Negras in Brazil
Re-envisioning Black Women, Citizenship, and the Politics of Identity

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The Black Women's Movement

Politicizing and Reconstructing Collective Identities

I am not subjected; I am a subject. I don't want to be an object anymore. I am tired of having to yell all the time that I am a subject when there is a truckload of rubbish pushing me to be an object. I don't want to be subjected; I want a trade relationship in this capitalist society. I am a direct heir of the society of slavery, and that also enslaves me in a more modern way.

-Miriam Alves, quoted in Charles Rowell, "Miriam Alves: An Interview"

The preceding statements by Afro-Brazilian poet Miriam Alves underscore the relationship among social identities, self-representations, and material inequalities. As a writer, Alves uses words and images in her struggle against gender and racial oppression. By refusing to occupy an objectified and subservient position within Brazilian society, Alves contests dominant discourses on gender and race and seeks to articulate new and liberatory forms of self-representation.

Much like Alves, black Brazilian women from different social classes and political orientations have taken up the banner of self-representation through activism in the black women's movement. Black women's collective mobilization in recent decades has called attention to the intersection of race and gender in structuring social relationships and constructing individual and collective identities in Brazil. This chapter examines how the black women's movement has sought to redefine and expand citizenship rights in four key ways: first, by constructing a collective social identity for black women that contests their social, economic, and political marginalization; second, by constructing a collective political identity through the process of making group claims and becoming recognized as active agents in Brazilian society; third, through efforts to claim space within the Brazilian public sphere; and, finally, through the process of becoming citizens by affirming the "right to have rights" (Dagnino 1994).

Enegrecendo o Feminismo—Blackening Feminism

The military regime that ruled Brazil from 1964 to 1985 began a process of abertura, or "political liberalization," in 1974, gradually opening the political arena to civil society. The process of abertura generated increased space for the establishment of oppositional social movements, including the women's movement and black movement. Brazilian social movements became active in re-creating civil society by expanding the terrain of politics and advocating anti-authoritarian definitions of citizenship. Members of Brazil's black movement and women's movement were instrumental in calling for reconceptualizations of democracy and citizenship that gave central regard to issues of race and gender. Such reconceptualizations were significant given the political exclusion of most women and blacks both prior to and during the military regime.

The emergence of "new" social movements in Brazil during the 1970s and 1980s occurred within a wider context of authoritarian rule, political repression, and worsening economic conditions. Many of the social movements that emerged during this time were active in re-creating civil society by advocating anti-authoritarian political practices and advancing more democratic notions of citizenship. Brazilian social movements also expanded the terrain of politics by calling for discussion of the links between daily life issues and institutionalized power relations.

Local, regional, and national women's groups became significant political actors during the transition to democracy. Activists in the women's movement sought to address gender-specific issues, including employment, education, and reproductive health, as well as larger political and social conditions (Alvarez 1990). Like many of the other social movements that emerged during the abertura, the women's movement was centrally concerned with redefining Brazilian political ideology and praxis in more democratic terms. The emergence of the women's movement has been attributed to the employment discrimination and economic hardship experienced by white middle-class women under the military regime (Alvarez 1990). The development of an international feminist movement combined with the gender discrimination found in leftist political organizations also contributed to the development of the Brazilian women's movement.

The presentation of the Manifesto das Mulheres Negras (Manifesto of Black Women) during the Congresso das Mulheres Brasileiras (Congress of Brazilian Women) in July 1975 marked the first formal recognition of racial
of gender domination, the manifesto also highlighted black women's victim-
product that deserves to be exported: the Brazilian mulatta.' But if
quality of the product is said to be so high, the treatment that she receives',
ization by long-standing practices of sexual exploitation. .

is extremely degrading, dirty and disrespectful” (qtd. in Nascimento

to address the problem of racism because of their own complicity in racial
were emotional, by some ... but representatives from the poorest
be more clearly articulated by black ';>;omen who were active in the
practices of racial domination have shaped gender relations in Brazil. Bil
feminists' failure to address the racism found in the women's movement.
She noted that women with seemingly progressive and leftist political
manifesto stated: "Black Brazilian women have received a cruel heritage:
unmasking the gendered aspects of racial domination and the racial aspects 11
women by white women” (Gonzalez 1982, 100, 101).
Gonzalez's comments highlight the role that race has played in shap-
ing relationships between white and black women. Her observations sug-
raise the issue of racism within the women's movement was
seen as a necessity by black women and seen as an unnecessarily divisive
issue by white women. Finally, she notes that white women were reluctant to
address the problem of racism because of their own complicity in racial
domination.
Marked differences in the social experiences of black and white women
led to divisions within the Brazilian women's movement during the late
1970s and continuing into the 1980s. While a number of black women had
turned to feminism seeking solace from the sexism that they encountered in
black organizations, they quickly found that race was a source of fissure that
prevented white and black women from making common cause around a
presumably shared sisterhood. Reflecting on racial divisions within the Bra-
zilian women's movement, black feminists Sueli Carneiro and Theresa San-
tos noted: “As a result of these conflicts, black and white women faced each
other in the space of the feminist movement in a conflictual and untrusting
manner that resulted from the different historical, political and ideologi-
cal references that determined their different points of views on common
problems” (1985, 148).
The legacies of racial and gender domination that resulted from slav-
ery and their reconfiguration in post-abolition Brazilian society have led to
markedly different social experiences and social locations for most black
and white women. As a result of these different social experiences and
social locations, problems and issues that are presumed to be common to
all Brazilian women, such as sexuality, reproductive health, and paid labor,
have held different significance for black and white women. Recognition of
these differences caused black feminists to challenge generalized notions
of women's oppression that failed to account for the qualitative difference
that patriarchal ideology “had and still has in the construction of the black
woman’s feminine identity” (Carneiro and Santos 1985, 42).
Work by black feminists such as Lélia Gonzalez (1982) and Luiza Bair-
ros (1991) also linked the apparent liberation of white women in recent
decades to the continued socioeconomic subordination of black women.
Gonzalez and Bairros argued that black women’s domestic service in the
homes of white families allowed white women to enter the paid labor force
in increasing numbers. Gonzalez also criticized the feminist movement for
being oblivious to the sexual exploitation experienced by black women, par-
icularly those who work in domestic service. She noted: “The exploitation
of black women as sexual objects is something that is much greater than the
Brazilian feminist movements think or say. These movements are generally
led by white middle-class women. For example, "senhoras" still exist who
seek to hire pretty young black women to work in their homes as domestics.
But the main goal is to have their sons be initiated sexually with them. This
is just one more example of economic-sexual superexploitation ... in addi-
tion to perpetuating myths about the special sensuality of black women” (Gon-
zalez 1982, 99, 100).
In their struggle to gain a greater voice within the feminist movement,
a number of black feminists argued that making black women’s concerns a
sub-theme under the larger rubric of “women’s issues" would be insuffi-
cient. Given their calculation that approximately 44 percent of the national
population was black and that, as a result, nearly 50 percent of the female population was also black. Carneiro and Santos urged that the "variable of color should be introduced as an indispensable component in the effective configuration of the Brazilian feminist movement" (1985, 41). However, noting white feminists' reluctance to address the issue of race, Carneiro and Santos argued that such an omission "means that, as black women, we must privilege the racial question over the sexual [question]. This is also because the oppression of black women in Brazilian society does not originate in biological differences, but in racial ones" (Carneiro and Santos 1985, 41).

Black women who have been active in black organizations have often been reluctant to become involved with the feminist movement. During a 1997 interview, Marta, an activist in the Belo Horizonte chapter of the Movimento Negro Unificado (United Black Movement, or MNU), offered the following assessment of the feminist movement: "The white middle-class feminist movement never ... even today it is hard for them to understand that we live a different reality from them.... A white feminist can go into the streets to protest on the 8th of March, while a black domestic is at her house working. ... So, our reality is different." Recognizing the differences in black and white women's life experiences and social locations is key to understanding why some black women have chosen to primarily struggle against racism or to be affiliated with black movement organizations, rather than women's organizations. As Marta explained: "I do not assume [claim/identify with] the term/feminist. ... I assume the following: I am negro. I am a woman. I am a mother. I am a woman who struggles for a better society. I am a worker. And within this condition, it is clear that I am a woman before anything else. ... I am a mulher negra (black woman). I am organized within the black movement. But I think that it is possible to exchange with these other sectors, but never in a subordinated position. I will not allow this in any way." When I asked Marta to expound upon her views of feminism, she responded by stating: "Perhaps I am a negra feminista (black feminist), but I am a negro before anything else. My starting point ... being a mulher negra (black woman) is fundamental for me." Instead of referring to herself as a feminista negra, as many black feminists do, Marta self-identifies as a negra feminista. This choice of terminology suggests that Marta's identity as a negra is one that is primary and permanent, while being a feminista is conditioned by her identity as a black woman.

Gender Politics in the Black Movement
While it is important to examine the challenges faced by black women in the Brazilian women's movement, it is also crucial to explore how the issue of gender has been addressed in Brazil's movimento negro, or "black movement." Since black women's experiences and identities have been profoundly shaped by both racial and gender politics, they have had the unique challenge of calling attention to the intersection of race and gender in the women's movement and the black movement.

Much like the women's movement, the black movement gained momentum during Brazil's transition to democracy. Between 1974 and 1985, the process of political liberalization generated increased space for racial contestation and mobilization by black activists. Brazil's emergent antiracist movement also found inspiration in African struggles for decolonization and the civil rights and black power movements in the United States. An increasing number of black movement organizations were formed in major cities throughout Brazil beginning in the mid-1970s. By 1988, there were 76 black movement groups in Rio de Janeiro and 136 black movement groups in São Paulo.

The founding of the Movimento Negro Unificado and a host of other black organizations during the late 1970s signaled the emergence of new forms of antiracist resistance. The nascent black movement played a crucial role in challenging the lack of both political democracy and racial democracy in Brazil. Prior to the establishment of the MNU, black organizations such as the Society for Brazil-Africa Exchange (SINBA) and the Institute for the Study of Black Cultures (IPCN) were founded in Rio de Janeiro during the mid-1970s. However, unlike black organizations that had previously been formed on the local level, the founders of the MNU sought to develop a movement that would be national in scope. From its inception, the MNU was designed to be an umbrella organization for other black movement entities. However, by the late 1980s the MNU had become one organization among many, rather than an overarching entity.

Despite the fact that black women have historically comprised a large percentage of the active membership of many black movement organizations, particularly in major cities such as São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Salvador, and Belo Horizonte, black men have traditionally dominated the leadership of most organizations. Sexism within the black movement became a major issue for many black women during the late 1970s and early 1980s. A sense of displacement was felt by a number of women who were active in the black movement during the 1980s. While their concerns about race largely went unheeded by the feminist movement, their concerns about gender were often marginalized by the black movement.

Many of the problems encountered by black women in black movement organizations during the 1980s continued to persist during the 1990s. Reflecting on gender politics in the black movement, MNU activist Marta noted: "It is clear that the black movement, like any other organization, is not immune to the effects of machismo and sexism. It is not immune. So,
Black women's increasing marginalization within the women's movement and black movement provided an impetus for separate organizing. During the early 1980s, separate groups focusing on the concerns of black women were formed within both women's organizations and black organizations. Black women's attempts to address the intersection of race and gender also led to increasing tensions within both movements. As Fátima Oliveira, an activist in the women's movement, black movement, and black women's movement at both the local and national level, observed:

The feminist movement had a lot of difficulty understanding this thing called "a questão da mulher negra" (the question of the black woman), and the black movement also had a hard time. So, I participated since the beginning in these conflicts in the black movement as well as in the feminist movement, since this debate began. ... This is because I was in both movements and black women had difficulties with both movements. If you were a black woman, as long as you were only a feminist you did not have a problem. There were always a lot of black women in the feminist movement. But people were just black women and just feminists, and they did not have a mapping of the racial question, so it did not cause a problem. But when you began to deal with the racial question more, to begin to understand it, to say that the feminist movement was not concerned with it, ... you began to be a troublemaker, a person who was seen in a bad light in both movements.

Silvia, an activist in the women's movement, black movement, and black women's movement in Belo Horizonte, made similar observations regarding the challenges of addressing the relationship between race and gender in the feminist movement and black movement. She noted: "White women have a lot of time understanding this. Because when we discuss ways to organize black women, we see that, when we are in the black movement men say, 'We are all black. We all suffer the same. It is all the same thing.' But we see that we have our specificities. ... We are active in efforts to politicize the intersection of these specificities in all instances."
black movement led to the formation of separate black women's groups during the early and mid-1980s. One of the first autonomous black women's organizations, Nzinga/Coletivo de Mulheres Negras (Nzinga/Collective of Black Women), was founded in Rio de Janeiro in 1983. The membership of Nzinga included pioneering black feminist Lélia Gonzalez, who participated in the organization in addition to her militancy within the MNU. The Coletivo de Mulheres Negras de Sao Paulo (Black Women's Collective of Sao Paulo) was formed in early 1984 in response to black women's exclusion from the newly formed Conselho Estadual da Condicion Feminina (State Council on the Feminine Condition, CECF). When the council was created by Governor Franco Montoro in 1983, it served as the first state-level council devoted to women's rights in Brazil. While the creation of CECF ostensibly reflected Montoro's commitment to including civil society in processes of state governance, his choice of thirty white women to serve on the council was criticized by black women (Alvarez 1990; Roland 2000). Black women's mobilization against CECF resulted in two black women being nominated to the council and the formation of the CECF Black Women's Commission. The black women who organized for representation on the council decided to continue organizing and subsequently founded the Collective of Black Women of Sao Paulo.

The Collective of Black Women of Sao Paulo was primarily composed of women who were active in black movement organizations. The group's efforts to achieve representation on the State Council on the Feminine Condition sought to redress the political invisibility of black women. Their efforts were noteworthy since they resulted in black women opening a dialogue with the state before the larger black movement or black male activists did (Roland 2000). The collective also galvanized efforts to create political dialogue among black women by organizing the First State Encounter of Black Women in 1984. The First State Encounter had more than 450 attendees, including black women from the state of Sao Paulo as well as black women from other states and black men. During the mid and late 1980s, black women's collectives and groups were formed throughout Brazil. Organizations such as the Coletivo de Mulheres Negras da Baixada Santista/Casa de Cultura da Mulher Negra, Grupo de Mulheres Negras Mãe Andreza, Centro de Mulheres de Favela e Periferia, Grupo de Mulheres Negras de Espírito Santo, Maria Mulher, Coletivo de Mulheres Negras de Belo Horizonte/Nzinga, Geledes, and Comissão de Mulheres Negras de Campinas were formed between 1986 and 1989 in the states of Minas Gerais, Sao Paulo, Maranhão, Espírito Santo, Rio de Janeiro, and Rio Grande do Sul (Roland 2000). Several black women's organizations were also formed during the 1990s. The Coletivo de Mulheres Negras do Distrito Federal, Coletivo de Mulheres Negras de Salvador, Criola, Eleeko-Instituto da Mulher Negra, Associação de Mulheres Negras Obotin Dudu, and Fala Preta Organização de Mulheres Negras were established in the Federal District of Brasília as well as in the states of Bahia, Rio de Janeiro, and Sao Paulo between 1990 and 1997 (Roland 2000).

Local black women's organizations have ranged in size from small, informal groups to professionalized nongovernmental organizations that receive international funding. Black women's organizations have developed areas of focus based on the needs of local populations and the expertise of their membership. Common areas of concern in many organizations have included reproductive health and sexual, racial, and domestic violence. Activists have targeted these issues in an effort to identify how they impact black women. The issue of female sterilization has been of particular concern to activists in the black women's movement given Brazil's high rate of female sterilization and a general consensus among activists that black women are targeted for forced sterilization.

Many black women's organizations are also involved in efforts to valorize and promote Afro-Brazilian culture and identity. A commitment to cultural revitalization is reflected in organizational names, such as Nzinga and Geledes, that reference African culture and history. The names of organizations, such as Criola and Fala Preta, also demonstrate attempts to resignify dominant racial discourses that have used the terms criola (Brazilian-born slave/black woman) and preta in a derogatory manner. Several organizations have also focused on promoting the self-esteem of black women through efforts to address topics such as self-help groups and community outreach. Workshops on hair braiding and African dance are often used as part of these efforts.

By the mid 1990s, the black women's movement was increasingly recognized as an autonomous political force. During a 1994 interview, Edna Roland, then director of the health program at Geledes: Instituto da Mulher Negra (Black Woman's Institute), a black feminist nongovernmental organization in Sao Paulo, commented on the organization's relationship to the women's movement and black movement. She noted:

We, Geledés as a whole, the organization as a whole, emerged from our perception and from our consciousness of the necessity for an autonomous organization for black women. Because as long as we remained, whether within the black movement or even in mixed organizations—of men and women—or within the feminist movement (women's organizations), we were not able to get the attention [needed] for black women. Black women were always the last item on the agenda, whether for black men or for white women. So, we consider ourselves to be an organization that is part of the black movement and part of the feminist movement, but we need to have
our own organization in order to have political force, in order to be
heard, in order to be a partner—a political partner within the black
movement and the feminist movement.

Further commenting on the effectiveness of black women's separate orga-
nizing, Roland noted: "The importance that has been given to our problems
today is much greater than it was, for example, six years ago, six or seven
years ago, when Geledés was created. Today, it is no longer possible for a
large encounter to take place, for a large conference to take place—whether
about blacks or about women—that does not give the question of the black
woman a large political space that is given a separate place of importance.
This is something that Geledés along with other groups of black women in
Brazil achieved."

Black Women's Mobilization at the National Level

The First National Encounter of the Black Woman in 1988 marked the emer-
gence of black women's collective organizing on the national level. The First
National Encounter was organized in response to the lack of discussion
about race and the experiences of black women during the Ninth Feminist
Encounter in 1987. The National Encounter of Black Women also coincided
with the centennial of abolition and the promulgation of the 1988 Brazilian
Constitution. Both events underscored the year's significance as a time to
rethink Brazilian history and the nation's future with respect to democracy,
equality, and citizenship.

The First National Encounter of Black Women provided a vehicle for
black women's efforts to influence Brazilian political culture during the
democratic transition. The encounter was held in Valença, Rio de Janeiro,
and was attended by 450 black women from seventeen states. The bulletin
from the encounter articulated black women's collective desire to shape
Brazil's future, stating:

All of us, black women, must understand that we are fundamental in
this process of transformation, demanding (reivindicando) a just and
equal society where all forms of discrimination are eradicated . . . .
We would like to clarify that it is not our intention to cause a diver-
sion in the social movements, as some sectors accuse. Our objective
is that we, black women begin to create our own references, that we
stop seeing the world through the lens of men, black or white, or
that of white women. The significance of the expression "create our
own references" is that we want to be side-by-side with black and
male companions in the struggle for social transformation; we
want to become spokespersons for our own voices in the

As-
The National Seminar on Black Women’s Reproductive Rights and Policies resulted in the publication of the *Declaração de Itapecerica da Serra das Mulheres Negras Brasileiras* (Itapecerica da Serra Declaration of Brazilian Black Women). The declaration outlined key issues affecting the reproductive health of black women and was presented to the Brazilian government and at the 1994 World Population Conference. This pioneering political document addressed the impact of population policies on poor and nonwhite communities and criticized the Brazilian state’s involvement in the realm of population policy through its involvement in formulating and implementing population control policies as well as through its failure to prevent the action of organizations seeking to limit population growth in the country. While noting that state policy on reproductive health tended to vacillate between coercion and neglect, the declaration proposed that the Brazilian state begin to treat reproduction as a private issue and provide the conditions necessary for reproductive freedom. The document also noted the growth of AIDS cases among black women and cited it as proof of the “lack of control that black women have over their sexuality and reproductive capacities” (National Seminar 1993, 2).

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In addition to addressing issues that affected the Brazilian population in general, including employment, sanitation, education, and housing, the Itapecerica da Serra Declaration also discussed factors that had a particular impact on black women’s reproductive health. The statement focused special attention on the need to develop public health policies for the prevention and treatment of illnesses, such as hypertension, sickle cell anemia, and fibroid tumors, that disproportionately impact black women.

The declaration also highlighted the importance of including racial data in birth, death, and health statistics in order to develop a profile of morbidity and mortality for the black population. By calling for racially specific health policies and statistical information, the declaration underscored the importance of race-evasive discourses in the area of public health.

Black women involved in health activism have argued that the medical community has traditionally paid minimal, if any, attention to the ethnic-racial dimensions of disease prevention and treatment. While statistical data on the black population, in the national and official documents, has long perpetuated this phenomenon, prevailing discourse on racial democracy has also fostered neglect of the racial dimensions of health and wellness. As a result, the prevention and treatment of illnesses whose disproportionate numbers have rarely been addressed.

The 1993 National Seminar on the Reproductive Rights of Black Women provided an important moment of collective mobilization for black women in preparation for the 1994 World Population Conference. During the 1990s, activists in the black women’s movement became involved in other significant forms of transnational organizing. A number of black women participated in the First and Second Encounters of Afro-Latin American and Afro-Caribbean Women in 1992 and 1995. These encounters were sponsored by the Network of Afro-Latin American and Afro-Caribbean Women and sought to foster dialogue among black women in the region. Black women also played a visible role in preparations for the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995. While the Brazilian government provided an official document, the Brazilian government also had a large showing during the National Conference of Brazilian Women that was held in July 1995. Black women’s involvement in the World Conference preparatory process resulted in the issue of race being incorporated in the Declaration of Brazilian Women for the 1995 World Conference on Women as well as in the official document of the Brazilian government. Moreover, as feminist Edna Roland has noted, in Beijing, the Brazilian government’s position defended by black women and their white allies associated with the movement to reassess and redefine the movement’s experiences and oppression. Autonomous organizing by black women facilitated the articulation of policy recommendations focused at the intersection of gender and race. Black women’s interventions in the area of reproductive health also highlighted the relationship between race, class, and gender in shaping reproductive autonomy. As the Itapecerica da Serra Declaration observed, “The drop in fertility happened in total disrespect to women’s reproductive rights, women were induced to surgical sterilization without other contraceptive options being made available. Sterilization has been erroneously considered a contraceptive method, safe and without negative effects, which should be demystified. International and national institutions stimulating this practice should also be denounced. The impact of mass sterilization of black women in Brazil can already be felt in the percentage decrease of the black population in this decade, in relation to the previous one” (National Seminar 1993, 4).

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objectives. The national meeting was organized by the Forum das Mulheres Negras in Belo Horizonte in cooperation with activists from Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. The Forum of Black Women in Belo Horizonte was composed of a small group of black women who were active in black organizations, women's organizations, black women's organizations, and political parties. The forum began meeting in April 1997 and the group's weekly meetings typically consisted of five to ten women and usually lasted for two to three hours. Soon after the forum's establishment, members of the group became involved in efforts to organize the national meeting of black women. As I mentioned in the introduction, conducting fieldwork in Belo Horizonte in 1997 allowed me to observe the preparations for the national meeting as well as to participate in the meeting as a nonvoting, invited delegate.

The original theme proposed for the national meeting was "O que nos une, o que nos separa" (What unites us, what separates us). Despite black women's relative success in challenging racism in the women's movement and sexism in the black movement, efforts at autonomous organizing have faced the difficulty of developing forms of organization that foster both unity and diversity. While in many ways black women are linked by common experiences and struggles, they are also divided by differences in class, educational background, sexual orientation, religious practice, and political affiliation. Regional differences and socioeconomic disparities between the more industrialized and affluent states of the south-southeast and the less industrialized states of the north-northeast have also increased the difficulty of organizing black women at the national level.

The main objectives of the 1997 National Meeting of Black Women were to discuss forms of organizing black women, identify common struggles and objectives, and discuss the relationship between the black women's movement in Brazil and the Network of Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Latin American Women. While they do so in different ways, each of these objectives addressed the importance of both fostering unity and acknowledging diversity among black women. In an attempt to defuse possible conflict between women from different organizations and regions of the country, the organizers of the national meeting requested that delegates at the meeting speak on behalf of themselves, rather than speaking as representatives of groups or organizations. The organizers also sought to prevent conflict over the issue of representation by allotting each state a number of delegates proportional to its size. This method was intended to allow adequate representation for all regions of the country.

The National Meeting of Black Women was held in Belo Horizonte in September 1997. Sixty-nine women from ten states were present at the meeting. While the meeting was largely focused on reenergizing and remobilizing activists in the black women's movement, restrictions on the number of delegates and limited financial resources prevented the national meeting from reaching a wider audience. One of the most important outcomes of the national meeting was the decision to forgo the development of a national-level organizing body for the black women's movement. During the meeting, delegates were given an opportunity to present their views on forms of organization within the black women's movement. There was a great deal of support for strengthening state forums of black women as a way to encourage collective exchange and mobilization. However, most delegates opposed the establishment of a national body within the movement. Ultimately, centralization of the black women's movement was opposed by a vote of forty-two to eight.

Although the majority of the delegates at the 1997 National Meeting of Black Women voted against centralization of the black women's movement at the national level, the question of how the movement would be organized in the future was left unresolved. While the absence of a centralized bureaucratic structure, such as a national commission, has allowed the black women's movement to avoid the complications of a hierarchical distribution of power and influence, it has been difficult for the activists to sustain momentum on the national level and maintain contact between organizations in different parts of the country. Aside from national meetings and seminars, most activists in the black women's movement are involved in initiatives on the local or state level. As a consequence, efforts to develop
and implement initiatives at the national level have been thwarted by the absence of national-level forms of organization. The views of two leading activists in the black women's movement, Fátima Oliveira and Edna Roland, exemplify divergent perspectives that shaped movement discourse during the mid to late 1990s. During an interview in August 1997, Fátima Oliveira expressed her view of the importance of maintaining a loose form of organization at the national level. She noted:

All of the difficulties that we are now living through in the black women's movement, I already lived through in the feminist movement here in Brazil. And the difference is of about a decade. What is happening now in the black women's movement happened about a decade ago in the feminist movement. The feminist movement, since its reorganization in the 1970s until now, it is older, more experienced, than the black women's movement. . . . We had moments in the feminist movement in Brazil; there were people who defended a federation of feminists, that there had to be a *dona* (head/owner) of the feminist movement in Brazil. . . . This caused fights at different moments, at different feminist encounters. . . . Because you had a faction of the feminist movement who argued that all feminists had to be tied to just one entity, with a single leadership, with everyone going to the same place. And life demonstrated that things are not that way. The feminist movement is a plural movement; it has a single objective which is to struggle against women's oppression. Now, how to struggle, how to do this, to my understanding this depends . . .

She went on to state:

The black women's movement, I think it is going to arrive at this stage. It is going to arrive at the stage where the feminist movement is today, without having a national leadership, because there's no need. This is a continental country. [We have to] learn to work with diversity, with plurality. We have to have common moments in order to define
bundleiras de luta (banners of struggle). So, in order for the future of the black women's movement in Brazil to be democratic, in order for it to be consequential, we will have to do what the feminist movement is doing today. . . . Because it is impossible . . . I do not think that there is a structured organizational form where we all fit. We, black women . . . we have differences of class, of ideology. So, there does not exist a form of organization, from this rigid point of view like people think of having a chefe (boss), a dona (head/owner), a president, where we all fit. And we are all part of the antiracist movement, so we are going to have to find a solution for ourselves.

Oliveira's observations highlight the difficulty of developing collective forms of organization that simultaneously promote diversity, plurality, and equality. Her critique of national-level organization centers on the importance of developing forms of organization that can accommodate the diversity of experience and opinion found amongst black Brazilian women. In contrast to the tendency to promote a single woman as the boss or owner of the black women's movement, Oliveira argues for the importance of maintaining egalitarian and democratic forms of organization within the movement.

Edna Roland's views on the need for national-level organization within the black women's movement were published in a written document provided to the delegates at the National Meeting of Black Women in 1997 as well as in essay form (Roland 2000). In her published essay, Roland stated that the outcome of the 1997 national meeting offered an "undefined position, which considers all forms of organization to be legitimate: networks, articulations, OONEN, etc." (2000, 250). In her view, the movement's failure to determine collective forms of organization has been due to "differences in conception" regarding the issue of autonomy (2000, 251). She noted: "With relation to differences in conception, there is an obvious contradiction between the sectors that consider that the black women's movement should organize itself autonomously, defining its own political agenda based on its political necessities, and the sectors that consider that the black women's movement is specific, but part of the black movement, and should subordinate its agenda to this movement, which is considered to be more general. . . . There also seems to arise, within the movement, an interest in subordinating it to the dictates of the feminist movement" (Roland 2000, 251, emphasis in original).

Roland also attributed differing views on the autonomy of the black women's movement to the different origins and political orientations of activists in the movement. She argued that black women's activism in the black movement, women's movement, labor movement, religious sectors, and political parties leads to different "conceptions and interpretations of reality, with different levels of emphasis on the hierarchies of race, gender and class" (Roland 2000, 251).

Examining the Views of Non-Activists

Making Time for Activism

While the emergence of an autonomous black women's movement highlights Afro-Brazilian women's recent efforts at collective organizing, it is important to note that the vast majority of black women are not involved in the movement. Sixteen of the thirty-five women that I interviewed can be categorized as activists in the black movement, women's movement, and/or black women's movement. Nineteen of the women were self-defined non-activists and were not associated with any of these movements during my field research. When questioned about their views of the black movement and the black women's movement, women who were non-activists responded in a variety of ways. Their responses ranged from statements that they had little or no knowledge of the black movement or the black women's movement to critical commentaries on the messages and strategies employed by activists.

One of the most favorable commentaries on activism came from Regina, the thirty-nine-year-old tax inspector and non-activist who was profiled in chapters 2 and 4. While Regina said that it would be hard for her to commit time to activism, she stated that she could see the potential benefits of sharing her experiences with other black women. She noted: "It is not that I am opposed to the black movement, but I am a little selfish. In order to participate in a movement, there are times when you have to meet with other people. And you have to create space in your life. You have to be available for these encounters, and I have not made myself available for this yet." Regina further said that the lack of widespread activism in Brazil could be seen as a cultural issue, rather than as an individual one, stating: "In general, people are not accustomed to participating, to reivindicar (demanding), to struggling for their rights in a collective and organized way. This is not common at all. Even where there are more popular movements, people are still not accustomed to participating. In terms of this, I am in the middle of the majority of people. If someone speaks, I will applaud. But as long as I do not have to leave my house on Tuesday at 7:00, or whenever. . . . The cause has to motivate me a lot to run after it."

While Regina's description of activism focuses on her personal difficulty in committing time and energy to social movement participation, it also points to the tremendous amount of personal sacrifice required by
activists. The small number of black women activists, in Belo Horizonte and throughout Brazil, has resulted in a large number of demands being placed on women who are active in social movements, in addition to their family and job responsibilities. During my interview with Ana, a forty-year-old member of the MNU in Belo Horizonte, she noted that her increased family responsibilities after her husband's death caused her to curtail her involvement with the organization. Activism in multiple movements—the women's movement, black movement, black women's movement, and political parties—also took a visible toll on a number of activists during my field research. One particularly active member of the Forum of Black Women suffered from physical exhaustion as a result of her efforts to organize the 1997 National Meeting of Black Women.

Critiques of Activism

Unlike Regina, the majority of non-activists with whom I spoke did not attribute their lack of political involvement to personal issues, such as a lack of time or scheduling conflicts. Instead, the overwhelming majority of non-activists were critical of the practices of black movement organizations. While conducting my interviews, I was often surprised when women who were involved in antiracist work would describe themselves as não militantes, or “non-activists.” I interviewed four women who were self-identified non-activists, but who were also actively involved in antiracist efforts through community organizing, working with Afro-Brazilian children, and participation in Afro-Brazilian cultural practices, such as capoeira.

Non-activists' views of activism challenge many of the assumptions that undergird both activists' and scholars' views of antiracist mobilization in Brazil. In many ways, non-activists' critiques of the black movement and black women's movement highlight the shortcomings of both movements as they have been conceptualized and constituted. Their critiques also suggest that a number of black women in Belo Horizonte have made a conscious decision to be non-activists because they do not agree with the philosophies and/or strategies associated with activism in the black movement or black women's movement.

Several non-activists expressed concern about how blackness has been defined by activists in the black movement. Adriana, a thirty-one-year-old graduate student and non-activist who was profiled in chapter 4, felt that activists should begin to focus more on the importance of education as a way to combat discrimination and encourage social mobility, rather than promoting culturally and aesthetically based views of blackness. In her opinion, wearing African clothing and “natural” hairstyles was simply not enough. I also spoke to two non-activists, Maria and Teresa, who said that they had a perception of black organizations as being fechadas (closed) and fundamentalist in orientation (see Burdick 1998b). Since Teresa was involved with antiracist work as the director of an Afro-Brazilian nongovernmental organization in Belo Horizonte, her critical view of the black movement was rather unexpected. Teresa's critique of the black movement underscored the need to address issues of difference and individuality within the movement. As she noted: "I am a little opposed to certain forms of militancy; they can be very closed. . . . [They say,] 'You are black; you have to wear your hair this or that way; you have to be raça; you have to use all types of African clothing because you are black.' Wait a minute! I am violating that person. And I think that this happens a lot within the movement. . . . I think that the discussion is still at this point, and I think that it needs to be much broader than this. . . . I think that there is an alienating fundamentalism in this discussion. They are becoming alienating fundamentalists and almost Shitites: it is like this; if not, you are outside."

Teresa also faulted some activists for speaking on behalf of the black community, rather than having an ongoing relationship or dialogue with community members. Her criticism centered on many activists' failure to develop trabalho de base (grassroots work). Teresa described trabalho de base as being an organic connection based on political work that seeks to educate and empower the povo negro (black community). Teresa also defined her position as the director of a nongovernmental organization that worked with Afro-Brazilian children as trabalho de base, rather than as militancia (militancy or activism). While Teresa distinguished between trabalho de base and militancia in reference to the black movement at large, this distinction is also relevant to the black women's movement.

Focusing on the differences between trabalho de base and militancia provides important insights into ways that activists in the black women's movement can reach non-activists. Although a number of black women's organizations have developed trabalho de base in local communities throughout Brazil, there is also a strong tendency for women to be involved in activism without having close ties to local communities. In Belo Horizonte, most members of the Forum of Black Women were activists whose political work took place within one or more of the following types of organizations: black organizations, women's organizations, black women's organizations, or political parties. Only one of the twelve members of the forum was involved with race- or gender-focused organizing at the grassroots level. During my field research, the largely insure nature of the black women's movement seemed to prevent the recruitment of new activists and stymie the movement's growth. My observations of the black women's movement in Belo Horizonte also indicated that most of the women who attended events sponsored by the movement were already involved with activism. Many activists tended to attend political meetings and movement events, rather
than become involved with local communities. The lack of contact between activists and non-activists was highlighted by the fact that many of the non-activists whom I spoke were unfamiliar with the black women's movement and the Forum of Black Women. Many non-activists were also unaware that the National Meeting of Black Women was scheduled to take place in their city.

One of the ongoing challenges facing the black women's movement is how to reach women who have minimal knowledge of or interest in activism. My frequent conversations and interactions with non-activists in Belo Horizonte provided important insights into some of the reasons why women who self-identify as mulheres negras and who have a heightened awareness of racism and sexism are not involved in the black movement or black women's movement. These women's experiences and reflections suggest that examining non-activists' views of the black movement and black women's movement is crucial to understanding how these movements can develop a larger membership and reach a wider audience.

**Class Cleavages and Activism**

During my field research, class differences among Afro-Brazilian women also emerged as a salient factor that prevented the expansion of the black women's movement and limited the movement's effectiveness in addressing the concerns of impoverished Afro-Brazilian women. During my initial meeting with Valdete da Silva Cordeiro, who was profiled in chapter 5, I asked her about the black movement's presence in her neighborhood, the favela of Alto Vera Cruz. She promptly responded by saying that the black movement did not have a presence there. Valdete also looked at some of her acquaintances who were present during our meeting to confirm her statement. They all shook their heads in agreement with her statement. This encounter further underscored their marginalized status in relation to the black movement's presence in their city.

My interview with Maria Ilma Ricardo, who was also profiled in chapter 2, further highlighted the ways in which class differences among Afro-Brazilian women have created distance between activists in the black women's movement and non-activists. I interviewed Maria Ilma the day after the National Meeting of Black Women ended in September 1997. During the interview, Maria Ilma stated her belief that poor black women, particularly domestic workers, were not represented at the meeting—either physically or in terms of their interests.

Maria Ilma's comments were supported by my observations of the 1997 National Meeting of Black Women as well as during several other political meetings sponsored by the black movement and black women's movement. During these meetings, it was commonplace for an audience member to criticize the speakers for failing to address the concerns of domestic workers. The absence of domestic workers, as both speakers and participants, at these meetings further underscored their marginalized status in relation to these movements.

While class dynamics within Afro-Brazilian communities are a complicated subject that has rarely been addressed in academic research, class cleavages seem to have a profound impact on the ways in which activists in the black women's movement, as well as the black movement, prioritize issues and develop strategies for combating gender and racial inequalities (see Burdick 1998b). Many of the activists that I came into contact with in Belo Horizonte, as well as in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, were either lower-middle-class or comfortably middle-class black women. Many of them had post-secondary educations and were employed in the non-manual, professional sector. Given the occupational profile of most Afro-Brazilian women, as described in chapter 2, the educational and occupational backgrounds of many activists in the black women's movement distinguish them from the majority of Afro-Brazilian women. Disparities in life experiences and class status among Afro-Brazilian women are likely further compounded by unspoken and unconscious class privilege, which may create blindness to the experiences and struggles of less-privileged women.

My conversations with non-activists and observations of the black women's movement highlight the importance of activists addressing class divisions among black women in order for the movement to successfully represent the interests of all black women. As recent research suggests, the living conditions and day-to-day struggles of many poor women of African descent prevent them from becoming involved with antiracist or feminist activism (Goldstein 2003). Activists in the black women's movement will likely have to find new and creative strategies to develop grassroots work that is shaped by the needs and values of poor women. It would probably also be fruitful for activists in the black women's movement to collaborate with community activists, such as Valdete, who have already developed successful initiatives in favelas and impoverished rural communities.

**Constructing a Collective Political Identity for the Mulher Negra**

Debates over autonomy and national forms of organization within the black women's movement provide important insights into activists' struggles to articulate a collective political identity for black women. As has already been
noted, socioeconomic, political, religious, and regional differences among black women have increased the difficulty of representing them in monolithic terms. Key questions associated with articulating a collective political identity for black women include how they should be represented and which issues should be prioritized in the struggle against racial, gender, and class domination.

Despite the challenges associated with collective organizing, the black women's movement highlights the relationship between historically constituted group identities, shared standpoints, and collective political action (Collins 1998). In an analysis of group identity among black women in the United States, Patricia Hill Collins has observed: "On the macro level, schools, labor markets, the media, government, and other social institutions reproduce a social position or category of 'Black woman' that is assigned to all individuals who fit criteria for membership. One does not choose to be a 'Black woman.' Rather, one 'finds oneself' classified in this category, regardless of differences in how one got there" (1998, 226–227). In Brazil, the historically constituted group identity of mulheres negras operates along similar lines. Dominant social institutions and discourses have constructed a collective social identity for black women, an identity that exists despite differences of class, region, and educational level. Similarities in black women's social identities and life experiences across classes and regions further underscore the existence of mulheres negras as a social group in Brazil.

Activists in the black women's movement have both called attention to and sought to transform the group identity of black women. However, as the views of non-active participants suggest, the relationship among identity, experience, and activism is not an automatic one. Instead, many of my informants' experiences indicate that Afro-Brazilian women's possibilities for collective self-definition and self-determination are enhanced when group-based experiences are used to "create the conditions for a shared standpoint that in turn can stimulate collective political action" (Collins 1998, 224).

Challenging dominant discourses on mestizaje essentialism and racial democracy has been central to activists' attempts to reconstruct black women's identities. As previous chapters have shown, Brazilian constructions of race and gender have functioned in mutually reinforcing ways, at the level of discourse, structure, identity, and experience. Brazilian notions of mestizaje essentialism have long objectified Afro-Brazilian women and relegated them to the status of second-class citizens. By calling attention to black women's social, political, and economic subordination, activists in the black women's movement have challenged the ideological hegemony of mestizaje essentialism and racial democracy from a gendered perspective.

While black Brazilian women have encountered difficulties in their attempts at collective organizing, their efforts have produced changes at the level of public discourse as well as in the lives of individual women. Silvia, a member of the Forum of Black Women in Belo Horizonte, made the following observation about the importance of black women's activism:

*I think that we are muito guerreiras (very much warriors). I think that we have advanced a lot by recognizing our identity, our specificity. We proved ourselves; we fought; we struggled. I think that we have advanced a great deal. I think that black women have a lot to celebrate, with all of these years of victory. Even with all of the disorganization in our form of organizing, it is real. It exists and it is there to bring a different direction to this country… Even with this precarious form that social movements tend to have and the small amount of infrastructure that we have... we have contributed to creating a more humanitarian and just society, without discrimination and that respects differences.*

## Conclusion: Deepening Democracy and Broadening Citizenship

Black women's collective organizing has played a fundamental role in challenging racism and sexism as well as in reconceptualizing the significance of democracy and citizenship in Brazil. Given the larger political context of Brazil's recent transition to democracy, the efforts of black women activists demonstrate collective attempts to claim rights and political space within a re-emergent civil society. This process of claiming rights highlights the long-standing social and political disenfranchisement of black women. In many ways, black women's emergence as political actors since the 1970s has sought to challenge their lack of citizenship rights before, during, and after Brazil's most recent period of military rule.

The emergence of black feminism and an autonomous black women's movement highlights black women's efforts to redefine citizenship in ways that challenge dominant discourses and practices related to race and gender. Black women's activism during Brazil's transition to democracy also demonstrates the resonances and dissonances between the cultural and political dimensions of citizenship in the country. In many ways, the claims to full citizenship made by black women provide crucial insights into the ways in which struggles for cultural citizenship may continue long after formal citizenship rights are granted.

In recent decades activists in the black women's movement have attempted to highlight the specificities of black women's experiences and challenge their oppression within Brazilian society. By calling attention to the existence of black women as a social and political force, the movement has made a major contribution to the demystification of racism and sexism.
and to the reconstruction of black women’s identities. Although the number of activists in the black women’s movement remains small in comparison to the total black female population, movement activists have played a strategic role in bridging the struggles against racism and sexism and bringing them to the fore of political discourse in Brazil. Moreover, despite internal divisions within the movement, it stands as an important example of the potential that collective action and mobilization focused at the intersection of race and gender hold in Brazil.

By refusing to remain in their socially ascribed place, black women activists have contributed to defining new standards for citizenship and democracy in Brazil. Their efforts have involved the claiming of new rights and the constitution of black women as active citizens and social subjects. Moreover, by claiming their rights to full citizenship, black Brazilian women have engaged in the struggle to create “a multiracial and multicultural society, where difference is taken and lived as equality and not as inferiority” (Carneiro 1990, 219).

Epilogue

Re-envisioning Racial Essentialism and Identity Politics

Ethnographic exploration of Afro-Brazilian women’s processes of subject formation and forms of political practice highlights the disjuncture between recent scholarly conceptualizations of essentialism and my informants’ everyday experiences and practices. The preceding chapters challenge anti-essentialist views of race and identity politics in at least two significant ways: first, by underscoring the psychological and political importance of valorizing self-identification as a mulher negra in a national context where whiteness and racial hybridity are privileged and blackness is denigrated and, secondly, by highlighting the social and political significance of black women’s collective mobilization around issues of identity and self-representation.

Reconstructing Blackness

Recent developments in Brazilian racial discourses provide an interesting and important contrast to critiques of racial essentialism that have been made by U.S. and British academics (Appiah 1985, 1992; Appiah and Gutmann 1996; Gilroy 2000; Hall 1996; Ifekwunigwe 1997). The increasing importance of racialized black subjectivities in Brazil runs counter to anti-essentialist views of race that have been proposed in recent scholarship. In contrast to the scholarly trend toward non-essentialist views of blackness, in Brazil the process of constructing black identities has often been premised on the rejection of ostensibly more fluid color-based discourses in favor of bipolar conceptualizations of race (Skidmore 1993). Examining recent