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# Geographies of Power: Black Women Mobilizing Intersectionality in Brazil

## Abstract

*In Brazil and throughout the African diaspora, rarely are black women, especially poor black women, considered leaders of social movements, much less political theorists. While Afro-Brazilian women are at the very heart of the struggle for urban housing and land rights in Salvador, the prevailing image of black women, particularly those who live in poor neighborhoods, is that they lack the knowledge and political sophistication needed to organize mass social movements. This article seeks to undermine this image by exploring how black women have come to radicalize local communities. It also explores why they are the main political actors interpreting the racial, gender, and class dynamics of urban development policies and fighting to reform projects of socio-spatial inclusion in cities. Bridging the scholarly gap between black feminist theorization and the grassroots practice of intersectionality, I argue that black women who organize as blacks, women, and poor people provide key insights into how intersectionality is mobilized for social and poltical change. Furthemore, the ethnographic focus on black women's activism illustrates the ways in which grassroots politics have advanced our understanding of intersectional identity formation in relationship to the material interests of the marginalized communities in Brazil.*

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# Introduction: Rethinking the Legibility of Black Women's Politics

> The neighborhood association and the struggle taught us a lot. It taught us that that the struggle for housing is not just to block the street and say that we want houses. It taught us that the struggle for housing is to say that we want houses, we want employment, we want education, we want women's rights.
>
> —Ana Cristina da Silva Caminha, personal interview, 2007

> In this brief retrospective look at three movements, one can observe see the diverse nature of the difficulties when the focus is on the three main dimensions of Brazilian society: gender, class, and race. In the racial dimension, urban movements like feminist movements demonstrate the theoretical and practical issues in confronting it. And in black movements, there are difficulties in dealing with the question of gender and of neighborhood [*bairro*], just as in the unions and the political parties.
>
> —Antonia dos Santos Garcia 2006, p. 156, my translation

The front page of the Brazilian newspaper *A Tarde* on May 3, 2003, showed a photo of 53-year-old Amilton dos Santos sitting on top of a yellow bulldozer. His left hand covered his face, which was further hidden by a blue Firestone baseball cap that matched his uniform, and Senhor Amilton was crying. The headline read, "*Um Homem*" (One Man), and the accompanying caption described the dramatic scene as follows: "The screams of revolt and pain were stronger than the 20 policemen armed even with rifles" (*A Tarde* May 3, 2003).

The day before, in Palestina, a predominantly poor black neighborhood located on the periphery of Brazil's northeastern city of Salvador in the state of Bahia, six police cars carrying more than 20 fully armed military policemen, some with machine guns and rifles, stopped in front of the two adjoining homes of Telma Sueli dos Santos Sena and Ana Célia Gomes Conceição. Accompanying a bulldozer and a moving truck, the military police had arrived in Palestina to carry out orders to remove the residents and their belongings from their homes, demolish the houses, and clear the land where Dona Telma lived with her husband, seven



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children, two grandchildren, and a daughter-in-law. Ana Célia lived with her husband, Edmilson Neves (Dona Telma's brother-in-law); daughter; mother-in-law; and brother. The two families were home when the police and demolition squad arrived, and their neighbors immediately reacted with alarm.

Upon seeing the families inside the houses, the three men who were in charge of moving the residents refused to follow through with the job. The police told the movers that if they did not carry out their duties, they would be arrested. The men then reluctantly worked to load the families' belongings into the truck parked in front of the houses, where a crowd of neighborhood residents, primarily women, had begun to gather and vocalize their indignation. Dona Telma cried uncontrollably as she pleaded with the police and the driver of the bulldozer.

Dona Antônia, Telma's aunt, showed the police officers legal documents certifying that the land had passed from the deceased original owner to Telma's grandmother almost two decades earlier. According to the family, they had always lived on the land. After Dona Telma's grandmother died, the land was bequeathed to her children and grandchildren. Before Dona Telma built her house on the property, the land was undeveloped and other families occupied adjacent plots, where they built their houses and raised their children. Recently, however, a Bahian engineer, Adolfo Stelmach, had claimed ownership of the land, saying that he had inherited it. With the support of the courts, he ordered the families to buy the land from him or vacate immediately. Even with documents supporting Dona Telma's claims to ownership, the two families lost all legal battles to secure the land.

An employee of the demolition company for more than a decade, Senhor Amilton was there to do his job. Visibly distraught, he remained motionless in his bulldozer as tears trickled down his face. He appeared to be sick, as if about to faint. The police repeated that he needed to carry out the orders to demolish the houses. He mumbled that he suffered from high blood pressure and had a bad heart. "I can't do this. I am a family man and I have nine children," he said, refusing to climb down from the bulldozer to be arrested (*A Tarde* May 3, 2003). The police surrounded him and continued to threaten him. Shaking, he whispered that he was sick and wanted to be taken to a local health center. Applauded by those at the scene, Senhor Amilton later became known as a hero for standing up to the military police

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and refusing to carry out the order to demolish the home, even though he faced the threat of being fired as well as incarcerated.
The two homes and land were safe, at least for the moment.

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I watched the story of Dona Telma unfold on live TV while I was carrying out field research in Salvador for my book, *Black Women against the Land Grab: The Fight for Racial Justice in Brazil* (2013). I document the conflict in greater detail in the book to discuss the agony and violence at the heart of the routine struggle for land rights in black neighborhoods throughout the city of Salvador. I challenged us all to challenge the gendered racial assumptions about the supposed spontaneity of the movement and the suggestion that the real political agent was a single black man, rather than a community already engaged in a vibrant struggle against land evictions. In this article, I return to the story more than a decade later, because recent attempts to revive the story still depict Senhor Amilton as an individual man of conscience separate from the communty where he resisted, ignore the systemic nature of militarized attack on poor black communities that include violent evictions, and disregard the intersections of oppressions that galvanized Dona Telma to fight for land rights and the preservation of her community. In fact, little attention has been given to the simultaneity of regimes of gendered racial and class power and collective resistance that routinely take place in Palestina and the surrounding neighborhoods (Garcia 2006). As in the opening quote from Antonia dos Santos Garcia's book *Mulheres da Cidade d'Oxum* (Women in the City of Oxum) (2006), the question of "*o bairro*," or the neighborhood, escapes the purview of how we understand class-based anti-racism taking place.

Moreover, Dona Telma continues to fight alongside her neighbors in Palestina and various other neighborhoods under seige for individual and collective land titles. Their activism provides the ethnographic backstory for the popular street protests in Brazil in June 2013 that drove more than a million to the streets in major cities from Recife to Rio de Janeiro (Caldeira 2015; Cornell and Grimes 2015; Vargas 2014). In Salvador, the street protests that sparked in solidarity featured an overwhelming representation of neighborhood activists who had long been fighting for accessible public transportation to their peripheral neighborhoods, where they have

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already been mobilizing for land, housing, and human rights and against police brutality and death. Economic marginalization as symbolized in the increase in bus fares is seen as interlocking with racial questions of poor public education and health, underemployment and under-compensation, and the routinization of militarized violence. In the city of Salvador, which is 80 percent black, the people who ride the bus every day from the distant periphery (in part, the consequence of forced removals from the urban center) to school, work, and hospitals are poor black men and women.

Over the past decade, I have focused my research on how, as a result of the forced demolition of urban neighborhoods and displacement of residents, urban spaces are terrains of constant struggle for blacks, women, and poor people in Brazil. Lacking the legal and financial means to counter urban redevelopment, residents of poor black neighborhoods have mounted a significant grassroots resistance against the threat of losing their land and homes. Citywide organizations such as the Articulação de Comunidades em Luta Por Moradia (Voices for Communities Fighting for Housing Rights) in Salvador, a collective of neighborhood organizations, document state-supported actions like unequal urbanization practices, land evictions, and forced displacement. They attempt to engage local politicians and representatives of nongovernmental organizations in a dialogue with poor black communities struggling for adequate housing and land ownership. They work to counter representations of black urban residents as "squatters" or "invaders" who occupy the city's social and geographic periphery without any rights to ownership (Caldeira 2014; Gay 1993; Holston 2008; Perlman 2007). Neighborhoods such as Gamboa de Baixo, a coastal fishing colony located in the city center of Salvador, have begun conversations with the Bahian municipal government about the legalization of collective land ownership after more than two decades of struggle. When all else fails, community organizations led by black women continue to develop strategies for resisting demolition when the bulldozers arrive.

Mass street protests communicating political demands for improved and accessible infrastructural resources have been a constant in Brazilian cities. Weeks after Dona Telma stood up to the demolition and military police squads in 2003, several cities, including Salvador, came to a halt when thousands of students protested increases in transit fares. For three weeks in August 2003, blacks occupying the streets in the city center represented

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their political interests, including claiming the right to the city and refusing to be pushed further and further away from basic material resources. Keeping blacks "in their place," in the *bairro*, by limiting movement in the city center, whose revitalization is aimed at maintaining and attracting the white elite, appears to be a class war against the poor. Yet, as activists and government officials have agreed, "poverty has a face in Brazil, and that face is black," (Winters 2014) and black feminists have rightfully identified that on the further margins of the existing racial and class margins, living in the *bairro* in their majority as heads of households, are black women. According to the documents of the Free Pass Movement, there have been protests on smaller scales taking place every year, led by thousands of Brazilian young people, students, and workers (typically poor black people).

What these various kinds of political mobilization teach us is that there exists a historical continuity that requires analytic attention. Furthermore, while there tends to be a proliferation of visual representations of recent protests as discontent and critique coming from a white and middle-class segment of the population—which is the primary reason the public only really knows about the 2013 events—I caution us to think more critically about how a continued focus on these kinds of social movements erases the activism of blacks, women, and poor people. Drawing from João Costa Vargas's (2014) essay on the apparent "black disidentification" with these street protesters and "the absence of Black people participating as Blacks" (3), I suggest that we must begin to examine more closely the political spaces in cities where blacks and poor people are engaged in a long struggle for structural equality and citizenship rights. How does reading events like the 2013 protests (in which there is an overwhelming presence of white middle-class activists) as exceptional moments in Brazilian political history, rather than just one dimension of a longer and broader social movement for the redistribution of basic resources such as transportation, health care, and land, contribute to the erasure of black mass activism that is always taking place? Vargas writes that "protesters become legible precisely because the Black protester, qua Black, is not. Non-Black protesters incite empathy in ways Black bodies, impacted by the contemporary effects of the afterlife of slavery, are intrinsically unable to produce (i.e., Hartman 1997)" (Vargas 2014, 8). If it is now widely understood in Brazil that social and economic inequality (such as high bus fares incommensurate with low



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salaries) is deeply structured by race and gender, it is the result of centuries of ideological and political work by the marginalized black masses. From the perspective of black activists, the political outrage against structures of social and economic inequality expressed by a white middle class is usually absent when articulated by the black masses. In other words, not only is there little attention given to the political spaces of black mobilization, but there is also little political empathy when black activists critique the state by articulating how race and gender shape their class experiences with poverty.

Scholars of feminist and black movements, and social movements in general, still need to pay attention to neighborhood activism throughout Brazilian cities, which is where the everyday political work of poor black women with limited schooling is done. Black women occupy the geographic periphery while steadily leading the political center of grassroots politics in Salvador, and yet they are still considered to be unlikely leaders of mass social movements. Foregrounding the political identity of black women in city politics illustrates the ways in which grassroots organizations have advanced the racial, gender, and class interests of entire black communities. My assertion is that scholars of black politics must include in their analyses social movements that have significant participation by women and blacks, but that appear at first glance to be struggles solely over class issues (e.g., bus fares, food, and public health access). Moreover, critiques of and activism against racialized state violence cannot be divorced from the gender and class dynamics of living in and moving to and from poor neighborhoods; in essence, questions of spatial exclusion that define the *bairro* illustrate the intersectionality of oppression in Brazilian cities. Without analytical attention to neighborhoods and grassroots social movements, black women's activism will not be legible as operating within the realm of black movement politics, nor will feminist and class struggles be read as white, middle class, and elite.

This article is motivated by the key ethnographic question that drives my ongoing research project on black women's anti-racism activism in Brazilian cities: Why is it mainly black women who are interpreting the racial, gender, and class dynamics of urban-development policies, and how have they radicalized local communities? Political meetings in neighborhoods such as Gamboa de Baixo in Salvador have become

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known as "*uma coisinha de mulher*," a woman's thing. This article narrates black women's neighborhood activism within the context of a citywide housing and land rights movement today, focusing on the uniqueness of women's political mobilization and the leadership roles they have always occupied in the Gamboa de Baixo neighborhood. This is part of my broader preoccupation with the place of the *bairro*, particularly the spatial location of poor black neighborhoods, in the formation of gendered anti-black racism politics. I argue that black women who organize as blacks, women, poor people, and residents of coveted coastal lands provide key insights on precisely how intersectionality is mobilized for social change and against forced displacement. More importantly, a close look at grassroots activism reveals an important aspect of Afro-Brazilian women's contribution to the development of intersectional theory in feminist and diasporic theories.

## The *Bairro*: An Intersectional Approach to Grassroots Political Activism

This theoretical focus on intersectional politics that center the neighborhood as the space where class enmeshes with race and gender politics is inspired by my reading of both U.S. and Brazilian black feminist thinkers (Bairros 1994; Carneiro 2000; Crenshaw 1993; Davies 2008; Santos and Carneiro 1985; Santos 2008). Much of this scholarship has focused on what Claudia Jones (2011) and Lélia Gonzalez (1984) understood as the super-exploitation of black women that produced a particular kind of militancy under-utilized in leftist struggles aimed at materialist aims. Gonzalez wrote that, as poor black workers undercompensated in the neo-slavery realm of domestic work in Brazil, black women comprise the super-exploited segment. The super-exploitation they experience as a result of their interlocking experiences with racism, sexism, and classism mobilized them in global movements for the liberation of workers, but also in neighborhood and other localized grassroots struggles targeting racialized and gendered concerns such as schooling, reproductive rights, and public health (Caldwell 2010; McDuffie 2011; Santos 2012).

In Brazil, there is a lack of awareness of the existence and importance of neighborhood political organizations that have emerged alongside



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formal social-movement organizations and the intersectional thinking and praxis that undergirds their approach to social transformation (Garcia et al. 2014). Activism by these neighborhood organizations is made to appear spontaneous by the media, as if arising in response to a single incident without much thought or planning. But in fact, these events are part of a broad movement of organized resistance that follows intense meetings about the racial, gender, and class nature of the violence taking place. Young people tend to also be integral members of neighborhood organizations, many of whom have also participated in black movement projects such as the Steve Biko Cultural Institute and CEAFRO, both focused on educational attainment and infused with courses on racial and gender consciousness. These students become "*multiplicadores*," or multipliers of political knowledge in the peripheral poor black neighborhoods where they live. This political labor at the neighborhood level is central to the mass mobilization of black people against institutional racism and for citizenship rights and resources in Brazil. Organized community movements for land rights are an important facet of the historical struggle for social and territorial belonging as black citizens in Brazil.

Another salient aspect of neighborhood activist organizations is that they are frequently led by black women. And yet the important role of women as activist leaders generally goes unacknowledged in the media, while the light is shined on male actors. Many can still remember exactly where they were almost a decade ago when the emotional scene in Palestina unfolded on live television and was repeated on the local and national news for several days afterward. They watched through the glass windows of electronics stores, from the stoops of their neighbors' houses, or from the living rooms of their employers as they cleaned. They watched Senhor Amilton step down from the bulldozer and collectively sighed in relief that he had done the right thing.

The media focus on Senhor Amilton's decision to spare the houses, which was admittedly an act of good conscience that merited public recognition, speaks to the general invisibility of the poor black women and families who work arduously to mobilize urban communities in defiance of the demolition of homes and usurpation of land. More than a decade later, in popular memory the incident remains a story about Senhor Amilton, not about the courageous homeowner who defied the police, Dona Telma.

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This invisibility reflects a general lack of knowledge about the lives of black women in Brazil, the brutality of their experiences with systems of oppression, and their painful political trajectories. Although black women are at the heart of the struggle for urban housing and land rights in Salvador, they are virtually ignored. From the news media, the public learned of the courage of *one man* in the Palestina incident, a notoriety that led to national and international invitations to Senhor Amilton to give lectures and massive support for a political post for him in the municipal government. Yet very little was heard and little is still known about Dona Telma, her neighbors in Palestina, and the numerous other poor black families and peripheral neighborhoods facing similar land disputes.

I met Dona Telma in Salvador during a forum on housing and land rights organized by the Articulação de Comunidades em Luta Por Moradia a few months after the government's attempt to forcibly evict her family. The forum was attended by community leaders from geographically dispersed neighborhoods. Politicians and officials were invited to attend to hear the residents' experiences and speak with them. At the forum, black community activists from around Salvador, the majority of them women, expressed their solidarity with Dona Telma and the Palestina neighborhood. They agreed that there was a need to highlight black women's central political role in urban communities. I had been documenting the black women-led Gamboa de Baixo neighborhood organization and its participation in a citywide movement for housing and land rights since 1998. Like these activists, I was intrigued by the story of one woman who represented the collective experience of black Brazilian women's violent reality, as well as their long history of resistance.

When Dona Telma delivered her speech at the forum, the struggle to keep her home and land had not yet been resolved, and she urgently called for collective action across the city to support her legal claims, as well as those of families unable to formally legalize their land. She described the ongoing fight against displacement and the anger and anguish she felt as a target of the structural violence that black women endure in their efforts to claim rights to land throughout Brazil. She related a brief history of the Palestina neighborhood, aptly named to symbolize the connection between black urban settlements in Salvador that are fighting for territorial rights and the settlements of Palestinians in the Levant.



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Dona Telma recounted that on the day of the scheduled demolition of her home, she had used peaceful tactics to organize family members and neighbors to defend her. The decision to gather her family, including elderly relatives and children, inside her home was a strategic technique used by neighborhood activists throughout the city. Media coverage of the event had told the public little of her ongoing conflict with the wealthy white businessmen who claimed to own her land, which had begun several years before the military police and demolition squad appeared on her doorstep. The political organization of her neighborhood was presented as a spontaneous incident, when, in fact, the female-led grassroots movement had long been preparing for just such a violent confrontation.

While journalists focused on one man and one moment in the bulldozer driver's bold decision to stop the demolition, not much was said of this calculated, female-led strategic resistance and the politically savvy local population that fought collectively to prevent the demolition. More importantly, Dona Telma affirmed in her speech, the bulldozer driver's actions should be understood within the context of poor and black people's solidarity with an ongoing urban movement against land evictions. The driver was also a poor black worker who lived in one of Salvador's peripheral neighborhoods. It happened to be Telma's house and land in Palestina that were targeted, but it could just as well have been his family's house and land under siege elsewhere.

After Dona Telma spoke, Ana Cristina, an activist from the Gamboa de Baixo neighborhood association, boldly asked the audience, "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?" The audience nodded in agreement and applauded when she firmly asserted, "The land belongs to the people." Black women throughout the city fight to preserve the land where they have built their homes, forged social networks, and generate material resources necessary to sustain their families. As a female homeless-movement activist affirmed during an Articulação planning meeting, "I want the right to my own backyard."

Claiming the right to urban land means challenging gendered, racial, and class dominance rooted in colonialism and the legacy of the unequal distribution of material resources. The central focus on black women in these discussions—as to speak of *terra de preto* (black land) is necessarily to speak of *terra de mulheres negras* (black women's land)—remains relevant

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today (Gusmão 1995; Harding 2000; Castillo 2011), as the story of Dona Telma illustrates.

In Brazil, black women are often uniquely positioned because they have both collective memory of residence and, in some cases, legal documentation of ownership of ancestral land. They also serve as the primary mediators of familial and social relations within their communities, influencing political decisions and how important resources such as land are distributed. Historically in Brazil, land has been perceived as *o lugar da mulher* ("a woman's place"; Gusmão 1995, 109), which helps to explain black women's political force in land struggles in urban areas. In Salvador, specifically, it is mainly women who are interpreting the racial, gender, and class dynamics of urban development policies (Garcia 2006). This focus on black women's engagement with public policy highlights how their views on development have radicalized local communities to demand justice and social change. They are key political interlocutors between local communities and the Brazilian state, advocating for greater access to material resources. They are the foot soldiers of the historical struggle for social and territorial belonging, particpatory urbanization policies, and improved living conditions for black citizens in Brazil.

Yet rarely are black women, especially poor black women, both in Brazil and throughout the African diaspora, considered leaders of social movements, much less political theorists (Caldwell 2007; Davies 2008; Hamlin 2011; Holsaert et al. 2012; Ransby 2003; Robnett 1997; Silva 1997). The public image of black women, particularly those who live in poor neighborhoods, is that they lack the political sophistication needed to organize social movements. This image, so different from the reality of black women's actual leadership, stems from these women's visible social and economic roles. Black women are celebrated for their role in maintaining Afro-Brazilian culture and religious traditions. Moreover, the vast majority of black women in Salvador are domestic workers whose work is greatly undervalued (McCallum 2007; Figueiredo 2011). In Salvador, 96.7 percent of domestic workers are black women (Figueiredo 2011), and most of the black women activists in Gamboa de Baixo do domestic work. Most of the government officials that these activists confront have interacted with black women only as babysitters, housekeepers, and washerwomen



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in their homes or as janitors in their workplaces. As Cecilia McCallum (2007) writes, "Some five million women worked as *empregadas domésticas* (domestic employees) in Brazil in 2001. Their symbolic place is in the kitchen, a stereotype reinforced on a daily basis in the mass media.... Many women spend much of their lives in these spaces, thereby reinforcing the symbolic ties of black female gender and domestic work" (56).

The stereotypical gendered, racist ideas of black women as passive and undereducated servants have been historically tied to the image of them as sexually available (Gilliam 2001; McCallum 1999; Williams 2013). These controlling images of black women are key aspects of the discourses of collective pathology and criminality that are used to police and destroy entire black urban neighborhoods. The end result of these limited images of black women is that although people are accustomed to seeing them occupy the support bases of social movements—those masses who participate in community assemblies and street protests—they are not envisioned as leaders. And yet the political organization of black urban neighborhoods has depended largely on the leadership and mass participation of women, who use their local wisdom and social networks within their communities to galvanize political support when their homes and lands are under siege.

My analysis of black women's activism emphasizes black Brazilian agency, particularly women's very own understandings of race and articulations of anti-racism politics. The complex racial politics of identification are linked to gender and class consciousness and identification as blacks, women, and poor people. For example, neighborhood activists are far from confused about the validity of blackness as a social category, which is often debated among Brazilian and Brazilianist scholars alike. In an informal conversation with me several years ago, Luiza Bairros (black movement activist and the former Brazilian Minister of the Secretariat of Racial Equality) affirmed that the ambiguity of race and racism in Brazil is an academic problem, not the problem of women like some in her family who have been domestic workers for elite white families. Black women who live the very real material world of the intersections of gendered, racial, and class inequalities hardly debate the need for radical social change in Brazil, nor are they passively waiting for that change to take place.

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Given the political saliency of blackness and women's struggles that have emerged against racial inequality, why are scholars fascinated with the supposed Brazilian plurality of racial identities, when it is not key to how black women in Brazil see themselves? I share many scholars' discomfort with the statistical emphasis on how people identify themselves in Brazil (Carneiro 2000; Santos 2006; Smith 2008; Vargas 2004). In response to the question of whether the racial perspective is adequate to deal with racial problems, Sueli Carneiro (2000) writes, "Look: I am black, and I have absolute consciousness of all the inequalities that my community, that my population suffers, and these inequalities manifest themselves within the reality that we already put forth here: there is a white world and a black world. *How can we assure that policies that promote equality reach the black population without referring to race*"? (quoted in *Caros Amigos* 2000, 27; emphasis added).

Carneiro, like many other Afro-Brazilian feminist scholars, such as Sônia Beatriz dos Santos (2008), who focuses on health care access, affirms that racial problems are hardly rhetorical, something that she understands as a black woman in her community. Racial problems in Brazil are the result of several generations of systemic social and economic exclusion negatively impacting black people throughout Brazil in both urban and rural contexts. Despite this recognition, the social-science focus on identification prevents serious academic attention to racial dysfunction in Brazilian society (Santos 2006). The argument persists that racial identity in Brazil is "ambiguous" and that there are at least 135 categories of self-identification that have produced a vast color gradient unlike any other nation in the Americas (Santos 2006, 34). Santos highlights the absurdity of this ambiguity: "Brazilian intellectuals declare themselves unable to decipher who is black in Brazil, even though the police, the justice system, public and private employers, the media (especially television), and other social groups and institutions can instantly identify blacks when physically and symbolically attacking them, denying them jobs for which they are qualified and punishing them more severely than their white counterparts for committing crimes of equal or comparable gravity (2006, 37)."

When Gamboa de Baixo neighborhood activists began to analyze urban renewal trends in Salvador in the early to mid-1990s, there was

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a clear racial and class pattern among targets of demolition squads and displacement. Race and class have been the strongest variables in determining which neighborhoods should be completely removed from the city center, which has been undergoing rapid redevelopment. The neighborhood struggle for land ownership and adequate housing led by black women has intensified over the last two decades as nearby communities such as Agua Suja and Vila Brandão have also experienced violent evictions. As these activists have claimed publicly, it has not been difficult for poor black people in Brazil to decipher "who is black in Brazil," as they see and feel race and class structures in their everyday lives *na pele* (in the skin). Nor do policy makers, development agents, and the police have very much difficulty in deciding who is black or how they should treat black women activists who protest demolition and displacement. These black women activists have mobilized in street protests as well as in strategic alliances with civil society groups and black movement activist groups. The threat of expulsion has further intensified in recent years as preparations for the World Cup and Olympic Games generated more international resources and provided more impetus to prepare Brazilian cities such as Salvador for mass tourism.

Hence, a focus on the multiracial self-classification model is not adequate to understand black land-rights struggles in Brazil. I believe, as Santos writes, that "through these sociopolitical lenses it is quite possible to identify blacks in Brazil" (2006, 40) and to see the tangible effects of the vast racial inequalities permeating black communities (Johnson III 1998; Mitchell and Wood 1998; Nobles 2000; Paixão and Carvano 2008; Santos 2008; Smith 2009; Telles 2006). In addition to promoting the positive aspects of black women's identity (Caldwell 2007; Santos 2007), black feminist organizations such as Geledés in Sao Paulo and Criola in Rio de Janeiro have long been preoccupied with other issues, such as black women's health (Santos 2008), and have recently led the struggle for domestic workers' and *quilombo* rights, as well as helming the local and national struggles against police abuse.

The most pressing aspect of black women's identities as blacks, women, mothers, and workers is that they constitute the majority of the superexploited workers in the country, producing the kind of political militancy necessary to lead social movements (Davies 2008; Jones 1974;



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Kelley 2002; McDuffie 2011). Drawing upon the ideas of radical leftist thinker and activist Claudia Jones, Carole Boyce Davies explains that the issues of material neglect affecting black women make them "both pivotal and vulnerable to struggles" (2008, 38). This positions black women, "the most exploited and oppressed," at the vanguard of black struggles (Davies 2008, 40). In Brazil, as throughout the African diaspora, "since black women are often heads of households, entire black communities will remain in poverty if the black women stay underpaid and superexploited" (Davies 2008, 41).

This understanding of black women's standpoint, constructed from their experiences on the margins of the political economy, elucidates the collective action of black women in Brazilian urban communities. In Salvador, the knowledge that black women gain as domestic workers is a source of political empowerment and organizing creativity. Local activists might not overtly resist their employers' actions, but they share their critiques with their neighbors in spaces like association meetings. Understanding that colonialism and racism are the root causes of their exploitation and domestic work—one of the most visible legacies of slavery—these black women contemplate collective ways to overcome that exploitation and transform society.

Black women workers have focused their political action in neighborhood movements in cities like Salvador because labor organizations rarely concern themselves with racial justice and housing rights. This absence of a class consciousness that includes the racialized poor discourages black communities from organizing around a shared class position. From this perspective, black women in Gamboa de Baixo prefer to mobilize as *moradores* (residents of a neighborhood) rather than *trabalhadores* (workers). In their neighborhood organizations, black women link their class positions as poor workers to their racial and gender conditions in a structurally unequal city. They understand that they are poor because they are black, an understanding gained through their heightened racial and gender sensibilities at work and at home. They self-identify as residents of an urban neighborhood under siege by the police, development agencies, and private companies because it is black and poor. The neighborhood, unlike the workplace, is an important site of political autonomy and liberation for poor black women in Salvador's communities



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(Perry 2008). Black neighborhoods are where we find vibrant examples of black women's political thought in action.

## Afro-Brazilian Religion as Source of Class Power

For the development of black feminist thought in Brazil, a focus on political action is crucial. We must refocus our attention on why, as well as how, people, especially black women domestic workers, participate in social movements. Although most domestic workers are black women who are underpaid and continue to live in poverty, they make up the majority of the participants and the leadership of *Candomblé terreiros* (Afro-Brazilian religious spaces of worship). In addition to the knowledge that black women gain as domestic workers, what drives the Gamboa de Baixo struggle for land rights during recent threats of mass eviction and forced displacement, or what neighborhood activists have termed the "wave of black clearance," is, in part, their love for and spiritual connection to the sea that forms the backyard of their urban neighborhood. It is important to recognize that in addition to its economic value for coastal residents and developers alike, the sea and African religious traditions combine to shape black women's everyday 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 is a key aspect of intertwining our understanding of black women as cultural producers and political agents in Brazil. Black women workers in urban neighborhoods in Salvador carve out geographic, social, and political spaces for themselves while expanding notions of cultural belonging and citizenship at the levels of the city, the nation, and the diaspora (Butler 1998; Harding 2003). Their central role in urban social movements must be seen as a part of a larger diaspora pattern of black women's oppositional politics, vested in property rights for both cultural and material gain.

In the *candomblé* religion, female deities such as Iemanjá (goddess of the sea) have long been considered a source of black women's political power, which is evident in present-day grassroots movements (Carneiro and Cury 2008; Garcia 2006; Hautzinger 2007; Oliveira 2009; Santos 1995; Sterling

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2010; Werneck 2007). 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 (Werneck 2007, 203). Rachel Harding has similarly argued that *candomblé* has served as "a collectivizing force through which subjugated peoples"—and I 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" (2003, 1).

From this perspective, local activists assert that the Iemanjá festivals they hold in Gamboa de Baixo should be understood not only 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* throughout the city, black women have inherited not only African religious practices but also 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 Salvador's 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 possibility 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 integrated their political demands to legalize collective property rights with demands to preserve the material and cultural resources the sea provides.

The centrality of *candomblé* belief systems is important insofar as they inspire the political formation of a black urban neighborhood located on the geographic and socioeconomic margins of a Brazilian city. The *terreiros* as sociopolitical spaces are understudied, but the political actions



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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" (2005, 326). 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 is deeply connected to what womanist theologian Dianne M. Stewart terms the "liberation motif" of African-centered traditions in black diasporic communities (2005). 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.

Historically, the main protagonists in anti-racist environmental justice movements in Brazilian cities, such as Makota Valdina Pinto in Salvador, have primarily been black women leaders of candomblé communities (Nascimento 2008; Perry 2006, 2009). Pinto has been a neighborhood activist since her youth and is 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 assertions 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. In Afro-Brazilian communities, 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 heavily tied

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this community-based activism to the eradication of the violent religious intolerance from which many Afro-Brazilian communities suffer.

Violence against these communities has targeted the built environments of the *terreiros*, such as the frequent defacement of the metal gates of the historic Casa Branca *terreiro* located in Ogunja and the ongoing encroachment on the lands of the Terreiro do Cobre in Federação. There also exists a long-standing ownership of massive amounts of land by female Afro-Brazilian religious leaders, many of whom are now engaged in fierce legal battles against the loss of land that surrounds their religious houses of worship (Ayrá 2009; Castillo 2013; Harding 2000). Through their narratives and legal claims of land ownership, the genealogy of conflicts going back to the colonial period and the emergence of social movements inform the current fight against the usurpation of these women's lands and the demolition of their homes. In her study of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century *candomblés* in Salvador, Rachel Harding (2000) documents the formation of ethnic-based communities comprising both freed and enslaved as well as African- and Brazilian-born peoples. Harding articulates a broader definition of the *candomblés* as autonomous sites for enacting a variety of ritual activities, but asserts that they were also "alternative spaces of blackness" that offered a necessary spatial "refuge" away from the experiences of slavery and racial oppression (2000). The extraordinary leadership and presence of Afro-Brazilian women (and their ownership) in these spaces serves to engender a historical perspective on land redistribution in Brazil, specifically highlighting black women's unique experiences as owners and leaders of struggles to prevent ongoing loss of access to urban space. The state demolition of the Oyá Onipó Neto *terreiro* in February 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 subsequent neighborhood struggle that then garnered mass solidarity from other religious leaders and black movement activists forced the government to recognize the *terreiro*'s right to exist and the urgent need for its reconstruction.

Hence, the leadership of black women in environmental justice movements and for the preservation of sacred spaces should also be understood within the larger context of emerging neighborhood movements. Black urban spaces that include *terreiros* are racialized, gendered "terrains of domination" in which black women's politics



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are deeply connected to resistance against "geographic domination" as practiced in environmental neglect, land evictions, and displacement in Brazilian cities (McKittrick 2006). In addition to making demands to the state for clean water and basic sanitation, activists in the Gamboa de Baixo neghborhood, for example, have adopted good environmental practices, such as 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 they matter to the state in order to create clean modern cities—but black neighborhoods desire clean urban spaces that include black people rather than exclude them. Thus, environmental reform 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 important for understanding the everyday grassroots actions of the black movement.

The sea, and specifically its relationship to African cosmologies, yields an indispensable source of spiritual, material, and political nourishment in the lives of black women in Bahia. It is not by accident that access to clean drinking water and sea water continue to be key political demands for neighborhood activists, nor is it coincidental that black women lead this fight. Land rights must be considered within the broader quest for water and an overall healthy, clean urban environment, as well as for the spiritual sustenance of entire communities. Politicizing the need for water, for example, has been integral to Gamboa de Baixo's ongoing fight for urban land rights and neighborhood improvement amid state threats of land expulsion. Water, specifically the water of the Bay of All Saints, has been a spiritual source of black women's political empowerment in Gamboa de Baixo, the neighboring Solar do Unhao, and the various neighborhoods that existed along the coast before they faced displacement. Water has been at the center of Gamboa de Baixo's political organizing around issues of land and housing reform since its inception, and poor black women have been key to those discussions. Consequently, *terreiros* located in black neighborhoods are deeply tied to ongoing mass movements aimed garnering state resources such as land rights and environmental preservation.



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## Conclusion

This article aims to bridge the scholarly gap between black feminist theorization and the grassroots practice of intersectionality. The story of Dona Telma in the Palestina neighborhood is situated within the context of an ongoing urban land rights struggle that includes coastal communities such as Gamboa de Baixo, providing a vibrant example of how, in grassroots feminist praxis, black women do not solely focus on their subjectivities. Political mobilization around issues of land and housing in Salavdor shows concretely that gendered, class-based, and spatialized racism is hardly rhetorical—something that black women (the majority of whom are undereducated domestic workers) facing forced eviction fully understand. When Gamboa de Baixo neighborhood activists began to analyze urban renewal trends in Salvador in the early to mid-1990s, they discovered a clear racial and class pattern among targets of police violence, demolition squads, and displacement. More importantly, gender also shapes this pattern in terms of the lack of perception of black women's political militancy. These ethnographic examples support the case for more feminist research on the perception of subserviency among domestic workers that obfuscates the vastness of their political militancy. This perspective encourages us to not only do the political work within the academy of documenting the vast inequalities that shape black women's lives, but also to seriously recenter praxis—the grassroots political actions of neighborhood associations, for example—in our ongoing formulations of black diasporic feminist thought.

Exploring black activism, gender identity, and grassroots activism allows us to recognize the existence and central role of community-based movements in black identity politics and black mass mobilizations. Foregrounding the political identity of black women in Salvador illustrates the ways in which grassroots organizations have advanced the racial, gender, and class interests of entire black communities. As black feminist scholars who have contributed to the globalization of theories of intersectionality such as Kimberlé Crenshaw have argued, to ignore the lives and actions of black women obfuscates the general experiences of black people. In the Brazilian case, I suggest that not paying attention to black women and their political work is one reason why we interpret

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black absence from recent protests as a lack of race-based critiques and race-inspired social movements. Racial consciousness in community movements is the unquestionable result of the central role of black women's activism. Neighborhood struggles for land ownership and adequate housing in cities such as Salvador illustrate the centrality of black women's participation and leadership, as well as precisely how they experience and politicize intersectional oppressions.

Race, gender, and class are very apparent in neighborhood movements and the central role of black women's political participation further illustrates how black women have always organized through these grassroots political networks, oftentimes as leaders, to address the everyday and institutional concerns of their material existence (Garcia 2006; Hautzinger 2007; Santos 2008). Mobilization around resources such as housing, land, clean water, women's police stations, and health care—key demands made by black women activists—shows that the grassroots base and leadership of the Brazilian black movement work to broaden the definition of citizenship to include not just culture, but also concrete material resources. The widespread existence of neighborhood activism debunks the notion that there are no black social mass movements of any consequence, or if there are, writing them off as culturalist movements. Black Brazilian activists already do the political work that social movement theorists claim they are absent from (Bairros 1996; Garcia 2006; Twine 1997; Vargas 2010).

Grassroots activists' ongoing fight against institutionalized forms of racism does not mean that black culture is not a central concern for them, as suggested by the political focus on candomblé as a source of individual and collective empowerment to take on leadership roles in social movements. In fact, for black women activists—often hypersexualized as potential prostitutes or rendered invisible as always-available domestic workers—the material aspects of the gendered racism that determines their class status are intricately tied to representational aspects of gendered racism intrinsic in Brazilian culture (Gomes 1995; McCallum 1999; Santos 2008; Williams 2013). Black women activists do express explicit interest in maintaining positive aspects of black womanhood such as natural hair, which is often both a key marker of blackness and a source of discrimination and low self-esteem (Caldwell 2007; Gomes

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2008). The political recognition of *candomblé* is central to how they understand themselves as blacks with African heritage and culture as well as to how they articulate their relationship to the coastal lands. Thus, I understand Afro-Brazilian culture as one source of knowledge and power that black women activists have drawn upon in their struggles against land evictions. On the other hand, neighborhood activists promote a definition of black culture that belies the scholarly and cultural nationalist definition of culture as devoid of political attention to the acquisition of resources such as land and housing. This is quite distinct from the cultural artifacts such as music, dance, religion, and food that have been widely accepted as part of the repertoire of black consciousness or even of Brazilian national plurality.

Black Brazilian feminist scholar and activist Sueli Carneiro asks, "Why did black women reach the conclusion that they had to organize themselves politically in order to face the triple discrimination as women, poor people, and blacks?" (2000, 27). Black women involved in Brazilian black social movements recognize the importance not only of racial and gender inequality, but also of class-based struggles over material resources in their urban communities. In contrast to recent street protests that appear spontaneous and exceptional, black women-led grassroots movements in Brazilian cities have always fought for the basic survival of black communities. They perceive housing and land as vital material resources, pursuing these aims alongside urban infrastructural reform that includes adequate schools and transportation. Through community networks, they engage in the everyday work of grassroots political organization that mobilizes the masses of urban blacks against the racist practices of urban renewal. The exclusionary practices of urban redevelopment have shaped black women's identity formation and have been the impetus of black mobilization in Brazilian cities.

Starting this article with the retelling of Dona Telma's story is significant at a key political moment, in that it demonstrates that recent street protests around increased bus fares in Brazil, like ongoing public school teacher strikes and mobilizations against mass demolitions, should come as no surprise. These protests are part of ongoing struggles for citizenship rights and public resources. Moreover, race is very apparent in what appears on the surface to be class-based mass movements. This article provides

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evidence of how blacks organize around class issues such as urban land and housing rights, although those are not readily interpreted as examples of black or women's politics. I also explain why poor neighborhoods, the majority of which are black, should be considered the training grounds for critiques of unequal social and infrastructural development in Brazilian cities and mass social action against these forms of inequality. Black women, deeply influenced by feminist thought produced throughout the African diaspora, are the main actors leading these grassroots movements at the community level.

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