

## **Cantigas e loas de mestras negras da cultura popular afro-brasileira: por uma pedagogia engajada radical de/com mulheres**

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### **RESUMO**

O presente artigo tem como objetivo analisar os discursos e produções de sentido engendrados nas cantigas e loas de mestras negras da cultura popular tradicional afro-brasileira e do grupo de mulheres percussionistas Baque Mulher. Considerando os aspectos socioculturais e religiosos, assim como as trajetórias de vida e artísticas, foram analisadas as letras de loas e cantigas com o objetivo de evidenciar se e de que modo os elementos artístico-culturais dessas mulheres produzem discursos de combate ao machismo, ao racismo e outras formas de opressão, e, portanto, articulam perspectivas e estratégias educativas populares, decoloniais, feministas e antirracistas, no sentido da emancipação das mulheres. Conclui-se que a pedagogia engajada presente nessas práticas artístico-culturais aponta para a produção de uma perspectiva brasileira, decolonial, feminista e afrodiaspórica que contribui para a superação das desigualdades e para a construção de uma sociedade radicalmente fundada na justiça social.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Cultura popular. Mulheres. Gênero. Educação. Arte.

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## **Songs and *loas* of black female masters of afro- brazilian popular culture: towards a radical engaged pedagogy of/with women**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The objective of this article is to analyze the lyrics of songs composed by black masters of traditional afro-brazilian popular culture and the female percussionist group “Baque Mulher” to understand the discourses and meanings disseminated in these songs. The study considered the sociocultural and religious aspects, as well as the life and artistic trajectories of the authors. It was possible to observe how the artistic-cultural elements present in the environments where these women live allowed the production of discourses that combat sexism, racism and other forms of oppression. In this way, they articulate popular, decolonial, feminist and anti-racist educational perspectives and strategies that enable the emancipation of women. It is concluded that the engaged pedagogy present in the practices analyzed points to artistic-cultural creation from a brazilian, decolonial, feminist and afro-diasporic perspective that contributes to overcoming inequalities and to the construction of a society founded on radical social justice.

**KEYWORDS:** Popular culture. Women. Gender. Education. Art.

## **Cantigas y loas de maestras negras de la cultura popular afrobrasileña: por una pedagogía comprometida radical de/con mujeres**

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### **RESUMEN**

Las canciones y cánticos compuestos por maestras negras de la cultura popular tradicional afrobrasileña y el grupo de percusionistas “Baque Mulher” son objeto de estudio en este artículo con el objetivo de analizar los discursos y posibles significados engendrados en estas creaciones. Los aspectos socioculturales y religiosos, así como las trayectorias de vida y artísticas de las autoras fueron considerados en el análisis de las letras de alabanzas y canciones para demostrar si y cómo los elementos artístico-culturales presentes en el entorno de estas mujeres producen discursos para combatir el machismo, el racismo y otras formas de opresión y, así, articular perspectivas y estrategias educativas populares, descoloniales, feministas y antirracistas capaces de promover la emancipación de las mujeres. Se concluye que la pedagogía comprometida presente en estas prácticas artístico-culturales apunta a la producción de una perspectiva brasileña, decolonial, feminista y afrodiaspórica que contribuya a la superación de las desigualdades y a la construcción de una sociedad radicalmente fundada en la justicia social.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Cultura popular. Mujeres. Género. Educación. Arte.

## Introduction

This article proposes an analysis of the discourses and meanings present in the songs and *loas*<sup>3</sup> de mestras negras da cultura popular tradicional afro-brasileira. of Black female masters in the traditional Afro-Brazilian popular culture. By recognizing the sociocultural and religious aspects, as well as the life and artistic trajectories of these women, we examine the lyrics of loas and songs with the aim of investigating if and how the artistic and cultural elements of these women contribute to the fight against sexism, racism, and other forms of oppression. We aim to discuss the presence of women in Brazilian popular culture through their artistic productions, weaving the central thread of this tapestry with the notion of the inseparability of the categories of race, gender, and class, grounded in Lélia Gonzalez's thinking.

In the article "*Racismo e sexismo na cultura brasileira*" ("Racism and Sexism in Brazilian Culture"), Gonzalez (1984) challenges us to rethink the fallacy of the myth of racial democracy in Brazil, highlighting it as a mechanism of domination that denies and renders invisible the culture, thought, and memory of Black people. Drawing on the psychoanalytic thoughts of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, Gonzalez discusses the notion of Brazilian cultural psychopathology, which she identifies as the "Brazilian cultural neurosis." This concept offers, we could say, an intriguing psychological perspective on Brazilian culture.

The "Brazilian cultural neurosis" is understood as a complex dynamic of oppression and alienation that permeates society. Gonzalez (1984) argues that this specific social neurosis is fueled by the dominant ideology that promotes white supremacy and denies Black subjectivity. The anthropologist further emphasizes that it is a neurosis sustained by alienated consciousness, which is the internalization of power ideologies. This alienated consciousness leads to the denial of Black culture and the adoption of white cultural and aesthetic standards as ideals and hegemonies. Thus, she underscores the importance of reclaiming Afro-Brazilian memory from the rubble as a way to break free from this cultural neurosis and achieve a social transformation that overcomes racism while affirming Brazil's ethnic-racial and cultural diversity.

Lélia Gonzalez highlights and analyzes the relationship between consciousness and memory. She discusses consciousness as "the place of ignorance, concealment, alienation, forgetfulness, and even knowledge" (Gonzalez, 1984, p. 228), where ideological discourse acts as a distortion of reality.

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<sup>3</sup> The *loa* is a form of poetry that is either recited or sung, which can be improvised or not, and is associated with a specific culture and popular manifestations, such as the maracatu de baque solto and maracatu de baque virado.

In this discursive context, Black culture occupies the place of forgetfulness. Therefore, racism persists because the ideology of whiteness dominates consciousness, relegating the history of Black people to oblivion.

On the other hand, memory, considered the place where truth emerges, is fundamental in promoting social transformation. In a dialectical opposition, memory reveals the reality that has been falsified by consciousness. With memory made visible and recognized, one can thus sustain the emancipatory process, that is, the overcoming of domination. Gonzalez tells us that memories, when placed in the realm of forgetfulness, insist on resurfacing “memory has its tricks, its flexibility: that is why it speaks through the lapses of the discourse of consciousness” (Gonzalez, 1984, p. 226), that is, it speaks through its gaps, its slips, often in a distorted way.

Following this argument, Brazilian culture, as presented by Lélia Gonzalez, constitutes a mechanism of suppression of what cannot emerge. A system of erasure is established regarding the African legacy, resulting in the appropriation and recontextualization disconnected from its origins in Black ancestry. Racism, then, is characterized as a symptom of Brazilian cultural neurosis (Gonzalez, 1984).

At this point in the discussion, we emphasize the inseparability of the categories of race, gender, and class. Gonzalez (1984) critiques submissive, sexualized, and dehumanized representations of Black women, developing her argument through a debate on three emblematic figures of the Brazilian cultural formation process: the mãe-preta (Black mother), the mulata, and the mucama (the latter, in modern times, identified as a domestic worker). She then highlights the different modes of rejection/integration of these roles.

Like all myths, the myth of racial democracy conceals something beyond what it shows. In a first approximation, we observe that it exerts its symbolic violence in a particularly harsh manner toward Black women. For the other side of the carnival-like deification occurs in the daily life of these women, when they are transformed into domestic workers. It is through this lens that the culpability generated by their deification manifests itself with strong doses of aggression. It is also through this lens that we see that the terms mulata and domestic worker are assigned to the same subject. The designation depends on the situation in which we are seen. If we take a look back at the time of slavery, we can find many interesting things. Many things that explain the confusion the white society makes with us because we are Black. And for those of us who are Black, it goes without saying (Gonzales, 1984, p. 228-229).

In these reflections, Gonzalez questions what is permitted and what is denied in the existence of Black women. The mucama (female servant), for example, was seen as a provider of sexual services for her master, while simultaneously performing tasks in the casa-grande (big house), such as maintaining order, cleaning, cooking, among other duties. The figure of the mucama is the result

Songs and chants of black female masters of afro- brazilian popular culture: towards a radical engaged pedagogy of the intersection between the mulata and the domestic worker, historically constructed through exploitation and sexual violence during slavery. bell hooks<sup>4</sup> (1995) strengthens this argument by asserting that sexism and racism, working together, perpetuate an iconography that portrays Black women as primarily destined to serve others.

In the case of the figure of the “*mãe-preta*” (Black mother), Gonzalez (1984) argues that she permeates the Brazilian imaginary, being present in history, the arts, literature, and media. Idealized since the colonial period, this representation denies Black women their identity as women and human beings. The exchange of knowledge between the *mãe-preta* and the white child is often overlooked, contributing to a narrative that erases the role, contribution, and relevance of Black women as protagonists in the construction of Brazilian history and culture. In contrast to the underestimation of the Black woman’s role in Brazilian culture, it is recognized that these distorted representations are used as mechanisms to delegitimize and strip away the space of resistance, wisdom, struggle, and *axé* (spiritual energy) of Black women and their ancestral memory.

The diversity of Brazilian culture does not fit into a single narrative and cannot be reduced to the often limited perspective that whiteness adopts when trying to define and universalize concepts such as cultural movements, art, feminism, and education. Over time, we have come to recognize that making visible and valuing the history of Black and Indigenous women, among other marginalized groups, reshapes our understanding of female protagonism and how it contributes to the cultural formation of Brazil. This results in the creation and preservation of a memory that is often erased, denied, and forgotten.

Therefore, some questions arise. How does recognizing the history of Black women influence the conception of female protagonism in Brazilian culture? What are the effects of erasure and denial of these women’s memory in the construction of Brazilian cultural identity?

In light of the above, based on the ideas of Lélia Gonzalez (2011), this research aimed to bring into presence the artistic and cultural creation of Black women involved in traditional communities of Brazilian popular culture. Specifically, it sought to amplify these silenced voices in society and neglected in the intellectual sphere, based on the premise that popular culture, expressed through the compositions and vocal expressions of women, can be a political tool for awareness and social

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<sup>4</sup> bell hooks chose to write her name in lowercase as a way to challenge capitalization conventions and question the excessive importance placed on personal identities. She argues that the focus should be on the ideas and content of the work, not on the personality or ego of the author. This choice also reflects her critique of capitalism and the power system that values status and individuality.

transformation. In this way, it constitutes an important technology of confrontation and resistance, or as an act of memory, in the sense brought by Lélia Gonzalez.

In this way, we aim to record the voices of the Traditional Masters. Black women, often erased, forgotten, and marginalized in Brazilian culture, their songs are brought here to contribute to this discussion. These are women who belong to the symbolic territory of Afro-Brazilian popular culture and play fundamental roles as guardians, leaders, and transmitters of traditional knowledge. The research focuses on the life trajectories and artistic productions of two active masters in *coco de roda*: Master Aurinha and Mãe Beth de Oxum; and the *maracatu de baque virado* group *Baque Mulher*, created by Master Joana Cavalcanti in Recife, Pernambuco. The analysis is based on feminist theoretical-methodological studies, primarily from the perspectives of Lélia Gonzalez (1984; 1988) and bell hooks (1995; 2017); and on the dialogical approach of discursive practices and meaning production from social psychology (Spink, 2010).

Discursive practices, as employed in this context, are defined as the ways in which people use language to communicate and interact in various social contexts (Spink, 2010). These practices are not limited to speech or writing, encompassing gestures, facial expressions, and other forms of non-verbal communication, thus including the *loas* and songs analyzed. On the other hand, meaning production refers to the process by which the masters assign meaning to the information they receive and the experiences they live. This involves the interpretation and construction of meanings from the discourses and social practices they are part of.

Each stage of the analysis presented here occurred in a dialectical and dialogical movement, allowing for the consideration of the contradictions of the reality communicated discursively and its understanding as a constantly transforming process. The goal was to highlight whether and how the artistic-cultural elements of these women produce discourses that combat sexism, racism, and other forms of oppression, and, in doing so, articulate popular, decolonial, feminist, and antiracist educational perspectives and strategies, aiming for the emancipation of women.

## **Songs and *Loas* – Movements, Discursive Practices, and Meaning Production**

Master Aurinha, Mãe Beth de Oxum, and Master Joana, all from Recife, Pernambuco, are women whose life trajectories are marked by a significant history of resistance and political activism. They dedicate their lives to the preservation and promotion of traditional practices, both cultural and religious, not only within their own territories of origin but also in various parts of the world. Their



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dedication is driven by a community educational commitment, aiming to empower and strengthen their communities.

Through their artistic expressions and positioning in their performances, these women have been pioneers for decades, bringing to light urgent issues related to sexism, gender inequality, and racism. Their compositions not only denounce these forms of oppression but also offer deep reflections and calls for social transformation, inviting the creation of a more just and equal society. Additionally, they establish spaces of welcome and support for those who face the multiple facets of these oppressions, providing a safe environment for expression and healing.

For bell hooks (2017), "healing" goes beyond merely addressing physical wounds or illnesses. In many of her writings, she refers to healing as a holistic and transformative process that involves the healing of the body, mind, and spirit. The American theorist emphasizes the importance of recognizing and confronting the traumas, oppressions, and injustices that affect people, especially women and marginalized groups, advocating for practices that promote collective healing and personal and social transformation. For hooks, healing is deeply connected to liberation and the creation of a more just world.

As Black women, community leaders, and activists in social movements, these masters play a central role in meaning-making and in the promotion of life. Their voices resonate not only locally but also globally, inspiring and empowering individuals and communities to rise up against injustice and to build a more inclusive and hopeful future.

The process of meaning-making in the struggle of these Black women not only deconstructs the systems of necropolitical production in the Western world<sup>5</sup> (Mbembe, 2018), but also represents the quest for the freedom and integrity of their communities. It is a struggle against erasure, pasteurization, and fragmentation of life—that is, a resistance to the disintegration inherited from the enslaving system and cruelly updated by contemporary capitalism. This resistance strengthens the dignity of the Black population, challenging the division between body and mind, theory and practice, nature and culture, formal and informal language, scholarly and popular, private and public, secular and sacred (Hooks, 2017). By rescuing from oblivion and illuminating the life force of Black women

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<sup>5</sup> Necropolitics, for Achille Mbembe (2018), is a concept that describes a form of power based on the management and control of death. In his works, especially in *Necropolitics*, Mbembe argues that, in many contemporary societies, power is not limited to controlling the lives of citizens but also extends to controlling who lives and who dies. In this sense, necropolitics goes beyond biopolitics, a concept introduced by Michel Foucault, which refers to the disciplinary and regulatory power exercised over the bodies and lives of citizens. While biopolitics focuses on the preservation and regulation of life, necropolitics deals with the instrumentalization of death as a tool of control and domination.



as masters, guardians of ancestral knowledge, and leaders of social, religious, and cultural movements, we approach the possibility of rewriting a diverse historiography grounded in the socio-historical reality of Brazilian culture. It is the work of memory that, according to Gonzalez (1984), challenges the colonial-racist ideology of forgetfulness and promotes social transformation.

Currently, there has been a growing body of studies addressing gender issues from a decolonial feminist perspective (Lugones, 2011; hooks, 2017; Curiel, 2019), forming a diverse set of knowledge and research that not only offers insights but also provides a theoretical foundation for understanding the structure of society. This understanding goes beyond merely recognizing the problems and violence faced by women; it also involves developing potential strategies to transform them. Decolonial feminism is grounded in histories and trajectories that challenge patriarchal white supremacist capitalism. From this perspective, it is alongside singers, drummers, *ialorixás* (priestesses), and theorists that we weave this reflection on the presence and participation of women in sacred and political territories spaces where feminine power is exalted and expressed through intelligence, strength, and wisdom, conveyed through their words and echoed in their voices. This is precisely what we can read and hear in the following *loa* by Master Joana, whose discursive practice affirms the identity of “Black women, from the favela, from the periphery” as strong and combative in the face of racism and its oppression embodying a power that exposes and unsettles violence and prejudice.

I'm from the ghetto  
Black woman, yes I am  
From the periphery, I am favela  
Pina, Bode, with love  
I am a Black woman  
Racism is an oppressor  
I feel the color of my skin  
Disturbing everywhere I go  
Periphery, I am the periphery  
Baque Mulher is the periphery  
My beat is strong  
Of a warrior, yes indeed  
It fights against violence,  
Prejudice, and the oppressor  
("Periferia," authored by Master Joana (S/D+))

Joana D'arc da Silva Cavalcante—known as Mestra Joana, Yakekerê Mãe Joana da Oxum—is recognized as the first female mestra of a Maracatu Nação, Encanto do Pina. She is also the founder of the maracatu de baque virado group Baque Mulher, composed exclusively of women, both based in the Bode community, in the Pina neighborhood of Recife, Pernambuco (Baque Mulher, 2024).

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Mestra Joana's trajectory encourages reflection on the presence of women in Maracatu Nação and the political dimensions of women's participation in traditional movements of Brazilian popular culture. As a young Black woman from the periphery, a Candomblé practitioner, percussionist, and mother, Joana Cavalcante has challenged the power hierarchies within maracatu and led a movement of resistance against the multiple forms of oppression faced by women in her community and beyond.

In Bode, Mestra Joana brings feminism to life in her daily experience. Her journey as a mestra of the Nação Encanto do Pina, facing various forms of oppression associated with that role, led her to found the group Baque Mulher. Initially composed only of women from the Bode community, the group has since expanded across the country and beyond. One of the questions that most unsettles her—and that drives the thinking of a woman percussionist in the context of maracatu is: Why can't women play? Or why can't they play all the instruments and choose what they want to play? In Maracatu Nação, the bateria (drum corps), rhythm, and drumming were, for a long time, seen as exclusively male domains, with the bateria composed only of men until the 1990s. Arising from this discomfort, Mestra Joana declares: "To join the drumming, a woman had to disguise herself as a man wear pants, tie up her hair under a hat, hide her chest we couldn't be women"<sup>6</sup>.

In a stance of resistance against the traditional structure of *maracatu*, Mestra Joana founded and leads a feminist *maracatu* movement one whose core principle is that it is composed exclusively of women. Women are protagonists in all aspects of *maracatu* practice, and the group serves as a social space of solidarity and exchange, addressing the challenges that shape women's existence, especially for those who are Black and poor.

One of the *loas* that addresses this theme is "*Sou mulher, negra e empoderada*" ("I Am a Woman, Black, and Empowered"). By identifying as "a woman, Black, and empowered," the *loa* affirms the identity and power of Black women. The mention of the "*axé* of the Nação Nagô" evokes African cultural heritage and spirituality, emphasizing the connection to ancestral roots and traditions. The reference to the "*feminists of the baque virado*" highlights the importance of the feminist movement in the struggle for equality and against gender-based violence symbolized by the sound of the drum, which represents the voice and strength of women.

I am a woman, Black, and empowered  
I carry the axé of the Nação Nagô  
Feminists of the baque virado  
Warrior women playing the drum

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<sup>6</sup> Statement by Mestra Joana during a conversation circle at the 1st *Baque Mulher* National Meeting, held in 2016 in the city of Sorocaba, São Paulo.

Feminists of the baque virado  
Warrior women playing the drum  
There is no violence or macho act  
That can silence my drum I am Baque Mulher  
Playing the drum, bringing the axé  
Of the baque virado, warrior woman  
("I Am a Woman, Black, and Empowered" by Mestra Joana)

In the *loas* of Baque Mulher, we repeatedly find the words "warrior women" and "empowered Black women," highlighting the strength of the feminist movement and its demands for rights, the fight against machismo, and gender-based violence. A historical milestone triggered by this movement, led by Mestra Joana, was the creation of a safe space for women percussionists to report and denounce cases of harassment and sexual abuse committed by men whether in personal relationships or within the *maracatu* groups they were part of. On the Baque Mulher website, for instance, there is a specific section listing the addresses of Women's Police Stations (*Delegacias da Mulher*) (Baque Mulher, 2024).

*Loas*, the term used for the songs of *maracatu*, are composed by women and address themes related to women's social and political struggles, denouncing violence, abuse, inequality, and oppression, while at the same time envisioning and building utopias in shades of pink and orange the symbolic colors of Baque Mulher, following the tradition of *maracatus de baque virado*. Each *maracatu* is guided by an *Orixá*, who governs and inspires it, and the *nação* dresses in the colors associated with that *Orixá*. In the case of Baque Mulher, these are Iansã, represented by pink, and Obá, by orange two warrior female *Orixás*.

Thus, we find the themes of gender-based violence, the affirmation of Black warrior women, and the struggle for women's rights in the following *loa*:

Maria da Penha is strong  
Truly strong indeed  
With her strength and courage, she made the law come to be  
The Maria da Penha Law  
Now I know it well—11.340 from the year 2006  
Women all around the world  
With courage to overcome  
Let us unite our strength  
And make it happen  
We have the right to freedom  
We have the right to live  
We have the right, we have the right  
We have the right to win  
("Maria da Penha" by Mestra Joana)

The discursive practices present in the *loas* of Baque Mulher's *maracatu* not only denounce rights violations but also serve as an educational tool on gender and race for the women in the group.

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This particular song exalts the strength and courage of Maria da Penha, a symbol of the struggle against domestic violence in Brazil. By referencing the Maria da Penha Law (Law No. 11.340/2006), the lyrics underscore the importance of legislation in protecting women from violence and call upon women around the world to unite in the pursuit of their rights. The central theme is that of female resistance and the fight for women's rights, especially in the context of gender-based violence.

Due to these social markers—combined with class—many of these women are often unable to name the violence they experience and are unaware of the paths that could protect their right to life. The loa mentioned above serves as a brief explanation of the existence and purpose of the Maria da Penha Law, encouraging the strength of Black women in the fight for their rights—or, as the loa itself affirms, for their “right to win”.

Within Baque Mulher's practices, in addition to the music itself, there is a dynamic of conversation circles among the participants, creating a safe space for emotional support. Furthermore, a formative space is offered, with educational activities in various modalities aimed at empowering participants (Baque Mulher, 2024). This process which involves musical practice, emotional support, and educational formation appears to transform the lives of these women. This individual transformation resonates collectively, prompting reflections on cultural practices that reproduce oppression. The goal is to strengthen and equip these women to recognize the violence they face in their daily lives, so that they may denounce it, confront it, and protect themselves.

In another city within the metropolitan region of Recife Olinda lived Áurea da Conceição de Assis Souza, known as Mestra Aurinha do Coco (in memoriam)<sup>7</sup>, one of the most prominent figures in coco de roda, a traditional cultural expression from Pernambuco.<sup>8</sup> Mestra Aurinha was born in Olinda and grew up hearing of great achievements in the neighborhood of Amaro Branco, a territory of historical importance in the legacy of *coco de roda* in Recife. In the song below, Mestra Aurinha drawing from the everyday experiences of her community also addresses the theme of violence against women:

Her scream fell silent

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<sup>7</sup> Aurinha do Coco released the album *Seu Grito* in 2020, available on digital platforms, which records part of her artistic work. The following year, in 2021, she released the album *Eu Avistei* through the Rio de Janeiro-based music label Reurbana. Mestra Aurinha do Coco “passed into enchantment” (se encantou) on January 27, 2021, in Rio de Janeiro, where she was living with one of her three daughters, due to a cardiorespiratory arrest.

<sup>8</sup> Coco de roda is a cultural expression and popular dance typical of Brazil's Northeast region, especially the state of Pernambuco. This traditional practice involves forming a circle of people who dance to music accompanied by instruments such as the zabumba, pandeiro, caixa (snare drum), and the voices of the participants. In addition to the dance, coco is also known for its lyrics, which address everyday life, regional culture, and history, transmitting knowledge and traditions from one generation to the next.

Up high in Olinda  
She was a beautiful woman, shaped by nature  
She was killed in the middle of the night  
By a shotgun blast from the hand of her lover  
I keep praying, I plead to God for mercy  
With all this violence, the world will come to an end  
I live in Olinda, I sing coco with love  
I fight against violence, because I too am a woman

I am a warrior woman, a woman warrior I am  
I sing coco in Olinda, and I sing it with great love  
("Seu Grito" by Mestra Aurinha do Coco)

The lyrics of this song, "*Seu Grito*" ("Her Scream"), primarily address violence against women, portraying a scene of intimate and personal tragedy. The narrative suggests the death of the female character at the hands of her own partner, highlighting the vulnerability of women to this form of violence. At the same time, the song also emphasizes female strength and resilience, embodied in the figure of the "warrior woman" who sings with love and fights against violence signaling a stance of resistance and overcoming in the face of adversity. Through this song, Mestra Aurinha powerfully echoed a strong, articulated, and impactful cry, denouncing *feminicide* and the prejudice faced by women in society, especially within the context of popular culture. Like the *loas* of Mestra Joana, Aurinha celebrated the image of the warrior woman, calling on women to rise up in the struggle against violence and for justice.

In the neighborhood of Guadalupe<sup>9</sup>, in Olinda, Pernambuco, lives Maria Elizabeth Santiago, known as Mãe Beth de Oxum a *ialorixá* and a cultural and political leader of great importance to popular cultures. In 2023, Mãe Beth de Oxum was awarded the title of *Living Heritage of Pernambuco*, in recognition of her cultural, religious, and political contributions. In the 1980s, she became the first woman to create a *maracatu* group composed exclusively of women, becoming a major reference for Mestra Joana. The group was founded with the goal of enabling women to learn and perform *maracatu* drumming something that had previously been forbidden to them.

Alongside her family, Mãe Beth has led *Coco de Umbigada* for over twenty-five years in her own home, which also serves as a cultural and religious space (Almeida, 2011). This movement emerged after a thirty-year period during which *Coco de Roda* had been silenced due to the passing of many masters in the region. Mãe Beth and her family revived the tradition, gaining a large

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<sup>9</sup> Even without formal cultural spaces, the neighborhood of Guadalupe maintains a vibrant cultural scene in the city of Olinda. The *Ponto de Cultura Coco de Umbigada*, located next to the Church of Guadalupe, preserves the tradition of *coco* through workshops and courses. The neighborhood is also known for hosting *Cariri Olindense*, the first carnival group in Olinda, founded in 1921, which traditionally opened the city's carnival festivities on Sunday morning. Guadalupe is also home to several other carnival groups and *troças*, and it hosts parades of giant puppets (*bonecos gigantes*).

Songs and chants of black female masters of afro- brazilian popular culture: towards a radical engaged pedagogy of/with women following and becoming widely known within the community, despite having to face and resist police violence. For many years, authorities attempted to suppress the practice of *coco*, even accusing her of disturbing the peace and criminalizing her cultural activism.

It's a cruel world, but not a dog's world  
It's a world of men and women  
Not an animal, not an evil beast—  
It's us who make the world like this

Society must put an end  
To social violence  
To the saws in the Pantanal  
To forced kisses at Carnival

To the man who hits a woman  
To the stuttering child beaten with a spoon  
To the hunger with no *gingé*  
While the TV only shows Pelé

In times of pain,  
May women have a place to give birth  
May the unhoused  
Have a place to sleep

When we go to work,  
We don't know if we'll return  
When we raise our children,  
We don't know what their future will be

Putting an end to violence  
Is our role  
I bring *coco*  
In this cordel

Hold the *coco*...  
This is our message  
To put an end to social violence  
Violence against women  
Violence against the elderly  
Violence against children.  
("We Are the Ones Who Make the World This Way", by Beth de Oxum, Mãe Lucia, and Isabel Tavares).

In the song "*We Are the Ones Who Make the World This Way*", Mãe Beth de Oxum, Mãe Lucia, and Isabel Tavares address various social and structural issues that permeate society. The lyrics emphasize the urgency of confronting social violence, highlighting specific problems such as environmental destruction, gender-based violence (represented by "forced kisses at Carnival" and "the man who hits a woman"), domestic violence ("the stuttering child beaten with a spoon"), and social inequality (the absence of food, symbolized by "no *gingé* to eat").

Furthermore, the song stresses the importance of guaranteeing dignified conditions for all such as access to health care (“a woman having a place to give birth”), housing (“the unhoused having a place to sleep”), and safety (“the guarantee of returning home from work”). Through this song, Mãe Beth de Oxum exposes social inequalities and calls for resistance against violence, elevating *coco* as a tool for awareness and social transformation.

Thus, based on the life trajectories, *loas*, and songs analyzed here, an urgent call seems to emerge for constructing new and diverse narratives of struggle led by Black and marginalized women—aiming to break free from the painful conditions imposed by racism and sexism. As bell hooks (2017) emphasizes, it is necessary to move beyond pain, to acknowledge and transform it. In other words, as Moura (2019) asserts, recognizing that this pain manifests as social injustice can broaden our horizons in the effort to halt so much violence. It is a pain born of machismo, racism, and exclusion from spaces of power and decision-making.

In this sense, the discursive practices, narrated memories, *loas*, songs, dances, games, and workshops that address such painful themes for women constitute an educational process of radical social transformation one that aligns with bell hooks’ concept of engaged pedagogy.

Engaged pedagogy is an approach that understands education as a practice that connects theory to lived experience, values personal narratives, and promotes social and political awareness. It is a pedagogy that creates spaces for dialogue and critical reflection, especially in relation to issues of gender, race, and class. Thus, engaged pedagogy emphasizes the importance of challenging structures of power and fostering inclusive and emancipatory encounters. It is an education that not only transmits knowledge, but also inspires social and cultural change (hooks, 2017).

In short, the life trajectories, experiences, and artistic expressions of Mestra Aurinha, Mãe Beth de Oxum, and Mestra Joana seem to produce a radical form of engaged pedagogy—one that, rooted in historical and cultural traditions, seeks to bring about material and social transformations in the lives of women.

## **Final considerations**

Mestra Aurinha, Mãe Beth de Oxum, and Mestra Joana are opening cracks in the fabric of the impossible—building territories and reclaiming spaces of speech. They draw upon ancestral strength to rise from the rubble where they were cast: subjugated, silenced, stripped of voice, light, and life by the hegemonic power that dominates not only Brazil but the world we live in.



Songs and chants of black female masters of afro- brazilian popular culture: towards a radical engaged pedagogy  
of/with women

We conclude that these Mestras, through their actions and artistic productions, create a profoundly feminist way of life one that represents a decolonial proposal for Latin America and resonates with Lélia Gonzalez's (1988) concept of Améfrica Ladina.

The concept of Améfrica Ladina was used by Gonzalez (1984), based on a proposal by psychoanalyst M. D. Magno, to describe the historical and cultural experience shared by Africans, Afro-descendants, and Amerindians in Latin America. For Gonzalez, this idea serves as a critique of the Eurocentric view of history and culture, highlighting the interaction and intersection of these ethnic groups and their cultures in shaping Latin American identity. The core idea is that these groups share not only a history of colonization and enslavement, but also a legacy of resistance and the construction of their own cultures often marginalized by dominant narrative.

These women of popular culture have been creating political horizons through their lives and works, marked by a passage a gentle displacement. It is not a sudden or immediate revolution, but rather a winding, ever-moving process. To consider the creative practices of Black women within tradition as a social, educational, memorial, and ancestral movement is to think in terms of a crossing. It is to cross the calunga grande the Atlantic Ocean where strength and inspiration can be drawn from the diasporas. It is an invitation to immerse ourselves in that ocean, to become Atlantic ourselves,<sup>10</sup> moving and transforming fluidly and strategically, breaking with Western time, logic, and norms. By illuminating the Afro-Brazilian memory through the artistic and cultural production of these Black women both known and still unknown we help compose this vast existential territory of Brazilian culture, whose roots lie in Africa and in the Indigenous peoples.

When Black people express the desire to escape the "trash can of Brazilian society" (Gonzalez, 1984) that is, when they seek to realize this insurgent desire, one that refuses submission to the logic of domination they generate new codes of existence, new pacts, and new ways of life grounded in their experiences as a Black people.

Traditional communities, even when organized in ways that differ from and often diverge from the dominant white, Christian social structure, are not exempt from the influence of that hegemonic framework. They are affected by the same oppressive elements that shape broader society, such as those related to race, class, and gender. Although it may be surprising to some that relations of oppression and violence exist within sacred practices rooted in African values that affirm life, a

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<sup>10</sup> Reference to the narration by Beatriz Nascimento in the documentary Ôri (1989): "Oh infinite peace, to be able to create links in a fragmented history. Africa and America, and once again Europe and Africa. Angola. The Jagas. And the peoples of Benin, from where my mother came. I am Atlantic".

broader and deeper analysis such as the one undertaken here reveals the presence of sexist and racist ideology within the social structure that shapes and attempts to define us. Since slavery, there has been a historical process of constructing Black female bodies through exploitation and violence, even within Black territories, as Gonzalez (1984) explored in her studies.

It is no coincidence that Black women occupy the base of the social pyramid and are often sidelined in gender and feminist discussions (Carneiro, 2011; Davis, 2016). According to hooks (1995), this occurs because sexism and racism, when combined, create an iconography that portrays Black women as destined to serve others shaping the collective cultural consciousness. Identification with a particular gender involves a representational system that assigns meanings and social positions in relation to others, establishing relationships according to norms that are external to the identified gender.

Even within non-hegemonic contexts, such as traditional Afro-Brazilian cultures, the memories and narratives about women must be revisited and rewritten. Writing about women even when it claims to construct and affirm Black subjectivity is still often produced by male hands or through a distorted feminist lens, thereby perpetuating dynamics of power and subjugation. This limits the possibility for other discourses even those already lived and embodied to be acknowledged. In fact, the recognized presence of women in all spaces of cultural expression, such as maracatu and coco de roda, remains restricted by the imposition of structural machismo, which designates certain spaces and activities as masculine domains. This phenomenon intensifies the forms of violence and abuse directed at women. It seems to be precisely these hegemonic, racist, and violent structures that the trajectories, loas, and songs of Mestra Aurinha, Mãe Beth de Oxum, and Mestra Joana seek to unsettle and they do so through struggle, rhythm, and beauty.

Finally, we suggest further qualitative studies to better understand this phenomenon through the life trajectories of the women who participate in movements such as those analyzed here. We therefore conclude that the engaged pedagogy present in these artistic and cultural practices points to the development of a Brazilian, decolonial, feminist, and Afro-diasporic perspective one that can contribute to overcoming gender inequalities and to the construction of a society radically grounded in social justice.

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