

Ethnicity in Wounded Spaces: Instrumentalism and the Making of Africa in Brazil

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***Abstract:** The shaping of ethnic citizenry is embedded in complicated processes of engagement with ancestry, self and group formation, metaphors for belonging, and cultural shift. I argue that at the core of all ethnic citizenry is a complicated relationship with social memory. I demonstrate this by examining memory, kinship, and ethnicity amongst Afro-descendants in Brazil, where the reinvention of Blackness and a cultural resonance with Africa represent powerful steps to assert ethnicity as an instrument to combat social injustice and racial disparity.*

Introduction

The shaping of ethnic citizenry, as a process of claiming membership to a politically defined community, is embedded in complicated processes of engagement with kinship, self and group formation, metaphors for belonging, and cultural shift. I argue that at the core of all ethnic citizenry is a complicated relationship with social memory. This manifests in a negotiated encounter with aspects of one's ancestry in order to facilitate the ongoing construction of self, moving forward into an aspirational future. Long understood as intimately linked, ethnicity and memory facilitate stages of identity formation and enactment. From the perspective of this research, the future of ethnic studies is found in an increasingly strong bond with memory studies and a rethinking of the relationship between

kinship and social memory. Kinship is a powerful social referent for belonging in moments where ethnic identities are claimed, challenged, or reconfigured for present day political, social, and economic purposes. This is what makes ethnicity so often a work in progress: a construction or instrument. The constructed quality of ethnicity is what enables it to become instrumental. Once chosen and crafted, individuals and collectives come to appreciate the manner in which their ethnic citizenry might be utilized throughout the life-course to shape a certain experience of the world. Ethnic loyalties are formed amidst complicated conditions for remembering and forgetting, thus they often manifest most creatively and powerfully in those instances where they affect the personal and political dimensions of difficult lives.

Ethnic studies has generated several approaches to the study of ethnicity and therefore the unpacking of processes essential to identity politics. The legacy of this intellectual heritage is important for the future of ethnic studies and for rethinking the powerful links between memory and ethnicity. The most prominent models for understanding have been primordialist, constructionist, and instrumentalist approaches. For the primordialists, memory is intrinsic in the project of ethnic identification; one is born an ethnic citizen as an extension of biological kinship.¹ For the constructionists, memory is negotiable as part of a wider project of self-realization and actualization over the life-course.² An instrumentalist view of ethnicity is one in which memories are chosen and denied, realized according to processes of decision-making and the weighing up of the costs and benefits of certain narratives and normative views of ethnic citizenry.³ Revisiting these existing frameworks within ethnic studies ensures the discipline's capacity to build on an already strong intellectual heritage. I argue that this heritage, in its very formulation, embodies some of the historical realities of ethnic citizenry, the contexts in which they have been studied, and the capacity for ethnic studies to contribute to and influence public debate and discourse around this particular aspect of identity politics.

In this discussion, I engage each approach in an effort to find a suitable methodology for engaging with ethnicity in wounded spaces. These spaces represent instances where ethnic identity is a political project prefaced on collective and social memory that attests to difficult or traumatic histories and contemporary inequities. "Wounded spaces" are the terrains across which "geographical space...has been torn and fractured by violence and exile,"⁴ shaping a geographical and social reality which reflects in the loss of life, rights, cultural expressions, and surety in ethnic identity and rights to belong. Such realities are often the backdrop to the foreground of emerging ethnicity. By working to reveal the ethnic scapes born of difficult histories, it is my vision that one part of the future of ethnic studies is found in its capacity to contribute to reconciliatory politics within spaces of past and present wounding. States of newness, emergence, and politicization within contexts of globalized identity politics are a resounding theme in the social sciences today.

Following this, ethnic studies concerned with emergence, genesis, and revival of ethnic identities generate frameworks for understanding and appreciating identity politics more broadly. I invoke one part of this, namely the bridging of ethnic and memory studies, by turning my attention to memory, kinship, and ethnicity amongst Afro-descendants in Brazil, where the reinvention of Blackness and a cultural resonance with Africa represent powerful steps to assert ethnicity as an instrument to combat social injustice and racial disparity. I create a dialogue here between ethnicity, choice, social justice, and positive ethnic identifi-

cations. This creates new frames for working with ethnicity, and I argue that it is the present, and not the past, which informs and substantiates ethnic identity.

Methodology

I position memory and kinship as central to an understanding of ethnicity as a process and ethnic identity as an arrival point. By undertaking ethnographic research with Indigenous families in Australia (since 2000) and Afro-descendant groups in Brazil (since 2008), I have witnessed the emergence of ethnic states that involve processes of remembering, and commemoration of a loyalty built around what is remembered and channelled into a politico-creative project. Together, these contexts have provided the space in which to consider ethnicity, and in turn the future directions in ethnic studies, which facilitate the consideration of ethnic identities born of socially and politically ruptured spaces such as in post-colonial and post-imperial nations.

In wounded spaces like Australia and Brazil, the capacity to “remain the same” ethnically has been profoundly compromised and threatened by colonial and imperial processes and their wounding. However, the expectation to “remain the same” persists powerfully in measures of authenticity and tradition as valuable. This means that groups and individuals deemed to be “non-traditional,” young, inter-culturally influenced, living in urban centers, educated, and politically engaged are judged by policy and populace to be somewhat “less” ethnically distinct and by default “less” legitimate. An unwillingness to accept the un-fixed nature of culture, and therefore ethnic identity, renders certain ethnic identities questionable and problematic for those who assess them, such as governments and those who validate them, and the collective majority. Ethnicity is often scrutinized in terms of its authenticity: according to attributes of deep ancestry, linguistic particularity, and geographical territoriality.⁵

In wounded spaces, where these three attributes are the most likely to be assaulted and fragmented, the satisfying of all these criteria can represent a deeply challenging process for those seeking to assert or legitimate particular ethnic identities. In such cases, the perceived legitimacy of an ethnic identity may be dependent on one’s or a group’s ability to meet all the criteria, irrespective of historical events or contemporary political, social, and economic realities. Such conditions can create inequity in the capacity to express an identity along ethnic lines. This inequity is born of the fact that colonial and imperial nations require acts of de-signification and resignification to justify their existence.⁶ This includes designification of existing social, political, and economic realities and resignification through overlaying of new meanings in place through political and economic action (such as slavery and labor relations). Designification involves the weakening and undercutting of territoriality and any claims to cultural exclusivity or traces articulated around an identity in a social, political, ideological, and economic sense.⁷

Resignification demands a redrawing of reality — an inscription of new meanings which can be overlaid onto places and nations, individuals and groups, history and social memory, often becoming the normative power in terms of how people are defined and relate to one another. Historically, these processes have taken the form of coercive and assimilative acts which see the removal of people from their territories, the reallocation of rights and

renaming of places, enslavement, imprisonment, and many other forms of control over ethnicized or politicized bodies, and the introduction of new languages and ideologies.

Tensions arise when ethnic identities are born of these political contexts. In some cases, the ethnic scapes that remain look remarkably different to what has come before, or might shape themselves according to a distant ancestry or socially prescribed kinship with non-biological affiliates. The latter is characteristic of identity politics articulated around African descent in Brazil, whereby deep ancestry is less a requirement in defining Afro-descent than is a political discourse born of a historical experience of slavery and its lasting labor and social relations. The tensions that manifest in Brazil primarily concern public debate around affirmative action and Afro-descent. Initiatives over the last decade, such as higher education racial quotas for Afro-descendants and the enshrining of law on teaching African history in education programs, have been widely critiqued according to the ethnic legitimacy and authenticity of Afro-descendants as a collective disconnected from African and slavery for generations. This has spawned questions around who is black in Brazil? When is one black enough? How is blackness defined and what constitutes black culture?⁸ These questions betray a strange relationship with ideas of kinship, memory, nationalism, and identity. Therefore, I argue that what is needed in politically complicated contexts of ethnic conflict and struggle is a framework for understanding the mediated role between memory, kinship, and ethnicity.

To develop this framework further, I craft a methodology that rethinks how memories are utilized in the process of self-actualization and what role remembered histories have within the context of present lives. In Brazil, ethnicity is a powerful element of local and national history and is likely to have arrived at its present state as something that is not merely a maintenance of what is remembered or drawn from social memory, nor is it exclusively a metaphor of unity drawn from ancestral connection and innateness. Quite the opposite, ethnicity in Brazil is a negotiated terrain, a work in progress, in which individuals and collectives seek to distinguish the character of their ethnic loyalty in relation to contemporary politics around rights and equity, color, and nationalism.⁹ I apply an anthropological lens to the experience of Afro-descendants within the prevailing narrative of Brazilian nationalism and the state myth of social homogeneity — “sameness despite difference.” This is achieved by focusing on the implementation of Law 10.639, the *Law on Education of Racial-Ethnic Relations* in the Brazilian educational system. By examining the role of collective and social memory in the crafting and implementation of this Law, I argue that memory and kinship are instrumental when the project of ethnicity is constructed. I accept the prevailing model of ethnicity as constructed and ask what might be the benefit to claiming an ethnic identity that has been marginalized historically or which encounters vulnerability in the present?¹⁰ The key to approaching this question lies in viewing ethnic identity as an instrument, designed to bring about certain benefits and returns which varyingly manifest in forms of a “good” and/or politicized life. How this instrument is crafted is directly influenced by social memory.

Memory, Kinship, and Ethnicity

Memory is human and subjective, and constructs reality rather than represents it. Classically understood as a retrieval of the past in the present, I move beyond this temporal schema

and have developed the notion of “present memory” in order to articulate a wider vision of memory.¹¹ Present memories work within a temporal framework that is not dependant on a referral to the past, but instead are intimately linked to the present and what lies ahead. It is a present construction of ideas subject to what the individual or group knows now (including what they have learnt already) and what they wish to know in the future. In a manner of words, memory is knowledge. In this configuration, the past as something that is fixed and retrievable is not essential to the construction of present memories. What is essential is the present — the social world occupied now that generates the frameworks for understanding the self and collective identity. These frameworks delineate what matters, what is needed, and even what is absent in the world the individual or group occupies.¹² Once people establish what is present (or absent in the present), a process of decision-making begins and what is known is brought to bear on current lives. These decisions are often underscored by visions of an aspirational future that determines our present action of constructing and choosing memory.

This establishes memory as an organic and relational experience, which comes to take its form in our present lives because we recognise and localise certain narratives.¹³ Teasing out the relationship between memory and history has long been an enterprise in memory studies, resulting in many configurations of temporality and historiography.¹⁴ For Olick and Robbins, human experience is “always embedded in and occurs through narrative frames... there is no primal, unmediated experience that can be recovered.”¹⁵ Experience, being very much a part of memory, is always constructed in and through its present narration.

Similarly, if we reconfigure our understanding of kinship, to envision it as a present narration of ancestry, we see it freed from biases rooted in assumptions about biology and the “past.” Cut free of its moorings to biology and inheritance, we return to kinship as a cultural construction made up of “social relations predicated upon cultural conceptions that specify the processes by which an individual comes into being and develops into a complete social person.”¹⁶ As an extension of this, “ethnicity consists of social and cultural processes that are associated with a constructed group identity.”¹⁷ It is a relational construct which relies heavily on present conditions which establish the possibilities of an ethnic identity and which varyingly enables individuals and groups to make choices around how they might articulate this identity.¹⁸ Thus, it is possible to view kinship, memory, and ethnicity, as social constructions which are directly influenced by the present contexts in which social lives and beings are shaped and enacted. In combination, memory, kinship, and ethnicity become the lightning rods to approaching how persons define the bases on which they construct a sense of social and moral worth.¹⁹ For Glazer and Moynihan, as a new social category, it is ethnicity that facilitates the “pronounced and sudden increase in tendencies by peoples in many countries and in many circumstances to insist on the significance of their group distinctiveness and identity and on new rights that derive from this group character.”²⁰ Its value as an interpretive tool for sociality is highlighted through the realization that “ethnicity and ethnic identity can be extremely powerful and influential forces, sparking the development of pseudo-histories, claims of political autonomy and sovereignty or a propensity for social relativism.”²¹ It is the subjective loyalty of ethnic belonging as crafted in a present political and social reality that is witnessed in wounded spaces. These subjectivities are what sustain platforms for self-determination, politics of exclusion and inclusion, nationalist political

agendas, and racial violence.²²

In common usage, ethnicity is attributed to those groups who are located as a demographic or cultural minority within a majority state. Decolonizing methodologies and Critical Whiteness Studies led the charge in deconstructing this notion, leveling critique at the normative power attributed to certain human groups (largely white) as a result of historical processes. Once imbued with normative power, all other identity positions deemed non-white are classified "ethnic," despite the fact that to identify as "white" is itself entirely an ethnic distinction.²³ What the process of ethnicity generates is a set of social parameters and conditions, which in turn are variously labeled as some form of ethnic identity. Ethnic identities may be referred to as wider categories such as Indigenous and non-Indigenous, white, or black, Brazilian, or Afro-Brazilian. There is no limit to the range of possible ethnic identities that exist at any moment in time, and these labels and their parameters can be renamed, redrawn, or removed. This is by nature the quality of ethnicity as a process, not a fixed entity.

Appreciating the intellectual heritage of ethnic studies, in reaching this insight, from primordialist to constructivist and recent instrumentalist approaches gives depth of field to any argument for the future directions of ethnic studies. Each approach offers a valuable entry point into discussions of ethnic specificities over time and space, creating the conditions for a selective and integrated approach that begins to unpack the complexities born of ethnic identities which are defensible along simultaneous lines of inherentness and flexibility; contradictions which can inform debate concerning who qualifies as a particular ethnic identity and how this identity might be embodied and enacted over the life-course.

Primordialism

According to Levine, "the primordial approach situates ethnicity in the psyche, so deeply that society and culture are bent to its will. Ethnic identities and hatreds naturally draw people into persistent identities and antagonisms."²⁴ This approach has formulated an "understanding of ethnicity as rooted in deep-seated or 'primordial' attachments and sentiment."²⁵ Primordialism differs from instrumental approaches to ethnic identity because it suggests inability to shift according to economic and political circumstances. Primordial attachments are born of the "givens" or the assumed "givens" of social existence.²⁶ Whether manifest as deep-seated passions that merit no explanation, or limited scope for a social existence beyond that which is circumscribed unto the individual and collective, memory and very particular styles of remembrance can work to create psychological essentialism around ethnic identity.²⁷ Treating ethnic identity as primordial requires the relationship between the past and present to be enshrined in the sense of one's self as an individual and member of a collective. This is a relationship of processual understanding in which memories, along with kinship, are fixed, inherited, and then used as governing structures for how the individual and collective are "to be." Both memories and kinship relations are seen as factual, historical archives of accumulated events that have persisted and are knowable, and manifest in the form of a particular ethnic identity. Infused with a primordial sentiment themselves, kinship and memory are understood to be the originary snapshots of an agreed-to past reality which can be named, stored, and recalled to inform present life and future direction.

Acts of remembrance, which are also agreed to, ritually re-embed knowledge of a certain ethnic narrative into the consciousness of the collective. Memory and kinship in this case are what forge ethnic identity as an external given, and even at times, a coercive social bond. Brownlie argues, "it is not possible to distil some kind of 'essence' that would be the 'memory' or 'mnemonic processes' of a population."²⁸ Essentialized memory supports a type of primordial self that can be retrieved from the deep past in an almost archaeological quest for parameters of belonging. Thus, a primordialist approach to ethnicity allows us to consider how deeply held and subjective loyalties come to be mandated and often powerfully defended. Although naturalizing of ethnic identities does occur through psychological essentialism, on behalf of those who claim a certain identity or by external entities that effect their presence, there is nothing primordial about the process of ethnicity itself. Change cannot be precluded from a discussion of the ways and means that collectives arrive at an essentialized ethnic identity. Whilst the ethnic arrival point may be claimed as primordial (in that it allegedly replicates what has always been), the journey taken to this destination is open to change as a result of historical particularities and contemporary conditions affecting the way things are remembered. "In this sense, the relativity of memory is just a consequence of its historicity, because it is directly connected with how much of the past is available in a certain historical context."²⁹

Constructivism

In the 1920s, Halbwachs sought to reframe ethnicity as a social phenomenon. The success of his project is seen in the prevailing view of ethnicity as being socially constructed.³⁰ As an extension of constructed identity, ethnic boundaries are flexible or changeable. In line with this dynamism, I argue that temporality is secondary in understanding the role of memory in the process of ethnicity. What is primary is the context of the individual's or groups' present life. What has greatest influence is the matrix that supports the individual and/or the group, such as their socio-political, economic, intellectual, and spiritual frames of reference. For the constructivist, these are the conditions that support the enterprising moment in which identities are made. Whether memory be attributed to the distant or recent past (vague temporal measures at best) is irrelevant to the place of remembrance in the construction of a particular ethnic identity. Distant memory and historical continuity with the distant past are utilized in the construction and reconstruction of ethnic identities, yet ethnic particularities can also be born of recent histories and particularly fractured and deeply politicized spaces. Whether from a proclaimed primordial and distant past, a recent traumatic past, or emerging sense of past and present (with the sudden assertion of an ethnic specificity), it remains that memory is an act of making meaning; meaning which may or may not be based on invention, desirable loyalty, and insider understandings of what is valued.

In this vision of ethnicity, the process is linked to existing socio-political structures and human agency. This is not dissimilar to the conditions required for the construction of memory and the activation of certain acts of remembrance. Ethnic identity becomes the product of actions undertaken by groups as they shape and reshape their self-identification, often actions set against a background of external social, economic, and political processes.³¹ In sum, the process of ethnicity is highly relational and rarely fixed, hence its association with

social or chosen kindred which support one's self and community throughout the life course of an ethnic identity. The present delimits what we know, and therefore how we understand our position in the world relative to group and individual identity. Once we establish what is present (or absent in the present), a process of decision-making begins and what is known is brought to bear on our current lives.

Instrumentalism

More recent instrumentalist perspectives on ethnicity, drawn heavily from the work of Sarna, emphasize the social construction of ethnicity, and its annexation as an instrument for gaining resources³². This view is underscored by the proposition that costs and benefits associated with ethnic group membership partly determine ethnic affiliation³³. According to an instrumentalist position when an ethnic choice becomes available, the costs and benefits of it play a pivotal role in determining the options. Alternative assertions of ethnic identity become possible only when an ethnic status quo is challenged and superseded and from this is born something distinct, not altogether new, but distinct from an earlier form. According to this view not all ethnic choices are rational and materialistic. Some people choose an ethnic affiliation not for material gains, rewards, or access to resources and services, but for emotional, intellectual and political satisfaction, which includes states of wellbeing, social attachment or recreational pleasure³⁴.

Comaroff and Comaroff point to 'looseness' as a definitive quality of ethnicity as an organisational category or mechanism of affiliation for human groups in today's world³⁵. Ethnicity as a "labile repertoire of signs by means of which relations are constructed and communicated; through which a collective consciousness of cultural likeness is rendered sensible; with reference to which shared sentiment is made substantial" captures a fuller suite of ethnic loyalties³⁶. I contend that swinging the pendulum so far that ethnicity becomes a loose organizational structure may render it meaningless (or more tragically powerless) as a means to distinguish cultural specificity born of challenging circumstances as, for example, found in Brazil. For human groups that occupy marginal spaces and for those groups whose cultural specificity is born of a political project based upon wounding and reclamation, the capacity to create and emerge in ethnic form remains an essential component of survival.

When modelling memory on similar instrumentalist terms, we encounter a strong body of comprehending literature built around the inventing enterprise. Imagination, repression and selection are central to an understanding of the relationship between memory and ethnicity as a process governed by principles of meaningful choice. According to this framework, memory involves deliberate and thoughtful choices as to what is remembered and what is forgotten. The subjective and contested loyalties that may be born of ethnicity as an instrumental process require an understanding of memory that acknowledges its plasticity. What is remembered and what is forgotten are subject to the weighing up of costs and benefits in light of material and emotional wellbeing. The complexity involved in this process is at the core of important work in memory studies, such as Connerton's work on the seven types of forgetting, including repressive erasure; prescriptive forgetting; forgetting that is constitutive in the formation of a new identity; structural amnesia; forgetting as annulment; forgetting as planned obsolescence; forgetting as humiliated silence³⁷. If indeed ethnicity is the ultimate

memory project. Thus, the need for a methodology that charters the subjectivity of personal and political lives is emphasized. It is to this that I now turn my discussion, bringing to bear an approach to memory and ethnicity in Brazil that combines a constructivist approach to ethnicity and an instrumentalist approach to memory.

Instrumentalism and the Making of Africa in Brazil

In Brazil, many social and structural conditions have functioned as catalysts for ethnic consciousness. We see the full complexity of ethnic identity assertion for people living often-difficult lives. Kinship, self-interest, and the larger economic, political, and social structures all underlie the social construction of Afro-descendant identity in northern Brazil. The Brazilian Census of 2009 provided five options for self-declared "race" along color lines. There is a history of documented color/ethnic classifications in Brazil. Wolfe remarks on Harris' identification of 490 such classifications.³⁸ He states that while these classifications are not all in contemporary or wide usage throughout Brazil, they reveal a complexity of social classification and stratification in a post-imperial era. These include, *preto* (black), *branco* (white), *pardo* (brown), *amarelo* (yellow), and *indigena* (Indigenous).³⁹ These color declarations, and that of *indigena* can be seen to represent five general ethnic identities. Color declarations reveal a subtle conflation of racial (biological) and ethnic (social) identities, in that skin color is taken as a measure of difference along social, economic and political lines.⁴⁰ This is, in part, smoothed over by a general sense of nationalism and "being Brazilian," but then reinforced by noted social differences and inequities in life experience along lines of skin color.

In 2009, 6.9 percent of the Brazilian population self-identified as *preto* (black).⁴¹ For many who identify as such, life is framed by "deep disparities in income, education and employment between lighter and darker-skinned Brazilians," and these "have prompted civil rights movements advocating equal treatment."⁴² Making up a considerable proportion of the total population, Afro-descendants constitute a majority of the nation's poor. The declaration of one's self as black sits in relationship to declarations of ethnic identity such as Afro-descendant and Afro-Brazilian. The differences or similarities between these monikers require attention, but this goes beyond the depth and breadth of this article. In this discussion, I refer to Afro-descendant as the ethnic identity which collectively holds those who self-declare an identity which is linked to an African heritage through social and biological kinship and African cultural expressions. What is key here is self-declaration, as many individuals who indeed have African ancestry do not identify themselves as Afro-descendant in Brazil, with individuals instead opting to identify as either *branco* or *pardo* (or a range of other self-declared classificatory terms).

Discussions of ethnicity in Brazil are inflected by the historical particularity of a population with ancestral connections to a cross-Atlantic slave trade that brought generations of African descendants into Brazil. Today, many Brazilians identify as Afro-descendant, yet the manner in which they do so is highly contingent and dependent on a range of complex variables ranging from individual choice (self-declaration), family history, socio-economic status, location of residence, and imposed categories used in demographic data collection by national bodies. For the purpose of this discussion, I draw attention to this African

heritage, traced through a history of slavery in Brazil set to the rhythm of imperialism and nation building.

Beginning in the mid-1500s, the Portuguese brought enslaved Africans to Brazil, a practice which would continue until its official abolishment in 1888 with the passing of the *Lei Áurea* (Golden Law), and for some time after that through illegal channels of human enslavement and trading.⁴³ According to Baranov, the decree involved “abolishing the slave while simultaneously failing to emancipate the African,” which led to the emergence of a multi-racial order along color lines, and the entrenchment of particular capital and labor relations in post-slavery Brazil.⁴⁴ This racial order positioned Africans and their descendants within a social reality that created the conditions for ethnic identities and inter-ethnic relations, which are still heavily negotiated in contemporary Brazil. The majority of Africans enslaved and brought to Brazil were from West and West Central Africa, Angola, the Congo, and Mozambique.⁴⁵

While slavery became the mainstay of the economy throughout all parts of Brazil, the northern regions are particularly known for having a kinship with African influences and cultural expressions as a result of a rich history of African cultural presence. As Wolfe notes, slavery was not homogenous in Brazil; in fact, different types of slavery occurred in different parts of Brazil (Bahia, Minas Gerais, Rio de Janeiro) in relation to different industries (sugar, mining, coffee, domestic slavery).⁴⁶ The nature of wounding from this political reality across Brazil thus varies according to regional histories and this manifests in varied social memories which document place-based narratives of slavery and its contemporary legacy for Afro-descendants.

More generally, the history of African slavery in Brazil figures prominently, if not uncomfortably, in contemporary narratives of nationhood and cultural origins. In many respects, this is the nature of wounded spaces, in which difficult histories must be reconciled. This reconciliation sits in an undeniable relationship with Brazilian nationalism. Historically, nationalism has been prefaced on the notion of “sameness,” and the blurring of ethnic distinctions in preference of a singular loyalty in the form of “being Brazilian.” The beating heart of Brazilian nationalism was prefaced on the myth of social homogeneity (“sameness despite difference”), long held as the lynchpin for racial democracy.⁴⁷ Today, assertions of racial plurality, “difference amidst claims to sameness,” have taken flight in an era of burgeoning affirmative action. Critiquing the narrative of social homogeneity, Ramos writes:

The Brazilian nation has been constructed on the basis of two main premises: one is its territorial and linguistic unity; the other is its purported social homogeneity resulting from the combination of three “races” – Indians, Blacks and Europeans. While the first premise, especially regarding territoriality, has been empirically sustained, the second is a clearly mystifying ideology.⁴⁸

The desire to find the essence of Brazilian identity is fraught, and brings about inevitably varied and inconclusive results over time and space. What masks as harmonious ethnic encounters or “social memory” of accommodation and assimilation in the annals of Imperial history, is for Ramos best understood as a process of creating “a recipe for homogenous nationality,” “an amalgam of whitened races with a unique and uniform national flavour.”⁴⁹

“Rather than having differences sorted out in a separate-but-equal ideological pattern, one would have a mixed-though-unequal national design.”⁵⁰ The singularity of Brazil has been a point of national reflection since the Declaration of Independence in 1822 and the founding of the Republic in 1889. With this reflexivity enshrined, this has prompted what has come to be a perpetual evolution of a nation’s ethnic citizenry, ever in need of reappraisal.⁵¹

In 2003, the Brazilian government implemented Federal Law 10.639, which positioned cultural plurality as a transversal theme.⁵² This was the result of activism for black rights and efforts to bring the issue of racism to the minds of educational policy makers. The Law establishes “guidelines for national curriculum for teaching ethno-racial relations and Afro-Brazilian and African history and culture.”⁵³ It extends to elementary and middle school levels as well as higher education. It includes a curriculum that covers the Atlantic slave trade, sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth century African history, and studies of contemporary Africa. The text also establishes the need for teachers to be trained in these subjects.⁵⁴ Initiatives of intervention in school curricula and in the classroom have also been carried out by nongovernmental organizations and black movement organizations for some time now.⁵⁵ These include “Afro-Brazilian religious communities, and cultural groups like the Afro-Reggae Cultural Group in Rio de Janeiro and the Olodum and Ilê Aiyê Blocos in Salvador, Bahia.”⁵⁶ Much of this has sparked concern as to the impact that increased recognition and the valorization of ethnic diversity within Brazil might have on Brazilian nationalism and interethnic relations.⁵⁷ The Centro Cultural Orunmilá, a nonprofit Black Rights organization which declares its function as “the elevation of the human condition through the promotion of citizenship, the search for elements of the socio-cultural identity, the regaining of dignity and self-esteem of black people in particular” has raised the following questions of Law 10.639: “Who will teach black culture?” “What form of pedagogy will be adopted?” and “Who is trained/qualified to transmit black culture?” Such queries provide rich terrain to examine ethnic identity within a wounded space and the role memory plays in its construction.

The emergence of an Afro-descendant ethnic particularity, shaped through processes of social memory, and the politics of affirmative action, involves collective coordination of kinship, agreed-to social memories, and contemporary events. What contextualizes the need for this coordination are present injustices and expanding opportunities for the effective exercise of citizenship and human rights.⁵⁸ As Nascimento establishes, “identity takes on a political dimension: it constitutes power,” and in this moment, it works to stimulate positive identifications for African Brazilians.⁵⁹ In particular, it mobilizes to redress situations of inequity in representation of Afro-descendants in education sectors and political arenas, elicit acknowledgement of the history of slavery, to challenge and remove the stigma, stereotypes, and discrimination felt in everyday life. In many respects, this politicizing of an ethnic identity brings into focus the pursuit of social justice and an equitable share in the benefits of a good life. This, in part, rests in the hands of collectives and their shaping of an Afro-descendant social memory, but it may also be taken up by government agencies and organizations with a vested interest in memory work as reparative and aspirational for a wider audience.

If the aim of educational initiatives is to strengthen the “African identity,” and its associated memories and cultural expressions, then there has to be agreement over a normative view of African identity and culture in Brazil. This requires a suite of memories and narra-

tives be identified that might best inform the construction of this normativity. It is the constructed part of this process that is most complicated and interesting. The instrumental logic behind both Law 10.639 and more general black rights movements in Brazil involves the weighing up of the costs and benefits involved in certain aspects of being Afro-descendant. Commonly seen in the streets of major cities like Salvador, Bahia, are Afro-Brazilian cultural symbols such as capoeira, Candomblé, samba, and *Carnaval blocos* (groups), each aimed at crafting and also embodying the personality of Afro-Brazilian ethnic identity and generating positive identifications for this ethnic group.⁶⁰ For Pinho, “reinventions of Africa have been tremendously important for black communities in the diaspora and have frequently spurred black resistance.”⁶¹ Simultaneously, they corroborate pre-established notions of blackness; keeping Africa alive through memory projects which require the enactment of songs, music, literature, foods, dance forms, and myths and the embodiment of an aesthetic linked to African-inspired fashion, beauty, and style.⁶² There are those who agree to and accept these symbols and terms of identifying, thus claiming social kindred and kinship and those who do not. Self-declaration is central and suggests it is individual decision-making (as sanctioned by the collective) that leads to the embodiment of elements of African descent — the choice to subscribe to an ethnic identity with full knowledge of the politics and aesthetics this implies. Even outsiders participate in the process of setting the limits to what being an Afro-descendant might involve. Judgments of what constitutes a black person, or a brown or white person for that matter, are keenly debated in Brazil.

The decision to move towards the teaching of black culture in Brazilian schools involves the construction of a pan-African diaspora, history, and subsequent identity. This overlooks the specificities of ethnic group experiences in Africa, a diversity of experiences matched by the diverse ethnic representation found among those enslaved and brought to Brazil. It does however, instrumentally, create unity in shared social kinship made of a pastiche of different historical experiences and specific cultural identities. What I argue is that this is entirely reasonable, as memory can only be understood at the very moment of its construction, the instance in which a choice is made regarding what and how to remember and therefore “how to go on.” In the crafting of African and Afro-Brazilian history, we see in action what is known in the present and what is desired into the future. In this configuration, the past is not essential to the construction of present memories. What is essential is the presence of a population within Brazil that asserts a connection to Africa through kinship and cultural expression, and the reality of documented inequity and disadvantage for this collective. Kinship is governing here, but in a more complicated way than biological connectedness or direct and traceable ancestry. Inspired by Da Costa’s⁶³ work on “*ancestralidade*,” I see social kinship at the heart of instrumental ethnicity, prefaced upon:

- Recognition of historical experiences, and engagement with how a particular remembered past engenders present situations.
- The creation and recreation of institutions and practices that aid struggles for self-determination within contexts of ongoing discrimination.
- A critical political practice directed towards social transformation.

As such, the social world, which is occupied now, generates the frameworks for understanding what being black, Afro-descendant, or Afro-Brazilian might mean. In the case of Afro-descendant interventions into social and political realities in Brazil, we see a deliberate project to assert a collective identity along ethnic lines, with the goal of creating a space within the national consciousness and the deliverance of rights. The decision of what constitutes an Afro-descendant in this moment is underscored by visions of an aspirational future of equity and rights. This is what influences memory and prompts the call for black autonomy over who teaches African and Afro-Brazilian history. Education and the delivery of a master narrative of African history works to set a form or shape to the character of Afro-descent. In this act lies power and the capacity to shape an ethnic reality that is at once arguably inherent in its widely agreed to terms, and yet also flexible in its capacity to be constructed and reconstructed along purposeful lines for present motivations. This is captured in the following statement:

There is no guarantee whatsoever that the transmission of black knowledge and culture will be the responsibility of the black community. This is the permanence of exclusion. The “training and qualification” cannot be acquired through courses on the Internet, nor in the school curricula that historically segregated, lied, stigmatized and discriminated black people and culture. The essence of black culture is not learned in books and in the academy.⁶⁴

If this is the case, then can it be that the essence of black culture lies in the mind, the body, the spirit; the elements that constitute identity politics and the construction of our “selves” in reference to an agreed to set of memories, values, and expressions? Self-declaration becomes a form of self-conscription.

For educational interventions to meet the need for respect and the valorization of black and Afro-Brazilian culture and to combat racism, the vision of what constitutes the history to be taught must be generated by social memory agreed to by collectives within this ethnic group. What these social memories reflect is the need to redress normative narratives born of the Brazilian nation concerning inter-ethnic relations and social justice. For Afro-descendants, there is a powerful role to be found in present memories in constructing their ethnic identity. Thus, Cavalleiro declares, “Knowledge is the weapon that we have available in struggling to defend our history, our existence, as well as the future of our sons and daughters.”⁶⁵ That knowledge is the sum of present memories.

Overview & Conclusion

In this discussion, I have revisited the relationship between memory, kinship, and ethnicity. I have explored the conventions around which ethnic identities have been understood. I have identified a methodology that best suits the needs of working with ethnicity in wounded spaces – in particular, in contemporary Brazil. The key to understanding Afro-descendant ethnic identity as an emerging and powerfully articulated social position has been in adopting an instrumentalist approach. The resulting methodology is one in which I argue that memory and kinship are both instrumentalist when the project of ethnicity is underway and politically charged. As instruments — kinship as more broadly defined, memory as socially

constructed and reflective of current circumstance, and ethnicity as chosen, agreed to, and enacted through varied levels of bodily, intellectual, and political performance — combine to ensure the emergence and vigor of certain ethnic expressions.

They also work to resist delegitimization and threat. They become tools for claiming space as an ethnic identity and collective amidst the complex conditions of citizenry in wounded spaces. In moments where blackness is denigrated or devalued in Brazil, whether in day-to-day instances of racism on the street, or through inequitable representation of Afro-descendant young people in secondary and higher education, or higher rates of infant mortality, affirmative action articulated around blackness and African ancestry, social kinship and cultural expression will be found. This remains the case for individuals and their families, for non-government organizations, policy makers, educators, and even the United Nations, and revisits the very terms of ethnicity as instrumental as outlined in this discussion whereby assertions of ethnic identity become possible when an ethnic position is challenged.⁶⁶

The value of instrumental ethnic identities is found not in their truth or the truth of their origins, but in their success as formations that speak to aspirations of belonging and their capacity to form and be reformed. Thus, I argue there is no way to dilute their power, nor render them false or illegitimate. The past, while entirely relevant to our present states (albeit in more complicated ways than we think), is as Lowenthal states, “a foreign country.”⁶⁷ The present is our home, and present memories are what we make and remake in the act of establishing an ethnic identity. This means that states of emergence in identity politics do not diminish the value and importance of certain ethnic identities, however much they might challenge the status quo, or appear to be “born overnight” or opportunistically engaged for some form of benefit. Critiques of affirmative action and identity politics around Afro-descendant often cite its emergent quality and perceived opportunism as an argument against the rise and vigor of a black rights movement in Brazil. Viewing political action around ethnic identity as “trouble making,” as often witnessed in media and political debate around certain ethnic identities and their “privileges,” or threatening the stability of national identity is flawed, not only because it is racist, but simply because it disregards the current state of play in any given country or region.

The state of play is what is “present,” and for many Afro-descendants in Brazil, this is inequity and disadvantage, and the desire to redress this situation through modes of legislative advocacy (using policy and governing structures to seek equity) and positive identifications for Afro-descendants (in public and private arenas of body and cultural performance). The reality of disadvantage and inequity brings about vulnerabilities in the form of higher rates of unemployment and under-employment, higher rates of disease and infant mortality, lower levels of education, lower wages, and shorter life spans for Afro-descendants.⁶⁸ It is the present and its form as a persistent memory that needs addressing in wounded spaces, in addition to the strength people harness in the form of powerfully articulated and resistant ethnic identities. Appreciating this brings us closer to understanding the social and political motivations that underscore ethnicity and identity politics more generally. A future ethnic studies which takes the lead in identifying the strengths and vulnerabilities of “new or emerging ethnicities” in wounded spaces, offers a great deal to understanding their experiences and the socio-political conditions in which they might co-exist with a range of other

ethnic identities. At the center of this are future streams within ethnic studies that may offer intellectual insight into the human conditions of relatedness and belonging, sameness and difference, whilst also contributing directly to academic and public discourse concerning ethnic conflict, social justice debates, affirmative action, and multiculturalism.

Notes

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