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# *Sambando* New Orleans: Dancing Race, Gender, and Place with Casa Samba

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## Abstract

Assuming that embodiment is a cultural marker in identity politics and that dance is an especially highly charged identity marker for Brazilian culture, this article explores the racial and gender politics of Casa Samba, an African American–directed samba school in New Orleans that aims to perform “authentic” Brazilian culture. The analysis of this cultural performance space is both ethnographic and autobiographical, since the researcher herself has been a dancer with the troupe for more than five years. An ethnographic and embodied analysis of Casa Samba reveals that the group’s definition of Brazilian authenticity is contingent on global understandings of Brazilian culture and the local cultural performance space of New Orleans.

For a time, while I lived in Brazil, I stopped writing. I learned to dance. I also learned to pray and to fight—two things I had never felt called upon to do. I did them with my body. I began to think with my body. That is possible and, in the case of Brazilian dance, necessary.

—Browning xxii

As scholar Barbara Browning found herself immersed in the cultural landscape of Brazil, the way that she physically responded to her surroundings began to change. She found a necessary sense of bodily bilingualism by moving through a new cultural context in dance. The movements of samba, Brazil’s national dance par excellence, have come to inhabit descriptions of the way that Brazilians are supposed to work, play, and, of course, move. In cultural circles as diverse as the Brazilian national soccer team and the maneuverings of Brazilian politicians, the players’ actions reference the swing and sway of samba. For example, Brazilian soccer players are known for their *jogo bonito* (“pretty dancelike game”) soccer style, and during election time, samba tunes headline political campaigns for diverse candidates. The movements of samba physically mark understandings of what being

Brazilian is supposed to entail (though, in truth, dancing samba does not come naturally to all, or even to most, Brazilians).

There is much to be learned about Brazil by dancing samba. But what happens when this dancing happens both outside of Brazil and in the company of non-Brazilians? Since samba is perhaps the most visible symbol of Brazilian nationalism, it is important to note that samba's largest manifestation, the samba school, is an aspect of Brazilian culture that is represented globally. Interestingly, performances by local samba schools abroad reveal that non-Brazilians usually perform this representation.

Embodiment is a cultural marker in identity politics and certainly samba dancing is a highly charged identity marker for Brazilian culture; with these assumptions, this article explores the racial and gender politics of Casa Samba, an African American–directed samba school in New Orleans that aims to perform “authentic” Brazilian culture for tourists and locals alike. The performances of Brazil projected by Casa Samba through their dance performances reveal how samba has come to represent an international understanding of an “authentic” Brazilian culture and how this representation of authenticity should be imagined as contingent on the local cultural performance space.<sup>1</sup> The following analysis of Casa Samba is both ethnographic and autobiographical, since I myself have been a dancer with the troupe for more than seven years.

In the field of cultural studies, there is a focus on the importance of embodied practice as a research subject strategy of analysis for how kinesthetic movements can be, just as much as visual or verbal signs, cultural markers in identity politics. Embodiment theory as it applies to dance deals with “the complex effects of the commodification of movement styles, their migration, modification, quotation, adoption, and rejection as part of the larger production of social identities through physical enactment” (Desmond 35). Consciously and unconsciously, individuals learn to express culture through their bodies.

Since my participant observation allowed me to experience the Casa Samba representation of Brazilian culture through my own body, I should note a few things about myself as a dancer and as a researcher. As a member of the Casa Samba troupe for more than seven years, I typically spent at least four hours a week at rehearsals and performed with Casa Samba a few times a month, depending on the intensity of the performance season. (Mardi Gras, for example, has many more shows than the hot summer months, when tourism slows noticeably in New Orleans.) Although I am an integral part of the group as a core dancer, there are clearly things about me that mark my experience as different from that of other group members, beyond the obvious fact that Casa Samba was also my research site. First, I am not a native of New Orleans, nor am I Brazilian. (In fact, most Casa Samba members are African American, not Brazilian.) Second, because of my own professional life as well as my social class as an academic, I have

actually spent much more time living (and dancing) in Brazil than most of the predominantly working-class Casa Samba dancers from New Orleans. Finally, during the time that this research was conducted, I was often the only Caucasian dancer in the group. Occasionally, I was one of two Caucasian dancers. While I have never felt that these differences significantly affected my participation in Casa Samba, they are obviously important in understanding how I position myself, my interviews, and this research. I have been highly conscious of the tensions and contradictions involved in being a white American ethnographer (who is also not New Orleanian) and yet who is involved firsthand in the performance and embodiment of these Brazilian (and New Orleanian) identities. Negotiating issues of race, place, and social class are not uncommon to ethnographers, but since the act of writing ethnography is an act of invention itself, it is important to keep my own personal profile evident.

### Global Brazilian Images on New Orleanian Stages

In international portrayals of Brazilian culture, samba prevails. New Orleans' Casa Samba, for example, performs dances and plays rhythms primarily from Rio de Janeiro, with some rhythms originating in Salvador and Recife. The richness and diversity of Brazilian culture are little known on an international scale, yet Brazil, paradoxically, becomes "authentically cultural" simply through its samba representations (Pierre 29 Dec. 2008).

Brazilian performance groups in the United States perform an idealized image of Brazil. Casa Samba's mission, for example, is to perform an "authentic" Brazilian culture and, at the same time, to link that idealized image to local practices in New Orleans. Thus, through Casa Samba representations, Brazil and New Orleans are seen as particularly culturally significant locales. Brazilian authenticity is often emphasized with words such as *preservation*, *authentic*, *roots*, and *history*, which become part of the stated goals for the group. The mission of Casa Samba according to director Curtis Pierre, an African American Louisiana native, is

to present audiences with an authentic Brazilian Carnival and folk arts experience. . . . [W]e maintain a center that works to educate the New Orleans community and the Gulf South region of the rich cultural traditions of Brazil and the similarities which bridge Carnival in Brazil with Mardi Gras in New Orleans emphasizing the importance of their African tradition and influences. ([www.casasamba.com](http://www.casasamba.com))

The focus on performing an authentic representation of Brazil is repeated in interviews with members of Casa Samba when they discuss their roles as dancers and musicians. Their goal as stated in multiple interviews is to be

able to present Brazilian culture in the most accurate and “traditional” way possible. Janese, the dance captain of New Orleans’ Casa Samba from 2008 to 2009, said, “I want people to watch me dance and say, ‘Are you sure you aren’t Brazilian? You dance like you are Brazilian’” (Janese Brooks 30 Apr. 2009). This comment is characteristic of both dancers and musicians in Casa Samba, who tend to be mainly American aficionados of Brazilian culture, with a few Brazilian musicians and dancers playing key leadership roles.

Casa Samba is constantly mediating images that come from preconceived notions of Brazilian culture as they are encapsulated during the *carnaval* season in Brazil as well as during New Orleanian cultural performances for tourists. Casa Samba parades Brazilian culture from Rio de Janeiro as it is marched through the Sambadrome during *carnaval*. Thus, the group models its representation of “real” Brazilian culture on a “hyperreal” Rio de Janeiro tourist experience—but within the performance space of New Orleans.<sup>2</sup> This projected image becomes indicative of how Brazilian culture is imagined by the audience and the performers alike. Casa Samba performances represent the normative trope of Brazilian identity because that performance becomes what performers and viewers with little contact with Brazil itself “know” as Brazilian. Even though Casa Samba shows are performed by persons who are mostly native New Orleanians, the performances become part of the way in which New Orleans is imagined to hold cultural affinities with Brazil.

The distinctions between the real and the ideal implode as they are performed in a context where Brazilian samba leads a staged Mardi Gras parade through a convention center for tourists in New Orleans. Figuratively speaking, the performance transports audience members temporally and spatially to an exoticized Brazil of the audience’s imagination. Yet this image of Brazil is performed as a representation of the cultural diversity of the North American city of New Orleans.

Finding harmony between global and local images, and playing to the expectations of each tourist environment, creates a symbolic world of meaning for a Brazilian–New Orleans performance experience. The space where the performance occurs (whether in a convention hall, at a Brazilian party for Brazilians, in the privacy of the rehearsal, or on Bourbon Street) greatly influences what symbols are mediated, and how and for whom Brazil is to be defined. Whether audience members care to think about representations of Casa Samba as “authentically real” or not (and most of them do not care), Casa Samba images inevitably stimulate a relationship to an imagined Brazilian identity, a parade of images that encourages audiences to live briefly a cultural and sensual Brazilian ideal.

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has explored the “political economy of showing” in performances of heritage out of context. In such performances she claims that authenticity actually lies in the way that culture is “reborn”

rather than how it preserves an imagined past. Culture is, in fact, a destination. She writes:

Heritage and tourism show what cannot be seen—except through them—which is what gives such urgency to the question of “actuality” and the role of “experience” as its test. The atavism of something genuine or real, even if it never materializes, can be seen in cases where the question of authenticity is either irrelevant or fails to illuminate the matter at hand. (166)

Following this logic, Casa Samba performances imaginatively transport the audience to another destination in terms of both time and space. The samba show in New Orleans, with its allusions to the place actually being displayed, mediates forces of tourism (both Brazilian and New Orleanian), New Orleanian culture and race, and the performance space of the event. In viewing Casa Samba performances as themselves destinations, conference or tourist audiences view the performance as a representation of New Orleans just as much as a representation of Brazil. New Orleans thus becomes a destination that valorizes symbols of Brazilian heritage—the show would not be the same transported to another place.

### **Dancing with Casa Samba**

To understand how the image of Brazil projected through Casa Samba is wrapped up in the specificity of New Orleans, it is first important to understand Casa Samba’s history. In 1984, a group of young African Americans began the Mardi Gras krewe *Palmares*. However, within less than a year, the krewe disbanded because of financial and organizational difficulties, and Curtis Pierre, a Louisiana native, took charge of the parading band and dancers with the goal of professionalizing the group from an informal marching krewe to a professional performance group. Pierre resourcefully made contacts with the renowned master Brazilian percussionist Jorge Alabe, who happened to be touring America with the performance group *Oba Oba* at the time, to begin the formation of *Cosmopolitan Amigo Samba Association*, or *CASA Samba*. Pierre and his wife, Carol Barber-Pierre, invited Jorge to live with them in their house for more than ten years during these founding years of Casa Samba.

According to director Curtis Pierre, Casa Samba is a case study in an “Amerizilian” experience (Lastrapes). In truth, Casa Samba is a New Orleanian–Amerizilian experience. Jorge Alabe commented in our interview that Casa Samba is the samba school with the most raw talent of anywhere in the United States (Alabe 23 Dec. 2008). This raw talent, however, speaks to the fact that members are predominately New Orleanian and have

grown up in a culture of dance performance in New Orleans. Talent, therefore, is neither “raw” nor natural, but culturally and historically determined.

During a Casa Samba performance, the focus of the audience’s attention is usually on the samba dancers. Though the band and, ultimately, the director dictate the movements of the dance in important ways, for the audience, the focus of attention lies on the bodies and costumes of the dancers, who creatively interpret musical cues. Thus, the dancers’ movements become very important to understanding both how Brazil is represented through dance and how the local context of New Orleans influences these interpretations.

When putting culture on display, Casa Samba dancers, myself included, become embodied representations of this New Orleanian–Amerizilian experience described by Pierre. They lead the parades, engage with the audience to encourage them to “dance like a Brazilian,” and yet move their own bodies in ways that create ample room for experimentation and blending between New Orleanian and Brazilian movement norms. Interpretation of these complexities is often much easier accomplished through the body than through words.

Samba dancers are referred to as *passistas*, from the verb *passar* (“to stroll”), which refers to the act of strolling through the Sambadrome in Rio. Monica Rector defines *passistas* as “the dancers who ‘speak with their feet.’ They have the liberty to dance the samba and cut figures as they wish, with no prearranged choreography. The dance is characterized by the feet that move, the body that swings from one side to the other in perfect coordination” (53).

In the context of Rio de Janeiro samba schools, *passistas* are differentiated from other sambistas, in that “*passistas* are considered to be outstanding dancers” (Rector 110). They can be both men and women, and even members of the percussion line who are extremely agile with their dance moves and instruments. In Casa Samba, however, the term *passista* refers specifically to the female samba dancers who wear sequined bikini costumes and are chosen, on the basis of their dancing skills, to dance in tourist shows representing Brazilian culture. They thus embody a symbolic idea of Brazil and Brazilian sensuality for global audiences outside of the normal context of carnival season.

As a popular global website on samba dancing puts it, the *passista* is a female soloist who is “symbolically” unmarried ([www.worldsamba.org](http://www.worldsamba.org)). What does it mean to be “symbolically” unmarried? It seems that, at least for the time frame of the performance, *passistas* are asked to perform availability and flirtatiousness that perhaps would not be seen as appropriate for a married woman, thus allowing the audience members the opportunity to feel that they themselves are desirable. By categorizing *passistas* as young, beautiful, and symbolically unmarried, the *passista*’s strength comes from her sexual desirability, linked not solely to aspects of physical beauty but also to

the ability to entice the audience into the performance. The dancer should be daring, playful, and sometimes aggressive, but always controlled. Female energy during a samba performance is percussive. Dancers follow the breaks in the rhythms with their hips. Exotic and sensual body movements and facial expressions are taught in Casa Samba. These elements are communicated as part of the performance of Brazilian character.

Whenever running choreography or sequences in rehearsals for Casa Samba, dancers are asked to smile nonstop and to practice watching the audience, toying with them through their gaze. Carol, the head organizer of the dancers from Casa Samba, says, "You have to play with them. Never be shy or show embarrassment while you are dancing. You have to make them feel embarrassed for looking at you. You say, 'Look at me! I am the sexiest thing in here and you are going to watch me.'" (Carol 13 Mar. 2009)

Because the ability to produce a sense of desire in the audience is an important aspect of the *passista* show, there are certain expectations as to what a samba dancer should look like and how she should hold herself while being affiliated with Casa Samba. (Much of this stage presence relates to the fact that dancers have to be willing to wear a skimpy *passista* costume and feel comfortable wearing it.) Feathers and sequins are strategically placed to enhance the beauty of the dancer. The exuberant costumes and the colorful and elaborate headdresses create a spectacle, but the focus of the samba show is always on the exhibition of the female body. While dancing skills are an important aspect of the decision about who is chosen to dance in the *passista* costume, there are other ways, too, in which the identity of *passista* dancers, the symbolic representatives of Brazil, is constructed.

Dancers go through a certain amount of scrutiny based on their physical appearance before being allowed to wear the costume, for example. If the dancer's body does not fit the prescribed requirements, then she will dance in the *baiana* costume (also called Carmen Miranda costumes at Casa Samba) that fully cover the body, or she may not dance at all. The *baiana* dancers are usually Casa Samba members who are experienced dancers but, because of age or body type, do not fit the desired physical look for the *passista* costumes that embody Brazilian sensuality.

The figure of the *baiana* is matronly and, unlike that of the *passista*, is not imagined as sexy at all. The differences in performance, gesture, and attitude between the embodiment of the *passista* and the stately *baiana* are directly related to the dichotomy of the image of Rio (the sexy *mulata*) and Bahia (the African motherland). The *baiana* costume covers the body from neck to feet in a billowing skirt, and a large headdress evokes a sense of regality, rather than the splendid feathered plumes of the *passista* costume that are reminiscent of a peacock with its tail unfurled. As the "maternal body," the *baiana* is intended to represent a sense of continuity with tradition rather than an object of desire. In fact, as the embodiment of the mother, such a figure does not at all invite desire.



Among dancers in Casa Samba, there is a sense of pride in dancing the *baiana*. The mother is the essence that precedes desire and, thus, embodies a certain power as both the creator and protector of the *passista* dancers. When asked how she viewed her role as the *baiana*, one dancer responded, “I feel like since I’m the mother, I’m making way for my children to enter” (Saraiyah 30 Apr. 2009), placing emphasis on the fact that she enters first and is the divine protector. This particular dancer herself was not a mother at the time of the interview, but she projected the social role of the mother onto her dancing persona.

Yet there is another side to the *baiana* category as well. At the same time that *baiana* dancers of Casa Samba have expressed pride in their role of dancing the matriarch of the samba show, they have also expressed feeling as if their bodies are less valorized. This highlights that there is a sense of importance given to sexuality in embodied Brazilian identity. For example, though *baianas* rehearse samba for the same amount of time as their *passista* peers, *baianas* will not find themselves performing their samba skills in a samba exhibition show. This is a critique not of their dancing ability, but simply of the shape and size of their bodies. The matriarchal *baiana* and the sensual *passista* are constructions based on normative ideas of what the motherly and the seductive body should look like; *baianas* do not put on the costume of the *passista*, and vice versa.

Though the discourse around *baianas* as matrons of the art grants them a central role in the theoretical conceptualization of the samba show, from the audience’s perspective, *baianas* are not the central dancers. The audience conceptualizes *baianas* as the prelude or as the closing act that signals that the performance has come to an end. And in performances that call for a smaller number of performers, the *baianas* are frequently cut from the show. There is, thus, an economic value placed on different body shapes. The *passista* body has more opportunities for financial gain in Casa Samba than the *baiana* simply because there are more shows that call on dancers to embody Brazilian sensuality. Putting it simply, the performance of desire is more profitable than the performance of tradition and motherhood.

In the context of the New Orleans tourist industry this makes sense. The city is conceptualized as a carnivalesque place. Visitors can mask themselves and behave differently than they would in their normal lives in other places. What happens in New Orleans stays in New Orleans. New Orleans locals, with their characteristic friendliness and openness, are seen as facilitators to visitors’ desires to become someone else for the duration of their stay. Displaying the flesh of their “Othered” bodies, *passistas* offer audience members closer physical contact with the exotic and, thus, facilitate an understanding of New Orleans as unique. Though visitors may not touch, they see sensual flesh that would normally be covered and out of view at a 9 a.m. business conference, for example, and this comes to perpetuate the idea of New Orleans as extraordinary. Matronliness or representations of “African

motherhood,” however, do not hold the same place in the context of New Orleans tourism. The role of *baianas* is lost in this shorter convention context because *baianas* as matrons of an art form is a cultural connotation understood in a Brazilian rather than a New Orleanian and/or American context.

Carol Barber-Pierre, Curtis’s wife and Casa Samba’s dance director, is the only member of the group, in the time that I have performed with them, who switches back and forth between the role of the *baiana* and the role of the *passista*. In her fifties, she is the obvious matriarchal figure of the group in the sense of both being a leader and being a caretaker for the other dancers. Members of the group even refer her to as “Momma Carol.” When Carol wears the *passista* costume, which she decides to embody on those days when she feels that no one from her day job at Tulane University is likely to see her, she continues to play the matriarchal role, making sure that the other *passistas* have their costumes in place to fully cover their nether regions, helping when high heels break, or spraying extra glitter onto dancers who are not yet sparkling. In these moments, Carol is able to transcend the position of *passista* as an object of desire to embody matriarchal female nurturing. Her privileged position as mother to all the *passistas* allows her to dance a corporeal reminder of the passing of time, where desire is more a construction of grace and experience than of sexuality. The *baiana* and *passista* together embody both the heritage and the sensuality envisioned in global representations of Brazilian culture.

For dancers, however, who are not the ultimate matron of Casa Samba, a high premium is placed on which bodies will fit the *passista* image. Dancers for Casa Samba are given a contract (though no one has been asked to officially sign and return this contract) promising to keep their bodies in top form.<sup>3</sup> The eighth rule on the membership qualifications given to Casa Samba dancers for 2009 was “Keeps their bodies in good condition with proper body weight and toning where one looks good in their costumes.”

Female body image is a controversial topic at Casa Samba, just as it is in general discussions of Brazilian identity. This is true not only in terms of body weight but also in terms of grooming habits. I have been asked to go to the tanning bed during the winter when I looked too pale, for example, not fitting the skin tone of the *mulata* that I was supposed to embody. In an interview, I asked a Casa Samba dancer if there were any personal changes that she has made in her relationship to her body since joining Casa Samba. She said that, even though she is tired of having long hair, she feels as if she cannot cut it because she is supposed to be performing the *mulata*. Having long hair is seen as being more feminine and alluring. Since most Casa Samba dancers are African American and do not have naturally long hair, some wear long wigs on days of the performances.

According to Jane Desmond, live performance and bodily display are ubiquitous in the tourism industry. Money is earned by capitalizing on

peoples' desire to see bodies that are somehow codified as different from their own. Live performers authenticate the exotic and offer a package in which the audience can be in direct contact with the "Other." "Tourists attending folkloric shows see a performance of 'traditional' (i.e., 'naturally occurring') behaviors which celebrate the difference and particularity of the performing group" (Desmond *Staging Tourism* xvi). Casa Samba dancers, motivated by pressures from the industry and by their own personal desire to fit the part, find themselves going to great lengths to transform themselves into an image of the exotic Brazilian *mulata*, even when they themselves are far from this identity in reality.

In the changes made by Casa Samba dancers in their grooming habits, the racialization of Brazil through samba is seen as a cultural trait rather than a biological attribute. Barbara Browning's fieldwork highlights this clearly. She writes:

While samba has been regarded as African, the people who dance it professionally—in the carnival or in tourist shows—are all called *mulatas*, regardless of their color. I myself am white and blue-eyed, and I have danced with shining jet black women, but in the context of our dancing samba we are all *mulatas*. When I have danced particularly well, I have always been told that this is evidence of some black blood. This is not a literal misapprehension of my race. It is a statement of belief that the meaningfulness of race is culture and that a commitment to culture can result in an accrual of racial spiritual energy. (19)

In New Orleans, African American dancers may become more *mulata* and thus more Brazilian by putting on a wig of long black hair, and white dancers, who would not otherwise fit the *mulata* category in its racial terms, are symbolically labeled *mulata* by sexualizing themselves through wearing the *passista* and displaying their "rhythm," a skill not imagined as part of white American culture. Thus, by becoming symbolically ambiguous culturally and racially, the dancers embody different meanings to their audiences simultaneously.

### **New Orleanian Influences of Casa Samba**

"Dancing the role of the *mulata*," as it is often referred to, is highly charged with significance that provokes different interpretations depending on context. In the New Orleanian context, the Casa Samba *mulata* dancers are conscious of their race. For the majority of dancers in Casa Samba, that race is black or perhaps black Creole. However, many of the Casa Samba dancers who identify as black would not be considered "black" if they were in Brazil. They would fall somewhere in between white and black, perhaps *parda*

or *morena*. At the moment of putting on a costume to embody a Brazilian identity rather than an American identity, however, local politics surrounding race merge with those of the embodied identity.

While this ambiguity is imagined as inherently Brazilian among performers, the embodiment of the *passista* is contingent on the local stage. Casa Samba performances can be just as much reflections of New Orleans as they are of Brazil, since the cultural history of the dancers and musicians of Casa Samba become part of the spectacle of performing Brazil. The fact that the majority of those presenting the spectacle for Casa Samba are African Americans from New Orleans means that Casa Samba is a uniquely New Orleanian interpretation of samba.

In costume design, for example, there is evidence of the influence of New Orleans. One dancer in the group in 2008 wears a samba costume with the New Orleanian fleur-de-lis symbol across the breast, while another designed her costume in black and gold as a tribute to the New Orleans Saints football team. A third dancer has a tattoo of a fleur-de-lis prominently displayed across her back, and a fourth dancer has a fleur-de-lis belly-button ring that she puts into place for performances. Inevitably, their New Orleanian heritage can be read onto their samba dance moves, their costume choices, and even their bodies.

Local traditions merge with representations of Brazilian culture in rehearsals and in performances as well. For example, at the end of rehearsals, dancers have pulled out jump ropes and played double-dutch while performing dance routines. And the routines themselves are often interpreted with New Orleans as a cultural reference. In October 2008, Beto Guimarães, a choreographer from Olinda, Pernambuco, was invited to New Orleans to run a dance workshop and to choreograph new dances for the group. He taught a class on *frevo* (a marchlike dance originating from Pernambuco, with many acrobatic movements). This was the first time that the majority of the dancers had any contact with *frevo* dancing, so he began the class by describing its origin. He explained to the dancers that *frevo* developed alongside capoeira as a way to conceal capoeira through dance during the historical periods of capoeira's repression in Recife. When there was some authority figure around, the capoeira players and the crowd would pick up their umbrellas and dance to hide the capoeira game. (Umbrellas are visible in various popular celebrations of the African diaspora as markers of African social status and class.) Larry Crook confirms *frevo*'s link to capoeira:

What distinguished the capoeira tradition of the nineteenth century in Recife from its manifestations in Bahia and Rio de Janeiro was precisely the close association that it maintained with the performances of the area's music bands. Increased police repression in Rio de Janeiro made capoeira all but extinct in the capital city by the beginning of the twentieth century. In Recife, police repression resulted in

the camouflaging of capoeira under the guise of a new dance form—the *frevo*. (184)

As this history was explained to Casa Samba dancers, they nodded in understanding, and one Casa Samba member even shouted out, “You mean like a second line!” A second line is a traditional brass-band parade performed in African American communities in New Orleans. The brass band makes up the first line, and the dancing crowd that accompanies it, many waving umbrellas or handkerchiefs, are known as the second line. That day during rehearsal the class began doing the *frevo* steps that Paulo taught, but those steps transformed themselves into a second line around the room. And this moment influenced the choreography taught that day. A scene like this would only happen in New Orleans because the dancers themselves were able to pull from their own cultural heritage and draw parallels with Brazil. Inevitably, Casa Samba has an influx of New Orleanian traditions that mediate a member’s relationship to samba because of the strength of the African heritage in the music and dance scene of New Orleans. While these interactions are not about the right or wrong ways of presenting samba or Brazilian culture, local imaginings of culture inevitably come into play.

The majority of Casa Samba dancers have grown up listening to brass bands, hip-hop, and bounce music. Stylistically, many of the movements of Brazilian dancing require the same looseness of the body and movement in the hips that these traditionally black New Orleanian music styles require. The Casa Samba dance captain explained that this often means that with new dancers who are natural dancers from New Orleans but untrained in Brazilian dance, “time is spent taking the ‘ghetto’ out of their dancing style” (Janese Brooks 30 Apr. 2009). For Janese, samba dancing is seen as “classier” than street or club dancing. In a city like New Orleans where sex, sin, and sensuality sell, Casa Samba dancers look for ways to separate their show from the images of blatant sexual exploitation. Because of the inherent ambiguity of bodily movements, there is often no consensus on what distinguishes a sensual and pleasing gesture from one that has become “ghettoized.” Women are encouraged to display their skill, energy, sensuality, and even seductiveness, but they are criticized if these movements should ever show a loss of control. Director Curtis Pierre understands losing control as “dancing in a way that looks more street than what the imagined idea of dancing ‘Brazilian’ should be” (Pierre 12 Feb. 2006).

In 2006, Casa Samba spent about two months doing a weekly samba show on Bourbon Street at Club Jazz Emporium. That experience was a perfect example of how and why Casa Samba focuses on separating dancers’ movements from reinterpretations out of context. The event was the epitome of the “hyperreal,” since it took a samba parade out of *carnaval* and onto Bourbon Street. Jazz Emporium lies right at the boundary between the strip clubs that sit close to Canal Street and the music venues

that line the rest of Bourbon Street. At this particular event, the goal of the Casa Samba show was to attract tourists off the streets through samba dancing and drumming and entice them to spend money on drinks inside the bar. The samba show began with a parade-style performance on Bourbon Street. Dancers performed dance solos and interacted with the crowd, inviting them to continue inside, conga-line style, for the stage show. Bodyguards marked off the space between performers and audience to keep audience members, who were perhaps feeling liberated by the relaxation of social norms on Bourbon Street, from being disrespectful. Dancers then filed up to the upstairs balcony and danced on the deck looking out over Bourbon Street. The deck was small, so there was no room for the band to be seen from the windows, but the band continued to play, though hidden in the hallway and along the stairwell. Thus, the show focused on the bodies of the dancers.

The manager of the club wanted a floor show with samba dancers, but in a more urban party setting. After attracting clients into the bar, dancers did conga lines and limbo games with the crowd. For the inside samba show, the costumes changed from traditional Rio-style samba clothing that had been used in the outside show to sequined hot pants and tank tops. The location of the club, the type of crowd attracted to the show from the street, and the modifications made to the show to give it a more “urban” aesthetic created a samba show in which Brazilian rhythms and dance were mixed with expectations of New Orleans’ tourist culture.

To deal with the threat of the performance dissolving into kitsch in such a setting, director Curtis Pierre limited the types of movements that dancers were allowed to perform in the club as a way of separating the samba show from the street culture of New Orleans. (No street dancing while at work.) Even though, in most cases, the dancers have been raised in such culture, they were asked to embody only Brazilian samba dancers, not Bourbon Street dancers. Curtis hoped that the dancers in his company would embody Brazil by restraining and regulating bodily movement; in fact, they attempted to convey his own understanding of Brazil, performed through particular ways of shaking, moving, and gyrating associated with Rio samba. This is the embodiment of Brazil that has become his group’s niche within the tourist market of New Orleans and, thus, what he expects of the dancers who perform for him.

The show stopped after two months, however, because the gig was not profitable enough for Pierre to overlook the fact that the setting was not conducive to portraying his idea of authentic Brazilian culture. The group earned money from the cover charge. That is, the group was paid on the basis of how many people the dancers could attract into the club from the streets. In this sense, the performance rivaled a similar practice implemented by the strip clubs a block away. The director ultimately decided that Casa Samba ran the risk of being exploited with no substantial financial gains by

continuing. Performers made somewhere between \$50 and \$100 a night, depending on the turnout, but they danced three sets, from 10 p.m. until 3 a.m.

Bourbon Street is a tough market for performers. For example, Ale, a Brazilian bassist (and construction worker) who spent two years living in New Orleans, said, and many New Orleanian musicians would agree, “Trabalhar como músico em New Orleans é morrer de fome” (“Working as a musician in New Orleans is like dying of hunger”) (Ale 20 Mar. 2009). Ale played many gigs on Bourbon Street between 2007 and 2009. During a two-hour set on Bourbon Street, his band often made between \$70 and \$150 a person. In Las Vegas, he now makes \$500 a person for the same show. Ale preferred living in New Orleans for the music culture there, but Las Vegas has been a better destination for him to make a career out of music. The difficulties Ale faced largely resided in the fact that he was trying to break into the Bourbon Street industry, an industry that feeds on the New Orleanian touristic culture of putting Louisiana heritage on display. Brazilian music does not necessarily fit into this context unless it can become blendable with Louisiana beats to become part of the illusion of the image of New Orleans—a cultural and timeless anomaly that allows tourists a sense of freedom and independence (and nostalgia) not visible in other parts of the country. For Pierre and Casa Samba, creating a show that was purposefully blended and hybridized with Louisiana rhythms meant that the group ran the risk of being seen as “kitsch” and losing cultural authenticity. Making a move to a regular gig on Bourbon Street did not offer the financial benefits necessary to give up the group goal of performing traditional Brazilian cultural representations in New Orleans.

### **Casa Samba’s Links to the African Diaspora**

Casa Samba also profits from being perceived as having close proximity to blackness and/or African culture through its representations of Brazil. Outside of performances, the aesthetic of dress for both drummers and dancers is African American New Orleanian, yet often heavily influenced by a pan-African pride that consciously unites them to Brazil, even if in a circuitous way, through the Afro-diasporic experience.

A Brazilian guitarist who moved to New Orleans post-Katrina (originally from Goiânia) has come to several rehearsals of Casa Samba. He said to me that he loves watching the drum line in Casa Samba because what they do seems almost African and not Brazilian to him. This seems to reference his understanding of samba as linked to ideas of Brazil’s *mestiçagem* rather than its African heritage. Hermano Vianna provides a detailed argument that the urban samba’s ascent to national status was based on the fact that it



was born of *mestiço* origins and influenced by a wide array of social groups. Vianna observes:

The invention of samba as a national music involved many different social groups. The favela dwellers and sambistas of Rio de Janeiro played a leading, but not an exclusive, role. Among those involved were blacks and whites (and, of course, *mestiços*), as well as a few gypsies—also a Frenchmen here and there. *Cariocas* and Bahianos, intellectuals and politicians, erudite poets, classical composers, folklorists, millionaires, even a U.S. ambassador—all had something to do with the crystallization of the genre and its elevation to the rank of national symbol. (112)

While the argument for diverse actors influencing Brazil's national music cannot be denied, Casa Samba's representation of Brazilian samba should not be interpreted as somehow less Brazilian because it can be interpreted as African. Samba is, after all, rooted in African drumming and dance traditions. In Bahian *blocos afro*, samba provides a direct link to proud Afro-centric traditions that practitioners trace back to their enslaved ancestors and beyond. Nei Lopes, revered samba composer, performer, scholar, and black activist, has argued that, in fact, Afro-Brazilian artists and musicians have resisted co-optation, oppression, and internationalization of their music through maintaining a strong African aesthetic through samba in both its musicality and often its lyrics. Lopes describes Brazil as a country where Africans left strong traces in the religion, the music, the way of being, the manners of working, and in daily life:

Today these traces, unconsciously re-created by Afro-Brazilians, are—from our point of view—the key to Brazil's rediscovery of itself. At least in cultural terms, Brazil is a predominately black country. . . . But Brazil's dominant classes, as we have already said, always wanted to appear European. And certainly, they are preoccupied with transmitting an image of a white Brazil. So analyzing our past and present history, we see that they have systematically tried to hide or even get rid of the black Brazilian. (Lopes 181–82, my translation)

Following Lopes's point of view, describing Casa Samba's rhythm as "African" is actually a way of writing the influence of the African diaspora back into the history of samba. Such a representation, in fact, is descriptive of the way that the African American organizers of Casa Samba envision Casa Samba. The Brazilian guitarist from Goiânia perceiving Casa Samba as less Brazilian because what its members perform seems more "African" is a matter of ideological choice. After all, for Vianna samba is *mestiço*, while for Lopes it is Afro-Brazilian. Given the demographics of Goiânia, the fact that



this spectator viewed Casa Samba as African also speaks to his local community of Goiânia. There, representations of samba are perhaps much more influenced by a *mestiço* cultural understanding of samba rather than a samba venerated for its Afro-Brazilian connections; given the numbers of the 2000 census, Afro-Brazilians make up less than 4 percent of the population of Goiânia.

By emphasizing the African elements of samba when it is most fitting, however, Casa Samba actually bridges New Orleanian culture with a Brazilian culture through perceived commonalities in African ancestry. For example, the most anticipated show of the year for Casa Samba is dancing in the Zulu Mardi Gras Ball. Zulu is a historically black Mardi Gras krewe that parades on Mardi Gras Day, wearing Afrocentric costumes and parodying white conceptions of Mardi Gras and blackness (Mitchell 7). Zulu members paint their already-black skin “black,” with large white eyes and thick lips, performing empowerment by taking control of the stereotyped black image formerly characteristic of minstrel shows. For Joseph Roach, the Zulu parody performance during Mardi Gras is a circum-Atlantic reinvention. “I believe that through the sophisticated disguises of Diasporic memory, the Janus-faced Trickster figure erupts at Mardi Gras in the Zulu parade, re-inventing an African cultural pattern in its New Orleanian social context” (Roach 24). It is the fact that Zulu is a local expression of the black neighborhoods that makes the Zulu Ball such an important event for New Orleanian Casa Samba members.

The Zulu Ball is the one show in which Casa Samba dancers will dance for a predominantly black audience. The atmosphere of the ball is quite different from that of the balls of other Mardi Gras krewes. Symbolically, dancing for Zulu is associated with dancing for one’s own community; the hierarchical structures between performers and audience function differently than in other tourist venues. Casa Samba is asked to dance for Zulu not solely because samba is a flashy floor show but also because Casa Samba is an Afro-diasporic performance. Casa Samba’s role in such a setting is to provide a pan-diasporic element to the black-pride structure of the event. Instead of *passista* costumes, the Zulu show is performed in African-inspired animal print and grass-skirt costumes that are just as revealing as *passista* costumes yet invoke the black pride motif. The floor show for the Zulu Ball also includes rhythms and dances from Bahia (the motherland of Afro-Brazilian culture), specifically Ilê Aiyê, rather than only the samba from Rio de Janeiro that is customary in the Casa Samba floor show for the Endymion Ball, a majority white krewe. A Zulu performance enables performers and audience alike, according to George Lipsitz, “to change their identity from a national minority to a global majority” through the connections to the diaspora experience (75).

According to Lipsitz, exploited communities have a long history of cultural expression in which seemingly innocent play becomes an important

process of identity contestation. For Casa Samba dancers, the Zulu Ball becomes particularly meaningful of their relationship to the diaspora, because by performing someone who they are not, in this case, racially mixed Brazilians, the temporary costumes affirm a collective historical experience. Lipsitz notes that such performances employ “strategic anti-essentialism” because they give the appearance of celebrating a fluid identity by seeking a disguise that highlights a part of one’s identity that cannot be expressed directly (Lipsitz 62). Casa Samba costumes bring to the surface important aspects of who the dancers are by costuming them to play at being something they are not. By performing being Brazilian, Casa Samba dancers and musicians as a group perform their connections to a pan-African diasporic community, regardless of their actual heritage or skin color.

Audience members in this context read the samba dancers as something culturally exotic and based in African ancestry. When dancers do not fit the profile physically, it becomes hard for audience members, conditioned in their local contexts, to place or categorize them. For example, there are currently two white dancers in Casa Samba, including myself. In an African-inspired Casa Samba show in March 2009, I was standing in the audience during the show because of an injury. Being with the audience gave me a new perspective on how race and categorization of the dancers became convoluted through their dedication to culture. When Bridget, the other Caucasian dancer in Casa Samba, came onto the stage, two African American women who were in the audience near me commented, “That girl can’t be all white. She has to have some black in her somewhere. No way that a white girl could move like that.” In a rehearsal for this show earlier that evening, Jorge Alabe pulled Bridget aside and told her that she was doing an amazing job and that she was an example who illustrated that “race is not an indicator of dancing abilities.” I was sitting beside him, again on the injured reserve squad, and as an aside he said to me that he always likes to tell his white students when they are doing a good job so that they won’t feel inferior.

The cultural assumptions depicting blacks and Latinos as possessing sexuality, sensuality, and a natural propensity for dance or other activities that require physicality is linked to a historical process. There is an ascription of sexuality to the subordinate classes and races, all of which, because of processes of colonialism, tend to be of non-Anglo-European ancestry. Jane Desmond points out:

In North America, it is no accident that both “blacks” and “Latinos” are said to “have rhythm.” This lumping together of “race,” “national origin,” and supposed genetic propensity for rhythmic movement rests on an implicit division between moving and thinking, mind and body. Even the upper classes in Latin America do not escape this stereotyping; since their “Latinness” can be said to override their class

distanciation from the realm of the supposedly “naturally” expressive body. (48)

The comments made about Bridget by both the audience members and by Jorge Alabe can be seen as being what Marta Savigliano describes as auto-exoticization, the process by which the colonized come to represent themselves to themselves through the lenses of the colonizers (Savigliano 137). On the one hand, the process is empowering. Jorge Alabe’s comment articulates this particularly: he wanted to tell the white dancer she was doing a good job so that she would not feel “inferior” to the black dancers, implying that there is local recognition of dancing abilities attached to both North American nonwhites and to Latin American bodies. On the other hand, the implications of that exotic sensuality remain in the hands of the dominating class.

## Conclusion

As a samba dancer in New Orleans, I have experienced similar situations regarding my race and my culture. A new dancer for Casa Samba who is Afro-Brazilian said to me after a rehearsal, “Don’t take this the wrong way, but you don’t look like a white girl. The way you walk, the way your body curves, the way you dance. You look Brazilian” (Casa Samba field notes 12 June 2009). She explained that she was giving me a compliment in that she could relate to me in ways that she could not relate to most other white people. For her my phenotype may be white, but there was something about the way that I carried myself that made it hard for her to place me. This is not the first time that I have received a comment such as this when I am dealing with people who are familiar with my life as a dancer with Casa Samba. A few years ago, for example, Ilê Aiyê came to New Orleans to do a workshop for Casa Samba. A member of the band was trying to explain to another member of the band that I would be picking them up at the hotel to take them to their next event. He described me as “Annie, an *americana brasileira* (Annie, the American Brazilian).” I am not Brazilian. I am a blonde-haired blue-eyed woman from North Carolina. There is nothing Brazilian about me, at least in my birth and upbringing. I am told over and over again that this label speaks more to the way that I move rather than to my circle of friends. I also realize that the way that I am interpreted when embodying the samba dancer ties me to a racialized discourse in which, through the act of samba, I am interpreted as being more sensual than I otherwise would be in my normal skin. Interestingly, I have found that this fact has also given me agency in the New Orleanian tourism industry. I have sambaed my way through Mardi Gras parades, saluted Zulu royalty, and

welcomed tourists to New Orleans, even though I have no blood ties to either Brazil or to New Orleans.

I first learned to move my body in certain ways to make “samba,” but then samba changed me, affecting the way that I walk, stand, and carry myself. These trained movements that I have learned are marked as being “Brazilian,” even though my training of them has happened outside of the context of Brazil itself and dialogues closely with the local New Orleanian cultural sphere in which Casa Samba performs. As Browning has noted, through samba my body is given agency as a dancer; I write meaning with my body, just as the audience has written upon it. Through embodying the Casa Samba *mulata*, I have learned to move with cultural flexibility that is thought to be inherently Brazilian, yet I have come to understand it as being reflective of the New Orleanian cultural sphere in which I perform.

It is my hope that, through the words of this article, the reader has absorbed the emotions, feelings, and, ultimately, the identity implications involved in the movements of Casa Samba dancers. Barbara Browning, whose work I invoked at the beginning of the article, wrote, “Her goal in writing about the dances is to try to heal the body divided from its intellect” (xviii). My article has sought to do the same, taking into account the subjectivity involved in uniting a body to its intellect through dancing and then interpreting. During Casa Samba shows, samba is performed outside of Brazil and interpreted by myriad different observers and participants—New Orleanian directors and dancers, Brazilian immigrant spectators, New Orleanian spectators, and tourists to New Orleans, just to name a few. Each of these observers bring with him or her differing amounts of knowledge about Brazil and even about New Orleans, for that matter. While Browning moves freely in her analysis between Salvador, Rio de Janeiro, and New York, I suggest that an analysis of Casa Samba is a reminder that geographical movement along with the physical movement of dance carries strong implications for constructions of identity; the importance of samba dancing in New Orleans is not the same as in Rio de Janeiro or in other areas of Brazil’s interior from which many Brazilians in New Orleans have immigrated. Dance is a space where performance, identity, and cultural geographies combine subjectively through movement. Casa Samba has made a place for itself at those points of collision. Dancing about Brazilian places in New Orleanian spaces, Casa Samba dancers embody cultural dialogues between imaginings of Brazil and imaginings of New Orleans. This is the embodied spectacle of samba.

## Notes

1. The idea of an authentic culture has been present in many debates surrounding postcolonial cultural production. The rejection of the colonial period in all

realms of societal organization, including culture, invoked the idea that certain practices were “inauthentic” because of the colonizing influence, and some argued for the recuperation of precolonial cultural production. Postcolonial culture was, thus, seen as hybridized or contaminated. The search for the authentic has since been criticized as arguing for a static, stereotypical representation of culture as people place generic signifiers to represent culture. This has the side effect of interpreting cultures as incapable of evolving over time and circumstances and, thus, subordinating some representations of culture over others. See Griffiths “The Myth of Authenticity” 70–85.

2. See Eco *Travels in Hyperreality*. Eco, however, would disagree with my consideration of New Orleans as a hyperreal. He claims that “New Orleans is not in the grip of a neurosis of a denied past; it passes out memories generously like a great lord; it doesn’t have to pursue ‘the real thing’” (30).

3. The Casa Samba contract is not a legal document. It is a way for the director to explain member responsibilities. In the contract, guidelines of membership are set and fines are put in writing for those members who do not comply. However, I have never seen anyone fined for not following the guidelines. It is more likely that a dancer or musician will be cut from a performance (performances are paid gigs) if he or she does not comply with the rules of the contract. This, however, is completely up to the director’s discretion. All legal employment contracts for Casa Samba are negotiated and signed by the director, without input from group members. Group members do not know how much money they will receive for a given gig beforehand, though they do expect to be paid unless otherwise told. They perform more for the love of performing rather than for financial gain.

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### List of Interviews with Casa Samba Members

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Carol 13 Mar. 2009  
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Janese 30 Apr. 2009  
Jorge 23 Dec. 2008  
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