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**The dissertation committee for Maria Andrea dos Santos Soares certifies that  
this is the approved version of the following dissertation:**

***Akoben:* Performance, Politics and Foundational Narratives of  
Blackness.**

**Committee:**

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**João H. Costa Vargas, Supervisor**

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**Charles Hale**

---

**Edmund Gordon**

---

**Joy James**

---

**Omi Joni L. Jones**

***Akoben: Performance, Politics and Foundational Narratives of  
Blackness.***

by

**Maria Andrea dos Santos Soares, Licentiate; M. Soc. Anthro.**

**Dissertation**

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# ***Akoben: Performance, Politics and Foundational Narratives of Blackness.***

Maria Andrea dos Santos Soares, PhD.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2015

Supervisor, João H. Costa Vargas

This work investigates Black performances and the performance of Blackness as expressions of narratives centered in the fact of existing in this world while a Black being. The themes investigated in this study are ontology, performance, and politics of Blackness deployed by Black Brazilian artists in Rio de Janeiro. In March 2012, several Black artists mobilized to protest against the systematic exclusion of artists and cultural producers of African descent from Brazilian state-sponsored funding opportunities. The *Akoben* movement—a word that represents the *Adinkra*<sup>1</sup> symbol meaning “War Horn”—has the goals of *Akoben* of: to demand transparency from the state in funding decisions, to assure that selection committees will represent Brazilian diversity, and to implement

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<sup>1</sup> Iconographic system of the Akan group from the region of Ghana and Ivory Coast.

Affirmative Action policies in state-sponsored funding opportunities. Departing from the review of how cultural expressions and art forms associated with African descendants have been used, I will discuss how *Akoben* brings questions of cultural appropriation and of material and symbolic alienation as effects of racism to the forefront of public debate. I will also discuss the subject of state co-optation of Black activists and the withdrawal of leaders from the social movement to engage within the state or with political parties. In the process of engaging with the state, the *Akoben* mobilization creates grounds for a racial identity that these artists' aesthetic creations and activist trajectories feed. Such aesthetic and political processes resist material and symbolic forms of racial subjugation while simultaneously creating a space for exchange and learning, for the establishment of professional networks, and for political action. However, the internal contradictions and limitations, the disputes generated from alignments of Black social movements and of individuals with state institution and political parties, constrain the possibilities of more radical projects of Black liberation either in political, in aesthetic or in ontological terms.

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List of Abbreviations:

**CADON = Osvaldo Neves Center for Support and Development**

**CONNEB = National Congress of the Blacks**

**ELETROBRAS = Brazilian Company of Eletriccity**

**FUNARTE = National Foundation of Arts**

**IPCN = Palmares Institute of Black Culture**

**IPDH = Palmares instituto of Human Rights**

**MINC = Ministry of Culture**

**OSIP = Social Interest Organization**

**PETROBRÁS = Brazil Oil Company**

**PT= Workers Party**

**SEPPIR= Secretariat of Politics for the Promotion of Racial Equality**

## INTRODUCTION:

### 1-The context of the fieldwork

This work is the result of research initiated in 2011, initially planned as an ethnography of Black performances and performers invested in the affirmation of Black racial identity. Along the way, it became an inquiry into the foundational conceptions of Blackness expressed in the aesthetic-political creations of Black Brazilian artists and activists. The initial research questions centered on the idea of transformative performances of Blackness quickly became contaminated by an uncertainty: what constitutes both “Blackness” and “transformative” in these performances? Are the performances transformative because they seek to create consciousness, or because the performers are Black? I started to question the limits of the “transformative” once I realized the real conditions under which my collaborators work and began to understand

that their goal is to gain access to material resources based on Affirmative Action measures. It could be said that, in their work, they base most of their public discourse in multiculturalism, constitutional rights, and international treaties to fight racial discrimination. As my initial beliefs about the possibility of Black radical thought came to terms with the concrete experience of these cultural agents—most of them long-term activists of the Black Movement—I realized that my idealization of the politics and visions of these individuals, combined with ethnographic knowledge of the historical processes and concrete conditions surrounding them, especially the constraints of the social networks in which they are positioned, caused an enormous amount of tension in my work.

To complicate things further, the theater company I had planned to be my central focus, *Companhia dos Comuns* (Commons Company), was no longer rehearsing or planning to produce a spectacle due to lack of funding. Although I watched performances (theater plays, scenes, urban interventions) and other social events with performative elements (protests, awards, meetings, visits to public institutions), the context of the fieldwork was determined by the very impossibility of having a stable object called “Black radical performance” or the “performance of Black radicality.” However, this impossibility led the work to a more multilayered experience where the imperatives of getting access to resources led the artists to social mobilization to fight for Affirmative Action in the realm of state sponsorship for the arts. The artists’ mobilization points to the historicity of Black movements in Brazil and to the symbolic, expressive, and political legacy of Black struggles in Brazil. At the same time, the relationship of these

struggles with the Brazilian state indicates how the state used Afro-Brazilians and Afro-Brazilian culture through the years, including the contemporary political moment and its multicultural policies. Finally, this work investigates how Blackness and the African Diaspora are understood and constituted among this group of people as political, social, and identitarian constructions determined and reshaped by the connections and circuits of exchange in which these artists invest. To summarize, the questions framing this work are: 1) How do artistic practices inform, and how are they informed by, Black political projects? 2) What do these Black performances and performances of Blackness indicate in terms of the type and scope of such Black political projects? and 3) What do these Black performances tell about the ontological position of the Black being?

In March 2012, several Black artists from Rio de Janeiro mobilized to protest against the systematic exclusion of artists and cultural producers of African descent from Brazilian state sponsored funding opportunities. The *Akobén* movement—a word that represents the Adinkra<sup>2</sup> symbol meaning “War Horn”—created an online mobilization through Facebook. They recorded and circulated a video accusing the Brazilian state of excluding Afro-Brazilian producers and artists from funding opportunities, and demanded meetings with state representatives. Akoben’s goals were to demand transparency in the state in funding decisions, to assure that selection committees will represent Brazilian diversity, and to implement Affirmative Action policies in state-sponsored funding opportunities.

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<sup>2</sup> Iconographic system of the Akhan group from the region of Ghana and the Ivory Coast.

In what follows, I will analyze the politics of representation of Blackness these artists deploy, and investigate what these politics mean in terms of a politically informed identity construction. Blackness, in this sense, diverges from the classic celebration of a “traditional” African heritage like that emphasized in Brazilian culture through the celebration of “African roots”: cultural practices such as samba music, Candomblé, carnival, and capoeira. On one hand, these practices are key elements of resistance and of the symbolic life of Black communities, often adopted by activists to assure dignity and collective mobilization (Fundação Cultural Palmares 2011; Perry 2005; Hanchard 1999; Lopes and Nascimento 1987). On the other hand, this celebration of African heritage is frequently used in Brazil to demonstrate the plausibility of the “racial democracy myth” (Kamel 2006; Freyre 2002; Vianna and Chasteen 1999; Ribeiro 1995). This perspective is related to a broader ideology of *mestizaje* in Latin America and Mexico that celebrates mixed cultural (and racial) heritage as one of the pillars of the national foundation. The rhetoric of mestizaje offered an alternate discourse to the early 20th century ideology of racial purity in the US and the eugenicist views of Brazilian politicians, medical doctors, and sociologists. Mestizaje suggests the foundation of a new and superior race whose creation is dictated by the assimilation of Black and indigenous elements into the dominant features of the White population (Skidmore and Smith 2005; Martinez 1998; Graham 1992).

The rhetoric of mestizaje, allied with the state economy of tourism, turns Blackness and the eroticized narrative of mixing into a profitable business (Clarke and Thomas 2006; Pravaz 2003; Alexander 1994). The city of Rio de Janeiro is well known



for its depictions of Afro-Brazilian culture, such as the Carnival parade, samba music and dance, capoeira, religion, and cuisine. However, according to artists and producers who are my research collaborators, those who have historically profited from the selling of Black cultural production are the White entrepreneurs in charge of show houses, theatre houses and companies, record companies, tourist agencies, the press, and other such ventures. Expressive Afro-Brazilian culture constitutes a profitable commodity in the tourism-driven city of Rio de Janeiro at the expense of the well being of Black and poor citizens. This is not a phenomenon restricted to Brazil: in other places of the African Diaspora, similar phenomena occur. Countries such as Jamaica and Cuba are just two examples where Blackness, aligned with the tropical climate, the landscape, and sex, embodies the dream of a lost paradise/plantation to many tourists (Kempadoo 1999; Kinkaid 1988).

Departing from this archive of how cultural expressions and art forms associated with African descendants have been used or misused, I will discuss how the Akoben collective and the work of people associated with this collective bring questions of cultural appropriation and of material and symbolic alienation as effects of racial inequality to the forefront of public debate. I will also discuss the subject of state co-optation of Black activists and the withdrawal of leaders from the social movement to work within the state or with political parties. The internal competition for positions, leadership, influence, and attention within Black collectives, aligned with the resilience of sexism and homophobia, weakens the organizational capacity of these struggles.

Despite the contradictions, limitations, and disputes generated by alignments of Black social movements and individual activists with state institutions and political parties, I propose that in the process of engaging with the state, the Akoben mobilization creates ground for a racial identity that these artists' aesthetic creations and activist trajectories feed. Such aesthetic processes resist material and symbolic forms of racial oppression while simultaneously creating a space for exchange and learning, for the establishment of professional networks, and for political action.

## 2- Methods

I spent twelve months in Rio de Janeiro living in the northern area of Honório Gurgel, which is mainly a working class area composed of several neighborhoods connected to Avenida Brasil, the major road of access to the city, and to Baixada Fluminense, a geographical area composed of several cities and known for its high rates of violence, poverty, drug addiction, human rights violations, and homicides. Those areas in the north never appear in the postcards; they are crowded, degraded, and lack infrastructure in all aspects: health services, transportation, security, education, and food quality. These areas, have a large percentage of Black residents.

Although I knew that Hilton Cobra, the head of the Akoben mobilization and the director of Companhia dos Comuns, lived in Santa Tereza, the downtown area of Rio, I decided to live in Rio's periphery for several reasons: 1) housing in downtown Rio is incredibly expensive and it is very complicated to sign a contract; 2) I would have a

deeper experience of immersion in different realities of Rio de Janeiro; and 3) by renting a backyard house with a family consisting of a mother and two sons, I would feel safer than I would if living alone with my daughter.

While I was immersed in the dynamics of Rio, the amount of time, energy, and money expended to dislocate from Honório Gurgel to downtown Rio (around one hour by train or bus) caused me stress and exhaustion. During my fieldwork, I often questioned my choice of living arrangements, but I can say now that this experience was fundamental to my apprehension of the city's dynamics and the circuits of Black life that I would never have understood if I lived in the downtown area. By living in this area, I could pay more attention to the racial geography of Rio de Janeiro; one observation is that the time required to travel from my living arrangements to downtown — over one hour, or more when the traffic was bad, which was often — kept the population living in the north away from the beaches, touristic venues, good schools, and health care providers. Besides, most of the people living in the north or Baixada Fluminense ride public transportation to go to work almost every day. What this means is that, for most of them, to try to go to the beaches during their free time, or to seek health care or better grocery stores means additional hours on often overcrowded buses and trains without air conditioning. As I noticed from my own experience, this is not exactly a relaxing time. Aside from the long time spent travelling to the downtown area or to south, the price of public transportation is high; a round trip on the metro, train, or bus costs \$3.00. To take any additional bus (which is often necessary) cost another \$1.50 (single ride). This is a prohibitive factor for many people. Five weekly roundtrips to the downtown area in one

vehicle costs \$15.00. This is \$60.00 a month for one person, whereas the monthly minimum wage in Brazil was around \$300.00 in 2012. Although the state of Rio de Janeiro has another value for the regional minimum wage (between \$ 320.00 and 380.00), and despite the additional money some companies provide to fund workers' transportation costs, people often lack money to tour the city, to look for better jobs, or to study away from home.

The choice of place, the frequent dislocations from the north area of Rio to the downtown area, and the networks of my research peers led me to conceive my fieldwork on three levels:

1) The first level was the object itself: the Akoben mobilization, the meetings, and the work of the artists;

2) The second level, which I call the tangential level, is related to all of the other events I participated in that were not directly a part of Akoben actions or performances. The reason I consider them part of the fieldwork is due to the fact that they shaped my understanding about other aspects related to the subject of the research;

3) The third level of the field, called the transversal level, is constituted by all events that somehow affected me and had some sort of impact on my perceptions, feelings, or thoughts. Thus, tours of the Madureira neighborhood, the chaotic traffic, the one hour plus bus journeys at night passing crack cocaine users in the streets and military police vehicles in favelas, my favorite *acarajé*<sup>3</sup> place, and encounters with neighbors or

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<sup>3</sup> A black-eyed pea dough fried in palm oil and filled with “*caruru*”(okra stew), “*vatapá*”(a puree made of cashew and coconut milk), shrimp, onion, and tomato. This dish is considered the food of the Orisha Iansã (or Oya), goddess of lightning, tempests, and death.

unknown people all created conditions to explore different potentialities of the writing process.

As part of my regular field notes I created and kept an updated agenda of events related to Blacks in Rio and in Brazil. Besides being involved in events created by Akoben members, I also took notes, and eventually engaged in other activities, festivals, shows, ceremonials, debates, and parties that spoke at some level to my own questions and to the circuits of temporalities and spatiality of Blackness in Rio de Janeiro. In addition, I started to use Facebook to track which events my collaborators were attending, creating, or thinking about. The use of this tool also allowed me to grasp my research peers' professional connections and projects.

One year before my fieldwork started in August 2012, I had an introductory meeting with Cobrinha in the summer of 2011. Our contact was mediated by the actor Gustavo Melo, a graduate student in the African and African Diaspora Studies Department at the University of Texas in Austin. This proximity between my research theme and academic peers facilitated my entrance into fieldwork, and by the time I attended the fundraising organized by Akoben, Cobrinha had introduced me to the other participants as a researcher and a new member of the movement. Being situated in the context of this mobilization led me to meet and connect with other collectives, activists, and artists. Some of them keep a loose association with Akoben, supporting the movement's demands but not engaging in the mobilization itself due to their own projects. My interaction with people such as the videographer and hip-hop feminist artist ReFem—who has a history of community engagement and pedagogical initiatives in

Black communities—and people such as Ruth Pinheiro—a long term activist of the Black Movement and supporter of Afro-Brazilian artistic groups—was an integral part of my fieldwork. These people, among others not attending the Akoben meetings, are at some level connected to Akoben's cause and have shaped my understanding of the object of research.

I planned to interview each person two times: one of the interviews was a life narrative and the other involved specific questions about the mobilization, the demands, and the general panorama of Black arts in Brazil. I conducted most of the interviews during the second half of my fieldwork. This was part of a conscious decision in delaying the interviews for two reasons: 1) I would be better acquainted with the context and the process of the mobilization and what has been discussed and suggested. This provided the basis to formulate relevant questions. 2) People would know me better after time spent in the field. This time together and all of the informal conversations and discussions during the meetings created an atmosphere of comfort and confidence to talk.

Regarding the use of images, I chose to use participants' Facebook photographs based on an ethical decision of trying to show these people in a way they wanted to be seen. Thus, by using their Facebook pictures, I am respecting the choices made by the research participants themselves. I also contacted the research participants and asked them to choose which pictures they would like to see in this work. It is important to note that I was working with artists, with people who are already used to having their images publicized. Most of them are very aware and vigilant about how they want their images to be displayed. Since the beginning of my fieldwork, I thought about the use of images and

the goals of using them: the visual record needs to be more than informative, and in its ideal form it should also have an artistic quality that can be appreciated by my peers as an archive of our time together, in addition to any possible academic and political usage. The visual records in this work come from three sources: Photographs taken by myself and others during fieldwork; Photographs circulated by research peers through their Facebook pages; and, The Companhia dos Comuns's portfolio.

By introducing these visual registers of people, space, and time, the work intends to re-capture the sensoriality of the field. The goal of translating this sensoriality is less an attempt to complement the ethnographic description and more an introduction to a group of people framing and being framed by space and time while carrying on their life projects.

### 3- The deployment of Black culture in Brazil

It is fundamental to note that the religious and cultural aspects of Black life in Brazil are considered an important (if not the most important) source of Afro-Brazilian identity and resilience for a large number of Black activists and intellectuals. It is also relevant to say that these realms of Black existence were often criminalized and persecuted by the state's institutions. The medical/psychiatric discourse of Nina Rodrigues regarding Candomblé religious practices is one example, as are the laws prohibiting the public practice of capoeira and samba meetings during the 1920s (Rodrigues 2006; Assunção 2005). However, it was precisely these signs of an "African heritage" that were later celebrated as national symbols (Nascimento 2007;

Hanchard 1999; Nascimento & Lopes 1987).

During the Estado Novo (the new state), the populist regime inaugurated during Getúlio Vargas' presidency from 1937 to 1945, there was a movement towards the election of national symbols. This movement included the aggregation of cultural practices such as capoeira, Candomblé, and samba as expressions of the Brazilian spirit and nationalist devotion. The aggregation of practices, until then marginalized and often criminalized, indicates that the eugenicist project championed by politicians, intellectuals, and scientists such as Nina Rodrigues, Arthur Ramos, and Sílvio Romero gave space to a new politics of assimilation. As a part of these new politics, a memory of Africa, its culture and folklore, supposedly honored African heritage, when in fact it was a mimicry of the real existence of people of African descent in Brazil (Hanchard 1999; Twine 1998; Skidmore 1990). In the same way, this memory of Africa also implied a mythical narrative of slavery, romanticized as a sad but necessary and generative episode of Brazilian history where the mistake of enslavement was overcome through miscegenation (Ferreira da Silva 2006; Munanga 1999).

But, at the same time that Black cultural contributions became valuable to the harmonious constitution of the "Brazilian race," the societal structure continues to reflect the trans-generational economic effects of slavery on African descendants, as Florestan Fernandes theorizes in *A Integração do negro na sociedade de classes*<sup>4</sup> (1978). Blackness is valued in itself, independently of social class or education. The processes of spatial segregation undergone by Blacks in Rio de Janeiro shows we are considered second class

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<sup>4</sup> Translated as *The Negro in the Brazilian Society*. New York: Atheneum. 1969.



citizens, asked to take the service entrance in buildings, being followed in grocery stores, or having our money checked twice. Racism in Brazil is a specific anti-Black stance invested in the desire for the suppression, or at least for the submission, of these dark bodies.

One needs only to look at Decree 7967 regarding the regulation of immigration to understand the inconsistency of the “racial democracy” narrative. According to Decree 7967, the country had “the need to preserve and develop, in the ethnic composition of the population, the more desirable characteristics of its European ancestry” (1945). In addition to the influx of European immigrants to the country, the internal process of interbreeding would make Brazil become progressively lighter-skinned over the years. The interbreeding among White men and Black/“mixed” women constitutes the basis for Gilberto Freyre’s theories of a Brazilian *race*. As a Franz Boas student, Freyre abolished race as biologically determined in favor of a poem about slavery, where the already mixed<sup>5</sup> Portuguese men (and women) indulged themselves in/with Black flesh.

While African descendent culture is valued in the rhetoric of *mestizaje* and racial democracy, issues of violence, job discrimination, unemployment, mental illness, and other factors of oppression have consistently affected Brazilians of African descent more severely than Brazilians of European descent. The deployment of Blackness and of Blacks in the national discourse must be read as a strategy of political and social control

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<sup>5</sup> Freyre asserts that the Portuguese had a long history of coexisting with different groups and amalgamating with them. He uses the example of the contact between Portugal and Morocco prior to the colonization of Brazil to justify his claim. Freyre, Gilberto. *Casa Grande e Senzala*. 2002.

similar to Homi Bhabha's findings regarding the colonial situation:

But surely there is another scene of colonial discourse in which the native or Negro meets the demand of colonial discourse; where the subverting 'split' is recuperable within a strategy of social and political control. It is recognizably true that the chain of stereotypical signification is curious mixed and split, polymorphous and perverse, an articulation of multiple belief. The black is both savage (cannibal) and yet the most obedient and dignified servant (the bearer of the food); he is the embodiment of rampant sexuality and yet innocent as a child, he is mystical, primitive, simple-minded and yet the most worldly and accomplished liar (2004: 118).

Parallel to the project of the physical erasure of Blacks, during the military dictatorship (1964-1982) the Brazilian state embraced Afro-Brazilian cultural production in order to affirm to the international community that Brazil constituted a genuinely mixed and harmonious nation and was a potential tourist site. According to this perspective, Black cultural heritage is part of the national foundation and provides definite proof that there are no racial divisions: almost all Brazilians are racially mixed, and almost all like to party at Carnival. In this context, traditional cultural practices such as samba music, Carnival, and capoeira are often utilized in Brazil to demonstrate the plausibility of the racial democracy narrative. However, as Brazilian cinema director Joel Zito Araújo observes:

The appropriation of black culture, a process that entailed the participation of all types of media, took place together with the rejection and devaluation of non-hegemonic ethnic and racial groups' efforts to keep their cultural specificities. (...) What happened to the black group in Brazil was a process of folklorization of its culture, as a mechanism of appropriation of black creations and as a separation of the Black from his identity representations (2000: 35 – my translation).

The folklorization of Black culture and artistic production denies artists the

possibility of autonomy over their own work and runs parallel with the celebration of an assumed physical virtuosity that situates the Black being on the side of nature, and consequently, not part of the intellectual project of the nation-state.

On one hand, state and civil society practices of surveillance of cultural production corroborates Moten's assertions that Blackness is generative of the human in the sense that "... blackness has always emerged as nothing other than the richest possible combination of dispersion and permeability in and as the mass improvisation and protection of the very idea of the human" (2008:1746). On the other hand, when we think about the struggle Black performers, cultural producers, and directors face in Brazil, we also see how difficult it is to break with the logic that the Black body is a site of virtuosity and rhythm, but is not considered a legitimate political agent within the nation.

#### 4- Themes of this work

The three themes investigated in this study are ontology, performance, and politics of Black life. The articulation of such themes inquires into Blackness as both a narrative and a presence that enunciates an ontology about being in this world while enduring gendered and racialized subjugation. My point here is not to investigate ontology, performance, and politics as three different subjects, or aspects of Black life. Instead, I am thinking about performance and performativity as a point of articulation of politics and ontologies. This point of articulation either expresses constituted political positions and understandings about the Black position in the world, or, this articulation

helps to confront political limitations and/or elaborate new ways of being in the world for Black individuals or collectives.

As a tangential discussion, the work approaches the problematic issue of the visual register of Black people by discussing how the visual imagery of Blackness has been used to legitimate domination, violence, and stereotyping (Fleetwood 2011; Mercer 2008; Bhabha 2004; Hall 1997) and how we Blacks have the need to recognize ourselves and produce a different imagery of Blackness. Another important aspect of this research is the practice of Activist Research and its articulation with Black Studies/African Diaspora studies. From the point of view of a Black Brazilian woman conducting research among Black Brazilian artists, I am sensitive to the ethical implications of my work in relation to the field of Black studies and Black social movements in Brazil.

#### 4.1- The performance of Blackness and the Blackness in the performance: searching for Black ontologies and foundational narratives

In this work, I discuss and analyze the work of Black performers in theater, dance, and urban intervention. In order to do so I raise questions related to the subject of Blackness and performance. One of these questions refers to Saidiya Hartman's consideration that the cycle of redress through performance (Turner, 1977) is never completed in the case of the slave because

... the very conditions that have produced the broken and disciplined body and the body as object, instrument and commodity ensure that the work of restoration or recompense is inevitably incomplete. The limited means of redress available to the enslaved cannot compensate for the enormity of this

loss; instead, redress is itself an articulation of loss and a longing for remedy and reparation (1997:77).

According to Hartman, the position of the Black subject in the modern world is regulated by what she calls the “afterlife of slavery” (6). Hartman asserts that although the difference between slavery and emancipation is not negligible, it is necessary

to examine the shifting and transformed relations of power that brought about the resubordination of the emancipated, the control and domination of the free black population, and the persistent production of blackness as abject, threatening, servile, dangerous, dependent, irrational and infectious (116).

In “People-of-color-blindness: notes on the after life of slavery” Jared Sexton returns to the idea of the afterlife of slavery that determines the condition of Blackness in the world. This afterlife of slavery is constituted by legal apparatuses and paralegal deployments of violence, which continues to define the politics of surveillance, distribution, and the re-arrangement of Black bodies in the nation state (2011). If violence is determinant of Black positionality, how is it possible to think about the “transformative” in the performance of Blackness?

The second question that Hartman’s work provokes concerns the refusal to engage in a narrative that brings back the pained Black body. The question, however, concerns the real possibility of not engaging with the representation of Black pain if, as Moten argues, there is an “inevitability of such reproduction even in the denial of it” (2003:4). Thus, if the fact that this pained Black body cannot redress suffering or crisis through performance is already a given, and if this body is always read either as a pained body (Hartman, 1997) or the exotic other (Bhabha 2004), what is left for Black

professional performers invested in a Black radical theater?

Performance art plays a central role as a space for resistance. It engages the audience, not as mere observers, but rather as subjects who can be transformed in some way (Iton 2008; Davis 1999; Kelley 1994; hooks 1995). The performance event is an identity-building experience that incorporates the critically reflexive knowledge of performers and audience as persons positioned by race and gender (Jones and all. 2010; George-Graves 2010; Brooks 2006; hooks 1995, Gilman 1995; Madison 1993). Different authors demonstrate the ways in which performances have the potential to inform action through their effective political symbology (Madison 2010; Denzin 2003; Boal 2004; Kershaw 1992). I propose that the site of performance presents the possibility of making the painful experience of subjugation and exposure to all levels of violence collectively meaningful, and that from this collective understanding arises the possibility of a radicalization of the grammars and ontologies of Blackness.

But global anti-Black racism created and sustained a context in which any place in the world where Black life flourishes is never seen as worthy or valuable (Sexton 2008). Any effort to communicate the suffering, to generate empathy, to discuss the reasons behind racial inequality, or to dream of liberation needs to be translated or intermediated in order to make sense outside of the Black world. The impossibility of Negroes having full lives as citizens and as ontological unities challenges the possibility of successful alternative projects for Black life.

The Afro-pessimist approach, represented by scholars such as Frank Wilderson, Saidiya Hartman, Lewis Gordon, and David Marriot, postulates that the “Black being” is

a “sentient being, yet not a “human being.”<sup>6</sup> Human beings are part of a modern category that aggregates and positions the Negro as the ultimate wretch, an ontological isolate living in a condition of social death (Sexton 2011). However, the insistence and resilience of Black performers in trying to tear up the White gaze (Fanon 1982) indicates an aesthetic project that is simultaneously an ontological one. Thus, these performance moments open the possibility to construct and configure history by inaugurating a new ontological moment of becoming a critical Black person.

But Fanon also proposes that the White gaze and White ontology frame the Black gaze and Black ontology. To be Black is to be constructed by Whiteness (1982). This conundrum suggests that all attempts to inaugurate a new Black being, a way of contesting racism, or a way of living while Black, are apprehended through cognitive schemas, systems of knowledge, and grammars created by the subject of the *cogito*<sup>7</sup>—the White man. Black beings are reflections of White beings; Blackness was/is (re)created to give sense to Whiteness (Wilderson 2011; Goldberg 1997).

This discussion requires a critical engagement with performance theories and the need to take into account the specificity that the processes of gendered racialization have upon the event of performance. The dominant theories in Performance Studies, as they were framed and employed by scholars such as Victor Turner, Erving Goffman, and Richard Schechner, cannot take into account the uniqueness of the Black ontological condition in the modern world. The theories situate performance either as social drama

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<sup>6</sup> Wilderson, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Descartes *Principles of Philosophies*. 2012.

representing a crisis, affirmation of values, and restored behavior (Schechner 2003; Turner 1982), or presentation of the self (Goffman 1959). Underlining these approaches is the assumption that the performers are people integrated into the social collectivity, with some power to dramatize a crisis or to perform normalcy among their own kind. Since Black people remain in a position of incommensurability in the modern world, they cannot be considered part of the collectivity, and will not generate empathy. As a consequence, the effect of a Black presence on stage can only be seen through the problematic cognitive schema through which Blacks are apprehended (Marriot 2007).

The Black body is the ultimate site of terror, amusement, and scientific scrutiny. The racial imaginary through which the presence of black bodies are understood is a constant that precedes and frames whatever narratives these bodies want to produce. So, how can one talk about Black performance, Black performers, and the performance of Blackness in ways that are not obsessed with the physicality of the Negro/ess? With the mark of his/her “otherness”? How can one discuss Afro-Brazilian artists’ work without falling into the trap of the normative racial fetishism through which black bodies are consumed in arts and academic works on Black arts? First, the mark of Blackness is a mark of absence (Wilderson 2008b), not of presence. Even when physically present, or when there is Black representation in the multicultural state, this Black body goes (un)noticed as absent, as a being that lacks history, territory, language, morals, law, social organization, subjectivity, and ontology.

Hortense Spillers in “All the things you could be if Sigmund Freud’s wife was your mother” says:



In other words, the subject, in a different order of things, must discover the degree to which he has engendered his own alienation. Consequently, the Western subject, it seems, sprouts guilt and big shoulders in taking on responsibility for an outcome, whereas his African counterpart, at least if Sow is right, does not acquire discourse for the *guilty conscience* inasmuch as his ultimate ground of social and moral reference is situated “outside” himself (2003: 718).

Because of these questions, there was a shift in my focus during the process of writing: from seeking the sources of aesthetic choices and understanding the processes of learning and transmission among these artists, I started to follow Spillers’s reasoning, trying to go beyond the possibility of performance as a tool for social mobilization. I started to reflect on the potential effects of the collective experience of performances on the psyche of Blacks as a social group, approaching performativity as a tool of de-alienation, a tool of ontological re-invention.

In relation to the engagement with Afro-pessimism and Black optimism, I can say that I see in Afro-pessimism a transformative turn in Black studies and a valuable conceptual framework to move beyond limitations of Marxism as a useful theory for Black liberation in the African Diaspora. Along these lines, I articulate a dialogue between Afro-pessimism and Black optimism because, during ethnographic research, I experienced moments where the first was shattered by the evidence that people don’t see their lives as purely abject, but rather as creative processes of building and caring for the community. At the same time, in regard to the second theoretical lense, Black optimism’s conceptual frame cannot withstand the evidence that Black generative processes are consistently defeated by the racial state, and by subjective processes that internalize

racism and self-hate. As such, I returned to Black feminisms as a conceptual frame that allow me to think through the intersection of categories and the contradictions between these categories. My take on Black feminisms recognizes differences among the diverse body of Black feminist theory. But I can say that, at the same time I align with a Black radical approach and with the feminisms of Critical Race Theory, I also rely on the perspective of healing and the sacred, not seeking an essentialized (Black) femininity but attempting to make sense of what fieldwork showed me in regard to how women and men seek strength and support in the sacred, and use art as a means to survive and take care of their loved ones.

As such, I consider myself a Black feminist borrowing conceptual tools from Afro-pessimism and Black optimism in order to re-think grammars of Black struggle and to reflect on the dynamics of resistance and to inquire into the individual and collective processes of subject formation of Blacks in the African Diaspora.

#### 4.2- The register of Black visibility

This dissertation invests in moments of visual narratives of fieldwork and in individual photographs of the collaborators. The reason I chose to do so is because I am interested in exploring the relationship between the visual register of Black people, performance, and their political aspects.

The decision to invest in visual ethnography indicates my concerns with the dialectic of Blackness as a hypervisible body that remains invisible as a people. Because my work is concerned with misrepresentation and invisibility, my use of photography

intends to illuminate the personal: the subjective distinctions mirrored in people's choices, life trajectories, and diverse positionalities. I am aware that images of Black people are always inhabited by ghosts of colonialism, scientific discourses, slavery, minstrelsy, criminal records, and hypersexualization (Browne 2009; Fanon 2008; Gilman 1985 Hall, 1997). As a technology of surveillance, art, or a mass cultural production, photography of Black people is always pre-inhabited by discursive formations and cognitive understandings about this presence. The example of Mapplethorpe's photograph "Man in Orange Suit" is an obvious one in regard to the fetishization of the Black male body in the field of visual arts (Mercer, 2008), whereas the episodes of racial stereotyping in advertising, cinema, TV, and digital media happen on an everyday basis (Keeling 2007; Collins 2000; hooks 1992).

The questions orienting my discussion on Black visuality are related to how the processes of exoticization and de-humanization of Black bodies—the "other" of civilization and society—take place. How is the underrepresentation of Black people in the media and in the performing arts in Brazil a parallel process to misrepresentation? The visual register of Black people and the ways these registers occur tell us about how this Black being is integrated or disappears from the symbolic universe (including the symbolic universe of other Blacks). This exchange between what the camera records or refuses to record reflects structures of the symbolic order in which the Black being is not seen or required to exist.

Photography as a mechanical technology was intended to be an ideal tool for the reproduction of "reality" with no interference from human judgment or style (Bourdieu;

1999). Such a technology would guarantee scientific neutrality and objectivity towards the subjects being presented, discussed, and decided upon. The history of visual ethnography is related to economic and political ambitions that led to the need to create instruments, technologies of control, and representations of the world. Such technologies needed to be fast and able to capture “reality” in ways that the human hand was not able. Drawings could not reproduce images of the world as “accurate” or “precise” and “real” as the mechanical reproduction of images. In addition, human hands could not fulfill the demand for visual information posed by the contemporary world.

Photography is also an art form, and at least in the academic tradition of the West, art and science have disputed their differences, meanings, frontiers, and relevance to humanity and societies. Sometimes what is left out of the discussion of differences, purposes, and intentions of technical photography in relation to art photography is the critical awareness that the choices made by both the ethnographer and artistic photographers are determined by their own positionalities in the world. As the photography theorist Simon Watney declares in his article “On the institutions of photography,”

Two central problems beset the sociology of photography. Firstly, it is caught inexorably in the grip of descriptive categories of production – documentary, photojournalism, and so on – which interrupts our understanding of how the various discursive formations of photographic practice are articulated. In searching out the institutional “sources” for these categories they are effectively naturalized, legitimated, and hence reinforced. Secondly, the ‘social’ emerges as a force working through photographers or subject-matter into photographs. This in turn pre-empts our understanding of the semiotic processes without which we could never produce images at all, or read them. What is missing from the sociological approach is any awareness of the specific power which institutions possess to define and organize the rhetoric of photography (2008:149).

There are always pre-existing choices and pre-existing understandings on the part of the person taking the picture. The defenders of objectivity, neutrality, and validation in science would say that the importance of a visual register is its ability to be used according to its intended goals: provide identification, statistics, accurate detail of a terrain or map, or faces, fingerprints, or genitalia. Cultural anthropologists could testify in favor of a more subjective use of visual ethnography where the fallacy of a pure “native” is disrupted by the similarities that “their” lives share with “our” lives. Mapplethorpe would perhaps defend beauty, freedom of expression, and transgressive desire. But what about questioning the very prerogative in which the existence of the “other” as an object of the photographic record came to exist? The Negro became a visual object within the context of a long history of being de-humanized and objectified in different ways and levels to the point that, as Hartman (1997) claims, Black existence—even more, Black suffering—is spectacular. Even when the use of images of Black people are intended as protest, to raise consciousness, or to celebrate Black life, these representations are consistently read as the publicization of the spectacular suffering that coincides with being Black in an anti-Black world (Sexton 2011; 2008).

Such processes of the simultaneous hyper-exposure of Black bodies and exclusion of Black people, understood as beings with an individuality and subjectivity, respond to the Fanonian problem of Black visibility/invisibility. The problematic of Black visibility/invisibility as addressed in *Black Skins, White Masks* suggests that Whites are racially invisible. Whites become the norm of humanity, whereas Blacks are visible only

as racialized entities: “Turn white, or disappear” (in: Goldberg 1997). But Fanon also suggests that the dialectics of visibility and invisibility could offer some ground for contesting racial subjugation: “Since the other hesitated to recognize me, there remained only one solution: to make myself known” (88). Thus, in my work, the possibility of “making ourselves known” is expressed in life histories, in the attention to informal conversations, and in the investment in the visual register of the ethnography. My expectation is that, by reproducing images chosen by the participants, the register of Black presence and of Black performance engenders some level of agency and circulation of knowledge that we can share about ourselves.

#### 4.3- Activist research, native anthropology, and other oddities

In this section, I will describe my approach to the field and the methods and ethics of research that guided the work. Once I started fieldwork, I had doubts about how to present myself to the collective of artists, but Cobrinha has an amazing capacity to bring people together, so I was introduced to the collective as one more arm to work. Let me be realistic: I was not in the position of a middle class academic *blackie* introducing myself to the *lumpenproletariat* Black folks organizing themselves. Among my research peers I have long-term activists, artists, community organizers, and graduate students. Some people come from families that have been involved in social movements since the 1960s or even before. They know an academic is useful, and I wanted to be useful.

Based on the unfolding of my approach to Akoben, I intended to reflect on the ethnographic experience *vis-à-vis* the practice of Activist Anthropology. I wanted to reflect less on what needed to be done to accomplish a dissertation—the expected product of an ethnography—and more on the poignant issue of being, my *existentia* per se, the object of the ethnographic scrutiny. It is even difficult to write the word “object,” because although I rationalize its analytical possibilities and potential to raise academic interest, it means more than that. It is something that comes from sitting around with people who became my friends and whom I care about. I may think that sometimes they are wrong. I may try to convince them of something; this is already trespassing the borders of a standard ethnography where I would merely sit by and observe. In the standard ethnographic format, I would learn about the lives of people, observe their mistakes without reflecting on my own, and write a book about them with no interference in the course of their lives. Perhaps not everyone is entitled or able to conduct standard ethnographies. I am not entitled, according to my ethics, to produce data if it is not useful to the people with whom I worked. Because as a Black Brazilian woman I am a native, and because of my ideological positions—which come from my being against the standards of Western reason—I want to produce work that is committed to struggles of liberation, reparation, and justice.

If the field, the specific place where anthropology constitutes itself as a science, has become porous and ubiquitous, challenging to grasp in its meanings and locations (Clifford 1998), for us natives, systems of knowledge still keep us in the position of the object. We advocate the perspective of decolonizing knowledge and methodology

(Sandoval 2000; Smith 1999). Empirical experience and the academic production of Black women in academia have demonstrated how the field of social sciences, specifically Anthropology, are centered in the White male's logos (Harrison 1991). Even more important for us is to reaffirm and sustain the ethics of the research committed to processess of decolonization—including academia—with regard to both the production of valuable qualitative and quantitative data and their interpretations (Hale 2008; Harrison 1999; Scheper-Hughes 1995).

## 5- Description of the chapters

Chapter 1, “The Black artists movement Akoben,” narrates the main events carried out by Akoben and analyzes the implications of such actions in a broader context of the Black Movement and its negotiations with the state. The chapter explores the ethnographic data in a way that highlights internal contradictions, institutional structures, and historical elements in which Black struggle in Brazil emerges. The engagement with Critical Race Theory and recent works on Latin America's Black movements demonstrate that in the context of multicultural developing countries, issues of inclusion and African heritage preservation assume a characteristic of limited state recognition of “ethnic minorities,” which does not really change the economic and institutional structures that set up the exclusion of African descendents from spheres of economic and political representation.



In Chapter 2, “Engaging with the state and facing all the consequences: navigating cultural politics at the institutional level,” I present the institutional panorama for the distribution of state funding for arts and culture in Brazil. Next, I analyse the results of state funding competitions for arts in 2012 in regard to the racial demography of the selected proponents and casts and in regard to their themes. The chapter lists the causes for the exclusion of Black producers from state sponsored cultural politics and describes the dynamics of power operating in Brazilian politics for culture and for protection of the cultural expressions of “minorities.” Chapter four also describes attempts made by Afro-Brazilian artists to penetrate these structures of power.

Chapter 3, “Performing Black politics,” enumerates the performative elements deployed by artists during the organizational meetings and encounters with state representatives. The analysis of speech acts, forms of interaction, visual languages, meeting formats, and body language reveal expectations about both Black politics and a “proper” racial consciousness. The chapter inquires into which elements or concepts are valued, shared, and projected in these collective constructions of Black activism; as well, it focuses on the scope and limitations of such elements. In sum, it investigates the dynamics of the consolidation of Black political projects.

Chapter 4, “Bios and intersectionality: lives, careers and political perceptions among Akoben members,” introduces each artist/activist and provides a short biography for each person. The bios lead to a discussion of the intersectional aspects of race, gender, class, sexuality, age, health, familial situation, and religion that affect the lives of the collaborators. Finally, I will look at the artists’ different views on Black politics, on arts,

and on Akoben's mobilization. This chapter reflects on the problematic of Black visibility by engaging with Black studies and cultural critique while simultaneously presenting a visual register of the research participants.

The fifth chapter, "The conceptual sources of Black performances," describes and analyzes four artistic performances created and/or presented by Black groups or artists related to Akoben, dance training in Afro-Brazilian dance, and a march organized by collectives of Black students during the June 2013 urban uprisings in Brazil. Taken together, these performances reveal important dynamics involved in gendered, racial self-making and the public representation of Blackness. These dynamics indicate specific conceptualizations of Blackness, of national formation, and of the African Diaspora.

Chapter 6, "Confronting the afterlife of slavery: foundational narratives in Companhia dos Comuns theater projects," focuses on the Companhia dos Comuns' theatrical projects and discusses the ways in which such projects propose a radical approach to Black theater. The chapter begins by summarizing Companhia dos Comuns's first play "*Roda do Mundo*" (The Wheel of the World) and highlighting the ways in which the play opposes the normalized representations of Afro-Brazilian culture. Next, a critique of "*Roda do Mundo*" published by the theater expert Bárbara Heliodora is analyzed as a mirror of society's anxiety with Black insubordination. The third section of this chapter engages Hilton Cobra's new theater project of creating a play whose storyline concerns racism on trial. During conversations with the artists I started to think about the limitations of the theater genres such as tragedy, epic or historical drama to give an account of the Black condition. The theater projects carried out by Comuns make use

of several theater genres and techniques without preoccupation with purity or fidelity. In this chapter I am interested in using the framework of Black studies to discuss what these projects mean and what they have to offer in terms of a tentative ontological *re-*organization of the Black being.

Chapter 7, “The awkward moment of revelation,” is a short fragment based on a personal narrative borne from the confluence between academic devotion and the memory of living while Black. It is a risk taken with the purpose of revealing the writer, but also of approaching the fact of gendered Blackness as a situated, embodied experience of fear and survival.

Chapter 8 is called “Time and place for healing,” and is oriented towards the need to re-invent both the Black politics and the Black self. Based on Black feminist genealogies, the chapter names the internal issues harming social mobilizations and points to suggestions indicated by research peers. I decided to invest in visual ethnography in this chapter as a means to re-enact the passage of time and discovery of Black territorialities. Time and territory configure dimensions of Black dis/placement throughout the African Diaspora. The territorializations and temporalizations in the African Diaspora denote resistance, resilience, and alternate spiritual lives. The apprehension of these dynamics of time and place mark and define the ethnographic encounter, which turns into a process of integration with these Black cartographies.

In term of the dissertation’s architecture, the first two chapters draw an overview of Akoben’s Black political mobilization and of state sponsored politics towards Afro-Brazilian culture and arts. The ethnographic description and examples situate the context

of Black Brazilian movements at the present moment, while the third chapter systematizes the dynamics and models of organization/presentation carried out by Black activists. The following chapters materialize the existence of actual people and prepare the grounds to discuss the specificity of life experiences, the intersectionality of gender, class, sexuality, age and religion, and differences among the collaborators' professional projects in terms of their political-aesthetic orientations. The last two chapters were intended to bring my own perceptions of experiencing being in Rio de Janeiro as a Black Brazilian woman, while at same time dialoguing with the life stories and memories of my research peers. Such structure was intended to bridge the ethnographic observation of Black social movements with the interpretation of performances and personal stories as expressions of Black ontologies.

The conceptual development of this examination of Black social moments and their dynamics of interaction with the state, as well as the dynamics of state politics towards Black movements, would require the articulation of the work with theories of the state. Although I did not engage with such theoretical bodies in the present work, I affirm that to think about the state is to think about it as a racial state, in which racialized structures of power and dynamics of interaction interfere in all levels of Black life.

The expectation of this work is to contribute to reflections concerning the Black position in the world by inquiring into the meaning that the recognition of this position has to the ontological constitution of Black political subjects. Performers, performances, theater, and dance enact narratives of the myths of foundation (Seagal 1996), but what constitutes the foundational narrative/s of Black existence, and how is it addressed? This

question became the theme of this work: what we know about ourselves based on the narratives that we have, reproduce, or create becomes the sign of a coming to be in the world that orients our lives, actions, and expectations. In this approach to performance, I want to frame the need for a Black radical or revolutionary performance as a need for foundational narratives of a utopian becoming Black in this world.

## Chapter One - The Black artists' movement Akoben

Debora: *There are a lot of productions around whose staff and cast are all White and nobody questions anything...*

Ilea (interrupting): *Dear, there are ONLY all White productions.*



Fig. 1.1- Akoben's symbol

Amidst our jokes, and the loud, overlapping voices in the big circle, we heard this dialogue between two actresses. We were discussing whether or not submitting theater and dance proposals to the Ministry of Culture with all-Black casts and performers would be strategic. Cobrinha organized this meeting in his beautiful home in Santa Teresa to evaluate the progress of Akoben's initiatives and to plan the next steps. In this chapter, I will present a brief review of Hilton Cobra, Cobrinha, and the trajectory of the Companhia dos Comuns theater company. Then, through describing ethnographic events, I will raise a few points of analysis concerning the type of dialogue with the state carried out by Akoben, the type of demands they are making to the state, what the terms and demands of this dialogue tell us about the political project of this collective, and how it is connected to the historicity of Black movements in Brazil. I intend to open a discussion about the effects that the institutionalization of Black social movements brings in terms of the constriction of a radical agenda, and the role of Black/Afro-Brazilian culture in framing political projects in a context of neoliberal multiculturalism. Finally, I will explore the meaning of Akoben's struggles *vis-a-vis* the material conditions of Blacks in Brazil. I will argue that the pretense of a multicultural state eludes structures of exclusion that keep Brazilians of African descent away from resources. Even when such resources or initiatives are meant to protect and promote Afro-Brazilian culture and patrimony, the mechanisms of exclusion impair Black protagonism and agency over their own cultural production.

### 1.1- Akoben's end of the year gathering

I met some of Akoben's members at the Carioca bus stop. While we were traveling to Santa Teresa we engaged in a discussion about the general lack of professional opportunities for Black artists, the typecasts that Black actresses and actors are confined to at the biggest Brazilian TV channel - the Rede Globo - and how we Blacks are screwed. Meaning that the opportunities for jobs, education, and media representativeness are un-equally distributed and that this inequality is racially motivated.

Some of us were talking about the exhaustion, or better, the inefficacy of "pacifist means" when we finally reached our destination at Largo do Guimarães (Guimarães Square), a central area of Santa Teresa at the epicenter of an effervescent nightlife. Situated along the Santa Teresa hills between the center area of the city and the south area of Rio de Janeiro, Santa Teresa is a cultural and tourist center with many studios, art galleries, vintage stores, and an amazing view of the city. Its nightlife is vibrant with many restaurants and bars with live music, specially samba and jazz. This was an upper class residential area that originated in the 1750s around the Santa Teresa convent. Along its narrow street there are numerous 19th century mansions; many of them now operate as art studios, galleries, museums, and restaurants. Often the decorations at the restaurants and bars display series of objects from imperial/slavery times: old iron pots, kitchen tools, and *cachaça*<sup>8</sup> barrels.

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<sup>8</sup> Cachaça is an alcoholic drink made from the fermentation of sugar cane.



For years, Hilton Cobra rented a studio where his theater group Companhia dos Comuns worked. They also organized workshops focusing on theater training for Black actors and actresses, including Afro-Brazilian dance, capoeira, the history of Black theater in Brazil, and general aspects of the theatrical arts such as voice training and illumination for theater. Companhia dos Comuns was not able to keep the studio after 2008 because the rent in this area was too high. Cobrinha put his house for sale in 2012; he said that he bought it as an investment and knew he would sell it one day. He knew that the life of professional artists in Brazil is uncertain. Some years they make good money, some years they do not, and in the case of a Black activist artist, the periods when money runs low are much more frequent than the ones when it is plentiful.

We started the Akoben gathering at seven pm. There was shrimp and green onion puree, and “*feijão amigo*,” a black beans cream topped with bacon and green onion. There were around 20 artists, producers, and activists present that night. Among them: Luiz Carlos Gá, activist and graphic artist; Adriana Baptista, media programmer; Náira Fernandes, producer; Débora Almeida, actress and school coordinator; Líbia Besouro, producer; Simone Cerqueira, actress; Tatiana Tibúrcio, actress and producer; Rodrigo dos Santos, actor and philosophy student; Valéria Monã, actress and dancer; Aduni Benton, director; and Filipe Romão, musician, graphic artist, and Anthropology student. Sandra Machado, the lawyer representing Companhia dos Comuns in the lawsuit Cobrinha started against the FUNARTE (National Foundation of Arts), was also there. This night

we were together to celebrate Christmas and the New Year, but above all, to discuss Black politics and strategies to navigate state institutions.

### 1.2- Hilton Cobra - “Cobrinha” and the Companhia dos Comuns

Hilton Cobra - Cobrinha, as he is known - has a long history of activism, artistic production, and political engagement. He was a friend of Abdias Nascimento, and was from the same generation of black Brazilian activists such as Lélia Gonzalez, Beatriz Nascimento, Haroldo Costa, Édson Cardoso, and Luíza Bairos. He often works in collaboration with important agents such as the Centro Afro Carioca<sup>9</sup> de Cinema (Afro-Carioca Cinema Center) created by the recently deceased actor and director Zózimo Bulbul. He also works in partnership with Elisa Larkin Nascimento, widow of Abdias Nascimento and director of the IPEAFRO (Institute of Research and Afro Brazilian Studies) and with Ruth Pinheiro, an activist of the Black Movement, one of the founders of the IPCN (Palmares Institute of Black Culture), IPDH (Palmares Institute of Human Rights), and the director of the NGO CADON, which supports Afro-Brazilian cultural initiatives.

Hilton Cobra's group Companhia dos Comuns was created in 2001. According to Cobrinha, the group's inspiration was the work of the actor, politician, activist, and playwright Abdias Nascimento, founder of the Teatro Experimental do Negro

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<sup>9</sup> Someone or something from Rio de Janeiro city.

(Experimental Theater of the Black). In Cobrinha's words, Companhia dos Comuns' main goal is to "...give voice to the historically silenced black suffering" (2010). Throughout its twelve years of existence, Comuns performed 4 productions, developed 2 workshops for actors, and organized 3 editions of the National Black Performance Forum, a national conference focused on politics and projects in the field of Black theater and dance in Brazil. The themes explored in the company's work refer to the experiences of Afro-Brazilians and the socio-historical effects of these experiences, the Black people's subjectivity formation while constantly submitted to racism and degradation, and the African cosmologies and the history of Afro-Brazilians as a political legacy that lead to a project of liberation. They frequently work with Márcio Meirelles, director of the Bando de Teatro Olodum (Olodum Theater) from Salvador, Bahia. Márcio was the director of three Comuns' spectacles. Since its formation, Comuns developed workshops and has contributed to create a network of Black artists from different artistic areas, ages, gender, educations, religions, and political views.

Their influence upon many of the new generation of activists is unquestionable. "Candaces" was the major Comuns success, staged in 2003. The play's name was a reference to the lineage of *kandakes* queens who ruled the Kush kingdom from approximately 170 B.C. to 50 B.C.<sup>10</sup> The story begins with a crisis in the ancient past

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<sup>10</sup> See Fluehr- Lobban, Caroline. "*Nubian queens in the Nyle valley and Afro- Asiatic cultural History.*" Ninth International Conference for Nubian Studies – Museum of Fine Arts, Boston USA- 20-26, 1998. In <http://wysinger.homestead.com/fluehr.pdf>

when men had become fearful of women's powers. The men manage to steal the women's powers and to subjugate them. The narrative switches to the present: Black men and women are caught up not only in the racialized structures of oppression, but, more sadly, in hate and lack of trust in the Black community. It is necessary to establish a balance; only balance can heal and empower. "Candaces" received four nominations for the Shell Theater Award — the most important theater award in Brazil. The play led the creation of a Black women's activist group named the "Candaces," and in 2006, the Samba School Salgueiro made the storyline of "Candaces" its carnival theme. This spectacle and others had been watched by every cultural agent, artist, and Black students collective that I met during fieldwork.

The play was mainly promoted by the members of the group themselves. Actor Cridemar Aquino told me that they went to several communities in Rio and in Baixada Fluminense—areas with a higher concentration of Blacks. They contacted the free preparatory courses for college admissions to promote the play and invited the students and teachers. These courses are social projects carried out mainly through voluntary work aiming to prepare poor and black students for the vestibular—the main system of standardized tests for college admission. Because these areas are far away from the Teatro Municipal—the biggest and most elite theater building of Rio de Janeiro where the Comuns staged "Candaces" during the Black Awareness Week in 2003—the

company members managed to guarantee buses and vans in charge of transportation for those who bought the ticket at the small fee of R\$ 10,00 (\$5.00).

Sandra Machado, the lawyer working with Akoben, remarked how important “Candaces” was, not only for the Black artistic community and activists, but also for regular people who were not active in arts or activism. People like Machado’s brother who, after watching a scene where a man, after the death of his wife, promises her that he will return to where they came from and confront the rich people who stole their land, decided to bring a lawsuit against someone who had unlawfully appropriated family property.

The story of how Cobrinha managed to stage “Candaces” at the *Teatro Municipal* is very revealing about the type of influences and relationships that oriented the artistic life of the city. This theater, located at the center of the Cinelândia neighborhood, is frequently found on postcards depicting scenes of Rio. Built at the beginning of the 20th century, it has a reputation of presenting traditional and European genres of opera and ballet, and the ticket prices easily reach R\$ 200,00 (\$100.00). Thus, we can say that the type of work “Candaces” represented and the type of audiences it attracted were not exactly typical for this theater. Cobrinha was friends with the theater director at the time and asked her to find space in the theater’s schedule.

In 2005, 2006, and 2009 the Companhia dos Comuns, alongside the Bando de

Teatro Olodum, organized the National Forums of Black Performance in Salvador, Bahia. At these forums, historians, artists, activists, religious leaders, and scholars discussed and delivered speeches on the history of Black theater and the aesthetic values and ideologies of “Black/Afro-Brazilian” artistic productions in the fields of theater and dance. Forty-nine artistic groups attended the first year’s Forum. They had a strong political dimension that debated the need for pressuring the Brazilian state to create and maintain public policies for culture that were democratic and racially equal, the probability of this happening, and the political strategies needed to make this happen (Bairros and Melo 2005).

Companhia dos Comuns is more than a theater group: it is something beyond the profession of being an actress, actor, director, musician, or designer. It is a school and a project of formation. “Whoever was part of Comuns, forever will be Comuns,” actor Cridemar Aquino said during his interview. Some of the actors and actresses developed their own career and artistic projects: Rodrigo dos Santos, Débora Almeida, and Tatiana Tibúrcio left the group prior to Akoben’s formation. They all still maintain ties of professional and political collaboration with Cobrinha, Comuns, and Akoben. Some of the actresses and actors from the company are eventually hired to perform on TV, mainly on TV Globo, the mainstream channel in Brazil. But working for TV Globo created ethical and interpersonal conflicts: Cobrinha has a negative vision of mainstream media

as incapable of truly incorporating Blacks into programming besides placing them in traditional roles.

Since 2010, after they ended the presentation of their last spectacle “*Silêncio*” (Silence), Companhia dos Comuns has ceased working together. This is mainly due to the lack of funding to initiate a project, and also because Hilton Cobra was nominated in February 2012 to the presidency of the Palmares Foundation, an institution created in 1988 and linked to the Ministry of Culture with the following goal: “...to promote and preserve the Afro-Brazilian culture and to formulate and implement policies that enhance the participation of black people in the development process of the country.”<sup>11</sup>

Ironically, the radical work of Companhia dos Comuns ceased due to a lack of money at the same time that the company leader became a state employee and some of its actors and actresses found professional opportunities at the TV Globo. They would not have had these opportunities without the company. The actors and actresses want to work, they want to expand the presence of Black actors and actresses in TV and in theater, and they need to make money as well; thus, it is not realistic to expect them to refuse to work on TV. While it has become impossible to give continuity to the theatrical work of Comuns, those involved do plan to return, especially Cobrinha, Valéria Monã, and Cridemar Aquino, and by hearing them I know it is not because of nostalgia; *once you were Comuns, you are Comuns...* They believe they will work together again as

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<sup>11</sup> In <http://www.palmares.gov.br>

Companhia dos Comuns because the aesthetic and political project of this theater ensemble still makes sense to them. The effect that *Comuns* had on the public and on a new generation of theater groups and artistic collectives is also a huge phenomenon. By participating in several events and mapping several cultural agents, we see that this theater group created a legacy and inspired many people to envision different Black aesthetic and political projects.

### 1.3- The sound of Akoben

In 2011, Cobrinha submitted a proposal to the residence competition for the Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil (Bank of Brazil Cultural Center). In 2012, the same proposal was submitted to the residence competition of the Glaucê Rocha Theater. These two theaters are important cultural spaces in downtown Rio de Janeiro, where the concentration of cultural spaces as well as the circulation of cultural goods are high and competitive. After the committee appointed by FUNARTE (National Foundation of Arts) rejected the company's proposals for theater residence competitions for two consecutive years, Akoben was established.

In both years, Cobrinha presented a proposal for a circuit of twenty-three plays from different companies mainly composed of Black artists, with themes related to racial identity and aesthetic forms that engage African and African descendant cultures, arts,



religions, and historical experiences. Besides the plays, workshops on *Orixás*<sup>12</sup> dance and capoeira as the basis for the actors' training, vocal training, and theater direction would be offered to aspiring artists and the general public. The proposals were rejected, and a production company owned by three White women, the JLM, won the competition. Apparently, one of JLM's owners is a daughter of a Banco do Brasil manager. Banco do Brasil is controlled by the federal government, and its managers are state employees. According to Brazilian law, if a close relative of a state institution employee is benefiting from any kind of opportunity sponsored by the institution where his/her relative works, this constitutes a case of nepotism.

The JLM has a consistent history of benefitting from several theater residency competitions and funding opportunities. According to one of my collaborators, they now are developing a new project in the Cais do Valongo area, a site of Black historical memory.<sup>13</sup> Typically, the JLM company presents the projects, and once they are approved, they hire Black actors, dancers, and musicians to perform.

The general discontent that mobilized Akoben was due the fact that Black artists are not seen as creators of their own art, but as employees of White producers who exploit the recent laws regarding the protection and promotion of Afro-Brazilian culture

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<sup>12</sup> Yoruba deities - Orishas.

<sup>13</sup> In this area, a burial site was created around 1811 and used until 1843. An estimated twenty-five thousand black captives who did not survive the Atlantic passage or the early days in Brazil had their bodies burned and their bones crushed and mixed with terrain, stones, and trash.

and patrimony, and have found new ground from which to profit. Moreover, the composition of selection committees nominated by FUNARTE (and other agencies) reinforces the same racial demographics, with the majority of these committees often being exclusively composed of White board members. This is what Hilton Cobra declares in Akoben's video call "*Eugenia Cultural*" (Cultural Eugenics):

If you appoint a selection committee it has to have blacks in this committee, it has to have Indians. Because there are black and indigenous projects and they have not been ranked because the committees are made almost totally by white people. And I want to mention one example: last year we were not ranked because our spectacle had dance scenes. If this year we had black representatives in this committee they would say: "Look, these whhhhhhite girls have only 6 years of experience, and as the whhhhhhite producers of the 'Black to Black' they discovered how to make money on top of black culture, and the state and the government are giving money to these guys" (2012).

Cobrinha named the video "Eugenia Cultural," but he does not speak of a lack of Black cultural performances. He speaks about how those who make the decisions about what is performed—secretariats of culture, FUNARTE, state companies, boards of directors, and selection committees—eliminate Black cultural agents, directors, and producers from the process. In other words, even when the discussion is about a Black theme, a project in Black culture, the conversation is among Whites.

In June 2012 Akoben officially launched their movement. They organized a fundraiser and a debate about the steps that should be taken. This event was in a Workers Union at the Lapa neighborhood – a cultural, tourist epicenter of the city. The fundraiser

was organized to fund airline tickets in order for some of the members to travel to Brasília where they had set up a public audience among the FUNARTE, the SEPPIR (Secretariat of Politics for the Promotion of Racial Equality), the Palmares Foundation, and Banco do Brasil representatives.

In this meeting, Akoben members questioned the criteria for the funding selection and challenged the state institutions to observe principles of equality and diversity when making funding decisions and selecting members of the committees that make those decisions. When Cobrinha questioned FUNARTE regarding the criteria used in the funding selection process, FUNARTE members responded that his proposal was simply not good enough. When the other artists questioned why Black producers are almost never considered for MinC (Ministry of Culture) funding opportunities, they heard that this was merely because Black producers were not applying for these funding opportunities. The bank representatives denied any knowledge of favoritism. Both institutions, FUNARTE and Banco do Brasil, agreed that there is no legal statement or decree demanding that they need to take into account the racial diversity of the recipients.

Through the creation of an open Facebook page, Akoben received support from artists, activists, students, and scholars from several Brazilian states and other countries. To date, *Akoben* has over 1,500 members on the open page. During the regular meetings, the number of participants was around ten artists representing different art companies, as well as individual artists and a lawyer, all from Rio de Janeiro. In a big meeting among

Akobén, FUNARTE, and the Black Movement in May 2013, and in a meeting among Akobén and the Minister of Culture in July 2013, there were around two hundreds participants.

As part of the mobilization, Companhia dos Comuns sued FUNARTE in October 2012. The company presented evidence demonstrating: a) The quality of the proposal that had been rejected by FUNARTE, b) Companhia dos Comuns' engagement with Black theater and Black activism in Brazil, and c) The excellence of Companhia dos Comuns' work in the Brazilian theater scene and abroad. In addition, suspicions of nepotism called into question the whole selection process, as well as the transparency of federal institutions such as FUNARTE and Banco do Brasil.

#### 1.4- The Akobén campaigns unfold

After we had dinner on the balcony, Cobrinha brought a few bottles of prosecco and called everybody to come to the large white room decorated with several African masks, djembes, and paintings he brought from the company's trip to Senegal. The presence of Africanness saturated that place, as well the people: the guests' hair, clothes, words, references to performances, memories of trips to Africa, Cuba, and the US, and references to jokes about who should be cooking and who should be serving all evoked signs of Blackness. Naíra, a small, dark skinned lady in her 60s who later became one of my closest friends during fieldwork, said to me: "You are light skinned, so if we were

slaves you would be the elected by the master to serve the dinner.” The reenactment of racial categories and social distributions of the colonial period were often performed as a criticism, but also as a way to call attention to various degrees of difference and privilege within Black collectives.

When we started the playful but serious part of our gathering, Hilton Cobra, amidst our laughs, jokes, and heated interruptions, evaluated what he considered advancements and what we should still pursue. As we always did during Akoben meetings, someone took notes for the minutes. Many times I was chosen for this task, since I would be taking research notes anyway. This accentuated my role in registering our discussions and decisions, and also influenced how my initial positionality changed to a much more involved and engaged one.

In this gathering we evaluated the campaign “*Vai colocar o que aonde?*” (more or less, “What will you put and where?”), The campaign’s goal as planned between September and October 2012 was to disseminate information regarding funding competitions, to stimulate Black producers and artists to submit proposals, and to ask the applicants to provide Akoben with feedback about the outcomes of their applications. The fall of Ana de Hollanda, the previous Minister of Culture, was mentioned as one of the effects of Akoben. Although her fall was probably not caused only, not even mainly, by this mobilization, the members of Akoben welcomed the substitution of Ana de Hollanda for Marta Suplicy, a politician from the Workers party (PT). We decided that

Akoben must write a letter to the new Minister welcoming her appointment and asking for a meeting between her and the community of Black artists from Rio de Janeiro.

In November 2012, Minister Suplicy announced a funding opportunity for Black producers; this announcement made it very explicit that the person signing the proposal and the majority of the cast and crew should be Afro descendants. The total funding available for this announcement was R\$ 9.0 million (approximately \$ 4.5 million), to be divided among thirty-three proposals in the areas of Theater, Dance, Visual Arts, and Literature. Attending to another demand of Black artists, the MInC organized a circuit of workshops in several Brazilian cities aiming to clarify the decree and to answer questions regarding the preparation of proposals.

Shortly thereafter, Hilton Cobra was appointed as the director of the Palmares Foundation by Minister Suplicy in February 2013. Although his appointment to this state position itself became problematic to the Akoben movement and to Cobrinha as an activist, it was at first welcomed among us because it seemed to be a recognition of Akoben's mobilization by the Ministry of Culture. At same time, we were aware that "recognition" by the state often works as cooptation. In the book *Black Social Movements in Latin America: from monocultural mestizaje to multiculturalism*, Rahier describes processes of state cooptation of Black movements in Latin America:

These processes point to the Latin America tradition of state corporatism, which has consisted in the populist and corporatist incorporation of popular sectors

into the state machinery in structures that organize the relations between civil society and the state, in that way, the state co-opts or re-create interest groups with the intent to regulate their number and to give them the appearance of having a quasi-representational monopoly with special prerogatives. In exchange for these prerogatives and monopoly, the state demands the right to monitor the groups represented (04: 2012).

By becoming a state employee, Cobrinha would no longer be able to speak against the state in a social movement capacity. Given that Cobrinha has an extraordinary ability to aggregate (and coordinate) people around him, the opportunity to have someone like him working within a state machine could represent a concrete change, even if small. We were thinking that with Cobrinha in the Ministry of Culture, him being close friends with the Minister of Racial Equality, Luíza Bairros, and by having the (supposedly) progressive politician Marta Suplicy as the Minister of Culture, we were close to opening a national discussion on the adoption of Affirmative Action politics in all of the actions carried out by the Ministry of Culture.

In April 2012, José Carlos do Vale, judge of the 5th Federal Court of the Judiciary Section of Maranhão, suspended the funding competition for Black producers. He based this decision on the Brazilian Constitution, which states that all Brazilian citizens are equal. In the judge's understanding, Marta Suplicy's special decree based on Affirmative Action harms the general principle of equality. The MInC appealed the decision using a defense of the constitutionality of Affirmative Action policies that have been adopted by the Ministry of Education (which assure that federal higher education institutions must have a percentage of spots reserved for Afro descendents and Indigenous students)

and in the Racial Equality Statute approved in 2010. The judicial decision was reverted and the selective process could continue, but the funding disbursement was suspended until the final decision declaring the legitimacy of this decree was announced in December 2013.

When the suspension of the decree was announced, Hilton Cobra arranged meetings with Black artists and activists from the Black Movement in Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, and Bahia to organize strategies to guarantee the continuity of the selective process and to prepare an agenda for an encounter with the Minister of Culture. The encounter occurred in July 2013 at the Banco do Brasil Cultural Center. Rodrigo dos Santos, member of Akoben and former actor with Companhia dos Comuns, read the letter elaborated by Akoben. The letter proposed that 40% of the federal annual budget for culture and arts would be allotted to Afro-Brazilian artists and producers. This letter's objective was to claim Affirmative Action for culture as a state policy, thus a major legal change at the federal level of resource distribution. Cobrinha and Akoben's idea was to create a type of amendment in the law regulating the federal budget distribution. With this change, a certain amount of funding given to the Ministry of Culture would specifically fund art projects presented by Black/Afro-Brazilian proponents. This policy would be permanent instead of being an isolated initiative restricted to special, and thus temporary, decrees, as was the case of the award for Black producers Suplicy announced.

The request of 40% sounded unrealistic to the Minister. As she said, "40% is not



possible”; nevertheless, this percentage was based on the understanding that if African descendents made up over 50% of the Brazilian population, the representation of such distribution should be approximately reflected in the MInC budget.

After the 33 elected proposals were announced, the artist and activist Spirito Santo, who was a member of Akoben’s Facebook page but never went to the meetings, created a major uproar with a report in which he questioned the principles for selection. He pointed out several controversial aspects in the selection process, such as that (phenotypically) white proponents had been elected, and that some proponents were accused of having been elected because they had relatives working in NGOs or state institutions. This was a crucial moment for Akoben because the inability to take a public position in regard to the process of selecting proposals and in regard to Spirito Santo’s accusations revealed a lack of collective organization and cohesion by part of the movement. This event confirmed what some of the members had predicted: Cobrinha’s withdrawal from the movement seriously damaged Akoben’s organizational capacity and initiative.

#### 1.5- The side effects of the Black Movement’s institutionalization

By the time of the gathering in December 2012, Cobrinha was not satisfied with the direction in which Black politics in Brazil had gone: “Did you notice how much the blacks activists love an homage? If X or Y dies, the following year we will have an award

or a statue in his or her honor.” Since he said this I have not stopped thinking about it every time I heard about or attended this type of event. Over the last decade, there have been numerous awards and honorable mentions given to Afro-Brazilian citizens, former slaves, artists, and professionals. The Black Movement itself pushed for most of these awards and homages, while others were state displays of recognition of the “Afro-Brazilian contribution” to nation formation. Many activists are willingly embracing these state posts, state-sponsored medals, and bland rewards, believing that “something has changed.” But in fact, these patterns of state-sponsored recognition of “minorities” go in accordance with a supposed multicultural ideology, where the roots of inequality are never examined. Everything happens in terms of a formal recognition of “importance.” Irma Velazquez, talking about the Guatemalan government’s politics of creating national holidays for the Native and for the Environment, demonstrates that such actions exactly follow this logic and illustrates how other Latin American countries where racial/ethnic problems persist are investing in the institutional politics of rewarding minorities without addressing the structural roots of inequality (2013).

In our meetings we criticized certain attitudes of some Black men who are in state positions for what we consider to be a subservient attitude towards Whites: “X said that Minister (Suplicy) is the blackest white woman in Brazil”; “Y said that she is the new Isabel princess.” For us, this clearly demonstrated how distant these Blacks working within the state are from the real demands of the Black population. However, after

Cobrinha's nomination to the Palmares foundation, he needed to recognize that operating within state institutions is not a matter of individual will, but instead requires the ability to navigate a complex network of institutional procedures, politicians, lawyers, and judges, as well as tacit knowledge of alliances, gossip, and disputes.

Although Hilton Cobra is respected among many Black collectives in Brazil, his political opponents (including the former Palmares president) engaged in an open campaign against his administration. This opposition is partially due the fact that Hilton Cobra is friends with Luíza Bairros, the Minister of Racial Equality. There are many activists who are discontent with SEPPPIR and openly criticize the Minister and the work of this Ministry. In April 2013, the online journal "Afro Press," which is linked to the Black Movement of São Paulo and opposed to the Luíza Bairros administration of SEPPPIR, published a note questioning the direction SEPPPIR had taken. According to the Afro-Press, as an institution designed by a social movement—the Black Movement—the SEPPPIR became a mere state organ with little dialogue with the very social movement that created it. In September 2013 the Afro Press published a note criticizing Hilton's silence in regard to the accusations of irregularities in the selective process of the funding for Black producers.<sup>14</sup> As Ruth Pinheiro remarks: "Now, he (Cobrinha) is on the other side (government). Now he is tasting the bitterness of being inside the Government. Social movement is great, but now he will pay the price for it." She was talking about the

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<sup>14</sup> <http://www.afropress.com/post.asp?id=15530>

delicate issue of being inside the state after having a trajectory within social movements. The need to attend to institutional demands generally contradicts the goals of the social movement and of former peers. One time allies and friends easily become suspicious of those acting inside the state machine.

In *Black Social Movements in Latin America: from monocultural mestizaje to multiculturalism*, the authors deal with questions related to the rise of Black Movements in Latin America within specific political contexts that inaugurated a stage of neoliberal multiculturalism (Rahier 2012). Central to some of these analyses is the inquiry into the dynamics of social movements' agendas versus strategies of cooptation used by the state. However, we should not be naïve and think that the negotiation of Black activist vs. the state could be described as pure co-optation. The state does co-opt social movements; the political parties do co-opt Black social movements to strengthen their own agendas. But, on the side of Black activists there is also an expectation of changing things through their infiltration of state apparatuses. At the same time, as I heard during the meetings, the distrust with state politics and politicians is very prevalent: "The state is White." "This party is a racist party, we all know, but we need to be strategic," said Luis Gá. As Mark Anderson indicates when he is describing Garifuna activism in Honduras after the 1990s:

State efforts to manage ethnic politics have exacerbated divisions within the movement but they have not captured it; the dispersed and contradictory character of state recognition of ethnic rights in the 1990s has produced widespread dissatisfaction with successive governments (2012: 58).

The criticism against Black activists working within state structures could be analyzed in two ways. First, I noticed that among Black activists and former activists engaged with state politics there is a question of which political party is in power or in charge of a given institution, such as Palmares or SEPPIR, for example. Partisan and also individual competition for these positions overshadows the possibility of a collective Black project. That means that, besides the criticism against Luíza Bairros' administration at SEPPIR and Hilton Cobra's administration at Palmares, there is also a competition among Black activists for the few resources and state positions available. Furthermore, there is the aspect of political alignment with different parties, and with different sectors within these parties. Even though the federal government has supported the "*Juventude Viva*" initiative,<sup>15</sup> which springs from Black Movement demands, the younger activists criticize the Black Movement and activists operating within state institutions due to their inability to address such fundamental issues as the rates police homicides against Black youth. These two sources of criticism—partisan competition for few office posts and the younger generation's distrust of the traditional political strategies of the Black Movement and the Left—point to the exhaustion of both leftist methodologies of social analysis and the left as the ultimate response to Black liberation. Reflecting on the insufficiency of a Marxist grammar as a foundational element for a

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<sup>15</sup> Juventude Viva (Youth Alive) is a project presented by the ministry of Racial Equality in partnership with the National Secretariat of Youth aiming to protect youth between 15 and 29 years old in situations of social vulnerability. See <http://www.juventude.gov.br/juventudeviva/noticias/15-05-2014-plano-juventude-viva-e-apresentado-em-evento-do-ministerio-da-educacao/>

project of Black liberation, Frank Wilderson articulates what he thinks is a foundational antagonism between Marxist theories and the Black positionality in modernity:

Capital was kick-started by the rape of the African continent. This phenomenon is central to neither Gramsci nor Marx. The theoretical importance of emphasizing this in the early 21st century is two-fold: First, “the socio-political order of the New World” (Spillers 1987: 67) was kick-started by approaching a particular body (a Black body) with direct relations of force, not by approaching a White body with variable capital. Thus, one could say that slavery—the “accumulation” of Black bodies regardless of their utility as laborers (Hartman; Johnson) through an idiom of despotic power (Patterson)—is closer to capital's primal desire than is waged oppression—the “exploitation” of unraced bodies (Marx, Lenin, Gramsci) that labor through an idiom of rational/symbolic (the wage) power: A relation of terror as opposed to a relation of hegemony (2003: 06)

In other words, the left is not able to address Black subjugation and exposure to violence because the analysis and critique of Capitalism start only after the forced, not exploited, slaves had properly picked and dispatched the cotton from the plantation to the manufacturer. Black subjects were never considered in Marxist theories of liberation from capital even though it had been their forced labor that fostered capitalistic accumulation. Although many, if not most, of the Black activists in Brazil have identified themselves with left-oriented parties, their disenchantment reflects the understanding that the grammar of class struggle will not address racially motivated violence and exclusion.

The current Brazilian state, which is under a (supposedly) social democratic order, began in 2002 with President Lula’s (Workers Party) first election and has promoted social policies based on class and income. The “Bolsa Familia” program has

been considered a model social welfare program. Indeed, many of the families benefiting from it are composed of African descendants. But, in regard to the pacts for the achievement of racial equity, the example of Affirmative Action in higher education institutions has demonstrated that an enormous tension rises up when “race” and “racial relations” are put on the table. The steps taken toward diminishing inequality are limited and have not been good enough to have an impact on the lives of millions of Black Brazilians living in poverty, experiencing job discrimination, and /or living in danger of lethal violence, including violence caused by the police (Walsefitz 2011; Paixão 2003;).

#### 1.6- Afro-Brazilian culture as the Black political project

In regard to the prevalent focus on “Afro-Brazilian culture” as a political project that will promote equality, some speeches delivered at the I National Forum of Black Performance confirm the centrality of “culture” as a—if not *the* main—battlefield of Black politics in Brazil. Former TEN’s actor Haroldo Costa argues, “There is a definitive channel, the only channel, I would say a permanent way for this (end of racism) to happen. This channel is the one we are in: the channel of Arts” (2005: 59). Of course we can interpret this remark as an exaggeration; it might be a statement made to impact a Forum intended to endorse the importance of black theater and dance groups. But, looking at the patterns of events I participated in and the conversations I had about the gap between the Black Movement and community based organizations fighting against

police brutality, it seems that to the few Black politicians, elder activists, and the incipient Black middle class, the path of culture and memory preservation would be the best way to assure dignity for all Black people.

The majority of activists and intellectuals consider religious and cultural aspects of Black life in Brazil an important—sometimes the most important – source of Afro-Brazilian identity and resilience. It is also relevant to say that state institutions often criminalize and persecute these elements of Black existence. The medical/psychiatric discourse of Nina Rodrigues in the early 20th century that labeled Candomblé religious practices as manifestation of psychosis<sup>16</sup> is one example, as are the laws that prohibited the public practice of capoeira and samba meetings until the 1920s. It was precisely these signs of an “African heritage” that were later celebrated as national symbols when, after 1964, the military dictatorship sought to project the image of cordial Brazil, pacifist and ordered (Vianna & Chasteen 1999; Hanchard 1999; Ribeiro 1995; Nascimento & Lopes 1987). However, examples of criminalization and persecution of practices related to Blacks can still be found today, as clearly evidenced through the prohibition of funk parties in the pacified communities<sup>17</sup> and the prohibition of noise after 11 pm, which

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<sup>16</sup> In Rodrigues, Nina. **O Animismo Fetichista dos Negros Baianos** - organization, presentation and notas by Yvonne Maggie, and Peter Fry - Rio de Janeiro: Fundação Biblioteca Nacional, 2006.

<sup>17</sup> There were reports of police interruption of community parties in a few pacified communities. In the Complexo do Alemão community, the UPP closed the community center where the parties were held. In 2012, a special law decree was proposed in order to regulate the parties in terms of fiscalization, selling of drinks, conditions of the space, volume of the music, and ending time. The text of the law does not mention any specific genre, but the target of such regulation became the funk parties.



affects Candomblé and Umbanda rites.<sup>18</sup>

In *Orpheus And Power* (1999), Michael Hanchard examines how the Black Movement in Brazil became a culturalist movement, meaning that culture became an end in itself, and not part of a whole social process (1994:139). Luíza Bairos and other activist members of CRIOLA—a Black women’s NGO that has been working on the implementation of policies in the area of public health directed to Black populations – strongly criticized Hanchard. To Bairos, Hanchard was modeling an ideal way to conduct Black social mobilization using the US model of the Civil Rights movement (Bairos 1996). The American - Jamaican scholar Keisha-Khan Perry also observes that Hanchard lost sight of examples of community mobilization that so often emerge in Brazil that do not use culture as an end in itself. Community-based movements organized by Black women without a clear relationship with the official Black Movement utilize images, songs, or discourses that refer to their racial identity and to the racial stratification of Brazilian society (Perry 2004). In addition to these critiques, I found during my fieldwork that “the only thing allowed was ‘culture.’” Ruth Pinheiro used this phrase when explaining that, in the 1980s, it was much more complicated to discuss racism in Brazil and to make demands of the state. The only way to create Black

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<sup>18</sup> *Lei do silêncio* (the silence law) prohibits the production of noise after 11pm. It recognized the right of religious rites in producing noise, but since the Umbanda and Candomblé rites are held at night, they became frequently interrupted by anonymous denunciations of disturbances of silence. See law text in <http://www.perfeituradorio.org/>

collectives was to disguise them as cultural organizations.

Throughout the '80s it remained difficult for activists to address the issue of racism in Brazil; the racial democracy narrative was still dominant and the shadows of the dictatorship were very present. Indeed, aside from what we call a “military dictatorship,” Brazil actually has a long tradition of state violence, which is easily demonstrated in reports on human rights abuses committed by the police.

Thinking about the strategy of disguising a political agenda through cultural preservation, I believe that many activists fall into the trap of culturalism. It is basically the only thing they can do with scarce resources and connection to “Negro state secretariats that rarely gain substantial funding, unless they create projects in partnership with influential White allies. Many activists feel that pushing for the valorization of Afro-Brazilian culture is the only way to operate inside the state and to create few opportunities for the social advancement of Black people. Conversely, cultural practices, especially music, have always been the escape for many people of African descent in Brazil. Still, through the Diaspora, it is difficult to keep the autonomy and the authorship of our creations (Mercer 1994).

This is especially interesting when we think about the image that Brazil projects to the world. Taking the example of the tourist city Rio de Janeiro, which at the time of my research was desperately trying to prove that it was capable of hosting the 2014 World Cup, Brazil is known for depictions of the carnival parade, samba and carioca funk

music, capoeira, religiosity, cuisine, and favelas—all Black cultural manifestations and spaces. This panorama leads to the realization that, in the Brazilian context, Black expressive culture—especially music, dance, and popular drama—has always played a dual role. While these modes of expression offer a space for resilience, solidarity, and political mobilization, the manipulative appropriation of Black cultural productions has portrayed such art as low-status culture used to sell the image of Brazil as a racial and hyper-sexualized paradise.

This cultural production is often patronizingly characterized as folkloric, naïve, or un-civilized—in fact, it plays all of these roles depending on the moment and interests of those who somehow take advantage of it. Attempts to gain full authorship of the creation, organization, and distribution of cultural goods, such as Abdias' Teatro Experimental do Negro, the Bando de Teatro Olodum, and the Companhia dos Comuns, or the invention of the “*passinho*”—a new dance style created in the favelas—are often frustrated by White domination of the institutions designed to promote culture in Brazil. As my research collaborators pointed out, those who have historically profited from selling these Black cultural goods are the White entrepreneurs in charge of show houses, theatre houses and companies, record companies, touristic agencies, the entertainment industry, the press, and so on. These are the same ones who are in charge of every single spot and project and are always ready to declare that culture has no color when Blacks make demands for Affirmative Action. As if it is not bad enough that private resources are not

in our hands, the state, which instituted laws for the eradication of racial inequality, gives public money to those who are already in positions of economic advantage.

Below is a fragment of the letter read by Hilton Cobra during a meeting with the FUNARTE director Antônio Grassi. In that moment, March 2012, prior to the constitution of Akoben, Cobrinha invites the participants of the Black Performance Forums and of the project “Olonadé: the Black Brazilian Scene” to mobilize as a Black artists’ collective and to demand from the state a fair distribution of resources:

We, black artists are here to exchange ideas and to claim our space within these projects and many other projects within companies and state in this country. First, I will read the letter, it is fast: Dear partners of the Companhia dos Comuns and partners of the project "Olonadé: the Black Brazilian Scene": The Companhia dos Comuns submitted the project "Olonadé: Black Brazilian Scene" to compete for the occupation of the theater Glauce Rocha in 2012. During the four months of "Olonadé..." We would offer to the Carioca public the following programming: sixteen spectacles - thirteen adults spectacles and three spectacles for children and youth as the announcement requires - totaling seventy eight presentations, six dramatic readings, ten workshops for aspiring actors and dancers, and four lectures: “History of Black theater in Brazil,” “Brazilian Black drama,” “The interpretation of the Black Brazilian actor,” and “Black aesthetics: a different way of doing theater.” We would have speeches by recognized actresses including Léa Garcia, Ruth de Sousa, Zezé Mota, Xica Xavier—and maybe the actor Lázaro Ramos (...) We were defeated in this competition. This is not new to the Companhia dos Comuns and to many other Black theater and dance companies scattered throughout the country: to be defeated. We were also defeated last year with the same project. They do not want us. The [project] "Brazilian Languages: Black Culture in the Stage," a project of the JLM company, won. This confirms that the money remains in the hands of white producers, because, as in the “Black to Black” project, the two owners of JLM are white women who discovered how to make money with nigga stuff (...) The information we have—unofficial information because until this moment FUNARTE did not publish the elected proposal’s programming—the information we have says the chosen project presents a programming with only three spectacles in comparison to the seventeen of the

"Olonadé" project and, amazingly, all three are produced by the winning company JLM . The "Olonadé" has only one spectacle produced by the Companhia dos Comuns—"Silêncio—in comparison to spectacles produced by fifteen other groups, because it has always been the Companhia dos Comuns' policy to share the cake, especially when dealing with public money (2012).

What Akoben wants is not the false illusion of multiculturalism so often taken by the state and civil society as the only possible way to fight against racism. Akoben organized to push forward for public policies that take into account the need for an inclusive system of funding distribution regarding cultural projects, not in relation to the theme of such projects but in relation to Black ownership, thus resulting in the autonomy of these projects. The idea that "It does not matter if it is a Black theme. It needs to be produced by Blacks" is nearly a consensus among Akoben's members.

But this is no easy task. In one of my conversations with Ruth we discussed the efficacy of funding Black producers. Considering the total budget of MInC is around one billion dollars, a four million dollar budget to fund Black producers sounded like a strategy to silence Akoben by giving a small amount of money for which thousands of Black artists would compete. Taking into consideration that African descendents make up 50% of the Brazilian population but the gross amount of the MInC budget goes to White artists, companies, and producers, I must agree with Ruth's analysis that this budget is insufficient. She also thinks that this funding is a transitory action; it is a particular initiative done by a particular minister, with no guarantees that the same funding will be

available in the future. To her, Hilton Cobra's friendship with Luíza Bairros made this decree possible. Likewise, Luíza may have pressured Marta Suplicy to give something that would suit Akoben's demands. As Ruth concludes:

To me this funding does not solve anything; we will have all the artists competing for a little money, let alone the instability of this decree! The problem of the black folk is not only culture, it is related to how to dismantle a 500 year-old structure. We had reached a point where we need to talk about sharing the money (2013).

As we can infer from Ruth's remarks, besides the country's recent steps towards racial equality, the distribution of resources in culture follows the general pattern of social and symbolic disenfranchisement faced by Black people in Brazil and throughout the Diaspora.

### 1.7- Chapter conclusion

We were close to the end of our gathering at Cobrinha's house. By this time we were examining questions related to funding for Black producers announced in November, significantly close to Black Awareness Week. Our points were related to the need to put the focus on the authorship of the proposals rather than the scope of the themes. Cobrinha and Gá seemed to disagree. To them, the producers and artists benefiting from these politics should also address issues related to race and/or working with artistic elements based on African heritage and the Black experience. But when Aduni Benton, director of the Theater group É Tudo Cena (It is all Scene), asked, "What

is a Black theme?” her question was first answered with a long pause. She added: “A Black person can talk about anything, right?” and we all started to think about how broad our freedom is to determine our artistic themes and our interest in talking about “everything.”

As a Black woman studying Anthropology of the African Diaspora, working in a theoretical framework of Afro pessimism, Black optimism, cultural critique, and Black feminism, I approach this question as an ontological one. In fact, it is my own research question. But does this question have the same meaning to Aduni and to the members of Akoben? The reason why the question remained at first unanswered (and was actually never fully answered) is because there are certain expectations when one talks about a Black artist, a Black performance, or an artistic work about Afro-Brazilian culture. These expectations seem to have two axes: one is related to states discourse on what is “Afro-Brazilian culture,” the other, oftentimes coincident with the aesthetic projections of the former, relies on the Black activists’ expectations of an artistic production that is committed to Black liberation. The question then becomes: how would it be possible to have a space for a radical Black theater within the state and capitalist relations—the very antagonists of Black liberation projects? The need and the impossibility of the Black radical theater of Comuns emerges out of the question, “What is a Black theme?” The answer: *There are ONLY all White productions*. The Black theme is concerned with the fact that companies, parties, states, and laws are all White productions. As Luiz Gá said,

we do not even have the opportunity to work and achieve excellence; the limit of our professional advancement is constrained:

Why don't we have quality [in our work]? We don't have quality because we don't practice, we don't work. Why do we have a Fernanda Montenegro in Brazil? Because she works, that woman works everyday, she *can* be an excellent actress! But we, we are dealing with a different situation: we are working against the whites (2012).

Even if FUNARTE's president's insinuation that the projects presented by Black producers are not of a high quality is accurate, this lack of quality reflects the general lack of fair opportunities in everything else: health, education, power positions, business ownership, representation in media, and so on. To reach the roots of such structures we would need quite a bit of Derrick Bell's "racial realism" (1995: 307) and face the fact that multiculturalism, agendas of cultural diversity, and advocacy for acceptance and recognition will not be able to revert Blacks' permanent state of subordination.



## Chapter Two - “*Engaging with the state and facing all the consequences*”: navigating cultural politics at the institutional level

This chapter is the result of the conversations with Akoben members regarding my work as a researcher. In an earlier meeting in October 2012, Luiz Carlos Gá, Filipe, and I talked about using ethnographic data to create tables with the types of competitions, budgets, outcomes, and descriptions of selection committees. The topic re-appeared again after Cobrinha (and Gá) left. Débora, Líbia Besouro, Filipe, and I agreed we would need to have quantitative data in order to show measurable results backing Akoben’s statements that Black artists and producers do not have fair chances in these state sponsored opportunities. From this came the idea of collecting, monitoring, and analyzing the results of funding competitions sponsored by MInC. In this chapter, I will present the institutional panorama of the Brazilian state system to fund arts, introduce a table with

the results of the FUNARTE funding competitions for theater in 2012, and then analyze these results. From this analysis, I will discuss different aspects that influenced the exclusion of Afro-Brazilian artists and producers from state-sponsored opportunities in the arts. The goal of this chapter is to propose a model for compilation, organization, and investigation of the funding competition's results, which Akoben could develop and use.

This is not an easy task for several reasons: a) The applications for the MInC competitions do not have the category "race/ethnicity" on candidates' identification forms; b) It is difficult, sometimes impossible, to access the online database of proposals elected before 2011; c) The Akoben campaign requesting that Black artists and producers report which funding competition they applied to was not successful, partly because of the fear of internal competition or lack of trust in regard to the goals of such a request. But the campaign was not successful due to the lack of planning and organization as well as in terms of a system of data storage. I think that all of these issues should still be addressed in order to achieve Akoben's goal of a state sponsored cultural politics that would be truly "inclusive, democratic, and honest" (Akoben 2012). Even with these difficulties I am urged to think about strategies to gain access to these structures of funding distribution. Conversely, it is necessary to know the barriers that keep Black artists and producers outside the structures of political and economic power that dictate the laws for art production in Brazil, and to develop strategies and data to confront this exclusion.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Although I do not here develop a discussion regarding theories of the state and the racial state in particular, this discussion is important to my work and will be developed in the future.

## 2.1- The organization of the Ministry of Culture

In the Federal Republic of Brazil, the Ministries of the executive branch have the power to establish and execute policies and programs throughout the entire nation. The twenty-four Ministries, plus the ten secretariats and five organs with the status of Ministries, are under the supervision of the federal government, and the President appoints their Ministers at the beginning of each presidential term.<sup>20</sup>

In Brazil, many artistic projects are sponsored and/or promoted by state institutions. The major representative organ for culture is the Ministry of Culture, or MinC. Based on data collection and interviews, I summarize the system of funding distribution that sponsors culture in Brazil in five ways: 1) Call for proposals sponsored directly through MInC resources; 2) Open competitions for cultural proposals sponsored by state companies such as PETROBRÁS, ANATEL, and ELETROBRÁS; 3) Competitions for residencies in theaters, galleries, music rooms and other spaces maintained by institutions such as the state banks Banco de Brasil and Caixa Econômica Federal and the Correios (Brazilian Postal Service); 4) Election of cultural and artistic initiatives carried out by governmental or non-governmental entities such as clubs, religious communities, community associations, schools, or art studios—these entities become *Pontos de Cultura* (Spots of Culture) and their cultural initiatives must have a socio-cultural impact; 5) Rouanet Law: the proponents of elected art proposals collect the budget of the proposal alongside private companies, and the companies sponsoring these

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<sup>20</sup> In <http://www2.planalto.gov.br/presidencia/ministros/ministerios>

projects deduct the amount they give to the arts proposals from their annual taxes. All of these initiatives go through the process of Ministry of Culture selection, approval, and evaluation.

Thanks to my collaborator and friend Ruth Pinheiro, I was able to understand these institutional structures and the system of arts proposal evaluation. Ruth has been developing projects such as alphabetization and internet skills workshops in *quilombo* communities, planning awards related to Afro-Brazilian Culture, and regularizing the legal and financial situations of other NGOs and art companies. Because of her professional expertise she has a broad knowledge of MInC's organization and functioning, and she was very willing to share this knowledge with me.

In its organizational structure, the MInC has six secretariats: the Secretariat of Cultural Policy, the Secretariat of Citizenship and Cultural Diversity, the Secretariat of Audiovisual Arts, the Creative Economy Secretariat, the Office of Institutional Coordination, and the Secretariat for Development and Promotion of Culture.<sup>21</sup> It has three autarchies: Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Nacional (IPHAN, the Institute of the National and Historic Patrimony)<sup>22</sup>; Agência Nacional de Cinema (ANCINE, the National Agency of Cinema),<sup>23</sup> and the Instituto Brasileiro de Museus (IBRAM, the

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<sup>21</sup> <http://www.cultura.gov.br/institucional>

<sup>22</sup> Created in 1935, IPHAN is intended to preserve Brazilian cultural patrimony through the identification, documentation, protection and promotion of cultural expressions, ways of making and living, artistic works, objects, documents, buildings with historical and/or cultural value, and archeological, paleontological, ecological and scientific sites.

<sup>23</sup> Intended to develop a cinematographic industry that is strong, competitive, and self-sustaining.

Brazilian Institute of Museums).<sup>24</sup> There are four foundations: Fundação Casa Rui Barbosa (the Rui Barbosa's House Foundation);<sup>25</sup> Fundação Biblioteca Nacional (the National Library Foundation);<sup>26</sup> Fundação Nacional de Artes (FUNARTE, the National Foundation of Arts); and the Fundação Cultural Palmares (the Palmares Cultural Foundation). For each type of competition or funding opportunity, MInC chooses a selection committee based on the members' familiarity with the type of art proposal and their assumed neutrality. Ruth drew to my attention the institutional scheme that regulates the distribution of resources for culture:

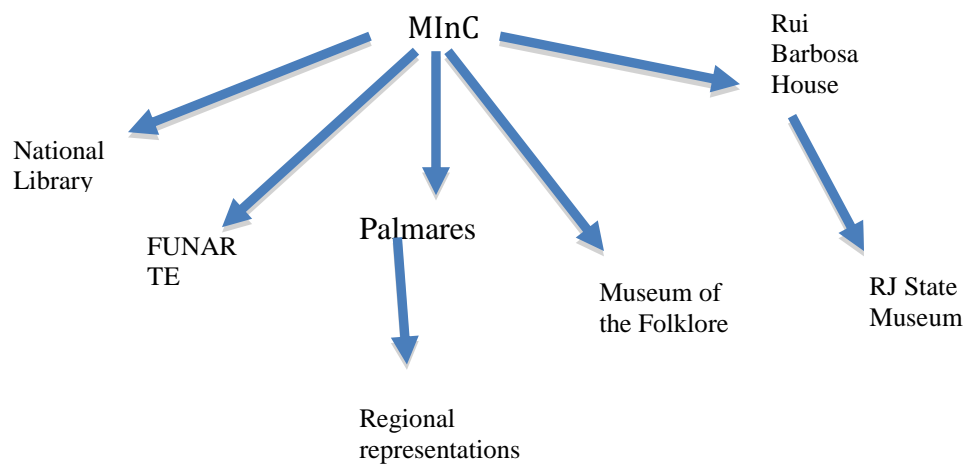


Illustration. 2.1- Ruth representation of the MInC structure

<sup>24</sup> Aims to promote the implementation of public policies of organization, management and museum conservation.

<sup>25</sup> Its mission is to promote the preservation and research of Brazilian literary production.

- <sup>26</sup> The National Library Foundation considered one of the ten biggest archives in the world by UNESCO. It regulates authorship rights and also operates as the national agency promoting the use of the ISBN (International Standard Book Number).

Many of the MInC projects and funding opportunities are developed in partnership with other institutions, such as the Ministry of Education (MEC), as in the case of the project “*Mais Cultura nas Escolas*”<sup>27</sup> (More Culture in the Schools), or the Ministry of Racial Equality (SEPPIR) and the MEC, as in the case of the “*A Cor da Cultura*” project (The color of Culture) formulated in response to the 2003 Law 10.639, which calls for the mandatory teaching of African and Afro-Brazilian cultures and history.

The Ministry of Culture in Brazil had a total budget of R\$ 1.795.193.13 (around \$ 800,000,000) in 2012 (PLO 2012). The following table shows how this budget (keeping aside administrative costs) was distributed through the autarchies and foundations, and the amount that goes to the National Fund for Culture.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> [http://www.cultura.gov.br/noticias-destaques/-/asset\\_publisher/OiKX3xIR9iTn/content/minc-e-mec-lancam-mais-cultura-nas-escolas/10883](http://www.cultura.gov.br/noticias-destaques/-/asset_publisher/OiKX3xIR9iTn/content/minc-e-mec-lancam-mais-cultura-nas-escolas/10883)

<sup>28</sup> This funding was part of the National Program for the Arts, an initiative created in 1991 with the goal to collect and distribute funds to further cultural projects that: stimulate an equal distribution of cultural goods in the different regions of the national territory; offer incentives to professional development and further the development of art expressions with less visibility; and attend to the interests of local communities. In <http://vix.sebraees.com.br/arquivos/fnc.htm>

<b>Total</b>	R\$ 1.795.193
	\$
MInC	623.542.000
IPHAN	351.675.000
ANCINE	85.994.000
IBRAM	129.508.000
Rui B.	35.089.000
Nat. Lib.	107.850.000
FUNAR	102.027.000
Palmares	19.000.000
Nat. Fund	376.379.000

Table 2.1 MInC budget for the year of 2012<sup>29</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Rounded to the nearest whole value. Source PLO 2012 (Budget Report Law Project).

The federal organizations that most effect the artists I worked with are FUNARTE and Palmares. FUNARTE aims to develop public policies that promote the visual arts, music, theater, dance, and circus. It encourages the production and training of artists, research development, the preservation of memory, and educating the public in the arts in Brazil. It provides grants and awards, promotes workshops, publishes books, retrieves and provides access to collections, provides technical advice, and supports cultural events in Brazil and abroad. On the next page I will include a table (2.2) showing FUNARTE funding opportunities and residence competitions in the fields of theater and dance. These opportunities happen annually and have a national scope. I will present data concerning 2012 and the proposals from Rio de Janeiro city and state. The goal of this data is to demonstrate that Black arts and Black artists do not have a significant presence either in the funding competitions or in the theater residence competitions.



## 2.2- FUNARTE results for theater and dance in the year of 2012

The following table is a compilation of the MInC and FUNARTE websites with the results of the selection process for all awards in theater and dance sponsored by FUNARTE in 2012:

Type	Budget	Number selected	Number of select committee	Selected from Rio
Miriam Muniz theater award	R\$ 12.000.000 (\$ 6,000,000)	132	10 + 01 Funarte member	16
Funarte/ Petrobras award Klaus Vianna for dance	R\$ 6.000.000 (\$3,000,000)	82	6 + 1 Funarte member	07
Funarte for street arts	R\$ 3,000,000 (1,500,000)	73	5 + 1 Funarte member	Theater 03
Dulcina theater residence – 1 <sup>st</sup> semester	XXXX	01	03	00
Cacilda Becker Theater residence – 1 <sup>st</sup>	R\$ 400.000 (\$200,000)	01	03 + 1 Funarte member	01 (with 01 dance piece + workshops and conferences)
Glauce Rocha theater residence -1 <sup>st</sup> semester	XXXX	01	03 + 1 Funarte member	01 (With 04 theater plays)
Nelson Rodrigues award	R\$ 1.360.000 (\$ 650,000)	17	05	03
Luso Brazilian award for dramaturgy	E 15.000 ( \$20, 470	01	08 – 4 from Brazil , 4 from Portugal	00
Cacilda Becker theater residence - 2 <sup>nd</sup> semester	R\$ 480.000 (\$240,000)	01	03 + 1 Funarte member	01(with 03 dance pieces + 1 installation)
Dulcina theater residence – 2 <sup>nd</sup>	R\$900.000 (\$450,000)	01	03 + 1 Funarte member	01 (With 04 theater plays)
Glauce Rocha – 2 <sup>nd</sup>	R\$ 750.000 (\$ 325,000)	01	04 + 1 Funarte member	01/ 00 (the producers are from Rio – the theater group is from a different state)

Table 2.2 Results of FUNARTE competitions for the year of 2012<sup>30</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Rounded to the nearest whole value.

The results show that out of twenty-eight theater plays<sup>31</sup> from Rio de Janeiro, six had an Afro-Brazilian/black theme, four of which are part of the proposal “Linguagens Brasileiras: Cultura Negra em Cena” (Brazilian Languages: Black Culture on the Stage), the winner of the Glauce Rocha residency competition. The production companies who presented these two proposals—JLM and NKV—are owned by White producers. According to the NKV profile on Facebook, JLM collaborates with them. Although this is not illegal, considering that the company JLM is constantly rewarded with funding competitions and theater residencies, it is something that could be questioned. JLM also collaborated with the production of the proposal in the area of dance that won the residency for the first semester at the Cacilda Becker theater.

This is the production company that defeated Hilton Cobra’s proposals for theater residencies at the Glauce Rocha theater in 2012 and in 2011 at the Cultural Center Banco do Brasil, a space maintained by the Brazilian government-controlled Banco do Brasil. By conducting a little research on JLM, Hilton Cobra found out that one of its owners is the daughter of a Banco do Brasil manager. In the lawsuit against FUNARTE, Hilton Cobra indicated suspected nepotism in the competition for the Banco do Brasil theater residency.<sup>32</sup> The fact that JLM has a history of consistently winning art proposals or

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<sup>31</sup> The table would show a total of thirty theater plays from Rio de Janeiro, but two of the spectacles that were part of the proposal “Linguagens Brasileiras” were part of the proposal that won the residency for the second semester at the Dulcina theater. Thus I counted these two plays just once.

<sup>32</sup> The lawsuit was suspended after Cobrinha’s appointment to the Palmares Foundation I do not know exactly why.

working with other theater companies that have also been elected in the same year suggests some favoritism.

Analyzing the other elected proposals reveals that the musical “Funk 40 anos,” which received a Miriam Muniz Award for theater, tells the history of funk ballrooms in the city and its producers are racially diverse; the founder of the company who presented the proposal is Osvaldo Caldeira, who is Black. Another proposal that received the Miriam Muniz Award, “Estamira,” tells the story of a homeless Black woman found in a garbage deposit. The actress performing Estamira is White. The Miriam Muniz Award winner “Clementina, cadê você?” is a homage to the samba writer and singer Clementina de Jesus, a dark skinned woman whose talent was discovered in her 60s, and is today called one of the “queens of samba.” The company producing this spectacle is a dance studio whose focus is on teaching popular dance genres such as samba and samba de gafieira. The owners are White, as was the spectacle’s director. The actress performing Clementina was a light-skinned woman in her 30s.

Except for the project “Linguagens Brasileiras” and four other plays (two of which were in the proposal presented by NKV for the second semester of the Theater Dulcina residency), the musical “40 anos de baile,” and “Clementina, cadê você?” that featured casts of Black actors and actresses, the presence of Black or racially ambiguous performers in all of the other twenty spectacles is marginal. Extensive research of the online portfolios of those spectacles showed two Black artists and another two racially ambiguous performers. From the six proposals dealing with an Afro-Brazilian/Black

theme, five were presented by White proponents, and five have White directors.<sup>33</sup>

In researching the eleven dance spectacles elected in 2012, I found that only one deals with an Afro-Brazilian thematic and/or dance style: “Mami Wata: Um Mito Africano Contemporâneo” (Mami Wata: a contemporary African Myth)<sup>34</sup> This dance piece presents a modern dance choreography based on the narratives of the Afro-Caribbean deities of the water. The director is a White woman who works in collaboration with the Center for Research in Afro-Amerindian Performance at the Federal University in Rio de Janeiro. There are three Black dancers total in the eleven spectacles, and three racially ambiguous dancers out of over twenty dancers. One of the spectacles has a character in *blackface*.

The table above provides an overview of how much culture and the arts have been supported by the Brazilian state. It shows that from thirty-nine spectacles, thirty-two deal with aesthetic forms related to Western-based theater and dance aesthetics. Seven proposals have a theme related to “Brazilian” or “Afro/Black” culture. However, in general, these productions are put on by Whites, performed by Whites, or have light-skinned performers interpreting dark skinned people. Most of the MInC budget goes towards these types of proposals, whereas the genres associated with “Brazilian popular culture” gain less support. Clearly, theater and dance, excluding so-called “popular dance,” are White artistic domains in Brazil.

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<sup>33</sup> I am not sure about the racial identification of the director of the musical “40 anos de baile.”

<sup>34</sup> From the Caribbean word *Mammi-Wata* (Mommy-Water)..

As the movement of Akoben has grown, more artists and producers have stated that they have been consistently pushed out of state and private funding sources. The circle of exclusion occurs at all levels, such as the example given by the designer Cachalote. He works with prompts for theater. His work received some recognition in Rio, but he says that theater companies still hire him and expect to pay less for his work, giving the position of main designer to White professionals who have a bigger name in the market, even though Cachalote does most of the creative work. This situation impairs these artists' full professional development. Although actor Rodrigo Santos insists he wants to make a living in theater, this is very difficult in Brazil because the vast majority of theater artists need to keep other jobs and the artists sometimes pay for the cost of producing and circulating a play. To Rodrigo, this needs to change: the valorization of arts and the possibility of the valorization and independence of Black arts need to be pushed forward. Cridemar Aquino in his interview expresses what he thinks could be a possibility for creating professional space for Black performers in big media vehicles:

We need to be in these spaces. We need to understand the machine from inside. But we need to have our goals defined, to think about our goals more than we think about their goals. I want money. But how should I behave when I'm there and not force myself to become another person? How should I act to benefit my strategy? (2013).

Cridemar and the former Comuns' actress Tatiana have found some success in their television careers. Through their participation in a TV Globo soap opera they became friends with other Black and White artists who work in collaboration with Tatiana in her dramatic reading circuit "*Negro Olhar*" (Black Gaze). In the sequence, the two participated in the TV series "Subúrbia," one of the very few Black TV series

produced in Brazil. This show's storyline about a young Black woman from a rural area facing the difficulties of living in Rio de Janeiro's inner city was directed by Luiz Carvalho, a White director, who Tatiana considered to be an ally who acted with respect and consideration for Black culture. However, the series was broadcast very late at night and received low ratings because of its small audience, and was not renewed for a new season. This example illustrates how difficult it is to create and, even more, to maintain a tradition of television series that invest in Black protagonism. In this sense, Cridemar's strategy does not work as he thinks, and despite his individual success, things have not changed at all in term of access and autonomy for Black performers in Brazilian media. Other people in the field corroborate Cridemar's idea and think that professional actors and actresses (and models, journalists, etc.) should seek out a space in media, a professional space they have the legitimacy to occupy.

### 2.3- Factors influencing the exclusion of Black artists and producers

Among the factors influencing the exclusion of Black artists and producers are: 1) the level of professionalization required to complete the forms for online submission of proposals; 2) the legal, juridical, and financial status of groups and producers; 3) the existing network of arts groups, big production companies, and other business companies. Some of the companies that won the funding competitions have on their staff attorneys, marketing specialists, lawyers, and anthropologists. Considering that Afro-Brazilians experience a general lack of access to resources such as higher education and private capital, Black producers and arts groups are more likely to have tax debts and more likely

to not have the technical skills to navigate highly complex (and impractical) online forms. Finally, at the level of interpersonal relationships, Blacks are less likely to be friends, relatives, or professional partners with influential people in businesses such as media.

Sponsors' interests are another factor that has kept Afro-Brazilian artists and producers from receiving funding opportunities. Normally the state companies sponsoring arts projects want to have well-known names promoting their companies. Ruth Pinheiro told me about her experience when she and another Black woman worked on the selection committee in 2011 for the PETROBRÁS awards. The award recipients were not the same ones Ruth and the other members had decided on; the company directors had the final word in the decision and some of the proposals elected by the selection committee were not chosen. Sometimes, Ruth said, a proposal is rejected because its proponents have some sort of trouble with PETROBRÁS, such as not having presented the budget report from previous awards, or the proponents have not paid their taxes. Unfortunately, as she pointed out, we need to recognize that many of our (Black) groups, organizations, etc., are not good about completing final reports in a timely manner, while others just do not have the money to keep their groups or NGOs clear on taxes. CADON itself is struggling with this, she remarked.

The selection committee's decision is central only in the case of two proposals receiving the same score. Otherwise, the person in charge of the money will decide who will get it, and sometimes this also depends on the strategic matters of the company. This means if a given company wants to increase its visibility in the Northeast region they will choose a proposal from this area, even if the selection committee does not elect a

proposal from the Northeast region. Thus, issues such as a director and managers' choices, preferences, and nepotism influence the selection processes and the results in state-sponsored funding opportunities for culture.

Gatto Larsen, partner of Rubens Barbot and working as the producer of the dance company *Barbot*, mentioned the difficulties that small artistic groups face in finding sponsors. He said, "The big art companies that already won a funding competition in general keep winning other funding." Even worse, when groups seek available funding from the Rio de Janeiro Secretary of Culture they face a similar reality since the Rio de Janeiro Secretary of Culture adopted a policy of investing only in cultural projects that make money. Gatto joked, "Give more money to the groups that already make money." This creates a never-ending circle of privilege and exclusion where the already famous art companies gain funds from different sources, as well as the preference to use the city's theaters, whereas small groups need to strive much harder to put a spectacle together. Needless to say, among big art companies there is not one Black collective, and even the presence of Black performers is minimal. Sometimes, these few Black bodies are not really even part of the group. The director decides they need a Black character or actor/actress and then hires performers familiar through the work of groups such as Companhia dos Comuns. In this sense, the remark of the actress Valéria Monã, during the Akoben gathering in December, makes the situation clear: "We will not work. We will work only as employees of the White producers."

During the preliminary fieldwork I conducted in summer 2011, I participated in one meeting organized by the actor Gustavo Melo at his house. In this meeting, he and



other performers came together to discuss the development of a proposal for a theater play called “Orire,” created and directed by Melo. Because the name of the play is a Yoruba word, it was associated with Candomblé, although it had no religious theme or connotation. In the meeting, I heard the actors and actresses saying that they had been refused funding and theater residencies from SESC, a private association of commerce that funds several artistic projects. In this case, the religious views of the sponsors are another factor that eventually keep Black artistic projects out, particularly if these religious views are related to the Christian Pentecostal religion. One of the actors said this was precisely the reason the SESC representative cited for denying “Orire.” The man said that many of the SESC associates are Christian Pentecostals and they would not like or attend a show with a name that could be associated with the Candomblé religion.

On top of the issues indicated above, my research collaborators often said that what works in Brazil, in terms of these selection committees, is to know someone from the selection committee of a given funding competition. The art proposals that are more likely to be elected are the ones whose proponents know someone from the selection committee who would vote for their proposals. This seems to be a widespread practice, actually the norm in Brazil (and in many other places in the world); one of Akoben’s members said that if she was part of a committee, she would support the proposals of her friends. Another member said that once she just had to hand her proposal to a friend of hers who was appointed as a selection committee member in a funding competition. This case demonstrates that these artists also try to use the same strategies of clientelism, which makes it hard for them to confront the accusations made by the artist Spirito Santo

and by the journal Afro Press about the lack of transparency in the competition for Black producers. For example, the Palmares Foundation's silence regarding the selection process for funding competitions contributed to undermining Cobrinha's leadership at this institution. Although people who take advantage of the same corrupt strategies use the excuse that this is simply the way things work in Brazil, it becomes very difficult to assure trust and collectivity among different Black collectives, because everyone is aware such strategies are used. This might be one of the reasons why Akoben's request for Black artists to report the funding competitions to which they apply was not successful.

The composition of selection committees is another component to the problem surrounding public policies for culture and Black Brazilians' fair access to these policies. Hilton Cobra's video "Eugenia Cultural" clearly states the problem:

If you appoint a selection committee it has to have blacks on the committee, it has to have Indians. Because there are black and indigenous projects and they have not been ranked because the committees are almost totally composed by white people (Cobrinha: 2012).

By conducting online research on the profiles of committees members working in the funding competitions presented in Table 2.2, I could confirm what Hilton Cobra says. From eleven competitions, with a total of forty nine committee members and eight FUNARTE representatives, I found that:

- The members of the selection committee circulate through different committees; some of the members participate in up to three committees. This decreases the number of the forty-nine committee members to more or less thirty-five people.

- There were three FUNARTE members circulating on all the committees.
- All of the FUNARTE members were White.
- Out of the twenty-seven committee members researched, twenty five were White.
- Researching their areas of artistic expertise I found that many of the selection committee members came from prestigious art and dance schools in Rio de Janeiro, with many of them having studied or worked in Europe for certain periods of time.

Aduni and Cobra described their experiences of having their proposals rejected because they did not adhere to the strict categories of either theater or dance. Aduni said: “They don’t understand Black aesthetics.” The fact that White selection committee members and their cohort of White artists and art critics have a Western-centered understanding of art creates a structure that does not allow autonomy for Black artists to determine their own expressions and critical frameworks of the Black arts. Even the opportunities offered to Afro-Brazilian culture under the label of diversity are scrutinized and judged by experts and state authorities who set the standards to classify and determine what defines Afro-Brazilian arts and what Afro-Brazilian artists need. Indigenous and Afro-Brazilian cultural arts have the smallest amount designated for awards especially designed to promote and protect cultural expressions labeled as folkloric and/or traditional.

The fact that indigenous and Afro-Brazilian culture needs to be “promoted and protected” is also very significant. In a country where African descendants make up 50%

of the population, this need for protection confirms that the country has for centuries been investing in Eurocentric ideals of aesthetics and arts. Brazil tries to obliterate, or at least, tries to deny the legitimacy of Black and indigenous manifestations as art forms. During informal conversations I had with Iléa Ferraz after Akoben meetings, she mentioned on two occasions how the work of Black artists or groups are generally mistaken as, or at least become interchangeable with, social work. She means that Black artistic/cultural collectives are frequently invited to perform or to conduct workshops in areas of social vulnerability as part of humanitarian or educational programs. Iléa is not denying that this type of work is important too, but the problem is that these artists are not considered as professionals creating art, but people who can educate through entertainment or who can “rescue” people in situations of social vulnerability. As she says: “We are professional artists. What we do is art, not social work. Still, our work is not considered artistic, but social.”

In other conversations I heard from the dancers Valéria Monã and Eliete Miranda concerns regarding the way Black expressive cultures are seen as practices that do not have techniques, aesthetic principles, and/or codification. This stereotype allows people to do whatever they want and call it “Afro-Brazilian” dance and culture. The examples given by Iléa, Valéria, and Eliete coincide with what Kobena Mercer states in regard to the way the work of Black artists is undervalued:

[The] structural underdevelopment of a viable framework for black arts criticism [...] itself must be seen as one unhappy legacy of historical marginalization. Black artists have not had their work taken seriously because the space for critical dialogue has been constrained and limited precisely as an effect of marginality (1994:238).

During the Akoben meeting to evaluate the encounter with the Minister of Culture, we reached the conclusion that it was disappointing because it seemed that the Minister was not there to hear us, despite that Cobrinha had told us she would listen more than talk. Someone said: “She (Marta Suplicy) wants to give me a museum, but she does not want to give me life.” This criticism against Minister Suplicy’s idea (and insistence) to create “the Museum of the Black,” as the Minister called it, expresses the frustration of Black artists with White interlocutors who in fact are not really listening to their demands.

In conclusion, there are different forces and interests influencing decisions on art proposals, such as nepotism, strategic interests, clientelism, and political alliances. In addition, it could be said that the Brazilian state makes use of a neoliberal logic for artistic production by privileging art products and names, brands, and artists with commercial potential, sometimes aiming to promote political campaigns through the circulation of these cultural products. The Brazilian state’s cultural politics rely on the dynamics of the coloniality of power (Quijano 2000), where artistic products circulating in the neoliberal cultural scenario are still ranked, described, and imagined based on the same hierarchies of culture, civilization, and arts constituted in the colonial era, situating Eurocentric aesthetic values as superior, or at least, defining other aesthetic formats according to Western frameworks for the arts. Thus, even claims of multicultural diversity have been undermined by structural frameworks that categorize, classify, and rank diversity according to Western principles.

Due to the conditions mentioned above—the corruption of the selection committees, clientelism, the Western-centered criteria for judging art proposals, and the lack of access to technical/professional formation and financial resources—it becomes clear why many of Akoben members are reluctant to cut off alliances with Whites allies. “The Whites on the selection committee want to see the name of X or Z, they want to see the name of White professionals they know. They want to see themselves.” This argument was raised during an Akoben gathering when we were immersed in the heated discussion about whether or not to submit proposals with an all Black cast for the Black producers’ funding competition. There was a strong discussion about this topic and it generated distrust and gossip about certain members’ intentions. But it was clear that everybody in the room knew that by having influential White allies on their side or by including known White professionals in the proposals, many Black artists believed that they would have a better chance. In addition, to not invite traditional allies could appear as a betrayal. And since the affirmative funding for Black producers is still a transitory measure that allocates a small amount of money, it does not seem worthwhile to cease professional and political alliances with certain White allies or to stop making concessions to White producers.

In regard to the question of Black performers being directed by White television directors, one of my friends asked me, “What is the point of not working with White TV directors, when groups such as Companhia dos Comuns and the Olodum theater ensemble’s plays are often directed by a White man (Márcio Meirelles)?” I also learned later that some people in Akoben were hired to act in JLM plays. The company that beat

Hilton Cobra's group continues to win funding competitions to work with Afro-Brazilian culture. These remarks and the working conditions of my collaborators made me think more carefully about my assumptions about what radical Black politics should be. I would invest in the centrality of Black protagonism, in the creation of Black institutions, including the media, and in the refusal of the capitalist, neo-liberal model of media production. However, this is my utopian project for Black liberation that does not match the real lives and means of my collaborators who, much better than me, have learned how to navigate the system and work through the contradictions.

#### 2.4- Tactics deployed to secure the insertion of Afro-Brazilians in state-sponsored cultural politics

In one of the Akoben meetings, Aduni Benton (group É Tudo Cena) tried get people involved in the state and in the city councils of culture. These latter, composed by members of the civil society, have voting rights in the city and state assemblies determining cultural projects and allocation of resources. "We need to have our people there because they are trying to elect a new directory for the year of 2013," Aduni said. She expected that these directories have Black artists and producers as members. This generated a long discussion between her and Cobrinha because, although both recognized the importance of having Black artists in all spheres of the system of arts funding, Cobrinha was also concerned with the viability of participating in city and state councils, which would involve more meetings to attend. He said, "We don't have enough arms." But at the same time he was the one shouting, "We need to engage with the state with all

of its consequences,” meaning that Akoben members would need to learn, incorporate, and navigate state institutions in order to have our demands heard and to produce any significant change.

The result of “engaging with the state with all of its consequences” resulted in Cobrinha’s appointment to a state position. To Gá, it was the direness of the situation regarding Black cultural politics that made it necessary to invest in Cobrinha’s appointment to the Palmares Foundation. Gá was directly involved in Cobrinha’s appointment . He used his political and professional alliances to criticize Palmares’s former administration and to suggest Cobra’s name to the president of the foundation. Nonetheless, Gá believes that Cobrinha’s role was not to work for the state, but to develop his artistic projects:

He (Cobrinha) should be installed as Debora Colker, with a good and big studio, developing workshops, rehearsing, giving speeches. I collaborated with his appointment to Palmares because it was necessary, but his main contribution is to be an artist, a Black artist (2012).

During the meeting between the Palmares Foundation and the artists in May 2013, Cobra, talking as the foundation’s president, said that the conditions of this foundation do not allow the actualization of big projects. Aside from the foundation’s restricted budget, the government gives the Palmares Foundation the responsibility to develop projects in “traditional communities,” i. e., *quilombos* not necessarily related to arts and cultures, disregarding the original purpose of this foundation. “All things that are related to Blacks fall under the Palmares or SEPPIR,” says Ruth. With this, the federal government



transfers all of the questions related to Afro-Brazilians to these two small organs; questions regarding culture, economics, health, violence, and access to jobs.

One example Ruth Gave was the case of the church “Nossa Senhora do Rosário e São Benedito,” created by Blacks in the Seventeenth century. The church, which was elected a cultural patrimony of the city, needs urgent repairs. However, the IPHAN (Institute of Historical Patrimony) is not willing to fund the repairs, because in the understanding of this institution, the repair of a traditionally Black churches is Palmares Foundation or SEPPIR’s responsibility. Comparing the budget of IPHAN with the budget of Palmares in Table 2.1, we see that the IPHAN budget is approximately \$150 million, whereas the Palmares budget is approximately \$9 million. SEPPIR, in turn, in 2012 operated with a budget of \$25 million. That means that if one combines the budgets of SEPPIR <sup>35</sup> and the Palmares Foundation together, that budget is less than one third of IPHAN’s budget. Still, the Brazilian government gives these two small institutions the responsibility of solving all subjects related to Afro-Brazilians.

During the first PT administration (2003-2006), initiatives for the preservation of traditional cultures gained momentum. The Minister of Culture Gilberto Gil, the first Black Minister of Culture (and first black Minister of anything), himself an anti-military dictatorship activist and a famous singer, furthered the creation of the “Pontos De Cultura” (Cultural Spots), which, according to Ruth Pinheiro, made room for Afro-Brazilian artists and cultural producers. Although the text of the “Pontos De Cultura” does not mention “race” or Affirmative Action or inclusion of ethnic diversity, the text of

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<sup>35</sup> Source PLO 2012 (Budget Report Law Project).

this initiative gives some credence to the inclusion of often marginalized Afro-Brazilian cultural practices:

The proposals to be selected must be derived from cultural initiatives and must serve as instruments for the propulsion and articulation of existing actions in the communities, contributing to the social inclusion and to the construction of citizenship, either through the generation of employment and income or through the strengthening of cultural identities (MInC: 2013)

According to Ruth, from 2003 to 2007 there was also more money available to sponsor arts, and “we had cycles of Black culture sponsored.” But this period passed, and the money for culture diminished as well as the investment in the “Pontos de Cultura” initiatives.

In subsequent years there was silence in terms of the need to further Black arts. Ruth affirms this by saying that the announcement of the funding opportunity for Black producers was possible only because the Statute of Racial Equality had been approved in 2010,<sup>36</sup> which opened space for initiatives based on Affirmative Action. She and other research peers think that this could represent a new period of state investment in Black arts. However, given the small amount of money given to this funding opportunity and to the Palmares Foundation, many of the people I talked with think that this is not enough to assure a truly democratic distribution of resources and representation of Brazilian racial diversity.

Another attempt to secure the inclusion of Black artists and producers can be seen in SEPPIR Minister Luíza Bairos’s initiative to seek alliance with state companies such

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<sup>36</sup> In: [http://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil\\_03/\\_Ato2007-2010/2010/Lei/L12288.htm](http://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/_Ato2007-2010/2010/Lei/L12288.htm)

as PETROBRÁS, the postal service, ELETROBRÁS, and private companies such as Oi. The Minister's goal was to convince the heads of these companies of the need to have more inclusive and racially diverse art proposals sponsored by these companies. In 2010, the above-mentioned companies signed a letter of interest in collaboration with Minister Bairros's proposal. However, during the meeting between the Palmares Foundation and Black artists in May 2012, Hilton Cobra declared that these companies are not funding any projects in Afro-Brazilian arts. He remembered how following the First National Forum of Black Performance in 2005, there was a consistent silence regarding the issue of funding for Black artistic projects or initiatives related to improving the representation of Black arts. After Akoben's mobilization against FUNARTE's funding decision processes, the Minister of Culture came up with the funding for Black producers based on Affirmative Action. As Cobra asserts, this affirmative action-based funding opportunity should not be understood as Minister Suplicy's initiative; rather, it was the result of both Akoben mobilization and the articulation of Minister Bairros with the Ministry of Culture.

Political concessions like the creation of SEPPIR, Law 10639-06, and the Statute of Racial Equality were designed to attain the goal of combating racial disparity, as the 2001 Durban conference guidelines recommended. However, interest in the "protection of Afro-Brazilian culture" should benefit Brazilians of African descent not just by giving us the right to consume or appreciate "Afro-Brazilian" arts. The right to produce culture should also be guaranteed to Afro-Brazilian producers. What in fact is happening is the de-politicization of black arts. If we use as examples the two proposals

submitted to the 2012 FUNARTE competition, “Olonadé: a cena negra Brasileira,” presented by Companhia dos Comuns and “Linguagens Brasileiras: Cultura negra em cena,” presented by JLM, we can infer that the first proposal invests in the relationship between theater, history, and the social context of the Black arts, while the second solely benefits JLM. Cobrinha planned to offer an ambitious total of “seventy-eight presentations, six dramatic readings, ten workshops for aspiring actors and dancers, and four lectures” (Cobrinha: 2012). Importantly, besides the theater plays produced by different groups and artists, “Olonadé” proposed lectures, speeches, and workshops nurturing the specificity of Black theater. In contrast, the proposal “Linguagens Brasileiras” presented only three spectacles, all produced by the same company, which stressed the proposal’s commercial orientation:

The information we have says the contemplated project presents programming with only three spectacles in comparison to the seventeen of the “Olonade” project and, amazingly, all three are produced by the winning company JLM (Cobrinha: 2012).

## 2.5—The danger of confronting corruption

In a meeting with the lawyer Sandra Machado, Cobrinha said, “We are dealing with bandits.” He was referring to the Banco do Brasil managers, about the corruption present in the funding competitions, the exchange of favors, nepotism, and possible cases of money laundering. Cobrinha mentioned his fear about suing an institution such as FUNARTE or demanding the release of budget reports for the selected proposals. His

remarks made me realized that the field of artistic production is as corrupt and dangerous as any other field where there is money and influence involved. After meeting Ruth Pinheiro and learning from her about different projects intended to develop cultural and social politics, this aspect of corruption involving cultural institutions like big NGOs became clearer.

During the 1990s, when many NGOs were created, several of their programs sought to offer arts and social policies to disenfranchised communities. Ruth Pinheiro, herself working in a NGO created in the late 1980s, told me that by the 2000s there were several cases of NGOs presenting irregularities in terms of their use of federal funding. In order to contain corruption, the Brazilian government proposed the creation of the OSIPs (Social Organizations of Public Interest). These institutions should have professionals such as attorneys, anthropologists, lawyers, educators, and social workers on their boards and prove that they would lead social work in endangered communities. These factors gave the OSIP more access to federal resources, since they would not need to compete for funding. They would have access to resources as soon as they had a proposal approved. In addition, because they had government approval, they could also successfully seek private resources.

According to Ruth, two major organizations function as OSIPs in Rio de Janeiro: Afro-Reggae and Viva Rio (Live Rio). Afro-Reggae offers workshops in the arts focused on Afro-Brazilian culture and is located in or near favelas. But the fact is that the OSIPs also became a site of corruption; Ruth tells me how Afro-Reggae first worked in collaboration with the military police during the process of pacification in the Cantagalo

community, and how they later received funding from different sources including TV Globo's project "*Criança Esperança*" (Child Hope) that itself receives funding from UNICEF. During my fieldwork, a scandal involving Afro-Reggae erupted when some of their members were accused of being involved in drug trafficking. There were death threats, and one of Afro-Reggae's rooms was burnt down in retaliation to Afro-Reggae president José Júnior's opposition to his former ally Pastor Marcos Pereira, himself accused of rape, murder, and alliances with drug traffickers.<sup>37</sup> To my surprise this story came back to Ruth: the young woman supposedly murdered by the Pastor was Ruth's niece, daughter of her half-sister, who became a witness under federal police protection.

The examples above indicate that certain features of Brazilian society operate through dynamics of favor exchange, relations of patronage, abuse of power, and criminality. In the case of OCIPs, it becomes apparent that big organizations supposedly working to improve the living conditions of disenfranchised communities, which are mostly Black, are heavily immersed in criminal schemes. In this context, challenging certain power structures could represent a huge risk, especially for people who do not have the same symbolic and material capital to fight against years of a colonial mentality that is also a racial mentality ranking people according to their skin color.

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<sup>37</sup> In: <http://totomartins.wordpress.com/2012/03/14/pastor-marcos-pereira-e-investigado-por-abuso-sexual-e-envolvimento-com-o-trafico/>

## 2.6- Next steps

In spite of the above, a large number of Black artists and producers are fighting against their exclusion and seeking alternatives, as indicated by the participation of over a hundred theater and dance groups at the Black Performance National Forums. Since that time, numerous Black artistic collectives have been struggling to produce art, to be seen and paid for their work. Akoben's mobilization allowed Black artists to see artistic production as a political field embedded in the same power structures that determine, reproduce, or sustain racial exclusion.

By collecting and analyzing data related to the results of funding competitions at the federal, state, and city level, as well as observing the demographics of art projects sponsored by state and private companies, we can gather evidence that Black producers and artists are systematically excluded. In this sense, the tables and interpretation of results presented here constitutes an activist aspect of this work. The prototype used in table 2.2 and its interpretation will be presented and discussed with Akoben members as a suggestion for the development of mechanisms to monitor the system of funding distribution in the area of culture, the appointments of committees, and the overall state of cultural politics in Brazil.

## Chapter Three - Performing Black politics

Social processes are understood by performance theorists as *dramatizations* (Hajer 2005; Schechner 2003). While the idea of performance suggests that meanings need to be reproduced and staged, *performativity* suggests that language can do things (Hajer 448; see also Austin 1962). The dynamics of social movements can also be understood as series of staged performances where people negotiate political processes through their discursive interactions. In this sense, discourse represents the “performative dimension of language” (Hajer 2005: 447). This chapter analyzes the performance elements in the actions and events carried out by the collective Akoben. To conduct this analysis, I will discuss events described in the previous chapters, and then highlight how performance stresses aspects of a racial identity while simultaneously enunciating other elements constitutive of one’s specific position within Black collectives. As scholar E. Patrick Johnson notes: “Racial performativity informs the process by which we invest bodies with social meaning” (2003:9). These performative acts observed in Akoben highlight the dynamics of policy making within this Black collective, announce internal



conflicts regarding the delimitation of a “proper” Blackness, and express external conflicts between Black and White. At the same time, these acts of speech, words, ways of carrying the body in public spaces, clothing, and graphic creations enunciate several instances regarding individual positionality, ideologies, and genealogies of Blackness.

### 3.1- Speech acts and dynamics of interaction

In this section I will focus on aspects of Akoben dynamics related to situations of verbal interaction among the participants. I will highlight characteristics of speech acts I observed during Akoben meetings, gatherings, and informal conversations I had with the participants. I will highlight fragments of speech analyzed here in order to differentiate them from the general format used in large quotations.

#### **3.1.a- Circularity:**

In all our meetings we sat in a circle. Cobrinha, while heading the mobilization, would open the meeting by saying what topics would be discussed and presenting a brief report of events that had happened since the last meeting. Sometimes he would raise questions like “How can we institutionalize Akoben?” or demand reports from the participants in charge of specific tasks: “Fillipe, how is the campaign going?” There was always someone in charge of taking notes in order to write the minutes of the meeting and someone, generally Naíra, in charge of annotating the names of participants who wanted to talk. Although people frequently jumped in while others were speaking, it could be said that the participants always kept a respectful attention to what the other

person was saying, even if they did not agree or did not think the remark was important. Some of us would express disagreement during the speech, not exactly by interrupting the speech, but by making our disagreement noticeable. If someone's intervention was too long, or not objective enough, another Akoben member, generally Cobrinha, would manage time by asking the person to summarize and conclude. After the person finished, Cobrinha or sometimes Iléa would ask the other members to keep the focus on the issue at hand. Towards the end of the meetings people usually became apprehensive with time management and the same person who opened the meeting would summarize, asking the person in charge of minutes to read the main points. The group would then indicate a checklist of things to do with the names of members in charge of specific tasks, and propose an agenda for the next meeting. The way each meeting was organized was circular in itself: we started by briefly remembering what was discussed in the last meeting, and then numbering the topics to be discussed. The next meeting would start by again remembering what was discussed by reading the topics elaborated in the last meeting.

The circularity of these meetings reflects an ideal of Africanness that is very present among Black activists in Brazil. In 2006, for example, three years after the creation of Law 10649 establishing the mandatory teaching of Afro-Brazilian and African Cultures and History, the Ministry of Education and SEPPIR organized a series of pedagogical materials named "*A Cor da Cultura*" (The Color of the Culture). In this set of materials, one class plan displayed "African Civilizational values" that guided the social structures of African civilizations. Among these values were cited "To value

ancestry” and “Circularity.” This material was produced by Afro-Brazilian pedagogues and History teachers who were also activists immersed in aspects of Afro-Brazilian culture. The most important artistic and cultural Afro-Brazilian expressions use the format of the circle, as we can see in capoeira, in Candomblé and Umbanda rites, and in samba music. The majority of the Akoben members engage with these aesthetic and religious forms; thus, it is expected that circularity would speak to them as a social value.

In Foucault’s elaboration of the processes of industrialization of modern society, he describes how horizontal lines create hierarchies and individualization through segmentation of the collective into units (Foucault, 1995). The circular format, on the other hand, stresses the idea of a community of equals where everybody is on the same level and can see each other. In this way the circle represents an alternate mode of social organization that stresses the collectivity instead of the isolated individual (Luz, 2000). The circle represents the totality of the social group and of the world itself. It is no coincidence that Companhia dos Comuns’ first play was called the “*Roda do Mundo*,” “roda” in Portuguese meaning “wheel,” evocative of circular movement. But “roda” also means a circle of people, as in the “roda de samba” or “roda de capoeira,” where performers sit in a circle and the audience surrounds them,



Fig. 3.1 Akoben's gathering. From left to right: Naira, Sandra, Unknow, Unknow, Aduni, Cobrinha, Adriana, Ga, Valeria, Zezinho, Debora, Libia, Rodrigo, and Tatiana - December 2012.

A characteristic of these meetings was that members were very open and frank, disagreeing with or questioning opinions and proposals. The members felt comfortable expressing disagreement or discussing certain remarks. This rendered discussions more profound, such as the case of the debate around the correct terminology to use in Facebook posts: "Should we use 'Black' or should we use 'Afro-Brazilian'?" From this question a whole debate around racial identity versus national identity and census

classification emerged and created the possibility for reflection about the meaning of these terms and the potential effects of each.

Although Akoben meetings were rich in terms of exchange of ideas and openness of debate, having observed and participated in other moments and spaces of interaction with Akoben members, I was aware that there were parallel conversations and suspicions about different people's goals in the movement. After Cobrinha left, some of the participants accused others of trying to be the movement's "leader."

The meeting between Black artists, producers, and activists with the Palmares representatives Hilton Cobra and Néa Daniel in June 2013 also adopted the circular format. Hilton Cobra, then appointed as the president of Palmares Foundation, occupied the center of the circle. Being an actor himself, Cobrinha had a great ability to secure people's attention. In the first part of this meeting, he presented the present context of the situation for Black producers: the funding announced in November by Suplicy had been suspended, the resources given to Palmares were insignificant, and the expectations regarding the work to be developed in Palmares exceed the reach of this institution. Cobrinha knew that he would be talking to allies and to opponents and that he would need to get people's attention and support. The way he conducted his speech revealed and depended on his skills as an actor: he altered the rhythm of speech, talking fast in some moments and then stretching some words; talking in a moderated rhythm for a while, and then making brief pauses. He walked around the circle and used large, slow gestures at certain moments. Occasionally, he would call someone in the audience by name:

From these meetings we are organizing we, Father Adailton, we need to acquire more forces to conquer other spheres...

This calling functioned as a break in narrative rhythm, dislocating the attention from the storyteller (Cobrinha) to audience members like “Father Adailton.”<sup>38</sup> At the same time, Cobrinha moved around the circle, making sure he was making eye contact with everyone.

In contrast, the meeting with the Minister of Culture was in a theater, and Minister Suplicy, the Palmares president (Cobrinha), and the Akoben representative Rodrigo Santos occupied the stage while all the others stayed in the audience. The Akoben members in charge of organization and recording stayed on the sides of the stage.

Cobrinha was a bit tense this day; he drank a lot of water and kept looking at Akoben members to see if everything was running smoothly. As a state employee he could not demonstrate that he was still in charge of a social mobilization. He was concerned with time too: Akoben had been trying to schedule this meeting with the Minister since November 2012, but meeting the Black artists was only possible because Minister Suplicy had another meeting in Rio. Right after meeting with the artists, she was scheduled to go to a big assembly with other Ministers and business companies.

Before the meeting started, Náíra, Iléa, Líbia, and Simone were at the door welcoming the artists and accommodating them. They also asked them to sign a list in

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<sup>38</sup> His title at the Candomblé terreiro *Ilê Omijuaró*.

order for Akoben to document the number of people present. Filipe and Gustavo were recording. Líbia and I were taking notes (I was also recording the audio). Rodrigo was in charge of reading the letter that we had prepared. When everybody was settled, and before the Minister arrived, Cobrinha called Mãe Beata de Yemanjá, a prominent Candomblé ‘*Yalorixá*.’<sup>39</sup> He invited her to open the meeting, and also called Elisa Nascimento, widow of Abdias Nascimento, to receive a medal given by the President Dilma Rousseff in recognition of Abdias’ trajectory and work. Soon after the Elisa and Mãe Beata speeches, the Minister arrived and Cobrinha then invited Rodrigo to the stage to read the letter.

The meeting had the formality and security procedures demanded on occasions like this. We had a high level state representative, the Minister, accompanied by her bodyguards, and she had a short time to be there and hear us. Before the meeting started, Cobrinha told us that he had already talked with her and that she said she would say only a few words. However, after reading the letter, which welcomed the funding initiative for Black producers and suggested that 40% of MInC’s budget should be given to producers of African descent, the Minister started to talk about the value of Black people in the construction of Brazil for almost 30 minutes. I could sense that people were upset. The Minister kept insisting that she would create a big museum of African and Afro-Brazilian history and culture, something that was not the immediate concern or even demand of that audience, most of them Black Movement activists completely aware of the history of Brazil’s formation and Black “contributions.”

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<sup>39</sup> From the Yoruba “Yá”= mother; and “Orixá” = deity, god/ness

Tired of being lectured about our own history, we were uncomfortable, moving in the seats and aware of precious time passing without a chance of really engaging in a discussion of proposals and solutions. Finally, the actor Gustavo Melo interrupted the Minister. He made a gesture with the fingers of his right hand under the palm of his left hand, signaling “time out” for her to stop speaking, and he added: “*Ministra, uma questão de ordem*” (Minister, it is a matter of order), jargon used in political meetings in Brazil to manage the time and direction of discussions. After Gustavo’s intervention, the Minister moved in her chair showing some discomfort while Cobrinha opened the microphone to the artists.

Several moments of this meeting represented the dynamics of interaction between Black collectives and the state. First all, there was the ceremonious reception, including Náira’s concerns about having the children present behave well in front of the Minister. I read this as an effort to present Blacks as capable of planning and organizing events contrary to accusations of a lack of responsibility and professionalism, something that my collaborators mentioned as a common sense idea held by Brazilians, including some Blacks.

The Banco do Brasil theater was chosen because it was a very convenient space, capable of accommodating the high number of people expected, with all of the equipment needed, located in a central area of the city. But the fact that the Minister, Cobrinha, and the Akoben representative were seated on the stage established a dynamic of the meeting as a performance of state politics, where the hierarchy of power had been staged.



More of these power dynamics could be seen in the Minister's long speech; she had just listened to a letter stating that "We are more than half of the population," that "We strive daily to make sure our children will not feel inferior for their hair, their skin, and their culture." From this reading one can assume that the writers were aware of their trajectories, but despite that, the Minister felt comfortable explaining to Black people who Black people are. Thus, not only state versus social movement/civil society dynamics had been staged. The confidence she felt in telling us who we were is related to the general confidence that White Brazilians feel in talking about the "other" without regards for these "others'" voices. In her understanding, we should be pleased by the fact that she recognized the importance of Black contributions to Brazil's national constitution. However, her speech was disrespectful in the sense that she did not recognize that her very audience had a trajectory of activism and political engagement with racial questions, that our concerns were other than learning about our own history or her project of creating a museum. The Minister's speech illustrates the performance of the multicultural state and its politics of "recognition"—this in detriment of the dialogue that had been proposed, one about structural changes and the distribution of material resources. Hilton Cobra, as I mentioned in the previous chapter, was tired of all these honors and awards granted by the state. Nonetheless, once he became a state employee he also needed to perform these ceremonials as he did at the beginning of the meeting when he gave the medal to Abdias' widow. In this moment, the contradiction between Black activists' individual political beliefs and state politics was made evident.

That said, Mãe Beata's presence on the stage at the meeting's opening—giving her benediction to the struggle of Afro-Brazilian artists and conjuring the Orixás—somehow interrupted the norm of such a type of meeting. After having attended other ceremonials of awards and honorable mentions given by state institutions to Afro-Brazilian figures, I observed that in this type of ceremony standard protocols were often broken by bringing elements of Afro-Brazilian culture such as dances, songs, and the circular format to these environments. Thus, Mãe Beata's presence at this event, her intervention, her conjuring of the Orixás, and the Yoruba song she sang, were not only expected, but presumptive. In another words, it is expected that in an event concerning Afro-Brazilian there will be some sort of intervention that is “different” or peculiar. At the same time that these types of interventions break the Western protocol and the horizontality of state institutions and functioning, they become exactly what the state expects from the racialized “other.” The protocol breaches in events concerning racial minorities become expected, and as such they are not surprising. Rather, they are the confirmation of an exotic and essentialist way of being Black.

### **3.1.b- Teaching and learning collectively**

In many of the meetings, we had speeches that were more statements on racial questions than objective action planning. In the fragment below, Luiz Gá, an elder activist, asks a question and answers it. He uses a question as a strategy to introduce his thoughts and to convince others about a cause-effect situation:

Why don't we have quality? We don't have quality because we don't practice, we don't work. (.....) But we, we are dealing with a different situation: we are working against the whites.

The effect is indicated in the question: “Why don't we have quality?” and the cause is unveiled in the answer: “...because we don't practice, we don't work”, and “...we are working against the Whites.”

In the next fragment, actor Rodrigo Santos, during the meeting with Palmares representatives in May 2013, states his disbelief in the usefulness of Western values to the Black artists and activists collective:

...I want to say two things: I want to paraphrase Mano Brown by saying that each black is a universe in crisis in this racist society. (.....) with the suspension of the funding for black producers, what I felt was the tremendous hate that I have for the “civilizing” process implemented in this territory since forever. And this extends to our brothers the indigenous, to our ancestors, to our children, and I am absolutely sure that the form of governability, the form of writing of any statute, either the racial equality statute or the human rights statute, does not represent me.

In Rodrigo's speech there is a link to previous knowledge elaborated by Black Brazilian artists, specifically the mention of rapper Mano Brown, a widely know artist whose lyrics sharply attack racism. Like Brown, Rodrigo situates himself as a Black man, and takes up Brown's perspective on the question of being Black: “a universe in crisis.” As a

philosophy student, he questions the legitimacy of the Western civilizing process. He is radical in affirming hate and in denying the validity of any Western-based document or perspective for Black people. Even when those documents seem to be in favor of Blacks, the “form, the style, the language” are not able to represent what he believes to be the particularity of the Black being.

During this same meeting, João Jorge, president of the cultural group Olodun, made the following statement:

We come from Africa, we civilize the whole world and this country owes us its culture and its civilization. Then we need to respect ourselves. This moment here is a victory of the Black Movement of the past 60 years. Here are the protagonists of the first moment, of the second moment, of the third, of the fourth, (...) the climbing of the Serra da Barriga, the creation of the TEN, the creation of the Blocos Afro, the defense of Candomblé. We need to respect ourselves.

We can see in the last two examples that these artists aggregate a pedagogical value to these speech acts where the speaker can question the hegemonic thought and functioning of the world or appeal to the memory of the struggle against racism in Brazil. By these operations, they relate the present moment both to the broader context of Brazilian society and to the historical continuity of the Black Movement.

### 3.1.c- Ancestry

During fieldwork I heard the concept of “respecting the elders” numerous times. The value of Ancestry appears as an African Civilizational value in the “A Cor da Cultura” pedagogical material. In the Brazilian context, the Candomblé religion worships the ancestors, either in the idea of the Orixá as a primary ancestor of a group or lineage, or in the idea that the lineage of *Yalorixás* and *Babalorixás*<sup>40</sup> must be respected as the guardians of secrecy. Since the Black Movement has among its activists many Candomblé devotees, the value of respecting the elders is prominent. Besides the religious value of ancestry, “respect for the elders” also concerns respect for the trajectories and lived experiences of elder activists. These were the words of Filipe during his interview, addressing the critique that Luis Gá made of Filipe’s visual work for the Akoben campaign:

I need to respect (Luis) Gá and accept his critique. He is older than my uncle, and at the very end I am also a product of Gá. Thus, I need to respect him, even if I don’t agree with him.

In the meeting with Palmares, Rodrigo exercised this rhetoric of respect for the elders and extended the idea of “respect” to the younger generation as well:

Good Afternoon to all, my respect to the elders and to the younger...

Others in the same meeting disagreed with the insistence on using such a formula:

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<sup>40</sup> Baba = father

Good afternoon everyone. I will not cite the elders or the younger, I think this is bullshit...

João Jorge, president of Olodum, spoke right after Rodrigo finished his speech and left the room. João Jorge negates the importance of using the salutation to the elders as something important. But throughout his own speech he mentions several past generations that are present in this moment: “This moment here is a victory of the Black Movement of the past 60 years. Here are the protagonists of the first moment, of the second moment...” His opposition to the use of the formula “respect to the elders” is contradictory because his speech explicitly mentions the legacy of previous generations. In a certain way, João Jorge’s initial remarks “I will not salute the elders...” is a rhetorical exercise aimed at creating an effect in the public by opposing the previous narrative, generating a certain shock in the audience and thus bringing their focus onto what he is about to say. However, he can only say that “I think this is bullshit” because he himself has a long trajectory of activism and involvement in Olodum,<sup>41</sup> considered the most important Bloco Afro. The fact that he is a celebrity, and also an elder to a certain extent, guarantee that he can make such a remark against the formula “respect to the elders.”

During the meeting with the Minister of Culture, after the Minister’s long speech, Mãe Beata was the first to talk. Her speech started with an invocation of the Yoruba Orixás:

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<sup>41</sup> Not the theater ensemble, but a music and dance ensemble created in 1979 by Black activists. The Olodum theater group was created in 1990 as a parallel group related to the musical ensemble that became autonomous.

Thanks to Obatalá, thanks to Oduduwa, thanks to Orummilá and to Exú, (thanks) to auntie Ciata, and other Africans who gave their blood, who lose their blood to help to build Brazil. I am now feeling myself even more Black .....

In her speech, Mãe Beata connects the Orixás to Black people that lived in Brazil, including Tia Ciata, a Candomblé practitioner who kept a religious house in the Pedra do Sal neighborhood where she used to give shelter to samba singers during the years of samba prohibition. By doing this, Mãe Beata points out the continuity of female ancestral lineages that make her acceptance of her gendered Blackness and her religiosity possible: “I am feeling even more Black.” Her discourse also goes in the direction of appealing to a certain nationalism, and the Africans who gave their blood are seen as “contributors” to the national formation.

This idea of enslaved Blacks as contributors to the national formation was also mentioned in Akoben’s letter to the Minister: “This country was made through the sacrifice of life and freedom.” Although I recognize in the claim that Blacks are builders of the nation a discourse that aims to engage the state and justify why Blacks deserve Affirmative Action, I also think that it can be contradictory and problematic. The idea of “contribution” suggests a desire to do something when, in fact, the lack of freedom made it impossible for the enslaved population to decide whether or not they wanted to contribute to the creation of Brazil. Thus, even as the discourse of contribution highlights the work of slaves, it corroborates the rhetoric of the “three races that made Brazil” as it had been articulated since the end of the Vargas era and that became the motto of racial democracy. By not recognizing that forced labor is different than contribution, the

rhetoric of Blacks “helping to build a nation” misses the opportunity of a more radical conceptualization of the role and place of Blackness in Brazil.

At the same time that she engaged this rhetoric of contribution, Mãe Beata disguised a sharp criticism against Suplicy’s insistence on creating a museum of Black history. She says:

I want to ask you – ask, no... you, madam, will forgive me, but we want to demand. What we demand is respect. Respect for the Black people. That nobody uses us as puppets, that nobody mocks our faith. We don’t need zoos.

Mãe Beata associates the museum with the idea of a zoo, where Blacks are on display. The ghost of the colonial exhibitions of Black bodies in zoos haunts the idea of “cultivating” Afro-Brazilian memory, as Suplicy imagines the museum. When Mãe Beata made this comment there was a barely restrained exhilaration among the audience. My sense is that the association of a museum of the Black with a zoo resonates in what people were really thinking about the Minister’s speech.

### **3.1.d- Lack of objectivity and focus**

Although the content of the discussions during Akoben meetings was very politicized, often with a pedagogical value, many speeches during Akoben meetings, and particularly during the two big meetings, lacked objectivity and goals. Cobrinha needed to intervene many times, limiting interruptions to the topic at hand. After participating in the meeting of Black artists with Cobrinha in June and the meeting of the artists with the Minister of



Culture in July, it can be said that this lack of focus was common during meetings of Black collectives. After the initial presentation of a certain topic, there were several points presented concerning pros and cons, but suddenly, when we should reach the deliberative stage, individual speeches always veered into abstraction, or to very specific issues not closely related to the central topic. These speech acts seemed to be the exercise of a political rhetoric that wanted to move a group to action. In the meeting with the Minister, for example, many men had the microphone in their hands and talked in very loud voices, with a rhythm that tended to accelerate.

Akobén participants critiqued the lack of focus on several occasions. For example: after the meeting with the Minister we had an evaluation meeting in which Líbia Besouro criticized our inability to contain or interrupt speeches that were either too long, or not specific to the meeting's theme: to demand the adoption of Affirmative Action criteria in the projects sponsored by MInC.

When Líbia made the criticism about long and unobjective speeches during the meeting with the Minister, we all agreed that the meeting had lost its objectivity and fell apart towards the end. One reason was because the Minister had a short time to stay and discuss projects, and after the reading of Akobén's letter, she spent too much time explaining the importance of African descendents to the 200 Black artists in the theater. After hearing the Minister speak for more than twenty minutes about things that all of us in the room knew, tension started to grow. Most of the people started to realize that she would need to leave soon and nobody would have time for discussion. In addition, to have a White woman explaining our history was annoying to say the least.

After Gustavo Melo firmly interrupted the Minister by saying “It is a matter of order,” the microphone was opened to a Palmares representative in the city of Rio. Néa Daniel was the person in charge of registering people to talk. But because she knew everyone, and did not want to sound rude or to create animosity with other activists, she allowed everybody to sign in the registration even without knowing what the person’s points would be. As a result, the main points regarding “Affirmative Action for culture” and “the return of the funding competition for Black producers” became diluted with the whole dimension of problems faced by Afro-Brazilians. Some speeches were not even questions or proposals, but individual statements where each person introduced his/her fight against racism or denounced something in particular. And of course, since there was a Minister in the room, many people wanted to talk, and many people were recording or taking pictures with famous artists who showed up at the meeting.

But Líbia’s suggestion to interrupt people in upcoming meetings was refuted by Iléa, Valéria, and Naíra. They all agreed that there was a lack of organization in the list of registration and a tremendous lack of objectivity in the speeches. But in their understanding, “our people” need to talk. According to them, these big meetings among Black activists are the rare moments where we can talk and hear each other. To deny this opportunity to Black people would not only create strong animosity but also betray our ethics.

### **3.1.e- Gender imbalance**

Even among the elders, I observed differences in how speakers were treated based on gender. The first difference is that there were about the same number of women as men in the big meeting, whereas in the meeting for planning and evaluation, women outnumbered the men. In the big meeting, I observed that male elders talked much more than female elders. In addition, the attention paid to women's speeches was less than the attention to men's, even if this attention was just pretend.

This evidence of gender inequalities in terms of attention received during public speeches corroborates with what some of the women in the Akoben collective told me: that sexism (as well as homophobia) is deeply rooted in the Black Movement. In Akoben itself we experienced certain gender dynamics that reflected this conclusion. Although our meetings were very democratic and the participants were, in general, very sincere in their comments and critiques, the women observed that after Cobrinha left, some participants stopped coming. During the encounter between artists and Palmares, one male participant was put in charge of presenting the meeting points, although he was almost never in the small meetings. During the meeting with the Minister, the gendered division of work became even more evident: while the women wearing T-shirts with the Akoben symbol were at the reception taking care of the doors, leading people to the auditorium, bringing water to the stage, etc., the men were in charge of conducting the meeting. This is not only the men's fault; it was a woman who suggested that Rodrigo read the letter to the minister. Thus, I think that even the women themselves, more particularly the older women, were invested in the dynamics of the gendered division of

labor in which women did the organizational work while the men carried out the public presentation of this work.

### **3.1.f- Humor:**

Despite the seriousness of the issues being discussed, there were always moments that were jocular and sentences with double entendres, allowing there to be humor in the way the subjects being discussed were addressed. Although sometimes the conversations took a different direction, or at times it was very difficult to go back to the focus of the meeting, humor allowed the participants to exercise a critique about the state of racial relations in Brazil without being dramatic, academic, or repetitive. Humor has the function of releasing the tension that a subject brings up while strengthening ties within the community among those for whom the jokes and humor make sense.

We can see this in the dialogue between the two actresses, Débora Almeida and Iléa Ferraz, how the first actress questions the need to be careful about hiring an all Black cast and creative artists in theater and dance shows:

Débora: There are a lot of productions around whose staff and creative artists are all white and nobody questions anything...

Iléa : Dear, there are ONLY all white productions.

Iléa promptly rephrases Débora's assertion that "a lot of productions are all white" to sarcastically stress the state of theater production in Rio de Janeiro: "...there are ONLY all white productions...."

To create good jokes or sentences with double meanings is also an exercise in creativity, where one can perform for others and be appreciated for his/her style of humor that would not be welcome in all circles. Though for some members this exercise of addressing a serious subject through humor is a characteristic of both Blackness and Brazilianness, to others, this strategy can also become a trap of falling back on the lack of seriousness and focus that prevents the advancement of political mobilization. Cobrinha himself, in spite of being a very humorous person, often got upset when meetings lost focus: "Ok, just a moment, let's refocus here," he said many times during our meetings.

Of course, different power dynamics also interfere with these displays of humor; the participants with a consistent trajectory such as Iléa, Cobrinha, and Adriana felt very comfortable using humor. The fact that Cobrinha knew everybody for a long time, having worked with most of the core members of Akoben, gave him legitimacy and confidence to be humorous. As I observed during our gatherings, the fact that he is an elder homosexual man gives him the authority to make jokes with sexual content either to the heterosexual men or to the women, who also engage in the same type of jokes, whereas the heterosexual men in general did not take the initiative of engaging in jokes or words with double meanings that also had sexual content.

### **3.1.g - Naming racial inequality in public:**

The numerous moments where some of us spoke out about racism in Brazil in buses, bars, and streets acted as barometers to test society's reaction to the issue. After our first Akoben meeting, we left the cultural center and walked through Santa Teresa's central area to the bus stop. There were several bars along our way. In most of these bars the music was either Bossa Nova or samba; many of the bars had old kitchen utensils as decoration, a reference to the imperial period and the neighborhood's history. The bars' customers were all White. The entire walk, Gá talked in a loud tone about racial segregation in Brazil, sometimes pointing his finger to the bars and saying, "Look, only whites." I felt many angry looks towards us; contrary to Blacks avoiding looking at other Blacks, the Whites who heard Gá looked back at us furiously. I realized that Gá was talking on purpose: he wanted to create that reaction, to make Whites feel uncomfortable with our presence in those spaces offering Black music in old mansions likely built by slaves.

Cobrinha, in the video "Eugenia Cultural," uses the performance of speech to call attention to racial tension:

Look, these whhhhhhite girls have only 6 years of experience

By stressing the word "brancas" (White) by pronouncing a long "r" sound, the performatic use of the language does the work of remarking on racial differences that civil society and the state want to pretend do not exist.

On another occasion, Líbia Besouro circulated a Facebook post where she criticized White producers' for opportunistically using Black culture. She wrote:

Everyone wants to make money off of Black culture. Let's open our eyes!

The strategy of stressing the words “White” and “Black” is used as a means of raising consciousness in the public sphere about Brazil's problems with racial inequality. The deliberate use and stress of racial differences also works as a provocation towards Whites who deny these problems.

In other moments, speeches about racial inequality were not intended to create discomfort among Whites. They were occasions when people were taking the bus to Akoben meetings, like on the day I met Líbia and Simone at the bus stop, or just eating at a restaurant. One day, while on the bus traveling towards Santa Teresa, Líbia started to talk about the eternal condition of subalternity to which Black actors and actresses are relegated on TV Globo. She became excited and ended by saying that she was tired of pacifism, and that if there was some violence or attacks against racists we would be more respected. When I looked around the bus, there were not many people, but they seemed to avoid looking at us while still paying attention to what we were saying. Nobody looked me in the eyes except an old Black woman at the back of the bus. Her look was profound, firm, maybe sad, and as she made eye contact, she demonstrated that she followed and understood everything we said.

### **3.1.h- Slogans**

Another aspect to mention regarding the performative use of specific Akoben rhetoric are the slogans for the campaign to engage artists nationally and to encourage them to submit proposals for MInC-sponsored funding opportunities. When we were deciding on the campaign's name, an interesting discussion erupted; Cobrinha proposed the militant name "*Vamos tomar de assalto os editais*," roughly translated as, "Let's take the funding opportunities by assault" or "let's storm the funding opportunities." In Brazil, the word "*assalto*" means either "assault" or "robbery." The idea of having a campaign whose name expressed potential violence carried out by Blacks immediately divided the group. Cobrinha, who frequently said that the Black Movement needed to take more audacious steps, defended this name, and was supported by Líbia, Filipe, and me. We argued that it would be good to have a name that expressed our anger and desire to fight. Also, in our understanding, it would be a nice provocation since Blacks were often criminalized and labeled as thieves. But Aduni and Adriana felt that this association would cause more damage than good, since Blacks are already considered potential criminals.

According to Aduni and Adriana, a campaign with this name could create animosity among the state institutions with which we were trying to dialogue. In the desire to separate themselves from any idea of criminal activity that could also damage their careers, one of the women, Adriana Baptista, came up with another suggestion: "*Vai colocar o que aonde?*" translated more or less as "What [proposal] and where [funding opportunity] will you submit to?" This phrase had a sexual connotation that could be read



with a sense of joviality and double meaning: “What will you put and where?” As discussed, these sexual jokes and double entendres were constant in our meetings and gatherings, and after everybody laughed with pleasure at Adriana’s idea, the majority agreed that this was a good name for the campaign, a name that would be memorable without risking association with criminal activity.

This episode shows that this Black collective is characterized by a tension between, on the one hand, the defense of a more combative approach, and on the other, a politics of respectability and dialogue with state institutions. However, to avoid an association with criminality, we abandoned the risky double meaning that associated Blacks with crime in favor of the humorous double meaning that associates Blacks with sexuality. This intrigued me in that people were proposing to avoid the stereotype of an inherent Black criminality through the stereotype of an inherent Black sexuality, which is much more accepted by Whites and Blacks than the former. The sentence with a double meaning with sexual content was proposed by a woman and embraced by a homosexual man. This could be seen as an example of female heterosexual and male homosexual agency voicing sexual desire. But in fact, the deployment of a slogan filled with sexual content works in accordance with the narrative of the national foundation where anything can be resolved through sex. Although the campaign was meant to circulate among Black artists and collectives, there was no desire to discuss more broadly why we always returned to metaphors of sexuality. The translation of the symbol of Akoben presents this same dynamic of repressing any signs of aggression; in the multilingual book created by Elisa Nascimento and Gá, the graphic symbol of Akoben is translated into English as

“War Horn.” The symbol is translated into Portuguese as “*Clarim da Resistência*,” which I translate as “Clarion of Resistance.” This suggests a refusal to engage with the idea of “war” in favor resistance associated with musicality—the clarion. This indicates that certain stereotypes, such as the idea that Black people are hypersexual and musical beings, have been internalized by Black activists themselves.

### 3.2- Body politics and presentation

The presence of signs of Blackness like Candomblé beads and bracelets, natural hair, and the Akoben symbol on shirts caused different reactions among people in the street, such as the day we went to the Public Defense building to deliver Hilton Cobra’s lawsuit against FUNARTE. I remember focusing on the pedestrians looking at us. We were preparing to go inside the building, the lawyer was consulting the paperwork, Cobrinha was asking her for details, and Filipe was recording. Meanwhile, Gá, Aduni, and I were talking about Monteiro Lobato’s racist book that was about to be distributed in the public school system.<sup>42</sup> Gazes directed at the women’s hair were the most frequent; there were looks of curiosity, and some of amusement. It is interesting that their attention went from the women’s hair, then to the four men, then to the cameras.

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<sup>42</sup> The book “*Caçadas de Pedrinho*” (Pedrinho’s huntings) written by Monteiro Lobato in 1933 has derogatory language used to refer to the Black domestic servant “tia Anastácia” (Auntie Anastacia). Lobato, who is still considered to be the most important children’s literature writer, was a supporter of eugenicist ideologies and regretted that Brazil did not have an organization such as the KKK. In 2011, the publisher in charge of Lobato’s authorial rights secured a contract with the Ministry of Education to publish a new edition of the book and circulate it in public schools. This resulted in a huge mobilization by Black movements and independent individuals to block the publication, as well as many defenders of Lobato’s work.

Perhaps because the women were the majority in the group and many of them were dark skinned with natural hair, they caught the attention of the surrounding people. To me, it was as if people needed to find an explanation for seeing a group of Blacks with such characteristics in that space; that is why the looks eventually stopped on the cameras, the objects that bring some explanation for our presence. Another interesting thing I noticed were two Black men walking alongside two White men. The White men looked at our hair with a mixture of surprise and curiosity, while the Black men did not look at us at all. I wondered if they did not look to make the statement that there was nothing special to look at, or if they were embarrassed for having a group of Black women with natural hair “exhibiting” Blackness and being scrutinized by White men. I will never know, but as I noticed in other moments such as the protest called the “Turbans Revolt” organized by Afrocentric academic collectives, the image of a group of Black people wearing natural hair and turbans, dressed with dashikis or other “African inspired” clothing and shouting anti-racist phrases, caused discomfort among other Blacks.

During the event “African Heritage: Urban Interventions,” a circuit of movies, photography exhibits, and performances, I also noticed that seeing a group of Black people wearing African prints, natural hair, and ceremonial clothing caused different reactions. To some, these Black bodies that affirmed Blackness became objects of mockery; to others, they elicited amusement; and to some Black working class people, they inspired interest to learn what was happening. This third reaction was the most profound, specifically an interaction with a woman waiting for her bus around the

Valongo port area asking me, “Is there anything with Blacks going on today?” When I explained to her that it was an event to remember the history of that area and the Black people who lived there, she replied, “Oh, thank you. I saw all of these Blacks with those different clothes, and I want to know more about what is happening, what Black stuff is happening in the city.” From this remark we can see that the circulation of signs of Blackness allowed other Brazilians to identify with their own racial identity. Thus, these displays of Blackness as the collective walked through public space worked as a circulation of knowledge and information that is often denied or erased from the daily lives of the majority of Blacks in Brazil. The act of recognition allowed by these public displays of Black pride and/or beauty establishes the body as a site of resistance and of self-making (Hall 2003).

Sometimes, though, these performances of Blackness create contradictory effects, as in the moment when Cobrinha started to collect golden coins (pennies) to prepare an *ebó* (offering) to Exú. We were inside the Public Defense building waiting for the lawyer, Sandra, to finish the protocols needed to register the judicial case *Companhia dos Comuns vs. FUNARTE*. With his usual excited speech, his noticeable accent from Bahia, his religious beads, and the white shirt with the Akoben symbol in orange, Cobrinha went around to all of us collecting the coins and saying that he needed to make an offering to Exú in order to amend his financial problems. The others started to give him coins, at the same time mocking him: “I think you are collecting money for the bus”; “Include my name in the *ebó*.” The people passing looked at us, some with contempt, others out of curiosity. But what caught my attention was the office secretaries’ reactions. They looked

at us as if they were watching children play. The blonde young woman who was an assistant smiled at us in a condescending way. We were there to sue a federal institution, but the fact that one of us called attention to the peculiarity of Afro-Brazilians (religion) led us to being immediately read as folkloric Negroes. In this sense, these public performances of Blackness acted as a double-edged sword: they made the body a site of resistance and self-making, but paradoxically, they were always in danger of being captured by a gaze framed by a well-cemented cognitive comprehension of what it means to be Black.

### 3.3- Visual language

The last element I want bring up here is the visual language Akoben used as a collective, and some of the graphic products created by individuals who were part of the mobilization.

Starting with the *Adinkra* symbol chosen to name the movement, we can first see the attempt to connect with a specific African cultural system—the Akan group and its graphic symbols.

The second idea indicated by this choice is the continuity of the Pan Africanist political project started by Abdias Nascimento in the 1960s. The book *Adinkra: African wisdom symbols* was the result of research developed by Elisa Nascimento and Luiz Gá. Finished in 2009, the work presents about 200 signs of the Adinkra system, the meaning of each one, and the variations of the sign. The book is influential among different Black

collectives in Rio who use it as a source of knowledge of an alternate system of thought, where a symbol expresses a complete idea.

If the Akoben symbol ties to Akan/African worldviews, the campaign aiming to stimulate artists and producers to submit proposals relates to iconic images of Black people. The posters created by Filipe Romão use the pictures of famous characters, artists, and Black leaders, as we see in the image below, where Filipe used the image of Martin Luther King, Jr. and his famous sentence “I have a dream” to make a statement about the Akoben campaign.



Fig. 3.2- Filipe Romão's poster for the Akoben campaign. "I have a dream: that you black artist/producer will submit (proposals) to the funding and will notify Akoben." October 2012.

Implicit in his choice, and made explicit in his interview, Romão believes the image of Martin Luther King, Jr. has the capacity to get the attention of Black Brazilians — more specifically the Black Brazilians that are a part of Akoben — because they know who Martin Luther King, Jr. was and what he did, even if only superficially. By relating the mobilization of Akoben to a major U.S. icon of Black struggle, Filipe’s choice is invested in the transnationality of the African Diaspora (Gordon and Anderson 2000).

The understanding of the fight against anti-Black racism as a transnational fact is also evident in Luiz Gá’s poster series “*Faça a coisa certa.*” This name is the translation of the title of Spike Lee’s movie “*Do the Right Thing.*”

## SÓ PORQUE HOJE É DIA DE ZUMBI



Fig. 3.3- Luiz Gá’s poster series “Faça a coisa certa.” “Just because today is Zumbi’s day.” November 2012.

Gá uses the title “Faça a coisa certa” to circulate his ideas, to criticize politicians, and to call attention to other Black activists who are apathetic. But he also uses it to send condolences to people who died, to wish happy birthday, or to celebrate dates meaningful

to Black people. In the image above, he associates “do the right thing” with the memory of Zumbi dos Palmares, but instead of an image of war or fighting, Gá uses the peaceful image of a (heteronormative) Black family staring into space as if envisioning the divine. Through this image, Gá associates different times and places with the struggle against slavery and racism: the seventh century when Zumbi died fighting for freedom in the colony of Brazil, and the 1990s when Spike Lee reacts against racism in the United States. The present and the future are represented by the possibility of harmony and of Black families existing in peace.

Adriana Baptista, a journalist and media programmer, created the trade name “Movimento e Mídia” (Movement and Media). Through this brand she expects to create a space for a Black, independent, and online media where she can circulate news and information. In the flyer she posted on Facebook, she offers press assistance, events, services, and product promotions (left). At the bottom, she writes: “From the drums to the web: communication in our own style.”



Fig. 3.4 Announcement of Adriana Baptista alternative online media project, March 2013.



During the interview I conducted with Adriana, she explained the name of her brand by saying that she wanted something that could be associated with the social movement but would not be so explicit, because she was afraid of losing clients who do not like or do not want to be associated with Black activism. In this case, Adriana is making use of words with double meanings again: she uses the word “movement” in a way that could be read either as physical movement or social movement, or in this case the Black Movement in which she participates. Her statement “from the drums to the web” suggests an idealized Africa where people communicate through the sound of drums. At the same time, this statement makes it clear that it is a Black vehicle of information by mentioning the drums followed by the pronoun “our.”

The next image shows the flyer for the Black Women International Fair (MIMUNEGRA) created by the actress and visual artist Iléa Ferraz. In the flyer, the letters that form the words announcing the fair’s attractions (workshops, lectures, theater pieces) become the turban of a Black woman, while the name of the event, “Mimunegra,” suggests the movement of a skirt. The woman has a bird in her hand, a representation of the Adinkra symbol “Sankofa.” The bird’s head is turned towards its back: “Go back and reclaim your past” (Nascimento & Gá, 2009).



Fig. 3.5 – Flyer for the Black women's fair MIMUNEGRA—October 2012.

In this flyer, we see the articulation of categories of Blackness (the Black figure), Femaleness (the color pink as well as the suggestion of the turban and skirt), and Africanness or ancestry (the Sankofa symbol).

### 3.4- Conclusion

In this chapter I delineated the general protocol observed in Akoben meetings and in the work of Akoben members to highlight the elements of a performance of Blackness that is manifested in performative elements such as speeches, body aesthetics, language, and visual imagery. Through the use of these elements, the individuals and the collective

displayed and at the same time constituted a dynamic of Black collectives in Brazil that permeates both the politics of Black cultural production and the Black social movements.

One of the values of African ancestry preached by some segments of the Black Movement since the early 2000s is the value of oral history (Luz, 2000). According to this perspective, African cultures place great value in the oral traditions and in the transmission of knowledge through stories, proverbs, and songs. The figure of the *Griot*, a storyteller who travels through villages narrating stories and poems as real facts, became popular among Black collectives in Brazil.<sup>43</sup> On different occasions, I heard my colleagues saying: “let’s listen to our elders,” even if this listening was more of a formality than a careful listening. Luiz Gá told me that he became close friends with Abdias Nascimento, that they would sit and chat for hours. “It was as if he was a Griot,” Gá said, characterizing the type of interaction he had with the prominent Black activist. The image of the Griot aligns with the Candomblé tradition of respect towards elders, the guardians of the tradition, enforcing the character of public speeches as an act of self-making among Black people who are teaching and learning ancestral values. Ancestors could be seen as either the blood lineage (family or group of origin), the spiritual lineage (the Candomblé houses), or the elder activists.

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<sup>43</sup> In 2006, the Minister of Culture Gilberto Gil presented a public policy in the area of culture called “Lei Griô” (Griot law). The mission of this policy is “... to establish a national policy for the transmission of knowledge and practice of oral tradition, in dialogue with formal education, to promote the strengthening of identity and ancestry of the Brazilian people.” In: <http://www.leigrionacional.org.br/o-que-e-a-lei-grio/historico/>

There are four levels of these events and moments of speech that I want to address here: 1) The need to express oneself to the collective and make sense of one's trajectory; 2) The memory and historicity of this process, which constitutes the pedagogical value of meetings and speeches where elders remember history; 3) The practice of public speech aiming to acquire political experience and resourcefulness; 4) The enunciation of positionality that the audience can also infer from the content and direction of speech. For example, is this a representative of an Afrocentric academic group talking? Is this a black man engaged with the Workers party? With the PDT party? Is she a NGO director? Did he work for the government? Is she aligned with the next candidate? Gauging a speaker's performance, we can infer objective political maneuvers, alliances, and oppositions that permeate the field of Black activism and politics in Brazil.

Participants in these meetings and other events promoted by Black activists indicate that certain clothes, words, and symbols are consciously used to declare racial identification and convey meaningful associations of one's individual work or personal presentation to the broad context of Black activists and global struggles against anti-Black racism. These dynamics of enacting speeches, aesthetics, and body language, however, are not homogeneous within Black collectives and they are often affected by an imbalance in terms of gender, age, education, class, and religion.

## Chapter Four- *Bios* and Intersectionality: lives, careers and political perceptions of the members and supporters of the Akoben collective

This chapter offers short biographies of the artists, photographs, interview fragments, and fieldwork stories that set up the grounds to discuss the effects that different positionalities have on the lived experience of Blackness and how different ways of *experiencing* Blackness shape and constrain life choices, subjectivities, professional trajectories, and political ideals.

I use photographs of each artist to individually present my research peers. There is a tension in this chapter: at the same time that it recognizes that the reproduction of images of Black people are often read as a return to nature (Moten 2003), or to the “suffering of the slave” (Hartman 1997), it also invests in the desire, in the *erotics* of Blackness as an act of self-making (Sinclair 2011). It is important to note that I was working with artists, with people who already are accustomed to having their images publicized. Most of them are very aware and vigilant about how they want their images to

be displayed. Naíra, when I told her I would be using photographs, warned me, “Watch out, hah!” (olha lá, hein..?), which gave me the confidence that if the image was not to her satisfaction, she would be frank and tell me. Because the individual images are from the personal Facebook pages of participants, these images were already chosen by them.

In interviews and informal conversations, I heard artists, producers, and activists speak about invisibility and/or stereotyped representations of Blacks in the media and film. I heard comments such as, “Black families do not buy butter or toothpaste?” and “Did you see the Black (light skinned) actor imitating a toothless Black women in ‘Zorra Total?’<sup>44</sup>” They described how lighting technicians and engineers often do not know how to properly light someone with black skin. Líbia commented, “They just throw on white light and our facial expressions disappear. And why does this happen? Because even the lights aren’t for us.” The rare ones who are skilled at working with Black actors are highly appreciated. The actor Cridemar Aquino observed, “Jorge for example, he is White, but he knows that Black skin needs to be lighted differently, so when he is working on a play with Black actors he used amber lights ...” Líbia Besouro also mentioned, “Most of them leave us in a dull shadow of grey... In his pictures our skins gain a bright green light that makes us shine. His work is terrific!”

The remarks of actor Cridemar Aquino and producer Líbia Besouro highlight other nuances of the in/visibility (Goldberg, 1997) dichotomies in which Black people live. Their statements show that when we want to be “in the scene”—on stage and in photography—our presence is not properly recorded. This happens because either the

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<sup>44</sup> A comedy show on TV Globo.

professional taking pictures or lighting the stage does not know that different lighting is necessary to illuminate Black skin, or he/she does not care.<sup>45</sup> Even the technology of cameras and other devices assume the basis of white skin tones to set the lighting for exposure time, leaving dark skin tones in shadows when taking pictures with the flash, as in the case of the Kodak Polaroid camera.<sup>46</sup> Black visibility, then, is problematic both when it exists and when it doesn't. In the first instance, we are scrutinized and presented as exotic, savage, dangerous, funny, or folkloric. In the other, our presence is neither seen nor recorded. Because my work is concerned with misrepresentation and invisibility, my use of photography intends to illuminate the personal, subjective distinctions mirrored in people's choices, life trajectories, and diverse positionalities. Thus, my investment in reproducing images chosen by the research participants is intended to create a visual archive of this interaction.

#### 4.1 Artists/Activists Bios

Below, I present 13 people from Akoben – members who regularly attend meetings, do the planning, create documents, campaigns, texts, and organize the big meetings. Nine of them are or were part of the Companhia dos Comuns, while others are

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<sup>45</sup> In this regard, Fanon's assertion "Turn white or disappear" suggests that, as Black individuals, we are not in the symbolic horizon of Whites (as humans). Thus, as in the recent case of Black journalist Gloria Maria, if a Black person is among Whites and a photograph is about to be taken, the photographer could just ignore the need to set the light differently to favor the Black person, because the focus is to register the White presence.

<sup>46</sup> The Kodak polaroid camera ID-2 had a very narrow light range. Its flash was set to boost light exposure by 42%. Since dark skin needs more light exposure to gain proper definition, Black people disappear in the photographs taken with this camera or become blurred marks. See: <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2013/jan/25/racism-colour-photography-exhibition>

artists and producers who do parallel work for other artistic projects, community organizing, women rights, etc. The other five people I introduce are artists, producers, and/or activists who are also signatories of Akoben and who contributed to my research either through aesthetic discussions, or ones around political values and forms of mobilization.

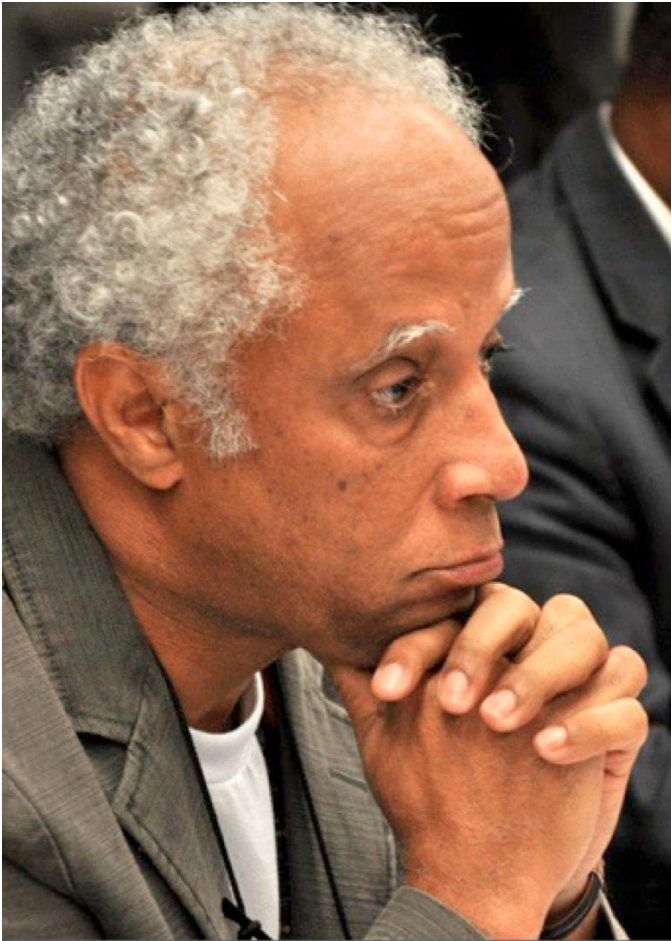


Fig.4.1 Hilton Cobra

Hilton Cobra never gave me an interview. Before I was able to schedule one, he joined the Palmares foundation. People spoke about him. “Cobrinha used to make us run



for hours during the ‘Candaces’ preparation,” one actress remembered. Another reflected on his comments on Brazilian people’s pacifism: “Cobrinha says that it must be something in the water that keeps everyone so anesthetized.” Cobrinha has participated in the Black Movement since the mid-1980s. In the 1990s, he worked at the José Bonifácio Cultural Center, the first center created by the municipality of Rio de Janeiro to sponsor and exhibit Afro-Brazilian culture in the city. It was during this time that Cobrinha befriended the activist and graphic artist Luiz Carlos Gá. After he left the center, he founded Companhia dos Comuns in 2001. Along with other projects, he wants to create an archive of theater production across the African Diaspora.



Fig. 4.2 Naíra Fernandes

Naíra Fernandes attended Martins Pena Theater School in the early 1980s. After the Martins Pena school, Naíra, actress Iléa Ferraz, dancer Carmem Luz, and actor and director Luiz Pillar created the theater group Em Black e Preto (In Black and Black). This company, as Naíra says, held that Black actors could interpret any genre or character. The group did not last long due to financial difficulties, but they had opportunities to perform in 1989 at a theater festival in France. After the theater group ended, Naíra worked in theater and television. She stopped acting due to the financial difficulty of surviving as

an actress and producing theater, but never totally left the arenas of theater, dance, and cinema. Throughout the years, she has been working with the production and promotion of groups such as Comuns and the Rubens Barbot dance company. Currently she is working as a producer and promoter at the Centro Afro Carioca de Cinema created by Zózimo Bulbul and directed by his wife Bisa Vianna. She also produces her own party, the “Black lovers,” that happens in the traditional Black space of the Estudantina club. It is a “charm,” party, as the musical genre “soul step” is called in Brazil.



Fig, 4.3 Adriana Baptista

Adriana Batista is a journalist, social commenter, and media programmer. She was born in Laranjeiras, an upper class neighborhood in the south area of Rio de Janeiro. Her father was a middle class Black man who married a light skinned poor woman. Her political activism started when she was 15 and became involved with student associations. In 1986 Adriana became involved with the Workers' Party, who she sites as

significantly influencing her political views. Thinking about the need for Black Brazilians to have our own vehicles of communication, she created “Movimento e Mídia” (Movement and Media), whose main function is to archive and update online news and articles and to announce events, conferences, and meetings all related to Black arts, politics, and mobilization. Her enthusiasm in sharing information and believing that we need to keep creating and generating knowledge about “our things” made a friend call her “Adriana, a *polenizadora*” (someone who spreads pollen). She concludes that “Communication is (the Orixá) Exú<sup>47</sup>: it is meant to open people’s paths.”

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<sup>47</sup> The Orixá Exú (Legba in Cuba) is responsible for opening or closing people’s paths, among other qualities. That is why he is associated with communication.



Fig. 4.4 Luiz Gá

Luiz Carlos Gá is the son of a Black activist from the Communist Party. He was born in Rio de Janeiro, and in the 1970s, attended the School of Fine Arts, receiving his BA in design. Gá worked in various college institutions as a design professor. He and his former wife created a Black clothing line—one of the first in the country—named “Coisa

de Criolo” (Criolo Thing).<sup>48</sup> By this time, he had become a good friend of Abdias Nascimento. He met Hilton Cobra in the 1990s when Hilton was working at the José Bonifácio Cultural Center. In 2009, Gá and Elisa Larkin Nascimento wrote the book *Adinkra: Sabedoria em Símbolos Africanos (Wisdom in African Symbols)*, a collection of the Akan people’s iconographic system known as *Adinkra*. The name “Akoben” itself came from this book. Since 2000 Luiz Gá works with Elisa at the IPEAFRO (Institute of Research and Study of Afro-Brazilian Culture). After Cobrinha left Akoben to work at the Palmares Foundation, Gá stopped attending meetings. He thinks that the movement is dead now that Cobrinha left. Now he is interested in Black entrepreneurship.

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<sup>48</sup> Criolo/Criola = a Black person born in the colony. Synonymous with Black, often used with a derogatory connotation (coon).





Fig. 4.5 Valéria Monã

Valéria Monã is a dancer, actress, and art educator born in Baixada Fluminense. When she was a teenager, her mother created a community group, which had “Afro Brazilian dance” in its program of activities. This was Valéria’s initiation into dance. Over the years, Valéria had the opportunity to learn and work with choreographers of Afro-Brazilian and African dance. By circulating in these circles of artists, she started to meet more people including Cobrinha, who saw Valéria dancing with the Rubens Barbot Company and invited her to teach at the José Bonifácio Cultural Center in the mid-1990s.



According to Valéria, the way Cobrinha organized the cultural center translated into the way Companhia dos Comuns was organized. For Valéria, Black activists needed to work more with poor and working class people so that Akoben can become a bigger organization affecting a broader range of people in multiple localities. She thinks Akoben should become a forum for Black performance. However, she recognizes that the lack of structure and financial and professional stability of the participants impairs this development.



Fig.4.6 Filipe Romão

Filipe Romão is a musician, human rights activist, and Social Anthropology student at the Fluminense Federal University. Lately he has been working with the quilombos association AQUILERJ. Filipe was born in the city of Niterói and comes from a family of activists and militants. Parts of his family came from Italy and were anarchists, while two grandparents were Caribbean-French immigrants. He studied flute

in a traditional Catholic institution and started to work with Comuns when he was 18 years old. Besides music, he also worked on the visual programming of the company's plays. For Filipe, mobilization should continue and Akoben could function like a Worker's Union (*sindicato*), or even a registered association that could bring more stability to Akoben.



Fig. 4.7 Líbia Besouro.

Líbia Besouro is a freelance producer and promoter who also works in graphic design and drawing. She passed the exams to enter a public college of Architecture, but

her mother could not afford the cost of her school supplies. In 2006 Líbia started to observe and then participate in the theater company Instituto Nossa Senhora de Teatro (Holy Mary Theater Institute) alongside her friend and roommate Simone Cerqueira. This company created the play “Auto da Escrava Anastácia” ( The Slave Anastácia Act). According to Libia and Simone, this company, which is directed by a White man, has sensitively dealt with Afro-Brazilian themes. However, she and Simone left the company after the company director refused to allow the two artists to represent the company at the Senegal Arts Festival in 2009.



Fig.4.8 Simone Cerqueira

Simone Cerqueira is an actress. She says that since her childhood she wanted to work in the arts and go to college. However, at 16, she delayed her plans in order to work and support her blind mother. At the same time, she began acting in theatre pieces with a church group near her home. At 18, she participated in the Rotary club's youth group and from there she received her first invitation to act in a professional play. In 2005 she joined the theater group Instituto Nossa Senhora de Teatro and was part of the company for seven years. In 2008, following a respite for a health condition, Simone along with

Libia planned their participation in the FESMAN (Senegal Arts Festival) that was opening in Salvador, Bahia. After the company director denied Simone and Libia the opportunity to represent the company, they raised money by themselves to go. They also decided that they could no longer continue to work for a company that denied their autonomy. In Simone's words: "I don't want be a hostage of people who do not follow change."





Fig.4.9 Tatiana Tibúrcio

Tatiana Tibúrcio is an actress and theater producer. She tells me that during her childhood she experienced contradictory social realities. For a long time she lived with her grandmother in a very poor house because her mother was a domestic servant and the boss did not want children around. When she was about ten years old, her mother

married a White man and she moved to a middle class neighborhood. When the man died, her mother lost everything again and she and her mother moved to a favela in the city of Niterói. Throughout the years Tatiana has participated in soap operas and television series. While working on the series “Subúrbia” that had an almost entirely Black cast, she met distinguished Black actors and actresses and invited them to participate in the project “Negro Olhar” (Black Gaze), a series of dramatic readings by Black playwrights. Tatiana believes that initiatives such as “Subúrbia” and the soap opera “Lado a Lado” (Side by Side) represent a change in terms of Brazilian television.





Fig. 4.10 Ruth Pinheiro

Ruth Pinheiro is a retired administrative manager. She worked in different public offices of the state and municipality of Rio de Janeiro. Ruth's life is intermingled with the Black Movement. In the 1980s, she married Osvaldo Neves, an activist in the

Black Movement. He created an NGO named the Center of Support for the Disenfranchised Populations (CAD). Alongside her husband, Ruth participated in the creation of the IPCN and of the IPDH. After the death of Ruth's husband, CAD was renamed CADON (Center of Support Osvaldo Neves), and Ruth took responsibility, investing her own resources after the organization underwent a severe financial crisis. She said, she currently owes more than R\$ 70.000 (\$35,000.00) to the bank, and is at risk of losing her home.



Fig. 4.11 Débora Almeida

Débora Almeida received a degree in Theater and Theater Education. She is an actress, producer, and teacher as well as a singer and writer. She worked in formal education for 16 years and now acts as an administrative coordinator in a public school. She worked with the Companhia dos

Comuns from 2001 to 2010. After that, she created her own solo performance “*Sete Ventos*” (Seven Winds) that weaves together seven Black women’s stories. The name of the piece is a reference to the seven qualities of the Orixá Iansã/Oya, the goddess of the winds, lightning, and the dead. She says that it was in the Companhia dos Comuns that she started to deal with racial questions in her work. To Débora, Black organizing loses strength when it invests in partisan politics and defends specific political party’s interests. From her vantage, the Black question remains outside of these parties’ agendas.



Fig. 4.12 Cridemar Aquino

Cridemar Aquino is an actor born in Baixada Fluminense. He believes that cultural politics bring so many different people together in Akoben; artistic expression is not as important as the alignment between artistic and political practices. He criticizes how NGOs use his Black artist friends' work without giving them recognition for their work. For Cridemar, this experience starkly contrasts with what he and other artists have felt at the Companhia dos Comuns. Cridemar refers to Comuns as “our” company that talks about “our” things in “our” way. Like Tatiana Tibúrcio, Cridemar believes that the TV series “Subúrbia” represented a different moment in Brazilian television, and he remembers how difficult it was to create this space on TV Globo. For Cridemar, access to

culture is a right, and artists have the power to inform the population about all of their rights.



Fig. 4.13 Rodrigo dos Santos

Rodrigo dos Santos is an actor and Philosophy student. He was born in Rio de Janeiro, but his father's family immigrated from the Northeast of Brazil and his mother's family came from a rural area in the state of Rio de Janeiro. According to Rodrigo, his grandmother was a former slave. One of his uncles was a samba singer. Rodrigo attended the same school where his mother worked as a janitor and became involved with theater. Later, when he began acting at a professional theater, he noticed there were no Black performers. He visited a rehearsal of Companhia dos Comuns that was just starting at the

time and began working on all four of Comuns' plays. He did television acting and had roles in the soap opera "Malhação" and the series "Cidade dos Homens," launched by TV Globo in 2006. In his academic work, he engages a philosophical discussion on the possibility of a Black tragedy by aligning the study of Philosophy with the tradition of capoeira Angola.



Fig. 4.14 Iléa Ferraz

Iléa Ferraz was born in Rio. When she was 20 years old, she started to study theater at the Martins Pena School at a time when this school was the epicenter of theater studies in Rio and Brazil. After her training, she became part of a theater ensemble

organized by the director and playwright Alcione Araújo, who was interested in creating an ethnically diverse theater group. The project did not last, and she and other Black actors (Naíra, Carmem Luz, and Luiz Pillar) created Em Black e Preto. The group disbanded due to financial and interpersonal difficulties. Iléa sometimes works in television. She was cast in soap operas such as “Xica da Silva,” which was an international success for the TV channel Manchete in 1995. In addition to her work in television, she always maintained her own artistic projects. She says that the adaptation of the story “*A Botija de ouro*” (The pot of gold) <sup>49</sup> and the play “*O Cheiro da Feijoada*” (The smell of the Feijoada), a play she wrote and performed, opened doors for her work to become known and welcome in different parts of Brazil. In addition to her acting, Iléa also illustrates books.

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<sup>49</sup> Written by the historian Joel Rufino dos Santos.



Fig. 4.15 Janaína Oliveira/ReFem

Janaína Oliveira - ReFem is a rapper, cinematographer, and producer from Duque de Caxias, Baixada Fluminense. Her grandfather was an Angolan man who married a White Brazilian woman from whom ReFem's father was born. ReFem, who recently became a mother, started her career as a hip-hop artist in 1999 performing in the Baixada Fluminense and participating in two hip-hop associations. Since the beginning of her career, she has been concerned with women's participation and representation in social movements. In 2003, she began producing the documentary "Rap de Saia" (Rap in



Skirts) (2006) that narrates the trajectories of four women in the hip-hop movement.

ReFem is actively involved in cultural groups, community groups, women's rights organizations, and Black youth collectives. She worked in collaboration with the Afro Carioca Center of Cinema, and offers courses on videomaking in favelas and quilombos.



Fig. 4.16 Rubens Barbot

Rubens Barbot is a dancer from Rio Grande, a city in Southern Brazil. He studied dance at Buenos Aires University in Argentina. Since the early 1990s, he has lived in Rio de Janeiro and created the dance company Barbot with his partner, the Argentinian producer Gatto Larsen. Recently, the company acquired from the municipality an old building located in the city's Lapa neighborhood. An early 20<sup>th</sup> century mansion, it is in ruins, but they are in the process of renovating the building that now serves as their studio, rehearsal space, and home.



Fig. 4.17 Eliete Miranda

Eliete Miranda is a dance teacher from Salvador, Bahia. She studied “Afro-Brazilian/Afro-Bahian” dance with the Olodum dance ensemble. These dances are associated with Candomblé and other Bahian rhythms including “Afro-reggae,” which is

a blend of the rhythms of *Ijexa*<sup>50</sup> and Reggae. She moved to Rio de Janeiro searching for a space to teach these genres of dance.

#### 4.2 - Intersectionalities in Black: reflections on the lived experience of the research collaborators

In the process of conducting fieldwork, it became clear how gender, class, age, sexuality, and religion impact the lived experience of Black people. The following section discusses how these other aspects of Black people's identity influence their life conditions and work.

##### **4.2.a- Gender and sexuality**

In regards to gender, it could be argued that Black women in this collective still had less access to education than black men. For example, Filipe and Rodrigo are graduate students, whereas Líbia and Simone gave up their dreams of going to college. None of the women are in graduate school. Class was a determinant in these women's and men's lives as was color. The alignment of light skinned privilege with class status influenced their different realities. The prejudice against men in theater and dance—arts often seen as feminine—could partially explain the difference in these numbers. However, the big meetings organized by Akoben demonstrated that there are many more heterosexual Black men engaged in artistic production, particularly music, literature, and

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<sup>50</sup> Genre derived from the percussive rhythm played to the Orixá Oxum in the Candomblé.

photography. In theater and dance direction, men also predominate. Nonetheless, in regards to gender and sexuality, I observed that even with Comuns, a theater company created by a gay Black man, plays focused on representations of Black heterosexual men. At least two of the characters in the “Roda do Mundo” are representations of thugs and hypermasculine Black men, whereas one of the actors interpreting the character, Cridemar Aquino, is an openly gay man. Cridemar Aquino has a thick physical constitution and dark skin. In observing the type of characters he plays on television, the recurrent stereotyping process of big and dark skinned men as thugs and criminals is highlighted. However, looking back at Comuns’ work itself, the same stereotype of aggressive hypermasculinity was at work when the company ascribed the role of thugs to the strong, physically built dark skinned men.

The example of the dance company Barbot follows the same lines: it was comprised of mostly Black gay men, with its creator living in partnership with another man for over twelve years. The company suffered some backlash for presenting a dance piece in which the men danced together naked. Ruth Pinheiro explained in an interview how, many years ago, she invited the company to perform during a ceremony for Black entrepreneurs. The performance piece was a modern dance with all male dancers in gray clothing and with gray lighting. When the dance became homoerotic, the audience started to leave. In 2013, members of Barbot were invited to perform at the ceremony “Camélia da Liberdade” (Camellia of Freedom), whose goal was to reward activists and (White) partners for their mobilization around the inclusion of Afro-Brazilians. I was present at two of the choreographic rehearsals for the ceremony (that built on a previous

choreography). The idea behind the choreography was to illustrate the history of Blacks in Rio and, more specifically, the history of Praça XI (XI Square), a site where Blacks used to gather to celebrate in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is sometimes considered the birthplace of samba music and of the dissemination of the practice of capoeira.

During the rehearsals for the “Camélia da Liberdade” event, I observed how the dancers interacted with one another, how they jokingly referenced male homosexuality, and how they danced in couples. Two female dancers joined the company to perform this dance piece. Cau Ramalho dances regularly with the company, while the other young woman started her dance career with the NGO Afro-Reggae. The piece depicts a nostalgic view of the past and a narrative of hegemonic masculinities and femininities that seduce the opposite sex, resulting in a dispute between men over the woman. The contradiction between this work’s presentation to a broad audience and the documentary about this dance company “*Este amor que nos protege*” (This love protecting us) speaks to the normalization and policing of Black sexualities within Black collectives. Made by the director Allan Barbosa, the documentary narrates the history of the company and the long-term relationship of Rubens Barbot and Gatto Larsen. The company’s aesthetic preferences also pose some contradiction between what Barbot wants to create as an artist and what the public wants to see in terms of Black/Afro-Brazilian dance. Barbot, who graduated from the School of Dance in Buenos Aires (Argentina) in the 1990s, created a repertoire of modern dance and ballet aligned with elements of Afro-Brazilian dance. However, the expectation for the company’s work, at least for the “Camélia da Liberdade” ceremony, was to present “traditional” Afro-Brazilian dance and culture.

On another occasion, I observed that the same logic of imputing a compulsory heterosexuality holds for women, too. Eliete Miranda, the dance teacher, was telling her class about the impact of the musical play “*Cabaré da Raça*” (Cabaret of the Race), created by the Olodum Theater ensemble in Salvador, Bahia, and first exhibited in 2006. She narrated how the piece presented the Black male dancers naked, and how the actress Auristela Sá, through her choreography, conveyed a sexual desire for Black male bodies. I recalled a lesbian friend telling me that she was sad because her former lover, the actress Auristela Sá, had died a few weeks before. While hearing Eliete celebrate the hypersexualization and compulsory heteronormativity as a site of Black empowerment, I reflected on the contradiction of a Black lesbian performing heterosexual desire and considered it an imposition. Black performers can certainly play roles that are different from their personal identities, but the insistence on these heterosexual and hypersexual depictions of Black life seem to be more in accordance with hegemonic constructions of Black life than with an artistic project that could encompass the diverse subjectivities of these artists.

#### **4.2.b- Familial Situation**

Familial support was often cited as a factor in the trajectory of these artists. Valéria’s mother, for example, was a community organizer. The dancer told me: “I have been political since the beginning.” It was her mother who encouraged Valéria to take African dance classes in a workshop she organized for the community. Valéria was sixteen when she started to dance; now at forty-six, Valéria is thankful for her mother’s support of her

dancing. In contrast to Valéria, Iléa said that she wanted to be an artist from an early age despite her family not supporting her desire. Iléa, like many other artists and even more Black artists in Brazil, now sings, plays instruments, writes songs, and draws. Líbia told me that her interest in the arts began as a child, and that even though she came from a very poor and violent community, she always managed to keep art in her life. In the case of Rodrigo, the fact that his mother worked at a prestigious school made his access to theater possible. Tatiana recalled that her stepfather always encouraged her to study the arts and to take piano lessons. She explained, “The ups and downs gave me a certain privilege that most Blacks don’t have.” She also recognized how difficult it was to be the only Black child in a middle class universe. Her poor Black relatives rejected her for being educated or different and she noted, “You end up not having social peers.”

Some of my collaborators clearly declare themselves feminists. Débora devotes her work to Black women and recognizes in her own family what she calls a feminist tradition. The daughter of a teacher and lawyer, she was raised mainly by her mother and grandmother. During her time at Comuns, Débora oriented her scripts and her characters around Black women’s life experiences, such as the women involved in drug trafficking in favelas in her play “Roda do Mundo” and the loneliness of the activists and/or intellectual Black women in “Silêncio.”

In the case of ReFem, the women in her family were in charge of most of the familial responsibilities in the context of alcoholism and ReFem’s father’s verbal abuse. ReFem’s family lived in a quilombo, with her large family living on one piece of land, growing food and raising animals. They had little money, but their mother was concerned



with her childrens' education and access to information. Her artistic name discloses many of her views and political position; "*refem*" is the Portuguese noun for "hostage," but the two syllables are abbreviations for Re, "*revolta*" (revolt), and, Fem, "*feminine*" (feminine): Feminine Revolt.

Only the women I interviewed discussed familial issues such as violence, broken homes, and loss of wealth. Perhaps being a woman enabled greater comfort and disclosure from my female interlocutors. Although I had great interactions and discussions with men, especially Filipe and Gá, they did not bring up subjects related to more intimate spheres of life. The exception was Cobrinha, who spoke briefly about his adopted son and his granddaughter while we were talking about the difficulty of raising children alone. But the women also had more of an opportunity to share their emotional, subjective lives because, after the first half of my fieldwork, many of them started to invite me to socialize.

When I interviewed Tatiana, at her house in the Engenho de Dentro neighborhood, she was heartbroken. Her twelve-year marriage had ended a few months before. She kept telling me how hard it had been to overcome the fact that her former husband, a White man, ended a marriage to start a new relationship with a White woman. Sometimes she is hired for small roles in soap operas and TV series, but as she says, sometimes she subjects herself to exploitative jobs, such as the one she had at the time at a production company owned by a "friend." She remarked that the woman was her friend but at the same time she expected Tatiana to work more hours and do more than her fair share of duties. She told me, "I am tired of being a warrior. Can't I be a delicate

woman?” She criticized the repeating stereotype of “the strong black woman,” the warrior. As Black women, our trials are often met with other people’s consolation that we must overcome the hardship of life because we are “warriors.”

#### **4.2.c- Age and health**

Age is another factor affecting the lived experience of Blackness and artistic political engagement. I frequently observed how elders were the ones who showed more initiative, organizational skills, and commitment to the struggle. When one of the participants at an Akoben meeting complained about the lack of engagement of participants, Cobrinha responded that this is the norm in social movements: “There was a time when the whole Black movement of Rio de Janeiro fit into my old *fusca* (Volkswagen beetle). There were only six [of us].” He always tried to maintain a high level of enthusiasm, objectivity, and organization in spite of the personal difficulties he was going through. In addition to what I witnessed with Cobrinha, I often heard that the older activists were tired, and had bills to pay. Náira struggles with financial and health difficulties. She only receives payment when the cinema center gets funding, which means that some months she does not receive income, decreasing her ability to help her daughter and granddaughter.

Some of the elder activists do not have a retirement plan. Cobrinha himself, now 64, was struggling to make money. He sold his beautiful house the month after Akoben’s gathering and was knocking on the door of *the Previdência Social* building (Brazilian

Retirement Plan) to check how long he had until he could receive retirement benefits. If it were not for his appointment to the Palmares Foundation in February 2013, he would not have any prospect of a salary or income.

Despite all of the difficulties, Cobrinha is still an inspiration for a new generation of artists, activists, and educators. The actress Tatiana wrote on her Facebook page: “Thank you, my father Cobrinha.” In addition to being a mentor, he is a father and a grandfather. He is a father by his conscious option of adopting a child as a single gay man. Now he is a grandfather taking care of this son’s daughter. My research collaborator ReFem, who is not from the world of theater and values different aesthetics than Comuns, also honors Hilton Cobra, alongside Black activists such as Lélia Gonzalez, Beatriz Nascimento, Neusa Santos, and the recently deceased cinema director Zózimo Bulbul. ReFem looks to Cobrinha and these others as mentors and as inspirations not only for their artistic work, but for their dedication to Black political mobilization.

Taking care of family members affects the lives of women more often than men. Certainly, some help care for their families, as was the case of Rodrigo who, alongside his partner, actively participated in the caretaking of his daughter. Gá helps with his grandson, and Cobrinha is the main person responsible for his granddaughter. However, the responsibility to take care of family members and the need to start working at a young age were felt more significantly by women. Among my interviewees, three take care of families members: Adriana, Naíra (partially), and Ruth. Líbia, Simone, and Adriana started working earlier than most due to financial need. Today, Adriana is a single mother raising a teenage son and taking care of her mother with her sister’s help. She believes

that her health challenges, including high blood pressure, have been aggravated because of the high demands and the stress caused by the struggle against racial inequality.

Recently separated from her husband, Tatiana told me that it was difficult to take care of her young son and work at the same time. She feels guilty for leaving her son for long hours in day care.

In our conversations, Ruth spoke about her health problems and how difficult it is to organize a social movement, follow up with legal and fiscal matters of institutional cultural politics, find money, and still have energy to take care of her mother, who is 95 years old and suffering from Alzheimer's. She is one of the few organizers responsible for the conference of the Black Movement (CONNEB), which she confesses feels overwhelming because of the majority of activists' lack of engagement and the lack of money. In this instance, the question of gender dynamics within Black collectives is noticeable since Ruth, and sometimes one or more assistants, are often requested to help artists or to organize conferences. Most of the people I observed asking for Ruth's help at CADON were men. Authors Barbara Ransky and Kathleen Cleaver describe how the NACP and the BPP in the US exploited women's organizational work, and at the same time denied them political leadership (Ransby, 2003; Cleaver, 2001). By talking with Black women during my fieldwork, I realized that a similar dynamic of insistence in patriarchy and male dominance occurs among Black social movements in Brazil.

#### **4.2.d- Religiosity**

Along with age and gender, religious views are important factors in how someone is perceived and the opportunities they have. A significant part of the interviewees are Candomblé devotees: Cobrinha, Valéria, Naíra, Débora, Luiz Gá, Rodrigo, Barbot, Cridemar, and Eliete. Two others declared themselves as agnostic, and I am unsure of the practices of the other three. In interviews with Tatiana, she mentioned that some of her views did not coincide with Comuns views, contributing to her reason for leaving the group. Later on, she mentioned that she is Kardecist. My guess is that the focus Comuns put on the symbolic, spiritual, and political importance of Afro-Brazilian religions, in addition to the interpersonal tensions, created an uncomfortable environment for Tatiana. There is a tension among Black activist collectives regarding the assumption that Candomblé, as a Yoruba practice, is superior to other religious forms. Ruth Pinheiro, a devotee of the Umbanda religion (whose principles are syncretic, with elements from Candomblé, Catholicism, Kardecism, spirituality, and Indigenous beliefs), told me that she is sometimes discriminated against by other activists because, for many of them, Candomblé is more “authentic,” more serious and pure.

There was a specific moment I perceived a contradiction between political engagement and religious life. ReFem’s activist and pedagogical work is to deliver speeches and perform rap songs on women’s reproductive rights and on the impact that racism has on Black populations’ health and self-esteem. She is a well respected Black activist who declares herself a feminist, and who defends the de-criminalization of abortion. At the same time, she draws on Jew Pentecostal religious views. Held at a ranch

in the city of Santa Cruz-Baixada Fluminense, with a view of the hills, her wedding was a perfect example of the complex dynamic of symbols, rituals, and ideologies. At the ceremony a chorus composed of Nigerian men sang traditional Nigerian wedding songs. ReFem's dress and the groom's attire were African inspired, and the guests were invited to wear either African inspired clothing or dress in white. During the minister's speech, he paraphrased the Bible, saying that women are the weaker vessel, that wives should be subservient to husbands, and the last word should be that of the man. It was a shocking moment not only for me, but, observing the female guests' reactions, it was polemical for them as well. Many of the guests were women associated with the world of activism and Black women's organizations, and some were openly feminist. I noticed that ReFem was laughing at the Minister's speech and was perhaps a little nervous, because the guests reacted to the quotes by saying: "The man has the last word: yes, madam," or by denying the role of the "weaker vessel." At least two guests left the area during the ceremony. The minister insisted to ReFem that she be subservient, and to the female guests, he asked: "Are you subservient?" I noticed that he was also smiling, perhaps with a mocking edge, since he knew ReFem is a feminist and that women present also identified with feminism. For him, it was an opportunity to preach conservative moral values to a group of women who might not otherwise hear. ReFem answered his question in a way that gave her a margin to assure her non-submissive position: "I will try not to yell all the time." By seeing her at other events and protests accompanied by her spouse, she has asserted that she is not a weak vessel. However, her wedding highlighted the contradiction between political ideologies and religion.

#### 4.3 - Perceptions of Black politics

The majority of those I interviewed had critiques of Black mobilizations. Simone believes that Black artists are immature, still waiting for someone to say what to do. Líbia is dissatisfied with what she calls a culture of acceptance; she thinks that Brazilian society accepts corruption and that today the country lives in a period of backlash in terms of social policies and women's rights. Líbia believes that great sacrifice and hard work bring knowledge and expertise. She stresses how Whites are organized and impeccably dedicated to what they do. In her view, there is a lack of strength and commitment on the part of Black artists and producers. In Filipe's view, the Black Movement must be ultra-libertarian, and if this does not happen spontaneously, we need to make it happen. For him, there is a state of "symbolic misery" that pervades Black movements; the activists engage in personal competitions that impair the construction of collective actions.

ReFem is also very critical of what she sees as the failures of national Black mobilization. First, she recognizes what she calls the "Lynching strategy," referring to the British slave owner Willie Lynch who delivered a lecture in 1712 instructing other slave owners how to create distrust among slaves and make them trust their owners more than

other Black slaves.<sup>51</sup> For ReFem, Blacks in Brazil have undergone a similar process of learning how to hate and be suspicious of each other. Second, she says that since Black people recognize that they are behind, they need to learn how Whites organize and manage resources. She assessed, “Whites don’t like each other, but they work together. We cannot manage to do the same,” meaning that Black activists in Brazil have difficulty working together on common projects and overcoming their differences and personal interests.

Ruth Pinheiro criticizes the lack of engagement and constancy of Black activists. She commented that the “*negrada*”<sup>52</sup> come here only when they need help. When it is time to give money, everyone abandons the boat.” She thinks that if Blacks in Brazil had organized themselves as they had in the US, such as by founding and financially supporting their own institutions, Blacks would now have more opportunities in Brazil.

Luiz Gá talks about what he describes as “an autophagic tendency” in the Black movement. In his late 20s, he received an invitation to create the graphic design for the Institute for the IPCN newspaper “SIMBA.” He was invited to work for free. “This is common,” he says, that Black activists ask other Blacks to work for free while they pay money to the press owned by the Whites. He lamented, “Unfortunately we live in a capitalist world and I need money.” Because of his polemical posts and remarks

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<sup>51</sup> See [http://www.finalcall.com/artman/publish/Perspectives\\_1/Willie\\_Lynch\\_letter\\_The\\_Making\\_of\\_a\\_Slave.shtml](http://www.finalcall.com/artman/publish/Perspectives_1/Willie_Lynch_letter_The_Making_of_a_Slave.shtml)

<sup>52</sup> A collective of Blacks, normally a pejorative term.



pressuring and criticizing Black activists and politicians related to the Workers' party, many people no longer want to talk to him.

But for some of these activists, there are changes in the racial struggle. Adriana believes that things are changing and that we mainly need to maintain the dynamic of mobilizing and creating consciousness among youth. However, keeping this dynamic is difficult because "we [she and other activists] feel very tired." Gá also sees changes in racial consciousness in Brazil. He thinks that there is a convergence between Black social movements and the regular Black folks who just want to go to the *pagode*<sup>53</sup> in their neighborhood. He was saying this based on observing popular samba venues that recently started to decorate their walls with images of transnational Black leaders. Valéria is another person who sees positive things in the present moment of Black activism. She thinks that Akoben itself could be seen as a new moment of the Comuns: a necessary step to create stable conditions for work. Hilton Cobra's commitment and emotional strength united several artistic groups across different aesthetic trends. Valéria believes that there is a strong need to create collectives like Akoben because it is necessary to raise consciousness among populations of African descent. She also acknowledged the need to create Black arts and artists as political and social references. She brings the example of her school, whose students are mostly of African descent, but do not recognize themselves as Black or do not agree with the need for Affirmative Action.

One of the most delicate issues I observed and discussed was the question of White allies. During the Akoben gathering at Cobrinha's house in December 2012, he

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<sup>53</sup> Musical genre derived from samba.

questioned whether or not White partners such as Elisa Nascimento and the theater director Márcio Meirelles should be invited to be part of the proposals to be submitted for funding for Black producers announced by Minister Suplicy. Cobrinha's question provoked a heated debate that night that reverberated in individual conversations in the following months. Some participants, mainly younger activists, were against the invitation of White allies because the moment and the specific funding opportunity based on Affirmative Action should be treated strategically by seeking autonomy and independence from any sort of White tutelage. But for others, that would be a betrayal of long time work partners, and Blacks would still need to work with influential White allies in other arenas.

This was one of the moments in which my personal views were hard to distance from my position as researcher. I firmly defended that there was no point in having Affirmative Action funding and still use the strategy of allying with Whites. "But this is the strategy that has been used for the last 300 years!" I said, which those defending this strategy met with animosity. After the gathering was over, four of us walked to take a cab and continued the discussion. Iléa felt that if not for Bisa Vianna, who is White, the Afro Carioca Center of Cinema would not exist. This made me angrier because I had heard how harshly Bisa treated the young Black women working in the center. Finally, Gá made a devastating statement: "Look at Elisa, she was at Abdias' side all of the time. She helped him in his projects. After his death, she dedicated her life to taking care of his legacy. She ... is a Black woman." This statement silenced three Black women. Even if the other women did not agree with my radicalism, they did not take lightly the idea that

Elisa, a White woman from the US, could become the same thing as a Black Brazilian woman because of her marriage to a Black activist.

But in my radical stand, shared by younger women such as Débora, Simone, and Líbia, I was missing the complexity of many people's trajectories. Many of them had/have White husbands, wives, or partners. Valéria for example, believes that Black artists should create a catalog of Black professionals (lighting designers, choreographers, prompts designers, etc.) and that they should not be afraid of making mistakes. She was saying this because many productions created by Whites also go wrong and there would be nothing to be ashamed of if Black professionals sometimes made bad choices. But she was reluctant to be radical and not invite White allies. She used her personal life to illustrate the complexity of racial relations: "Anyways, I like to fuck whites." She used the double meaning of "fuck" to demonstrate that her personal life, being married to a White man, is an example of the contradictions regarding racial relations in Brazil.

Despite personal aspects of their lives, many of the people defending the continuity of alliances with Whites had built their careers on partnerships with those allies. To refuse to engage with these allies could not only be a betrayal, but potentially harmful to their work. That is one of the reasons that Naira, during her interview months after this gathering, said to me: "We need not to be radical with the ones (White allies) we know." The politics of interracial cooperation I observed in this collective are not exclusive to Akoben and other artistic groups; having participated in protests and community-based mobilizations, I had observed that most of these mobilizations have Blacks and Whites working together, as was the case of the Network of Communities and

Favelas Against Violence and the Community Association of Manguinhos favela. My observation regarding the subject of interracial collaboration in community-based mobilizations against police brutality is that in recent years there has been progress in terms of recognizing the racialized aspects of police violence, and Black women as key protagonists of these mobilizations. Scholar Luciane Rocha observes that poor Black women have been able to organize themselves and become protagonists in the fight for justice, seeking punishment against policemen accused of murdering their sons and daughters. (Rocha: 2014). Among a younger generation of Black academics engaged in an Afrocentric approach, a tendency to create ‘Blacks-only’ spaces is noticeable and appears at their social gatherings, in their (public) romantic lives, clothing, musical tastes, and reclamation of an African identity. They simultaneously deny the validity of the term “Afro-Brazilian,” naming themselves instead as “Africans in diaspora” or “Africanos.”

#### 4.4- Constitution of subjectivity and perceptions of racism

Many of my collaborators mentioned the influence of Comuns on their aesthetics, political subjectivities, and careers as Black artists and as Black people who grew up without positive references to Black representation. Rodrigo, one of the founders of Comuns, says that he remembers his school had a progressive vision, but its curriculum lacked Black culture and history. Through Comuns he discovered the possibility of a Black theater and of an aesthetic project not centered in Western traditions of theater. Today, he reflects that even though he is no longer a part of the company, he is part of a

“Comuns collective,” meaning that his individual work still relates to the aesthetic and political project of Comuns.



Fig. 4.18 Filipe Romão and Rodrigo Santos during the course “Anthropology of the African Diaspora”- July, 2013.

After being refused admission into the Theater College Martins Pena, Tatiana discovered the work of Companhia dos Comuns, and through her engagement with them, understood the difficulty she had with theater practices focused on Western traditions. These traditions did not relate to her experience. In the case of Débora, it was with this company that she started to develop work as a producer, because in Comuns each person learned how to work on theater productions. For Filipe, his affinity with Comuns is due

to a similarity of goals. He is invested in human rights, and Comuns is focused on assuring rights and dignity to Black people. From Valéria's perception, working with Comuns was a determinant in her career. She has been in the company since its beginning, and has great admiration for the way that Comuns operates through collective leadership that seeks equilibrium despite eventual crisis. By contrast, Cridemar stresses the racial consciousness that he developed while working with Comuns: "I have (Black) friends who work with arts but who do not want to get involved with racial matters. I had the privilege of meeting someone like Cobrinha in my life. I was 17 years old and this changed my conceptions." From Simone, I heard that for a certain time, she was afraid of being rejected because of her natural hair, and how theater professionals sometimes clearly stated that they did not know what to do with her hair. She continued by saying that after joining the Black women's NGO Estimativa (literally: Estimative, but also: Active Esteem), she came to learn about the extent of racial problems in Brazil. Until then, she had not thought of doing Black theater because her references were all European.

Narratives about concrete manifestations of racism appeared in several interviews. In Líbia's account of her attempts to enter the college of Architecture, she remembered being the only Black student at the college entrance exams: "You should have seen the people's faces. It was something incredible to see! Their looks were furious. It was a like a punch hitting me. It was like they were saying that this was not my place." Valéria, who has had a consistent career as a dancer and actress, said she does not like to audition for television, even if she occasionally acts in TV series and movies. She added with

resignation that she does not invest much energy in this because she knows she is not the type of face TV shows want. In another moment, Adriana told me how much she was impacted by Brazilian racism. In 1987 she got her first job in the advertising department of the store retailer Mesbla, one of the most important retailers in Brazil at that time. She remembers how she never saw Black models in the store announcements and graphic materials, and that the only year the flyer showed a Black model, store managers suspended the flyer. Those experiences convinced her that Blacks in Brazil needed to have their own vehicles of communication.

The organization and mobilization of Black artists is considered a way to fight against stereotypes imposed by Whites deciding Black themes. At the same time, Simone mentioned how children are not usually affected by a performer's skin color, whereas parents make comments about the race of the actress. She gave an example of a parent's frustration with a Black woman portraying a doll. Simone also made another reference to stereotype: "Do I just look like a slave, domestic worker, or prostitute? Even if it's a domestic worker, the character deserves to have development, she is a real person." Her speech resonates with other comments made about the representation of Black people in media and the scarcity of opportunities given to Black performers to develop their talents.

#### 4. 5- The importance of seeing ourselves through our own lenses

The African Diaspora is often conceptualized in terms of loss of territory and reference, forced labor, and the constitution of trade routes through the circulation of Black men (Wekker 2006; Brown 2005). This conceptualization lacks the recognition that gender, sexuality, age, and other factors play a central role in the ways in which Black people are subjugated. Black feminists and queer theory scholars have pointed out the patriarchal paradigm that leads both Black social movements and the academic field of Black studies to deny the specificity of different positionalities in a racist and sexist society (Lorde 2007; McKittrick 2006; McClaurin 2001; Crenshaw 1995; Davis 1983; Combahee River Collective 1983). Throughout this section, the voices of the people who mobilize and who are engaged at different levels with the fight against anti-Black racism (and sexism, misogyny, and homophobia) contribute to the understanding of how gender, sexuality, religion, age, class, and political views affect the types of social interactions between Black people.

At this juncture, one can ask if there is an advantage in becoming less susceptible to pain by taking up the shield of the Black warrior mother instead of requesting the right to be a fragile woman? In fact, the crucial point demonstrated by many of these narratives is that most of the time the individual's agency is limited by their material conditions or by the demands imposed by the collective to which they belong.





Fig. 4. 19 Simone Cerqueira, Débora Almeida, and Líbia Besouro during an interview- July 2013.

The people presented here are artists who like to be seen, and to see each other. I have discussed with them many times how we have a hunger to see ourselves on stage, television, cinema, magazines, and in commercials. We have a hunger to circulate among ourselves freely, with pride, with peace, love, and money. We are concerned with equality, with the killing of Black youth, with access to health, education, and respect, and we are also concerned about art. For us artists and art educators, the joy resulting from the aesthetic creation and from the aesthetic appreciation of art is a vital sphere of life. Our symbolic life is a foundational element to our freedom in life. Thus, we want to have choices and different possibilities through which to build our narratives.

As part of a collective of Black artists, I expect this work will illuminate moments of beauty in Black people's lives. As a Black woman, I believe it is necessary to apprehend the specificities in the foundational narratives of Blackness in this anti-Black, anti-Black woman, anti-Black gay world. The subject of the Oedipal crisis also ordenates Blackness in an economy of sexual differentiation. Several times I heard/read the reproduction of the Fanonian anecdote "Look..." Scholar Joy James provoked a cognitive turmoil when she asked, "What if instead of 'Look, a Negro' we have a 'Look, a Negress?'"<sup>54</sup> The generic Black being founded by slavery/modernity, born into abjection, is first imagined as male, which indicates that the Black female body is marked as an abjection even in the eyes of another abjection, the Black man. It is my understanding that a revolutionary change in our foundational narratives as Blacks will not be done within the framework of an exclusively phallic cognitive order.

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<sup>54</sup> James, J. 2012. UT Austin. "The performance of the un-thought" Symposium. UT- Austin.

## Chapter Five - The conceptual sources of Black performances

This chapter analyzes theater performances, theater projects, urban interventions, and training for dance performances. Over the course of my research, reflection on the need for the creation, representation, and interpretation of Black narratives became more important than my initial focus on whether or not the Black body is capable of redressing its suffering through performance (Hartman, 1997), how a radical performance of Blackness raises consciousness, or even the type and origin of the aesthetic elements chosen to create these Black performances or/and performances of Blackness. Thus, this chapter focuses on discussing the artistic languages, discourses, and the use of scenic elements and space in various events observed throughout my fieldwork. My central questions are less concerned with the origin of these elements—samba, Orixás dance, West African Dance, epic theater, Shakespeare—or how these elements are being included or mixed into these creations. The question, or rather questions, this analysis seeks to ask are: is slavery the central narrative of Black life? If so, how is slavery and its afterlife articulated in these performances? And if other landscapes are viable, what other

foundational elements of Black life do these performance events of theater, urban intervention, and social protest have to offer? Is there a way to re-invent the fact of being born into social death?

I will reflect on the reason why there is a performer at the center of differentiated attention—events of theater, dance, installation, preaching, social protest, and other forms of public performance. The fact that there is a story to be told, or a message to be delivered, precedes the extra-ordinary presence of the performer and the techniques she/he uses to present a story. This is how I want to think about the simultaneous facts of performance as a presence and as a text whose function is to re-animate the foundational moment of a people or social group.

### 5.1- Artistic Performances

In the first section I will describe and analyze four performances. The first is “*Ama de Leite*” (Nanny), presented by the collective “Amas de Leite” during the Black Women’s International Fair (MIMUNEGRA) organized by Iléa Ferraz and Jana Guinond with the collaboration of ReFem in November 2012.<sup>55</sup> The next event, “*Louvor à Consciência Negra*” (Praise to the Black Consciousness), was a theater performance in an urban space sponsored by the Rio de Janeiro house of deputies to celebrate Black Awareness Week. The third event, “*Herança Africana: Intervenções Urbanas*” (African Heritage: Urban Interventions), was created by the director Zózimo Bulbul and executed the week of

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<sup>55</sup> Iléa Ferraz, and Jana Guinond are the heads of the NGO Estimativa, whose work focuses on videographic production. Jana also works at CONDEDINE, the Rio de Janeiro city council for the rights of Black populations.

November 20<sup>th</sup> parallel with the Brazil-Caribbean Cinema Festival.<sup>56</sup> The fourth performance is “*O Cheiro da Feijoadá*,” created, directed, and interpreted by the artist Iléa Ferraz.

#### 5.1.a - “**Ama de leite**” (Nanny)

Four women in white dresses and turbans come from the left entrance of the room, carrying a large barrel containing milk and sustained by four wood branches. They carry white dolls on a strap tied to their bodies, and they walk at a slow, composed pace, looking ahead. A very popular nursery rhyme accompanies their walk. They cross in front of the stage and then access the stage through the stairs on the right side. On the stage are four chairs and a screen on the right. The women sit down, the music stops, and an image appears. It is a photograph from the mid-1800s of an enslaved Black nanny with her breast uncovered and a white baby on her lap. One of the women pours milk over her own face in big, fast movements. She delivers fragments of descriptions from the 19th century celebrating the role of the Black nanny: “Sweet nanny, sweet milk that feeds ...” When the image disappears, the nursery rhyme returns, and the women in the seats look ahead, facing the audience while gently bouncing, as if asking us for something. The nursery rhyme and the dark, semicircular theater room almost filled young Black female college students seems to undulate to the rhythm of the nursery rhyme. Then an effect of

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<sup>56</sup> Organized by the Afro Carioca Center of Cinema created by Zózimo Bulbul and directed by Biza Vianna, Zózimo’s widow. The festival had three editions; the first in May 2005; the second in July 2006; and the third in September 2009. All editions were in the city of Salvador, state of Bahia.

dissonance interrupts the rhyme. It cuts the chords of rhyme with the heavy, distorted sound of an electric keyboard. The second woman bathes herself in the milk, and prepares to deliver her lines. She opens her chest with defiance, her look fierce and bold against the sadness of the women in the picture and the sweetness of the first actress. The next image shows the reified image of the back of an enslaved man covered by scars caused by whipping. The actress's texts are fragments from hygienist discourses regarding the presence and work of the Black nanny. These discourses argued that constant contact between Whites and Blacks would weaken the mores and physical strength of the Whites. One of the fragments says: "Contaminated milk, vessel of syphilis." The image disappears and the nursery rhyme returns while the women leave the stage, taking the wood barrel with them and exiting on the same path they entered.

This scene, notably directed by a Black man, theater director William Santiago, presents a critical reflection on the uses and discourses made about Black women's reproductive and nurturing labor. Thinking about Moten and the "commodity that speaks" (Moten, 2003), the "nanny" in the mid-1800s picture does not speak, but her image tells us what was said about her exchange value: her nurturing power, and possibly her sexual and reproductive labor, were her exchange value on the slave market. How is it possible that contradictory messages—the images of the Black nanny and of the tortured body of the slave, the texts celebrating the "sweetness" of the nanny and the other accusing her of transmitting syphilis—speak to each other in this scene? What sense can we make from this demonstration of the uses of the exchange value of the "Black nanny" followed by its devaluation?

The different discourses about the value of the Black nanny tell us about biopolitics, understood here as the state power to manage, distribute, and organize segments of populations according to the interests of the nation-state based on scientific discourse and power-knowledge (Foucault, 2010; Esposito, 2008). These biopolitics reflect the racialized processes of the national formation at different moments in Brazil. The scene, while deconstructing the narrative of the sweet Black mother, also engages in the critique of the scientific, sociological discourses on race in specific political moments of the nation. The two fragments explore two moments of Brazilian discourses on race: the first actress's lines accompanied by the image of the Black nanny along with the text corroborates the idea of harmonious co-existence of White owners and enslaved Black women. This narrative is at the basis of the racial democracy narrative, the Brazilian version of *mestizaje* theories so prominent in Latin America in the 1940s. The second fragment illustrates eugenic ideology, whose project followed the immediate end of slavery. It is interesting how from 1880 to 1920, Blacks—until then working in productive sectors such as mining, agriculture, farming, construction, and domestic labor—started to be seen as a threat to the development of a modern nation. Following what happened in the US, scientific racism and moral and medical discourses created the conditions to sanitize the past. Slavery, then, was a mistake; so the question becomes, how do we, the nation, get rid of all of these Blacks? The investment was in the direction of trying to eliminate Blacks from Whites from the White space of the family, allied to the “importation” of European immigrants to be assimilated as workers in farms, cities, and industries.

The circulation of texts and images that transmit contradictory messages (the sweetness of the Black nanny, the harshness of physical punishment, and opposite views about the Black nanny) make us inquire about the existence of two simultaneous models through which the presence of the Black has been thought about in the national imaginary until today: in one model, the nurturing Black nanny is one of the roots of Brazilian people; in another, the persistence of this presence in the aftermath of slavery could represent a never attainable White ideal. Similarly to what Dorothy Roberts describes in *Killing the Black Body*, the scene highlights national ideologies concerned with the presence of the Black body: while during slavery the reproductive and nurturing labor of Black women was a source of profit and domestic arrangement, post-slavery Black women represented the risk of contamination and the deterioration of White society. A similar paradox of exploitation of Black women's reproductive and nurturing labor followed by the devaluation of this same labor is observed by Dorothy Roberts and Patricia Hill Collins in the US. The verification of these processes in both locations, the US and Brazil, stresses the similarities of the domestic economy of slavery and its aftermath, highlighting how the gendered division of labor had different impacts on race. Black women's bodies were marked by a history of alienation of their rights over their own bodies, and this alienation continues to be celebrated as the generosity of Black women who feed White children. The fallacy of generosity has hidden the fact that the slave had no free will to refuse to be the nanny of the slave owner's kids. By vigorously bathing themselves in milk the women reclaim the de-alienation of their bodies. By saying the lines with sadness or defiance, by silently inquiring the audience, the actresses



create an opportunity to criticize reified narratives of national formation that deeply rely on either the romanticization of slavery or on the criminalization of the Black female body.

There is, however, one problematic aspect to the scene, which intends to give voice to the memory of Black women forced to feed the slave owner's offspring, including Black mothers forcefully separated from their own sons and daughters. All of the texts come from White male writers, reporters, and medical doctors. Thus, although critique emerges through the contradiction between what the text says and what the actresses do, there is still no voice coming from the lived experience of Black women. However, as the director William Santiago later told me, the piece prepared for the MIMUNEGRA fair was just a fragment. The work still continues to be developed, and what they presented does not represent the whole work.

#### 5.1.b – “**Louvor à Consciência Negra**” (Praise to the Black Awareness)

This theater scene was presented in front of the House of Deputies in Cinelândia Square in the downtown area of Rio de Janeiro. The Rio municipality hired renowned actors and actresses to present a play celebrating the Zumbi dos Palmares. The scene mixed texts, poetry, dance, and percussion. At the beginning, an actor (Antônio Pompeu) emerged from the early 1800s building where the House of Deputies functions. He presented the context: Africans were enslaved in the colony of Brazil. The actress (Iléa Ferraz)

appeared and recited the famous Castro Alves poem “*Navio Negreiro*” (Slave Ship).<sup>57</sup> All of the solos were made in an interpretative style, using large gestures and a stylized voice amplified by speakers. The group of actors, all in white and beige sack clothing carrying baskets and colanders of stew, executed a choreography based on “West African” and “Afro Brazilian” dance. The actor and actresses who functioned as a chorus returned with more descriptions of the quilombo and new fragments of poems. The actors interpreting the slaves returned and discussed the news of the Quilombo do Palmares while they planned to run away. Mixing choreography with dialogue and theater action, the actors and actresses escaped to the quilombo by entering the building while the percussion rhythm accelerated.

It was a rainy day when this scene was performed, and there were few people watching this public homage to Black Awareness Week. The narrators appeared as empowered African descendants, first wailing about the horror of slavery by reciting Castro Alves’s poem and then celebrating the freedom represented by the slaves running away to Quilombo dos Palmares. The dance scenes aggregated “Afro Brazilian dance” and “West African dance” elements with the choreographic use of objects assumed to be used by the slaves in their daily occupations: colanders to filter seeds and grains, baskets to carry things.

The first thing that impacted me, besides the highly interpretative old fashioned style, was the use of space. The fact that running away to the quilombo is represented by

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<sup>57</sup> In fact, a more accurate translation would be “The Negro Cargo Ship.” The meaning of the word “negreiro” would be an adjective meaning that the ship transports “negroes.”

the characters entering an imperial building most likely made by slaves exposes a fracture between an original intention—to celebrate Zumbi and Black Awareness Week—and the effect that the state has had on the Black struggle. Running away from slavery is performed by returning to the same path that represents the slave owner house, and although the scenic solution was not intended to be thought of in this way, the metaphor resembles the discussion at the core of the Black Movement itself. The cooptation of Black activists by the state and political parties is considered by some activists to be one of the central causes of the demobilization of the Black Movement. During the encounter between Black artists and the Palmares foundation, for example, the activist Yedo Ferreira mentioned how the Unified Black Movement organized the big march in 1988, and how the movement had cohesion and well-defined goals. But he concluded, “Everybody went to the parties and the movement got demobilized.”

The militant Ruth Pinheiro during our conversations also mentioned the internal conflicts presented by the Black Movement and indicates that after 1990 the movement was not able to renew its board of members. In addition, she said that the conflicts between former activists now working in state positions and activists who remained in the social movement poses a huge challenge to the cohesion of Black political projects. In one of her examples she mentioned the difficulty she was having in organizing the 2013 CONNEB. The Black Movement asked SEPPIR to fund part of the conference, but demanded that CONNEB exhibit the SEPPIR logo on all of the materials at the conference. The participants of the conference did not accept this demand because they are in political opposition to the Luíza Bairros administration of SEPPIR. Part of this

opposition is due to what the activists denounce as a “white badge Black Movement,” meaning that some sectors/militants of the Black Movement, after entry into the state, were afraid to pressure for more radical changes. This makes SEPPIR and its allies submissive to White politicians, and they refuse to dialogue with other Black collectives, so they end up saying just what the government wants to hear.

This theater scene is a display of state recognition of “minorities” through the celebration of a commemorative date. However, despite the recognition that slavery was wrong, the scene constrained the original meaning of Black Awareness Week to two moments in the past. The first moment was the creation of the Quilombo dos Palmares during the colonial era (the 17th century) when Zumbi led the quilombo. The second was in 1880 when the White poet Castro Alves (whose family owned slaves) wrote a poem projecting what he imagined to be the horrors of a slave ship. There is no present, no future, no critical reflection on the actual context of racial relations, nor any need to present a political project for Black liberation in this institutional representation of Black Awareness Week. Such a reflection about the contemporary state of racial relations would compromise state politics by going beyond multiculturalist politics. In my interpretation of the scene, the act of running away becomes again a capture, with performers going into the house that was once a setting of the slave system and is now representative of a democratic, multicultural state.

Another interesting aspect of this play is the choice to use Castro Alves’s poem instead of a Black writer’s work. This choice indicates a lack of dialogue between the state representatives in charge of executing the celebration of the Black Awareness Week

and the social movements. By following online discussions of many activists, I noticed general discontent with the dismissal of the intellectual work of Black writers. During the same period that Castro Alves was imagining the suffering of the slave, Luiz Gama, former slave, lawyer, and writer, produced a body of work based on his own trajectory of activism against slavery and his knowledge of the meaning and effects of slavery for Black people. The insistence in using the White man's description of slavery represents one more instance where the suffering of the slave needed to be represented by Whites in order to make sense (Hartman, 1997).

#### **5.1.c – “Herança Africana: Intervenções Urbans” (African Heritage: Urban Interventions)**

During the week of November 20<sup>th</sup>, 2012, Zózimo Bulbul and his staff of Afro Carioca Center of Cinema made a series of interventions in the area of Valongo cais, located in the Gamboa neighborhood in central Rio. This old port area contains an unexplored archaeological treasure: there, under several layers of construction sediment from different eras, were pieces of objects, clothes, pipes, and ornaments carried by new slaves being brought to the Brazilian empire from 1811 to 1843.<sup>58</sup> Recently, the city's mayor, Eduardo Paes, authorized the construction of modern stairways that cover most of the archaeological area, leaving open a small square where people can see a fragment of the stones used in construction in the imperial era. This entire area, including the nearby Pedra do Sal, the “Largo da Prainha” square, and the recently discovered “*Cemitério dos*

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<sup>58</sup> In: <http://riotimesonline.com/brazil-news/rio-travel/cais-do-valongo-rios-african-heritage/#>

*Pretos Novos*” (The New Blacks Cemetery),<sup>59</sup> is an embodiment of Black memory. Some of these spaces recently became historical patrimony preservation sites. “Pedra do Sal,” a small area around a colossal stone between the old port area and Conceição hill, was where the enslaved deposited salt bags that came on the ships. From this point, the salt was dispatched throughout the city. In the early 1800s, this area became inhabited by freed Blacks and also received freed or runaway slaves from the state of Bahia. Several samba writers and singers and Candomblé priestesses including Tia Ciata worked or lived near this area, now facing an accelerating process of urban remodeling. In the past ten years, Pedra do Sal gained the status of quilombo. It is now a big tourist center and a site of samba music presentations three days a week.

For Zózimo’s interventions, event staff put up large photographs of Black people who were/are somehow a part of that area’s history on electric post lights along the street that goes from the Largo da Prainha to the Cais do Valongo. The photographs were framed in *Capim Santa Fé*,<sup>60</sup> a type of straw that has ritual meaning in the Candomblé religion. On the left of the street the Largo da Prainha square surrounded by restaurants functioning in buildings from the early 1900s and serving typical carioca food such as fried sardines. One of these restaurants is the famous Angú do Gomes, whose expertise is the *Angú*—a type of porridge made of corn or manioc flour with pieces of meat, generally associated with Afro-Brazilian cuisine.

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<sup>59</sup> “New Blacks” in this case means the recently arrived Africans.

<sup>60</sup> *Panicum Prionitis*.

In the square, I saw Zózimo, all in white, seated in a straw chair. At his left were several vases with flowers and plants: *Espada de São Jorge* (Saint George's sword) and white *Palmas* (gladiolus). In front of the vases were ritual offerings of roots, seeds, and cereals such as yellow corn, popcorn, and yam. At the right side of Zózimo, several Candomblé priestesses and the actress Léa Garcia were seated. In front of them, a semi-circle of candles burned. Hilton Cobra opened the circuit of "Urban Interventions" by reading a text presenting the goals of the work, the meaning of the Valongo area to Black Brazilians, and the importance of resisting cultural and spatial appropriation.

After the reading, the *jongo*<sup>61</sup> group "Jongo da Serrinha" performed, and when the presentation was over, everyone started to walk to the next two (and concurrent) events: a performance and a sit-in at the stairways of the Valongo. When we arrived at the old port we sat on the new stairways looking at the wall projecting images of Bulbul's movies. The bartenders brought us "cachaça," the strong liquor made from fermented sugar cane. The Candomblé priestesses arrived in a van or private cars accompanied by their *ekedis*.<sup>62</sup> Some of the cinema producers and directors from African and Caribbean countries presenting at the cinema festival that was also happening that week arrived at the Valongo. Zózimo came with his family. I introduced myself to him, told him how important it was to me to be there and meet him and see so many Black activists together. He could only answer me with his kind smile and gestures with his hands. He was

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<sup>61</sup> Dramatic dance and music supposedly created by slaves in the rural area of Rio de Janeiro and Minas Gerais state. The origin of this circular dance is attributed to the Banto-Congolese cultural complex.

<sup>62</sup> Title of the women who are the assistants of the *Yalorixás*.

recovering from a delicate surgery and it was not possible to talk or walk. In fact, he died a month and a half after this event.

After the projections, we walked back two blocks and turned right to Pedra do Sal. By 8pm around 30 of us had arrived there. The bar serving drinks, beer, and appetizers was preparing the tables for that night's show. This night was an atypical event: Pedra do Sal hosted an evening with "*forró*" rhythm—a northeast musical genre that became very popular in Rio with the immigration of people from the northeast states to escape drought and make money Rio and São Paulo. In the last 15 years, the genre gained a new pace, accent, and lyrics that became appreciated by middle- and upper-class college students. A new derivation of *forró* was created, and it became known in Rio and São Paulo as "Forró Universitário" (College Forro). When these Black people in fancy and ritual clothing appeared and sat at the tables to chat, some of them foreigners carrying cameras and camcorders, it caused surprise and a certain uneasiness among the few White customers arriving to the *forró* show. The way they looked at us made me reflect on why Zózimo Bulbul's work was necessary: we were at one of the centers of Black history and resistance in the city of Rio de Janeiro, recognized as a quilombo, yet our Black presence was looked upon as excessive, or as if it was disrupting the normalcy of this now touristic space.

Zózimo's *Intervenções Urbanas* speaks through silence, intimate conversations, and the ritualistic content of the work. The elements of Candomblé, the priestesses, and the visual record of the ancestors create a bond between the living and the ones who are not in this world anymore, but that still exist somehow, just as Zózimo himself, whose



closeness to death was already felt by himself and his friends. As Hilton said during the Comuns gathering in December: “I wrote that text thinking about Zózimo’s death.”

Zózimo’s work has a ceremonious silence. The work is not a presentation to an audience, but a collective act of remembering, reconnecting, retelling, and re-encountering people from across the Diaspora. The coincidence of this intervention with the beginning of the cinema festival organized by the Centro Afro Carioca de Cinema was intended to be a reunion. It was intended to be a reunion between those who left the motherland, lived through the Atlantic crossing, landed on the shores of Brazil, and survived with those who stayed and endured colonialism in Africa, now re-united through art. *Intervenções* is a remembrance of the ancestors, a recognition of the centrality of the sacred (Alexander 2005) in the Black experience, and a reconnection with global Blackness. There was no exteriority to this project. This lack of exteriority could be thought of as a collective act of self-making that concentrates its efforts in collective participation and construction of a communality rather than in presenting or explaining something to an audience. At the same time, Hilton Cobra’s speech, an explicit political stand about the exclusion faced by Blacks in Brazil, made clear that memory of ancestors, religiosity, and art are not dissociated from engagement with concrete social action.

#### 5.1.d – “O Cheiro da Feijoada” (The Smell of the Feijoada)

This play was created, directed, and interpreted by the actress Iléa Ferraz with the presence of a percussionist. *Feijoada* is a traditional Brazilian dish made with black beans and pork meat. In this play, Iléa plays the character of an old woman who had been

a slave. Now she works as a washing lady who is near a river washing clothes when she suddenly remembers she forgot a pot with beans on the stove.

When she remembers her pot, she starts to go back in time and remember the day she created a new dish on her master's farm. She retells that day while washing more clothes: the master and his wife—also played by Iléa—were nervous about some strange people watching the farm. The master tells her to prepare food because he thinks that the “weird” people could be pacified if he offers them a meal. Iléa stirs the long cloths that she had been washing as if they were the ingredients given by the master to prepare the meal. The stick she uses to help her walk becomes the spoon with which she mixes black beans and leftover pork meat while singing a little song: “*o cheiro da feijoada yaya, yaya*” (the smell of the feijoada, yaya, yaya).<sup>63</sup> The mistress is distraught: her daughter cannot be found in the house. The master and mistress start to think that the “weird” people who stopped in front of the farm kidnapped her. Then the old slave makes her revelation; the daughter is in the slave court with her lover, a young enslaved man. A blonde and a black doll emerge from the fabrics as the old slave manipulates them as if they are having sex and then sleeping next to each other. She returns to stir the beans for awhile, singing with happiness. When the music becomes more euphoric, she leaves the stage singing and dancing among the audience.

In this theater scene, we can see the re-enactment of miscegenation theories, re-framed by a Black woman. She inverts the narrative of White master and Black enslaved

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<sup>63</sup> “Yayá” or ãiá could be read as an onomatopoeic sound, but also and more often means “slave owners,” as an appropriation of the word “Sinhá” (mistress, landlady, madam). Likewise, the word could reference African words, since “Yá” means “Mother” in Yoroba.

women to state that since early times White women went with Black men. The continuity between the more or less accidental creation of the national dish and the sexual encounter between a White woman and a Black slave became a reason for celebration, using the smell of *feijoada* as a metaphor for Blackness itself. According to this play, the seductions of Black food and Black sex become the key elements of Brazilian identity formation.

The immense creativity in the usage of scenic elements, and Iléa's versatile interpretation and use of storytelling techniques that parallel her immersion in and transition through different characters, reaffirms her talent as a multi-faceted artist. At the same time, the main character, the old Black woman who was a former slave, stresses the same old stereotypes: the half mad, decrepit Black woman dressed in colorful fabric that resembles rags, or the overlapping of many layers of fabric as worn by some homeless people in Brazil. The colorful fabric that matches Iléa's clothing (mostly yellow and green) could be interpreted as a celebration of the colors of the Brazilian flag, thus a celebration of Brazilianness. By solving the conflict through the romantic union between mistress and slave, the play paints a joyful image of slavery that is corroborated by the enthusiastic rhythm of the percussion, and although Iléa's song at the beginning opposes this happiness, the general idea returns to the celebration of *mestizaje*. "O cheiro..." also reaffirms the centrality of Black women's domestic labor in the economy of Brazilian national formation and links the roots of this formation to the present by connecting the rhetoric of "weird" people at the farm's outskirts with the audience's presence.

## 5.2- Conceptual frames

In these performances, we can see different approaches to the narratives of Rio and of Brazil's formation. The fact is that everything started with slavery, which echoes both in the attempt to celebrate Black resistance ("Louvor à consciência negra") and in the attempt to resist gentrification and to preserve memory ("Intervenções"). The memory or narrative of slavery also echoes in the celebration or critique of Black women's work ("Ama de Leite" and "O Cheiro da feijoada"). Most of these works bring a reflection about the deployment of Black bodies in the constitution of a nation. "O Cheiro da Feijoada" creates a comic depiction of the encounter between masters and slaves that resulted in modern Brazilians, while highlighting the contribution of Blacks. The work "Intervenções Urbanas" addresses the specificities of Black communities, territories, and movements of resistance through the iconographic display of Black influential figures, and through the re-appropriation of gentrifying urban space. It is necessary to take into consideration that the rhetoric of "O Cheiro da Feijoada" is much more palatable to the larger public; this joyful representation of a "this is how Brazil was born" moment gave the play considerable success and made it possible for the actress to travel through Brazil and to Angola. We could think about this as a marketing strategy, the play being a commercial work that made it possible for the actress, director, and graphic artist to invest in other projects.

Three of these performances happened during Black Awareness Week: "Ama de Leite," "Intervenções Urbanas," and "Louvor à Consciência Negra." While this period is very significant for Black activists, being the state's recognition of the quilombos's fight

for freedom (an achievement of the Black Movement itself), the concentration of the events related to “Afro-Brazilians” indicates another reality. Iléa Ferraz told me that the best chance to get some money or to be hired to do something relatively big is during Black Awareness Week, “basically the only time of the year when there’s some work for us.” The state, in all its spheres, demands its specialized “Negro” secretariats to do something about the “Negro,” and then with the few resources that these secretariats have, they hire professional actors, dancers, and singers to present something in relation to the theme. In general, there is not a lot of time to prepare or to work together; thus, pieces of other choreographies are reassembled to make sense in this context. The assumption, or rather the prejudice, of the people in charge of promoting this type of celebration is that the text needs to be something popular, since events like this are appealing to an audience mainly composed of lower class workers, the majority of whom are not familiar with theater, who are on their way back home from downtown to the northern region or to Baixada Fluminense.

Although “Ama de Leite” enacted a critique and “Herança Africana” an act of resistance, the same logic of state sponsorship for “minorities” is evidenced here. The only way these artists and producers can get some funding is by justifying their artistic work by associating it with Black Awareness Week. Outside the niche of this specificity, there is no interest in sponsoring a regular tradition of Black art that is not in accordance with the standard narrative of “traditional” Afro-Brazilian culture, i.e., samba music and Carnival, both already regulated and dominated by White producers and mass media corporations.

The performances remember and remark on Black territories. Such territories, in the works analyzed here, are sometimes spatio-geographic, as in the case of the kitchen (and the cuisine), the farm, and the slave quarters in “O cheiro da Feijoada” and “Louvor à consciência negra.” These territorialities also refer to the city as a whole and to the temporality of the Black presence, as in “Herança Africana.” Sometimes these territorialities refer to the body and to the embodiment of a gendered blackness, as in “Ama de Leite.” There is, particularly in a work such as “Ama de Leite,” an effort to make archives talk. The set of discourses and documents that registered Black bodies as chattel property become a tool in the contestation of racial subjugation. The effect of sexual differentiation to the regime of slavery appears as critique in “Ama de leite,” and as reification and subversion in “O cheir”—reification because the old slave telling the story re-introduces recurrent narratives about the role Black enslaved women had during slavery, and subversion because it reverts the gender norms of the sexual encounter between Whites and Blacks.

### 5.3 – “Do you think this is just a walk?”: the metaphor of walking in Eliete Miranda’s Afro- Brazilian dance class.

In this section I will go from the description of plays to the description and interpretation of the Afro-Brazilian dance class I took with the dancer and teacher Eliete Miranda. The decision to discuss a dance class is due to the fact that Afro-Brazilian dances represent an important sphere of artistic creation, and also offer the basis for actors’ training in Companhia dos Comuns plays and workshops. In addition, certain

genres of Afro-Brazilian dances, such as the “Dança dos Orixás” (Orishas’s dance), have fundamentally dramatic narratives that interpret the Orixás’ powers or that narrate through dance the episodes and adventures of a given Orixá. In this section, I will reflect on the meaning of the metaphor of walking in Eliete Miranda’s class and relate it to both the religious view of Candomblé and to the Black Movement’s activism.

Eliete Miranda is from Bahia; she danced with the Olodum dance ensemble. She has a strong physical build. Considering the average body type of Black dancers, I can see why she was not so successful in the field of dance. She is a good teacher though, and very rigid. She likes to make jokes and laugh, but when it comes to discipline during class, she can be very strict. I saw her lecturing two young women who came to class and had stopped the exercises two times, once to go the bathroom, and the other time to rest. Eliete made clear that this is not allowed in her class. We were supposed to stop only during the breaks, or we were expected to ask her permission to leave the class. I liked this sense of devotion and commitment; this was how I was trained in theater as well. But I also knew that Eliete is trying to show something else: that “Dança-Afro” (Afro-dance) is not about leisure time; it requires technique, discipline, and knowledge. It is a performance of seriousness and respect to a type of work upon which several stereotypes are attached.

Eliete has been teaching “Afro-Bahia dance” in different spaces in Rio. Her style of dance is the same as the Olodum ensemble, developed by Mestre King during the 1970s, but also influenced by Mercedes Baptista, a dancer who studied with Katherine

Durham.<sup>64</sup> The Afro-Brazilian dance that Eliete teaches uses narratives from the Yoruba Orixás to introduce dance steps that are associated with each Orixáa and the narratives, stories, and adventures of each Yoruba deity. She also teaches the samba reggae and other Bahia rhythms.

In the first class I attended, before class began Eliete gave us a sheet of paper with the contour of a head draw on it. She gave us a notebook where we were supposed to keep track of our experiences in the class. In the middle of the room, she made a circle with squares of papers in different colors. She asked us to choose one color, which I later realized referred to the colors associated with the Orixás. Then she played music and asked us to walk in the rhythm. We start to walk and ten minutes later she said, “Nobody is in the right rhythm. Did you think it would be that easy?” As we kept striving to find the rhythm, some of us were able to get the right pace, and I was surprised to start a class on Afro-Brazilian dance this way.

Throughout the numerous classes I took, she always came back to walking, and it always proved to be a difficult thing to do, not only finding the rhythm but collectively keeping the rhythm. It was during one of these classes, while she was giving her regular warnings that we were in the wrong rhythm—intended to compell us to try harder—and we were all sweaty and breathing rapidly, that I heard her saying, “Do you think this is

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<sup>64</sup> Mercedes Baptista, born in 1921, is a Brazilian dancer with a background in classic ballet who devoted her career to the study of the ritual dances of Candomblé and to the creation of choreographies based on the Orishas. Mercedes received a scholarship in 1950 to study for over a year at the Katherine Durham ballet school. After her return to Brazil in 1951 she created the Mercedes Baptista Folklorical Ballet. In: [http://www.wikidanca.net/wiki/index.php/Mercedes\\_Baptista](http://www.wikidanca.net/wiki/index.php/Mercedes_Baptista)



just a walk?” When we stopped, she started to talk about the walk and I understood that the act of walking was a principle of the dance and of the politics behind the dance. The walk was not only to find the pace. As she said, “When I walk I carry the weight of my ancestors.” At this moment I understood the meaning of walking in her pedagogy; the walk in her dance was a metaphor for the whole history of Black people’s trajectory. The “weight of ancestors” was not only referring to the ancestors in the religious way, but also to the trajectory of Black fighters.

In another class, Eliete humorously commented, “There is a march for diversity going on, isn’t there? Well, here we have the march of sameness.” Her remark emphasized the collective aspects she was invested in creating during our classes, and once more strengthened the relationship between an artistic practice centered in the religious values of Candomblé and the collectivity of political struggle.

In our first class she explained the significance of the head as central to the understanding of personhood in the cosmovision of Candomblé. The head, *Ori*, is where the Orixá lives. Thus the Orixá of one’s person is the owner of her/his head. By writing down on the drawing our feeling and perceptions of our bodies during and after the exercises, we were reconnecting body and *Ori*. The scholar and writer Beatriz Nascimento said that

...the ORI is the most occult word, because it is the man, it is ME. Because it is the person, the identity. The individual, the collective, the political, and the historical identity. ORI is the new name of the History of Brazil. Maybe ORI is the new name of Brazil. This name created by us, the great mass of the oppressed, of the repressed. Repressed before and after oppressed and tortured. Transgressors. Then we are orphans. Thus we organized this Movement these

past 15 years,<sup>65</sup> and ORI<sup>66</sup> accompanies the Movement when it seeks institutionalization. The open processes of speech. (Ratts 2007: 65, my translation)

The exercise of writing down our feelings and perceptions of ourselves in the drawing reconnected all these levels of identity that are also marked in the collective walk. The artistic work resembled both the process of religious initiation and of political (and historical) development of Brazilians of African descent.

#### 5.4- “The Revolt of the Turbans”: the Afrocentric paradigm of Blackness among the younger generation of black activists

This third section describes and discusses the march organized by different collectives of Black students during the protests that erupted in Rio (and other cities in Brazil) in May 2013. Although contact with these collectives was not originally part of my fieldwork, I felt compelled to know them because they have an important role in terms of Black youth politics in Rio and unavoidably they were at almost all of the “Black events” I attended. Besides, I heard the names of those collectives during the Akoben meetings as well, because at least two persons from Companhia Dos Comuns presented their individual projects in the events held by one of the collectives. By describing the march and discussing its aftermath my intention is to think about the

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<sup>65</sup> Beatriz Nascimento is referring to the Black Movement initiated in 1974.

<sup>66</sup> Here she is making a reference to the movie “Ori,” directed by Rachel Gerber, that took 11 years to finish. Thus, in Beatriz Nascimento’s view there is a correlation between the process of the movie’s creation and the development of the Black Movement. See: Ratt, Alex. 2007: 64-5.

intellectual and symbolic prototypes that a new generation of Black activists deploy in their collective processes of racial self-making.

The academic collective of Black women, Aqualtune,<sup>67</sup> organized a “Blacks only” march amidst the protests that started in Rio in June 2013 against abusive prices in public transportation fares, and against political corruption. The Aqualtune collective named their participation in the protest “The turbans’ revolt.” Their idea was that everyone must wear a turban as a sign of racial identification with Blackness and the claim for *Africanness*. We stayed at the front of the Candelária church, first making signs stating several demands and expressing discontent with racism and sexism to be held during the march. The members of another Black academic collective composed mainly of men also came. First they said they would not participate, even making a mockery of the mobilization, and then eventually they joined the group.

After the signs were ready, people organized in a circle. Someone had brought speakers and the marchers started to chant slogans and make speeches. The different collectives started to fight for the speakers, or even fight to see who was supporting the “sisters” and “brothers” in their speeches. Then we finally started to march. There were a large number of people in the street that night. Some people say that there were around one million people that night, although the media said there was much less. There were also thousands of military policemen and over ten helicopters (some from the army, and others from TV channels). Our group had around 50 people walking very close to each

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<sup>67</sup> Aqualtune was generally referred to as the wife of Zumbi dos Palmares, although there is no concrete evidence of her existence, and even the information regarding Zumbi himself is imprecise.

other, even holding each other's arms to not "let the Whites in." Our signs were all about race, racism, and genocide. I heard a White woman behind us saying: "This is not about Black problems." One of the slogans was, "Anyone who is not jumping is racist." I thought it was a silly thing to shout, and my colleagues were saying it in a playful way that made many Whites around us smile with amusement, hoping to show they were not racist. Meanwhile, the Black people I saw around our group seemed to be embarrassed by the performance. Someone started to sing the Pan-Africanist anthem: "I am African with much pride." They sang it in response to the Brazilian national anthem. I did not feel like it was something I wanted to sing; I felt embarrassed in that moment imagining what my colleagues and friends born on the African continent would think about it. Then, one participant, an openly homosexual man, start to shout things like "Hailie Selassie does not represent me."<sup>68</sup> I thought it was so brave to defy the dominant parameters of Black masculinity present there, and more broadly, Blackness. I also started to think how positive it was to have all of these divergent groups walking together.

The aftermath, though, was a disaster. As I heard and read on Facebook, during the meeting to evaluate the march, the collectives had a strong argument. Much of the argument revolved around two women accusing a man in the other collective of calling one of the women a "whore" and that "all women in this women's movements are bitches." Some witnesses said that the same man made homophobic remarks against the gay man who was shouting, "Haile Sallassie does not represent me." In response, the women wrote a letter accusing this collective of sexist and homophobic attitudes.

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<sup>68</sup> Emperor of Ethiopia: Hailie Sailassie is revered as the incarnation of Jesus Christ by the Rastafaris.

Activists and Black feminists including myself supported the letter, but it also received criticism from the supporters of the men's group. The tone of these critiques in general focused on saying that the attitude of "airing dirty laundry" only weakens the Black collectives and gives Whites a reason to mock Black activism. There were even comments questioning the need to bring gender and sexuality issues to the core of the Black struggle, advocating that such issues would only disperse the focus on the racial question. Such treatment of gender and sexuality issues resembles similar conflicts presented in an extensive body of work produced by Black feminists and queer scholars in the US and Brazil (Carneiro 2003; Cohen 1997; Combahee River Collective 1993; Hull 1982).

The dominance of Afro-centric ideas is prominent among the academic Black collectives. This thinking built their aesthetics, speeches, and the semantics of their words, such as subverting negative meanings associated with Blacks and Blackness, or using the word "*escurecer*" (darkening) instead of "*esclarecer*" (clarifying). Their ideological inspiration was mainly the work of the scholar Molefi Asante, as it was expressed by one of the members of the men's collective. They also align with the ideas of the Brazilian Pan-Africanist activist, theater director, and intellectual Abdias Nascimento, as indicated by a painting representing Abdias on the wall of the meeting rooms where one of the collectives gathers. The men's collective is very refractory about feminism (Black feminisms included), labeling it a White ideology that does not accommodate the demands of Black women. Sometimes they make mention of African

womanism, but it seems to be more of a response to the Black feminists' criticism of their politics than a real knowledge or alignment with this school of thought.

I noticed a lack of dialogue with other social movements within these collectives. They centered their politics in Afrocentric aesthetics by using turbans, dashikis, and African fabrics, by converting to Candomblé, and by using “brother” and “sister” in reference to other Blacks. But as ReFem said to me: “The guys criticize the Carioca funk; how do they expect to talk with people from community-based organizations?” On another occasion, I was discussing this very same issue of lack of communication between community-based mobilizations with one of the women. I mentioned the work of some activists I knew and the woman said, “Can you give me their contact information? We can go there and offer them a workshop.” I took this statement as a signal of academicism, where the Black intellectual positioned herself as the owner of knowledge she imagines the community-based organizers do not have and which they need. In fact, by knowing other activists and community organizers, I can say that they are not concerned with pursuing an Afrocentric style, Kemmetic knowledge, or in reclaiming an essentialized Africanness, as is the central focus in these academic collectives.

Yet, these collectives' attempts to re-animate an idealization of Africa as an essential and homogenous motherland at least offer a valid criticism against the national paradigm of multiculturalism and diversity. By refusing the title of “Afro-Brazilians” and embracing the “Africans in Diaspora” or “Africans,” their performance questions the limits of the insertion of Blacks as citizens of the nation and seeks other ontological

possibilities. In this case, the investment in an alternate model for Blackness relies on the hetero-normative and patriarchal framework of Pan-Africanism and Afro-centrism.

#### 5.5- Chapter conclusion

Throughout this chapter I described, interpreted, and discussed different types of performances. Some of my findings at this moment point out that most Black artistic performances base their narratives on slavery. Some of these performances insist on the paradigm of Black contributions to the national formation and some insist on the value of the memory of Black resistance. Some artistic practices, such as the Orixás's dance, invest in a counter narrative to slavery by presenting and interpreting the life and narratives of Yoruba deities while presenting the dancers as descendents of African queens and kings. In regard to the performance of Blackness—understood as the way Black people construct and publically present themselves as racial/Black beings—it could be said that one of the sources of racial self-making among a new generation of Black students and activists is Afrocentric thought. Many times these attempts fall in the trap of essentialization such as in the case of the Afro-Brazilian dances, with some dancers insisting on a supposed purity of the Yoruba roots of the Orixás dance and denying legitimacy to other genres of Black dances that mix elements from different sources. The same essentialism is observed in Afrocentric collectives with the idealization of Africa sometimes serving the goal of eluding other structures of oppression such as sexism, homophobia, and classicism.

The limited resources and constant exclusion from state sponsored funding opportunities, aligned with the patronizing gaze of the state upon Black expressive culture, creates barriers to the development of a consistent Black artistic project. Given these circumstances, Black artists and producers need to either do what the state expects them to do, or use the small breach of the recent statute of racial equality in order to guarantee a certain degree of autonomy. In addition, there is no interest on the part of the state or private capital in supporting more radical approaches in Black arts and in amplifying the reach of such art projects. Due to this situation, the audience of radical, or at least, critical Black artistic projects remains confined to a small circuit of Black activists, intellectuals, and a few White allies.



## Chapter Six- Confronting the afterlife of slavery: foundational narratives in Companhia dos Comuns projects

This chapter will explore the significance of Companhia dos Comuns projects in terms of the treatment given to the foundational narrative of Blackness as a product of the modern slavery scheme. The first section presents a summary of “Roda do Mundo,” the first play performed by Companhia dos Comuns, and reflects on this work, the subjects approached in it, and the implications of this work to the Comuns’s project of a Black radical theater. In the next section, I will discuss the critique of the play “Roda do Mundo” written by the theater critic Bárbara Heliodora. Departing from Heliodora’s critique of Comuns’s first play, I will argue that this theater critic’s judgment mirrors state and civil society’s perceptions regarding Black behavior that is not in accordance with what is expected from Blacks in a given context. The third section discusses Hilton Cobra’s theater project of creating “the trial of racism.” The chapter invests in the examination of these projects as attempts at an ontological re-organization of the Black being.

6.1- “Roda do mundo” (wheel of the world): black radicality in Companhia dos Comuns first spectacle.

“Roda do Mundo” was launched in 2001. The plot, whose text was a collective creation of the actors and actresses, portrays different scenes in which the actors interpret situations of conflict, violence, and self-hatred experienced by Black people living in a poor community between the “asfalto” (road) and a favela. The characters present their stories and conflicts: Pai Joaquim (Father Joaquim) is a con artist taking advantage of the people’s faith either in Candomblé or in the Christian Neo-Pentecostal religion. Aurora is a mixed-race woman desiring to become White who seeks the help of Pai Joaquim in order to secure the love of Gringão, a White man in charge of drug trafficking in the community. The character Centeonze<sup>69</sup> is a half mad man, conditioned to live in subordination to the Whites. He is a Candomblé devotee and sells sacred herbs in the community. His daughter, Detinha, does not want to follow the tradition and her father’s teachings, she is ambitious and wants to leave the community, so she becomes involved in drug trafficking. Her boyfriend, Águia, a prostitute and drug dealer from another drug cartel, gets in trouble with the local drug cartel. Nascimento is a corrupt policeman who gets extra money from the drug dealers. Penélope is a social worker who considers herself to be White and tries to show solidarity with Dandara, a homeless woman, and Latinha is a young kid making his money from collecting and selling recyclable cans. Verônica is a woman from the favela who decided to enter drug trafficking as an option

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<sup>69</sup> One hundred eleven.

to avoid becoming a domestic worker or a prostitute, the only options she believes to be available to women in the favela. Arandir is a former inmate and former lover of Aurora, who has returned to drug trafficking and works for Gringão. Sônia is a worker who was robbed on the bus and seeks justice. During the entire play, a silent figure of a young black man circulates among the scenes observing the actions of the characters until he is stopped by Veronica who thinks that he looks suspicious.

After the characters introduce their dilemmas their actions are interrupted as Hilton Cobra comes to the center of the stage to incorporate the figure of the *Griot*—the storyteller from West African tradition. He takes the microphone located at the center of the stage and makes a statement against Western civilizational principles, denouncing the richest countries for dominating and exploiting other countries and people. The Griot also denounces the lie of the racial democracy myth in Brazil. During the Griot's speech, image projections show scenes of bombings from the Iraq War in 2011, and scenes of famine in Africa appear on the screen at the back of the stage. After he finishes his lines, the performers, who until then remained seated in a circle on the floor, spring into capoeira and other choreographic elements to transition to the next scene.

In different moments of the play new projections come: they show fragments of interviews with Black activists and intellectuals such as the geographer Milton Santos who asserts that the Brazilian nation has little or no interest in the improvement of the living conditions of Afro-Brazilians. Some scenes occur concurrently with one another, occupying different spaces on the stage. In certain moments the performers make the

capoeira circle and some of them execute movements while others sing songs, which mention the circularity of life and of the world.

Towards the end, the actors and actresses form a bloc and sing a popular samba song: “*Moço não se esqueça que o negro também construiu as riquezas do nosso Brasil*”(Sir, do not forget that the Black also built the wealth of Brazil). In the last scene, while the performers are frozen in their final actions, one actor comes to the center of the stage to declare that “Our story remains unfinished ...” He asks, what will be the resolution of the scenes and of the future of each character? When he delivers the last question: “Will Verônica discover what the kid is up to?” the scene between Verônica and the young black male returns. She is pointing a gun at him and asks: “Will you tell me or not? What do you want?” The kid answers: “Do you want to really know? I want to build my own future.”

Observing the play’s flyer we can see how the Comuns used different elements related to African cultural heritage like the Griot, a storyteller in West African tradition, to name the role of the narrator who comes to the center of the stage at the beginning and at the end of the play to guide the viewer. The capoeira and choreographies based on Afro-Brazilian dance constitute another example of the integration of expressive Afro-Brazilian practices, as well as the use of the samba song. The songs used during the transitions from one scene to another follow the patterns of songs used in capoeira circles, but they were created by the performers specifically for the play, and their meaning is related either to the metaphysics of life’s circularity or to the concrete repetition of a history of violence in Black peoples’ lives. The “traditional” cultural

elements in “Roda do Mundo” are aligned with political discourse and with activism as a clear attack on imperialism through the Griot’s words and the use of images. The context of the social reality faced by poor Blacks in Brazil is presented through fragments of two interviews: one with the geographer Milton Santos affirming the state’s lack of interest in improving the living conditions of Afro-Brazilians, and the second showing a homeless kid saying that a business owner frequently threatened to hire policemen to kill these kids.

These elements of “Roda do Mundo” were based on Cobrinha and the performers’ observations of Brazilian reality and society at the time (2001). The name of the character “Centeonze” is a reference to the one hundred eleven inmates murdered by the military police in 1992 during a rebellion at the Carandiru state prison. The kids talking about homeless children receiving death threats comes from the TV news coverage that followed the killing of eight youths who were sleeping on the stairways of the Candelária church in 1993. These killings perpetrated by the police were not an isolated episode, and cases of homeless children killed by policemen hired by local business owners became frequent in Brazil during the 1990s. Although the historical facts that inform the plot of “Roda do Mundo” are located in the 1990s, the persistence of the same issues today testifies to the unchanged position of Black people. In one of my conversations with the actor and colleague Gustavo Melo we talked about this contemporaneity of “Roda do Mundo” in the face of current events:

Maria: I remember you mentioning something about “Roda do Mundo” being the departure point for all other Comuns theater plays. I thought this is ingenious! Looking at the text, oh man! It’s so absolutely up to date as in the

scene where the character Verônica is frisking the young black male and then the other character, a woman named Sonia says: “Well, maybe I am wrong, maybe it was not him who stole from me. But, how would I know? Blacks are all alike.” If we look at the recent case of the actor Vinicius Romão,<sup>70</sup> He was kept in jail for days after being mistaken as a thief. If he was not recognized as an actor, he could have remained in jail indefinitely! Thus, my question now is what is the foundational myth of the Black being? Which narratives give origin to our ‘being in the world,’ since all of the facts indicate that blacks are consistently read as a threat, and not as “citizens”?

Gustavo: Yes, I think we have this in the flyer of the play. There was a moment when Cobrinha was concerned with the fact that the play was too broad, then I told him that I like it because it was like an agenda of compromise. Then came the idea that “Roda da Mundo” was an “agenda-spectacle” where all of the themes to be approached by the company were announced. The way the play closes with “We want to build our own future” is related to the recognition of a narrative of subordination and with an attempt of building a narrative of the black being that is not this narrative (of subjugation). (2014 – my translation)

Companhia dos Comuns’s work focused on the internal conflicts faced by Black communities. These conflicts are the result of the processes of racialization, of racial interpellation that keep Black people from social opportunities. The emergence of a new future and of new narratives of/for Black life becomes the leitmotiv of Companhia dos Comuns plays, as well as the search for the roots of the problems impairing union, love, and respect among Black people. The fact that the texts in all Comuns’s plays are the result of collective creation and of improvisation indicates a revolutionary approach to theater production in Brazil. The texts are the result of personal interests and beliefs of

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<sup>70</sup> Vinicius Romão is an actor and psychology student. He worked for TV Globo on a soap opera and later got a job as an attendant in a fancy clothing store. In February 2014, Vinicius was mistaken for a thief and spent several days in prison, even after the victim withdrew the accusation and admitted she was pressured by the police to “identify” Vinicius as the criminal who assaulted her. He was sent to jail even after he proved he is a worker. When he was released, his Afro had been cut. He said that there were many cases like his at the police station, many men accused of something and jailed without proof or a trial.

performers that through theater are giving a voice to their subjectivity and individuality instead of delivering lines that are not related to their personal life.

At the same time, a critique of self-hate in Black communities is evident in this play. However, I think there is a dissonance or a gap between the macrostructure of capitalism, neocolonialism, and imperialism addressed by the *Griot* in his solo and the micropolitics of self-hate depicted in the scenes.

The relationship between the macrostructure of racism and domination of the other is sketched but not explored, and maybe this is part of what Gustavo Melo refers to as the “Cobrinha concern”; the play became a discussion of all of the structures and power dynamics that position the Black in a condition of subjugation, violence, and self-hate. Maybe, if we consider the invisible presence of Gringão—the White foreign man who controls crime, fucks the women, and orders the killings in the area—we can consider him the embodiment of Western colonial, patriarchal rule. Gringão constitutes the invisible White gaze around which the Black characters revolve and fight against each other in order to fulfill the demands of White supremacy.

Part of the relationship between the macrostructures of racism, the micropolitics of self-hate, and Black-on-Black violence are addressed in the scene called “*Funk das mulheres*” (Women’s funk), when three of the female characters have their solos. In Detinha’s solo, she argues:

This thing, racial democracy, is a big fake. It is an agreement of non-violence between Whites and Blacks. “Let’s pretend that you are not discriminated against and you pretend you believe.” This is the agreement that sustains things here in Brazil. (...) But things are changing. There is a new generation that is

not willing to comply with this agreement of being silenced about the racial question... (2001- my translation).

The critique of the paradigm of racial democracy in Brazil points to the way society has been structured while at the same time announces the possibility of change through the rise of a Black consciousness that would be able to disrupt the normalcy of such structures of domination. In Sônia's solo, she makes evident how the intersectionality of race and gender works against Black women:

There is the Black world and the White world. The male world and the female world. Do you want to see? White feminists say they are fighting to defend the collective rights of all women; however, the achievements that are the result of the work of Black and White women results in privileges for White women. And the Black Movement? Black women and Black men struggle and get small victories. And who is the privileged? The Black man (2001).

In the next sequence, Aurora's solo explains the effect that the devaluation of race and of gendered Blackness has upon Black women:

Where is the mirror that reflects Aurora? I am Brazilian, I am Black. What is to be a "mulatta"? What is to be like a vampire without an image? Where can I recognize me? I am mixed, but this mix has a Black component that is denied. How can I deny part of myself? (...) That is why Aurora wants to be white, then she will need no man, no White, no foreign White man to be someone, to leave the wheel. But what we need is to create a new Aurora,<sup>71</sup> a new day when we can recognize ourselves. When I can turn on the TV and see myself, go to the cinema and see myself, open the newspaper and see myself not only in the criminal reports (2001).

Aurora's solo denounces the lack of representativeness of Black women in the Brazilian media. At the same time she makes explicit the strategies of survival deployed by her character: to secure a White man as an alternative to improving her life. At the end she

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<sup>71</sup> Name of the character, but also "dawn."



suggests a re-invention of this Black woman that would happen through fully integrating Blacks into society.

Centeonze in one of his dialogue poses an irony about the moral values of society and the applicability of such values in the life of Blacks:

Honesty is a White thing, do you know why? Because honesty means to respect the things that belong to others. The “others” who possess things are the Whites. That is why my family and me obeyed, curved our heads, and respected what belongs to the Whites, then they gave us what we have today (*id, ib*).

Centeonze’s lines makes explicit what the hypocrisy of a racist society tries to deny; that what are called moral values are already based on racial privilege and that Black life is settled upon subordination.

Some moments of the play perform affirmation through negation; for example, Centeonze introduces himself to Penelopy by saying that his name is representative of the number of the portion of land he gained from the governor, not the number of dead in the Carandiru massacre. In another scene he starts by saying he is “Centeonze, not the one hundred eleven who died in Carandiru”; by saying what he is not, he brings back the memory of the one hundred eleven men killed in the massacre. In other moments it is the contrary; the play uses the affirmation of racial stereotypes to denounce the actual mentality of Brazilian society: “Black women always steal,” says Nascimento after taking part of Sônia’s salary; “God made me poor and Black, this is unfair” says Aurora; On a crowded bus two men share a joke: “When does a Black become a person? When he is in

the bathroom, someone knocks on the door and he answers: someone is here.”<sup>72</sup> In these examples, the de-naturalization of racial stereotypes occurs through the performance of naturalization of such racial prejudices that operates as a critique of internalized racism. The shocking revelation and exhibition of such racist comments in a Black performed and created theater piece oppose hegemonic representations of “Afro-Brazilian” culture and move towards a radical critical thinking that opposes folklorization. Such theater cannot please or create amusement for the White gaze.

## 6.2. “Roda do mundo”; or, Black rage, why not?

These were the words that the theater critic Barbara Heliodora, considered the most influential critic in Brazil, devoted to the Companhia dos Comuns’s first play, “Roda do Mundo”:

There have been a few decades that the theater has not had such a violent contestation (...) The group's goal is to bring the universe of the Black to the Brazilian theater, discussing and proposing a new awareness that guarantees his personal, intellectual, and professional growth. Hardly any goal could be more worthy of support and applause ( ... ) Visually, the show is very attractive: the simple scenic solution of Marcio Meirelles and Biza Vianna, and the beautiful costumes created by the latter, as well as Jorginho de Carvalho’s light and Jose Carlos Arandiba’s choreography are all well utilized by the director Marcio Meirelles, giving fluency and good communication in the play. ( ... ) The beautiful language of capoeira, however, is presented only as a value in itself, never as a metaphor to the episodes. The entire cast acts with aplomb, dances well and are obviously engaged in a deep way, with a fair contestation—the only thing to dislike are the several times (scenes) in which the tone becomes wildly aggressive. This is a show that has qualities, but its results are quite confusing in its objectives (2001- my translation).

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<sup>72</sup> “*Tem gente*,” literally, “There is someone” meaning that it is occupied.

There are three things in Barbara Heliodora's criticism that I want to mention here: the first is her generalization about the play's theme as "the universe of the black." Her over-generalization constricts all Blacks in the "universe of the Black," an isolated, homogenous entity without communication with the external world. This critique is made even when the first statement in the play is an accusation against imperialism and capitalism.

My second point is that she does not see the circularity of the capoeira as a metaphor of the play's theme (the wheel, but also the roundness of the world, and the circularity of life and history). It is clear that she is analyzing the elements of spectacle through a standardized view of theater as they appear in the Western theatrical tradition. For example, she understands capoeira as a beautiful demonstration of physical virtuosity, but did not notice that by using this element of Black Brazilian culture, the company was investing in ontologies of Black life. Thus the capoeira is an element of transition from one scene to another, but also a metaphor for the circularity of Black life.

But the other aspect of Heliodora's criticism that is enlightening in this matter of voicing Black demands is the juxtaposition she makes between the beautiful moments of dance and the deplorable moments when the scenes become "wildly aggressive." Why is a wildly aggressive language not a valid expression in a theater scene? And better, why is Black theater beautiful when it has dance, but deplorable when it expresses rage? Why is rage less tolerated from certain categories of people: women and Black people, for example? Considering the alarming rates of state violence and police brutality, why is

docility the highest quality expected from those most likely to suffer deadly violence? Her word choice, “wildly,” stresses the colonial view of Blacks as savages, the others compared to the civilized humans (Bhabha 2008; Fanon 2004).

Still, by watching “Roda do Mundo,” I would not say that the best description for some of the performers lines would be “rage.” It is instead more of an energetic call for action. Actor Gustavo Melo confirmed that this first play established the path the company would follow in the upcoming years, and that what this piece expressed was the desire to “build our own future.” In regard to the violence of the conflicts enacted by the actors and actresses, it is not clear why they should be described as deplorable if they were meant to present a concrete reality experienced by a large number of Black people living in conditions of misery, oppression, and self-hate.

As a “righteous” White person, Barbara Heliadora recognizes the legitimacy of contesting racism; however, being a White person in a Black theater confronted with Black rage is beyond humanitarian tolerance. If on one hand the ascribed and assumed physical virtuosity of Black dancers and performers is praised, on the other hand, the smallest sign of revolt based on the recognition of racial communality generates uncomfortable feelings. At the same time, in her declaration that the play was about the “universe of the Black,” she also determines that such a universe is not good when rage comes up. Her word choice is also very telling about how White Brazilians perceive Blacks: as wild in their lives and actions.

The type of community (audience) who is watching the play frames the reception of the performers’ texts and of the narrator’s call. That means that a person like me has a

different reading of what Heliodora criticizes as wild and aggressive, and this issue of reception calls attention to the generalized fear of an angry Black man, the fear that makes a Black kid look older, cold, and angry. It sounds like rage to those who are not part of the community, as the teaching of Critical Race Theory is sometimes labeled as “reverse racism” in the US.

Departing from the aversion or fear of confronting Black rage or assertiveness, we can start to delineate how the Akoben movement itself is perceived in its concrete demands for inclusive funding distribution. Such types of requests or accusations of appropriation, such as in the video “Cultural Eugenics,” are read as Black rage or at least, as a disruption of the narratives about a shared “Brazilian” culture. One example is the episode narrated by Líbia Besouro and Simone Cerqueira. They worked for seven years in a theater company coordinated by a White man and focusing on “Afro-Brazilian” themes. By the time of the suspension of the funding competition for Black producers, this theater director made a public statement asserting that “finally reason has prevailed” and that “culture has no color, as some people were trying to make others believe.” “Some people” refers to the Akoben collective and its demand for the implementation of Affirmative Action in the initiatives of the Ministry of Culture. The director’s remarks make the whole struggle of Akoben sound like a sort of betrayal against a supposed neutrality in cultural production. The fact that there are some Black artists protesting and then questioning this neutrality poses a threat to his position and to the entire system of artistic production and distribution. Once more Black rage/demand is unbearable.

### 6.3 - The trial of racism

Hilton Cobra mentioned his new theater project at least three times while I was doing fieldwork. On one of these occasions, he said:

I want to create a trial, the trial of racism. I want to sentence the three pillars of racism. So I am thinking of using Caliba's island ("The Tempest") and have this trial there. I need to discover what the third pillar is. Two of them I already know: Religion and science. (2012- my translation)

Cobrinha wants to use the frame of Shakespeare's play "The Tempest" to discuss how racism was created and maintained. The storyline of "The Tempest" happens on an imaginary island where the nobleman Prospero, usurped by his brother Antonio, tries to restore his and his daughter Miranda's rights. Prospero uses illusion and magic to trap his treacherous brother by conjuring a tempest that brings the ship with the brother to the island. This nobleman keeps two slaves: the mischievous but good Ariel who is serving Prospero because the nobleman saved him from a trap made by Sycorax, an Algerian witch, and Caliban, the deformed son of Sycorax and a native to the island. Caliban taught Prospero how to survive on the island, but after attempting to rape Miranda, he was made a slave (Shakespeare 2013). This play has been analyzed by post-colonial theorists (Mannoni 1990) and Aimé Césaire adapted the story in "Une tempête," setting the island in Haiti and transforming Caliban into the hero whereas Prospero is the villain (Césaire, 2000).

It was not clear to me if Hilton Cobra was basing his project on Shakespeare's play, on Césaire's version, or on both plays. I knew that he knows Aimé Césaire's version because he mentioned her on another occasion. The fact that Cobrinha refers to

“Caliban island,” instead of saying “The Tempest,” reflects that he corroborates the critique denouncing the play as a colonial project and the fact that Caliban is the native usurped from his land. But what draws my attention is that he is not interested in re-creating the play; he is invested in creating a new dramatic action using a known reference. In this case, the dramatic action is the judgment of racism as a fact originated by specific sets of Western regimes of knowledge, specifically religion and science as two of these discourses that led to racism. Hilton’s project points simultaneously to the need to de-construct history as it has been told from a hegemonic point of view and the need to create narratives about Black life (Caliban) for Black people.

A noticeable characteristic in some of the company’s plays is the presence of a narrator, the figure in epic theater who breaks the wall of mimesis to speak directly to the audience’s reason and senses. One could ask: “In which ways are these Black performances different from theatrical forms such as Bertold Brecht’s epic theater?” While the structure of tragedy seeks to provoke catharsis through recognition, fear, and pity of the hero’s pain and extinction (Aristotle 1970), the epic genre seeks to rationalize and reflect oppression (Brecht and Willet 1964; Boal 2004). As a professional actor and director who graduated from a theater school that follows Western traditions of theater, Hilton Cobra acknowledges the two genres of epic and tragedy. As a Black activist who seeks to decolonize the Black aesthetic experience, he uses these genres and the archive produced by these genres to make them tell other stories. Thus, the performers in “Roda do Mundo” do not break the wall of representation, but their words are more an

impassioned call for revolt than a rational inquiry about the reasons for conflict and its possible solutions.

Actors and actresses of Companhia dos Comuns spoke on more than one occasion about how the reaction of the audience, the commitment of the performances, and the energy that they felt in the theater during and after their plays transcended pure aesthetic pleasure. There is, in the Comuns's plays, a search for the ritualistic, an appeal to the memory of ancestors and mentors that seeks a collective communion rather than distancing the audience from mimeses in order to critically analyze the problem represented.

In regard to what is different in theater formats derived from Brechtian theater, including Augusto Boal's Theater of the Oppressed and the Companhia dos Comuns' project, it can also be said that the Marxist basis of these formats leads them to focus on the grammar of oppression and exploitation originated by class struggle (Wilderson 2003). It is necessary to raise consciousness because the exploited have been alienated from their consciousness and from their labor power. The exploited, the workers, are human beings who have been oppressed and exploited by their own kind. Whereas we can still affirm that Black life is under oppression, the totality of Black experience within modernity cannot be defined only by oppression. In this way, Comuns's plays invest in re-telling the foundational moments of the Black experience in modernity, situating the present as a condition originated by racism. Thus, to a certain extent it does not matter if the frame is the epic theater or the tragedy. The resonance of these words and theatrical



actions is not loyal to these traditions; rather, Comuns' plays resonate with what Moten conceptualizes as "tragic political despair":

This is what "BLACK DADA NIHILISMUS" is about: the absence, the irrecoverability of an originary and constitutive event; the impossibility of a return to an African, the impossibility of an arrival at an American, home. (2003: 94)

This state of simultaneous political despair and black utopia is precisely what the theater critic Barbara Heliodora was not able to understand.

During my interview with actor Rodrigo Santos, he talked about his academic project in philosophy. He was seeking the basis of a Black tragedy investing in the study of African philosophers such as Cheik Diop and the principles of capoeira Angola.<sup>73</sup> At the same time, Rodrigo has an appreciation of Nietzsche's philosophy and views of the tragic genre. To Rodrigo, Nietzsche provides a critique of Western logo-centric reason, while at the same time recognizing the high quality of the Africans. To this actor, the statement: "Happiness is African"<sup>74</sup> is the recognition of a kind of superiority of Africans, as well as the supposed capacity of Black people to endure more pain without collapsing; it is a statement about the strength of Black people.

I am not the only one who thinks that this is problematic. In the book, *Existence in Black: an anthology of black existential philosophy*, William Preston reveals the racist aspects of Nietzsche thought and remembers that the idea 'Blacks endure more pain' was

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<sup>73</sup> Capoeira Angola: First style of the martial arts of capoeira. The name is a reference to the place from where the movements that constitute this martial art supposedly came: Angola. This style of capoeira is considered the original style, and closer to the traditions that originated it.

<sup>74</sup> Nietzsche, F. ?

at the core of many cruel scientific experiments using Black people (1997). Women's organizations and scholars have pointed to the fact that Black women received less anesthesia during C-sections based on the same assumption (Werneck et al. 2000). How does the stereotype become strength? Taking the idea of happiness being a permanent characteristic of Black people, we easily find several examples of stereotyping processes that animate the idea that Blacks, even when enslaved, could find amusement (Hartman 1997). But if, as Hartman asserts, "the infamous propensity of the Negro for mimicry and imitation is tantamount to insurgency," (41) then the Africanness, the Blackness of a state of joy could open a door to evade despair and loss. In the same way, the capacity to endure pain as the character of 'superior' men and women allows for the entrance of a new hero: the Black tragic that Rodrigo seeks.

But is tragedy a genre for the Negro? In the *Poetics*, Aristotle defines the tragedy as the mimeses of the "superior man's" actions (Aristotle 1970). The grandiosity of the tragedy is given not because someone was destroyed by reason of destiny or by reason of his/her decisions, but primarily because he/she is a superior being, above ordinary mortals: kings, queens, princes, titans. When Freud drags from Greek tragedy the cradle of modern man's mind, he takes the narratives of myths of origin from a group whose linearity descended in his "own kind." Freud and other canons of Western thought are the descendents of the Oedipus lineage, not in the biological sense, but in the sense of a lineage of power knowledge. In Greek tragedy, the remembrance of a primal slaying that inaugurates an era or peoplehood has the function of raising terror, fear, and piety (Aristotle). The tragic genre works as a process of redress made possible through the

remembrance of someone who takes the place of the community, an honorable spirit or a noble person who takes the burden of self-sacrifice for the sake of the community to which he/she belongs. The tragic hero has the empathy of the community for which he/she dies.

*In All the things that you could be if Sigmund Freud's wife was your mother: psychoanalysis and race*, Hortense Spillers enunciates that our narratives were interrupted and that the middle passage offers some of the qualities of a myth. Although the author alleges she is not claiming the existence of a “trans-historical black psyche,” (2003:728) she claims we need to consider that:

The slave trade, of course, bears none of the advantages of myth, but shows some of its earmarks, as the Atlantic trade might be thought of as one of the founding events of modern history and economy. But for our purposes here, the execrable trade, in radically altering the social system in Old and New World “domestic community” is as violent and disruptive as the never-did-happenstance of mythic and oneiric inevitability. In another words, this historical event, like a myth, marks so rigorous a transition in the order of things that it launches a new way of gauging time and human origin: It underwrites, in short, a new genealogy defined by a break with Tradition — with the Law of the Ancestors and the paternal intermediary. (2003:732)

During fieldwork, several performance events and regular conversations indicated the consistency of slavery as the foundational moment of the Black being. But is there any room for us to decide or create new foundational moments? A glimpse of possibility is elaborated by Frank Wilderson in his re-elaboration of a Fanon quote, “‘The end of the world’ is the possibility for a recovering of Black absence, precisely because in the case of the Black being, there is no way to conciliate the tragedy of existence with the existence lived as absence” (Wilderson, 2008:102). How can the Black being be the

tragic hero while simultaneously an existential void? Thus, the seizure of the Black subjective, political, and cartographic existence constitutes both the tragic in Black existence and the impossibility of being recognized as the agent of this history. The tragedy in our perspective is to recognize that we are existential voids that are not in the symbolic horizon of other “humans.” The Black being becomes the one whose narrative or myth of foundation is precisely the negation of personhood. We know about slaying; we are the ones endlessly dying different deaths, and these deaths are not meant to bring a new era for our kind. What else could possibly redress the effect of this primal (Black) death—social death—other than a new foundational massacre?

The quest presented here is related to unveil the foundational narrative/s being told in these Black performances. Concerning this quest, the middle passage triggers the memory of the central Black foundational narrative: being born into slavery. In this regard, Spillers suggests that:

I think that I am prepared to say that those markings on the social body of the New World Africanity are the stripes of an oedipal crisis (for male and female children) that can only be cleared away now by a “confrontation” with the “scene” of its occurrence, but *as if* a myth. In other words, the discontinuity that the abandoned son demarcates here must be carried out as a kind of new article of faith in the *non*-Traditional, in the discovery of the Law of the living, not the dead, and in the circulation of a new social energy that confronts the future, not the past (2003: 732-3).

By discovering the fact of slavery as our foundational moment and assuming our discontinuity, we can create conditions not only as to contest the past of slavery but, more importantly, to challenge the continuity of its afterlife.

## Chapter Seven -The awkward moment of revelation

I was trying to advance ... very concentrated in my scholarly pursuits ... hardly looking at what I had been writing so far...trying to locate what I had lost after the computer shutdown. Maria Andrea, the southern Brazilian light skinned Black girl, daughter and granddaughter of washerwomen... She who dreamed about leaving a city of 50,000 inhabitants in this Brazilian deep south... *Me*. I was looking very hard at the letters and paragraphs describing the life trajectories of the artists; I was thinking about Black visibility, about ontology, thinking how to say things about people in a way they would like to hear about themselves. Suddenly, the letters and paragraphs became diffuse. My eyes were tired of following the cursor rapidly over the pages, tired of seeing one hundred pages sliding up and down while my brain was simultaneously rethinking the fieldwork. And remembering, remembering. Part of my brain was thinking of possible combinations of different sections, another still of something different. I was losing the focus... getting dizzy.... the blocks of text seemed to dance for a little while with my tired eyes following this imaginary stir. I think I went someplace else, towards a dimension beyond words. Towards the dense secrecy of existence. Next, I remembered two things more or less at the same time, and then I had a hallucination of sorts. The things I remembered: “Kindred”<sup>75</sup> and the episode with the Black postal service worker I met in the Gateways Graduate Housing while leaving for a walk. I was leaving with my earphones, inspired, listening to Orishas’<sup>76</sup> “A lo cubano” and thinking about the ‘African

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<sup>75</sup> Octavia Butler. 2003.

<sup>76</sup> Cuban hip hop musical group.

revolution,' I mean, Black liberation, the final stand...ha. On the first half of the stairway, I saw this Black man walking fast among the buildings. He was more or less 35 years old, medium height, medium weight, very short hair (maybe turning gray), in jeans and a loose brown sweater. He stared at me, and I don't know why it seemed to me that his eyes were showing fear, or that there was something wrong with him. It lasted three, maybe five seconds but by his look, by his way of walking, I knew he did not live there, nor work for the UT maintenance staff. I think he thought that I was suspicious of him; he looked at something in his hand, and then to the building number and then to the box in his hands again, and I understood; he was a postal service worker. I was feeling weird, because the whole situation was weird; I was in my academic utopia when an everyday event of meeting an unknown Black man walking fast could scare a Black woman. And I was feeling guilty, but also embarrassed because I actually thought that *he* was scared of something (maybe me, because I had opened the door abruptly and ran through down the stairway). Even more awkward was trying to understand my own emotions: why did I feel relieved when I realized that he was the postal service man? I went for my jog, thinking back on Fanon, of course. This had been for sure a case of Blacks looking to each other as "look, a negro," proof that we also constitute our visions towards ourselves the way White supremacy sees us; we look at each other through the White gaze. That was why I was feeling guilty; were it a weird White man walking through the building, I would still be feeling mad because I was scared of a man. But maybe a White man, even a criminal one, would not have that scared look. A White man would not look like someone in fear of being mistaken as a criminal. When I went down the hill, I saw the man again; now there was a car close to him, and a (White) man was driving and he was delivering mail to the apartments. When he saw me, he repeated the same performance; looked at the boxes, looked at the building number, and looked back to the boxes. This time I understood that this was his performance to show he was a worker. I think we both knew what happened. We live in fear of being mistaken for the wrong Negro. And maybe that is the most fatalistic discovery: there is no wrong Negro, there are Negroes, and being Negro is already wrong. That is how the hallucination—in fact, a revelation—

came, and that is how I experienced this awkward moment of being abducted from my reality of being a good Black graduate student. I fell into another dimension as if, like in *Kindred*, my room would vanish and I could be teleported to one of the Avenida Brasil overpasses where I, Maria Andrea, would be mistaken for a *crackuda*, a crack cocaine addict lynched by a mob. I felt like it would be possible, and that moment represented a sort of desintegration of the self, when for less than a second I doubted if I was really who I have been saying I am. Maybe I was a homeless drug addicted woman hallucinating that I was a student, a citizen, or righteous person. Maybe I never made it here; it is all just a hallucination. We are trapped and the attribution of qualities does not change the essence of the entity.

## Chapter Eight - Time and space for healing

The process of writing is also an experience of bringing back the time of lived experiences. Ethnographic writing is an attempt to share not just rational knowledge, but our subjective interpretations of perceptions and feelings meaningful to our existence and to the existence of others. This chapter reflects on the experience of friendship, care, and trust as values of Black experience that have, along this unending crossing, allowed us to reconstitute ourselves and overcome suffering, fear, distrust, and loss. How do individuals maintain their sanity, physical health, and strength amidst the external (racism, inequality, physical, and symbolic violence) and internal (sexism, homophobia, competition) pressures? How do people think about healing and resilience? Drawing from bell hooks' conceptualizations on the need for healing in Black communities (hooks, 1993) and by engaging with Jacqui Alexander's thoughts on the place and value of the sacred (2005), I will narrate episodes and memories from fieldwork that speak to Black Brazilians' lived experience and to the need for healing that is also a need to re-constitute the self.



Throughout the chapter, the dimensions of time, space, and place support the idea of memory and continuity of struggle. The temporality and the spatialities of Black life and history in Rio are contextualized through visual ethnography, and at the same time, this visibility indicates the temporality of the fieldwork itself as a lived experience where researcher and research collaborators are all implied.

Fanon suggests that the dialectics of visibility and invisibility could offer some ground for contesting racial subjugation: “Since the other hesitated to recognize me, there remained only one solution: to make myself known” (in: Goldberg, 88). In this sense, the visual ethnography planned to be an archive of a specific moment and of a specific interaction among Black people. In other words, a way to “to make ourselves known.” At the same time, there is one layer of the visual narrative that points to the apprehension of the significance of temporalities and territorialities which I came to know as Black spaces and events. Part of this chapter is driven by the need to remember how I felt, how it was, how I returned transformed from fieldwork. Another driving force of this chapter is the need to re-apprehend the sensorial dimensions of living in this city, of being in continual dislocation (either dislocation within the territory of Rio de Janeiro or dislocation in terms of my own positionality as a Black Brazilian woman studying at a prestigious US institution). This chapter was intended to satisfy a need to communicate how it was to be there, what dimensions of being there affected me and my work. It is an investment in the erotics of discovering and becoming part of these Black cartographies.

### 8.1- Wounds

From which wounds do we need to heal? Which aspects of our material, political, or emotional lives are broken or ill? I heard many different complaints during my fieldwork. I heard that the elder activists are tired and have bills to pay. I heard that yes, racism is our enemy, but the disunion among Black activists is a barrier to the construction of a collective project. I observed Black people fighting among themselves about small questions and big questions. Dynamics of gender inequality, homophobia, and sexism are often relegated to a second, third, or non-existent plane of discussion. The liberation of the Black 'race' is still consistently thought of as the recovering of the Black male, a kind of performance of *Black phallus fight the power*. Political partisan disputes, envy, and distrust are present in most of social movements, but due to the positionality of Blacks in Brazil still striving to convince state and civil society that race affects all of life's dimensions, such issues more severely impact the possibility of a collective project.

One critique that resonates in Hilton Cobra, Luiz Gá, Ruth Pinheiro, Líbia Besouro, and Débora Almeida's speeches is related to the lack of quality or commitment in Black projects. Debora said, "Sometimes you see Black activists coming late to a meeting or a workshop and justifying by saying: relax sister, this is a Black people thing." Luiz Gá also says that he could not stop thinking that the lack of quality in the Black projects becomes another element that counts in favor of the Whites. In his view, this is a delicate issue to be addressed, but something needs to be done. The question that nobody seems to be able to fully answer is, what can possibly be done?

The investment in creating a workshop for Black artists and producers in order to help them to elaborate on their art proposals and to navigate the highly bureaucratic system of online submission was an initiative in this sense. This workshop was planned by Akoben and executed by Ruth Pinheiro in December, aiming to prepare the producers for the funding opportunity for Black producers. But the structural problems of many Black artistic collectives kept them outside of state and private funding opportunities. In general, such opportunities demand that the applicant's legal and financial situation be regularized, with no pending taxes, with the group or company officially registered. This type of paperwork requires time, knowledge of the system, and institutional procedures, and above all, money to pay taxes. The problems of access to information and financial resources aligned with the lack of experience, and sometimes, of perseverance, limit the professionalization of Black artistic groups.

Many of the participants recognize the limitation that the lack of resources imposes over their choices (and the choices of the majority of blacks in Brazil). Simone Cerqueira, for example, talks about how it is necessary to go after knowledge and information, but then our search is limited by the scarcity of sources about Africa in the public libraries or on the Internet. Simone says that at the beginning of her career, she did not have this perspective of doing Black culture or Black theater because her choices were all about European theater.

But when she started to discover the possibility of a Black theater, or at least of a so called "Afro-Brazilian thematic" in theater, this discovery was coordinated by a White man whose theatrical choices generally fell into the rhetoric of the "suffering of the

slave.” The theater plays performed by the company that Simone and Líbia mentioned were “O Auto da escrava Anastácia” (The Slave Anastácia Drama) and a play based on a story written by Monteiro Lobato. The first play is about the narrative of the slave Anastacia—the princess-made-slave who was raped and tortured by her master, and who forgave her murderer before she died. The second play is based on a story about a lonely black doll. The author of the second story, Monteiro Lobato, was an openly racist intellectual who defended eugenic ideology and praised the Klu Klux Kan.<sup>77</sup> This example shows how patronizing the treatment of “Afro-Brazilians” and “Afro-Brazilian themes” can be. As we saw in the performances “Louvor à consciência negra,” and even in “Ama de Leite,” Black bodies are on the stage reciting the words of the Whites, reiterating the White gaze.

The insistence of Black activists to be recognized by the state often jeopardizes the construction of a more radical project. In one of the speeches during the National Forum of Black Performance, one of the participants declared, “...We (artists) have responsibilities, and this country has a responsibility of allowing us to show the entire country how we are.”<sup>78</sup> This statement makes me think of Blyden’s rhetoric of a moral obligation of African descendants towards the world (1967). We, the wretched, should now show how good we are in order to make the world accept us. There is a naivete in many discourses that misleads the focus on racism to fall into the small niche of integration. In fact, some of the activists are aware that the “state is a White possession,”

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<sup>77</sup> See [http://www2.uol.com.br/historiaviva/reportagens/eugenia\\_a\\_biologia\\_como\\_farsa\\_imprimir.html](http://www2.uol.com.br/historiaviva/reportagens/eugenia_a_biologia_como_farsa_imprimir.html).

<sup>78</sup> In: Melo & Bairros 2005: 59.

as Luiz Gá says, and the left wing—still considered by many Black activists the ultimate chance of achieving racial equality—is also a White construction that will never push anti-Black racism to the forefront of its debates.

Indeed, when confronted with Black demands, White anger erupts from all sides, from the mega TV channel with its main CEO writing, “We are not racists”<sup>79</sup> to the leftists defending Monteiro Lobato. White rage cannot deal with a Black judge prosecuting White politicians; the fairness of his discretion needs to be discussed in terms of his race, of his ingratitude in condemning men from the party that elected him.<sup>80</sup> It is white rage that moved the white director working with “Afro-Brazilian” themes to post on Facebook how happy he was that the funding for black producers was suspended. He wrote: “Finally reason won. Producers have no color. Culture has no color.” This is the same man who denied two Black women the right to represent the company they had been working at for seven years in a Black arts festival.

The episode narrated by Ruth Pinheiro about her participation in the selection committee for the Petrobras award exemplifies the eruption of White anger. She and her friend, activist Maria Júlia Ferreira, suggested the criterion of diversity for the award, trying to avoid the concentration of proposals from the southern and southeast regions of the country. In addition, they tried to balance the results, assuring that there will be

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<sup>79</sup> Kamel, A. 2006.

<sup>80</sup> Joaquim Barbosa was the first Black to command the Supremo Tribunal Federal, the highest judicial appointment in Brazil. He was appointed by President Lula during Lula’s second term. In 2012 and 2013 Barbosa judged and sentenced to prison high politicians linked to the Workers Party accused of corruption. Joaquim was called “*Capitão do mato*” (equivalent to “Uncle Rufus”), accused of ingratitude and aggressive behavior.

proposals with indigenous and Afro-Brazilian cultural themes among the winners. They were rudely challenged by a man and woman, both White, who created a letter protesting such criterion and arguing that it hurts the principle of equality. Ruth says:

We left that place feeling sick because of the way they looked and talked to us; my friend had tears rolling down her face. You need to see the way they look at us, they look at us with hate. They (Whites) are so arrogant, they think they could say whatever they want to us (2013- my translation).

Adriana Baptista is another person feeling the symptoms of a life devoted to struggle. She mentioned her health problems and how hurtful it is to verify that people do not understand the importance of policies such as funding for Black producers after all of the issues Black activists have been talking about (exclusion, appropriation, invisibility). She talks about cultural appropriation, how key elements of Afro-Brazilian culture such as Carnival are not in our hands anymore. As a journalist, she mentions the fact that the media coverage of Carnival is all in White hands. It is the Whites who determine which writings are valuable. She says, “They call our writing ‘marginal.’” She remembers Black writers and their trajectories being forgotten most of the time. To Adriana, there is an intense coloniality in the Brazilian academy that does not allow other knowledge to come in.

At the same time, there are internal questions that need to be addressed; Adriana mentions how frequently Black men turn Black woman down, how a Black theater director—who had been friends since childhood with an actress we know—after achieving success, never invited this actress to work with him. Similar critiques were made by another activist, not a participant of Akoben, when she says that Black men,

once they achieve some success in life, go after White women, and the money or success never stays in the Black community. By their turn, the Afrocentric collectives advocating love between Black women and Black men, create their poetry jam sessions and talk about not criticizing other Blacks in front of the Whites, while simultaneously affirming that the men have the prerogative to choose women, and Black women are competing among themselves to be chosen. What type of poetry is that?

The insistence on a patriarchal, heteronormative paradigm of Black politics, including sexual politics, often erases Black women from the picture. This can easily be seen in one of the events organized by the Black Movement. They created a cycle of lectures, debates, and workshops called “*Nossas Expressões*” (Our Expressions) to be held in May 2013. When the list of guest speakers was announced, some women (and some men) questioned why out of six lectures there were no Black women invited. I saw Naira lecturing one of the organizers of the event, an elder activist in his 70s. She came to him and said: “Look, I did not like what you folks did, how did you leave us out of the event?” Later on, when she was at the CADON with Ruth and me, we talked about the forgetting of Black women’s work:

In that event to remember the [Unified Black Movement of March of 1988] march, that guy was talking only about the men. He said: “Romão was in the march”; and I was thinking to myself: “I was there too”; then he said “Humberto was in the march”; and I thought, “I was in all the manifestations, and other women who are here today also were there. These guy are saying just the name of the men. Wow! These folks aren’t talking about the women!” (2013)

As Black feminists have discussed, Black activist men consistently erase women from the memory of the political action. bell hooks in “We real cool” writes about the need for Black men and women to heal from patriarchy and misogyny: “The imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal society we are living in is to blame for much of the horrors black men must face, however, black males are responsible for the manner in which they confront those errors or fail to do so.”

Líbia Besouro mentioned how often she sees Blacks being humiliated in their work places. The worst thing, she says, is that sometimes these Blacks themselves do not want to be advised by other Blacks, in particular not by Black women. By reflecting on Líbia and Naíra’s comments, we see once more how sexism, misogyny, and a patriarchal mindset are impairing the construction of a Black utopia of freedom. In this regard, bell hooks comments:

Wise progressive black women have understood for some time now that the most genocidal threat to black life in America, and specially to black male life, is patriarchal thinking and practice. Wise progressive black women have understood that any coming together of free, whole, decolonized black males and females would constitute a formidable challenge to imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy (2004: 134).

Some of my peers point out the state of alienation and/or lethargy under which the vast majority of Brazilians of African descendents live. This is what Valéria Monã means when she mentions her secondary school students who do not consider themselves to be Black, as a famous soccer player also recently declared.<sup>81</sup> On one hand, the vast majority of African descendents in Brazil still prefer to declare themselves anything but Blacks.

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<sup>81</sup> Reference to statements made by the soccer player Neymar.



On the other hand, a large number of cases of anti-Black violence are perpetrated by Blacks against other Blacks. This dynamic of Black-on-Black violence was mentioned by Filipe; we were discussing the corruption of the military police in Rio and how this institution is itself deeply involved with the organized crime it was supposed to fight against. I mentioned the fact that many policemen are Black/mixed men who are killing other Black men, children, and women. I said: “They do not have a racial consciousness.” Filipe sarcastically answered: “They do! They have a racial sense of who they must kill.” Filipe’s words resonated in my mind as a profound critical reflection on how the structure of racism works in countries with a large Black population. Whereas in a country like the US, where the majority White police force is a tool of racial oppression, countries such as Brazil have internalized racism as a potent anti-Black weapon. Nonetheless, the high ranks of military command remain homogenously White whereas Blacks become the targets and the perpetrators of deadly violence. This is part of a broader question on structural racism. It does not matter who the agents of the institution are they are working for White Supremacy.

## 8.2- Cures

When Simone was invited to perform the character of the doll, she remembers thinking, “A black doll? There is no such doll.” Her surprise in imagining a black doll reveals a reality where Black people frequently are not used to seeing their own image; many Black children in Brazil live their entire childhoods without even wondering about the possibility of having a doll that looks like them. In the process of constituting

themselves as Black artists, my peers stress the role and importance of theater, arts, and access to knowledge as tools of empowerment and positive models of Blackness. The actor Rodrigo Santos talks about his encounter with the work of Comuns in this way:

My body blossoms in such a way!... until then I had no reference to Abdias Nascimento, Ubirajara Fidalgo,<sup>82</sup> Solano Trindade.<sup>83</sup> I admired the work of Mussum,<sup>84</sup> Grande Otelo<sup>85</sup> ... but it was after coming to the Comuns rehearsal that I was able to radicalize the question of the black theater. In Comuns I discovered the universe of Afro-Brazilian dance, of Greek theater through the eyes of Márcio Meirelles. It was there that I immersed myself in the Candomblé, and today I am an *ogã*.<sup>86</sup> (2013)

Theater, says Naíra, is a practice that changes people's energy. I remember the feeling after the Afro-Brazilian dance classes, all the difficulty in executing the steps, the expenditure of energy, and a certain pain. But at the end, I felt so invigorated, I felt big and inundated by a flow of energy that was shared by the collective. Although Saidiya Hartman asserts that the performance of Blackness "...thwarts efforts to reassess agency because it has so masterfully simulated black 'will' only in order to reanchor subordination" (56) and that the word "black" by itself asserts "the fixing of the body by terror and dominance" (58). The author also claims that:

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<sup>82</sup> Actor, theater director, and activist of the Black Movement. He founded the Professional Theater of the Black in 1974. In: [http://www.brasileiros-na-alemanha.com/portal/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=240:personalidade-ubirajara-fidalgo&catid=111:voce-no-bna-perfis-e-entrevistas&Itemid=210](http://www.brasileiros-na-alemanha.com/portal/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=240:personalidade-ubirajara-fidalgo&catid=111:voce-no-bna-perfis-e-entrevistas&Itemid=210)

<sup>83</sup> Poet and actor who lived 1908-1974.

<sup>84</sup> Comedian and musician. Mussum (Antônio Carlos Gomes, 1941-1994) had a consistent career on TV through his participation in the humor show "Os Trapalhões" from 1974 to 1993.

<sup>85</sup> Considered one of the greatest Brazilian actors. 1915-1993.

<sup>86</sup> *Ogã* is a word of Yoruba origin that in the Candomblé religion describes the men in charge of playing drums during rites of possession.

Certain uses of making use of the body are diacritically marked in practice as 'black' or as self conscious forms of racial pleasure: "having a good time among our own color," to quote McAdams. These acts become productions of race focused on particular patterns of movements, zones of erotic investment, forms of expression and notions of pleasure.... This counterinvestment in all likelihood entails a protest or a rejection of the anatomo-politics that produces the black body as aberrant. More important, it is a way of redressing the pained constitution and corporeal malediction that is blackness. (58-9)

The actress Iléa Ferraz speaks of arts as a way to re-invent the self and the world. In the drawings she made for the book "The nine African combs," she was seeking the recreation of African ancestral narratives symbolized in the form of nine combs, each one with a different shape and meaning. Parallel to the drawings, she composed a song: "*They are the nine African Combs/ nine combs that I give you as a present/ nine combs made to highlight your beauty/ nine African combs made to sculpt your kinky, your curly hair/ made to preserve your wolly hair/ made to sow your styles throughout the world.*" In "Xica da Silva the women who invented the world," her drawings seek to interpret history through different lenses. She distances herself from the narrative of Black women as exotic sexual objects to imagine the agency of a former slave who negotiated sex and power and interfered in the political and economic relations between the colony of Brazil and the kingdom of Portugal. In her continuous search for inspiration, Iléa travelled to Angola; she visited the women in the markets and from this experience, she wrote songs that talk about the perceptions of commonality between the lives of Black women in Africa and in Brazil. In Iléa's songs we can see a narrative of the Black Diaspora through the combs "made to sow your hairstyles throughout the world." The combs mark an

aesthetics of hair as a site of empowerment, identity, and beauty, a “relation of freedom” as Simone Cerqueira said in regard to assuming her natural hair.

Performances of Blackness, the ways Blackness is assumed and demonstrated, offer a site to oppose the dereliction of being Black in an anti-Black world. bell hooks, in “Performance as a site of opposition,” affirms that “Performance practice was one of the places where the boundaries created by the emphasis on proving that the black race was not civilized could be disrupted. Radical ideas could be expressed in this arena” (1995: 212). By talking with my peers, I observed their/our quest to bring into existence liberated forms of living while Black . Líbia Besouro describes the process of buiding her racial identiy. She changed her last name from the French “Olivier” to “Besouro,” in reference to the capoeira master Besouro Macanguá. She says that after she changed her name, she felt relief; she realized that Olivier did not look like her, she says. As in Assata Shakur’s experience of changing her name, Líbia’s case shows a process of becoming conscious that encompasses the subjectivity of the name (1987). Líbia states that the biggest issue in her life is the right to live without humiliation; to achieve this is necessary to seek out information and knowledge, not accepting being under anyone’s boots, because, she says “for one to be dead all that is necessary is for him/her to be under someone’s boots.” The name changing serves as a rite of passage from being under the boots of a colonized mentality/name to embracing the name of a Black warrior.

These processes of re-territorialization of the Black self can gain strength through collective exchange in social movements, religious communities, and intellectual or academic work. It is his alignment with African philosophers, Candomblé, and capoeira

that allows Rodrigo to formulate, “What happens in the body happens to the spirit. The soul is not better than the body.” He is invested in challenging the idea of universal reason and the hegemony of the logocentrism of Western thought. At the same time, he recognizes contradictions presented in Black social movements and the negotiations that take place between movements and the state. For example, he acknowledges that the funding for black producers represents a small amount of the MInC budget, but he thinks that it will promote visibility to the question, even if this funding had been “not even 1% of what Brazil owes us.” To Rodrigo it is necessary to live and deal with the contradictions, which is knowledge he gains from capoeira.

While Iléa and Rodrigo talk about their artistic or academic creations as tools of empowerment and challenges to the hegemony of Western thought, with Tatiana I learned something powerful in terms of strategies of resistance, resilience, and self-preservation. She was talking about all the sorrow of her recent divorce and how Black and White friends kept saying to her that five months had passed already and she should get over it, because she was a strong Black woman. At the same time, many of these friends are the same ones who do not understand why she talks so much about race. Some of her White friends or work partners even questioned why such a beautiful and smart woman should be concerned with these matters. Tatiana sighs and says, “There is no point in trying to prove to the Whites why this is necessary,” and then she slows the rhythm of her voice and talks in a slow, lower voice: “There are fights we win by losing them, by remaining silent.”

Through Ruth, Náira and Léa Garcia's stories, it becomes clear how Black agency is erased, and more poignant, how Black women's agency is erased. Brazilian scholar Alex Ratts in his book on the life and work of Beatriz Nascimento mentions how the intellectual production of Black women is consistently forgotten in academia: "We can consider that the invisibility of [the] black woman in the academy is also consolidated because her other (white man, white woman, or black man) does not see her in this space" (2007:29). The stories told by these women, as well as the event "Our Expressions" to which no Black woman was originally invited to speak, demonstrated that this dynamic of erasure and silencing is also present in other realms of social life, not only academia. Even though women like Léa Garcia, Iléa Ferraz, Débora Almeida, Tatiana Tibúrcio, and Simone Cerqueira are investing in the creative work of writing songs, chronicles, and theater scenes. Their efforts to overcome invisibility and silence resonate in Audre Lorde's words:

But women had survived. As poets. And there are no new pains. We have felt them all already. We have hidden that fact in the same place where we have hidden our power. They surface in our dreams, and it is our dreams that point the way to freedom. Those dreams are made realizable through our poems that give us the strength and courage to see, to feel, to speak, and to dare (2007:39).

These meetings and stories had an impact, not only upon my work, but on my own persona. Once I met Ruth and Náira and developed a friendship with them, I was welcomed as a younger sister who had things to learn from elder Black women; thus, they gave me advice. To be around them made me finally understand what I had read and heard many times about the Black Brazilian politics of "respecting elders." Until then, I

think I had a narrow understanding of what this respect meant. It is not only about giving the elders a seat on the bus, or referring to them as “madam” or “sir.” It is respect for the knowledge and experience they have. It is also political respect. The memories Ruth and Naiía and Gá, Cobrinha were so willing to share with me are valuable because they situate my generation as the heirs of their struggle, even if we do not agree with them all of the time.

### 8.3- Memories

Débora Almeida said to me once, “There are stories inside our homes, the poetry of our daily life, stories of love and kindness within the Black homes and we need to tell these stories.” In this section I will bring in some episodes from my fieldwork and passages from my diaries. By doing this I want to illuminate these moments of love and kindness that permeated my interactions, while also teaching me things about historical processes that shaped Black life in Rio, or simply teaching me to re-think my own values about life.

### **8.3.a- Ruth's new era**

Green for health, blue for protection, violet for transmutation, pink for love, yellow for wealth, orange for energy. She advises me to close my eyes and breathe, to concentrate and visualize the ray of light descending over me and my daughter. Ruth has holistic, syncretic beliefs. She participates in the Umbanda religion and also in groups of meditation. She believes in the power of people's minds. It is her beliefs that give her relief from the illness consuming her; she has vitiligo and other health complications, her hands shake a little bit, and her knees are not good anymore. At home she has a 95 year old mother who did not like her because "she thinks I look like my father," a man who abandoned the family. She sighs in resignation and goes back to all of the budget reports she needs to do.

Since the gathering in December, I often heard Ruth Pinheiro's name when we were talking about project planning, legal, and financial regularization of NGOs and arts groups, as well as projects' final reports. I introduced myself to Ruth, described my research, and as soon as she started to talk I realized that everything she was saying absolutely related to my work. In February 2013, I started to come twice a week to CADON to learn about institutional structures, the history of the Black Movement in Rio, and changes in Brazilian national politics in regard to culture. I also worked with Ruth in the elaboration of projects. It was Ruth who told me several stories from the Black Movement, like the 1988 march dispersed by military police. Through her, I came to know that the now famous touristic area of Lapa was totally abandoned until the 1990s



when four groups initiated a project of revitalization; one of these groups was a branch of the Black Movement that, with some money from the Black Panther Party, created the IPCN, now in ruins. She is proud of having met Kwame Ture and of the letter of recognition she received from the African Union. But she is so tired of dealing with activism. At the time of my research, she was trying to manage the conflict between SEPPIR and the Black Movement; SEPPIR gave some support to the conference of the Black Movement, and in exchange, the secretary demanded the exhibition of its logo on all conference materials. The Black Movement refused to add the SEPPIR logo, and Ruth was trying to mediate the conflict. She sighs and talks about her hopes: “A new era is coming, the planet is undergoing a huge transformation”; then she assures she will keep my daughter and me in her prayers.

Interestingly enough, when I returned from fieldwork and started to organize and classify the data, I used colors to differentiate categories of information. Unconsciously I chose the green color to represent people and orange to represent each event I attended. Although I occasionally practiced the visualizations, it was not until I was seeking to associate the categories of information to a theoretical body that I realized green represents the idea of healing. At the moment when I thought “green is for the people I interviewed and I will rely on Black feminism to deal with that category,” the image of Ruth teaching me the quality of each color came to mind. So, yes, this chapter is the “green chapter,” the chapter on uses of curative power, and all the other chapters are associated with colored rays of light and their properties in Ruth’s holistic system.

### 8.3.b Naíra, a daughter of Oxum

Naíra and I were at the CADON; she came to prepare the invitations for the “Africa, Brazil, Caribbean festival of cinema.” Ruth started to talk about the coming of a new era of peace and evolution; an era when humankind would discover the inner secrets of the earth and of the universe, life outside earth, and the occult life forms living inside the earth, a time when death would be overcome. I said that maybe she was right, but most of the time I saw the world with pessimism and I added:

Andrea: Sometimes I feel so mad at things.

Naira: That is because you don’t have faith, something in which you believe.

Naíra listened to me carefully and her response was that of a survivor, of someone who keeps herself together because she believes she is not alone. She has Oxun and the Orixás by her side. She is a *Yao*—a woman who is possessed by the Orixá—and it is from her faith that she gets the strength to continue after surviving Lupus and breast cancer. But still, she has so much energy! She and I attended so many events that I could not have even counted if I was not religiously keeping my fieldnotes diary.

Naíra was one of the most difficult people to establish trust during my fieldwork. I think she was suspicious of my intentions regarding my participation in Akoben. Maybe it was because during Carnival, some young activists invited me to follow a samba ensemble from Rio Grande do Sul, my own state, known for being one of the Whitest states in Brazil. Banda da Saldanha has traditionally performed in the Copacabana neighborhood during Carnival, and its performance is highly appreciated. I thought it was

so ironic to be invited to watch a “gaúcho” samba during Rio de Janeiro’s Carnival—the land of samba—and made some comment like, “See, we gaúchos also know how to make samba.” I guess she took my comment as some sort of “*gaúcho* exceptionalism,” or that I was saying gaúchos were better at samba than cariocas, something that I did not mean to imply.

I do not know exactly when, but we developed a kind friendship with each other. She invited me to accompany her to numerous events that opened doors for me in the last months of my fieldwork because Naíra and Ruth are known by basically all Black activists in Rio. My beautiful sister Naíra, who enjoys partying and dancing, who cooks divinely, who has a mysterious Jamaican boyfriend, who needs to take care of her immature daughter, who has worked her entire life to rent a small single bedroom apartment in Lapa. I worry about her; she needs to work but her health conditions are not good; she feels tired, and worse, she needs to type on the computer very often but she has severe pain in her upper arms due to a surgery. Her employer Bisa Vianna—a problematic person to deal with—made comments about Naíra to Ruth. Bisa said that she may need to fire Naíra because she is not accomplishing all of her tasks. I do not even know if she has a retirement plan. One day she was so worried about money and about her daughter, she said to me, “I think somebody might have made some bad juju against me, it is not possible! Nobody calls me for nothing, for any work.” That day, she looked different than the woman I knew; instead of her bright face, always with lipstick on her lips, her face was gray and her eyes showed fatigue. She continued to tell me that she did not make many things on television, but she still should be mentioned in the book

*Mulheres Negras no Brasil (Black women in Brazil)*, a collection of images and stories about black Brazilian women published in 2007.<sup>87</sup> Several of her friends appear in this book, but not her. Her sorrow comes not only from the hardship of her life, work, and health conditions but, also from the constant process of erasing her presence as a Black woman, artist, and activist. Still, someone told me that her Oxum is so beautiful, that the manifestation of mother Oxum, the Orixá of motherhood, love, beauty and fresh water has nobility and a strong presence while manifesting through Naíra's body. Her Oxum and her material existence as Naíra Fernandes could not be more synchronic; she is a gracious woman and dedicated mother. She takes care of people: family, friends, and the Akoben itself, and those are things not to be forgotten.

### **8.3.c- Echoes from the past**

I went to Naíra's granddaughter's birthday in Santa Teresa. There I was, seated among her father, a 90 year old with many stories to tell, and the talented actress Léa Garcia, whose talent was partially wasted due to the racial dynamics of the big TV channels. Léa is in her 80s; I remember watching her in a soap opera when I was a child: she played a slave who was the former lover of the cruel slave owner. She was depicted as a bad woman who is envious of Isaura, the protagonist of the storyline, a light skinned slave played by the white actress Lucélia Santos. I remember my mother saying, "this bad *negra*<sup>88</sup> will do some harm to the poor Isaura," or "this ugly *negra*." Now I know that it is

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<sup>87</sup> Schumacher & Brazil. 2007.

<sup>88</sup> Negro woman.

partially through television shows that Black people like my mother learned to call ourselves ugly. Lea tells me she is writing, that she has a storyline for cinema, but she has not been successful in finding money for her project; “No one wants to hear what an old woman has to say,” she says with resignation.

Naíra’s father started to remember the shows he put together in the early 1980s; he worked in the Carnival industry. He remembers one of Naíra’s friends. “There was this guy, a tall, thin guy, very effeminate, Jorge... he died recently.” Léa finishes: “Jorge Lafond. He died of sadness.” I remember Lafond, the tall, beautiful dark skinned drag queen wearing spandex pants and long eyelashes who participated in several humor programs. Léa confirms what Ruth had already told me; that Lafond got very sick and depressed after a Catholic priest celebrity refused to sit on the same stage with Lafond during a TV show. We sigh: one more Black life lost to hate.

#### 8.4- Temporalities and territorializations

In *Demonic Grounds: Black women and the cartographies of struggle*, Katherine McKittrick asks, “What happens to the cartographies and understanding of the world when it is continually re-imagined through and beyond the legacy of race and racism” (2006:28)? Rio de Janeiro’s cartographies of racial hierarchization are obvious and at same time dynamics, encompassing the neoliberal ordering of the touristic spaces planned to please the foreign tourist. Spaces, places, and temporalities of Black life are constantly under siege of the White supremacist gaze, the neocolonial order. But it is in

those spheres that we constitute the bonds of sameness, of love, caring, and resistance. As McKittrick continues,

Hall's argument pivots on black representational politics, which I would suggest are also underwritten by the poetics of landscape: how black communities represent themselves, how black cinema represents black social differences, how political representation is connected to those static misrepresentations Frantz Fanon finds so restrictive. I would add to these forms of representations; how black people represent the world around them, how they represent "place" in a world that has profited from black displacement, and how black geographic representation is recast through a struggle. Rather than a complacency, with space and place (29).

The following subsections are the report of subjective perceptions of territorialities and temporalities in Rio de Janeiro.

#### **8.4.a- My "White spaces" phobia**

I missed the launching of Barbot's company film *Esse Amor que nos Protege* (This Love Protecting Us). The film was launched in a fancy cinema theater at the Botafogo<sup>89</sup>—the Itaú Cinema—a private cinema maintained by the Itaú bank. There were several movies (some commercial and some "cult"), some documentaries, and the Barbot movie. Coming from the far north area of Rio de Janeiro, it took me almost two hours to get there. By then, the hall was so crowded by White adults in their 40s to 70s walking around large, stuffed leather couches. Inside, Barbot's room was almost full, and I was told the tickets had been sold out. By that time I had not personally met Barbot, so I did not make a strong case for staying. I think that was the day I realized I feel panicked

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<sup>89</sup> Upper-middle class neighborhood in the south area.

when I am surrounded by all-White crowds. “Isn’t it funny?” I thought to myself, and immediately heard the answer in my head: “Not, it is not funny.” I started to realize that maybe this is how every Black person feels inside. I never had the same feeling walking in the central area of Madureira, always crowded with Black people walking fast, almost bumping into each other, with hundreds of yelling street vendors, and different music competing at the highest volume. This experience of feeling as if being squeezed, of having a dry mouth, shaking hand, and a hole in the stomach amidst a White crowd indicates how the corporeal schema of Black personhood co-exists with the permanent fear of violent assaults of any kind. In other words, the systematic repetition and anticipation of violence defines the psychoanalytic contour of the Black being (Marriot 2007), even when we know that violence will not be concretized. From this fear of being assaulted rises a recognition of the value of creating Black spaces, spaces where we can feel the safety of being among “our own colour” (Hartman 58). This safety is not necessarily physical, but concerned with the psychological relief of not being gazed upon.

#### **8.4.b- Madureira erotics**

Madureira is a special place of Black culture. I heard once that after the removal of Black neighborhoods from the Valongo and other downtown areas, many samba singers, dancers, and artists moved to Madureira. This large neighborhood located in the north area of Rio is the home of one of the first samba schools, the Portela Samba School, and the Império Serrano, another traditional samba school. Located at the central area of Madureira, Império Serrano remains one of the few schools that keeps its “roots”; it still

has a “*madrinha de bateria*” (percussion’s godmother) from the community, in general a young Black woman, whereas many of the most famous and wealthier samba schools have opted to have famous White actresses, singers, and models as their godmothers. To the right of Império Serrano is the Serrinha, a hill where, I was told, the tradition of the Jongo was re-created in Rio.<sup>90</sup> There, in the community of Serrinha, the Jongo da Serrinha ensemble was born. Ruth Pinheiro told a story about this ensemble: in the late 1990s an academic student went to do research about the jongo ensemble and fell in love with the jongo; he brought the dancers to perform in several events. Once he was done with his research, the ensemble wanted to continue to perform, but when they were about to sign a contract to perform a show, they heard that it was not possible since the owner of the ensemble rights (the academic) was not there to sign the contract. Ruth says that this was what killed Mestre Darcy do Jongo (Master Darcy of the Jongo), the person responsible for the creation of this ensemble. This hill tells just one more story about appropriation and White cannibalism of Black artistic culture.

It is in Madureira that the biggest *Baile Black* (Black ballroom) of Rio de Janeiro, the “*baile do viaduto*,”<sup>91</sup> takes place. Bailes Blacks are parties in which people dance in blocs to the rhythm of the soul step, called “charm” in Brazil. These parties became

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<sup>90</sup> There is controversy regarding this “re-creation” of the Jongo tradition. Some activists and musicians say that the dismantling of Jongo was motivated by that state in the 1970s, and that in the 1990s, due to the laws regarding the protection of immaterial patrimony, the state and scholars (mainly anthropologists) pushed for the founding of the group “Jongo da Serrinha” and sustained the narrative that the Serrinhas community had kept and maintained the jongo tradition, although the practice of Jongo was not exactly the same as the original Jongo. See: Santo, Spirito. 2011. *Do samba ao funk fo Jorjão*. Rio de Janeiro: KBR.

<sup>91</sup> Literally “Ballroom of the overpass,” this party happens every first Saturday of the month and is held under the overpass of the Madureira neighborhood.



popular in Rio and São Paulo during the late 1970s, when black Brazilian youth connected with the aesthetics of the US Black Power movement (Medeiros, 2013). They continue to be spaces of black pride, with many college students attending the “Baile do Viaduto,” which had been happening for 25 years in 2013.

The “Feira das Yabás” (Yabás<sup>92</sup> fair), a gastronomic fair with samba shows, also occurs in Madureira every first Sunday of the month. I always went to the fairs and met people from Akoben, as well as the Brazilian students from the UT summer program. This is one of Adriana Baptista’s favorite events, although she called my attention to the lack of infrastructure and to the working conditions of the women at the fair. This event was organized by a Black man in the community in an area of Madureira known as “Portelinha” (Little Portela) in reference to the Portela samba school. However, Adriana says the fair has quickly grown fast and today hosts artistic attractions. Thousands of people come, but the money that the women workers make is still quite marginal, and once more Black women suffer the effects of exploitation of their work.

Madureira became to me the closest thing I have to the notion of “home.” I felt safe there, despite that Madureira has violence, and the police constantly attack the nearby favelas. Even still, I experienced a sense of freedom when walking through its streets at any time of the day or night. Several times I crossed those streets late at night alone, something that I would not dare to do in Austin. But there, I felt I could, because there were other women walking alone and if someone were to say something, I felt able to react. Every time I needed to relax, take a walk, go for a jog, or drink a beer, this was

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<sup>92</sup> Yabá—Yoruba word meaning “Queen mother.”

the place I had in mind. Not only in my mind—Madureira is the place I have in my heart as a nostalgic temporary home.

#### **8.4.c- Rio's Flavor Fever**

I loved that when I went to some of my interviews, they prepared something to eat; it made me feel welcomed as a part of the community. Gá was waiting for me on the morning of the interview (that lasted 4 hours) with a complete breakfast: cheese, two types of bread, orange juice, ham, papaya, and cantaloupe. Naíra, who is a very skilled cook, made black-eyed peas with codfish and onions—a traditional dish in Rio. Tatiana made lunch for us, too. Other interviews were in bars; at Cinelândia, Filipe and I observed the scene, commenting on the city's dynamics and enjoying the beer. I interviewed Iléa in a bar at Lapa, and Simone and Líbia in the tents around the Banco do Brasil Cultural Center while we enjoyed a delicious *acarajé*—the energizing ritual food of the Orixá Iansã.

All of the conversations, emotions, and strategies for the movement were wrapped in the flavors, textures, colors, and noises of the city, so chaotic and seductive, so rotten and dirty and delightful. That is something I will forever carry with me; the pleasant/unpleasant dichotomy through which Rio de Janeiro operates. The nights at Madureira, the samba shows, the cute guy next door, my new friends, side by side with the constant danger of the traffic, the awful aspects of the places I needed to cross to get home, and the rude sexual harassment in the streets and buses combined to make my experience dense and rich. Months after fieldwork, I still remember and miss the

sensation of walking in these streets, the flavor of “Acarajé do Luís” religiously eaten at least once a week, and the feeling of joy amidst that mess.

Rio de Janeiro is a tricky place, and while typing these words I missed it so badly that it made me confused; what draws me back there? Is it the friends I made? Is it the places of Black resistance that I came to know? Is it hope? I remember a few weeks before I came back to the First World, I was in my awful backyard house at the far north area of Rio, looking at the news on the computer screen, seeing what my carioca friends were doing, the next events and parties they would be attending, and what new gossip arose in the Black world. Then for a moment I thought: “What if I stay here?” Until right then, the idea of delaying my doctorate or not coming back to Austin had never crossed my mind.

The “*What if I stay in here?*” kept echoing in my head. Cobrinha says that there is something in the water of Rio that makes people happy and dumb amidst the chaos. Perhaps it is not only in the water; it might be something in the sea, the wind, the fire, the music, the food, the inebriation of senses that causes these sparkles of euphoria to surface from all places. There is an addicted polyrhythm that goes nowhere in the cars buzzing frenetically, the blaring music, the name shouting, the laughs, the sounds of fireworks and gunshots. Even when people are still, they seem to be ready to run somewhere, nowhere, everywhere. The big disparate. Rio is the “big disparate,” moving fast in a slow circularity among its colonial buildings, colonial bureaucracy, colonial mentality, and militarization at the highest level. Rio is about corruption, violence, racism, sexism, hate, fear. Rio is about rapture and joy for life like I rarely had felt. I was there to be an

anthropologist, but sometimes I wonder if my hidden agenda was much more about a journey, a process of becoming, than anything else.

#### **8.4.d- As time goes on**

Somehow, I became a different person there: a more mature person. In fact, it was also the moment of my life I realized “I am getting older.” During my time there, I learned a lot about being old, having a history, and the importance of telling people stories. I never had really paid attention to what many told me was a significant part of Black life: the voice of ancestors, the narrative of their struggles, and their wisdom. These people taught me about so many different things about life from politics to careers, from love to disappointment, and fear and hope. Their stories are mirrors of the present; they are answers to many expectations that so many of us feel in all our hesitant attempts to just *do* something. I learned about people who had survived cancer and HIV, Black women and men who are in their sixties, fighting, producing, creating art and making love. They have stories to tell. Stories of their families, health, religion, income, love, sexuality, alliances, betrayals, distrust, political facts of the city and of the country, memories of traveling, time and space through air, water, land, or ritual, and memories of repeated loss. Things that change and things that remain the same.



Fig. 8.1 Opening of “African Heritage: Urban Interventions”—Hilton Cobra reads the letter announcing the project; seated at Hilton’s side is Zózimo Bulbul. Some of other people in this picture are: Mãe Beata de Yemanjá, Léa Garcia, Bisa Vianna, Zebrinha, and Débora Almeida—Rio de Janeiro—Largo da Prainha square, November 2012.



Fig. 8.2 Cobrinha, Maria, Luiz Gá, Débora and Filipe during the Companhia dos Comuns’s gathering—Santa Tereza, December 2012.





Fig. 8.3 Circle of Afro-Brazilian dances presented by the group Fuzuê de Aruanda at the Viaduto de Madureira—December 2012.



Fig. 8.4 Circle around dancers at the Viaduto de Madureira—December 2012.



Fig 8.5 Boats with offerings to *Yemanjá*—Castelo neighborhood (downtown area), February 2013.



Fig. 8.6 Train line from Madureira to Honório Gurgel (north area)—no date.





Fig. 8.7 Carnival—Cinelândia, February 2013.



Fig. 8.8 Yabás fair—Madureira, March 2013.





Fig. 8.9 Madureira park—no date.



Fig. 8.10 Eliete Miranda's class—Rio, June 2013.



Fig. 8.11 Ruth looking at the minutes of the Black Movement conferences—March 2013.



Fig. 8.12 ReFem's wedding—Santa Cruz (Baixada Fluminense), March 2013.





Fig. 8.13 Dancers Rubens Barbot, Nego Maia, and Rubens at the “Terreiro Contemporâneo” studio—Lapa, April 2013.



Fig. 8.14 Reharsal at Barbot studio—April 2013.



Fig. 8.15 Saint George Celebration at the *Império Serrano* samba school—*Madureira*—April 2013.



8.16 Celebration of Iléa's birthday after an Akoben meeting—April 2013.





Fig. 8.17 Meeting of Black artists and Palmares. Some of the people in this picture: Luiz Antônio, Cachalote, Marcos Romão, Gustavo Melo, Hilton Cobra, Cridemar Aquino—Downtown Rio, May 2013.



Fig. 8.18 “Let me register your black feminist moment!” Filipe Romão registered us at Santa Tereza after the meeting of Akoben—June 2013.



Fig.8.19 UT Students of the summer abroad program during the “Tour through the Afro-Brazilian history” with the guide Margarida Abraão—Pedra do Sal, June 2013.



Fig. 8.20 Luiz, owner of the food stand “Acarajé do Luiz” —Madureira, July 2013.





Fig. 8. 21 View of Madureira and Serrinha hill—July 2013.



Fig. 8.22 Bia Onça and Malcon, Naira's father, and Léa Garcia during the birthday of Maria Luíza, Naira's granddaughter—Santa Tereza, July 2013.



Fig. 8.23 Débora Almeida in front of the Banco do Brasil Cultural Center—July 2013.

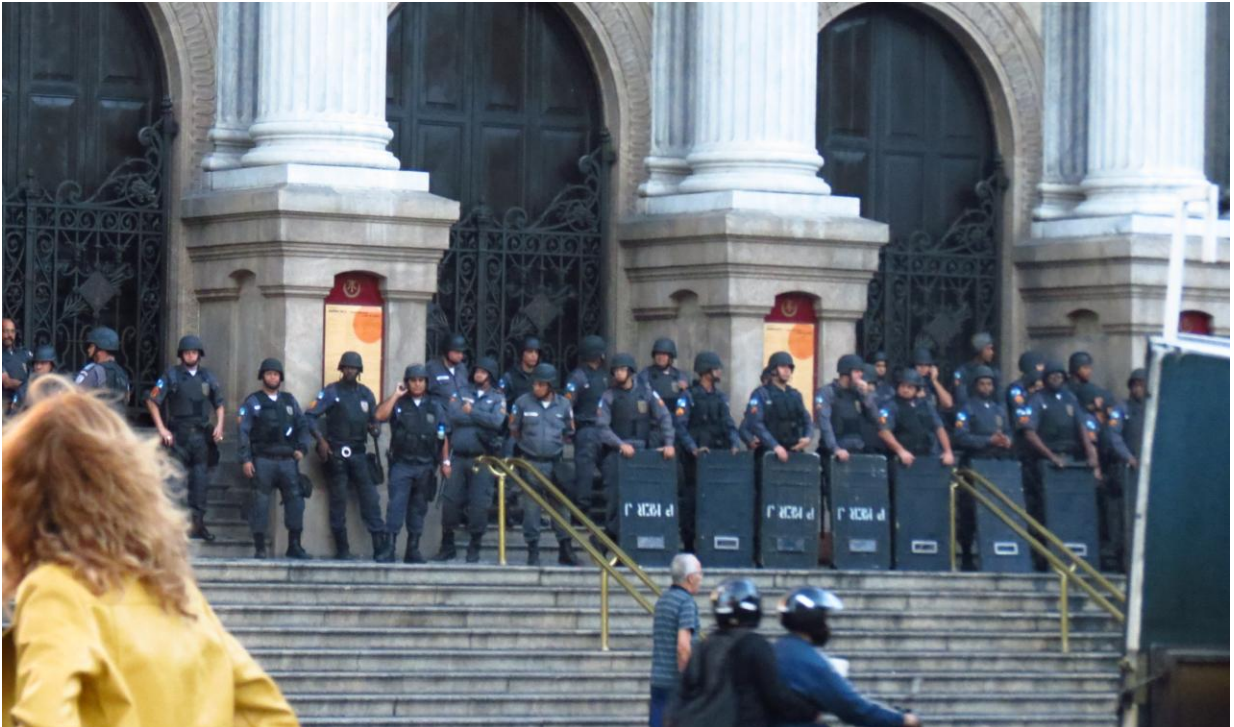


Fig. 8.24 Military police in front of the Municipal theater preparing to contain one of the demonstrations that erupted in Brazil during June and July—Cinelândia square, July 2013.





Fig. 8.25 IPCN building—Lapa, no date.



Fig. 8.26 A group of kids pose for Naíra and me in Madureira—August 2013.



Fig. 8.27 Naíra and Ruth—Carnival, March 2014.



## 8. 5- Work of healing, work of facing an awkward revelation

### 8.5 - Work healing, work of facing an awkward revelation

In these experiences of survival and re-constitution of the self there is a notion of resistance that is also embedded in the notion of the sacred and in alternate views about the meaning of the body and soul. In “Pedagogies of crossing...” Jacqui Alexander proposes that feminism needs to go beyond materialism and ideas of marginalization to embrace the sacred:

There are Sacred means through which we come to be at home in the body that supersede its positioning, in any of the violent discourses of appropriation, and in any of the formations within normative multiculturalism.... Sacred energies would want us to relinquish the very categories constitutive of the material world, not in the requisite of a retreat but as a way to become more attuned to their ephemeral vagaries and the real limits of temporality so as to return to them with a disciplined freedom capable of renovating the collective terms of our engagement (2005:329).

Indeed Naíra, I do need to have faith. I need to believe in Black liberation. To get there I need to make some considerations: Are the dead generative? Is Black death generative? Of course it is! And why are we all here after all? Black death paradoxically marks a generative moment of the Black being coming to be in the anti-Black world. Even when we think we are descendents of queens, that Kemetic knowledge is at the basis of several systems of the West, or even when the entities and ancestors come to us, still our condition in the global world is that of the wretched. So, all we need to do is believe we are strong? I don't think I can give any suggestions about how to stop feeling bad about the world.





Fig. 8.28 Naíra at *Lapa* after the last *Akoben* meeting I physically attended—July 2013.

What is empowering about assuming Blackness is an ontological condition of social death? That this is not our world? No, we made modernity; modernity is possible because the cotton fields, the sugarcane fields, the gold and diamond mines (and now thallium mines and everything else that is necessary to build iPhone batteries, is there, in Africa still). We can always look to old and historical/colonial buildings, churches,

palaces, parks, ports, and say: “Our ancestors did this,” our ancestors climbed the “Pedra do Sal” up and down, first carrying salt bags from the port and later creating a freed black neighborhood. However, today the majority of Black people going there are going to work, any and all types of work, including the “work of dying”<sup>93</sup> as the 10 year old Black boy sniffing glue in one of the corners of Pedra do Sal anticipates. See the prison complex? We work inside and outside the cells, we are fungible: some of us are guards while the others play inmates. It does not matter who is who, just the name of our sponsor: State, Militia, Crime, Music company. We made and remake the world with the accumulation of our bodies. But The World is not our morality project. We carry the weight of someone else’s projects for the world, which is not just any little, particular, cultural world. It is “The World,” the winner’s project for the world, settled upon colonization, patriarchy, racism, slavery, capitalism. Violence. Settled upon consolidated violence upon the “other.” Someone has power in naming the other, in taking their land, in taking their Norm, Law, Family to carry only bodies extracted from their meanings. Someone judges right and wrong and we are wrong, essentially. We can come closer to righteousness, we know we can, some even believe that multiculturalism is a great advancement, the more conservatives want to banish it as a national threat.

Anyway, I don’t think that consuming modernity or buying multiculturalism will make the Black Being alive as a Black Human Being. Because the original meaning of Blackness is to be a thing against which Whiteness opposes Humanity, Humanism, Humanhood, against which all the walls were built: School, Security, Justice, Churches,

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<sup>93</sup> Wilderson in: Hartman and Wilderson 2003

Media, Arts, Property, Nation. I think the positive in Afro Pessimism is that we can stop trying to reconcile with “The World,” we can stop waiting for a progressive slow down of racism, stop waiting for the gradual assimilation of Blacks into middle class circles. *We can start to think of creating another order of connections and chains of actions.*

We need to surpass the pain of thinking about our existence as impossibility (or at least limitations and barriers, threats). But we can only overcome this disorientation if we are radical enough to admit that no possible reconciliation with the state, law, and order as they exist is possible. A reconciliation of this order will never represent a real change in the position of Blackness. Conciliations are weak tracts. All the anterior bonds of White humanity are stronger than the slight niche of diversity or multiculturalism;

As the thousands of killings in Rio show

As the Black women forcibly sterilized in the 1970s in the US show

As the staring eyes, red lips, and charcoal skin tone in the cartoons show

As the Oscar awards show

The Prison Industrial Complex shows

The cuts in public education shows

As the murdered, skittles-armed teenage shows

We are the ones whose script for the “Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life” (Goffman, 1990) was not written by our own kin and as long as any Black political project is rooted in the search for acceptance, we will lose. In fact, “We should free ourselves of the need to be accepted before we can create and write about a theory to

liberate people of color,”<sup>94</sup> as Critical Race Theorist Taunya Lovell asserts. I need, we all need to learn the work of healing. We need to heal from the desire to be accepted.

I think that my trajectory, personal life, professional experiences, and relationship to academia forges a life that is a mission: a devotion to the struggle for liberation. So, it is not that I learned to treat minorities fairly and want learn with them. I do learn from people, but I, and many others I have met, have an urge for a free life, for a life with options, a life with peace and love. A place where we are not the funny toothless guy, the piece of ass on the stage, the mad and ugly witch, and so on. We want the right to subjectivity and to a life where our stories and historical agency in the world are told by ourselves, to ourselves.

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<sup>94</sup> 1995: 335

## Conclusion: Remarking the Black script

Rio de Janeiro is sometimes called the “*Cidade Maravilhosa*” (Wonderful city). The title comes from a song composed in 1935 by André Filho and popularized by Carmem Miranda in the late 1950s. In 1960 the song, converted into a samba, was declared the official music of the new Guanabara state,<sup>95</sup> and is considered Rio de Janeiro’s anthem. The song corroborates the idea of a touristic city, a site of uncountable pleasures and unending joy. To think about the lie that is the wonderfulness of Rio with its alarming rates of criminality, police brutality, state promoted genocide, violence against women, and continuously renewed process of gentrification is also to think about how race, particularly how Blackness, has been conscripted to become part of the “wonderful city.”

As a southern Brazilian, I had different and confusing expectations in regard to Rio de Janeiro. It is a city of seduction and of tension, of beauty and violence. As a Black

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<sup>95</sup> In [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cidade\\_Maravilhosa](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cidade_Maravilhosa). The Guanabara state was created in 1960 as a division of the Rio de Janeiro state. It was located in the geographical area of Rio de Janeiro city. In 1974 the Guanabara state was annexed to the Rio de Janeiro state.



woman born in Rio Grande do Sul, one of the whitest states in Brazil, I prepared my entrance into fieldwork as a quest; a quest for “Blackness” not available in the south. As someone originally from the field of theater, I went to meet and understand artists who, like me, are Black people living in a country where, until recently, a hegemonic tale was told: we are a racial paradise, a model for the future; people here live together and mix happily. Rio de Janeiro is at the epicenter of these narratives that sustained the discourse of racial democracy beginning with descriptions of harmonious interactions between slaves and slave owners, created and reproduced by writers, sociologists, movie makers, and soap operas, situated time and again in Rio de Janeiro.

The threat of a country of Negroes and the whitening ideal are very real and deeply sedimented, as I frequently overheard in conversations on trains, in bars, and in schools. The fear of *savagerie* in Brazil is tremendous, so there the enunciation “Look, a Negro” is immediately repressed: “Don’t look, a Negro.” This sort of “hyperconsciousness and negation of race” (Vargas: 2006) makes Brazilians (including most Blacks) very uncomfortable when confronted with concepts such as “White privilege,” or discussions about Black invisibility and/or underrepresentation in the media, job market, and political spheres of power. It also makes Brazilian society cautious about the grades, quantity, and quality of Blackness it wants to keep and display to itself and to the world.

In the imaginary of the nation-state, Blackness is devalued as a site of primitivism and decay (Moten 2008a) against which mechanisms of control are deployed to assure the wellness of the national body. In the Brazilian case, the narrative of miscegenation

works as way to avoid the past of slavery by romanticizing its violence. The Brazilian state and civil society, by capturing cultural expressions of Brazilians of African descent, insert these expressions and representations of Blackness into a mosaic of a diverse nation without allowing the African populations to be full citizens of the nation.

The unlimited examples of racial stereotypes and blackface in Brazilian media, alongside different levels of cultural appropriation and the criminalization and murder of the Black youth, demonstrate the processes of objectification that lead either to the hypervisualization of the Black body or to the invisibilization of the Black being as a human being. This erasure of the Black being is most often seen in the assumption that Africans have no history, in the dismissal of Black intellectuals' work, or in negative reactions to Affirmative Action policies.

At the begining of this work, I was thinking about how to make this research work an activist project. By the time of my prospectus defense, when the field was either a blurred cloud over my head or an imaginary line that does not exist for people interacting in the real world, I was struggling to define the activist aspects of my work. The field, Clifford says, is an abstraction and we, as ethnographers, choose what and how to tell about it. As narrative and mimesis of life events it is the text or the script of academic life.

Now, the fact that dissertations such as this one have been produced here at the University of Texas at Austin to the debates on means and strategies that could be used to decolonize the Black experience. This confirms that we cannot lose sight of struggles for

liberation that were our initial positions as individuals. Can one be the ethnographic object and the gaze over the object at the same time?

One of the reflections that emerges from this work concerns the reach and ramifications of a broader political project envisioned for Black people in the Diaspora. People like ourselves; the activists and artists in Brazil, my colleagues and professors here in the graduate program. These intersections suggest bridges across spatio-geographical territories as well as across interdisciplinary fields of knowledge production. In arts, as in academia, we seek to decolonize ourselves, and in the course of this work, I found similarities between Akoben's struggle and the Austin School Manifest (Gordon, 2009). I saw this mostly in the sense that in Brazil, as at the University of Texas at Austin, Black people are building an idea of Diaspora that

...focuses on Black agency and the processes of self-making; the Black/African Diaspora as a transnational, intellectual, cultural, and above all, political project that seeks to name, represent and participate in Black people's historic efforts to construct our collective identities (2009:94).

When Cobrinha, Filipe, and I had a discussion about Cobrinha's theater project of creating a play whose theme would be the trial of racism, a series of conversations was initiated in which their practices and theoretical knowledge were interwoven with the academic debate that I myself proposed. On another occasion, I worked with Cobrinha for a few days researching, locating, and downloading works of Black theatrical productions on the African continent, in the Caribbean, the US, and Brazil. I already knew that information about Black theater is scarce. But I had not imagined that the Brazilian sites and online archives were so deficient: for example, I was not able to locate

any reference to African theater or African playwrights on Brazilian sites. This absence indicates two things: 1) that the implementation of Law 10639/03 concerning the teaching of African, Afro-Brazilian, and indigenous history and culture has a long way to go until it becomes effective, and until Brazil actually invests in discovering other paradigms of knowledge production outside the Western framework; 2) Cobrinha's initiative of researching these artistic references could represent an important step in creating an archive of theatrical production throughout the African/Black Diaspora in Brazil, which could become part of the National Forum of Black Performance. These perspectives of creating archives of Black arts, more specifically theater arts, and the possibilities of an effective application of Law 10639/03, are definitely subjects that speak to my own commitment as a native, activist scholar.

Still, regarding my role within this collective, on two other occasions Luiz Carlos Gá made me question the point of this research, and on one occasion, he stated that this is an important project and that Akoben itself could benefit from the information I would be gathering. From this conversation, we started to collectively plan a project to measure the results of proposal submissions and the awards given in a specific year. The goal of such a project is to collect quantitative data that can be used as evidence of the lack of representation of Black producers and artists. Although Akoben is de-mobilized, some of the members still continue to participate on city and state councils for culture and arts, attempting to move the discussion of Black culture and Black producers' representation forward. Thus, the idea of collecting quantitative data regarding the demographics of the

distribution of awards and funding to arts is still relevant and a worthy place to invest time and energy.

The interest and support I had from Akoben makes me think about my own positionality in the fieldwork and in the broader context of the Brazilian Black Movement. As a Black Brazilian woman who became a scholar partially through Affirmative Action policies, I sustain that research into the politics of Blackness and its interfaces with gender, sexuality, age, religion, and nationality must be contiguous with efforts to promote a counter-hegemonic process of knowledge production (Hale, 2008; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999).

Two questions I proposed for the ethnography were: “Do these transformative cultural practices express a political philosophy?” and “What kinds of disruptive elements do these performances of Blackness introduce into the nation’s narrative of racial equality?” In regard to the first question, one of the findings indicates that this collective invests in a political project of inclusion and adoption of Affirmative Action. Concerning the second question, according to Akoben participants, Black artists are forcing the state, through their mobilization, to admit that even though “Afro-Brazilian” culture is claimed as a foundational element of Brazilian society, the state’s treatment of the creators of this culture is bound up in subjugation and racial oppression.

The relationship of Akoben members with the Black Movement and other black cultural agents confirms one of the initial hypotheses: The Black performers’ aesthetic choices and methodologies demonstrate a continuity in the fight against racism and racial exclusion. These methodologies and aesthetics help Afro-Brazilians make sense of

themselves in a society structured around racial inequalities by providing intellectual and symbolic tools to confront racial oppression.

In 1989, Law 7.716 was created, punishing racial crime; in 1997, Law 9459 altered the text of the law 7.716. In 2001, the World Conference Against Racism (Durban) brought together countries and international organizations to create a document whose signatories committed themselves to combat all forms of racism and racial discrimination. In 2003, SEPPIR was created. Law 10639 concerning the teaching of African and Afro-Brazilian history and culture was elaborated, and the process of implementing Affirmative Action policies in higher education was begun. These steps were possible due to the struggle of Black activists who have been engaged in the fight against racism since the 1970s and even before. Although proponents of neoliberal multiculturalism may embrace these initiatives and make them work for their own benefit, there is a lineage of elders and newer generations of activists and artists denouncing the numerous cases of racism and of racial exclusion. Either the racial democracy paradigm or the neoliberal multicultural state demand Blacks to be the smiling folkloric figures while the nation invests in processes of invisibilization and elimination of Black people. Akoben's mobilization needs to be understood as the continuity of a project for Black cultural politics started at the first National Forum of Black Performance in 2005. Since then, Black Brazilian artists are having conversations about the status of their artistic work within Brazilian society. The right to equal access to financial resources, as well as the right to create autonomous artistic works are at the core of these discussions (Bairros and Melo 2005).

But the internal difficulties of Black politics, not only Black cultural politics in Brazil, became evident in Akoben actions; they need to be addressed as well. Thus, at the same time activists recognized the need to raise consciousness among many Brazilians of African descent who did not recognize themselves as Black, the activists also recognized that their efforts were not reaching their target population. Although some of the reasons for this involve a scarcity of material resources available for Black activism, there are other issues to be considered. Some of these issues are: the focus on partisan politics, the alignment of activists with the state, the small number of activists, and the centrality of culture and religiosity (Candomblé) at the core of the Black Movement, which creates antagonism with other community-based mobilizations with different religious views.

There are several community-based mobilizations in Rio, such as movements carried out by mothers whose sons and daughters were murdered by the police, but there is no articulation between the official agenda of the Black Movement and these struggles. In the same way, there is no claim for an all-Black mobilization in these community-based initiatives, which does not mean that these initiatives are missing Black protagonism or a focus on Blackness as a target of state violence. What I am pointing out here is that few people related to the official Black Movement are in touch with these community-based initiatives, and that these initiatives, although mixed and not claiming themselves as “Black movements,” are addressing crucial racial issues. At the same time, the official Black movement is more focused on trying to change the state by operating from inside it and working in cooperation with White allies. However, the small number of people involved, the difficulty in overcoming internal differences, and political

competition have undermined Black activists' power to work with groups that have different political goals.

A symptom of this difficulty in overcoming difference and professional or personal competition could be observed in large meetings and conferences. These events, which should be spaces for debate and knowledge exchange, became compromised by a lack of objectivity and frequent exchanges of accusations. Another problem comes from solidified discourses and politics of representation of a "proper" or "correct" way of being Black or of "talking Black." In this regard, actor Gustavo Melo thinks that such reified modes of representation or performances of Blackness become empty of meaning:

...in the sense of investing in an intentional public representation, and sometimes institutional, that catalyzes desires and anxieties – supposed or real – of a given community which one assumes he or she represents. And yes, this make us question how certain theatrical genres, or certain "languages" do not give an account in representing certain bodies or political subjects [*sic*]. On the contrary, they become means of emptying political practices. (2014 - my translation)

In regard to performance of Blackness and to Black performances, when we talk about the transformative potential of performance, we hypothesize that performance practices unveil the spectacles of violence embodied in police killing, political discourses, and humor. The performance would be able to disrupt the pervasiveness of such violence by calling attention to civil society's naturalized ways of seeing violence and more specifically, seeing racial violence either as physical or symbolic. Nonetheless, since "Blackness thus, is an ontological product of violence and it is situated in a



condition of incommensurability,”<sup>96</sup> these claims of performance as tools to disrupt the normalcy of anti-Black violence are made useless. Civil society does not need to be made conscious of anti-Black violence; in fact, it demands this violence. That is why Dianna Taylor’s notion of *percepticide* is not applicable to describe civil society’s reactions to Black death (1997). Black death maintains the coherence of society (Wilderson, 2011). The place of Blackness is already situated as a performative presence in the world, always carrying the spectacle of otherness of the society.

The narrative of the West as the holder of humanity’s future could only make sense if there was something from which the ‘human future’ needs to be preserved. Starting with the Renaissance and consolidated in the Enlightenment, there was a systematic definition and categorization of entities living in a state without knowledge/reason. The “savage,” “Arab,” “Indian,” “Aboriginal,” “African,” ; “Negro” or “Slave” were entities that functioned counter to the civilized man, the man of the modern nation-state. Concurrently, it was the process of the destruction or domination of these other societies that made Modernity possible. In another words, “Modernity requires the death (physical and symbolic) of the black being” (Vargas, 2013). The only way to have civilization make sense is to prove that certain categories of men and women are living below the standards of civilization, and thus below standards of law, morality, and science. According to this discourse, these human groups were/are in need of being guided by any means necessary.

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<sup>96</sup> Wilderson, Frank. 2008a, See also 2011.

The West with its sciences, moral discourses, religious views, political structures, and philosophies established itself as the role model for humanity. In fact, the processes of nation formation in Europe inaugurated the concepts of “civilization” and “culture,” whose meanings and expressions were disputed politically, militarily, and philosophically (Elias, Hobsbawm). The colonial powers that European nations established in Africa, Asia, and the Americas needed to present themselves as the natural continuity of human evolution, and to accomplish this, they first needed to create the “savage” in order to annihilate them physically and symbolically. The righteousness of colonial rule was justified by the presentation to “civilization” of the horrendous mores, features, smells, and habits of these others. As a former colony, Brazil has the even more pressing need to prove itself as diverse, but not too Black. Rio de Janeiro’s spatial segregation, as well as the hierarchies of value attributed to cultural expressions, both clearly marked by race, are paradigmatic of Brazilian society’s anxiety to prove itself as a modern, multicultural nation, but still guided by the same ideas of (White) civilization that frame the concept of the nation-state and modernity alike (Bhabha 2008; 2004; Balibar 1991).

Black people are, at the same time, fully exposed as stereotypes and still invisible as people; this is not a contradiction. One is the predicament of the other: we need to be displayed as savage in order to have our very existence as autonomous beings cease to exist. All that is necessary for these dynamics of misrepresentation/non-representation is to have a few categories of Blackness performed every once and awhile. Sometimes not even the physical presence of the “Afro-Brazilian” is necessary, since in Brazil, almost everybody can claim a mixed ancestry without harm to their White privilege. Everybody

can say the infamous quote “I also have a foot in the kitchen/slave quarter,” meaning that someone in the family was Black. All Brazilians can enjoy “Negro” happiness and “Negro music;” almost all White Brazilians feel entitled to act “Black” during Carnival, and many will say to Black people that they understand the “Negro’s” pain. Conversely, to be and to act White is not for everybody. Whiteness assures the right to subjectivity, individuality, and life projects.

Returning to the question “What is a Black theme?” presented in the first chapter, one thing that can be said is that the Black theme is not about, as some spectacle flyers I collected say, the “universal questions of humankind.” The Black theme is not about this “humankind” at all! It is related to the “Black problem,” to the resilient persistence of the color lines marking sameness and otherness (Chandler 2008; Dubois 2007). That is why I think we need refine our methodological tools in order to create a theory and practice of Blackness in the modern world. This embodiment of Blackness as a project and as a politic could indicate a cognitive radicalization that attempts to capture the meanings of anti-Black violence, not as general violence or side-effect of class difference, but as the racial project of modernity. By specifying anti-Black racism as a specific violence not possible to explain or eliminate by using the traditional grammars of oppression, I embrace the Afro-pessimist approach, since it allows me to dialogue with my peers to articulate another way to express our anger and political despair, as I saw in the play “Roda do Mundo,” where the performers exposed the racist jokes and dynamics of self-hate. At same time, I also recognize both the specificity of Brazilian reality and examples of resilience and re-invention as I saw in the faith in the healing power of

African based religions that some of my peers have, in their uses of humor, or in Cobrinha's theater project of creating a trial of racism.

In "In the break: the aesthetics of black radical tradition," Moten, in his contemplation of Adrian Piper's work, proposes that there is a possibility for the object (Negress) to resist the gaze. He asks, "What if glancing is the aversion of the gaze, a physical act of repression, the active forgetting of an object whose resistance is now not the avoidance but the extortion of the gaze?" (2003: 233). Remembering the critique of the Comuns's play "Roda do Mundo" and the labeling of its scenes as "wildly aggressive," something that (White, and many Black) spectators do not want to see, we can think about what the investment in the extortion of the gaze could represent, in terms of a revolutionary change of an ontological becoming.

As I observed in community-based manifestations—particularly ones carried out by Black women<sup>97</sup>—when these Black bodies use performance not to ask for civil society's solidarity, but to accuse state and society of anti-Black violence, the extortion of the gaze forces it to glance away from this original object—the Black—that was once available to the gaze. The aversion of the gaze is indicated in the discomfort of the White theater critic and in the avoidance of pedestrians in seeing Black women's public performances of confrontation. In both cases, the fixity of the White gaze is extorted, forcing it to glance.

Such moments of subversion of the gaze were not often observed in Black artistic performances, perhaps because of the dominant framework of theater art in Brazil, still

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<sup>97</sup> See also, Rocha, Luciane. 2014.

very Western-centered, or because such artistic events were demanded by the state itself or by the economic needs of the artists. The fact that theater, performance, and dance are marginalized and do not have much space or social reach in Brazil forces artists, and more specifically, Black artists, to accommodate their projects to the state's demands, to the few private funding opportunities, or to audience demands. The possibility of a radical Black theater is constrained by the lack of material resources and by the dynamics of state cooptation of "Afro-Brazilian" culture and arts. But even more delicate than these two issues of state cooptation and lack of resources is the insistence on political and aesthetic paradigms that do not encompass a cognitive turn in Black political thought in Brazil.

Scholar Joy James in *Shadowboxing: Representations of Black Feminist Politics* presents a typology of Black feminisms, categorizing them as radical, revolutionary, and liberal (1999). This typology could help us to think through the modalities of Black political thought and the premises of a cognitive turn in Black politics (and life). Such a turn would move away from the liberal, or left-oriented Black political thought and advance towards a radical, if not revolutionary, approach to the question of Black positionality in Brazil and the global Diaspora.

A central finding of my work is the conceptualization of performance and performativity as a point of juncture where politics and ontologies are articulated, expressed, and practiced. Accompanying this discovery is the perception that radical Black art can only emerge outside spheres of the state and established artistic canons. Throughout my ethnographic research I observed moments where a conceptual break

occurred, moments where rage, contestation, or sarcasm extrapolate the script designed by the neoliberal multicultural state to fix and control Blackness.

It is in this sense that it was necessary for me to re-think the idea of “transformative.” From my experience I learned that the “transformative” I was seeking implied the transformation of material conditions and a radical critique of the racial state. But to achieve such transformation and to elaborate a critique of the racial state, which speaks to the pragmatic level of Black struggle, it is necessary to confront the subjective formation of Black being. A confrontation with the cognitive structures of the Black self and the comfort zones we create to protect ourselves from all the pain. Such confrontation questions certain aspirations, such as the hope of having the rhetoric of “Black contributions to the nation” truly accepted and embraced, or the faith in Marxism as a possible solution to achieve racial equality. Since anti-Black racism and violence constitute a final barrier that both leftist ideologies and neoliberal multiculturalism fail (or in fact, refuse) to dismantle, this confrontation requires, on the part of Black Brazilian activists, an intense rethinking of the role of their cultural production and the path of Black social mobilizations. I think that to consolidate transformation it is necessary for Black activists (and for Black Brazilian people in general) to invest in a cognitive turn, not aimed at simply opposing racism, but firstly aimed at inventing ourselves as Black beings. We need to discover our place in the world and choose our role, which also demands a critical look into what the goals of Black initiatives have been, and why it is still not possible to think outside the patriarchal, heteronormative frame that, once more, re-introduces our subordination. Such a turn would escape the rhetoric of Black

citizenship and contributions to the national formation, and would also question the uncritical embracing of common sense ideas that many activists have been celebrating: "Black is beautiful"; "Blacks have an intense, natural happiness." Although I believe our hair, our skin, our features are beautiful and diverse, our music is wonderful, and so on, I also saw how often this become a mask to conceal our despair. I think it is time to face despair. I saw in Akoben's political project an attempt to name such despair, and to mobilize to change material conditions. Through the analyses of Black artists' trajectories and projects we can think about processes of self-making that are carried out through the production of art work that are simultaneously informed by and informing the constitution of new political identities and positions. Although I saw how the mobilization ended up by seeking state recognition and support, the collective discussions, protests, and campaigns performed by Akoben created grounds for a necessary criticism of Black political projects, shared knowledge, stimulated critical thinking, established professional networks, and generated new artistic projects.

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## **Vitae**

mandriusantos@gmail.com

Maria Andrea dos Santos Soares was born in Santiago, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil in 1973. She attended college at the Federal University of Santa Maria where she earned the degree in Art Education –Theater in 2000. In 2001 she moved to Porto Alegre city worked with public education for eight years and obtained the Master degree in Social Anthropology at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul. The PhD program at the Anthropology Department/ African Diaspora program (UT – Austin) was initiated in the Fall 2009.

This manuscript was typed by the author.