

Geographies of Identity in Brazil

JOSHUA REASON

Carleton College

May 29, 2017

Introduction

HUMAN GEOGRAPHY IS A ROBUST FIELD that analyzes human activity as it pertains to community, culture and other forms of interaction across place and space. In recent years, scholars such as Katherine McKittrick and Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley have radicalized geography studies by theorizing the movement of Black, queer and female bodies throughout the world. I refer to this new subset of geography studies as *identity-based geographies*, analyzing the locations (both permanent and transient) in which identity is produced. Identity-based geographies afford scholars the opportunity to intimately interact with the dynamism of cultures. Theories regarding the condition of women, indigenous people, afro-descendants and queer communities have emerged as a result of identity-based geography studies. Desire, humor and abandonment across cultures are just some of the topics analyzed in contemporary identity-based geography research.

Given its diverse social, economic and political histories, Brazil is an ideal place to see how identity-based geographies are used to make sense of complex social realities. How does a Black woman from the favela negotiate her roles as a mother, domestic worker and community leader? How do queer youth communicate and act out sexual desire despite living in precarious conditions? Investigating the ways in which Brazilians of various identifications navigate space allows us to better understand the construction of marginalized identities in Brazil. Furthermore, this research serves as an exemplar of how identity-based geography research challenges dominant ideologies regarding marginalized peoples.

In the literature review that follows, I examine several prevalent themes in the academic discourse on geographies of identity in Brazil. The sources presented in this review are mostly ethnographic, highlighting the intersections of race, gender, class and sexuality in Brazil to varying degrees. I group my analysis of these sources across four key themes that emerged from the literature: 1) Africanity; 2) public/private space; 3) shared oppression; and 4) intersectionality. Following my discussion of these themes, I critique the current discourse on identity in Brazil in terms of gender- and hetero-normativity, uncritical reflections on intersectionality and an overemphasis on oppression as a locus of community building. Overall, I aim to emphasize both the importance of geography in understanding identity and the potential to fortify the use of this field in future research on Brazil.

Africanity: Real & Imagined Connections to Africa

The role of Africa in Brazilian society is a core concept in the literature on Brazilian identity formation. On the national level, Africa is often evoked as one of many cultures that contribute

to the Brazilian nation. Concepts such as *mestiçagem*¹ and *democracia racial*² serve to obscure the slave history of Brazil and reposition its memory of Africa in capoeira, candomblé and other survivals of African culture. However, scholars have recently shifted their research from explaining the role of Africa in the nation as a whole to its significance to and appropriation by Afro-Brazilian communities.

In “‘Bahia Pêlo Negro,’” Denise Ferreira da Silva situates the emergence of Banda Olodum within the context of Afro-Brazilian subjectivity and *Africanity*. Silva defines Africanity as the essence of Africa, real and imagined, that impacts the articulation and expression of Afro-Brazilian culture. As one of the first *blocos afros* to perform in Carnaval, Olodum uses its lyrics to articulate Africa as “not that of *orixas*. . . but that of emperors and slaves, anti-colonial and other revolutionary struggles.”³ Though colonial resistance in Africa does not correspond to the history of Afro-Brazilians, Olodum creates a nostalgic, imagined past in which Africa becomes the locus of afro-descendant struggle. This new ontological understanding dismantles popular, antiquated notions of Africa in Brazil by connecting Afro-Brazilians to a diasporic conception of Black identity. In Silva’s own words, “Olodum’s lyrics institute a kind of subaltern self-consciousness...a spatial thing which inhabits a subaltern region it shares with all people who have engaged in political struggle against juridical and economic subjection.”⁴

Though they never specifically reference the concept of Africanity, other scholars of Afro-Brazilian identity formation have also complicated the meanings of Africa within Brazil. In “Spaces of Silence and Efforts toward Voice,” Colleen Lyons uses *quilombos*, runaway slave communities that have since been formalized by the Brazilian government, to signify the reclamation of history and space by Afro-Brazilians. Throughout the article, she claims that despite the formalized status of *quilombos*, the rights of these communities are often subverted by the state. This happens because “*quilombos* are most often either located on contested lands. . . or the communities are situated in areas that have gradually been eroded to a bare minimum of territory because of incursions by powerful, elite neighbors they cannot contest.”⁵ Lyons introduces the concept of *resgate*, or cultural rescue, to explain the process under which Afro-Brazilians have revalorized the *quilombos* despite this oppression. She states that “[i]n Southern Bahia. . . youth from a particular urban neighborhood who have grown up on *quilombos* or who have relatives from these communities are increasingly speaking of *resgate*, a process of reclaiming their disappearing past.”⁶ *Quilombos* exemplify the evocation of Africa in Brazil along the lines of collective memory (i.e. slavery) and a survival/performance of African culture (i.e. capoeira, candomblé and storytelling).

Kia Lilly Caldwell also evokes a new reading of Africa, specifically regarding other diasporic communities. Her book chapter, “‘Look at Her Hair’: The Body Politics of Black Womanhood,” comments on the influences of prominent Black Americans on Afro-Brazilian identity formation through media and cultural production. In her discussion of *Raça*, one of the first Afro-Brazilian publications, Caldwell mentions that “African American musicians. . . have also been prominent in the magazine,” noting sections devoted to Tupac, Prince and Toni Braxton.⁷ Caldwell also states

¹*Mestiçagem*, or miscegenation, is the mixing of racial groups that, especially during slavery, would have been separated otherwise. This term is often evoked to downplay the violent history of slavery in Brazil, specifically the rape of Black and Indigenous women at the hands of Portuguese colonizers.

²*Democracia racial*, or racial democracy, was a term coined by Gilberto Freyre, a Brazilian sociologist. Freyre believed that miscegenation amongst all races in Brazil would lead to the creation of a meta-race, strengthening the Brazilian national identity by realizing a post-racial future.

³Denise Ferreira da Silva, “‘Bahia Pêlo Negro’: Can the subaltern (subject of raciality) speak?” *Ethnicities*, 5 (2005): 335.

⁴Silva, 337.

⁵Colleen M. Scanlan Lyons, “Spaces of Silence and Efforts toward Voice: Negotiation and Power Among Quilombo Communities in Southern Bahia Brazil,” *Afro-Hispanic Review*, 30 (2011): 119.

⁶*Ibid.*, 125.

⁷Kia Lilly Caldwell, “‘Look at Her Hair’: The Body Politics of Black Womanhood,” in *Negras in Brazil: Re-*

that one of her informants “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.”⁸ This attention to Black representation throughout the diaspora is also acknowledged in Silva’s work, claiming that Olodum represents “the prevailing meaning of Africanity circulating both in the Brazilian national and in the 1980s black diasporic cultural politics.”⁹ Africanity derives not only from Africa itself, but also from all its iterations throughout the diaspora.

Public/Private Space

The distinctions between public and private displays of identity are central to the literature on identity-based geographies in Brazil. The negotiation of identity in different settings can yield radically different treatments of race, gender and sexuality. Many of the sources complicate the public/private dichotomy by asserting that the private can often become public due to hidden scripts that reveal intimate aspects of social life.

One way in which the private is brought forth into public discourse is through the politicization of private life. McCallum provides an example of this through the connection between Black womanhood and domestic work in Afro-Brazilian feminism. She states, “[s]ymbolically associated with blackness, domestic work is low status. . . In Salvador, black women’s groups promoted a move ‘out of the kitchen’ into the public political sphere.”¹⁰ She furthers this connection through her discussion of the feminist group, *Ya-Mim Collective of Black Women of Bahia*, stating that the group “proposed electing black women who would ‘also deal with the needs of communities [. . .]: the day-to-day household tasks — the nappies, the washing tank and the stove are all part of political life.”¹¹ These statements highlight two key ideas regarding the incorporation of the private into public life. First, they serve to unify Afro-Brazilian women under a common dimension of their social experience (i.e. domestic work). Second, they allow these women to advocate not for a complete abandonment of the domestic realm, but rather a revalorization and politicization of it. This recognition of the personal as political reveals the ongoing incorporation of Afro-Brazilian women into politics via domestic work, broadening the base of support for Afro-Brazilian feminism to include non-academics.

Black women and domestic work is also used to discuss the distinctions between the public/private life of domestic workers themselves. In “Laughter ‘Out of Place,’” Donna Goldstein uses her relationship with Glória, a Black domestic worker and favela resident, to describe the negotiation of Black womanhood at home and at work. One entry from her fieldwork, titled *Two Kisses*, details a visit Goldstein made with Glória and her friend to the home of Glória’s employer. In Brazil, it is typical to greet a person with a kiss or two on the cheek. While Goldstein received this customary greeting, neither Glória nor her friend were afforded the same symbol of Brazilian hospitality, causing anger amongst them. Despite the fact that “Glória is greatly respected...in Felicidade Eterna,” her status as a domestic worker and favela resident precludes her from receiving a proper hello and good-bye from her employer. This shows that one can simultaneously experience empowerment in one setting and marginalization in another with relation to the same social identity.

envisioning Black Women, Citizenship, and the Politics of Identity, (Rutgers: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 95.

⁸Caldwell, 101.

⁹Denise Ferreira da Silva, “‘Bahia Pêlo Negro’: Can the subaltern (subject of raciality) speak?” *Ethnicities*, 5 (2005): 336.

¹⁰Cecilia McCallum, “Women out of Place? A Micro-historical Perspective on the Black Feminist Movement in Salvador da Bahia, Brazil,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 39 (2007): 61.

¹¹Ibid.

The public/private dichotomy has also been used to understand sexuality, specifically in relation to the queer community. Moises Lino e Silva's article titled "Queer sex vignettes from a Brazilian favela: An ethnographic striptease" is a prime example of how analyses of public/private discourses on sexuality reveal special knowledge on intimacy, pleasure and desire. Lino e Silva's article aims to use "ethnographic material on sex...to talk about sex and pleasure in themselves, and not just used to support different rational arguments and reductive analyses that aim at explaining sex."¹² In other words, he argues that current literature on sexuality hyperemphasizes the "clinical" dimensions of sexual practice in favelas (i.e. prostitution, rape, etc.) while ignoring conceptions of pleasure and desire that play a central role in how queer youth experience sexuality.¹³ By using vignettes to reveal how private ideas about pleasure and desire are evoked in daily conversation and practice, Lino e Silva demonstrates the negotiation of sexuality amongst queer favela youth.

Community Building through Shared Oppression

Discussions of marginalized groups in Latin America often concentrate on oppression as the nexus of their lived experiences. In the current literature on identity, this oppression is analyzed as a source of empowerment and community building within these groups. The history of slavery and the degradation of Black women are just some examples of oppression as the centerpiece of camaraderie amongst the marginalized. In their aim to empower historically oppressed communities, many of the sources cited give agency to marginalized communities by asserting that their marginality is simultaneously their source of empowerment.

Though briefly discussed in most works on Afro-Brazilian identity, Lyons's analysis of *quilombos* talks explicitly about Brazilian slavery. Given the historical significance of slavery to the formation of the *quilombos*, it is impossible to avoid the discussion of slavery in any conversation on present-day *quilombos*. Furthermore, the ongoing process of formalizing *quilombos* under the state also requires the vehement recognition of slavery as the historical foundation upon which these communities are built. By emphasizing the importance of historical congruence to the ability to make claims to land, Lyons insinuates that slavery plays a key role in the formalization and legitimization of *quilombos* as Afro-Brazilian communities.

In his article titled "Necropolitical Governance and Black Spatial Praxis in São Paulo, Brazil," Jaime Amparo Alves applies Achille Mbembe's theory of *necropolitics*, state-sanctioned violence used to maintain control over life and death, to the systematic killings of Black boys by the police in Brazilian favelas. Alves also explores the gendered resistance that has arisen from necropolitics. Since the mothers of the deceased are often the most affected by these deaths, the women of Alves's research site staged a protest in the Patriarch's Square, a symbolic reclamation of a central location in São Paulo, therefore converting it into a space for Black suffering to be seen.¹⁴ According to Alves, this is one example of how Black mobilization and identity formation can be used to reclaim agency and counteract police brutality in the favelas.¹⁵ Much like the case of the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, Alves claims that Black women in this São Paulo favela have formed community around the systematic killing of their loved ones, once again emphasizing the centrality of oppression in community building.

In her analysis of Africanity, Silva characterizes Olodum's lyrics as a direct response to white supremacy and colonialism. Though she argues that their music "produce[s] the economically dispos-

¹²Moises Lino e Silva, "Queer sex vignettes from a Brazilian favela: An ethnographic striptease," *Ethnography* 16 (2015): 226.

¹³Lino e Silva, 235.

¹⁴Jamie Amparo Alves, "From Necropolis to Blackpolis: Necropolitical Governance and Black Spatial Praxis in São Paulo, Brazil," *Antipode* 46 (2014): 331-34.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 334.

sessed black Brazilian as a self-consciousness emerging in the place of affectability,” she nonetheless draws upon the notion that Afro-Brazilians are subaltern.¹⁶ Their position as subaltern does not exclude them from agency. Rather it is precisely because they exist as subaltern subjects that they can develop this particular ontological response to hegemonic forces. Silva presents yet another example of how oppression serves to unify Afro-Brazilians in relation to their oppressors.

Intersectionality

Though never explicitly mentioned, intersectionality is often implicitly used as a conceptual framework to understand the complex realities of people who possess multiple social identities. Intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, refers to the ways in which social experiences are modified by interactions between multiple marginalized identities (e.g. Black woman or queer Latinx). Her framework has since become a staple of research on identity, so much so that intersectionality is rarely mentioned by name. Many of the sources in this literature review inadvertently use intersectionality to complicate our understanding of Blackness in Brazil in conjunction with class and womanhood.

Caldwell discusses the longstanding stigma against Black women’s hair and bodies through song lyrics and popular conceptions of beauty. She claims that despite the blatantly racist remarks made by Tiririca in “Vejo os cabelos dela” (“Look at Her Hair”), “the song was seen as humorous and non-offensive by many Brazilians,” supporting Caldwell’s assertion that “negative images and the humorous style employed in the song are validated by Brazilian discourses on race.”¹⁷ She also explains that *cabelo ruim* (bad hair) is used to characterize Black women’s *cabelo crespo* (natural hair) as undesirable in comparison to white hair.¹⁸ *Cabelo ruim* is overwhelmingly associated with Black women; although Black men can also have natural hair, the racialization of beauty is more characteristic of women’s experiences.¹⁹ Caldwell’s use of song lyrics to discuss conceptions of beauty in Brazil reveals the gendered dimensions of Brazilian body politics. The Black female body becomes a primary site of simultaneous sexual desire and aesthetic repulsion. Her analysis reflects prominent discourses on race, gender and beauty in Brazil.

Blackness in Latin America is also often associated with low-income communities. As both Goldstein and McCallum point out in their research on domestic workers and favela residents, Black women from these communities are often treated as less-than-human by their employers and other members of urban centers. In her article “Restraining Women: Gender, Sexuality and Modernity in Salvador da Bahia,” McCallum claims that despite the increase in sexual freedom experienced by Brazilian women, Black women in this low-income neighborhood report the persistence of double standards in relation to sexual practices; while men feel at liberty to engage in sex with multiple partners, women are critiqued for exerting any form of sexual liberation.²⁰ In Goldstein’s analysis, she highlights the resource poverty, or the lack of access to essential services (clean water, food, education, healthcare, etc.), that exists in the favela. Upon returning to her fieldsite, Goldstein is told that Zeca, one of Glória’s sons, had passed away. Despite a joint effort by Glória’s other children to save Zeca, the doctors at the hospital to which he was admitted were too incompetent

¹⁶Denise Ferreira da Silva, “‘Bahia Pêlo Negro’: Can the subaltern (subject of raciality) speak?” *Ethnicities*, 5 (2005): 323.

¹⁷Kia Lilly Caldwell, “‘Look at Her Hair’: The Body Politics of Black Womanhood,” in *Negras in Brazil: Re-envisioning Black Women, Citizenship, and the Politics of Identity*, (Rutgers: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 93.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 87.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 88.

²⁰Cecilia McCallum, “Restraining Women: Gender, Sexuality and Modernity in Salvador da Bahia,” *Society for Latin American Studies* 18 (2009): 281.

and arrogant to save their brother. When they attempted to explain to the doctor that Zeca had sickle-cell anemia, “[o]ne of the doctors responded, ‘Who is the doctor here, you or me?’”²¹ Though Goldstein contextualizes this death within the context of humor, her research focus does not detract from the precarious circumstances that are characteristic of poverty in the favela.

Gaps in the Literature

Despite the depth of description and analysis that these sources provide, there are several areas in which they fall short. Though most of the sources use gender to complicate our understanding of Black identity, none of them address the absence of non-binary gendered individuals in their analysis. Furthermore, nearly all discussions on sexuality (albeit the queer sex vignettes) focus exclusively on heterosexual relationships. Cecilia McCallum attempts to explain this gap in the literature on Black life in her article “Restraining Women: Gender, Sexuality and Modernity in Salvador da Bahia.” She incorporates non-binary and non-heterosexual Afro-Brazilians in her discussion by analyzing the importance of masculinity/femininity and activity/passivity in constructing gender. These dichotomies, however, simply incorporate non-binary and non-heterosexual people into a hegemonic ‘men’ and ‘not-men’ dichotomy based on outward appearance and sex roles. Despite the shortcomings of this approach, McCallum legitimizes it by stating, “[W]hile it is important to recognise difference, one must be careful not to decontextualize cultural analysis from understanding social processes.”²² While context is important, it is dangerous to generalize the experience of non-binary, non-heterosexual people to fit that of heterosexual, cisgender individuals.

As previously stated, none of the scholars cited explicitly implemented intersectionality as a conceptual framework. Though many of these articles implicitly use the intersections of race, class, sexuality and gender to complicate understandings of identity, they take intersectionality for granted in doing so. A fundamental tenet of Crenshaw’s framework is the non-additive nature of intersecting identities. Possessing multiple oppressed identities does not double the marginality, but rather produces a social experience that often contests our previous understandings of identity. While much of the research presented in this review addresses how intersecting identities produce unique subjectivities, it does so without contextualizing the emergence of those subjectivities. By being more intentional about their use of intersectionality, scholars of identity can more clearly articulate the distinctions between the new subjectivities that arise from intersectionality and those of the individual communities themselves.

Lastly, and most prominent in all the literature, is the overemphasis of oppression in forming community within marginalized groups. While it is impossible to depoliticize oppressed groups, there are ways in which to analyze marginalized populations apart from their condition as oppressed people. Moises Lino e Silva exemplifies this departure from oppression in his work, claiming “[I]t would be really regrettable if we were to miss the pleasurable dimensions of sexuality in a study of gay life in favelas.”²³ Implicit in this statement is that studies of both the favela and sexuality tend to focus exclusively on the negative facets of each; the favela is often read as a zone of social and economic disparity, and studies of sexuality tend to ignore pleasure and desire as valuable angles of analysis. Like Silva, scholars of identity should give as much attention to the positive dimensions of social life (i.e. pleasure, humor, etc.) as they do the negative.

²¹ Donna M. Goldstein, *Laughter Out of Place: Race, Class, Violence, and Sexuality in a Rio Shantytown* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 39.

²² Cecilia McCallum, “Restraining Women: Gender, Sexuality and Modernity in Salvador da Bahia,” *Society for Latin American Studies* 18 (2009): 288.

²³ Moises Lino e Silva, “Queer sex vignettes from a Brazilian favela: An ethnographic striptease,” *Ethnography* 16 (2015): 235.

Conclusion

The sources used in this literature review display the power of identity-based geography research in revealing previously hidden knowledge about the intricacies of daily life. Though imperfect, as most writing is, the scholars whose work appears in this review pose diverse analyses of Black social life. Black womanhood, sexuality in the favela and Afro-Brazilian community building are just a few of the topics that appear in the literature. More than a critique of several authors, this review is a call to action for scholars of identity in Brazil to break away from the overwhelmingly negative discourse on marginalized people. It is clear that scholars want to give voice to the oppressed by highlighting the ways in which communities have overcome adversity. But in doing so, scholars of identity have fallen into the trap of reading the marginalized subject as perpetually operating under hegemonic systems. While this is true to an extent, Afro-Brazilians, queer people and women are not precluded from experiencing positive aspects of life amidst their marginality. Future ethnographic research needs to move beyond marginality, aiming to understand the social lives of historically oppressed groups on more positive terms. In doing so, we can hopefully dismantle hegemonic discourses that continually place certain groups as the ontological “others” to white, male, heterosexual and cisgender individuals.

Works Cited

- Alves, Jaime Amparo. 2014. "From Necropolis to Blackpolis: Necropolitical Governance and Black Spatial Praxis in São Paulo, Brazil." *Antipode* 46 (2): 323-339.
- Ferreira da Silva, Denise. "'Bahia Pêlo Negro': Can the subaltern (subject of raciality) speak?" *Ethnicities*. 5 (2005): 321-342.
- Goldstein, Donna M. *Laughter Out of Place: Race, Class, Violence, and Sexuality in a Rio Shantytown*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.
- Lilly Caldwell, Kia. "'Look at Her Hair': The Body Politics of Black Womanhood." In *Negras in Brazil: Re-envisioning Black Women, Citizenship, and the Politics of Identity*, 81-106. Rutgers: Rutgers University Press, 2007.
- Lino e Silva, Moises. "Queer sex vignettes from a Brazilian favela: An ethnographic striptease." *Ethnography* 16 (2015): 223-39.
- Lyons, Colleen M. Scanlan. 2011. "Spaces of Silence and Efforts Toward Voice: Negotiation and Power among 'Quilombo' Communities in Southern Bahia Brazil." *Afro-Hispanic Review* 30 (2): 115-132. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23617162>.
- McCallum, Cecilia. 1999. "Restraining Women: Gender, Sexuality and Modernity in Salvador Da Bahia." *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 18 (3): 275-293.
- McCallum, Cecilia. 2007. "Women out of Place? A Micro-Historical Perspective on the Black Feminist Movement in Salvador da Bahia, Brazil." *Journal of Latin American Studies* 39 (1): 55-80.