

THE DIFFERENCE ORÙNMILÁ MAKES: THE PAST AS PROJECT  
IN AN AFRO-BRAZILIAN STRUGGLE

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# THE DIFFERENCE ORÙNMILÁ MAKES: THE PAST AS PROJECT IN AN AFRO-BRAZILIAN STRUGGLE

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This dissertation explores how the *Centro Cultural Orùnmilá* [Orùnmilá Cultural Center] struggles for the substantive valuing of Afro-Brazilian culture and knowledge as a means to address contemporary racial inequality. Located in the city of Ribeirão Preto, in the interior of the state of São Paulo, Brazil, the Orùnmilá Center's cultural work and politics mobilizes a critical historical perspective and Afro-Brazilian forms of embodied knowledge and learning as key sites and sources for the struggle to decolonize social relations and achieve racial equality. In this process, they claim representation in the spheres of education, institutional politics, and culture to push the substance and practice of citizenship beyond the circumscribed inclusion afforded through Brazilian racial democracy, ideologies of miscegenation (i.e. racial and cultural mixture), and contemporary apolitical multiculturalisms. Orùnmilá members strive to transcend addressing inequality through access to and inclusion into an already defined system—educational, economic, political, and cultural. Instead, they reclaim the importance of culture in struggle to challenge and transform the unequal histories of power and race that structure dominant understandings of what knowledge counts in the making of modernity and development. Their work addresses how capitalist development and the colonial legacy re-articulate racial hierarchies and rule in ways that continue to marginalize and exclude Afro-descendant peoples.

The Orùnmilá Center engages in a range of efforts including cultural

workshops, lectures and presentations, anti-racist activism, and policy-advocacy. The chapters of this study look in detail at the philosophy and action underlying Orùnmilá's work, especially how they mobilize *ancestralidade*, or ancestral knowledge/wisdom and lived experience to construct the Afro-descendant past as a project for contemporary social transformation. The chapters also analyze their struggle to construct and implement a municipal education project and their use of the Afro-Brazilian cultural form of *Afoxé* as a means of protest and anti-racist advocacy in the annual carnival parade. In these efforts, Orùnmilá members politicize black culture and difference as sites of epistemological critique that shape other ways of understanding history, progress, value, and collectivity.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Alexandre Emboaba Da Costa was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in the United States of America to parents who moved to the U.S. from Ribeirão Preto, Brazil in the early 1970s. Alex received his B.S. in Rural Sociology from Cornell University in 2000. After receiving his degree, he lived in New York City where he worked briefly for the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) prior to joining the staff at the Legal Aid Society of New York's Brooklyn Office for the Aging. As a paralegal casehandler for Legal Aid, he advocated for ethnically diverse elderly Brooklyn residents in relation to public benefits issues, such as Social Security, Medicaid, Medicare, and Food Stamps. His clients were from a range of places in Brooklyn as well as immigrants and refugees from many Latin American, Caribbean, Eastern European, and Central Asian countries. While in New York City, he also translated audiovisual materials from Portuguese to English for the Witness organization, which were included in a "witness alert" for to publicize and request investigation of massacres of members of the Brazilian Landless Workers' Movement, or Movimento Sem Terra (MST).

In 2002, Alex enrolled in the Department of Development Sociology at Cornell University (formerly Rural Sociology) to pursue his Master's and PhD. As a graduate student, he sought training in various subjects including political and historical sociology, sociological theory, social movements and citizenship, race and ethnicity, quantitative and qualitative methods, and Latin American studies. His research interests include diasporic and Brazilian black cultural struggle, especially in relation to questions of race in development, critical multiculturalism, and the transformation of formal political institutions and public policy. In May 2009, he defended his dissertation, *The Difference Orùnmilá Makes: Past as Project in an Afro-Brazilian Struggle*.

When not busy working on his academic career, Alex deejays under the moniker Fictitious Commodity. He has organized events and played at bars, lounges, and house parties in Ithaca and Brooklyn New York as well as Kingston, Ontario and Ribeirão Preto, São Paulo. He also produced a Brazilian music radio show entitled *Saravá Kingston* for 101.9 CFRC FM community radio in Kingston from January 2008 to January 2009.

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, Sandra and João, for making my continuing relationship and connection with Brazil a priority as they raised me; to Dia for her unfailing encouragement and support; and to my friends at the Orùnmilá Center for opening up a window into another way of thinking about and understanding myself and our world. Without each of you, this dissertation would not be possible.

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I would specifically like to thank Pai Paulo and Mãe Neide, the spiritual and political “father” and “mother” of the Cultural Center. Their dedication to their community and their ability to struggle for what they believe, often with the smallest of resources, institutional capacity, and local governmental support, serves as an inspiration and guide for me in my own work and those that aim for making this world a more equal place. I thank Mãe Neide for her hospitality and openness, her smile and personality are magnetic and transmit energy and a feeling of happiness to anyone who comes into contact with her. I thank Pai Paulo for his patience with my ongoing questions, his detailed explanations of history and culture, and the fact that he let me tag along with him to various events and engagements throughout my year in Ribeirão. We had many conversations and discussions that not only helped shape my questions, but also brought us closer together.

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humor never waned despite their busy schedules, neither did their ability to organize and carry out workshops and other events. Their partners, Robson, Anderson, and Emerson, also were supportive of my work. Robson in particular became not only a friend, but a fellow DJ partner and someone who taught me a lot about Brazilian hip-hop and about orality and performance. His energy and love for black culture and hip-hop never failed to move a crowd when he got on the microphone. Malcolm is another person who became a good friend and constantly challenged my thinking. His calm, approachable demeanor and composed perspective contributed tremendously to making me feel like part of the Cultural Center. He also made it possible that I could be at many events both at the Cultural Center as well as around town by never hesitating to offer me a ride or to entertain my questions with explanations.

Several other Orùnmilá participants deserve mention here for making my fieldwork experience smooth and comfortable and for becoming my friends through the experience. Vanessa became a good friend and made possible my participation in various spheres of cultural life in Ribeirao Preto. We had many good conversations and bonded on our musical tastes. Her friendship gave a sense of normalcy to an intense year of fieldwork. Marina also helped in this regard. Her claims that my own personality and character “never ceased to amaze” her, helped me feel that I could be myself and express my ideas and personality no matter what context we were in. She also helped cart me around town to Orùnmilá events when needed, as did her sister Teresa, who also made me feel at home. There is also Sérgio, with whom I had several good conversations, both personal and intellectual. Finally, I cannot forget to mention a few other people who were open and helpful and with whom I connected beyond my research in different ways. This includes Márcia, João Vitor, Anelise, Cris, Bianca, Regina Brito, Lheo, Buana, Maré, Sara, Ricardo, Jacqueline, Júnior, Soraia, and Nicole. I apologize if my list has overlooked anyone.

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## INTRODUCTION

If Mãe Neide and I go out on the street and have a conversation with people, they will throw into the garbage the thirty years she has of black culture, of lived experience within black culture, in exchange for my four years of university. And this is why we have to truly create a process of transformation, but through culture. We must really insert black culture... into the process of cultural formation, even more than cultural, ideological, of Brazil.

--João Vitor, member of the Orùnmilá Cultural Center

The most progressive exponents of liberal generosity, upon “recognizing” the African cultural contribution to Brazil, still emphasize the predominance of European cultural values *over* those of the majority of the population which is of African origin.

--Abdias do Nascimento in *Brazil: Mixture or Massacre*

The above statements highlight various layers of the experience of being black and Brazilian, especially the character of Afro-Brazilian inclusion in the nation. The statements point out that the visibility of Afro-Brazilians and the recognition of their culture and contribution to Brazil remain partial. Abdias do Nascimento, longtime black movement activist and scholar, attributes circumscribed recognition of the African and Afro-Brazilian contribution to the continued emphasis on European values as ideal despite the large Afro-descendant population. João Vitor’s statement illustrates an outcome of this process. He describes how the knowledge held by Mãe Neide, a priestess of the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé religion and co-founder of the *Centro Cultural Orùnmilá*, is not valued within Brazil’s social formation. In contrast, the university diploma holds significance and respect. This reveals a hierarchy of

knowledge that shapes the representation and value of cultural and knowledge forms stemming from Afro-descendant communities. In a society like Brazil where miscegenation—racial and cultural mixture—is hailed as formative of the national character, these quotes assert how the experience of mixture has led to unequal results for Afro-Brazilians. Consequently, Afro-Brazilians are acknowledged as contributors to the nation, but in particular ways that reproduces their marginalization and racial hierarchies shaped by the colonial legacy. This dissertation explores how the *Centro Cultural Orùnmilá* [Orùnmilá Cultural Center] struggles for the substantive valuing of Afro-Brazilian culture and knowledge as one means to address contemporary racial inequality.

Afro-Brazilians have long struggled against the limitations on citizenship structured by the place of “race” in colonial and post-colonial projects of rule.<sup>1</sup> Whether through outright rebellion and sabotage, demands for respect, integration, and equality, or the forging of solidarity in semi-autonomous institutions and communities, Afro-Brazilians fought in different ways for self-determination amidst the negative meanings of “race” and blackness that designated their subordinate social status in society (Andrews 2004; Butler 1998; Hanchard 1994; Harding 2000; Nascimento 2007; Reis 1993; Sodré 2002). Their efforts confronted a shifting terrain of popular and state discourses and practices that reproduced racism and discrimination, limited their abilities for social ascension, and curbed their power to dissent.

Since the late 1970s, black movement organizing and activism has generated diverse efforts, growing public discussion of race and racism, and increased attention

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<sup>1</sup> I use the terms Afro-descendant, black, non-white, and Afro-Brazilian interchangeably, conforming to usage by those I interviewed and the academic literature demonstrating that, despite some advantages experienced by lighter-skinned Blacks, there is greater difference between non-white and white Brazilians than among Afro-Brazilians of different skin tones. The term *negro*, which directly translates to ‘black’, is used by many people, especially black movement activists, as a method of claiming a politicized identity through a term that historically had negative connotations and associations. The term Afro-Brazilian and Afro-descendant are seen as more encompassing, as it includes those that may not identify politically as *negro*, but are of visible African ancestry.

and policy initiatives from government officials and institutions. Brazilian society has witnessed the implementation of affirmative action initiatives in dozens of public and private universities and businesses, the growing prosecution of acts of racial discrimination, and efforts to address the limited portrayal of Afro-Brazilian history and culture in education. Race and racism are now on the public agenda and in the social imagination. Yet, the implementation of policies in areas such as education, culture, and health remain contested, varying at the local level depending on civil society mobilization and the willingness of state representatives to engage the issue. This study examines this process by analyzing how the philosophy and action of the Orùnmilá Cultural Center engages in anti-racist mobilization through cultural work and policy advocacy.

For Orùnmilá members, constructing substantive equality for Afro-Brazilians necessitates struggle over not only the distribution of resources, but also over representations that continue to define history, meaning, and value, and thus re-articulate hierarchical treatments of Afro-descendant knowledge. They see the historical devaluing and labelling as inferior of Afro-descendant peoples, their cultures, and ways of life as integral to capitalist development's foreclosure of both alternative ways of organizing society and the valuing of knowledge forms marginal to the framework of the market paradigm. They see this historical devaluing as a significant component that sustains racial inequality in the present. The processes that structured circumscribed inclusion for Afro-descendants reflect the place of "race" in twentieth century Brazilian development. While a national discourse declared the symbolic value of blackness and black culture, negative interpretations of blackness endured, and along with it, so has racism, discrimination, and inequality.

In twentieth century Brazil, state officials, cultural critics, and public intellectuals were key orchestrators of the shifting treatment of Afro-Brazilians and

their cultural practices in the national imagination. While blackness was a “problem” for national progress, modernization, and development in the decades after slavery’s abolition (1888), it became an affirmed component of Brazil’s social formation in the late 1920s and 1930s. Afro-Brazilian cultural forms, along with other “popular” cultures, went from signifiers of backwardness and targets of repression to symbols of national culture, Brazilian racial mixture, and “authentic” Brazilianness. The visibility given to Afro-Brazilian forms like samba and Capoeira, coupled with the hailing of miscegenation, came to symbolize racial integration and unity.

Underlying the racial element of Brazilian state-formation was a culturalism that folklorized and commodified Afro-Brazilian culture and knowledge. Culturalism fetishizes difference in form while excluding substantive content, as it simply equates Afro-Brazilian culture with the expressive and artifactual elements of cultural production. This neglects or obscures the normative and political aspects of cultural processes. It also divorces cultural practices from their histories, from their ongoing creation in the present, as well as from the modes of consciousness that brought them into being (Hanchard 1994). In this way, Afro-Brazilian contributions were reified and valued within a narrowly defined sphere of culture. This particular engagement with Afro-Brazilian culture and knowledge limited their contribution to shaping political, educational, and other institutions.

This study analyzes how Orùnmilá’s anti-racist politics contests the effects on Afro-descendants of the culturalism underlying Brazil’s political and social formation. Their focus on cultural struggle and knowledge places them at the center of questions of development because they focus not only on policies aimed at including Afro-Brazilians within current political, cultural, and educational institutions. They also aim to transform the content and terms of citizenship to substantively engage with the knowledge and experience stemming from Afro-descendant communities. This

dissertation examines how they mobilize embodied knowledge and history to challenge racial inequality and construct other definitions of education, collectivity, and development. I will show this by examining what Orùnmilá means to its members, the Center's philosophy and practice, the activities and advocacy they engage in, and the notions of knowledge and visions of substantive inclusion that arise from them.

Several interrelated questions frame my analysis. How do Orùnmilá members mobilize an African and Afro-Brazilian past—culture, knowledge, and epistemologies—to construct contemporary idioms and practices of struggle to decolonize social relations? What role do Afro-Brazilian forms of resistance, knowledge, and sociality play in the struggle for substantive equality and citizenship? In what ways do the Orùnmilá Center's philosophies and actions challenge and/or go beyond histories and processes formative of racialized capitalist development and black inequality? Finally, how does the Orùnmilá Center's cultural work articulate with broader struggles aiming to reshape and redefine development, collectivity, and possibility to construct another, more equal world? Through these questions, I explore how Orùnmilá's struggle contests the ongoing salience of race and knowledge in shaping material inequalities and lived experiences of unequal development for Afro-descendants. I do so by looking at the difference Orùnmilá makes in using culture in struggle.

### **Afro-Brazilians, the Coloniality of Power, and Orùnmilá's Cultural Struggle**

Scholars studying Latin America have used the coloniality of power to describe the ongoing re-articulation of hierarchical meanings and values based on categories like "race," gender, spirituality, class, culture, and knowledge (Quijano

1997; 2000; see also Mignolo 2000; 2007; Grosfoguel 2007; Walsh 2002).

Colonization and European capitalist expansion turned the peoples outside of Europe and their corresponding geographies into objects of colonization, civilizing missions, academic study, and later, development (Quijano 2007). Through the forced subjugation of peoples *and* the production of knowledge, this process transformed the “colonial difference”—modernity’s classification of different cultures, peoples, and their corresponding geographies—into values, into expressions of levels of humanity, civilization, progress, and development (Mignolo 2000). Power articulated race and labor, space and peoples to the needs of capital, associating certain groups with different characteristics and positions in national and global society (Quijano 2000).

Racialization and cultural classification were integral to the production of “difference” that subalternized ethnic-racial groups and their knowledge (Walsh 2002), and consequently, the cultural practices and forms of collectivity shaped by and producing such knowledge. Afro-descendants became producers of folklore or cultural artifacts, but not knowledge or theory. Their spirituality, cultural practices, and worldviews were linked with a premodern past, only to become “modern” through reified or commodified inclusion within capitalist state-formation and paradigms of accumulation.

I focus on the colonality of power as a way to think about how capitalist development obscures and/or disqualifies the subaltern knowledges and ways of being that shape diverse understandings of value and collectivity (cf. Escobar 2004; Grosfoguel 2007; Mignolo 2000; Quijano 2000; Walsh 2002). A focus on colonality illuminates what forms of sociality dominant knowledges and epistemologies assume, especially what histories and ways of being are included and which are excluded within development processes. Using colonality to study the Afro-Brazilian case links Afro-Brazilians’ experiences of subjugation, folklorization, and commodification to

the broader treatment of African and Afro-descendant peoples and their knowledge within capitalist development. In this way, struggles to address coloniality engage the broader historical relations of power shaping the intersection of “race” and development.

A focus on coloniality also offers a way to think about interventions into these processes that re-articulate hierarchies and inequality. Specifically, it opens up the “reconstruction and the restitution [of] silenced histories, repressed subjectivities, [and] subalternized knowledges” as possible epistemologies and values for re-organizing social change (Mignolo 2007: 451; see also Escobar 2004). For example, Afro-Brazilian epistemological perspectives *emerge from* and *respond to* colonial legacies, as they encompass both struggles for cultural continuity (e.g. the reconstruction of cosmovisions, cultural history, meanings, and practices) and historical experiences of change (e.g. displacement, colonization, segregation, and domination). In this way, Afro-Brazilian struggles can reveal forms of *an-other thinking* that reflect situated knowledges and epistemologies arising out of the lived experiences of “race” and inequality. I use the term “other” or “an-other” to capture how, through struggle and resistance, Afro-Brazilian epistemologies have historically existed as a perspective on identity and collectivity that diverge from and challenge, dominant, elite perspectives. My analysis engages the Orùnmilá Center’s anti-racist philosophy and practice as a form of *an-other thinking* that mobilizes *ancestralidade*—ancestral wisdom/knowledge and lived experience—to challenge the coloniality of power and knowledge (see Chapter 2).

In Orùnmilá’s anti-racism, culture is not just a claim or characteristic of Afro-Brazilian tradition. Rather, culture is an expression of power within the Brazilian nation where a complex history of oppression, folklorization, cooptation, and commodification strongly shape meanings of “race” and blackness, and thus the



treatment of Afro-descendants. Here, culture is not a static past embodied by people in the present, but a form of embodied knowledge shaped by ancestral values and ways of being, and historical and contemporary experiences and struggles. Afro-Brazilian embodied knowledge is constituted in process, expressing both continuity and change in the struggle to construct solidarity and collectivity in the face of oppression and inequality. This vision reveals how the Orùnmilá Center's anti-racist project draws on the past not as a static legacy to be restored, but as a means to decolonize power and knowledge. They mobilize the past as project for social change, recognizing the past as living and subject to transformation.

### **The Difference Orùnmilá Makes**

I am a priest of the Yoruba tradition. So [this space] here was established first with the idea of *axé*<sup>2</sup> of the *culto orixá* [Orixá worship]. Over some years I had conferences and Yoruba language courses. Things were more centered on the question of ancestrality, on the question of religiosity. In November 1994 was when we created the concept of the *Centro Cultural Orùnmilá*.

--Paulo, co-founder and president of Orùnmilá

The Orùnmilá Center is located in the city of Ribeirão Preto, in the northeastern part of the state of São Paulo. It was founded by a couple, Paulo and Neide, a priest and priestess of the Candomblé religion, specifically the West-African derived, Yoruba influenced *Culto aos Orixás*.<sup>3</sup> They purchased land in the mid-1980s

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<sup>2</sup> The term *axé* refers to a spiritual energy that is central to Candomblé and is cultivated and transmitted through ritual and orality. The term *casa de axé* [house of *axé*] is also often used to refer to a space of Candomblé worship.

<sup>3</sup> Candomblé developed during the nineteenth century in Brazil, drawing heavily on West African spiritual ideas and practices brought by enslaved Africans and recreated within a new context of slavery, repression of African cultures and ways of being, and the interaction and mixture between

to build their home and construct a *terreiro de Candomblé*, or house of Candomblé worship. While still a Candomblé house that performs ceremonies, initiates new members, and provides spiritual and religious services, the focus of their work shifted in 1994 with the creation of the Orùnmilá Cultural Center. Since then, they have developed their anti-racist cultural work along two broad lines: (a) public policy advocacy and (b) cultural workshops, seminars, and presentations that cultivate and share philosophies and practices central to Afro-Brazilian culture and history. While the shift in their work may seem to the reader as a form of secular modernization, as the following chapters show, this is far from the case. The fact that they do not abandon religiosity, instead recognizing it as a form of sociality, makes Orùnmilá different from the majority of anti-racist organizations involved in public advocacy. They draw on *ancestralidade* and religiosity as knowledge, as formative of the living past they mobilize as project. Their anti-racism unites cultural critique with policy advocacy to mobilize Afro-Brazilian culture and epistemology and make racial inequality a more visible local issue.

Orùnmilá's policy advocacy makes claims on the state to address racial inequality, exclusion, and marginalization in the spheres of education, health, and culture. While they maintain fiscal and institutional autonomy from the state, they advocate for the presence of Afro-Brazilians in political institutions and decision-making processes.<sup>4</sup> Orùnmilá's work promotes local discussion in executive,

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Africans from different nations and regions of the old continent. Candomblé involves African cosmologies and mythologies transmitted through oral tradition and cultivated through particular rituals and practices in *terreiros*, or houses of worship. In particular, participants worship *Orixás* which are great ancestors who were divinized into deities, exhibit particular personalities and traits, and require certain forms of food and other offerings (Johnson 2002). Candomblé, like several other Afro-Brazilian cultural practices, has maintained a relatively stable system of meanings and practices that emphasize particular cosmovisions and engagements with the world—understandings of space, time, human interaction, history, knowledge, movement, and identity.

<sup>4</sup> The exception to fiscal autonomy is the money granted to Orùnmilá for their participation in the annual carnival, which they use to purchase supplies for the *Afoxé* (see Chapter 4). The money used to run the Center comes from the savings of Paulo and Neide, the small income from the spiritual services

legislative, and administrative government institutions and also provokes media coverage of issues involving “race” and Afro-Brazilians. Through newspapers and television, seminars and discussions, and advocacy with local officials, Orùnmilá’s work pushes for a critical engagement with historical and everyday forms of racism and discrimination and how these shape the unequal position of Blacks in society. They then build on these discussions to negotiate institutional political power, influence legislative politics, and scrutinize the nature and implementation of local initiatives.

Their second line of work informs their policy advocacy. Through weekly workshops and discussions, special cultural events, presentations, and public debates, their work develops Afro-descendant epistemologies and cultural forms as legitimate and valuable sites of knowledge. They politicize Afro-Brazilian culture to question how coloniality shapes what forms of knowledge and ways of being count for constructing collectivity and societal development. They situate dominant, hierarchical representations of Afro-Brazilian history and culture within the processes that have produced lived, material inequalities for Afro-Brazilians. To accomplish this, their cultural work promotes critical discussions that develop an anti-racist discourse (seminars on African and Afro-Brazilian history, philosophy, and social mobilization) as well as workshops (dance, percussion, musicality, and orality) that emphasize performance as embodied knowledge and collectivity.

A key excerpt from an article in the Orùnmilá Center’s periodically published *Soro Dúdú* newspaper captures how Orùnmilá members conceptualize Afro-Brazilian cultural forms and epistemologies as historical sites of struggle. In the article, Paulo and Silas<sup>5</sup> state,

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that Neide provides, and small contributions from participants and members. There are no paid staff, so maintenance and upkeep is done by members.

<sup>5</sup> Silas is professor of communication and Orùnmilá member.

[The Orùnmilá Center] acts to politicize activities considered merely as culture to show their political meaning, a political meaning that goes beyond partisan and electoral politics. In Brazilian society, certain expressions and institutions clearly illustrate the inseparable character of the cultural and political sphere. To highlight those with which the Orùnmilá Cultural Center works, we give as an example, Capoeira, Carnaval, and Hip Hop... expressions [that] are viscerally connected to the history and culture of black peoples. The political content of these expressions increases exponentially in a nation that lived under slavery. The very historical character of such expressions was constructed in political confrontation, in the struggle for the liberation and emancipation of a people. How can one deny their eminently political character?

But we do not want to only valorize that which is most historically visible. We must consider how the roots of Capoeira, Carnaval, and with new characteristics, Hip Hop, involve fundamental elements of black culture. Capoeira and Carnaval, with emphasis on samba, on *afoxé* and maracatu, conceived their base through the core thoughts and symbolic universe of African peoples. Out of the *Culto aos Orixás* and the philosophical conceptions of Candomblé were born forms of dancing and fighting, pleasure and knowledge, happiness and sadness, misery and abundance that inundate both festivals and political struggles in the history of black peoples (“As Dimensões Inseparáveis de Política e Cultura e a Luta do C. C. Orùnmilá.” 2004: 2; my translation<sup>6</sup>).

For Orùnmilá members, culture and politics are inseparable in Afro-Brazilian cultural forms used to forge and maintain collective memory, cultural continuity, and solidarity in the face of subalternization, repression, racialization, and regulation. These forms represent sites through which Afro-Brazilians constructed epistemologies based in orality and embodied knowledge (e.g. storytelling, percussion, dance, and musicality), means that simultaneously expressed the thought and symbolic universe of African-matrix cultures as well as viable possibilities for creating a sense of identity, self, and community. Under regimes of slavery and contemporary racism and discrimination, Afro-Brazilian culture encompasses not only performance, entertainment, or a form of coping, but an ongoing struggle to live on and survive, to maintain and strengthen

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<sup>6</sup> All translations from Portuguese to English are my own unless otherwise noted.

identity, cultural forms, and ways of being.

João Vitor, a white twenty-four year old man initiating into Candomblé through Pai Paulo and Mãe Neide,<sup>7</sup> describes how Orùnmilá's anti-racism mobilizes histories of black struggle in ways that differentiate it from other cultural centers,

At Orùnmilá, we have old, traditional culture, the language spoken in the rituals. But on the other hand, we also have contemporary African culture [*cultural Africana*]. Here there is not only *ijexa*, or traditional rhythms from Africa. We also contemplate a diversity of black culture, of the hip hop movement, Capoeira, samba, of graffiti, which is a black cultural expression. (...) This is what makes Orùnmilá something different from most of the black cultural centers in Brazil. If you go to [famous Candomblé houses in Bahia], you will learn a lot about Africa of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. But they exclude contemporaneity, and thus Orùnmilá has this difference of being the old, the new, or in other words, the “past” and the “present” in a balanced way. (...) Here we don't have just drums. We also have DJs and Rap music.

So, black culture is important, but you also have to adapt. (...) Orùnmilá is an agent of differentiation in this sense of recreating and reestablishing. So what happens? You take the rap produced by the people that frequent Orùnmilá, and they have African stories/legends in them, understand? So it becomes something more than the expression of an excluded people.

João Vitor captures how Orùnmilá transforms histories of black cultural struggle to go beyond expressing “tradition.” They recreate and re-establish the *ancestralidade* in practices like Candomblé, Capoeira, samba, and hip hop as embodied knowledge and history that can inform social transformation in the present. This is in stark contrast to the culturalism that reifies black culture as static and limited to folklore and entertainment. In this way, Orùnmilá's work challenges the role of coloniality in Brazilian state-formation's treatment of “race” and culture and its subsequent effects on Afro-Brazilian lived experience.

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<sup>7</sup> “Pai” and “Mãe” refer to mother and father, respectively, which are labels adherents and initiates use to describe the priest and priestesses of the *Candomblé* house to which they belong. Most Orùnmilá members use Pai Paulo and Mãe Neide, as opposed to Paulo and Neide.

## Dimensions of the Anti-Racist Struggle in Ribeirão Preto

Despite general progress on the issue of racial equality, the struggle continues to face various difficulties as influential government and media figures express opposition to open discussions of racial inequality and the implementation of race-based public policy. This discursive opposition reflects the ongoing strength of dominant constructions of racial democracy—the idea that race relations are relatively harmonious and race does not affect life chances—as the core of being Brazilian (see Chapter 1). Critics of anti-racism define systemic racism as a phenomenon external to the Brazilian national space, deeming “race” as an insignificant category to understand lived experience and inequality. This makes attention to race in everyday conversation and public institutions a priori controversial. As Malcolm, a twenty-five year old Afro-Brazilian member of Orùnmilá explains,

Prejudice in Brazil is complicated because of this, because people are prejudiced, they know that they are prejudiced, but there is already a pre-made discourse in Brazil that is used. *Every second* someone repeats this discourse. (...) Because people in Brazil, they know this discourse that prejudice doesn't exist, that this is something of the past, that this is just talk, that this is just something created by vengeful/whiny Blacks [*negro doi doi*], a lot of things of this type.

Consequently, the contemporary struggle for racial equality confronts state-formation's symbolic inclusion of Afro-Brazilians as well as everyday forms of repressing democracy that silence the ability to openly discuss race and make it a target of public policy.

The situation in Ribeirão Preto reflects this progress and difficulty on racial equality, especially in relation to governmental attention and public policy. When

racial inequality and Afro-Brazilian issues have not been ignored outright, they tend to be treated within a culturalist framework. Moreover, the majority of public officials and municipal employees have tremendous inexperience with the issue. Nonetheless, the recent responsiveness of several public officials has helped make strides in the realm of policy implementation.

Since the mid-1990s, the black community has struggled for the creation of institutions to represent issues affecting Afro-Brazilians locally. A Municipal Council for the Development and Participation of the Black Community was founded in 1996, but it was not provided with proper resources and infrastructure. Moreover, councils are consultative bodies without any legislative power, limiting their ability to effect change. Despite this, council members, some of whom are currently involved with Orùnmilá, did put pressure on local government and use the media to publicize the issue of racial inequality. However, no substantial inroads were made in terms of local policy and projects until around 2005. Since then, Ribeirão Preto officials have implemented several initiatives to address racial inequality in spheres like education, health, and culture and to increase Afro-Brazilian representation in municipal government institutions. The Orùnmilá Cultural Center has been a decisive factor in generating, publicizing, and monitoring such changes.

During the mayoral election campaign of 2004, Orùnmilá and other black community leaders drafted a document entitled *Proposal of the Ribeirão Preto Black Community for Affirmative Political Action in the 2004 Elections*. This document demanded candidates' campaigns take up public policies to fight racial inequality and discrimination. The proposal requested the creation of advisory positions in the executive branch (the mayor's cabinet and municipal secretariats), recognition and support of the Municipal Council for the Black Community, and the allocation of

fixed funds for the promotion and preservation of black culture.<sup>8</sup> Only one candidate, Welson Gasparini, from the *Partido Social Democrata Brasileiro*, The Brazilian Social Democratic Party (PSDB), incorporated the demands into his election campaign.<sup>9</sup> After he won the election, Orùnmilá leaders and other members of the black community pushed him to make good on his campaign promises.

Initially, Mayor Gasparini did not prioritize the demands of the black community. But, Orùnmilá leadership pressured the administration through a series of letters and articles in the local media. Gasparini reacted. During the Week of Black Consciousness in November 2005 in a room filled with municipal department heads, members of the black community, and the media, he asked for the assistance of the black community in accomplishing the tasks,

I want to act as mayor to make our community an example of racial integration and equal treatment for all. In this respect, I expect your collaboration. The inclusion of two advisory positions in my administrative staff will help me in this respect and symbolize the open doors city hall has for the black community... what I want is your collaboration in making me be a good mayor... help me govern correctly, especially to attend to the justified yearnings of Afro-descendants. I complement you [the black community] on the representation you had in Brasilia [at Zumbi + 10],<sup>10</sup> and I leave you with the certainty that in Ribeirão Preto, a governmental leadership exists that is active and capable in guaranteeing you a better future in our community.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Taken from copy of the document given to author by Paulo Oliveira.

<sup>9</sup> The PSDB is a liberal center-left, or centrist party. While the party affiliations of Orùnmilá members are varied, Paulo and Neide, as well as several others are members of the PSDB. This affiliation has not tamed Orùnmilá's efforts or critiques. As Paulo told me in an interview, "My party is the party of black." Thus, the issue of racial inequality tops the Orùnmilá Center's priorities. As a consequence, the PSDB party members, politicians, and administration are treated as any other, becoming targets of vocal and visible demands to address racial inequality when they ignore or obstruct the issue.

<sup>10</sup> Zumbi + 10 was a national mobilization for anti-racism that brought tens of thousands of people to the national capital to demand the government take seriously the task of addressing racism, discrimination, and inequality. The name Zumbi + 10 indicates the ten year anniversary of the march on Brasilia of 1995, which was held to commemorate the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of Zumbi dos Palmares, a legendary leader of the longest maroon community in Brazilian history. Zumbi remains a strong icon of the black struggle in Brazil.

<sup>11</sup> "Gasparini promete tornar Ribeirão Preto exemplo de inclusão social", November 18, 2005, Ribeirão Preto municipal government website, [<http://www.ribeiraopreto.sp.gov.br/ccs/noticias/0511/18/i33b-gasparini.htm>].



At this meeting, Gasparini announced the creation of the advisory position in the Education Secretariat, for which he nominated Silvany, an Orùnmilá member and trained educator. He also announced the creation of an advisor in the Culture Secretariat designated to administer black cultural entities. While Orùnmilá members were pleased by the overall outcome, the announcement of the advisor in the Culture Secretariat came as a surprise. The position they had demanded was within the *Casa Civil*, which is part of the mayor's cabinet [*gabinete do prefeito*] in City Hall. A position in the *Casa Civil* would provide greater access to the mayor and scrutiny over municipal projects. Approximately one year later, the mayor would also create the Commission for the Coordination and Accompaniment of Affirmative Action Policies for Afro-descendants<sup>12</sup> and place it in the Culture Secretariat. The Commission is an entity that brings together civil society and representatives from municipal secretariats to discuss and encourage initiatives targeting the racial theme.<sup>13</sup> The advisor in the *Casa Civil* was to preside over Commission meetings and take the proposals to the mayor for consideration.

Orùnmilá members resisted the placement of the advisor and Commission in the Culture Secretariat, resulting in their placement within the *Casa Civil* as was originally demanded. The attempts to place the advisor and Commission in the Culture Secretariat reflect two important aspects of the black struggle for institutional power. First, they demonstrate culturalist tendencies, as one Afro-Brazilian closely involved with the process remarked to me,

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<sup>12</sup> *Comissão de Coordenação e Acompanhamento da Política de Ações Afirmativas para Afrodescendentes*. The Commission in Ribeirão Preto was one of three created in the whole State of São Paulo, which has 645 municipalities.

<sup>13</sup> Government members include representatives from the Finance, Citizenship and Social Development, Culture, Health, and Education secretariats. Civil society members include six people from organizations involved in Afro-Brazilian issues (Capoeira, health and gender, student organizations, etc.), three representatives from institutions of higher education (local private and public universities), and one representative from the Orùnmilá Cultural Center.

It's because they pejoratively consider the black question [*questão negra*] as merely cultural. Carnival, the date of May 13<sup>th</sup> (which is the commemoration of slavery's abolition), the 20<sup>th</sup> of November (which is the anniversary of the death of Zumbi dos Palmares)... So they pejoratively define [Afro-Brazilian issues] as something [less important], "The Blacks must be talking about samba schools, 13<sup>th</sup> of May, or 20<sup>th</sup> of November, so stick [the advisor] in the Culture Secretariat because they take care of cultural events. And everything is fine." They define it as something less important because they understand it as such.

Second, the black struggle for institutional power strives for entities and advisory positions with actual sway within administrations.<sup>14</sup> An advisor in the *casa civil* dealing with racial inequality would give the black community a direct line of access to the mayor. In contrast, the Culture Secretariat answers to the mayor's cabinet and does not have any power over other municipal secretariats. The attempt to isolate the advisor and Commission in the Culture Secretariat would have made it more difficult to implement and monitor projects across the various secretariats and municipal institutions.

An issue also arose with the advisory position in the Education Secretariat. Silvany was nominated in November 2005, but was not granted an office at the Education Secretariat. My interview with her in June 2006 (about 8 months after her nomination) took place at a school in one of the furthest peripheral neighborhoods of the city. The Secretary of Education and his education director placed her at this school under the guise of running a pilot project. They proceeded to ignore her presence and the mandate of her position, which was created to implement and

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<sup>14</sup> While municipal and state councils for the black community started being created in the 1980s, they have served as spaces for the discussion of projects, but have had difficulty influencing institutional change in a number of contexts. Consequently, black movement activists and organizations sought the creation of *coordenadorias*, coordinating bodies, within government institutions, especially in governments run by the Workers' Party. At present, the creation of advisory positions in the *Casa Civil* and of Commissions are increasing, as they constitute positions and institutional bodies that can propose, motivate, and scrutinize policy implementation.

monitor municipal-wide policy, not one project at a single school. Specifically, Silvany was to administer implementation of Federal Law 10,639, which calls for the teaching of Afro-Brazilian history and culture in the school curriculum, the training of teachers and administrators in these subjects, and a broader campaign to address racism and discrimination in the school environment.

Orùnmilá members viewed Silvany's initial treatment as an outright refusal to accept the mayor's decision and the demands of the black community to address racism in schools and historical absences in the school curriculum. The placement of Silvany in the urban periphery and the furthest school from the Secretariat was not just a metaphor for how distant racial inequality was from the agenda of the Education Secretariat. It reproduced coloniality through the spatial segregation and the isolation of the race issue. Blackness became an issue of the periphery, rather than racial inequality an issue that all schools needed to address. As discussed in chapter 3, ongoing pressure from Orùnmilá, coupled with the entry of a new Education Secretary in January 2007, corrected the situation and Silvany was able to begin her work addressing issues of race in education.

The local difficulties outlined above and the examples analyzed in this dissertation reflect how coloniality shapes the struggle for political power and cultural transformation. Everyday struggles and the changes they enable point to the perseverance of the Orùnmilá Center and members' preparation to engage the racial theme. Mãe Neide views this perseverance and preparation as a main cause of resistance on the part of the state. She noted,

The people who pass through here, they have discourse, they know, they have lived experience [*tem a vivência*]... These people, independent of skin color, when they pass through here, they are our allies. They defend [the struggle] in any location/space. The other side fears this. They fear it a lot because Orùnmilá is a hub of resistance [*foco de resistência*], and they fear it because people [coming here] actually learn, live and experience deeply, [they] are our

allies out there. And this is growing. And so this is why [they use this] method of wanting to disqualify [our struggle] and not address public policy. Ribeirão just has Orùnmilá and we are increasing our allies. So this is very complicated for them, you know.

Mãe Neide sees the Orùnmilá Center as a location where Blacks and their white allies unite to construct solidarity and a strong philosophical base to challenge everyday racism and political exclusion. At the Center they gain lived experience in Afro-Brazilian culture and knowledge, taking the messages and ideas underlying the struggle into local society and political institutions.

### **Researching Orùnmilá: the Setting, Data, and Methodology**

The Orùnmilá Center is located in the northern periphery of Ribeirão Preto, a 25 minute bus ride from the center of town.<sup>15</sup> The Center sits on a corner, adjacent and across the street from large walled properties known as *chacaras*<sup>16</sup> and catty-corner to large grassy field bordering train tracks. Urban growth in Ribeirão produced a periphery dotted by small one story, working class homes and a mix of automotive shops and garages, corner bars, bakeries, small markets, and grassy fields. During rush hours outside the Center, a commotion of motorcycles, bikes, trucks, and buses go by as residents of the periphery transport themselves to and from work. It is not uncommon to also see horse drawn carts and men on horses bringing twenty to thirty

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<sup>15</sup> Periphery refers to the physical location on the edge of the city, but also denotes social location, as in poorer working class neighbourhoods or *favela* shantytowns with people living in more precarious conditions than those close to the center of the city or in wealthier neighborhoods.

<sup>16</sup> *Chácaras* are small properties, often surrounded by fences or walls, where people live and/or vacation. Often, *chácaras* owners cultivate fruit trees, vegetables, and other herbs and spices for consumption. They may also cultivate small livestock. In other cases, people use *characas* for recreational purposes, making a swimming pool, a small soccer field, a space where people can barbecue and eat, and sometimes rooms where people can sleep. Both as a place of residence and as a form of leisure, *chacaras*' distance from the city provides a quiet, more spacious environment.

heads of cattle up the street to graze them in the field. In this location, the modern fast paced grit of urban life intermingles with the dustiness of rural livelihoods long abandoned by many of the periphery's residents.

The choice of location for Paulo and Neide's home, house of Candomblé, and now the Cultural Center was based on the need for ample space to accommodate their home and the structures and spaces necessary for *Orixá* worship. Their choice also stemmed from a desire to locate their space in the urban periphery, which is predominantly working-class and black. The large space is ideal for gatherings and rituals and necessary to grow herbs and plants used in rituals and spiritual services. Conforming to these needs, the space is divided into three segments of approximately twelve to fifteen square meters each. The topmost third includes their home, a small yard with some fruit trees, and a short driveway space with a sliding door that opens to the street.

A wall containing a metal door in the middle separates the topmost third from the next segment of the property, which includes several small, square one-story religious rooms used for ritual and initiation purposes, a small building housing the community radio station, and trees and bushes that provide shade as well as herbs used for ritual purposes and wood used for percussion drumsticks. A concrete, roof-covered patio where meetings and celebrations take place completes this middle segment of the space. The patio forms part of a building that spans the width of the property and divides the middle space from the last third. This building includes a small kitchen and a storage room to one side of a hallway and another room use for religious purposes to other.

The hallway leads to the last third of the property which contains the *barracão*, or large barrack/shelter type space, with a smooth concrete floor about the size of half a basketball court. This is where larger ritual gatherings, workshops, seminars,

rehearsals, and festivities take place (see Figures 1, 2, and 3). In a room off of one corner is a library dedicated to the themes of race, black culture, and African and Afro-Brazilian history—the first of its kind in the interior of São Paulo. In another room off of the remaining corner is a bathroom. This side of the *barracão* (to one’s right coming from upstairs) includes the main entrance to the Center: two metal garage doors that open to the street.



Figure 1. Main entrance to the *barracão* at the Cultural Center.



Figure 2. Orùnmilá members taking a break from *afoxé* rehearsal for the Carnaval.



Figure 3. Orùnmilá percussion workshop presentation, 2006 week of Black Consciousness.

Orùnmilá members are a diverse group. They consist of a mix of men and women of Afro-, Euro-, and a few of Japanese descent as well as people of mixed class and employment backgrounds—from professors, teachers, and lawyers to paper mill workers, electricians, and musicians. While some members are only involved in Saturday workshops, many participants visit the Center several times a week, involve themselves in the majority of public *afoxé* performances, turn out in support of these performances, local events, and protests, and attend parties or celebrations at the Center. No particular level of engagement is required by Center leaders, but respect for the knowledge and discussion shared at the Center is a primary concern of the leaders and members. Consequently, people participate with different time and energy commitments, and different people coordinate and manage activities based on their time, experience, and skill level. In general, people bring their strengths and abilities to bear on the operations of the Center in the way they see fit, whether it be fixing a drum, producing shows for the radio, re-painting the Center space, or conducting the weekly dance workshops. While the general protocol reflects this fluidity, some people do have set roles or take on more responsibilities than others. This includes the workshop instructors who have a level of expertise in a given activity, those with closer personal and religious ties to the Center, and those who demonstrate solid abilities in any given area that can advance the capacity of the Center to do its work.

The main Orùnmilá leaders are Pai Paulo and Mãe Neide, the founders of the Center. I also include in this category other respected elders like Silas (communications professor), Silvany (teacher and advisor in education secretariat), Mestre Tião (Capoeira master), and André (president of the Union of Samba Schools), as they constitute the core group of decision makers in relation to Orùnmilá's strategies for action. They are also leaders because, due to their age, roles as mentors



and teachers, and experience in racial mobilization and struggle, they command the respect of the large contingent of younger members. A second tier of the leadership includes Paulo and Neide's daughters, Daniele, Ana Paula, and Renata, who are responsible for coordinating workshops and making sure cultural events are organized and run smoothly. This tier also includes workshop instructors like Pim Pim, Rasta, and people who assist, like Malcolm.

During my 11 months of fieldwork in the city of Ribeirão Preto, I carried out approximately 60 semi-structured interviews with Orùnmilá leaders and members as well as with public officials and several men and women historically involved in black organizations in the city. Interviews provided a range of information, from perceptions about broader race relations and understandings of Brazil's racial history, to specific descriptions of and engagements with the Cultural Center's work. Most interviews were conducted with Orùnmilá leaders and members. Those conducted with people historically involved in black organizations (but not involved in Orùnmilá) helped familiarize me with the local context and select Orùnmilá as the site of study. The public officials interviewed for this study are those connected to local decision-making around cultural and/or racial issues, including members of the Culture Secretariat and those officials representing secretariats on the Commission.

Besides interviews, my other primary sources of data consist of experiences and notes collected during observant participation within the two broad categories of Orùnmilá's work: their cultural philosophy and practice and their policy advocacy. In relation to the first, I participated in percussion and dance workshops, *afoxé*<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> An *Afoxé* (pronounced Ah-fo-sheh), also called 'street Candomblé', is a public manifestation of Candomblé religious centers that involves the song and dance of Candomblé worship and the celebration of African heritage and Afro-Brazilian history. Different *Afoxés* emphasize different elements in their presentations. Orùnmilá's uses its *Afoxé Ómò Orùnmilá* throughout the year as a means to educate others about Afro-Brazilian culture, knowledge, and history. Their *Afoxé* is explicitly rooted in drawing upon Afro-descendant ancestry as a source of culture and knowledge in the struggle against racism. During their march in the annual carnival, *afoxé* members carry banners linking black identity and politics to timely local and national issues facing Afro-descendants.

rehearsals and performances in various educational institutions and public spaces, community radio broadcasts, diverse celebrations held at the Center, and discussions about Afro-Brazilian history and culture that often complemented these types of activities. Participation in these diverse activities was important to experience and understand how musicality, orality, dance, and lived experience involve embodied knowledge and a particular orientation to history that shapes the philosophy and practice of Orùnmilá's anti-racism. In relation to their policy advocacy, I centered on Orùnmilá organizational meetings, discussions and meetings with public officials from various local offices and secretariats, official ceremonies, and public events related to Afro-descendants organized by Orùnmilá and/or city officials. Through observation, participation, and interviews I discerned how Orùnmilá's cultural work translates philosophies and practices stemming from Afro-Brazilian culture into a political practice aimed at addressing inequality.

The analysis in this dissertation also utilizes other primary sources. This includes several issues of the *Sorò Dúdí: Fala Negro* [Speak up, Blacks] newspaper, published periodically by the Cultural Center. *Sorò Dúdí's* concise and detailed articles synthesize Center members' perspectives on anti-racism and contemporary policy debates and reveal their timely engagement with issues debated in the media and policy circles. Orùnmilá leaders also shared their archive of local newspaper articles, pamphlets, and video recordings of televised news reports where the Center or its members were featured. These sources provided an overview of the different activities the Center has organized over time as well as a look into the way local reporting engaged Center politics. To further construct the broader picture of the discourses and practices that shape the present terrain of race relations, I draw on local and national newspapers, national weekly magazines like *Veja*, televised programs, and key internet websites that report on Afro-Brazilian issues like AfroPress

([www.afropress.com](http://www.afropress.com)) and *Jornal Ìrohìn* ([www.irohin.org.br](http://www.irohin.org.br)).<sup>18</sup> Altogether, these other primary sources help trace the history of Orùnmilá’s work, and situate their efforts within the broader context of debates over race, inequality, and public policy.

The strong friendships I forged with Center leaders and members, the personal growth and knowledge I gained in my research experience, and my previous moral and political commitment to anti-racism were ongoing factors shaping my ethnography of Orùnmilá’s work. As such, I characterize my method as observant participation, which stresses participation and accentuates commitment to the anti-racist efforts and actions I observed (cf. Vargas 2004). Observant participation emphasizes participation first, and observation second. I always knew the end product of my time in Brazil would be a PhD dissertation, which requires following particular procedures and methods to ensure ethical and proper data collection. Nonetheless, I never hesitated to engage in Center discussions, debate and share my own perceptions about racism or ideas for projects, or help organize activities like workshops and *afoxé* performances. Having previous involvement in anti-racist efforts, I approached Orùnmilá’s work from a sympathetic perspective with the aim of understanding and situating their anti-racism in relation to national and transnational contexts and efforts to address the persistence of racism and inequality.

As a researcher, I am fully aware that my presence may have influenced aspects of the research process, just as the research process continually reshaped my questions and strategy throughout the project. Moreover, I concur with João Vargas (2004) that “objectivity” and “detachment” are unachievable goals in ethnographic research and that the pursuit of methods that aim to guarantee objectivity may in fact serve to strengthen epistemologies that reproduce inequality, especially in the case of

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<sup>18</sup> These websites are maintained by black journalists and activists and consolidate daily news related to Afro-descendants in Brazil, the Americas more broadly, and Africa. They also include editorials, analyses, and short articles from columnists discussing relevant topics.

research on race and racism. This particular commitment to participation and to those involved in the study strengthens the goal of understanding how and why Orùnmilá members choose to mobilize in the way they do. A deeper commitment to the research subjects, most of who are now also friends and allies, demands even more vigilance in relation to understanding the contribution and consequences of sociological research to everyday struggles for equality and dignity.

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

The chapters in this dissertation contextualize and analyze the Orùnmilá Center's anti-racist struggle so as to describe how they understand and engage the meanings and actions that structure the predicament of racial inequality in contemporary Brazil. Together, the chapters elaborate the Orùnmilá Center's philosophy and practice as they challenge racial inequality from the perspective of Afro-Brazilian knowledge, history, and *ancestralidade*.

The first chapter, "Anti-Racism out of Place? Miscegenation with Inequality and Brazil's Black Geography," examines opposition to the Federal Racial Equality Statute, an effort to implement race-based policies to address racial inequality, as a lens on the persistent power of the ideology of racial democracy to shape discourses about Brazilian race relations. Critics of the Racial Equality Statute mobilize dominant narratives of racial mixture and harmony to produce a Brazilian geography that obscures Afro-descendant experiences of inequality and undermines their anti-racist efforts. Idealizations of miscegenation intertwine with normative assumptions about universal equality within the republic in ways that fail to account for how inequality can coexist with racial and cultural mixture.

Those in favor of the Statute see affirmative action as one important way of dealing with the tremendous inequalities between Blacks and Whites in the educational sphere. The Orùnmilá Center supports this stance, but goes beyond it by proposing a politics aimed not only at providing access to education for Afro-descendants, but diversifying the production of knowledge itself. They argue for a substantive engagement with Afro-Brazilian knowledge and historical lived experience as a privileged epistemological and political space from which to challenge coloniality and construct more equal social and racial relations.

The second chapter, “Orùnmilá as an Alternative Space of Blackness: *Ancestralidade*, Embodied Knowledge, and Anti-Racist Practice,” analyzes the philosophies and actions underlying the Orùnmilá Center’s cultural politics and anti-racism. I discuss how *ancestralidade* (ancestrality) constitutes an emergent and dynamic conception of history, culture, and identity that informs how Orùnmilá members understand and engage knowledge, social relations, and development. I analyze interviews and Cultural Center activities to illustrate how leaders’ and participants’ conceptions of culture, race, and inequality inform a cultural politics that politicizes blackness to challenge coloniality. As historically situated and emergent, *ancestralidade* underlies Orùnmilá’s mobilization of the past as project.

The third chapter, “Decolonizing Knowledge through the *Baobá Project*: Education, Inclusion, and the Afro-Brazilian Struggle,” traces efforts of the Orùnmilá Center to have the municipal government implement the inclusion of African and Afro-Brazilian history and culture in school curriculum and classroom. Orùnmilá members designed the content and framework for an education project that revalues forms of knowledge, embodied learning, and values produced in and through Afro-descendant communities. In revaluing Afro-Brazilian cultures as sites of knowledge production, their efforts go beyond addressing inequality by claiming inclusion into an

already defined system—educational, economic, political, and cultural. Rather, they challenge racial inequality by shaping other ways of understanding history, progress, value, and collectivity. As such, their politics contest unequal histories of power underlying the very meanings of knowledge that count in understanding the making of modernity, race, and development. Examining Orùnmilá's project design and their engagement with local policy-makers reveals how they challenge dominant definitions and practices of multicultural inclusion that de-historicizes inequality.

The fourth chapter, “Anti-Racism in Movement: Contesting Coloniality through the *Afoxé Omó Orùnmilá*,” analyzes how the Orùnmilá Center’s *Afoxé Omó Orùnmilá* confronts local public officials’ management and representation of carnival. As a key, but contested component of the annual carnival festivities, the *afoxé* brings embodied knowledge and history into the streets to historicize Afro-Brazilian inequality and challenge dominant narratives and practices that materialize the coloniality of power in contemporary Brazil. In particular, the *afoxé* critiques the reification of Afro-Brazilian difference as form and the relegation of their history and knowledge to the past. The *afoxé* builds on *ancestralidade* and occupies public space to openly contest racial inequality and ongoing efforts to delimit the meaning and place of Afro-Brazilian culture, knowledge, and epistemologies in the national formation.

I conclude the dissertation considering Orùnmilá’s work within the broader context of struggles for equality and self-determination in Latin America and beyond. I return to the theme of race in development to link Orùnmilá’s struggle around decolonizing knowledge in Brazil to that of Indigenous and black peoples elsewhere. Together, these various struggles engage the multiple hierarchies shaped by coloniality and capitalist development to achieve substantive citizenship and the power to define value and collectivity on one’s own terms in the construction of more equal societies.

**CHAPTER 1**  
**ANTI-RACISM OUT OF PLACE? MISCEGENATION WITH INEQUALITY**  
**AND BRAZIL'S BLACK GEOGRAPHY**

**Introduction**

Since the late 1970s, black anti-racist movements and scholarship on race relations have largely discredited the ideology of racial democracy—the notion that Brazilian race relations are relatively harmonious and play little or no role in life chances. Large numbers of Brazilians of all colors acknowledge the existence of racism and discrimination as something that affects Afro-descendants. Diverse organizations and scholars focused on racial inequality currently defend various forms of taking race into account, including affirmative action policies in education, the private sector, and in the media. Moreover, in the late 1990s, the government itself began discussing the issue of racial inequality, bringing it into the arena of public debate and emphasizing it as worthy of attention in social policy. The Lula administration, which took office in 2003, made racial inequality one of its priorities, creating various initiatives and legislation, including a Federal level secretariat for the promotion of racial equality (SEPPIR).<sup>19</sup>

Despite these changes, many still privilege an understanding of miscegenation—racial and cultural mixture—as producing harmonious race relations and as the essence of what defines Brazilianness.<sup>20</sup> This is expressed through claims

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<sup>19</sup> SEPPIR stands for the *Secretaria Especial de Políticas de Promoção da Igualdade Racial*, or Special Secretariat of Policy and Promotion of Racial Equality.

<sup>20</sup> Miscegenation, *miscigenação* or *mestiçagem* in Brazil, refers to the process of mixture involving different cultures (and races) historically attributed to particular populations (e.g. African/afro-descendants, Indigenous peoples, Whites/Euro-descendants). I use mixture, miscegenation, *mestiçagem*, and 'racial and cultural mixture' interchangeably in the text to refer to a process involving both racial and cultural mixture unless otherwise noted.

arguing that, if not a historical reality, racial democracy and its supposed propensity for de-racialized thinking, remains a utopian ideal, a “future hope” and possibility that needs protecting. In other words, the values of racial democracy are deeply cherished, making them the moral high ground that places Brazil at an advantageous position to abolish or attenuate racism (Bailey 2002; Telles 2004). While commendable as a goal, the assertion of racial democracy as a future hope to be realized re-invigorates defenses of miscegenation that discipline, obscure, or censor existent anti-racist struggles which are based on real experiences of racism, discrimination, and inequality. Thus, racial democracy is debunked as a non-existent myth, but miscegenation persists in influencing understandings of relative harmony and race relations in constructions of Brazilianness. This shapes perceptions about strategies to address racial inequalities, especially how those in positions of power—politicians, academics, journalists—conceptualize and respond to the existence of systemic racism and discrimination.

The onset in the early 2000s of affirmative action policies for Afro-descendants in universities has sparked an ongoing debate over the role “race” plays in producing inequality and whether or not privileging “race” as a category of policy constitutes a viable and desirable means to address unequal race relations. During my year of fieldwork (May 2006-May 2007), a controversy over the implementation of the *Estatuto da Igualdade Racial* or Federal Racial Equality Statute forcefully brought these issues to light. The debate over affirmative action once again dominated public discussions of race and policy in the media and among scholars of race, segments of the black movement, and broader society. Arguments made in opposition to the Racial Equality Statute (henceforth referred to as “RES” or “Statute”) invoked interpretations of race relations that privilege mixture and racial harmony as constitutive of the Brazilian social space. By re-articulating dominant narratives of Brazilianness as



miscegenation, these arguments eclipse how racism and discrimination have coexisted with mixture and relatively cordial race relations. In contrast, those arguing in favor of the Statute highlighted how four generations of Afro-descendants have experienced less education, less salary, less access to health, less employment, and worse housing conditions than Whites and Asians. These arguments highlighted a Brazilian history where “race” shaped fundamental symbolic, social, and economic hierarchies. They also pointed out that, without race-specific policies, it would take at least thirty years for Afro-descendants to reach the level of secondary education Whites enjoy today (Nascimento et. al. 2006). A fundamental divergence existed between those for and against the RES as to whether universal, non-race specific policies of inclusion in a context of miscegenation could address racial inequalities.

My aim in this chapter is to examine how the dominant discourses that defend miscegenation ignore how the coloniality of power and knowledge shape Brazil’s unequal social relations. The various discourses and actions employed in opposition to anti-racist efforts and public policy construct a national geography that places “race,” racism, and the racialized lived experiences of black Brazilians as external to, rather than constitutive of, the country’s historical social formation. Discourses about miscegenation reproduce Brazilian national difference as a distinct cultural space and unique historical experience disconnected from broader world historical processes shaped by coloniality. Brazil’s racial history thus appears as exceptionally, rather than relationally, constituted. Such a construction shapes a black geography that renders Afro-Brazilian claims of racialized experiences and their demands for anti-racist policy as unthinkable or anomalous within a history of miscegenation. This black geography is the outcome of two tendencies: first, how the political and social processes of Brazilian state-formation incorporated “race” and Afro-Brazilian culture to affirm miscegenation as a cornerstone of Brazilianness, and second, how it

simultaneously failed to address historical racial inequalities and the ongoing hierarchical meanings and representations of blackness.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, racial subjection is exercised through a symbolic valuing of Afro-Brazilians and miscegenation that appears egalitarian while discounting lived experiences of “race” and the possibilities of anti-racist cultural work and de-colonizing politics.<sup>22</sup>

Through an examination of the debate over the Racial Equality Statute, this chapter situates how dominant narratives and ideologies of mixture shape the context for the Brazilian anti-racist struggle. An analysis of the main points in the debate reveals how different understandings of the history of race relations and its effects influence interpretations of the meaning of the explicit attention to “race” in social policy. I argue that the opposition to the RES builds on a history of power and hierarchy to deny the importance of “race” and the significance of critical Afro-Brazilian perspectives on the issue. The affirmative privileging of mixture elides racism, violence, and inequality and the place of race in forming Brazilian citizenship post-slavery. I then examine how supporters of the Statute deconstruct these arguments in an attempt to make racial inequality visible and argue for the necessity of affirmative action. The final section explores the simultaneous importance and limitations of affirmative action for decolonizing knowledge and race relations through the Orùnmilá Center’s perspective, which not only aims to include Blacks within pre-given educational institutions but struggles towards the transformation of knowledge and the institutions themselves.

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<sup>21</sup> The concept of black geography does not only refer to geographies occupied by black subjects, but rather, it is a relational construction of spatial practices that focuses on black subjects, constituting their place and experience rather than erasing their difference. Black geographies are further discussed below.

<sup>22</sup> Denise Ferreira da Silva (2004) argues that we must get past seeing Brazil’s racial formation as a contradiction where mixture and racial democracy were unable to achieve egalitarian effects. Rather, we should examine how racial democracy—the identities, discourses, and practices it makes possible and those it denies—has functioned a form of racial subjection itself.

## **Re-asserting Miscegenation and Equality as Brazilian Difference**

This ideal of the nation came out victorious and consolidated itself in our minds. We like to see ourselves this way, miscegenated. We like to recognize ourselves as not racist.

--Journalist Ali Kamel, in his book *Não Somos Racistas* [We are not Racists]

Those researching racial inequality are often questioned for their intentions and the purpose of their studies. Questions are framed in ways that fault the researcher for imposing “race” upon a hitherto de-racialized space. My own research and support for anti-racism was subject to vehement opposition on numerous occasions. In one conversation that led to a discussion of racial quotas [*cotas*],<sup>23</sup> I was aggressively asked by a blonde, light-skinned woman, “Why should people be obligated to choose a racial categorization or identity? They should not be forced.” Her query failed to consider whether anyone, especially Afro-descendants, is immune to racial classification and treatments based on their skin color. Nor did she consider why many Blacks do in fact struggle to articulate a positive black identity and make racism a visible issue, challenging centuries of oppression and a context hostile to such efforts. In this case, meaning is sought only through the perspective of the imposition of “racial” identities where they have not mattered instead of examining how anti-racism and assertions of black identity reveal black agency in challenging historical exclusions while also illuminating unequal power relations.

Persistent in trying to convince me that my attention to racial inequality was

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<sup>23</sup> The nature of Brazilian affirmative action policies vary, but a dominant approach for university admissions is the adoption of quotas, where a percentage of spaces are guaranteed to those coming from the public school system, Blacks, and Indigenous peoples. Thus, people often refer to affirmative action as *cotas*, or quotas.

misled, this same person declared that most Brazilians have mixture in their family. She postulated, “I, myself, could have a black grandmother.” This statement asserts an ambiguous notion that, if we are all possibly mixed, then we are all of the same “race” (i.e. Brazilian). The possible historical mixture in each and every Brazilian supersedes skin color as a determining factor of how “race” actually plays out in the everyday in not so ambiguous ways. At the same time, this statement reflects the black grandmother as the iconic representation of miscegenation, valorizing her figure as signifying racial and cultural integration, rather than the gendered and racial violence that constitutes miscegenation’s history. It is pointedly not the black grandfather she speaks of.<sup>24</sup> How mixture happened is idealized and romanticized as a unifying force, rather than one shaped by hierarchy and inequality. The debate over the Racial Equality Statute elicited various responses that echoed similar understandings of miscegenation and Brazilianness.

In May 2006, voting was imminent in the house of deputies on the implementation of law 73/1999, which would require the reservation of 50% of university spaces for students from the primary and secondary public school system.<sup>25</sup> A percentage of these reserved spaces would be dedicated to Afro-descendants, Indigenous people, and other minorities.<sup>26</sup> Law 93/1999 was one initiative related to

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<sup>24</sup> Gendered representations of Brazilian mixture in seminal texts like Gilberto Freyre’s *Casa Grande e Senzala* represent the Portuguese male as the active perpetrator of mixture through sexual encounters with Indigenous and later African and Afro-descendant women. The text often equates successful colonization of tropical Brazil with the flexible ability of the Portuguese to mix and adapt in new environments. The black female subject is represented as passive, as licentious, as the vector through which Portuguese (white) civilization was able to make its mark in the tropics. For a concise analysis of gender in this process, see Chapter 2 in Kia Lilly Caldwell (2007).

<sup>25</sup> The public higher education system in Brazil is the most competitive and offers what is considered the best and most respected degrees and diplomas. The majority of students enrolling in public higher education attended private primary and secondary institutions, which are of much higher quality than public education at this level.

<sup>26</sup> While Afro-descendants (people classifying as black or brown) comprise around half of the Brazilian population, estimates of Afro-Brazilian students at public universities (generally better and more prestigious than private ones) hovers around 2% (Lima 2006), while the overall percentages in higher education are 2% and 8% for black and brown Brazilians, respectively (Munanga 2003; Jorge de Carvalho 2003). Among university professors, in a country where about 6,000 receive diplomas per

the more extensive Racial Equality Statute (RES) (Law 3.198/2000) drafted by Workers' Party Senator Paulo Paim. The RES has the broad aim to promote equality through the specific implementation or consideration of policies that address the unequal representation of blacks in education, the media, and public and private sector employment. The RES also aims to guarantee equal access to justice, religious freedom for Afro-Brazilian religions, and the right to an education that includes and addresses one's history and culture. The RES aims for proactive actions to address historical racial inequalities.<sup>27</sup>

On June 30, 2006, 114 Brazilian scholars, researchers, and artists presented an 'open letter' to Congress opposing the signing of the RES. The opposition letter, entitled 'All have Equal Rights in a Democratic Republic' (Daher Filho, et. al. 2006), aimed to stop a vote on the RES in the house of deputies. For opponents, a lot hinged on this move since one version of the RES had already been approved in the senate. Despite the range of policies initiatives included in the RES, the opposition letter primarily focused on the more polemical issue of racial quotas for Afro-descendants in higher education. The main premise of arguments made in opposition to the RES claimed that the Brazilian state, society, and peoples have never defined citizens' rights based on racial criteria. As a result, by creating "race-based" policies to address inequality, the RES goes against the country's social and legal history by imposing racial categories on the population. They argued that policies privileging certain racial groups in the name of justice do not eliminate racism and may produce the opposite effect, exacerbating conflict and intolerance and producing racial divisions by giving credence to the legal concept of "race." This would create racial difference and open

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year, "less than 1% are black and less than 1% engage themes of interest to afro-descendant populations"<sup>6</sup> (Jorge de Carvalho 2003: 156).

<sup>27</sup> A 2006 Microsoft Word version of the Racial Equality Statute (Portuguese), which is authored by Senator Paulo Paim's, is accessible on his website at: <http://www.senado.gov.br/paulopaim/pages/vida/publicacoes/textos/Estatuto%20da%20Igualdade%20Racial%202006.doc>.

up the possibility for hitherto non-existent racial conflict and animosity. The letter to congress also defended the precept of universal equality of all individuals before the law, and argued that the principal way to deal with social exclusion is the construction of quality universal services in education, health, and employment (Daher Filho, et. al. 2006). The delivery of the opposition letter sparked an intense discussion about race, inequality, and national history in the print and televised media between journalists, activists, and scholars.

### *Miscegenation Produced Equality?*

Arguments against the RES vehemently defended miscegenation—racial and cultural mixture—as formative of the national character (Brazilianness) and as a process producing a non-racist nation. Exemplifying such arguments, one white journalist declared, “Brazil, as *we have all experienced*, never was a racist country. We obviously have racist people. Nevertheless, our national cultural was always an *ode to miscegenation*” (Di Franco 2006, emphasis mine). This statement assumes a shared, similar experience of history among all Brazilians while also reducing racism to a few (read: bad) individuals that exist among a broader (read: general population) ‘ode to miscegenation’. Others echoed a similar theme, taking equality for granted rather than examining the particular processes and results of miscegenation. For example, journalist Ali Kamel, wrote that, due to a history of mixture, racism is “not a dominant trait of our national identity” or part of the national character (Kamel 2006: 53, 78). Thus, for him, “a nation that always was proud of its miscegenation does not deserve” a division of its population through race-based policies (Kamel 2006: 40). The title of Kamel’s book, *We are not Racists*, is a forceful declaration he repeated

often in his articles about race relations in Brazil.<sup>28</sup> In their opposition to the RES, ‘race-based’ policy, and anti-racism in general, both Di Franco and Kamel reassert mixture and unity as formative of the national character. They turn opposition to the RES into a question of defending national pride and identity against those that seek to divide the country.

The RES opposition’s arguments characterizing miscegenation as an egalitarian process are rooted in the reformulation in the 1920s and 1930s of the place of race mixture within Brazilian development. At the time, scholars, intellectuals, and policymakers were rejecting certain elements of Europeanization and embracing a version of the country’s racial past that re-interpreted the encounter and mixture between European, Indigenous, and African peoples as positive, unique, and formative of a “new” and distinct civilization in the tropics that was neither Europe nor European (Andrews 2004; Hanchard 1994). Afro-Brazilian peoples and their cultures, along with the large mixed-race population and popular culture in general, were embraced as the heart of what made Brazil unique. However, while these reformulations broke with the fateful determinism of scientific racism that dominated turn of the century thinking, the shift in discourses and practices around “race” and blackness was incomplete. Eugenics and scientific racism remained strong in certain intellectual quarters and permeated social reforms pursued in education, health, and planning institutions at least until the mid-1940s (Dávila 2003; Stepan 1991).

The growing exaltation of racial and cultural brownness did not displace the tendency toward and desire for whitening among elites and the broader population. However, it did provide a strong base for unifying the nation. The most influential thinker in the reconceptualization of miscegenation was social historian Gilberto

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<sup>28</sup> Released two months after the RES opposition letter was delivered to congress, the book became a bestseller for several months.

Freyre, who viewed it as a process that produced racial tolerance and racial democracy (Davis 1999; Reichmann 1999; Skidmore 1993; Telles 2004). Freyre related the entire Brazilian cultural construction to miscegenation, conceiving of Brazilianness as “the result of the productive fusion of antagonistic cultures, placed in a hierarchy in which the opposites,” the European and African, “complemented each other harmoniously” (Rezende and Lima 2004: 759). Freyre’s formulation counteracted racial pessimism by characterizing the *moreno* (mixed/brown) individual as the vector that would resolve racial problems. He also explicitly counterposed the Brazilian situation to the US, defining racism as a US phenomenon expressed by segregation, lynching, and the resultant tension between groups (Racusen 2004). The absence of these North American expressions in Brazil stood for the lack of a racial problem, enabling the denial of racism and discrimination.

For national development, racial democracy offered an alternative to racially divisive systems like that in the United States, and was latched onto (and constructed) by many as proof of the advantage of Brazilian social relations vis-a-vis other developing multicultural and multi-racial nations (Owensby 2005). Thus, Gilberto Freyre’s examination was not only about explaining the national character. It was also profoundly “oriented toward a pan-American and circum-Atlantic conversation about race, region, and nationality in the 1930s and 1940s” in which the aim was to “valorize Brazil’s difference from its neighbours and from the whiter ‘peoples of the North’” (Matory 2005: 154). In a context where the “question of how to make Brazil’s diverse population into a ‘people’ capable of representing a modern nation” was a primary concern, Freyre’s ideas “proposed a radical reformulation of Brazilian culture” (Owensby 2005, pp. 327-329; D. F. d. Silva 1998). Cordiality and miscegenation were characterized as inherent to Brazilian culture and society, thus constituting Brazilian difference among trans-Atlantic countries with a large African diaspora. However,



“race” and the subordinate position of blackness in the racial hierarchy would remain a central component underlying conceptualizations of miscegenation and racial democracy.

Within the process of miscegenation, Blacks and mixed-race peoples appear as passive elements or props to the Portuguese or Euro-Brazilian male agents and ‘real’ protagonists of national history (Matory 2005: 155). Anthropologist J. Lorand Matory makes several key points about how this formulation reflects the common role “dark people” have played in the nationalism and regionalisms of light-colored (Latin) American creoles that romanticize particular historical relations while ignoring others. Freyre’s formulation included racialized romanticizations of black mammy’s, white sexual relations with *mulatas* [brown women], and the black friends every white Brazilian had as a child.<sup>29</sup> These narratives overlook the coercive and violent past realities of slavery, while also avoiding existing prejudices and discrimination in society. They also mask how whiteness remained the valued benchmark within the discussion of Brazilianess and the process of mixture. Freyre’s history, then, is “not a nostalgia made for black people’s appreciation,” as it romanticizes cordiality and mixture over real, lived inequalities and oppression (Matory 2005: 155-156).

The passive role of black peoples were also evident in state social and cultural policy that strongly promoted and invested in the ideology of racial democracy and thus sought to regulate the way race, Afro-Brazilian cultural forms, and black political organizations expressed blackness, and thus experiential, epistemological, and racial difference. Since the 1930s, practices originating in Afro-Brazilian communities like Capoeira, Candomblé, and samba, were constructed and used as symbols of national, as opposed to ethnically specific culture (Crook 1993; Pravaz 2008; Sheriff 1999). The

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<sup>29</sup> These “friends” were often the children of enslaved blacks or black women employed as domestic workers in white households.

integration of Afro-Brazilian cultural forms into the “univocal discourse of the national” delinked them from their origins in Afro-descendant communities, defined them as popular culture, and promoted their visible presence in society as representative of harmonious race relations and Brazilian mixture (Ortiz 1985). At the same time, racial democracy and mixture depend upon the black roots of Afro-Brazilian cultural practices remaining clear, i.e. mixture must invoke its “original,” separate elements (cf. Wade 2005). In this case, African and Afro-Brazilian roots are presented and understood in a reified, folkloric manner where Blacks are accepted as marks of Brazilianness, but not as dynamic persons (Guimarães 1999). The ideology of racial democracy appropriated Afro-Brazilian difference in *form* while excluding *substantive content*, thus failing to achieve substantive black inclusion/equality.

This “nationalization” of blackness in Brazil mirrored concurrent efforts of many Latin American nations to produce unified identities by recasting “low-brow” cultures (especially Indigenous and African) and turning them into core symbols of nationhood (Pravaz 2008). Blackness became a nationalized resource, much like other strategic political and economic resources, like oil or tin and copper mines (Andrews 2004). This appropriation of black culture was a step over previous outlawing and attempts at eliminating black culture. Moreover, official and commercial promotion created opportunities and provided livelihoods to artists and cultural practitioners. However, the symbolic integration of African elements of Brazilian culture and Afro-Brazilians into discourses of national identity was not followed by concrete political power, nor did it spawn a substantive valorization of Brazil’s African heritage and a serious engagement with the knowledge and culture stemming from Afro-descendant communities.

State-centered populist nationalism and development built upon miscegenation to integrate Afro-Brazilians through a symbolic revaluing of blackness and some

minor improvements in socio-economic status, but failed to address relative inequality vis-à-vis whites and everyday racism and and discrimination in the labor market and public sphere. Negative meanings and representations of blackness persisted as black bodies continued as markers of illegality, violence, and sub-citizenship (Bryto 2003; Mitchell and Wood 1999; D. F. Silva 2001; Vargas 2006), black and brown skin remain strongly connected to particular social positions in society (Santos 1999; Wagley 1952), Blacks continue to suffer job discrimination and receive less wages for similar work (Lovell 2006; Lovell and Wood 1998), and black contributions continued to be constructed as important in a narrowly defined/understood sphere of culture. Large disparities in income, education, and employment between white and Afro-Brazilian (*Negros e Pardos*) populations continue to exist.<sup>30</sup>

Miscegenation cannot be understood without considering how it re-articulated racial hierarchies. The hailing of miscegenation by those opposing the RES betrays a perspective of those at the normative end of whiteness in the color spectrum, as well as how they deploy their normative experience to speak for all Brazilians. Based on this, they assert that ‘race’ does not matter, privileging the defense of miscegenation over attention to addressing its specific racial inequalities.

### *Mobilizing Race: Constructing Anti-racism or Creating Racial Animosity?*

Within a Brazilianness characterized by cordiality and mixture, mobilizing “race” for identity or in claims for equality become problematic prospects. Asserting

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<sup>30</sup> The *Synthesis of Social Indicators 2003*, released by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE 2004) revealed, for example, that Afro-Brazilians represent 65% of the poorest decile of Brazilians. Even with 12 or more years of education for both populations, Whites still have double the earnings in comparison to the black and brown population. The distribution of students by age group, color, and level of schooling shows that by age 17, 60% of whites have already finished secondary education while only 36.3% of blacks and browns have. Finally, for students between the ages of 20 and 24, 57.2% of whites are enrolled in higher education as compared to 18.4% of blacks and browns.

this position, several arguments against the RES explicitly placed “race” and racial categorization outside of Brazilianness. Anthropologist Yvonne Maggie, a key figure in the RES opposition and longtime white scholar studying Afro-Brazilians stated, “The Statute and quotas pressure us to not be Brazilians... Upon establishing the classification of Brazilians into two races, we would be another nation... The first lesson is that race does not exist. Ethnic identity only causes suffering, it’s an invention” (Interviewed in Colombo 2006: C6). While it is true that “race” is an invention, it is also a social construction with lived effects. Maggie assumes that Brazilians have thus far been free of the suffering caused by ethnic or racial identity and discrimination, inequality, and oppression based. These claims equate miscegenation’s de-racialization (or non-racialism) with anti-racism and the elimination of racial discrimination. In this case, Brazil’s supposedly fluid racial boundaries based on ambiguous color categorizations mean that race cannot serve as the basis for discrimination (Guimaraes 2001; Dulitzky 2005). Maggie’s stance ignores how this ambiguous social construction of race differentiates and discriminates against the Afro-descendant population (Safa 2005).

Scholars investigating race and color classifications in Brazil have repeatedly noted how individuals distance themselves, and those for whom they wish to show respect, from the darker end of the color spectrum (cf. Burdick 1998; Sansone 2003; Sheriff 2001; Twine 1999; Vargas 2004). Anthropologist Robin Sheriff demonstrates that, despite the use of multiple color categories to classify people, many Afro-Brazilians are well aware of the bipolar nature in which race works in Brazil; they know how blackness has negative connotations and that even light-skinned Blacks are treated negatively based on their color (Sheriff 2003; 2001). This body of research reveals how selective use of color and racial terminology in particular contexts indicate the existence of a keen awareness of skin color and the negative meanings and

implications of blackness in social interactions. As Antônio Sérgio Guimarães notes, “a person can only have a color and be classified in a color group if an ideology exists in which the color of people has meaning. That is, people do not have any color except within racial ideologies” (1995: 215). Thus, color figures for race within a hierarchy of meanings and social positions that continue to determine the roles and opportunities for Afro-Brazilians in society.

In another interview, Maggie claimed, “What is at stake is not the modification of a law, but a change in the meaning of Brazilianness [*Brasilidade*]” (Quoted in “Especialistas,” July 2006). The meaning of Brazilianness spoken of here, one based on racial mixture and relative harmony, is at best partial. Afro-descendants have mobilized against the negative meanings of *their* blackness and the wounds of everyday racism, indicating they have suffered and felt discriminated against for being black. The present push for affirmative action represents one consequence of the broader struggle of Afro-Brazilians to voice their experiences and have them considered in public policy. Moreover, they are also striving to have the lived experiences of being black and Brazilian count in defining what it means to be Brazilian. Maggie’s statements paint Brazilianness under siege by characterizing the Statute as pressure to give in to racial identity. This implicitly identifies the specific point at which the suffering caused by ethnic identity should matter, privileging concern for race-based legislation over that for Afro-descendant inequality caused by centuries of negative meanings, representations, and treatments based on blackness.

Invoking Brazilianness as under threat takes on different forms in discussions of the RES. Many opposing the Statute characterized black mobilization and anti-racist legislation as efforts to produce racial animosity and hatred. These arguments counterpose Brazilian difference to other, supposedly “more racialized” spaces. For example, sociologist Demétrio Magnoli declared that, “In Brazil we do not have

popular racism, mass-based racist movements, like in the United States and France. But this can change if these projects are approved in the Congress... you create popular racism” (Interviewed in Arruda 2006). Others characterized those mobilizing against racial inequality as wanting racial conflict, for example, the poet Ferreira Gullar claimed, “The concept of a mixed nation is an obstacle to those who desire racial conflict” (Gullar 2006), while Kamel asserted that those mobilizing want to produce “racial hatred” [*ódio racial*] (Kamel 2006; Di Franco 2006).<sup>31</sup> In other words, anyone who invokes “race” is deemed as racist and the diverse possible consequences of policies to address racism are reduced to “racial hatred.” These charges assume a level playing field where whiteness and blackness are valued and represented equally and where Whites and Blacks have equal power in dictating the terms of their racialization and the racialization of others.

Historically, anti-racist activism and black mobilization have challenges acceptable expressions of blackness and dominant constructions of race. As a result, since the 1930s, both black activism and broaching the issue of “race” have been regarded with suspicion and branded as un- or anti-Brazilian. In these cases, miscegenation and racial democracy are counter-mobilized to deny non-whites the right to dissent (Dulitzky 2005). Idealized miscegenation and racial democracy camouflage the diverse experiences of citizenship and inclusion. The opposition to the RES outlined above reflects the ongoing power of miscegenation and racial democracy to shape Brazilian black geography.

### *Miscegenation, Anti-Racism, and the Brazilian Black Geography*

Black geographies involve the “ways in which essentialism situates black

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<sup>31</sup> *Ódio Racial*, or “racial hatred” exemplified by violence and extreme segregation and animosity, became a catchword for Statute opponents and in their eyes came to represent the only form of racism that was worth fearing.

subjects and their geopolitical concerns as being elsewhere (on the margin, the underside, outside the normal), a spatial practice that conveniently props up the mythic norm and erases or obscures the daily struggles of particular communities” (McKittrick and Woods 2007: 4). In the Brazilian case, the ideology of miscegenation and racial democracy utilize blackness to produce the essentialized *mestiço* (brown or racially mixed person) as the ideal Brazilian subject while simultaneously allowing blackness to remain a signifier of inferiority in the Brazilian imagination (Caldwell 2007; Silva 1998; 2001). This simultaneously props up the mythic norm of mixture and obscures how racial histories and relations of power shape the unequal lived experience and struggles of Afro-Brazilians and the maintenance of whiteness as desirable.

Black geographies also encompass “how the lives of [black] subjects demonstrate that ‘common-sense’ workings of modernity and citizenship are worked out, and normalized, through geographies of exclusion” that map power relations and rejections (McKittrick and Woods 2007: 4). Belonging to a mixed nation defines an idealized Brazilian citizenship where socio-economic inequalities may exist and need to be addressed, but the racial has been transcended and thus does not mediate opportunities and experiences. There is a threefold consequence of the workings of modernity and citizenship in the Brazilian case: (1) the bias towards mixture and unity camouflages the existing diversity of identities, communities, forms of knowledge, and lived experiences that make up the Brazilian population; (2) the naturalization of mixture as harmony and equality normalizes its re-articulations of racial hierarchies and the exclusions they create; and (3) emphasis on an ideal *mestiço* identity limits the possibility of valorizing and articulating non-*mestiço* forms of racial identity and subjectivity. This writes anti-racism and the conscious black Brazilian subject as out of place in the Brazilian space (Racusen 2004; Vargas 2004).

Brazil's black geography bolsters the denial of how racialization, the whitening bias, and the folklorized treatments of Afro-Brazilians are re-articulated within discourses and practices of mixture. Social ascension remains strongly linked to a proximity to physical and cultural whiteness, as blackness still signifies moral, intellectual, hygienic, and social deficiencies. Consequently, assimilation and mobility for Afro-descendants has depended on avoiding or masking racial and class appearance and/or cultural traits and practices constructed as negative by dominant aesthetic, spiritual, and cultural ideals (Guimarães 1995; Moura 1988; Vargas 2004). Some scholars have characterized this as a form of genocide, viewing miscegenation as a form of national integration premised on the eventual elimination of that which it aims to integrate: black peoples, their cultures, and ways of being<sup>32</sup> (cf. Nascimento 1989 [1979]; Vargas 2004).

The Brazilian black geography normalizes black exclusion from positions of power and educational institutions, their overrepresentation as victims of police violence and assassination, and the persistent negative representations in the media. This is compounded by the continual definition of racist phenomena as those historically present in the United States, like Jim Crow, lynching, or the Klu Klux Klan, which are used to argue the absence of expressions of racism in Brazilian society. The doctrine of miscegenation becomes self-perpetuating because it discourages the identification of phenomena inconsistent with the theory (Racusen 2004). Within a democracy where race does not matter, experiences of racism are individualized anomalies while inequality is attributed to individual failure or socio-economic factors but not racial inequality.

Elites, scholars, and politicians deploying ahistorical understandings

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<sup>32</sup> Specifically, Nascimento (1989) characterized as genocide the progressive whitening through acculturation and the pressure to conform to bourgeois, Eurocentric aesthetic and behavioral norms to which black cultures and peoples are subjected.



miscegenation's consequences exclude the experiences and perspectives of Afro-Brazilians. The former assert dominant interpretations to speak for the contemporary racial reality and to deny the legitimacy of anti-racism or deviations from this norm. These accounts dissociate the process of miscegenation from its unequal historical conditions and its constitutive negative and reified representations of blackness and Afro-Brazilian culture. Moreover, positive interpretations of mixture privilege preserving the future hope of racial democracy at the expense of taking seriously "race" as a category of exclusion. Preserving a future hope of racial democracy ignores that, while miscegenation encompasses a dynamic of homogenization, it also involves differentiation that maintains permanent spaces (of a particular kind) for whiteness and blackness (Wade 2005: 240). Miscegenation is neither inherently liberating nor inherently oppressive. Rather, the question centers around "who deploys ideas and practices of mixture, in what context and to what effect" (Wade 2004: 361). Unintentionally or not, the deployment of miscegenation to counter the RES reproduces racial privilege, obscures the diverse experiences of race relations, and limits consideration of how Brazil's racial history produced its own particular form of racial subjection—mixture *with* racial hierarchy and inequality.

### **Supporting the Statute: Accounting for Coloniality and Lived Historical Difference**

As discussion of the Statute and racial quotas increased, scholars and activists involved in anti-racist work reacted by critiquing the assumptions of the RES opposition. Supporters of the RES drafted a letter (330 signatories) in response to the opposition, which they sent to congress, and they expressed themselves in the editorial

pages of the print and internet media. They deconstructed the notions that the tendency towards miscegenation produced equality, that Brazil's colonial legacy has been free of racialized relations and representations, and that the idea of universal equality of all before the law does not account for the failures and exclusions of liberal democratic citizenship. Their arguments exhibited several key features. They argued that universal equality in the Republic is not an empty principle, but it is a goal to strive for, something that must be constructed as opposed to taken for granted. Attention to "race" is necessary in this process of building a more equal society. They also highlighted how the betterment of universal public services like education would not fully address racial inequality. While RES supporters agreed that universal improvements are necessary, they pointed out that (1) affirmative action and the universal improvement of state services are not mutually exclusive, (2) higher education in Brazil currently exhibits one of the highest racial disparities globally, and (3) without race-specific policies, it would take 30 years for the black population to reach the level of secondary education that the White population has today (Nascimento et. al. 2006). Those in favor of the Statute and affirmative action also argued that resistance to addressing the racial theme reflects the broader history of avoidance of the issue (cf. Leitão 2006), especially how the inequalities stemming from the colonial legacy structure contemporary Brazilian society (cf. Avritzer 2006; B. Santos 2006).

Statute supporters argued that using universalism to oppose its implementation reflects a twenty-first century reiteration of the immobilizing effect underlying the constitution of 1891. The 1891 constitution reproduced racism and deepened inequalities by focusing on legal equality and ignoring the specific conditions affecting freed and other Afro-descendants in their transition from a slave to a free society (Nascimento et. al. 2006). The ideology of racial democracy continued along

these lines. Statute supporters argue that the RES's attention to "race" transforms the values of the 1988 constitution, written after re-democratization post-military regime, into pro-active concrete actions to achieve the long-desired racial equality. Supporters note that the Statute is the first attempt in the 118 years post-abolition to actually use public policies to promote the ascension of Blacks in Brazil (Leitão 2006).

Statute supporters used several argument to defend their claims that universal equality failed to engage lived, real inequality. Boaventura Santos pointed out how in the constitution of modernity, powerful mechanism like "liberty, equality, secularization, scientific innovation, international rights and progress" occurred simultaneously with "colonialism, racism, genocide, slavery, cultural destruction, impunity, [and] non-ethics of war [sic]" (B. Santos 2006). The former processes could not exist without the latter. This naturalized a system of power claims liberty and equality while practicing oppression and inequality. Orùnmilá Center members echoed this critique, arguing that the Eurocentrism embedded in liberal democratic notions of equality constructed as universal Western values, forms of politics (the nation state, division between private and public), and knowledge (scientific and rational). As Orùnmilá members argue, the effect was "ethnocide [*etnocídio*]," the destruction and/or unequal assimilation of cultures, diversity, different values, and histories that diverged from that defined as universal. As a result, "cultures, values, and philosophies that are of non-Western origin can exist as long as they do not question or aim to modify the political and ideological values, and passively accept the hegemony, of Western culture" (*Soro Dúdí*, November 2006: 8). Orùnmilá members point out here that universal equality is already based on practices of exclusion.

The history of colonialism, slavery, and the attempt to universalize Eurocentric values, culture, and forms of production produced inequalities that continue to mark the post-colonial terrain in Brazil. Even as Brazilians—from scholars and politicians

to the “common” citizen—tangled with the reality of mixture and diverse populations interacting over time, the perspective and power from which miscegenation and racial democracy were constructed re-articulated rather than eliminated racial hierarchies. The constitution of Brazilianness cannot be delinked from its location within a project of nation-state and national identity formation and the construction of a unity and order envisioning modernity and progress. As Luiz Carlos Bresser-Pereira noted in an editorial, the emphasis on harmony and equality in racial democracy and miscegenation also served the purpose of maintaining order within a highly stratified developing society. Those opposing the Statute place the social order, which is based on a false racial cordiality and social harmony, over and above addressing the claims to address racial inequalities (Bresser-Pereira 2006).

The letter in support of the Statute situated Brazil as out of touch vis-à-vis the pursuit of affirmative action and race-based policies in other multicultural nations and the United Nations conventions aimed at eliminating all forms of discrimination. For Statute supporters, the struggle to assert Brazilian difference as mixture and harmony comes at the expense of actively dealing with the issue of over a century of post-abolition inequalities. Statute supporters also asserted that the affirmative action quotas proposed do not correspond to the percentage of Afro-Brazilians in the population, nor would they promote sweeping changes in the composition of university students. Nonetheless, providing access to higher education in a country where the latter strongly determines social ascension and success in the job market constitutes one important means to address racial inequalities. The broader policies of the Statute complement affirmative action with efforts in the sphere of public and private employment, health, housing, and other spheres where “race” affects citizenship (Nascimento, et. al. 2006).

## Beyond Quotas: Orùnmilá's Cultural Struggle and De-Colonization

Inclusion through affirmative action, while improving access to education and the job market does not necessarily address how the coloniality of power and knowledge excludes diverse cultures, knowledges, and experiences from societal institutions and conceptions of collectivity. Orùnmilá members believe racial quotas in higher education to be a positive, necessary, and important step in the struggle for racial equality, but as Paulo explains,

The racist imaginary must be deconstructed at its base. This is the valorization of culture. Racism was invented and thought from the point of the denial [*negação*] of culture. What I mean is, how do you identify a human being? Within culture. So I always had this cultural question as the focus of the struggle. Not that other public policies like affirmative action aren't important. They are fundamental for the socio-economic betterment of the black population, but absolutely do not combat racism. In my opinion, they are two distinct things. One thing is the effective combat of racism, which is an imaginary. Another thing is affirmative action, which means putting blacks in the university, and placing them in the position to access the goods that are there [in society].

An article by Paulo and Silas in the *Soro Dúdu* newspaper complements this statement,

It needs to be clear that Orùnmilá doesn't believe that the system of quotas is the solution for the question of the exclusion that exists in Brazilian education, much less for the general issues Blacks face in society... We know that the black question necessitates much more profound and complex changes that get to the root of the problem. [But] we are dealing with a struggle of immense dimensions and [therefore] we cannot dispense with any tool; any instrument of mobilization, debate, and discussion; any opportunity to advance positions and conquer spaces within the adversary's terrain. The system of quotas, despite being weak, is one of these tools (August 2004: 3).

This second quote asserts the indispensable nature of the quota debate as a means to

generate discussion on the long avoided issue of racial inequality, but not of quotas as solution to all inequalities Afro-Brazilians face. At the same time, the first indicates affirmative action's importance for socio-economic betterment. In a context where major gaps of access and achievement in education exist between Afro-descendants and Whites, affirmative action presents an immediate and medium-term solution to diminish material inequalities and improve opportunities. Moreover, affirmative action also inserts Blacks into the university space, into the terrain of key societal institutions that define and produce knowledge and reproduce privilege.

The above quotes also assert that more profound and complex changes are needed, ones that not only provide Afro-Brazilians access to the present goods available in society (e.g. educational institutions, dominant knowledge, livelihood opportunities), but question and address how the political-economic system and its educational institutions themselves materialize coloniality and reproduce the racist imaginary. The statements illustrate that, like miscegenation, affirmative action assumes inclusion into an existing continuum of hierarchical value. Which cultures and knowledges matter are already defined. In the case of miscegenation, hierarchy had to do with the underlying meanings of color and blackness, while today, affirmative action is centrally about integrating populations into dominant epistemologies and notions of productive value. This makes the question not only about including Afro-descendants as abstract citizens within a democracy prefigured as liberal. It also involves taking seriously the histories and perspectives they bring with them into the space of the university.

Efforts must go beyond inclusion to substantively engage the values and forms of knowledge stemming from Afro-Brazilian communities and cultural practices. The broader goal becomes inserting excluded populations, their perspectives, and their forms of knowledge into the university space to engage the ideologies, theories and

methodologies that have historically sustained the production of knowledge as well as what forms of knowledge are valued in society (Gonçalves e Silva 2003; Cunha Júnior 2003). This would reconfigure academic and scientific activities by bringing diverse experiences and knowledges into a space of dialogue with each other. From Orùnmilá members' perspectives, substantive inclusion of Afro-descendant knowledge elicits a rupture with dominant pedagogies and epistemologies—European, North American, and capitalist—that exclude other definitions of value and collectivity (see Chapters 2 and 3).

The process of decolonizing knowledge as a means to construct more equal social relations and other visions of development permeates the anti-racist cultural struggle examined throughout this dissertation. What Orùnmilá members envision, and what I mean by de-colonization, is to address how Afro-descendant cosmovisions, ways of being, notions of value, philosophies, cultural forms, historical experiences, and constructions of collectivity have been excluded or incorporated in marginal, rather than substantive ways. Relegated to a (narrowly defined) cultural sphere, folklorized, or conceived of as cultural accessories to the construction of a European civilization in the Tropics, Afro-descendant forms have never been treated equally as philosophy and knowledge within Brazilian understandings of modernity, democracy, citizenship, community, and the nation-state. A substantive Brazilian difference would address the economies of power that produced miscegenation as a particular mode of inclusion. An active engagement with the diverse epistemologies and ways of life that comprise the population would move towards the transformation of dominant practices and institutions of knowledge production, and consequently more substantive inclusion and citizenship. As the following chapters show, the Orùnmilá Center's struggle represents one contemporary site for decolonizing knowledge and pedagogy and the development of a critical multicultural inclusion.

## Conclusion

The struggle over the Racial Equality Statute reveals the persistent power of racial democracy and miscegenation to shape understandings of race relations and Brazilian difference. These understandings underlie the denials that race is a systemic issue. Moreover, critics of race-based policies mobilize such understandings to delegitimize the evidence of racism, discrimination, and inequality and the ongoing claims by academics, activists, and black organizations. This presents various difficulties, as opposition to the Statute caused the issue to be tabled and the vote stalled. This prevented moving forward on the broader implementation of standardized and monitored efforts to deal with racial inequality.

As Orùnmilá members note, the debate over affirmative action and the Statute are only the tip of the iceberg. Orùnmilá members support the Racial Equality Statute and its race-based reforms as a means to insert Afro-descendants into spaces from which they have been excluded. At the same time, they believe that addressing the coloniality of power and knowledge will require more profound and complex substantive efforts, specifically those that actively reconfigure institutions and forms of knowledge that reproduce inequality. As the following chapters reveal, this struggle involves countering how ideologies based on miscegenation both continue to construct racism as outside of the Brazilian geography as well as shape how public officials deal with Afro-Brazilian demands. Orùnmilá members historicize black inequality and politicize Afro-Brazilian culture and knowledge to contest intersecting hierarchies that shape racialized capitalist development, its representations, and its forms of rule. In so doing, they bring to light the marginalized histories, ways of being, and perspectives stemming from black communities that can challenge ahistorical ideologies that



reproduce racial inequality. They accomplish this through their philosophy and action based on the notion of *ancestralidade*, the subject of the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 2

### ORÙNMILÁ AS AN ALTERNATIVE SPACE OF BLACKNESS: *ANCESTRALIDADE*, EMBODIED KNOWLEDGE, AND ANTI-RACIST PRACTICE

*A ancestralidade é nossa via de identidade histórica, sem ela, não sabemos o que somos e nunca saberemos o que queremos ser.*

*Ancestralidade* is our route to a historical identity, without it we do not know who we are, and we will never know who we want to be.

--Paulo Oliveira, President of the Orùnmilá Cultural Center

#### Introduction

During my year at the Orùnmilá Center, I often heard the above statement. Pai Paulo inserted it into his seminars and discussions. I read these words in Orùnmilá's newspaper articles addressing questions about the teaching of African and Afro-Brazilian history and culture in the school curriculum. I also witnessed Orùnmilá members young and old engage *ancestralidade*, or ancestry, in how they perceived the question of identity, history, and spirituality and how they understood the past as formative of the present. On the surface, I initially took *ancestralidade* to mean the recovery of an ancestral past as a means to identity in the present. But as with many things I learned at the Cultural Center, the meaning would surface over time in the different activities, interviews, and day to day I experienced during my time at Orùnmilá. By observing its repetition in the Center's diverse discussions and activities, I began connecting the words to the broader philosophy underlying Orùnmilá's cultural work and political action. I started to discern the multilayered,

deeper points about history, culture, knowledge, and identity within *ancestralidade's* dynamic complexity.

The term *via* in Portuguese means a “route” or “path,” as in a way to something or to get somewhere. It also indicates a “means” to something, as in a manner through which to achieve it. Paulo’s use of *via* to frame *ancestralidade* reflects both definitions: an engagement with identity through the link to the culture, knowledge, and history of an ancestral past, as well as the emergent meanings and practices created in new contexts based on these links. As historical and emergent, *ancestralidade* conceptualizes the past in ways that shape how individuals see themselves, their society, and possibilities for the future. Thus, for Afro-Brazilians, the idea of “knowing who we are” and “who we want to be” through *ancestralidade* is not about recovering an essentialized identity or “tradition.” Rather, *ancestralidade* cultivates a historical identity as a means to reconstruct the past through one’s own voice, to take a relation to history through one’s own experience, and to struggle over what it means to be Black and Brazilian in a context where hegemonic national narratives circumscribe such opportunity. *Ancestralidade* historicizes Afro-Brazilian identity to reveal histories of power and struggle that shape Afro-descendant agency and their economic, social, and cultural positions in contemporary Brazil. In this way, cultural work and anti-racism based in *ancestralidade* mobilizes the past not as legacy, but as a project for contemporary social transformation (Dirlik 1997).

In this chapter, I examine how the Orùnmilá Center’s anti-racist discourses and actions engage *ancestralidade* in the production, transmission, and use of Afro-Brazilian culture and knowledge. I argue that the Center mobilizes *ancestralidade* by integrating diverse Afro-Brazilian practices as forms of knowledge, history, and philosophy into a multilayered anti-racist practice. *Ancestralidade* reflects how the Orùnmilá Center engages self, community, and identity, as well as how members

understand contemporary, situated experiences of prejudice, discrimination, and inequality. Through workshops and other activities, Orùnmilá’s anti-racist cultural work re-values cosmovisions and knowledge grounded in different notions of value and collectivity to challenge taken for granted constructions of the social formation. They mobilize a perspective grounded in the particular historical experience of Afro-Brazilians to critique dominant narratives of the nation and commonsense notions of history put to the uses of “silencing” difference. Orùnmilá’s cultural workshops and seminar discussions form the base of developing their decolonizing critique and politics.

This chapter begins by situating *ancestralidade* historically to examine how its meaning and uses challenge the naturalization of understandings of knowledge and culture that marginalize Afro-Brazilians and certain ways of being. I then situate the Orùnmilá Center as a location where Afro-descendants and their white allies come together to engage and explore forms of culture and knowledge with origins in Afro-Brazilian communities. Arguably, by building on and nurturing practices that historically served as means to collectivity, solidarity, and struggle in Afro-descendant communities, the Center constitutes an “alternative space of blackness” (Harding 2000) that challenges dominant epistemologies and histories shaping racial inequality in contemporary Brazil. An analysis of Cultural Center literature and interviews with workshop instructors and Orùnmilá participants reveals how Orùnmilá’s cultural work engages *ancestralidade* and constructs a challenge to the coloniality of power in their anti-racist struggle.

## **Ancestralidade as History, Knowledge, and Emergent Anti-racist Practice<sup>33</sup>**

The importance given to *ancestralidade* at Orùnmilá lies both in its cultural content and its engagement with historical processes of slavery, colonialism, post-abolition *branqueamento* [whitening], and ongoing racism and exclusion. As Afro-descendants struggled to reconstitute and construct their religious and social worlds in the Americas, they continually adapted to the changing historical demands colonial social formations placed on their cultures and ways of life. In Brazil, religious practices like Candomblé and cultural forms like Capoeira and samba have represented sites where collective memory, oral history, and embodied knowledge are maintained, created, and shared in ways that resist the epistemological and racial hierarchies of coloniality and lived experiences of prejudice and discrimination. *Ancestralidade* both underlies and reveals the ongoing adaptation of Afro-Brazilian forms of sociality and practices of collectivity.

Orùnmilá's cultural work reveals four main aspects underlying the historical and emergent character of *ancestralidade*. First, *ancestralidade* involves a *set of cultural values, knowledge, and cosmovisions (worldviews)* that stem from ancestral memory and philosophical principles that order life and community relations and construct ways understand and act in the world (see also Walsh and León 2006). Second, *ancestralidade* involves the *historical processes and experiences* that over time shape one's present position and situation. *Ancestralidade* is not static, it is cumulative and emergent as it builds on the relational articulation of values, meanings, and actions in new contexts. Present being is tied to that of ancestors in ways that

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<sup>33</sup> This section seeks to develop the meanings and uses of *ancestralidade* in black anti-racism, something that is rare or non-existent in social science literature. Exceptions include some theorizations of *ancestralidade's* place within questions of Candomblé specifically (cf. Braga 1995) and black identity and cultural resistance in Ecuador (Walsh and León 2006).

encompass historical experience and change over generations. Third, *ancestralidade* involves the *oral and expressive practices* and *collective spaces* that generate and transmit embodied knowledge and history. Throughout the Americas, Afro-descendants re-created or created new institutions and practices that aided struggles for self-determination within contexts of enslavement and ongoing racial discrimination. Fourth, *ancestralidade* merges knowledge, spirituality, values and cosmology with historical experience to construct an *Afro-diasporic political practice* that seeks present alternatives and future possibilities for substantive Afro-descendant equality.

As Catherine Walsh and Edizon León argue, *ancestralidade* is broader than tradition. It not only involves recent memories and references (e.g. medicinal and gastronomical practices or festivals and celebrations), but also something less tangible and more spiritual in nature, it involves

Senses that come from a past that began in Africa and that has continued with the diaspora provoked by the violence and force of slavery and the fragmentation, dispersion, discontinuities, and disarticulation of multiple local identities that this diaspora entailed. Ancestralidade responds to this ...; its intent is not just to rearticulate these identities in new historical, social, cultural, and spatial contexts but also to reconstruct the histories and spiritual ties that have been hidden and silenced; to cultivate a source as well as a sense of belonging in order to culturally live on and survive (2006: 215).

Struggles to culturally live on and survive, to cultivate a sense of identity and belonging constitute “points of identification... made within the discourses [and practices] of history and culture” (Hall 1990: 226). They involve a “positioning” within local and global hierarchies of power that seek to challenge the denial of value and validity to the ancestral and cultural material upon which Afro-descendants

construct identity and community. Orùnmilá's cultivation of *ancestralidade* through Afro-Brazilian practices reflects their own history as well as diverse, overlapping Afro-diasporic experiences within projects of racialized, capitalist development.

*Ancestralidade* is not only shaped by inheritance, it involves a “socio-historical, political, and existence-based construction” (Walsh and León 2006: 216). Orùnmilá Center members engage *ancestralidade* not only as a means to cultural continuity and reproduction. They also use it as a way to “un-silence” the past, subvert negative historical meanings of blackness, and address the structures, values, and practices that shape Afro-Brazilian inequality. Thus, *ancestralidade* encompasses a multifaceted, historicized means to cultural identity and collectivity. Through explicit discourse, but also in the subtle rhythms and bodily movements of center instructors and participants, *ancestralidade* permeates Orùnmilá's notions of culture and community and sustains the lived and embodied knowledge and history shared and emphasized at the Cultural Center.

### **From *Terreiro* to Cultural Center: Cultivating Space and Collectivity**

The Orùnmilá Cultural Center is located in the northern periphery<sup>34</sup> of the city of Ribeirão Preto (popln. approx. 500,000) in the northeastern part of the state of São Paulo, Brazil. The Center was founded by a couple, Paulo and Neide, both priests of the religion of Candomblé, specifically the Yoruba derived *Culto aos Orixás*.<sup>35</sup> When

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<sup>34</sup> Periphery refers to the physical location on the edge of the city, but also denotes social location, as in poorer working class neighbourhoods or *favela* shantytowns with people living in more precarious conditions than those close to the center of the city or in wealthier neighbourhoods.

<sup>35</sup> Candomblé developed during the nineteenth century in Brazil, drawing heavily on West African spiritual ideas and practices brought by enslaved Africans and recreated within a new context of

Paulo and Neide purchased the land in the 1980s for building their home and a *terreiro*, or house of Candomblé worship, the road was unpaved and the number of residences in the neighborhood was very small. Since then, the main road outside has been paved and various working class and low-income neighbourhoods have sprouted. While *favelas* or shantytowns are not immediately visible from the Cultural Center, there are several located within a short distance, interspersed on blocks between small one story, working class homes on the edges of communities. The nature of urban growth has created a *melange* of automotive shops and garages, corner bars, bakeries, small markets, housing, grassy fields, and larger *chacaras*<sup>36</sup> common in the northern periphery of Ribeirão Preto. The Cultural Center is located on a corner on a slightly downward sloping street, directly across the street from another *chacara* and on a corner opposite a large grassy field.

Paulo and Neide's choice to locate their home in the periphery reflects ritual and worship needs, personal desires, and the continued marginal status of Afro-Brazilian religions in a city like Ribeirão Preto. Walls surround their isolated plot of land, providing privacy, protection, and space to grow herbs to create ointments and baths for rituals and ceremonies. A large space also accommodates the construction of

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slavery, repression of African cultures and ways of being, and the interaction and mixture between Africans from different nations and regions of the old continent. Candomblé involves African cosmologies and mythologies transmitted through oral tradition and cultivated through particular rituals and practices in *terreiros*, or houses of worship. In particular, participants worship *Orixás* which are great ancestors who were divinized into deities, exhibit particular personalities and traits, and require certain forms of food and other offerings (Johnson 2002). Discussions of Candomblé's continuity with African origins (e.g. authenticity, replication versus recreation, etc.) exist in scholarly debates as well as among Candomblé houses. A discussion of the literature is beyond the purview of this chapter. The concern here is to examine how Candomblé and other Afro-Brazilian cultural practices have maintained a relatively stable system of meanings and practices that emphasize particular cosmovisions and engagements with the world—understandings of space, time, human interaction, history, knowledge, movement, and identity—and analyze how such cosmovisions inform a politics that challenges relations of rule structured by the coloniality of power and knowledge.

<sup>36</sup> *Chácaras* are small farms or landholdings, often surrounded by fences or walls, where people live and/or vacation. Often, *chacara* owners cultivate fruit trees, vegetables, and other herbs and spices for consumption. They may also cultivate small livestock. In other cases, people use *chacaras* for recreational purposes, making a swimming pool, a small soccer field, a space where people can barbecue and eat, and sometimes rooms where people can sleep. Both as a place of residence and as a form of leisure, *chacaras'* distance from the city provides a quiet, more spacious environment.



small buildings called “houses” for Candomblé deities, or *Orixás*. Candomblé leaders and worshippers also value the privacy and seclusion from neighbors, as ceremonies and events involve singing, drumming, and dancing, and often go on for hours throughout the night. Historically, the choice of location distant from the center of town mediated scrutiny and vigilance by authorities, who often invaded and repressed Candomblé houses and worshippers. Spacious seclusion presented an ideal spiritual and physical location that buffered discrimination against Afro-Brazilian cultural and religious practices and practitioners.<sup>37</sup> In larger urban areas like Salvador, Recife, Rio, and São Paulo, Candomblé houses have always been present in poor and working class neighborhoods with large numbers of Afro-Brazilians. Despite the more positive public and official perceptions and treatment of Candomblé since the mid-twentieth century, a public embrace of the religion remains incomplete, manifest in exoticized, folklorized, and now commodified representations that reflect a form of marginalization and lack of respect for the fullness of Candomblé’s meaning and import (Harding 2006). The periphery provides a level of autonomy, minimizes visibility, and avoids negative perceptions and the political and social constraints they may engender.

Candomblé and *terreiro* spaces constitute sites of cultural resistance where Afro-descendants reterritorialized and reconstituted their spiritual and social world after their transatlantic displacement. Candomblé constituted one means for Afro-Brazilians to assert cultural identity and construct alternative community configurations, solidarity, and transformative possibilities despite racism and discrimination. The performance of rituals and learning through orality and embodied knowledge—knowledge contained within the body—transmitted particular values and

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<sup>37</sup> This is not to say that urban *terreiros* do not exist. A short drive from Orùnmilá was a house of Candomblé located in an apartment above shops in a key commercial area which becomes quiet and deserted at night.

practices while cultivating spirituality and sociability. The physical and spiritual structure of the *terreiro* has served as an “alternative space of blackness” (Harding 2000) where Afro-descendants constructed collectivity in ways that challenged their defined place as slaves and Blacks. In these spaces, Afro-Brazilians contested attempts to reify blackness as “slavery” or “subalternity” while also while also cultivating valued traditions, sources of *axé*, and a spiritual orientation to the divine (Harding 2000: 150). Blackness here represents a “contested terrain of memory, identity, culture and politics[and] an historical arena in which different political projects, historical narratives, cultural logics, and self-designations are enunciated and debated” (Lao-Montes 2007: 313).

Historian Kim Butler (1998) characterizes Afro-Brazilian spaces like *terreiros* as “semi-autonomous alternative communities,” that mirror broader Afro-diasporic efforts for self-determination within regimes of slavery and inequality across the Americas. Through these alternative spaces of blackness, Afro-Brazilians refused the foreclosure of collective possibilities orchestrated through dominant ideological, political, and spiritual practices of colonial rule. Instead, they redefined blackness and lived experience on their own terms to forge solidarity, at times taking visible challenges into broader society, while at others maintaining forms of collectivity in more hidden, autonomous ways.

Pai Paulo and Mãe Neide confirm these spiritual communities as sites of resistance in an article written for Orùnmilá’s newspaper *Sorò Dúdú*. They state,

the resistance of black people in the maintenance of [religious and ecological] knowledge in their *Egbe Awo* (communities of worship) represents part of the struggle for the maintenance of identity stolen by the slave trade and by the racism still present today in society, where our cultural values are submitted to actions from simple theft, as happens to Indigenous Brazilians, or transformed into folklore by mass culture, by the Eurocentric cultural dictatorship to which

we are subjected (“Ecologia e a Tradição Religiosa Africana,” May 2004, p. 3).

*Egbe Awo (terreiros)* constitute spaces of resistance where Afro-descendants (and often their white allies) cultivated knowledge and identity in a multi-layered challenge to the experience of being Black and Brazilian in the nineteenth and early twentieth century.<sup>38</sup> Candomblé communities practiced an alternative citizenship, “a model of human relations and of participation in society within a paradigm strikingly different from that embraced by the nation’s elites” (Braga 1995, cited in Harding 2000: 160; See also França 1999). This struggle continues today.

As Muniz Sodré argues, the Candomblé *terreiro* has represented “a place from where energy or social potential originates for [Afro-Brazilians] who experience conditions of unequal citizenship,” and thus a place that contains and generates an Afro-Brazilian subaltern historical subjectivity (2002: 20). The meanings and memories within such spaces, the physical materials used in cultural practices, and orality and bodily movements are cultivated and engaged. As Harding writes,

What is perhaps most striking and fundamentally remarkable about Candomblé is [its] relationship to history. It is a transformational relationship in which devotees take the straw mats, the wide meters of swirling cloth, the foods stained red with palm oil, their own danced communion with the *orixás* and use them to transform the pain and trauma of their historical and contemporary experience. The effort is neither to ignore nor run from the history ... but to enter into it, with humility and grace—on its own terms, with great respect for what those who have gone before witnessed and lived. Indeed, to take on some

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<sup>38</sup> This was necessary as repression of Candomblé by authorities was acute in many instances—police raids destroyed *terreiros* and religious artifacts and harassed priests, priestesses, and members (Barros and Cavalcanti 2006; Butler 1998; Harding 2000). Even when not repressed directly, authorities took an ambivalent relation to Afro-descendant gatherings. Some believed it relieved the stresses of slave life and prevented rebellion, while others saw gatherings as disruptive and threatening to the social order (Harding 2000). Either way, such practices were not seen in a positive light, as tolerating something (especially as a social safety valve) is not the same as accepting or understanding it as a legitimate spiritual practice and way of being.

of their burden because that is, ultimately, where their (and our) strength lies (2006: 17).

To enter into history is to know it and feel it, to draw strength from it to understand and face present difficulties.

The Orùnmilá Cultural Center's cultural work and anti-racism is very much grounded in the historical, cultural, and political possibilities generated through Candomblé and the *terreiro* space. While still a Candomblé house that performs ceremonies, initiates new members, and provides religious services, Orùnmilá's present primary focus involves organizing cultural workshops, seminars, *afoxé* performances,<sup>39</sup> festivals, and other activities aimed at producing and sharing the philosophies and practices underlying Afro-Brazilian history and culture. Over time, the Center has run a diversity of workshops that include Capoeira (a Brazilian martial art/dance/community expression), percussion, African-dance, *rodas de samba*, hip-hop (graffiti, breakdancing, deejaying, and rapping), and drum making. They approach these diverse activities as historically vital to cultural and knowledge transmission, collectivity, and struggle in Afro-descendant communities. Orùnmilá's leaders and members draw out the historical, philosophical, and practical intersections of these diverse Afro-Brazilian forms to construct a multi-layered anti-racist politics.

While Afro-Brazilian cultural practices are not solely the product of resistance, struggle has shaped the history and lived experiences informing cultural identity in such practices. Orùnmilá leaders acknowledge this and assert it as part of the Center's philosophy. Paulo and Silas, the latter a communications professor and member of Orùnmilá, pinpoint how practices like Capoeira, Carnaval, and hip-hop were

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<sup>39</sup> *Afoxé* (pronounced Ah-fo-sheh) is a public manifestation of *Candomblé* religious centers and usually involves the dance and rhythms of *Candomblé* worship and the celebration of African heritage and Afro-Brazilian history.

constructed in political confrontation and the struggle for the liberation of black people in Brazil (the struggle against coloniality). They state, through “these dialectical confrontations [between African/Afro-Brazilian cultures and ‘Western’ culture and domination], black peoples extracted new conceptions or reaffirmed existing ones in the attempt to preserve or reconstruct their identity” (“As Dimensões Inseparáveis de Política e Cultura e a Luta do C. C. Orùnmilá” May 2004, p. 2). They used the resources afforded through *ancestralidade* to generate practices relevant to maintaining a relation to the past within their given condition at that particular moment. Cultural practice and experience shaped a critical historical consciousness. Just as the spiritual and physical manifestations of Candomblé provide the connection between the “then” and “now”—the material and immaterial link between individual and community and the historical past (Harding 2000)—Capoeira, samba, hip-hop and other Afro-Brazilian practices localize collective memory and shape an alternative orientation to identity.

### *Orality, Embodied Knowledge, and Afro-Brazilian Cosmovisions*

For Orùnmilá leaders and workshop instructors, Afro-Brazilian oral and expressive cultures like Candomblé, Capoeira, and samba involve dance and music not only a series of choreographed steps or musical notes, but as choreography, action, and movement that contain, produce, and transmit philosophy, history, and knowledge. Song and bodily movement communicate information through enunciated prayers and song lyrics as well as embodied knowledge—knowledge found within the body. Ana Paula, Paulo and Neide’s twenty-six year old daughter who helps coordinate workshops and choreograph the *afoxé*, explains the type of knowledge shared in Cultural Center activities,

People learn bodily expression from Yoruba culture that we try to teach. Like how we show each choreography. We show each *orixá* dance so that people can understand the ‘why’. Each *orixá* has a representation and a form of dancing. Each movement has a particular significance. We try to pass this to the students too. We also try to pass this through conversation. Some stories from our ancestors. You can’t teach everything. Through [Center] lectures we try to clarify a few questions... why we are ‘different’, that our history isn’t summed up by slavery... we try to teach a different vision [from dominant conceptions], make clear the differences.

Through bodily movements, choreography, and orality (stories and conversations), workshops teach an embodied way of engaging with history. Paula also emphasizes how this complements lectures that clarify a more complex Afro-Brazilian history, the “difference” of being black and Brazilian that exists within lived experience, and thus embodied history and knowledge. Her statement alludes to how embodied knowledge involves learned movement and philosophy stemming from an ancestral memory that encompasses the lived experience of older and past generations as a source of rich information.

In this fashion, embodied knowledge is “a way of experiencing a relationship to history, to divinity, to ancestry from the movements of one’s own body, from within the deepest memory of one’s own cells” (Harding 2006: 17). The body is the site of learning and feeling; it absorbs as well as transmits information that shape cultural as well as daily practices. This happens through the experience of the individual in relation to the divine or ancestral, e.g. spirit possession, as well as in the communication between people through movement in rituals, dances, singing, and other physical engagement, e.g. the *roda de samba* or Capoeira *roda*.<sup>40</sup> Through the aural cues of drumming and physical movements of dancing, these religious rituals

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<sup>40</sup> *Roda* is the word for wheel or circle and denotes the manner in which Capoeira and *samba de raiz* (roots samba) are danced—people make a circle and take turns playing (Capoeira) or dancing (samba) inside while others clap to maintain the beat and raise the level of energy.

and forms “reveal and reference history, philosophy, religion, physiology, psychology, botany, and mathematics, in addition to music and dance” as disciplines that the body articulates as it grows in spiritual and cultural practice over a lifetime (Daniel 2005: 5; See also Browning 1995 and Merrell 2007).

As scholar Muniz Sodré (1988) argues, dance

is manifestly pedagogical or ‘philosophical’, in the sense that it exposes or communicates a knowledge of which present and future generations should be aware. Inciting the vibration of the body to the rhythm of the cosmos, provoking an opening for the advent of the divinity, dance occasions a meditation ... [and transmits a knowledge] glued to the experience of the body itself (quoted in Harding 2006: 17).

Historically, under racialized projects of rule that sought to limit freedom, Afro-descendants “used dance and music to transform space and meaning in their lives,” as music and dance “afforded people another way of knowing themselves and engaging their situation” (Harding 2006:16). Bodily experience feels and learns history while bodily movement (re)produces and communicates this history and knowledge that cultivate energy, transform physical space, inform interactions within collectives, and provide a means to engage lived realities of inequality. Within this conception lived experience becomes important as a source of information about social orientation towards others, the larger collectivity, and one’s ancestors, thus the experiences of elders and longtime cultural practitioners are valued as knowledge and shared with younger community members to teach humility and respect towards those who have come before.

Rasta, a 32 year old Capoeira *contra-mestre*<sup>41</sup> with 19 years of experience, was one of the first instructors at the Cultural Center in the mid-nineties. After teaching Capoeira in a neighboring town for a few years, he was invited back to Orùnmilá to

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<sup>41</sup> *Contra-mestre* is one rank below *mestre*, or master.

give lessons again and was the instructor during my fieldwork year. He is also a key participant in the *afoxé* and other Center activities. His vision and experience of Capoeira exemplify the intersection of embodied knowledge, culture, and education. He explains,

Today I see [Capoeira] as my principal path. I think it was the hook that moved me towards other things because Capoeira involves a whole, which is why people say *Capoeira is life* [*uma vida*]. There you will learn about your body, your people. (...) You have to talk about music, about history. So I think that today's Capoeirista cannot just be a fighter, only think of being a fighter. For me Capoeira, after one or two years of training I began to research it and then I understood that a Capoeirista had to comprehend Capoeira's historical, social, and cultural processes. Even for you to understand what you are doing. You got involved in a practice. There is a 'why', an explanation for its existence.

For me, I see Capoeira as a great educational instrument, an instrument for transforming the human being. I think that through it, much like through the other forms of African or Afro-Brazilian culture, you learn a lot of things. But I think that Capoeira is the most complete [of these forms] that I have seen. I'm not saying its better, but I say this because it involves a lot of aspects: a bodily aspect, a ludic aspect, even a pedagogical aspect, to use a more modern vocabulary. So it helps you, helps you get to know yourself, and I think that the main thing for me was this, to get to know myself, to see myself more clearly.

Rasta offers a holistic vision of Capoeira as a way of life based on an engagement with the body, history, and culture that originates through an understanding of the creation and development of Capoeira over time and an understanding of how its different aspects—bodily, ludic, pedagogical, musical, historical—merge to shape one's understandings of the self. A critical engagement with these diverse aspects generates Capoeira's potential as an educational and transformative tool.

Orùnmilá leaders and instructors draw upon the systems of knowledge in forms like Candomblé, Capoeira, and samba that shape behavior and practice as a reservoir from which to develop both a spiritual and concrete understanding of history, identity,



and community. For example, Candomblé involves a complex set of beliefs, practices, and conducts that emphasize characteristics like humility, self-awareness, self-reflection, and an understanding that self-development complements community, thus creating conformity with one's surroundings and a means to resist and negotiate adversity (Merrell 2007: 106-7). Candomblé places tremendous value on knowledge as mind, body, spirit and community, as well as on the role and importance of oral and bodily transmission of *ancestralidade* (Botelho 2006; Daniel 2005; Harding 2006; Jones 2005; Merrell 2007). *Orixás* (Candomblé deities) and ancestors guide and provide strength through a connection to a historical past and by illuminating a path for daily action and to confront difficult, complex situations. As such, Candomblé, like Capoeira, samba, and newer forms like hip hop, offers a set of values, meanings, and practices through which people relate to and interpret not only the past, but also their lived experience in particular contexts.

Orality, or *oralidade*, has plays a key role in the process of cultural creation and transmission. In Yoruban cosmovisions, *oralidade* [orality] serves both as a conduit of knowledge and transmitter of *axé*, a form of creative spiritual energy or life force with real material effects, the power to make things happen and the power of transformation (Drewal 1999; Johnson 2002; Xavier 2006). The spoken word “makes up part of a combination of elements, of a dynamic process, that transmits the power of realization” (J. E. Santos 1976: 46). For example, in the process of Candomblé initiation, *axé* and knowledge are passed directly from one person to another through gestures, pronounced words accompanied by corporeal movements, and the breathe that gives life to inert material and reaches the most profound plane of personality (J. E. Santos 1976; Leite 1992). *Axé* is embodied energy created through song, ritual, dance, drumming, and other practices that take place in Candomblé *terreiros*. *Axé* is not only associated with spiritual leaders and people, but also with the *terreiro* space

(e.g. taking care of the physical aspects to please deities generates energy).

*Oralidade's* creative force gives it a particular plasticity that does not bind it to historical context, allowing it to maintain significance over time. At the same time, this plasticity allows *oralidade* to penetrate the bowels [*entranhas*] of a particular context and reinvent it, to never lose its role in the creation of possibilities<sup>42</sup> (Xavier 2006).

The transmission of *ancestralidade* and the legitimation of orality as a form of learning and wisdom are fundamentally political projects that encompass both the culture of a people and their history of re-creating and forging collectivity through struggle. Through alternative spaces and practices of blackness like Candomblé and Capoeira, Afro-descendants have made sense of and contested the limitations of their unequal racial condition. Orùnmilá members mobilize the meanings, uses, and power of cultural practices, politicizing Afro-Brazilian culture to challenge relations of rule that, through colonialism and particular conceptions of modernization, development, and progress, have oppressed and denigrated these ways of being and their substantive content. Their work builds upon generations of struggle and resistance by continuing the legacy paved by their ancestors. The rest of this chapter examines how Center instructors and participants conceptualize and understand the type of work in which they are involved. The themes of history, education, and knowledge permeate their statements, as do the challenges to common sense and the discovery of new ways of thinking that Orùnmilá's work engenders.

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<sup>42</sup> In Chapter four, I examine how the public action of the *Afoxé* uses orality and draws on *axé* to orchestrate a powerful political enunciation that engages with, and challenges, local and transnational issues affecting Afro-descendants and the poor.

## **Understanding Orùnmilá's Cultural Work through Members' Experiences**

At the Center, culture is lived, practiced, and shared, through the cultivation of the skills and meanings behind Capoeira, samba, dance, percussion, and other activities. Some members come to Orùnmilá at specific times during the week to participate in workshops, while others involve themselves in multiple activities or special occasions like birthdays, ceremonies, celebrations. Some activities are scheduled, while others blend with the day-to-day lived experience at the Center. People come by every day of the week to discuss local politics or religious and cultural issues, to play music on the community radio station, or to simply enjoy a meal and some conversation with whomever is there at the time. During festivities or after important events, people gather to play samba, sing and dance for long hours, and engage in discussions about Afro-Brazilian issues. Those preparing for initiation into Candomblé, a process that can last several years, interact with and maintain the space. These members maintain a focused religious relation to Pai Paulo, Mãe Neide, and the Center space. Others not initiating into Candomblé learn its philosophical elements through their colleagues and broader discussions. In sum, at Orùnmilá, spiritual and cultural embodied knowledge mix with celebration and pleasure, with special events and day-to-day experience. All the while, these activities blend with politics, whether planning the next anti-racist action or discussing how Yoruba and Afro-Brazilian cosmovisions can inform challenges to Eurocentrism. For members and visitors, the Cultural Center contains learning and pleasure, forges solidarity through interaction and struggle, and privileges other epistemologies and ways of learning.

My conversations with participants and instructors about their experiences revealed a lot about the Center's work. I have chosen several key excerpts that reveal

perspectives and aspects that arose in interviews and observation of workshops, informal gatherings, public performances, and lectures. I begin here with comments on the diverse nature of activities that make up Orùnmilá's work. Malcolm, a young, twenty-five year old Afro-Brazilian man has gone to the Center since 2000. He participates in samba and Capoeira, and often assists in the percussion workshops. He explained how he got involved at Orùnmilá,

I got to know [Orùnmilá] as a form of work, of movement. The people did some kind of cultural work in the periphery. So what was this work in the periphery? It always [encompassed] everything the people did. So much so that the thing started with Rap, Capoeira, samba, so it was a place that all these people came together... Hip hop had their headquarters there....

So a lot of this went on [*rolava muito*], that *real* integration, a large group of people who divided into smaller groups that had their activities. There were the people from Capoeira, samba, rap, people that did dance. There are the people that do percussion until today. That whole gang going there to this day. [Some people] don't go there as their headquarters [anymore], but they were able to take/learn a lot of information from there.

For Malcolm, the Center's unity in diversity attracted him. Participants in different activities relate to each other within the broader anti-racist work and shaping of the Center as a cultural and political space. Even those that no longer participate gained knowledge at the Center. Malcolm also discussed how he was not only attracted to the feeling of integration, but also to the energy and activity in the space, "I started participating in the action, because it was samba that I liked, so I would go there because there were always people gathered together and playing samba on the radio, playing samba in the *barracão*." Orùnmilá appealed to Malcolm through samba, which was his own cultural and musical interest, but also through the level of engagement with ideas,

I think the first time I went there, there was a seminar talking about black

culture [*cultural afro*]. There were various speakers. So, the foundation of people that work within these [cultural and activist] segments [locally], those people that have a different level of philosophical engagement, many of them came from/through the Cultural Center.

This last statement points out how cultural workshops, the day to day, and activities like seminars generate knowledge and produce a broader engagement with questions of “race,” politics, and culture. These aspects of the Center’s work have benefitted many and produced a level of engagement among activists that they carry with them in their work inside and outside the Center. Malcolm feels that this solid philosophical “base” that Orùnmilá provides by politically unifying diverse activities with varied social, musical, and aesthetic styles, differentiates its members’ perspectives on culture and activism.

Ana Paula cites the unity of diverse activities as a unique element of the Cultural Center,

I think Orùnmilá’s work is different [than other cultural centers] because it embodies all the aspects related to black culture. In other words, hip hop, samba, all the aspects without leaving religiosity [*religiosidade*] aside. Because, in other movements, I can’t say that they are superficial, I can’t say it that way, but I can say that other movements do not include all the aspects, that they do not valorize each aspect to valorize black culture.

João Vitor, a white twenty-four year old man initiating into Candomblé through Pai Paulo and Mãe Neide, highlights how this aspect differentiates Orùnmilá’s work from other Cultural Centers,

At Orùnmilá, we have old, traditional culture, the language spoken in the rituals. But on the other hand, we also have contemporary African culture. Here there is not only *ijexa*, or traditional rhythms from Africa. We also contemplate a diversity of black culture, of the hip hop movement, Capoeira, samba, of graffiti, which is a black cultural expression. (...) This is what makes Orùnmilá something different from most of the black cultural centers in

Brazil. If you go to [some famous Bahian Candomblé houses], you will learn a lot about Africa of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. But contemporaneity is excluded, and thus Orùnmilá has this difference of being the old, the new, or in other words, the “past” and the “present,” in a balanced way. (...) Here is not just drums. We also have DJs and Rap music.

So, black culture is important, but you also have to adapt. (...) Orùnmilá is an agent of differentiation in this sense of recreating and reestablishing. So what happens? You take the rap produced by the people that frequent Orùnmilá, and they have African stories/legends in them, understand? So it becomes something more than the expression of an excluded people.

Orùnmilá’s philosophy and work emphasizes, but transcends “traditional” African or Afro-Brazilian culture through contemporary practices that draw on these earlier forms in some way. Echoing others’ sentiments, João Vitor emphasizes this specificity as something that differentiates Orùnmilá from other black cultural centers.

*Ancestralidade* brings not a past to be recovered and remembered, but embodied knowledge, lived experience, and critical history that makes their work more than an expression of an excluded peoples. *Ancestralidade* is not about recovery, but about struggle to legitimize, value, and engage the past and present simultaneously as a means to construct collectivity and address inequality.

Pim Pim, a working class black man of 35 years of age and the percussion instructor during my time at Orùnmilá was Pim Pim, likens the Cultural Center to a unit or puzzle with various people constituting the pieces that bring together different knowledges and cultural practices,

I perceive [the Center] as a puzzle where Pai Paulo does his part with the political question. On the other hand, there is Mãe Neide’s articulation with the religious question, myself doing the percussion part through workshops. And so it doesn’t overload [Mãe Neide and Pai Paulo], it makes possible the continuity of work there. It doesn’t stop. Just like Capoeira, Rasta is another piece [of the puzzle], Renata [with dance] is another... What I see is the summation of these workshops with the question of posture inside the Cultural Center, which is one of the pieces, one of the tools, not only as something that exists, but something to truly amass in the struggle, in resistance.

The existence of various “pieces” in the Orùnmilá puzzle shapes its posture towards racism and culture—diverse workers and cultural activities merge to create the base of, and possibility for, resistance and struggle. As Center members emphasized above, this is a source of Orùnmilá’s strength in the struggle against inequality.

### *Knowledge for Citizenship*

For Malcolm, one product of Orùnmilá’s cultural work is *informação*, or information/knowledge. Here *informação* involves knowledge as well as lived experience and the tools to examine ones situation, engage politically, and construct citizenship.<sup>43</sup> Malcolm notes that the formal system of schooling fails to provide *informação* and educate Brazilians to be active, engaged citizens. He says,

You are not educated to be a citizen [through formal schooling]. You are not educated, and that’s it. So the cultural centers, of which there are many in Brazil, and the NGOs that engage in some actions ... They are playing the role the government doesn’t. The Orùnmilá Center is one of these. The difference is that there is a strong black militancy there. It’s different than what I see in any other place. When people ask [us], “Wow, how do you do it?” Several hip hop artists have visited, several *sambistas* or *capoeiristas*, they end up impressed. Why? Because they have never been able to ... bring together people from these different cultural forms and experiences in the same place: university teachers [together] with people who live in the *favela*, understand? People who like rock ‘n roll [with] people who like samba. You can do this [at Orùnmilá]. But why? Because people go in search of a vision, they don’t go there in search of groups with which they identify. Everyone identifies with each other because they have respect [for each other].

Malcolm points out that the Cultural Center’s framework (philosophy *and* practice)

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<sup>43</sup> Malcolm’s use of the term *informação* to describe Orùnmilá mirrors the use of the term among hip hop artists and other politically engaged youth of the periphery. “Information/knowledge,” as opposed to the literal translation to “information,” is used to denote the more multifaceted, holistic character of *informação*. *Informação* constitutes a resource and a tool. Acquiring it is not only a goal, but a process of educating oneself and synthesizing lived experience with other forms of knowledge.

uniquely brings together people from different walks of life and different cultural expressions, providing *informação* (knowledge *and* lived experience) that educates people culturally and politically. The engagement with culture as a transformative force mobilizes diverse practices to explore and transmit forms of knowledge and experiences that are not generally accessible in schools in a substantive, dynamic way. Orùnmilá's cultural work mobilizes forms with roots in African and Afro-Brazilian cosmovisions (e.g. Capoeira, samba, and Candomblé) and black struggles of resistance to coloniality (e.g. Capoeira, Candomblé, and hip hop). Malcolm sees this type of work as "information" for citizenship, for living, for understanding one's past, for generating community and respect. Thus, through diverse cultural activities and a broader ideological commitment to anti-racism, Orùnmilá participants gain *informação* and construct a sense of community.

The types of invited guests over the years illustrate this point. Along with well known hip-hop artists like Racionais MCs and MV Bill, the Center has also hosted talks by samba composer Nei Lopes and anthropologist Edson Cardoso, as well as local scholars lecturing on gender, education, and local black history. Bringing together these important Afro-Brazilian cultural and political figures that represent different genres and generations strengthens connections between different practices and ways of thinking about Afro-Brazilian culture, identity, collectivity, and resistance. Malcolm stated how visitors were impressed by this "difference" in Orùnmilá's cultural work, their strong black militancy that also reflects diverse cultural segments of the black community. In my first interview with Pai Paulo and Mãe Neide in June 2006, Mãe Neide proudly stated,

The interesting thing is that here we have rap, carnaval, samba. In other words, we can reach these diverse branches. When MV Bill was here, he said 'folks, I'm struggling so much to have something like this in Rio de Janeiro, and it's hard. I've never seen something like this, of putting rap together with



Capoeira, with samba, with African-matrix religions, carnival.’ So he thought it was very interesting. And it really was like this, people believing in something for them to approach and have respect for the Cultural Center. It’s truly because they saw transformation existed, that we wanted to create this transformation. That’s exactly why we were able to bring all these people together here.

Rapper MV Bill expressed this admiration for Orùnmilá’s ability to unify diverse forms under one roof, especially with an overarching focus on cultural politics and anti-racism. Relating this accolade to me in our conversation was a way for them to express their broader vision and the goals to which they strive in their work.

The knowledge and lived experience at Orùnmilá also offers different things for different people. Malcolm feels he gained tools to challenge the particular form of racism in Brazil, especially naturalized discourses informed by racial democracy,

I know how to deal more with discrimination today. I know how to identify discrimination, regardless of how camouflaged, masked it is, which happens the most in Brazil. Prejudice in Brazil is complicated because of this, because people are prejudiced, they know that they are prejudiced, but there is already a pre-made discourse in Brazil that is used. *Every second* someone repeats this discourse. (...) Because people in Brazil, they know this discourse that prejudice doesn’t exist, that this is something of the past, that this is just talk, that this is just something created by vengeful/whiny Blacks [*negro doi doi*], a lot of things of this type. Today, I know how to identify and combat these things. I know, meaning, I have been learning, informing myself, so that each day goes by and that thinking is less and less acceptable.

Orùnmilá’s cultural work, coupled with Malcolm’s ongoing efforts to inform himself, have debunked the myth of racial democracy and idea that racism is a thing of the past. He has identified the main elements of the taken for granted discourse that shape thinking perceptions of racism and denials of inequality. His participation at Orùnmilá helped him identify taken for granted perceptions of racism and prepared him to confront denials of inequality.

*Knowledge, Culture, and Critical History to Challenge Racism*

Pim Pim, the percussion instructor, participates in various musical groups in Ribeirão and claims a fondness for reggae music, evident in his six inch dreadlocks. He was always dressed in Capoeira or similar loose-fitting pants, sandals, and loose cotton shirt. In an interview he explained what he tries to do pedagogically in the Saturday percussion workshops.

I try to make sure in the best way possible that people understand that we are not there just simply to learn how to play music... I [also] give percussion lessons here at home. And, the students that come, there are moments where we stop to talk. There are various moments that we talk about questions related to the instruments, rhythmic questions, the importance of lyrics, you know, of samba, hip hop, reggae, of Capoeira, that come with an enormous gamut of information, many times with a posture of protest that goes under the radar.

In his teaching, Pim Pim conveys the different elements involved in different styles of music, the stories that the lyrics tell. He sees the various Afro-diasporic musical forms as reflecting similar postures of resistance. For him, lyrics exemplify an oral history of protest, of detailed content and information available to those listening. His holistic approach encompasses this understanding of the oral and sonic elements of percussion. He elaborates,

So, in all the places I have involved myself, I always have worried about the content of the work. What will be worked on there? The question of resistance, of respect, involvement, the cultural question, ideological, etc. (...) So at the percussion workshops, I worry about doing the same thing because one process accompanies the other. Nothing can be too brusque, because [of] people who do not have the habit of being culturally, ideologically, and politically involved ... In terms of articulations that are done [at the Orùnmilá Center], they may become tired or shocked. So we have to do it in a way that people understand slowly.

Pim Pim's instruction lies in both the music itself and the meaning behind beats, the words used, and the types of instruments and songs played. While he seeks a particular politicized approach, he also understands that people may encounter the workshop experience from different perspectives and levels of engagement with Afro-Brazilian culture and anti-racism. As such, he tries to make sure he doesn't press too hard in his presentation. He summarizes his position in the workshops,

My objective is to make sure that people [*he pauses*]. Are you coming to learn how to play? If you want to learn to play music, fine. So you will learn to play, you will learn *why* you are playing, *for whom* you can play, *what you can do* with this knowledge so that you don't distort it as they did with Capoeira. Unfortunately, the large majority of capoeiristas are using Capoeira in an improper way, as a commercial form, strictly as competition, of commercial competition. This is so much so that some [Capoeira masters] are even saying that they don't have students, they have 'clients'. This is one word that really scares those involved with the cultural question (...), but unfortunately we already know that this [attitude] has become generalized and we are trying to combat and reverse the situation. In sum, [these instructors] don't have the smallest amount of commitment.

Here Pim Pim points out a key emphasis of Orùnmilá's cultural work: addressing the abuse of culture for personal gain. Using the term "client" for students of Capoeira modifies and distorts the relation between teacher and student as well as the meaning behind Capoeira as a cultural form. The term "client" links students to a relation of exchange in a language of the market paradigm. Just as playing percussion involves understanding when, where, why, and how you should do it, Capoeira involves a set of principles and a way of life that goes beyond a "banking" form of education. The commodification of culture in general, and black culture in Brazil in particular, is an ongoing, contested process, with much at stake ideologically and politically. The Cultural Center has seen several people come and learn and then use the knowledge in

ways that bolster, rather than challenge, the coloniality of power. This concerns Pim Pim.<sup>44</sup>

Most people I initially got to know who were not instructors were those involved in the Saturday percussion and dance workshops. I talked to many of them about their experience at the Center and they shared how it was transforming their own understandings of race and culture in Brazil. Cristiane, a twenty five year old white woman involved in the local reggae scene heard about Orùnmilá around 2004. She got involved in Capoeira (at one of Ribeirão Preto's oldest academies) and participated in dance, percussion, and the *afoxé* at Orùnmilá. Her studies led her to seek out Orùnmilá, and the latter fundamentally changed her understanding of culture and heritage. She explains how her university professors treated material on Brazilian culture and history,

My [undergraduate studies in] tourism got me interested in the preservation of cultural heritage... Then, when I did my [post-graduate] concentration in history, I started studying colonial Brazil in more depth... [and] the interest in cultural heritage/goods arose. I did a trip to Bahia and stayed in a Capoeirista's home. I also went to Porto Seguro [in Bahia]. At the same time... I already perceived the existence of another sentiment, something that happens, something beautiful and strong in the heart. For example, in Capoeira, and in dance too, from the side of music...

I think that I cultivated my interests slowly little by little, from the angle of slavery... I wanted to do my undergraduate thesis on something related. Because in college, they say "folklore" a lot. And later I began to change my consciousness that all this for me, today, is not folklore. But in the university it is presented as folklore... Brazilian history was folklore in the third year. What *complemented* history was folklore. Why? Because we were talking about movements that were cultural.

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<sup>44</sup> As he told me, Pim Pim charges fees for lessons in his home, which means he also negotiates the question of remuneration and making some sort of living from music and percussion instruction. It is not as though he disavows the money-making aspect. Rather, as many Orùnmilá members expressed, there is a difficult negotiation between making a living to survive and the slippery slope of commodification and selling culture in a manner divorced from political and knowledge content. A larger system that assigns value to certain skills within a market paradigm constrains those who advocate critique and social transformation through cultural work—performance and practice.

At the time she began questioning how history and culture were presented as folklore in tourism and at her university, she worked at an exhibit at the Ribeirão Preto Art Museum related to the 13<sup>th</sup> of May, the abolition of slavery. At the exhibition, models, photos, and diagrams dealing with slavery, slave ships, and slave rebellions were presented and discussed. She became interested in pursuing the topic further:

When I wanted to do my concentration, I wanted to make a link to this work. Then I went to Orùnmilá and I noticed that their consciousness was another. So much so that I gained a lot of respect and I couldn't write about it. I haven't been able to do my research and have distanced myself from it because I identified strongly with it, to feel it. I began doing Capoeira and saw there that it wasn't folkloric.

Her close contact and the feeling generated through participation in Capoeira and Orùnmilá caused her to take leave of her studies in order to develop a deeper understanding before proceeding. I ask her to elaborate on how this shaped her previous exposure to culture as “folkloric.” She responded,

When I got to know Mãe Neide and Pai Paulo, I gained respect for the religious question. Because when we talk about folklore, we talk about dates, celebrations, and cultural exhibitions. This is important, but there is also the day-to-day of people. It is not folklore, it is life... Candomblé for tourists is one thing. For participants it is another... When people see folklore, they see the simulated side of things [*encenação*]... So I began to see two things, to see that the life of a Capoeirista or Candomblé devotee is not just a simulation, it is a life structure. So for me, folklore ends up seeming like something pejorative... I ended up with such love, such respect, I said “wow, it's not just simulation. There are people who live this, who dedicate their whole lives to this”.

If I had continued at college with all that I had learned about Afro-descendants without getting to know Orùnmilá, without being exposed to Capoeira, I think I would have a very small, superficial vision. So when I got to know Orùnmilá, I realized that the word “folklore” was too superficial to describe all of this.

Lived experience in Capoeira and at Orùnmilá helped Cris deconstruct the notion of “folklore” and re-examined how such terms become attached to and reify certain cultures and practices. Through simulation, cultural forms that in their day to day are dynamic ways of being lose their complexity. Note that she strongly identified with Afro-Brazilian culture, she *felt* something “beautiful and strong in the heart,” a respect gained through participation and conversations with people at Orùnmilá. She was pushed to engage the depth of meaning and place that such practices have. She questioned folklorization and limited representations of Afro-Brazilian history and ways of being while also cultivating a critique of tourism and culture as display. Orùnmilá gave her *an other* orientation for engaging culture, one unavailable through the means of university professionalization.

In relation to the level of cultural engagement, Cris echoes Malcolm’s perspective that current and former Orùnmilá participants have carved a visible niche for themselves in the cultural life of Ribeirão Preto,

At the places I frequent, I come into contact with various people that have spent time at Orùnmilá. Today, these are the people who are most active in the cultural question in the city, in the artistic sphere of the city. So the majority of artists I know, of people that work with art and culture, are people who have spent time at Orùnmilá and have a less alienated conception of art, culture, and politics than, for example, those I had contact with at the university.

Orùnmilá’s cultural work influences people’s involvement and approach to art, culture, and politics in Ribeirão Preto. As Cris’ own biography reveals, she came to engage more deeply with Afro-Brazilian culture and knowledge as complex ways of life after participating at the Center. She also notes how it’s not just discourse, but behaviour that differentiates Orùnmilá members, “Because it is not just speaking in a more political way. What I see when I meet a person who frequents the Cultural Center, their conversation, their way of speaking, respecting others... really is a

composed manner.” In Cris’ experience, Orùnmilá also conveys notions of respect and how to engage with others in your day to day. She values this and believes it aids in long term change, “[It is] over the long term that things happen.”

Marina, an Afro-Brazilian woman of twenty five whose father was black and mother is white, joined the Cultural Center around the time I arrived to conduct my research in May/June 2006. By the end of my stay (June 2007), she was actively involved in Center activities and bringing her degree in pedagogy to the table to coordinate and discuss education efforts and other activities. I interviewed her early in my fieldwork (September 2006), and her comments reveal the basis of what would be her increased involvement over the following year. She had this to say,

Orùnmilá only began making sense to me the third time that I went, when there was dance class. Up until then, the other two times I went, Renata was not there so we only did percussion. But, on the day I had dance class was when the Center began to mean something to me. Because, for me, it was very strong, very liberating, it was enjoyable to come into contact with all the energy, with all the symbolism of the movements. Then it made sense. Then I liked it. I said, “There is something [here] I have to get to know.”

So I am going slowly. I’m trying to get involved, get closer to Mãe Neide and Pai Paulo and reclaim this black consciousness. Well, not reclaim, I think to acquire it, really. I think this consciousness is lacking for me. [Orùnmilá] is a space for this, for discussions, to exchange experiences, of knowledge. But it only made sense once I did dance. On that day, at that class, Renata asked us to introduce ourselves and say why we were there. I think that is why it made sense. Up until then I hadn’t thought about why I was there. I had gone out of curiosity and my sister was going and enjoying it. Then I said, “No, I am here because I want to come into contact with all of this, all that I have had little contact with in life.”

What Marina felt at dance classes—the movements, energy, and symbolism—drew her to the Center and gave her the sense that there was something deeper under the surface she had scratched through her first few participations. The moment she was asked to talk about why she had come to the Center, “it all made sense,” revealing an

aspect of people's attraction to Cultural Center activities that is hard to put into words. The feeling comes from dancing with others, learning choreography and percussion, joining the *roda de samba*, and sensing the energy and history that the movements and sounds embody and how they provide orientation in relation to self and community.

For Marina, the sense of collectivity through shared knowledge and discussion made possible that she acquire the black consciousness she felt she lacked. It also helped her connect with others who had experiences with racism. I asked her to elaborate on the question of consciousness and what differentiates Orùnmilá from any of her prior experience with race issues. She stated,

Because [at Orùnmilá] we talk more about Blacks, that they are marginalized everyday, that their social situation is much more complicated than what whites confront. I think I lack this consciousness, precisely because I haven't been in such a socio-economic situation, precisely because I have not been marginalized [economically]. I think it's this type of consciousness, because, even though others have suffered prejudices and what not, I never suffered anything that made me really feel, "Wow, I am marginalized in society." You know, like that. I think I need to know how that is. Not that I want to suffer it, it's not that. I want to know what the history of all of this is in people's lives. And beyond that, enter into contact with black history, with Candomblé. What I mean is, I stayed 15 days in Salvador (Bahia) and I didn't have the courage to go acquaint myself with a *terreiro* and involve myself more. In our education, we don't learn anything. I learned that Africa was [one undifferentiated mass] and the slaves came and that's it. And then [formal education] moves right to the slaves in Brazil. It's like that. I think that, because of the issue of getting to know about black culture, how it is, what can we do to reduce marginalization that is based on 'race.'

The Center offered possibilities to learn more about Afro-Brazilian culture as well as how socio-economic marginalization, something she never felt herself, exacerbates discrimination.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, discussions at Orùnmilá revealed to Marina how formal

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<sup>45</sup> Being of an upper middle class background and living with their white mother, Marina and her sister, Teresa, explained how they were always in a majority white and well-off social environment. They both recounted various instances of racism and discrimination they experienced growing up due to living in a middle/upper-middle class world. Marina's interview acknowledged these experiences, yet she felt that



was inadequate to the task of explaining and representing Africa and black history, and thus the complex (racial, religious, and cultural) diversity of Brazil's peoples. Marina's words reveal the pedagogical nature of the Center's work, how as a space it blends Other histories, epistemologies, and experiences to educate with the goal of broadening pedagogical possibilities and reducing racial marginalization.

The workshops taught by Renata (dance) and Pim Pim (percussion) are fundamental in this process, as Marina describes,

I think they constitute a way to develop this knowledge by involving people much more... I think that the aspect of learning by doing is very rich... So I think the role of the Center, of the workshops that exist there, they will help disseminate what is presently unknown, what is really unknown. It was unknown to me and it still is. Much still is. Only in this way will people treat it in a more normal, natural way. Or else everything will remain unknown, very "different" and people tend to reject what is different. So I think the workshops are fantastic for various reasons. The goal of integrating people. That you can talk about issues with people who are very diverse. So you have people from every corner of Ribeirão, each one does something. I think it's fantastic.

The techniques used in the workshops help spread knowledge to attendees. She also notes how it is part of spreading information beyond the walls of the Center, as participants take that knowledge elsewhere making it "echo in other spheres." While she gains knowledge through cultural practices and discussions, she also feels a level of integration with others at the Center, highlighting the importance of collectivity. The attendees and participants over time solidify bonds through the information and activities they share on Saturday afternoons and at the many other performances throughout the year.

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class had protected her to some degree, but not completely. Thus, she felt the working class and poor Afro-Brazilian experience with racism must be worse because the protection of class was not available.

## **Conclusion: Mobilizing Ancestralidade and Making Race an Issue**

This chapter has examined the philosophical and practical aspects of the Orùnmilá Center's cultural work and how Center participants understand and respond to such work. The Center builds on and mobilizes *ancestralidade* with the goal of changing perceptions of race and knowledge among its members and within the broader society. Their work develops the orality, embodied knowledge, and a critical history of Afro-Brazilian forms as a particular engagement with the past and with collective identity. Through these forms, the past lives in the present and constitutes a means to understand and contest coloniality. Through Center workshops and activities, members gain knowledge about their own histories, a critical knowledge about race relations in Brazil, a more complex engagement with the philosophies and practices that stem from Afro-Brazilian practices and communities, and the experience of diverse pedagogies, especially orality and embodied knowledge.

The following chapters demonstrate how *ancestralidade* informs Orùnmilá members' politicization of Afro-Brazilian history, lived experience, and knowledge in their struggle for substantive racial equality and social transformation. From the *Baobá* education project to carnival, Orùnmilá aims to occupy and transform educational and political institutions, as well as politicize the meaning of events like the annual carnival. In these various spheres, they struggle simultaneously to make race a visible issue, to implement institutional changes geared towards addressing inequality, and bring their own perspective and experience to bear on the content of discussion and policy. Reflecting on the Center's work and impact, Ana Paula told me,

This day and age, the Cultural Center is taking [its] political role forward, [its] cultural role forward. I think the Center plays a very important role in Ribeirão Preto in the arena of discussion. It causes people to discuss, even if they don't accept [the nature of the work], they discuss the [racial] problem... I think

Orùnmilá is making society stop to think in a different manner in relation to these questions... Orunmila provokes discussion to see if people will open their eyes and see things in a different way.

Ana Paula's twenty-eight year old sister, Daniele, complemented her statement emphasizing the perspective Orùnmilá members bring to the ongoing anti-racist struggle,

[Orùnmilá's] role is a very strong one, right, because it's a continuous struggle in relation to public policy, [black] self-valorization, against discrimination, racial equality, employment opportunities, everything. [Orùnmilá's] role is a very strong one, because it is not just here at the Center, at the headquarters. It includes all of Ribeirão, the region, Brazil, you know? It is a discussion being had throughout Brazil, and at Orùnmilá, the lived experience is very strong... There are people who have lived this question their whole lives [that are passing on knowledge here at the Center].

Both Daniele and Ana Paula affirm Orùnmilá's important place in the ongoing anti-racist struggle. The first concrete policies to address inequality in Ribeirão came through Orùnmilá's mobilization and advocacy. In this way, the Center provokes hitherto nonexistent discussions and actions around race within local government institutions and among the local population while teaching and developing an engagement with *ancestralidade* as a form of knowledge and pedagogy and means to construct collectivity. This permeates their work in education, as we will see in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER 3

### DECOLONIZING KNOWLEDGE THROUGH THE *BAOBÁ PROJECT*: EDUCATION, INCLUSION, AND THE AFRO-BRAZILIAN STRUGGLE

All of you already know that I am a defender of inclusion in its most diverse forms, whether it is the inclusion of handicapped individuals, or the inclusion of excluded people for whatever social reason. I am a fighter for the cause of education.

– Ribeirão Preto’s Education Secretary at the Inauguration Ceremony of the *Projeto Baobá*<sup>46</sup>

Practice shows us that racist thought, even when it talks about integration, about the acceptance of diversity, of accepting those who are different, in most cases colludes to eliminate those who are different, to exterminate black as black and accept them as an individual whose difference appears merely in the color of his skin or in his colorful clothing.

– Paulo Oliveira in his article “Centro Cultural Orùnmilá e a 10,639,” *Sorò Dúdú: Fala Negro* Newspaper, November 2006.

#### Introduction

One of the main areas Orùnmilá members focus their work is education. Recent government policies have opened up a framework to orchestrate changes in the municipal school curriculums so as to address the absence and delimited representations of Afro-Brazilians and their history. Black organizations like Orùnmilá, coupled with scholars of race, have studied the issue, made recommendations for implementation, and pressured municipalities to go through with reforms. Yet, within a history where racial democracy and miscegenation continue to

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<sup>46</sup> A project organized to implement the teaching of African and Afro-Brazilian history and culture in the municipal school curriculum according to Federal Law 10,639/03.

shape ideas about race, implementing these changes have not been easy. Moreover, the growing recent discourses of multiculturalism do not necessarily address the symbolic inclusion of excluded groups or the colonial legacy that structures inequalities.

Over the past twenty years in Latin American, words like cultural diversity, multiculturalism [*pluriculturalismo*], inclusion, and difference have entered policy-making discourse and action with newfound vehemence. States have responded to the growing demands of Indigenous and Afro-descendant populations mobilizing for racial and cultural rights and recognition, implementing efforts in relation to land claims, ecology, education, employment, and health. Those mobilizing base their claims on a critical examination of the past that seeks specific policy to address centuries of inequality, disadvantage, and cultural domination. These movements also seek to stem the ongoing encroachment of neoliberal capitalist relations on their communities and ways of life. Many Indigenous and Afro-descendant movements push for a revaluing of their forms of knowledge and cultural practices to overturn the power relations that have relegated them temporally to the past, locked their peoples into inferiority, and discarded their ways of life as possibilities for shaping future collectivity. How do we understand the nature of these movements' demands, i.e. the philosophies, experiences, practices, and goals driving their struggle? Conversely, how do we understand the growing recent trend by governments to address or accommodate these demands through state multicultural policy?

To explore this process in the Brazilian case, this chapter situates the Orùnmilá Center's struggle to implement an education project in the municipality of Ribeirão Preto within the broader entrenchment of policies on inclusion of diversity within contemporary neoliberal development projects. I raise the following questions: What does the shift to multicultural discourse in state policy in a context of neoliberalism imply for Afro-Brazilians? Into what are Afro-Brazilians being included? And,

correspondingly, in what ways does the nature and context of inclusion challenge or reinscribe relations of rule and with what consequences for substantive racial equality? How does Orùnmilá's effort to construct and implement a substantive education project challenge these broader processes that include subaltern populations in a delimited way?

In this chapter, I examine how Orùnmilá's *Projeto Baobá* aims to substantively include African and Afro-Brazilian history and culture in the school curriculum and classroom. First, I outline two elements of Afro-Brazilian efforts at educational reform and inclusion—racism and discrimination in the classroom and the exclusion of diverse knowledges and epistemologies from school spaces and the curriculum. I then look at how multicultural policy within neoliberal contexts can perpetuate inequality by reconfiguring categories like culture, inclusion, and “difference.” Then I outline the specifics of federal education Law 10,639/2003, aimed at including African and Afro-Brazilian history and culture in the curriculum. The rest of the paper examines the *Projeto Baobá*. First I look at how it contests categories of rule and certain values naturalized by the coloniality of knowledge and power through an engagement with ancestral knowledge. I explore how this informs efforts to decolonize educational institutions and practices. I then examine how Orùnmilá's efforts to transform education content and practice query dominant knowledge and worldviews that shape societal notions of progress, development, and collectivity. In a present context where the neoliberal economic project shapes policies of racial and cultural recognition, treatments of difference and inclusion often privilege access to the “benefits” of participation in market society over other forms of social transformation. An analysis of the conflicting conceptions of inclusion expressed by Orùnmilá activists and local public officials illustrates one dimension where contemporary struggles play out around implementing a critical multiculturalism that substantively shifts the meaning,

place, and outcome of educational reforms geared towards subaltern communities.

### **The Struggle for Substantive Inclusion**

The opening quotes express contrasting perspectives on questions of diversity and inclusion held by state representatives on the one hand, and Afro-Brazilian anti-racist politics on the other. Both take a relation to Brazilian Federal Law 10,639, passed in 2003, which mandates the teaching of African and Afro-Brazilian culture and history in the school curriculum. The *Centro Cultural Orùnmilá* has struggled to implement this law in their home municipality of Ribeirão Preto. For this purpose, they designed the *Projeto Baobá*, or Baobab Project, which envisions a substantive transformation of the school curriculum that integrates critical history, cosmovisions (worldviews), and forms of knowledge created and transmitted through Afro-Brazilian cultural practices. The *Projeto Baobá* represents one type of project designed to implement 10,639. While implementation is the responsibility of municipal governments, projects can be designed and proposed by non-governmental organizations that have the capacity to implement a project, which includes teachers, materials, lesson plans, and workshop designs.<sup>47</sup>

Despite the Education Secretary's enthusiasm for the project and his receptiveness to black movement demands, in his statement from the *Projeto Baobá's* inauguration ceremony quoted above, he acclaims its importance through an

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<sup>47</sup> These organizations compete for a public contract to implement teacher training and curriculum modifications (e.g. carry out workshops and lectures) while municipalities administer the funds (usually federal) and provide an institutional structure (lecture halls, cultural spaces, etc.). Many programs to implement 10, 639 have been created over the past few years, but little research exists on project implementation. The Orùnmilá Center created the *Baobá Project* as a means to advance implementation in their own municipality as well as to avoid issues they saw as prevalent in other local and statewide projects, such as brevity, inconsistency in educational materials and teacher training, and lack of substantive engagement with knowledge, philosophies, and practices underlying Afro-Brazilian culture. This chapter analyzes the characteristics, potential, and challenges presented by the Orùnmilá Center's politics and *Projeto Baobá* implementation.

ambiguous, generalized discourse of inclusion and diversity. By placing Afro-descendants as one group among many types of excluded peoples, he generalizes exclusion and obscures the specific experiences of Afro-descendants that warrants a law like Law 10,639. Like many policy-makers' discourses, vague language displaces concrete discussion of historical racial inequalities, leaving untouched broader relations of power shaping knowledge production and transmission in the educational system into which people seek inclusion. While inequality is acknowledged, it is not substantively treated. In contrast, the quote from Orùnmilá's *Sorò Dúdú* newspaper questions the implications of inclusion for Afro-descendants that doesn't address the coloniality of power. Paulo Oliveira, Orùnmilá's president, suggests that, within unequal relations of power, inclusion and "integration" of Afro-descendants turns difference into something merely skin deep, ornamental or cosmetic (e.g. colorful clothing), as opposed to a substantive engagement with the knowledge produced through perspectives, experiences, and cultural practices within black communities. Paulo seeks to historicize the terms of black inclusion to reveal how cosmetic acceptance of difference and diversity reproduces rather than addresses racial inequality within educational institutions and society more broadly. This perspective underlies how the Orùnmilá Center's cultural work redefines the meaning, content, and practice of education to construct substantive inclusion for Afro-descendants.

Historically, Brazilian development and formal education marginalized the multiple forms of knowledge, and corresponding values, practices, and understandings of community and development present among its diverse population. The struggle to teach African and Afro-Brazilian history and culture in the school curriculum aims to redress absences as well as deconstruct folklorized, devalued, and hierarchical representations of Afro-descendants that underlie prejudice and inequality. Substantively diversifying both curriculum and classroom pedagogies creates a



springboard to reconstitute multiple, alternative, or “other” possibilities for organizing knowledge and society. These efforts centrally question how dominant categories of knowledge and value displace other ways of being and thus shape opportunity, material inequality, and welfare for the communities from which these forms originate.

Over the past two decades, education researchers and Afro-Brazilian activists have advocated along two fronts in relation to addressing racism and exclusion in the formal education system. On the one hand, they target everyday racism in the school space (classroom, playground, etc.), the lack of positive representations of Africa and Afro-Brazilians in school textbooks, and the superficial treatment of the role of Afro-Brazilians in shaping the nation. At the same time, scholars and activists argue for incorporating Afro-Brazilian cultural practices into school curricula, affirming such forms as origins of knowledge production and transmission, and as different pedagogies (Cavalleiro 2001; Machado 2003; Theodoro 2005). They argue that drawing creatively on this excluded knowledge re-values forms sociality present in Afro-descendant cultures and diversifies the methods, epistemologies, and foci of the curriculum (Botelho 2006; Xavier 2006; *Sorò Dúdí* November 2006). These foci of reform are mutually constitutive, as racism and exclusion in texts stems from the historical devaluation of Afro-Brazilian knowledge and culture and a limited perspective on their contribution to the national formation. These education efforts aim to address how the coloniality of power and knowledge naturalize negative representations of blackness and circumscribe what forms of knowledge count for societal development.

### *The Curriculum and Classroom Experience*

Education is about an imposed curriculum that socializes students in ways reflecting broader societal relations, expectations, and every day practices. Curriculum content and students' everyday experiences in Brazilian schools legitimizes cultural and racial prejudices. Teachers' differential treatment of white and Afro-descendant students based on associations of skin color with behavior and academic ability reproduces the naturalized associations such treatment presupposes. Also, Afro-Brazilian children's schoolmates subject them to "nicknames, name calling, and mockery [*ironias*] [that] consolidate and perpetuate latent prejudices and discrimination" (Cavalleiro 2005: 14). In relation to curriculum content, educational texts include depreciating representations of Afro-descendants as subservient or occupying demeaning social positions, and as passive subjects of national history (Cavalleiro 2001; Fernandes 2005; Munanga 1996; A. C. Silva 2005). Humanity and citizenship are normalized as the middle class white male, while women, Blacks, and Indigenous peoples existence are marked by their gender and skin color. At the same time, associations of Afro-Brazilians and blackness with incompetence, dirt and ugliness<sup>48</sup>, poverty, passivity, and slavery persist (A. C. Silva 2005; Lima 2005). Ana Paula from Orùnmilá explains the effects on black and white children and their families of such stigmatized representations and visibility,

this [is a] form of us not recognizing ourselves when we are kids. I didn't see one black person, a black family in a book, for example, that they gave us to read [in school]. I never saw a black family, or even a black woman, excluding housekeepers, cleaners, in my whole childhood. I saw only negative representations. That's what we learned. And what I learned, my white schoolmates learned too. Black equals slave. This was the form it was taught. And I think this exists until today, it got a little better but it still exists.

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<sup>48</sup> For example, the notion of (curly, afro) hair being "bad hair" [*cabelo ruim*] and a marker of blackness has remarkable effects on young children, especially girls, often causing negative self-esteem and attempts to change one's appearance to gain social acceptance (cf. Burdick 1998 and Caldwell 2007).

Ana Paula describes the effect of these representations on identity-formation for both white and black children. They construct senses of self and a relation to their roles in national history and contemporary society based on how they see themselves in the school space and in textbooks. Blacks are largely invisible in the latter. Ana Paula further elaborates on how some Afro-Brazilian families are better prepared to challenge how these representations affect their children,

For us it was hard [to encounter stereotypes and discrimination] because we were small and didn't have a broader [critical] understanding... We had to come home, talk with my mother and father, and they would orient us. It was easier because they were more enlightened on this question. Because, any other black friend from school, if some type of racism happens, they don't know what to do, you know. They cry, isolate themselves, right, [they] don't have that type of confrontation, precisely because the mother and father don't have a base. So, [dealing with racism] became more complicated for them.

In this way, the school system not only contains negative representations and fails to address racism and discrimination in the day to day. Many students' families are also not prepared to support and guide their children should such situations arise. In contrast, Ana Paula grew up in a context where Afro-Brazilian culture and skin color are a source of pride. Educational reforms aim to address the fact that most Afro-descendant children are not grounded in a background that valorizes blackness.

André, an Orùnmilá member and President of the NGO *Memórias Vivas* [Living Memories] articulates how one-dimensional, static curricular representations frame conceptions of who Afro-descendants were and naturalize black's subalternized positions in society. But he also reveals another element, as he stated,

Today in schools we see teachers say that Blacks were slaves, that Blacks were beaten and punished, that Blacks worked in the sugarcane fields. This is what we see. [The content] is very limited, you know? If they could, they would

remove it [from the books]. They would even forget that the “Other” was enslaved. This is what they do to our kids in the schools.

The suggestion that educators would erase even these limited representations of Blacks alludes to the perceived unimportance of presenting a complex history. This reflects the naturalization of the subordinate place given to black history and the black experience in Brazil’s social formation while masking a violent racial past that contradicts national narratives of racial harmony. School materials are the target of reform because they minimally address the colonial legacy and its influence on the development of racial inequalities.

Silvany, advisor to the education secretariat on racial and ethnic issues and member of Orùnmilá, described the process of curricular material selection for the new school year. She said,

The [municipal education] secretariat and the public education system in all of Brazil is now beginning to discuss the selection of textbooks for 2008, including in the priority areas for [Afro-descendants], which are Portuguese [and] history. And, we feel that there is no concern by those making selections, which are the teachers, in questioning stereotypes [nor] to contemplate the necessity of a positive image and history of blacks. I don’t think it is because they don’t want to. It’s more because in general they don’t see it as relevant.

Silvany’s remarks suggest that the lack of perception of the necessity of addressing racial representations in school materials reflects an inability to critically engage taken for granted representations of history and peoples’ places in society. The irrelevance of selecting textbooks with positive representations of Blacks and their history conforms to a geography of blackness that obscures the significance of “race.” Moreover, the privileging of dominant narratives of national history reflect how coloniality shapes which representations and histories are included and which are excluded.

Everyday racism and the denigrating representations of Afro-Brazilians have the power to make Afro-descendants see and experience themselves as “Other” by subjecting them to knowledge “not only as a manner of imposed will and domination, [but] by the power of inner compulsion and subjective con-formation to the norm” (Hall 1990: 225-6). Self-rejection and negative self esteem result from socialized preferences for the esteemed aesthetic, cultural, and civilizational values in society (e.g. whiteness, European history, European colonizers contributions to the nation). Silvany, sums up the situation,

A system of education like the Brazilian one, all based in the culture of Europe, a history that only credits heroes of European origin, that only addresses the science produced by Europe, is a history, a culture, a science that discriminates. So for our students, [as] they grow up in school, the idea of European superiority and African inferiority is reinforced.

The education system socializes black and white children in ways that materialize the coloniality because they reproduce historical hierarchies of peoples that reinforce a racial commonsense and notions of civilizational “progress.” The structure of knowledge and its transmission bolsters everyday racism, affecting black children’s self esteem and white children’s sense of superiority and perceptions of Afro-Brazilians.<sup>49</sup> Afro-Brazilian history and culture are not valued as productive of knowledge viable insights into modes of organizing contemporary society. This legitimates a historical narrative that delimits (and even rules out) the role and place of particular actors, histories, and knowledges.

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<sup>49</sup> Material effects are explicitly visible in Afro-Brazilian dropout rates and low self-esteem. They are also visible in how the value given to particular forms of culture, knowledge, and history inculcates denigration of certain groups and appreciation and valuing the contributions of others. Orùnmilá’s project seeks to address the inclusion/valuing of Afro-Brazilian knowledge while also creating a welcoming school space that shares in the diverse history of all Brazilians.

*Afro-Brazilian Culture and Knowledge and Epistemological Diversity*

Just as whitening and the ideology of racial democracy shaped meanings of race and blackness, an epistemological perspective strongly informed by Eurocentric and capitalist notions of knowledge, progress, and value has structured the curricular exclusion of Afro-Brazilian forms of knowledge and learning. This process broadly involved,

the conversion of the knowledges of colonized peoples and the diversity of their cultures and cosmologies to expressions of irrationality, of superstition, or, at best, to practical and local forms of knowledge whose relevance was [a] dependent on their subordination to modern science, perceived as the sole source of true knowledge, or to religious conversion or acculturation; [b] the subordination of their customs to the law of the modern state and of their practices to the capitalist economy; and [c] the reduction of the variety of their forms of social organization to the state/civil society dichotomy (Santos, Nunes, and Meneses 2007: xxxiii).

Knowledges and practices that did not produce wealth, status, or monetary value within paradigms of accumulation (e.g. colonial, and later, market capitalism) or that did not reflect the “rational” or “scientific” requirements of development were devalued. In this process, Afro-descendants were relegated to subordinate positions within narratives of modernity, progress, and development. The school curriculum and pedagogy in Brazil reflects this racial exclusion, as forms of learning and knowledge originating in black cultures and communities remain absent from the educational experience of young Brazilians.

To address these exclusions, scholars of education argue for a serious effort to incorporate and engage the epistemologies and ways of learning that are African and Afro-Brazilian in origin (c.f. Botelho 2006; Machado 2003). This includes oral and embodied knowledge shared through dance, song, the plastic arts, percussion, and other forms that stimulate learning through the various senses and help students

understand how different cultures produce and share knowledge in different ways. An Afro-Brazilian epistemology would encompass these values and worldviews stemming from African and Afro-Brazilian culture while also incorporating knowledge about society acquired through the subaltern experience of being black and Brazilian. This combination underlies a perspective based in *an-other thinking*, or a critical, alternative way of understanding history and constructing collectivity that challenges hegemonic values and conceptions of society and development (Mignolo 2000; Walsh and León 2006).

Mobilizing *an-other thought* seeks not only to tell the histories that dominant discourses have silenced, but to also “think otherwise, to move toward ‘an other logic’—in sum, to change the terms, not just the content, of the conversation” (Mignolo 2000: 69-70). These new terms involve the substantive inclusion and consideration of “other logics” or “other thought” for their liberatory potential and critique of coloniality—the institutions, practices, values, and norms that reproduce inequality and exploitation. The Orùnmilá Center mobilizes *ancestralidade* in this way to contest the racial inequality produced through capitalist development’s hierarchical valuing of certain ways of being and knowing over others. As outlined in the previous chapter, through *ancestralidade*, they build a pedagogy based on *an-other logic* that encompasses an epistemological perspective informed by Afro-Brazilian cosmovisions and the subaltern lived experience of racial subjection. In this light, Orùnmilá’s work aims to challenge inclusion into the given system on terms defined through power (i.e. “equal opportunity,” socioeconomic betterment, *access* to education) by shifting the terms of inclusion through a substantive re-valuing of forms of knowledge and collectivity based on non-Eurocentric and non-developmental epistemologies and experiences of power. The goal is to insert these forms into the curriculum and classroom space.

A critical recognition of epistemological diversity (values, practices, and ways of seeing the world) and the collective possibilities they generate moves towards a substantive multicultural transformation of the Brazilian school curriculum. Rather than a fetishized difference, cosmetic inclusion, or the symbolic valuing of diversity in and of itself, this critical multiculturalism aims for a “cosmopolitan ecology of knowledges” that sets up “dialogues and alliances between diverse forms of knowledge, cultures, and cosmologies in response to different forms of oppression that enact the coloniality of knowledge and power” (Santos, Nunes, and Meneses 2007: xiv). The goal is to give students access to the diverse forms of knowledge and learning present in Brazilian society and to revalue them as ways of understanding the world and organizing community. Institutional reforms along these lines would better reflect the social and cultural reality of Brazil, educating black and white students to value and learn through difference.

### **Multiculturalism and the Neoliberal Cultural Project**

Broader political, cultural, and economic changes shape educational institutions and influence possibilities for reform. At present, multiculturalism is a contested concept that can exhibit both a continuity or break with the exclusions of liberal democracy, depending on how multiculturalism is interpreted. The expansion of neoliberal capitalism and development appear to erode cultural differences by subsuming increasing portions of the globe under a mode of market citizenship with consumption as the defining factor or future goal (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000; Coronil 2000). This has, at the same time, opened up possibilities for the assertion and construction of development alternatives. Increasingly, Afro-descendant and



Indigenous peoples have asserted “difference”—cultural, epistemological, historical—as a means to establish autonomy and/or control over the terms of their own social, cultural, and economic development (cf. Escobar 2008; Santos, Nunes, and Meneses 2007; Saldaña-Portillo 2003, chapter 6).

While these struggles often challenge the bases and tenets of ‘development’s’ racial, ethnic, and epistemological exclusion, they occur within contexts where state and private institutions aim to simultaneously address claims from historically oppressed populations *while* maintaining economic competitiveness, stability, and growth. Thus, claims for truly substantive recognition and material redistribution compete with governmental and private sector discourses of inclusion. The latter characterize diversity as a resource or factor to be acknowledged in today’s globalizing economy. These discourses also define questions of inclusion as giving more peoples and groups access to the benefits of capitalist development. Diversity is not treated as an element to reshape societal relations and understandings of economy and collectivity. Instead, recognition of diversity and “difference” aims to mediate social conflict and insure stability for accumulation.

The increasing recognition of group rights and use of multicultural discourses by the state incites Afro-descendant and Indigenous communities to do the work of subject-formation. As their cultures and communities are reconstituted within multicultural citizenship regimes, they are shaped in the image of the state and sheered of their radical excesses (Hale 2002: 496; See also Hale 2005; Melamed 2006; Park and Richards 2007; Postero 2006: and Speed and Sierra 2005). At the same time, new forms of state social management regulate objects and practices deemed “cultural” (Yúdice 2003) in ways that re-articulate categories of rule, past forms of control, and racial/ethnic inequalities. Elites and policy-makers become “reluctant arbiters” of a carefully delimited set of cultural rights, as they find that particular multicultural

inclusion policies “not only pose little challenge to the forward march of the neoliberal project but also induce the bearers of these rights to join in the march” (Hale 2005: 13).

Struggles over the terms of inclusion and development also implicate questions of national identity. In particular, apolitical multiculturalisms value and affirm respect for “difference” as long as it does not diverge from a defined mosaic within dominant constructions of national identity and development. Politicizing historical difference in Brazil would expose the coercive relations behind an imagined racial harmony and deconstruct commonsense notions about race relations. As analyzed in chapter one, this generates alarm calls of “threats” to social stability and accusations that anti-racist groups have crossed the line with their demands. National projects clearly articulate the limits of what is and is not acceptable, and thus continue to circumscribe the meaning and form of Afro-descendant and indigenous cultural expression and claims for rights.

These instances of struggle illustrate how multiculturalism, or *pluriculturalismo* as it is called in Brazil, and its vague keywords of equal opportunity and inclusion mold “difference” into a flexible category of rule that conforms to the contemporary demands of neoliberal capitalist development (Hale 2002). This leaves the underlying structure of inequality—racial, ethnic, gender, and class—unchanged. While claims for group rights (cultural or otherwise) often achieve socio-economic betterment and in some cases, more political power, their impact in transforming dominant values permeating societal institutions and thought is mixed. Consequently, within this context, movements deploying cultural politics must be alert to the nature and consequence of their mobilization, lest they be contributing further to their own self-management and incorporation into such subject-formation.

*Federal Law 10,639, Afro-Brazilians, and Education Reform*

Afro-Brazilian mobilization, recent government responsiveness, and the broader regional Latin American shift towards recognizing cultural rights have propelled various changes in the sphere of education. Former president Fernando Henrique Cardoso's administration (1995-2003) was the first to contemplate affirmative action and multicultural state policy, putting these issues on the table as possibilities for addressing racial inequality (Htun 2004). President Luiz Ignácio da Silva (Lula) followed his predecessor by going one step further, creating a federal secretariat working on racial and ethnic inequality in March 2003 called the *Secretaria Especial de Políticas de Promoção da Igualdade Racial* (SEPPIR) [Special Secretariat of Policy and Promotion of Racial Equality]. SEPPIR's mandate involves generating, analyzing, and monitoring policies related to Afro-descendants, Indigenous peoples, and other minorities. Prior to creating SEPPIR, Lula signed a federal law, Law 10,639/2003, making obligatory the teaching of African and Afro-Brazilian history and culture in schools. The text of the law states:

Article 26-A. In public and private primary education institutions, the teaching of Afro-Brazilian History and Culture becomes compulsory.

§ 1<sup>st</sup>. The content referred to in this article will include the study of the history of Africa and the Africans, the struggle of blacks in Brazil, Brazilian black culture and the participation/effect of blacks on the formation of national society, redeeming the contribution of black peoples in the social, economic, and political spheres pertinent to Brazilian History.

§ 2<sup>nd</sup>. The content referring to Afro-Brazilian History and Culture will be administered in the ambit of the whole school curriculum, especially in the areas of Art Education and of Brazilian History and Literature.

Article. 79-B. The school calendar will include the 20<sup>th</sup> of

November as the ‘National Day of Black Consciousness.’<sup>50</sup>

Currently, the Ministry of Education (MEC), together with SEPPPIR, produces educational materials and studies examining the nature of Afro-descendant exclusion in the curriculum and classroom. Efforts in the educational sphere involve changing the treatment of Afro-descendants in the school or classroom space (e.g. unequal treatment and access, prejudice, negative portrayals in textbooks) and including a more thorough and balanced representation Afro-descendant contributions to the nation (e.g. reconsidering and re-valuing social, economic, and cultural contributions).

The passing of Law 10,639/2003 has not guaranteed that municipal school systems insert this thematic into the curriculum or prepare their faculty to deal with it through qualification courses and new educational materials.<sup>51</sup> Nor has it meant that municipal governments, education secretariats, or school administrators and teachers have been open or willing to spend the time and money to implement the policy. Many teachers, public officials, and other citizens were often unaware that such a law even existed<sup>52</sup> or that SEPPPIR had been created. The federal government, while promulgating the law and providing detailed guidelines based on a March 2004 directive,<sup>53</sup> placed the responsibility of implementation in the hands of local school systems. To attend to the 2004 Directive’s recommendations, municipal school systems would be responsible for the following:

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<sup>50</sup> <http://www010.dataprev.gov.br/sislex/paginas/42/2003/10639.htm> (accessed July 16, 2007).

<sup>51</sup> Materials were one of the main targets by the black movement, as portrayals of blacks were often negative and stereotyped. Qualification courses are deemed necessary to prepare teachers to teach African and Afro-Brazilian history and deal with prejudice, racism, and discrimination in the classroom.

<sup>52</sup> In my year of fieldwork I met many people both inside and outside the educational sphere who were unaware that this law existed.

<sup>53</sup> *Diretrizes Curriculares Nacionais para a Educação das Relações Étnico-Raciais e para o Ensino de História e Cultural Afro-Brasileira e Africana* [National Curriculum Directive for Education of Ethno-Racial Relations for the Teaching of African and Afro-Brazilian History and Culture], CNE/CP 3/2004. Full text is available online from the Ministry of Education at: [http://www.publicacoes.inep.gov.br/arquivos/%7B2A0A514E-6C2A-4657-862F-CD4840586714%7D\\_AFRO-BRASILEIRA.pdf](http://www.publicacoes.inep.gov.br/arquivos/%7B2A0A514E-6C2A-4657-862F-CD4840586714%7D_AFRO-BRASILEIRA.pdf) (accessed on May 7, 2009).

- create material and financial conditions to implement the law;
- provide the schools, teachers, and students with bibliographic and other educational materials necessary;
- promote, through pedagogical coordinators, the study and development of projects related to the subject matter;
- create incentive for research about educational processes oriented by Afro-Brazilian values, worldviews, and knowledge;
- establish channels of communication with the black movement, cultural groups, and research centers to exchange ideas, pedagogical plans, and educational projects;
- guarantee the rights of Afro-descendants that frequent their schools by ensuring that teachers are competent in their knowledge of the content necessary to correct postures, attitudes, and words that involve disrespect and discrimination;
- create educational situations to deal with acts of discrimination in order to promote the recognition, valorization, and respect for diversity.<sup>54</sup>

These thorough directives orient schools towards meeting demands of implementing Law 10,639/2003, including addressing curriculum issues and sensitizing educators to issues of prejudice and discrimination in the classroom. The minimal engagement with the racial thematic in university programs offering degrees in education necessitates that 10,639 prepare primary and secondary teachers to address the racial theme in various subjects taught.

### **Shaping Affirmative Education Policy: *Ancestralidade*, Knowledge, and Pedagogy**

The discussion and implementation of Law 10,639 has primarily depended on

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<sup>54</sup> These are taken from Article 3 of the *Conselho Nacional de Educação/Conelho Pleno/DF*, or National Education Council/Plenary Council/Federal District, Resolution N° 1 of the 17 June, 2004. (CNE/CP Resolution 1/2004. Official Daily Record of the Union, Brasilia, 22 of June, 2004, Section 1, p. 11).

the advocacy and initiative of NGOs, scholars, and activists. In Ribeirão Preto, the Orùnmilá Cultural Center's advocacy prompted the mayor to sign a decree in November 2005 for a set of policies addressing racial inequality, including the creation of an advisor in the education secretariat to coordinate and implement 10,639. This advisor would orchestrate teacher and administrator training, school curriculum changes, and dealing with racism and discrimination in the municipal school system.<sup>55</sup> As noted in the introductory chapter, Welson Gasparini was the only candidate during the mayoral campaign to commit to dialogue with the black movement and the implementation of policies to address racial inequality and unequal representation in Ribeirão.

To move towards the task of implementing 10,639 in the municipality, Silvany and the Orùnmilá Center designed the *Baobá Project*. This 120-hour teacher training project incorporates lectures and assignments aimed at preparing teachers to understand how race and racism work historically and how this shapes the schooling experience. The course also covers historical themes like colonialism and slavery in detail and with a critical lens. The project also engages Afro-Brazilian cultural production and forms of embodied knowledge like music, dance, drum making, percussion, and Capoeira through workshops and activities that incorporate the history, philosophy, and meaning behind these practices. The *Projeto Baobá* aims to prepare teachers and schools to educate students about African and Afro-Brazilian history and culture by integrating formal educational practices, such as readings and lectures, with embodied/physical practice and lived experience.

The *Projeto Baobá* targets curriculum content to address the absence of Afro-Brazilian history and culture and the denigration of blackness prevalent in portrayals

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<sup>55</sup> The decree also created an advisory position to the mayor and the Commission for the Coordination and Accompaniment of Affirmative Action Policies for Afro-descendants, where representatives from civil society and from various municipal secretariats and local universities discuss the creation and implementation of initiatives.

of national history. As Daniele from Orùnmilá explains, the issue of representation is directly linked to the question of self esteem and empowerment,

This law [10,639] is good because kids, for kids self-esteem. Because she is there in school and no one explains to her why her hair is kinky, her nose wide, and her skin dark. [Other students] create humor out of her difference. So for her it is good, her self-esteem. Because her parents didn't have that, they don't know how to explain it. So this child will pass it to her parents, as well as her own children, who will, from the moment [these themes] are transmitted/learned in school, will also have access to this. So [10,639] is very important.

Danile speculates on the possible repercussions for black (and white) children and their families of law 10,639. For her, it would address representations and curriculum content, and thus the reproduction of circumscribed notions of what being black means for Brazilian history and society, which reinforces the desire to 'whiten' oneself socially and culturally as well as avoid openly contesting racism and discrimination because of a broader ignorance of the issue.

Another element Orùnmilá stresses as a goal of projects implementing 10,639 is the inclusion of practitioners of Afro-Brazilian cultural forms as instructors in the school space. Capoeira masters, elder samba school directors, musicians, and other "experts" are often excluded as teachers due to formal education requirements. This effort seeks to simultaneously legitimize cultural practices and recognize the practitioners with experience, ability, and respect as holders [*detentores*] as teachers of such knowledge/wisdom. Despite being versed in cultural practices through years of experience, training, and a system of rules, such skills are illegible to municipal school systems focused requiring "formal" credentials.<sup>56</sup> In this way, the Baobá Projects

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<sup>56</sup> Over the past five to ten years, Capoeira instructors/practioners have sought formal credentials through degrees in physical education and have become included as teachers in municipal schools in many cities. Yet, on several occasions, *Capoeiristas* and other black activists emphasized the limited

structure comes directly out of the philosophies and practices underlying Orùnmilá's anti-racist cultural work.

As discussed in previous chapters, Cultural Center activities integrate oral and written knowledge with lived experience and physical practice, or embodied knowledge, stressing the different ways these forms constitute learning. Storytelling, song, and dance constitute sonic, oral, and embodied knowledge, elements neglected, or seen as add-ons, in mainstream education. The cultural forms and philosophies they emphasize cultivate and share *ancestralidade*—ancestral wisdom/knowledge and lived experience—as a particular engagement with the past and present and form of learning history. Through value placed on the oral and bodily as sites of learning as well as knowledge production, these activities construct knowledge as involving mind, body, spirit, and shared experience within collectivity.

Practices like Candomblé, Capoeira, samba, and hip-hop are mobilized as critical, alternative orientations to knowledge, community, and identity and a means to challenge coloniality and the devaluation of blackness and Afro-Brazilian culture. As discussed in chapter two, these practices can engender *an-other perspective* about history through the cultivation of Afro-Brazilian epistemologies and the construction of oppositional personal and collective selves. As Paulo and Silas write in *Soró Dùdù* the worldview, philosophies, and practices stemming from Afro-Brazilian communities differ “from the conception developed in the West since Aristotle,” and thus “permit the development of a sharp, clear critique of the limitations and wounds [*mazelas*] of Western culture” (“As Dimensões Inseparáveis de Política e Cultura e a Luta do C. C. Orùnmilá.” 2004: 2). In other words, lack of equal citizenship, the

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nature in which Capoeira is taught in these programs as well as the fact that some people who major in physical education with few, if any, years lived experience in Capoeira often gain positions as municipal teachers. Many are wary of the placement of Capoeira in the delimited category/field of ‘physical education’ because it encompasses much more than physical exercise.



denigration of blackness, and the obstruction of possibilities for Afro-Brazilian (and other) knowledge and culture *are* the limitations of Occidental culture to which Blacks have been subjected. Paulo and Silas' statement also hints at the larger issue, what the assertion of Occidental culture (and capitalism) as universal, as progress, as development, and as civilization has wrought for a majority of the planet: colonialism, socio-economic inequality, poverty, racism, sexism, etc..

Paulo and Silas suggest that drawing on cosmovisions based in *an other thinking* opens a possibility for social transformation that transcends some of the failures of the current dominant form of development and social relations. Orùnmilá's work in the sphere of education reflects *ancestralidade* as an *Afro-diasporic political practice* aimed at inserting alternative forms of learning and collectivity in the educational sphere, a site where silenced histories and denigrating representations have historically bolstered racialized projects of rule that shape the place of Afro-Brazilians, and their culture and knowledge, in national and transnational formations.

Acknowledging 10,639's potential for decolonization through *an-other thinking*, Orùnmilá members write:

Valorizing all the senses by using your whole body, movement, music, dance, experience, [physical] contact, by identifying a leaf or building a drum, valorizing memory and not just writing, valorizing nature and *ancestralidade*... [can] ... reformulate teaching methodologies that, in most cases, already reveal themselves as limited in reference to complete child development, particularly of black children and adolescents ("Centro Cultural Orùnmilá e a 10,639." 2006: 5).

Building on this sentiment, Silvany highlights what the shift to substantive inclusion for Afro-descendants really means,

In our case, to include means more than guarantee our presence in schools. It means re-structuring education in Brazil based on values that this education always rejected [*negou*], to re-structure pedagogical theories and practices, the didactics of teaching... It is not only guaranteeing that the student has matriculated, that he has a space, and that he remains in school. It's revolutionizing the national education system.

To “revolutionize” education, the implementation of a law like 10,639 must evaluate how to educate and train teachers and administrators in a manner that challenges taken for granted knowledge, culture, and racial hierarchies and values inherent in the formal education system. Such an effort not only contemplates world historical narratives of Eurocentric colonialism and capitalist development, but also undertakes a decolonizing deconstruction of knowledge and discourse produced in Latin American societies (e.g. miscegenation, whitening, modernization, and development). In this way, the process involves challenging the given parameters of possibilities through a critical excavation of history and a serious engagement with other ways of constructing community.

### **Contested Histories, Contested Inclusions**

Struggles over the nature and content of teacher training required by Law 10,639, coupled with the discourses of inclusion deployed by public officials, demonstrate current subtle yet profound limitations on substantive, critical multicultural inclusion. Over the past few years a variety of projects have arisen and asserted themselves as teacher training programs for Law 10,639. Orùnmilá members have criticized certain projects for their poor design of instructional materials and the

very limited length of workshops and training sessions, both of which pose challenges to fully preparing educators to properly deal with the subject matter. I attended a meeting of the State Council for the Development and Participation of the Black Community with Paulo, where we were told that versions of the program *Educando pela Diferença para a Igualdade* [Educating for Equality through Difference] had already qualified over fifteen thousand teachers in the state of São Paulo. At this meeting, they presented a video used in the process of qualifying teachers that discussed issues of “difference” and exclusion as experienced by a man in a wheelchair, a Japanese catholic priest, a young gay teenager, and several black men and women.

After we left the meeting, Paulo wondered aloud to me about what a Japanese priest has to do with the question of African and Afro-Brazilian history. While acknowledging that understanding and engaging various forms of prejudice and discrimination is important, Paulo was appalled that the State Council would use this video as a key instructional tool in the implementation of a law about African and Afro-Brazilian history and culture. His objection conveyed a feeling that the increasing spotlight on racial inequality was being diluted into general issues of inclusion, exclusion, and prejudice in society. Materials like the film, which become incorporated into training projects based on Law 10,639, reduce the issue of racism and Afro-descendant exclusion to a question of knowing how to *see disadvantage* in society. This fails to reframe disadvantage as a characteristic of those who are ignorant of Brazilian cultural and historical diversity, which includes Afro-descendants’ experiences with colonialism and racism. Disadvantage continues to signify those individuals that need to be “included” without questioning how they are being included, what they are being included into, or causing introspection among those who devising the including.

The lack of standards regarding materials or pedagogical approaches in teacher training programs makes difficult evaluating results and ensuring continuity. Public officials can appeal to Afro-descendants by saying that groups are implementing programs without monitoring their nature or results. At the same time, programs that pronounce the ability to train large numbers of teachers may solidify their program over others, as they seem more efficient the more teachers they train and conform to political pressure to show results, however compromised. Silvany highlights the flaws in how the process is unfolding, especially regarding the economic incentives involved,

We have a lot of problems [implementing Law 10,639]. The opportunists, right? This law [is causing] an upsurge of specialists in history and black culture that didn't exist when the law didn't exist because it didn't bring a profit. We used to give presentations for free, we traveled with money from our own pockets, and we reproduced materials from our own pockets. Nobody wanted [to do this]. Now there is a wave of people. I think that a national observatory [scrutinizing implementation] could ... control this. Who is qualifying [teachers]? In what way? With what content and what materials?

This statement highlights several pitfalls to the nature of civil society – government interactions in the realm of implementation. First, the rush to create implementation projects so as to capitalize on government attention to the issue may have detrimental effects on outcomes as well as addressing pitfalls in the future. As teachers become “capacitated” [*capacitados*] by these programs, they obtain their certification and may not need to attend future, more in-depth programs. By passing this law directed at assuring a multicultural curriculum that includes diversity and difference, the federal government creates a market for the development of projects by individuals, NGOs, and university research programs. Much in the character of the neoliberal state, the government “farms out” the creation of projects to groups in civil society who must

submit proposals and requests for funding. Through the evaluation of proposals, state agencies continue to determine the content of these projects, as organizations tailor their proposals to appeal to particular models of inclusion. Questions of standard criteria and the evaluation of implementation persist.

A second aspect of recent implementation involves the demand for instructors, many of whom begin to specialize and present themselves as capable to implement qualification programs. Combined with a market for the development of projects, you now have a labor supply defining (and sometimes training) itself to implement multicultural education programs that obtain government funding. In a system set up to legitimize those with teaching degrees and training course qualification, as Orùnmilá members have noted, many individuals with knowledge relevant to implementing Law 10,639—Capoeira masters, elder samba school directors, percussionists, musicians, and cultural workers—may remain excluded from involvement. As a result, programs to implement Law 10,639, especially those aiming for substantive changes in pedagogical approaches, need to consider alternatives to strict educational requirements for primary and secondary teaching and teaching in municipal schools through involvement in projects.

An article in *Soró Dúdú*, echoes these concerns. In an answer to the questions raised in the article, “Who will teach black culture [*cultura negra*]? What will be the pedagogical method adapted? Who is qualified to transmit black culture?” The authors respond, “The answers to these questions are already signaled. There is no guarantee whatsoever that the transmission of black knowledge and culture will remain a task of the Black Community. This is a maintenance of exclusion” (“Centro Cultural Orùnmilá e a 10,639.” 2005: 5). The article continues,

The substance of black culture isn’t learned in books or in the academy. If [its transmission] does not remain the duty of the black community, the eminent

risk is a repetition of a white/occidental logic talking about a culture that is beyond its expertise. This is the maintenance of black culture as stereotype, as ‘folklore’, as something bizarre, as ‘non-culture’. The real holders and carriers of black culture will be ‘kept out’, remaining as the ‘object’ of study of white, Occidental science, they will not be protagonists of a process that involves nothing less than their soul, their history, their culture.

This sharp critique argues that the inclusion of culture is much deeper than what educational materials can offer, demanding that state and educational institutions take seriously this knowledge and practice. The words highlight cultural learning as an ongoing, long-term process where lived experience and practice play a fundamental role. This concern on the part of Orùnmilá members is less a struggle over “authenticity” and more one that reveals a context of ongoing black inequality in negotiating the terms of inclusion. Fear of cooptation and folklorization, when considered within Brazil’s historical treatment of race, culture, and blackness, and thought of in relation to the uses of culture for development, become very legitimate concerns.

The above concerns also reflect how forms of “inclusion” can reinforce racialized rule, as “inclusion” becomes devalued or reduced to a technical, or market, quality that undercuts the very reason for creating and implementing Law 10,639/2003. While “exclusion” describes what happens to cultural practitioners and workers, delimited inclusion highlights the continuity of such projects with past forms of Afro-descendant participation in educational and political institutions. Orùnmilá’s critique anticipates the ways dominant educational values and multicultural policies of inclusion may re-articulate difference and diversity through the coloniality of power—history as well as market forces—in ways that shape how Afro-Brazilian epistemologies and cultural and pedagogical forms become inserted into the formal education system.

Administrators and public officials also participate in this process in ways that generalize “exclusion” and obscure the relations shaping Afro-descendant inequality. While open to multicultural policies, officials often engage in a universal discourse of equal opportunity and diversity, reflecting an ahistorical and apolitical engagement with the issue of inclusion. While several public officials were responsive to black movement demands, incessant advocacy was often needed to make the discussion public and to push policy through. Moreover, it was rare in Ribeirão Preto that any public official discussed Afro-descendant issues explicitly, even when inaugurating projects specific to that population. This is a consequence of both the historical tendency to avoid the public discussion of racial inequality and the lack of desire among some of seriously addressing the issue.

At the *Baobá* project inauguration in March 2007,<sup>57</sup> Paulo and Silvany spoke alongside an official invited from the federal Ministry of Education (MEC), the mayor, and the education secretary. After Paulo and Silvany highlighted the importance and specific nature of the project as a victory for Afro-descendants, both the mayor and the secretary of education reverted to generalized discourses of inclusion. The mayor stated,

I think [the issue of inclusion] is extremely important. In my opinion, these victories [like the Baobá project] will only occur when those that govern implement free education and universal healthcare for *all classes*, for *all categories*... We have to give equal opportunity to all people and may *the best* and *most dedicated* be successful, be they white, black, sons and daughters of immigrants, or anyone else.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> While the inauguration was held with some pomp— a lecture by a Federal Ministry of Education representative and the presence of the mayor and various other important public officials and media—at the time, details about project implementation and teaching staff were still under development.

<sup>58</sup> It is important to note here the importance of the image of the ‘immigrant’, especially Italian, in this region of São Paulo. Italian immigrant history is often portrayed as one of arrival from Europe with nothing and the achievement of success through hard work. This narrative masks the unequal conditions through which blacks and whites (especially European immigrants) competed post-abolition as well as the diversity of factors (racism and job discrimination, the desire to escape lingering paternalistic

The mayor's statement demonstrates a notion of inclusion without dialogue, without attention to histories of power involving the hierarchical valuing of certain knowledges and cultures.<sup>59</sup> Claiming the goal of universal education and health care *for all* invokes lofty liberal ideals that conceal the piecemeal, compromising nature of politics and the (re)construction of societal relations. Furthermore, notions of equal opportunity and success re-inscribe ideals of individualism and meritocracy into the substance of societal relations, e.g. we will provide benefits as long as it bolsters individual competitiveness. Such declarations mask the very racial and cultural inequalities that historically shape how factors besides being "the best" affect opportunities and possibilities. After presenting this limited view of inclusion, the mayor reasserts a vision of success based on individual aspirations and achievement, leaving the market paradigm's distribution of cultural value and economic resources unaffected. Such statements to an audience of Afro-Brazilians who have worked hard for the implementation of 10,639 ignore a claim to history and thus undermine their struggle.

Addressing the same audience, the recently appointed education secretary<sup>60</sup> also spoke of inclusion: "...I am a defender of inclusion in its most diverse manifested forms, whether it is inclusion of handicapped individuals, or the inclusion of the excluded for whatever social reason, I am a fighter for the cause of education". Like the mayor, the secretary elides the connection between biography and history,

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plantation relations reminiscent of slavery) that affected blacks' choices and possibilities in terms of participation in the labor market. This narrative of the successful immigrant as a model of hard work also masks the diversity of conditions in which immigrants themselves arrived in the region, including differences in wealth.

<sup>59</sup> The point here is not to neglect how the mayor was responsive to Afro-Brazilian demands, implementing various initiatives. Rather, it is to highlight how generalized discourses of inclusion exist and avoid addressing certain issues explicitly *despite* the fact that they engage with Afro-Brazilian demands.

<sup>60</sup> The secretary took office in January 2007.



obscuring the political and historical significance of implementation and content of the *Baobá* project for Afro-descendants.<sup>61</sup> Instead, the secretary prefers to claim his credentials as a champion of broad, abstract inclusion. The avoidances of “race” betrays a lack of vision of why or how Blacks must be included. Rather, officials see Blacks as simply one more element to be added into the mix. By not engaging with 10,639’s transformative potential, they express a limited vision of such policies as a step towards bringing *more* people into the already established educational system.

The amount of official attention given to racial inequality in Ribeirão Preto, as well as the amount of resources dedicated to the issue also diminishes the significance of Afro-descendant claims. Demonstrating an honest interest in dealing with questions of racial inequality, the new education secretary started his term by giving Silvany an office space at the Education secretariat.<sup>62</sup> Yet, while he gave her a dedicated space, Silvany was expected to work on the range of issues the secretariat deals with. The education secretary pointed this out at the *Baobá* inaugural event stating,

Silvany works at the Secretariat on a project that has the characteristic of inclusion. Yes! To diffuse and triumph over the barriers [in terms of] black culture, *but* she also participates on the whole body of educational projects. She is not a *marginalized* person, [like] ‘she can only do one thing.’ No! She works on all projects that represent inclusion, that represent actions of the secretariat *for all*. So, Silvany, I hope that you don’t feel... *excluded at the Secretariat*.

While Silvany’s participation in general inclusion projects and policies

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<sup>61</sup> Just as the mayor, the secretary was responsive and helpful in implementing Afro-Brazilian demands. Nonetheless, he also expressed a discourse of inclusion that avoided “race” and the specific history and difficulties of Afro-descendants.

<sup>62</sup> The prior secretary had ordered her to work at a municipal school far from the center of town, with minimal infrastructure and resources. As she told me at the time, “they decided to stick me here without any explanation. We discussed [the issue]...but they didn’t accept [me at the secretariat].” Bringing her to the secretariat was an important moment for Silvany, Orùnmilá, and the Black movement in Ribeirão Preto, improving her ability to carry out education projects.

represents an interest in her input for diverse initiatives in the secretariat, her hiring was based on black movement demands that her priorities sit with implementing Law 10,639. This latter is already a tall order, considering the amount of work it would take to train four to five thousand municipal teachers, order educational materials, examine school curricula, and address racism and racist incidents in municipal schools. The idea that she would be marginalized by only working on Afro-descendant issues illustrates the underlying marginal status of such work and the fact that her position exposes the very need for (at least) one fulltime employee working on such issues. His suggestion that she spread her time devalues her focused tasks, while his (and others') use of the term 'inclusion' render it so banal that it loses its connection to historically produced social relations. Historical guilt is publicly dulled and the hard work of constructing equality diminished through his speech.<sup>63</sup> Making the issue of inclusion a banal or marginal one both reduces the historical role of power in shaping opportunities and possibilities for Afro-Brazilians and their cultures and dampens the impact a critical, substantive multiculturalism may have for transforming prevailing structures of power and knowledge.

Now, although she has been "included" in the secretariat the question of proper implementation still arises. Silvany explained how she attempts to forward materials to various schools to no avail:

I always send materials to schools. They've *already complained* that I send too much stuff [she laughs]. Now, the other day I sent a book... [and I asked]... 'Please share this text with Capoeira instructors, Portuguese teachers, history teachers.' Then, a Capoeira instructor comes here [to the education secretariat]

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<sup>63</sup> Silvany explained to me that used this demand to insert the racial theme into various other spaces in the secretariat, i.e. general pedagogical meetings and committee discussions. As Park and Richards (2007) show with Mapuche state employees in Chile, state workers actively subvert internal constraints placed on them by neoliberal models of governance and multicultural policy through everyday practice as in Silvany's case.

and says, ‘Umm, no, they didn’t say anything to me about the text you sent. I didn’t know.’

This example illustrates how school administrators are not participating in spreading information to their faculty sent to include African and Afro-Brazilian history and culture. Those advocating for inclusion of the subject matter see this as an outright manifestation of racism,

Paulo commented yesterday, ‘what pushes a teacher or a school director to think that they shouldn’t teach the history and culture of a people that is half of the population?’ What moves them to think that a text I send discussing the 13<sup>th</sup> of May [Abolition of Slavery] can go into a drawer instead of into the hands of a history teacher? Racism, right?

Racism here encompasses how coloniality shapes not only the process of exclusion of the history, culture, and knowledge of Afro-descendants, but also the continual ignoring or avoidance of dealing with this absence as though it is of no importance to the broader construction of a more equal society.

## **Conclusion**

While the experience and outcome of implementation has yet to be evaluated, the *Baobá Project* represents a nascent effort to establish one particular theoretical and practical framework for organizations and municipal governments seeking to develop programs to implement Federal Law 10,639 in a substantive way. The process of addressing racial inequality in Brazil is contentious, reflected by how initial efforts to

discuss the project and prepare the municipal school system for its implementation led to defensive denials of racism in education (curriculum and classroom) by many educators. Many appeared fearful of taking responsibility for the reproduction of discrimination in the school environment (Euclênio 2008). However, as Silvany notes, “less than one year later, we have difficulty in attending all the people interested in participating in the proposed activities, [as they are] seduced by facts, histories and values hitherto ignored, but that make possible a better understanding of Brazil, Brazilian citizenship, and of oneself” (Euclênio 2008: 268). The growth in enthusiasm for the program is a positive sign, demonstrating that teachers and administrators are interested in learning ways of dealing with the inequalities their students face, diversifying pedagogical approaches, and improving their own knowledge with the goal of enhancing the educational experience. To better understand the concrete changes coming out of the *Projeto Baobá* specifically, and 10,639 projects more broadly, future research will have to examine whether and in what ways programs help modify how administrators, teachers, students, and families engage with issues of race relations, history, and culture inside and outside the classroom.

Understanding the formation and context of implementation of projects like the *Baobá* can help scholars and organizations like Orùnmilá anticipate and respond to both obstacles and opportunities. This includes taking advantage of federal legislative and fiscal frameworks to place pressure on local government for the implementation of projects as well as dealing with the emergent discourses accompanying state shifts towards multicultural policy in neoliberal contexts. In Ribeirão, Orùnmilá’s work encouraged cooperation with the state without sacrificing a critical perspective on multiculturalism’s tendency to promote inclusion into a pre-given system. Through advocacy and project design, Orùnmilá members emphasized the importance of transforming the values, knowledge, or educational goods distributed in school

curricula or the classroom space as a means to address a colonial legacy that affects how all Brazilians understand “race” and history. While Cultural Center members saw the official creation of the *Projeto Baobá* as a victory, the struggle continues in monitoring its implementation, addressing its weaknesses, and ensuring its continuity over time.

At a broader level, the challenge for anti-racist movements involves contesting how, by repeating parochial visions of the past, multicultural policies of inclusion often do not problematize individualized aspirations, and hence may fail to reconstruct knowledge, social relations, and collectivity. Groups struggling for substantive cultural recognition and the redistribution of resources and representation must address how neoliberal multiculturalism molds categories of rule like citizenship, race, and culture without affecting how coloniality structures power and inequality. Orùnmilá’s *Projeto Baobá* aims to challenge how these discourses and programs, when deployed in the sphere of education, recreate restricted citizenship for Afro-descendants in contemporary times. As such, their work shines a path on a vision that decolonizes knowledge and education to build a more egalitarian collective through a critical, substantive multiculturalism.

The institutional changes afforded by education projects are important, but part of challenging racism and representation goes beyond spaces like schools and government secretariats and into the streets during national celebrations. Orùnmilá strives to occupy and transform various spaces through their Afro-diasporic political practice based on *ancestralidade*. As the next chapter demonstrates, Orùnmilá takes embodied knowledge in to the streets through their *afoxé* at carnaval to perform public history outside the classrooms and confront racial discrimination in plain sight of government officials, cultural critics, and the broader Brazilian public.

**CHAPTER 4**  
**ANTI-RACISM IN MOVEMENT: CONTESTING COLONIALITY**  
**THROUGH THE AFRO-BRAZILIAN AFOXÉ**

**Introduction**

The culturalist treatment of Afro-descendants in Brazilian state-formation has taken many forms. Carnaval is one symbol of national identity where dominant national narratives are reaffirmed as well as reshaped and contested. This includes questions of racial identity, the meaning of culture, and the political uses and possibilities of the annual celebration. In Ribeirão, the Orùnmilá has struggled over the terms of carnaval as a site for politics to critique racial inequality, make demands on the municipal government for public action, and link local issues to broader national and transnational political processes. This chapter examines events that unfolded during the 2007 carnaval to demonstrate how Orùnmilá defends culture and carnaval as political processes. In this case, Orùnmilá members asserted the historical difference of the black experience to challenge how local cultural officials sought to limit the politicization of carnaval by reaffirming commonsense notions of miscegenation. I begin by setting the context of a text in the municipal carnaval CD that spurred Orùnmilá members into action.

With the 2007 carnaval in Ribeirão Preto was a week away, preparations for the *Afoxé Omó Orùnmilá* were moving at a brisk pace. As I entered the *Centro Cultural Orùnmilá* I walked towards the work table to assume my position gluing cowrie shells to *afoxé*<sup>64</sup> outfits. Before I could sit down, Paulo, the Center's president,

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<sup>64</sup> An *Afoxé* (pronounced Ah-fo-sheh) is a public manifestation of *Candomblé* religious centers usually involving the song and dance of *Candomblé* worship and the celebration of African heritage and Afro-Brazilian history. *Afoxé* refers both to the form of cultural expression and the group as an entity.

came to me anxiously with a booklet in hand. “Read this and tell me what you think”, he said, awaiting my response. The booklet was the sleeve accompanying the municipal culture secretariat’s official 2007 carnaval CD, which contains recordings of participants’ yearly compositions. I scanned the short paragraphs inside, focusing on the second two which read,

Maintaining strong ties to the tradition, uses, and customs, brought together through national history and cultural process in which the carnaval exists as culture, the annual carnaval celebrations... have sought to break with conservative ties in Ribeirão Preto [by] ... going beyond culture as symbolic object, and adding to cultural action two other contemporary factors that are equally important: culture as a right and the exercise of citizenship, and culture as a job-creating and income-generating economic activity.

Carnaval is culture! Carnaval is, however and still, an instrument of cultural resistance, tourism, entertainment, recreation, leisure, spectacle, means of social and community action and mobilization, element of social inclusion, familial and community integration, [and] unique opportunity for miscegenation [*miscigenação*] in local and national civilizational processes.

As I finished reading, Paulo asked me, “What is wrong with that statement?” Other than the simultaneously expansive and reductive view of culture, I imagined he took issue with the use of the word “opportunity” to describe miscegenation. I also suspected he viewed the coupling of “opportunity for miscegenation” with “civilizational processes” as problematic. I was right. For Pai Paulo and Orùnmilá members, hailing miscegenation as opportunity for participation in national cultural life repeats dominant discourses that obscure how coloniality shaped the unequal nature and often cruel effects of miscegenation’s history in Brazil. By linking mixture to Brazil’s civilizational process, the municipal secretariat’s CD statement reaffirms commonsense conceptions of race and nation and reasserts carnaval as mixture’s symbolic representation. Critical of the uses of this history to depoliticize claims for racial equality, Cultural Center members’ questioned the terms of opportunity offered

by such representations of miscegenation and culture.

For years Orùnmilá members have emphasized cultural activities and the philosophies guiding their work as political action, especially the *afoxé*. The *Afoxé Omò Orùnmilá's* form and content expresses the inseparability of culture from politics, economics, spirituality, and social action. Through it the Center occupies the public space of carnival to contest dominant conceptions that seek to manage, depoliticize, and/or commodify Afro-Brazilian culture, especially as symbolized by the carnival. The *afoxé* represents an annual renewal and declaration of Orùnmilá's resilience amidst ongoing criticism and resistance on the part of municipal officials' and the avoidance of the "race" issue in local cultural and public policy.

The author of the CD statement has been a key organizer of the local carnival for many years and has often contested the *afoxé's* presence in the carnival. He chose his words for the CD to reflect the ongoing tensions between Orùnmilá and local officials. He explicitly broadened the meaning of culture to incorporate politics and social transformation—culture as "a right and exercise of citizenship," "resistance," and "community action and mobilization"—while also hailing culture as "a job-creating and income-generating economic activity," "tourism," and "spectacle." This redefinition feigns a break with the "conservative ties" that construct culture as static tradition because the broader definition of culture (and carnival) given dilutes and circumscribes its political potential within a sea of possible uses. While the statement characterizes the various uses of culture and carnival as forms of social inclusion and integration, his words leave unquestioned definitions of worth, power, and value that shape what kinds of social actions and possibilities count. This move mitigates the meaning of participation and citizenship by neglecting the existence of hierarchy and inequality despite mixture. In the eyes of the official and culture secretariat, carnival constitutes an important contemporary means of national integration where



miscegenation, a unique national characteristic, should be embraced.

The emphasis on mixture as opportunity delegitimizes claims to historical cultural, racial, and material difference and inequality while reclaiming carnival as an ambiguous location for the realization of a Brazilianness based on mixture. Through the statement, officials reassert their power to manage the meanings and uses of culture and carnival in the face of the Orùnmilá's historical politicization of Afro-Brazilian difference and public anti-racist action during the annual celebrations.

Orùnmilá members interpreted the message of the CD statement not only as a simple attack on their cultural work and the *afoxé*, but also as a deeper strike against black anti-racism for deviating from the national narrative of mixture and harmony, especially during a popular, local official event like carnival. In a context where tense debates over racial inequality, affirmative action, and miscegenation were reverberating in the media, Cultural Center members considered the CD statement a profound attempt to undermine their claims that being black and Brazilian has produced an unequal experience of Brazilianness and mixed inclusion. To Orùnmilá members, declarations like the CD statement represent a continuation of Afro-descendant political action and inclusion on someone else's terms and a re-articulation of race within a paradigm emphasizing the consumption and commodification of culture and carnival.

This chapter examines how Orùnmilá's *afoxé* in the city's carnival represents a contemporary form of struggle against the coloniality of power. Through the *afoxé*, Orùnmilá members occupy space and engage in public history to contest modes of black inclusion that obscure histories and shape possibilities for Afro-Brazilian knowledge, culture, and ways of being. I examine the meaning and place of the *afoxé* within Orùnmilá's anti-racist philosophies to analyze how the *afoxé* mobilizes a public claim for social transformation rooted in Afro-Brazilian knowledge and history.

Through *ancestralidade*, *oralidade* (orality), and embodied history, the *afoxé* is a physical and philosophical enunciation that performatively destabilizes taken-for-granted meanings of carnival, national narratives of racial and cultural mixture, and the place of black culture in Brazilian race relations. The *afoxé* is a significant intervention within an arena of contested local politics and a national context where explicit anti-racist discourse and mobilization have historically drawn criticism for the politicization of race, especially when such actions contest the mythical connection between miscegenation and harmonious race relations or insert politics into celebrations like carnival that represent “national culture.”

### **Mobilizing a Response to the Carnival CD**

The release of the CD a week prior to carnival led Orùnmilá leaders to quickly call a meeting to discuss a response. It was proposed that at least two of the banners carried by *afoxé* participants would address the CD statement specifically so as to challenge its assertions. During the parade, one banner displayed the statement, “*The civilizational ‘opportunity’ of miscegenation perpetuates unique racial inequalities.*” This banner queried the notion of opportunity: who gets to define what constitutes opportunity and on what terms it is offered? Carnival officials asserted culture as politics *and* as product to push groups like Orùnmilá to accept that some may want to sell culture and carnival or use them simply as spectacle or recreation. Equating culture as politics and resistance with these other uses dehistoricizes the terrain of power shaping racialized capitalist development by presenting all possibilities as equally accessible “choices” and possibilities rather than ones delimited by political and historical opportunities.

Within a history of the folklorization of Afro-Brazilian and popular culture, the

management and marketing of cultural goods by the state and private sector, and the growing commodification of blackness, official incorporation of cultural resistance as “opportunity” seems like another attempt at cooptation. The second motive behind the banner was to turn the idea of Brazil’s “unique” racial and cultural mixture on its head to question miscegenation as opportunity. By reconnecting miscegenation to its pernicious uses in discussions of the formation and “progress” of Brazilian civilization, the banner challenges the audience to consider racial and cultural mixture’s multiple outcomes: as an ideology *and* lived experience that can both open up possibilities for inclusion and reassert racial hierarchy and subordination.

Historically, Brazilianness has privileged an ideal *mestiço* identity through a “mestiço essentialism” that limits the possibility of valorizing and articulating non-*mestiço* forms of racial identity and subjectivity (Caldwell 2007: 43). The construction of this essentialized *mestiço* identity continually invoke, reconstruct, and present the “original” identities that mixed in Brazil (e.g. the European, Indigenous, and African) to support a narrative of harmonious mixture. But, miscegenation itself is neither inherently liberating nor oppressive. Rather, the question centers around “who deploys ideas and practices of mixture, in what context and to what effect” (Wade 2004: 361).

In response to carnival officials’ ahistorical, commonsense, and laudatory invocation of equality and participation through miscegenation, the *afoxé* banner refocuses the term “unique” on the specific forms of racial inequality shaped by Brazil’s own history. Here, Orùnmilá members are not challenging miscegenation per se but rather its use in ideological reproduction of a discourse of racial harmony and Brazilianness that neglects hierarchy and power. The banner links the state’s construction of miscegenation as civilizational process and of culture as economic citizenship, to the materialization of coloniality and the production of circumscribed inclusion for Afro-descendants.

In directly responding to official discourse around carnival, the *afoxé* calls for a historicized and contextualized understanding of Afro-Brazilian inequality within Brazil's "civilizational process" of mixture. The *afoxé*'s politicization of blackness at carnival undermines historical culturalist practices that "simultaneously fetishize and disavow Afro-Brazilian people and their cultural expressions" and displace popular culture's political import for black peoples (Pravaz 2008: 90-91). This challenge by Orùnmilá reflects a longer local and national history of carnival as a site of contested identities and participation as well as the ongoing tension in Ribeirão between the Orùnmilá Center's anti-racism and public officials' responses to racial inequality. The rest of this chapter turns to these two issues.

### **Carnaval and Contested Brazilianness**

Traditional perceptions of carnival construct its events and elements—costumes, float themes, fantasy role playing, the dancing and partying together in the streets of people from different classes and colors—as a space of confraternization and "inversion." During carnival, daily routines, societal roles, and the ruling sociopolitical system are abandoned and disregarded as revelers dissolve hierarchies (cf. DaMatta 1991). In this perspective, carnival represents a suspension of reality. Critics of this view argue that the stark hierarchical divisions and power differentials that permeate Brazilian social relations throughout the year do not disappear prior to, during, and after carnival (cf. Risério 1999; Stam 1997). Rather, carnival itself constitutes a key site where race, culture, politics, gender, and economics intersect in contested struggles over the making and unmaking of Brazilianness and national identity. Drewal describes the power and play, or power *in* play, at carnival as *siré*, or

serious play, which promotes cultural critique as much as celebration (1999). During street parades and related events, identities are negotiated and transformed as positions, strategies and discourses shift in relation to the issue raised or confronted. For Afro-Brazilians, the carnival, in its contradictory and contested history, encompasses a terrain of protest (Dunn 1992; Cunha 1998) as much as capitulation to hierarchy and cooptation by state and material forces (Andrews 2004; Pravaz 2008; Sheriff 1999).

In the planning and execution of annual carnival festivities throughout cities in Brazil, elites, politicians, men and women, samba schools, carnival *blocos*, and black anti-racist cultural organizations tangle over the politicization and cooption of culture and blackness. The representations *in* and *of* carnival constructed by these different participants reflect both reassertions and challenges to taken for granted understandings of the historical meaning of carnival within national narratives and social relations. While elites and authorities' attempts to control the meaning and nature of celebrations is often contested and incomplete, they have nonetheless played a strong role in managing and benefiting from the event over time.

In the late nineteenth century, elites and city officials sought to tame the mayhem of street festivals, or *entrudos*, by implementing a form of carnival based on refined parades and masked balls that consisted with the growing national ethos of "order and progress" (Butler 1998; Sheriff 1999). Despite such attempts to "civilize" carnival, Afro-Brazilian clubs inserted themselves and their musical forms into public street celebrations in places like Salvador, bringing with them stories of African history and antiquity and venerating Kings and Queens with music played on African-derived instruments like *agôgôs* and *atabaques* (Butler 1998). In Rio de Janeiro, "groups dominated by poor people of color... emerged from clandestine contexts into public visibility" to initiate new kinds of carnival parading with dancing and

percussion that, despite being officially outlawed were “difficult to quell by the turn of the century” (Sheriff 1999: 12).

Elite concern over blackness in carnaval and black visibility in society reflected broader concerns over the problem a large Afro-descendant population posed for Brazil’s modernization and development. In response, diverse actions were pursued to regulate race and promote the cultural and physical whitening of the population, including policy to promote European immigration as well as hygiene and the control public space. In Salvador and other cities, Afro-Brazilian religious houses of worship, *rodas de capoeira*, and public Afro-Brazilian manifestations like *batuques*<sup>65</sup> and *afoxés* were often subject to state repression through violence and outlawing (Andrews 2004; Crook 1993; Moura 1988). Authorities broadly targeted the “Africanization” of carnaval, as the culture wars between white (and a few black and brown) elites and the predominantly black and brown masses played out in the public streets and plazas. These efforts to “de-Africanize” carnaval and public space were consistent with broader attacks against the “African” elements that permeated the culture and neighborhoods of the Brazilian masses.

Officials and elites slowly realized they could not control the rising popularity of samba, the music and dance associated with popular street parades. Nor could they prevent the presence of poor and working class carnaval groups and the increasing “Africanization” of the annual festivals. As such, they opted to regulate and manage samba schools’ participation, while the advent of radio in 1922, propelled Brazilian and foreign record producers to capitalize on samba’s popularity and growing record sales, thus initiating the age of samba’s commercialization (Pravaz 2008). Sambistas, samba composers and artists, saw this as one means towards upward mobility. The

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<sup>65</sup> *Batuque* refers to the sacred drumming of Candomblé, but was often applied to Afro-Brazilian festivities where and gatherings where drums were played (cf. Butler 1998).

management and commercialization of samba and carnaval was bolstered by the search by intellectuals and artists for themes and ideas stemming from Brazil's own historical formation and culture (Pravaz 2008; Vianna 1999). As a positive re-evaluation of racial and cultural mixture was taking place with Gilberto Freyre's reconstruction of race relations (i.e. racial democracy), white intellectuals embarked on the search for "authentically Brazilian" forms of music and culture that could be upheld and supported. Freyre himself participated, as he and other intellectuals' search for authenticity led them to meet in Rio with respected Afro-Brazilian samba composers like Donga and Pixinguinha (Vianna 1999; Ownesby 2005). Samba would become a quintessential Brazilian creation. Understood as a blend of African and Portuguese musical ideas, it would stand "as one of the most persuasive emblems of a cherished vision of Brazilian identity, linked through carnaval to a myth of social levelling which, though confined to the few days of the festival, still forms part of a unifying national spirit" (Chasteen 1996: 30, quoted in Sheriff 1999: 15).

The state would participate aggressively in this process, as the Getúlio Vargas regime (1930-1945) harnessed carnaval as a means to both manage popular culture for populist purposes of national integration and institutionalize mechanisms to promote a cultural nationalism and Brazilianness based on racial democracy (Davis 1999). A state structure was created for this purpose, involving legal constitutional decrees, institutions like the Ministry of Education and Culture responsible for disseminating national culture and promoting civic pride, and censorship directed by the Department of Press and Propaganda.<sup>66</sup> Recognition and legitimacy for samba schools came at considerable political and artistic costs, as only nationalistic themes drawn primarily from romanticized versions of Brazilian history were permitted (Pravaz 2008).

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<sup>66</sup> The pursuit of cultural and physical whitening by the state, especially in institutions of education, did not fully disappear with the increasing promotion of racial democracy. Nor did the whitening bias cease to influence broader societal perceptions of blackness and the treatment of Afro-Brazilians.

Moreover, the granting of authority over samba schools to the National Tourist Commission in 1935 marked the beginnings of the decades-long process of transforming carnival into the major tourist attraction and business enterprise it has become today (Andrews 2004).

Various intersecting processes—the search for “authentic” Brazilian popular culture, the populist and nationalist promotion of culture, and the idea of carnival and samba as leveling social and racial hierarchy—helped crystallize dominant representations of national racial and cultural history. As historian Brian Owensby notes, “samba, carnival, and racial democracy came together powerfully during this period because they offered something to almost every segment of a fractured social order” (2005: 332). The consequence for Afro-Brazilians was the shaping of dominant, acceptable understandings of blackness and culture that labeled expressions of blackness involving black pride and racial identity affirmation as un-Brazilian or “foreign.”

The military regime (1964-1985) continued this push for national integration through the expanded production, distribution, and consumption of cultural goods and commodities, and culture as display (Pravaz 2008). The regime further institutionalized cultural management through the National Culture Council in 1966 (which embraced the discourse of miscegenation), a system of state culture councils that carried out the task of exhibiting, protecting, and preserving culture, and the National Foundation for the Arts in 1975 geared towards promoting folklore and popular culture (Ibid.). To foster tourism and express the essence of Brazilian culture, state institutions defined Afro-Brazilian culture as folklore, relegating Afro-Brazilians to the past, rather than viewing them as coeval citizens who construct their past in relation to contemporary experience (J. T. Santos 1998). Premised on the preservation of practices and artefacts representing reified “traditions” or archaic holdovers of the



past, folklorization framed black inclusion through ideal, *a priori* conceptualizations of Brazilianness. Here, the state upholds the taken for granted history of mixture by appearing as guardian of national memory and defender of the nation against imported foreign cultures or deviant autochthonous thought (Ortiz 1985: 100).

Afro-descendants have engaged in various efforts during carnaval to occupy and transform public space, represent Brazilian racial history on their own terms, and construct confrontational identities through the politicization of black culture and racial inequality. One of the most known and studied examples was the emergence of the *bloco afro* and new *afoxés* as a growing force in the city of Salvador in the 1970s, which marked the beginning of what has been termed the “re-Africanization” of carnaval. Drawing inspiration from negritude, U.S. black pride movements, and Pan-Africanism, *blocos* employed musical styles and aesthetics that reinvented Africa and Afro-diaspora to construct a “socially engaged image of black Brazilian identity that celebrated black heritage and black distinctiveness but that was rooted in the social, cultural, and economic realities of blacks in contemporary Brazil” (Crook 1993: 95). At first, the objective of *blocos* like Ilê Aiyê (founded in 1974) was to raise the consciousness of young Afro-Brazilians through cultural events and “strengthen ties to youth through political and cultural activities by focusing on Afro-Brazilian themes” (Cunha 1998: 231). These *blocos* would later expand into larger social and community organizations involved in diverse activities throughout the year.

Through explicit links of their music, lyrics, aesthetics, and dance to African and Afro-Brazilian cultural production, the *blocos* reappropriated, reimagined, and refashioned African-based cultural forms to challenge carnaval as an expression of mixed national identity and the limitations placed on Afro-Brazilian culture since the

1930s (Andrews 2004; Dunn 1992).<sup>67</sup> Carnival became a stage to dramatize social inequalities, render explicit and denounce social-racial asymmetries, and advance the “terrain of protest” (Risério 1999: 254). The mobilization of Afro-Brazilian difference to challenge racism and the myth of racial democracy struck a nerve with cultural critics, who claimed that *bloco* aesthetics, themes, and discourses imported “racial war” from the United States into a context of Brazilian racial harmony (Crook 1993). In a context where the spectacle of carnival, like the discourse of racial democracy “conceal[s] the complex forms of contestation that engage both the political and the moral economy of race in Brazil” (Sheriff 1999: 23), manifestations like the *blocos afro* offer an alternative interpretation of Brazil’s black identity and to this day remain an important intervention as a public expression of politicized blackness.

Multiple expressions and contestations of coloniality of power emerge from this reconstruction of Afro-brazilian cultural policy and practice. *Blocos afro* represent the more politicized end of cultural forms that refuse to submit to the harmonizing narratives of racial democracy. However, their distance from “tradition” is apparent as they negotiate the challenge of politicizing Afro-Brazilian culture in a contemporary context shaped by the commodification and marketing of blackness and black culture in places like Bahia. The entry of black symbols like *blocos afro* and Afro-Brazilian manifestations like Capoeira and Candomblé into the circuits of capital indicates a how coloniality re-articulates “race” and culture within paradigms of accumulation. The Orùnmilá Center contests this coloniality by mobilizing African and Afro-Brazilian “tradition” as dynamic forms of embodied knowledge integral to

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<sup>67</sup> The (re)invention or (re)construction of what constitutes an “African” or “Afro-Brazilian” aesthetic varied from *bloco* to *bloco*, demonstrating dynamic uses of clothing, dance, and musical styles. Some mixed reggae and Caribbean music into their sound inventing new rhythms like *samba-reggae* or *axé music*. While some groups privileged Yoruba language and culture, others pursued more Pan-African inspirations, invoking images of Egypt, Ethiopia, Jamaica, and other places expressing transnational, diasporic blackness. Themes also included African decolonization struggles. Generally, *blocos afro* sought to re-value African and Afro-Brazilian culture and aesthetics as a means to confront afro-descendant’s lived cultural and material situation.

contemporary struggles to reconstructing social relations and create collectivity. The *afoxé* is one means through which they carry out this project.

### ***Afoxé: the Enunciation that Makes Things Happen***

The *afoxé* represents an Afro-Brazilian cultural form historically part of carnival, primarily in Salvador, Bahia. Its origins are linked to Candomblé, and as a public display or manifestation of Candomblé houses, *afoxés* are sometimes referred to as *Candomblés de rua*, or Candomblés of the street. *Afoxés* emerged in the late nineteenth century as one of the first public expressions of Candomblé, as percussion groups composed of men who were members of Catholic fraternities and Candomblé houses gathered to publicly present the rhythms and songs associated with the *orixás* (Dunn 1992). This explicit connection to Candomblé rhythms and songs differentiates *afoxé's* from the samba music and samba schools parading during Rio de Janeiro's carnival, the more common image of Brazilian carnival. It also differentiates *afoxés* from *blocos afro*, which have over time become less explicitly linked with Candomblé and have employed a range of hybrid symbols and themes in their constructions of blackness and racial pride.

Like other black manifestations at carnival, the *afoxé* also constitutes a site of struggle within the colonality of power. During outright repression and regulation by authorities in the early twentieth century the presence of these Candomblé inspired/oriented cultural practices in Salvador was a means to stake a claim to the right to express black cultural solidarity out in the streets as well as cultivate community through singing, dancing, and moving through the city together. At present, some *afoxés* localize resistance to contemporary folklorization and

commodification for the tourism industry. In general, *afoxé* dancers and musicians take Candomblé rhythms and movements into the street during carnival as a celebration of aesthetic, cultural, and often political strength.

The term *afoxé* literally means “the enunciation that makes (something) happen.” As Pai Paulo explains,

[*Afoxé*] is, in a contextualized translation of the culture of Yoruba peoples, ‘the verb that does [*o verbo que faz*], the word that moves and elicits action,’ in this sense it’s the word that carries magic, *axé*, enchantment, power. *Afoxé* is the weapon that we need to end racism and inequality. But it is also festivity, happiness, dance, music, and ritual (Quoted in Nogueira 2005, chapter 5; translation mine).

In this way, *afoxé* involves directed political action amidst festivity, happiness, and ritual. It constitutes verbal elocution and physical movement that acts, enchants, and operates with magic, magnetism, and knowledge. This power of the *afoxé* originates in Candomblé philosophies and African and Afro-Brazilian epistemologies where sonic creation and bodily movement embody knowledge and history and contain the potential to transform space and possibility. Key to such epistemology is the transmission of *axé*—energy that enables action.

The spoken word is one element central in Yoruba culture and Candomblé rituals as a transmitter of *axé*, where *axé* and knowledge pass directly from one person to another through gestures, words accompanied, and corporeal movements (Santos 1976; Leite 1992). The spoken word “makes up part of a combination of elements, of a dynamic process, that transmits the power of realization” (Santos 1976: 46). In Candomblé, *axé* is linked to the treatment of physical space in houses of worship, the performance of rituals and offerings, and engagement in song and dance in the worship of *orixás*. Activities in the *terreiro* and related spaces cultivate a particular energy linked to ancestral wisdom and the lived experience of history and place, to

*ancestralidade*. *Axé* is key to the spiritual and physical manifestations of Candomblé that contain and share knowledge within a spiritual collectivity. *Ancestralidade* provides the connection between the “then” and “now”—the material and immaterial link between individual, community, and the historical past (Harding 2000).

As an “enunciation that makes things happen,” the *afoxé* draws on and generates *axé* through song and dance as a means cultural transmission and learning through embodied knowledge, memory, and orality [*oralidade*]. The parading of *afoxés* during carnival is not simply a means to show a bit of culture, customs, and legends. It is more profoundly geared towards “acting” on reality through the words that are sung (Cambria 2006). The power of song and movement act on the environment by occupying public space in the streets and mobilizing embodied knowledge and history to confront contemporary lived realities.

Orùnmilá’s formation of an *afoxé* stems directly from their anti-racist philosophy and particular engagement with race, history, culture, and politics. The *afoxé*’s multifaceted character forms one element of Orùnmilá’s broader cultural politics, where practices like capoeira, samba, and hip-hop are cultivated in a way that reflect a critical, alternative orientation to knowledge, history, identity and collectivity. They mobilize the *afoxé*’s power of realization to produce knowledge, shape meanings, and build collectivity in their cultural struggle to transform how race and coloniality structure the present.

## ***Afoxé Omò Orùnmilá's Anti-Racism: Occupying Space to Confront Local Power***

*Quando soam os tambores do Orùnmilá, soam também os gritos da revolta, brotan as alegrias das festas mas também a clareza militante.*

When the drums of Orùnmilá ring out, the cries of revolt also resound. Just as the happiness of celebration sprouts, so does militant clarity.

--Paulo Oliveira and Silas Nogueira, "As Dimensões Inseparáveis de Política e Cultura e a Luta do C. C. Orùnmilá."

The *afoxé* participation in carnival perhaps represents the Orùnmilá Center's single most public presence on the streets of Ribeirão. Together, the official and important nature of the annual carnival celebrations, the presence of the media and public officials, a large public lining the streets and filling the bleachers, and the participation of anywhere from 150-300 people in the *afoxé* create a context ripe for a visible impact. Paulo, Neide, and Orùnmilá members capitalize on this opportunity to educate the public on the *afoxé* as Afro-Brazilian embodied knowledge and culture as well as mobilize it as a means to contest local and national issues affecting Afro-Brazilians.

Founded in 1996, the *Afoxé Omó Orùnmilá* [Afoxé children of Orùnmilá] has since opened the annual carnival celebrations in Ribeirão Preto. Between two to three hundred people of diverse racial and class backgrounds participate. They wear the annual costumes designed with the color and symbols associated with the particular *orixá* being honored<sup>68</sup> (Figure 1). The procession is led by several pairs of people carrying banners with statements focused on timely issues of race and inequality as

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<sup>68</sup> For 2007, the *afoxé* saluted the *orixá* xango, god of thunder, who carries a double headed ax and whose colors are red and white. The clothing worn by participants reflected these elements, as it does every year with each *orixá* that is honored.

well as banners critically highlighting Afro-Brazilian history and elaborating aspects of the *afoxé* as a manifestation (Figure 2). Following the banners, a woman carries the main *afoxé estandarte*, or flag. Behind her the lines of female dancers follow with four in each line (Figure 3). Behind the rows of dancers who move from side to side across the avenue come rows of the percussion section (Figure 4), the two lead singers (Mãe Neide and Ruda Felipe, Figure 5), and a van carrying the leading percussionists and a pickup truck carrying the sound system. Each year the *Afoxé* salutes [*sauda*] a particular Orixá through specific lyrics and drumming linked with that deity.<sup>69</sup>



Figure 4. Author wearing men's *afoxé* clothing.

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<sup>69</sup> The participation of people from diverse colors and classes in an explicitly Afro-Brazilian cultural form that engages in anti-racism communicates that racism affects all Brazilians, that everyone can participate in the solution, and that the vision of community expressed is useful for all Brazilians.



Figure 5. Banners leading *Afoxé* procession, “the ‘Civilizational’ Opportunity for Miscegenation Perpetuates unequal race relations.”



Figure 6. *Porta estandarte* [flag carrier] followed by rows of dancers.





Figure 7. Older percussion players (left) make sure the youth (right) are in sync with the rhythm.



Figure 8. Mãe Neide and Ruda Felipe warming up for the procession in front of the sound truck.

The *afoxé* opens carnaval, parading before the samba schools take their turns to compete and demonstrate their lyrical, musical, artistic, and choreographic ability. The initial reaction by the media and local carnaval officials to the *afoxé* was ambiguous, somewhat incredulous surprise. Silas Nogueira recounted the moment in his doctoral thesis (2005),

A battery of fireworks explodes. *Atabaques*, *agogôs*, *ganzás* mark their own rhythm, the participants move in harmony, a forceful song takes over the runway. A black woman, with long torso and vestments, adornments and a wide smile, with a calabash in hand, spreads something on the path of the runway. The *afoxé* enters the street, making rhythm, undulating, like water, like a serpent. People happy, singing, playing, festive... in ritual. The procession follows as does confusion over its meanings.

As the *afoxé* enters, the undulating people move in the rhythm and dance of *ijexá*, the main rhythm, or *toque* [beat], of the *afoxé*. Silas goes on to describe the initial reactions he overheard among spectators,

“How is the *samba-enredo*<sup>70</sup>?” The drum section is strange, where is the *surdo*, *tamborim*, *pandeiro*<sup>71</sup>? Journalists, presenters, and commentators ask among themselves.

“We can’t understand anything, the people are singing in an African dialect [sic]” answers one well-known commentator on local samba parades who then states, “Aren’t their costumes a bit poor? What is this ping-ping-ping of *agogô*, what is this...?”

Right from the start, the *afoxé* was something unfamiliar to local carnaval, as members played rhythms and instruments and sang lyrics alien to many watching. Officials and

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<sup>70</sup> A *samba-enredo* is basically the theme song sung by a samba school, written specifically for the festivities of carnaval.

<sup>71</sup> These are several instruments most integral and common to the performance of samba during carnaval.

commentators did not understand how to situate the “costumes” and “enredo” of the *Afoxé Omó Orùnmilá* within the typical structure and performance of carnaval. This official reaction reflects how carnaval in Ribeirão has historically been based primarily on the parading and judging of several samba schools that compete every year with original *samba-enredos* and a basic theme conveyed by costumes and floats. Carnaval celebrations in many smaller cities in São Paulo have sought to build the annual street parade element to mirror the well-known, “traditional” celebrations of larger cities like Rio and São Paulo. Even the latter has aggressively invested in and promoted the annual festivities to attract spectators to the city. Carnaval in Salvador contains more diverse street manifestations, including *afoxés*, *blocos afro*, and *trios elétricos*, some of which explicitly engage the racial theme.

Renata, dance workshop instructor at Orùnmilá, described the first time experience,

It was a shock for the local media, because up to that time only *blocos* [samba schools] paraded, men dressed as women, these kinds of things. All of a sudden comes something that is actual culture, they said “wait a minute, what’s this? People playing *ijexá*. Dressed in Afro clothing, one hundred and fifty people singing in Yoruba. There is something strange here”...

At that time we competed because it was required, but we fought so as not to compete [anymore]. We don’t compete today, we just open the official carnaval or Ribeirão Preto. Then, after carnaval passed, people started coming [to Orùnmilá] for dance workshops. We started giving lessons after February, and began receiving more people.

Renata’s description notes how officials and commentators react to the contrast the *afoxé* displays to the typical annual samba school performances and competition. Rather than a performance emblematic of Brazilianness and miscegenation, the *afoxé* explicitly embodies Afro-Brazilian culture, spirituality, and politics where aesthetics, sound, and lyrical content convey meanings grounded in *ancestralidade* and a

politicized blackness. While their victory in the 1996 carnival attested to how they not only surprised, but also impressed the judges and observers, their participation in these annual festivities has been marked by controversy from the start. The affirmation of African culture highlights the depoliticization and sanitization that marks conventional constructions of carnival. Orùnmilá reinvigorates the value of African form as embodiment of political content and history.

### *Attempts to Undermine the Afoxé*

Politicizing carnival did not come easy in Riberão, as Orùnmilá members came together with very little resources to create costumes and prepare choreography and music. They bought much of the material for costumes on credit, as they had few resources. They also arranged transportation to and from the avenue for the parade with several members who owned cars and a friend who had a truck with a cargo bay. They crammed as many people into that dark bay, only to arrive at the scene and be told the carnival wasn't happening. Mãe Neide recounted the experience, paraphrasing the exchange between Paulo and the carnival officials,

[Orùnmilá members] arrived and the carnival commission [members] said, You can't parade because it will rain. The rain has already started and you won't be able to. There will be no carnival." Then, Paulo, never forgetting his origins, his way of being, said, "No. We are going to parade. Why not? It's not raining. It rains in Bahia, in São Paulo, in Rio de Janeiro, and this has never prevented carnival from happening. And today, we arrived here with great difficulty, we are going to parade." [They responded] "No you are not, we are going to close the gate and you are not going to parade."

But, it just so happened that Globo, EPTV from Ribeirão was there. [Paulo said], "Okay, then I will do an interview with the journalists and tell them that there is no carnival in Ribeirão because it is raining, which it isn't, it only looks like it will rain."

So then we took to the streets. They chased us, "No, you are not going." But Paulo did the interview, spoke, and then the radio folks came over, and all that.

Paulo said, “Due to the incompetence of Ribeirão Preto, the people who think they are the owners of carnival in Ribeirão think that they can give orders disrespectfully. Today, for example, we arrived here with great difficulty, even by flatbed truck, and we aren’t going to parade? We are going to parade. With rain, without rain, it does not matter. We are going to parade!”

At that point, they couldn’t block it. So we put the Afoxé on the avenue, started singing, all of that. The spectators started coming and coming, because they had already announced carnival wouldn’t happen so the people [had begun dispersing]. They came back. We took to the avenue, went down, then back up, parading...

The difficulties continue, but we conquered the space to open up carnival.

The fight to parade despite officials’ wishes is part of the ongoing struggle over public space and the nature of cultural events, over who gets to participate and on what terms. They fought to take to the streets on their first night, and sent a strong message that carnival groups and participants, rather than a municipal commission, should determine who can participate and when. Moreover, *afoxé* leaders’ desire to proceed in spite of rain reflects their vision of culture as part of the environment rather than compartmentalized from it. The *afoxé* goes rain or shine, not to be dictated by formal conventions of how events should proceed.<sup>72</sup> This first encounter with the leaders of the Orùnmilá Center did not please the organizers. As Mãe Neide explained,

So, when it was the following year, then [the situation] was already terrible, right, because what did [the main organizer] do? He changed the statute, he changed the law. He changed it to require that the *blocos* [carnival groups] had to have “cheerfulness,” as well as a bunch of stuff that wasn’t in the *afoxé*. The *afoxé* is not [these things]. But the more he did this, the more the people liked [the *afoxé*]. That second year we hit the streets with our banners.

Neide here describes how already in the second year of the *afoxé*’s participation, the

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<sup>72</sup> This particular parade was not the official one where groups would compete and be judged. The official parade occurred two nights later, and the *afoxé* would go on to win carnival by impressing the spectators and judges. In 2007, there were two nights of carnival also, the one where the schools competed and a second one where the top three, plus the *afoxé*, did a reprise two nights later.

situation had become “terrible,” as officials already began to attempt to disqualify the *afoxé*’s participation. The “cheerfulness” requirement reflects an attempt to manage the meaning and nature of cultural expression in local carnival. Dominant interpretations of carnival as a celebration of joy, unity, mixture, and glorious histories reflect a limited view of what carnival has meant or can mean for participants, especially carnival as a public space to express history, knowledge, and social critique on one’s own terms. As Mãe Neide states, “They continue to reject [the *afoxé*] to this day because they are prejudiced. They make it a point that Ribeirão not acquaint itself with this cultural side that is *Brazilian, that is ours.*” (emphasis mine). Mãe Neide exposes how local cultural managers want culture to look a certain way. In other words, local officials manage the version of Brazilianness to conform to their desires and uses for carnival. In the case of the *afoxé*, they attempt to silence a black cultural form that publicly articulates a radical blackness and a critique of race relations while engaging in song, dance, and festive expression within a major yearly event.

The individual who changed the law in 1997 is the same person who authored the 2007 Carnival CD statement. In the years following the *afoxé*’s first appearance, he came together with other people in the culture secretariat to try to get the *afoxé* to open carnival in neighboring towns as a means to get them away from Ribeirão. But Orùnmilá would not consent to these suggestions or demands, knowing that if they gave up access to space in Ribeirão’s carnival, they would lose the chance to rework the terms of Afro-Brazilian presence within it. In these efforts, sometimes they had the help of culture officials who supported the *afoxé*, especially the secretary who invited them to open the event in the first place. At other times they would reach for help beyond the local sphere. In one case, around 2005-2006, Ricardo, a Cultural Center member, drafted an e-mail to Gilberto Gil, the Minister of Culture and strong

historical ally of *afoxés* in Salvador. The e-mail explained how local officials had been undervaluing and treating the *afoxé* with disdain in an attempt to remove it from local carnival. Minister Gil made an inquiry into the situation at the Municipal Culture Secretariat, demanding rectification. Those responsible for the situation eased up in response to the Federal minister.

In order to deal with the yearly uncertainty and shifting tactics of some officials in the Culture Secretariat and the carnival commission, the Orùnmilá Center pursued a local law themselves. Municipal Law N° 10.927, passed in 2006, now obligates that the *afoxé* opens Ribeirão Preto's carnival every year. Despite these ongoing difficulties, they continued to parade every year and use banners to express critiques of local officials and policies. These banners form a key element of the *afoxé* that concretizes the message they wish to convey.

### *Performatively Contesting Coloniality*

*O dun Ni àwa eniyan dudu*  
*O dun Ni àwa eniyan dudu*  
*Omo Orùnmilá*  
*Ile Yorùbá*  
*Njó a ki*  
*Orùnmilá bàbá mo*  
*Njó a ki*  
*Orùnmilá bàbá mo*  
*A ege a ege àwa iyn sin sin*  
*A ege a ege àwa iyn sin sin*

*In this great annual festival, we Blacks*  
*In this great annual festival, we Blacks*  
*Children of Orùnmilá*  
*From Yoruba native land*  
*Sing and salute*  
*Orùnmilá, the father of knowledge*  
*Sing and salute*  
*Orùnmilá, the father of knowledge*  
*And with this we celebrate Agué*  
*And with this we celebrate Agué*

- *Cantico*<sup>73</sup> of the *Afoxé Omó Orùnmilá*

As embodied knowledge and history, the *afoxé* asserts historically

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<sup>73</sup> A cantico is a chant or hymn, in this case, the *afoxé's* main song.

marginalized, “erased,” or obscured forms of collectivity and action as a contemporary modes of being and politics that build solidarity in the face of inequality. Through such action, Orùnmilá’s *afoxé* defies encapsulation as “tradition,” religious ritual, festival, cultural display, or politics; it simultaneously embodies all of these with a focus on decolonizing social relations through the substantive inclusion of Afro-Brazilian knowledge and culture in national life.

One powerful element of the procession is the series of five banners containing statements that critique local and national policy decisions, take positions on issues, or express insight into Afro-Brazilian history and politics. The statements are pithy, geared towards grounding what may be more abstract to the observer (e.g. song, movement, and singing in Yoruba) in a historical and national context. Table 1 illustrates some representative banner examples from 2007 as well as previous carnivals. In the remainder of this chapter, I analyze several banners to illustrate how their words embody the message of *afoxé*, linking history, culture, and politics to contest the coloniality of power and knowledge.

Table 1. Examples of *Afoxé* Banners

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Afoxé: First Black manifestation at carnaval. Everything that follows came from here.</li> <li>2. Kill me for I continuously emerge. I am movement. I am <i>Exú</i>.<sup>a</sup> I am <i>Afoxé</i> (2007).</li> <li>3. Exú enables movement—He is all convergences of all paths.</li> <li>4. We oppose the reduction of the age at which a minor can be tried as an adult: childhood without hunger and with dignity repels violence (2007).</li> <li>5. Whites ask for peace to continue rich. Blacks ask for peace to stay alive.</li> <li>6. We are against all wars, from the war in Iraq to the one that kills our people in the urban peripheries.</li> <li>7. We are survivors of <i>Palmares</i>. We are <i>mestres salas dos mares</i>. We are <i>Malê</i> warriors.<sup>b</sup></li> <li>8. From Captain to Captain<sup>c</sup>... we maintain our tradition.</li> <li>9. As long as we play our drums, no <i>capitão do mato</i> will silence our voice.</li> <li>10. The respect and dignity of Black People are not products for marketing.</li> <li>11. The teaching of African culture: the Black contribution to the human condition.</li> </ol>
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Table 1 (Continued).

12. Law 10,639 obligates the teaching of African and Afro-descendent history in schools (2007).
13. The civilizational ‘opportunity’ of miscegenation perpetuates unique racial inequalities (2007).
14. Miscegenation is not civilization, it is ethnoracial assassination (2007).
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a. The deity Exú is the messenger between humans and the <i>Orixás</i> . Exú is the god of the crossroads, with power over fortune and misfortune. Exú is also considered a trickster that can make difficult or facilitate and give energy to human action, which is why ceremonies and rituals begin with an offering to Exú.
b. <i>Mestres salas dos mares</i> refers to João Cândido, the Black leader of the Revolt of the Whip [ <i>Revolta da Chibata</i> ] of 1910, while <i>Malê</i> warrior refers to the <i>Malê</i> Revolt, or Great Revolt, considered a significant slave rebellion in Brazilian history.
c. Captian, short for “captain of the forest” [ <i>capitão do mato</i> ]. Refers to Afro-descendants that hunted and captured runaways slaves, and presently, to Blacks that ‘sell-out’ other Blacks or the anti-racist cause.

The history and energy of the *afoxé* encompasses religious philosophies stemming from *Candomblé* and Yoruba culture. The statement “*Kill me for I continuously emerge. I am movement. I am Exú. I am Afoxê*” (Table 1, Number 2) illustrates how Orùnmilá politically deploys such conceptions in their struggle. An editorial in Soro Dúdú newspaper elaborates on Exú:

Our conception of politics, Exú teaches us, is the conception of movement, of the spiral of time in constant ascension and mutation, in the constant conflict between opposites that generates the new, new movement, new struggles. It is the confrontation of diverse things in the direction of transformation. Politics and culture at Orùnmilá are not separate; both only gain human, and thus political, meaning if we place their fruits, their weapons at the service of transformation, of emancipation of black peoples, against inequality and all the ills of racism existing in Brazil and the world (“Editorial.” 2006: 2).

As philosophical enunciation, embodied history, and movement, the *afoxé* seeks to elicit transformation through contestation, through critically occupying space in the anti-racist struggle. Symbolizing the reemergence, tenacity, and movement of *Exú*, the *afoxé* performatively contests challenges to Orùnmilá’s activism that accumulate

throughout the year. These include the lack of political will around policy, cultural cooptation, media criticism, the re-invocation of the ideology of racial democracy, and attempts to tame or disqualify *afoxé* participation in carnaval. The *Afoxé* announces Orùnmilá's presence, makes visible these issues affecting Afro-descendants, and reminds those in power that they will not stand for maintenance of the status quo. As a performative disruption, the *afoxé* generates new paths and new movement, signaling the dynamic nature of the struggle for equality. At the same time, it serves as a means to consolidate and renew members' energy and solidarity through dedicated preparation participation in this annual manifestation.

The *Afoxé* also demands local policy action. Carried during the 2007 carnaval, the banner "*Law 10,639 obligates the teaching of African and Afro-descendent history in schools*" (Table 1, number 12) was directed at local officials obstructing the implementation of the teaching of African and Afro-Brazilian culture and history in primary and secondary education (As outlined in chapter 3). Despite certain gains in getting Afro-Brazilian and racial issues on the municipal agenda during 2006, the education secretary at the time, and another powerful, high ranking municipal education official, directly and indirectly prevented efforts to get a discussion going around race and education. These education officials acted in this manner even though Silvany, who was chosen to deal with race and education at the secretariat, secured federal funding in 2006 to facilitate implementation. Due to these experiences, Orùnmilá used the banner to forcefully clarify and make explicit that the implementation of 10,639 was not solely dependent on the whim of education officials. Rather, it was an obligation of local politicians as representatives of the people.

The banner may have sent a solid message to the new Education Secretary (who took office 5 weeks prior to carnaval) that Orùnmilá members would not

acquiesce on this issue. Less than two months after carnival, the new Education Secretary inaugurated the Projeto Baobá, drawn up by the Cultural Center and Silvany. This reflected both the more open position of the education secretary on issues of equality in education as well as the persistent advocacy of the Orùnmilá Center.<sup>74</sup> The *afoxé* banner also sought to alert spectators and the media about the Law's existence and connected it to the broader question of dealing with racial inequality. Locally and nationally, scant media coverage had prevented widespread awareness of Law 10,639, and Orùnmilá sought to rectify this while staking their stance on administrative delays around project implementation. Education and political claims overlap as the *afoxé* moves down the avenue.<sup>75</sup>

Two banners from the carnival of 2002 had also targeted issues in the secretariats: “As long as we play our drums, no *capitão do mato* will silence our voice” and “The respect and dignity of Black People are not products for marketing” (Table 1, numbers 9 and 10). The *afoxé* banners targeted the coordinator of black culture in the culture secretariat, a post created during the Workers' Party administration at the time, and the Culture Secretary, so as to critique the culture secretariat's handling of local issues related to the black community. The marketing issue questioned the discourse of the coordinator who always couched questions of

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<sup>74</sup> As discussed in previous chapters, the *Baobá* project involves a) training teachers in African and Afro-Brazilian history; b) training teachers and administrators to deal with racism in the classroom; c) making available to teachers and students resources like books and videos; d) dialoguing between secretariats to engage the issue of inequality in the school system. The previous education secretary and high level secretariat officials had ignored demands for project implementation and addressing racial inequality in education.

<sup>75</sup> Banners such as the one on *Exú*, highlighted above, also educate by placing figures and concepts like *Exú* in a different light. These efforts redefine and reclaim positive, dynamic meanings in a public space and explicitly link them to particular spiritual and philosophical understandings of social relations, time, and history. Evoking *Exú* challenges taken-for-granted, pejorative perceptions of the deity—*Exú* is often perceived to represent evil characteristics and actions in forms of Umbanda and is often attacked by evangelicals as ‘the devil’ or evil. Such conceptions of *Exú* have influenced prejudice and discrimination for members of Candomblé and religions involving Orixá worship. *Exú* becomes an element of sorcery, rather than a figure that mediates between the human and spiritual world whose actions reflect or respond to human intent and action. In this way, Orùnmilá links education and awareness as an aspect of politics.

black culture within a marketing language. The term *capitão* refers to Afro-descendants that hunted and captured runaway slaves. It is used presently to refer to Blacks that “sell-out” other Blacks or the anti-racist cause. When the *afoxé* appeared at the carnival with these two banners, the coordinator demanded the police prevent them from carrying it, exemplifying another attempt at silencing black protest. The police refused and the banners were allowed in the parade.

Orùnmilá members not only use the banners to historically situate the *afoxé* or target local policy issues, they also use banners to relate their struggle for racial equality in Brazil to broader, transnational hierarchies of power and rule. The banner “*We are against all wars, from the war in Iraq to the one that kills our people in the urban peripheries*” (Table 1, number 5) critiques the translocal politics of race, democracy, development, and coloniality. Connecting “wars” across space and contexts demonstrates how Orùnmilá sees itself as one locally engaged response connected to, and impacting a much larger universe of “global coloniality” (cf. Escobar 2004). The struggle is larger than Ribeirão Preto, as coloniality of power permeates both the Iraq War and Orùnmilá’s struggle for racial equality. In Iraq, imperialism and capitalist exploitation are carried out under the guise of freedom, democracy, and a cultural (and often racialized) “clash of civilizations” between Islam and the West. In the Brazilian urban peripheries, marginalization and the lack of cultural and social recognition kills people through poverty, hunger, violence, and sub-citizenship.

Orùnmilá members recognize the relationship between the Iraq War and American Empire and the marginalization of Afro-descendant knowledge and culture and their position in the urban periphery. By connecting the “war” that socially and economically marginalizes Afro-descendants and their knowledge with a conflict like that in Iraq, they urge observers to engage both as constitutive of contemporary global

inequalities and projects of rule. They suggest that violence and materiality permeate struggles over culture, power, and knowledge and imperialist military projects. While explicit at sometimes and indirect at others, the *afoxé* politicizes history and culture to critique relations shaped by coloniality locally, nationally, and within global, racialized projects of rule.

The final banner I will examine is the one that caused the most controversy in the 2007 carnival. It stated, “Miscegenation is not civilization, it is ethnoracial assassination” (Table 1, number 14). Before the second night encore carnival parade, when we gathered to prepare and organize to go to the avenue, several participants in the *afoxé* revealed that they were questioned about this banner by friends and family. We had a discussion about this situation. Several women expressed how friends and family had asked them why the *afoxé* was against mixture, whether this was some kind of segregation, and why were whites were participating if Orùnmilá had that attitude. One young woman who was asked by a family member whether Orùnmilá was against miscegenation answered no, but didn’t have a solid response as to why, especially in relation to an issue that is so sensitive and contentious in Brazil. Another young woman added that those that do not know the history of the CD statement text and therefore the reason for the banner saw another meaning. But nonetheless, it generated a good discussion, as no one knew exactly how to characterize it. She indicated that at least her family was curious to get more information on why she would participate in such a group. At this point, the first young woman interjected again, saying that she and her white friends are always welcome at Orùnmilá, and that through the lived experience at the Center, they knew that the banner was not advocating a desire for segregation and racial separation.

After hearing these stories, Paulo and Silas emphasized that those asking about the banner saw miscegenation as a question of biological mixture, a question of

personal love relationships between Blacks and Whites, rather than as a historical question. They were quite clear that opposition to love relations could be seen as segregationist or racist, but when examined within the history of racial power in Brazil, the banner meant to contest the assimilation of black peoples and cultures within a civilizational process defined by Eurocentrism. In the group conversation, Paulo highlighted how this history of power denies the historical importance of African civilizations and the existence of Blacks as Blacks in Brazil. Despite the confusion generated by the banner, Orùnmilá leaders expressed that putting salt on the wound was a means to get a discussion going. It was a way to make people think about how Whites and Blacks could come together to oppose miscegenation as a problematic ideology and unequal process, rather than perform the national ideology that requires Blacks and Whites to come together to affirm an ahistorical miscegenation.

On the second night of the carnaval and partway into the *afoxé* procession, Paulo asked for the music and dancing to stop, something unprecedented at carnaval. He then took a moment to clarify the situation around the banner. Here is a paraphrase of what he said:

I want to stop for a moment because there was a polemic caused by the *afoxé* banners. Prior to carnaval, there was a text produced by the event organizers that states that the civilizational opportunity comes from miscegenation. I want to make clear that we think this is an affront, a denial of African civilization. The *afoxé* is proof of five hundred years of resistance, [proof] that black culture exists and you are seeing it here. We are Blacks [*negros*]!<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Silas wrote a longer text contextualizing the event around the CD statement and Orùnmilá's banner response building on what Paulo stated that night. The text was published at Afropress [www.afropress.com] and Jornal Irohin [irohin.org.br], two prominent websites dealing with Afro-descendant issues, on February 25, 2007. It was also published Orùnmilá's website. A summary paragraph of Orùnmilá's position was published in the Ribeirão Preto newspaper A Cidade on February 24, 2007.

Paulo's words forcefully reaffirm blackness and the right to diverge from accepted understandings of Brazil's cultural formation. After he asserted the *afoxé* as a politicized blackness, as representative of ancestral knowledge, resistance, and struggle, the music and dancing resumed and the *afoxé* finished its parade down the avenue. *Afoxé* participants congregated at the end of the avenue, jubilantly congratulating each other before getting on the buses chartered to take them back to the Center. There, the post-carnaval festivities would go into the late hours of the night in a triumphant celebration of, and reflection on, one more year of struggle gone by.

### **Conclusion**

The controversy over the miscegenation banner reveals the complex demands of publicly engaging racism and power. It reflects issues of communication and organization both within and beyond the *afoxé*. Dynamic, quick responses, often during the peak moments where planning and organizing preoccupy Center members and leaders, are an ongoing element of the struggle with local power. One Center member suggested that perhaps one solution could be the better explanation to participants about the content and purpose of the banners and their messages. Another would be guaranteeing that the messages on the banners are as clear as possible, especially with an issue so contentious in Brazilian cultural life. Yet, even while participants may not all be well-versed in the exact meanings of the banners, they come together annually in this event, absorbed by the energetic construction of collectivity through the *afoxé*. Most importantly, *afoxé* participants strongly assert that Blacks and Whites can join together in an anti-racist mobilization that critiques ideologies like miscegenation and racial democracy.

The *afoxé* exemplifies how embodied knowledge and history constitute a central means of engaging the coloniality of power in the present. The Orùnmilá Cultural Center politicizes black culture to historicize the making and remaking of the meanings, uses, and possibilities of Afro-Brazilian cultures in the Brazilian context. Their critique of miscegenation interrogated the power relations confounded by the ambiguous CD statement on culture. The *afoxé* deconstructed how culture as “everything” does not work for an anti-racist group in a context where coloniality shapes definitions of worth, power, value, and knowledge in ways that rearticulate racial inequality. As a public means of organizing community and claiming rights, the *Afoxé Omó Orùnmilá* contests the meanings and practices that sustain inequality. Engagement with *ancestralidade*—ancestral knowledge and lived experience—forms a historicized, dynamic base that generates political collectivity and solidarity to contest the coloniality of power’s cultural, social, and material consequences for Brazilian Blacks.

As Paulo and Silas write in *Sorò Dúdú*:

Insisting on organizing a Carnival that is merely “spectacle” destroys the conception of it as community, collective, [and] creator of new elements of identity and the symbolic representations of a whole people. Capoeira and Carnival have their remote and contemporary roots in predominantly Black and poor communities. Recognizing and stimulating their historical, cultural, and collective character is an attempt to forge new instruments of struggle, of organizing the fight in favor of equality, against racism, and against all forms of discrimination and oppression (“As Dimensões Inseparáveis de Política e Cultura e a Luta do C. C. Orùnmilá.” 2004: 2).

As the current conjuncture exhibits contested local, national, and global struggles over the commodification, depoliticization, and instrumentalization of culture for “development” and capital accumulation in the market, the *Afoxé Omó Orùnmilá*



presents a vital instance of resistance that simultaneously reveals and contests the intersection of history, race, class, culture, and power in these processes. Just as *ancestralidade* mobilizes the past as project for a more equal future, by mobilizing historically excluded knowledges and cosmovisions, Orùnmilá's politics disrupts coloniality to define an alternative future for culture that goes beyond instrumentalization or commodification.

## CONCLUSION

### RACE, DEVELOPMENT, AND THE PAST AS PROJECT

My aim in this dissertation was to explore how the anti-racist struggle of the Orùnmilá Cultural Center engages the intersection of race, culture, and knowledge within the development of an unequal, hierarchical society like Brazil. Their work critiques the epistemological edifice supporting racial inequality that privileges certain forms of knowledge while excluding others from shaping visions of progress, collectivity, and social change. Through cultural workshops, seminars, performances, and policy advocacy, Orùnmilá members contest the meanings of blackness and representations of Afro-Brazilians shaped through Brazilian state-formation's folklorization, commodification, and exclusion of Afro-Brazilian culture and knowledge. To overcome the process and effects through which the political construction of Brazilian society reifies and obscures Afro-Brazilian culture and racial hierarchies through the guise of mixture and inclusion, the Orùnmilá Center mobilizes *ancestralidade*—ancestral wisdom/knowledge and lived experience—as a source of philosophy and action, as political practice.

In my analysis, I have tried to show how an Afro-Brazilian epistemology developed through *ancestralidade* both *emerges from* and *responds to* colonial legacies. It encompasses cultural tradition and continuity (cosmovisions, cultural history, meanings, and practices) *as well as* lived experiences of racialized capitalism (displacement, enslavement, segregation, and everyday racism), constituting a form of thinking from the perspective of coloniality, from the excluded underside of modernity and development. *Ancestralidade* also constitutes a particular way of thinking about identity and history, one that Orùnmilá members mobilize as *an-other* understanding of the meaning and experience of being Brazilian. Through this epistemological

perspective, Orùnmilá members struggle to de-colonize knowledge as one step in the process of creating substantive citizenship for Afro-descendants.

Chapter one outlined the broader history and context of Brazilian race relations, especially how those in positions of power continue to mobilize miscegenation and the ideology of racial democracy to bolster dominant understandings of Brazilianness and delegitimize anti-racist efforts. Despite the black movement's gains in making "race" a visible issue and putting race-based policy on governmental agenda, opponents of the Racial Equality Statute mobilize the persistent power of a Brazilian difference based on mixture and harmony to undermine legislation and institutional changes that address racial inequality. Analysis of the debates over the Statute reveal how dominant constructions of Brazilian difference are intertwined with the representations and practices that continue to construct "race" and racism as outside of the national space.

The examination of events during the 2007 Carnaval in Ribeirão Preto in chapter four reflects the broader representation of Brazilian difference. The *Afoxé Omó Orùnmilá* contested local cultural managers' attempts to re-assert notions about the meaning and uses of culture and carnival that are embedded in dominant historical narratives about "race" and mixture. Orùnmilá members bring the *afoxé* into the streets to construct a public history that challenges the unequal power relations and representations that allow officials to continue asserting ahistorical notions of miscegenation and delimited understandings of culture as display or recreation. The *afoxé* represents *ancestralidade* in action, as it expresses embodied knowledge, history, and lived experience in its movements, music, lyrics, and banner statements that make a powerful declaration that "tradition" and the past are not static, but take on new forms in new contexts and can powerfully shape the future. Through the *afoxé*'s participation in carnival, Orùnmilá members define cultural struggle, politicize black

culture, and claim identity on their own terms to provoke discussion and change around “race” and inequality.

Orùnmilá’s work in the sphere of education, examined in chapter three through the *Baobá Project*, also constitutes a response to how the social and political construction of Brazilian society and dominant national racial narratives about “race” have shaped the silences and delimited inclusion in Brazilian identity, history, and development. The *Projeto Baobá* builds on the Orùnmilá Center’s philosophy and action in an aim to substantively insert African and Afro-Brazilian culture and history in the school curriculum as knowledge and practice. The project seeks to diversify the pedagogies and epistemologies treated as relevant, valid, and useful forms of knowledge and learning. The goal is twofold. The *Projeto Baobá* re-values and redeems Afro-Brazilian history and knowledge while also challenging the meanings and representations of history and blackness that reproduce racial hierarchies, racism, and discrimination against Afro-Brazilians, their cultures, and worldviews. By accounting for the diverse cultural forms and experiences of the Brazilian citizenry, the *Projeto Baobá* begins reconstructing self-esteem among black children and addressing stereotypes and prejudices among white children. The project mobilizes learning and education as a site for transformational politics and the construction of a more egalitarian society.

Understanding Orùnmilá’s philosophy and practice are key to the analysis of the various elements of their struggle in the dissertation. While complex and multifaceted, chapter two attempted to explore Orùnmilá’s cultural work in detail and highlight how the Cultural Center represents an alternative space of blackness where philosophy, history, and experience shape a politics based in *an-other thinking*. For Orùnmilá leaders and workshop instructors, Afro-Brazilian cultural forms not only constitute sites of knowledge production and collectivity, but their formation within

contexts of struggle reveals their relation to the position of Blacks in colonial and post-colonial Brazil. Orality and bodily movements in musical and cultural forms like samba, Capoeira, *afoxé*, hip-hop, and Candomblé embody the knowledge and history of Afro-Brazilian collectivity; they reveal the power of solidarity and cultural struggle. Through these forms, Orùnmilá members gain an understanding of the Afro-Brazilian past and its importance for constructing community and addressing racial inequality in the present. The Orùnmilá Center's mobilizes Afro-Brazilian culture and knowledge to shape a critical black perspective on Brazil's unequal racial history and assert a claim to constructing a more equal future.

The analysis throughout the dissertation reveals various institutional and practical dimensions of state presence in shaping race relations, from local politics and education to the annual carnival celebrations and national discussions of affirmative action. As the issue of racial inequality increasingly enters public debate and spawns multicultural and affirmative action policies, Orùnmilá and other black movement organizations must remain vigilant for the continuities these emergent efforts express with past culturalist and circumscribed treatments of Afro-Brazilians. Are these emergent efforts re-articulating hierarchies through their discourses and practices? What kind of inclusion and participation do these new efforts propose: access to a pre-determined system and the “goods already there in society” or a seat at the table to help determine the terms of education, politics, and societal development? What kinds of efforts move towards addressing the colonial legacy that still shapes social relations and structures institutions? As the analysis of Orùnmilá's work demonstrates, these questions can only be answered through struggle—its claims, contexts, outcomes, and transformations.

The term “struggle” captures the contingent and ongoing nature of social transformation. It captures how anti-racist cultural work is difficult and by necessity

negotiates histories of power that shape the ability to make and realize claims. In the Afro-Brazilian case, the term struggle also captures the complex process of creation and construction that draws on the past, on cultural continuity, but also accounts for the situation Blacks confront in the present. Their struggle involves addressing the representations and uses of the past that naturalize the inequality of the present.

Culturalism reifies “tradition” and culture, it folklorizes peoples believed to express or hold such “tradition” and culture by reducing these to artifacts and superficial expressions. Multiculturalism has this potential, depending on how cultural diversity is engaged and how values and ideas stemming from different cultures are shared and placed into dialogue with one another. Culturalism also underlies the commodification of blackness in Brazil, whether as static heritage for the tourism industry (expressed as cultural patrimony, cultural performance and display, or a historical essence of Brazilianness) or as a cool aesthetic (expressed in dreadlock hairstyles, bright-colored clothing, and the consumption of “black” music). The results can be contradictory as commodification gives blackness visibility and may raise black self-esteem, it can also obscure culture and identity as process, divorcing them from the power relations and contexts that bring them into being.<sup>77</sup> In this way, the Afro-Brazilian struggle for equality involves an ongoing engagement with the changing articulations of “race” that, over time, reshape hierarchies and frame possibilities for historically oppressed groups.

Orùnmilá’s cultural struggle confronts these re-articulations through *ancestralidade* and the mobilizing the past as project. As delineated in chapter two of the dissertation, *ancestralidade* is not a past to be recovered and remembered. Rather,

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<sup>77</sup> We only need to ask the poor mixed-race Brazilian female whether she evaluates as liberating the option of acting as sexual fantasy for the consumption of wealthy foreign and national white men. The more important question would be to ask that, despite being empowering in certain ways, how do we address the racial, sexual, and economic coloniality that limit her options to gaining power through the exploitation of her own blackness as fantasy, as commodity. How does she struggle with the hierarchies that shape necessity and consent?

it brings embodied knowledge, lived experience, and critical history into a struggle to legitimize, value, and engage the past and present simultaneously as sites central to constructing identity and collectivity and addressing inequality. In this way, rather than being about “recovery” of a romanticized pre-colonial social world, the past as project based in *ancestralidade* advances critiques of and conceptualize alternatives to the present social, political, economic, and philosophical status quo.<sup>78</sup> The engagement with the immediate past of slavery, racism, and discrimination that mark the colonial legacies affecting Afro-descendants is what makes the past as project so powerful and threatening to the status quo. A past that accounts for the immediate past is much harder to accommodate and negotiate with than reifications of precolonial cultural markers, folkloric artefacts, and cultural processes.

For example, Orùnmilá’s work challenges the absence of a substantive engagement with Afro-Brazilian knowledge and culture in educational and political institutions as a means to transform the present and shape the future. Their work aims to reveal the historical social possibilities obscured or made un-thinkable through culturalism and the capitalist paradigm that drives the development project. As such, the Orùnmilá center draws on ancestral knowledge and cultural continuity but also directly confronts how miscegenation and racial democracy have produced the coexistence of hierarchy *and* mixture. Orùnmilá’s work points out the limits these dominant ideologies placed on Afro-Brazilians while struggling to address the inadequate interest and ability of societal and state institutions to address racism and discrimination. The historically grounded and emergent character of a politics that mobilizes the past as project is central to the contemporary push for the de-colonization of social relations and substantive Afro-descendant citizenship.

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<sup>78</sup> As noted in chapter two, the term “past as project” comes from historian Arif Dirlik and his work on Indigenism (1997, chapter 10). My discussion here brings together *ancestralidade* with his ideas about Indigenism to highlight how Orùnmilá’s struggle mobilizes the past as project.

The Orùnmilá Center's approach to anti-racism exemplifies one way subalternized populations make claims not only for inclusion in the current system, but for the right to actively transform this system and participate in its reconstruction. While focused on the plight of black Brazilians, the goals and strategies of Orùnmilá's politics correspond with those of Afro-descendants, working poor, and Indigenous peoples across Latin America and elsewhere who struggle for self-determination and the right to define development, value, and collectivity for themselves. These various groups engage in intertwined struggles over the distribution of resources and the recognition and representation for ways of life marginalized by capitalist development.

Groups like the Landless Workers' Movement (MST) in Brazil are changing understandings of land and what constitutes agricultural productivity. They differentiate their goals of human self-sustainability and collective interests from value for the market. By re-embedding land back into an understanding of the social they redefine "productivity" and re-structure social relations beyond economic exchange and the market paradigm. In other cases, Indigenous peoples in Bolivia and elsewhere struggle against the privatization of resources like water, which is a fundamental element for the reproduction of life, and consequently, community. These Indigenous groups claim cultural autonomy and territorial land rights to fight the encroachment on their lands by private corporations and governments in pursuit of resources like timber, oil, and gas. Like the MST, they also refuse to allow the market and capital to dictate the uses of natural resources and their vision of development.

These struggles against the narrowly defined "productive" value of capitalism and its devastating consequences are currently taking place throughout Latin America and in many other locations across the globe. These struggles mobilize, debate, and challenge power as citizens aim to construct more social definitions of productive value as well as assert Afro-descendant and Indigenous ways of life as sites of



valuable ecological and social knowledge that can redefine definitions of democracy and collectivity. Together, these efforts reveal the intersection of economy, culture, knowledge, and epistemology within struggles to assert autonomy and redefine development. They reveal how cultural struggle and struggle over knowledge are also material struggles. The Orùnmilá Center is part of these larger efforts to make another world possible, to make a difference in their own way by intervening to shape what counts as knowledge in development. This is the difference Orùnmilá makes.

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## GLOSSARY

**Agôgô:** two-toned bell used in *afoxé*, samba, Capoeira and other musical forms.

**Axé:** from the Yoruba term *asë*; life force; energy; potential; creative spiritual energy or life force with real material effects; the ability to make things happen and the power of transformation.

**Atabaque:** drum used for percussion in forms like *roda de samba*, *afoxé*, Candomblé, and Capoeira.

**Barracão:** a large barrack/shelter type space.

**Brasilidade:** “Brazilian-ness”; national identity; national culture.

**Candomblé:** Afro-Brazilian religion, predominantly of west-African origin, but also containing some Bantu influences; polytheistic religion that worships gods derived from African deities: Orixás (Yoruba), Voduns (Ewe and Fon), and Nkisis (Bantu). Some forms of Candomblé have syncretised elements drawing on Christianity or native American spirits.

**Cantico:** chant or hymn

**Contramestre:** the highest rank below mestre in capoeira.

**Favela:** shantytown.

**Mestre:** master. Top rank in capoeira.

**Palmares:** the largest, most famous Brazilian quilombo that lasted for most of the 17th century in the Northern state of Alagoas. Today it remains a historical symbol of Afro-Brazilian struggle.

**Pandeiro:** small, tambourine without jingles used in samba and Capoeira, usually made from wood and animal skin.

**Quilombo:** maroon/runaway slave communities that existed throughout Brazil, predominantly in rural areas, but also in urban areas from the 17th century until the abolition of slavery in 1888. Currently the federal government is officially recognizing many *comunidades remanescentes de quilombo*, or remaining *quilombo* communities, that prove their link to historical *quilombos* and persistence on particular lands.

**Roda:** wheel; circle; ring where *samba de roda* is danced and capoeira is played.

**Samba:** form of music originating in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Brazil with strong Afro-Brazilian percussive and bodily movement influences and rhythmic elements;

**Samba de Roda:** considered a traditional form of samba; danced in a circle where different men and women take turns dancing with each other; those on the outside of the circle clap a beat to the music played by percussionists; often occurs after Capoeira games and Candomblé ceremonies

**Terreiro:** Candomblé house of worship.

**Toque:** rhythm played on instruments, e.g. on the *atabaque* in *afoxé*.

**Umbanda:** spiritist religion that blends elements from Afro-Brazilian religions like Candomblé with Catholicism and Kardecism.

**Zumbi, or Zumbi dos Palmares:** legendary leader of the *quilombo* of Palmares, the 17<sup>th</sup> century maroon community. Remains a strong icon of Afro-Brazilian pride and the black struggle in contemporary Brazil.