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## The Making and Silencing of “Axé-Ocracy” in Brazil: Black Women Writers’ Spiritual, Political and Literary Movement in São Paulo

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October 2019

## The Making and Silencing of “Axé-Ocracy” in Brazil: Black Women Writers’ Spiritual, Political and Literary Movement in São Paulo

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## **The Making and Silencing of “Axé-Ocracy” in Brazil: Black Women Writers’ Spiritual, Political and Literary Movement in São Paulo**

By Sarah Ohmer<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

In this article, I will focus on two influential writers from the south of Brazil, Cristiane Sobral who currently lives in Brasília, from Rio de Janeiro, and Conceição Evaristo who currently lives in Rio de Janeiro state, from Minas Gerais. I got to know them in São Paulo in 2015 at a public event: the “Afroétnica Flink! Sampa Festival of Black Thought, Literature and Culture.” I will include references to some of their younger contemporaries such as Raquel Almeida, Jenyffer Nascimento, and Elizandra Souza, all of whom reside in São Paulo, in order to illustrate the Black Brazilian women writers’ resistance in the face of silencing of their spiritual, political and literary movement. Witnessing the obstacles that the two authors faced at a public event that honored their foremother Carolina Maria de Jesus, a Black Brazilian Female writer, and seeing how Sobral and Evaristo overcame those challenges, helps to grasp the context in which their younger contemporaries Raquel Almeida, Jenyffer Nascimento, and Elizandra Souza, are coming of age as adult women writers. This article offers an auto-ethnographic rendering of the “Flink!Sampa” Festival, where the two prominent writers Cristiane Sobral and Conceição Evaristo were visibly marginalized, as well as a close reading of poetry by Raquel Almeida. A close reading of poetry by Raquel Almeida dedicates space to the stark reality of violence against Black women as it pervades the Brazilian life, and is an integral part of Black women’s poetry, calling out the violence that shapes the multi-layered oppression and silencing of Black women. Throughout the article I will point out the poetic, political, and spiritual prowess that inspires, guides, and gracefully dictates how to overcome institutional oppressions in Brazil and other parts of the world where women of African descent have to struggle to live, to make money, and to write.

*Keywords:* Contemporary Literature, Brazil, São Paulo, Black Women, African Diaspora

### **Introduction**

Each part of this study presents a construction of social participation and creativity that is concurrent with the constant ambivalence, antithesis, and dialectic tension characteristic of Black Feminist thought production and activism (Hill Collins, 1990, p. xxvii). With the support of poetry, auto-ethnography, and theory, I will demonstrate that in a 21<sup>st</sup> century Brazil that continues to oppress them institutionally, physically and symbolically, Black female writers create and act in

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[https://academicworks.cuny.edu/do/search/?q=author\\_lname%3A%22Ohmer%22%20author\\_fname%3A%22Sarah%22&start=0&context=5800691&facet](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/do/search/?q=author_lname%3A%22Ohmer%22%20author_fname%3A%22Sarah%22&start=0&context=5800691&facet)

the shaping of a political, literary and spiritual resistive movement that I choose to coin intuitively, intentionally, and in line with Black Brazilian women's knowledge production and values as, *axé-ocracy* (pronounced "ashay-ocracy").

In a context of state-directed, codified, and economic oppression and suppression, Black Brazilian women writers resist in action and in writing. Via social action and literature, they create a sociopolitical and symbolic space that engages utopias/imagination/dream-making as indispensable to thriving, and empowerment beyond mere survival. In order to create a world in which Black Brazilian women are respected and empowered agents of change, this space of imagination is nurtured and inspired by *axé*: by the ancestral knowledges and by the rooted solidarity of the Afro-Atlantic Diaspora and its religions. The created/creating/real-and-imagined sociopolitical and symbolic world recognizes spirituality as the force that provides and guarantees human rights and citizenship in the face of oppression. This is what I call *axé-ocracy*, a term inspired by Brazilian intersectional Black feminist theory, by Black Brazilian female writers' words—some heard, others published—and in dialogue with other Black female literary critics specialized in Afro-Latin American contemporary literature.

*Axé-ocracy* is a political poetics that works to establish equity via spiritual empowerment and community building. It encompasses poetry, prose, theory and activism that articulate a spiritual and political movement for equity, and the recognition and dream-making of Black women's rights in Brazil and other parts of Latin America. In order to create citizenship, social organization and ruling (-ocracy, from the Greek *kratos*, to rule) that respects, values, and empowers Black women, ruling based on *axé* counters the current "racial democracy"<sup>2</sup> that excludes Black women's rights and upward social mobility.

Here, I intend to define and present how to make use of *axé* and *orí* (a Yoruba religious concept of human-soul consciousness, spiritual intuition and destiny) in a theoretical framework with an unorthodox scholarly article format that includes poetic prose, photo-essay, a call and response format, and direct addresses to the reader.<sup>3</sup> I present an auto-ethnographic case study of an instructive and sisterly morning with Conceição Evaristo and Cristiane Sobral at Flink!Sampa, and a close reading of poetry by Raquel Almeida to create a call and response aesthetic with spiritual incantation intentions.

### **Black Women's Resistance in Brazil and Brazilian Literature**

Black women intellectuals and community leaders have actively contributed to Black Brazilian advancement and human rights activism since the turn of the twentieth century. Though they were not consistently made visible in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Black São Paulo newspapers such as *Clarim do Alvorada*, black women consistently emphasized their role as national founders against the "mãe preta" Black mother reductive symbol of enslaved wet nurse sacrificial mother figure (Alberto, 2011, p. 126). Their foremothers participated in maroon rebellions and military strategy

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<sup>2</sup> The term racial democracy has a long history in Brazil. Influenced by the works of Gilberto Freyre in the 1930s and 1940s, Brazilian political and economic elites (mostly white) argued that because there was no formal segregation in Brazil as there was in the United States, race did not pose a barrier to success in the country. Since then, the myth of racial democracy has veiled the very real systemic racism in Brazilian society.

<sup>3</sup> I refer to *axé* intuitively, though not loosely, humbly referencing the energies, spiritual practices, and radical tools for transgression, transformation, healing, solidarity, and communion, in use in "variations of traditional Yoruba religion, an alternate religious system that survived the African slave trade and is often marginalized in the Americas. Blended with Catholicism in the New World, it is known as *Regla de Ocha*, *Lucumí*, or *Santería* in the Spanish Caribbean and the United States, and *Candomblé Nagô* in Brazil." (Valdés, 2014, p. 1)

as well as Black communities in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and before (Butler, 1998, p. 826). Since the 1970s, around the time that many dictatorships in Latin America ended, Brazil witnessed a boom in Black culture and political movements, and Black female poets participated in this boom (Oliveira, 2008, p. iii). Women such as Miriam Alves and Esmeralda Ribeiro and Sonia Fatima da Conceição founded the Quilombhoje Collective, coordinated Literary Salon conferences and the publication of literary criticism and publications (Afolabi, 2009, p. 56). They infused literature and human rights activism with Black Brazilian and African Diasporic symbols and belief systems (Oliveira, 2008, p. iv). Though the contributions of Black Brazilian women have shaped literature, culture, and politics, they are seldom presented as a collective and significant contribution to Brazilian literature and to Latin American women's movements.

In "Transgressive Acts," literary critic Lesley Feracho (1999) claims "Brazil is one country whose Black women writers have used literature as a forum for addressing social and political concerns." (p. 38) This is in part due to the peculiar context of race, gender, and class in Brazil. In "The Black Woman in Brazil," anthropologist and activist Lélia Gonzalez (1981) explains that in Brazil, the violence against Black women is connected to a symbolic system that codifies Black women as inferior and poor, from a racial and ethnic perspective (pp. 320-321). A large part of the codification occurred in literary and national imaginary discourses during the 19<sup>th</sup>-century foundation and mapping out of Latin American nations.<sup>4</sup> From the novel *Úrsula* by Maria Firmina dos Reis published in 1859, to the 20<sup>th</sup> century canonical works of poetry and diaries by Carolina Maria de Jesus (Feracho, 1999, p. 42), to 21<sup>st</sup>-century anthologies published by São-Paulo based Black female literary collectives such as Louva Deusas and Mjiba, Black women have resisted the codified oppression via literature.

Cristiane Sobral and Conceição Evaristo are both associated with the state and the city of Rio de Janeiro. Cristiane Sobral is a few decades younger and inspired by Conceição Evaristo, and she is from the city of Rio de Janeiro. Conceição Evaristo is a native of the more rural and landlocked state of Minas Gerais, and currently lives in the state of Rio de Janeiro. Sobral lives in the nation's capital, Brasília, with a career as a playwright, government employee, actress, director, poet, short story writer, and mother of two, married to her husband. Evaristo owns a home over an hour out of the city of Rio de Janeiro, where she takes care of her adult disabled daughter. She is retired from a career as a social worker with a PhD in Literature. She has published a novel translated into multiple languages, three books of short stories, two additional novels, and various books of poetry. In Brazil, Evaristo is the most recognized, studied, and cited Black Female Brazilian writer, though she would not admit it or allow anyone to claim that without citing the hundreds of women who write and publish alongside her.

Among those in Conceição Evaristo's generation, Miriam Alves stands out as a poet, novelist and short story writer. Alves made a living as a social worker in the north periphery of São Paulo and continues to write while retired. She attends various cultural events, festivals, and tours the nation with invitations to read and sell her books.<sup>5</sup> Alves has taught as a Visiting Professor in U.S. universities, and lectured in Europe, the U.S., and other parts of Latin America.<sup>6</sup> Esmeralda

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<sup>4</sup> The foundation of Latin American nations in the long 19<sup>th</sup> century was happening with individuals who were simultaneously lawmakers and creative writers or poets. This had racial and gendered implications, as Tanya Saunders explains in *Cuban Underground Hip Hop: Black Thought, Black Revolution, Black Modernity* (2015). For more information on the connections between the fields of literature and policy-making in Latin America, see Aarti Madan (2017), Jerome Branche (2006), Angel Rama (1996), Doris Sommer (1991).

<sup>5</sup> For Miriam Alves, see *Bará*, her first novel (2018) and *Mulher Matriz*, her most popular book of short stories (2011). These are the two books that she has been circulating the most at book signing events.

<sup>6</sup> See Alves (1995).

Ribeiro, also in São Paulo, has an established career as a journalist; she is renowned for being the co-editor of the annual publication of *Cadernos Negros* for the Black Literary Collective Quilombhoje. *Cadernos Negros*, or Black Notebooks, is an annual volume of Black Brazilian Literature, of poetry one year, and of short stories, another year. *Cadernos Negros* comes out annually, usually in December, and is currently on its 41<sup>st</sup> edition.<sup>7</sup> With fiction writer and poet Sônia Fatima da Conceição, and novelist and poet Geni Guimarães, these women make up a core part of the generation of women writers who began publishing at the cusp of the Brazilian democratization, in 1970s Southeast Brazil.<sup>8</sup> Their younger contemporaries include Raquel Almeida (*Sagrado Sopro*, 2017), Jenyffer Nascimento (*Terra Fertil*, 2015), Elizandra Souza (*Punga*, 2013; *Pretextos de Mulheres Negras*, ed., 2014; *Águas da Cabaça*, 2015), Mel Duarte, and Cidinha da Silva, among many others who have published on social media, in print, and in digital publications in São Paulo, Brazil.<sup>9</sup>

### **Towards a Definition of Black Brazilian Women’s Political Agency and Leadership, or “Axé-Ocracy”**

Axé-ocracy is at once aesthetic, theory, and praxis. The Black Brazilian female writers cited above inspired me to coin this term to showcase to readers and other scholars the spirituality-based strategies that combat political shifts and act against continued inequity and discrimination. The collective body of axé-ocratic work from the 1980s, 1990s, and 21<sup>st</sup> century Black female literature presents a heterogeneous vision for a better world that provides political and socioeconomic agency by making use of the “axé” within—including earth, fire, wind, water and orixá spirits that connect Black women to their ancestors, and to their inner and outer goddesses. Axé-ocracy drives one to transform herself, the genre of poetry, the city of São Paulo, the nation of Brazil, and other parts of the world, in order to allow space for Black female bodies, souls, and rights.

Carla Akotirene defines intersectionality and black feminism as inherently spiritual in Brazil in *O que é interseccionalidade? What Is Intersectionality* (2018). She asserts that being a part of the Afro-Atlantic Diaspora and inheriting historical memories that remain in the Middle Passage, deep at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean, makes clear that Black Brazilian women’s herstories and knowledges have been transported through memory and spirits (Akotirene, 2018, p. 10). For her, the spiritual import of knowledges, along with the centuries-old history of spiritual resilience and resistance from a dehumanizing life in bondage, justifies a definition of intersectionality as inherently spiritual. It is a mind-soul interconnected framework, apparent in

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<sup>7</sup> For information about the current and past issues of Quilombhoje, visit their website

<http://www.quilombhoje.com.br/site/> and for an English reference on the history of Quilombhoje’s *Cadernos Negros*, see *Cadernos Negros/ Black Notebooks: Contemporary Afro-Brazilian Literary Movement* (2008).

<sup>8</sup> By Sônia Fátima da Conceição, see *Marcas, sonhos e raízes* (1991); *Ser negro, povo, gente: “uma situação de urgência”* (1982); *Conselho de Participação e Desenvolvimento da Comunidade Negra* (1985); *Literatura e afrodescendência no Brasil* (2011); and various publications in *Cadernos Negros*. By Geni Guimarães, see *Terceiro filho* (1979); *A cor da ternura* (1989); and many more publications

<sup>9</sup> See Mel Duarte’s website, <https://www.melduarte poesia.com.br/> and her books include: *Fragmentos de Poesia* (2014), *Negra na Crua* (2016), and her first edited volume, an anthology with a prologue by Conceição Evaristo *Querem Nos Calar: Poemas para Serem Lidos em Voz Alta* (2019). Cidinha da Silva has published over 20 books including chronicles, poetry, short stories, children’s literature, plays, essays and edited volumes, some titles: *Um Exu em Nova York* (2018); *Africanidades e relações raciais* (2014); *Engravidei, pari cavalos e aprendi a voar sem asas*, a play put on by the troupe “Os Crespos” (2013); *Racismo no Brasil e afetos correlatos* (2013); *Kuami* (2011); *Cada Tridente em seu lugar e outras crônicas* (2006).

both action and in written resistance (Akotirene, 2018, p. 19). Other works reinforce these connections: in *Oshun's Daughters: Women of the Diaspora*, Vanessa Valdés points out the indispensable work of recuperating the links between literature and spirituality in Black women's literature (Valdés, 2014, p. 5). Kim Butler likewise describes the religious phenomenon of Candomblé as an indispensable manifestation of resistance in the Afro-Atlantic Diaspora culture that inevitably unfolded after the mass forced migration of Africans to Brazil in *Freedom Given, Freedom Won: Afro-Brazilians in Post-Abolition São Paulo and Salvador*. She explains that “decades immediately following abolition in each of the slave societies of the Americas and the Caribbean opened a unique opportunity for African descendants to redefine themselves and their roles in the nations in which they lived. For [Eugenia Anna] dos Santos<sup>10</sup> and her followers, this meant reconnecting themselves to an African heritage and spirituality.” (Butler, 1998, pp. 61-63)

The collective work of Black Brazilian women intellectuals and activists makes up several centuries of theory, praxis, and aesthetic of collective governance that embodies axé-ocracy based on Candomblé practices and beliefs, or a praxis of political leadership and agency. Axé-ocracy has roots in 1800s Black Brazil, emerges in the 1970s, takes shape in the mid-1990s, and currently booms in the face of heightened systemic oppression *femicídio* or femicide in Brazil and Latin America. Women, particularly Black LGBTQ women, continue to be targets of violent physical suppression. The politician and activist Marielle Franco who was brutally and unjustly assassinated in the streets of Rio de Janeiro in 2018, #mariellepresente, remains in our hearts and minds as one of too many faces representing the multiple acts of violence against women of color's livelihood.<sup>11</sup> The current government in Brazil promotes a platform that legitimizes hate crimes and violence against women and LGBTQ individuals, in stark contrast to the axé-ocratic governance promoted by Black Brazilian women intellectuals and activists.

I came into physical contact with Black Brazilian women's knowledge production and values when I met a dozen writers and three literary collectives during a year of field research in São Paulo from 2014-2015, where I witnessed the intersectional oppression first hand and experienced the impact of their literary and social resistance. As I read their works prior to meeting them, I interacted intuitively, spiritually, and sensually with their work. As I attended their performances, and spoke with some of them one-on-one, I discovered that the discursive resistance

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<sup>10</sup> Eugenia Anna dos Santos (born July 13, 1869 to Sergio dos Santos “Aniyo” and Lucinda Maria da Conceição “Azambriyo”, is recorded to have been an influential community leader as early as 1910, with parents self-identifying as Brazilian *and* Grunci, one of the African nações of Bahia. Eugenia, also known as Aninha, became a devotee of Maria Julia Figueiredo, the senior priestess of a candomblé house's daughter, became a child of Ketu with the name Oba Biyi. She is remembered here as one of the most ardent defender of Yoruba traditions in Bahia, northeast Brazil. Butler recognizes these connections when she states: “Assisted by a babalawo, a diviner trained in Nigeria, [Eugenia Anna dos Santos] dedicated the land to Xangó, the patron deity of the kings of the Oyó Empire,” so that her generation and those following would spiritually enter a special land, now ‘baptized’ as spiritually and sacredly African, thanks to a ritual learned from elders in the Motherland and on the other side of the Atlantic. (Butler, 1998, pp. 58-60, 827-831)

<sup>11</sup> Marielle Franco was a Rio de Janeiro city council member who remains present in the hearts and lives of her family, her partner, and global #BlackLivesMatter and LGBTQ+ activists. A government official allegedly ordered her assassination and two police officers—Elcio Vieira de Queiroz and Ronnie Lessa—have been declared suspects of her shooting, which occurred on March 14, 2018. Marielle is from the Maré favela of Rio de Janeiro, and her daughter Luyara Santos and the rest of her family honor her memory and her struggles, as does her partner, Mônica. Current investigations are linking the Bolsonaro administration to both suspects, while other Brazilian citizens of color have been targeted by state-generated violence. Since the 2014 Ferguson protests in the United States, similar marches and protests have rising to bring attention to the genocide of Black Brazilians by Brazilian police and Military Police (PM) officers in favelas. These deaths include those of Black Brazilian women such as Cláudia da Silva Ferreira, Aurina Rodrigues Santana, Luana Barbosa dos Reis, and many more.

included striking spiritual components coming from the Afro-Atlantic Diaspora religion of Candomblé, a religion with origins in Yoruba culture that is sometimes compared to Santería in Cuba. It became clear to me that Black women's resistance in literature went hand in hand with Afro-Atlantic spirituality. It became urgent to my work that I develop a framework for literary analysis and fieldwork that made room for spirituality, for *axé*, for *orí*.

As I notice how much spirituality infuses discursive, literary, and activist resistance in 21<sup>st</sup> century Black Brazilian women's work, I embrace the fact that poetic resistance is inherently spiritual in Black women's work. During my brief stay from September 2014 through July 2015 in Brazil, where I lived mostly in São Paulo, I realized that this poetry was also very political, and more concretely poetic than symbolically poetic, all the while functioning to repair symbolic codifications. With this experience, today I define Black Brazilian women's poetry to mean that *axé-ocratic* poetry is not poetic in the sense of I-think-therefore-I-am-luxury.<sup>12</sup> It is concretely poetic in the sense that survival is at stake, and the poetry happens, originates, is inspired in and acted out in the streets as much as in the pages of Black women's self-published books.<sup>13</sup> Their foremothers' and their Afro-Atlantic Diasporic cultures' spiritual components imprint the aesthetic of Black Brazilian women's poetry. The presence of the earth, the rivers, the ocean, the storms, the rain, has a precise purpose here. It calls attention to and includes the "orixás" or Candomblé deities connected to various elements of the physical realm, while connecting humans to the spiritual realm. The orixás have offered hope, meaning, direction, peace, fierceness, otherwise known as *axé*, to Black Brazilian women for centuries. In the face of daily oppression, on the shoulders of literary goddesses who resist through literature, and at the heart of the Afro-Atlantic Diaspora, Black Brazilian women writers inspire me to label their literary movement as a form of written resistance that offers a new approach to nation-making and citizenship: *axé-ocracy*.

The format of this article channels *axé-ocracy* as it blends traditional literary criticism, poetry, and offers a spiritual ritual-in-theory with anecdotes from the author, a Black woman daughter of a Malagasy mother and White French father, biracial, bi-national, French and American, looking for meaning in and making meaning with Black women's Literature in the Americas. I remember my American sisters' blood, shed in the foundation of American nations,

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<sup>12</sup> Here, I am invoking Audre Lorde's points in the essay "Poetry is Not a Luxury" from 1985, published in *Sister Outsider* (2007). Poetry by Black women is understood as a mode of survival with a sociopolitical purpose towards change, both personal and collective: "The white fathers told us, I think therefore I am; and the black mothers in each of us—the poet—whispers in our dreams, I feel therefore I can be free. Poetry coins the language to express and charter this revolutionary awareness and demand, the implementation of that freedom. However, experience has taught us that the action in the now is also always necessary. Our children cannot dream unless they live, they cannot live unless they are nourished, and who else will feed them the real food without which their dreams will be no different from ours?" (38) Her essay is widely accessible online; it can be read in its entirety here: <https://makinglearning.files.wordpress.com/2014/01/poetry-is-not-a-luxury-audre-lorde.pdf> and here <http://sites.utexas.edu/lscjcs/files/2017/07/Lorde-Poetry-Is-Not-a-Luxury.pdf> and on other online venues.

<sup>13</sup> During the Ferguson protests in the United States, the Black Movement in Brazil organized several protests in support and solidarity of the Black Lives Matter movement ([https://www.vice.com/pt\\_br/article/8q4dax/ferguson-sao-paulo-protesto-manifestacao-brasil-racismo](https://www.vice.com/pt_br/article/8q4dax/ferguson-sao-paulo-protesto-manifestacao-brasil-racismo) & <https://www.africanglobe.net/headlines/inspired-ferguson-afro-brazilians-streets-protest-police-violence/>). While marching in protest in the heart of São Paulo with over 800 Black Brazilians and allies, I ran into Raquel Almeida, who was also marching. As we walked around downtown São Paulo, in between chants and coordinated choreographies, she shared with me that her book *Sagrado Sopro* was finally published, that the boxes of new books had shipped to her house that week. The opening poem of that book clearly denounces the state and municipal police abandonment of Black bodies, analyzed further below in the article. I can't think of a better example of protest in action and in writing. Meanwhile, she shared with me that this victory was bittersweet—her debit card had been the target of fraud, and a friend was helping her pay for the books while she was trying to figure out how to feed herself and her daughter without a viable debit card, savings, or credit.

and shed in the birth of more sisters multiplying the resistance... I call out the bloody hands who took our foremothers' lives, and I call in our foremothers whose blood shed as they resisted heteronormative patriarchy and capitalism.... I ask myself, I ask you, to remember with us, whose blood is on this hand...



**Figure 1: Photo taken by the author, untitled.<sup>14</sup> 2015.**

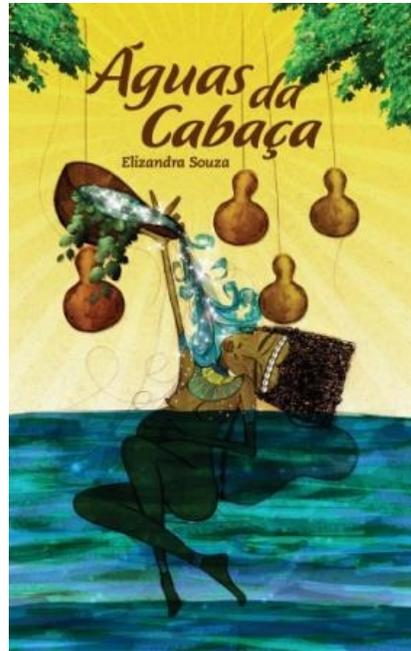
In São Paulo, Black female poets offer spiritual spaces of resistance, in spoken word and published poetry, that provide strategies for efficient activism and self-care rooted in Afro-Atlantic Diaspora spiritual values. They work against or in the face of continuous displays and legislative acts of white supremacy, misogyny, and homophobia. This can be seen in the work that they do in person, in print, and on social media.

For example, Elizandra Souza's latest book of poems, *Águas da Cabaça* (2015), the cover features a Black woman bathing in sweet waters, reminiscent of the sweet water goddess Oshún in Candomblé. The bright yellows in the cover art echo the goddess's colors. Inside, the poems consistently refer to oppression, and to resistance that Black women enact in São Paulo and other parts of Latin America, guided by spiritual connections to their ancestors. Many poems are dedicated to ancestral knowledges: "Coroa Imperial" on dreadlocks as imperial crown; "Cadência

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<sup>14</sup> I use the photographic image as a chorus in this article, accompanying the multi-genre axé-ocratic essay to include visuals and a chorus. I will later describe what is depicted in the photo, and have left the description for later intentionally, so that the reader focuses on the image rather than the sculpture and the artist who did this sculpture.

Sagrada” on the sacred rhythm of life and creativity inspired by ancestors and *axé*; “Tecendo Memórias” on the ability to store memory in the body, hair, and poetry, with the spiritual intent to honor ancestors’ knowledges. On the back cover, her contemporary Mel Adún declares that the book is a clear manifestation of Elizandra Souza’s connectedness with her ancestors, and her *Orí*.



**Figure 2: Elizandra Souza’s *Águas da Cabaça*, Cover art by Renata Felinto (2015). Image reprinted with permission.**

In similar vein, Raquel Almeida has established strong connections between the art of poetry and African ancestry. Raquel Almeida co-founded the literary collective “Elo da Corrente” that meets monthly in a local bar, Bar do Santista, located in a marginalized urban neighborhood on the northwest periphery of São Paulo. They invite community members as well as renowned or emerging artists and creative writers to a monthly “Sarau,” or open mic and spoken word gathering. Each month, the open mic/spoken word begins with a drumming ritual. The co-founders and guests open the evening with drumming and chants to call on ancestors for protection and inspiration. The collective Elo da Corrente celebrated their seventh anniversary, which coincided with Black Consciousness Month in November 2014, with a day of live music. The event was produced by Raquel Almeida and featured national and international Black musicians such as Aláfia, Gerson King Combo & Banda Supergroove, Ba Kimbuta & Banda Makomba, local bands Samba do Congo and Samba Delas and local DJ Vivian Marques.<sup>15</sup> The collective thus brought live music to the neighborhood of Pirituba in northwest São Paulo, where most residents could not afford to attend live concerts and knew little or nothing about these famous local and international Black Brazilian bands or music. Raquel Almeida produced a musical event that recognized, valued, and offered access to entertainment, pleasure, expression, and creativity. She connected her neighborhood to their *axé* through music, dance, open mic and spoken word.

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<sup>15</sup> For a description of how each band is connected to Afro-Atlantic Diaspora and spirituality, see the collective Elo da Corrente’s blog entry describing the day of music: <http://elo-da-corrente.blogspot.com/2014/11/>



Figure 3: Poster for the Elo da Corrente 2014 Black Consciousness Month Event, produced by Raquel Almeida. Permission to use image by Raquel Almeida.

## Our Bodies and Spirits in Parallel: Axé-Ocracy in Literary Practice



**Figure 4: (Still) Untitled and unreferenced photo, taken by the author in 2015.**

To perform a #sayhername “parallel” with the ethnographic rendering of literary marginalization below, I would like to analyze Raquel Almeida’s poetry in her second book of poems that was published in 2015, *Sagrado Sopro*.<sup>16</sup> I use the term “parallel” politically and poetically and spiritually here, or as an act of axé-ocracy. The opening poem “Sunday Parallel” reminds readers that in the “racial democracy” of Brazil, a parallel reality exists that wherein Black women dying in the streets. This parallel deserves our attention and an urgent call for change. Further below, I will relay an experience shared with Black women writers at a Literature Festival, but here I dedicate space to analyze a poem that depicts a Black woman in the *quebrada* or streets of São Paulo.

*Sagrado Sopro* by Raquel Almeida begins with a heart-wrenchingly sincere dedication to a sister abandoned on a sidewalk in her neighborhood, and a heartbreaking reference to the Sunday ritual of barbecues in the *quebrada*.<sup>17</sup> The sun, the heat, a cold *cerveja* (beer), the sound of a sizzle

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<sup>16</sup> Raquel Almeida is part of the same generation as Elizandra Souza and Cidinha da Silva, who continue the work of and collaborate with Esmeralda Ribeiro, Miriam Alves, Sonia Fatima da Conceição, Conceição Evaristo, Carolina Maria de Jesus, and their foremothers from centuries before, described above as axé-ocrats.

<sup>17</sup> Slang word meaning “the streets” in Portuguese; also refers to the periphery or the “projects” in Sao Paolo. It literally translates as the pavement, and as “the broken female one.”

and smell of charred meat... Raquel Almeida reminds her readers in the first pages of her book that, those Brazilian, American, Latin American Sunday habits, have a different meaning in the epistemology of Black women's axé-ocracy, a governance anchored in Afro-Atlantic Diasporic spiritual principles and, at the same time, anchored in the very real violence that accompanied the birth of these spiritual principles in the middle passage.

"Paralelo dum domingo," a stark word play on barbeque and a woman's body frying on the sidewalk, left behind by the police. This places *Sagrado Sopro* in the quebrada—or life in the urban periphery of São Paulo, reflecting realities in Brazil and throughout the Americas. The poem's sounds are very much a part of painting the scenery—"assa, assa, assa" (sssizzle, sssizzle, sssizzle). In this poem, Raquel recalls how one of our sisters was ignored, under a sheet on the streets: "Fragments, carcasses, frying, frying, homewrecking, a body laid to fry," Almeida writes. Memories flow, memories weighted like boulders, memories fried from the hot sun that uncovers them, a violent remembrance that blinds.

In a "Race for Theory," Barbara Christian explained that all a Black Feminist critic has to do is give the literature by Black women a space. The literature says it all, and speaks for itself. The ungendered flesh that Hortense Spillers speaks of in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" is portrayed poetically in Raquel Almeida's poem.<sup>18</sup> Spillers defines Black women's flesh ungendered in the context of global capitalism's enslavement of Black women as they were "seared, divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship's hole, fallen, or 'escaped' overboard." (Spillers, 1987, p. 67) By portraying a Black woman's flesh left to "Assa, assa, assa," Almeida's poem renders why it remains difficult for Black Brazilian women's voices to be published, heard, read, critiqued. Despite centuries of institutional evolutions in various parts of the Americas, the flesh remains defined and marked by captivity (Montero, 2018, p. 2). Contextualizing the work of Black Brazilian women writers in the flesh, in the sssssizzle, sssssizzle, sssssizzle, suffices to substantiate why our voices systematically remain unpublished, unheard, unread, uncritiqued. Is it because we say too much? Because we [Black women] tell you [whomever won't listen or show willingness to understand] whose hands make us bleed, whose blood is on your hands, and whose blood has been shed, and for what? Do you wonder whose blood hand is on this hand... anyway...?

The flesh ungendered in *Sagrado Sopro*, is embraced, enlaced; it is not left alone on a street under a sheet, frying under the sun, no, it comes enveloped with the *axé*, and remembered into spiritual healing elements and the ancestors' nurturing breaths. The land, the four elements, nature and the ancestors are prominent throughout the book. Many poems include references to the ocean, the moon, sweet waters, sometimes as elements, other times as orixás. Some poems even feature some scenes reminiscent of Candomblé rituals: a moonlit ocean swim, an argile mud bath, a basil herb bath, etc., that connect the book of poems to healing rituals prescribed by a Mãe de Santo or intuitive individual connection with orixás.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Here, I imply that Almeida's poem illustrates a 21<sup>st</sup> century Black Brazilian "scene of unprotected female flesh- of female flesh 'ungendered'" (Spillers, 1987, p. 68) that is reminiscent of the logic that surrounds capitalism and slavery: "Slavery throws into crisis the ethical presumptions of modernity; living and dying operates in an entirely different field of relations for those who are denied the possibility of life in the first place." (Montero, 2018, p. 2) The female flesh ungendered is the unprotected flesh in a physical sense, and in a theoretical/philosophical sense that does not in any way essentialize Black women's bodies or render them as objects of study, but, rather, thinks from the very scarred, captured, tortured, sssssizzled women's bodies and their souls: "[which] offers a praxis and a theory; a text for living and for dying, and a method for reading both through their diverse mediations" (Spillers, 1987, p. 68)

<sup>19</sup> Please, see and read her poems: "Preciso beber da fonte ancestral"; "Mund'agua"; "Se um dia eu cantar pra o mar"; "De Terra que Renasço"; "Evocação."

In general, the poems are consistently structured, each time building up to a climax, ending in a surprising or hook-like ending. A lot of Almeida's poems are told from an unknown third-person poetic voice, sometimes addressed from an unknown "você," and other times from an unknown I-poetic voice, or a well-defined I-Poetic voice that is markedly close to, similar to, that of the poet herself. In some instances, an unknown part of Nature is the focus of the poem.

*Sagrado Sopra*, the latest book of poems by Raquel Almeida (her first book was co-authored, this was her first self-authored book), is dedicated to her grandmother, her daughter, and all women. It is chockfull of wordplay: play with sounds and puns, play with structure and layout of the words on the page. These are Almeida's specialties. It is a female poet warrior's (s)wordplay, with an endgame of Black female empowerment.

For this 21<sup>st</sup> century Black Brazilian female poet, nature is not a reflection of her emotions, like it would be for a 19<sup>th</sup>-century Creole Brazilian romantic. Here, nature is a site of interconnection for the poetic voice's heart-soul-mind-body-orixá-poetry. *Sagrado Sopra* reinvents romanticism, a 19<sup>th</sup>-century literary genre that witnessed the birth of American nations, as *axé-ocracy*: poetry as dream-making-nation-altering-spiritually-empowering literary genre. Almeida confronts other American canonical poetic tropes—the "poet god" poem, for instance, a trope often associated with poets such as Rubén Darío, Baudelaire, etc., which reminds me of a Black female 21<sup>st</sup> century take on a european-male-creole-male-avant-garde symbol. She calls herself a God-Poetess and calls upon the Earth and ancestors shaping her communal sense of self as creator. The I is We, and Deus-Poeta encompasses more than one individual or even the human body, as I/We-mind-soul-body/ies. Without the ventriloquism of Alejo Carpentier or Nicolás Guillén<sup>20</sup> that harked back to an African past they may or may not have spiritually connected to in their poetry, the drum beats and Afro-centered onomatopoeias in Raquel Almeida's poetry are not essentialist; they are interconnected to spirituality and nature and intergenerational struggles for Black women's sensual and creative and societal freedom.

Almeida creates a Black Female Writing or Escrita Mulher negra metapoetry, with several poems about poetry with black women's bodies and sensuality and neologisms and nature at the center of creativity ("Deus-Poeta", "Sou", "Uterinação." "Não Durou Nada"). Finally, with Samba in the background, and sometimes introduced as a character in a poem, in *Sagrado Sopra*, the city of São Paulo that I found so quiet on one Saturday morning, on my way to a Black Literature Festival, becomes ungendered flesh, a site of writing from the torn, tortured, measured, but also beautiful, sensual, desirous, desiring, desired, spiritual, axé-ocrat Black woman.

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<sup>20</sup> Two renowned early-mid 20<sup>th</sup> century Cuban poets often associated with Black Caribbean literature and wrongfully presented as emblematic Afro-Latin American literature.

**Axé-Ocracy in Practice: An Ethnographic Case Study of Black Brazilian Women Writers Conceição Evaristo and Cristiane Sobral, and a partial answer to “Whose blood is on this hand, anyway?!”**



**Figure 5: A Sculpture in the “Latin America Memorial” Plaza. Photograph by the author**

It was a warm, overcast, yet bright morning. Very quiet for São Paulo standards. Perhaps because it was extremely early on a Saturday. I felt excited for several reasons. I was on my way to a literature festival organized by the Palmares University of São Paulo—a university committed to Black education. The theme was Carolina Maria de Jesus, an inspiration for most writers that I was studying on a nine-month Fulbright research trip in Brazil<sup>21</sup>. The panel I was going to attend featured major figures of Black Brazilian literature: Conceição Evaristo, an award-winning novelist, poet, doctor of Literature, professor; and Cristiane Sobral, an award-winning playwright, actress, director.

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<sup>21</sup> De Jesus was a favela dweller whose diaries were edited and published in the 1960s. The revenue from book sales allowed her to leave the favela, and to publish a total of three full length books. Her works, particularly *Quarto de Despejo* and *Bitita's Diary*, continue to inspire and influence Black women writers today, who reference her one of the greats of Black Brazilian literature. The harsh realities of Brazil's myth of racial democracy, and the unfair invisibility that occurred after her books were published, in stark contrast to the popularity and book sales that occurred after her head, led Carolina Maria de Jesus to a lonely death and continued financial struggles. But her spirit lives on in today's writers who are also from marginalized neighborhoods of São Paulo.

I felt ecstatic.

I was coming from Vila Madalena, an upper-class, majority white neighborhood where I was renting an apartment in a condominium complex and where, daily, I was reminded I did not belong. By the residents, by my landlord, by the staff in the cafeteria.

I looked up directions to get to the Memorial of Latin America, next to the Barra Funda station for metropolitan subway and suburban trains. One bus would take me there directly. I started taking screen shot after screen shot, to capture the whole route on a newly acquired iPhone 5c, yellow. I purchased my first smart phone shortly before my trip, a \$50 purchase that I could afford with the Fulbright start up fund. The iPhone put together by underage Chinese girls was instrumental for Black feminist fieldwork in Brazil, and the tragic irony was not lost on this author. With the smart phone device, I could pull up an address on corporate Google maps that makes Black businesses less visible than white businesses in the United States. I would pull up the route with wifi paid for by the Southeast Brazil upper class racist white Brazilian landlord. I would do this each time I needed to get somewhere to do field work in the oppressive megalopolis, knowing I would not have wifi access once I was out there, in the *quebrada*. Out there, I could pull up the GPS on my phone, and follow the blue dot to situate my Black female self and compare the blue dot to the screen shots of the route, to see if I was headed in the right direction. I also asked for help, but my Portuguese at the time was not at its best, and sometimes, often times, I was too tired, or my social anxiety was too unmanageable, to interact in Portuguese.

That warm, overcast, yet bright Saturday morning I would quickly get tired, but I was driven by excitement. On the bus I went, checking my phone periodically, and mildly containing my excitement. I was on my way to see Conceição Evaristo again, and to see Cristiane Sobral, again. Two major figures of Black Brazilian literature.

The walkway from the massive Barra Funda station connects into the Latin America Memorial complex, but I took a bus and went around, getting lost, as I usually did on my way to every event in São Paulo. The Latin America memorial is gated all around, quite inaccessible, actually. What is it about Memorials and lack of access? They are hardly inviting to those looking forward to and deserving of commemorating Carolina Maria de Jesus. This particular irony continued through the day. In an event honoring a Black woman writer, there were symbolic and literal gates keeping Black women writers out. Hardly inviting to those looking forward to and deserving of the time to honor their foremother, Carolina Maria de Jesus, an established Black Brazilian female author most known for her work produced in 1950-70s São Paulo, specifically two autobiographical non-fiction books, *Quarto de Despejo* and *Bitita's Diary*.

The irony of the Palmares Foundation marginalizing these women, by the end of the day, was outrageous. After all, not only were women as well as men fundamental participants in Palmares, but the foundation uses its name to make a claim to uphold and advance justice and equality.

The Palmares Foundation is named after the largest runaway slave settlement in 17<sup>th</sup>-century Brazil, located in the Northeast of Brazil and known for resisting Portuguese and Dutch colonizers for almost 90 years.<sup>22</sup> Palmares was no small maroon settlement. With over 30,000 people built in Serra da Barriga, a mountain range in the state of Alagoas. The leaders of the community were Dandara, Acotirene, Ganga Zumba, and Zumb (also known as Zumbi dos Palmares), all of whom remain iconic in the collective memory of Black Brazilian activists. Zumbi is known for dying for the community's freedom during the height of the resistance against the

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<sup>22</sup> See *Quilombo dos Palmares*, Carneiro, 1958. Also see Augel (1992), Anderson (1996), Carneiro (1988), Rassner (1984). On Quilombo as Literary Activism, see Duke (2013), Afolabi (2012), Oliveira (2008).

Portuguese and the Dutch, on November 20, 1695. The anniversary of his death is commemorated every year as National Black Awareness Day, and November is Black Consciousness Month in Brazil. The Palmares Cultural Foundation is a government-created institution. In 1988, the federal government created the Foundation. Its task was to manage finances and promotions of actions that would benefit the Afro-Brazilian community, but the Foundation's legitimacy remains questionable, according to Black activists (Duke, 2012, pp. 39-40).

In terms of Black Brazilian Resistance and Black Brazilian Female Poetic Resistance, Palmares and Zumbi have been staple references of hope and infinite sources of inspiration. In "The State of Zumbi's "Palmares" According to the Poets," Dawn Duke explains:

Poetry does not remain lodged within historical fact of Zumbi's defeat and the destruction of Palmares; poetic value is in the fact of Palmares's edification and in symbolic illustrations of martyrdom, ancestrality, and spiritualization. Quilombo, Palmares, and Zumbi have *fundamental ideological roles within contemporary spaces of black movement militancy, in politics, and the Arts. Poetry takes on the challenge of psychological confrontation with pain and suffering, in the expectation of individual capacity to overcome and thrive.* This poetic context, while specific to Brazil, has a deeper diasporic intention. Quilombo as interaction and shared legacy makes Palmares an allegory for Brazil, an extension of Africa, and with potential for duplication everywhere as the same space repeating itself for a people whose legacy is connected, complex, and in continuous construction. (52)

So, whose blood is on this hand, anyway. The blood that runs through the palm of a hand in the middle of the Latin American Memorial in São Paulo reminds me of Zumbi and numerous brothers and sisters who have lost their lives in the plight of resistance, from the time of the Middle Passage through the 21<sup>st</sup> century, confronting pain and suffering in life *as well as the poetic confrontation.* In poetry, pain and suffering meets "the expectation of individual capacity to overcome and thrive," Dawn Duke explains. Black Brazilian women poets challenge images of martyrdom and infuse them with empowerment, construction, and connectedness. Even in a literary festival where they are pushed to the side, in a small room at a time of day where no attendees have arrived, the female poets who are revered in most Black activist circles infuse their marginal position with "capacity to overcome and thrive."

The Latin America Memorial plaza was quiet for a mega literary event. They were still setting up most rooms and booths. A large curtain of bracelets commemorating the great Carolina Maria de Jesus was being put up:



**Figure 6: Photograph by author. 2015.**

The bracelet entrance would make for a colorful background for a great many selfies, taken by attendees who may or may not have read Carolina Maria de Jesus' work, and may or may not understand or even read her words printed on multicolor drapes.



**Figure 7: “Those who write it will not be extinguished.” Photograph by author. 2015.**

The irony of the very quote on the bracelets was not lost on this author. “Those who write it will not be extinguished.” And yet, the whole event was dedicated to a Black Brazilian woman writer who was not adequately recognized throughout her life—she was briefly recognized, though even then only for her descriptions of the favela rather than her capacity as a writer. She passed away without recognition and received a series of honorary celebrations on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her death. Meanwhile, at the event honoring her death, or her extinction, her successors were actively suppressed, symbolically and physically extinguished. First, as I checked the program, building location, and checked again, I could not find Conceição Evaristo and Cristiane Sobral’s names in the program. Secondly, when I found the building where I finally realized that their lecture would take place, it was locked. I asked around, checked again. Thirdly, as the booths selling literature started setting up, neither of the author’s books were put up for sale or prominently publicized.

The sun was beating down already at 8:30 a.m., and I wondered where the crowds were to welcome the amazing Conceição Evaristo and Cristiane Sobral, at this Black university's literary festival. I took a walk around and found my way back to the library auditorium. There they were, the award-winning writers, Conceição Evaristo and Cristiane Sobral. I had not lost my excitement, but their demeanors were sober, to say the least, and I could tell that they had not been welcomed correctly to the event. This is a look one gets in Brazil, particularly, among Black women, when there has been significant discrimination that makes a hard day even harder. In the United States, one may refer to the expression as a "side eye," or a look of justified discomfort. Something was clearly wrong, and I could tell, but I was not close enough to either Cristiane Sobral or Conceição Evaristo to ask them.

Over lunch, I listened while Cristiane Sobral and Conceição Evaristo unpacked the truths about the literature scene in São Paulo, the Palmares University's intentions around organizing this event, and the various ways they had been shown disrespect on their trip down to the Flink! Sampa Literature Festival. Cristiane Sobral had to negotiate how to book her way from Brasilia and find her own place to stay and transport to the venue. Because the event organizers did not prepare a booth for her to sell her books, and she had plenty of readers at the event wanting to buy them, she rolled around a suitcase full of self-published books that she had to sell herself. The festival organizers had promised her a space to sell her books, but they did not provide a table, or advertising, on site, and they did not accept to receive or pay for shipping to have her books mailed to the event in advance. Cristiane Sobral was therefore faced with the only option to sell books on her own: literally out of her suitcase. She sold them next to a human sized bright colored cardboard announcement of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, standing next to an intricate pyramid of the Nigerian author's books.<sup>23</sup> At a Black Brazilian literature festival, a Black Brazilian author sold her book out of a suitcase.

The program featured major authors as two of "three of the best specialists in the life of Carolina Maria de Jesus" who had "lived experience as women and students of the author." The mediator never showed up to mediate. Other male writers of African descent, as well as Black women writers from the United States and Great Britain, were described in the program as "notable Brazilian writers."<sup>24</sup>

In another panel, the award-winning Conceição Evaristo, who has published multiple books, some of which were translated into multiple languages, was described as a male moderator ("debatedor"), while other comparable panel participants are described as "one of the best Brazilian filmmakers" ("um dos maiores cineastas Brasileiro") or Nigerian novelist ("romancista nigeriana").<sup>25</sup> Another emerging published author from São Paulo, Elizandra Souza, was described

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<sup>23</sup> This book received extensive publicity all over Brazil and Brazilian bookstores, while hundreds of African-descended Brazilian novels, poetry, plays, anthologies, remained off of shelves and without publicity.

<sup>24</sup> "9h –Mesa: Letras Carolinianas: Gênero, Violência e Atitude Feminista com Conceição Evaristo, Raffaella Fernandez e Cristiane Sobral. Mediador: Uelinton Alves (who was absent) Mesa com três das melhores especialistas na vida e na obra de Carolina de Jesus, todas com abordagem da escritora mineira sobre aspectos e visões particularizadas com base em experiências vividas como mulheres e estudiosas da autora do Quarto de despejo. / 9a.m. – Panel: Carolinian Literature: Gender, Violence, and Feminist Behavior with Conceição Evaristo, Raffaella Fernandez and Cristiane Sobral. Mediador: Uelinton Alves (who was absent). A panel with three of the best specialists on the life and work of Carolina de Jesus, each having experience to discuss the literature from Minas Gerais and its particular perspectives, concepts, based on the lived experiences as women who study the author of *Quarto de Despejo*."

<sup>25</sup> "16h –Mesa: Três Vezes Carolina com: Conceição Evaristo –Diário e Escrita Feminina ... Cada debatedor falará cerca de 15 minutos, com abertura de debates para o public. / 4p.m.- Panel: Three Times Carolina with – Conceição

as panelist in the program (“palestrante”). Cidinha da Silva, an established author and renowned critical race theorist, was limited to the administrative role “Coordinator of Information Distribution for the Palmares Foundation” on the program (“Coordenadora de Disseminação de Informações da Fundação Palmares).

The program section of the bookstore stand, named after Zumbi dos Palmares, includes only one slot for a Black Brazilian author—a modest mid-morning slot on the first day of the festival: “10h45—A escritora Cristiane Sobral autografa o livro *Só Hoje Vou Deixar o Meu Cabelo em Paz* (Ed. Teixeira).” Cristiane Sobral did not have a table or chair to sit at, a shelf on which to display her books, and not even a sign with her name on it. A pop star author received a full set up, and the Nigerian novelist’s book *Americanah* was placed in a prominent central space in the Zumbi dos Palmares Bookstore Booth. The 10:45 a.m. slot did not lead to any foot traffic, hardly any attendees had arrived.

Literally or symbolically set aside at a 9 a.m. panel as “debators” unworthy of the title of award-winning author on a program or website, was the impression that the Palmares Foundation’s Flink! Sampa Black Culture Festival left imprinted on my experience. Unless they are dead and can be commemorated by an actress and found objects behind glass at a gallery, like Carolina Maria de Jesus’s commemoration in the middle of the Festival that made Conceição Evaristo, Cristiane Sobral and myself shudder and mourn the loss of a great writer that was never truly appreciated as a living author, the Flink! Sampa Festival honoring Black culture and literature made it clear that it was most comfortable honoring Black women writers only once they were dead or from abroad rather than alive and from Brazil.

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Evaristo, the diary and feminist writing. ... each presenter will speak for about 15 minutes, with time to open for conversation with the public.”



**Figure 8: Photograph by author. 2015.**  
**The sculpture depicted is soon to be described and explained.**

The image depicted above, and repeated throughout the article, is a sculpture of a hand, raised vertically. In the middle of the hand one can see blood shedding, which outlines the geographic boundaries of Mexico, the Caribbean, and South America, and blood trickles all the way down to the ground. The hand and blood mark suggest Latin American past oppressions and revolutions of independence and struggles for freedom, and the sacrifices that were made. Implicit is that the struggles are in the past, that Latin American nations are coming together, and that the struggles and the coming together are male, and Creole/Spanish/Portuguese descent, not Black, nor indigenous, nor female. It is located in Barra Funda, a central neighborhood of the city of Sao Paulo, Brazil, and was developed by Brazilian anthropologist Darcy Ribeiro, who designed the “Latin America Memorial”. Barra Funda is a neighborhood with a long Black history as Kim Butler notes in *Freedoms Given, Freedoms Won*. In Barra Funda, the Latin America Memorial complex was inaugurated in 1989 and includes various buildings spread over 900,000 square feet

that completely erase and bury the district's iconic history. The sculptor, sculpture title, and Memorial designer are purposefully left out of being associated with the image, until now.<sup>26</sup>

The experience of invisibility, discrimination, and cult of the dead Black female writer or English-writing Nigerian writer, can be compared to the "Sunday Parallel" victim left to sssssizzle on a sidewalk of the quebrada. The wishes that we make on fita bracelets are coming true while our sisters are left to die: as long as we write, we will not be forgotten. And as long as we are alive and attempting to thrive, our bodies will be hypersexualized, and our lives threatened to end in hypercapitalist societies that were founded on our bodies as sites of labor production and nothing else. Black women are left to die on sidewalks, their award-winning literature set aside as non-existent until 50 years after their death, in the Brazilian nation that promotes "racial democracy," a slogan that came to define the nation as it objectified and oppressed its people of African descent. After all, Carolina Maria de Jesus reminds us with *Diario de Bitita/ Bitita's Diary* (2017) Carolina Maria de Jesus claims that similar to the words she puts on paper, she cannot be erased, and that she is a Black Brazilian citizen. And so, as long as we write, we will not be forgotten, nor will our sisters who perished in the streets, not in vain, nor will our foremothers who wrote without recognition, not in vain, nor our ancestors who fought for independence in Palmares, not in vain, nor will our sisters who were assassinated by government officials, not in vain. We will not be forgotten, we will not be erased, we will not be extinct, extinguished or even set aside. We will right ourselves into the past, the present, and the future, not in vain, and rule with our ashé.

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<sup>26</sup> Oscar Niemeyer titles the sculpture depicted in the photograph "Mão." 1989 marks the year of the first direct, two-round presidential election in Brazil after the military regime that lasted 1964-1985, and after the 1988 Constitution. 1989 also marks the year that Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva ("Lula") and the Workers Party earned significant national support. The very first presidential election was in 1894, the second first presidential election was in 1946, and the third first presidential election was in 1985 (there was a dictatorship known as the "Vargas Era" from 1930-46). At this point, the multi-genre essay takes on the photo-essay genre.

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