From Queens to *Batuqueiras*:
Race, Gender, *Maracatu,* and the Persistence of the Myth of Racial Democracy
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In the literature on *maracatu de baque virado*, an Afro-Brazilian drumming practice related to the religion known as *xangô,* from Pernambuco state in northeast Brazil, the dominant discourse is of tradition and change. In the earliest scholarship, *baque virado* was celebrated as an African survival of slavery and repression. More recently, some scholars have argued that this discourse constructs *baque virado* as a static relic of a pre-modern past. These scholars also posit a state of "Yoruban hegemony" in Afro-Brazilian religion, and have emphasized cultural mixture with whites and the indigenous as important in *baque virado's* development. Integral to this argument is the historical relationship between *maracatu de baque virado* and another *maracatu*, known as *maracatu de baque solto.* Underlying these discourses of tradition and change are contestations over cultural patrimony, appropriation, and entitlement, which reproduce or respond to discourses of *mestiçagem* (racial and cultural mixture) and the myth of racial democracy, notions which have promoted ideals of racial integration but also contributed to a silencing effect on the articulation of a black political subjectivity in Brazil.

An under-examined yet significant part of this tradition and change is the role of women in *maracatu*. While women have historically been prohibited from playing drums in *baque virado*, they have also enjoyed roles as leaders in the figure of the Queen—an Afro-Brazilian woman who is often both the president of the *maracatu* organization and the head of its affiliated *xangô* house. However, some, mostly white, middle-class women have begun to challenge the prohibition against playing drums. Significantly, the only academic writing to discuss gender in *baque virado* is focused on this issue and does not

discuss black female leadership (Carvalho 2007; Galinsky 2002: 80-86). Furthermore, the historical validity of black female leadership in Afro-Brazilian religion in the state of Bahia is itself contested by scholars who claim that it arose from the idealized projections of US anthropologist Ruth Landes (Healey 1998; Matory 2003, 2005, 2008). In this paper, I argue that these academic discourses on the relationship between *baque virado* and *baque solto* and the historical validity of Afro-Brazilian matriarchy reproduce problematic aspects of the myth of racial democracy that falsely position black organization and identification as racist and/or exclusionary, and, by implication, women's organization and identification as sexist and/or exclusionary.

Integral to understanding cultural politics in Brazil is the legacy of Brazilian anthropologist Gilberto Freyre (Hanchard 1994, Lebon 2007). In 1933, Freyre published a study in which he argued that African and indigenous contributions to Brazilian society should be celebrated (Freyre 1968). Though Freyre's ideas were progressive at the time, as Brazilian nationalism embraced *mestiçagem*, non-white Brazilians still found and continued to find themselves at the bottom of a socio-economic hierarchy (Lebon 2007). Rather than promote equality, this new discourse of *mestiçagem,* and the myth of racial democracy that developed from it, has served to silence attempts to articulate a black cultural or political subjectivity by enabling the argument that African heritage is the cultural patrimony of all Brazilians, and that race is not an important factor in Brazilian social life and should not be the basis of political analysis. Under this logic, political (or indeed, musical) groups that embrace a black or Afro identity have been, ironically, slammed as racist (Dunn 1992; Hanchard 1994), though their images have

simultaneously been appropriated by the Brazilian state and the tourism industry (Carvalho 2007, Metz 2008, Packman 2012).

Yet the concept of hybridity has also been used to undermine homogenizing nationalisms. Paul Gilroy proposed the concept of the Black Atlantic as a space of transnational hybridity in the African diaspora. This Black Atlantic cultural interchange has been instrumental in the formation of Afro-diasporic culture throughout the world and carries political implications in the emphasis on Afro over national identification. Within this circuit, black musical practices have played a particularly important role. In Brazilian music, Afro-diasporic identification and its controversies have been perhaps most discussed with respect to the *blocos afros* of the state of Bahia, such as Ilê Aiyê, which combined politicized lyrics with an Afro-oriented aesthetic. This group more than any other was criticized as racist for its black-only membership policy. In part inspired by these developments in Bahia, since the 1970s many black Pernambucans have sought to politicize *baque virado* in similar ways (Metz 2008). Often this politicizing gesture has involved relinquishing certain "traditional" elements of the practice in favor of others that speak more to a contemporary black Brazilian identity with symbolic linkages between Afro-Pernambuco, Afro-Bahia, and the wider African diaspora.

Most academic discussions of *maracatu* include a distinction: there are, in fact, two kinds of *maracatu*. The first, known as *maracatu de baque virado,* is predominantly associated with Afro-Brazilians living in the slums of Recife, capital of Pernambuco. It bears a close relationship to *xangô,* a Pernambucan variant of the Afro-Brazilian religion known more widely as *candomblé,* but is itself a secular practice that is focused around *carnaval*. It is also commonly linked to the colonial practice of slave-holders designating

black kings as leaders of various groups of slaves, as a sort of divide and rule tactic, from which derives the practice of crowning a king and a queen of the *maracatu*, and the procession of a royal court in *carnaval* parades. The king and/or queen of a *maracatu* is typically the president of the organization, and is also often the head of the affiliated *xangô* house. Because women have enjoyed places of prominence within *xangô/candomblé*, they are also often the president of the associated *maracatu*. Many practitioners of *baque virado* view the *Rainha* as first in importance, at least in terms of the organization of the *carnaval* procession (Thalwitzer 2013: 28). Religious doctrine forbids women to touch drums with a drumhead or drum-skin, though they have participated musically in *xangô/candomblé* ritual and *maracatu* performance through singing, dancing, and playing rattles and shakers. However, in recent years women have been allowed to play drums in most of the traditional *maracatus,* a change largely spearheaded by white, middle-class university students but has also embraced by some Afro-Brazilian women (Carvalho 2007; Galinsky 2002: 80-86). However, traditional musical gender roles are maintained in religious practice.

The other *maracatu* is known as *maracatu de baque solto.* It is associated with poor rural populations that identify as racially mixed*,* and it has been argued to have been developed by oppressed sugar-cane workers, partly inspired by the *maracatus de baque virado* of the city (Medeiros 2005: 77-97). The practice is generally assumed to bear a close relationship with religious practices such as *umbanda* and *jurema,* which involve a combination of African, Catholic, and indigenous elements with Kardecian spiritism. However, *baque solto* is likewise a secular practice that has been incorporated into *carnaval*. Some claim that historically women were excluded from *baque solto*

altogether, and men would dress in women's clothes in order to portray female characters in the parade, though women do now fill these roles (Oliveira 2011: 64).

The distinction between the two practices is generally held to be a product of the different communities in which they developed. However, Brazilian historian Ivaldo Lima contends that *maracatu* was not originally bifurcated but instead existed as a plurality of practices without codification into rationalized traditions (Lima 2007, 2008, 2014). According to Lima, as the Brazilian state began a phase of heavy repression in the early 20th century, the communities which played *maracatu* and practiced Afro-diasporic religion and their elite sympathizers advocated for the Brazilian state to accept the legitimacy of some of these practices on the grounds of their "African purity." In doing so, they constructed other variants of these practices as "impure," "syncretic charlatanism." These discourses favored Yoruba-derived elements, Lima argues, displacing elements form other cultural sources. Lima claims that these distinctions were taken advantage of by some Brazilian blacks in order to evade repression, and their complex of musical and religious practices would develop into *maracatu de baque virado* and *xangô*. However, in the process they shouldered the brunt of the repression onto the communities in which would develop *maracatu de baque solto* and religious practices such as *umbanda* and *jurema.*

Though gender remains virtually unaddressed in academic literature on *maracatu*, the distinction between *baque virado* and *baque solto,* and Lima's contentions, have important implications for women. There does exist, however, a small body of literature that addresses the role of women in *candomblé* in nearby Bahia. In the late 1930s, US anthropologist Ruth Landes travelled to Bahia to research *candomblé* and was impressed

with the high degree of social and economic independence of the priestesses, publishing a few articles and a book on the topic (Landes 1940a, 1940b, 1947, 1953). Her focus on gender and at-the-time unconventional methods earned her the animosity of leading Brazilian scholar Arthur Ramos and the US anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits (Landes 1986, Cole 1994), who collaborated together to publish defamations of Landes' character and to discredit her ideas.

In the early and mid-2000s, US anthropologist J. Lorand Matory argued that Landes' claims were hardly more than a figment of her imagination, "a primitivist cliché" (2003: 412) that resulted from her feminist convictions, but that once published, were used by female priestesses in a bid for social ascendance (2005). In a related article, Matory even goes so far as to say that "Landes has tampered with the evidence" (2003: 412). Matory claims that this social ascendance became naturalized and hegemonic, causing the "marginalization of men in the priestly leadership" of *candomblé* (2005: 265). His argument rests on the assertion that Landes claimed that Afro-Brazilian matriarchy in the *candomblé* was ancient "African tradition," evidence of its "Yoruban purity" (2003: 412). However, in an article published 7 years before her book, Landes clearly outlines her theory on the development of matriarchy in *candomblé* as a process that took place in Brazil due to socio-economic factors (Landes 1940b: 268).

Matory's argument about Landes and women in *candomblé* is part of a larger argument similar to Lima's: that in order to avoid state repression, practitioners used the notion of African purity to construct Yoruba-oriented versions of Afro-Brazilian religion as legitimate, and in so doing, constructed other variants as impure and inferior. Landes is significant to his argument as one of many scholars who bolstered these claims, and the

one who supposedly attached the idea of Afro-Brazilian matriarchy to the idea of Yoruba

purity. Matory goes into greater detail than does Lima, illustrating how relatively wealthy

and powerful free blacks from both the Americas and West Africa took part in the

transnational construction of Yoruba ethnicity, language, and religion. Certainly, in this

regard, Matory and Lima's attendance to power in the construction of Afro-diasporic

culture is an important project, yet elements of their work replicate the fallout of the

racial democracy in subtle but troublesome ways.

While Matory does much to critique Freyre's *mestiçagem*, the ethnographic section of

his book reproduces some of its logics and effects. Matory offers an ethnobiography of a

male priest, Pai Francisco, who he argues has faced repeated difficulties in becoming a

chief priest of *candomblé,* as a result of Landes' claims and notions of African purity. As

Matory paints it, Pai Francisco:

> is a man whose income, complexion, and features qualify him to be white in Brazil.
> North American-inspired Black nationalist discourses, which privilege dark and self-
> described "Black" people in the membership and leadership of Afro-Brazilian
> cultural institutions, threaten to turn Pai Francisco's racial advantage in Brazilian
> national society into a disadvantage within the transnational religion to which he has
> with great sacrifice committed his entire adult life. Yet his dark family background,
> his hard-won priestly pedigree, and the spirits that guide him also keep him in the
> running for the leadership of the struggling Jeje nation. Thus, the greatest obstacle to
> Pai Francisco's success is not his color but his gender (Matory 2005: 258).

In this way, Matory attempts to construct the middle-class, white male as the victim of

working-class Afro-Brazilian women's ascendency in *candomblé*. Given the structure of

white supremacy, patriarchy, and class hierarchies in Brazilian society, this argument

rings hollow on materialist grounds alone.

In fact, Matory's argument parallels earlier discourses on black matriarchal family

structures in the US, primarily mid-century claims that black women were domineering

and thus responsible for the low status of black men in US society. Black feminists later

refuted these claims, arguing that black women's independence and the relatively high number of female-headed black households was due to the necessities of survival under slavery and post-abolition poverty and racism (Davis 1981). Though the origins of the "myth of black matriarchy" are usually credited to the 1965 Moynihan report, the debate in fact goes back to the 1930s and 40s, and its primary participants were the African American sociologist E. Franklin Frazier and none other than anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits. In 1939, Frazier published the book version of his 1932 dissertation, *The Negro Family in the United States,* in which he argued that matriarchal structures in some black families were caused by social circumstances. Herskovits took up the position that this structure was an inherited cultural "Africanism." They would both carry this debate into their research in Bahia on family structures in *candomblé* communities, conducted just after Ruth Landes finished her fieldwork and just before she began publishing on the topic (Frazier 1942, Herskovits 1943, Sansone 2011). Frazier, proponent of the social adaptation explanation, cites Landes' work approvingly. It is likely that Frazier's earlier work on African American family structures was also an influence on Landes, as she makes reference to a US parallel in her 1940 article and uses similar arguments to Frazier's (Landes 1940: 268). Herskovits, proponent of the African culture and tradition explanation of black matrifocality, hotly denounced both Frazier's and Landes' writings (Herskovits 1943). Clearly, observation and discussion of black matriarchy in the African diaspora generally predates Landes' work, and it would seem that the fusing of the idea of Afro-Brazilian matriarchy with the notion of "African tradition" is the legacy of Herskovits, not Landes.

Ivaldo Lima does not address gender but is explicit about his investment in racial democracy. In one book, Lima argues that scholars should abandon the use of the "Afro" prefix and cites Freyre as inspiration (Lima 2009: 18). Lima's rationalization is that to refer to "Afro-Brazilian" individuals and culture is to exclude them from full "Brazilianness," arguing that his work would never be seen as the work of a "Luso-Brazilian" (2009: 19). That Brazilian blacks may be proud of their African ancestry is entirely lost from view, as is the agency involved in the process of (re)-orientation towards a black and/or Afro-diasporic aesthetic in the cultural politics of *maracatu*.

Ironically, in arguing for the *mestiço* origins of *maracatu,* Lima flattens the complexity and diversity of positions in the cultural politics of race solely within *maracatu de baque virado*, and the multiple negotiations and contestations between generations, communities, and genders over the political symbolism of the details of their practices. Amongst these points of contention, issues of cultural patrimony and concerns over cultural appropriation as the practice migrates socially, regionally, and transnationally, undergird seemingly "essentialist" discussions of tradition and authenticity (Enriquez 2012, Mira 2014). Lima's concerns about "the hegemony of a culture constructed and practiced by blacks" (Lima 2009: 22) paints white, middle-class Brazilians interested in *maracatu* as somehow unjustly excluded or discouraged from participation. Using a discourse related to that of "Yoruba hegemony," and a rhetoric of racial democracy (McCann 2004), Lima has put together an interpretation of *maracatu's* history that in constructing white, middle-class youth as the victims of a "black hegemony," attempts to circumvent any uncomfortable confrontation with white, middle-class privilege or conversations about cultural appropriation. This discourse put forward

by Lima, as well as by Matory in the domain of gender, can be seen as the academic parallel of the discourses that cast Bahian *blocos afro* such as Ilê Aiyê as racist for excluding Brazilian whites.

These contestations have other significant political implications for women in *maracatu* practice. While *maracatu de baque virado* has historically featured highly gendered roles, it has also been a space of black female leadership. However, if we follow Lima and Matory, this place of leadership is a distortion, as is the distinction between *baque virado* and *baque solto*. Given that *baque solto* was until recently a practice that excluded women entirely, Lima's arguments would represent *maracatu* as the cultural patrimony of black, white, and indigenous men, but (perhaps unwittingly) would exclude women from its history except as the supposed interference of Yoruban ascendance.

Could this history of academic discourse offer an explanation of why so little has been documented on the historical gender roles of *maracatu,* or why the study of gender, without doubt an increasingly popular field of inquiry, is still so understudied by scholars of Afro-Brazilian culture? Could this history also perhaps shed light on why the minimal discussion of gender in *maracatu* is framed as the sudden and recent entrance of women into the male space of drumming? The precise terms of the historical development and contemporary practice of gender in *maracatu* are in great need of further academic attention to answer these and many other questions.

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