

*O Movimento Negro Unificado*: Colonial Contexts, Black Power, and the Future of Afro-  
Brazilian Unity

Jennifer Chisholm

Professor Narendran Kumarakulasingam

University Honors

Fall 2011

As the foremost organization in Brazil's national black conscious movement, the *Movimento Negro Unificado* seeks to raise awareness about racism in Brazilian society as well as to create a unifying and empowering black Brazilian identity. In Brazil, black women and men struggle against discriminatory practices and negative images of themselves. Therefore, Afro-Brazilian activists created the *Movimento Negro Unificado* and others like it in an effort to resist the negative images and socioeconomic conditions of Afro-Brazilians. These negative images are generally ones of animality and savageness while Afro-Brazilian women are constantly faced with externally-imposed images of themselves as ready-and-willing sexual objects.

Although these perceptions affect Afro-Brazilians today, they have their origins in historical European views of Africans. Aside from detrimental stereotypes, Afro-Brazilians also struggle with poverty and low socio-economic status, which can be explained by the history of Brazilian of slavery during colonial Brazil. However, Afro-Brazilians have resisted their terrible conditions—both during slavery and post-emancipation. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and especially during the 1970s, Afro-Brazilians questioned their marginalization and oppression in Brazilian society and realized that empowerment could come from within. Through inspiration from the Black Power movement and afrocentricity in the United States as well as from earlier radical afrocentric Brazilian groups, Afro-Brazilian activists created the *Movimento Negro Unificado* as a part of the black consciousness movement. Today, this organization continues to be influential in the black consciousness movement, but has largely failed in its endeavors to create unity among all Afro-Brazilians. This failure can be explained, in part, in its reluctance to incorporate the voices and experiences of black Brazilians women and feminists.

*Images of African Savageness*

When Afro-Brazilian activists convened in the late 1970s to start the MNU and the national black consciousness movement, one of their goals was to develop a consciousness among their fellow black Brazilians about the origins of their oppression. Slavery was certainly a reason for their continued oppression, but lesser known and perhaps more insidious were the images of African savageness that had come to be accepted as truth by both white and black Brazilians. White Brazilians did not invent images of Afro-Brazilian inferiority and savageness. In reality, they originate from a much earlier time in relations between Europe and Africa.

Before Africans destined for enslavement landed on the northeastern shores of Brazil, conceptions of them as intriguing, yet repulsive were prevalent in the minds of colonial-era Europeans. A popular argument to explain racial prejudices of Europeans towards non-Europeans during the colonial era is the assertion that when confronted with difference, it is natural to demonize the unfamiliar. However, Europeans were not faced with a completely unknown Other when they first began to enslave Africans on a large scale. Also, Europeans throughout the ages did not always hold such prejudicial views of Africans. Rather, racism against Africans had its beginnings in early Christian Europe but was constantly negotiated until the time of European imperialism and colonialism.

African people (unlike indigenous peoples in the Americas) were known to Europeans since antiquity. Ancient Greeks and Romans had extensive contact with North Africa, as well as with other parts of what is now considered Sub-Saharan Africa. They noticed phenotypic differences between themselves and Africans, but did not equate their darker skin tones with racial inferiority or any other prejudicial notion (Jahoda 26). They did, however, have the belief

that the color black connoted evil while the color white represented goodness. It does not appear, though, that this color dichotomy translated to a racially hierarchical view of good, racially white Greeks/Romans and evil, racially black Africans.

The value-ascribed color dynamic persisted into the early Christian period of Europe, when more unfavorable views of Africans seem to have augmented. During this time, the notion that the color black denoted “darkness, the devil, and evil” became widespread (26). This was also the period when their negative view of the color black may have been directed towards the darker-skinned Africans. For instance, during the 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D., a monk named John Cassian wrote a series of religious papers in which he claimed that the devil either had the appearance of a “hideous Negro” or looked like “a Negro woman, ill-smelling and ugly” (Dunstan qtd. in Jahoda 26). A possible explanation for the change in sentiment among Europeans may have been tensions between Christian Europeans and African Muslims. Eager to assert the religious (as well as the socio-political) authority of Christianity, early Christian Europeans antagonized North African Moors. In an effort to contain the spread of Islam, Christian Europe segregated itself from the African continent and projected their negative image of Moors onto all African peoples.

On the other hand, not all early Christians considered Africans to be abhorrent. Black faces adorned church walls, since European painters often depicted figures such as the Queen of Sheba as African. Although rarely, African people living in Europe occupied positions of power or were the spouses of powerful Europeans. More commonly, African people labored for Europeans but were sometimes given positions of prestige such as guardians of treasure. Enslavement of Africans did exist in early Christian Europe, but Africans were not the only group of enslaved people: Bulgarians, Turks and Greeks were also enslaved. At this time, there was neither a sense of distinctive African inferiority nor a singular image of Africans in the

minds of Europeans. As Christianity strengthened in Europe and as Europeans pushed further into Sub-Saharan African lands which were previously unknown to them, the image of Africans became increasingly solidified and increasingly negative (27-29).

Medieval Europeans, eager for more gold and slaves and inspired by a “planetary consciousness”, travelled into the mysterious interiors of Africa (Jahoda 31; Pratt 15). There, they expected to find “monstrous” races—or, hybrids of humans and animals or at least animalistic humans. The idea of human/animal hybrids, or animal-like people originated with the Romans, but over time came to describe newly encountered people from Africa (Jahoda 31). For example, 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D. Roman geographer Solinus wrote that

The Ethiopian Garamantes [a race of sub-humans from an area south of Libya] have no knowledge of marriage: it is the custom of the country to have the women in common. Hence only the mothers recognize their sons; the honorable title of father cannot be applied to anyone. Who could, in effect, distinguish a father in the midst of such moral licence? So the Ethiopian Garamantes are rightly regarded as a degenerate people since, as a consequence of that promiscuity, the family name is sadly lost. (Solinus qtd. in Jahoda 31)

Later in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, French geographer Pierre Duval echoed Solinus’ sentiments but used the image of animalistic human-like beings to describe not only imagined groups of Africans but Africans at large: “they [Africans] have so much of the Beast, that they are born blind, and do not see until five days and...they...have large members. Their shape makes them resemble apes” (Duval qtd. in Jahoda 31).

Pre-enlightenment Europeans struggled to situate these so-called monstrous races (and increasingly African peoples) into their Great Chain of Being, which was their way of explaining the relationships between humans and animals in nature. Based on Christian thought, the Great Chain of Being was an imagined universal hierarchy of everything that comprised the Christian God's Creation. Beings that occupied the uppermost rungs of the hierarchy were considered to be the most perfect of God's creation. Medieval Europeans who accepted the idea of the Great Chain of Being saw all beings in nature as interconnected, even if some beings were superior to others.

It would have been hubristic of medieval Christians to assert themselves at the top of the hierarchy, and so they positioned themselves in the middle between angels and animals and slightly above human/animal hybrids. Their close proximity to animals and human/animal hybrids may have caused medieval Europeans distress; perhaps this is why debates about the Great Chain of Being persisted into the 18<sup>th</sup> century. At first, European thinkers sought to ascertain the exact relationship between humans and animals and particularly apes. Later, the debates were about the connections between apes and Africans (25). It is probable that at this point, the image of beastly Africans started to become fixed in the collective European psyche.

By the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the European Enlightenment, the Great Chain of Being had been replaced with more secular understandings of the world, but hierarchies among species remained. Europeans in the midst of the Enlightenment were anxious to discover laws for nature that did not require the commonsense logic of the Catholic Church. Without being able to rely on the image of a world controlled by an omnipotent God, secular Europeans sought to bring order to a world that for them must have seemed chaotic without the rules of religion (Pratt 31). In an effort

to bring order to chaos, Europeans like Carl Linnaeus fabricated a system with which to construct and understand the natural world.

Carl Linnaeus created a taxonomy that first enabled Europeans to make sense of beings and landscapes that they had never encountered before. Linnaeus created a system in which all objects found in nature could be logically categorized. Similarly to the Great Chain of Being, his taxonomy placed beings in a hierarchical order. Interestingly enough, he not only categorized the hierarchies of animals in relation to humans but also hierarchies within human groups. For instance, Linnaeus lays out the following categories of *Homo sapiens* in what appears to be the beginnings of racial groups:

1. Wild man, four-footed, mute, hairy
2. American, copper-colored, choleric, erect. Hair black, straight, thick; nostrils wide; face harsh; beard scanty; obstinate, content, free. Paints himself with fine red lines. Regulated by customs.
3. European. Fair, sanguine, brawny; hair yellow, brown, flowing; eyes blue; gentle, acute, inventive. Covered with close vestments. Governed by laws.
4. Asiatic. Sooty, melancholy, rigid. Hair black; eyes dark; severe, haughty, covetous. Covered with loose garments. Governed by opinions.
5. African. Black, phlegmatic, relaxed. Hair black, frizzled; skin silky; nose flat, lips tumid; crafty, indolent, negligent. Anoints himself with grease. Governed by caprice.

(Linnaeus qtd. in Pratt 32)

It is clear that Linnaeus had a particular disdain for Africans and essentially assigned moral values to certain facial features and perceived temperaments (Jahoda 77). In any case, he and

other Enlightenment thinkers like him sought to understand the natural world by first removing themselves from it and then categorizing it in a hierarchical fashion.

Europeans effectively removed themselves from nature by increasing the distance between humans and animals. Next, they distanced themselves from groups of people whom they thought were close to nature and therefore irrational (Adas 210). In this way, Europeans were able to occupy the top position in the hierarchy of beings that had previously been denied to them under the Great Chain of Being. However, in order to keep their position at the top, they needed to put as much distance between themselves, animals, and humans who were thought to live like animals. A particularly effective method for this (at least as a method of distancing themselves from Africans) was to demonize them as nothing better than savage beasts.

### *Savage Africans*

The 19<sup>th</sup> century in Europe saw an emergence of discourse about the animality of Africans who, by this point, had been firmly racialized as grotesque beings who were inherently inferior to Europeans (75). Europeans, attracted yet repulsed by the African body, often examined and did experiments on Africans in order to showcase their perceived ape-like physical qualities. For example, in 1861 German doctor Franz Pruner-bey published a monograph detailing the animalistic traits of African people. He notes in the monograph that Africans had larger nerves than Europeans, African men had larger than average sexual organs, and that there were possibly similarities between ape and African brains. Later on in the monograph, he explicitly states his beliefs in the apishness of Africans: “in the same way that the shortening of the big toe...has been noted in the Negro, in some Malaysian races, and in the Hottentots, as a constant character which brings these people close to the apes” (Pruner-Bey qtd. in Jahoda 82).



It is clear from this passage that the idea of “monstrous races” of degenerate, animal-like people was still operative in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe. Like the “Negro” and “Malaysian” races that Pruner-Bey articulated in his monograph, the Hottentots were “monstrous race” of people who were thought to inhabit South Africa. The term was generally ascribed to the Khoikhoi tribe of South Africa and the name “Hottentot Venus” was given by Europeans to at least two women from this ethnic group. In Europe, the image of the Hottentot Venus came to represent the image of all African women as sexually promiscuous and savage (Thompson 28).

The portrait of the Hottentot Venus was thoroughly illustrated in Georges Cuvier’s work, *Etudes sur l’ibis et Mémoire sur la Vénus hottentotte* (Studies on the Ibis and Memoir on the Venus Hottentot, 1817). Although this name could have been given to multiple African women who were sent to Europe as exhibit pieces, the most famous of the Hottentot Venus’ was Sarah Baartman. A slave of Dutch colonists in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century (Crais and Scully 2010; Davie 2002), Baartman travelled to Europe at the suggestion of her master’s brother, who assured his brother that she would acquire wealth if she exhibited herself as part of an exhibition of Africans in Britain (Crais and Scully 2010). As an aside, it should be noted that as a slave, any money she earned would have belonged to her master. At any rate, Baartman was displayed in exhibitions throughout Europe as an anatomical freak—likely due to coercion rather than any desire on her

own part (Strother 2009).

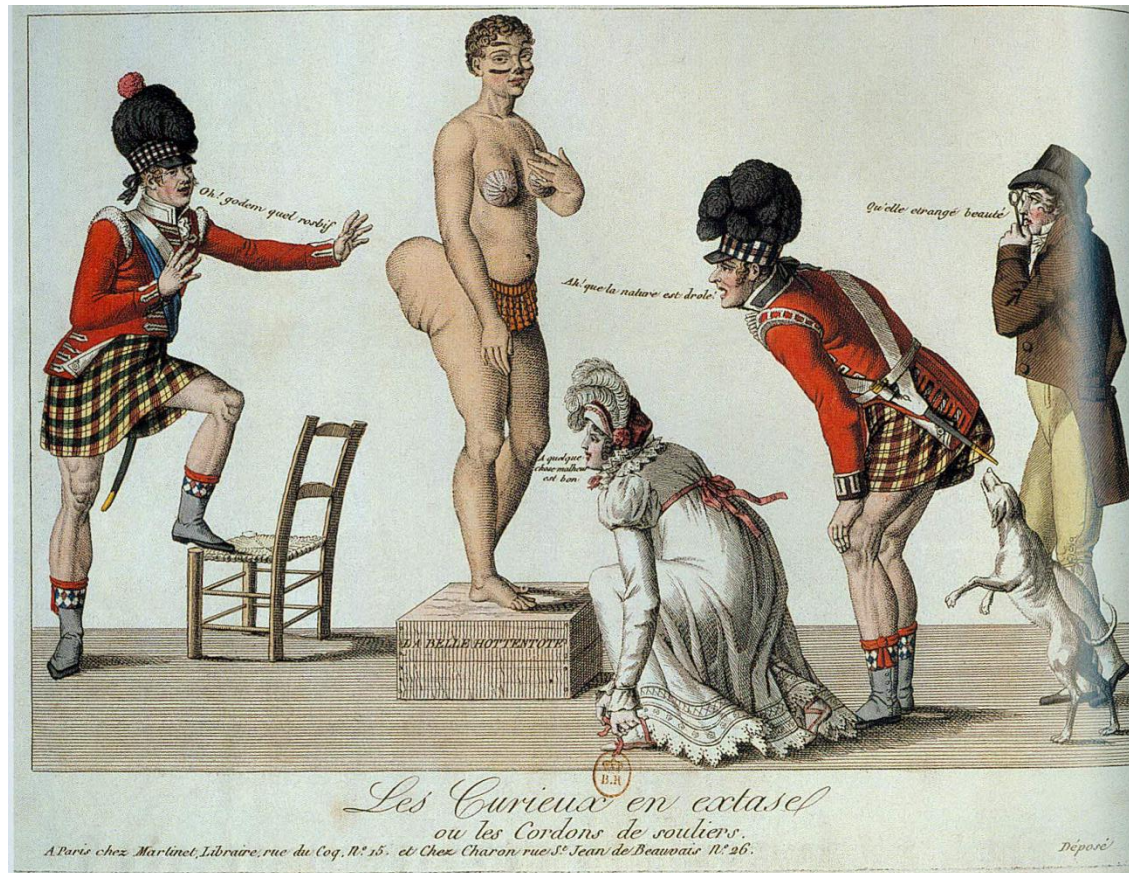


Figure 1.1 Aaron Martinet and Louis-François Charon, *Les Curieux en extase ou les cordons de souliers*, 1815 (Thompson 28).

Like with African men, Europeans were fascinated by the size of her genitals, her behind, as well as her “brutal” and “disgusting” countenance. After a physical examination of Baartman, Cuvier could barely contain his disgust as he chronicled in *Etudes*:

Her movements were marked by a quickness and capriciousness which reminded one of those of the monkey tribe. She had moreover a habit of pushing out her lips in the manner of the orang-outang...the enormous masses of fat which the

Bushwomen carry on their buttocks...offer a striking resemblance to those which characterize female Mandrils [and other apes] and which take on at certain points a truly monstrous enlargement. (Cuvier qtd. in Jahoda 79)

For Cuvier and countless other Europeans, Baartman was a hideous sight to behold because her body and mannerisms differed from the European norm which, in their minds, meant that she was less than human—an ape, specifically. After a short stint in Europe as a sideshow attraction, Baartman died in 1812. Her skeleton, as well as her sexual organs and brain, were preserved and displayed in the Musée de l’Homme of Paris until 1974 (Morgan and Tucker, 29).

Other African women during the colonization of Africa (or rape of Africa, as an alternative and perhaps more appropriate name) also faced similar dehumanization by the European colonizers. Upon the advent of modern photography in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, European travelers to Africa photographed the bodies of African women, which were then disseminated throughout colonial Africa and Europe as souvenir postcards. Europeans readily consumed images of African women who they believed were paradoxically deceptively beautiful, yet the ultimate picture of savageness (Thompson 279).

Throughout colonial Africa, Europeans distributed photographs and postcards of “savage” African women. African women were pictured with or without clothes—the latter images serving erotic or pornographic purposes (Geary 143). When African women were directed to wear clothes, it was often done in an effort to contrast the image of savage and sexually available African women with that of chaste and civilized European women. Another popular method was to juxtapose a so-called civilized African woman wearing Western clothing

with an African woman in traditional wear. These photographs in particular served as visual evidence of the successes of the European civilizing mission in Africa (146; Adas 1989).



Figure 1.2 Unknown photographer, *Her Country Cousins*, c. 1900 (Geary 146).

Unlike today's equivalent of producing and consuming images of the savage Other (i.e. National Geographic), photographs during colonial Africa were not meant to capture savageness in action and are largely devoid of context. In fact, most of these photographs were either staged or fabricated in order to appeal to the common stereotypical image in Europe of African women (Geary 148). Photography was also used to document racial "types" of differing African ethnic

groups. In these cases, photos were used for ethnographic purposes (showing specific clothing or accessories of a particular ethnic group) or to highlight anatomical features that, for Europeans, were indicative of the African “race”.

In the following postcard, both ethnography and racial typing inform the image. This picture, entitled *Huilla—Typos e Penteados* (*Huilla—Types and Hairstyles*), depicts a group of men and women from the Huilla tribe in the former Portuguese colony of Angola dressed in traditional clothing. Some of them face the camera, while others present their profiles. The unknown photographer wanted to showcase the unique hairstyles of the Huilla but also wanted to portray the animality of these people by inviting the viewer to see their protruding jaws<sup>1</sup> and flat noses which indicated apishness (147-8; Jahoda 1999). By ascribing types to photographs of black bodies, European colonialists controlled the meanings behind images of Africans as well as the perception of Africans in general (Geary 151).

---

<sup>1</sup> Prognathism, or a protruding jaw, was one of the imagined characteristics often applied to African people in order to prove their similarity to apes. Today in biological anthropology, prognathism is used to separate *Homo sapien* skulls from skulls of lesser-evolved *Homo* groups.



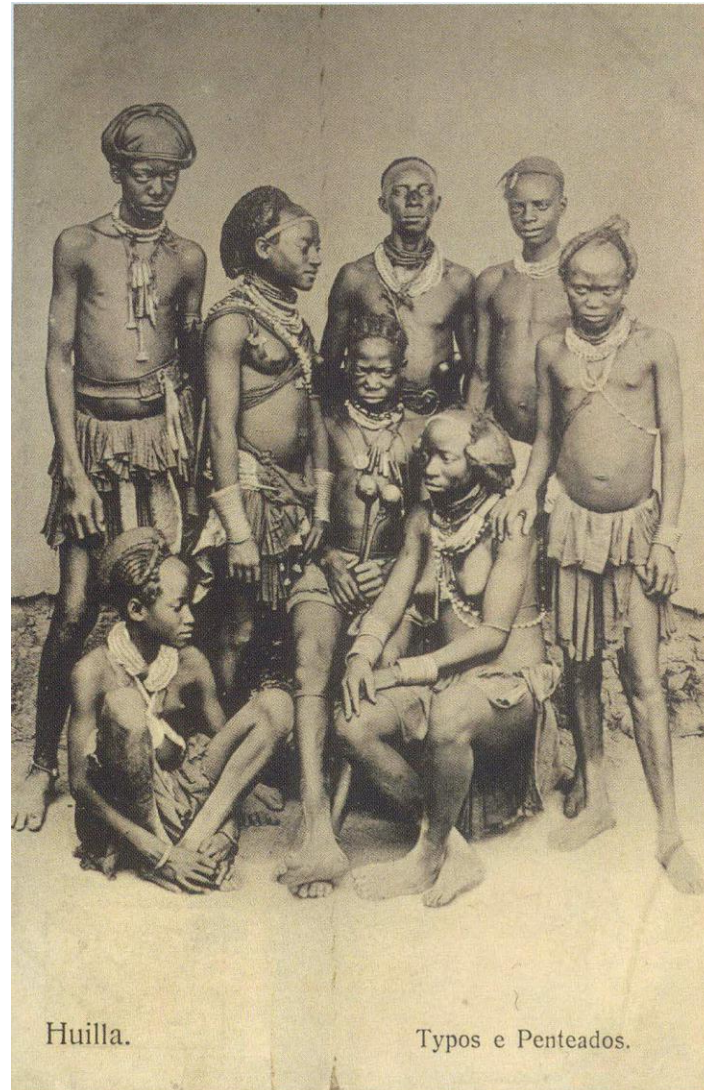


Figure 1.3 Unknown photographer, Huilla—Typos e Penteados, c. 1900 (Geary 148).

Racial types in photographs served to substantiate another form of natural hierarchy that had replaced, but also supported Linnaeus's conceptions of hierarchy within the human race. Charles Darwin developed and published his work detailing evolutionary theory in which, among other things, he argues all beings evolved from a parent species. Inherent in his logic is the idea of a hierarchy among beings, which was quickly applied to groups within the human

race. Such were the beginnings of pseudo-Darwinian “evolutionary hierarchy” of races and a reinvigorated field of scientific racism (150).

As Henry Louis Gates Jr. wrote in *Thirteen ways of Looking at a Black Man* “the black body has, of course, been demonized in Western culture; represented as ogreish, coarse, and highly menacingly sexualized. But the black body has also been valorized, represented as darkly alluring—still highly menacingly sexualized by, well, in a good way. And this, historically, is its ambiguous role in the Western imagination (Gates Jr. qtd. in Thompson 15). Although Europeans during the colonial era viewed Africans as savage and inferior to Europeans, they (especially women) remained intriguing to them. Early literary and visual representations of the African female body indicate that Europeans held contradictory views of them: “both desirable and repulsive, available and untouchable, productive and reproductive, beautiful and black” (Morgan qtd. in Thompson 279). Europeans had these perceptions of not only continental African women, but also of diasporic Africans who were taken away from their homelands as a consequence of the trans-Atlantic slave trade to the Americas. In the New World, European colonialists saw them as expendable slaves who were sexually available and valuable for their ability to produce more slaves (Thompson 279).

As previously mentioned, these images of sexual and savage African women were constructed in order to differentiate them from European women. Moreover, this separation between African women and European women translated into a general distancing between Europe and Africa, which allowed for the development of black slavery in the Americas (280). Today, Afro-Brazilian activists fight against prevalent and longstanding images of savageness that have transformed into damaging stereotypes of African-descended people in Brazil. They

are also fighting against socioeconomic disparities which have their roots in the slavocracy of colonial Brazil.

### *Slavery and Resistance in Colonial Brazil*

Slavery in the so-called New World depended on the exploitation and oppression of enslaved people. In Latin America, European colonialists preferred to enslave indigenous people and Africans who had been brought to the Americas for the sole purpose of slavery. Slavery began in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century in the frontier areas of Brazil (such as the Amazon) with the enslavement of native Brazilians and ended in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the emancipation of Afro-Brazilian slaves (Schwartz 44). During the beginning of Brazil's colonial era, Portuguese colonists hoped to institutionalize a system of enslaved indigenous labor, which was later replaced by African enslaved labor. As slavery became a way of life for indigenous Brazilians and Africans, they faced a choice: to accept the inevitability of their enslavement or to resist. Those enslaved Africans and native Brazilians who chose to resist had the option to revolt against their masters or to escape from the plantations into maroon colonies. However, enslaved people in Brazil also employed more subtle forms of resistance through their own spiritual beliefs and practices.

Although slavery became a fully-fledged operation in colonial Brazil, the first Portuguese colonists did not initially seek out to enslave indigenous Brazilians. In fact, they were open to various kinds of labor relationships including bartering (Schwartz 50). However, the Portuguese soon found out that the native people did not have the same concepts of work that the Portuguese held. The Portuguese found that members from the local indigenous tribe, the Tupinambá, did not accumulate more than they needed to survive. The native Brazilians agreed to labor in



exchange for goods, but refused to work at quicker paces or for longer durations in exchange for a surplus of European material goods (46-47). This relatively reciprocal bartering system ended soon after the creation of sugar plantations in Brazil due to the larger workforce needed to harvest the crop. Despite the demand for more labor, new sugar plantation owners could not afford to purchase African slaves (51). Consequently, colonists forcibly enslaved the Tupinambá, who the Portuguese later replaced with African slaves and their descendants.

Enslaved native people faced extremely harsh working conditions and the very real threat of dying from European diseases (58). Native populations had been decimated by disease and since native Brazilians were the ones who grew and harvested food, a famine occurred. While Portuguese colonists suffered from the decreased amounts of available food, many native Brazilians starved to death. Some native people, hoping to avoid famine, voluntarily became slaves, unaware that their servitude would be permanent (59). Although the Portuguese demanded both indigenous and African enslaved labor, the Portuguese did not value their labor equally. In general, the Portuguese reserved skilled labor for African slaves while native Brazilians carried out menial tasks.

Throughout the Americas, Europeans appraised native labor less highly than the labor of then highly-prized African slaves—who Europeans thought possessed specialized skills but also indicated status for the Europeans who owned them (73, 76; Cope 13-14). The relatively high number of enslaved native Brazilians compared to the number of enslaved Africans, the high risk of native Brazilian slaves escaping their servitude, and European preferences for African labor diminished the market value of native slaves. For instance, during an appraisal of native and African slaves from 1572-1574, a native Brazilian slave cost an average of 7\$000 while an African slave cost an average of 20\$000 (Buescu in Schwartz 78). For Portuguese slaveholders

and prospective slaveholders, the purchase of an expensive African slave presented a better economic choice because he produced more sugar and therefore earned more money for the Portuguese slave owner. Coinciding with the growth of the sugar plantation industry in the 1550s and 1560s, African enslaved labor replaced native enslaved labor by 1570 (Schwartz 78, 44). Before this shift occurred, however, native Brazilian slaves fiercely resisted their exploitation and oppression.

Slave revolts represent the most obvious examples of native resisted but native people also used religion as a means of resistance. During the time of native enslavement, native Brazilians fought against their oppression through armed rebellions. One notable rebellion occurred in the northeast region of Bahia in 1567. Indigenous slaves, as well as slaves from other ethnic groups, overtook sugar plantations in the area, killed numerous slave masters, and liberated slaves who then escaped from the plantations. Dissent among native people did not go unpunished, however, and the Portuguese often killed or enslaved native Brazilians who did not acquiesce to Portuguese authority. Despite threats of violence from Portuguese soldiers, rebellions still persisted—both among enslaved native people and free indigenous Brazilians upon whose land plantation owners encroached (59).

Free and enslaved native Brazilians also formed a millennial movement called *Santidade* that aided them in their resistance against the Portuguese. Millennial movements generally occur among extremely oppressed groups who imagine an idealized world in which neither their oppression nor their oppressors exists. Oppressed people in these movements engage in rituals and other spiritual practices with the goal of excising the evil that has caused their subjugation and suffering (Metcalf pars. 2-3). During the Santidade millennial movement in southern Bahia, native Brazilians also employed religion as a tool to fight against their enslavement. Participants

in Santidade not only called upon native spiritual forces, but they also incorporated Roman Catholic beliefs into their rituals—possibly hoping that both native gods and the Christian God could help them with their cause. With a force of over 20,000 native Brazilians—including some escaped enslaved Africans—the Santidades burned a host of sugar mills and plantations. Although the Portuguese ultimately repressed the movement by 1627, it remained symbolically important to enslaved Brazilians, both native and African, because the movement proved that enslaved people did in fact have agency and that they could fight against what seemed like an inevitable and everlasting condition (Schwartz 59).

The legal enslavement of native Brazilians lasted for a relatively short period of time (around 1500-1570) because an enslaved labor force of Central, West, and Southern African involuntary migrants to Brazil replaced them (44; Sweet 2). Like indigenous Brazilians, Africans in Brazil experienced horrible lives as slaves. Countless slaves constantly suffered from malnutrition, disease, and sexual abuse from their Brazilian masters (66-77). Aside from physical harm, African slaves faced psychological harm. For instance, pregnant women mentally suffered because they knew that their children would be born into a world where they would endure abuse as slaves and would lack any kin group for support. As a result, enslaved women sometimes had abortions or abandoned their children (Sweet 66-67). Women who had escaped their bondage would sometimes abandon their children— not with the intent to indirectly kill them but to give them a better chance of survival. For example, in the 1690s a nameless enslaved woman escaped to the forest near the city of Jacarepaguá with her daughter. She lived in the forest for over a year before returning to Jacarepaguá and in 1692 she gave her child to a white Brazilian man (68).

Resistance to these atrocious situations took similar forms for enslaved Africans as they did for enslaved native Brazilians. Like native Brazilians, enslaved Africans held onto their

religious beliefs in the face of unbelievable pressure from the Portuguese Inquisition and other Portuguese colonists to forget their own cultural ways of life. Some enslaved Africans and Afro-Brazilians did eventually acculturate some Portuguese cultural norms but African cultural forms and especially Central African cosmology continued to influence the worldview of enslaved Africans and their descendents.

Central African cosmology served various functions for a community: it helped explain the origin of the universe and humankind, shaped honor codes within communities, defined the relationship between humans and gods, and helped explained phenomena such as illness. This cosmology presupposed a division between the terrestrial world of Earth and the spiritual world, which was assumed to be divided by a vast body of water (103-104). Although Central Africans viewed this world and the spirit world as distinct entities, humans and spirits could easily pass through both worlds. The spirits of the ancestors continued to occupy a place in the community after death and so still involved themselves in its everyday happenings. Ancestor spirits “witnessed village disputes, sometimes intervening to uphold the moral codes and community standards. They watched over hunters in the forests, protected women during childbirth, and insured bountiful harvest” (104). As compensation, ancestors expected that their living kin would honor and revere them.

Like the division between Earth and the spirit world, Central Africans also conceptualized of a division within people as well. Central Africans thought that all humans had an “outer shell”, or a body, and an “inner shell” which they considered to be the real essence of the person. Central Africans thought that this independent and eternal essence, or soul, traveled to other locations during sleep and explained the occurrence of dreams (104). While high social status and overall good health connoted a complete soul, sickness signified that the sick person

had a weak soul, which affected the well-being of the entire community. All maladies in a community were considered punishment by the ancestor spirits or an act of an ancestor spirit itself. The act, called *kalundu*, represented an instance when an ancestor would purposefully caused illness by possessing a living person (144). *Kalundu* and other forms of misfortune could only be alleviated by ingratiating and appealing to them for help (104-105).

Respect and fear for the ancestors as well as their overall cosmology stayed with Africans when they arrived as slaves in Brazil. Although enslaved Africans in Brazil came from Southern, West, and Central Africa and so often faced difficulties communicating with one another, they still managed to bond over similar cultural practices and cosmological beliefs. Enslaved people from these areas could relate to and understand each other's worldviews easily, which helped them to deal with enslaved life (117, 132). Not only did their spirituality help create a sense of Africanness and enslaved Africans unity, it also laid the foundation for a covert form of resistance through divination.

For Africans, divination explained, predicted and controlled the natural world and allowed the diviner to communicate with the spirit world. In Central Africa, the community regulated divination and required that all revelations needed the validation and interpretation of community members (119-120). Outside of African communities in Brazil, however, diviners exercised great influence in the lives of those Portuguese-descended Brazilians who believed in the power of their magic. Religious white Brazilians abhorred all non-Christian religions, but other white Brazilians, who had no qualms with accepting at least some aspect of Central African cosmology, sought after diviners on a regular basis (217-226). For instance, Sweet tells the story of a white Brazilian woman named Barbara Morais, who in 1721, tried to find a cure for the mysterious illness plaguing her husband. Convinced that a *feiticeiro* (wizard) had cursed her

husband, Barbara Morais called upon an enslaved African man and diviner by the name of Domingos João Pereira for assistance. Sweet uses documents written by the Portuguese Inquisition to describe Pereira's divination method and the aftermath:

Domingos began his divination by drawing a cross in the dirt with his finger. On top of the cross, he put a calabash with various objects inside of it. Domingos tapped on the calabash with his finger and cast some blessings on top of it "in the language of Angola." He then emptied several objects from the mouth of the calabash into the palm of his hand. These objects included "some things like roots" and "a silver coin."

Reading the objects that emerged from the calabash, Domingos informed the sick man that his ailments were "*feitiços* [cursed objects] that were given to you by a woman who you had a relationship with before marrying this one; and the cause that she had for this was because she wanted to marry you, and since you left her and married with another, she made this for you to suffer." Skeptical of Domingos's divination, the man wanted further proof that what Domingos said was true. So Domingos prepared a dance with three little bottles: "grabbing one, he danced with it and he showed the bottle suspended in the air." Inside the bottle "appeared a very old black man with a red belt fastened around his stomach and a shepherd's staff on his shoulder, with some roots in one hand and some coins in the other." The roots and the coin were precisely what had spilled out of Domingo's calabash. When the sick man saw them in the hands of the man inside the bottle, he understood that "that *preto* [black man] was who gave me the *feitiços*, and the roots the material from which they were composed, and the coins

the payment that he received for the evil.” Domingos then reached for another bottle, and again displaying it suspended in the air, there appeared inside of the bottle the mulatta, “who ordered that the *feiticos* be made for the sick man because he rejected her.” (Sweet 126, ANTT)

As evidenced by Barbara Morais and her husband’s (as well as countless other white Brazilians) search for answers through African diviners, Central African spiritual beliefs were able to withstand the Portuguese Inquisition’s efforts to eradicate African religious practices from Brazil.

Enslaved diviners also used their skills on plantations as a form of justice. White Brazilian slave masters would often oblige a diviner slave to uncover the identity of the unknown person who had committed a particular crime. For example, in 1646 a plantation owner named Duarte Roiz Ulhoa had diviner Gunza conduct a ceremony to find the culprit who had stolen cloth from the plantation. Unfortunately, the white Brazilian who had witnessed most of the ritual and subsequently informed the Portuguese Inquisition left the scene before the diviner named the perpetrator (123). Although Brazilian plantation-owners expected a certain outcome when a slave divined, diviners could and did often use their supernatural gifts to save other slaves from harsh punishment.

In 1728, many slaves had died on Domingos Alves da Costa’s plantation and he believed that one of his slaves casted spells on other slaves in order to kill them. Costa told José Mina to supernaturally ascertain the identity of the *feiticeiro* and so José Mina performed the ritual. To Costa’s surprise, Mina declared that a *feiticeiro* did not exist on the plantation and furthermore he told his master to release the four men imprisoned as suspects in the crime. Interestingly,

Costa never told Mina that he had imprisoned any of his slaves as suspects. Convinced that Mina was using powers from the Devil, Costa denounced Mina to the Portuguese Inquisition.

Although Costa probably did not heed Mina's demand for the slaves' acquittal, Mina's actions did spare a slave from the abuse that would have undoubtedly followed if Mina had accused a fellow slave of being a *feiticeiro*.

Enslaved Africans and Afro-Brazilians used divination and the power of their spirituality as subtle tools with which to fight their enslavement. However, resistance in colonial Brazil also manifested in the creation and actions of *quilombos*. *Quilombos* functioned as Brazilian maroon communities of African-descended people who had escaped their servitude. The term *quilombo* comes from the Central African concept of *ki-lombo*, which described a relatively isolated society of male warriors who were kinless because war and the slave trade had killed family members or otherwise tore their families apart. These communities in Central Africa of kinless warrior men supported each other and created a new group identity (50). *Ki-lombos* transformed into *quilombos* in Brazil, where they served a similar function—except in the Brazilian context, rootless former slaves and not kinless warriors lived in self-imposed exile.

Enslaved Africans who wished to escape their appallingly horrible lives as slaves, fled from plantations in order to live in *quilombo* maroon communities. *Quilombos* had a variety of structures: from a group of small huts to entire villages and small towns. There, self-emancipated Africans and Afro-Brazilians could practice and perform their African cultures freely without fear of being mistreated by hostile white Brazilians. Although *quilombo* residents celebrated their African cultural roots, they also incorporated European and native Brazilian cultural ways into their everyday lives (Conrad 366).



Brazilian maroon colonies, like other maroon colonies throughout the Americas, existed in places that were difficult to reach and undesirable as living spaces for most people—such as forests, swamps and other hinterland areas. This isolation ensured *quilombo* inhabitants safety from slave catchers. The bravest and wisest women and men in their communities would occupy leadership positions in *quilombos* and protect their communities from hostile Portuguese forces. Aside from bravery and wisdom, chiefs of *quilombos* may have been chosen because of their former status as royalty in their previous African communities. In any case, these leaders would oftentimes head assaults against other maroon settlements and plantations in order to obtain resources and women (368).

For example, in the 1670s, the Alagôas, Porto Calvo, and Penedo plantations endured many attacks by Afro-Brazilians from Palmares. Palmares was a network of *quilombos* that formed an independent republic in the present state of Alagoas. Free Africans and Afro-Brazilians from this republic apparently killed cattle and freed slaves on plantations so that their *quilombo* could grow in numbers (Fonseca in Conrad 369). *Quilombo* life was not easy, especially since food and other resources were sometimes hard to come by and the threat of battle with mercenaries on behalf of irate slave-masters was always imminent (Sweet 82). However, a difficult life in a *quilombo* must have been preferable to life as debased slave, condemned to exist as useful, yet expendable property for a master.

Enslaved Africans and Afro-Brazilians, as well as native Brazilians endured terrible conditions, which propelled them to resist against their bondage. Despite all concerted Portuguese efforts, enslaved people exercised great power and agency in the face of their enslavement. When the opportunity presented itself, enslaved people actively rebelled against their masters in slave revolts or through participation in *quilombos*. Less directly, they used

divination and a shared sense of African cosmology to negotiate power in the colonial system and to build the unity necessary for resistance. Today, Afro and native Brazilian activists owe a great deal to their forbearers, who not only fought so that their descendants would be free, but whose efforts also helped lay the foundation for future Brazilian resistance movements.

*Race in Brazil and the Foundations of the Movimento Negro Unificado*

The legacy of slavery in Brazil shaped the perceptions of race in the country and continues to negatively affect the socioeconomic conditions of Afro-Brazilians. Unlike other colonial societies in the Americas such as the United States, the colonizers (in this case, the Portuguese) never intended to stay in Brazil. Brazil was seen as a colony from which the Portuguese empire could extract wealth and leave once resources had been depleted (Covin 20). As such, the presence of Africans in Brazil was seen as a necessary but temporary evil in order to build the colonial empire.

The common assumption at the time was that (like the native Brazilian population) the African-descended population would also eventually die out (24). The lives of African and Afro-Brazilian slaves were seen as expendable, which is one reason why slavery in Brazil lasted for 350 years and why Brazil imported the largest number of African slaves of any colony in the Americas (22). The Portuguese imported large numbers of slaves in order to replace, not add to, the population of enslaved people. Enslaved Africans in Brazil were literally worked to death and when they died, they were simply replaced by some other unfortunate person doomed to a life of labor that would eventually kill them. While it is true that African slaves were valued as specialized laborers or in other ways were deemed valuable by Portuguese colonists, it is important to note that, as Covin maintains, “black labor was valuable, black life was not” (24).

After European diseases and the harrowing conditions of slavery killed the majority of indigenous Brazilians, African-descended people became the majority of the population. White elites as the minority were terrified of losing power to Afro-Brazilians, so white Brazilian elites employed divide-and-conquer tactics in an effort to prevent any sort of rebellion against them. Identity was seen as a useful divider and so they partitioned Afro-descended people into many separate racial groups—the idea being that as a minority, white elites could better dominate a society comprised of smaller minorities (25).

For example, in colonial Brazil the Afro-Brazilian population was divided in the following ways: *ladinos* (acculturated Africans) who were contrasted with *negros locais*, or recently-arrived enslaved Africans. There were also *crioulos* (Brazilian-born African-descended people), *mulatos/pardos* (children of black-white unions), and *libertos* (free Afro-Brazilians). Moreover, there were divisions among Africans from differing parts of the continent and so someone from West Africa would belong to a different racial category than another person from Central Africa (24-25). The white elite also saw to it that the Afro-Brazilian majority was kept in check by employing *mulato* overseers, policemen, military officers, and others to assert authority over black Brazilians. Most often, these people occupied a racially ambiguous position between blackness and whiteness and consequently also largely made up the nascent Brazilian middle class (26).

Race was also tied to one's occupation. During colonial Brazil, labor was intensely racialized. White Brazilians refused to do the lowest paying and most difficult tasks and so these jobs were reserved for Afro-Brazilians (29). By the time the emancipation of slaves was declared on May 13, 1888, 95% of Afro-Brazilians were already free—many having purchased their own freedom or the freedom of others (27-28). Despite this, Afro-Brazilians were restricted to the

same kinds of work that they had done previously before emancipation because it was still deemed to be “black” work (28). Furthermore, in a concerted effort to rid Brazilian society of any African presence, Brazilian authorities encouraged immigration from Europe. At the expense of Afro-Brazilians, the government provided Europeans housing and jobs upon arrival. White Brazilians hoped that the increasing number of Europeans, as well as miscegenation<sup>2</sup>, would lead to a whitening of Brazil that would enable it to be as advanced (or, civilized) as other Western nations (28-29; Caldwell 29, 31).

Race in Brazil post-emancipation largely followed from ideas about race during the colonial era. Unlike in the United States, there was no law based on ancestry that stipulated blackness (like the one-drop rule in the U.S.). However, racial distinctions were still apparent but were mainly based on appearance. For example, in Brazil if someone had African ancestry but his or her phenotype looked more European, then he or she would be considered white, and vice versa. However, a non-white identity did not necessarily translate into a completely black identity. Pardos (mixed-race people) were neither black nor white; neither were: *morenos escuros com cabelos lisos* (dark-brown people with straight hair) or *claros com cabelos crisos* (light-skinned people with kinky hair), ad infinitum (Covin 31).

Essentially, blackness was reserved for those with solely African ancestry, while whiteness was granted to everyone who exhibited enough “European” characteristics—making it difficult to identify as a black Brazilian. Today in Brazil, there are up to 200 possible ways to self-identify on the census, which asks respondents for their skin color as opposed to their race. Covin interprets this statistic as not indicative of racial harmony or ambivalence towards race,

---

<sup>2</sup> Interracial sex, not interracial marriage, was seen as a tool through which to whiten the population and eventually eradicate the Afro-Brazilian population (Covin 29).

but as proof that a black identity is a “choice of last resort” in Brazil: “If one takes the estimate of 193 as an example, what is critical to understand is that 192 alternatives to black are available. One can be identified as black—or as one of the 192 other possibilities...The tendency to self-identify as black is very limited, particularly since everyone understands the closer to white and the further from black you are, the better you are” (32). Many white Brazilians vehemently reject the idea that race is an important factor in society or that racism even exists in Brazil. However, due to the efforts by the black consciousness movement, this sentiment is changing. For instance, in 1995 a prominent Brazilian newspaper polled Brazilians about the significance of race. Of white Brazilians, 89% said that Afro-Brazilians were racially discriminated against, although only about 10-11% admitted that they themselves were prejudiced or racist (Daniel 239).

### *The Myth of Racial Democracy*

Although it is encouraging that racism is increasingly being accepted as a social problem in Brazil, the false idea of Brazil as a racial democracy still persists. The architect of the racial democracy theory was renowned Brazilian anthropologist Gilberto Freyre. Unlike his contemporaries, he argued that miscegenation improved, rather than hindered, Brazilian society. Not entirely breaking with colonial ideas of race, Freyre asserted that Brazil was a predominately *pardo* nation, comprising the best of both Portuguese and African cultures. Furthermore, he championed whitening through interracial sex as a way to integrate the Afro-Brazilian population—a popular belief today (Caldwell 32-33, 35). He supposedly proved Brazil’s racially harmonious society in his 1933 book *Casa Grande e Senzala*<sup>3</sup>, later translated into English as *The Masters and the Slaves* by noting the lack of overt racism and legal discrimination in Brazil’s history (33).

---

<sup>3</sup>(The Big House and the Senzala)—Senzalas were the living quarters of slaves on Brazilian plantations (Ribeiro).

Freyre had the United States in mind while he was formulating his hypothesis about the non-existence of racism in Brazil. For Brazil and many other Latin American countries, racism and legal racial apartheid are American phenomena and have not occurred in other places in the Americas. However, Freyre and others who believe this sentiment are mistaken because legal racism is not necessary in order for racism to exist in a society. In *The Unified Black Movement of Brazil*, Covin discusses the differences between the southern and northern parts of the United States. In the former, racial segregation was legal for much of the country's history, while the North was generally spared from the Jim Crow laws of the South. However, racism was just as much of an issue in the North as it was in the South; the only difference was that northern racism (like racism in Brazil) was more discreet and harder to detect (Covin 18-19).

In any case, the myth of Brazil's racial democracy spread throughout Brazil, as Brazilian thinkers praised Brazil for being unlike the racist United States and for its perceived progressive attitude towards race (35). This myth was also transmitted to other parts of the Western world and so Brazil was seen by Western powers such as the United States as a racially utopian society. In the 1950s, UNESCO sponsored a study of Brazil, which was conducted in order to find out how Brazil maintained harmony among the races. Anthropologists and sociologists descended upon Brazil to find out its secret for racial harmony, but researchers found that no such racial harmony existed (Caldwell 6; Covin 36). In fact, the belief in the inferiority of African-descended people is just as salient today as it was in colonial Brazil.

Institutionalized racism keeps Afro-Brazilians from aspiring to higher socioeconomic statuses but overt racism is also a current problem in Brazil. The image of African-descended people as savage and apish is still very much alive and Afro-Brazilians are often subjected to taunts or racist remarks about their supposed animal-like characters. For instance, in white or

*pardo* settings, it is not uncommon to hear Afro-Brazilians referred to as monkeys. In racially-charged jest, people will offer Afro-Brazilians bananas—another allusion to their animality. In a racist environment such as this, it is difficult not to internalize a sense of inferiority. An Afro-Brazilian woman named Maria recounts her experience with racism in Brazil:

The other day I saw...on the television. I hated being black. It was in the month of August. I changed the channel. They were in Bahia [a state in northeastern Brazil] talking about the blonde in the [musical] group Tchán, this horrible thing. They were talking about the other one...until a woman arrived and the reporter asked, “Do you like Gilberto Gil?”<sup>4</sup> “No.” “Why don’t you like Gilberto Gil?” “Because I am not a veterinarian.”...So the reporter asked, “Why?” “Because I don’t like monkeys.”...I hated being black. I hated it. I began questioning. I started to question religion, many things...The reporter didn’t do anything. He was like, “...but you are discriminating.” The woman responded, “Yes, I am. They also discriminate.” So, I felt hatred for being black, because I was not able to do anything to respond. I tried...But at times it makes you so angry. (qtd. in Caldwell 86)

Institutionalized, overt, as well as internalized racism were all forms of discrimination that propelled Afro-Brazilians to form organizations such as the *Movimento Negro Unificado*.

### *Black Power and Afrocentricity*

The 1970s was certainly a decade of racial turmoil in the United States, but it was also a time when African Americans felt free to express their pride in their African roots. In early 1968,

---

<sup>4</sup> Gilberto Gil is a legendary Afro-Brazilian musician known for his pioneering socially-conscious songs during the Tropicália movement of the 1960s. He was also the Minister of Culture in President Lula’s administration.

radical black Americans broke away from the mainstream black civil rights movement and started the Black Power movement. The movement was born out of a general malaise about the conditions of black Americans but was also in response to ineffective black leadership, the Vietnam War, Malcolm X's assassination, and conflicts among civil rights leaders about the effectiveness of nonviolence from 1964-68 (1). Unlike Martin Luther King who advocated nonviolence in the face of overt racism and physical abuse by white Americans, Malcolm X and his adherents strongly believed in self-defense. Black activists, frustrated over what must have seemed like futile nonviolence tactics, found solace in Stokeley Carmichael's famous clarion call: "This is the 27<sup>th</sup> time I have been arrested. I ain't going to jail no more. What we gonna start saying is 'Black Power'" (qtd. in Glaude 3).

After Malcolm X's and subsequently Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassinations, black activists took up the Black Power slogan and created a number of organizations based on Malcolm X's ideology including the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, the US Organization, and the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (4). Some groups called for a separate nation for all black people, while others thought Black Power was synonymous with black capitalism. Essentially, black capitalism supports the choice of "buying black", or only patronizing businesses run by black people (Marable 139). Every group, however, maintained that African Americans needed to challenge the white power structure but that also a mental revolution, or mental decolonization, needed to take place in order for African Americans to empower themselves: "to become self-directed, to be assertive, to take pride in skin color and heritage was to remove the negative connotations of race that had long served as a constraining psychological and social force" (Van Deburg qtd.in Glaude 4).



Like Malcolm X, Black Power activists saw their struggle as part of a larger worldwide struggle to end discrimination against African-descended people and all people of color. Likewise, oppressed groups such as the Dalit of India, African and Asian Jewish people in Israel, and First Nations activists in Canada all found inspiration from the Black Power movement (Berger 77; Baldwin 291). The Black Power movement also influenced Afro-Brazilians but more so in terms of culture than politics. The cultural products from this movement like songs, dances, and especially blaxploitation<sup>5</sup> films such as *Shaft*, steadily found their way into Afro-Brazilian communities from the United States.

Although Brazil had not experienced a civil rights movement like the United States, Black Power resonated in a way with young Afro-Brazilians. Songs from the Black Power movement, such as James Brown's "Say it Loud—I'm Black and I'm Proud", were sung by Afro-Brazilians even though they could not understand the meaning of the lyrics. Although the meaning of the words themselves were lost, the message of these songs was clear. Through a consumption of African American cultural products, Afro-Brazilians became exposed to the Black Power attitude, which became trendy among Afro-Brazilian youth. Oftentimes, nightclubs would hold *Noites do Shaft*, or Shaft Nights, when young people would wear bell bottoms, pick out their hair into large afros, and forgo Brazilian samba for American funk music. These were all black affairs, and even though black pride was not yet on the consciousness of most Afro-Brazilians, a new trend in Afrocentricity was starting to form (Covin 50-53).

Afrocentricity is a sense of unity derived from a shared experience of "slavery, racism colonialism, and neocolonialism" among people of African descent (Adeleke 1989, 95). Like

---

<sup>5</sup> Blaxploitation was a film genre popular during the 1970s in the United States. Although films showcased negative stereotypes of African Americans, some African Americans felt empowered by the predominately black cast of the films (Rahner).

Black Power, Afrocentricity seeks to reevaluate blackness as an identity of inherent worth and also celebrates the cultural legacies of Africa. In many ways, Afrocentricity builds on the idea of an imagined (or real) community of African-descended peoples throughout the world who, aside from their shared experiences of oppression, also share basic African cultural elements. Afrocentricity and Black Power are related concepts, although Afrocentricity may have a more global scope than does Black Power.

Despite its power to unify African-descended people and help them believe in their own self-worth, there are critics of Afrocentricity. Adeleke argues that Afrocentricity is an unsound project because it ignores the vast cultural differences among African-descended people as well as African peoples still living on the continent. He also maintains that Afrocentricity is based on an idea of a static, singular African culture when in reality, culture is always changing (1989, 98). For Adeleke, colonialism affected continental Africans much differently than it affected Africans in the Americas and that today Africans and African-descended people cannot claim to be sharing the same experiences. Furthermore, he claims that African-descended people in the Americas should not self-avow an African identity because our African roots have long been destroyed.

Adeleke is not critical of all Afrocentricity, however. He alleges that true Pan-Africanism and Afrocentricity were vibrant during anti-colonial movements of Africa from 1900-1945. Today's Afrocentricity, he laments, is but a "shadow of its former self" (1989, 113). African nations today have had difficulty uniting through the African Union as well as through other entities and so Adeleke cannot fathom how a splintered Africa could be used as a rallying point for Afrocentrists.

Another critique of Adeleke's is Afrocentricity's relationship to Black Nationalism. According to Adeleke, Black Nationalism, Afrocentricity, and Black Power could all be considered "black" forms of white nationalism and white power and that black nationalists in the United States have actually borrowed tactics from white nationalists (2009, 14). He also has a problem with Black Nationalism among African Americans because of the viewpoints of certain black nationalists during the late 1800s. He criticizes thinkers such as Edward Wilmot Blyden and Marcus Garvey (the recognized father of the Pan-Africanist movement) for supporting European civilizing missions in Africa (2009, 29-30).

Afrocentricity is not perfect and likely has problematic aspects, including essentializing African cultures. However, for African-descended people in the Americas whose histories have been erased because of slavery, Afrocentricity is the only source of a positive identity. Afrocentricity may not make sense to Africans who still have tribal and ethnic identities, but for black people in the Americas our identities since slavery have been conflated with servitude, oppression, poverty, and landlessness/rootlessness. Africa is the imagined homeland and a source of pride for people who have been denied the privilege to know their roots. Unlike white nationalism, Black Nationalism and Afrocentricity are about carving out a space called home and asserting power in a society that still operates on the oppression of people of color. African-descended people throughout the Americas are culturally different, true, but what is also true and perhaps more significant is that our experiences of discrimination *because* of our African heritage are relatively the same regardless of the nation in which we live.

In fact, Afrocentricity is more important than ever today, at least in the United States: "We are at a stage where it is hip to consume black culture, but it is no longer hip to be black. Black thinkers/scholars are in vogue when their ideas can be abstracted, universalized, and then

expunged of their provincial black experiential roots/routes” (Baldwin 291). As Daniel (2006) argues, Brazil and the United States may be experiencing a switch in their views about the significance of race. Therefore, if post-race and post-black are operative words in American scholarly discourse, then Brazilian thinkers are experiencing a newfound realization of the significance of race and the necessity of black unity.

*The Movimento Negro Unificado, Black Feminism, and the Future of the Black Consciousness Movement*

The development of black consciousness in Brazil has its foundations in the *Movimento Negro Unificado* as part of the larger black consciousness movement in Brazil. *O Movimento Negro Unificado* (the Unified Black Movement) was officially founded in Sao Paulo in 1978 by activists Thereza Santos and Eduardo Oliviera de Oliveira (Cabiao). The organization, originally planned as a mass movement of all Afro-Brazilians, was inspired by the African American Civil Rights movement as well as by earlier Brazilian groups such as *Grupo Evolução* in 1971 (Cabiao; Caldwell 155). However, radical black Brazilian groups of the 1930s were the first to advocate for black unity in Brazil.

In the 1930s, an Afrocentric Brazilian consciousness was starting to form, although it did not carry political undertones until the black consciousness movement of the late 1970s. Afro-Brazilian intellectuals, seeking for outlets through which to speak about the black experience in Brazil, formed newspapers dedicated to this purpose. These newspapers discussed events in the local Afro-Brazilian community, as well as happenings and important figures in Africa and in other parts of the African Diaspora (Covin 34). Black social clubs also started to emerge and in 1931, the *Frente Negra Brasileira* (Black Brazilian Front) was born.

This organization-turned-political party, with a membership of around 20,000 Afro-Brazilians, operated out of urban centers of southern Brazil and called for a greater integration of black people into the greater Brazilian society (Reiter and Mitchell 3). Also ascribing to Freyre's notion of racial democracy, members of the *Frente* did not unite around a politicized racial identity. However, they did realize that due to the legacy of slavery, most Afro-Brazilians were in the lower classes. Therefore, they advocated for more economic opportunities for Afro-Brazilians. Near the end of the decade, Vargas established a dictatorial regime in Brazil, which outlawed all political parties including the *Frente*. Later, once Vargas' regime was replaced by a military regime, the teaching of race in schools and especially universities was banned with the hope that this would solidify the idea of racial democracy in Brazil (35-36). Abdias do Nascimento and other black intellectuals and artists who resisted the cultural repression by the Vargas regime, formed the Experimental Black Theatre (TEN) in 1944 (Walters 274).

Abdias do Nascimento was an influential Afro-Brazilian artist, activist, and scholar who founded the Black Experimental Theatre in order to critically analyze and expose the nature of racism against Afro-Brazilians. He was also central articulating the unique context for black Brazilian social movements, which he called *quilombismo*. For Nascimento, the resistance of African slaves, epitomized by the quilombo stronghold of Palmares, is the foundation upon which the black consciousness movement stands today:

The re-emergence of peoples of African descent in Spanish and Portuguese-speaking South and Central America are actors on the stage of Pan-African world affairs. I say 're-emergence' because these peoples have never in fact been absent from that stage. The early history of anti-colonial resistance shows that Africans

in this region waged one of the first, most heroic, and largest lasting battles for freedom known to the African world<sup>6</sup>. (Nascimento 84)

The kind of black consciousness that Nascimento advocated became possible once the military regime liberalized its politics in the late 1970s (Covin 37; Caldwell 2). During this period, Afro-Brazilian intellectuals were able to think and organize with a kind of freedom that they had not experienced since before the coup occurred in 1964 (Kingstone). They also realized that white Brazilian leftists would never accept them into their ranks, so they decided to start their own radical movement based on Afrocentricity and black consciousness (Covin 46-47). The Movimento Negro Unificado (MNU) was the first organization created from this nascent Brazilian black consciousness movement of the late 1970s (189).

Social movements never occur spontaneously; in fact, they require careful planning and deliberation in order to be effective (65). However, there were specific occurrences that led to the creation of the MNU. The first was the racially-motivated torture and murder of an Afro-Brazilian taxi driver named Robson Luz in Sao Paulo during 1978. Another was the expulsion of four volleyball players for apparently racial reasons (Cabiao). Tired of the oppression against Afro-Brazilians and seeing an opportunity to call for black unity, black activists created the Unified Movement Against Racial Discrimination (MUCDR), which was later changed to the United Black Movement in 1979 (Covin 77).

---

<sup>6</sup> Nascimento was referring to a battle that took place between Portuguese militia and Afro-Brazilian inhabitants of Palmares. For years, the Portuguese tried to destroy Palmares and enslave its citizens but the community resisted. Finally, the Portuguese defeated the last chief, Zumbi, who is now considered a hero in the Afro-Brazilian community and is a symbol of black resistance in the black consciousness movement (Covin 114-115).

Their primary goals were to end discrimination against black Brazilians and also to provide more job opportunities for Afro-Brazilians. The following excerpt from the founding statement of MUCDR/MNU explicates the goals of the movement: “We, Black organizations, meeting at the Center of Black Culture and Art on the 18<sup>th</sup> day of June, resolve to create a movement with the purpose of defending the Afro-Brazilian population against the racial exploitation and human disrespect to which the Community is subjected” (qtd. in Covin 69) At the time, a black identity was not seen by a majority of Brazilians as a unifying force, or even something to be proud of. Black activists radically transformed and transvalued notions of blackness to such a degree that the concepts of blackness, race, and racialization have drastically changed in Brazilian society (191).

Activists in the black consciousness movement knew that the only way to secure rights for Afro-Brazilians was to unite the community. The ways that they attempted to unite them were by bringing the problem of racism into public awareness and by making the black identity more inclusive. MNU activists reasoned that all African-descended people, regardless if they were *negro*, *pardo*, or otherwise, all experienced the same kinds of discrimination (79, 190). The beginning of the MNU Letter of Principles, written in 1978, beings: “We, members of the Brazilian Black population—understanding as Black all those who possess in skin color, face, or hair, characteristic signs of that race, met in the National Assembly, CONVINCED of the existence of:

- Racial discrimination
- Racial, political, economic, social, and cultural marginalization of Black people
- The worst conditions of life
- Unemployment
- Discrimination of hiring practices at work

- Subhuman life conditions for the imprisoned
- Permanent police repression, persecution, and violence
- Sexual, economic, and social exploitation of the Black woman
- Abandonment and despicable treatment of minors, the majority of whom are Black
- Colonization, mischaracterization, crushing and commercialization of our culture
- The myth of racial democracy

(qtd. in Covin 203)

Making blackness more inclusive helped illuminate the kinds of oppression that were affecting at least 44% of the population, if mixed-race people are also considered black (Caldwell 44). A more inclusive definition for blackness also helped draw in more supporters for the cause.

The MNU (as well most organizations in the black consciousness movement) have a majority of their support in urban centers. The problem is that most Afro-Brazilians live in the countryside. Therefore, since the beginning the MNU has been trying to gain more support from both urban and rural Afro-Brazilians. In order to gain popularity and financial resources, the MNU frequently co-sponsored events during its formative years. They held marches against police brutality and in 1988 the MNU mounted a protest of the national celebrations for the centennial anniversary of the abolition of slavery. Thousands of Afro-Brazilians marched in the streets shouting “we are still enslaved!” and “racial democracy is a lie!” Not surprisingly, these protesters were met with the largest display of police force since the era of the military regime (Daniel 237).

Arguably, their most significant demonstration was the November 20, 1995 March for Zumbi of Palmares Against Racism and for Equality and Life. During this march, Afro-Brazilians across the nation descended upon the capital, Brasília, to commemorate the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of the last chief of Palmares and Afro-Brazilian hero, Zumbi. The march



was a public display of black Brazilian pride that had never before been seen in Brazil and spoke to the unifying power of the MNU (Covin 138-143).

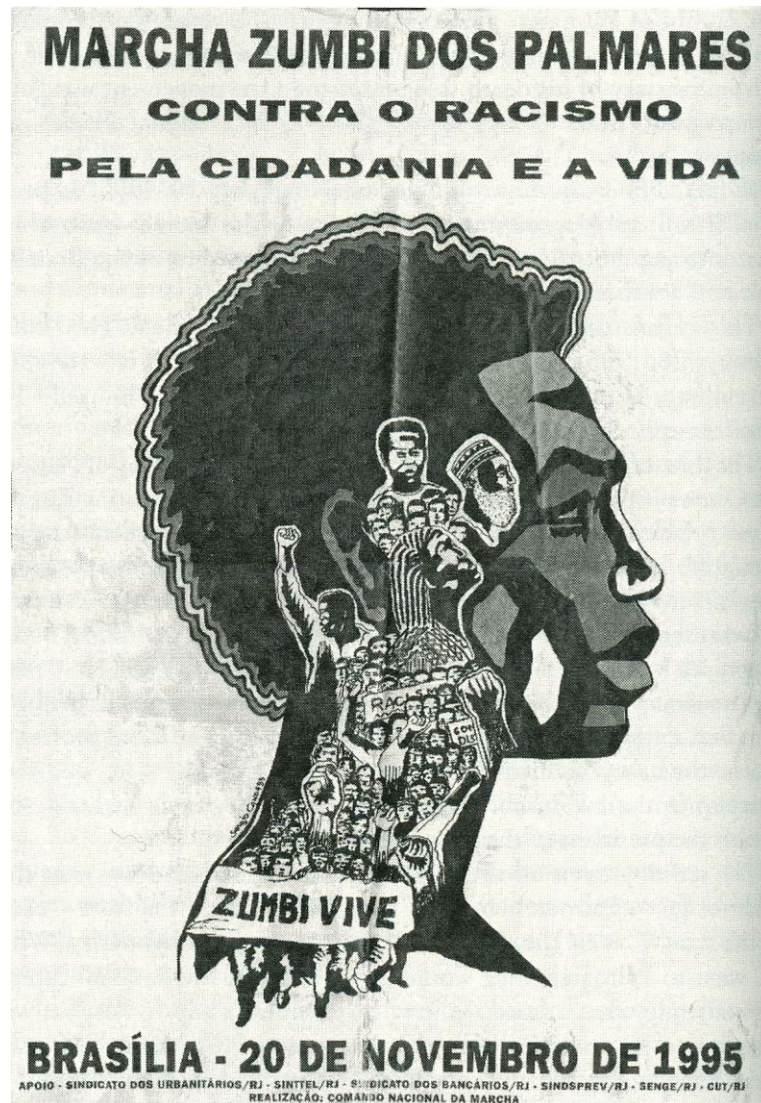


Figure 1.4 Official poster of the March for Zumbi of Palmares, Against Racism, for Citizenship and Life (Covin 140).

At present, the efforts of the MNU and the larger black consciousness movement have resulted in an increasing acceptance and display of Afro-Brazilian pride. For example, more hair salons than ever before offer hair care for people with “kinky” or natural Afro-textured hair since more Afro-Brazilian women are becoming comfortable wearing their hair naturally. Also,

amongst Afro-Brazilians, there has been movement to revitalize the practice of African religions as well as a growing interest in African musical forms. Moreover, the genre of Afro-Brazilian literature has gained in popularity (Daniel 238).

In terms of tangible successes, the MNU has had few but significant accomplishments. Aside from the landmark March for Zumbi of Palmares, the MNU has sponsored several other marches throughout the 1990s and 2000s and has taken up initiatives to fight against police brutality and to protect the rights of *quilombo* residents (Covin 144-145). Also, the MNU and other black organizations successfully lobbied for the implementation of affirmative action measures in the public and private sector in 2001 (Caldwell 13; Reiter and Mitchell 123). Additionally, it was through the efforts of the MNU that in 2001 Brazil designated November 20<sup>th</sup> as the National Day of Black Consciousness—to be celebrated as a national holiday throughout the country. It should be no surprise that in reality, this day is generally only celebrated as a holiday in northeastern states like Bahia that are known for having a large population of Afro-Brazilians (Cabiao; Covin 138-143).

Despite its successes, the MNU has fallen short of its ultimate goal of black unity (Covin 126, 158). Originally envisioned as a movement in itself, or at least an umbrella organization for the various radical Afro-Brazilian groups, the MNU today is an independent organization that is in a period of decline. The MNU's main problem is that it has never amassed large support needed for the kind of group that they had aspired to become. They face competition from other NGOs who are better financed and more internationally known as well as from other specialized groups within the black consciousness movement such as the black women's movement (158-159; Caldwell 150-1). Perhaps most significant, however, is that the MNU does not appeal to all Afro-Brazilians, even though the group envisions itself as being inclusive of age, religion, class,

and gender. Like other movements created in patriarchal societies, the MNU has largely ignored the voices and experiences of Afro-Brazilian feminists.

Afro-Brazilian women make up half of the membership of MNU and other black organizations but comprise a small minority of the leadership positions. Sexism is also a problem within the organization. A female MNU activist criticizes:

It is clear that the black movement, like any other organization, is not immune to the effects of machismo and sexism. It is not immune. So this always appears in the relationships. It appears in some way... We were never immune to machismo. So, it is the woman who struggles, who pushes the group forward. But she ends up being invisible in the history of the group. Who ends up speaking for the group? A man. It is always a man... the impact of this type of machismo is deeply rooted. (qtd. in Caldwell 156)

It is perhaps this machismo and sexism that propelled the well-known militant Afro-Brazilian feminist Leía Gonzales to write that the importance of the MNU has been “exaggerated” to the detriment of other factions of the black consciousness movement (Nascimento 173-174).

The inclusion of women in MNU is important because Afro-Brazilian men are not oppressed in the same ways as Afro-Brazilian women. Afro-Brazilians are marginalized because of their race, class, religion, etc., but only Afro-Brazilian women are discriminated against because of their gender. It is for this reason that the black feminist contingent of the Brazilian black consciousness movement strives to challenge racism, sexism, and citizenship in Brazil. Although they are technically citizens, Afro-Brazilian women are largely denied privileges such as access to education and lucrative job opportunities that are granted to more privileged

Brazilian citizens. In this sense, Afro-Brazilian women (as well as all Afro-Brazilians) are not truly citizens because their race and/or gender preclude them from attaining the full rights of citizenship. Therefore, cultural citizenship is the goal that Afro-Brazilian feminists are actively seeking towards. Silvestrini defines cultural citizenship as “the ways people organize their values, their beliefs about their rights, and their practices based on their sense of cultural belonging rather than on their formal status as citizens of a nation” (Silvestrini qtd. in Caldwell 3). Not quite fitting into the world of white Brazilians, or in the overwhelmingly male world of black activism and politics, Afro-Brazilian feminists are constantly searching for a space in which to negotiate their blackness as well as their womanhood.

Due to the legacies of slavery and colonialism, black Brazilian women continue to face social and economic hardships. For example, they must endure images of themselves as natural servants to white people or otherwise as willing and available sexual objects (Caldwell 53, 55). Also, Afro-Brazilian women are under tremendous pressure to adhere to European standards of beauty or risk dealing with unemployment. For instance, in Brazil, many job announcements will explicitly call for people with *boa aparência* (good appearance), which is widely understood to mean someone with Nordic phenotypes (65). Furthermore, in a study conducted in 2000 Damasceno found that the majority of these job announcements were geared towards women (66). As the understood direct opposite of Europeaness, Afro-Brazilian women receive the least consideration for these jobs.

Like Afro-Brazilian men, Afro-Brazilian feminist women want the same kinds of access to jobs and other resources. Unfortunately, gender-specific issues such as reproductive health and education for women go largely unheeded in the MNU (151). This failure on the part of the MNU and other mainstream organizations within the black consciousness movement has created

a situation where black feminists are ambivalent about being a part of the feminist movement (mainly comprised of white Brazilian women) or being a part of organizations within the black consciousness movement (154). As a result, many capable and dedicated Afro-Brazilian women activists do not partake in organizations such as the MNU, to its detriment.

Although it would likely not solve all of MNU's problems, a greater inclusion of black women into the organization would at least help the group towards its goal of black unity. If the MNU endeavors to be representative of all Afro-Brazilians, then they must first dismantle its patriarchal hierarchy and eliminate sexism within the group. Afro-Brazilian men cannot speak to the experiences of Afro-Brazilian women, even if they empathize with them, and so it is necessary that black women are given a chance to communicate their own stories of oppression in their own voices. The existence of other splinter movements such as the black women's movement should not impede the participation of women in MNU, especially if their goal is still to become one unified movement of Afro-Brazilians. In fact, it is perhaps necessary to include women in order to expose and rectify sexism within the black consciousness movement so that true black Brazilian unity can be realized.

These are exciting and undoubtedly challenging times for Afro-Brazilians, who are struggling against a larger society that underestimates their oppression while at the same time negotiating new identities as empowered black Afro-Brazilians. Unity is a key factor in ending discrimination against African-descended people, but unity cannot come until true consciousness is obtained. Part of this true consciousness is realizing the colonial source and rationale for racism against black people and realizing that this racism is neither natural nor permanent. In the past, black Brazilians looked to the Black Power and Afrocentricity movements of the United States as an example of unapologetic black pride. Today, the MNU and the entire black

consciousness movement have the opportunity to be their own sources of inspiration. However, no movement based on true consciousness or unity can succeed unless all factions of a movement are represented and considered equally important. The MNU can begin to improve its condition by working with and incorporating more black Brazilian women activists in leadership positions. Next, they can incorporate the voices of gay, rural, poor Afro-Brazilians as well as the voices of native Brazilians and others who are marginalized in Brazilian society so that the movement truly becomes one of unity.

### Works Cited

- Adas, Michael. *Machines as the Measure of Men: Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1989. Print.
- Adeleke, Tunde. *UnAfrican Americans: Nineteenth-Century Black Nationalists and the Civilizing Mission*. Lexington: Kentucky UP, 1998. Print.
- . *The Case Against Afrocentrism*. Jackson: Mississippi UP, 2009. Print.
- Arquivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo, Lisbon (ANTT), Inquisição, Cadernos do Promotor, No.92, Livro 285, ff. 396-401. Print.
- Baldwin, Davarian L. “‘Culture is a Weapon in Our Struggle for Liberation’: The Black Panther Party and the Cultural Politics of Decolonization” in Lazerow, Jama and Yohuru Williams. eds. *In Search of the Black Panther Party: New Perspectives on a Revolutionary Movement*. Durham: Duke UP, 2006. Print.
- Berger, Dan, ed. *The Hidden 1970s: Histories of Radicalism*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2010. Print.
- Cabiao, Howard. “Movimento Negro Unificado (1978-- ).” *Online Encyclopedia of Significant People and Places in Global African History*. BlackPast.org. Web. 14 Oct 2011. <<http://www.blackpast.org/?q=gah/movimento-negro-unificado-founded-1978>>.
- Caldwell, Kia L. *Negras in Brazil: Re-Envisioning Black Women, Citizenship, and the Politics of Identity*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2007. Print.
- Conrad, Robert E, ed. *Children of God’s Fire: A Documentary History of Black Slavery in Brazil*. University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1994. Print.
- Cope, R. Douglas. *The Limits of Racial Domination: Plebian Society in Colonial Mexico City, 1660-1720*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1994. Print.

- Covin, David. *The Unified Black Movement in Brazil*. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2006. Print.
- Cuvier, Georges [1817] (1994) *Etudes sur l'ibis et Mémoire sur la Vénus hottentotte*. Paris. Print.
- Crais, Clifton and Pamela Scully. *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: A Ghost Story and a Biography*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2008. Print
- Damasceno, Caetana M. ““Em casa de enforcado nao se falta em corda””: notas sobre a constução social da “boa” aparência no Brasil. In Sérgio, Antonio, Alfredo Guimarães, and Lynn Huntley. eds. *Tirando a Máscara: Ensaio sobre o racismo no Brasil*. Sao Paulo: Paz e Terra, 2000. Print.
- Daniel, G.R. *Race and Multiraciality in Brazil and the United States: Converging Paths?* University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 2006. Print.
- Fonseca, Pedro Paulino da. “Memoria dos feitos que se deram durante os primeiros annos da guerra com os negros quilombolas dos palmares, seu destrocco e pas aceita em Junho de 1678.” *Revista do Instituto Histórico e Geográfico Brasileiro* 39 (1876), Part I, 293-321. Print.
- Gates, Henry L. Jr. “The Body Politic” in *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man*. New York: Random House, 1997. Print.
- Geary, Christaud M. “The Black Female Body, the Postcard, and the Archives” in Thompson, Barbara, and Ifi Amadiume. *Black Womanhood: Images, Icons, and Ideologies of the African Body*. Hanover, NH: Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College in Association with University of Washington, 2008. Print.
- Glaude, Eddie S. Jr. Ed. *Is it Nation Time? Contemporary Essays on Black Power and Black Nationalism*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 2002. Print.
- Jahoda, Gustav. *Images of Savages: Ancients Roots of Modern Prejudice in Western Culture*. London: Routledge, 1999. Print.
- Kingstone, Steve. “Brazil Remembers 1964 Coup d'Etat.” *BBC News*. 1 Apr. 2004. Web. 09 Oct. 2011. <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/3588339.stm>>.
- Marable, Manning. *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America: Problems in Race, Political Economy, and Society*. Boston: South End, 1999. Print.
- Metcalf, Alida C. “Millenarian Slaves? The Santidade de Jaguaripe and : Slave Resistance in the Americas.” *The American Historical Review* 104.5 (1999): 47 pars. Web. 30 Nov. 2011 <<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/ahr/104.5/ah001531.html>>.
- Morgan, Hal and Kerry Tucker. *Rumor!* Fairfield: Penguin, 1984. Print.
- Morgan, Jennifer L. ““Some Could Suckle Over Their Shoulder’: Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology, 1500-1770.” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 54.1 (Jan. 1997): 169. Print.

- Nascimento, Abdias D. and Elisa L. Nascimento. *Africans in Brazil: A Pan-African Perspective*. Trenton: Africa World, 1992. Print.
- Rahner, Mark. "Despite Incendiary Name, Blaxploitation Genre Was About Empowerment." *The Seattle Times*. 19 Feb. 2004. Web. 4 Oct. 2011.  
<[http://seattletimes.nwsources.com/html/entertainment/2001860267\\_blaxploitation19.html](http://seattletimes.nwsources.com/html/entertainment/2001860267_blaxploitation19.html)>.
- Reiter, Bernard and Gladys L. Mitchell. *Brazil's New Racial Politics*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2010. Print.
- Ribeiro, Pedro. "US, Senzala or Quilombo - Reflections on APOC and the Fate of Black Anarchism." *A-Infos: Anarchist News Service*. 14 Jan. 2005. Web. 10 Nov. 2011.  
<<http://www.ainfos.ca/sup/ainfos00395.html>>.
- Strother, Z.S. "Display of the Body Hottentot" in Lindfors, B ed. *Africans on Stage: Studies in Ethnological Show Business*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1999. Print.
- Schwartz, Stuart B. "Indian Labor and New World Plantations: European Demands and Indian Responses in Northeastern Brazil." *American Historical Review* 83.1 (1978): 43-79. Web.
- Silvestrini, Blanca G. "The World We Enter When Claiming Rights: Latinos and Their Quest for Culture" in Flores, William V. and Rita Benmayor. *Latino Cultural Citizenship: Claiming Identity, Space, and Rights*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1997. Print.
- Sweet, James H. *Recreating Africa: Culture, Kinship, and Religion in the African-Portuguese World, 1441-1770*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2003. Print.
- Thompson, Barbara. "Decolonizing Black Bodies: Personal Journeys in the Contemporary Voice" in Thompson, Barbara, and Ifi Amadiume. *Black Womanhood: Images, Icons, and Ideologies of the African Body*. Hanover, NH: Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College in Association with University of Washington, 2008. Print.
- Van Deburg, William.ed. *Modern Black Nationalism: From Marcus Garvey to Louis Farrakhan*. New York: New York UP, 1997. Print.
- Walters, Ronald W. *Pan Africanism in the African Diaspora: An Analysis of Modern Afrocentric Political Movements*. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1993. Print.