

## **Exploding the myth of racial harmony: Afro-Brazilian female experiences**

**Epifania Akosua Amoo-Adare**

### **Abstract**

*In this paper, I problematize France Twine's (1998) argument that Brazilian non-elite's racial sense-making is narrowly defined as compared to US understandings of racism and antiracist politics. First, I review literature that provides parts of the complex and complicated picture of how racism is experienced and contested by Afro-Brazilian women in particular. Second, I argue for recognition of race and racism as floating signifiers, which mutate according to specific geohistorical contexts. In effect, all sociopolitical strategies must vary according to the various particular and peculiar phenomena of racism and its effects. Finally, I reiterate Chandra Mohanty's (1997) caution about the use of western scholarship and in this case activism too as the main referent for evaluating Third World social, cultural, and political practices.*

*Favela* of the dancers  
who shake their hips and their feet  
with buckets of water on their  
head, hands on their waist  
shimmying.

In her book *Racism in a Racial Democracy*, France Twine (1998) provides a microcultural analysis of racism in order to highlight the practices of working and middle-class Afro-Brazilians and Euro-Brazilians. She does this by providing an ethnographic study of "everyday discursive and material practices" of the Brazilian nonelite, as contrary to US and Brazilian scholars' discursive practices. Twine expresses a concern with how ordinary Brazilians perceive, conceptualize, and negotiate multiple forms of racism in Brazil. This concern is represented by her constant positioning of a western (US) definition of racism at the center of her description and critique of their racial sense-making. Twine constructs their ideological terrain of common sense understandings of racism as being narrowly defined. She attributes the lack of an Afro-Brazilian social movement on par with the Civil Rights Movement in the US to the following explanations: (1) Euro and Afro-Brazilians' inability to recognize Brazilian racism as occurring beyond the realms of individual attitudes and beliefs, (2) subsequently their refusal to recognize instances of institutional racism, (3) Afro-Brazilians' reluctance to confront Euro-Brazilians who are racist or to engage in antiracist politics against white supremacy, and (4) Euro- and Afro-Brazilian non-elites continued faith in the myth of racial democracy. Twine uses US understandings of racism and antiracist politics as a benchmark to map and evaluate Brazilian definitions of racism, using the inhabitants of the small town of Vasilias as her sample.

In this paper, I problematize France Twine's (1998) argument that Brazilian non-elite's racial sense-making is narrowly defined as compared to US understandings of racism and antiracist politics. First, I review literature<sup>1</sup> that provides parts of the complex and

complicated picture of how racism is experienced and contested by Afro-Brazilian women in particular. Second, I argue for recognition of race and racism as floating signifiers, which mutate according to specific geohistorical<sup>1</sup> contexts. In effect, all sociopolitical strategies must vary according to the various particular and peculiar phenomena of racism and its effects. Finally, I reiterate Chandra Mohanty's (1997) caution about the use of western scholarship and in this case activism too as the main referent for evaluating Third World social, cultural and political practices.

The analytical description that I represent looks specifically at some of the social relations that Afro-Brazilian women, living in the *favelas*,<sup>2</sup> have with the rest of Brazilian society. In making my descriptions I will be showing how an unacknowledged racism affects Afro-Brazilian women on an institutional and a personal level, (i.e. how racism denies most of these women access to adequate housing, education, good jobs and even stable personal relationships). I will make explicit the connections between these various factors in that being female, black, poor, and responsible for children is tantamount to being homeless or inadequately housed in the peripheries of a racist community. Thus, also acknowledging that "[a]lthough concepts of space and time are socially constructed, they operate with the full force of objective fact and play a key role in processes of social production" (Harvey, 1990, p. 418). In critically analyzing these personalized social relations, I intend to also describe the structural effects of racism in Brazil and how these impact Afro-Brazilian women's socioeconomic, sociopolitical and sociocultural lives. As social relations result from concrete sequences of practices that are an important focus of analysis for understanding larger social and economic processes (Escobar, 1989).

*Favela* of the improvised roller skates  
sandals that shuffle  
broken toys  
people who go up and down

with no fear of the dark,  
no fence, no wall  
no hesitation.

### **EXPLODING THE MYTH OF RACIAL HARMONY: RACISM IN BRAZIL**

Brazil has the largest black population outside Africa. Its Afro-Brazilian population is slightly smaller than the population of Nigeria - the most populous country in Sub-Saharan Africa (Aguilera & Silva, 1998; Benjamin & Mendonca, 1997). This fact is understandable when you consider that of the 9,385,315 slaves transported to the Americas, 37.7% were brought to Brazil alone (Caipora Women's Group, 1993). The social inequalities in Brazil today have their roots in the racial exploitation that took place in Brazil during slavery. The first to be exploited were the indigenous Indians, second came black people, and then poor white people (Aguilera & Silva, 1998). Brazil was also one of the last countries to abolish slavery on May 13, 1888 (Benjamin & Mendonca, 1997; Caipora Women's Group, 1993; Kowarick & Ant, 1994; Serbin, 1993; Skidmore, 1993). Even with the abolition of slavery there were still Afro-Brazilians living in miserable conditions. The majority had no access to education. The landless were unable to find decent jobs and the few that were able to obtain land did not have the resources to work the land. These stresses caused many family breakdowns and Afro-Brazilian women often became the main or sole support of the family. Interestingly, these women worked mainly as domestic servants, a role that they had during slavery (Benjamin & Mendonca, 1997).

In 1992, national statistics in Brazil reflected the persistent and widespread racial inequalities. Black Brazilians were disproportionately represented among the lower social classes with considerably lower incomes and less social mobility than whites (Telles, 1992). In 1997, this difficult existence was still visible, as Afro-Brazilians received less education, earned less, ate more poorly, and even died earlier than whites. They also made up the

poorest sector of the population, and Afro-Brazilian women disproportionately populated this sector. In fact, the emancipation of the slaves can be said to have served the interests of the ruling class, as they did not have to plan or make provision for the incorporation of former slaves' labor into the new economic system (Caipora Women's Group, 1993).

Since the abolition of slavery in Brazil, three important features have distinguished Brazilian race relations: (1) a color continuum rather than a color line, (2) its racial ideology, and (3) an avoidance by the Brazilian government of legislation that mentions race (Telles, 1992). One example of the third feature was the decision in the late 1960s to omit the category of race from the 1970 census. In doing this, an elite consensus that race was not an individual variable in Brazilian society, was strongly represented (Skidmore, 1985). As Twine (1998) posits, historically and at present many white people insist that there is no racism in Brazil. This historic denial was easily achievable at a time when racial segregation and violence in the United States and Apartheid in South Africa provided white Brazilians with a yardstick against which they could measure themselves and be found not wanting. Brazil had never been affected by race hatred as visible as that in the United States and South Africa. Also the colonization of Africa led many white Brazilians to advocate "whitening" the less civilized people of color, the majority of the Brazilian population, as a bid to maintain the superior racial white element. This "whitening" was to take place mainly through the decrease in the black population (due to higher incidences of disease and lower birth rates), miscegenation (i.e. the production of a lighter race by black and white choice), and the European immigration into Brazil helping to speed the process (Skidmore, 1985; Skidmore, 1993). The myth of racial harmony was able to take its roots and flourish at this time. But with the advent of African national independence, the successes of the African-American Civil Rights struggle and finally the end of Apartheid, white Brazilians were stripped of their 'myth of racial harmony.'

Racism in Brazil is so internalized that many blacks refuse to define themselves as being black. As an example of this, there are many different terms for describing a person with dark skin, such as *mulato*, *feijaozinho*, *criolo*, *pardo*, *cafe com leite*, *marrom*, and *bombom*. This mentality has affected how people respond to surveys on race thus making it difficult to determine exactly how large the black population is in Brazil. One reason why the definition of race is so complex in Brazil is that a person's race is not solely determined by their origin. A person of African descent who has light skin may be considered white, especially if they have a good job, live in a middle or upper class neighborhood and are well educated. In contrast, if a person with the same physical characteristics was poor and illiterate and lived in a *favela*, they would be considered black (Benjamin & Mendonca, 1997). The irony in this circumstance is that despite this form of racist discrimination, all white Brazilians have the luxury of being able to identify with black culture, as a part of their Brazilian popular culture identity. In short, the "race issue in Brazil is deeply embedded in the country's political, economic, social and cultural structures and must be seen in conjunction with the theory of dependence between the peripheries and the center countries" (Caipora Women's Group, 1993, p. 47).

Brazilian women won the right to vote in 1934, but it was not until 1989 that this right was extended to 'illiterates.' This meant that the majority of Afro-Brazilian women were not allowed to exercise their voting rights for 55 years (Caipora Women's Group, 1993). As a direct consequence of the feminist movement concentrating solely on gender discrimination rather than racial discrimination, "[t]he [Brazilian] women's movement ignores the fact that around 50 per cent of Brazilian women are black with the majority of them living in poverty, and has so far neglected the inequality of opportunity which exists between black and white women in all spheres of social, economic and political life" (Caipora Women's Group, 1993, p. 58). Thus, even though there has been progress made by feminists in Brazilian society,

the full benefits of this progress have not been realized by Afro-Brazilian women. Despite the abolition of slavery, Afro-Brazilian women are still subject to three-fold discrimination: as blacks, as women, and as poor people.

Negating Brazil's myth of racial democracy, more than a century after the abolition of slavery, many Afro-Brazilians believe that emancipation has barely begun in a society of sharp contrasts between the rich and the poor (Serbin, 1993). Benedita da Silva,<sup>1</sup> in talking about the deeply embedded racism and the dominant society's role in it says, "[t]hey say that we have built a society with a fair distribution of wealth, the position of blacks would automatically improve. But I disagree, blacks suffer because they are poor, but they are poor *because* they are black" (Benjamin & Mendonca, 1997, p. 122). In recognition of this fact and as a response to the serious racism that Afro-Brazilians experience, several black movements have developed. One of the successes of the black movements has been to ensure that the 1988 Constitution protected the rights of Afro-Brazilians. An amendment was passed that made racial prejudice a crime without bail and with no statute of limitation. Although this law has not changed behavior, it at least can be said to provide legal support for Afro-Brazilians (Benjamin & Mendonca, 1997).

*Movimento Negro Unificado Contra a Discriminacao Racial* (MNUCDR)<sup>2</sup> is one of the most radical black movements in Brazil. The MNU, as it later came to be known, was established during the military regime. It came out of a time when the Brazilian police had intensified their attack on the poor black population as a response to criticisms made by black movement activists about the authoritarian makeup of the police institutions (Cunha, 1998). The MNU's "strategies and attempts to unify black movements were grounded in the understanding that racism was a political issue," (Cunha, 1998, p. 222) as opposed to a cultural or social issue as emphasized by other black movements.

Lelia Gonzalez, then an MNU activist, believed that "politics" as well as "culture" when viewed as separate

entities would be unable to carry out the transformation of Brazilian society. "In other words, she maintained that neither cultural events such as dance parties and celebrations nor the traditional political appeals of leftists parties and organizations had proven capable of mobilizing or raising the consciousness of the black population" (Cunha, 1998, p. 223). The idea of transformation in her view was a reconfiguration of the relationship between culture and politics. There was the need to devise a political ideology that would create a dynamic and unified national movement; thus the struggle had to be constructed around cultural diversity. Other important factors for the transformation were the debunking of the myth of racial harmony and the educating of all Brazilians about the existence of racism. In addition, the concept of double militancy meant that externally, the MNU's main priority is to work towards the struggle against racial discrimination and internally, the MNU women work towards denouncing the machismo of their male comrades and deepening discussions about themselves.

The MNU differs from other black movements, such as *Frente Negra Brasileira* (FNB)<sup>1</sup> and *Teatro Experimental do Negro* (TEN),<sup>2</sup> in that it does not have a leader with the power to control the destiny of the organization. In order to ensure this, the basic organizational structure of the movement is the Centros de Luta (CLs) or what are now called Action Groups. These centers consist of a minimum of 5 persons, who accept the statutes and program of the MNU. The role of the CLs is to promote debates, information, consciousness raising and the organization of Afro-Brazilians. The CLs set up wherever there are Blacks, "such as in work areas, villages, prisons, *candomble* and *umbanda* temples, samba schools, *afoxes*, churches, *favelas*, swamp dwellings, and shanties" (Gonzalez, 1985, p. 125). Thus, as can be seen, racism in Brazil is certainly not an uncontested issue.

*Favela that inspires the poets*

who speak to her, about her  
speak of passion, of loss  
of returning  
and even of the broken heart on the  
dance floor.

*Favela* of the betrayed woman  
of the *malandro* who left prison  
and comes back and finds nothing  
and nobody home.

### **AFRO-BRAZILIAN WOMEN: NEGRAS IN LOVE, MARRIAGE AND FAMILY**

Poverty is most definitely a female issue and has been for a long time. Of all poor adults in the world today two-thirds are women. Poverty is also a children's issue and as children more often than not are in female care this adds another dimension to women's experience of poverty. It is also important to note that it is not just an individual's lack of resources that makes a person poor, but it is also their family's lack of resources. Poverty then, is a family or household concept, not an individual one (Albelda & Tilly, 1997). For this reason, I will now look at how racism affects Afro-Brazilian women in love, marriage, and family. As this would shed some light on whether they are potential candidates for experiencing 'poverty' in both senses of the word. If it can be said that these women do experience 'poverty,' in that they are more likely to become single, female-headed households, then, this would illuminate the other problem areas, namely income generation, access to education, and access to housing.

One may be fooled into believing that in Brazil all women<sup>1</sup> have the same privilege of love, as the "idea that youthful urges transcend color prejudice is, in fact, common in Brazilian popular media" (Burdick, 1998, pp. 26-27). However there is much room for doubt when looked at closely, as most of the media images are of white Brazilian women with Afro-Brazilian men. In actuality, Afro-Brazilian women are invisible in this arena: "In general, the dark hue of *pretas*' skin and the nappiness

of their hair destine them in the awful calculus of the heterosexual romantic economy, to be the ones last chosen and the ones first abandoned. *Negros* and *pretos* with any claim to status - the fine dancer, the snappy dresser, the one with a car - will do what any self-respecting young Brazilian man will do: he will find himself a *morena*, or, better still, a *branca* with long, flippable hair" (Burdick, 1998, p. 27). To be a moderately attractive white woman in the working class courtship arena of Rio de Janeiro means being the center of many images, which construct you as a token of social honor and power. Every street of Rio is laden with images of attractive white women, thus, representing their power to occupy public space. "The connection between white women and social power is reinforced in the media through the use of white women's images in association with material wealth. The most socially prestigious products, advertised in magazines and on television, require models who are not only white, but blonde" (Burdick, 1998, p. 28). Afro-Brazilian women, on the other hand, will not find any black models in magazines or on television (Benjamin & Mendonca, 1997; Twine, 1997). In fact, even "schoolbooks still contain many discriminatory examples - the dumb black girl, the one that knows nothing and breaks everything. In contrast, we see the white girl, who sits right, eats right and speaks right. In television programming you see the same thing" (Aguilera & Silva, 1998, p. 17).

For the Afro-Brazilian man there is an element of choice, in that if the blackest men are on the lookout for the fairest-skinned and softest-haired women, the lightest men have their pick of darker women but avoid the darkest. For them the ideal is the *morena* or the *mulata*.<sup>1</sup> *Morenas* and *mulatas* have two physical features in common, defined in contrast to the *preta*. Although the color of their skin can vary, it cannot be very deep brown or black. Their color has in fact been endowed in Brazilian culture with a certain mystique. And in Brazilian popular culture the *mulata* is perceived as a sensual beauty who attracts the male gaze effortlessly. An important aspect of the *mulata* is their

hair which is not 'nappy' but long and soft; the centrality of hair in the image of the *mulata* has been present since the nineteenth century. The *mulata's* sex appeal is located in the synthesis of white unattainability with the availability of the black woman (Burdick, 1998).

In contrast the *preta* is seen as problematic in terms of her nappy hair, as Tiririca's making of the song '*Veja os cabelos dela*'<sup>1</sup> showed. From this, one could argue that after twenty years of cultural struggle, on the part of the black movement, there has been no success in shaking the deeply embedded stigmatization of the looks of the dark/black, 'nappy-haired' woman. This concern with *cabelo ruim* (bad hair) or *belo feio* (ugly hair), as known in everyday Brazilian speech, means that many black women are subjected to advertisements that encourage the straightening of their hair in order to be acceptable in Brazilian society (Burdick, 1998). Benedita da Silva describes her anguish in being a black girl with nappy hair in the following way: "I hated being a black girl and dreamed of being something that I wasn't. One day, I was so distraught that I took a tub that my mother used to wash clothes, filled it with bleach and water, and took a bath in it to see if I could make my skin lighter" (Benjamin & Mendonca, 1997, p. 124). One of the experiences that lead to this desire to whiten herself she says was because "[a]ccording to the media, beautiful women were light-skinned. I could never hope to fit this standard. When I was in school the other kids would call me *nega maluca* - an ugly nigger. I was big and black and had 'hard hair.' I longed to have straight hair. I felt so ugly and rejected. I'd try to hide my hair" (Benjamin & Mendonca, 1997, p. 123). The 'nappy-haired' women's response to this racism is the process of keeping nappy hair manageable - by straightening it. This means a heavy investment of time, energy and money. No other group of women in Brazil is pressured into such a process (Burdick, 1998).

Other factors that the dark-skinned Afro-Brazilian women have to contend with are that in "Brazilian culture, the bodies of *negras* and *pretas* are regarded as the seat

of primitive, uncontrollable sexuality” (Burdick, 1998, p. 38). Thus many dark-skinned Brazilian women are subject to sexual harassment on the streets and at dances. These women are also considered to be harder for men to control, hard to trust, promiscuous and insubordinate. This and an over-sexualized vision of dark-skinned women means that they are in most cases not considered for long-term meaningful relationships. “Black women bear the brunt of this exploitation, particularly when it come[s] to white men. There is this impression that black women are ‘*mais quentes*’ - hotter, so men feel free to exploit them more. Black women are considered more pleasing sexually, but these men usually don’t make a commitment to them” (Benjamin & Mendonca, 1997, p. 109). In experiencing abandonment from both black and white men, especially for *mulata* and *morena* women, dark-skinned women become wary of relationships generally and especially with white men. This experience of abandonment is also at times felt within the immediate family. It is not uncommon to hear of cases where parents give preferential treatment to their lighter-skinned children (Twine, 1997). The descriptions that I have made of dark-skinned Afro-Brazilian women are not to essentialize their experiences, as some of these women also know unconditional love within family and relationships. But always these experiences are in intimate relation to white women, *morena* and *mulata* women, and men of all colors (Burdick, 1998). Thus, these experiences, although harsh, can be qualified in various ways by other people’s empathy, solidarity, communication and love.

*Favela* of high heels  
tight skirt and hoop earrings  
pointed shoes, straw hat  
toothpick, decked out,  
kite, cricket, balloon  
*Favela* of the drums  
ceremonies, processions  
preachers knocking on doors  
carolers arriving

waking everyone up.

*Favela* chatting along the way  
hopscotch  
pastries, snacks and chicken feet  
calf's soup and that special *feijoada*.  
*Favela* of today and yesterday  
time that will never come back  
from my fantasy  
to make her smile  
sing, play  
forget  
and live.

## **AFRO-BRAZILIAN WOMEN: ACCESS TO EDUCATION AND WORK**

Afro-Brazilian women have always been an active part of the Brazilian workforce, and for this reason they have been subject to oppression both at work and at home. Within the world of work, these women are seen as ignorant and only capable of menial jobs. Afro-Brazilian women's roles appear to be that of cleaning the houses of white people and taking care of their children. This is illustrated by Aguilera & Silva (1998) who state:

Thirty three percent of all Afro-Brazilians that work earn the minimum wage of \$103.00 per month. Only 2% of the Afro-Brazilian population belong to the privileged strata; that is, people who earn more than 1,000 Reals per month, or approximately \$900. Afro-Brazilian women have the highest levels of illiteracy, i.e. 48% of black and mixed-descent women are illiterate. As a result, they also predominate in the informal sector of the economy. Out of every 100 black women who are currently studying, only two obtain an office-level job or pursue further education. Once in the job market, these women are only able to secure the worst jobs where you see

the worst conditions and salaries. There in fact exists a disturbing correlation: the lower the salary, the greater the presence of black women (p.16).

The sons and daughters of the poor become machinists, mechanics, cooks, seamstresses, or enter any other trade that helps to sustain the domestic market. In 1980, Afro-Brazilian women were underrepresented among the new female professionals that resulted from the expanding middle sector. And as of 1990, only 2% of all Afro-Brazilian women in the labor force were in prestigious occupations (Alvarez, 1990). Even as recently as 1998, there are no black ambassadors, no black managers, and no black army generals (Aguilera & Silva, 1998). Speaking about herself, Benedita da Silva says, "[t]he only reason why I am here [referring to being a politician] is because a highly conscious and organized popular sector, within a highly conscious political party, believed that it was possible to take a housewife, an ordinary woman, and elect her to the Congress of the Republic" (Aguilera & Silva, 1998, p. 17).

Many Afro-Brazilian women produce goods and services for trading in the informal sector. The younger women tend to work in the beauty sector as hairdressers, manicurists, or pedicurists. If they manage to learn and master basic math, they look for work as cashiers in supermarkets or as bus conductresses. Many earn a living as dressmakers, washerwomen, or ironing women. Street trading is also an activity that is often carried out by Afro-Brazilian women. The majority of jobs that are available to Afro-Brazilian women is within paid housework, for example as kitchen-maids, cooks, cleaning women, charwomen, nannies, and general help. Thus, despite the abolition of slavery, it appears that Afro-Brazilian women are still maintaining the role of domestic servants, albeit with pay. That is, Afro-Brazilian women are still expected to serve their master, their master's wives and their master's children. In fact, many families do without a washing machine simply because they have a

servant who can do the washing. The domestic servant occupies the lowest rung of Brazil's employment ladder, and 80% of domestic workers are black (Benjamin & Mendonca, 1997; Caipora Women's Group, 1993). It is important to note that a *preta* (dark-skinned) Brazilian woman is the most likely amongst Afro-Brazilian women to be working as a domestic servant, just as a *morena* or *mulata* is more likely to have a job as a retail clerk. Hence we see that "[t]oday the image of a *preta* as a maid continues to be one of the most durable in Brazilian popular culture, reinforced through everyday practice, as well as by storytelling, media, schoolbooks - and even by the figure of the *preta velha* (old black woman) in the religion of *umbanda*" (Burdick, 1998, p. 47).

Benedita da Silva is right when she says, "education is so important. It is an instrument of power. We still need some time to establish a system of education that will adequately inform people of who they are and what they are capable of. This will take a long time. While I have lived on the streets, I also had the opportunity to attend elementary school. And it was exactly this opportunity that allowed me, thirty years later, to take control of my life and recommence my studies" (Aguilera & Silva, 1998, p. 17). This statement reflects the fact that "obtaining a formal education is fundamental for nonwhites as it is virtually their only passport to higher social positions" (Hasenbalg, 1985, p. 30). Yet this education that she speaks of is not equally available for all population groups in Brazil. For example, in 1976, the educational disadvantages of Afro-Brazilians were greater in the rural areas. Within the urban populations the literacy rates were 72% for Afro-Brazilians and 85% for whites, whereas in the rural population the percentages were 41.7% and 64.5% respectively. In the country as a whole the literacy rates were 59.8% for Afro-Brazilians and 78.4% for whites. One of the basic determinants of access to educational and economic opportunity is the geographical segregation of blacks and whites. Almost two-thirds of the white population live in the Southeast and a greater proportion of blacks are

concentrated in the rest of the country, especially the Northeast (Hasenbalg, 1985). By 1998, Afro-Brazilians were 3 times more likely than whites to be illiterate (Burdick, 1998).

The sharp racial inequalities in education are most visible when looking at higher education. Whites are 5 times more likely than *pardos* (those of mixed ancestry) and 9 times more likely than *pretos* (those who identify themselves as black in the census) to obtain university degrees. The darker the child, the more often they are allowed to drop out of school by the 4th grade (Burdick, 1998). As "a result of discriminatory practices and the symbolic violence inherent in a racist culture, nonwhites have more limited educational opportunities than whites of the same social origin. In turn, the educational achievements of blacks and mulattos are translated into proportionately smaller occupational and income gains than those of whites" (Hasenbalg, 1985, p. 40).

*Favela*, my treasure  
 your charms seduces me  
 with no water or electricity, you are  
 still made of light  
 you're my inspirational muse, my  
 place, my land

## **AFRO-BRAZILIAN WOMEN: HOUSING AND RESIDENTIAL SEGREGATION**

Whites make up more than 80% of the Brazilian population in 10 of the 14 areas in Sao Paulo and the South. Both of Brazil's two large urban cities in the South, Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo, have white majorities of 72% and 60% respectively, but also have Afro-Brazilian populations surpassing three million in number (Telles, 1992). During the 1950s and early 1960s, UNESCO-sponsored research reported substantial residential segregation in Rio de Janeiro, but concluded that this segregation was highly conditioned by social class. However, surveys on racial attitudes conducted during

that same time found considerable racial prejudice, including resistance by many whites to having blacks and *mulattos* as neighbors (Burdick, 1998; Skidmore, 1985; Telles, 1992). In Brazil's cities, areas with high industrialization, greater immigrant influence, and lower racial heterogeneity tend to have higher residential segregation. A certain level of residential segregation occurs along racial lines within members of the same income group, whilst residential segregation between blacks and both whites and browns is especially high in low-income urban areas. Residential segregation by color is also lowest among the very poor. Urban areas with high levels of home ownership are significantly associated with greater white-brown and white-black segregation. In Salvador,<sup>1</sup> for example, the "skin color of residents varied according to the quality of the neighborhood: The poorest and most overcrowded areas of the city were inhabited by blacks, dark-skinned mulattos, and a limited number of light-skinned mulattos, while whites and occasional light-skinned mulattos lived in middle-class sectors of town" (Telles, 1992, p.188). Studies by Emilio Willems (1949) and Michael J. Turner (1985) noted that racial residential segregation appeared to be particularly high in the Brazilian South, as racism is heightened in more industrialized areas such as Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo (Telles, 1992).

A prime example of where residentially segregated poor Brazilians live is the *favelas* in Rio de Janeiro.<sup>2</sup> The *favelas* date back to the first wave of migration from the countryside, after the abolition of slavery. Many of the plantation owners chose to close their plantations or employ white labor, rather than pay wages to their ex-slaves. Thus the ex-slaves with no work or land rights migrated to cities such as Rio de Janeiro to find work. Many of the early inhabitants of the *favelas* were Afro-Brazilian and the same can be said today (Botting, 1977). In 1994, a popular vision of Rio de Janeiro was that of a busy cosmopolitan city surrounded by sun, sea and vast stretches of golden sand. The reality of this city was different as only a relatively small and specific area of

the city related to images that were normally seen in travel brochures. Much of Rio de Janeiro and its hinterland, was considered violent, unserved, and extremely poor. In fact, about 14% of Rio's over six million inhabitants lived in the 500 or so *favelas* that dominated the city's urban landscape (Gay, 1994). The highest concentration of *favelas* is in the industrial and commercial districts in the north of the city. Alvarez (1990) describes the *favelas* as the urban periphery, where urban growth was not accompanied by an adequate expansion of urban and social service, thus leaving many of its inhabitants without running water, electricity, sewage, health facilities, educational facilities, and other basic services.

Benjamin & Mendonca's (1997) English translation of Benedita da Silva's personal account of living in a *favela*, talk of how "[m]ost of them [houses in the *favelas*] have just two rooms, with about six people living there, and the houses themselves are not very sturdy. There's no sewage system and no regular garbage collection." (p. 33). In describing some of the hardships that Afro-Brazilian women generally experience, the Caipora Women's Group (1993) argue that it is black women who either have to provide for their children on their own or help their partners to do so. In particular, "[t]he first stage in a black woman's survival strategy is to find a *favela* in which to make her home, in a hut cobbled together by planks of wood, cardboard and tin and under the most difficult of conditions (without drinking water, without drainage)" (p. 62). These living conditions are the root cause of the considerable deficiencies in black women's education and training, and reduce their chances of finding decent jobs.

However, it is also important to realize that much work has been carried out to either eradicate or alleviate the hardships within Rio's *favelas*. The state, social movements, private enterprise, and the *favelados* themselves have carried out this work. In terms of state initiatives, this included complete relocation of the *favelas* inhabitants, to what was termed as a "pragmatic, cost-effective and hopeful approach" by the Inter-American

Development Bank (IDB). This approach involved the “upgrading rather than uprooting” of existing neighborhoods, leaving the community’s “social and economic fabric intact” (IDB, 1997). Albeit humane, the above approach cannot be described as transformative if the economic fabric low status employment alongside of low educational achievement is being left intact. However, what was important is that IDB’s money, along with the city’s technical expertise, was being put towards the improvement of several of Rio’s favelas. City officials resolved to upgrade almost all of Rio’s favelas and other low-income subdivisions by the year 2004 (IDB, 1997).

Hold tight, Favela,  
things are gonna get better.

Benedita da Silva  
‘An Afro-Brazilian Woman’s  
Story of Politics and Love.’

## **RECOGNISING RACE AND RACISM AS FLOATING SIGNIFIERS**

In the final analysis, it can be argued that the Brazilian form of racism occurs at both the personal and the institutional level. However, it appears to have more serious manifestations and significance at the personal level, in terms of the power of attitudes and beliefs (especially in relation to love and marriage). However, this cannot be interpreted as an indication that Brazilian and Afro-Brazilian understandings of racism are narrowly defined in comparison to the US definition of racism (which itself is constantly being contested and transformed). In my description of the MNU, I have demonstrated that social movement exists in Brazil, and like anywhere else, it is a negotiated practice struggling for definition and survival. To attempt to compare the MNU to the Civil Rights Movement in the US would be impractical to say the least, as both movements are born out of different times, needs, and contexts. Having said

that, there are lessons to be learned about antiracist practice from both of these movements.

If I am to look at Afro-Brazilian women's experience of racism from a feminist perspective, believing the feminist maxim that the 'personal is political,' then it is possible for me to contemplate larger structural issues through these women's personal experiences. Their individual experiences of racist attitudes and beliefs elucidate the larger structural aspects of racism. In addition, in attempting to understand the Afro-Brazilian female experience, I use a Chaos Theory (Briggs, 1992; Gleick, 1988) understanding of systems. In Chaos Theory, systems are repetitional and relational. It is the repetitional and relational nature of systems that enables me to see how in the case where pretas or negras are unable to find sustainable and unbiased loving partnerships, this suggests their inability to avoid poverty and the subsequent deprivation of adequate housing, education, and employment. A Chaos Theory understanding of systems also argues that systems are at the same time dynamic and fixed, and are made up of discrete parts that are wholistically connected. Using this theory means I can simultaneously identify the wholistic dynamism of Brazilian spatial socioeconomic relations and the particularism or fixity of Afro-Brazilian women's place-bound social positions. In embracing this conceptualization of systems as being both dynamic yet static, whole yet fractured, we would begin to engage in dismantling the binaries of Cartesian thinking. Thus, definitions of racism constituted by individual attitudes or beliefs would not be interpreted as a reductive analysis of the institutional nature of racism. They would rather be contextualized as a fractal of a dynamic system that uses racism in many forms to control.

Anne Stoler (1999) talks of the relevance of race in Foucault's essay *The History of Sexuality*, in which Foucault argues that the concept of race as we know it tends to obliterate the aristocratic particularities of blood for the controllable effects of sex. Through his work, we are able to further see how interrelated the perceived

notion of an individual sexual preference/choice is to the institutionalized manifestations of a dominant racist ideology. Once again giving us reason for pause in any presumption that personal accounts of racism are not about institutional racism, thus, they cannot be accepted as a legitimate recognition of the reality of racism or as a basis for a transformative social movement. As I described earlier, Lelia Gonzalez, of the MNU, had an understanding of the importance of dismantling binaries, when she argued for the reconfiguration of 'culture' and 'politics' as a means to raise consciousness among Afro-Brazilians. She argued paradoxically for a critical consciousness constructed around cultural diversity while at the same time maintaining a recognition of racism, perhaps challenging Twine's notion that Brazilians have a narrow definition of racism, and are therefore unable to challenge it.

From the above arguments it can be concluded that race and racism are floating signifiers. That is, the meaning of what it is to be black is not fixed in some genetic codification of the body, but rather shifts according to the individual's self-definition and their place in time and space. In the Brazilian experience, racism is experienced differentially depending on gender, skin complexion, and the social, economic, cultural, and political contexts. Thus, as I have demonstrated, women *pretas* experience love or employment very differently from *mulatas* or *morenas*. The category 'race' itself has been contested and we have finally come to the rational conclusion that 'race' is a social construct. "Race thus evolved as new world view, a body of prejudgments that distorts our ideas about human differences and group behavior. Racial beliefs constitute myths about the diversity in human species and about the abilities and behavior of people homogenized into racial categories. The myths fused behavior and physical features together in the public mind, impeding our comprehension of both biological variations and cultural behavior, implying that both are genetically determined. Racial myths bear no relationship to the reality of human capabilities or

behavior" (American Anthropological Association, 1999, p. 713).

Along with race, racism is "a device that, of itself, explains nothing. It is simply a means. An invention to justify the rule of some men over others" (Hansberry 1994, p. 92). The notion of race as a biological construct has always been incorrect, and racism is most definitely a social construct used to maintain unequal power structures. It is not enough to simply say that racism is a device, as "it also has consequences: once invented it takes on a life, a reality of its own. So, in one century, men invoke the device of religion to cloak their conquests. In another, race. Now, in both cases you and I may recognize the fraudulence of the device, but the fact remains that a man who has a sword run through him because he refuses to become a Moslem or a Christian - or who is shot in Zatembe or Mississippi because he is black - is suffering the utter *reality* of the device. And it is pointless to pretend that it doesn't exist - merely because it is a *lie*!" (Hansberry 1994, p. 92). So in this 21<sup>st</sup> century, "we now understand that human cultural behavior is learned, conditioned into infants beginning at birth, and always subject to modification. No human is born with a built-in culture or language. Our temperaments, dispositions and personalities, regardless of genetic propensities, are developed within sets of meanings and values that we call 'culture'" (American Anthropological Association, 1999, p. 713). Bearing these arguments in mind, it then becomes questionable to presuppose that a US definition of racism can be applied to the Brazilian context, as there would be a very different set of social practices and mythmaking in each Brazilian local context, albeit with a common historical referent. Having said that, even within the US itself there is no consensus about the individual meaning-of some of the antiracist legislation in response to institutionalized racism, even if there is a general understanding of the history of those constructs.

Finally, in the article 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,' Chandra Mohanty (1997) critiques a discursive colonization in

which "a certain mode of appropriation and codification of scholarship and knowledge about women in the Third World through the use of particular analytical categories employed in specific writings on the subject take as their referent feminist interests as they have been articulated in the United States and Western Europe" (p. 255). That is, the use of textual strategies that codify others as Non-Western and themselves as Western. Mohanty argues that in such a text it is "possible to trace a coherence of effects resulting from the implicit assumption of 'the west' (in all its complexities and contradictions) as the primary referent in theory and praxis" (p. 255). In addition, she illustrates how western feminist discourse cannot be seen as only the production of knowledge, but rather as a political and discursive practice that is purposeful, ideological, and "carries with it the authorizing signature of Western humanist discourse" (p. 257). Although Mohanty speaks specifically about Western feminist research on women in Third World countries, I would argue that Twine potentially develops a discursive colonization of Afro-Brazilian (Third World) oppressions when she homogenizes and systematizes the Vasalian experiences as a Brazilian norm that is counter to the American way. This is problematic in her account of racism in Brazil, which we as western outsiders (even when we are in the diasporic margins) looking into other people's experiences often times unconsciously repeat.

So one can argue that even if Brazil's racism occurs at institutional levels, but is recognized by Afro-Brazilians only in its personal consequences, this is neither here nor there. What is important at this juncture is that we, as outsiders looking into Brazil, need to develop humility and a different conceptualization of race in order to better understand the Brazilian racial experience. We can perhaps begin by doing the following: 1. Dismantling the binaries of self and society in our analysis of Brazilian racism, 2. Refraining from using western scholarship, activism, and experiences as a referent in any research on Brazil and its people, and 3. Begin to deeply analyze the significance of what it may mean if Brazilians choose

to conduct an antiracist social struggle on other issues, such as class discrimination rather than racial discrimination, as was the case in revolutionary Cuba (Taylor, 1988), or on the personal politics of love.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that my access to literature on Afro-Brazilian women is limited by my inability to read text written in Portuguese.

<sup>2</sup> By using the word geohistorical I intend for its use to embody a description that implies a geographical and historical location that is inherently political, economic, social, cultural, spiritual, etc. It is not monochromatic, but is rather a spectrum of difference in perpetual struggling motion.

<sup>3</sup> The term *favela* dates back 100 years to when the soldiers of the young Brazilian Republic returned from a campaign to put down a peasant revolt in Bahia. The soldiers encamped on a hill named *Morro das Favelas*. This hill was covered with wild flowers called *favela*. Thus the soldiers became known as *favelados*. When the soldiers returned home to Rio penniless, jobless, homeless, and with the girls that they had brought back from the Bahian countryside, they built their shacks on Providencia Hill (the northern edge of the city centre). This place became known as a *favela* - the place of the *favelados*. Since then the name has been applied to all shanty towns and slums in Brazil (Botting, 1977; IDB, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> Benedita da Silva, the granddaughter of a slave and the daughter of a washerwoman, was raised in a Rio *favela* in which she still lives. She has managed to overcome poverty, illiteracy and other obstacles caused by racial discrimination. She has had a long and eventful political career as a member of the *Partido dos Trabalhadores*, i.e. the workers political party, of which Brazil's current President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silve is also a member. In 1982, she was elected to the City

Council of Rio de Janeiro. In 1986, she was elected a Federal Deputy and became one of the 9 people of color and 25 women among 599 deputies. In 1992, she ran for mayor of the City of Rio de Janeiro, in a racially charged campaign, but lost by only a few percentage points to her white male opponent. Benedita da Silva has also worked as a street vendor, janitor, servant and nurse's assistant in her lifetime (Aguilera & Silva, 1998; Benjamin & Mendonca, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> MNUCDR is the Unified Black Movement Against Racial Discrimination. Two events constituted the decisive factors for the creation of it: the torture and assassination of a Black worker, Robson Silveira da Luz, by policemen of the 44th Police District of Guaianazes on the night of April 28, 1978 and the dismissal of 4 Black male children from the volleyball team of the Tiete Yacht Club because of their color. A black athlete contacted members of the Sao Paulo Black organizations to ask if something could be done. Meetings then followed to discuss what action should be taken and as a result of these meetings on the 18<sup>th</sup> of June 1978 the MNUCDR was created. This took place in the headquarters of the Center for the Study of Black Culture and Art. Contacts were established with Rio, through another black athlete that informed a meeting of Blacks in Rio about the occurrences. On September 9, and 10, 1978, the first National Assembly of the MNUCDR took place at the Institute for Research on Black Cultures in Rio, with approximately 300 delegates from the states of Sao Paulo, Bahia, Minas Gerais, Espirito Santo and Rio de Janeiro (Gonzalez, 1985; Burdick, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> FNB is the Brazilian Negro Front. It was the first major Black movement in Brazil, after the abolition of slavery. It flourished in the 1930s and even became a political party. But in 1937 it was abolished as well as other parties, by the Estado Novo government of Getulio Vargas. In 1938, it ceased to exist (Gonzalez, 1985).

<sup>7</sup> TEN is the Negro Experimental Theater. It was founded, in Rio de Janeiro, by Abdias do Nascimento. Its objective was the use of theater to raise Black consciousness.

It thrived in the late 1940s and the 1950s (Gonzalez, 1985).

<sup>8</sup> Burdick (1998) in his description of Brazilian women in love, marriage, and family uses a sliding scale of very dark-skinned women to white women – as represented by these Portuguese words: *negra*, *preta*, *parda*, *morena*, *mulata*, and *branca*.

<sup>9</sup> According to Burdick (1998): “The term “*mulata*” draws attention to descent, originating during the slave period in the comparison of the offspring of a white-black union to the mule, the issue of horse and donkey, though shorn today of this bestial connotation, the association with hybridity remains. This association, in effect, embodies the male sexual fantasy of uniting the white woman’s respectability with the black woman’s stereotyped lubricity and powerlessness” (p. 30). It is also important to note that the *mulato/mulata* always occupies a middle ground in relation to dark Afro-Brazilians and white Brazilians, in terms of love, marriage, family, work, education, and housing.

<sup>10</sup> Burdick (1998) shows us some of the words from the infamous Tiririca’s song, which was on a Sonny Record Label in July 1996. It reads as follows:

Look, look, look at her hair  
It looks like steel wool  
When she walks by, I give a look  
But her hair just won’t do.  
Look, look, look at her hair  
She stinks to high heaven  
Like a zoo animal.

Despite the black movement leaders’ ability to get this song banned –with the ruling that it was a violation of the constitution– Sony Records still kept the record on sale in Rio. In fact, the publicity led to the subsequent nationwide skyrocketing of record sales.

<sup>11</sup> Salvador, Bahia is a predominantly Afro-Brazilian city in Brazil’s Northeast.

<sup>12</sup> In 1997, there were about 480 *favelas* in Rio de Janeiro

that had approximately 2.5 million inhabitants and there were approximately 35 million slum dwellers in Brazil itself (Benjamin & Mendonca, 1997). In 1980, the majority of Rio's *favelas* were small settlements of less than 1000 people, but these counted for only 12% of the *favela* population. The few really large *favelas* counted for the majority of the population; settlements of more than 5000 people accounted for 54% of the *favela* population. Most of the large *favelas* were found in the northern parts of the city. The remaining 34% lived in *favelas* that had between 1001 to 5000 dwellers. The largest single *favela* in Rio is Rocinha – it is estimated to be between 35,000 (official estimate) and 200,000 (popular estimate) (Gay, 1994).

## References

- Aguilera, L. & Silva, B.. (1998). The Challenge to the Brazilian Left: A conversation with Benedita da Silva. Dollars & Sense. 217, pp. 16-20.
- Albelda, R. & Tilly, C. (1997). Glass ceilings and bottomless pits: Women's work, women's poverty. Boston, MA: South End Press.
- Alvarez, S. E. (1990). Engendering democracy in Brazil: Women's movements in transition politics. Princeton, NJ: University Press.
- American Anthropological Association. (1999). AAA Statement on Race. American Anthropologist. 100 (3), 712-713.
- Benjamin, M. & Mendonca, M. (1997). Benedita da Silva: An Afro-Brazilian woman's story of Politics and Love. Oakland, CA: Food First Books.
- Botting, D. (1977). The great cities/ Rio de Janeiro. Nederland: Time-Life International.
- Briggs, J. (1992). Fractals: The patterns of chaos. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Burdick, J. (1998). Blessed Anastacia: Women, race and popular christianity in Brazil. New York:

Routledge.

- Caipora Women's Group. (1993). Women in Brazil. London: Latin America Bureau.
- Cunha, O. M. G. (1998). Black movements and the "Politics of Identity" in Brazil In S. Alvarez, E. Dagnino, & A. Escobar (Eds.), Cultures of politics, politics of culture: Revisioning Latin American social movements. (pp. 220-251). Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.
- Escobar, A. (1989). The professionalization and institutionalization of "development" in Colombia in the early post-World War II period. International Journal of Educational Development. 9 (2), 139-154.
- Gay, R. (1994). Popular education and democracy in Rio de Janeiro: A tale of two favelas. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Gleick, J. (1988). Chaos: Making a new science. New York: Penguin.
- Gonzalez, L. (1985). The unified black movement: A new stage in black political mobilization. In P. Fontaine (Ed.), Race, class and power in Brazil. (pp. 120-134). Los Angeles: Center for Afro-American Studies.
- Hansberry, L. (1994). Les Blancs: The Collected Last Plays. New York: Vintage Books.
- Harvey, D. (1990). Between space and time: Reflections on the geographical imagination. Annals of Association of American Geographers. 30 (3), 418-434.
- Hasenbalg, C. A. (1985). Race and socioeconomic inequalities in Brazil. In P. Fontaine (Ed.), Race, class and power in Brazil. (pp. 25-41). Los Angeles: Center for Afro-American Studies
- IDB. (1997). IDB extra: Urban renaissance. Inter-American Development Bank.
- Kowarick, L. & Ant, C. (1994). One hundred years of overcrowding: Slum tenements in the city. In L. Kowarick (Ed.), Social struggles and the city: The case of Sao Paulo. New York: Monthly Review

Press.

- Mohanty, C. T. (1997). Under western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. In A. McClintock, A. Mufti & E. Shohat (Eds.), Dangerous liaisons: Gender, nation, & postcolonial perspectives. (pp. 255-277) Minneapolis: University of Minnesota.
- Serbin, K. (1993). Benedita da Silva: Prophet from the *favelas*. Christian Century. 110 (15), 489-492.
- Skidmore, T. E. (1985). Race and class in Brazil: Historical perspectives. In P. Fontaine (Ed.), Race, class and power in Brazil. (pp. 11-24). Los Angeles: Center for Afro-American Studies.
- Skidmore, T. E. (1993). Black into white: Race and nationality in Brazilian thought. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Stoler, A. L. (1999). Race and the education of desire: Foucault's history of sexuality and the colonial order of things. Durham, Duke University Press.
- Taylor, F. F. (1988). Revolution, race, and some aspects of foreign relations in Cuba since 1959. In C. Mesa-Lago (Ed.), Cuban Studies 18. (pp. 19-41). Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Telles, E. (1992). Residential segregation by skin color in Brazil. American Sociological Review. 57 (2), 186-197.
- Twine, F. W. (1997). Racism in a racial democracy: The maintenance of white democracy in Brazil. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

