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Women out of Place? A Micro-historical Perspective on the Black Feminist Movement in Salvador da Bahia, Brazil*

CECILIA McCALLUM

Abstract. In Brazil, black women are symbolically and practically associated with domestic work. The article examines feminist responses to black women's place in the socio-economic hierarchy of the city of Salvador, Bahia. These include proposals to introduce affirmative action and a 'politics of presence', involving the election of black women to represent the city's black female constituency. It describes the racial dynamics at work between black and white feminists in Bahia, signalling the contradictory tendencies that structure their relationship. Arguing against the view that a 'politics of identity' necessarily supports a new essentialism of race or culture, the article describes the diverse ideological and political influences upon the ideas and proposals of Bahian feminists. Black feminists construct racial difference as experiential and structural in origin. They adapt academic concepts and language in order to discuss their own lives and the specific social and cultural context of Salvador. The ethnographic and micro-historical perspective adopted here provides insight into 'native' understandings of affirmative action and a 'politics of presence' and suggests that criticisms of these measures on the grounds that they represent imported, non-Brazilian views of race are misplaced.

Keywords: gender, feminism, racial dynamics, identity politics, affirmative action, Brazil

Introduction

Some five million women worked as *empregadas domesticas* (domestic employees) in Brazil in 2001. Their symbolic place is the kitchen, a stereotype

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reinforced on a daily basis through the mass media. Throughout the country, architects design new apartments with *dependências completas* (complete dependencies) - integrated spaces, adjunct to the main living area, composed of a kitchen, a service area and a maid's room often barely large enough for a narrow single bed. Many women spend much of their lives in these spaces, thereby reinforcing the symbolic ties between black female gender and domestic work.¹

Black feminists in Brazil have struggled to create a new set of symbolic associations for black women beyond the confines of the 'dependencies'. This article investigates the languages and rationales they use in this struggle, and the racial dynamics involved in their engagement in 'identity politics'. Adopting a micro-historical perspective, it explores relations between black and white women in the feminist movement in Salvador, the capital of Bahia state in North-eastern Brazil. Through an analysis of auto-biographical narratives, contextualised ethnographically, contradictory tendencies towards both separation and solidarity are revealed.

A key problematic in the study of identity politics in Latin America is the manner in which protagonists come to define political goals and mobilise support through claims to difference. Of what do differences consist? How do actors conceive them? How do they act upon them? 'Essentialism' is often considered the ontological approach favoured by such movements. Thus, Wade writes that new social movements in Latin America 'frequently have a rather essentialist view of their own culture which, according to them, traces its roots continuously back through history and has an inner core which defines their identity'.² Obviously we need to analyse each case on its own terms in order to understand the form such essentialism takes.³ Yet this apparently simple injunction is more challenging than it might at first appear. Analysts may presuppose essentialism even if the subjects they study do not in fact subscribe to it in their understandings of their own identities.⁴ Protagonists of movements mobilising around a particular identity may see identities as fixed, as constantly re-negotiated and 're-invented', or

¹ In 2001 a majority of Brazilian domestic employees were black. See Álvaro França, 'Os empregados domésticos e a Previdência Social', (Brazil, 2003) <http://www.previdenciasocial.gov.br/reforma/opiniao/outros1.htm>. Site accessed 3 June 2006; Adriana Andrade, 'Trabalho feminino e desvantagem social: diferenciais de raça/cor no emprego doméstico'. Paper presented at XIV Encontro Nacional de Estudos Populacionais, ABEP, (Brazil, 2004).

² Peter Wade, *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America* (London/Stirling, VA: 1997), pp. 109–10.

³ Peter Wade, *Race, Nature and Culture* (London: 2002).

⁴ Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, 'Beyond "Identity"', *Theory and Society*, vol. 29, no. 1 (2000), pp. 1–47, critique the analytical category of identity as too ambiguous. Charles Hale, 'Cultural politics of identity in Latin America', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 26 (1997), pp. 567–90, challenges the dichotomy between essentialism and constructivism.

as taking some other form, yet commentators often assume that they anchor their concepts of sameness and difference on some notion of a fixed, inner essence, in order to stress internal homogeneity and establish boundaries.⁵ Some analysts view a politics of identity as requiring, at the least, a 'strategic essentialism', where protagonists consciously evoke core similarities to further political ends, such as mobilising and unifying support.⁶ Yet such a reading is problematic, suggesting that the pursuit of such goals *necessarily* involves the construction of difference in essentialist terms. An alternative approach premised on an appreciation of protagonists' own ways of framing their claims to difference permits greater analytical precision about the relationship between academic categories of identity, on the one hand, and everyday lived practice on the other.

As historical phenomena, identity-based politics may develop as challenges to hegemonic processes that constitute differences practically while denying them discursively. Such identity-based political movements often draw on philosophical and sociological frameworks that resonate across national frontiers. The black feminist movement in Brazil can be seen as a case in point. Feminist theories which developed during the 1970s, forged in defiance of both the essentialism inherent to biological determinism and the gender-blind universalism of liberal political philosophy, posited a universal duality of political subjects, differentiated by gender. In Europe and the USA, black feminists swiftly challenged the thesis of 'universal woman'.⁷ During the following two decades a stream of research and publications in English explored the distinctiveness of non-white women's consciousness, experience and identities and the inter-connectedness of race, class and gender. Researchers developed more nuanced appreciations of differences in the study of gender in relation to topics such as nationalism, citizenship, and politics.⁸ Yet black feminists were sometimes accused of essentialism. In

⁵ Brubaker and Cooper, 'Beyond "Identity"'; Stanley Bailey, 'Group dominance and the myth of racial democracy: Antiracism attitudes in Brazil', *American Sociological Review*, vol. 69 (2004), pp. 728–47.

⁶ On 'strategic essentialism' see Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (New York, 1989); Hale, 'Cultural politics'; Wade, *Race, Nature and Culture*, p. 27.

⁷ Valerie Amos and Prathiba Parmar, 'Challenging imperial feminism', *Feminist Review*, vol. 17 (1984), pp. 3–19; bell hooks, 'Essentialism and experience', *American Literary History*, vol. 3, no. 1 (1991), pp. 72–83.

⁸ See, for example, Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis, *Racialized Boundaries: Race, Nation, Gender, Colour and Class and the Anti-racist Struggle* (London, 1992); Nira Yuval-Davis and Pnina Werbner, *Women, Citizenship and Difference* (New York, 1999); Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation* (London, 1997); Brackette Williams (ed.), *Women out of Place: The Gender of Agency and the Race of Nationality* (London, 1996); and Kum-Kum Bhavnani (ed.), *Feminism and Race* (Oxford, 2001). On white North American women's race consciousness, see Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis, 1993). On race in Brazilian feminist writing, see Kia Lilly Caldwell,

her review of Diana Fuss's *Essentially Speaking*, Bell Hooks criticises Fuss for assuming *a priori* that black intellectuals understand difference in essentialist terms. She states that 'the perspective from which [white feminists] write is informed by racist and sexist thinking, specifically as feminists perceive black and white women of colour'.⁹ Hooks suggests that to treat essentialism as a strategy predominantly employed by marginalised groups is to refuse to acknowledge the daily oppression experienced by their members, as they are subject to practices of domination and exclusion that might be based on essentialist thinking. The fact that such groups organise politically precisely in response to identities attributed or denied to them by others is often lost from view.

Black feminist writing in English was little read in Brazil. Women's studies programmes rarely incorporated their critique of mainstream feminism, not least because very little of this corpus of work was translated.¹⁰ However, black Brazilian feminists increasingly published their own critiques and studies as they mobilised within the wider context of national and regional cultural politics.¹¹ During the 1990s, redressing the structural inequality of blacks in Brazil became a central concern of the black movement.¹² Many supported policies combating poverty, but debates increasingly revolved around proposals to establish an affirmative action programme. There was no unanimity on the issue. On one side, proponents argued that it would redress historical injustice and strengthen solidarity among divided blacks; on the other, opponents felt that this would exacerbate racial differences or sidestep the deeper economic and historical causes of inequality.

Feminists became embroiled in the discussion on one particular measure: quotas for blacks. This topic was not new to feminists, who had campaigned in order to institute quotas for women in the political sphere. The quota law of 1998 stipulated that political parties should ensure that between 30% and

'Racialized boundaries: women's studies and the question of "Difference" in Brazil', *The Journal of Negro Education*, vol. 70, no. 3 (2001), pp. 219–30.

⁹ Bell Hooks, 'Essentialism and experience', p. 172.

¹⁰ Caldwell, 'Racialized boundaries; Sônia Azerêdo, Teorizando sobre gênero e relações raciais', *Revista Estudos Feministas*, Numero Especial (1994), pp. 203–16.

¹¹ See Lélia Gonzalez, 'A mulher negra na sociedade brasileira', in M. T. Luz (ed.), *O Lugar da Mulher* (Rio de Janeiro, 1982), pp. 87–106; Sueli Carneiro and Teresa Santos, *Mulher Negra*. (São Paulo, 1985); For discussion, see Peggy A. Lovell, 'Gender, race, and the struggle for social justice in Brazil', *Latin American Perspectives*, vol. 27, no. 6 (2000), pp. 85–103; Caldwell, 'Racialized boundaries'.

¹² Rebecca Reichmann, 'Introduction', in R. Reichmann, (ed.), *Race in Contemporary Brazil* (Pennsylvania, 1999), pp. 1–35; Rosana Heringer, 'Mapeamento das ações e discursos de combate às desigualdades raciais no Brasil', *Estudos Afro-asiáticos*, vol. 23, no. 2 (2001), pp. 1–43.

70% of candidates be of one sex.¹³ Whilst gender quotas had encountered low resistance, opposition to quotas for blacks was considerable. The differentiated responses can be attributed to differences between constructions of gender and race, and to the nature and presumed consequences of each piece of legislation. Gender-based quotas were not mandatory and restricted to party candidacy alone, thus posing little threat to male access to positions of power. However, the proposed race-based quotas were to be mandatory, directly affecting non-blacks who would otherwise have been chosen for a job or a university place.¹⁴ In the last few decades of twentieth century, women began to ‘catch up’ with men. The gender income gap lessened, although blacks did not close the gap with whites.¹⁵ Whilst binary gender categories are taken for granted in Brazil, racial classification is not a simple matter, so critics often argue that racial quotas are impossible to apply. They take binary race difference to be a dangerous ‘foreign’ idea in Brazil, creating a basis for forging or exacerbating racial division.¹⁶ Such measures as reserving quotas for blacks in higher education, for instance, imply the institutionalisation and fixing of binary racial categories in a country that historically had avoided legal definitions of racial difference as a basis for policy-making.¹⁷ The architects of the ideas behind the campaign for affirmative action were charged with introducing a new form of essentialism into thinking about race in Brazil. It was argued that social practices would change as racial categories hardened in the wake of the implementation of

¹³ Law 9.505/97, article 10 – see José Apóstolo Netto, ‘Sistema de cotas: um velho (des)conhecido nosso’, *Revista Espaço Acadêmico*, No. 33 (<http://www.espacoacademico.com.br/033/33netto.htm>) (2004), site accessed May 2006; Mala Htun, ‘A política de cotas na América Latina’, *Revista Estudos Feministas*, vol. 9 (2001), pp. 225–30.

¹⁴ The Legislative Assembly of Rio de Janeiro passed a law allocating a quota to blacks at the state university in 2001. See Marcos Chor Maio and Ricardo Ventura Santos, ‘Política de cotas raciais, os “olhos da sociedade” e os usos da antropologia: o caso do vestibular da Universidade de Brasília (UnB)’, *Horiz. antropol.*, vol. 11, no. 23 (2005), pp. 181–214. The Bahian state university followed suit in 2002, as did other institutions in other states. The Federal University of Bahia, following the CEAFFRO campaign, instituted in 2005 a quota of 43% public school students, of which 85% were to be self-identified blacks, and 2% indigenous.

¹⁵ Helen I. Safa, ‘Challenging Mestizaje: A gender perspective on indigenous and afro-descendant groups in Latin America’, *Critique of Anthropology*, vol. 25, no. 3 (2005), pp. 307–30.

¹⁶ Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant, ‘Sur les ruses de la raison imperialiste’. *Actes de la Recherche en Science Sociale*, vol. 121 (1998), pp. 109–118.

¹⁷ See Michael Hanchard, *Orpheus and Power: The Movimento Negro of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, Brazil* (Princeton, 1994); Peter Fry, ‘Politics, nationality, and the meanings of “race” in Brazil’, *Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of the Arts and Sciences*, vol. 129, no. 2 (2000), pp. 83–118. For debates on affirmative action see Mala Htun, ‘From “racial democracy” to affirmative action: changing state policy on race in Brazil’, *Latin American Research Review*, vol. 39, no. 1 (2004), pp. 60–89; and Edward Telles, *Racismo à Brasileira: Uma Nova Perspectiva Sociológica* (Rio de Janeiro, 2003).

the new laws'. To promote the idea that blacks are different risked giving strength to racial categories and instigating racial divisions in a country that once prided itself on being a 'racial democracy'. Yet there is evidence that many support affirmative action.¹⁸ While some intellectuals appealed for caution,¹⁹ others writing on the topic rejected the notion that support for affirmative action or adherence to a bi-racial classification scheme was a sell-out to 'imperialist reason', as Bourdieu and Wacquant had argued.²⁰

This article shifts the analytical lens away from a concern with the ontological dangers of bi-racial categories – such as suspected implicit 'essentialism' – and towards understanding of situated dynamics whereby subjects actively produce their own categories, as local versions of global ideas or otherwise. It argues that when activists embrace or question and rework an idea such as 'affirmative action' it is because it responds to particular concerns emanating from local histories and experiences. However, when a movement's discourse makes no appeal to some notion of 'inner essence', or explicitly rejects essentialism, we should take their stance seriously. Moreover, the ethnography presented below underlines the fact that the relational environment in which the production of ideas, ideologies and action occurs should be taken into account in assessing particular forms of identity politics. Where structural factors constantly require crossing boundaries erected on the basis of claims to difference, charges of 'implicit' or 'strategic' essentialism tend to falter.

This article is based on data gathered in 2002, as part of a study of activism and daily life in Bahia, when I followed the black movement's campaign in favour of affirmative action and attended meetings and public events dealing with race and gender issues. I had informal conversations with participants and recorded semi-structured interviews with black and white public figures involved in the politics of race. Informants spoke about their lives, detailing connections between childhood, youth and adult experiences in the passage from anonymity into public life. The interviews also elicited discussion of affirmative action, racism, sexism, racial democracy and other current topics. I spoke to a number of feminists, both black and white. Much of what follows is based on these discussions, especially interviews with black Bahian feminist activists, specifically Olivia Santana – schoolteacher and militant of

¹⁸ See Bailey, 'Group dominance'. On racial democracy, see Wade, *Race and Ethnicity*; Donna Goldstein, "'Interracial" sex and racial democracy in Brazil: twin concepts?' *American Anthropologist*, vol. 101, no. 3 (1999), pp. 563–78.

¹⁹ Yvonne Maggie and Peter Fry, 'A reserva de vaga para negros nas universidades brasileiras', *Estudos Avançados*, vol. 18, no. 50 (2004), pp. 67–80.

²⁰ See Jocélio Teles dos Santos, 'De armadilhas, convicções e dissensões: as relações raciais como *Efeito Orloff*', *Estudos Afro-Asiáticos*, vol. 24, no. 1 (2002), pp. 167–88, and the articles published in this special number of *Estudos Afro-Asiáticos* discussing Bourdieu and Wacquant's article.

the *Partido Comunista do Brasil* (PCdoB);²¹ Ubiraci Matildes de Jesus – nurse, trade unionist, PCdoB militant and *União de Negros pela Igualdade* (UNEGRO) activist;²² Jussara Santana – black activist, reggae musician and nurse; and Creusa Maria Oliveira – president of the domestic workers’ trade union (Sindoméstico) and militant of the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (PT).²³ All four are by self-definition *negra* and were born into working-class families.

Gender, domestic work and the politics of race in Salvador

Roughly 80% of Salvador’s 2.5 million residents are black or brown and low-income. Afro-Bahian women and children predominate among the very poorest.²⁴ Many depend on domestic work for white families as a means of survival. The social relationships that structure this work are deeply racialised. In day-to-day parlance, the expression *casa de família* is often used interchangeably with *os brancos*. One might say ‘She works in a *casa de família*’ or alternatively ‘for the whites’. A family home is implicitly a domestic group composed of the family and one or more domestic servants. The core kin group is normatively white; the employees, black.

Symbolically associated with blackness, domestic work is low status. Workers are often ashamed of their jobs. By 2002 black women in Brazil had begun to react against a system that destined them for domestic work. The media presented the success of some black women in politics as a sign of progress. Benedita da Silva, the first black female senator, state governor and federal government minister in the history of Brazil, was the best known of the new generation of black female politicians. In Salvador, black women’s groups promoted a move ‘out of the kitchen’ into the public political sphere. For example, a pamphlet distributed in 2002 by the Ya-Mim Collective of Black Women of Bahia displayed the title ‘Campaign for Black Women to be Valued in Politics’ and immediately underneath ‘Vote *Negra*. Vote Woman!’ It discussed the quota law of 1998, stating that, ‘politics has always been a masculine domain and racism is a mechanism of power [...] for women, historically, the exercise of citizenship [...] is made difficult by the burden of triple discrimination: [against] women, blacks, and the poor’. Ya-Mim proposed electing black women who would ‘also deal with the needs of communities [...]: the day-to-day household tasks – the nappies, the washing tank and the stove are all part of political life’. The pamphlet insisted it did

²¹ The Brazilian section of the Communist Internationale was founded in 1922 and known as the *partidão*. It split into the PCdoB and the *Partido Comunista Brasileiro* (PCB) in 1962.

²² UNEGRO is a nation-wide organization with local branches in major cities.

²³ The PT was founded in 1980 and came to power in the 1990s. Its leader, Luís Inácio Lula da Silva, popularly known as Lula, was first elected president of Brazil in 2002 and was reelected to the presidency in October 2006.

²⁴ See Telles, *Racismo*, pp. 195–200.

not intend to ‘essentialise’ the debate about ‘the invisibility of the black woman in formal spaces of political representation’. On the contrary, its intention was to reach everyone, men and women, blacks and whites, ‘but, for this, it is necessary that **black women** are present, for delegation has its limits’ (my translation).

During the 1970s and 1980s, social, political and cultural movements flourished in Brazil.²⁵ In Salvador, many new groups promoted Afro-Brazilian identity, following pioneers in the early 1970s such as Ilê Aiyê. By the mid 1990s there were some thirty black carnival and cultural associations in the state, with an estimated 20,000 members, in addition to *capoeira*, dance and theatre groups, about 2,000 *candomblé* houses and a dozen political groups.²⁶ Additionally, many trade unions enjoyed significant black participation. In Salvador people responded positively to the black identity promoted by Ilê and other groups, more so than in other regions of Brazil.²⁷ Elite political groups governing Bahia state selectively supported some black cultural groups and promoted a tourist brochure version of black Bahian identity, sold as a regional identity, in a strategy aimed at garnering electoral support.²⁸ At the request of the municipal government, the Forum of Black Entities chose ‘Africa’ as the theme of the 2002 carnival. Other institutional changes occurred within government: for example, by 2002, a municipal Commission for Reparations had been set up to plan and lobby for affirmative action. In the *Ministério Público* – the state public prosecution service – a section was established to investigate race crimes. Alongside organisational and institutional developments in the cultural politics of race, legislative changes at national and regional level lent greater muscle to the fight against racism.²⁹

In the late 1990s the black movement gained new force. The establishment of courses preparing black students for university entrance exams – *cursinhos*

²⁵ Lovell, ‘Gender, race’; Michael G. Hanchard (ed.), *Racial Politics in Contemporary Brazil* (Durham, 1999); Robin E. Sheriff, *Dreaming Equality: Color, Race and Racism in Urban Brazil* (New Brunswick, 2001); Marcio Goldman, *Como Funciona a Democracia: Uma Teoria Etnográfica da Política* (Rio de Janeiro, 2006); Reichmann, ‘Introduction’.

²⁶ Michel Agier, ‘Racism, culture and black identity in Brazil’, *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, vol. 14, no. 3 (1995), pp. 245–64.

²⁷ See Sheriff, *Dreaming Equality*. Telles suggests that the demographic concentration of blacks is related to this singular success of a positive black identity; Telles, *Racismo*.

²⁸ Cecilia McCallum, ‘Resisting Brazil: perspectives on Brazilian nationalism from an urban heartland’, *Ethnos*, vol. 61, nos. 3–4 (1996), pp. 207–29; Jocélio Teles dos Santos, ‘Dilemas nada atuais nas políticas para os afro-brasileiros: ação afirmativa no Brasil dos Anos 60’, in Jéferson Bacelar and Carlos Caroso (eds.), *Brasil um País de Negros?* (Rio de Janeiro, 1998), pp. 221–33.

²⁹ Laws against racial discrimination include the 1988 Constitution, the Caó Law of 1989, which reformed the penal code to make racism a crime, and Law 9.459 of 13 May 1997. Brazil has also ratified the 1965 Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination.

pré-vestibulares – served to incorporate many young people into the movement. In 2002, these young black Bahians supported the campaign calling for public higher education institutions to adopt a quota system for blacks, targeting the Universidade Federal da Bahia (UFBA). The campaign was led by the Centro do Estudante Afro-Brasileiro (CEAFRO), a university-based pro-black group supported by the oldest established *cursinho*, the Steve Biko Institute.³⁰ These self-denominated ‘educational *quilombos*’ (runaway slave communities) appealed to a notion of ‘ghetto’ in order to mobilise students.

Despite such rhetorical appeals to a homogenous black identity, diversity and inter-connectedness were key features of this ebullient environment. Connections were personal as well as organisational. Michel Agier notes that individuals participate simultaneously in different religious, professional, political and cultural arenas within the black milieu.³¹ He stresses that this makes the movement ‘ideologically, politically and relationally’ integrated.³² But black militants are also involved in non-black organisations and milieus. As Wade comments with respect to identity politics in Latin America as a whole, ‘[b]ecause of the fragmentation of the political scene, one characteristic of black and Indian movements is the intertwining of different axes of identification and action: ethnicity, race, gender, class, sexual orientation, religion, music and so on’.³³ In Salvador, this intertwining takes the form of participation in multiple groups and movements, as well as in party politics.

This is also a characteristic of the feminist movement, where growing approximation between blacks and whites is driven by strategic needs as well as by a shared commitment to feminist ideas and demands. Nevertheless, there is a clear separation between black and white feminist activists. The result is a field infused with both tension and expectations, as the following sections detail.³⁴

Women united?

By the turn of the twenty-first century an apparent convergence on the topic of race in relation to gender was occurring within national and regional

³⁰ CEAFRO is a programme for black students founded in 1995 as an off-shoot of the Centro de Estudos Afro-Orientais (CEAO) at the UFBA. The Instituto Steve Biko was founded in 1992 by Afro-Brazilian professors and students, with the declared objective of ‘strengthening the fight against racial discrimination through concrete action: creating and offering conditions to facilitate the upward mobility of the low-income black community’. Towards this end, its activities aim to ‘reconstruct Afro-Brazilians’s ethnic identity, self-esteem and citizenship in the context of political and educational training.’ (www.stevebiko.org.br – site accessed 11 February 2005, my translation).

³¹ Michel Agier, ‘Etnopolítica – a dinamica do espaço afro-baiano’. *Estudos Afro-Asiáticos*, vol. 22 (1992), pp. 99–115.

³² Agier, ‘Racism, culture’, p. 257.

³³ Wade, *Race and Ethnicity*, p. 97.

³⁴ Goldman notes a similar tension between a ‘segmentary logic’ and the ‘federalizing tendency’ in the black cultural movement in Bahia; Goldman, *Como Funciona a Democracia*.

feminist circles in Brazil. This was manifest at the 2002 *Conferência Estadual de Mulheres Baianas* (CEMB), organised by the *Fórum de Mulheres* of Salvador, a feminist organisation which brings together diverse women's and feminist groups in the city. These include university research groups at UFBA;³⁵ trade unions such as Sindoméstico; black movement groups (UNEGRO, Calafate Women's Collective and others); and the *Grupo Lésbico da Bahia* (GLB). The Forum acts as a point of contact with nationalist feminist groups. Poorly funded, up to 2002 it relied upon the regular participation of a small group of activists and – lacking a formal structure – tended to come together sporadically around key dates, such as International Women's Day (8 March) or the *Dia da Consciência Negra* (Day of Black Consciousness) on 20 March.³⁶ The original nucleus of the Forum was drawn from the middle-class and comprised principally Euro-Brazilian liberal professionals or researchers and university lecturers, usually of left-wing orientation. However, since its inception in the 1980s the Forum also included black women involved in working-class social movements, such as Creusa Oliveira.³⁷ The influence of black feminism on the Forum grew throughout the 1990s, such that by 2005 it defined itself as a multi-racial 'anti-racist feminist articulation'.

The Forum is a non-party organisation, although most feminists in Salvador belong to a political party and some have become successful politicians, such as Deputy Maria do Carmo of the PT and Lidice da Mata, who was mayor of the city between 1992 and 1996.³⁸

Black women linked to the PT, the PCdoB and the black movement took over the organisation of the 2002 *Conferência Estadual de Mulheres Baianas*. Some white informants claimed that these political groups tend to

³⁵ *Núcleo de Estudos Interdisciplinares sobre a Mulher* (NEIM); *Programa de Estudos em Gênero e Saúde* (MUSA); *Grupo de Estudos sobre Saúde da Mulher* (GEM).

³⁶ I am grateful to Maria Helena Souza, one of the founding members of the Forum and 2006 Municipal Secretary for Women's Affairs in Salvador, for clarifying certain aspects of its history and functioning.

³⁷ The history of the feminist movement in Salvador has yet to be written. Although black feminists organised separately, it seems nonetheless that there was a closer relationship between white and black feminists than in other parts of Brazil. See Sonia E. Alvarez, *Engendering Democracy in Brazil: Women's Movements in Transition Politics* (Princeton, 1990); Hanchard (ed.), *Racial Politics*; Lovell, 'Gender, race'.

³⁸ The transition to democracy in Brazil saw the flourishing of a large number of political parties, some largely opportunist groupings and others, such as the two communist parties, drawing on a long history of ideological work and organisational struggle. Links between individual politicians and parties are weak, coalitions are formed across ideological lines and the practice of moving between parties is common. Lidice da Mata, for example, has shifted her party affiliation over two decades from the PCdoB (1985–1991), to the PSDB (1992–1998), and finally the PSB, (1998–2006). For a discussion of party politics and the state in Brazil, see Peter R. Kingstone and Timothy J. Power (eds.), *Democratic Brazil: Actors, Institutions, and Processes* (Pittsburgh, 2000).

occupy the public sphere created by non-party aligned feminists as a deliberate strategy. The PCdoB, for example, commonly seeks to participate in established social movements and expand its influence from within. From another perspective, militants in the *Movimento Negro Unificado* (MNU) are usually deeply involved in party politics.³⁹ In fact, the Women's Forum, a feminist coordinating body, is one of the spaces in which women of the black movement who are also members of left-wing political parties try to advance their position.

In fact there is considerable articulation between political parties and black and feminist movements in Salvador, in the sense that established feminists do not oppose such 'entryism', even though they worry about its impact on the 'traditional' feminist agenda.⁴⁰ However, the rules governing this movement-party articulation are not well defined. According to one informant with a long history of participation in the movement in Salvador, certain tensions exist between white feminists, and black feminists linked to these parties. For example one non-black informant, who had a history of supporting the black movement's fight against racism, told me that certain black militants often treated her in a cool, almost hostile fashion. Such behaviour is especially significant in Brazil, where interactions between colleagues are marked by displays of cordiality and, among women, affection.

Cunha observes that forms of struggle grounded in 'identity' tend to camouflage internal tensions and differences.⁴¹ In the case discussed here, the new identity of 'anti-racist feminist' is not based on claims to shared social origins or common (gendered) natures, but rather on holding common ideological and political positions on gender. Black feminists see themselves as different from white feminists. But in what sense?

Creusa Oliveira is a founder member and President of Sindoméstica and has long fought for better conditions for low-income women. She stood for office several times, including in 2004, as a PT candidate for *vereadora* (town councillor). She began working as a maid when she was nine years old. Speaking about her feminist identity, she said:

I think that a feminist is that person who fights for her rights. We women want equal rights, right? We do not want to be more than a man, nor different. So, when we are in a struggle, fighting for better life conditions, work, dignity, and for our emancipation, we are feminists.⁴²

³⁹ Sheriff, *Dreaming Equality*; Hanchard, *Orpheus and Power*.

⁴⁰ These comments are based on my discussions with feminists who participate in the movement but are not involved in party politics.

⁴¹ Olivia M. G. da Cunha, 'Black movements and the "politics of identity" in Brazil', In *Cultures of Politics, Politics of Culture: Re-visioning Latin American Social Movements*, Sonia Alvarez, et al. (eds.) (Boulder, 1998), pp. 220–51, pp. 231–2.

⁴² All translations of transcripts are my own.

Feminist identity derives from action and agency, not simply adherence to a specific ideology. Creusa referred to the differences between white and black feminists, pointing to tensions but also acknowledging a need for solidarity and alliance:

Us domestic workers, our relationship with [feminists from the elite] leaves a lot to be desired. Everyone knows that the feminist movement is dominated by the elite ... the most recognised are academics. But women's struggle has to take place in each and every corner ... there are 'women' and 'women', right? Oppression and domination exist, but there are differences, right? The oppression a white woman suffers is not the same as that a black woman suffers. The oppression a black academic woman suffers is not the same as that a black domestic worker suffers. These differences exist, by virtue of the question of acquisitive power, and by virtue of the question of consciousness.

Creusa emphasises the different *life experiences* of poor black women and white women of the intellectual elite. Both occupy inferior positions in asymmetrical gender relations, but the lived experiences – the nature of suffering – are different. She draws our attention to a process that we might call 'the formation of distinct subjectivities' – implied by her use of the term *consciência* – 'consciousness'. Used by black militants, it refers to 'coming to know who one really is'; in other words, to recognise oneself as black, accepting one's true identity.⁴³ The dawning of consciousness is sometimes described as a form of conversion or sudden awakening.⁴⁴ Here, however, Creusa refers to a wider, more extended process: *consciência* describes the coming-into-existence of a specific kind of awareness through the formation over time of a specific sort of person. In line with this approach, Creusa observed that the process of acquiring *consciência* differs in some respects between black domestic workers and black intellectuals. Class, defined by educational level, is a key dimension of difference. In other words, there are important differences amongst black feminists as well as between black and white feminists and these are not innate or 'essentialised', but rather the product of distinct life histories.

Creusa related her psychological considerations about the formation of distinct subjectivities to another sociological concept which I translate as 'the structural position of the subject'. She observed:

When these meetings of feminist women take place, everyone joins together. But black women organise themselves separately from white women, right? White women had the right to vote before black women. White women have had more space in circles of power. If women were oppressed in the 1950s and 1960s, black women were much more so.

⁴³ Sheriff, *Dreaming Equality*, pp. 185–217.

⁴⁴ Santos, 'Dilemas nada atuais'.

Here Creusa notes the difference between each type of subject's life history, made up of the experiences that mould distinct *consciências*. She also introduces three other concepts: first, that of a separate sphere of power, associated with formal politics; second, that of social hierarchy, characterised by relations of oppression in distinct degrees; and, third, that of the structural, historical, nature of this oppression. The implication is that subjective experience occurs within an enduring social structure, and is shaped by this broader context. Creusa then commented:

Black women's struggle stood out as a lot more ... necessary. There are moments when I think black women and white women have to be together, discussing things. But to say that they are equal, that a white woman's needs are the same as a black woman's? No, it's different! So, this union of women is necessary. Women have to be in solidarity with each other.

The relationship between white and black feminists, while not easy, is dynamic. Creusa sees it as a relationship in construction, one that looks forward, ideally based on solidarity. From the point of view of non-black feminists, it is important that more women occupy positions of power, independently of their colour. Black candidates often receive support from white feminists, who recognise the need for unity. This recognition also occurs at a national level. Thus the Ya-Mim Collective cites the support of the *Articulação de Mulheres Brasileiras* (AMB).⁴⁵

The situation in Salvador seems to reflect a national movement of approximation between mainstream non-black feminists and black feminists. The CEMB was part of a series of state conferences, financed with resources obtained by the AMB. The AMB requested that women in each state conference discuss a national feminist political platform made available on their website, adding clauses and suggested alterations, to be discussed and voted on in the *Conferência Nacional de Mulheres Brasileiras* (CNMB) a few weeks later in Brasília.

Published accounts of feminism in Brazil emphasise a historical split between black feminists and mainstream white feminists and underline the latter's failure to address the issue of race during the 1980s. In contrast, the 2002 AMB platform gives extensive and unprecedented space to discussing racial discrimination and proposing measures to combat it. Under the title 'Seventy Years of the Women's Vote: From Formal Conquest to Radical Transformation', the document offers an impressive analysis of social inequality, considering race and class as well as gender; supports human rights, including reproductive rights; and covers themes such as neo-liberalism and social inequality. It is not limited to traditional feminist issues, which are concentrated in only two of the five main sections of the

⁴⁵ See www.articulacaodemulheres.org.br.

document.⁴⁶ Race is mentioned throughout. In section four, ‘the Democratisation of Social Life’, the first item addressed is the ‘myth of racial democracy’, which, according to the authors, functions to maintain and reproduce social inequality, just as the myth of sexual liberty functions to maintain gender inequality. The poster and the pamphlets advertising the CEMB also bear the title ‘Seventy Years of the Feminine Vote: From Formal Conquest to Radical Transformation.’ Ironically, however, they display images heavily laden with the symbolism of racial democracy: there are pictures of three women – a brown-haired white, a black woman in Afro-braids and a Yanomami Indian woman. The platform’s presentation of its defence of diversity thus manifests itself as (unintentional) support for the myth of racial democracy.

Women divided?

The unintentional evocation of ‘racial democracy’ is a reminder that Creusa’s support of solidarity and the renewed attention to blackness within the feminist platform may not be enough to overcome divisions. Recalling black women’s life experiences in Salvador, black feminists detail the manifold events that have led them to acquire a deep sense of their differential place in social, economic and symbolic orders. This section explores their accounts of the formation of black subjectivities, which are seen as simultaneously affective and intellectual. It analyses the way this process gave rise to divisions between black and white feminists, and the micro-historical encounters of activists with different political viewpoints, over a period in which their sense of self-identity and of others’ identities came into being, and their understanding and practices of political action shifted.

On the day of the CEMB, several hundred Bahian women of all social classes and from different regions of the state filled the auditorium of a private college, the Faculdade Visconde de Cairu, located in the city centre. Afro-Brazilian women were a significant majority of those present. During the morning there was a panel with four speakers, two of whom were well-known black militants: Luiza Bairros, founder of the section of the MNU in Bahia and an academic working in the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and Vânia Santana, who worked for Governor Benedita da Silva’s administration in the State of Rio de Janeiro. Speakers dealt with some of the Platform’s main themes, concentrating on the fight against racism, social inequality and women’s conquest of political power.

⁴⁶ The five sections are: 1) On Political Democracy; 2) On the Democratic State and Social Justice; 3) On Brazil’s place in the International Arena; 4) On the Democratization of Social Life; 5) On Sexual and Reproductive Liberty.

Other black feminists spoke from the floor, such as Jussara Santana of the Women's Collective (a small group in a low-income neighbourhood), Vilma Reis of CEAFFRO; and Olivia Santana of UNEGRO and the PCdoB. 'Combating Racism' was the main theme of the day. Speakers mentioned traditional feminist topics, such as gender violence, but the debate centred on the notion of 'reparations', specifically, affirmative action and the adoption of quotas for blacks in state and national institutions.

Jussara Santana, a self-declared feminist, has dark brown skin and wears her hair in Afro-Bahian braids. A nursing technician for Bahia State's public service, like sociologist Vilma Reis, she introduces herself as 'a scientist' as a strategy to disrupt interlocutors' assumptions about black women. Jussara receives a modest but sufficient wage, but she identifies herself as a poor woman and distinguishes herself from black intellectuals and university lecturers. She participates in the black cultural movement in the colonial city centre, Pelourinho, and is a member of what she claims is the only women's reggae band in Salvador. In 2002 she still lived in Pelourinho with her reggae musician husband and her children. The family was in the process of being expelled by the state agency responsible for the district's 'revitalization' or renovation.⁴⁷

In the morning debate at the CEMB, Jussara spoke about the difficulty faced by black women in escaping from their attributed social position, referring to her own mother, a domestic servant. In the interviews, black feminists often mentioned their personal experiences of the association between the categories *preta* (black) and *doméstica* (domestic servant). These experiences were not occasional, as in instances of overt racism, but rather a constant presence from earliest memory. In a subsequent interview, Jussara told me:

My mother, who is an illiterate woman, mother of thirteen children, taught us the following: that we are born women and make ourselves feminist, because she taught us not to lower our heads. She said that just because we are *negras* doesn't mean that we have to accept certain things. She worked a lot as a domestic servant and she used to say 'I don't want you to be *empregadas domésticas*', one suffers a lot. I want you to study and to have a profession, but not to work in the houses of whites.

Jussara links the oppression of women to racial oppression through the lived experience of black women. This experience is portrayed as unique and unitary. Similar to Jussara, all the other black women activists that I interviewed grew up in close contact with relatives who worked as domestic servants. Thus, from early childhood, they embodied an association between

⁴⁷ On the contested transformation of Pelourinho from a low-income area inhabited by afro-bahians, to a commercial and tourist area, see Kim Butler, *Freedoms given, Freedoms Won: Afro-Brazilians in Post-Abolition São Paulo and Salvador* (New Brunswick, 1998).

categories such as ‘my mother’ and the category ‘domestic servant’ as a central part of their lived worlds.

Creusa was a live-in maid from the age of nine until in her thirties. Ubiraci’s mother died when she was a child. Her father abandoned her and her many siblings and she had to go to work as a maid. When Olivia Santana overcame the odds and obtained a place at university, her mother, herself a domestic servant, bitterly opposed her leaving her first job as a school cleaner because it was an improvement on the position of maid. Ana Célia da Silva, a founding member of the MNU-Bahia and currently a lecturer at Bahia State University,⁴⁸ had a similar experience. Ana Célia’s mother was a washerwoman and maid before marrying. Ana Celia told me:

My mother thought that we were too poor and that we could not study, because we did not have money. When I obtained a place at secondary school, she wanted to beat me. I ran off. But my father said ‘No, let her be! I’ll buy her school uniform’.

According to my black feminist informants, a white person would find it hard to understand the meaning of these experiences. Creusa cited the day-to-day behaviour of white feminists as proof of this:

I am part of the category of domestic employees. Lots of times feminist women oppress this other woman, who is the black woman who is the *empregada* in their houses. She adopts a *machista* posture, one of domination, with these women who work in her house. Some *companheiras*, when I tell them this, deny that it is so. But it is, it really is! Because a *companheira* in the feminist movement struggling for the right to equality, the right to sex, the right to abortion, the right to pregnancy, to maternity and all of a sudden, the woman who is in her house cannot get pregnant, cannot have a boyfriend, cannot study, because she has to stay with her boss’s children so she can go out and be politically active, or go out to do her doctorate.

Creusa again emphasises two aspects of the difference between blacks and whites: life experience and social position. Recognising the need for solidarity between all kinds of women, she is critical of the domestic politics of what she terms *feministas elitizadas*. She defines them as *machistas* (sexists) when they do not concede full rights to their own domestic servants, thus not ‘democratising’ domestic relations. In her view, racism and sexism are fused. In Cruesa’s view race difference is constituted simultaneously to gender difference through the social practices prevailing in the private domain. Here she makes a point similar to Jussara’s about the fusion between racial and gender oppression in day-to-day experience, taking it to a more analytical plane. To these informants, the history of the coming-into-being of subjectivities through past and present engagement in social relations indelibly marks the two styles of feminism. Each is linked to the formation of a

⁴⁸ UNEB – Universidade Estadual da Bahia.

particular type of subjectivity. In Creusa's words, this comprises 'white and *elitizado* (eliticised)' on one side; 'black domestic employee' on the other.⁴⁹

Creusa became aware of the significance of her condition slowly. As a teenager she perceived that other workers were treated differently from maids. They had time off, fixed work hours and paid holidays. Domestic workers did not. She only had time off on Sunday afternoons. She says, 'I noticed this difference, but I did not have a political vision of the thing, I just began to wonder if our work was not worth the same, that it was not work, that's what I thought.' Then she began to question this, to wonder why maids had no trade unions. She felt worst on Sunday mornings, when her bosses went to the beach, or the club. One day, ironing clothes while listening to the radio, she heard that a group of domestic servants met every Sunday at the Vieira College (a fee-paying Jesuit School). Creusa began to attend the meetings regularly, telling her employees that she was going to mass. The priests and the teachers at Vieira provided the domestic workers with the means to meet members of trade unions and social movements. The MNU gave them technical support in their struggle to establish a trade union, helping write projects and obtain advice from lawyers.

About the importance of the MNU in her life, Creusa said:

If there had not been the MNU, I would not have this consciousness that I have today. The racial discussion, here in Brazil but especially in Bahia, goes very deep. It is not just a question of class, but of race and class. This question of race was for me fundamental.

Luiza Bairros (one of the speakers at the CEMB 2002) came to the Sunday meetings as an MNU activist. Creusa found her strong, courageous and beautiful. She was especially impressed by Luiza's hair, worn in braids. At that time Creusa's hair was ironed straight, always hidden by a scarf. It was the first time she had met a black woman who was proud of her hair. As a child growing up in a rural area in the Bahian Recôncavo, she had no clear awareness of race. At home, she heard references to *os brancos* and in her child's mind, associated the category with bosses and ranchers. To rural people a white was: 'of the highest level, the greatest importance, all powerful, like a god, because that person was rich, in fact the question of colour was always given value, to be white was to be intelligent, to be beautiful, to be rich. And they were respected, called "Doctor".' During her youth she took it for granted that normal people, like herself, were not

⁴⁹ The association between female gender and domestic work is barely questioned in Brazil, so naturalized is its status. In Salvador, the overwhelming majority of domestic workers are black or brown. It is possible that middle-class black families employ a white domestic worker, but I have only come across one case. None of the black feminists I know employ domestic workers.

good-looking. Thus the encounter with women in the black movement came as a revelation. Creusa, a charismatic and attractive person, now wears her hair in Afro-braids.

In 1985 Creusa participated in the Fifth National Congress of Domestic Worker's Trade Unions, in Recife. It was a turning point. Her eyes were opened and she was inspired by meeting so many women from all over Brazil determined to obtain the right to have a trade union. They drew up a series of points to be presented to the 1988 Constituent Assembly. After this she and her colleagues became more determined to forge ahead with the trade union. She also began to attend MNU meetings. Although she was the only person in the MNU meetings who was not university educated, she says she felt among 'her people'.

Creusa's reaction to the visual and discursive message passed on by MNU activists was similar to that of other young Afro-Bahians, like Ana Célia da Silva, who became a founder of the Bahian section of the MNU after she saw Lélia Gonzales lecture in Salvador in 1978. Gonzales, an important figure in the history of black feminism in Brazil, had a powerful presence and a talent for speaking. Bairros writes, 'She was our spokesperson against the sexism that threatened to subordinate the participation of women inside the MNU and the racism that impeded our full insertion in the women's movement'.⁵⁰ For a domestic servant, the experience of seeing black women assume positions of leadership, making the language of the 'doctors' their own, was especially intoxicating.

White feminists of Creusa's generation (that is, those born between 1945–1955) did not have to cope with disturbing emotions caused by repeated reference to 'bad' hair, 'coarse' features or 'excessively dark' skin. A black child grew up knowing that others were pretty, not girls like herself. Jussara, for example, was told that she could not be the 'queen of corn' at a school festival because 'then it would be burnt corn'. A blonde girl was chosen instead. In 2002, affective, sexual and reproductive relations were problematic for many black feminists. Informants spoke of difficulties maintaining a steady relationship with a partner for varied reasons, such as lack of time and energy due to their intense commitment to a political movement. Several informants spoke bitterly of the sexism and racism of many potential partners, including militants in the black movement. By contrast, a young woman with 'good' (straight) hair and light-coloured skin is privileged in her access to sexual and reproductive partners.⁵¹ Her symbolic capital is further enhanced if she belongs to a

⁵⁰ Luiza Bairros, 'Lembrando Lélia Gonzalez', in Jurema Werneck et al. (eds.), *O Livro da Saúde das Mulheres Negras* (Rio de Janeiro, 2000), p. 43, my translation.

⁵¹ See also Livio Sansone, *Negritude sem etnicidade* (Salvador/Rio de Janeiro, 2004), p. 82.

‘good family’ and has access to higher education. Nevertheless, several informants had affairs with white men and Olivia was once married to a white man.

There were clear differences in the expectations that black women and white middle class women brought to relations within the home. The latter expected to become *patroas*. Black girls knew that they were destined to become maids. The contrast in prospects for the future reflected the normative status of white families, to which blacks were peripheral. Indeed, white children may have lived a close and often affectionate relationship with maids, as did Adna Aguiar, a well-known feminist, lawyer, judge and anti-racist. Like many white children of her generation, Adna experienced a world where blacks were omni-present in day-to-day life, though usually socially inferior. Experiences at a Catholic school in Salvador shaped her views:

It was a college that welcomed diversity. They gave a lot of grants.⁵² The middle class people living in that neighborhood all studied in that school, [...] but also the poor people, coloured people, *preto* (black) or not, they studied there. So in the classroom we had the opportunity to mingle with people of the *negro* race.

Thus Adna encountered class and colour diversity, and the possibility of relating to blacks as co-students. At the same time, she was exposed to a humanist Catholic philosophy. Adna made friends with her new schoolmates and they would study together after school, often in her house. These experiences shaped her attitude towards racial diversity and, later, her openness to the views of the black movement. Adna admits she is ‘socially white’, but prefers to describe herself as ‘yellow’, claiming indigenous ancestry, pointing to her smooth dark hair and slanted eyes. Other ‘white’ anti-racist activists I interviewed also did not readily self-identify as *branco*.⁵³ Black activists dislike such a stance from people they see as white. At the end of the interview with Ubiraci, for example, she asked me how I classified myself. When I hesitated, she turned to a white male colleague (we were in the headquarters of the PCdoB), commenting ‘You see! She doesn’t want to admit she is white!’.

Adna encountered the black movement in 1989 through her work in the organised women’s movement; as a human rights activist; and, eventually, as a prospective politician. As President of the Commission of Women Lawyers she coordinated the Bahia State Women’s Forum, drawing up the state

⁵² Students with grants in such schools were usually obliged to perform services in exchange, such as cleaning.

⁵³ Middle-class whites in Rio de Janeiro are reluctant to self-identify as *branco* – see John Norvell, ‘A branca desconfortável das camadas médias brasileiras’ in *Raça como retórica* (Rio de Janeiro, 2001), pp. 245–67. It is likely that the motives of Norvell’s informants are of a different order to those of activists and politicians in Salvador. Critics in the black movement say that white Brazilians who claim African ancestry to illustrate their disavowal of racial difference sustain the disempowerment of blacks.

constitution from 1989, working with black women and later with the black movement of Salvador, principally the MNU and UNEGRO. She approached inequality from the perspective of human rights and was impressed by the black feminists, of whom she says:

The women of the black movement in Salvador are very combatative, university-educated and they have great clarity about the racial question and the condition of discrimination for being a woman and for being black. Since my own concern was also to oppose discrimination against women, there was a huge similarity.

This approximation with the black movement was one component of a larger political agenda in Adna's life. The 1980s were a period of intense activity for feminists. As well as being active in the women's movement, they advanced in their professional careers and engaged in other political and cultural activities. Adna says:

In 1992 we ... decided it was important to have women in political office. I was candidate for *vereadora* (town councillor) here in Salvador, when Lidice da Mata stood for mayor. It was a very important moment ... because it brought the question of women into debate.

Later, like these white feminists, feminists in the black movement also decided to enter formal politics. But black informants understand the decision to run for office to have emerged from a specific perspective, shaped by their distinct place in the symbolic and material hierarchy. As we have seen, more than simply different to that occupied by white feminists, this place is understood to emerge in symbolic and lived opposition to it. As well as causing tension between black and white feminists, these differences also affect their political priorities. I return to the 2002 CEMB, to look at the public discourse of black feminists and the policies they proposed, especially those dealing with the question of affirmative action.

Talk about women's place

Public speech is replete with analyses and expressions from academic discourse. During the conference, debate centred on whether feminists should support affirmative action for blacks. Key speakers used a combination of abstract concepts and 'objective' facts to describe and explain (black) women's subordination. On the whole speakers did not focus on the experiential bases of black-white difference. Those who supported quotas for blacks in higher education and in public institutions did so while avoiding essentialising, de-historicised ontologies.

Participants in the 2002 CEMB agreed that the most important problems facing the nation were the 'feminization of poverty' and the 'racialised nature of female poverty'. The place of the black woman was the main theme of the morning session. A white speaker, Liège Rocha, of the Brazilian Union of

Women, cited demographic analyses based on the 2000 census to underline this point. Opinions as to how to improve women's lives differed. There was a cleavage along ideological lines – those more to the left preferred policies that would tackle social inequality as a whole. There was also a difference along colour lines – white feminists merely listened while black feminists defended, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, affirmative action.

The idea that public policies should 'target' officially sanctioned categories of racial groups took root unevenly within a diversified intellectual milieu. The left was particularly important in shaping opinions. Adna brought this to my attention, when she commented, 'I joined first the PCB and then after that the PPS (*Partido Popular Socialista*).⁵⁴ This passage through the parties was very important, because the *partidão* always supported educating its members, advancing knowledge, and so I had the chance to go along and discuss issues within a wider vision'.⁵⁵ Militants read social and political science classics. Black activists read new studies in the history and sociology of race and works coming out of other politicised intellectual movements, whether from Africa or the black movement in the USA. Language and ideas from diverse intellectual currents shaped the discourse of the leftwing militants (and sometimes of those on the right of the political spectrum too). Although feminist studies have a more limited audience, feminists exert an important influence on policy-makers. Concepts and discourses often pass between parties and different political arenas, propagated by militants who can easily change their party affiliations or who participate in several social, cultural and professional movements simultaneously. The rise in support for new ideas and policies should be understood in relation to this intellectual fluidity which characterizes the Bahian political scene.

When black militants, a small group of academics and the federal government began to discuss affirmative action in the 1990s as a means to ameliorate racial inequality, many (but not all) members of the black movement took it up enthusiastically.⁵⁶ In Bahia, some black militants felt that beneficiaries would always be looked down upon as unfairly advantaged; others felt it deflected attention from the class struggle. Many white middle class people and members of the elite reacted negatively to the proposal to introduce quotas for blacks in university entrance. At social gatherings, I heard condemnations from white liberal professionals. Whites expressed their opposition in newspaper articles or in heated discussion on the federal university's intranet. But other Bahian whites supported the measure,

⁵⁴ A 1992 offshoot of the PCB (N21).

⁵⁵ *Partidão* is a term used to denominate the communist party.

⁵⁶ Telles, '*Racismo*' notes that the government was responding to pressure from the black movement. Htun, 'From "racial democracy"' places greater emphasis on the then president, Fernando Henrique Cardoso's support for a proactive approach to racial inequality.

notably, leaders of the ruling populist right-wing political group, the Carlistas.⁵⁷ In 2002 the idea was fast gaining currency in political circles and among some sectors of the population, especially among the black students at the *cursinhos*. Nevertheless, many middle-class people supported quotas for *carentes* (the needy) in general, not just for blacks. Although there was agreement that inequality of opportunity should be remedied, there was a rejection of measures based on race or indeed of conceding that racism was a root cause of socio-economic inequality.

The black movement continued to press for recognition that racial oppression caused blacks to face added obstacles to social mobility. During the morning round table of the 2002 CEMB, Luiza Bairros touched on the relation between the domestic and the public spheres – a central question for feminism – remarking that racism is not confined to the ‘intimate’, which she defined with the question: ‘Would you marry a *negro* or a *negra*’? She suggested that the long-standing feminist preoccupation with domestic politics is inadequate for understanding the nature and effects of racism. Rather than emerging from the day-to-day power plays within ‘intimate’ spaces, she argued, racism – like sexism – is rooted in history. Racism is structural and integral to Brazilian politics and institutions of power. Using this notion of structural and historical racism, Bairros contested the claims made in the AMB platform, which attributed inequality to the government’s neo-liberal policies. Instead she stressed the *longue durée*. Echoing opinions expressed by the Ya-Mim Women’s Collective, she argued that historically there had been no space for black women in public institutions of power. On this basis, she made a lively defence of the politics of reparation and above all, of affirmative action. For Bairros, racism and sexism are linked, such that women of different colours occupy distinct positions in the ‘wide matrix of oppression’. Whites, whether they like it or not, enjoy advantages through living in a racist society, for racism engenders differences of opportunity and thus structures Brazilian society. In this way, Bairros defended the imposition of quotas for blacks in the institutions of prestige and power in the country, such as government ministries, Itamaraty (the diplomatic service) and in the public universities.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ This powerful group comprises the kin and supporters of the politician Antônio Carlos Magalhães who held office at state, municipal and federal levels on many occasions. Investment in a black regional identity has been a long-standing strategy of the Carlistas. On their cultural politics of race see McCallum, ‘Resisting Brazil’; Santos, ‘Dilemas nada atuais’.

⁵⁸ On events leading up to the adoption of affirmative action as a banner of the black movement, see Telles, *Racismo*; Htun, ‘From “racial democracy”’. By 2002, the Brazilian government had instituted a programme of quotas in some ministries, including the foreign ministry and the diplomatic service. The Legislative Assembly of Rio de Janeiro passed a law allocating a quota to blacks at the state university in 2001. See Marcos Chor Maio and

Most participants in the debate supported Bairros' call to include quotas for blacks in the feminist platform. Among them was Olivia Santana, then campaigning for election as a state deputy. Recently returned from participation in the World Conference on Racism in Durban, South Africa, in September 2001, she spoke in favour of the measure. However, she did not completely agree with Bairros' analysis. As befits a communist, she cited the neo-liberal policies of the government, globalisation, and the external debt as causes of inequality, supporting a 'politics of income' to combat it. In Santana's view, quotas are at best a secondary means to tackle feminised and racialised poverty. Despite such grudging support, the quota initiative won the support of the plenary.

The white feminists present did not contest the black feminist call for the introduction of a quota system, merely letting the latter do the talking, though one well-known white feminist and academic did question the feasibility of actually applying quotas in Brazil, asking '(h)ow could you say who is to be benefited – who is and who is not an Afro-descendant?' – a frequently voiced objection to affirmative action. To the annoyance of the black feminists present, she described herself as an example of an Afro-Brazilian with a Euro-Brazilian appearance, stating 'my grandfather was black'. But hers was a timid protest. Some white feminists like Adna Aguiar supported quotas. Speaking about her experience of quotas for women in the political party system, Adna pointed out that it is ineffective to introduce the rule unless accompanied by other measures, including crucial ones such as financial support for beneficiaries. Taking a broader view, like many people she considers investment in public education to be a more effective long-term strategy for diminishing racial inequality.

For Adna and other feminists influenced by a human rights paradigm, the key question is not so much the racialisation of difference or the constitution of racial difference, but rather how to redress the diverse inequalities affecting women. She is willing to support affirmative action as one means to tackle the problem. Like other white feminists, she does not take the lead in this project, but is willing to cede public space to black feminists in support of it.

Conclusion

This article has discussed how feminist responses to black women's inferior place in the socio-economic hierarchy of Salvador included support for

Ricardo Ventura Santos, 'Política de cotas raciais, os "olhos da sociedade" e os usos da antropologia: o caso do vestibular da Universidade de Brasília (UnB)', *Horiz. antropol.*, vol. 11, no. 23 (2005), pp. 181–214. The Bahian state university followed suit in 2002, as did other institutions in other states. The Federal University of Bahia, following the CEAFFRO campaign, instituted in 2005 a quota of 43% public school students, of which 85% were to be self-identified blacks, and 2% indigenous.

affirmative action and for a politics of presence, electing black women to represent the black female constituency. The ethnographic and micro-historical perspective adopted here provides insight into ‘native’ understandings of these issues. Diverse ideological and political influences impinged upon Bahian feminists’ ideas and proposals, without making them adhere to ‘essentialist’ views of race, culture or gender. These women interviewed ponder racial differences and social inequalities from within humanist and Marxist traditions, drawing upon distinct theories, reworking key concepts in relation to their own experiences and political needs. They may do so simultaneously or in succession, one phase building upon or superseding another. The language of ‘citizenship’ and human rights is omnipresent, but an ideological split is discernible between approaches based on a Marxist analysis of capitalist political economy, such as Santana’s, and those rooted in a structuralist and historicist sociology of race and gender inequality, such as Bairros’s. In the CEMB debate, these ideological differences corresponded to greater or lesser enthusiasm about affirmative action as a means to redress inequality. Feminists of all educational backgrounds employ academic discourse, ideas and theories, not least because many activists are academics. Influences are multi-disciplinary. Sociological concepts order thinking about personal experience and underpin proposals for intervention. The language of demographic sociology has proven essential for mapping out the object of policy – in the case of the speakers at the CEMB, low-income segments of the female population who self-classify as black or brown. When black feminists discussed race in Brazil or female black identity in public, they also made use of concepts such as self-esteem and consciousness, linking the political to the personal and speaking about their own experiences or those of their close kin.

Black feminists are firmly in favour of naming themselves as *negras* with special needs and rights; but they do not do this on the basis of an essentialist view of race. Rather, informants variously stressed the experiential, structural and historical origins of racial difference. Rhetorical appeals to a collective black cultural identity are virtually absent in the political contexts discussed in this article. This is not to say that they are not important in other contexts in Bahian politics. The cultural black movement in Salvador developed and continues to use a rhetoric of purity based on descent from Africa and linked to a notion of real, unmixed blackness.⁵⁹ The symbolic work of such groups as Ilê helped thousands of Bahians – black and white – define personal identities and styles. Informants of all ideological bents underlined this, often speaking admiringly and affectionately about Ilê. Yet the material presented here suggests that this success did not generate a paradigmatic shift towards

⁵⁹ Agier, ‘Racism, culture’.

essentialist thinking. In the narratives elicited, public speeches and discussions reported and documents analysed, a notion of shared African 'culture' as the *raison d'être* of identity was absent. Rather, the analysis shows that informants' passages through the milieu in which a discourse of cultural purity is elaborated, in speech, song, style and dance, shape a personal journey of discovery. They may relate to discourses of cultural purity, but do not adopt or reproduce them uncritically.

As outlined in the introduction, affirmative action is feared as a practical means of introducing, if not essentialist ideas, then racial divisions where supposedly they did not exist previously. The exploration of black and white feminists' understandings led to a more critical assessment of the notion that 'essentialism' is the lens through which affirmative action approaches should be assessed. Discussing charges that the policy introduces North American style bipolar thinking and lays the foundation for racial discord, Reichmann writes that such a reading conceives of subject's nature as 'derivative'.⁶⁰ It is as if personal experience and the complex intellectual history of Brazilian activism (merely touched on here) are irrelevant to subjective formation.

It has not been my primary concern here to trace the origin of these ideas in the city, but it does seem clear that support for affirmative action (or for a politics of presence) in Salvador emerges not from external imposition, but rather from a home-grown movement with deep roots in the local social, cultural and political contexts. A survey of national and local Bahian newspapers in the 1960s documents Brazilians arguing for (and against) affirmative action, long before the Ford Foundation gave grants to some black NGOs or university programmes.⁶¹ The notion of binary racial division is not alien to Brazilians.⁶² The enthusiasm and indeed the relief with which young activists adopt the notion of racial difference is some indication of the deep-rooted-ness of racial division in non-discursive practice and in the structuring of daily living.⁶³ In this context, and in the light of activists' own personal testimonies, it appears unwise to label racial binarism as simply an 'imported' idea. What is new is the introduction of legislation based upon recognising the objective existence of racial categories. The immediate consequence of the implementation of quotas for university places has been a series of local controversies, where rejected candidates have taken their cases to court, for example in Brasilia.⁶⁴ Critics concerned with the long-term

⁶⁰ Reichmann, 'Introduction'.

⁶¹ Santos, 'Dilemas nada atuais'.

⁶² Yvonne Maggie and Claudia B. Rezende (eds.), *Raça como Retórica: A Construção da Diferença* (Rio de Janeiro, 2001).

⁶³ Cecilia McCallum, 'Racialized bodies, naturalized class: moving through the city of Salvador da Bahia.' *American Ethnologist*, vol. 32, no. 1 (2005), pp. 100–17.

⁶⁴ Maio and Santos 'Política de cotas'.

effects of such legislation on social dynamics fear a more perfidious process which leads to a hardening of racial divisions.

Yet the brief description of the multiple and dynamic field of feminist politics presented here indicates that there are many forces that would work against the feared accentuation of racial divisions. These forces are both structural and cultural. In Brazilian politics the multiplication of political parties means that success requires the formation and maintenance of alliances. Activists operate in a number of spheres simultaneously, cultural, economic and political. And as Peter Wade argues, a politics of identity does not imply an agent's steady adherence to a unique position.⁶⁵ Culture is not fixed, but endlessly constructed and negotiated in social contexts. Even those activists who prefer to foreground differences, may in some situations underplay them. Black, white, middle class and working class feminists meet, work together, exchange ideas, and provide support, easing – if not overcoming – tensions. Rifts do occur, notably, the separate organisation of black and white feminists, but as Anne Phillips argues, separate identities and the recognition of difference is also a basis for solidarity.⁶⁶ If the new black graduates from medical, dentistry and law schools aspire to greater social mobility, they must form friendships, alliances and partnerships with whites as well as blacks. Like earlier generations, they must enter into largely white spheres of sociability.⁶⁷ Their social identities will be shaped by many forces, not least among them homogenizing regional and nationalist identities (football, for example, remains a powerful unifying force in the city). Whatever the long-term effects, affirmative action and a politics of presence are welcome strategies for many black Bahian women, who hope they will help to redesign 'women's place', symbolically, at least, moving them out of the kitchen into other, more valued spheres of Brazilian life.

⁶⁵ Peter Wade, 'Debating identity, working culture: making cultural identities in Cali, Colombia,' *Current Anthropology*, vol. 40, no. 4 (1999), pp. 449–71.

⁶⁶ Anne Phillips, *Democracy and Difference* (Oxford, 1993).

⁶⁷ Thales de Azevedo, 'Classes sociais e grupos de prestígio' In *Ensaio de Antropologia Social* (Salvador, 1959), pp. 103–20.