FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS
A JOURNAL
OF CRITICAL STUDIES
IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics, 9(1), 05
ISSN: 2468-4414

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Historical Genealogies of Black Feminism in Brazil: Candomblé Priestesses and Embodied Territoriality

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Published: March 1, 2025

ABSTRACT

Brazilian Black Feminists Lélia Gonzales, Beatriz Nascimento and Djamila Ribeiro constructed theories that reference historical processes of liberation among Afro-Brazilian communities, the two most prominent sites being the former maroon societies—*quilombos*—, and the Candomblé *terreiros*—communities of Afro-Brazilian religious worship. In this article I propose a genealogy of Black Feminism that places Candomblé priestesses as foremothers to the contemporary political and intellectual movement through the concept of embodied territoriality. Ethnographic and historical engagement with public representations of Candomblé shows that despite the rich history of Black women's leadership, their politics are oriented more towards racial justice than gender oppression. Considering the ongoing tensions between an unmarked, but largely White 'Feminism', and the political commitments of Black Feminism as a path to liberation for all oppressed peoples, this work approaches historic Black women who did not frame themselves as 'Feminists', but who nevertheless are fundamental to the genealogy of contemporary Black Feminism. In conversation with US Black Feminism, the paper argues that following the relationships between generations of Black grandmothers and granddaughters from Africa to the Americas allows for continuity of Black feminist thought, history, and practice as it evolves through political and intellectual discourse.

Keywords: Black Feminism, Brazil, Candomblé, Africana Religion, African Diaspora

INTRODUCTION

In her collection of essays *Quem tem medo do feminismo negro?/Who is Afraid of Black Feminism?* (2018), preeminent contemporary Brazilian Black Feminist and Sociologist Djamila Ribeiro shared her experiences with her grandmother, Dona Antônia, who was a *bezendeira* (a healer through prayer and herbal cures),

> Still today I hold the olfactory memory of her house, a mixture of *boldo, arruda* incense, and beans that only she knew how to make and the sweet pumpkin candy with coconut (…) When I felt a stomachache, she would take herbs from the backyard and make a tea, a habit that I still have today (…) she would pray for me and after give me the drink… (Ribeiro, 2018: 9)[1]

Ribeiro's sensory description is laden with nostalgia, admiration, and gratitude for the time she had as a young girl learning traditions passed down from her grandmother. Dona Antônia comes from a lineage of Black women who survived the Middle Passage, slavery, imperialism, racial discrimination, and ongoing anti-Black violence in Brazil. The wisdom Ribeiro received from 'my grandmother, a healer, is a form of knowledge like no other' (2018: 21). She associates her grandmother with other religious leaders, including 'the Candomblé priestesses and priests, the midwives, [and] original inhabitants of the land [indigenous people]' to advocate for feminists to 'recognize other cosmologies and geographies of reason' (Ribeiro, 2018: 22). Ribeiro shares about how she was initiated into the Afro-Brazilian religion Candomblé at eight years of age, and that 'the knowledge that constitutes me also comes from the *orixás* [deities]' (Ribeiro, 2018: 22). Ribeiro's positionality as a Black woman, Black feminist scholar and Candomblé initiate situates her as a public leader in a growing movement to represent and empower Black Feminism, particularly from Latin America.

[1] All translations from Portuguese into English are by the author unless otherwise noted.

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Ribeiro's collection traces a historical trajectory that led to the development of a movement called Feminismo Negro in twentieth century Brazil. Yet, she and other Black Feminists who founded the scholarly and activist movement like Lélia Gonzales and Beatriz Nascimento, reference much deeper histories and trajectories of feminist practice inherited from generations of Black women from Africa to the Diaspora. While the late-twentieth century mobilisation of a Black Feminist movement in the public sphere of Brazilian politics found inspiration from the Black Feminist movements that emerged in the United States (particularly from the 1970s to the present), the Brazilian historical and socio-economic context orients their theoretical frameworks and activist platforms as distinct from Black Feminism in the United States. Nevertheless, taking a deeper historical viewpoint reveals important convergences of how Black Feminist thought and practice have been passed down through generations in the African Diaspora.

Many of the key theoretical contributions in the field of Black Feminism in Brazil draw from historical processes of liberation among communities of African descent. The two most prominent sites of Black liberation and autonomy in Brazilian history are the former maroon societies—*quilombos*—that descend from communities of runaway slaves, and the *terreiros*—communities of Afro-Brazilian religious worship and Black solidarity. Contemporary Black Brazilian Feminists articulate concepts such as *Amefricanidade* and a gendered, corporeal knowledge that connect to generations of Black ritual and cultural practices that have persisted despite the colonial history of Brazil as formerly the largest slave society in the Americas, and the last to abolish slavery only in 1888 (Gonzalez, 1988; Smith *et al.*, 2023). A primary site for this intergenerational practice is the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé religious community and physical territory, the *terreiro* (translated here as temple).

The concept of embodied territoriality as applied to Candomblé priestesses as leaders of the *terreiro* draws from Black Feminist articulations of identity and belonging that result from shared experiences of displacement and racial discrimination in the African Diaspora. Black Feminist historians argue that to understand and represent the experiences of Black women from the African continent to the Diaspora scholars must employ specific tools of inquiry, research, and analysis (Harding, 2006; Hartman, 2008). Drawing from oral histories, ethnography, and written publications by Candomblé priestesses and their daughter-initiates in the twentieth century, my approach considers the historical necessity of 'reterritorialisation' for Black subjects in the Americas through the formation of autonomous Black communities like *quilombos* and *terreiros* (Harding, 2000; Sodré, 2002). The relation to the spiritual in Candomblé as an African Diasporic religion perpetuates historical memory and identity intergenerationally from people to people (rather than through text, for example) as an embodied experience (Alexander, 2006: 297).

In this article I argue that Candomblé priestesses are key historical predecessors and foremothers of contemporary Black Feminism in Brazil. Candomblé ceremonies are privileged sites of feminine embodied expression through rituals that worship African deities (*orixás*) on Brazilian soil. The religious community established through initiation creates new kinship bonds to form a 'family of saints', with the head priestess, the *Mãe de santo* (Mother of the saint) as the family's leader (Lima, 1977). Contrary to the prominent patriarchal model of the Catholic Church, the Candomblé family descends from historic matriarchal and matrilineal traditions characteristic of 'Black Africa', including the cultural zones of people most involved in the trans-Atlantic Slave Trade from West and Central Africa to Brazil (Amadiume, 1997; Diop, 1978). Select historic temples in the coastal city of Salvador continue matriarchal traditions through lineages of Black priestesses that descend from the original African-born founders of the mid-nineteenth century (Castillo and Pares, 2010; Landes, 1947). In these religious spaces, Black women's authority and maternal care have sustained generations of practitioners, many of whom are also very active in anti-racist organising, scholarship, and political discourse.

METHODOLOGY

Although Candomblé priestesses have held prominent leadership roles as representatives of their racial and religious communities since at least the nineteenth century, in over ten years of historical and ethnographic research I encountered no case where the priestesses align themselves with 'Feminism'[2] in their organising and intellectual efforts in the public sphere. To substantiate this claim, I draw from interdisciplinary research methodologies including twentieth century media representations of Candomblé priestesses (including *A Tarde* and *O Globo*); ethnographic research conducted among Candomblé temples from 2016 to 2018 in Salvador with a focus on the public politics of African heritage in Brazil and contemporary anti-racist activism; an analysis of published writings by prominent contemporary priestesses; and the collection of oral histories among lineages of Candomblé practitioners with a focus on the state of Bahia (Andreson, 2022b). The ethnographic research received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University of Michigan with all research subject protections

[2] In capitalising Feminism, I signal the absence of public engagement with a feminist identity or a formal feminist movement, though leave space for the possibility that women in Candomblé nevertheless engage in everyday practices of lived feminism.

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applied. The temples I visited and conducted ethnographic research in include the Terreiro Bate Folha, Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, Terreiro São Jorge Filhos da Gomeia, Terreiro Tumba Junsara, Terreiro Mokambo and the Terreiro Gantois, all located within the coastal region of Salvador da Bahia.

Despite the long and rich history of Black women as leaders of Afro-Brazilian communities, their public politics are more oriented towards racial solidarity than gender oppression. During ethnographic research I attended numerous public seminars and events organised by Candomblé practitioners with the intention of following political negotiations between the religious communities and the state regarding the implementation of cultural heritage policies designed to protect Black religious sites and culture (Andreson, 2022a). These seminars were on the topics of 'preserving our history', and honouring the legacy of their founders and leaders, many of whom were Black women referred to as 'matriarchs'. [3]

From my experience as a postgraduate student with the Pós-Afro program in Ethnic and African Studies at the Center for Afro-Oriental Studies (CEAO) at the Federal University of Bahia (UFBA) from 2012 to 2015, I attended several events organised by academics and Candomblé practitioners, many of whom identify too as anti-racist activists. For example, during Julho das Pretas (Black Women's July) prominent Black women in Salvador articulated the struggles they face through intersectional oppressions (Crenshaw, 1989), presenting a developed analysis of structural racial and gendered inequalities that includes ongoing religious racism and persecution.[4]

Given the long history of state persecution of the Candomblé religion compounded by a distrust of White society and researchers, I approached the religious communities slowly over time through relationship building that started in academic contexts. I situated myself in public events, seminars, and ceremonies to understand how Candomblé communities narrate their own histories and advocate for rights and protections in the context of a multiracial democracy. Previous anthropological work by Ruth Landes in the 1940s initially drew me to Candomblé as a rich research site to investigate a case where women's leadership and Africana gender roles presented a powerful alternative to the hierarchies of race and gender in dominant and mainstream American societies (Andreson, 2019; Segato, 1998; Sterling, 2010). Among my varied engagements with narratives and representations of Candomblé, I did not encounter cases where practitioners identified themselves as feminist or with a feminist movement.

Considering the ongoing tensions between an unmarked White Feminism implicated in imperial relationships and the political commitments of Black Feminism as a path to liberation from all modes of interlocking oppressions (Combahee River Collective, 1977), this article asks how scholars can approach historical mobilisations from Black women intellectuals and community leaders who did not frame themselves as 'Feminists', but who nevertheless are fundamental to the intellectual genealogy of contemporary Black Feminism. To do so, this research considers multi-generational modes of transmitting ritual and embodied ancestral knowledge and practice that have sustained lineages of Black women in Brazil, particularly through the grandmother and granddaughter relationship. The article offers an alternative genealogy of Black Feminism in Brazil that includes historical predecessors—the 'foremothers'—who informed the current generation's approaches to racial and gender justice through African diasporic practices of embodied territoriality.

TENSIONS BETWEEN WHITE AND BLACK FEMINISM IN BRAZIL

Black women are the largest single demographic group in Brazil at over a quarter of the population (Partido dos Trabalhadores, 2023).[5] Yet, Black women activists lament that 'the base of the social pyramid continues belonging to Black women who sustain the country brilliantly without taking advantage of the riches produced' (Rede de Mulheres, 2016). Black women are the backbone of the Brazilian economy and social structure yet are largely invisible in popular representation of the country's history, leadership, and demographics. As Black Feminist Anthropologist Christen Smith (2016) articulates,

> We are always standing on the precipice of the social world; teetering on the edge of invisibility, dis-ease, and insanity, triply affected by gender/sexuality, race, and class. As a result, our contributions to society typically go unremarked... The task of Black feminism then, is, in part, to bring these historical figures from the margins back onto the pages of her story (73).

[3] The two seminars referenced here are 'Redescobrindo Nossa História' (Salvador: Tumba Junçara Temple, August 3, 2018); 'Seminário Mãe Mirinha do Portão: 70 anos de preservação da cultura de Matriz Africana' (Portão, Bahia, April 28-29, 2018).

[4] Some of the key women leading these events include the sociologist and politician Vilma Reis, the journalist and anthropologist Cleidiana Ramos, Lindinalva Barbosa, and Valéria Lima.

[5] The last national census in 2022 recorded that most of the Brazilian population was Black (when considering both *Preto* and *Pardo* racial categories), and that the largest single demographic were Black women at 60.6 million people, or 28% of the population.

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My work takes up this 'task', as articulated by Smith, to place Candomblé priestesses in the broader historical development of Black Feminism and centre stage as major protagonists of Brazilian history.

Dra. Jurema Werneck claims that Black women in Brazil began to self-identify as feminist in the 1970s. Among many of her achievements, Werneck is the founder of the NGO Criola, which promotes Black women's rights, and the acting Director for Amnesty International in Brazil. According to her, Black women in the 1970s began 'join[ing] anti-racist practice and debate with feminism utilizing resources from the Afro-Brazilian cultural tradition, which affirmed the wholeness of human perspectives' (Werneck, 2007: 107). Much of the Black Feminist production since that period has come out of university-trained social scientists and humanists, as the presence of Black students and professors increased in Brazilian universities following expansion of Affirmative Action programs (*Cotas*) in the early twenty-first century.

While recognising that the adoption of 'Feminism' for Black women activists in Brazil is relatively recent, Werneck (2007) articulates a longer history of Black female leadership and activism that is 'ancient and long predates the history of European colonialism in Africa' (102). With such a deep consideration of Black women's survival strategies and community leadership, Werneck places Feminism as the most recent label that has been relatively successful in facilitating broad-based coalition building and presenting a political platform that addresses intersectional forms of racial, gendered, sexual and class-based oppression, particularly in white supremacist countries of the Americas.

Black Feminists from both Brazil and the U.S. have articulated two key tensions between how White and Black women identify with Feminism: 1) the issue of a projected universal woman subject and 2) the reality of historically racialised labour regimes:

> The universalization of the category of 'women' has in view a political representation that was made with the white, middle-class woman as its basis—for example, to work outside of a man's authorization would never have been the assertion of Black or poor women. (Ribeiro, 2018: 45-46)

The life history of one of the founders of the Black Movement in Brazil (MNU) and a pioneer of Brazilian Black Feminism, Dra. Lélia Gonzalez highlights the divisions between White and Black women as complicating the possibility of solidarity across racial and class lines. Gonzalez's mother was a domestic worker of indigenous descent; a profession that 'poor black women often do in the homes of wealthier white families' (Barreto, 2020: 15). This labour regime perpetuates the social relationships established through nearly four-centuries of racialised slavery in Brazil, which included the enslavement of African, Indigenous, Black, and mixed-race people. Post-abolition (1888), domestic work continued as very low-paid labour that often required the domestic worker to live and sleep in the servant's quarters of the owner's home. Domestic worker remains the most common profession for Black women in Brazil; a statistic that reflects the country's racial inequalities and lack of opportunities for Black women to participate in government, shape the economy and occupy positions of power (Caldwell, 2007).

Even recently, multiple news stories from Brazil reveal that elderly Black women, particularly domestic workers, live in 'conditions analogous to slavery', trapped working in the homes of wealthy White families, in some cases, for their whole lives (Agência Senado, 2024; Globo News, 2024). The ongoing legacies of racial inequalities that stem from the accumulation of wealth at the expense of an impoverished and oppressed working class continue to create an insurmountable rift in the relationship between White and Black women in the Americas. Gonzalez was very clear in her body of work that 'the liberation of white women has been done at the expense of the exploitation of black women' (Gonzalez, 1979: 20). Such a statement justifies the need for a movement with Black women's leadership and a platform directed to meet the demands of that specific community given the history of racialised oppression and discrimination (Hudson Weems, 2023).

Like her mother, Gonzalez started domestic work as a nanny at a young age but pursued a different career path as the first Black student in her classes at the State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ), where she studied History, Geography and Philosophy. By the late 1970s, Gonzalez became one of the few Black lecturers at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio), where she worked until the end of her life (Barreto, 2020: 15). She published foundational works for Black Feminism in Brazil and mobilised the early foundation of the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT-Worker's Party), the Institute for Research on Black Cultures (IPCN) in 1974, the Unified Black Movement (MNU) in 1982, and the N'Zinga Black Women Collective founded in 1986 (Barreto, 2020: 16). Her most influential theoretical contributions to debates on racism, gender oppression and sexual violence in Brazil revolve around her critique of 'the romanticization of miscegenation', which was central to the national myth of a Brazilian 'racial democracy', as a 'way of covering up the trauma of colonial rape' (Barreto, 2020: 16). Through her works, Gonzalez placed Black women as protagonists in the construction of the Brazilian nation, to counter their invisibility in Brazilian history, politics, and intellectual thought.

Gonzalez's most lasting theoretical contribution in Black Feminist and intellectual discourse today remains the political-cultural category of *Amefricanidade,* or Amefricanity, which 'designates a historical process of intense cultural dynamics (resistance, accommodation, reinterpretation, creation of new forms), referenced in African

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models but referring to the construction of *a whole ethnic identity*' (Gonzalez, 2018: 336). This theoretical formulation counters mixed-race discourses about Latin American national identities and cultures by centring a Black ethnic group formed between Africa and America. By providing a deep historical perspective, Amefricanity encompasses traditions of Black women's activism in all spheres of life, particularly before they had any significant participation in formal institutions like universities, political parties, research institutes, and activist collectives.

Afro-Brazilian religious territories like the Candomblé temple are among the most prominent examples of an 'African model' that resisted European colonial impositions, cultivated Black community, and facilitated the intergenerational transmission of ancestral knowledge in Brazil. Practices of embodied territoriality permitted the continuation of ritual identity and gendered subjectivity from West-Central African cultural and religious systems to the Brazilian context. The priestesses lead their communities given the historical tradition of African and Black women as spiritual healers and leaders of their communities from the continent to the Diaspora, though not without modifications and reconfigurations in the American context. Black women's leadership is also not exclusive, as male priests too hold key roles in the leadership and serve as public representatives of the religion in Brazilian society (Braga, 2014; Matory, 2005).

Many Candomblé deities, rituals and myths focus on mothers, femininity, fertility, and the power of the feminine, yet religious leaders and practitioners do not orient their public discourse towards a formal, intellectual, theoretical, or political 'Feminism'. This could be in part due to an alternative articulation of sex, gender, and ritual in the Candomblé context, which is informed by Yoruba rituals, where 'motherhood has no gender' (Matory, 1994; Oyěwùmí, 2016). The act of mothering in Candomblé is not necessarily performed only by 'biological' mothers or ciswomen. Another possible motivation for not identifying with Feminism is that Black women do not experience gender oppression within Afro-Brazilian religious communities, which are spaces of empowerment and relief from the dominant hierarchies of race and gender in Brazilian society writ large (Landes, 1947; Segato, 1998; Sterling, 2010). Perhaps the biggest reason, though, that Candomblé priestesses and Black women of prior generations have not identified with Feminism is because of its association as an imperialist, White women's movement.

CANDOMBLÉ, QUILOMBO AND EMBODIED TERRITORIALITY

A prominent Brazilian Black Feminist, Dra. Beatriz Nascimento theorised the *quilombo* (maroon communities) in her work through a wide theoretical lens of Black autonomy. Smith (2016) provides a thorough analysis of Nascimento's conceptualisation:

> Quilombos are not only physical spaces, but also the practice of finding refuge from the *total condition* of slavery—including those conditions that extend beyond the temporal boundaries of physical bondage, like racism and the erasure of Black history. Quilombos are not only physical and cultural spaces that are materially tangible historically and today but also trans-temporal, trans-spatial spaces of Black liberation that Black people in Brazil have articulated in response to the conditions of subjugation (78).

Nascimento's formulation of *quilombo* included various Black territorialities including the *favela* (predominantly Black peripheral neighbourhoods of large Brazilian cities), the *baile blacks* (dance parties), the actual 'remnant quilombo communities' that descend from runaway slaves, and the Candomblé *terreiro* (temple). Furthermore, Nascimento's 'conceptualization of quilombo is uniquely gendered because she privileges the body as a political site' (Smith, 2016: 80). The gendered, embodied experiences of Black women, then, offer a privileged perspective to envision the path to full autonomy and emancipation, which have been denied to Black and Indigenous people through the history of European colonisation, slavery, and ongoing settler occupation in the Americas.

This section presents key historical and contemporary examples of Black women's leadership from the context of *quilombo* and Candomblé communities to view them as integral to the development of Black Feminist thought and practice in Brazil through the practice of embodied territoriality. The boundaries between the Candomblé temple and the *quilombo* are often blurred and overlapping. Members of remnant *quilombo* communities cultivate African religious practices, and many *terreiros* share a history of African and Black-owned land occupation and cultivation in peripheral neighbourhoods of urban cities and interior rural zones to create autonomous Black communities (Andreson, 2022a). Both are key sites of Black liberation and autonomy that persist from the historical context of Brazil as a slave society that was the primary destination for enslaved Africans in the Americas.[6]

The case of Bernadete Pacífico, a leader in the *Quilombo* Pitanga dos Palmares community, demonstrates the clear overlap between *quilombos* and Candomblé as sites of Black territoriality. Known by her religious title 'Mother', Mãe Bernadete was assassinated in her home on August 20, 2023, with twenty-two shots to the body. News outlets

[6] Estimates suggest 47% of the 10.7 million African captives who arrived in the Americas through the trans-Atlantic slave trade arrived in Brazil. For more see 'Estimates', Transatlantic slave trade database (www.slavejoyages.org).

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called the murderers *bandidos* (thieves), and headlines suggested she thought she was being robbed with a home invasion (O Globo, 2023). Yet, the Candomblé community and Black activists in Brazil rightly assert that this murder likely had political motivations, as Mãe Bernadete was the acting coordinator of the National Coordination and Articulation of Quilombos (Conaq) and had previously worked as the Secretary of Politics for the Promotion of Equal Rights (Sepromi) of the city Simões Filho (outside of the metropolitan region of Salvador). Current investigations reveal that the assassins were driven by capitalistic land speculation interests to invade Bernadete's *quilombo* territory. This assassination, like that of the Rio de Janeiro City Councilwoman Marielle Franco in 2018, clearly shows that Black women in public positions of power, particularly those working on anti-racism campaigns, are perceived as a threat to the status quo. That Brazil has one of the highest rates of political impunity in the world makes these murders too permissible, as true investigations and punishments for the assassins are few and far between.

Mãe Bernadete was one of many Candomblé priestesses who took a public stance in politics, national debates, and popular culture regarding issues of Black autonomy, territoriality, and cultural resistance. Throughout the twentieth century, prominent Black priestesses participated in the construction of a multi-racial Brazilian democracy by articulating Afro-Brazilian ritual concepts in public discourse, often with support from the Unified Black Movement (MNU). Key figures including Mãe Menininha, Mãe Olga de Alaketu, Mãe Stella de Oxóssi and Mãe Beata de Iemanjá, to mention a few, were fundamental to centring African heritage, religion and culture in Brazilian twentieth-century national politics and culture. In some cases, their advocacy resulted in the redirection of government rights and protections in favor of Candomblé communities and affirmative action policies. Candomblé priestesses are among the most prominent historical and contemporary examples of Black women's leadership in Brazil.

Take for example the lineage of public-facing intellectuals and politically engaged priestesses of the Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá temple, founded by Mãe Aninha (Eugênia Ana dos Santos, 1869-1938) in 1910 in the city of Salvador. Mãe Aninha was born to African parents of the Grunsi ethnicity in Salvador in 1869. She was a financially successful merchant who facilitated the importation of African ritual materials as a commercial trader with shipments between Bahia and West Africa. Her commercial success contributed to her financial independence and allowed her to legally buy the large piece of land in the São Gonçalo neighbourhood of Salvador where she built her temple of 39,000 square meters that still stands today (Santos, 1988). As the founder of Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá, Mãe Aninha was the first in a prominent lineage of head priestesses that transformed public discourse on race, gender, and African heritage through the Candomblé religion in Brazil (Matory, 2005).

Mãe Aninha was one of the central collaborators in the Second Afro-Brazilian Congress organised in Salvador in 1937, which brought together scholars and religious leaders to represent Candomblé as a religion in civil society in the face of historic discrimination and persecution (Carneiro, 1964). She also proposed the creation of the Union of Afro-Brazilian Religious Sects as a body of leaders to represent Candomblé and self-organise the community (Carneiro, 1940). The Union of Afro-Brazilian Religious Sects served to defend the 5th item of Article 113 of the 1934 Constitution, which granted 'the liberty of consciousness, belief and guarantee of free exercise of religious cults' (Talento and Couceiro, 2009: 61). Although the 1934 Brazilian constitution gave nominal freedom to African religion in a declaration of religious equality, the Bahian state continued persecutory policies from the colonial period, which required temples to pay for licenses to conduct their ceremonies and subjected non-compliant temples to police raids until 1976.

Seven years following the passing of Mãe Aninha, in 1945 the priestess Mãe Senhora (Maria Bibiana do Espírito Santo, 1890 - 1967) became the head priestess of the Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá Temple. Mãe Senhora, like Mãe Aninha, was also an independent businesswoman who sold African products through commercial networks in the historic downtown of Salvador (Santos and Nobréga, 2000). Senhora ran a food vendor's tent called the Vencedora (the Winner) at the Mercado Modelo, a central public market in the lower city of Salvador, where she became acquainted with the local intelligentsia. As acting head priestess from 1942 to 1967 at the Opô Afonjá temple, Mãe Senhora received international visitors, particularly from Africa, Europe, and North America (Matory, 2005). At the turn of the 1960s Mãe Senhora was sought out by international artists, local intelligentsia, and politicians as a living legend of African heritage in Brazil. She was even crowned the 'Mãe Preta' (Black Mother) of Brazil by the national folkloric director in Rio de Janeiro in 1965 (Alberto, 2011). Mãe Senhora was widely sought out as the source of African religious knowledge in Brazil, including by African dignitaries, tourists, and academics.

Mãe Stella (Maria Stella de Azevedo Santos, 1925–2018), continued the traditions established by her lineage of priestesses Mãe Aninha and Mãe Senhora at the Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá temple in Salvador. Over the course of her lifetime Mãe Stella promoted transatlantic educational and religious connections between African leaders and her temple. Following a trip to Nigeria, she established the Ohun Lailai Museum to preserve the legacy of her predecessors. Throughout the course of her life, she also became a vanguard as the first published Candomblé writer in a religion of oral traditions. By the end of her life at 93 years of age in 2018, Mãe Stella had published 4 books, wrote a column for the local newspaper, was nominated a member of the Bahian State Academy of Letters,

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and gained an honorary doctorate from the State University of Bahia (UNEB), to mention just a few of her accomplishments.

Consider the following passage written by Mãe Stella when she worked as a columnist for the most prolific newspaper in the state of Bahia, *A Tarde.*

> Many of the seeds of African wisdom planted in me still haven't found the fertile land to germinate, but I don't give up, and that's why I care for the land in every moment. Other [seeds], however, have grown and given fruit… (Filho and Ramos, 2012: 26).

Mãe Stella's passage illustrates the dynamics of embodied territoriality and incorporates the themes of Nascimento's theorisation of the Black woman's body as the ultimate territory of the *quilombo*. By referencing the African wisdom that was planted inside her, Mãe Stella's words also resonate with Gonzalez' articulation of an Amefrican identity that is still in formation. Stella's attention to cultivating the land, in this instance referring also to the physical land of the temple she leads, marks the ongoing process of establishing a more permanent home for the African ancestors in Brazil.

Mãe Stella was not the only priestess who published written works in the late twentieth century. Mãe Beta de Yemanjá (Beatriz Moreira Costa, 1931-2017) published her first book of stories, *Caroço de Dendê: a sabedoria dos terreiros / Palm Oil Seed: The Wisdom of the Temples* in 1996 using her ritual name. In 2004, Mãe Beata published another book in the same genre, *Histórias que a minha avó contava/ The Stories my Grandmother Told*. Mãe Beata was born in 1931 in Cachoeira, Bahia as the great granddaughter of an enslaved Nigerian man and the niece of a Candomblé priest (*babalorixá*). Even though she only went to school until the third grade, during her life she wrote two books and several articles that preserve the ancestral knowledge transmitted through the Candomblé temples. She established her temple in Rio de Janeiro in the 1960s and gained many recognitions including prizes, honorary diplomas and head positions at leading organisations associated with the Black Brazilian movement (Marques, 2012). Due to the social and educational projects she promoted as head priestess, her temple Ilê Omiojuaro was recognised as a federal cultural heritage site by the national agency IPHAN (Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional) in 2015. According to Geledés—the Institute of Black Women in Brazil—'the strength of Mãe Beata's stories are in her ancestrality, as a paper record of the teachings transmitted by generations in the day to day, story circles, and in the advice from mothers to the youth in the temples' (Marques, 2012: n.p.).

Mãe Beata's writing of historic myths of the *orixás* (the deities worshipped by Candomblé practitioners) documented stories passed orally through generations of women from West Africa to Brazil. These oral stories persisted within families and among Candomblé temples despite the violence and ruptures of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and Brazilian slavery. Her work made these myths available to new audiences on a larger scale, bringing humanity, images and texture to the creation stories as understood by generations of Afro-Brazilian religious communities. She continued an active and outspoken leader, appearing in documentaries and interviews, as well as seminars and events until her death in 2017.

These examples of prominent Candomblé priestesses in public life, national politics and Brazilian popular culture illuminate how Black women religious leaders impact multiple dimensions of Brazilian history and society. Their political initiatives work towards racial justice, protecting African heritage in Brazil, and advocating for religious freedom rather than with Feminism as a movement. Furthermore, Brazilian Black Feminists drew inspiration from the lives, struggles and successes of Candomblé priestesses and *quilombo* leaders in their theories that became foundational to the intellectual and political movement in Brazil.

GRANDMOTHERS OF BLACK FEMINISM

The ancestral knowledge, ritual practice and everyday forms of activism passed down from generations of Black women in the Diaspora can be traced through the grandmother and granddaughter relationship, as it spans the living generations to those passed through embodied knowledge and practice. In the case of Black women in the Diaspora, these intergenerational connections are situated between Africa and America. In this article's opening vignette, Djamila Ribeiro's recounting of her childhood with her grandmother Dona Antônia places herself as an inheritor of Afro-Brazilian women's cosmologies and geographies, yet she does not call Dona Antônia a feminist. Ribeiro highlights Dona Antonia's ancestral knowledge and practices that contributed to the formation of her own identity as a Black Brazilian woman. By doing so, Ribeiro places Dona Antônia within the lineage that led to her development as a Black Feminist.

Ribeiro's framing of her upbringing with her grandmother, which she elaborated in another work *Cartas para minha avó/ Letters to my Grandmother* (2021), resonates with U.S. Black Feminist Mikki Kendall, who in the introduction to her popular trade book *Hood Feminism* (2020) wrote,

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> My grandmother would not have described herself as a feminist. Born in 1924, after white women won the right to vote, but raised in the height of Jim Crow America, she did not think of white women as allies or sisters... (ix).

Yet, when recalling the important lessons her grandmother taught her, Kendall concedes that, 'My grandmother remains—despite her futile efforts to make me more ladylike—one of the most feminist women I've ever had the pleasure of knowing, and yet she would never have carried that label… *she lived her feminism*...' (x). This 'lived feminism' or 'everyday Black Feminisms' (Jackson, 2024: xi) in prior generations of Black women connects to the embodied territoriality of Candomblé priestesses in Brazil who did not mobilise under the terms of Feminism, yet their contributions to racial and gender-based movements are integral to the projects of nation building and civil rights organising in the Americas.

Consider the family of the Candomblé Priestess Iyalorixá Valnizia Bianch (known affectionally as Mãe Val). She was born the biological great granddaughter of Mãe Flaviana, the head priestess of her Candomblé temple, the Terreiro do Cobre. Mãe Val wrote of her great grandmother,

> She came from Africa when she was still a small girl with her mother, Margarida de Xangô, who founded the Terreiro do Cobre in the Barroquinha neighborhood. It functioned there until Flaviana, 127 years ago, moved the terreiro to [the] Engenho Velho da Federação [neighborhood], where it exists until today (Bianch, 2019: 30).

Following Mãe Flaviana's passing in the 1940s, the temple did not have a successor and was closed for the next fifty years. According to oral histories, when Mãe Flaviana was dying, she said the person who would take over as Mãe-de-santo had not been born yet. Mãe Val was then born on May 10, 1959 (serendipitously Mother's Day) and initiated into Candomblé at about 20 years of age. She found out she would be the head priestess and re-establish the Terreiro do Cobre when she was just 28 years old and took on the position in the early 1990s. Assuming a leadership role at a young age, she re-established the temple's physical structures that had been in disuse and reconnected the religious ties with the community, as well as created new ones.

Mãe Val is representative of a growing number of leaders and elders of Candomblé who transmit this knowledge through writing interpretations of their own lives, communities, and religion; not allowing their narratives to be usurped and structured by others, well-intentioned or not (Harding, 2019: 14-15). Her most recent collection of published stories, *Reflexões/ Reflections* (2019*)* was translated into English by the African American historian and initiate of the Terreiro do Cobre, Rachel Harding. In the translator's note, Harding presents Candomblé as 'a religion of mothering', in which 'Black women are the pinnacle of leadership', carrying wisdom that 'we, human beings, all of us, particularly need now—a wisdom imbedded in ancestral strength' (Harding, 2019: 15).

In *Reflections,* Mãe Val recounts stories of her upbringing and celebrates the women—*guerreiras* (warrioresses)—who raised her. Her mother birthed thirteen children, and her father died when she was just 11 years old. Given these challenging circumstances, she recounts, 'my mother carried water, worked as a laundress, as a domestic [worker] and made cookies and sweet coconut crackers to sell and supplement her income' (2019: 31). Mae Val's family history echoes that of Lélia Gonzalez, as working-class Black women who performed domestic labour to support their families when facing immense challenges including poverty, racial discrimination, and gendered labour.

Black women in Brazil and throughout the Diaspora articulate specific embodied territoriality and a process of identity formation between Africa and America that clearly deviates from White women's historical trajectories between Europe and America. The divisions between White and Black women along racial lines are well-documented and lived through contentious relationships shaped by labour and class. With the expansion of antiracist movements that hold in view 'interlocking oppressions' (Hill Collins, 2000) through approaches to intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), how might scholars and activists include a longer historical trajectory of Black Feminism that counters erasure and appropriation, while honouring the specifics of Black women's embodied knowledge?

My presentation of a historical genealogy of Black Feminism in Brazil that includes Candomblé priestesses as foremothers resonates with a U.S. Black Feminist framing of their movement as connecting to Black women leaders during slavery. For example, the Combahee River Collective formed in 1974 references the river crossed by Harriett Tubman in a guerrilla action that freed more than 750 slaves to place Tubman's anti-slavery organising as a predecessor to their work towards Black liberation. In their statement, the Combahee River Collective presented their deep historical perspective: 'we would like to affirm that we find our origins in the historical reality of Afro-American women's continuous life-and-death struggle for survival and liberation' (Combahee River Collective, 1977). Such efforts connect an ongoing antiracist and antisexist struggle through the leadership, courage, and wisdom of Black women past and present to counter their invisibility in the historical record, social life, and political discourse. Considering the longer historical genealogy of Black Feminism in Brazil through the

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Candomblé priestess presents an alternative trajectory by which contemporary Black Brazilian Feminism did not merely respond to the U.S. movement in the twentieth century. Rather, what connects both movements is a broader Diasporic struggle for Black liberation in response to the intersections of racial, gender and sexual violence in their respective societies.

CONCLUSION

This article contends that Candomblé priestesses are important predecessors to Black Feminism in Brazil, and the historical sites of the *quilombo* and the *terreiro* have been fertile sites to conceptualise and enact Black liberation through practices of embodied territoriality. Yet, it is not within my purview as a scholar to project a 'Feminist' label onto these identities, territories, and mobilisations. Rather, I place Candomblé priestesses as the foremothers of Black Feminism in Brazil as a longer historical trajectory that resonates across the Diaspora. I argue that following the relationships between generations of Black grandmothers and granddaughters from Africa to the Americas allows for continuity of Black feminist thought, history, and practice as it evolves through political and intellectual discourse. Furthermore, as shared through examples of literature, theory and text, the lived experiences of transnational Black Feminists are highly embodied and contextualised within territories; they require specific tools of interpretation and articulation that cannot be easily shared or appropriated across different genders, races, or national identities.

Finding the points of overlap in identifying with a Feminist movement remains a primary challenge of feminist solidarity, both among diverse populations of multiracial nations and across nation-states globally. When comparing the genealogies of Black Feminism in Brazil with the US, there are clear points of intersection, particularly given the centrality of embodied and oral knowledge passed down through multigenerational families as an ongoing struggle 'against racism and violence, and for a good life'.[7]

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research was funded by the Fulbright-Hays program from 2016-2017, the Rackham Graduate School at the University of Michigan (2017-2018), the Ruth Landes Memorial Fund of the Reed Foundation, New York City (2019), the Africana Research Center (ARC) at the Pennsylvania State University and the Institute for Research on the African Diaspora in the Americas and the Caribbean (IRADAC) at the City University of New York (CUNY) Graduate Center.

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[7] This was the primary messaging for the political campaign of the Black Women's March (Marcha da Mulher Negra) that united 50,000 women in the Brazilian capital in 2015.

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Citation: Andreson, J. L. (2025). Historical Genealogies of Black Feminism in Brazil: Candomblé Priestesses and Embodied Territoriality. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 9(1), 05. https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/16015

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