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"If We Didn't Have Water": Black Women's Struggle for Urban Land Rights in Brazil

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the relation between black women's quest for environmental justice and the struggle for urban land rights. Using ethnographic research conducted in Gamboa de Baixo, a coastal community in the center of Brazil's northeastern city of Salvador, I defend the claim that Afro-Brazilian religious thought has shaped blacks' relationship to the sea, and subsequently community politics defending their right to occupy the land alongside it. More important, we are able to understand black women's leadership in religious communities as intertwined with their central roles in building neighborhoods and fighting for material resources such as water necessary to sustain them.

> *Se não tiver água, se não tiver mata, se não tiver espaço de terra para a gente colocar o pé no chão, na terra, a gente não tem de onde tirar a nossa energia, a nossa força* (If we didn't have water, if we didn't have the bush, if we didn't have land for us to put our feet on the ground, on the earth, we wouldn't have where to get our energy, our life force).
>
> Makota Valdina Pinto[1]

In late December 2004, the tsunamis ravished Southeast Asia and Africa, killing more than 140,000 people. In reading about the rescue and recovery efforts, I was struck by the statement of a Sri Lankan irrigation engineer that, "now people hate the sea, they hate it."[2] Although geographically distant, the devastation made me think differently about how Gulf Coast residents, many of whom have long since relocated from coastal cities such as New Orleans, might have viewed the ocean in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Did they develop what Mike Davis calls, an "ecology of fear" of living on the coast, or, similar to tsunami victims a few months prior, a *hatred* of the sea?[3]

These questions about the relationship to coastal landscapes provide a global framing for understanding the Brazilian fishing community and its female-led, grassroots movement against land expulsion that have been the focus of my anthropological work since 1999. Conducting research in Gamboa de Baixo, on the coast of the Bay of All Saints in the city-center of Salvador, Bahia, has challenged me to delve into the way I think about African descendants' simultaneous indictment and celebration of the sea that extends back to slavery. I am reminded of the testimony of abduction by an enslaved African woman, Mrs. Brooks, who recounted to missionaries in nineteenth-century Jamaica: "I was playing by the sea-coast, when a white man offered me sugar-plums, and told me to go with him. I went with him, first into a boat, and then to the ship. Everything seemed strange to me, and I asked him to let me go back, but he would not hear me; and when I went to look for the place where he found me, I could see nothing of land, and I began to cry. There I was for a long time, with a great many more of my own colour, till the ship came to Kingston."[4]

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[1]Makota Valdina Pinto is a black woman environmental rights activist and community and Candomblé religious leader in Salvador, Bahia. This excerpt is from an interview conducted by Afro-Brazilian historian and director of the Palmares Foundation Ubiratan Castro in 1999, published in *Revista Palmares*, vol. 2, (Brasília: Fundação Palmares), 82.

[2]Amy Waldman and David Rohde, "Fearing a Sea That Once Sustained, Then Killed," *New York Times*, January 5, 2005.

[3]Mike Davis. *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster*. (New York: Vintage, 1998).

[4]Cited in Dianne M. Stewart. *Three Eyes for the Journey: African Dimensions of the Jamaican Religious Experience*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 15.

For black people in Brazil, the sea evokes similar memories of the journey and terror of the transatlantic slave trade but also represents a continuous geographic link to Africa that allows them to imagine a psychic return to "full freedom."[5] What drives the Gamboa de Baixo struggle for land rights during recent threats of mass eviction and forced displacement as a result of urban revitalization programs, or what neighborhood activists have termed a "wave of black clearance," is partly their love for and spiritual connection to the sea that is the backyard of their urban neighborhood. That collective memory of the blood in the waters between Africa and the Americas has not caused diaspora Africans to hate the sea inspires me whenever I think of the Bahian political context. In this article, I discuss the profound ways in which the sea in African religious traditions shapes everyday black culture and environmental politics in Gamboa de Baixo and in black neighborhoods throughout Salvador.

This privileging of the spiritual in understanding the intricate relationship between black diaspora culture and grassroots politics represents a key aspect of the broader issues with which I grapple in my interdisciplinary research on black women as cultural producers and political agents in Brazil. Following in the diaspora feminist footsteps of American-American Brazilianist scholars such as historians Kim Butler and Rachel Harding, I highlight how black women in poor urban neighborhoods in Salvador carve out geographic, social, and political spaces for themselves while expanding notions of cultural belonging and citizenship rights at the levels of the city, the nation, and the diaspora.[6] It is significant that we see black women's central role in urban social movements as part of a larger diaspora pattern of black women's oppositional politics vested in property rights for both cultural and material gain.

DISCUSSION

"If we didn't have water . . . "

To begin to comprehend this inseparable connection between black women's religious culture and politics, the words of the late Brazilian literary scholar of Bahian culture, Jorge Amado come to mind: "The ocean is large, the sea is a road without end, waters make up more than half the world, they are three-quarters of it, and all that belongs to Iemanjá." In the African diasporic religion of *candomblé*, practiced by the vast majority of Bahians, Iemanjá is the highly revered *orixá* (goddess) of the sea commonly known as the mother of the waters (*a mãe das águas*). Each year in Salvador, February 2 marks one of the most important days of celebration in *candomblé*, the Festa de Iemanjá, which takes place in the Rio Vermelho coastal neighborhood. With more resources today, particularly government sponsorship, the festival has been transformed from a community practice into a massive cultural project of local interest, as well as national and international tourism. However, the dominant ceremonial presence of black fishermen and *candomblé* religious leaders (most of whom are women) reminds us that, although Rio Vermelho is now a predominantly white, elite neighborhood, black fishing colonies have historically occupied the coastal lands of Salvador and have carried out these traditions since the slavery period. Gamboa de Baixo is now one of the few black urban fishing colonies that exists on the Bahian coast, and the Iemanjá festival still occurs simultaneously within the neighborhood on a much smaller scale. Like in most fishing communities, local residents pay homage to the goddess of the sea for protecting the fishermen and fisherwomen while they work, and for supplying the sea with sufficient fish, an important natural resource that sustains the local economy and African-inspired culinary traditions. More important, Gamboa de Baixo residents express their gratitude to Iemanjá, who protects their children while they play on the neighborhood's beaches.

Approximately one week after the February 2 festivals, another Iemanjá festival is carried out in Gamboa de Baixo. Preta, a longtime activist and neighborhood association board member, organizes an offering of gifts to the *orixá* Iemanjá, a personalized celebration that has become a local custom. She receives relatives and friends from all over the city and state, as well as her *candomblé* family from Itaparica Island, located in the bay and visible from Gamboa de Baixo. The neighborhood association has been active in preparing Preta's offering each year, from raising funds to creating traditional gifts, many of which are biodegradable after much discussion within the organization about the harmful environmental effects of plastic presents such as dolls and perfumes. When I asked Preta why she joined the community struggle, she first explained that living in proximity to the resources of the city-center, such as schools and hospitals, was very important. Then she explained, chuckling, that few places in the city exist where she can have access to her own beach to carry out her yearly religious obligations to Iemanjá and celebrate with her neighbors. For this right to own and live on these coveted coastal lands, she will continue to fight.

According to black Brazilian feminist scholar and activist Jurema Werneck, female *orixás* have long been a source of black women's political power evident in present-day grassroots movements. From within African religious communities comes a collective imagining of Africa "that is as real as it is translated through the patterns of organization and political organization" in which women's leadership is recognized as crucial for spiritual and material transformation.[7] Rachel Harding has similarly argued that *candomblé* has served as "a collectivizing force through which subjugated peoples," and I

[5]Kim D. Butler. *Freedoms Given, Freedoms Won: Afro-Brazilians in Post-Abolition São Paulo and Salvador* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998).

[6]Kim D. Butler, *Freedoms Given, Freedoms Won*; Rachel E. Harding. *A Refuge in Thunder: Candomblé and Alternative Spaces of Blackness*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003).

[7]Jurema Werneck. "Of Ialodês and Feminists: Reflections on Black Women's Political Action in Latin America and the Caribbean," *Cultural Dynamics* 19 (2007): 103.

would emphasize black women, "organized an alternative meaning of their lives and identities that countered the disaggregation and the imposed subalterity to which they were subjected by the dominant social structure."[8]

From this perspective, local activists assert that not only should the Iemanjá festivals in Gamboa de Baixo be understood within the context of African religious traditions and their reverence for the sea, but also as an aspect of black women's deliberate actions of staking claim to urban land on the Bahian coast. In *terreiros* (*candomblé* houses) throughout the city, not only have black women inherited African religious practices, but they have also inherited the rights to the land on which they practice these traditions. Historically, to speak of these *terreiros* has meant to speak of black women's land. Thus, black women have been uniquely positioned in these communities as having both collective memory and legal documentation of ancestral lands. This memory extends beyond the Bay of All Saints to the practice of women as landowners in Africa, where they served as the primary mediators of family relations within their communities, influencing the distribution of important resources such as land. Signifying more than just the physical space where families live, work, and forge political networks, urban land in contemporary Brazil represents the ability for black women to pass spiritual and material resources from one generation to the next. Land has become one of the greatest social and cultural assets for black people, and particularly for women, who are the most economically marginalized. In essence, the neighborhood fight for land rights has been able to integrate their political demands to legalize collective property rights with demands to preserve the material and the cultural resources the sea provides.

"If we didn't have land . . . "

I am deliberate about not detailing *candomblé* practices nor its specific African-derived cosmologies and mythologies. Rather, the ethnographic examples of the Iemanjá festivals are intended to bring attention to the political formation of a black urban neighborhood located on the geographic and socioeconomic margins of a Brazilian city. The *candomblés* as sociopolitical spaces are understudied, but the political actions of black women in grassroots struggles bridge the relationship between black struggles for self-definition and the freedom of African cultural expression and social movements that make territorial claims to urban space. The case of Gamboa de Baixo supports my theoretical claim that African religious traditions are indissociable from black women's political actions in the local, national, and global black struggle for material resources such as land, employment, and education. As black Canadian feminist M. Jacqui Alexander asserts, "Ultimately, excising the spiritual from the political builds the ground at the intersection of two kinds of alienation: the one an alienation from the self; the other, which is inevitable, alienation from each other."[9] In other words, black women's religious matters are political matters, and black women's collective resistance against the violence of land evictions and displacement are deeply connected to what womanist theologian Dianne M. Stewart also terms the "the liberation motif" of African-centered traditions in black diasporic communities.[10] This emphasis shows that black women in Brazil and throughout the black diaspora are cultural producers as well as political agents in their own right with their own African-inspired sensibilities of gendered racial liberation and social transformation in Brazilian cities. Spirituality, I reaffirm, must acquire a privileged space in the broader understanding of how black women have responded to the barbarous reality of class-based and gendered racism in Brazil and throughout the black diaspora.

Scholars of black social movements have emphasized the importance of culture in antiracism and anticolonialism politics. Similar to the aforementioned ideas by Werneck and Harding, Kim Butler argues that adaptations of *candomblé* have been "rooted in the conscious choice of Afro-Brazilians to use African culture as a mode of support and survival in modern Brazilian society."[11] The ethnographic focus on the political mobilization of black urban communities contextualizes black cultural practices within the ongoing processes of gendered racial and economic oppression that mark the black Brazilian experience. The black majority in Bahia and the predominance of African religious traditions does not obscure the lack of black women in positions of political and economic power, such as holding public office, executive positions in financial institutions, or even as store clerks in shopping malls. In many respects, the black population, particularly black women, carry the burden of centuries of enslavement and social marginalization. A legacy of the slave economy, 95 percent of domestic workers are black women who in their majority are underpaid and continue to live in poverty. Serving as spiritual spaces of racial and gender solidarity, the female-centered *terreiros* have been crucial to the maintenance of an African cultural identity and black community formation in the city of Salvador.

From this perspective, we cannot ignore that, historically, the main protagonists, such as Makota Valdina Pinto in Salvador, in antiracist environmental justice movements in Brazilian cities have been black women leaders (in their majority) of *candomblé* communities. Pinto, since her youth, has been a neighborhood activist and one of the city's most outspoken voices against environmental racism, linking the increased lack of public access to unpolluted lands and natural water sources to the widespread neglect of black urban communities. Pinto's actions echo Jomo Kenyatta and other diaspora scholar activists who argue that water and land are two of the greatest natural resources for black people socially, economically, and spiritually, and in Afro-Brazilian com-

[8]Rachel E. Harding, *A Refuge in Thunder: Candomblé and Alternative Spaces of Blackness*, 1.

[9]M. Jacqui Alexander. *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 326.

[10]Dianne M. Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey*.

[11]Kim D. Butler, *Freedoms Given, Freedoms Won*, 195.

munities, gaining access to these resources or protecting them from privatization and destruction has been an ongoing focus of community-based activism. Black women environmentalists in Salvador have also focused heavily on the urgent need for environmental reform while also fighting for the eradication of the violent religious intolerance many Afro-Brazilian religious communities suffer. Violence against these communities has targeted the built environments of the *terreiros*, such as the defacement of the metal gates of the historic Casa Branca terreiro located in Ogunja and the encroachment on the lands of the Terreiro do Cobre in Federação. The state demolition of the Terreiro Oyá Onipó Neto (Imbuí) in March 2008 further illustrates the gendered implications of these violent attacks on black women's lands, and their organic leadership in combating such violence locally.

The leadership of black women in environmental justice movements should also be understood within the larger context of emerging neighborhood movements. Recently, I attended a housing rights forum during which Gamboa de Baixo activist and *candomblé* practitioner Ana Cristina boldly asked the audience, which included activists from other *bairros populares* and urban planning experts: "What kind of city do we live in that prepares architects and engineers to demolish homes and expel local populations in order to implement their urban development projects?" (Her public denouncement of destructive development policies would be later echoed in the cries of injustice in the aftermath of the demolition of the Terreiro Oyá Onipó Neto, which community activists fought to be rebuilt). She firmly asserted that "*a terra é do povo* [land belongs to the people]!" The affirmation of collective land ownership alludes to a serious question of why the *povo*, or the masses of blacks who occupy Salvador's poorest neighborhoods, have no legal right to own the land they have lived on and cultivated for generations. In the broadest sense, what does it mean for the likes of Ana Cristina—black women who occupy the racial, gender, and socio-spatial margins of the city—to make claims to it and work for its collective improvement? These questions force us to examine black women activists in Salvador, located at the center of political opposition to the racial social order, to include critiquing pedagogies and practices that integrate ideologies of exclusion into processes of urban planning and land distribution.

Within a city "structured in dominance," to borrow from Stuart Hall's formulation of the necessary relationship between racial domination and economic and political processes, black women carve out a geographic, social, and political space for themselves while expanding definitions of rights, citizenship, and national belonging.[12] Securing their citizenship rights to adequate water and sanitation also constitutes a necessary aspect of guaranteeing their permanence on the disputed coastal lands of the Bay of All Saints. In this sense, the political experiences of Gamboa de Baixo highlight the emergence of black women's militancy at the community-level in struggles to improve the environmental and habitat conditions of Salvador's black neighborhoods. After the outbreak of cholera in Bahia in 1992, which caused several deaths in Gamboa de Baixo, the women organized themselves and founded the Associação Amigos de Gegê dos Moradores da Gamboa de Baixo. They led Gamboa residents to radio stations to bring attention to the cholera outbreak and the contamination of their tap water. They demanded that the state test the natural water sources and the public water pipes in the neighborhood. Testing proved that the victims of cholera had died from contaminated water provided by the city and not from the neighborhood's natural water fountains. After these actions, the community received some social service interventions such as the construction of the *chafariz*, a central water fountain in the area. As founding leader of the neighborhood association, Boa Morte, recounted about this period:

> I was the first person to go to the radio stations. When I arrived home, EMBASA [the State water company] was already there investigating how to install the water fountain. What strengthened our movement more, was the death of Mr. Geraldo [known as Gêgê], the father of Lueci [ex-community leader]; in other words, I become mobilized at that time because families that I knew, mother and father, everybody young . . . I was at home when I found out that he went to the hospital with symptoms of cholera and other residents had gone already. Another boy had died, so I thought that it was time for me to get moving. I called two other women, Tônia and Mel, and we went to the radio. Afterwards, other women began to arrive, Tinda, Solange, Hilda, and later Lueci. We took action and began to put water [in Gamboa]. It's from then on that the movement began to organize Gamboa, because before that, Gamboa was in a stand still, just being marginalized (my translation).[13]

Pioneer activist Dona Lenilda and Sr. Geraldo's widow also remembers that, "What led me to participate in the movement was that I wanted a better life for my family, for my children. We had just seen their father die, and other people, right? So, we wanted a more dignified life, with potable water, toilets so as not throw our feces just anywhere. That's why the disease [cholera] surfaced here, and that was what led me to the movement. If we are go-

[12]Stuart Hall. "Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance," in *Sociological Theories: Race and Colonialism*. (Paris: UNESCO, 1980).

[13]My translation of the original quote in Portuguese: *Eu fui a primeira pessoa que foi para a rádio. Quando cheguei em casa, já estava EMBASA pesquisando colocar um chafariz. O que fortaleceu mais a luta foi a morte de Sr. Geraldo [conhecido como Gegê], o pai de Lueci [ex-líder comunitário], quer dizer, que eu fiquei mobilizada nesta hora porque famílias que eu conhecia, pai e mãe, todo mundo pequeno. Eu estava em casa quando soube que ele foi para hospital com principio de cólera e já tinha ido outros moradores. Já tinha falecido outro rapaz, então eu achei que estava na hora de me movimentar. Chamei duas mulheres, Tônia e Mel, e fomos para a rádio. Depois chegou outras mulheres, Tinda, Solange, Hilda, depois Lueci. A gente tomou providencia e começaram a botar água [na Gamboa]. Aí, foi de lá para acá que começou a luta para organizar a Gamboa, porque antes disso a Gamboa estava parada, sendo só marginalizada.*

ing to live in a place, we should treat it properly" (my translation).[14]

As Afro-Canadian geographer Katherine McKittrick frames it, "black matters are spatial matters."[15] In addition to making demands from the state for clean water and basic sanitation, local activists have found ways to treat their environment properly, to include scuba diving to remove garbage from the ocean and using biodegradable materials in *candomblé* ceremonies. Environmental reform and the building of sanitized spaces matter to poor people as much as it matters to the state to create sanitized, hygienic, modern cities, but black neighborhoods desire clean urban spaces that include them, rather than exclude them. Thus, environmental reform also should be viewed as intertwined with the struggle for the legalization of black urban lands, recognizing that property rights continue to be a crucial aspect of black claims to Brazilian citizenship. Furthermore, black women's political leadership in issues of land and sanitation in Salvador's *bairros populares* is an important field of understanding everyday grassroots actions of the black movement. Hence, as McKittrick suggests, black urban spaces are racialized gendered "terrains of domination," where black women's politics are deeply connected to resistance against "geographic domination" as practiced in environmental neglect, land evictions and displacement in Brazilian cities.[16]

CONCLUSIONS

"We wouldn't have where to get our energy . . . "

In my analysis of the political organization of Gamboa de Baixo around the urgent issue of rights to urban land, I have recognized that the sea, specifically its relationship to African cosmologies, yields an indispensable source of spiritual, material, and political nourishment in the lives of black women in Bahia. Many in the *candomblé* community have expressed their discontent with anthropological representations of African spirituality that fail to examine the role that antiblack racism and sexism play in the continuity of *candomblés* in Bahia and the institutionalization of black women's leadership in grassroots social movements. In this vein, I confront ethnographic paradigms that reduce black subjectivity in Bahia to a singular African religious essence. This approach to black Bahians' production of cultural knowledge is particularly salient when researching the lives of black women who are rarely considered cultural producers outside the realm of *candomblé*. Thus, my aim has been to theorize within the "liberation motif" of African diasporic religious traditions, which has given impetus to the political work of poor black women in Salvador's poorest neighborhoods. The women of the Gamboa de Baixo neighborhood association illustrate that black political movements imbricate the spiritual with the political.[17] In fact, I draw on the insights of the Iemanjá festivals as a way to examine how black women play vital roles in preserving African traditions while creating social networks and politicizing urban communities located on the Bahian coast. The nature of black women's agency in neighborhood-based social movements for land rights in Brazil is interconnected with black women's agency in Bahian *candomblé*. In Gamboa de Baixo, these cultural and political identities merge in the struggle over space, and in particular, the use and control of coastal lands and the sea.

It is not by accident that clean water continues to be a key political demand for neighborhood activists, and that black women lead this fight. As Makota Valdina Pinto suggests in the opening quote, land rights must be considered within the broader quest for water and an overall healthy, clean, urban environment. Politicizing the need for water has been integral to the Gamboa de Baixo's ongoing fight for urban land rights and neighborhood improvement amid state threats of land expulsion. Water, specifically the waters of the Bay of All Saints, has been a spiritual source of black women's political empowerment in Gamboa. Water has been at the center of Gamboa de Baixo's political organizing around issues of land and housing reform since its inception. Poor black women have been key to engendering and racializing political discussions around natural resources, and for broadening black collective claims to citizenship in dignified living conditions. As black feminist anthropologist Faye Harrison reminds us, "racism is an enduring social problem with serious implications for social and economic justice, political conflict, and struggles for *human dignity*" (my emphasis).[18] In Brazil and throughout the diaspora, black women's antiracism activism (as is also evident in post-Katrina New Orleans) is deeply rooted in the politics of the built environment, specifically how to use, protect, restore, and *own* spaces and places.

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[14]My translation from original in Portuguese: *O que me levou a participar do movimento, eu queria uma vida melhor para minha família, para meus filhos. A gente já tinha visto o pai ir embora [morrer], e mais gente, não é? Então, eu queria uma vida digna, com água encanada, sanitário para não fazer fezes e jogar a toa. Porque foi por isso que surgiu esta doença aqui, e o que foi me levou ao movimento. Se a gente vai morar num lugar, temos que tratar dele.*

[15]Katherine McKittrick. *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xiv.

[16]Ibid.

[17]M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 323.

[18]Faye Harrison. *Resisting Racism and Xenophobia: Global Perspectives on Race, Gender, and Human Rights*. (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2005), 9.