Women-Space, Power, and the Sacred in Afro-Brazilian Culture

Cheryl Sterling

The Global South, Volume 4, Number 1, Spring 2010, pp. 71-93 (Article)

Published by Indiana University Press

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Abstract

This article places Afro-Brazilian women in the midst of the discourse of globalization, in light of its impact on marginalizing women of color, economically, politically, and culturally. It extends the concept of globalizing discourses to the history of enslavement and the racialist policies in Brazilian society, as seen in its policy of *embranquecimento* and the myth of Brazil as a racial democracy. The article then analyzes the historic and present day role of Afro-Brazilian women in the religious tradition of Candomblé, focusing on one public festival in particular, the *festa* for the Yoruba-based orixá, Obaluaye, in Salvador da Bahia. It posits that Candomblé offers an alternate model of empowerment for Afro-Brazilian women that inverts their status as the most negated in the hierarchies of power.

Globalization has become the new signifier to mark a much longer history of translocation, imperialism, and strategic power blockades. In its current manifestation, globalization is linked to an unprecedented level of technological innovation, instant access to information, and the ability to communicate with ease across continental divides. Yet for all the openings technology provides for greater access to peoples, places, and things, it has not erased a hegemonic actuality wherein the most politically and economically powerful control access to these domains and, in tandem, define what is acceptable in the social, cultural, and educational realms. Simply, the leaders of past globalizations are the leaders of global world powers, and we have only to look at the configuration of the G8 to accept this axiom.

While it should be impossible to speak of globalization without focusing on women of color, in discourses of power, women and, particularly, women of
color are the most neglected and negated. The purpose of this paper is to focus on Afro-Brazilian women, who are some of the most peripheral women in the global landscape. My attempt here is to carve out a space to understand their particular history and trajectory in the discourse of globalization, through the interrelated paradigms of gender, race, and class. Afro-Brazilian women, I specifically contend, use the practice of Candomblé as a site from which to gain personal power and agency in a social and political climate that continues to treat them as sub-citizens. Candomblé, as a socio-religious discourse and praxis, derives from the global spread of African belief systems in the transatlantic slave trade. In examining their adherence to a paradigm that derives from an enduring link to Africa, I propose that Afro-Brazilian women create an alternate social and cultural space in which their Africanness, their blackness, generates powerful narratives of identity to interrupt the social forces that negate them.

Paradoxically, it is at once impossible and extremely easy to describe the conundrum facing the Afro-Brazilian woman. For it is so much like the issues facing all women of color; namely, what it is to be a woman, an automatic second class citizen, and in this case, what it is to be black, the subaltern in every society where racial hierarchies prevail. Yet, what complicates the analysis of Afro-Brazilian women is the innate reluctance of Brazilian born blacks to admit to their own blackness. Within the Brazilian scope of racial construction, there are over 200 self-defined categories with which to describe one’s degree of blackness or whiteness. It is common to hear a woman, who by U.S. standards could be nothing else but black, call herself, *morena-clara* (light skin mixed woman), *sarará* (blonde, light skin mixed woman with African features), *morena-escura* (dark skin mixed woman), and it continues, *ad infinitum*, it seems.

The 1991 census narrowed the manifold self-identificatory color based categories into a fixed text in which one can be labeled *branca* (white), *amarela* (yellow), *indígena* (indigenous), *parda* (brown), and *preta* (black). Two thirds of the census takers in the year 2000 identified as white, proving that Brazil is a white nation. Out of these overall respondents, the majority of the practitioners of Candomblé identified as *parda* and *branca*, with a significantly lesser number identifying as *preta*. Now if we consider Candomblé an expression of blackness, a continuance of African culture in the Americas, why is it that so few practitioners identify as black? But then again out of the total population, only 6 percent identified as black. How is that possible when it is well documented that the Brazilian nation houses the largest black population in the world next to Nigeria? (Lovell, “Race, Gender and Development in Brazil” 7).

Given the history of Brazil, these multiple identities become quite understandable. Even though Portugal has become a peripheral nation in the European hierarchy, they were the first Europeans to simultaneously extend their reach all around sub-Saharan Africa and the New World. Portuguese global-
ization allowed for the development of the revisionist discourse of *lusotropicalism* that reconstructed its colonial past as empathetic and open to hybridity, visible in its multifaceted cultural dynamics and practices of miscegenation.\(^3\) While it has become commonplace to examine the issues of race and racial categorizing when dealing with slavery and black identity, in the case of Brazil, racial discourse takes on its own insidiousness reflective of the idealized construction of the Brazilian national character. Regardless of the detail that the Portuguese were racially mixed, like their European counterparts, they imbibed the globalizing idealization of their whiteness and sought to preserve it at all cost.\(^4\) The problem, however, was that the first wave of colonization to Brazil brought the dregs of Portuguese society, criminals and derelicts, who co-habited and had conjugal relations with the indigenous population. The first group to be accurately named Brazilians was thus the offspring of this racial mixing. With the advent of slavery and the sheer numeric force of arriving Africans, the subsequent generations of Brazilians were products of an ensuing multilayered racial mix.

These Africans who came to Brazil adapted just like all of their other affinitive and consanguineous kin in the Diaspora. Yet to ensure survival, the uniqueness of Brazilian enslavement fostered within them an identity bound to their acceptance and rejection of dominant ideologies. Hence, the combination of various African, Portuguese, and indigenous bloodlines create a spectrum of color on the human palette that demanded expression through at least 200 categories (Eakin 115). Each color category carries specific phenotypic characteristics based on skin color, hair color and texture, eye color, the broadness of the nose, and the fullness of the lips.

Before we begin to imagine that Brazilians are simply reflecting the reality of their racially entangled lives in the censuses, we must also understand the dominant social discourses on race that still permeate the society to this day. With the end of slavery in 1888, Brazil’s African population greatly outnumbered the Portuguese. The political vanguard could not allow the world to perceive Brazil as a black nation. Thus began the policy of *embranquecimento*, gradual whitening of the population for social amelioration. Like the United States in its post-slavery days, the Brazilian government fostered an open-door immigration policy, directed at Europeans, with the hopes that an increased white population would whiten the nation. Unlike the U.S., however, they encouraged miscegenation with the same ideal in mind; unambiguously, that race-mixing would gradually absorb the African population, whose offspring would then be lighter skinned with European facial features. This policy of social whitening reaffirmed the stringent social hierarchy existent during slavery, placing those who were African, with no visible signs of European bloodlines at the bottom. The gradated social hierarchy rested on the visible phenotypic differences due to the admixtures of indigenous and European
bloodlines, and color became a metonymic signifier to encode caste-based and class-based divisions in the society.

Even though the official policy of *embranquecimento* ended in 1914, its psychological and sociological impact is still apparent. One’s economic, political, and social roles in Brazilian society are determined by the color of the skin and the darkest people provide menial and service related labor. Since the stereotypes from the era of slavery still exist in the Brazilian imagination of their world, to be labeled as black (*preto or negro*) denotes that one has no white ancestry. It signifies that one is at the lowest rung of society, that one has limited potentiality for education, that one has limited intelligence, that one is ugly and primitive, and it will only ensure the continuing second class status of Brazil as a country. Consolidating an association of blackness with poverty, Mala Htun tells us that “[b]eing black is synonymous with being lower-class, lacking opportunities, working as a servant, and living in bad neighborhoods” (74). The impact of this anti-black discourse is so profound that the Ford Foundation funded a project called “não deixar sua cor passar em branco,” loosely translated as “don’t pass for white,” to educate Afro-Brazilians on the importance of registering as the right color on the census (Andrews 495). Given the historically pejorative context in which blackness has been viewed, it is surprising that even 6 percent of the population labeled themselves as *pretos* in this nation.

In the course of this paper, I expand the definition of the black population to include the color categories of *pardos* (brown) and *pretos* (blacks). This is by no means an attempt to reduce the color dichotomies in Brazil to the binaries that operate in the U.S., especially given Edward Telles’ brilliant but brief criticism of the color coding on the census. While Telles critiques the overall color reductionism imposed by the census, he finds it most ambiguous for those who identify as *morena/o*, since its elision as a category forces respondents to either identify as whites or *pardos*. Such broad-based groupings, Telles argues, gloss over the distinctiveness of racial categorizing in Brazil, whose variation is not just limited to individual perception, but is also determined by region and location. What Telles does not factor into the argument, however, is that due to the pejorative figuration of those who are considered *pardos*, most who would identify as *morenos* would then change that identification to white, thus contributing to the construction of Brazil as a white nation. Few will disagree that *pardos* and *pretos* are labeled as such because within the pigmentocracy of the nation, they have obvious and visible African phenotypical characteristics. However, to arrive at a better understanding of the black woman in Brazil, we must understand her presence in the public and private domain and the ways in which she continually subverts her marginalization. We will then examine Candomblé as a space where she is self-defined and actualized.
Globalization’s impact on women economically through marginalization and exploitation in low-wage sectors, politically through exclusion from political processes, and culturally through the loss of identity and its subjection to a hegemonic überculture is well documented. Afro-Brazilian women, like most subaltern women, were either maids, mammies, workhorses, sex workers, sex slaves, or mistresses to the privileged, and in the present day, not much has changed. According to Peggy Lovell, there is a growing presence of Afro-Brazilian women in the urban marketplace, performing both white and blue collar jobs, but only 4.5 percent, according to the 2000 census are in managerial or planning positions (Lovell, “Race, Gender and Development in Brazil” 19; Baeto 776). Education in Brazil, in general, is of remarkably poor quality, and even though more Afro-Brazilian women than men complete middle school, they occupy mainly service positions, receive the lowest wages, and are subject to greater levels of unemployment (Lovell, “Race, Gender and Development in Brazil” 20; Baeto 774–75). Afro-Brazilian women earn 39.3 percent of the hourly salaries of white men and, when we specifically examine the differences between pardas and pretas, preta women have the highest levels of participation in the workforce. In spite of this, they are the lowest paid and continue to do the most menial jobs (Beato 777; Lovell, “Race, Gender and the Struggle for Social Justice in Brazil” 92). It is not by chance that 90 percent of the maids are black given that Afro-Brazilian women overall are disproportionately represented in the domestic labor sphere (Lovell, “Race, Gender and Development in Brazil” 12; “Gender, Race and the Struggle for Social Justice in Brazil” 98).

Ubiquitously, scholars in the volume Women and Globalization attest to the sexual commercialization of women due to the ever-increasing economic disparities between nations. Angela Gilliam’s research places Afro-Brazilian women in midst of this commodification and objectification, noting their prevalence in the domestic sex trade. Suggesting that “women’s bodies are both labour and raw material” (2), Gilliam interrogates the impact of international economies on the sex trade to account for the growing consumer demand that designates women as goods for consumption (2). Simply put, men and women from wealthier nations seek diversion in the bodies of Third World peoples. A point must be noted within this discussion that the commodification of the female body is not a new phenomenon, for it was the basis in which to perpetuate the supply of enslaved labor. Like all diasporic societies, enslaved Afro-Brazilian women were forced and coerced into providing sexual services to white men. Gilberto Freyre, in his seminal work The Masters and the Slaves, refers pointedly to the sexual accessibility of enslaved women, who were often made into prostitutes and objects of sexual abuse by white men. The “sexual fire” of these women, remarked upon by Loretto Cuotto, a traveler in the late 18th century Brazil, excited and tempted these white men. Freyre’s mythic
The construct of Brazil as a “racial democracy” simultaneously derives from the multi-colored, mixed raced offspring of these sexual liaisons and the relative racial tolerance found in the society, compared to the violence against blacks that he observed in the U.S. His conclusion that racism did not exist in Brazil has proven to be a pernicious source of identity amongst Brazilians today, for they easily dismiss claims of racist behavior since most can attest to having a “distant” black ancestor. Freyre’s myth became the self-perpetuating marker of identity for Brazilians, who co-opted African-based cultural forms to create what is now considered Brasileidade or Brazilianness. The 1940s saw a change in the national character of Brazil, and under the leadership of the then president Getúlio Vargas, the quest for a national identity extended to the black Brazilian, for the uniqueness of the society stemmed from its African roots. Brazil was constructed as a nation composed of three races—white, indigenous, and African—and being a brasileiro became synonymous with markers of an African heritage: “samba, carnaval, feijoada e, por fim, futebol” (Damasceno 169). The revisionists’ framework did nothing to alleviate the race-based social and economic divisions of the society and rather served as a dangerous camouflage that allowed the perpetuation of individual and institutional racisms without a semiotic context in which to identify such behavior.

Most apparent is the use of the term “boa aparência” or “good appearance,” which Maria Damasceno characterizes as an irrefutable euphemism used to disguise the racist character of Brazilian social relations. The phrase “boa aparência” is used in employment advertisements, which within the Brazilian mindscape, Damasceno demonstrates, translates to só para brancos, [only for whites]. In 1951, overt acts of racism were outlawed in the Lei Afonso Arinos, yet Brazilians did not hire blacks in administrative or supervisory positions. The general explanation given to this day is simply that white Brazilians do not want to have black bosses (Telles, “Industrialização” 43). Such linguistic duplicity developed around the time the law was passed and became the coded signifier for the desired whiteness and comportment of the prospective employment candidate. Before the law, it was quite common for employers, even those looking for domestic workers, to advertise a position using color as a descriptor, openly stating that they desired the services of brancas or others of European descent, people de cor, or simply maintaining, não faz mal seja branca or preta, [it’s not important if you are black or white] (Damasceno 179). The subtlety of the phrase does not take away from its denunciatory effect, for the average Afro-Brazilian woman knows explicitly that if she does not have straight, long hair and light skin, she need not apply.

Conversely, in the global sphere the metiçagem praised by Freyre allowed for the celebration of Brazilian exoticism, marked by the body of the darker female. Immediately the works of Jorge Amado come to mind, for he is of that
same generation of thinkers. While he, in like mind, celebrated Afro-Brazilian culture, his female protagonists are hyper-sexualized *mulatas* who are essential to the concept of Brasildade.\textsuperscript{13} To this day, this persistent trope of the exoticism of Brazilian women prevails in the international arena to the extent that Brazil has a reputation as the sex capital of the world. Linking this legacy of sexual exploitation to the inequity in global economic forces, the black woman’s body is still simultaneously the object of sexual fetishism and of social negation to the point that it manifests itself through abundant industries in sexual tourism and child prostitution, most prevalent in the Northeast of the country (Gilliam 5; Beato 782–83).

The Northeast just happens to be the area of the nation with the largest black population. Further studies conducted in this area have shown that the black woman is not just the victim of the grossest societal inequities in Brazil, but she is also the often-cited example of social pathology. Her sexuality may be lauded, but her fertility is lambasted, as she is accused of perpetuating the “incomplete family” (Goldani 181). It is with data such as this that we must exercise interpretative agency as the incomplete family is defined by the large number of consensual unions, separations, and children born outside of marriage. The statistics tell us that *preta* and *parda* women in particular can expect to live more than a half of their adult lives either unmarried or without a partner.\textsuperscript{14} Consequently, they are more likely to have children before marriage or to have had a child without ever being married. As unmarried mothers, they are labeled as “key to the reproduction of domestic instability,” especially given that over the past thirty years, female headed households have increased from 10 to 20 percent, with a greater occurrence in the Northeast (Goldani 181–82). Yet, these facts cannot speak to the underlying queries they generate. Indeed could these issues of domestic instability be related to the racist policies of the Brazilian state and the institutionalized racist behaviors of Brazilians? Could the imbibing of the whitening ideal prevent men from marrying Afro-Brazilian women? What is more important to the production of a stable domestic environment: marriage or economic self-sufficiency and empowerment of women?

The Moynihan Report generated in the United States in 1965 stands as the most obvious reminder of the ways in which the struggle to survive amongst black families becomes an object of pathology to mainstream cultures. Moynihan suggests that slavery is the root of the problem for blacks in the U.S. Ironically, differentiating between the legacy of slavery in the U.S. and Brazil, he considers Brazilian slavery to be more benevolent, for it did not rely on the dehumanization of the black subject. The chattel slavery found in the U.S., he further postulates, left a pernicious legacy that impedes the mobility of poor blacks. Moynihan, of course, did not understand the history of slavery in Brazil, for if he did he would never consider it a lesser evil. However, the point of contestation is his take on the role of matriarchy within the family. For he, like
his present day Brazilian counterparts, could only view the black woman's role as unnatural and attack her fertility and survival skills, without an attendant critique of the white privilege that allows such inequities to continue and flourish. Hence, when we interrogate these assumptions of fragmentation and debilitation as specifically applied to the Afro-Brazilian women, it is easy to see that the issue of domestic instability is but a mask for the conditions that the State tolerates for the poor, who, according to the Human Development Index, live under subhuman conditions (Baeto 778–80).15

Disempowerment implies a level of cognitive dissonance, an inability on the part of individuals or groups to perceive their agentative capabilities. Globalized policies, however, recode the realm of individual agency in the way they are regulated through state action, often without the knowledge of the subjects they directly impact. In no other issue are such policies more insidious than in the forced sterilization of women. Scholars like Kuumba and Hartmann16 attest to the pressure placed on subordinated nations by organizations like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund to implement population control strategies, and the bodies of women of color are often the targeted domain of control.17 Exercising one of its most coercive and repressive tactics on the bodies and agency of black women, the Brazilian state (before the current Presidency of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva) implemented this “reproductive imperialism” through forced sterilization policies (Kuumba 449). Women were often advised by their physicians to undergo cesarean sections (paid for by the government) and unbeknownst to them, tubal ligations were performed during the procedure (Roland, “O Movimento de Mulheres Negras Brasileiras” 247).18

Mobilizing anti-sterilization campaigns, Afro-Brazilian female activists proved that these pogroms specifically target poor, black women; however, the Brazilian government steadfastly refused to acknowledge its culpability and rather stated that sterilization is an optional procedure available to poor women, in obvious denial of the evidence that the majority of poor women are also black women. Using class as a signifier of race is part of the legacy of the myth of a racial democracy, and at its most detrimental, it allows for the perpetuation of these institutionally-sanctioned attacks on black female bodies. It may be most profoundly (in)visible in the attitudes of the physicians who implement these pogroms and, who, according to Edna Roland, will not suggest alternate forms of contraception to these women simply because they view the poor as too ignorant to comprehend other alternatives. Even more disturbing is that although women's rights are guaranteed in the Brazilian Constitution of 1988, some employers require proof of sterilization before agreeing to hire a woman (Roland, “The Soda Cracker Dilemma” 202–3).19

Systematic changes overall for women began in the 1970s with the advent of the abertura democracia, a policy shift away from the dictatorship that governed Brazil from 1964 until 1985 to a more democratic state. After the mili-
Military takeover in 1964, all forms of political advocacy and dissent were suppressed. Torture and censorship were the common tools used by the government, and the police became paramilitary forces used to control the population (Verucci 551). In such a climate of repression and fear, it was illegal to speak of racism or to suggest that any actions should be deemed as racist, for it constituted a challenge to institutional order. The democratic opening allowed for the resurgence of both the feminist movement and the black movement, as represented through the Movimento Negro Unificado (MNU).20 Out of collaborations and contentions with them, Afro-Brazilian women forged a political radicalism that neither of its incubators addressed. Sueli Carneiro, in discussing the ways in which Afro-Brazilian women found their voice, notes that since their struggles could not be limited to just being women or just being black, they needed alternate formulations and strategies to generate transformational policies specific to them.21 To understand the transformative dynamics Afro-Brazilian women envision, it is beneficial here to quote Carneiro at length:

The struggle of black women includes enforcement of the constitutional ban on racial discrimination, legalization of abortion, eradication of conditions that obligate poor women to turn to abortion, and the transformation of social conditions to allow women and black couples to care for the number of children they choose to bear. This means that we must fight for housing, health, sanitation, and antiracist and antisexist education—basic conditions to break the vicious cycle that confines the black population, and black women in particular, to the subterranean levels of Brazilian society. Finally, black women’s struggle is for a multiracial and multicultural society, where difference is experienced not as inferiority but as equality. (228)

This wish list becomes the idealized goal for empowerment, yet it still does not reveal the internally defined vision of subjectivity and self outside of a unidimensional political apparatus. To find those strategies that reshape orthodoxy, it is essential to examine the lived reality of Candomblé.

From the onset, we must ask: how are these paradigms of inequity and resistance linked to the practitioners of Candomblé? It is my contention that historically and in the present day, Candomblé serves as a practice that aids Afro-Brazilian women in their negotiation of the racial, sexual, social, political, and economic hierarchies that structure the Brazilian world. To this end, I suggest that within Candomblé houses and through ceremonial interactions, the women connect to and restructure their African heritage to empower themselves and transcend the social discourses of embranquecimento and racial democracy.

Anthropologist Rita Segato argues that the increasing influx of whites in
Candomblé transforms the power dynamics. The religious space becomes a space of inversion, for whites must be subservient to the powerful black matriarchs who dominate. Through their conversions, whites too must accept a way of life based on African hermeneutics. While in an interview with Julio Braga, an Afro-Brazilian anthropologist and Candomblé devotee, he confirms that whites are the predominant converts to Candomblé, we must however question the implications of these conversions. Do they signify a lesser black presence in the religion? Are white Brazilians also gaining control of the religious discourse? Or, is it, as Segato implies, an inversion of the power dynamic where power is no longer solely defined through the prism of white privilege? Of note is the response by cultural activist and Mãe de Santo, Valdina Pinto, who suggests that many of these whites have an alternative sense of identity which allows them to identify with their blackness. It is a fact of history that when more powerful peoples globalize their identities, they subsume, and at times, erase the identities of those they control. Can we then assume that by accepting a subaltern black identity in the religious space, these adherents are challenging the hegemonic whiteness embedded in the social discourses of the nation? Or is it just an expedient identification because actual social roles in the public sphere do not change? What is readily apparent is that even with the greater participation by whites in the religion, the houses are still controlled primarily by black women, who ideally pass on the position to their daughters. The terreiros are thus institutional structures that pass through successive generations from one black hand to another.

A terreiro is a place of religious worship, and in Salvador da Bahia, it can either be a house with many antechambers like the first Yoruba-based house, Casa Branca, or an entire community as found in its now-famous offshoot, Ilê Axé Apô Afonjá. These houses guard the sacred shrines of the orixás, the nature-based African deities who came with the enslaved from West and Central Africa. Rachel Harding best describes it as a “pan-African and Afro-Brazilian synthesis” generated in nineteenth century Bahia because of its melding of ritual forms and beliefs from the Yoruba-speaking peoples in West Africa, the Congo peoples of Central Africa, indigenous peoples in Brazil, and Catholicism. Even with these manifold influences, according to historians such as João José Reis and Kim Butler, in Salvador, in particular, a clear Yoruba dominance developed. The centrality of the Yoruba model allowed for the homogenizing of the different belief systems under a set codex or matrix. Patterned after the discourse and rituals for the Yoruba orixás, the matrix includes the names of the deities, the dress of the worshippers, the dance movements, prayers, and offerings which allows for the simultaneous remembrance and rearticulation of an African identity.

In the formation of the earliest terreiros in Salvador, to become a leader, one had to prove one’s African ancestry (Sterling 53). This is not to say that
present day Mães dos Santos are not of mixed heritage, but their authority simultaneously derives from their ability to communicate with the orixás and the ability to trace their ancestral lineage right back to Africa. The institutional order of the first Yoruba based terreiro, Casa Branca, came directly from Yorubaland. In the early nineteenth century, a priestess with the title Iyá Nassô traveled to Yorubaland and returned with a priest of Ifa, Bambo Obítico, who established the ritual ceremonial order for entrance and address of the orixás. Known as the xire, this order re-territorialized Afro-Brazilian terreiros as sites for the incarnation of the Yoruba orixás (Harding 101). In other words, Brazilian terreiros symbolically became an alternate Africa, and it is believed that when an adherent incarnates an orixá, it spiritually re-locates from Africa to manifest itself in the body of this individual (Omari-Smith 149).

With the formation of the terreiros, women were the main adherents and practitioners, and thus, a clear female dominance occurred. Still relevant today is Ruth Landes’ first feminist account of Candomblé practices in The City of Women, wherein she attests to its female hierarchy and the social and economic independence of initiated women. In a more recent study, Randy Matory gives valence to the matrifocal emphasis of the terreiros in providing both a space to incarnate the orixás and a center for female solidarity in all its forms. In the terreiros, women constructed an alternate hierarchy that none dared to construct as “incomplete” or pathological, but instead affirmed their sacred authority reflective of the positionality of priestesses in traditional African societies whose transcendental purpose superseded their womanhood.

Preferring common-in-law marriages, the priestesses and the acolytes were never subject to the same rules of wifedom expected in Brazilian society. As the caretakers of this hermeneutic tradition, only women and their children lived in the Candomblé house, husbands visited in the evenings and, at times, stayed in houses on the grounds of the terreiro. The women were for the most part self-employed and economically self-sufficient, working as street and market vendors, of which the selling of acarajé, a fried bean cake, is still the most common. Within the name of this popular food, we also find the re-location of Africa in a new world context; in the Yoruba language, akara is the term for the bean cake and jé signifies to eat. The Mães and filhas also worked as dressmakers, washerwomen, midwives, healers, and diviners. Although as black women, the society perceived them as the subalterns, yet their lives within this sanctified space attest to their self-reliance and solidarity, which too is a transfiguration of the divine authority conferred on orixá devotees.

In this matriarchal universe, males were commonly given the titles ogans, but their positions in the terreiro depended on their color and status of initiation. The most powerful terreiros had non-initiated white or moreno patrons, who, in return for their public support, received this honorary title, recognition during ceremonial events, and I would dare assume, the spiritual guid-
ance of the Mãe de Santo. Only black men were initiated and they performed specific tasks, such as the slaughter of animals for ritual offerings, the drumming, and singing for ceremonial events. Men were strictly forbidden from dancing in the roda, the sacred circle where the orixás incarnate in the bodies of their devotees. This implies that the transcendental relationship cultivated between the initiate and the orixa was forbidden to men. The question then that needs to be asked is: was this idea deliberately cultivated to guarantee the power of the Mães?

The Yoruba belief system does not subscribe to this gendered play as both men and women carry the orixás, and even Oxalá, the orixá of creation, is said to be both male and female. We may speculate that the Mães, in understanding the secrets of the orixás, saw that femaleness was not powerless. The female orixás are as powerful and, at times, even more powerful than the males, whom they mother and love. Even though Queens as regents do not exist in Yorubaland, female orixás are known as Ayabas, Queens who are Kings, and not the wives of the King as the term denotes. Today in Brazil, men do cultivate and manifest the orixás, but they are still the minority in this female dominated world.

An attendant cultural phenomenon within the context of globalization is the rise of religious fundamentalism, often attributed to the growing prevalence of televangelism (Eviota 62). In a study of Catholic and Pentecostal religions in Brazil, Manuel A. Vazquez and Philip J. Williams suggest that religious organizations emerge as alternative spaces to build stable and meaningful individual and collective identities. While the significant growth of a Pentecostal following in Brazil suggests a collective reconfiguration of belonging, Candomblé too generates “symbols, narratives, habituses, (modes of structuring and carrying oneself in the world) and institutional morphologies” that allow its adherents to navigate the duality of blackness and outsiderness (Vazquez and Williams 6). Within its female-centered hierarchy, we see the conjunction of spirituality and epistemology. The supreme Mãe de Santo or Iyalorixá is both the administrative and ritual head. Other Mães dos Santos are given attendant positions based on their specialty of knowledge. Along with these Mães are a host of filhas and filhos dos santos [daughters and sons of the saints], who perform the ritual events and incarnate the orixás when in trance (Ziéglér 119–21). The hierarchy is often reduplicated in ritual ceremonies wherein the premier Mãe sits in state, surrounded by the lesser Mães. In some houses, her chair is elevated and in others her chair is distinguished by its elaborateness and height above the others.

It is in the restructuring of affiliation that new forms of collective belonging develop. Removed from the social malaise of the society, the Mãe de Santo often lives in the terreiro along with a few of her adepts. As she is the supreme authority, the terreiro becomes a personal fiefdom, an enclave of female power.
outside of the purview of the Brazilian social and political structure. Those undergoing the first levels of initiation also live in the terreiros for a period of three months in which they are sequestered from the public. For the first time, existing in this liminal world, they are free of the anti-black, anti-African discourse of the society. Included in an alternate arrangement in which the culture, mythos, rituals, language, food, and dress of Africa dominates, they undergo a psycho-social restructuring. As initiates, they learn to communicate with their orixás; and it is through this communion that they begin to apprehend the profundity of this spiritual power. For the relationship cultivated with one’s orixá is not one that is based solely on faith or the guidance of someone with greater spiritual authority; it deepens into a personal, psychic transformation as the initiate becomes the vehicle used by the orixá to become corporeal through trance possession.  

It is at this point of manifestation that we see an interruption of the social discourse of the Brazilian state. For in the dominant ideologies, power exists only amongst the political elite and wealthy, white strata. In these alternate spaces where blackness prevails, power is reconfigured as the interrelation and interplay between the human vehicle and the spiritual world. When the orixás incarnate in bodies of the initiates and the Mães, everything changes and everything is possible. They come to provide succor, to give advice, to provide direction during adversity, to cure in times of sickness, to give warning of dangers to come, to bless and open the way for the good things of life to enter. The communication is thus between the transcendental and divine and the human subject. Through these incarnations, spiritual power becomes tangible, accessible, and concretely located in the body of the filha de santo. No longer is she the denigrated object of the society’s gaze, or simply the object of sexual desire, but the revered and esteemed subject who bears messages of divine origination.

With greater training an initiate may learn the art of divination and, as her skill develops, so will her reputation. It then becomes commonplace for white Brazilians to seek her out in times of crises. In the public sphere, she can easily be the ignored black woman, or the sexualized mulata, but in these times of need and want, by entering her domain, they submit to her authority. For in locating the problem, she also tells of the solution. Through these acts, whites symbolically enter the black world as they seek from this African hermeneutic tradition answers to what ails them. Inverting the power hierarchy, as Segato suggests, whites bow down to this numinous authority and are forced to reconcile within themselves the prejudice against and need for the black ‘Other’.

Yet once outside of the terreiro space, it appears that the power structures remain relatively unchanged until one observes a public ceremony for the orixás in Salvador. It is in these public rituais, a combination of rituals and festivals, that we see the overt challenge to the dominant discourse and the reversal of this white/black dynamic. For the sake of brevity, I will concentrate
on one ritoval in particular, the celebration of the orixá, Obaluaye, which takes place during the month of July in Salvador.32

Obaluaye, the orixá of smallpox and sickness, is known to be extremely powerful and he is called on to get rid all types of sickness and diseases. Normally, a filha only incarnates her own personal orixá, but Obaluaye happens to be the only orixá who anyone can incarnate. During his incarnation, the devotee's posture often bends and she begins to shake convulsively, mimicking the physical suffering he endured as a victim of smallpox. In ceremony, one who manifests Obaluaye wears white and is fully covered with raffia. The raffia is a metonymic device linking the filha with the transformative power of the orixá, as it is said that the orixá uses it to conceal the ravages brought by smallpox.

During the month of the ritoval, his devotees circle the city each day. Dressed in the white favored by the deity, they carry a basket on their heads filled with popcorn. Popcorn as an offering to the deity resonates with symbolism. Corn is his food of choice and the white of the popcorn replicates the purity of the dress of his supplicants. The popcorn simultaneously gives homage to the orixá as an offering and serves as metonymic link to his transcendental power. The popcorn is first offered to the orixá and is blessed by him; his devotees then walk the city with a basket filled with it on their heads, offering it to those in need. Individuals with any type of sickness approach these devotees, give coins as a token of respect and, in return, are showered with the popcorn, which symbolically cleanses them of their illnesses.

This month long expurgation of sickness from the city culminates with a ceremony on the third Thursday of the month at the Igreja do São Lazaro. São Lazaro or Saint Lazarus, in the Catholic pantheon, is the patron saint of the poor and the sick. The enslaved, who were forced to conceal their religious beliefs, juxtaposed the qualities of the orixás and the Catholic saints, using the guise of the saints to camouflage their own practices. Saint Lazarus is an obvious metonymic disguise for Obaluaye and the day of veneration of the saint simultaneously becomes a day to venerate the orixá.

On this day, ritual specialists converge in front of the church ostensibly to worship the orixá; in the process, they generate a polemic dialogue that interrupts both state institutions and officially sanctioned religious dogma. During the course of the day, several Masses are said for the saint. Mães dos Santos and filhas and filhos dos Santos arrive on foot carrying their offerings to the orixá. Banned from entering the church, the Mães, on arriving at the steps, create a contrapuntal ritual ground that deliberately challenges official discourse. Leaving the church after Mass, the worshipper is immediately confronted by this display of an alternate text as found in the bodies and symbolic accoutrements of the Mães dos Santos. Lining up one after the other, the supplicants see no conflict in leaving from the Catholic/European based ceremony and stepping into the African universe as they await their turn to get blessed by the
Mães. After being showered with popcorn and prayed over, each supplicant continues on his/her journey of the day. When a Mãe catches the spirit of the orixá and goes into trance, the line shifts to her because each person wants to be personally blessed by the orixá.

During my observance of the day, I was particularly struck by one house and the ostentatious display of the Mãe and her filhas. Arriving around midday, dressed in the brilliant white lace clothing reserved for Candomblé ceremonies, the Mãe and her filhas walk in single file as the crowd parts to let them through. By this time of the day, the street leading to the church is packed with thousands of people. When this Mãe and her filhas enter, however, they are determined to be the center of attention. The Mãe stops at a choice spot in front of the church and the filhas, all bearing huge metal basins full of popcorn, stoop down around her in a semi-circle. The Mãe takes popcorn from these vessels and throws it into the crowd, calling the attention of those around her, while the filhas remain motionless and expressionless, crouched close to the ground.

Within minutes, the Mãe’s movements become slower. Before we know it, she suddenly bends over as if she is hit by something, rocks her body, and utters a sound called the ika. The ika is the call of possession; it not only lets the onlookers know that the deity has arrived, but based on the particular noise, the initiates know which deity has arrived. Her body becomes a visual text that tells of the incarnation, as she removes her oja, her headwrap, and ties it around her waist. During ceremony, the way an oja is tied around the bust and waist of the initiate tells which orixá has descended. In this case, it is Obaluaye himself, and those in the crowd know it immediately, for a line immediately forms in front of the Mãe de Santo as the participants desert the other Mães who have yet to be possessed by the deity. This fickleness is commonplace in the public sphere because they have come to be blessed, and who but the orixá himself can give the most powerful blessings? The old and the young are pushed forward: the old to ward off or alleviate their sicknesses and the young to prevent any impeding illness. However, this is not the end, for the Mãe demonstrates her power by showing her ability to transmit this transcendental energy. Those she hugs who are susceptible to the power of the orixá immediately become possessed.

One young man, with short dreadlocks, hugs her and immediately begins to shake convulsively. The shaking of his body, the foreboding noise issuing from him that attests to his pain, and the uncontrollable movement of his hands, all signal that the deity is indeed present and powerful. He is not the only one as another young woman too becomes possessed after hugging the Mãe. As the orixá resides in each of them, the crowd shifts between them as more and more people come to receive the blessing of the deity. These incarnations become a personal testament to the sacred authority of this Mãe, whose axé, spiritual force, is so great that she not only calls the deity to her but trans-
mits his energy to those around her. It is important to understand that the people who become possessed are not her initiates, nor do I know if they are initiated in another terreiro, but the combined force of the mother and the god overcome their individual selves to allow them to be vehicles for the manifestation of the divine. This is where power lies: in the transcendental, non-corporeal world that, at times, is as real and as touchable as the devotee who brings it into being.

This particular ritual continues all day and ends well after midnight, once the revelers are fully satiated with food, conversation, and drink. The culmination of the sacred occurs around eight at night, when the statue of São Lazaro is brought out of the church and paraded on the streets. The priests who accompany it look less than pleased at the crowd surrounding them, for, I can only speculate, they fully realize that these congregants see within the image of São Lazaro an aspect of Obaluaye that affirms their desire to interact with the god force rather than worship from afar.

It is in such rituals that we see the reversal of the social dynamics. The Mães, leaving the enclosed space of the terreiros, symbolically “out” their transcendental authority. It is openly acknowledged by the adherents of Candomblé that it is the will of the orixás that guides one’s life, and during such ceremonies, that numinous authority is made visible and apparent. The rituals involving public processions, gifts to the orixás, singing, dancing, possession trances, elaborate costumes, prayers, and supplications evoke compelling responses amongst the adherents. Generating a visual and verbal identificatory text, those who are deemed sub-citizens show their transcendental aspects. Invoking and valorizing African cultural forms, they enable an overt challenge to be issued against the institutionalized construction of whiteness and the normative standard of European culture. In the ritual context, power is thus recentered and redefined as the purview of those with transcendental authority.

Outside of the ritual sphere, the positions of the Mães dos Santos can be quite ambivalent. The most well known Mães such as Mãe Stella of Ilê Axé Apó Afonjá or Mãe Carmen of Gantois are venerated and treated with the utmost respect by members of all levels of society. Lesser known Mães like Mãe Valdina of Jussara, and Mãe Valnizia of Terreiro do Cobre do not have the same level of social recognition, but they stand as vanguards for a lived Africanness that can empower black women.

The journey here is the inverse of the telos in social dominance theory, it is not one of empowerment to power, but one of power to empowerment. The question then becomes: how does that transcendental power translate into concrete forms of activism to change the positionality of black women? Naturally, this question is best answered by social scientists who can give the necessary statistical correlations, but what we find is that Candomblé becomes a matrix and a model for institution building. In the quest for a voice outside of
the white dominated feminist movement, and the male dominated black movement, black female social activists find inspiration in the female-centered ideal of the terreiro and the collectivism and communalism it fosters (Carneiro 224). Within the terreiros, the women not only work together to care and carry the orixás, they aid each other emotionally, socially, financially, and in facilitating their movements in and out of the political sphere. Quite often, the terreiros become the chosen spaces to house educational and empowerment programs geared to the community.

Known to be advocates of Candomblé, whether initiated or not, these activists view its Africanness as a counternarrative to the processes of embriancamento and the myth of racial democracy. Thus, their identification with the religion is a part of their political positioning that is as important as their public discourses against the Brazilian state. Mãe Stella views this identification as “uma moda,” a fad, but it is definitely not a fleeting association. Within the purview of Salvador, most of the female activists proudly proclaim their affiliation to Candomblé and the terreiro to which they belong. The African symbology found within the religion has also been co-opted and reconstructed to suit this journey of power to empowerment. It is quite common for Afro-Brazilian organizations to use visual metonyms like the swords of Iansã and Ogun, the double-edged axe of Shango, the fans and mirrors of Yemanja and Oshun as markers of identification. Organizations have taken on names with resonance in the belief system such as Geledés, traditionally a masking ritual that honors women in Yorubaland, but in Brazil, it is an organization dedicated to combating racism and improving health.

The symbols and names of these organizations are of significantly lesser importance compared to their goals. It is through their activism that we see the beginnings of change in policy in Brazil.

Both Roland and Htun consider the Beijing Conference in 1995 as the turning point for Afro-Brazilian women, for as Roland points out, the Brazilian government was finally receptive to their charges of racism (249). Htun further accords a combination of factors such as political activism and the personal commitment of the President at the time, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, to the radical alteration in state policy in 2000, whereby the government finally admitted that racism is a dominant force in the social fabric of Brazilian life. Consequently, the government advocated what has become an extremely controversial policy of quotas to redress these inequities (Htun 61). As mentioned previously, the 1988 constitution specifically addresses the issues of women as it guarantees equality before the law regardless of sex, race, profession, religious, or political beliefs. It ensures women access to the labor market, equal pay, maternity leave, and rights to contraception and abortion; it also redefines the concept of family. It also allows for social security benefits for domestic workers, land rights, and protection against domestic violence.
(Verucci 551). This too, is part of the reverse journey from power to empowerment, for as seen from the beginning of this paper, even with the increased advocacy, not much has changed for Afro-Brazilian women. As Sueli Carneiro points out, there is an immense gap between theory and practice, especially with regards to black women’s rights.

What I have tried to illustrate in this paper is the way a capitalist world system and the underdevelopment it generates interact with local forms of dominance through the interrelated prisms of gender, race, and class. Globalization favors the powerful and it has beggared and made more vulnerable individuals and communities by marginalizing them and denying them basic human services. Today, Afro-Brazilians make up 33.7 percent of the 53 million poor Brazilians, which translates to 63 percent of the poor population (Beato 778). Being black in Brazil signifies being poor, and the Afro-Brazilian woman, who suffers the most from all aspects of societal negation, stands as the most victimized in this system of oppression. However, she has a source of power that, when tapped into, tells a different story: not one of victimization, but one of agency, one of self-sufficiency, and of collective belonging.

The political activism that comes out of the identification with Candomblé begins with a level of trust by the community for the Mães and their initiates. That trust enables women to negotiate the daily traumas faced through their cultivation of an intensely personal relationship with the god-force. Whether they are initiated or not, the relationship with the divine is a source of empowerment as it allows women to increase their self-esteem, sense of authority, and control over their lives. The Mães serve as bridge between the transcendental and the material plane; through the art of divination, they aid the supplicant by finding solutions to whatever problem is at hand. When the gods descend, they become the vehicles to facilitate that personal communication. The deprivation of life thus becomes less significant because one feels that the divine is on her side, and, if one is privileged to incarnate that numinous power, then she is invincible. Candomblé opens the space for oppositional identities (material/spiritual, black/white, rich/poor) to transform the discourse of Brazil, for within its space, all are supplicants to the orixás. One’s race, class, ethnicity, economic, and social position are irrelevant because what matters is the respect for the Mãe and cultivation of one’s axé with the orixás. Inverting societal norms, as the site where femaleness and blackness prevails, it allows for the creation of de-essentialized identities that construct alternate hierarchies of gender, race, and class.
Notes

1. Although the level of self-identification has narrowed to these five categories, it does not yield an accurate depiction of the racial dynamics as individuals still tend to whiten themselves within this classificatory system and, at times, census takers mark the color of the respondent rather than allowing this self-identification. See Piza and Rosenberg, “Color in the Brazilian Census” (1999) for a more detailed discussion on the unreliability of the 1991 census results.

2. Out of the 169,872,856 respondents, 91,298,042 identified as white. Out of the 127,582 respondents who admitted to practicing Candomblé, 47,763 identified as white, 29,123 as black, and 47,989 as brown.

3. It is generally acknowledged that the discourse of *lusotropicalism* began with Gilberto Freyre, as the overarching framework for the Brazilian myth of racial democracy. See Isfahani-Hammond’s *White Negritude* (2008), which traces the discursive beginnings of this ideology and contemporizes it with an analysis of relevant social issues such as quotas and affirmative action.

4. See Taylor’s *Buying Whiteness* (2005), which delineates the construction of whiteness in the 15th and 16th centuries, while Isfahani-Hammond addresses the construction of the lusotropic ideal.


6. See the works of Goldani, “Racial Inequality in the lives of Brazilian Women” (1999) and Roland, “The Soda Cracker Dilemma” (1999), which use this categorization for the black population in Brazil.


8. See Lovell’s “Gender, Race and the Struggle for Social Justice in Brazil” (2000), which compares statistical data from the 1960s and 1980s. The 1980s data is taken only from .8 percent of the census takers and, as such, represents a small margin of the population. Beato, “Inequality and Human Rights of African Descendants in Brazil” (2004), bases her statistics on the 2000 census and provides the most current statistical analysis of the Afro-Brazilian condition.


11. A common joke among those who identify as white Brazilians is that they too have “a foot in the kitchen,” in acknowledgment of their black ancestry. Most notable, however, is that the kitchen is the domain of blacks, and while the phrase seemingly acknowledges the inclusivity of different races in Brazil, it points to a profoundly imbedded socio-economic hierarchy. This saying is so commonplace that even the former President Fernando Henrique Cardoso used it to speak of his African ancestry (Htun 73).

12. Lei Afonso Arinos passed after Katherine Dunham visited Brazil and was denied access to a prestigious hotel in Rio. She publicly denounced her treatment and generated a great deal of embarrassment for the Brazilian State, which was deeply invested in perpetuating the myth of racial democracy. The law became the chosen panacea as its success lies in bolstering the myth without an attendant alteration of the social dynamics.

13. One of the ironies of this racialized discourse is that while Amado celebrates Afro-Brazilian women and Brazilians celebrate his work, this is not extended to the filmic depictions of his novels.
Notably, Sonia Braga becomes the visual marker for the Bahian woman, yet it is obvious that she has indigenous ancestry. See Amado’s *Tenda dos Milagres* (1963), *Tereza Batista* (1972), and *Gabriela: Cravo e Canela* (1963).

14. 56% of *preto* women will remain unmarried or without a partner for over half of their lives and, correspondingly, 48% of *pardo* women and 42% of white women.

15. The term “subhuman conditions” specifically refers to the miserable housing conditions, poor infrastructure (sanitation, water, waste, and power facilities), as well as the degree of poverty and need.

16. Kuumba, in “Cross-Cultural Race/Class/Gender Critique of Contemporary Population Policy” (1999), explores the effects of forced sterilization on women of African descent and Hartmann, in “Bankers, Babies and Bangladesh” (1995), extends the analysis to include men and women in Malaysia, China, and Bangladesh.

17. The global impact of population control policies are well documented. See Getgen’s “Untold Truths” (1999), which focuses on sterilization campaigns against Quechua women in Peru and Kesselman’s “Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement” (2004), which addresses such campaigns in relation to Native American and African American women.

18. See Roland’s “O Movimento de Mulheres Negras Brasiliéiras” (2000), which specifically addresses the anti-sterilization and health campaign of Geledês, an organization created for and by Afro-Brazilian women.

19. Due to the general disregard for the health of Afro-Brazilian women, they are subject to greater levels of infant mortality and maternal death, and they have a 50% greater chance of contracting diabetes, HIV, and uterine cancer than white women (Baeto 772).

20. See Bailey’s “Group Dominance and the Myth of Racial Democracy” (2004) and Hanchard's *Orpheus and Power* (1994) for discussions and critiques of the *Movimento Negro Unificado* (MNU). Members of the black intelligentsia formed the MNU in 1977. Openly critiquing racism within their society, they sought to mobilize the poor to create alternate strategies for empowerment.

21. See Roland’s “O Movimento de Mulheres Negras Brasiliéiras” (2000) and Soares’ ”O Verso e Reverso da Construção da Cidadania Feminina, Branca e Negra no Brasil” (2000), for discussions on the points of discord between the black women’s movement and the feminist movement in Brazil.


23. When examining all of Brazil, there is an overall decline in Afro-Brazilian participation in Candomblé, but in Salvador da Bahia, Afro-Brazilians are still the majority participants.

24. Mãe Valdina is a Mãe de Santo (mother of saints) in the tradition of Candomblé-angola.

25. Included in this index are the Gege, Aja, and Fon peoples from the present-day neighboring countries of Benin and Togo; historically, they are consanguinely related to the Yorubas.

26. The title Iyá Nassô is given to the head priestess of a shrine of Shango.

27. Some of the most notable of these ogans were Roger Bastide, Pierre Verger (who was initiated in West Africa), and Jorge Amado.

28. Landes’ *The City of Women* (1994) affirms the gendered nature of spirit possession, since it was considered unmanly to be “mounted” by an orixá. Even though her study was conducted from 1938–1939, it validates the homoerotic interpretation given by Matory in *Black Atlantic Religion* (1994) to newly initiated Shango priests in Oyo. Landes states that initiates believed that men were subjected to homosexual dominance when possessed and, as a result, would lose their machismo. Matory predicates his argument on what he considers the transvestitism of Shango priests and the relative submission of the initiate to the orixá, who, whether male or female, is called a *iyawo* or bride. See also Oyewumi’s *The Invention of Women* (1997), in which she takes umbrage with Matory’s characterization, considering it an imposition of Western models of discourse since concepts of
gender did not exist in pre-colonial Oyo society. To add to the debate, Clark’s *Where Men are Wives and Mothers Rule* (2004) examines gender as a category within the Yoruba ritual context and concedes that an initiate, whether male or female, as an *iyawo*, performs female based duties in relation to the orixá and the shrine. However, she, like Oyewùmí, does not see within these relationships the (homo)sexualization attributed by Matory.

29. *Casa Branca* maintains a strict female-only policy for its initiates and members that remains inviolable to this day.


31. I am coining the term *rituals* to illustrate the combination of ritual and festival that occurs in Salvador to honor the orixás.

32. I have personally observed this ceremony in July 2002 and in July 2008.

33. I had the privilege of witnessing a similar incarnation of the deity at Gantois. This was a private ceremony as the terreiro was closed to public ceremonies because of the death of the previous Mãe. The male, who incarnated Obaluaye, was placed in a chair and a sheet was draped over him to replace the raffia garb used during ceremony. He sat shaking convulsively and emitting this terrible sound while the other attendees came to receive his blessing.

34. These two Mães stand out due to their activism in Salvador. Their terreiros have also become the sites of social transformation as their filhas and filhos are now some of the leading proponents of social and political activism within the city.

35. See Bailey’s “Group Dominance and the Myth of Racial Democracy” (2004), which uses social dominance theory to trace the ways in which the myth of racial democracy impedes resistance to antiracism strategies. Social dominance theory attempts to explain how subordinates contribute to their own subordination and, therefore, allow us to understand how and why social hierarchies are produced.

36. While Sueli Carniero points out that women’s movements organize by creating collectives and networks, I make the link to Candomblé based on my research observation from 2000 to the present.

37. See Cardoso’s “Mãe Baeta” (1999), which gives a brief chronicle of the life of Mãe Baeta, telling how her activism within her terreiro has led to her role as national and international advocate for women’s rights in Brazil.

38. Over the course of my research, I have personally observed a range of debates taking place within the terreiros on issues from health to the role of African culture in the society. I have also observed the *palestros* of organizations like UNEGRO (União de Negros pelo Igualdade), CEAFRO, Niger Okan, and Steve Biko Cultural Institute, to name a few from Salvador, whose members look to Candomblé as a model for black empowerment.

39. Within the last seven years, many of the women with whom I conducted research, and who only attested to a fleeting identification with Candomblé, have become initiates or are working towards their initiation.

40. See Roland’s “O Movimento de Mulheres Negras Brasileiras” (2000) for a more comprehensive list of Afro-Brazilian women’s organization.

41. Htun, in “From ‘Racial Democracy’ to Affirmative Action” (2004), argues that three vectors allowed for the changing reception to the issue of racism in Brazil: issue networks (scholars, activists, journalists, state officials, economists), presidential initiatives (Fernando Henrique Cardoso’s advocacy of affirmative action programs), and international events (global conferences like the Beijing Conference in 1995). See also Bailey’s “Group Dominance and the Myth of Racial Democracy” (2004), which points to the specific affirmative action initiatives implemented by Cardoso to depict the beginnings of the transformation in official policy.
42. Also see Carneiro’s “Black Women’s Identity in Brazil” (1999).
43. See Verucci’s “Women and the New Brazilian Constitution” (1991) for a discussion on the changes within the Constitution that guarantee rights to women. See also Carneiro’s “Black Women’s Identity in Brazil” (1999), which further discusses the problematic of enforcing constitutional mandates in regards to black women.

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