

## **Cultural goods, transnational strategies and identity dynamics. The case of Brazilians in Los Angeles.**

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This paper is the result of the firsts finding of my fieldwork conducted in the city of Los Angeles during 2015 and 2016. Its objective is to analyze the disputes and negotiations among cultural workers around the definitions of Brazilian identity (ies). In this case I focus in two transnational strategies deployed by some cultural workers. Part of this research is dedicated to the process of *cultural commodification*, this means to consider several cultural goods (music, practices, meanings and symbols) circulating transnationally. Although they are sold in L.A., these cultural goods are filled with meanings from ‘other sites’. I selected the cases of samba (as a dance) and Afro-Brazilian arts. Throughout the perspective of multi-sited ethnography I ‘follow the people and the things’ (Marcus, 2011) to understand to which places this activities are tied and connected. Therefore, I try to show how the cultural workers connect their teachings and shows with the Carnaval do Rio and Salvador and Cachoeira, Bahia. Moreover, the connection is not to geographical points, but to *imagined sites*. Using their personal experiences the cultural workers construct the sites through a selection of images, symbols and meanings. In conclusion these individuals are actively defining the *sites* and events as sources of legitimacy and authenticity, at the same time that are part of the links between social spaces.

Key words: *multi-sited ethnography; commodification; cultural workers; transnational strategies; sites.*

### **Introduction and preliminary notes.**

This papers aims to organize and present the primary findings of my fieldwork on Brazilian cultural activities in the city of Los Angeles, as a part of my PhD dissertation in Political Sociology. The subjects of this research are ‘cultural workers’ (Brazilian and non-Brazilians). In a restricted sense I focus on people who have an income derived from performing and teaching activities defined as ‘Brazilian’. The field of culture (Bhabha 1994; Hannerz 1996, Coimbra de Sá 2011) is a privileged space where we can observe specific disputes and tensions, while certain agents and groups seek to define what is ‘truly or authentic’ Brazilian.

An important reason that led me to focus on cultural workers was the difficulty of identifying a Brazilian community in Los Angeles. According to the Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs the estimated<sup>2</sup> number of Brazilian immigrants in United States was of 1.368.300 for the year 2014, and 90.000 in the database of the Brazilian Consulate in Los Angeles (which accounts

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<sup>2</sup> Source: <http://www.brasileirosnomundo.itamaraty.gov.br/a-comunidade/estimativas-populacionais-das-comunidades>

for the south region of California) for the same year. Most of the researches conducted by Brazilian scholars on the subject have focused in the region of Boston, due the historical ties and the steady flows from specific regions of Brazil. As Beserra (2005a, 2005b, 2011) explains, Brazilians in Los Angeles County are not located in specific neighborhoods. Yet they do have a considerable visibility through centers, clubs and associations<sup>3</sup>. Following Beserra's work I decided to 'access' the Brazilian community through these centers.

Focusing on cultural workers provides the advantage of concentrating in an individual or group who is deliberately presenting and offering a commodity as a 'Brazilian' cultural product. As a consequence she/he seeks to configure her/himself as an authorized representative, often using credentials such as geographical origin, artistic trajectory, among others. In this paper I will concentrate in some of the firsts findings of my fieldwork.

As a general objective I hope to accomplish a multi-sited ethnography prompted by the purpose of '*following the people, following the thing*' (Marcus 2011; Appadurai 1986; Hannerz 1996). In other words, following 'the people' is about the cultural workers and the different ways they circulate within the cultural market and between Brazil and USA. Thus, it is necessary to think about diverse 'scenarios' in order to perceive and understand the ways in which they are presenting themselves and the cultural product they offer (Falzon 2009; Coleman & Hellerman 2011). Following the things applies to cultural commodities, considering goods, practices, meanings and symbols (Lash and Urry 1994; Hannerz 1996). In this sense I worked with cultural practices such as dance, music, sculptures among others.

A multi-sited approach requires us to think about sites differently from geographical spaces. 'Sites' can be thought as social spaces and scenarios. These references can be geographically continuous or not, but the main element is to identify them as meaningful social and cultural connections. These 'sites' are, basically, constructed. Imagined by cultural workers, whose endeavors are dedicated to evoke these sites by explanations, personal experiences and traveling. Defining the Carnival in Rio de Janeiro, the ceremonies of Candomblé en Salvador or the origins of forró in the desert is mainly accomplished by the selection of specific elements and a particular configuration of places and time. This process of imaginary construction is based on an array of elements that gain importance due to economic opportunities (within the cultural market in L.A.), disputes around authenticity and authority, and transnational ties and links.

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<sup>3</sup> Most of them are related to the congregation of fellow Brazilian, but also have a discourse and 'mission' of social commitment and integration, especially the Samba baterias and Capoeira groups.

## 1. About the fieldwork and methodology.

Following the discussion of Collemand & Hellermann (2011), Falzon (2009) and Gupta & Ferguson (1997) a fundamental part of the methodological design of a multi-sited ethnography is receding from a 'traditional' understanding of the field as a location for the research. According to Gupta & Ferguson (1997a, 1997b) the deconstruction of the Malinovskian idea of the field means to renounce to the equation of geographical spaces with cultural exclusiveness. In other words, we must question the thought of the field as something that is 'out there', as well as some kind of natural state that we can explore as observers.

The field as an empirical reference must consider meaningful *links*. These are specific *meaningful* connections with other social contexts produced in distant places and times (Marcus, 2011, p. 20). In my research I realized that these links are produced and maintained by social agents, groups and individuals engaged actively with the constructions of identity and a social hierarchy. This is the reason why working with some of these agents, whom Marcus defined as para-ethnographers, is vital for the researcher. I would risk saying that is the only way of understanding some of the mechanisms of social distinction and hierarchy. The phenomena we are trying to understand are defined by the distribution of knowledge, dynamics and relations that we can only comprehend with the collaboration of para-ethnographers.

In my case, these individuals explained to me the specifics of the economic activities (opportunities and adaptation), as well as the cultural content of the activities that they taught. Some examples are limits of sacred and profane in the case of Capoeira and Candomblé, mainly in all Afro-Brazilian arts; the different conceptions of the body and nudity and sensuality related to the Carnival. Another example is the complex knowledge about gender hold by some of the female samba dancers I interviewed. They are able to transit between the social representations of gender, focused in male and female, build and/or brought from Brazil with those they recognize in the United States.

The techniques used during the fieldwork were divided in two moments. Firstly, due to my lack of knowledge about the cultural market in L.A., I decided to conduct participant and non-participant observations. Throughout six months of participating in classes and workshops, as well as shows and performances, I identified groups and individuals who were prominent within the field. In addition to this, I also started being a 'familiar' to the cultural workers and the students. Secondly, the second stage of the fieldwork was focused in in-depth interviews to specific cases. Because I continued with the participant observations I was able to get to know more cultural

workers. Also, throughout an year of observations I got the chance to participate in workshops with international guests, which emerged as an important strategy used by some of the cultural workers.

## **2. Main findings.**

During my participant and non-participant observations, interviews and analyses of the social networks I was able to build a data base with companies, groups, gyms and bands offering activities related to Brazilian culture. I included music, dance, capoeira, Afro-Brazilian arts, photography, sculptures and cultural producers. I listed sixty-six enterprises legally registered, with professional web sites, Facebook pages and updated portfolios. This 'census' allowed me to gather important information regarding hiring co-ethnics, the regular size of the groups (especially important in the case of Samba companies) and the way the social networks are used in cases of needing extra people for specific events. These aspects are highly significant for future analyses regarding ethnic economy, as well as how economic opportunities favor (or not) Brazilians in future jobs.

I would like to dedicate the following pages to the strategies I identified regarding the disputes of authority and authenticity among cultural workers. Several mechanisms are used to solve these tensions. What I was able to see clearly was the important role of the circulation of people as resources in these disputes. On one hand, there is an established flow of cultural workers from L.A. to particular locations in Brazil, and some very peculiar flow of students to Brazil with organized trips I will describe henceforth. On the other hand there is a flow of people and things from Brazil to L.A., which is smaller in quantity, yet extremely significant in terms of cultural exclusiveness. In addition to this, I will try to show how this circulation is the base for links between L.A. and 'sites' in Brazil. These ties are built and maintained thanks to particular movements of individuals, meanings, experiences and images of Brazil.

## **3. Going to Brazil, shaping the site.**

### **3.1 In the case of Samba: O Carnaval do Rio.**

Part of the epistemological innovation of the multi-sited approach is the effort of thinking that our 'local' reality, where our fieldwork is embedded, is connected with other 'sites'. The latter refers to social spaces constructed and imagined; in this sense the geographical reference is not enough (Marcus 2011). In this sense if I wanted to understand why people are circulating

transnationally and how is it possible, I needed to think beyond L.A. But particularly I needed to comprehend why these other 'sites' (thought of as places filled with social meanings) were defining factors in these flows. As I said, within the flow of individuals and groups from L.A. to Brazil, I was able to recognize two types of flows.

The most expressive component of this flow are women who are samba teachers and/or owners of samba companies, who perform Samba shows regularly. During my interviews, these women explained to me that they travel during the Carnival season to Brazil, mainly to Rio de Janeiro (although some of them travel to São Paulo), to participate in the parade with the Samba schools. Using contacts established previously to migrating, these women pay the Samba Schools to participate in the parade. During this time, photos and videos are made in order to promote their careers 'back in L.A.'. These participations are the main resource these cultural workers have to update their connections to the Carnival and Brazil.

Analyzing my interviews, I learned that the movement of these women to Brazil, and back, is not only about people circulating, is about *experiences, costumes, music and perceptions*. A closed and updated connection between the teacher and the Carnival promotes a perception of authenticity. The fact that the teacher participated in the quintessential expression of Carnival (thus, the overrepresentation of Rio's Carnival over others within Brazil) proves her knowledge and dexterity on *Samba enredo*. I will explain this better.

When the dancer comes back to L.A., she 'brings back' with her a particular experience, that of the performer. During the classes in which I participated in, this experience and perspective is the one that shapes the idea of Carnival taught and transmitted to the students. In other words, the way the students learn how to dance is based on the role of the dancer and defined by the perspective of the spectator. The instructions generally are: 'you must appear bigger, occupy the space', 'you need to understand that the Samba school spent the entire year preparing for this moment'. It is quite clear that there are no other type of situations evoked related to samba, although it is a very popular dance in Brazil. The examples used during samba lessons are from the experience of being a performer ('I saw' 'I learned') in a personal perspective. Nevertheless this includes other people in the same perspective, people performing with her: 'the musas of Carnival dance in this way because of their role in the parade').

Yet, the dancers 'bring back' more than experience, they also carry music and costumes with them. These are destined to the Samba companies and the shows offered as novelties after the Carnival season. Performing with the same costume worn by a well-known Samba school and/or *musas*, can be a very profitable feature for the company. This not only makes evident the experience of the dancers who work in the group. But also shows a tight tie between the company and the

Carnival, which is the type of show they offer: Samba show Rio style. This way we can see that, in the case of the samba lessons, this transnational strategy collaborates with the authority of the teacher; meanwhile in the case of the Samba shows, it contributes with authenticity. Although is difficult to strictly separate this two aspects, it was thanks to the para-ethnographers that I understood how these resources were articulated and used.

### **3.2 The case of Afro-Brazilian arts: traveling to Salvador.**

In the case of Afro-Brazilian arts, the range of the analysis is ampler, so I will focus on one aspect in particular: the mobility of students from L.A. to Salvador and Cachoeira in the State of Bahia. These trips started eleven years ago, organized by a couple who are also two prominent teachers in the city. They own a well-regarded dance company which has performed in festivals, shows and several theaters in L.A. They also offer private and open classes, residency for university students and workshops focused in Candomblé and cultural history of Brazil.

As a company they regularly offer workshops with guest (Brazilian) artists. I attended several, with *mães de santo* and the artistic director of Ballé Folklórico da Bahia. These were excellent opportunities to witness how the influence of an international guest was used to contribute to the authenticity of what was taught to the students. There is an active effort deployed by these individuals in shaping the cultural history of slavery in Brazil. The interpretations go back and forth in history, focusing in the process of retrieving and (re) articulate the cultural heritage of African populations within the history of Brazil.

According to Sarah (one of the owners), the trips started by the claims of her students of ‘really knowing’ the place that was the source of all they were learning. This needs to be explained. During all the classes and shows I saw, Salvador and/or Bahia is presented and configured as the main locus of *Africanidade* in Brazil. This is the place were ‘Africa survived’, culturally and demographically (always referring to the expressive percentage of black population in the city). This is a particular configuration of Salvador, focused on specific elements that are important in shaping the ‘site’. Then again, thinking about the city as a city would not offer any progress in the interpretation of how this ‘sites’ are connected. *It is an imagined Salvador, a construction of the city based on selected elements that work in favor of the cultural commodification in L.A.* It does not mean that the teachers are deceiving the students. The point here is to understand that the personal experiences of the cultural workers are the base for this imagined ‘sites’. *It is their interpretation of the places as a ‘site’.*

So the question is: how these trips contribute to configuring 'sites'? Firstly, it is offered as a cultural trip, a two-week cultural immersion in the Afro-Brazilian heritage in Salvador. The students spend a week in the city and another week in Cachoeira. The main activities are: witnessing (and participating depending on the student) in ceremonies of *Candomblé*, being part of *rodas de capoeira*, learning about Afro-Brazilian dance and specially the cultural history of the Afro-Brazilian population. The students have the chance of visiting *terreiros* and having classes and meetings with *mães de santos*. They are the same priestesses frequently invited to L.A. during the year to give workshops, *leitura de jogo de buizos*, among other activities.

Anyone can travel to Salvador and Cachoeira, but this program offers, throughout the cultural workers, access to spaces and events that otherwise would not be open to regular tourists. The exclusiveness of having access to these spaces is strongly related to their sacred nature, particularly evident in the case of *terreiros* and ceremonies. The cultural workers who organize the trip are not only translators, but also interpreters. They do assist the student communicating in Portuguese. Yet the important role they play has to do with being the connection between cultures. Thus they explained the ceremonies, what is sacred and what is profane, what are the students allowed to do and to tell. They shape the situations by explaining them, what they give to the students is their interpretation of every situation.

It is necessary to mention here that these cultural workers are extremely knowledgeable in the matter of Afro-Brazilian culture. Sara is a person with a significant academic background and his partner, José, was born and raised in Salvador. He also participated in several well-known dance companies in Salvador, performing Folkloric dance and Afro-Brazilian dance and music. From my participant observations and interviews with some of the teachers, the authority of Sara and José is unquestionable. Therefore, I believe that the trips to Salvador are actually resources destined to reinforce and update the authenticity of what they teach. It is a strong strategy that shows to the student that what they learn and experience in L.A. with Sara and José is the same that they will find in Salvador, i.e. 'original source'.

#### **4. Discussion.**

In this paper I tried to briefly sum up a few international strategies that some of the cultural workers deployed trying to reinforce their authority on the subjects they teach and perform, as well as the authenticity of the cultural goods they offer. I believe that a deeper analysis is necessary to understand the effects and influences that these strategies, and others, have in the hierarchy of the cultural market of L.A. regarding Brazilian cultural activities. The latter is, in addition, an ample

label, since defining what is culture, and what is not, can be a continuously unfolding debate. Nevertheless, the cases of samba and Afro-Brazilian dance are extremely fruitful to reflected upon since they offer different modalities of circulation.

Probably the Carnaval in Rio de Janeiro is one of the most widely known cultural manifestations from Brazil; even if the images and meanings that circulate internationally are not completely truthful to local interpretations. The embeddedness of the Samba schools in the communities, the social tenor of the narratives performed during the Carnaval and other aspects are mostly excluded of the way *samba enredo* is conveyed in L.A. Regarding Afro-Brazilian cultural heritage the ‘labeling’ is even more complicated. What I learned in L.A. is that Afro-Brazilian can be, sporadically, used as an ‘umbrella’ category, including some activities that other cultural workers reject. This is the case of Capoeira, some *mestres* claim that this is a peculiar martial art, due to its history and meaning in Brazil. Thus, there are tensions about what can or cannot be included as Afro-Brazilian, especially because of the way this is articulated by the most powerful cultural workers. Some individuals and groups reinforce the African component, postulating that Salvador is the Africa that does not exist even in Africa. There are significant institutional efforts of including what they teach into the discourse of African diaspora throughout conferences and workshops.

These disputes and claims within the field of culture answer to multiple objectives; it is not fair to reduce them only to economic opportunities. They are embedded in structures of power mainly influenced by the distribution of knowledge (Marcus 2011, note 2). To understand how these hierarchies change it is necessary to consider the role of para-ethnographers, “[as] nodes in distributed systems, perceived as knowledge-makers and not merely holders” (Colleman & Hellermann 2011: 5). They did not only provide me with information about how these strategies work (like their traveling, the circulation of goods and how to use photos and videos ‘back in L.A.’). But also taught me about dynamics regarding the Carnaval, how to participate in the parade, about the sacred and profane boundaries in the Candomblé ceremonies, about Orixás and how to dance for them, to kiss the roda de Capoeira, among other things. They provided me with the necessary knowledge to understand complex dynamics present locally and transnationally.

I believe that these transnational strategies are extremely rich for analyzing several aspects of the processes of commodification, as well as the construction of ties between Brazil and L.A. These trips are exceptional situations where the cultural workers turn into cultural interpreters. They established the connections between sites, and they are part of it. This is a particular point that I would like to highlight regarding how we can figure out the shaping of sites. I will explain this.

Firstly, both of these strategies establish and maintain transnational links between L.A. (being the samba lessons, the Samba shows, the Afro-Brazilian dance classes and ceremonies) and some specific places and situations in Brazil. If we think only in geographical terms we would not be able to fully comprehend the meanings of every special situation evoked during the classes and shows. In addition, we need to understand that the type of cultural reference being used: the Carnaval and the Ceremonies and rodas in Salvador are limited in time and space. Their exclusiveness has to do with the access to them, but also with their transitory nature, they 'exist' temporarily. And I believe this is something extremely important in the case of the Carnaval. The dancers who parade there and go back to L.A. bring with them costumes, music, but mainly the experience of 'being there'. And that is what they try to teach the students, if you want to learn 'the real samba' you must learn how the *passistas* dance in the parade.

In the case of Afro-Brazilian arts it is different, since Candomblé ceremonies and rodas de capoeira can be found regularly in Salvador. Nevertheless, the difference is that Sara and José have access to more traditional house of Candomblé, to *terreiros* and to well-known *mestres* of Capoeira. So the personal connections that they have are the main elements that open the doors for the students to things that exists in Salvador, but not 'for tourists'. The sites are these particular situations, delimited in time and space in which the classes in L.A. are based in. They appear more authentic because they happen in Brazil, with 'locales' and prominent individuals related to the activity (musas de Carnaval, mãe de santos and mestres). The site is born out of a specific selection of narratives, images, times and spaces defined as (more) authentic. A Candomblé ceremony in Venice Beach in L.A. can be considered serious, but it would never be as genuine as a ceremony in Cachoeira, Bahia.

## **Conclusion.**

To sum up, it is throughout the biographic experience of the cultural workers and their circulation that the ties between L.A. and selected 'sites' are built and maintained. Together with cultural workers, meanings, definitions, symbols and 'ways of being' circulate too. The 'sites' are imagined and constructed from these experiences, and used as the sources of knowledge and authenticity. Therefore, these transnational circulations are a fundamental part of the process of commodification. Due to the way the cultural market is structured in L.A., and the way the diverse Brazilian activities are organized, a tight connection with Brazil is an important component for selling a cultural product.

Of course some activities are easier to sell due to older transnational circulations of symbols and meanings, like the Samba Show Rio Style. Although this does not mean, necessarily, a direct exportation of the cultural good or that it has been always the same. Like Appadurai explained, we need to understand that cultural commodities have a biography. We need to understand that part of the circulations are new places, social arenas, being disputed (Kopytoff, 1996)<sup>4</sup>. So the process of commodification implies changes, transformation, adaptations. Moreover, some elements that were part of those practices or meanings, in the 'local of origin', are no longer part of the cultural good in other national and cultural spaces.

Facing the challenge of: '*following the people, following the thing*', requires of us thinking simultaneously in several 'sites' and social spaces. Without a direct participation in the Carnaval, it would be difficult for samba teachers to claim their authority on the matter. Likewise with Sara and José, who reinforce their social and capital cultural in every trip; with the students as witness of their connections and knowledge in Salvador. In the cases I analyzed, following the people was a way of following the things, which applies to examples like the costumes. But in the cases of cultural practices the configuration of the commodity is more complex. Certain practices turn into commodities in L.A. throughout specific mechanisms. But they are filled with meanings from 'another place', other locales and events that are far in time and space yet evocated in every lesson and show.

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<sup>4</sup> In other words we need to understand that this is a historical process, that certain 'cultural goods' were not exchangeable or salable in some periods of time and for specific reasons and process they do become commodities

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