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The Claim of Blackness

What is blackness in Latin America? Who claims it? Whom does it claim? And to what end? In my presentation, I will consider how black performance erupts from the work of a white Brazilian artist whose efforts could be seen as an attempt at appropriation. In the early 1960's Hélio Oiticica developed close ties to a predominantly black community, the Mangueira *favela*. His subsequent "works", are informed by and engage the social and expressive practices of that community. Inspired by the architecture of the *favela* Oiticica frequented and the movement of the *sambistas* with whom he studied, the *Parangolés* attempted to explore and extend what Oiticica called the "constructive principles" of these practices and their abilities to foster new modes of sensuality and sociality. In order to demonstrate something of what he hoped the *Parangolés* could make possible and to downplay his own role, Oiticica invited a number of friends from Mangueira with whom he had frequently collaborated—Jerônimo, Nildo, Miro, and Mosquito, among others—to come to the museum and help initiate the experiment. Many scholars have rightly critiqued white artists' appropriations of blackness in Brazil and the neutralization of the radical, critical and creative capacities of blackness within a myth of "racial democracy" that was, in reality, a strategy for the exclusion of the very blackness it sought to absorb. The "experimental exercise of freedom" erupts out of his work as blackness, as black performance. It is "set off" in the interplay of refusal and transformation that the often unremarked and finally inappropriate and inappropriable presence of Oiticica's black collaborators instantiates. This social and aesthetic assemblage—part of the ongoing response of the Afro-Latin to the myth of racial democracy that has been deployed in order to contain it—also disturbs what Hortense Spillers calls "the tendency to perceive a coterminous relationship between the symbolic boundaries of black and the physical, genetic manifestation named black..." I will argue that the symbolic boundaries of black are the locus of this experimental exercise of freedom