Oshun, Xica and the Sambista: The Black Female Body as Image of Nationalist Expression

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Oshun, Xica and the Sambita
The Black Female Body as Image of Nationalist Expression

By Oluyinka Akinjiola

A thesis submitted to the Department of Dance of The College at Brockport, State University of New York, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Dance May 20, and 2014
Oshun, Xica and the Sambista

The Black Female Dancing Body as Image of Nationalist Expression

by Oluyinka Akinjola
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Abstract

The context of this work explores black female iconography from the African Diaspora including Oshún, Xica da Silva, and the Deusa de Ebano. These representations of black female dancing bodies are integrated into images of nationalist expressions in Brazil, Cuba and Nigeria. Oshún, the Yoruba deity from Nigeria and Benin represents ultimate femininity from the African perspective. Xica da Silva was an Afro-Brazilian slave who became the richest woman in Minas Gerais through her romantic union with João Fernandez. The Deusa de Ebano, or ebony goddess, becomes the symbol of blocos afros during the yearly celebration of Carnaval in Salvador, Brazil.

Keywords

Yoruba Diaspora, orisha, Oshún, black dancing body, samba, rumba, Deusa de Ebano, Xica da Silva, Carnaval, Santería, Candomblé, Ifá, Cuba, Brazil
Oshún, Xicá, and the Sambista: Introduction

The journey of this writing moves geographically and historically through the many struggles and triumphs that faced and continue to face black women of African descent. Ultimately, it is these struggles and triumphs that make the image of the black dancing woman an appropriate representation for nationalism in the Americas. The complexity and diversity of iconic representations of black female dancing bodies will be explored as well as why these images are commonly associated with national identity. History, socio-economic situations and political ideologies are the major factors that have created these nationalist expressions. The struggles of nations to achieve independence from their colonizers included creating a new and separate identity, and largely one that embraces African ancestry and the beauty of a woman.

The black female dancing body has and continues to be projected to mass audiences. From folkloric performer to Carnaval dancer, images are presented that show the body scantily clad, adorned with jewels, feathers and fabric. These images are featured on brochures, flyers, in commercials and tourist pamphlets. The complexion of the performers ranges across the spectrum of hues that come with the racial mixtures of African, Indigenous, European and Indian people. The dancing of these bodies is almost always associated with their rhythmic expressions, and this relationship with African ancestry.

The black female dancing body as a subject of inquiry can be deconstructed into a range of definitions; this one term cannot delineate one blanket identity, aesthetic, or
culture. Instead, this concept or term within this writing represents the societal constructs that surround female dancing bodies of African descent or dancers performing themes within the African Diaspora. Exploring structure and agency will help unravel the complex racialized and gendered roles in creating icons. Just as the cultures, politics, religions, and languages vary in the lives of black women in the Americas, the term must be fluid with their dispositions. Unifying factors among these women and representations of women will be highlighted. For the purpose of this study, the black female dancing body will be referring to the structure and agency of Afro-Brazilian and Afro-Cuban dancing bodies. And the icon is the representational figure of the women in these roles.

Unlike other discussions of these nationalist expressions that place African ancestry as a fractional component, this study places the African-ness of these images as central and primary. To introduce this perspective and argument, the first chapter discusses the iconic image of femininity and womanhood which is depicted through the African deity Oshún. Chapter 1, titled “Oshún: African Myth to American Icon,” focuses on the quintessential woman –from the Yoruba perspective. Under Yoruba cosmology Oshún is an orisha, a divinity of energy, once possibly a human but her presence remains as a force of nature. This chapter also focuses on the Yoruba method of constructing an iconic figure, or an ideal representation valued in Nigerian culture.

From this perspective, I argue that the idealized and iconic woman was embedded in American culture from Africa. My goal is to bring to the foreground a viewpoint that contradicts a Western perspective that does not associate beauty with dark
skin. According to Yoruba cosmology, Oshún’s beauty was recognized at the beginning of time or the creation of the earth in Ife, Nigeria.

Offering Oshún as the catalyst for viewing beauty, I reexamine iconography, socio-political theories, and social movements relevant to how the black female dancing body is portrayed in representing nationalism. The concept of Oshún’s beauty, according to Yoruba cosmology, was established during precolonial contact in Nigeria, before the transatlantic slave trade and prerevolutionary movements in the Americas. Taking this concept of Oshún to examine post-colonial Brazil and Cuba foregrounds what dance scholar Dr. Brenda Dixon Gottschild established as the “Africanist perspective.” Iconography, sociopolitical theories and social movements used in the Americas will be examined with the Africanist perspective.

Cultural icons of beauty, whether historic, mythical, or generalized, contain subtleties of social codes and messages. Iconic images presented on a national level are used to leave memorable impressions on viewers and market ideas to masses. The roots of these ideas are linked to socio-political ideologies, theories, societal shifts and movements. These icons represent points in history, geographic locations and often the circumstances relevant to the people influenced.

While exploring the deity Oshún, the linkage between Nigeria, Brazil and Cuba will be established, and this provides the relevancy for the Africanist perspective in the Americas. The maintenance of Oshún, Oxum or Ochún worship in Brazil and Cuba has continued since the Yoruba people were transported to these countries. The Yoruba concept of beauty and womanhood has contended with the Western concept of beauty
since the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. These concepts have also influenced each other, in both positive and negative ways. Yoruba scholar Adewale Alani Kuyembi has explored the relationship between Osun of Nigeria, the Old World, and Oshún of the Americas, the New World in her Doctoral Dissertation. The connections remain strong and deviations and adaptations have allowed the deity to be persevered in the cultural climate of the Americas. The aesthetic and movement qualities similarly associated with Oshún have become synonymous with women of African descent. These qualities are often linked with the seductive abilities of black women’s bodies and the way they dance.

The consequences of Oshún’s beauty can be positive and negative. The deity does not exist without faults, often carrying human traits such as jealousy and vanity. Yoruba folklore and myths describe the many aspects of Oshún often offering a moral or a greater understanding of how Oshún creates balance in the world. These myths and folkloric tales will help deconstruct how Oshún is influential in defining the quintessential black woman from the Yoruba perspective. These characteristics and qualities will also be examined in how they are interpreted in the New World.

This chapter will set the premise for how opposing ideologies and attitudes negating this beauty were imposed on the black female body in the Americas. The idea of “othering” as a process will be introduced, and how it is harmful to the image, livelihood, and situations of the victims of this process. In the Americas, after the arrival of Western Europeans, African and indigenous women became the victims of “othering.” Creating an “other” implied an abnormal deviant from the Western European white woman.
The socio-economic circumstances of being enslaved and oppressed became associated with the aesthetics of the black female body. Being lower class and poor continue to face the social circumstances of the majority of black people in the Americas, and women remain at the bottom of the social ladder. Stereotypes continue to point to dark skinned black people, with natural hair and curvy figures, as lower class and less educated. This imagery is directly contradictory to the images of Oshún who is adorned with gold jewelry and possessions associated with wealth.

Chapter 2 will focus on the historic icon Xica da Silva, an Afro-Brazilian woman. Her life journey from slave to being the richest woman in Minas Gerais, Brazil was made possible through her relationship with her slave master João Fernandez. Xica da Silva’s body and her slave master’s desire for her are often the focal points in most accounts of her story. Her triumphant rise from slave to noble woman inspires thoughts of hope for social progress. Her assent to national icon reflects social attitudes towards the black female body, what it represents and how it can be used. Richard A. Gordon points out in “Allegories of Resistance and Reception in Xica da Silva,” that Xica’s position as representative figure of Brazil is complex due to the sexual paradigm of her disposition.

From the Yoruba perspective, a black woman possessing the favor of Oshún can achieve success on her own, contrary to the circumstances of Xica. Through her appeal to her slave masters and their socio-economic standing, she was able to improve her circumstances. Knowing this, Xica navigated the boundaries of slavery, survived, earned her freedom, and ultimately achieved the status of an international icon. Xica, weather
knowingly or inadvertently, was able to capitalize on her sexuality and appeal to João Ferndandez, creating a sexual paradigm.

The beauty of the black female body is highlighted because Xica’s slave master, João Fernandez, was infatuated with her physical features and fell in love with her. His attraction to her physical qualities and personality overshadowed her social circumstances, re-elevating the qualities of the black woman, although as an object of desire. Despite the social climate, Xica and her master married, thus making Xica almost his equal.

Although Xica’s fate was unique, the desire of Western European males for the exotic “other” of a black woman was not. While some romantic relationships did form between slave masters and female slaves, often this relationship was forced by the desire to objectify and dominate. These relationships began to yield a population of mixed race Brazilians, beginning the vast array of racial categorizations based on complexion.

While social attitudes shifted with political regimes, a national identity emerged in the 1930s which highlighted a new image of Brazil – a mulatta. This idealized icon of a mulatta embraced the racial and cultural mixtures that existed in Brazil - African, European and Indigenous. But, once again this exotic mulatta’s body was foregrounded as well by how it moved to Afro-Brazilian rhythms. Just as Xica negotiated her social circumstances to rise to freedom, the mulatta emerged from second class status to an image of national identity. And just as Oshún’s beauty has two sides, so does the mulatta’s. The mulatta may have achieved national iconography, but her physical body is
objectified as a marketing tool for Brazil. Like Brazil, Caribbean countries and individuals have capitalized on the sexual desire for black and mulatta dancing bodies.

Xica’s sexual paradigm and the sexual paradigm of black and mulatta women associated with these iconic images remains linked. According to author Kamala Kempadoo, “emancipation did not fundamentally alter the patterns of sexuality which had been established under slavery.”¹ These sexual patterns refer to two contemporary issues that evolved since emancipation and post colonialism. The first issue involves the desire for an exotic “dark” woman, the engine behind sexual tourism to the Caribbean and Brazil. The second contemporary issue is one that Kempadoo tackles in her books Sexing the Caribbean and Sun, Sex, and Gold: Tourism and Sex Work in the Caribbean. Kempadoo discusses sex work as a “strategy for advancement,” which is facilitated through the transnational relationships created through contact with foreign men.²

In Cuba’s shift away from colonial powers, it was reestablished as an Afro-Latin nation and expelled the exploitive control of the United Sates over its people and women. United States mafia rings ravaged the island with prostitution, drugs and gambling under the Batista regime. By using the appeal of the “black” female body, Cuban woman and other Caribbean women gained control of their objectification. The sexual prowess and seductive qualities are exuded in Cuban dance forms including rumba, makuta, and dances for Ochún. Women who join men in rumba circles are embodying new mannerisms and gestures. Once, this arena was for men to display their virtuosity and

¹ Kamala Kempadoo, Sex, Sun and Gold (1999), 9.
² Kamala Kempadoo, Sex, Sun and Gold (1999 ), 17
cleverness, now young girls and women are flaunting their skills over the complex rhythms.

The final iconic images introduced will be those referencing Carnivalesque dancers in both Cuba and Brazil. The chapter “Embracing Carnaval and Releasing the Inner Sambista” will focus on the agency of women over their sexuality, femininity and ability to create social change. The empowerment of women and sense of ownership over their bodies, present and future, are exhibited in the Deusa de Ebano figure in Salvador, Bahia and folkloric dancers in national dance companies in Cuba. These dancing bodies exude empowerment in all forms of venues and spaces. These dancers occupy the public sphere during Carnaval and other seasons. Claiming public space communicates empowerment and social change.

Carnaval groups including those in Bahia, Brazil create political presence by elevating the issues of black communities and promoting positive messages and values. According to dance scholar Carole Boyce Davies, “the blocos-afro offer re-interpretations of pan-Africanist politics in order to challenge racist exclusions of Afro-Brazilians from Brazilian economic and social structures.”3 With a focus on empowering women, In addition to expressing their manifestations of Oshún, Cuban promotional materials feature rumba dancers. Although this dance maintains its traditional national elements, it communicates new messages in the public sphere. The sambista is the subject of many Carnaval and popular songs that have crossed over to Western audiences.

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3 Carol Boyce Davies, Representations of Blackness and the Performance of Identities 50).
The love of “dark,” “othered” beauties continue to retain the aesthetic and movement qualities of Oshún.
Chapter One

Oshún: From Yoruba Myth to American Icon

From the calm banks of her sacred grove she is adorned with gratitude, praise and material offerings. Elaborate sculptures and temples make her grove immaculate and mystical. Her devotees dressed in white wait to adorn travelers with her blessings. Mother of many, wholesome woman, fierce and abundant, this is the place that Oshún calls home.

~ Personal account from 2009 visit to Oshún Grove, Oshogbo, Nigeria

Devotees of the orisha Oshún gather from all over the globe in Oshogbo, Nigeria to witness the Arugba deliver the community’s offerings to Oshún’s grove. This procession from the King’s palace to the grove is the most important part of the Ṓṣun festival according to music scholar, Bode Omoloja. The arugba, or votary maid, “symbolizes purity, represents the link between humans and Ṓṣun, and constitutes the medium through which the corporate healing is delivered to the land.”

An Orisha in the Yoruba traditional religion is a divinity or spiritual essence coexisting in the natural world. Orishas provide a system of checks and balances in the world. While people fear and worship the orishas, the orishas provide protection and blessings from the Supreme Being, Olodumare, in return. So to continue this exchange, people gather every year to pay homage, or mojúba, to Oshún at her sacred grove.

6 (Ologundudu 2008)84
At the Oshún festival in Oshogbo, public performance highlights the orisha as a symbol of identity and socio-political issues in Oshogbo. Participants invite and celebrate the presence of the deity in their lives by singing, chanting, dancing, and playing music. Dr. Bode Omojola finds that “as a demonstration of religious belief, participants at the Ọsun festivals pray to the deity for a gift of child, a good job, good health or victory over enemies. Songs (orin) and chants (oríki) are the media through which the religious, social and political dimensions of the festival are performed.”

The chants exhibited in Oshogbo are appropriated and adapted. Similar to the range of fully improvised to choreographed structures of the dances, chants have elements of strict traditional and improvisational forms. This balance of structure also exhibits the performance agency of the participants. It also represents the connection between past and present, and the maintenance of history while adapting to the current needs of the community. “The group’s performance illustrates the significance of Ọsun as a living concept that transcends the immediate context of the festival.”

Oshún is the orisha of fresh water, and one of many orishas that descended to the world in Ile-Ife, Nigeria, the cultural center of the Yoruba tribe. The myths of Yoruba folklore depict rich imagery and abundant metaphors explaining Oshún’s relationship with humans and nature. Her symbols and favorite items like jewelry, honey, mirrors, fans, and bells help to illustrate her stories and characteristics. She is known to have

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7 Omojola, Bode. “Ọsun ọsogbo,” 84.
power over fertility, (be) a mother of many and a symbol of beauty.⁹ Oral transmission of her myths has continued for generations, providing a unified understanding of Oshún.

Yoruba traditional religion, sometimes referred to as Ifa, provides an understanding of the orishas through myths, dance, music and songs. These modes of worship are interrelated, in that sometimes the myths describe dances, songs dictate body movements in dance, songs determine the speed or rhythms played, or dances describe the myths. The myths that bring Oshún to life describe her attributes, her actions, her relationship to the world and other orishas. Adewale Alani Kuyebi, scholar of philosophy, examines the myths within Nigeria, Brazil, and Cuba among other countries surrounding Oshún. Not only does she find the retention of major myths, but that the myths contribute to the preservation and evolution of the Yoruba culture. The Yoruba myths surrounding Oshún describe many details that allow Oshún worship to be recreated in the Americas.

In focusing on the Nigerian constructs of Oshún, Kuyebi emphasizes Osun’s roles as an orisha, ways she manifests herself in the human world and her symbols. She further emphasizes that within myths we find the basis of religious beliefs and practices which are applicable for present and future generations. According to Kuyebi, “African lifestyle is built upon locally integrated myths.”¹⁰

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The myths of the *orishas* and religious practices of the Yorubas were transported with enslaved Africans, establishing the religion and lifestyle on new continents. The power of oral transmission combined with the will of survival engrained the Yoruba culture within the Americas. The rich imagery, songs, dances and rhythms were embodied and continued the practices outside of Nigeria and Yorubaland. The Nigerian practice of oral history, metaphorical proverbs, and myths were all advantageous to the survival of Yoruba culture in the Americas.

In agreement with Kuyebi, I argue that from the myths, embodied knowledge, and power of oral transmission, the Yoruba perspective of beauty was embedded within American culture and incorporated into nationalist expressions. Nationalist expressions in the Americas include iconic images, songs and dances expressing a collective identity of a nation. The best representation of this argument is the use of the black female dancing body as nationalist expression in Cuba and Brazil. The quintessential and iconic women portrayed in these nationalist expressions possess Oshún-like qualities. The images and songs describe the movement qualities of woman, and particularly women of African descent.

Imagery of Oshún has been used to portray newly established Afro-Latin nations that wanted to break ties with colonial powers and establish separate identities. Portraying black female bodies and dancing bodies served this new image of nationhood. Imagery of Oshún and figures with Oshún-ness represented an acceptance of non-whiteness, non-Europeaness, and proclaimed cultural ties to African-ness. Portraying an image of a dancing body also signifies the presence of music, festivities, and joy.
Who is Oshún and what does she represent to the “nation”?

Here, I will further explore representations of Oshún or Oshún-ness in myths, symbols, and dances of Oshún. Their manifestation in the Americas will best explain how the Yoruba aesthetic established itself in American postcolonial constructs of beauty. The Yoruba concept of Oshún and exquisite femininity encompasses aesthetic concepts and relationships between people, energies, music and dance. Just as the people in Oshogbo use Oshún as a symbol of identity, the deity can be transferred to representing national identity and provides a metaphor for socio-political relations.

The following descriptions and passages from HRU Yuya T. Assaan-Anu, author of *Grasping the Root of Divine Power*, and Adewale Alani Kuyebi, scholar of philosophy, provide the Yoruba concept of Oshún. Assan-Anu offers a contemporary investigation of the deity that can be placed in dialogue with traditional Nigerian concepts of Oshún presented by Adewale Alani Kuyebi. The African and American manifestations of Oshún exemplify a Trans-Atlantic bond unifying the Yoruba conception of the deity. From these depictions, I draw on the relationship of the deity to nationhood, politics and cultural identity. The first selection is from Assan-Anu:

“Osun is a beguiling lover of sweet things and of all that is beautiful. She is the owner of fresh water rivers and the rivers of blood which flow through our veins. She is a powerful enchantress and healer; just as the honey is that she loves so dear. This provides her with
an exceptional gift of diplomacy. She’s the only Orisa able to get the 24 hour eating and working Ogun to stop in his tracks and value her exquisiteness and magnetism.”

Assan-Anu immediately refers to the sweetness and beauty of Oshún, and that she presides over all that is in this nature. Not only does she own but she resides in fresh flowing water, symbolic of human veins. She exists in the veins of all that are beautiful and sweet natured. Her movement qualities remain sinuous like the movement of a river, and buoyant like water. Her dances often have unbroken lines and circular arm movements when her hands are not accenting her feminine figure.

Honey, one of her symbols, enchants and heals, and is also suitable as an offering to strangers. This offering is present in her diplomatic acts of creating unions with potentially harmful adversaries. Assan-Anu references the relationship between Oshún and Ogun, Orisha of metal and swift judgement. Oshún was the only Orisha that could draw the fierce Ogun out of the forest, exemplifying her natural diplomatic abilities and disarming lure.

Her beauty is also referenced in the sense of fertility and ability to provide children. In African culture, the number of children in a household signifies wealth and a woman that can provide many children is an abundant provider. Oshún is often referred to as a mother of many. Kuyebi also references Oshún’s fertility in the following passage:

“Osun has a special mission for the world. She has power over fertility. She can cure sickness and disease. She has control over still-birth and hears the cry of the oppressed.”

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The significance of fertility in this context encompasses more than just the ability to conceive children. The Yoruba construct of fertility has three designations according to Andrew Apter, professor of History and Anthropology at the University of California, Los Angeles. These designations of fertility in Yoruba culture provide models of agency in womanhood. Fertility refers to socio-political relations within the individual household, lineage system as dictating inheritance, and the market, symbolic of economic exchange. “Yoruba ideals of fertility extend to the reproduction of social and political relations managed by priestesses who invoke the Orisha (deities), and during annual festivals of ‘carrying water,’ bring the orisha’s power into the town in ritual bottles and calabashes to revitalize the community.”

Fertility is the opposite of barrenness, encompassing all that leads to death, poverty and the end of a bloodline. Disease, sickness and infant mortality as mentioned by Kuyebi can be reversed and countered by Oshún. These afflictions are also socio-economic indicators of development and often the conditions that face communities under severe oppression. Oshun’s ability to influence these circumstances can bring economic progress for those she favors.

One particular Afro Cuban dance and song for Oshún describe her escaping and braking from chains that a male orisha used to capture her. Advice in Yoruba culture is often given in proverbs, providing metaphors applicable to life’s circumstances. Breaking from chains symbolizes freedom from oppression. The movement in this dance

focuses on the freedom Oshún feels as she emphasizes the accents of her feet, lifting away from the chains.

What Apter does not mention in his discussion on fertility is the its association to attraction and the codependence of male counterparts. Assan-Ani discusses Oshun’s relationship and influence over male energy:

Osun is the law of attraction and governs the raw primal magnetism that occurs between forces and individuals. Osun is not only wombmynd and all of the alluring sensuality of it but, she is also the true mirror of manhood. She is the reflection of the highest love that man can express. She is the allure of procreation and man’s desire to seek balance and achievement with his feminine complement. Osun is the reflection of pleasure and pain that man witnesses in the eyes of his mate.”

Assan-Anu’s descriptiveness of the attraction towards Oshún exists with initiates and children of the deity. The “alluring sensuality” and “primal magnetism” discussed are attributes that are exhibited in American manifestations of Oshún. The performance of Oshún in Cuba and Brazil emphasize the mentioned attributes in the articulation of the torso, flirtatious laughter and grin exhibited by the dancer. The dancer also pantomimes bathing in fresh water and the movement of water down the body. The attraction of males towards Oshún is also exemplified in the tactics Oshún used to draw Ogun out of the forest. Oshún bathed under a waterfall in the forest, singing and tracing the lines of her body. Ogun watched hidden among the trees admiring her beauty and began following her out of the forest.

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The relationship of Oshún to individuals, community, identity and politics continues on both sides of the Atlantic. The concept of who she is and how her energy interacts with the world is expressed in myth, dance and song, as reflected in the previous mentioned passages. These expressions are also significant in that they can be embodied. They are forms of embodied knowledge which are practices familiar to African and African based culture as mode of cultural preservation. This mode of cultural maintenance was essential to engraining African practices and ideas within American culture.

**Transforming from African Myth to American Icon**

Myths, songs and dance served as modes of preserving and embodying knowledge for Yoruba people to continue religious practices in foreign environments. I find four major advantages of embodied knowledge that supported the transference of cultural practices. These advantages worked particularly well in the circumstances of all enslaved Africans in the Americas. The first is that there are no material items necessary to record the information. Since there is no need for tangible records like paper, the knowledge is easily transported. Africans were unable to retain any personal items once captured, what was embodied was all that traveled. Once in the Americas, African rituals were banned, which leads to the third advantage of embodied knowledge, the ease of concealment. The greatest advantage of embodied knowledge and oral transmission is that both allow the information to be easily shared and adapted.

*Ọrọ*, or words, hold a considerable importance in Yoruba culture by solidifying the need for children and descendants to carry on the traditions. Words, expressions and
language carry weight and intensions with them. “Words, or ṣọrọ, to the Yoruba people, have a very powerful spiritual significance. Yoruba believe there is power in the spoken word…Many of the traditional Yoruba believe that knowledgeable people can use invocation and incantation to change the nature of things… they believe there are specific energies in most matters that can be invoked.”\(^{16}\) This cultural significance of spoken word and the advantage of oral transmission are the driving factors that allowed Oshún and other deities to manifest in the Americas. The content of myths, songs, rhythms and dances provided enough information to establish the religion and cultural practices in the Americas.

**Myths across Miles**

During the era of the slave trade, millions of Africans from the Western coast of the continent were taken to European colonies and the Unites States of America. Yorubaland consisted of a much larger area than Nigeria before Europeans restructured the political boundaries of Africa. “Unfortunately, Oshogbo was one of the coastal cities that suffered at the hands of slave-traders and many of the people were carried away to the new world. Some of these Yoruba people were familiar with Oshún. This explained how Oshún worship started as a religious cult in the Americas.”\(^{17}\) In addition to Yorubas from Oshogbo, a range of Yoruba speaking and Ifa practicing people were transported and dispersed throughout the world during this time. Since this range of Yoruba people from Nigeria, Benin, Togo, etc. were regrouped in the Americas, a range of practices were

\(^{16}\) (Ologundudu 2008)37.
blended. Africans adapted to their new environment by substituting herbs, plants and recreating instruments to continue religious practices.

Over centuries *Ifá*, or traditional Yoruba religious practices, began to form their own distinct religion in the Americas as *Lucumi, Santería* or *la Regla da Ocha* in Cuba, and *Candomblé* in Brazil. In Cuba, women have been instrumental in the preservation and continuation of traditional religious practices. Ferminia Gómez, Ma Monserrate Gonzalez and Ferminita Gómez all presided over ceremonies that initiated others into priesthood. By continuing the Yoruba religious practices, these women created some of the largest familial branches of the *Lucumi* in Cuba.¹⁸

In Brazil, unlike Cuba, a large indigenous population existed. Religious practices of the Indigenous Brazilians particularly supported the continuation of water deity worship. Oshún, Yemoja and Olokun, female *orishas* of fresh water, the sea, and deep ocean waters blended with existing worship of indigenous water deities. Yemoja, or Iemanja in Brazil, receives the greatest admiration among female deities because she presided over the passage of Africans to Brazil and the souls of Africans lost in the middle passage.

¹⁷ Kuyebi. 74
This transformation of Ifa was also influenced by practices of enslavement. Plantation owners and slave masters aimed to control the physical life and spiritual life of enslaved Africans. Often Christianity was forced on Africans and their traditional religions were banned or grounds for punishment if caught in practice. In order to survive, Africans superficially practiced Christianity, but in the privacy of their homes continued to practice traditional African religions. The practice of syncretism was a method used in Ifa to disguise the workshop of orishas. Each Orisha was given a Catholic saint, either matching the orisha’s preferred colors or character, as a representation that was identifiable to other Ifa practitioners and disguisable to slave masters. Oshún is represented by Our Lady of Charity of Cobre.

This syncretism of orishas maintained a connection to the symbols and myths from Yorubaland, but depictions of the orishas were rarely present as human forms in Nigeria. This transformation of Oshún from being represented by mirror, comb, bells and fan to a statuesque figure of a tall slender woman with flowing hair was the beginning of her American iconography. The imagery from myths was blended with acceptable representations. Oshún’s figure was taking form. Her stories now had a personified representative. She was draped with gold and yellow fabric, crowns and halos, standing on a pedestal with child or mirror in hand.
In the imagery that has developed in the Americas of Oshún, continuations of her qualities have been maintained from Yorubaland. In an excerpt of her poem, Carmen Stevenson describes Oshún imagery visible in figure 4.

…Oshun

*Lovely River Goddess your bosom green, swells with abundance
we drink from the fountain of you waters,
it is sweet as the honey you desire…

*Beautiful Oshun, gracious River Goddess,
Granting petitions to those who know her mystery
Fertile, rich, enchanting seductress…*19

This poem and figure exemplify her metaphoric symbols of fresh water, honey, and fertility. The image places Oshún by a waterfall, alluding to the movement of water and sinuous veins. The phrase “swells with abundance” dually references movement of water and fertility and Stevenson also applies this phrase to the womanly physique of the orisha. The author acknowledges on many lines the attractiveness of Oshún by writing “desire,” “enchanting seductress,” “beautiful,” (as?) repetitive praises in many of her chants and songs. Oshún is also believed to be very vain because of her exquisite beauty, and she enjoys when others acknowledge her assets. Vanity is just one of her personified imperfections. Oshún also uses her beauty to manipulate others to achieve her desires.

**Process of Cultural Creativity in Public Celebrations**

The embodied practices and oral transmission of Yoruba and other African practices are visible in the public cultural celebrations in the Americas. Similar to the

Oshún festival in Oshogbo, a process of cultural creativity links the nations of Cuba and Brazil. Omoloja argues that “rather than re-enacting an unchanging form, the festival is shaped by the constantly evolving dynamics of social and political life in Oshogbo.”

Afro-Brazilian and Afro-Cuban communities adjust public celebrations to meet the changing dynamics of society. The fluidity of cultural re-interpretation meets the needs of the community.

Public celebrations in the Americas reflecting this process of cultural creativity include Carnaval in both Cuba and Brazil, the Iyemajá festival in Salvador, Brazil, and *rumba* performances in Matanzas, Cuba. These public performances represent the identities of the communities in which they occur. The events are also moments when the community gathers to celebrate their heritage and identity. With this fluid process of creating, participants are active agents in the shaping of culture, identity and community. In these contexts participants elevate Oshún and beautiful feminine figures with Oshún qualities.

In these public performances we see the manifestation of Yoruba beauty in Cuba and Brazil. Black female dancing bodies are present as participants and as idealized forms providing a theme for celebration. Just as in the Oshún grove, where the concept and understanding of the deity promotes a cultural identity, American celebrations formed around celebrating an iconic African female. The concept of Oshún-ness not only relates to celebrating physical beauty, but prosperity, fertility, and spirituality.

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Post-abolition, African descendants were not immediately welcomed to equality, nor were their cultural celebrations. Decades followed throughout the Americas with struggles to claim and establish a sense of place and belonging in the public sphere. Cultural institutions including churches, spiritual houses, and dance halls helped solidify black Afro-American communities during these decades. Spiritual houses, or terreidos in Brazil and cabildos in Cuba, were specifically dedicated to Yoruba Culture. These institutions were established during slavery and continue to be pillars of Yoruba culture in their communities.

**Oshún as Icon of the American Nation**

When Brazilian and Cuban governments shifted away from the empirical colonial control, Afro-descended cultural expressions were adopted into post-colonial and revolutionary regimes. Brazilian and Cuban governments wanted to create distinct national identities, separate from their colonizers. Proclaiming allegiance to African paternity provided a bold statement to the world. Black is the binary opposite of white and African culture represented opposition to European culture. Africans were also subservient to whites during slavery, and the image of Africans rising over European powers represented the oppressed conquering victoriously over the dominant class.

New nationalist images incorporated blackness and references to Africa. National songs and dances incorporated the cultural expressions that African descendants created in Brazil and Cuba. These music and dance forms were acknowledged as the new national identity and were federally funded through the institutionalization of African folklore into folkloric dance companies. These Afro-Cuban and Afro-Brazilian dance
companies represented Yoruba culture as it manifested in Brazil and Cuba. Dance companies including Balé Folclorico da Bahia and the Conjunto Folkloricó Nacional de Cuba toured internationally, promoting the new images of their countries. Federal governments funded elaborate productions exhibiting the beauty and national pride for African culture. These companies as well as others debuted to audiences their Oshúns and how her worship was maintained over centuries. African folkloric performances were presented on concert stages, and in public and community venues. In addition to African folkloric, the unique blend of African and European heritage was showcased. Dances like the samba in Brazil and the rumba in Cuba represented these unique blends. *Samba* and *rumba* are vernacular dance forms, creating a visual representation of the music that they were accompanied by. These truly Brazilian and Cuban born forms were referenced as part of the new identity of the nation. National holidays, political gatherings, sporting events, and religious celebrations incorporated a time and space for these vernacular dances.

Music and dance themes often crossed over from religious contexts to secular. Yoruba religious references and concepts also found their way to into Rumba, Samba and other nationally recognized national dances. The crossover from sacred to secular engrained Oshún and Oshún-like qualities into national discourse. For example, in “Brown Woman with Golden Mouth,” a samba song by Ary Barroso, author Natasha Pravaz investigates the symbolic status of mulattas as national icons. Pravaz describes a mulata as “‘a woman of mixed racial descent,’ but it also connotes voluptuousness,

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sensuality, and the ability for dancing the samba.”

This Barroso song was written in the 1930s during the Vagas political era when the regime wanted to establish a relationship with urban popular culture. In addition to Pravaz’s investigation, I find that from an African perspective this song also references qualities of Oshún.

Brown woman with golden mouth, you make me suffer Your ways kill me Go round, brown woman, go, don't go Swing, brown woman, fall, don't fall Dance the samba, brown woman, and scorn me

Brown woman, is a hot coal ready to burn Burning us with no compassion Go round, brown woman, go, don't go Swing, brown woman, fall, don't fall Dance the samba, brown woman, and scorn me

My heart is a tambourine Swinging to the beat of the enchanting samba Samba that moves us Samba that makes fun of us Love is such a different kind of samba

Brown woman dances in the yard Proudly stepping on my heart Brown woman, take pity on yet another sufferer Who got burnt in the hot coal of your love

Although the song references a mulata, a woman of mixed racial descent, the woman is a fair skinned black woman. In Nigerian culture, Oshún is believed to have fair skin and is often the complexion of a mulata in Cuba and Brazil. One of Oshún’s colors is gold in addition to white and yellow. Barroso’s first line describes the “golden mouth,” which allures him to the point of suffering. Since Oshún governs the “laws of attraction” and “primal magnetism,” the constant cry of suffering from Barroso seems to be have been enchanted Oshún. The mulata references a complexion and woman that dances samba professionally or with expertise. This connectedness of dancer to music is a direct linkage to African culture, and in Oshún worship dance is inseparable from the music. Oshún’s presence can be heard in her rhythms and seen in her dances, just as this

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22 Pravaz, Natasha. “Imagining Brazil: seduction, samba and the mulata’s body.”
23 Pravaz, Natasha. “Imagining Brazil: seduction, samba and the mulata’s body.”
24 Ibid.
symbolic reference to the mulata. A woman can embody Oshún when she performs her
dances, just as a woman can become a mulata as she dances the samba. Barroso’s woman
proudly steps on his heart, and he begs for her pity. Barroso’s woman is in control of her
seductive power over him, especially when she dances. This woman possesses the power
of Oshún; she is an enchanting seductress capable of love, compassion, jealousy and
vanity.

This presence of Oshún-ness in Barroso’s samba song is one way that this image
of femininity has evolved in Brazil. The merging of African and European-ness is a
complex matrix of social, political and religious constructs on both continents. In Brazil,
Cuba and Nigeria the images, sounds, and movement qualities of icons like Oshún help
construct notions of identity similar to the celebration in Oshogbo where “the Oshún
festival provides an important context for participants to function as agents in the ever-
continuing process of negotiating and reflecting social reality.” Negociating identity is a
process, and it faces new challenges with time. An identity can be self-generated by a
community and imposed by dominant structures like political regimes.

In the case of Yoruba femininity and the black female dancing bodies in the
Americas, an identity existed and an identity was imposed through the transatlantic slave
trade and centuries of slavery. After being forced into a world of European hegemonic
dominance, black and white notions of beauty were placed in a binary system. In
European ruled environments, whiteness represented true beauty, purity, and femininity.
Blackness in the Americas was seen by the dominant class as opposite to whiteness, the

25 Òmojola, Bode. “Ọsun ọsogbo” 103
other. But, even in this new environment, the Oshún-ness of black female bodies was undeniable. The othering of black women also led to exoticism or the sexual desire of persons of racial and cultural difference from the admirer. Black femininity and beauty became acceptable, but were seen through a different lens in white dominant perspective. Before post-colonial shifts, acceptance of this beauty was allowed when viewed with exoticism, but lasting linkages to this exoticizing of the black female body exists in our contemporary society.

Although slavery, lack of human rights, and impoverishment among many other things changed the sociopolitical and economic situations of Africans, the Yoruba perspective of beauty was maintained. Embodied history maintained the connection for Africans to rebuild social values in the Americas. The lived, danced, sung and played expressions recreating African culture provided an internal strength through oppression. Afro-Brazilian and Afro-Cuban expressions reconstructed the national identities of Brazil and Cuba. What was once concealed through fear of punishment was capitalized upon by political regimes. Political regimes in both Brazil and Cuba needed a cultural source to bring solidarity to their nations and an identity that would represent victory for the oppressed. Yoruba cultural institutions provided this cultural source as well as icons of beauty, prosperity and diplomacy.

Oshún, the Yoruba myth and American icon, helped to represent a new identity, an identity that was destined to prosper, appealing to the human desires, and capable of
creating transnational alliances. The Yoruba deity and quintessential woman provides a figure of adoration, compassion, beauty, and fertility with the capacity to change social and economic circumstances. She instills hope and solidarity in present and future generations. For these reasons, Oshún has become a nationalist expression for Nigeria, Brazil and Cuba.

As the other figures are discussed in the following chapters, continued references of Oshún-like qualities will be highlighted as well as the negotiation of this identity in the Americas. Peering into the contexts of these icons will reveal a hybrid or matrix of concepts that have created the black female dancing body as image of nationalist expression.
Chapter Two
Xica da Silva

Re-envisioning African femininity in the Americas

Xica enters the dining room like an explosion followed by her entourage. Xica moves freely around the table while the Portuguese aristocrats in the room are firmly seated. Her grand gestures are symbolic of her agency. She is free to express herself and frees the expressions of the house slaves. João Fernandes is also freed; his posture is relaxed unlike his stiff aristocratic colleagues. Xica takes her seat of authority, but her limbs reach across the table entering the personal space of her former oppressors. (scene from Xica, 1967 film by Carlos Diegues)

Xica da Silva dressed in yellow and gold, dancing through the streets of Tejuco to her signature song can be placed within the Yoruba concept of womanhood. She wears the same colors as Oshún, exudes constant laughter like the flirtatious deity, retains a connection to music in her dancing, commands the attraction of men and envy of women. The myth of Xica also describes the transition of African womanhood into American postcolonial constructs. Xica’s dancing body foreshadows the changing roles of black females in American dance forms.

The Xica da Silva depicted in the Carlos Diegues film Xica represents both the struggles of black women in pre and postcolonial times, as well as the struggles of Latin American nations for political freedom from Europe. Although the true life of Chica reveals a woman with the agency to change her isolated circumstances, the myth of Xica
has its own life, reflecting the larger needs of society. What is central to the myth is the black female dancing body of Xica da Silva. Her body provided a site for negotiating liberation as well as providing an instrument of change. Xica became a symbol of resistance to colonial rule, military dictatorship, and black oppression. Not only did she survive the hardships of slavery, but she dominated the attention of high society through her relationship with João Fernades, the richest and most powerful man in the state of Minas Gerais.

The struggles of this national icon through gender roles, racial barriers and politics continue in contemporary society. These struggles are also represented in nationalized dances including the Brazilian Samba and Cuban Rumba. The exoticism of the black females performing these national dances attracts tourists to Brazil and Cuba because they present sensuality and sexuality offers financial stability and economic liberation. Black female and male dancing bodies are agents of change in their lives, and the lives of their families and communities. The sexual paradigm of Xica da Silva serves as a metaphor for finding freedom within oppressive circumstances.

Both the life and myth of Chica da Silva reveal the sexual paradigm that faced and continues to face women of African descent in the Americas. In the brutalities of slavery and colonialism, whites asserted their control and dominance over black women through sexual abuse. But, black women changed the culture of sexual abuse in order to survive. One avenue was to create a relationship out of exploitation and claiming a position as a mistress or concubine. Being a mistress or concubine offered new privileges, including emancipation and access to wealth. This avenue defines the
circumstances of the sexual paradigm. The black female body was a site of sexual exploitation, but the physical body became a tool for achieving freedom.

In the myth of Xica, the African concept of womanhood confronts this paradigm. Xica da Silva is an extreme representation of Yoruba womanhood, visible in the symbols and movement qualities of Oshún present in the Diegues film. There is also a dialogue between African and European constructs of femininity and womanhood. Nationalized dances including the Cuban Rumba and Brazilian Samba display both African and European aesthetics and how black dancers negotiate this complex societal structure. Kamala Kempadoo examines these social relations as they continued into the lives of contemporary sex workers in the Carribbean, but she also references the same embodied history and culture present in these dances. In this social matrix she finds “patriarchal and racialized dominations and exploitations of black and brown bodies of labor, self-empowerment by women through the strategic use of sexual labor for their own and family’s survival, and struggles by both men and women for liberation from oppressive colonial and neocolonial conditions.”

In Cuban rumba and Brazilian samba, Yoruba aesthetics and the concepts of fertility can be found. Central to both these nationalized dances is the movement of the pelvis with total control and ease. The pelvis is never stagnant in both rumba or samba. Just as the deity Oshún commands the laws of attraction as she moves to her rhythms, women dancing the Rumba and Samba depict power and gender relations. As gender roles and women’s agency evolve so do the movement of women in these dances.

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addition to presenting sensuous and sexual characters, women assert power, creativity and spontaneity.

The relationship between Xica da Silva and women dancing Cuban rumba and Brazilian samba centers on the agency of black women to create change in their environment. Xica’s rise to cultural icon symbolizes how the female body can reclaim power. The rumbera asserts power in the cat and mouse game of guaguanco, displaying as much virtuosity, character and spontaneity as her male counterpart. The sambista of Brazil asserts power in reclaiming the word mulatta, formerly derogatory, now an accepted term for beauty and dance professionalism. Xica is an icon of female power and her story is relevant to how contemporary black women assert power in society.

Xica da Silva and the Sexual Paradigm

During Chica’s life, she aspired to separate from her slave past and create a new identity. She wanted a life that had better economic and social status, with beautiful clothes, jewelry, property, and ultimately freedom. In order to achieve this identity Chica had to assimilate to white Portuguese cultural norms, but in the myth Xica indulged in both Afro-Brazilian and white Portuguese culture. Both historical and mythical icons had the agency to change their social circumstance inspiring black Americans to challenge societal structures. To support the investigation of the life and myth of Francisca da Silva de Oliveira I draw from author Júnia Ferreira Furtado, author of Chica Da Silva a Brazilian Slave of the Eighteenth Century, Richard A. Gordon, author of “Allegories of Resistance and Reception in Xica da Silva”, Kampala Kempadoo in her articles exploring
the structure and agency of Latin American and Caribbean sexuality and the film *Xica* by Carlos Diegues.

Francisca da Silva de Oliveira, or Xica da Silva, became a historic icon over centuries of historic debate and artistic recreations. Although her circumstances were not completely unique for a woman of mixed race in the former town of Tejuco, debates among historians sparked controversy that would lead to the creation of a historic icon. Her body, lifestyle and the mutual love between Chica and João Fernandes inspired novelists, play rights, and film directors. Her story fulfilled a need for a symbol of liberation, resistance and uplifted Afro-Brazilian culture. Her story symbolized the structure of political oppression throughout Brazilian history and the agency of black Brazilians to change their circumstances.

Francisca da Silva, or Chica, was born between 1731 and 1735 in Milho Verde, Brazil.\(^{27}\) In her lifetime, Portugal controlled the Brazilian diamond industry in Minas Gerais in the 18\(^{th}\) century. Slave labor, including Africans and black Brazilians, provided the man power to extract the diamonds from the mines providing enormous wealth for Portugal. Her mother was Maria da Costa, a black slave, from Salvador, Bahia. The last name *da Costa* refers to the coast or Slave Coast of Benin and Nigeria.\(^{28}\) Chica’s father was Antônio Caetano de Sá, a white man, from Rio de Janeiro.\(^{29}\) Chica is often referred to as meztiso, mulatta or parda (brown). These racial categories denote complexion or


\(^{29}\) Junia Ferreira Furtado, *Chica da Silva*, 59.
color and were the method of classifying Brazilian born slaves. The term mulata or mulatto is derivative for the Spanish and Portuguese “mulo” or mule which carries derogatory connotations of stubbornness and the inability to reproduce or be fertile. This classification as parda or mulatta implies a lighter complexion than an African or creole, dark-skinned of two African or black parents. Whether light or dark in complexion, white Portuguese men were attracted to African and African descended women. The following passage is from a European chronicler discussing the lust that existed towards black and Brazilian females:

… twelve is the age at which the African girls flow, [in whom] from time to time there is such enchantment that one forgets their colour… The little black girls are usually strong and solid, with features denoting agreeable amiability and movement full of grace, with artfully beautiful feet and hands. Their eyes irradiate a fire so particular that their chests heave with such ardent desire that it is difficult to resist such seductions.

The above paragraph is reminiscent of the description of Oshún, and how she rules the laws of attraction. The description of enchantment, referencing movement and irresistible desire are characteristics associable to Oshún-ness. Infiltrating Oshún-ness is a grotesque exoticism based on a desire of an Other. The passage also implies a rite to exploit the unknown. In many cases white Europeans and slave owners exerted their social dominance over their slaves and black Americans by indulging in sexual desires without considering the consequences.

30 Junia Ferreira Furtado, *Chica da Silva*, 43.
31 Junia Ferreira Furtado, *Chica da Silva*, 43.
Complicating the view of exoticism, João Fernandes was attracted to young Chica for both exotic and familiar reasons. Chica was believed to be between the ages of 18 and 22 and suited a “European notion of beauty.” This notion of beauty visible in Chica included pleasing body proportions and complexion. Since Chica was a mulata, she possessed the physical attributes of both her Afro-Brazilian mother and white Portuguese father. The combination of the features appealed to the exotic and familiar notions of beauty for Fernandez. Whether this attraction was reciprocated is unknown, but a genuine love existed between Chica and Fernandez.

João Fernandez purchased Chica as his slave from her former master but soon fell in love with her. He exhibited a sincere love that transcended racial and social boundaries. This love was demonstrated when Chica was given manumission within months of her purchase, Chica adopted Fernandez as her surname and the ability to acquire his patrimony, the number of children she gave birth to, and the longevity of their relationship. These events secured their relationship as genuine with Chica as a free woman, and that she was treated as a woman in Fernandez social class. João Fernandez treatment towards Chica was abnormal for his time period and significant among white and black mistress relationships.

Chica and Fernandez relationship challenged the power relations between blacks and whites of the 18th century. Relationships between white men and black and mulata women were common, but the dynamics of these unions reflected the norms of 18th century society. In many cases, manumission was earned through coartation, the process

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of self-purchase over many years, which had potential to be an exploitive process. Unlike other black and mulatta women, Chica was given her freedom within months of being purchased from her former owner, blacks and whites lived side by side within their household, and after leaving Brazil to return to Portugal, Fernandez continued to support their 13 children whom also carried his surname.

The social change and progress that Chica and Fernandez exhibited in their relationship created a controversial story that would become the myth of Xica da Silva. Chica represented women with the ability to challenge hierarchies that had been established by colonial and neocolonial systems. Fernandez desire for her physical body opened a pathway for social mobility. historian and anthropologist, Andrew Apter describes that “black lovers and concubines threatened to subvert the [colonial] system…Thus the blood of enslaved mothers was not only lightened, or ‘cleansed’ in the language of racial caste, but was converted into money and honor through pathways of upward mobility."

The embodied roles of black women seen from Yoruba perspectives were placed in the structure of colonial society- creating racialized gendered roles. This is visible in the images and stereotypes perpetuated of African women in the Americas during and post slavery. “At this point we can simply note how the antimonies of black womanhood were stereotyped into familiar figures of loyalty and lust.” These figures are the Mammy and the Jezebel. These images divide notions of fertility into opposing images implying

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34 Junia Ferreira Furtado, *Chica da Silva*, 130.
35 Junia Ferreira Furtado, *Chica da Silva*, 121.
36 Apter, 89.
37 Apter, 82.
that a seductive beauty cannot bear children, or a caring mother cannot be attractive. Chica da Silva could not be placed exclusively in either of these categories. She broke the stereotype revealing that black and mulata woman are multidimensional with a full range of femininity.

Making the Myth

The myth of Xica retains the skeleton of the historical figure but uses the sexual paradigm as metaphor for the power relations between the Brazilian people and political regimes. Xica’s body, now a black dancing body, represents the struggle of the nation and its people. The Xica, portrayed in the 1976 Carlos Diegues film, was an intelligent, cunning, and attractive woman with full intentions of gaining wealth and power. In the beginning of the film, Xica is already capable of manipulating the power relationship with her owners. She is fully aware of the social opportunities of being a concubine or mistress to a white man of power. Kempadoo describes that despite the sexual abuse during slavery “there was, on the other hand, everything to be gained by becoming the mistress of a white man. Prestige among her fellows, preferential treatment for herself and the possibility that she might in time obtain freedom for herself and her children were all possible goals.” Xica already has these opportunities with her current owner, but she desires more prestige, more possessions, and more freedoms.

Francisca da Silva Fernandez de Oliveira began transforming into the internationally recognized myth in 1868. Joaquim Felício, former attorney to the

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38 Kamala Kempadoo. *Sun, Sex and Gold: Tourism and Sex Work in the Caribbean.*
granddaughter of Chica, began publishing chronicles of the family’s assets into the Tejuco paper *O Jeguittinhonha*, then finally published his novel *Memorias do Distrito Diamantino* in 1868. This novel would serve as a canon for a series of other novelists perpetuating a negative image of Chica.

Felício’s perspective looks negatively at the relationship between João Fernandez and Chica, portraying Chica as a “lavish spendthrift, witch and shrew” capable of manipulating the powerful Diamond contractor. Felício also depicts Fernandez as oppressing the people of Tejuco to satisfy Chica’s every whim. Following in Felício’s footsteps was Joaquim Silvério de Sousa whom calls Chica by the nick name “Quemanda, ”meaning the boss, in his book *Sítios e Personagens Históricos de Menas Gerais*. This nickname perpetuates the idea that Chica had control over Fernandez.

With the publishing and popularity of these novels, the myth of Chica was in full effect by the 20th Century. Chica da Silva, according to Furtado, was the subject of bedtime stories. Chica was heroine in the dreams of Afro-Brazilian, and the villain of nightmares to white aristocrat children. In 1950, Chica and Fernandez house became a site of National Heritage and an official tourist attraction.

It was not until Soter Couto’s book, *Vultos e Factos de Diamantina*, was published in 1954 did Chica begin to acquire an image of positivity and philosophical complexity. According to Furtado, Couto and the book exalted Chica’s beauty and African heritage.

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40 Junia Ferreira Furtado, *Chica da Silva*, 289.
41 Junia Ferreira Furtado, *Chica da Silva*, 290.
42 Ibid. 291.
“Soter Couto splits her personality, portraying her as a woman with ‘good and bad’ attributes. To the Portuguese she showed on the deepest hatred, which would explain the legend, already circulating in Joaquim Felício’s day… For Couto, the ‘African blood coursing through her veins made her maltreat them, exacting revenge for the torment inflicted upon her brothers, hunted down and shackled to be sold like animals in other lands.’”

This perspective makes Chica into a heroine of her story. This also brings back the metaphor of blood and the presence of African concepts and influence. In this circumstance, Chica’s blood retains the memory of oppression and fights for retribution. According to Furtado, Couto “closed the first cycle of the myth, which modernized and adapted to the mid-twentieth-century values, acquiring fresh dimensions and sophistication and gaining in psychological complexity.” This image almost completely contrasted and strongly contended with the image depicted by Felício.

Continuing this new image of Chica in 1959, Antônio Callado brought O Tesouro de Chica da Silva to the theater stages. Then, Agripa de Vasconcelos published Chica que manda in 1966 which became the new main source on her life. Vasconcelos wrote about Chica as an indomitable spirit, symbolizing rebellion against the colony. These 20th century representations of Chica, including the novel Chica by Paulo Amador, begin creating her as a representation of the Brazilian people.

Chica finally achieved iconic status through the Carlos Diegues 1967 film Xica, which also changed the spelling of her name. Diegues was successful in setting up his
main character as an international icon due to the socio-political commentary, images and audio present in the film. First, Diegues updates the myth with a new sensual character that is current with the 1970s sexual revolution. This is visible in the relationships Xica has with her owner, her owner’s son and eventually João Ferndandes. Often stages of her social climb are recognized through the repetition of the Jorge Ben song “Xica da Silva.”

The difference in the movement vocabulary of Xica verses other black Brazilians in the film is most visible when Xica is first seated at the dining room table. João Fernandez guides Xica by the hand to her seat at the head of the table, directly across from him. She walks with broad shoulders, her head lifted high and as she makes direct eye contact with Fernandez. She sits up strait and long in her chair admiring the new dress and shoes that Fernandez gave her. The kitchen servant enters the room with her shoulders rolled in towards her chest holding the breakfast food. As she serves Fernandez she never raises her head. Her steps are short and quick even while Xica yells for her food. Fernandez stops the servant immediately with the sound of his voice giving her the smallest gesture for her to turn around and return to the room.

The gestures of the other blacks in the household begin to change as Xica is adorned with more gifts and power. The other black women that surround her begin moving with the same qualities as Xica, although they look up to her like their leader not as a master or João Fernandez. They form a community around Xica, they are happy when she is happy, and sad when she is sad. Richard A. Gordon describes the director’s strategy as well as the troubles of using Xica as a symbol of nationalism in his article

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47 Ibid.,301.
“Allegories of Resistance and Reception in Xica da Silva.” He states that “by representing the protagonist’s resistance to colonialism, the film hopes to model for spectators in Brazil in 1976, resistance to another system of oppression: Brazil’s military dictatorship.” A possible message may be that what was possible for Xica is possible for Brazilians in 1976. Although Xica’s physical being was in a system of oppression, her mind and ambitions were never under control. If she had the will to make change in the structure of slavery, then the possibilities can be limitless for Brazilians of 1976 or at any moment in history. Although Diegues may not have intended to perpetuate women using their bodies for social progress, the culture still existed from slavery as well as other forms of oppression into postcolonial times. Diegues’ emphasis on Xica’s movements throughout the house, streets of Tejuco, and the choreographed sequences in the film bring attention to fact that dance captures and reflects socio-political circumstances.

After receiving her manumission papers, or emancipation from Fernandez, Xica decides she wants to finally attend mass at the Catholic Church, a rite reserved for whites. Xica makes a joyous procession to the church with her entourage of maids. The Jorge Bem song overpowers the sounds of dialogue. They are all dressed in white and yellow. The maids surround Xica like a bouquet with their bouncing voluminous skirts. They leap, twirl, and smile, filling the alleys as they parade through the streets. Their movement is light and buoyant as if their feet are just gliding across the ground. Xica is front and center in the crowd with her roll of papers in hand. She is dressed like a European queen and stops the procession at the steps of the church. Although her papers

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are the key to liberation, they come with limits. The priest turns her away; even though she is free, blacks are still not permitted in the church. As she screams and curses, her maids’ emotions melt from joy to sadness.

The importance of Xica’s body, a black female dancing body, is the primary factor to the character’s liberation. Although Xica was a mythical-historic character, the bodies of black females remain active agents of changing socio-political circumstances and economic liberation. In the procession to the church, white males and females moved from their pathway an unlikely occurrence in true 18th century society, but symbolic of the change that was occurring. Xica received basic human rights with the manumission papers. When she was liberated her maids simultaneously expressed liberation.

**Vehicles of Redemption and African femininity in postcolonial constructs**

One of Diegues’ intentions in making Xica into an icon was to create an understanding around the importance of Afro-American traditions and influence in contemporary Brazilian society. This shift away from colonial influence was reflective of postcolonial ideals and social movements between the 1960s and 1980s. Diegues honored African heritage in the film highlighting efforts of resistance in Brazil. Xica’s iconography presented a pride in black womanliness and how the roles of the African woman adapted in order to survive in Brazil. Furtado believes that Diegues focused on Xica’s physical body and sexual prowess for these reasons:

“Chica da Silva’s sexuality and radiant energy portrayed a rich and complex African culture. As such it undermined the stereotype of white domination over blacks in Brazilian culture and

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presented an alternative picture of this relationship… She is a vehicle of redemption in the movie: using her sexuality in her favor, she inverts the mechanism by which the whites ensured their dominance over her race, namely the use of colored women to satisfy their sexual appetite.”

Xica’s energy is expressed in her gestures and movements throughout the film. Her movement qualities allude to her sensual nature, ability to be loving, connection with her culture, strength as an individual and ability to create community. Xica always looked directly into the eyes of every white person she encountered, her head remained high and her shoulders broad.

In the film, João Fernandez is ordered by the Portuguese crown to return to Portugal. As an effort keep this from happening, Xica arranges an African meal to present to the inspector. To accompany the meal, percussionists play Afro-Brazilian music within the syncopated bell patterns found in Candomblé. A sequence of choreography begins with Xica’s maids dressed in traditional African looking wraps.

The maids move in unison with wide steps and backward leaning stance like the Brazilian martial art of resistance, capoeira. They accent the movement of the torso with their arms, contracting in then expanding arching their backs and gaze towards the ceiling. After descending to the floor with spiraling hips the tempo increases. The maids run towards the back of the room and turn their backs toward the inspector. When they turn around they are now topless. Xica makes her entrances with nothing but a small cloth covering a small portion of her pelvis. She circles her head and pelvis as the women behind her isolate their shoulders. The maids do a small samba like step before forming

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50 Ibid.,302.
and moving in a circle. Xica’s shoulder isolations begin to hypnotize the inspector. When she finally descends to the floor the music stops and the inspector is overcome with animal like behavior. He is incapable of controlling his desire for Xica.

Xica draws on her Afro-Brazilian culture and sexuality to achieve what she wants. She presents African femininity in pre and postcolonial constructs. Femininity in the African context includes an influence over the household, economy and society. Sexuality became one of the new contexts to assert this notion of femininity. Kamala Kempadoo explains that female sexuality in the Caribbean among other places is a site for reconfiguring relations of power. The combination of embodied African traditions and agency of survival in the Americas frames this new notion of femininity.

Associations between femininity and nationalism were consistent in nations shifting away from colonial influence. In many cases political entities capitalized on exoticism of female bodies, Kempadoo defines that “exoticism captures the simultaneous romanticization and domination of the racial, ethnic or cultural Other that has occurred through colonial and imperialist projects.” By romanticizing the female bodies within the country, an image of national harmony is projected as well as value for the nation’s people. Images of black female dancing bodies in Brazil and Cuba are used in this way.

Two iconic images present African womanhood and this new context of nationalism; they are rumberas in Cuba and sambistas in Brazil. In Brazil, the term and

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51 Kamala Kempadoo. *Sun, Sex and Gold: Tourism and Sex Work in the Caribbean.*

52 Kamala Kempadoo. *Sexing the Caribbean.* 35.
role of the mulatta was reclaimed by the sambista. This was possible through the valorization of the samba and praising the woman that dances it. Focusing on the mulatta created new issues surrounding race in Brazil. Simultaneously in Cuba, the Cuban Revolution elevated the African-ness in Cuba and a mixed racial heritage that was uniquely Cuban. The performances of women in both national dances present historic, political and social issues surrounding the presentation of black female dancing bodies. Both icons relate back to Xica and how they conquer their own paradigm.

**Dancing with Agency to National rhythms**

**Reclaiming Mulata**

In Chica’s life, she was capable of changing social class because of her physical body and the fact that her physical body was racially mixed. Like many racially mixed or mulatta women of the 18th century, Chica’s light complexion gave her a higher probability for class mobility. In the centuries following the Transatlantic slave trade, a large population of racially mixed people of European, African and indigenous descent influenced the cultural geography of the Americas.

The Portuguese and Spanish term mulata was initially derogatory, but as European influence in Brazil lost its grip during the World Wars a new sense of pride centered on racial and cultural uniqueness. Author Natasha Pravaz addresses the figuration of the mulata in the national discourse of samba music. Pravaz finds that “in Brazilian culture, she [the mulata] represents the concrete and symbolic synthesis of sexual intercourse between a white master and black female slave. The violence inherent in this form of rape is erased from the imaginary, for this intercourse is usually portrayed
as a romantic encounter in which the woman becomes the seductress of a hopeless gentleman.”

This figure of the mulata was re-envisioned just as the figure of Xica da Silva. By valorizing the mulata as a part of the Brazilian national identity, the physical identity of Brazilian-ness shifted in complexion. Since this identity shift Pravaz finds this new mulata definition reaching beyond the complexion of a woman with mixed racial descent but “ready to deploy her tricks of sorcery and bewitching, embodying sensuality, voluptuosity and dexterity in dancing the samba. She has become a figure of desire in the Brazilian imaginary.” This image of the mulata was reinforced through popular discourse of nationality beginning in the 1930s. The national expression of the mulata encompasses movement qualities, exoticism, and socio-economic implications.

When Rio de Janeiro was the capital of Brazil under the president Vargas and his political office in the 1930s, carnival associations including samba schools received federal support to use themes surrounding progress and work discipline in their samba songs called enredos, choreography, costumes and floats. Samba thus became a political tool used nationally and internationally. Samba asserted political ideologies, but also represented the people that performed the music, dances and songs. “This process makes use of, in particular, African-Brazilian forms of cultural expression, and of

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54 Pravaz,48.
55 Pravaz,49.
African-Brazilian bodies, celebrating and ‘transforming ethnic symbols into national ones.’”

Brazil’s shift towards claiming a new racial identity was not an isolated occurrence. Other nations in the Americas experienced this shift in nationalist expressions and influenced each other in the process. Gilberto Freyre used the mulata as a physical representation of his “racial democracy” theory. “Racial democracy” proclaimed a uniquely American harmony between Europeans, Indians and Africans. Despite Freyre’s efforts to combat racism, “racial democracy simultaneously expressed a clear preference for racially mixed mulattoes over people of completely African ancestry.” This theory created an unchallenged hegemony for many years. “Freyre’s writings thus became the basis of a new, semi-official ideology propagated in public proclamations, schools and universities, and the national media.” This was until social movements led by non-whites outside of Brazil brought attention to social justice and human rights issues. United States based foundations funded the graduate studies of Brazilian students in the United States. This created an international dialogue among Black social movements.

New waves of scholarship from these Brazilian students in the 1970s and 80s began breaking down Freyre’s theory. The civil rights and black empowerment movements served as models for critique and progress. “Thus by the 1970s, as upwardly

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56 Pravaz, 52.
58 Andrews, 489.
59 Andrews, 488.
60 Andrews, 496.
mobile non-whites began to create their own organizations and movements to combat the racial barriers that they confronted, many looked toward the U.S. civil rights and black power movements as possible models for emulation.\(^{61}\) James Brown and other artists of the ‘Black Soul’ movement were used as musical styles of influence to interrupt the Brazilian national identity and theory of racial harmony. “Young Afro-Brazilians wishing to express an independent, oppositional identity had to reach outside the national cultural lexicon to do so.”\(^{62}\) This expression of pride in blackness was incorporated into existing public performance practices. In 1978 the Unified Black Movement or *Movimento Negro Unificado* formed in Brazil as an active social justice organization.\(^{63}\)

The unification of this movement included black Brazilians of all complexions. Black carnival groups began to emerge, *blocos afros*, and following in the footsteps of religious procession groups, Afoxés. These groups brought Afro-Brazilian religious dances into the streets and introduced *samba reggae* and *danças do blocos afros*. These groups and their dancing influenced the black empowerment movement in Brazil. “As a result of those attacks [on the racial democracy and imposed national identity], during the 1980s racial democracy lost its unquestioned dominance in Brazilian national life.”\(^{64}\)

These black cultural institutions promoted images of black, indigenous and Indian figures, all racial minorities that are excluded from economic and political opportunities. One icon which will be explored in the third chapter is the *Deusa de Ebano*. The *Deusa de Ebano*, or ebony goddess, is crowned in an annual competition created by Ilê Aiyê, the

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\(^{61}\) Andrews, 494.

\(^{62}\) Andrews, 495.


\(^{64}\) Andrew, 496.
first *bloco afro* to emerge at this time in Salvador, Bahia. The *Deusa de Ebano* reasserts the beauty of the African aesthetic in the community and uplifts black women.

Maintaining the African or Yoruba concept of womanhood continues to support collective identity and efforts of nationalism. The representation of black women in samba through symbolism, icons, songs and dances encompasses a complex past and present. Evolving representations of women can also be seen in the nationalized dance forms after the Cuban Revolution.

**Rumberas of Matanzas**

Similar to Brazil’s racial democracy, the *mestizaje* (mixed-race) image became the “Cuban Color.” Equating Cuban-ness with a particular complexion privileged people of mixed racial descent. The blending of European and African dance and music formulated the essential Creole or “mulata” dance music of the Americas. *Son* was mixed-heritage and became as tantalizing and feminine as the *macho* gaze could imagine. Again, black and mixed-race female dancing bodies were elevated as symbolizing this dance form as well as exemplifying Cuban-ness.

*Son*, and eventually *rumba*, gained the attention of international visitors in Cuba and the relationship of these dance and music forms to African heritage appealed to the marketing of exoticism. U.S. and European tourism popularized Afro-Diasporic cultures influencing the racializing of leisure activities. These leisure activities were events tourists planned as part of their sight-seeing of the island. At these events white tourists

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65 Guridy, 109.
67 Guridy, 110.
and visitors were guests and black Cubans were either staff or performers. Tourists were interested in the primitive cultures in Cuba, creating a continuation in the intrigue of other-ness and exoticism of black dancing and musical bodies. “Moreover, it was in the racialized clubs and dance halls of Havana, like those of Harlem, where the Afro-Cuban son and rumba flourished, entertaining white audiences who desired to immerse themselves in the “low” cultures of Havana.”

White tourist’s leisure activities lead them to neighborhoods, clubs and dance halls in black neighborhoods in Havana. “The district of Marianao on the outskirts of the city was also a zone where Afro-Cuban musicians and dancers performed for local audiences. Sonero musicians also played in the academias de baile, these dance halls existed in Havana during this period. Although, these halls were technically ‘dance schools’ where men could learn how to dance, in reality they became centers of prostitution, where men, mostly white, sought the sexual services of women.” The dancing bodies of white and mulatto women were associated with sexual availability, this became entwined with islands infamous history of prostitution.

In addition to prostitution, Cuba was a U.S. and European playground for gambling and mafia activity. Because of the exploitation of Cuban people and resources in the 1920s a need for change was stirring in the Cuban people. Guridy describes that “the 1920s was a time of dramatic change and turmoil in Cuba. Cuban intellectuals were becoming a major force in the island politics, emerging as critical voices against corrupt Cuban governments. This in turn led to a resurging nationalism that was based on strident

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68 Guridy, 110.
69 Guridy, 126.
anti-imperialist critiques of U.S. presence on the island.”\(^{70}\) This anti-imperialist inspired nationalism would become the Cuban Revolution. The structure of tourism and even prostitution would be drastically changed.

Yvonne Daniel describes the transition of the Afro Cuban Rumba to a symbol of Cuban nationality after the 1959 Cuban Revolution. The federal government’s new goal was the protection of Cuban cultural expressions through creating national dance companies, including folkloric companies, between 1959 and 1962.\(^{71}\) It was during this time that “the dance shifted from its original locus, street corners, where it often shared attentions with parallel activities of traffic, business, and socializing, to its secondary quarters, the professional stage, to another home the theatrical patio.”\(^{72}\) Daniel acknowledges that without Teresa Gonzalez and Roldglío Martinez-Furé rumba would not have achieved its status. Daniel says that “they used all opportunities to validate folkloric contributions in Cuban history and, in this manner, have been instrumental in the emergence of rumba as a national symbolic dance.”\(^{73}\)

The roots of Afro Cuban rumba extend much earlier than the 1959 Revolution. The cultural mixing of Africans on the island and the incorporation of European contra and social dances allowed rumba to manifest. “Three basic dance expressions developed as the rumba complex, all of which have identifiable rhythmic bases and rely heavily on pantomimed themes of seduction and competition: yambú, guaguancó, and columbia.”\(^{74}\)

\(^{70}\) Guridy, 125.
\(^{72}\) Daniel, 59.
\(^{73}\) Daniel,61.
\(^{74}\) Daniel, 63.
Rumba as well as many other Cuban styles of music and dance is organized by clavé. Clavé refers to both the two-stick instrument and the syncopated rhythmic pattern which is the structure for organizing music and the body. Although Daniel rightfully acknowledges BaKongo, Lunda and Luba of Zaire cultural linkages, I find profound linkages to Yoruba aesthetics in the use of semiotic, the use of signs or symbolism in movement, and body attitude.

Just as carriage, facial expressions and the aesthetic of “cool” are all necessary in this Afro-Cuban dance form, these are also essential characteristics that Omofolabo S. Ajayi defines in Yoruba dance in Nigeria.

“ Their body attitude so vital to their daily interpersonal communication, becomes more heightened and more potent in the dynamic art of dance. By the same token, the rhythmical transposition of body signs into a symbolic form in a motional continuum gives Yoruba dance its high communication value… Stance is an important indicator of what the dance means to the performer, and the facial expression is an essential component in this respect. The posture of the dancer, as in most of the people’s daily activities, is seldom far from the ground. If they are not kneeling or squatting, they are bending from the waist…”

From these changing semiotics, body attitude, and stance of the rumbera I see woman exerting agency. The movements of women dancing rumba transitioned greatly from pre and post Cuban revolution. As I observed in Matanzas, Cuba, women’s communicative and pantomime like movements have become more like their male counterparts. Also, more women are dancing columbia, one of the expressions part of the rumba complex traditionally reserved for men to show off their virtuosity.

As explained to me by Dolores Perez, dancer and singer for Grupo AfroCuba de Matanzas, there are traditionally two main arm gestures of the woman dancing guaguancó. These two gestures are also symbolic of the woman never losing her ease and poise despite the eagerness and trickery deployed by the male dancer to execute the vacunao, or vaccination. Daniel describes these gestures as “torso-initiated movement that uses the center of the body as an axis (axial movement, such as undulation) continues with little change.”

In guaguancó, the traditional relationship between the man and woman is represented as a rooster and hen. In the choreography, Daniel describes the male as seeking opportunism and the female’s attitude as “like a hen at times, is uninterested, tries to evade and avoid him, but is eventually attracted to him and allows him to dance nearby.” This relationship is consistent in traditional representations of rumba. In public performances of rumba that I witnessed in Matanzas, a much different role of the woman was expressed in this relationship.

The contemporary rumbera’s semiotics, body attitude and attire represent the changing role of women in society. The rumbera no longer waits unemphatically for the vacunao, she taunts, teases and even initiates the vacunao. The gestures of the woman are innumerable, often inventive and improvised based on the present partner. The attitude of the rumbera is assertive even exhibiting sexual prowess. The rumbera entices and provokes her partner, and at the last moment attacks the attempted vacunao with her own stylized gesture.

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76 Daniel 67.  
77 Daniel, 69.
Women often wear pants and carry a scarf to emulate the movement of the traditional skirt worn in rumba. Pants allow more freedom for women to change level, direction and make leg gestures that were once restricted by the skirt. The absence of the skirt also allows the fast foot work to be seen such as balancing on the tip of the toes or staccato-like pauses. The freedom of the arms from holding the skirt enables women to accent the movement of the body even at times touching the body or accenting the fluidity in the shoulders. The arm gestures show more strength and accents in addition to the subtle and suave traditional gestures. Women also adorn themselves with subtle to flashy jewelry displaying their individuality.

Rumberas represent the same autonomy and sexual prowess as Xica da Silva. Whether sponsored through state funding as dancers or aficionados, Cuban women’s lives are heavily influenced by the socio-political issues of Cuba. Within the structure of the socialist system, women find avenues to negotiate independance. Dance provides the sense of freedom from a physical to a spiritual level. As women perform the national dances of Cuba; they also represent the national identity of Cuban women.

Similar to Xica, this identity represents resistance to former colonialism and a culture that embraces African paternity. Rumberas are experts in embodying Afro-Cuban rhythms and use this rhythmic understanding to assert femininity and power. Xica and many women of African descent create change in racialized and gendered constructs in the Caribbean, North and South America. Xica’s myth represents women who recognize the desire they awaken in men, exert power in a position of weakness and use sexuality
and sensuality as a source of pride and defiance. The mulata is romanticized in songs, images and dance. She is elevated as the identity of Brazil as well as other complexions of black women. The mulata is equated with sensuality, desire and her dancing body. Working with the rhythm of clavé, the rumbera awakens the same desire in men. The rumbera’s roots in Afro-Cuban culture represent the whole nations defiance against empirical rule as she performs on national stages. Conversely, the rumbera represents individual spontaneity and virtuosity as she performs on the streets on Cuba. These dancing bodies re-envision African femininity in postcolonial constructs.

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78 Gordon. Allegories. 47
Chapter 3
Beleza Negra
Black Female Dancing Bodies in Social movements

_Deusa do Ébano_

Written by Geraldo Lima

Minha crioula
Eu vou cantar para você
Que estás tão lina
No meu Bloco Ilê Aiyê
Com suas tranças, muita originalidade
Pela avenida cheia de felicidade

Refrão:
Minha Deusa do Ébano
É Deusa do Ébano
É Deusa do Ébano
Todos os valores
De uma raça estão presentes
No estrutura deste Bloco diferente
Por isto eu canto pelas ruas da cidade
Para você minha crioula, minha cor, minhas verdades
This song expresses *Beleza Negra*, or the beauty of blackness found in Afro-Brazilian women. *Beleza Negra* is the visible and audible public statement of African-esque pride, solidarity and community. The *Beleza Negra* movement in Brazil is a fragment of the larger black consciousness movement known as the *Movimento Negro Unificado* (MNU), or Black Unified Movement in Brazil. The dancing that corresponds to the social movement propels forward, is grounded and stable, fluid and circular, connected to spiritual symbols, and maintains the heartbeat of the drums.

When black Diaspora women perform in public spaces they assert their agency in the economies, politics and cultural fabrics of their nations. Dance, as an embodied practice, foremost states that the performers are in control of their bodies. While dancing in public black women become active contributors to social progress, economic progress, progression of social justice, and cultural institutions.

While maintaining African cultural aesthetics, the *Beleza Negra* movement has been integrated into the cultural identity of the Americas by projecting iconography of black femininity. Imagery and ideas of this black consciousness movement are made visible during the annual Carnaval season. Carnaval, the cultural celebration corresponding to the period of revelry before lent, turns streets in public performance arenas. The street becomes a public platform, a place to break social norms.

Carnaval provides the framework for Diaspora communities to express the concept of *Beleza Negra* in the form of a *bloco afro*. A *bloco afro*, refers to a community based performance group including music and dance that plays and dances a signature Bahian style of samba called *Samba Reggae* or *Samba Afro*. The dancers of the *bloco*
afro must maintain the ideals of the community and reflect the aesthetic of beleza negra. The dancers often lead the procession of the bloco through the streets, or avenida. The dancers are the first image spectators take in as the sound of the percussion follows closely behind.

This chapter focuses on the iconography during the period of the Beleza Negra movement, how the image was created, and how it connects to similar concepts outside of Brazil. I argue that Beleza Negra icons represent a new understanding of African Femininity that reflects international social movements and nationalist expressions. The history of social movements and public performance will support the explanation of this argument.

**Defining the Public Sphere and Performance Space**

Folabo Ajayi provides the Nigerian perspective on the public performance of dance by explaining “Ceremonials of power validation can – in a different context – also become a means of curtailing the powers of those in positions of authority. Particularly for those who are not allowed to verbalize their opinions and who are not members of formal decision-making bodies, dance – in combination with other non-verbal expressions- often becomes a metaphor of protest.”79 The use of metaphors instead of literal messages helped disguise the subversive material of black dance in the Americas and connects to a form of protest in Nigeria.

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Dancing in the public sphere serves as a method of protest by making bodies, the dances, music and songs performed visible and audible to the public. Thus making dances like *rumba* and *samba*, which are performed in public, vehicles for visibility for Afro-Cuban and Afro-Brazilian communities. The public arena that *rumba* and *samba* will be investigated in is Carnaval and the preparatory period that precedes it.

Like Carnaval, many festivities of African origin have elements of spirituality and religion. “Like the narrated myth the festival is realized on two levels- the sacred and the civic…It will appear that the other forms of activities crowding the festival celebration transcend any religious concerns and effectively transform festivals into an affirmation of social values and aesthetic expressions.” Festivals provide a space for religious and sacred statements to emerge from Ifa and other African based religious communities. Carnaval, an existing public festival, became a platform for black Americans to assert their value as people, as communities, and as citizens. The choreographic form of a processional is used during Carnaval similar to the choreographic in African public festivals.

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80 “A public sphere emerges when people come together to debate political issues that involve the nature and constitution of political authority. Democratic political systems express the ideal of a singular sphere that should in theory be open to all citizens. In practice, however, the public sphere tends to institutionalize existing forms of social stratification that are grounded in social, cultural and economic experiences.” The public sphere as defined by John A. Guirdry in “The struggle to Be Seen: Social Movements and the Public Sphere in Brazil”, in a democratic context, people claim authority, present political issues and new concepts of citizenship. Guirdry further explains that even though the public sphere should be available to all citizens to express their autonomy, existing forms of oppression emerge. Guirdry expands on the role of social movements in creating public politics through claiming public space. “The struggle to be seen is a metaphor for contentious politics” in participants in Guirdry’s study it was often communicated that “looking at and looking after the poor, seeing suffering and knowing what poverty feels like were linked to a sense of obligation to do something for those in need.”

Yvonne Daniel and Catherine Evlelshin bring into summation the purpose and metaphors embedded in Carnaval in the Caribbean and Brazil. They describe:

“In both European and African history, periodic processions marked the year and ritual calendar. Pageantry, dance, and annual cleansing rituals included sacred offerings to insure fertility, fermented beverages that preserved food through late-winter scarcity, the sacrifice of a goat or fatted calf, and merrymaking before the semi-starvation of early spring. In the Caribbean, the drudgery and horror of plantation life for Africans, the loneliness and gender imbalance for both Africans and Europeans, the endless colonial and class conflicts – all these things necessitated the suspension of rules periodically.”

This suspension of rules for all races, genders and sexual orientations occurs in the week before Lent on the Catholic calendar or in July through August in Cuba. Throughout the Caribbean and Brazil parading is a vital part of celebrating Carnaval. It is within the processions and throughout the streets during Carnaval that one will witness “the metaphoric challenge to quotidian rules, the mocking or satirical challenge to authority and to traditional social order.” The many complex metaphors allow protests for social justice to exist with celebrations of life. Expressions of joy seem to overshadow the hardships of life, but ultimately the public space created during Carnaval allows disenfranchised groups to assert their identities and values to those with authority.

Out of the Clubs and into the Streets

One of the first artistic social movements for African Americans in the United States was the 1920s Harlem Renaissance, but this movement existed simultaneously in

83 Daniel. Caribbean and Atlantic Diaspora Dance. 108.
other Afro-American communities internationally. The social movements of Afro-Cubanism and the Harlem Renaissance disrupted the social structures of the 1920s and 1930s, promoting a positive image of blacks as part of the American identity.

Simultaneously in the 1930s, as mentioned in Chapter 2, Brazilian president Getúlio Vargas began funding samba schools to promote a positive national image for Brazil that was of mixed race. This new identity for blacks of the Diaspora used images of black dancing women to communicate their ideologies. During the 1920s and 1930s, blacks traveled and exchanged ideas at great volumes creating cross-cultural linkages which involved dancing bodies. This structure of combining artistic movement, identity, and dancing female bodies would be repeated and reemerge later in the 1960s and 1970s in the Cuban Revolution in Cuba, the Black is Beautiful movement in the United States, and Negritude in Brazil.

John A. Guirdry explains that “Overtime, successful community movements build a history of practices that construct identity and create counter politics that become formally recognized through political concessions (such as the provision of services or mutual participation in state agencies), a continuity of public action, and a predictable (if not always contentious) relationship to the state.”

The social movements of the 1920s and 1930s set a foundation for the following decades ideologies and methods for constructing nationalist expressions. The dancing highlighted during the Cuban Revolution, Negritude and Black is Beautiful movement in Brazil presented a convergence between cultural celebrations and social movements. The social movements

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of the 1960s were a reconfiguring and resurgence of the “New Negro” movement of 1920’s 1930. The “new negro” identity was identified as someone whose “art and literature would work in the service of the goal of racial equality.”

Vital artists that promoted the Afro-Cuban and African-American interchange and romanticized imagery of black female dancing bodies in the 1920s and 1930s were Langston Hughes, Nicolás Guillén, Fernández de Castro and Miguel Covarrubias. Langston Hughes, a successful poet in the United States, was fixated on Cuba long before his first visit. Hughes was acknowledged as the “blues poet,” romanticizing the African American music style and vernacular dance environment of the blues. Lalita Zamora, one of Hughes’s female admirers in Cuba, commends his writing of Diaspora womens’ identities in his work. “Zamora’s praise is particularly noteworthy. Despite the cultural differences between herself and Hughes, she clearly felt that he understood the female characters as ‘types’ with whom she could identify.” During his visit to Havana, Hughes was captivated by the son and rumba environments witnessing the energy of the musicians and sensuality of dancers. Nicolás Guillén, nicknamed as the “son poet,” had

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85 Guridy, 109.
86 Guridy, 139.
similar accolades as Hughes in romanticizing Cuban vernacular dance and music in his writing.

Artistic linkages allowed socio-political ideas to dialogue in dance institutions, both in the United States and Cuba. “Whether it was in the 135th Street Library, the Apollo Theater, the Savoy Ballroom, or in the growing community that became known as “Spanish Harlem,” Afro-Cuban cultural forms were an inextricable part of Harlem’s vast array of Afro-Diasporic cultures.” Similar to the status of the Savoy, Club Athenas and *academias de baile*, or dance halls, in Havana were sites where black artists developed their crafts and drew the attention of white Americans.

Frank Andre Guridy, author of *Forging Diaspora: Afro-Cubans and African Americans in a World of Empire and Jim Crow*, describes this paradox and *fetishization* that emerged during the 1920s and 1930s. Guridy states that, “…the fetishization of the primitive was not the only factor informing the making of Afro-diasporic linkages during this period. If gender and sexuality shaped the making of the Harlem Renaissance and Afro-Cubanism, they also influenced the forms of interaction that took place among those individuals who linked the two movements together. Diasporization was predicted on an economy of desire that was based on the objectification of women.” The term *diasporization*, described by Guridy, is a process of creating the African Diaspora and connections within it. Even Langston Hughes memoirs draw attention to the fetishization and sexual privileges of both white and black men over women in *diasporization.*

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87 Guridy, 117.
88 Guridy 131.
89 Guridy, 132,
Romanticized writings, the lyrics of music and tourism to the island of Cuba were all centered on and around the dancing musical bodies of Afro-Cubans. The fantasy of the *rumbera*, mulata and Afro-Cuban woman was forming and gaining international recognition. The rise of sexual tourism promoted an image of the Afro-Cuban woman as both a beautiful mover to African polyrhythms and sexually available. With tourism as a primary influence on the islands economy, infrastructure had to be built to support this sector of the economy in the form of racialized leisure practices.

Andre Guiridy further describes the intercultural linkages and solidarity between blacks in both the United States and Cuba. Among the socio-economic challenges, black communities were still resilient to the oppressive constructs they lived in.

“But much like African Americans, Afro-Cubans turned segregation into congregation by forming a vast array of organizations that became the lifeblood of their cultural life across the class spectrum. These associations, known as the *sociedades del color* (colored societies), which first emerged out of the *cabildos de nación* (African-based fraternal societies), of the colonial period, were the primary initiators of Afro-Cuban contacts with African American institutions.”

These institutions protected the integrity of African culture in Cuba and kept the communities unified through maintaining cultural values. The trans-national interchange provided unity in the larger struggle against the oppression of all black people, even though each nation had varying structures of racism. In the Afro-Cuban context, artists asserted agency by constructing their crafts within the racialized leisure practices and forced cultural production for the tourism industry. Even within the confines of

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90 Guridy, 11.
91 Guridy, 118.
segregation, the artistic brilliance of black Americans emerged and permeated white culture. The artistic explosions of both communities could not be ignored by the state governments and ruling classes.

**The Cuban Revolution, the Civil Rights movement and Negritude**

The overwhelming presence of black Americans in the cultural, economic and political fabrics of the Americas clashed with Eurocentric aesthetic values. Oppression in all facets of life for the poor, black, indigenous and women in the Americas was being voiced through organized societies. Blacks throughout the Diaspora were influencing each other through traveling back and forth, from Brazil to the United States, United States to Cuba and through Caribbean. Although the theory of racial democracy was debunked, it inspired the need for equality in Brazil taking an aesthetic form with African features. Brazilian graduate students, who had studied in the United States and witnessed events in the Civil Rights movement, challenged the theoretical authority of the racial democracy proving that it did not promote racial equality by eliminating the vast spectrum of cultures in Brazil. In Cuba, “The altering of hierarchical understandings of African American and Afro-Cuban
culture that was first evident in the late 1920s and early 1930s came to full fruition after the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in the 1960s.92

Differences between “New Negro” movement of 1920s and the 1960s movements were the transitional attitudes of state politics on issues of race. In national efforts to integrate, cultural and education institutions were funded by federal governments.93 Brazil, Cuba and the United States were reconstructing their national images to promote racially mixed and black images. African based art and the artists that performed were used as cultural ambassadors for their nations. Their artistry was used in creating expressions of nationalism. In Cuba, African heritage was instrumental to creating the “revolutionary identity.” This identity rejected imperialist capitalist culture and embraced racial equality in the form of socialism. Brazil was still under military dictatorship, which continued to promote the image of the “mulata” as a representative of Brazil’s unique cultural mixture that is

92 Guridy, 149.

93 Integration with its many benefits had some drawbacks for black communities. In Cuba, the government closed or repurposed segregated and all black institutions including Club Athenas. With blacks leaving previously all black education institutions for integrated schools constituency was lost in sociodades del color and U.S. institutions. “This transformation lessened the need for African Americans to pursue cross-national linkages as a strategy to combat racial discrimination.” Under the state funding and control, the conditions of cultural institutions were sensitive to the changing politics of their nations. The international struggles between Capitalism and Communism changed the interaction between Cuba and all nations influenced by the United States. The politics of Havana and Washington D.C. caused the separation of people, ideas and art. The Embargo and Coldwar almost deteriorated the linkages between Afro-Cubans and African-Americans. “The visit of the Black Scholar delegation in 1976 illustrates the continuities and ruptures in the African American and Afro-Cuban linkages after the Cuban revolutionary government of Fidel Castro took power in 1959… they wanted to witness firsthand the Cuban government’s efforts to make a revolutionary national culture from the nation’s African and non-African cultural roots.”93 This visit was almost entirely controlled by the state, what the group saw including performances and speakers was determined by the state. As witnessed by the delegation of the Black Scholar, the state decided what was to be funded and how the state would be represented by its people.
inseparable from music and dance. But the image of the mulata remained linked to the theory of racial democracy. Inspired by James Brown and the proclamation of black pride in his music, Bob Marley, Jimmy Cliff and other politically charged music, ideas of a new style of samba were underway.

Making New Images

Beleza Negra, Negritude and the Movimento Negro Unificado proclaimed similar ideologies that were gaining force around the Americas. Unique to Brazil was the platform of Carnaval. Preceding the bloco afro groups in Carnaval processions were Afoxés, Camanche and Apache groups. Afoxés, like Filhos de Ghandi an all-male group, were strongly affiliated with Candomblé Terreiros and brought sacred music to the streets in the form of Ijexa rhythms. The Camanche and Apache groups had a predominantly masculine or machismo energy with a violent reputation.

The assumption of African-ness into Carnaval brought a female component which gave levity and sweetness to Candomblé associated groups. These groups took on qualities of Oshún, less violent and aggressive than in the preceding Carnaval processions. Negritude, or black African-ness as it manifested in Brazil, had a distinct image that led the movement. Negritude was found in the dominance of percussion in music, use of African prints and fabrics, promoting natural African hairstyles like braids.
and dreadlocks, honoring African religions, and a grounded African-centered dance aesthetic. The designing of African inspired but Brazilian printed cloth gave each bloco afro its distinct look.

The bloco afro, which can be defined as the African or black music and dance community group made the ideology of Negritude visible. “In history and orientation, the blocos-afro offer re-interpretations of pan-Africanist politics in order to challenge racist exclusions of Afro-Brazilians from Brazilian economic and social structures.” The first Bloco Afro, Ilê Aiyê, was and continues to be a major contributor to the Negritude movement in Salvador and beyond.

Ilê Aiyê originated from the Liberdade Curuzu neighborhood in Salvador, Brazil, in 1974 but the ideas that helped manifest this new type of group came from a combination of internal and external influences. Mãe Hilda Jitoli, a Mãe de Santo in the Candomblé religion and the mother of Antonio Carlos dos Santos “Vovô”, founder of Ilê Aiyê, helped establish the internal foundation. Also, a series of African music recordings were brought to Salvador refreshing the ears of Bahian listeners and inspiring the creation of a new samba sound.

Ilê Aiyê, like other blocos afros, is connected to Candomblé terreiros. Members of the bloco may be initiated into the religion and members of the terreiro and the religious community supports the internal structure of the bloco. From blessing the spaces that the blocos perform in, to preparing the spiritual offerings to the orishas, the

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Candomblé community provides the sacred aspect to which all festivities of African origin encompass. The sacred and civic work in tandem. In syncretized cultures, like Brazil and Cuba, public holidays concerning Catholicism have a syncretized linkage in Candomblé or Santeria. Carnaval, with its significance in Catholicism, has its dual significance in Candomblé. Orishas including Oxalá, Oxalufan, Oxaguian, Ogum, Yemanja, etc., are all honored in the preparatory period before lent.

Mãe Hilda Jitolu, a Mãe de Santo and religious leader in the community, provided a pathway for generations to maintain strong community and religious values exhibiting Oshún like qualities. She helped establish a school in Liberdade Curuzu, raised her children including Antonio Carlos dos Santos “Vovô” on a religious path, and supported the creation of the iconic image of the Deusa de Ebano. These actions connect back to the Yoruba concept of fertility relating to familial, economic and political influences in the lives of those around her. As part of Ifa based religions, an initiate is ordained an orisha that predominates in their lives. The term used when an individual is chosen by a particular orisha is referred it as “made” to an orisha. Mãe Hilda Jitolu was “made” to Oshún and Omolú (or Obaluayé, orisha of health). This direct thoroughness from Nigeria to Bahia allowed Yoruba concepts of fertility to re-emerge in the teaching and values of new generations. These values would emerge in the creation of the Deusa de Ebano figure.

The concept of the Deusa de Ebano benefited the Liberdade Curuzu neighborhood, all other blocos afros and eventually influenced how Carnaval would be represented throughout Brazil and the world. Deusa de Ebano, or ebony goddess, is the
female figure of the Beleza Negra movement. The position of the deusa is earned. Women who compete for this position are well studied dancers of the Ilê Aiyê style movement, contribute to the development of the community, and maintain the values of the Bloco Afro.

While the lifestyle and communal values of the competitors are important, earning the title depends on the competitor’s ability to dance. The dancer must carry herself and move through space with the essence of Oshún-ness. The rhythm of samba afro must be completely embodied. The pathways of the arms are elegant, strong, sustained, and articulate the message of the lyrics. The knees are never locked; they are always soft and ready to charge forward, drop to the earth, or spiral allowing the fabric of her costume to open in the air. Many of her gestures reference the qualities of the orishas of Candomblé.

The winner of the competition claims the title of Deusa de Ebano and queen of Ilê Aiyê for that year. She is given a platform on top of the parade vehicle where she dances in the Carnaval procession. The Deusa de Ebano can be clearly seen by spectators. As the contest was repeated annually, other blocos afros created similar figures to represent their communities in their processions. Over time the Deusa de Ebano and other queens of blocos Afros became permanent fixtures in the image of Carnaval procession in Salvador.

The Negritude movement creates a sharp contrast between Carnaval in Rio de Janeiro and Salvador. Dance scholar Carol Boyce Davies describes rich imagery and meanings of Carnaval in Salvador, with the visible presence of an African identity.

“Bahian carnival and festival traditions are rich with resonance and iconography, directly traceable to African, particularly Benin (Nago-Yoruba and Angolan) forms. Blocos-Afro such as Ilê Aiyê
Simultaneous to the _Beleza Negra_ and Black is Beautiful movements, the Cuban government wanted to raise domestic and international consciousness toward the Afro-Latin identity of Cuba. The new Cuban government highly valued the arts and their power to unify its people. Artists employed under the Ministry of Culture, including departments of folklore, classical and modern dance, worked to contribute to the new Afro-Latin and socialist identity by providing free public performances in Cuba. Carnaval and these federally funded performances would be the new platform for artists to communicate a new identity for Cuba.

Cuba’s relationship with the annual Carnaval celebration needed to change in order to support this new national identity. “After a few years, the spirit of the revolution and ‘the carnivalesque’ clashed, and _comparsas_ no longer assembled in their neighborhoods and paraded miles along the length of the seawall; they became part of a staged spectator event along a short section of the boulevard.” _Comparsas_ were harnessed as a source of income for the national government by confining the spectacle into a marketable condensed performance.

After the revolution there was a shift in the relationship between the federal government’s attitude towards Carnaval or _Carnavales_ in Cuba. Daniel explains that in

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96 Daniel. _Caribbean and Atlantic Diaspora Dance_.117.
“Havana and Santiago *Carnavales* were celebrated in an effort to clean up Cuba’s previous ‘sin city’ image… No nudity and cross dressing was allowed. Cuba’s government declared homosexuality a crime, so not extreme behaviors were permitted within the exception of one African hoop-skirted character, *la culona.*”\(^97\) The stipulations and laws of the new government directly changed the performance practices and identities represented during Carnaval and other Afro-Cuban dance traditions.

Privileges and struggles became visible in dance as Cuba moved into a new era and national identity. “In large measure, concert presentations predict trends in tourist form, where choreographers condense social, sacred, concert and popular dance types into short impressive tourist repertory.”\(^98\) Since concert presentations were condensed only the most visually stimulating material could be portrayed limiting the deeper concepts within the dances, songs and music. Yvonne Daniel found that performances of rumba represented the social change that existed in Post-Revolutionary Cuba. Daniel states that “*rumba* performances that feature a lower-class ‘black’ dance publicize Cuba’s reach toward social equality without explicit capitalism. Rumba performance provides lively entertainment and simultaneously encapsulates the shift from postcolonial hierarchy to idealized socialist equality.”\(^99\) Rumba and other Afro-Cuban dances in some aspects were congruent with the ideology of *Beleza Negra*. Promoting *Rumba* as the national dance of Cuba represented a reach towards racial equality and made the poor black communities that created *rumba* visible.

\(^98\) Daniel, 180.
\(^99\) Daniel, 177.
Dancers like Nieves Fresneda, Isora Pedroso, Zenaida Armenteros, Dolores Perez and Anna Perez became political figures as they shaped the nations images of Afro-Cuban dance. In addition to dancing *rumbas* and *comparsas*, these women performed folkloric Afro-Cuban dance from the Yoruba, Arara, Carabalies and Palo traditions. How they danced set the premise for how Afro-Cuban dance was to be performed and eventually institutionalized. Nieves Fresneda, Isora Pedroso and Zenaida Armenteros were founding women of the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional de Cuba (CFNC) one of the first national folkloric companies.\(^{100}\) Dolores Perez and Anna Perez represented traditions maintained in Matanzas, Cuba with Grupo AfroCuba and Los Muñequisos de Matanzas.

The CFNC, Grupo Afro-Cuba and Los Muñequisos de Matanzas created icons for Cuba to project as part of their identity. These women, along with male company members built repertories from the African traditions, *rumba* cycles, and *Carnavales* based *comparsas*.

Concluding sequences Afro-Cuban folkloric performances often feature *rumbas* and *comparsas* which in nature are celebratory. *Comparsas* onstage incorporate a conglomeration of Cuban dance expressions maintaining the processional form from *Carnavales*, visible in the photos on the left.

\(^{100}\) http://www.montunocubano.com/Tumbo/biogroupes/folclorico%20nacional,%20conjunto.htm
Improvisation and creativity are dominant characteristics of *rumbas* and *comparsas* exhibiting boundless freethinking bodies in motion. Drawing from the energy of the dances, boundless women in vibrant colors and fabrics became the dominant images on posters, brochures and marquees as these groups toured. The women or caricatures of women in images were often dressed as the orishas from Santeria. Vibrant yellows represented Oshún, royal blue represented Yemaja, and deep red represented Oya. While the government wanted to communicate the ideals of the revolution with these women, the sacred and civic messages within the dances traveled with these images.

While touring company members became cultural ambassadors they created cultural linkages through music and dance. Percussion and dance workshops they taught in Bamff, Canada and Tijuana, Mexico became sites to rekindle artistic relationships. Since the embargo blocked the once vibrant interchange between the United States and Cuba, Canada and Mexico were the indirect exchange routes. Margarita Ugarte, dancer from the CFNC, was instrumental in teaching Afro-Cuban folkloric dance at these workshops in the 1980s.\(^{101}\) The government’s push towards projecting a new identity allowed her to promote Afro-centric values and spirituality through dance. Ugarte and other women of these founding companies integrated the voices of Afro-Cuban communities into the nationalist movement. Their bodies became instruments of education. They represented a new political ideology, cultural history, and supported the national economy.

The iconography of female Afro-Cuban folkloric dancers and the *Deusa de Ebano* figures in *blocos afros* connect to each other because both have been incorporated into nationalist expressions. These black female dancing icons promote economic value, racial and gender equality. These images draw on Africanisms, how they uniquely manifested in each nation and are made visible in a celebratory public environments. These women are presented leading the community, drawing the gaze of the audience and dancing to Afro-based rhythms. Both Afro-Brazilian and Afro-Cuban symbols represent change from European dominance, heritage grounded in African roots and prosperity of Afro descended people in the Americas.

Despite the differences in the political, economic and social structures, the presence of Oshun-ness unifies these figures. Femininity is expressed through dancing, songs, and polyrhythms. The use gold, yellow, jewelry, crowns, mirrors and fans in images project references to the myths of Oshún and other female orishas. The Yoruba construct of fertility is visible in the connectedness of these figures to family and community, economic value and political progress of African people.

Dance articulates in an enticing and condensed format these social messages for viewers to see, hear and participate. Yvonne Daniel states that in many nations of the Caribbean, “Dances provide tourists with visual pleasure, as they also reflect history and present conditions, and educate audiences.” This ability of dance that Daniel describes allows ideologies for political change, racial social equality to be expressed. 

Communicating the joy of political freedom and successful struggles was a priority for

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nations in Caribbean, South and Central America who were breaking away from colonial rule. Their female icons are enticing, vibrant, and powerful. The images remain in the minds of viewers and artistically communicate socio-political messages.

The Conjunto Folklórico Nacional de Cuba and Ilê Aiyê are just two of the many performance groups that promote positive Afro-Diasporic female identities in the Americas. These groups project their community values in the public arena and connect to an international dialogue. The Conjunto Folklórico Nacional de Cuba and Ilê Aiyê were created during these social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, but the cultural practices and dances also connect to previous artistic social movements. The “new negro” movement provided a successful method for promoting positive imagery and racial equality led by the arts. Dancing female bodies had a significant role in the construction of identity in the 1920s and continue to be significant in contemporary female identities. Carnaval and other public festivals provide the space for these dances to emerge and for Afro-Diasporic identities to become visible. Carnavalesque images of black female dancing bodies remain part of the nationalist expressions of Cuba and Brazil as they unify their nations internally and promote their national image internationally.
Oshún, Xica and the Sambista: Conclusion

From Oshún grove in Oshogbo, to Carnaval in Salvador, Bahia the influence of African and Diaspora women manifests in dancing bodies. The impacts of black female dancing bodies reach beyond a single race, ethnicity, nationality, gender and political standpoint. These Icons are not static representations; they continue to create dialogues among cultures. Oshún-ness and other African ethnic constructs of beauty have influenced the cultures in which they were transported. This influence was subversive and cleverly syncretized with dominant cultural practices of constructing beauty. The iconic images of Oshún, Xica da Silva, and the Sambista represent the many ways that African femininity and Diaspora women negotiate religious, racial, social, and political constructs in the Americas. United social movements and political ideologies supported the integration of black culture and African femininity in the public sphere. While these movements promoted racial equality, they also supported positive and beautiful images of black people. These icons are not isolated from each other, Oshun-ness is visible in the characteristics in Xica da Silva and Carnivalesque expressions in the Americas.

Although concepts of African femininity were transported with Oshún worshippers in the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, Africans, Caribbeans, North and South Americans continue to travel back and forth sharing ideas. The exchanges of Diaspora ideas continue a dialogue among Africans and Diaspora communities. African Diaspora
culture is also not exclusive to descendants. People of all cultures, nationalities, genders and races support the interchange between Nigeria and Brazil, and Brazil and Cuba.

Through these constant migrations across the Atlantic Ocean and Caribbean Sea, Oshún manifests, adapting to community needs and new cultural expressions. Her persona crosses lines between sacred and secular. Her aesthetic descriptions, symbols, and personality are identifiable in popular culture from samba enredos to rumba songs. Her femininity is visible in the aesthetics of many danced expressions of African Diaspora women from her flirtatious smile, torso and shoulder gestures. When a dancer is adorned with jewelry, crowns and gold, and embody these gestures a connection is made with Yoruba deity.

Yoruba constructs of fertility have also transformed in American constructs. Diaspora woman continue to influence the household, socio-political and economic spheres of society. Dance signifies the permeation of African womanly-ness in American culture. The use of Oshún’s dances in Cuba and Brazil, and the presence of Oshún-like beauties in popular discourse of nationality highlight the perseverance of African femininity. When Oshún dances with all of her regalia on national stages she upholds the African traditions and people for audiences to see. As her songs and rhythms fill theaters, Yoruba values are communicated and made visible through the dancer. Audiences connect with the African construct of beauty and womanliness while observing Oshún’s movement qualities.
Victorious presentations of African culture may seem completely joyous, but the hardships of oppression are still visible in American dance forms. African femininity still negotiates a history of derogatory messages. Othering and enslavement in the Americas created images that directly contrasted Oshún-ness. Images such as the *jezebel* and *mammy* are still present, but even within these derogatory characters black women negotiate agency over their circumstances. Dance offers a platform to communicate corporeal ownership and power.

In Brazil, the mulata presents a dialogue with a past of sexual abuse and a future of racial equality. Her beauty and sensuality is celebrated. She is a new manifestation of Oshún. Onlookers are drawn into her ownership of rhythm, sparkling beauty and flirtatious energy. The mulata conquers with sensuality, contradicting notions of objectification. This identity conquered the constructs of slavery in the form of Xica da Silva. The historic figure and mythical character represents national resistance and the triumph the people over oppressive political entities. Xica’s sexual paradigm became an analogy for people of Brazil. The use of a black female as a heroine draws attention to the status of women globally. As long as women continue to remain the most politically and economically marginalized populations, the progress of women will influence the collective progress of nations. As the Yoruba construct of fertility suggests, fertile or successful women influence the household, lineage and economic sectors of the community.

Xica da Silva remains a symbol and icon of hope. Her myth presents the possibility for all Brazilians to achieve success and have fertile lives. Xica’s myth was
canonized through literature and infiltrated popular culture. Xica da Silva’s myth entered
the public sphere and popular discourse in 1963 through Salgeiro’s *samba enredo*, an
*escola de samba* in Rio de Janeiro’s samba song. Salgeiro’s carnival theme preceded the
release of Diegues film *Xica*, signaling that Xica’s myth was already part of popular
discourse.

The following lyrics were used in the *samba enredo* in the 1963 procession:

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**E a mulata que era escrava**
Senti forte transformação,
Trocando o gemido da senzala
Pela fidalguia do salão.

**Com a influência e o poder do seu amor,**
*Que superou*
A barreira da cor,
Francisca da Silva

**Onde nasceu a Xica que manda,**
*Deslumbrando a sociedade,*
Com o orgulho e o capricho da mulata,
*Importante, majestosa e invejada.*

**Para que a vida lhe tornasse mais bela,**
*And it was a mulatto slave*
*Felt strong transformation*
*Replacing the groaning of Slaves*
*The nobility of the hall.*

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**With the influence and the power of his love,**
*that exceeded*
**The color barrier,**
**Francisca da Silva**

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**Where was the Xica who commands**
*Dazzling society,*
*With pride and caprice of the mulatto,*
*Important, dignified and envied.*
*For life will become more beautiful,*

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The excerpt from the samba song describes what the myth means to this
community of Rio de Janeiro. Instead of focusing on the negatives of black oppression,
Salgeiro exalts the love that exceeded racial barriers, the style Xica exhibited and the
riches she acquired. Xica’s myth became a joyous protest. Xica’s individual triumph was
a triumph for the nation.
The centralizing of Xica’s body in her myth emphasizes the sexual paradigms that face women. As Xica’s myth exemplifies, the body is the site for negotiating freedom. Dancing with sensuality allows women to claim ownership of their bodies and femininity in the public sphere and this sensuality is solicited for economic means by both individuals and nations. In national discourses of identity, promoting sensual dancing bodies communicates both liberation and sexual objectification. Imagery of sensual, black or racial mixed dancing bodies is used consistently in tourism marketing campaigns. “Tourism interests have recognized the place of dance in terms of revenue and have integrated dancers, musicians, visual artists, and theater into national programs.”103 This dual message is negotiated by women and men ranging in professions from sex workers to dance hall performers. The assertive, sensual and sexual identities challenge these racial and gender boundaries.

With the combination of the civil rights movement, the sexual revolution and Cuban revolution, images projected of women reflected a new agency in professions, roles and mannerisms. Cuban women also embraced the “revolutionary identity” sharing the goals of new political regime. Afro-Cuban artists were supported through federal funding as workers of the revolution and dancing bodies were usurped into the national identity. As Yvonne Daniel explains, “control over dance presentation is splintered, however. Sometimes control is found within the islands governments or with independent performers; control is found less frequently inside artist organizations.”104 To address the

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104 Daniel. 177.
goals of the revolution, choreography and bodies would communicate the socio-political ideals of their nation.

Despite the influence of national politics, dancers still communicated an African Diaspora identity. Dancers performed preserved traditions and national dances that emerged from their communities. These dances and the bodies that performed already had messages to communicate. Daniel describes these overarching messages present in all Diaspora cultures in the Caribbean. “Yet, Caribbean popular dances often contain powerful political statements and reveal the hazards of body politics. Dancers reference their circumstances in lower-and working-class neighborhoods, their confrontation with unequal segments of island populations, and their opposition to privileged audiences in global centers and among texters, bloggers, and twitterers. Their movements are fierce, determined, and aggressive – upsetting and irritating for some, and wrenchingly honest to others.”

These qualities are present in the young *rumberas* in Matanzas and Havana. They break from tradition, displaying gestures often associated with their male counterparts. *Rumberas* are spontaneous and creative improvisers, never losing their connection to the *clavé*, or the key that holds all Afro-Cuban music together.

*Rumberas, Sambistas*, and women that perform in Carnivalesque expressions continually reconstruct African femininity in the Americas. These women address the needs of their communities, promote images of beauty and support the national economy. In addition to representing individuality, these women support a collective identity and

105 Daniel, 181.
These women carry important roles in mutual aid societies and community institutions.

These icons of the Carnivalesque have been canonized by international spectators. Danced carnaval expressions have been recreated throughout the world, even in nations that do not traditionally celebrate Carnaval or lent. The United States has a growing sub-culture of Brazilian music and dance enthusiasts from Axé Didé and the Lions of Batucada in Portland, Oregon to the G.R.E.S. Acadêmicos de Opera Austin Samba School in Texas. Carnivalesque and samba cultures have been affected by globalization, transposing the sexual paradigm of the mulata to new cultures. Global sambista culture turns historical oppression to mass empowerment and acceptance of all bodies. Icons of the Carnivalesque can be seen from San Francisco, California to Sydney, Australia.

As this culture is transported, so are the messages and dialogues. African constructs of femininity are transported with these dances and embodied by new dancers. The presences of semiotics and symbols in the dances maintain aesthetics, values and traditions from African and Diaspora cultures. “Diaspora dance contains the major concerns of Diaspora dancers…-namely, transcendence, resilience, and citizenship.”

These concerns of Afro-descended Americas, visible in dance, work in partnership with social movements. Dancers, musicians, fine and literary artists have been instrumental to

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106 Daniel, 189.
the progress of socio-political movements. From the Harlem Renaissance to Cuban Revolution, the public dissemination of art has been fundamental to movements toward racial equality.

John Guirdry explains that “through movement organizations, social forces gain visibility and clarity in popular public spheres, where relatively disempowered actors challenge more powerful politicians…develop important connections between local spaces and the larger political system.” 107 Community celebrations and processions maintain the connections that Guirdry describes. The shared importance of the procession to both African and European cultures allowed cultural and racial dialogues to take place. Carnaval and Carnavales offered a platform for protests to be made and for black communities to be visible. The suspension of societal norms during Carnaval offers a period for debauchery for some and demonstration of identity for others.

Dance has had a pivotal role in Carnivalesque and Afro-centric expressions in the public sphere. Dance expresses a physical freedom. This freedom has long been recognized through traditional African religions that use dance as an avenue for connecting with the Divine. Dance continued to provide spiritual connections, a sense of freedom and a form of resistance for African descendants in the Americas. Dance offered an escape from oppression and momentary liberation. For Diaspora women, dance provided all of these things in addition to a space to express empowered femininity. For these reasons, the black female dancing body is continually used as an image of nationalist expression in post-colonial societies. Transcendence, resilience and

empowered identities are communicated when the black female body is used as an image of nationalist expression.
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