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The Fire Every Time Conference

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Black Power in Brazilian Perspective

In tracing the influences outside of Brazil that informed black identity formation among Afro-Brazilian activists, Michael Hanchard, a political scientist, recorded the following statement from Carlos Alberto Medeiros:

At the end of 1969...I started seeing and buying black American magazines, *Ebony*, principally, which in this period had revolutionary rhetoric. This journal (*Ebony*) reflected what was occurring in civil rights and nationalist movements in the world, and it reflected this in a very strong way, especially the aesthetic element, the Afro hairstyle and Afro clothing. It was love at first sight...It was a new image of blacks that came from the United States. (Hanchard 1994: 95)

This quote points to the possibilities for black identification that the circulation of African Americans, through their images or their physical presence, can generate in another context. For Medeiros, this “new image of blacks” presented a significant incursion into the Brazilian visual sphere by showing positive and powerful images of blackness, which were not prevalent in Brazil.

Black power movements and ideologies underwrote the creation of images in periodicals like *Ebony* in the late 1960s and 70s, which circulated within and beyond the United States' borders. Stokely Carmichael, credited with popularizing the term Black Power, defined it, along with Charles Hamilton, as “a call for black people to begin to define their own goals, to lead their own organizations and to support those organizations. It is a call to reject racist institutions and values of this society” (1967: 44). As part of their platform, Carmichael and Hamilton charged black people with redefining themselves through images that they created and that communicated the positive aspects of black life. This order found its expression through the individuals and organizations that employed visual, aural, and artistic expressions to refashion images of blackness, including the Black Panthers, the Black Arts Movement, and Black

musicians. These images, ideologies, and discourses infused with Black Power have resonated not only at home in the United States, but abroad, as many historians have shown.

In this paper, I ethnographically describe and examine how Afro-Brazilians resuscitate narratives of Black power as part of contemporary racial politics through the images of figures, like the Black Panthers, and symbolic actions, like raised fists. In the instances that it appears, Black power and black struggle frame the stories that Afro-Brazilians tell about African Americans and becomes a part of the stories that Afro-Brazilians tell about their own activism. Through their circulation into other contexts, African American images and aesthetics that emphasize black pride accrue new meanings as part of larger African Diasporic processes of interconnection, identification, and solidarity. Before I move to the ethnographic examples, it is critical to understand the racial context of Brazil.

Between Racial Democracy and Racial Recognition

Racial democracy continues to be the framework through which to understand popular ideas about race in Brazil. Racial democracy holds that historical and contemporary miscengentation between Brazil's African, Indian, and Portuguese populations was foundational to eroding the boundaries of racial identities and central to producing a mixed race population. Popular claims that racism does not exist in Brazil rely upon racial mixture as their central justification. Racial democracy informs many Brazilians ways of understanding themselves and their social relations due to the hegemony this idea maintains within social life (Burdick 1998; Goldstein 1999; Sheriff 2000; Vargas 2004; Caldwell 2007).

Despite the dominant belief in racial democracy, scholars have found that inequality can be delineated along racial lines. Afro-Brazilians operate on the economic, political, and social margins of Brazilian life (Hasenbalg 1985; Hasenbalg and Silva 1990; Johnson 1996; Lovell

1999). A strong contradiction emerged between the discourse of racial democracy and the experiential reality of Afro-Brazilian inequality and exclusion. The transnational movement of Black Power discourses and the forms of African American popular culture it influences resonate with the empirical reality recorded by these studies. As Gilroy explains, “First the rhetoric of rights and justice, then the discourse of Black Power crossed the seas and enabled black folks here, there and everywhere to make sense of the segregation, oppression and exploitation they experienced in their countries of residence” (1993: 251). Black power intervenes in this contradiction racial dynamic by explicitly articulating how race organizes exclusion and proposes to confront this condition by cultivating black pride, building black institutions, and redefining the image of blackness.

Afro-Brazilians have been active in confronting the reality of racial inequality that they experience through sustained activism and resistance (Covin 2006). After years of fighting for affirmative action (Htun 2004; Martins et. al. 2004), the federal government has very recently signed these policies to racially diversify higher education into law. Former president “Lula” da Silva made Law 10.639 the first piece of legislation he signed at the beginning of his presidency. Law 10.639 makes African and Afro-Brazilian history and culture compulsory in the elementary school curricula and designates November 20 a national holiday celebrating Black Consciousness. African Americans do not corner the market on social activism and Afro-Brazilians have garnered enough influence to push their racial agenda into law. Although changes in racial politics are occurring at the governmental level, the general belief in racial democracy has not abated as many Brazilians continue to deploy this logic in everyday life and as a means to resist these larger changes. Thus, the social context that provides the backdrop for the events this paper documents is a Brazil between racial democracy and recognizing that race plays a fundamental role in power dynamics. In the ethnographic vignettes that follow, I describe two

events in São Paulo in 2007: a lecture from Fred Hampton Jr. and the Day of Black Consciousness March. I examine how narratives of Black Power circulate through contemporary activist venues and how they become folded into current Afro-Brazilian struggles to continue the momentum for racial recognition.

Black Power Today

In São Paulo, November is the month of black consciousness (*consciência negra*). Throughout the month, various community organizations for black consciousness and racial equality sponsor activities and events, such as speeches, panel discussions, and informative lectures. All of these activities center on the history, culture, and politics of Afro-Brazilians, people of African descent outside of Brazil, and in Africa. November 20th is the federally designated Day on Black Consciousness. On Nov. 20, 2007, Afro-Brazilian activists organized the Black Consciousness parade, where 3000 people marched down Paulista Ave, the city's prominent thoroughfare, in honor of Zumbi dos Palmares, an icon of black struggle and resistance. I will discuss this parade later on in the paper, but my story of Black Power's contemporary iterations in Brazil begins about two days before the parade.

On November 18th, two friends who are plugged into the black circuit in São Paulo, invited me to attend a lecture and discussion with Fred Hampton, Jr., son of slain Black Panther Fred Hampton Sr. Organizers of the Black Consciousness festivities coordinated his visit to include a lecture and his participation in the Black Consciousness march on Nov. 20. The lecture was held in a small community center in the Santa Cecelia neighborhood in the downtown section in the city. I accompanied two friends, Manoel and Gabriela, and Gabriela's mother Rosa, to the event.

Fred Hampton Jr. entered the room and took a seat behind a table. The event organizers flanked him on all sides. One of them introduced Fred Hampton Jr. to the audience and the other provided the translation from Hampton's English into Portuguese. Hampton appeared replete with sunglasses, leather jacket, and beret to give his lecture, thus channeling the classic style of the Black Panthers. He began the lecture with a directive to the audience to pause for a moment of silence to honor all those who fought and died for black liberation. We were told to honor black freedom fighters by bowing our heads and raising our fists as a unified group. Hampton and the group channeled what Naomi Beckwith calls an, "aesthetics of revolutionary intent." Beckwith writes that "with their bookish black turtlenecks, black leather jackets, voluminous black afros, and, yes, black pistols and shotguns. The Panthers lent an image to pro-blackness, to revolutionary intent, and even to the 'blaxploitation' genre that followed soon afterward" (2011: 18). Through his dress, directives, and demeanor, Hampton invoked the image of the Black Panthers and involved the group in a transnational display of black solidarity through recognizable actions and symbols.

The primary content of the lecture focused on his father Fred Hampton Sr., a leader of the Black Panther Party chapter in Illinois.¹ Hampton began the spoken part of the lecture by stating that the police assassinated Hampton Sr. when Hampton Jr. was in utero, causing him to grow up without ever meeting his father. Hampton Jr. then went on to narrate the short but meaningful life of Fred Hampton Sr. He began his activism as a leader in a NAACP youth chapter in Maywood, IL and then went on to become the chairman of the Chicago chapter of the Black Panther Party. As part of this leadership role, he organized rallies, strengthened the breakfast program, and launched a community police watch. Fred Hampton Sr. was particularly known for his oratory skills, delivering energetic, sincere, and inspirational speeches at rallies and other speaking events. On Dec. 4, 1969, the Chicago police murdered 21-year-old Hampton

during a raid on his place of residence. The actions of the Black Panther Party have captured the interest and imagination of many people, both inside and outside of the United States. The Black Panther's unabashed demand for respect, their tactics of policing the police, and their iconic exhibition of black power through their rhetoric, actions, and clothing style incite a sustained interest in them on the global stage. Hampton Jr. added to the general knowledge that many in the crowd had about the Black Panthers with the story of his father, a figure little known to many Brazilians.

When the event concluded, Hampton agreed to take pictures with those who attended. Manoel and Gabriela wanted their picture taken with Fred Hampton Jr. When I asked Manoel why he wanted a picture he said for a remembrance of the occasion. When posing for the picture, Hampton again articulated a connection with black panthers by displaying the raised fist, wearing his beanie, and sunglasses – all references to the black panther's style. Upon viewing the photo taken, the constellation of African Diaspora symbols, images, and practices emerges in a striking way. Manoel's shirt also bares the image of the clenched fist in red, mirroring his and Hampton's own clenched fist. Manoel's t-shirt was made for a documentary about hip-hop in São Paulo, called *Hip-Hop in Movement*. This particular documentary narrated the emergence of hip-hop in the region. One of the rappers interviewed stated that hip-hop was a way to experience and express Afro-Brazilian culture and consciousness. Manoel's t-shirt that combines the fist with a documentary on hip hop references how hip hop has become an insurgent musical form through which marginal Afro-Brazilian youth can contest the conditions that constrain their lives, illuminate the systematic injustices they face, and express black identities. This image shows and encounter between people of African descent that emphasizes black pride manifested through dynamic performative actions expressed through visual symbols that can become shorthand instructions for other revolutionary, emancipatory, or empowering actions.

At the end of the night, Manoel, Gabriela, and I mingled with each other before the venue emptied out. Manuel told me the significance of the event for him: “See you don’t understand. Here in Brazil, there are no places to talk about blackness or race. When I go to class at my university it’s difficult to talk about racial inequality with my classmates and with my advisor. This kind of event is one of the only places where we can talk about being black.” For Manoel, these kinds of events were a reprieve from the everyday denial of blackness he encountered as a student. These events renewed his commitment to study and talk about racial issues and assured him that there existed a community of like-minded people, both in Brazil and outside of it, who shared his commitment to black consciousness. This event then served as a place where blackness was affirmed for the participants, making this a space of opposition to racial democracy. Black struggles in Brazil must not only concern themselves with racial inequality, but they must also insist that blackness as a personal and collective identity exists. This event, through interactions with Fred Hampton Jr. and with each other, nurtured and encouraged identification with blackness as a resistant and positive force.

Two days later, November 20 marked the Day of Black Consciousness. Throughout Brazil, this day commonly commemorates Zumbi dos Palmares, the historic leader of the fugitive slave community who fought for the community’s independence from the Portuguese artillery in 1694. Zumbi dos Palmares was captured and killed by the Portuguese on November 20, 1695. Today Zumbi is constantly invoked as a symbol of black resistance and black consciousness through poetry, song, and visual images. In São Paulo, the Black Consciousness March and musical concerts in various areas celebrated the occasion. The route for the black consciousness march began under the Modern Art Museum (MASP) and then we marched for about 2 miles down Paulista Avenue to the Municipal Theatre that designated the march’s end point. Marching crowds snaked down the route along with large trucks, on top of which stood groups of

people relaying messages through bullhorns to maintain the energy of the crowd. Hampton was stationed on top of one of the trucks for the march where he called out words to the crowd through a bullhorn, which I could not hear above the general noise of the crowd. On the actual day of the parade, Hampton Jr. would not take center stage, as he did previously at his lecture.

The Black Consciousness parade was a multivocal event that was made up of different groups who used it as a public venue to make their agendas visible. There were some groups doing capoeira, an Afro-Brazilian martial art. Many unions and political parties also walked in groups, with banners and flags representing their constituency and distinguishing them from one another. Educafro, an NGO that prepares poor and Afro-Brazilian students for the college entry examination, organized a segment of the parade. They waved large flags with their logo emblazoned over black, yellow, green, and red stripes. They called for affirmative action through audible chants of “Quotas now,” which they yelled in unison as they marched down the street. Two people carried a banner that read: Enough! Stop with prejudice. We want quotas which is our right!” Some members carried an effigy of the University of São Paulo. It symbolized the death of the university as long as it continued refusing to institute an affirmative action system that would racially diversify the student body. One of the sides of the coffin read “Death from Exclusion.” As a group, Educafro created a demonstration in favor of affirmative action, thus opposing those who claim that Brazil should not entertain such actions because the black beneficiaries of affirmative action could not be identified in a country with a racially mixed population and against others who claim that affirmative action introduced the very prejudice and racism is claimed to ameliorate.

As an honored guest Fred Hampton Jr. certainly had a prominent position on top of one of the trucks, but his presence was minimized by the size of the crowd and the other manifestations enacted by the marchers. The parade was covered by the Globo newspaper’s

online edition. In one of the stories, they focused on Hampton and included a quote from him denouncing the idea of Brazil's racial democracy by saying, "the problems with blacks in the United States, in Brazil, and in Africa are the same. Racial democracy in Brazil does not exist." This statement draws black populations in Africa, the U.S., and Brazil together as subject to global patterns of domination and inequality that marginalize black people within many different national contexts. In positioning Brazil with Africa and the U.S., Hampton denies Brazil's exceptional status as a racial democracy, and asserts that race relations in Brazil follow the racialized status quo.

Contemporary struggles for blackness in Brazil connect themselves to a transnational genealogy of black struggles that have taken place in the U.S., as well as those in Brazil. Afro-Brazilians reach out and make connections with contemporary activists in the U.S. and incorporate them into their own struggles. These actions do not privilege African Americans as the sole proprietors of black activism, but they can be seen as strategic. An international visitor can attract press to Afro-Brazilian events and demonstrates that they have the connections and the resources to bring guests from outside of the country for an event about black consciousness. Events surrounding racial politics in Brazil do not always attract much press or much attention from the general public. Afro-Brazilian activists also differentiate themselves against the dominant narrative of racial democracy in Brazil by privileging blackness as an important category of identification rather than just Brazilianess. In claiming that they are black, Afro-Brazilians align themselves with people of African descent in other parts of the world, including the US. African Americans are not necessarily dominant in these moments, but rather participants in black struggles in a different national context. The goals may be similar – racial equality and black liberation – but the context demands that African Americans understand the idea of racial democracy in Brazil and then their role becomes to denounce it, in the same way

that Afro-Brazilians do. By including symbols of an African American past into current struggles for blackness in Brazil, Afro-Brazilians position themselves as inheritors of this legacy of Black Power and reinvigorate its principles as tools for the contemporary activist present.

¹ See book Haas 2010 for more information on the life and death of Fred Hampton

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