

***“Bleque Pau, Black Bailes and the Perfor(n)ormative in  
Afro-Brazilian Cultural Space”***

Brazil has maintained a public posture and a global positioning as being a “post-race” society, which makes overcoming its particular brand of racism and racialism particularly difficult. The myth of Brazil as a racial democracy, although often challenged, is only now being examined by Brazilians with an agenda for social change. Racial democracy purports that because Brazil is a nation comprised of a mix of indigenous, European/Portuguese, and African peoples, hence it cannot be racist because everyone has a proverbial “foot in the kitchen”. When examined, this saying is a perfect example of Brazilian racism because the kitchen is the purview of the black woman, the slave, the mammy, the nanny, the wet nurse, the sexual subservient, who serviced and continues to serve the white dominant population. This myth of racial democracy propounded in the 1930’s and 40’s became a defining rubric of the nation, in contrast to U.S. based forms of racism. Its earliest advocate, Gilberto Freyre spent time in Texas and, in seeing the brutal treatment of African-Americans in comparison to the paternalistic dynamic of black and white relations in Brazil, concluded that the nation could not and indeed was not racist, even though black peoples lived in the worst conditions, were allowed only to perform menial labor, and received almost no education.

In the present day context, Brazil is one of the tenth largest economies in the world, with one of the most inequitable distributions of wealth. The Human Development Index marks it as a nation with markedly substandard conditions for the poor and the working class, and severely lacking in social policy or infrastructure to

ameliorate this vast disjunction (Nobles 6; Baeto 778-80).<sup>1</sup> What becomes the dangerous camouflage in the national imaginary is that these economic and social cleavages are treated as class-based issues, rather than racial ones. However, the Afro-Brazilian population is 33.7 percent of the 53 million poor Brazilians, or 63 percent of the overall poor population, and are disproportionately affected by these “subhuman conditions” (Beato 778). In tandem, they are the most likely targets for state sanctioned violence (Moehn 2007, Vargas 2006, Arias 2004, Yudice 2001). Due to popular imbibement of the mythos, to suggest that the society is racially demarcated or its inequities are racially coded becomes evidence of ones own racism (Sheriff 2001, Nobles 2000).

Only after 1987, with the writing of a new constitution was racism specifically disallowed in the society. Before the 1970’s, to speak of race or to articulate specific actions or paradigms around a race-based identity was illegal and subject to legal prosecution. What shifted was a democratic opening away from the super repressive policies of the military dictatorship that ruled from 1964 to 1985. Torture and censorship were its methods of containing ideological sedition, with the police morphing into paramilitary units used to control the poor population (Verucci 551).

Symbolic dissent first came from the masses in different arenas of culture and leisure because the government patrolled and forbade all other forms of protest. For the darker population, it emboldened the creation of a new “black” identity, influenced specifically by U.S. based politics. The 1960’s and 1970’s were eras of political change, African states were undergoing processes of decolonization or wars for liberation, in the

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<sup>1</sup> The Human Development Index uses the term “subhuman conditions” and specifically refers to the horrific housing conditions, poor infrastructure (sanitation, water, waste and power facilities), as well as the degree of poverty and need.

U.S. the civil rights movement in tension with the demand for black power, led to processes of political change for African-Americans. These dynamics converged in Brazil in the 1970s specifically through a dance movement alternatively known as “Black Rio” or “Black Soul.” The dances became known as *bailes black* and played a mix of soul and funk music, called *funk pesado* (heavy funk), predominantly featuring the music of James Brown and Parliament Funkadelic. When James Brown sang, “I’m black and I’m proud,” it shifted the agonistic internalized racism conferred from a society that objectifies and devalues the black being simply because of skin color, to an interrogation of black subjectivity in white dominated spaces.

DJ Maurício who, in fact, brought soul music from Rio to São Paulo, states that, at first, he only played James Brown, “Eu achei que era locura, negócio de negro “louco” [I thought he was mad, this black *thang* was “crazy”]. And, he named his *baile*, Black Mad, because of his love for the music. Attesting to the profound influence of the music, Maurício tells us that:

Na época, a gente não tinha conhecimento da lingual, nada era só o suingue, o que a gente pegava dele era o ritmo porque o inglês que a gente cantava era o inglês inventado na hora,... A gente não tinha o poder das mensagens do James Brown, tinha sim o poder do suingue dele, que era contagiante.

At the time, we didn’t know the language, but it wasn’t only the style, what we got from it was the rhythm since we invented the English on the spot ... We didn’t know the power of James Brown’s messages, it had power from his style, which was contagious. (Barbosa and Ribeiro 154, translation mine).

Sociologist Márcio Macedo affirms that, “A negritude, ironicamente, viria com o ritmo ‘importado’ soul!” [Negritude, ironically, comes with the imported soul rhythm] (Macedo 20). The term negritude in Brazil simply means blackness. Black Soul

emboldened a phase of pride in one's blackness that triggered a new era of race based cultural celebrations, literature and demand for political change. Michael Hanchard accords to the Black Soul movement, a newness in its incorporation of blackness that was decidedly outside of both white and black Brazilian purview of allowance. One *baile* in particular he shows, *Soul Grand Prix*, began the processes of transforming the consciousness of its participants, through their inclusion of multimedia presentations, in slides and films, of African-Americans in various forms of protest and peace (113). Black power ideology came from visuals of the militaristic stance of the black panthers, members of the Nation of Islam, and of African-Americans on the streets protesting, in concert with scenes from everyday life. The symbology of the African-American experience, Michael Hanchard suggests, serves as a catalyst for identity based politics and its canvases of representation became bodily codes like the wearing of big Afros, platform shoes, and bell-bottoms (112-113). A *baile* like *Noites do Shaft*, promoted a didactic, politicized sense of identity revolving around borrowings from the U.S. Black Power movement through the creation of a "Black is Beautiful" aesthetic intervention. As the *bailes* became more politically transgressive, their names like *Black Mad* and *Tranza Negra* reflected their engagement with representation of blackness and its expressions of *bleque pau*.

The founder, Santiago, of one of the most successful *bailes* attests to the influence of African-American political life when he states:

...o negro americano é 12% do país, que tem 360 milhões de habitantes, e eles fazem o barulho que fazem, mas eles sabem de onde vieram, a cultura deles, história deles. Nós não temos história, não fazemos para ter porque nós não fazemos para ter nada, essa é a grande verdade. Se nós somos 60% da população,

por que o nosso Presidente não é negro; por que nosso governador não é negro? Nós não fazemos políticos negros, nós não temos essa consciência, nós não temos essa cultura, se a gente não faz isso, a gente também não faz artista! (Santiago, Zimbabwe 195).

...the black American is 12% of the country, which has 360 million inhabitants, and they make the noise that they make, but they know where they come from, their culture, their history. We have no history, we don't have it because we don't have anything, that's very true. Since we are 60% of the population, why isn't our President black, why isn't our governor black? We don't have black politicians, we don't have that awareness, we don't have this culture, since we don't have it, we also don't make art! (Translation mine)

Santiago's polemic best explains why African-American forms of blackness take on heroic signification and are symbolically reterritorialized in Afro-Brazilian cultural modalities. The *bleque pau* expression that came out of the soul movement provided a vision for the change that Afro-Brazilians desired and offered them a language and strategies for protest that would reverberate in new forms of political engagement.

### **Influence of bleque pau**

This merging of politics and pleasure reached new levels with the formation of *Ilé Aiyê* in 1974. Vovo attests that African-American demands for black power, in tandem with the music and visuality of empowered black people seen in the black *bailes* made them rethink and revision a new aesthetic of blackness. Thus in creating the first ever carnival *Bloco Afro*, they called themselves *Poder Negro* (Black Power), but they were advised by the police to name themselves less provocatively, and resultingly, changed it to the Yoruba term, meaning "house of the world." When *Ilé Aiyê* first formed, it only allowed people who were *Azvechie Negro* to join. *Azvechie Negro* signifies the blackest of the black, and to this day, in *Ilé Aiyê's* contest to choose the

queen of Carnival, the *Duesa do Ebano*, the Ebony Goddess, she must embody that aesthetic criterion.

The black power ideology also found voice in concrete political action. In 1978, the *Movimento Negro Unificado* (MNU), the United Black Movement, was formed as a political organization and Black Consciousness movement. It demand for Afro-Brazilians an equal space in the nation and demanded of Afro-Brazilians the creation of a race-based identity to achieve majority as a voting block. Just as the new leaders of the MNU were influenced by the representations of blackness within the *bailes*, in seeing the pedagogical potentiality of the dances, they adopted them as propagandizing spaces to connect with the black population.<sup>2</sup> MNU members embarked on education projects having its members read texts like the Autobiography of Malcolm X, Black Power by Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture) and Charles Hamilton, readings from different revolutionaries from Amilcar Cabral to Agostinho Neto, just to name a few. The literati within the MNU created a journal called *Cadernos Negros*, Black Notebooks in which they self-published poetry from various artist. This led to the formation of the writer's collective, Quilombhoje, which today is the only black-identifying writing and publishing group in the country.

The *bailes* must be seen as the incubatory spaces for that hidden transcript of resistance to the concept of racial democracy and the formulation of new forms of racial and cultural belonging. The *bailes* provided an alternate space, a "social site" outside of the surveillance of the state (Scott 120). Social sites, according to James Scott, do not

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<sup>2</sup> Barbosa, Márcio. Apresentação. In *Bailes: Soul, Samba-Rock, Hip Hop e Indentidade em São Paulo*. Eds. Márcio Barbosa, Esmeralda Ribeiro. São Paulo: Quilombhoje Literatura e Fundação Cultural Palmares Ministério da Cultura, 2006. 11-40. 11.

necessarily denote a separate space, rather it implies a discursive separation where alternate linguistic codes, gestural language, and dialects operate freely and opaquely from the dominant codes (121). For these hidden transcripts to achieve voice, it also depends on the relative free time of the human protagonists who can generate it and disseminate it. The *bailes* offered exactly this type of concourse. While the *favela* or the *periferia*, the places designated for the poor and black populations are viewed by the mainstream as outside of the norm, within these spaces a different dimension exists, which Paul Sneed describes as a “wealth of human community,” because in the *baile*, friendship, food, drink, and congeniality flow in abundance (Sneed 70). Thus, the *bailes* became a temporal injunction of the good life they sought; it was a space of escapism from the quotidian norms of societal exclusion.

Since the *bailes* were supremely black spaces, controlled and created by black entrepreneurs, Afro-Brazilians could talk freely amongst their compatriots, critique a system that conspired against them and fashion ways in which to mediate the white spaces that encircled them. A general response to the query as to the reasons for attending the *bailes*, Jesus Felix reports is “porque eu estou entre os meus iguais e porque aqui eu não sofro discriminação, aqui é um lugar onde eu sinto num espaço igualitário” (because I am with my equals and because I don’t suffer from discrimination, here I am in a space where I feel equal to everyone) (Jesus Felix 33 -34).. According to Marcio Barbosa, the *baile* was a space for creating identity, for reconfiguring a subjective and communal sense of blackness:

... Ali, entre seus iguais, o afro-descendente se vê pertencendo a uma cultura e a uma comunidade, pode encontrar semelhantes para praticar a sociabilidade,

repartir comunitariamente alegrias ou preocupações e descontraír ao som de músicas e ritmos marcadamente pertencentes a uma história da qual faz parte.

There, among his peers, the *afro-descendente* sees how s/he belongs to one culture and community, s/he can find similarities that generate sociability, share community joys and concerns, and relax to the sound of music and rhythms belonging distinctly to a history from which s/he is apart. (Barbosa 13, translation mine)

### Bleque Pau Today

The very first recorded hip-hop song, by Thaíde and DJ Hum's "Senhor Tempo Bom" [Mr. Good Times], gives homage to the *bailes* and the black power ideology they promoted. The combination of lyrics and visuals evoke the soul/funk era, but it is used to ground this new musical form in the narrative of Afro-Brazilian empowerment:

Que saudade do meu tempo de criança,  
quando eu ainda era pura esperança,  
eu via nossa mãe voltando pra dentro do nosso barraco,  
com uma roupa de santo debaixo do braço.  
Eu achava engraçado tudo aquilo,  
mas já respeitava o barulho do atabaque,  
e não sei se você sabe, a força poderosa que tem na mão  
de quem toca um toque caprichado, santo gosta.  
Então eu preparava pra seguir o meu caminho,  
protegido por meus ancestrais.  
Antigamente o samba-rock, black power, soul,  
assim como o hip hop era o nosso som,

I'm longing for my childhood  
When I still had pure hope  
I would see our mom coming back to our shack  
With the saint's clothing under her arm  
I thought everything was funny  
But I respected the sound of the *atabaque*  
I don't know if you know, the powerful force in the hand  
Of one who plays mercurially, the saint loves [it].  
So I prepared to follow my path,  
Protected by my ancestors  
In the past samba-rock, black power, soul  
Was our sound, then along came hip hop.

The music sampled is from a popular hit, Mr. Big Stuff, from the 1970s by Jean Knight.

The video begins with a quasi-farcical invocation, seen in the cartoon figure of a woman



in a yellow cat suit and huge Afro, evokes the dress and style of the 1970s. Forging a direct connective link with sonic impact of the soul movement, Taíde appears through a visual tunnel going through the mouth of the woman, wearing a floral shirt, a bell bottom suit, and Afro to evoke the iconoclastic trends of the time. Shots veer between members of the group dressed similarly and performing various dances like the syncopated moves popularized by soul groups, to the robot, and the freestyling of the soul train line, juxtaposed against current images from the hip hop scene of different break dancers and the group performing the song during a live show. When Taíde ends the song with the lines, “Hip hop / bleque pau no hoje,” [Hip hop/black power today],” he sets the tone for the political and aesthetic engagement of the hip hop movement, highlighting its influence from the Black Power movement in the creation of a lexicon, language, style, and organizational platform for Afro-Brazilian articulation of power.

### **Conclusion**

The soul / *bleque pau* movement marked the beginnings of what has become a long standing relationship of recoding African-American activists discourses in Brazil, whereby the symbology from African-American cultural styles permeate and are used to express different types of blackness. Social activists Afro-Brazilians have consistently looked to African-American political formations as a quasi-Utopic ideal for the degree and depth of activism they desire in the black population in Brazil, if not necessarily, in its social outcomes. Hence there has been an extended relationship between the symbolic use of clothing, hairstyles, slang, and slogans from “Black Power” to “Black is

Beautiful,” in the construction of localized blackness in Brazil. The *bailes* began a new era of “speaking truth to power,” the silences of the oppressed gave way to the power of articulation, to the power of blackness as a means of organizing rubric for political change, educating the marginalized, forming identity, and generating institutional apparatuses to transform social excoriation and exclusion.