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Sites of resistance

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The year 2019 marked an unprecedented moment to ponder beauty in the context of gender and race relations. Four top beauty pageants – Miss USA, Miss America, Miss World, and Miss Universe – had crowned Black women. Brazil, the largest Black country outside Africa and the center of the African diaspora, featured a white contestant, Júlia do Vale Horta, at the Miss World pageant, positioned in opposition to Nigeria’s Nyekachi Douglas and Jamaica’s Toni-Ann Singh, both of whom were Black. Miss Jamaica was declared the winner of the 2019 Miss World, with the heart-warming support of Miss Nigeria during the crowning ceremony.

Miss Brazil’s white skin at the 2019 Miss World is emblematic of a racial pattern embodied in the structure of Brazilian society, which further stands out in a moment of the twenty-first century when positive representations of Black beauty assumed global status. In Brazil, where most women resemble the Black Miss Jamaica and Miss Nigeria, the paradigm of beauty positivity for Black women has faced deep resistance in the social imaginary. In such an oppressive context, the emergence of Black spaces for celebration and the crowning of the beauty of Black women historically function as sites of resistance in Brazil – as we present in this chapter through the analysis of this phenomenon in the states of São Paulo and Bahia.

Brazil underwent significant changes in its demographics in the twentieth century, and this has implied the “transformation of racial dynamics in different parts of the country” (Hanchard, 2001, p. 44). In addition, there had been an increase in the industrialization and urbanization process, highlighting São Paulo as one of the states most affected by this movement and the immigration of Italians who came to replace slave labor post-abolition, which facilitated the racial whitening project of the nation (Andrews, 1998). São Paulo, according to the 2010 census record, includes 63.9 percent of inhabitants who declared themselves white and 34.6 percent who declared themselves Black, unlike the state of Bahia, where the population is mostly Black at 76.3 percent. This demographic difference represents multiple racial interaction patterns (Hanchard, 2001, p. 44), and for the purposes of this chapter can provide us with differentiated data on how people understand, learn, and experience Black beauty.

The debate about Black identity in Brazil brings with it the plurality of the concept of “being Black” and what would be “Black identity,” something that can only be thought of plurally, as
we speak about a country of continental proportions in which history, space, and culture play a fundamental role in identity construction. It is possible to assume the existence of plural and differentiated experiences of being Black in Brazil, but as they started from a common point – the forced arrival of millions of Africans for slave labor – they share points of convergence.

**Forms of Black organization in the state of São Paulo**

The existence of Black recreational associations, clubs, and balls in the countryside of the state of São Paulo is of central importance to thinking about Black population, forms of mobilization, resistance, and structure inside cities and mostly, comprehending Black identity at the beginning of the twentieth century and today. We can point to a Black celebration movement in the state of São Paulo through many clubs, balls, and sociocultural events in places such as Araraquara (170 miles from São Paulo’s capital) and Rio Claro (110 miles from São Paulo’s capital), which we will address more accurately, as our previous studies approached the reconstruction of the Black community’s history in both cities. Our work highlights the relevance of Black associations and sociability sites for the construction of Black identity (Souza, 2004, 2008; Tenório, 2010, 2013).

The large quantity of Black sociocultural events in many countryside cities of the state of São Paulo is also a form of opposing the discriminatory practices that produced racial segregation in leisure spaces, which include “the samba schools, the soccer teams, the dance courts and the religious temples [that] are architectonical and spatial coordinates of the physical existence of black communities” (Hanchard, 2001, p. 44). Brazil did not have racial segregation laws as we find in the United States or South Africa, but the nation built an efficient system of non-formal segregation, keeping Black people in subordinate roles, producing and sustaining inequalities in the context of the myth of Brazilian racial democracy.

Such inequality is not only material, but promotes uneven power relations, subjective impressions of inferiority of a citizen or their treatment as inferior, and their inability to effectively take part in social life, regarding their access to work, education, healthcare, housing, as well as their political and civil rights.

*(Telles, 2003, p. 137)*

In our research on Black history in Araraquara and Rio Claro, many Black people addressed the impossibility of participating in parties and balls and joining white recreational clubs. We were able to interview people from both cities who were there in the first half of the twentieth century (Souza, 2004, 2008; Tenório, 2010, 2013) and expressed their visions of the interdictions they suffered or witnessed with Black friends and relatives when they tried to attend white spaces.

Black clubs and associations in the state of São Paulo established themselves as sites where the Black community shared similar world conceptions and built their means and interpretations on how to advance Black beauty and identity.

Race, associated to physical characteristics, social condition and expected behavior, has attributed the black body with a meaning in society. This prejudice “surrounded” sense has in the Brazilian black body the incarnation of stereotypes defended since colonial times. Since then the black body has been imputed with the notion of inferior intellectuality,
propensity to extenuating manual labor, displeasure with formal work, exacerbated sexuality, unclean skin, careless hair and ugliness. These stereotypes attributed to the black population have deeply marked their corporeality.

(Souza, 2015, p. 30)

It was necessary to oppose these ingrained stereotypes in the São Paulo cities – spaces that had European ideals of beauty especially due to European immigration to that State – constructing sites where the Black community, mainly Black women, could have their beauty reverenced, thus strengthening their bonds.

Black manifestations resisted and continued to develop in twentieth-century Brazil in the shape of social clubs, carnival groups, and religious brotherhoods, among others. In Rio Claro and Araraquara, the Black organizations undertook a series of specific collective strategies to abandon what we call racial intermittent spaces and thus occupy their own spaces of race – which would only happen at the end of the 1960s, specifically in Rio Claro (Souza, 2004, 2008).

It is worth mentioning that Rio Claro and Araraquara had a majority white population at the beginning of the twentieth century. What did it mean for Black men and women to live in cities where the population was overwhelmingly white? In other words, to what kind of racial embarrassment would the Black portion be subjected as a political and quantitative minority in these cities? Both the testimonies from our research and the newspapers analyzed show the ongoing pressure and racial humiliations that Black people suffered in local contexts without any legal means to solve the problem.

Newspapers from Rio Claro and Araraquara from the first half part of the twentieth century openly expressed the depreciative and prejudiced views on Black people that the white population had held also in the Brazilian republican regime. Such attitudes were not restricted to the cities in the countryside of São Paulo but were aligned to scientific racial doctrines from the end of the nineteenth century, which affirmed the superiority of the white race and the innate and permanent inferiority of non-white races. At the end of slavery, society valued European immigrants, which maintained and increased the inequality between Blacks and whites in Brazil (Guimarães, 1999; Monsma, 2010; Souza, 2004, 2008; Tenório, 2010).

Between 1880 and 1930, according to Andrews, whitening via European immigration was an ideal of all American countries colonized by Spain or Portugal between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. The objective was to whiten what the author defines as Afro-Latin America, that is, a whole set of countries deeply shaped by the African presence and the historical experience of plantation agriculture. Only between the decades of 1940 and 1960 did the federal governments pass anti-discrimination laws in Brazil (1951), Venezuela (1951), Panama (1956), and Costa Rica, even if they were never effectively applied (Andrews, 2004).

It was definitely not easy to maintain such an Africanized tradition in Araraquara and Rio Claro, where the strong presence of immigrants and their descendants, especially from Italy and Germany, produced a collective identity that pushed their racism against the Blacks of the city as a form to extend the celebration of fascism and Nazism locally. Despite the efforts of the state and sectors of the national intellectual elite to build the race of Brazilians, in Rio Claro, in practice, throughout the twentieth century, Black was still Black, and white was still white, each with their own symbols, sociability and spatiality around the respective race. Moreover, the Black woman (and Blacks in general) still faced wide-open racism by white people in the local context (Souza, 2004, 2008).

According to Andrews (1998), “it is through social clubs that middle-class Brazilians build their bonds and strengthen ties with people who can do ‘favors’ to each other” (Andrews,
1998, p. 267). For the author, social clubs for the white middle class are a form of integration and social progress for whites, becoming a difficult barrier for Blacks, who were not admitted to these clubs and were excluded from interpersonal contact and social networks that could enable them to get, among other things, better jobs and income. In addition to this economic aspect, non-admission to white clubs also had a psychological effect and negatively affected the self-esteem of Black people, as many were barred or expelled from these white places (Andrews, 1998, p. 269). This situation led to the formation of several essential Black clubs in the state of São Paulo.

Under this context of prejudice, we think of São Paulo’s Black identity through the concrete experiences of discrimination against Blacks that led to the creation of Black associations and the realization of cultural gatherings. Such events offered Black people the possibility of experiencing the feeling of being Black without any interdiction or discrimination, being among their racial group in structured environments designed to recognize beauty and raise Black self-esteem.

Black women’s beauty in the racial sites of Araraquara and Rio Claro

The Black presence in Araraquara and Rio Claro is directly connected to the slave labor that sustained the coffee farms in the west of the state of São Paulo. The medium-size cities in the countryside of the state had railroads as a form of social mobility for immigrants (mostly Italians) and the local small “Black middle class,” who constructed organizations that congregated Black people at municipal and neighboring events, especially those dedicated to strengthening Black women's self-esteem.

Araraquara has a traditional and widely known event called “Baile do Carmo” (“Carmo’s ball,” named after the neighborhood where it takes place and also because of the celebration in honor of “Nossa Senhora do Carmo”), which is a resource for thinking, event directly linked to Black women’s identity and self-esteem. Between 1930 and 1987, Black recreational associations in Araraquara, mostly founded by Black railroad workers and public employees, held the balls at rented white club saloons, reuniting hundreds of people from different families of the city and region, including Rio Claro. Accompanied by the big orchestras of that time, Black community members gathered at these balls, creating a space for Black sociability, memory and identity (Tenório, 2010, 2013).

When interviewed about the ball, people largely used such Portuguese words as “elegância” or “chique” to describe the “Baile do Carmo”, especially women of different ages, who thus characterized the gala night of the event, which currently holds festivities that last several days. In Portuguese, “elegância” means “grace, dress, manner and forms [of] distinction,” whereas “chique” stands for “beautiful, elegant, good taste”. These words convey the idea of distinction and refinement, which for a population used to having a deprecated image, represents the way they want to be known and how they want to demonstrate knowledge and mastery of social behavior (Tenório, 2010, 2013).

According to Gomes, “by establishing leisure territories similar to those of whites – regarding the codes of conduct and conquered status symbols (in clothing and language, above all) – but exclusively frequented by blacks, the distance to ‘equality’ was shortened” (Gomes, 2005, pp. 38–9). In other words, Black recreational associations sought to reduce the inequality between whites and Blacks, even in their forms of leisure. If whites perform their balls, Blacks also perform their own; more than that, Black dances, like the “Baile do Carmo”, occurred in white spaces as a form of occupation and protagonism in the space of
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During the 1950s, the Black community of Araraquara held beauty pageants for the most elegant Black women, who anxiously waited the whole year for the moment of doing their hair and choosing their outfit in order to feel pretty and elegant within their community. According to former directors of the Black clubs of Araraquara, there was a “Top Ten Ball” during the 1960s, when associates elected the top 10 most elegant Black women (Figure 31.2).

The “Baile do Carmo” is still held nowadays and, since the 1990s, has elected a Ball Muse – a young Black woman chosen for her beauty and resourcefulness – a reminder of the Black beauty pageants promoted by many Brazilian Black associations at least since the beginning of the twentieth century. According to one of the elected muses, Doralice, the event gives visibility to Black beauty and the ball:

> It was really good! People treat you well wherever you go; everyone says “she was the muse of the Baile do Carmo”. We are well known. As the ball is very famous, we become kind of famous too, so most people know me because of it, and they say “Dora was the muse of the Baile do Carmo”. So that’s it. It was good for me. (Tenório, 2010, p. 98).

The election of the muse is also a site where the contestants do not suffer any discrimination. When questioned on whether she had already gone through any prejudice or difficulty at fashion shows, Doralice affirmed:

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*Figure 31.1* Photograph from a 1960s edition of “Top Ten Ball.” (Tenório, 2013, 104)
Always! Mostly when I used to walk the runways, there was always prejudice! But not at the Baile do Carmo, because the event is for us, so no one feels different, people treat each other well. But I did suffer in many places.

(Tenório, 2010, pp. 98–9)

Through Doralice’s speech, we are able to see the identification with the event when she says that there is no prejudice because the ball is “for us,” and hence, she feels protected in the “Baile do Carmo” environment. To Doralice, there is no difference between the participants, a distinct situation from what she has seen doing other jobs as a model. The election of the muse and the existence of the Black balls that value the beauty of Black women have been crucial sites of resistance and strengthening, in the past and in the present. In Rio Claro, the Black population spent the majority of the twentieth century holding their dancing and civic activities in rented or lent spaces, wishing to build their own physical space as the Italians, Germans and Japanese had done in the city. For the Rio Claro Black community, the dream of their own house would only become real in the late 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s.

Parallel to the development of Nazi and fascist communities, the identification mechanism continued to be present at the Black associations of Rio Claro. The 1936 carnival, for instance, had the participation of the following Black societies: “Sociedade Dançante 28 de Setembro” (“September 28th Dancing Society”), “Sociedade Dançante Progresso da Mocidade” (“Youth Progress Dancing Society”) and “Sociedade Dançante Uma Noite de Alegria” (“A Night of Joy
Dancing Society”). The newspaper Cidade de Rio Claro covered the preparations for the parades and radically innovated the reports by printing in its pages a few clichés (the equivalent to photography at that time) of members from the city’s “color societies”:

After the three-day carnival, the Black champion “Progresso da Mocidade” held a ball where they named their two carnival cups (won at the 1935 and 1936 carnivals), at a ceremony with the presence of the Black queens Sebastiana Pedro and Lourdes Calixto, both symbols of Black women’s beauty. A caravan of Black women came from São Carlos, a nearby city, to honor the solemnity.

(Souza, 2008)

Between the 1950s and the 1960s, the movement of the Rio Claro Black collective was intense around the election of the race queens. Such movement meant three things: (1) the valuation of self-image and the revitalization of race identity through the mirroring of one another; (2) an answer to the other beauty queen pageants of the city, which mostly did not offer space for Black representation; (3) an answer to the racial discrimination that particularly hit Black women, such as newspaper ads for white-only maids and white-only wet nurse, for instance. In this period, the Black organizations of Rio Claro (and of the state of São Paulo) aimed at pairing race and beauty, especially for the eyes of a larger society. Black people fostered their own dignity as they valued and crowned Black women – the triple discriminated element of the race (Souza, 2008) (Figure 31.3).

In Rio Claro, there was a Black soccer team named Tamoio, famous among Black and white people in the city. In 1955, when a contest for the Sports Queen of Rio Claro was held, Tamoio
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was the only sports club to present a Black contestant for the title – a direct reflection of the club’s racial composition. Five sports clubs took part in the pageant, and votes from supporters determined the results. The Black competitor from Tamoio reached third place, not so far from the first two white misses in terms of voting (Souza, 2008) (Figure 31.4).

The participation of the Tamoio club in a universal pageant (that is, one that was not held exclusively for Black people) was deeply connected to race dignity and representation. The associates and supporters of Tamoio were aware that in a majority white city, filled with

Figure 31.3 First Black queen of Rio Claro city, 1951. Diário do Rio Claro newspaper, December 22, 1951 (Souza, 2008, 172)

Figure 31.4 The candidate of Tamoio Futebol Clube as the queen of sports in Rio Claro city. Diário do Rio Claro newspaper, December 8, 1955 (Souza, 2008, 175)
discrimination and racism, a Black queen had no chance of winning. However, that was precisely what motivated Tamoio: as a Black club, they wanted to rebel against the racial status given by the majority of the population. Thus, presenting a “unique” contestant at a “universal” pageant required Tamoio (1) to have enough racial self-esteem to refuse to select a pattern candidate (in terms of race) and (2) to mobilize their members to support their Black queen, especially through voting (which partially worked, as the Tamoio queen was not far behind the winners). In other words, the participation of Tamoio meant a racial struggle for dignity, value and representation of Blacks in a majority white space (Souza, 2008).

However, both the Tamoio club and the José do Patrocínio club (named after the Brazilian Black doctor and journalist José do Patrocínio, a key figure for the abolition movement in Brazil) held internal contests for the election of race queens instead of taking part at “universal” pageants in Rio Claro. This happened not only because there was no real chance of a Black victory at the majority white beauty pageants in the city but also because these institutions were resistant sites of production and propagation of Black racial identity, which guaranteed their own collective existence in a white world (Souza, 2008).

The beauty queens had pivotal roles in the construction of these permanent sites in Rio Claro as the main figures of balls, lunches, cocktail parties and festivals. During the 1960s, while the Black is Beautiful movement was rising around the world, the Black beauty queens of Rio Claro were central for the establishment of the Black clubs and associations (Souza, 2008).

The beauty of the Black woman in the context of the Ilê Aiyê African block in the city of Salvador (Bahia, Brazil)

Unlike the state of São Paulo, Bahia was the first place in Brazil to receive African men and women in the sixteenth century for slave work at the sugar cane plantations. Currently, Bahia has a majority Black population and has become some sort of “Africa” in Brazil because of both the number of Blacks and the lasting African cultural traditions. It is described as “Black Rome” by travelers due to its central location of African-based religions, much like Rome’s central location for Catholicism. In the twentieth century, Bahia has taken an important role in the constitution of African-American anthropology, which has considered Salvador, the capital of Bahia, as a place where the black culture has kept African traits at larger degrees than any other location. While in Araraquara and Rio Claro, in the state of São Paulo, the Black associations of the twentieth century fought racism by demonstrating to white society that Black people had equal abilities to dress and behave elegantly, in Salvador, the cultural Black associations arose during the 1970s with a Black beauty ideal directly connected to the ethnic and racial affirmation process linked to traditions from Candomblé, a religion of African origins.

The intention was to affirm blackness as something positive; “The most beautiful of all”, “black beauty”; to contest the myth of racial democracy; to denounce the innumerable racist practices and, most of all, the lack of reparation public policies. The expression “Black Rome” gains a political meaning, that is, a site of blackness and resistance.

(Silva, 2018, pp. 9–10)

According to Chagas (2001, 2004), the bonds with Africa were vehemently affirmed in Bahia during the 1970s. The Afro blocs, the Black organizations of Bahia during carnival season, produced new ideas about Black pride based in African traditions that were rebuilt in Brazil, along with the Black is Beautiful movement from the United States and the Ubuntu principle against apartheid in South Africa. One of the most traditional Afro blocs of Salvador is “Ilê Aiyê”
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Ilê Aiyê was established through the ideals of the Black religious leader Hilda Dias dos Santos. Known as Mãe Hilda Jitolu, the ialorixá (priestess) became famous for her social actions and the struggle for the expansion of bonds between Brazilians and Africans, which was decisive for the formation of the block.

She was responsible for the creation of the Literacy School in 1988, encouraging candomblé followers to study. The actions of Mãe Hilda served as a stimulus to the execution of the Pedagogical Extension Project of Ilê Aiyê in 1995, that acted like a public school in the Liberdade neighborhood, in Salvador.

The Ilê Aiyê block annually holds the “Noite da Beleza Negra” (“Night of Black Beauty”) in order to elect the queen of the block, the “Deusa de Ébano” (“Ebony Goddess”) for the carnival – a similar event to the ones from Araraquara and Rio Claro described earlier in this chapter. The “Noite da Beleza Negra” happens in January and is one of the most important moments for the Ilê Aiyê block, which has promoted the event since the 1980s, and is one of the biggest events of this nature in the country. The contestants must present themselves with outfits and hairstyles of strong African inspiration, accompanied by the block percussion music. “It is essential to have dark skin to participate. The blacker, the better. The winner will be the queen of the block through the whole carnival” (Chagas, 2001, p. 152).

The “Noite da Beleza Negra” is intended to promote the self-esteem of Black women. Unlike many other beauty pageants in the country, at this contest, women do not present themselves in swimsuits but in clothes made of African fabric, with elaborated hairstyles and outfits of symbolic colors based on Candomblé religion. “The competition is based on African notions of beauty, instead of the beauty patterns in Brazil. The one who best dances and represents African-Brazilian culture, wins” (Dias, 2019, s/p) (Figure 31.5).

The words of Daniela Nobre, Ilê “Ebony Goddess” of 2019, deeply express the meaning of Black beauty:

Black beauty is not a fight for the first position; it is about female empowerment. We are all pretty, but this title values the woman. It is not financially rewarding or anything. It is just the recognition of winning a competition where my beauty is accepted. I do not need to have a sharp nose, or white skin, or big buttocks, neither expose my body. I became a Goddess due to all of me, my dance, my beauty, my wrinkled nose. It is surreal.

(Dias, 2019)

Final considerations

In Brazil, the heart of the African diaspora, marked by racism and slavery perpetrated by Europe, there has always been the idea that white people represent what is beautiful, sublime and aesthetically positive, while Black people represent what is ugly and aesthetically negative. In such contexts, Black women from Araraquara and Rio Claro, in the state of São Paulo, and Salvador, in the state of Bahia, have challenged these representations by entering competitions that affirm them as symbols of beauty, royalty and positive identity among Black communities.
Naturally, female beauty events created inside a male chauvinist, patriarchal, capitalist and Eurocentric society will raise many sociological questions about the absence of autonomy of women as decision and power agents. At the same time, the mirroring of identity and positive representation matter to Black women, historically affected by structural disadvantages of combined race, gender and class categories, which will influence them from early childhood to elder age. The exaltation of Black women then assumes a character of protest and contestation.

At the close of the second decade of the twenty-first century, Brazil is governed by right-wing conservatives who consistently diminish the fight against racism and discrimination under false claims that these problems are exaggerated and that political minorities such as Blacks and LGBT are seeking advantages over the rest of the population. The deaths of cleaning assistant Claudia Silva Ferreira in 2014 (killed by white policeman and dragged for over 300 meters by a police car in Rio de Janeiro) and of councilwoman Marielle Franco in 2018 (assassinated in Rio de Janeiro by white policemen with the apparent involvement of white male politicians) are terrible and fatal examples of so many Black women whose lives are daily ripped away in Brazil. In such a context, celebrating the life and crowning the beauty of Black women constitutes a challenging, pedagogical and political manifest that definitely matters.

References


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