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Review / Reseña

Patricia de Santana Pinho. *Mama Africa: Reinventing Blackness in Bahia*. Translated by Elena Langdon. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2010.

How to be Black in Brazil, or the Paradox of Raciological Antiracist Struggles

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How does an individual born with a dark phenotype (*preto*) become black (*negro*) in Brazil? Which kind of images about black soul and body essence has to be activated to produce Afro-referenced black identities? Do they corroborate pre-established notions of blackness and how are they constituted in relation to a broader ordering of power? Why are African American tourists searching for Africa in Brazil? These are some of the issues addressed by this important work on the production of race-based black identities in Bahia, considered as the most “African” part of Brazil.

This book is more than a simple translation of the Brazilian original edition of Patricia de Santana Pinho's Ph.D. dissertation (*Reinvenções da África na Bahia*, 2004), which received an Honorary Award from LASA's Premio Iberoamericano in 2006. Through an extensive rewriting of the original chapters to which has been added new material, the author offers a revised and expanded version that includes a welcome discussion of the recent literature on Brazilian racial politics and black identities.

The main goal of the book is to identify the local and global elements that have been used in the construction of race-based and Afro-referenced black identities in Bahia. In order to do so, Patricia Pinho, deeply inspired by the work of Paul Gilroy, Michel Foucault and Stuart Hall, adopts a cultural studies perspective, analyzing the myth of Mama Africa as central to narratives and representations produced by Afro-descendants in different parts of what we call today "the Black Atlantic." This myth acts as a guiding thread that links the different parts of the book, examining Bahia's black cultural production as the result of local versions of a diasporic imaginary that connects the notion of *baiianidade* (Bahianness) to multi-layered interpretations of blackness and Africanness.

Responding to the criticism addressed in Brazil to Gilroy's work, Pinho chooses to examine the place that Brazil occupies within the Black Atlantic, showing how Bahia is today one of the producing *loci* of black ethnic in which Africa plays a central role in nourishing the imagination and cultural production of Afro-descendants. Roots tourism is part of this positioning of Bahia at the core of Black Atlantic imaginary. The increasing number of African American roots tourists, especially in the capital city of Salvador and in Cachoeira, two traditional centers of Candomblé, is attracted precisely by what has been preserved of Africa in Bahia. For African American tourists, Bahia is a site to find African traditions, recovering an "authentic" African past that has been lost in the United States. In this conversation between "brothers and sisters in destiny", Bahia's black cultural production is, at the same time, "a buyer of international black modernity and a seller of black tradition."

In Bahia, Candomblé temples, capoeira schools and *blocos afro*, black cultural organizations particularly active in Carnaval period, are

among the major producers of discourses of blackness, fostering the idea of an “imaginary community” that connects Afro-descendants in the diaspora through a homogenous and unchanging image of Africa. Like Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá for Bahian Candomblé, Ilê Aiyê, founded in 1974, is considered as “the most African” of the *blocos afro* of Bahia. Both became the “guardians of blackness” and “African traditions.” African American tourists contact these groups in search of what they believe to be their lost Africanness. This search for tradition in contemporary Afro-Bahian culture reinforces assumptions about the “nature” of African/black peoples and comforts essentialist interpretations of a supposed, unified, “African culture.”

Ilê Aiyê, as other black organizations in Brazil, has relied on notions of “nature” and “essence” to sustain the boundaries of black Afro-referenced identities. Its main strategy to fight racism is the production of new cultural and aesthetic symbols that are predominantly based on the black body. This strategic use of the body, as well as the centrality of music and dance in the representation of black identities, is currently one of the major characteristics that make black diasporic cultures “black.” Resuming Gilroy’s seminal work, Pinho chooses to adopt “an anti-antiessentialist position” to give value to the agency of black subjects in a society still marked by racism and inequality, while stressing the social and historical construction of local reinventions of Africa and Africanness as source of empowerment. The main goal is “to overcome the idea that identities must be fixed and that human beings are hostages of their culture or prisoners of their physical appearance.” The deconstruction of black identities is thus meant, as clearly stated by Pinho, “to examine how truths have been produced” and to capture “the political meanings generated in the production of representations.”

Following Stuart Hall, black identities are seen as socially and historically, not biologically, defined. Blackness is therefore understood as a “structure of feeling” that develops socially and historically, challenging the essentialized interpretations that relate cultural black production to a “biological” patrimony, the “natural abilities” to dance and to produce music believed to be transmitted by blood. As Pinho rightly points out, presenting definitions of blackness on the basis of biology and phenotype “pins identity politics onto biopolitics”, defined

as “the predisposition to define people and to forge identification and solidarity patterns based on the body.” *Blocos afro*, as Ilê Aiyê, aim at consolidating identity boundaries in order to assert a clear-cut and oppositional black identity, inverting the dominant national narrative about *mestiçagem*, racial democracy and “racial conviviality.” To clearly differentiate blacks from whites in a country historically characterized by a multiple mode of classification that has never been based on a black/white dichotomy, Black phenotypes have to be manipulated to look “blacker.” In Brazil, contrary to what occurs in the United States, phenotype is actually more important than origin when it comes to classifying individuals racially.

The black Afro-referenced identities activated by the *blocos afro* are also the product of a transnational consciousness-raising movement that spans the black diaspora. Old black symbols, as Candomblé iconography, are articulated to new Afro symbols, adopting U.S. forms of black identification. The author calls them “hyper-black symbols,” directly produced by an Afro-aesthetics centered on clothing, hairstyles, and accessories meant to “look African.” These objects are not produced in Africa, but are specifically produced to invoke Africanness. As the re-Africanization movement in Candomblé, and despite the incessant appeals for tradition in the *blocos*, this Afro identity is more a product of modernity, in which the African past is often recovered in books and encyclopedias, than the preservation of an immutable cultural legacy.

Patricia de Santana Pinho brilliantly shows how the “technologies of the self” implemented by *blocos afro* to discipline the black bodies paradoxically perpetuate the same logic defended by nineteenth century’s racial theories. If the discriminating stereotypes of the black body are inverted, the opposition between a black man, which is “naturally” inclined to physical and artistic activities, and a white man, “naturally” predisposed to intellectual accomplishments, subsists into Bahian black activists’ minds. Hence, in several pamphlets and books published by Ilê Aiyê’s members, one finds the depreciation of intellectual activity in behalf of a spectrum of activities centered on the body, as sports, dance and music, considered as the real expression of blackness. As remembered by Pinho, body-centered representations of blackness reinforce stereotypes and differ little from the racist conceptions forged during slavery and colonization.

This raciological response to racism also needs to find its place into a highly stratified social reality, marked by the hegemonic discourse of *baianidade* (Bahianness), promoted, even if for different purposes, by the local political establishment and the tourism industry. The commodification of symbols of black culture, to construct a public image of Bahia that can attract an international audience in search of authenticity and exoticism, is highlighted by a process that Pinho calls “milking Mama Africa.” This generic, globalized, and commodified Africanness is not only produced by *blocos afro*, but is also the outcome of the global circuits of exchange that are activated by the African American roots tourism. In this process, the body becomes a “cultural capital,” the main arena of intervention for the production of black identities.

Nonetheless, the surveillance of black body and the imposition of a “correct form” of blackness serve also to erase internal differences, based on gender, class, age, and access to formal education. Thus, to *be black* one must act, behave, and dress *black*. Dreadlocks, as a symbol of a globalized Africanness, are today at the core of Brazilian Afro-aesthetics, in a country where the rule of “*boa aparência*” (good appearance) and the power of Eurocentric models of beauty are still effective in everyday life. In the dominant discourse produced within *blocos afro*, one finds the contradictory belief that there is a black essence, a priori natural body characteristic of all Afro-descendants, associated with the political project that claims that *pretos* have to “become black” (*negros*) and makes this “recovered” black body the main representation of black identities. The analysis of the pedagogy that has to be internalized by the members of Ilê Aiyê, especially the embodiment of a unified female form of blackness, unveils the ways in which gendered and racial dominations intersect. If female body is the “preferred locus for performing the pedagogy of blackness,” it is also still the “site of male pleasure, spectacle, and desire.”

In this provocative work, the author clearly stands for a new black political culture that dares to go beyond the notions of blackness and whiteness, liberating itself, at once, from the raciological logic that sustained the inequality of Brazilian social formation, and from the very process of objectification and commoditization of black culture by a Bahia’s political elite that paradoxically promotes the notion of

Bahianness as the expression of harmonious racial relations. The long-lasting relationships linking politicians and scholars to black organizations, labeled as traditional and embodied with Africanness, contribute to the establishment of a hierarchy not only of *blocos afro*, but also of Candomblé *terreiros*. *Blocos afro* are not alone in trading their blackness to bestow Bahianness and legitimacy to political local elites, manipulating black cultural expressions for their own political purposes within the existing configurations of power.

In order to better understand these processes, notably the formation of black identities in relation to local and global politics, it would be probably suitable to broaden the author's analysis of the uses and abuses of "race," an interesting and sophisticated analysis of Brazilian racial politics, addressed to an American audience, that has been regrettably limited to the introduction as a new part added to the original edition. Likewise, a further examination of roots tourism could have brought in new material to challenge the North American model of racial relations as it is imagined and reinvented by black cultural production in Brazil. The analysis of what Pinho calls "the diaspora's search for Bahia" is unfortunately too incidental to fully consider the impact of the confrontation between different regimes of blackness in the diaspora.

The author rightly notes that, just as they receive influences, the *blocos afro* also re-create, resignify, and produce new elements that are integrated in a broadest network of black imaginary. These transnational symbols created by the *blocos* are characterised by their modernity, as well as by "a taste of the past, of tradition, of Africanness," perfectly matching the image of "black culture" that is sought by African American tourists. During their journey in Brazil, they seek out black representatives who are able to produce discourses about blackness that are in accordance with their own expectations. As in the Voodoo Festival, held on the beach of Whydah (Benin) by traditionalist voodoo priests that try to preserve their political power through the ties weaved with the diaspora, the African American audience also plays a legitimating role in the reproduction of Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá's hegemonic position in the micro-politics of Candomblé *terreiros*.

By the same token, the cultural misunderstandings, entailed by the confrontation of two regimes of racial identification, exemplarily highlight the difficulty to apply the North American model to the Brazilian reality. Hence, in a revealing formulation of the shifting boundaries of blackness, one of the Ilê Aiyê's directors declares that African Americans, who come to Bahia for the *bloco's* rehearsals, put the *bloco's* members in a difficult situation because, according to them, these people, "practically light-skinned (but) saying they're black," are actually "white" and consequently should be excluded from the public parade of this "only-black" *bloco*. The same kind of cultural misunderstanding is also at work in the appreciation of the Festival of the *Irmandade da Boa Morte* (Sisterhood of the Good Death) in Cachoeira by African American tourists, which often strongly regret that black sisters of the Boa Morte worship a white saint, Our Lady of Glory. This kind of affirmations reveals the profound misrecognition of the cultural and political specificity of Brazilian black culture, as well as the concealing of the historical process that gives birth to African American cultures as hybrid cultures, resulting from the encounter of African, European, and Native American cultures.

These illuminating contradictions and misunderstandings bring in new material for the edification of novel interpretations of black cultural production in the diaspora. Building on Paul Gilroy's criticism of uncentered perspectives, the challenging work of Patricia de Santana Pinho is particularly effective in demonstrating that "the diaspora does not have a single center in Africa as its motherland or in the United States as an exporter of models of ethnicity." Roots tourism constitutes an important channel of communication between different interpretations of blackness, promoting the existence of alternative centers of "Africanness" in the diaspora and challenging the United States' predominant position in the international black cultural scene.

However, roots tourism also deeply models local discourses on Africanness, consolidating long-lasting topographies of power in black Bahia. Pinho rightly stresses the impact of a wider transnational racial hierarchy that, in some contexts, merges black and white Brazilian, while transforming African Americans into "whites." As remembered by the author, whiteness is a global force that, "operating together with colonialism and capitalism," has positioned some nations in the core

and others in the periphery of the world. Hence, Brazilian immigrants, as Italian and Irish before them, experience the process of being “unwhitened” in the United States, while African Americans in Brazil enjoy the privileges of whiteness when compared with their black Brazilian “brothers and sisters in destiny.” The myth of Mama Africa can also conceal a relation of symbolic, politic and economic domination.

The excellent work of Pinho vividly demonstrates that meanings of blackness and whiteness should be examined both in local and global contexts, also taking into account the different “politics of representations” that often strengthen old stereotypes about blacks. Afro-aesthetics uses the body to reconstruct an essentialized blackness, confirming the unchallengeable difference opposing blacks to whites, while concealing internal differences among blacks from core and periphery countries. If black cultural production situates Brazil between an “African past” and a “North American future,” Brazilian black activists should find their own path towards a full racial equality that respects their own historical experience.

The author takes a courageous political stand, when she asserts that the raciology and the body-centricity of the renewed black identities jeopardize black activists’ capacity to overcome racism and racial inequality. Raciological antiracist attitudes strengthen clear-cut identity boundaries, without effectively overcoming racial barriers. The black liberating project thus finds its limits in the reproduction of racial stereotypes, even if inversed. Pinho pleads for an opposite path: to defeat racism it is necessary to transcend the very idea of “race” and deconstruct essences, moving “beyond, instead of within, raciology.” Identities are not *things*, but *processes* that are constantly undergoing renegotiation. To warn against these dangers, she reminds us, is both a challenge and a duty for all of us who refuse essentialist notions that continue to freeze blackness.