Escobar).

According to Ilza, the youths complained about older people’s attitudes, but she took some “heat” when she was approached at a ball for daring to wear a lower-cut outfit.

(...) we complained. Girls hugged their boyfriends and we really couldn’t. One day I made a dress with a slightly lower back, and then I don’t remember if it was Alcione’s mother who complained that the dress was too low-cut. Back then it was daring. This was in a Spring Ball. She told me directly, but I took it as a joke. (MOREIRA, 2013. Interview granted to Giane Vargas Escobar).

As Alcione reports, inside the Treze, during the ball, the minimum display of intimacy was contained, surveillance was constant and, consequently, those who dared to break the rules were asked to leave the room, going to a little room for a private “conversation” with one of the directors.

(...) No. We couldn’t even dance cheek to cheek. Let alone anything more, like kissing. And if they did, and of course, there were people who tried to do. But these people were... I had said there were those people who were hall directors. Then they came and said, look, you’re misbehaving ... Usually they called the boy, and they brought him back to this small room, the small room that you use today for the computers, there. So, in that room they were invited to sit down and they said: look you are misbehaving, if the thing was regarded as very serious they were punished and could not come to the club’s upcoming promotions, for a certain time (AMARAL, 2013. Interview granted to Giane Vargas Escobar).

Although adults were rigid and controlled the youth, for some of these women, such as Izoete, these repressive actions served to help them in their personal growth and in knowing right from wrong.

I remember one time when the lights went out, it was a ball, the lights went out and someone spoke, there up on the stage someone told the girls to stay up there and the guys should all
go down! (Laughs) (...) at the time, you know, all this, it’s like I told you, it helped to shape us. We knew what was right, what was wrong, right? We only made mistakes if we wanted to (RIBEIRO, 2013. Interview granted to Giane Vargas Escobar).

Besides being a place for sociability, leisure, and strategy towards black visibility, the party was a place of borders, where power relations between men and women, young and old, single and married were emphasized, and where there was a paradoxical female empowerment through male power, after all “the president’s wife is president as well”:

(...) My husband was president and so was I!! Dejanira was also president because Sadi Vasconcelos was president... she was his wife, right, she was in charge. The female wing was up to us! The way they danced, when they did something kind of wrong... we... just by looking... I just made a signal like this (laughs)... they got it! At that time they wanted to dance cheek to cheek (laughs)... I just did this, look, look! They got it! This way it didn’t raise people’s attention, you know! I just made a signal (laughs)! But it was very good, you know! Bah! But they were very good, the boys never did anything! There was a gentleman who was on the Financial Advisory Board, he was a director, but he was very serious, and he would stand like this, look, so close to the wall or by a table and he was very serious! The youths were dancing all around, but no one lost their pace! Because he was intimidating, his gaze alone and his stance was intimidating! (LOPES, 2015. Interview to Giane Vargas Escobar).

Maria Emery Santos Lopes was married to Antão Lopes, former President of the Treze de Maio Club. She explained that one of her responsibilities as “co-president” was preventing couples from getting too close and, with the authority bestowed upon her, “tap on the shoulder” of couples who “misbehaved”, as confirmed by Célia Claro.

He called people and they had to go to the office. (...) Then the youths said that only the old, only old folks ran this club! And then came younger people and it only went bad! The youths complained about old people and said there were only old people in charge. And then everything in society disappeared. We do not forget the good things! I like to remember the past! I like it so much! And then Antão left the board and did not want to come back! (LOPES, 2015. Interview granted to Giane Vargas Escobar).

(...) Even my mother who was the on board, was on the board. Often ladies had these tasks of not letting couples get too close! And mother tapped on the shoulder a lot... “hey, you’re too close”, you know? My mother was one of them! “Can’t you step back a little?”. But it was a good time! (CLARO, 2015. Interview granted to Giane Vargas Escobar).

According to Giacomini (2006, p. 143) the party is an important divisor. A quintessential moment for sociability, group meeting, enjoyment of others and of the self, it plays a central role in collective life and individual growth. So it was through the party, in their careful and impeccable attires, with gloves, lace, satin, sparkles, and pearls, that black women represented themselves within the Treze. The club remained a place for sociability for nearly a century. Its membership was different than that of another black club, the União Familiar (Family Union), located on the outskirts of the city. That is, even if they descended from the black people who came to Brazil as slaves after being captured in Africa, the regulars of these two black social clubs had different positions in Santa Maria’s society: “a group of individuals
originally occupying a similar social position are separated in the course of time by differences related to the changes in volume and structure of their capital” (Bourdieu, 1979 p.124).

Treze’s women were part of a “black elite” in Santa Maria. But, according to Alcione, that required abiding by certain norms of behavior inside the club, which for that society’s lived culture included different values, behaviors, and privileges for men and women.

I was part of that period. For me, all things were normal. I do not remember, like, getting mad at the Treze because of some rules. But we were, the balls were very brightly lit. Our parents chaperoned us at parties, at dances. I mean in our adolescence, right. And there were the hall directors. They checked if you were behaving in a way they found improper for that party. For example, you couldn’t dance cheek to cheek with a boy, that was unseemly. And we went with our parents, or someone responsible. You didn’t leave here to step outside and come right back in. These things do not hit me, as well. I obeyed, I had no problem. My mother was always watching, watching who I danced with, how I danced... (AMARAL, 2013 Interview granted to Giane Vargas Escobar).

Thus, the “desirable female” formed through a process of gender role socialization that occurred first within the family, but the club provided the ambience for crystallization of selective traditions associating social roles to each sex, determining the differences in the behavior of men and women (AMÂNCIO, 1994).

Within the Treze, selective tradition of members led to identity constructions “marked by difference” because it was not “any black person” who could attend the club, and white people were not allowed in. According to Woodward (2000), identity is relational and marked by symbols. There is an association between a person’s identity and the things they use. Thus, the construction of identity is both symbolic and social.

In relation to black women, selective tradition forms on a moral plane, as not every black woman could attend the Treze de Maio Club. In addition to power relations legitimized by the choices of black man, that is, the board of directors (always men) who defined who could and could not stay in the club, they also needed to pass the probing of well-married women or girls “who hadn’t strayed” to be able to attend the club. That is, the club did not admit separated women, widows, single mothers or those living with their partners out of wedlock.

 [...] Now, single mothers, separated women. It’s a thing of that time, it’s not a Treze de Maio thing. It’s a thing of society in general. The same was true in Caixeral, in Comercial. I now feel some guilt towards some of my friends who had children then, out of wedlock, and that my family would say: look, from now on, you’d better not hang with that girl. I find it awful today, but it’s how it was, right? You don’t choose the time you live in. You know? I lived in that time. And at that time you couldn’t. Today, I have a sort of debt to these friends who were, I don’t know, unfortunate, I don’t know. And these things, they said: “the girl is damaged goods”. You see? When she had sexual intercourse before marriage. But at the same time I feel uncomfortable with it, I understand that’s how it was then. (AMARAL, 2013 Interview granted to Giane Vargas Escobar).

In this interviewee’s speech, you can recognize another selective tradition, as she blames the Zeitgeist for the discrimination of women whose behavior did not abide by the rules and
standards that attest profound gender inequalities perpetrated in equal parts by that black social club and by white society. She appeals to the nature of the time to explain inequalities that were being combated, especially since the late 1960s, by women and black civil rights groups. Although such movements had more visibility in the United States, aiming to abolish discrimination and racial segregation and recognize gender equality in the country, the impact they had on the world, including Brazil, is undeniable. In Brazil, the feminist movement had media exponents such as Heloneida Studart (Manchete magazine) and Carmen da Silva (Cláudia magazine).

Conclusion

This short analysis made it possible to identify some levels of selection that ultimately form a tradition regarding black women. In lived culture, a social selection was already in place towards who was allowed to join the Treze de Maio Club: a “black elite” that excluded black people from the periphery. We also pointed to a selection of a “desirable female”, which operated in accordance with moral standards that segregated “damaged goods”.

The patterns that shaped social practices in that particular time and in the club’s particular formation, as well as how they were lived, experienced, and sometimes reinvented by the interviewed women in order to turn them into “their social practices”, became part of the organization. That is, to peer into the cultural patterns by which the Treze operated as a place of sociability, rigidity, morality, and power relations, the analytical process of this article traced regularities and breaks, considering the accounts of what was actually lived by women.

Thus, traditions of gender, power, and class inequality were formed, in several layers of selection, within the Treze de Maio Club, the third oldest black social club of Rio Grande do Sul.

References


