

Kia Lilly Caldwell

"LOOK AT HER HAIR": THE BODY POLITICS OF BLACK WOMANHOOD IN BRAZIL

This article examines Brazilian ideals of female beauty and explores their impact on Black women's subjective experiences. The analysis focuses on hair as a key site for investigating how Black women's bodies and identities are marked by Brazilian discourses on race and gender. Despite Brazil's image as a "racial democracy," derogatory images of Black women in Brazilian popular culture highlight the prevalence of anti-Black aesthetic standards in the country. Through analysis of Black women's personal narratives, this article examines how individual women attempt to reconstruct their subjectivities by contesting dominant aesthetic norms. The analysis provides insight into the gendered dimensions of Brazilian racism by demonstrating the ways in which Black women's views of, and experiences with, their hair highlight the complex relationship among race, gender, sexuality, and beauty.

KEYWORDS: Hair, Afro-Brazilian women, popular culture, Brazil, Black

"Otherness" is constructed on bodies. Racism uses the physicality of bodies to punish, to expunge and isolate certain bodies and construct them as outsiders.

– Zillah Eisenstein¹

INTRODUCTION

This article examines Brazilian ideals of female beauty and explores their impact on Black women's processes of identity construction. Given Brazil's longstanding image as a "racial democracy," examining the racialized and gendered significance of hair provides key insights into the ways in which Black women's bodies are marked by larger political and social forces. My analysis focuses on hair as a key site for investigating how Black women's identities are circumscribed by dominant discourses on race and gender. I examine the pervasiveness of anti-Black² aesthetic standards in Brazilian popular culture and explore Black women's attempts to reinvest their bodies with positive significance.

The racial implications of hair and beauty have received scant attention in most research on race in Brazil (Burdick 1998). This tendency is largely due to the lack of research on the intersection of race and gender and the near invisibility of Afro-Brazilian women as a focus of scholarly inquiry (Caldwell 2000). Nonetheless, examining the social construction of beauty provides cru-

cial insights into the intersection of race, gender, and power in contemporary Brazil. As a key marker of racial difference, hair assumes a central role in the racial politics of everyday life in Brazil. Most Brazilians are keenly aware of the social and racial significance of gradations in hair texture and use this knowledge as a standard for categorizing individuals into racial and color groups. The racial implications of hair texture take on added significance for Black women, given the central role accorded to hair in racialized constructions of femininity and female beauty.

This article forms part of a larger study that explores Afro-Brazilian women's struggles for cultural citizenship through analysis of women's life histories and practices of social activism. Field research was conducted in the city of Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, in 1997. The research participants included activists in the Black movement, women's movement, and Black women's movement, as well as non-activists. My field research and ethnographic analysis examine how women who self-identify as *negra* (Black) develop critical consciousness about issues of race and gender, and how this consciousness translates into social and political activism. Excerpts from my interview data are used in this article to explore Afro-Brazilian women's views of hair and beauty. My analysis places dominant constructions of female beauty in dialogue with Black women's critical reflections on the psycho-subjective dimensions of beauty and their role in processes of identity formation.

'LOOK AT HER HAIR': THE *NEGRA* IN BRAZILIAN POPULAR CULTURE

The song "*Veja os cabelos dela*" ("Look at Her Hair") provides a telling example of Black women's portrayal in Brazilian popular culture. "Look at Her Hair" was written by an ex-circus clown named Tiririca and distributed by Sony Music in 1996. While popularly re-

Kia Lilly Caldwell received her Ph.D. from the Department of Anthropology/Graduate Program in African Diaspora Studies at the University of Texas at Austin in 1999. She is an assistant professor in the Department of New Humanities for Social Justice at California State University, Monterey Bay. Her research and teaching areas include, African Diaspora Studies, feminist studies, critical race theory and Black feminism(s). She is completing a book manuscript on Afro-Brazilian women's processes of identity formation and involvement in social activism.

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garded as a playful and humorous tune, the lyrics evoke a number of negative stereotypes about Black women and highlight the gendered dimensions of Brazilian racism. As the lyrics state:

When she passes she calls my attention, but her hair, there's no way no. Her *catinga* (body odor)³ almost caused me to faint. Look, I cannot stand her odor. Look, look, look at her hair! It looks like a scouring pad for cleaning pans. I already told her to wash herself. But she insisted and didn't want to listen to me. This smelly *negra* (Black woman) ... Stinking animal that smells worse than a skunk.

In a few short lines, this song verbally assaults the images and identities of Black Brazilian women. The offensive nature of the lyrics created an outcry amongst Black activists and resulted in both Tiririca and his recording label, Sony Music, being sued for racism. The Center for the Articulation of Marginalized Populations (CEAP or *Centro de Articulação de Populações Marginalizadas*), a non-governmental organization in Rio de Janeiro, requested that the Brazilian Public Ministry prohibit the music on the basis of discrimination against Blacks and women. A formal denouncement of racism was presented in July 1996 based on article 20 of the 1989 Cao Law, which declared racism in the Brazilian media to be a crime.

As a result of the charges of discrimination, Tiririca was forbidden to perform the song in public. Sony also responded to the charges of racism by complying with a request that the record be removed from stores throughout Brazil. During a hearing in September 1997, the Black Department of the Party of the Brazilian Democratic Movement (PMDB or *Partido do Movimento Democrático Brasileiro*,) sought \$100 million as indemnification for moral damages. In response, Sony proposed donating 10,000 dolls and videos of the film *Pocahontas* to needy children on Children's Day. During the hearing, Sony's representative asked that their proposal for the donations be evaluated kindly because it was made with "the greatest and best intentions" (Pinheiro 1997:12). Oswaldo Ribeiro, a representative from the PMDB, considered the proposal degrading. At the hearing Ribeiro stated, "The White always thinks that whatever he does to the Black is a joke. We want respect for the race. The case is not as simple as you think" (Pinheiro 1997:12). Ribeiro also added that the lyrics of "Look at Her Hair" were offensive to Black women, including his mother, daughter, and female friends.

Benedita da Silva, the first Black woman to serve in the Brazilian Congress and Senate, wrote a magazine editorial entitled "*Negros tiririca da vida*" (Black

clowns of life) as a response to the controversy. Silva argued that the song "should be observed as a typical case of propagating racist stereotypes, which signifies an aggression, an insult to the Black woman, even if involuntary, because it animalizes this woman and associates and compares human beings and animals" (Silva 1996:98). She further argued that freedom of expression should not be used as a pretext, or excuse, for acts of racism. While acknowledging Tiririca's role as a popular musician and his significance as the embodiment of Brazilian joviality, Silva noted:

This way of being Brazilian, happy, carefree, translated in the singular feature of Tiririca should prevail. Not pejorative and prejudiced jokes relating to the racial characteristics of a population [Afro-Brazilians], because they affect our self-esteem, principally that of Black children (Silva 1996:98).

In spite of Benedita da Silva's insightful commentary regarding the negative images in "Look at Her Hair," many Brazilians saw the song as humorous and non-offensive. In fact, Tiririca's agent was quoted as saying, "this type of joke is innocent" in a newspaper interview. The belief that "Look at Her Hair" was a joke suggests that the comedic and ostensibly benign tone of the song were thought to provide immunity from charges of racial discrimination. However, it is also important to note that the negative images and the humorous style employed in the song are validated by Brazilian discourses on race. The frequent use of humor to transmit racist stereotypes validates the claim that the song was an "innocent" joke. Brazilian *brincadeiras*, or jokes, often involve comparisons between Afro-Brazilians and animals, especially monkeys. The popular acceptance of racist humor indicates that joking provides a culturally sanctioned means of articulating beliefs, which reproduce dominant notions of White superiority and Black inferiority in Brazil (Twine 1997).

The song "Look at Her Hair" also highlights the gendered dimensions of Brazilian racism. The song parodies and insults Afro-Brazilian women on a number of different levels. While the narrator describes an initial attraction to the woman described in the song, his attraction quickly turns to revulsion as he observes the woman's hair texture and body odor. The narrator maligns the woman by comparing her hair to a scouring pad and likening her bodily aromas to those of a skunk. By comparing a Black woman to an animal, the song perpetuates gendered practices of racial alterity. These practices of "othering" reinforce dominant configurations of gender and race, which regard Whiteness as essential criteria for femininity and true womanhood. By doing so, the lyrics clearly demonstrate the extent to

which Black women are accorded a less than fully human status in Brazil.⁵

Silvia, an antiracist and feminist activist in the city of Belo Horizonte, commented on the controversy created by the song "Look at Her Hair" during an interview. As she observed:

When Tiririca released this music about the *negra* – you remember – the Black Movement denounced Tiririca, this singer... that said that the *mulher negra* smells worse than *gambá* (a skunk)... and the Black Movement reacted, [but] people *banalizaram* (banalized it),⁶ saying that the Black Movement was exaggerating, that he was only joking.

Silvia's comments underscore the dangers of "banalizing" practices of racism and sexism. She notes that Black activists' attempts to criticize and challenge the negative representations of Black women in "Look at Her Hair" were dismissed as exaggerated responses to an inconsequential joke. Silvia also suggests that challenging racism and sexism becomes more difficult when acts of discrimination are accepted as banal or commonplace. Finally, she notes that the popular acceptance of symbolic violence against Black women delegitimizes efforts to denounce it.

Silvia's discussion of banalization also highlights the dangers of regarding "Look at Her Hair" as a benign expression of contemporary popular culture. When Tiririca sang "Look at Her Hair," he was not simply making fun of a fictional song character; instead, he was reinforcing and reinscribing dominant constructions of racial alterity, which construct Black women as "outsiders-within" Brazilian society (Collins 2000 [1990]). However, it is important to note that Tiririca did not invent these representations; these notions called upon pre-existing tropes regarding Black women's bodies that had long been validated by Brazilian discourses on race and gender. Consequently, while the song "Look at Her Hair" utilized popular culture as a vehicle, it drew upon socio-cultural beliefs and prejudices that were, and are, deeply engrained in Brazilian society. By focusing on physical characteristics such as hair texture and body odor, the song perpetuated popular beliefs that Afro-Brazilian women are unattractive and lack proper hygiene.

Use of the term *negra* (Black woman) was essential to achieving the song's intention of presenting derogatory images of Black women. The images used in the song were racially specific and would have been ineffective without reference to the woman's racial identity. The term *negra* conjured up long-standing stereotypes of Black women that could be employed for comedic value. Use of the term *negra* was also essential

to constructing an absolutely deprecating image of the woman portrayed in the song. Although the term *negra* is not inherently insulting, it represents negative connotations, which make it a racially loaded term in Brazil. Widespread beliefs regarding the inferiority and undesirability of Blackness have largely caused referential use of the terms *negro(a)* to be viewed as a form of insult and deprecation. As Neuza Santos has observed, "What is dirty is associated with Black, with color, and with Black men and women. Gestural, oral, and written language institutionalize the deprecating meaning of blackness" (1983:29). Along similar lines, Denise Ferreira da Silva has argued, "To name someone Black, without the qualification that this person does not share negative meanings associated with Blackness, is highly offensive" (1998:2). The negative linguistic connotations of the term *negra* suggest that its usage in the song constituted a form of insult in and of itself. Furthermore, when placed in the context of Brazilian discourses on race and gender, it is clear that the images used in "Look at Her Hair" were reinforced and solidified through their association with the woman's description as a *negra*.

"BAD HAIR" IN A RACIAL DEMOCRACY: MAPPING THE AESTHETIC TERRAIN OF BLACK WOMANHOOD

While not explicitly stated in the song "Look at Her Hair," the notion of having "bad hair" was implicit in the song's lyrics. By comparing the woman's hair to a scouring pad, Tiririca made a clear statement regarding the coarseness of her hair, which resonated with Brazilian notions of *cabelo ruim*, or bad hair. In Brazil, the concept of bad hair is associated with individuals who have Black or African ancestry. Having "good" or "bad" hair is also used as a means of assigning individuals who have questionable or ambiguous racial origins to either the "White" or "Black" racial category. Given the high degree of racial intermixture in Brazil, individuals with African ancestry may not readily appear to be "Black." As a consequence, hair texture has long been used as an indicator of racial background and a basis of racial classification.

Although Brazilian notions of *cabelo bom* and *cabelo ruim* resonate with ideas of "good" and "bad" hair found elsewhere in the African Diaspora, it is important to note that these notions are not confined to the Afro-Brazilian community; they permeate Brazilian society as a whole. As a result, it is not uncommon to hear White Brazilians describe someone as having "bad" hair. Widespread familiarity with the significance of hair texture amongst all racial groups further underscores the significance of hair as a marker of racial and social identity in Brazil.⁷

The inextricable relationship between Brazilian constructions of race and gender is underscored by Black women's positionality vis-à-vis dominant discourses on female beauty. Of all Brazilian social groups, Black women are the most profoundly impacted by Brazilian beliefs and prejudices regarding hair texture. While one might argue that Black men experience discrimination based on their hair texture, this discrimination pales in comparison to the countless incidents of humiliation experienced by Black women on an everyday basis. As Gilliam and Gilliam note:

Of all the physical characteristics, it is particularly hair that marks "race" for women.... It is in the issue of hair that one sees a distinction between men and women and the differential social coding of race and ethnicity. Thus "race" is gendered. (1999:68-69)

Moreover, as other Black feminist scholars in the United States and England have observed, the dynamics of race, class, gender, and sexuality intersect in ways that multiply marginalize women of African descent (Collins 2000[1990]; King 1988; Mama 1995; Mirza 1997). The experiences of Afro-Brazilian women indicate that they face multiple forms of discrimination as their bodies are assessed and valorized according to standards established by dominant discourses on race, gender, sexuality, and beauty (Piscitelli 1996).

Investigating the significance of hair and beauty for Afro-Brazilian women illuminates both commonalities and differences when compared to the experiences of Black women in other national contexts. Like Black women who reside in other regions of the Americas, the social identities of Afro-Brazilian women have been shaped by a national history of European colonization and African enslavement. However, unlike Black women in many other areas of the Americas, during most of the twentieth century Black women in Brazil were subjected to a discourse of "racial democracy" which sought to downplay and discursively erase the realities of racism.

Brazil's now widely disputed image as a "racial democracy" also played a central role in constructing official and popular understandings of gender during most of the twentieth century (Caldwell 1999). In an attempt to reinterpret Brazil's national past of colonial slavery, nationalist ideologues, such as Gilberto Freyre (1986[1946]), promoted constructions of Black womanhood that legitimized colonial gender norms. These gender norms continue to buttress and perpetuate colonial hierarchies of gender, race, and class by constructing the social identities of White women as the standard of womanhood and female beauty, and the social

identities of mixed-race (*mulata*) and Black women in terms of sexual and manual labor.⁸

In contemporary Brazil, the social identities of Black, Mulata and White women demonstrate how physical differences are linked to gendered notions of racial superiority. While Black and Mulata women have long been regarded as being more sexually desirable, White women have traditionally been considered to be more beautiful. In many ways, the distinctions made between White, Mulata and Black women draw upon a virgin/whore dichotomy that classifies women into different categories based on their presumed suitability for sex or marriage. These forms of differentiation are succinctly expressed in the Brazilian adage: "A white woman to marry, a mulata to fornicate, a black woman to cook."

In Brazil, racialized gender hierarchies also classify women by dissecting their bodies and attributing certain physical features either to the category of sex or beauty. This dissection process assigns features such as skin color, hair texture, and the shape and size of the nose and lips to the category of beauty, while features such as the breasts, hips, and buttocks are assigned to the sexual category. Given the Eurocentric aesthetic standards that prevail in Brazilian society, Black women have traditionally been defined as being sexual, rather than beautiful. Ironically, however, Black and Mulata women's association with sensuality and sexuality has been lauded as evidence of racial democracy in Brazil (Caldwell 1999; Gilliam 1998).

Representations of mixed-race or Mulata women in Brazilian popular culture reveal the complexities of Brazilian discourses on race, gender and beauty. A carnival song from 1932, "Teu Cabelo Não Nega" (Your Hair Gives You Away), highlights the ambivalent portrayal of Mulata women in Brazilian popular culture. As the song states:

In these lands of Brazil
Here
You don't even have to cultivate it
The land gives
Black beans, many learned men, and *giribita*
A lot of beautiful mulatas

The hair gives you away.
Mulata.
You are mulata in color
But since color doesn't rub off, mulata,
Mulata, I want your love. (Davis 1999:155)

"Your Hair Gives You Away" was the carnival success of 1932 and became one of the most successful carnival songs of all time (Davis 1999). The portrayal

of Mulata women in the song reinforces Brazil's nationalist image as a racial democracy and racial-sexual paradise. The lyrics portray Mulata women as being quintessentially Brazilian. Like black beans, they seem to spring from the land in large quantities. However, on closer observation, the lyrics also reveal racist beliefs premised on anti-Black aesthetic values. Both the title of the song and the lyrics contain the phrase, "hair gives you away." When analyzed in the context of Brazilian racial beliefs, this phrase can be seen as an expression of racial "outing." By referring to the Mulata's hair, the narrator of the song states his belief that this desirable woman has African ancestry. Her hair texture is the marker that reveals this ancestry. The narrator then goes on to describe the Mulata as being Mulata in color. This statement reinforces the Mulata's phenotypic characteristics and the fact that she is not *negra* or black in color. The narrator further states that the Mulata's color is inconsequential since it will not "stick" to him. His desire to have the mulata's love, or more accurately her sexual favors (Carvalho 1999), is unchanged and he continues to sing her praises, albeit with a double-voiced message of attraction and revulsion.

The process of racial outing performed in "Your Hair Gives Away" demonstrates how Afro-Brazilian women's bodies are marked and categorized by Brazilian practices of racialization. Despite the prevalence of official and popular discourses, which emphasize the importance of racial miscegenation, practices of racial differentiation and categorization are pervasive in Brazil. As recent work by Antonio Guimarães (1995) and Robin Sheriff (2001) has shown, the much acclaimed Brazilian color continuum coexists with practices of racialization that center on categorizing individuals into bipolar categories of Whiteness and Blackness. These practices of racialization reflect a decidedly anti-Black bias, which privileges Whiteness as an unmarked and universal identity. Lewis R. Gordon's (1997) work on anti-Blackness provides significant insights into these processes. As Gordon provocatively argues,

in an antiblack world, race is only designated by those who signify racial identification. A clue to that identification is the notion of being "colored." Not being colored signifies being white, and, as a consequence, being raceless, whereas being colored signifies being a race. Thus, although the human race is normatively white, racialized human beings, in other words, a subspecies of humanity, are nonwhite.... In effect, then, in the antiblack world there is but one race, and that race is black. Thus to be racialized is to be pushed "down" toward blackness, and to be deracialized is to be pushed "up" toward whiteness. (1997:76)

"Your Hair Gives You Away" demonstrates how a national preference for Whiteness and a concomitant devaluation of Blackness circumscribe the social identities of Afro-Brazilian women. The anti-Black aesthetic values articulated in "The Hair Gives You Away" describe the Mulata's hair texture and skin color as being unappealing. These physical attributes were considered to be undesirable largely because they were associated with the Mulata's African ancestry. Furthermore, while not explicitly stated, Brazilian notions of "good" and "bad" hair are present in the narrator's evaluation of the woman described in the song. By stating, "the hair gives you away," the narrator indicates that she does not have "good" hair and thus has not completely escaped the "stain" of Blackness.⁹

"CIRCLES AND SQUARES": THE BODY IN CONSTRUCTIONS OF BLACK WOMANHOOD

Analysis of anti-Black aesthetic standards is fundamental to understanding how Brazilian racial discourses operate on the institutional level, in everyday social interaction, and in processes of personal identity formation. However, until recently, there has been little discussion of Blackness as a signifier of difference and the biases against Black physical features in most research on Brazilian race relations (Burdick 1998; Guimarães 1995; Twine 1997). Instead, most research has focused on the prevalence of whitening, as both ideology and practice, in twentieth-century Brazil (Davis 1999; Hanchard 1994; Skidmore 1974, 1990). Nonetheless, while exploring the notion of whitening is essential to understanding Brazilian racial thought and practice, alone it provides a partial understanding of race in Brazil. In many ways, anti-Blackness is an indispensable feature of Brazilian ideologies of whitening.

Examining the embodied dimensions of Black womanhood highlights the prevalence of anti-Black aesthetic standards in Brazil and underscores the impact of these standards on the subjective level. In their attempts to develop positive self-images and identities, Afro-Brazilian women are forced to confront dominant values that caricature and malign their physical features. Many of the women who participated in my study described personal struggles related to beauty and self-image that centered on acceptance of their hair. In addition, despite differences in their experiences, most women underwent a process of acceptance that required them to reassess the social stigma associated with black hair in Brazil. One of my interviewees commented on the stigmatization of black hair, by stating: "Why *ruim* (bad)? *Cabelo crespo* (kinky hair), but *cabelo ruim* (bad hair) is already a sign of this racist thing [belief] that the hair of Blacks is bad."

Recent research by Burdick (1998) provides a rare

and insightful analysis of Afro-Brazilian women's subjective experiences and views related to beauty. Burdick refers to the painful struggles faced by Afro-Brazilian women as "the everyday wounds of color." This phrase aptly describes the relentless personal torment that Black women experience as a result of being judged according to anti-Black aesthetic standards. During my field research, several interviewees recounted experiences that highlighted the centrality of hair and beauty in Afro-Brazilian women's lives. Their experiences, presented below, resonate with Burdick's notion of "the everyday wounds of color" and underscore the racialized significance of Black women's bodies.

GISLENE

Gislene is 36 years old. When asked whether she had memories of racial discrimination from her childhood, Gislene recounted the following:

I always wanted to be some sort of majorette or ballerina. The type that did acrobatics, that danced and carried the school flag. They went in front, turning and doing acrobatics on the ground. And I was never able to. Back then, I thought that it was because I did not have money to buy that type of clothing.... I was never able to buy those ballet slippers! I was a student of the *caixa escolar* – this is for the poorest students. So, I thought that I was not a ballerina and that I did not participate in the theater at school because I could not buy the clothes. Today, I think that, even if I had had the money back then, even if I had had financial means, I still would not have participated, because I did not fit the standard of beauty to be in the front representing the school. The goal was to get the prettiest girls to do that. Those who were considered the most pretty, who coincidentally were White, with straight hair... Preferably with light colored hair, very light hair. Blonde even.

As a child, Gislene thought that she was unable to be a ballerina or majorette because of her family's financial status, she later realized that class was not the determinative factor. As a Black young woman, she did not fulfill the requirements for consideration as her school's representative or as a participant in a traditionally female extracurricular activity like ballet.

Gislene's experiences demonstrate how the body functions as a racialized and gendered signifier of difference. In the preceding passage, Gislene notes that the girls who were chosen as ballerinas and majorettes were usually White and had straight blonde hair. Gislene's exclusion from ballet and the marching band were not based on objective criteria such as talent, skill,

or potential. Instead, Gislene's inability to participate was decided on the basis of her non-European physical features. Her skin color, hair texture, and body shape were all physical signifiers that encapsulated the corporeal dimensions of Black womanhood. Ultimately, these factors disqualified Gislene as a potential representative for her school.

Using squares and circles as metaphors, Gislene described Brazilian intolerance of non-European physical features in her personal narrative:

In Brazil there is only the circle, the square does not exist. Just a little while ago the square began to appear, very slowly.... I think that is what is most serious; because you have to work with two models. They are different. But in Brazil, there are not two models, there is only one model. Whoever is not inside this model, is outside. He [sic] does not exist. He [sic] is worthless.

REGINA

Regina is 39 years old. Based on her age, she can be grouped into the same generational cohort as Gislene. Regina described her childhood experiences in the following way:

The dream of all girls who had *cabelo crespo* (kinky hair) was to have *cabelo liso* (straight hair) that swung. I had an acquaintance that went to high school. She would take her hair loose like this and put her head outside, so that when the bus passed her hair would fly. Not that it ever did. People invented [things]. My cousin had a wig. I put on my cousin's wig so that my hair *balançava* (would swing).

The importance of having hair that *balançava* (would swing) is central to Regina's comments. She describes straight hair as being the type that could swing. Regina and her peers felt themselves to be at a disadvantage because their hair was not straight, and thus did not swing.

After recounting her childhood experiences, Regina expressed a desire to see her daughter grow up with a more positive self-image than she had as a child:

I want Ana to grow up knowing that her hair is pretty the way that it is. That she is pretty the way that she is... Because if you compare yourself with that model that everyone says is pretty.... If you put Xuxa¹⁰ and Regina together, everyone will say that Xuxa is pretty and you lose. It is unfair to do this. And this is what happened with my generation. The models that were put out there for us were

very different. There were a lot of blonde, blue-eyed women and everyone said that they were pretty. It was very difficult for me to believe that I was pretty. Today, no, you have Isabel Filardis, Camila Pitanga...and others...It was very hard for my generation to, not only accept itself as Black, but also to create a space. Because, we did not have a model. The models are developing now.

Regina's narrative provides important insights regarding the role of hair and beauty in Black women's processes of identity construction. She notes that, during her childhood, Eurocentric standards of female beauty excluded Black girls like herself. Regina's comment about making comparisons between Xuxa, a blonde-haired television star, and herself underscores the fact that Black girls and women emerge as losers in aesthetic competitions with White girls and women. Regina does call attention to changes in the arena of beauty, however. She mentions that the presence of non-White models and actresses, such as Isabel Filardis and Camila Pitanga, in the Brazilian media provides alternative models of beauty that valorize a more Black aesthetic.¹¹ She further notes that these alternative models can be used to promote and reinforce a positive self-image for her daughter. As she observes:

So, when Ana sees a photo of a woman with extremely straight hair, [and thinks]: "my hair is going to be like that." [I can say]: "no, your hair is going to be like this," because there are a lot of styles with a lot of hair, but like hers – *crespo* (kinky) – to show her.

Regina's comments suggests that the existence of media representations that affirm Blackness can play an important role in promoting a positive self-image among Black girls and young women.¹² Regina also notes that photos of Black women's hair can serve as a valuable reference as she encourages her daughter to accept and value her hair.

BLACK WOMEN AS AGENTS: RESIGNIFYING THE EMBODIMENT OF BLACKNESS

While recognizing the pain and victimization experienced by Afro-Brazilian women in the realm of beauty, it is also important to explore how women attempt to challenge anti-Black aesthetic values and resignify the embodiment of Black womanhood. Exploring Black women's resistance in the realm of beauty underscores the political importance of the body as a marker of racial and gender identity. It also is essential to understand how they struggle against dominant ideologies and work to give meaning to one of the most intimate

aspects of their lives, their bodies.

Burdick's (1998) work provides a nuanced discussion of the politics of Black women's hair and appropriately cautions against oversimplifying the complex issues and struggles related to beauty. Openly critiquing the view that Black women only experience oppression with regards to their hair, Burdick forcefully argues:

They do experience oppression there, but that is not all they experience. It would also be too simple to conclude that whatever these women experience that is positive is nothing but a crumb, plot, or stratagem to draw them into a regime of power over which they have no control. Again, it does that, but not only that. What we are witnessing in the arena of hair care is the deep tension between structure and agency that continues to inform most social arenas in which black Brazilian women move. (1998:38)

Burdick's analysis highlights the need to examine Black women's activities and positionalities as subjects within the realm of hair and beauty. While, admittedly, Afro-Brazilian women have had little control over defining the norms and values that define beauty in Brazil, it is crucial that their agency be recognized and critically examined.

Two of my interviewees stand out as examples of Black women's attempts to reinvest their hair with positive significance. Their experiences highlight the central role which hair plays in Black women's processes of identity construction. Their experiences also underscore the relationship between the valorization of Blackness as form of racial identification and the acceptance of Black or African physical features.

CLEONICE

Cleonice is 51 years old. As a child, she experienced the impact of anti-Black aesthetic values firsthand. One day at school another child told her that her hair was *arame*, or wire. Cleonice ran home crying. During our interview, I asked Cleonice to explain the significance of *arame*. She stated that it is a fiber, which is harder and thicker than *bombril*, the wire used for kitchen scouring pads. Her description of *arame* suggests that the term has a more negative meaning than other terms, such as *bombril*,¹³ that are commonly used to describe Black hair in Brazil.

Cleonice straightened her hair as a young woman. However, during the early 1970s, she began to wear her hair in an Afro. In her personal narrative, Cleonice notes that she began to "*me assumir como negra*" (assume myself as Black) when she moved to Salvador,

Bahia, in 1970. On a symbolic level, it is important to note that Cleonice's racial transformation began to take place in Salvador. The city of Salvador and the state of Bahia are popularly known as the "most Black" areas of Brazil. Afro-Brazilian religion and culture permeate the city of Salvador and the state of Bahia has one of the largest populations of African descent in Brazil. Cleonice's racial transformation was also facilitated by the encouragement of her boyfriend, Pedro, a Brazilian of German ancestry. Pedro encouraged Cleonice to stop straightening her hair and begin to wear "*cabelo black*" (Black hair or an Afro).

Cleonice's transformation also was prompted by her exposure to images of Angela Davis in the Brazilian media. She admired the images of Davis that she saw in Brazilian newspapers and sought to emulate Davis's pro-Black aesthetic.¹⁴ In addition to wearing an Afro that closely resembled Davis's, Cleonice also began to wear the same style of eyeglasses. In her narrative, Cleonice states that she thought it was "*chique*" (chic) when people said that she looked like Davis. Through use of *cabelo black*, Cleonice was able to transform her *cabelo arame* (wire hair) into a symbol of racial pride and political resistance.

Cleonice's experiences highlight the lack of affirming images of Black women in the Brazilian public sphere and points to the transnational circulation of body politics within the African Diaspora. My view of diasporic body politics includes discourses, practices, and aesthetics that valorize and affirm the beauty of Black bodies. Diasporic body politics challenge Eurocentric aesthetic standards and promote the affirmation of Blackness and Black political consciousness. It is also important to note that, linguistically, the term *cabelo black* exemplifies interaction between Black politics and culture in Brazil and the United States. The term combines the Brazilian term for hair, *cabelo*, with the English term "black." In many ways, Cleonice's experience of racial transformation was both symbolized by and embodied in her *cabelo black*. Cleonice identified with the image of radical Black womanhood that Angela Davis represented and used Davis as a model in the reconstruction of her own racial, gender and political subjectivity. Moreover, for Cleonice, the Afro was more than a hairstyle; it was an expression of her nascent racial consciousness.

Jacqueline Brown's (1998) discussion of diasporic resources resonates with the conceptualization of diasporic body politics articulated in Cleonice's narrative. In her analysis of relationships and connections between Blacks in Liverpool and the United States, Brown observes that

Diasporic resources may include not just cultural

productions such as music, but also people and places, as well as iconography, ideas, and ideologies associated with them. . . . I use the term *diasporic resources*, then to capture the sense that black Liverpoolians actively appropriate particular aspects of "black America" for particular reasons, to meet particular needs-but do so within limits, within and against power asymmetries, and with political consequences. (1998:298)

Brown's (1998:308-9) ethnographic research elucidates the ways in which Black Liverpoolians engage in processes of "diasporic identity formation" by seizing and appropriating diasporic resources and utilizing them in a local context. Much like Cleonice, one of Brown's interviewees described the appropriation of diasporic resources and diasporic body politics in terms of "Growing Afros, wearing arm bands, wearing one black glove to a certain extent" (1998:310).

MARCIA

Marcia is 36 years old. At the time of our interview in 1997, Marcia had been wearing her hair in a natural style for eight years. She had also been working as a model in hair shows for five years. When asked about her racial identity, Marcia recounted the following:

I was always conscious of being *negra* (Black). Although, I think that, let's say, the only thing that was not *assumida* (assumed) was the issue of hair. Today I would pass through all of the process that I already went through of straightening my hair. But today I have the consciousness that if I straighten my hair, I will not stop being Black. Although, when I straightened it, I did not think that I was going to stop being Black. But it was a question of vanity. I wanted that type of hair that swung and so forth.

This passage touches on key issues related to hair, beauty and racial identity in Brazil. Marcia states that she was always conscious of being Black and that hair was the only thing that she did not "assume." Her use of the term *assumida* (assumed) can be viewed as a reflection of her racial consciousness. This interpretation is consistent with use of the term *negro(a) assumido(a)* by Black Brazilian activists as a way of describing individuals with a strong sense of racial consciousness. Unlike the English verb "to assume," in Portuguese *assumir* signifies personal assumption of an identity, which an individual takes on and adopts. As Robin Sheriff has noted:

To become a negro assumido is to reject the polite discourses and miscegenated identities associated

with intermediate racial terms (*moreno*, *mulato*, *pardo*, etc.) in favor of an unambiguous, unsoftened, and unqualified negro identity. It is to make a psychological leap into what activists sometimes call “negritude” and to undergo what they describe as something akin to a conversion experience. (2001:207)

Many Black activists would regard Marcia’s negative view of her hair as a rejection of Blackness and thus as a reflection of her lack of racial consciousness.¹⁵ However, in her narrative, Marcia states that based on her current consciousness, or way of thinking, she realizes that she would not stop being Black if she straightened her hair. She revises this statement slightly in the next sentence by stating that she did not think that she would stop being Black when she straightened her hair in the past. She concludes by focusing on vanity as being the motivation for straightening her hair. Much like Regina’s description of her childhood, Marcia describes her former preference for hair that swung. However, it is worth noting that Marcia describes her hair preference as an expression of personal vanity, rather than as a reflection of a socially constructed standard of beauty that privileges straight hair.

In other sections of her narrative, Marcia states that shame about her hair caused her to straighten it. In the past, however, Marcia did not admit that she chemically straightened her hair. Instead, she told people that she used a *banho de óleo* (oil bath) to achieve a straighter hair texture. Marcia’s denial about the use of chemicals on her hair gave the impression that her hair underwent less extreme alteration than it actually did. Despite her previous public representation of her hair, Marcia described her view of the straightening process in her personal narrative:

The process of straightening was terrible. There were burns. When you straightened, you ended up with that really straight thing [hair]. And you couldn’t do anything with it. If you went to a party and it rained, oh my God. How terrible. Torture.

Despite Marcia’s current use of natural hair, the transition from straightened to natural hair was a somewhat difficult one. She described the process in the following way:

When I wanted to stop straightening my hair, I kept asking her [the hairstylist] “If I stop straightening my hair, how is it going to look?” Of course she did not know how to respond. So, she said, “it is going to be *crespo* (kinky).” And I said “why?”

Marcia’s narrative describes her difficulty in accepting her hair’s natural texture. Marcia’s repeated questioning of her hairstylist suggests that she was seeking to allay concerns about allowing her hair to return to its natural state.

In her personal narrative, Marcia notes that her hair preferences changed after she began to socialize with larger numbers of Blacks. During the late-1980s, she started to frequent *pagode* dances and have greater “*convivência com negros*” (interaction with Blacks). Since *pagode* is a Black-dominated social and cultural space, Marcia encountered larger numbers of Black women wearing natural hairstyles there.

Once she decided to wear her hair naturally, Marcia began the process of addressing and accepting her hair’s natural texture. She also let her chemically straightened hair grow out. This process involved the use of braids in her hair. Wearing her hair in braids caused Marcia to confront her previous dislike for braided hairstyles. As she notes, “Each week I braided my hair. I braided it to stop straightening it.... It was a shock for everyone.”

Despite her earlier struggles to accept the natural texture of her hair and the process of braiding, Marcia’s current pride in and acceptance of her hair is clearly visible. As she observes:

I love my hair. I always liked it, straightened or not. I feel an enormous energy in my hair... I think it [natural hair] is pretty, practical. You’ve seen all the things I do with my hair. I am not going to say, “I repent for not having *assumido* (assumed) this.” I really do not repent, because I think that everything is a process. It is all a question of time, a question of maturity. But, I think that it is fantastic.

Marcia displays a nonjudgmental attitude regarding her former hairstyling preferences. Rather than engaging in self-condemnation because she straightened her hair in the past, she describes her hairstyling practices as being a reflection of her growth and maturity. Unlike Cleonice, however, Marcia does not explicitly link these processes of growth and maturity to changes in her racial consciousness. Instead, Marcia’s comments suggest that some Afro-Brazilian women drastically change their hairstyling practices without developing a forceful critique of racism.

UNTANGLING THE POLITICS OF HAIR AND IDENTITY

The personal narratives presented in this article raise a number of important questions regarding Afro-Brazilian women’s experiences in the realm of hair of beauty. First, to what extent do Afro-Brazilian women’s hairstyling practices reflect racial consciousness? Second,

does straightened or chemically altered hair reflect the internalization of anti-Black aesthetic standards or racial self-hatred? Finally, can the use of natural hairstyles be seen as a form of resistance to anti-Black aesthetic standards even when it is not consciously linked to transformations in racial consciousness?

Attempting to untangle the relationship between hair and Afro-Brazilian women's identities is a difficult and perhaps never-ending task.¹⁵ As my research participants' experiences suggest, each generation of women must come to terms with the embodied significance of Black womanhood within a specific sociopolitical context. Additionally, individual women must come to terms with the significance of their hair in personal and intimate terms. My interviewees' experiences suggest that this can be done in a variety of ways. While Cleonice's change in hairstyling practices was nearly inseparable from the transformation in her racial consciousness, Marcia's process was not nearly as dramatic. The impact of larger social forces on each woman's individual process of transformation is also worth noting. As someone who came of age in the 1970s, Cleonice was profoundly influenced by the U.S. Black power movement. She utilized the pro-Black aesthetics of the era to fashion a new form of body politics and racial subjectivity. Unlike Cleonice, however, Marcia's process of personal transformation occurred during the late-1980s. By this time, 1970s-style pro-Black aesthetics had begun to decline in influence. Nonetheless, Marcia drew upon styles and discourses found in the Black-dominated cultural spaces of *pagode* dances.

Cleonice and Marcia represent two different generations, and their narratives demonstrate how the political significance of hair and particular hairstyles are subject to change and contestation. Transformations in the political connotations of particular hairstyles can perhaps best be seen in relationship to the Afro as a style that affirmed Black pride and Black beauty during the 1970s, but decreased in popularity in later years. These changes suggest that, although hair is a permanent part of Afro-Brazilian women's embodied experiences, its significations are shaped by larger political struggles and transformations, within Brazil and across the African Diaspora.

While stating that Black Brazilian women's hair is a direct reflection of their racial or political consciousness would be an oversimplification of the issues involved, the personal narratives examined in this paper indicate that hair is a significant indicator of the extent to which women are *negras assumidas* (assumed or racially conscious Black women). The relationship between hair and consciousness further suggests that Black women's hair is a key site for mapping and reflecting internal struggles and transformations related to race

and gender. As Regina notes in her personal narrative: "I think that there is an internal question. It is not really that idea of 'Black is beautiful.' No, it is not just that, it is not just this kind of hollow issue. But, it is definitely an internal question, of people beginning to assume themselves as people."

NOTES

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1. Eisenstein (1996:21).

2. My view of ant-Blackness is informed by Lewis Gordon's (1997) work.

3. *Catinga* is a popular Brazilian term meaning body odor. In *Negroes in Brazil*, Donald Pierson refers to it as "the body odor, the so-called *catinga*, or *budum*, reputedly characteristic of the African" (1942:175).

4. This is a translation of the song lyrics.

5. No English equivalent exists for the term *banalizaram*. The closest English translation for the verb *banalizar* would be "to banalize."

6. In February 1998 a criminal court judge in Rio de Janeiro absolved Tiririca and two Sony executives of charges of racism. The judge found that the song "Look at her Hair" was not intended to offend Black women. This court decision reversed an earlier court ban prohibiting the sale of Tiririca's record and public performance of the song "Look at her Hair."

7. Angela Gilliam and Onik'a Gilliam's (1999) work argues that hair type matters more than skin color as a marker of race, especially for women.

8. See Angela Gilliam (2001) for an engaging and nuanced analysis of "global stereotypes" of Black women.

9. The song "Nega do cabelo duro" (Black Woman with Hard Hair) is another noteworthy example of images of Black women in Brazilian popular music. The following translation of the lyrics is provided in Darién Davis's (1999:161) work:

Hard-haired black woman
Which comb do you use to comb your hair?
Which comb do you use to comb your hair?

When you enter the circle
Your body moves like a serpent...
Your hair is now fashionable.

Which comb do you use to comb your hair?

Your permanent hair,
Something from a mermaid,
And the people ask
Which comb do you use to comb your hair?

If you use a hot iron
It doesn't go to pieces in the sand,
You go swimming in Botafogo,
Which comb do you use to comb your hair?

10. Amelia Simpson's (1993) work suggests that Xuxa's meteoric rise to stardom was facilitated by three key physical assets: her extremely white skin color, naturally blonde hair, and blue eyes.

11. The notion of "Black aesthetics" used here is quite complicated. Neither Camila Pitanga nor Isabel Filardis has highly Africanized phenotypical features. Both women have light to medium brown complexions and naturally or chemically straightened, wavy hair. Camila Pitanga's mother is white and her father is Antonio Pitanga, a famous Afro-Brazilian actor and politician. However, despite her *mestiça/mulata* (mixed-race/mulata) phenotype, Pitanga self-identifies as *negra* (Black). I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for *Transforming Anthropology* for calling my attention to this.

12. My field work was conducted in 1997. This time period coincided with *Raça Brasil's* first year of publication. *Raça Brasil* [Race Brazil] was launched in November 1996 as the first national magazine for Afro-Brazilians. Several of my interviewees commented on the magazine's potential and shortcomings. Other sections of Regina's narrative mention *Raça Brasil's* importance in creating positive and affirming images of Afro-Brazilians. She alludes to the importance of these images in the excerpt that is presented here.

13. *Bombril* means scouring pad, the equivalent of this term in U.S. English would be an S.O.S. or Brillo pad.

14. Angela Davis's (1994) essay "Afro Images: Politics, Fashion, and Nostalgia" provides a provocative commentary on the use of her image in contemporary fashion and advertising.

15. Burdick (1998:33) discusses Black activists' views of hair straightening.

16. See Ingrid Banks (2000) for an analysis of the politics of Black women's hair in the United States.

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