

The social impact of the work of Brazilian braider and intersectional black feminist activism

O impacto social do trabalho das trançistas brasileiras e o ativismo feminista negro interseccional

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ABSTRACT

The text discusses the black feminist activism of braiders in the African diaspora in Brazil and the social impact of their practice. Although the movement of black women braiders is still struggling to formalize this category, the effects of their actions are remarkable in society. Through intersectional black feminist thinking, we have built a theoretical-methodological foundation, focusing on what has been developed by different braiders, taking lived experience as the criterion for valid knowledge among black women. In this sense, this paper aims to present some aspects observed in the analysis of field research with braiders from different regions of Brazil. The results show that black women braiders preserve the ancestral knowledge of braiding, developing their knowledge connected to their historical time, expressing intersectional black feminist activism by guaranteeing individual and collective subsistence; participating in social transformation projects and dialoguing with their territory in different Brazilian institutions.

Keywords: Braids. Braiders. Black feminism. Intersectionality. Creative economy.

RESUMO

O texto discute o ativismo feminista negro de trançistas na diáspora africana no Brasil e o impacto social de sua prática. Embora o movimento de mulheres negras trançistas permaneça lutando para a formalização dessa categoria, os efeitos de suas ações são notáveis na sociedade. Por meio do pensamento feminista negro interseccional, construímos a fundamentação teórico-metodológica, enfocando o que tem sido desenvolvido por diferentes trançistas, tomando a experiência vivida como critério de conhecimento válido entre mulheres negras. Nesse sentido, este trabalho objetivou apresentar alguns aspectos observados nas análises de pesquisa de campo com trançistas de diferentes regiões do Brasil. Os resultados apontam que as mulheres negras trançistas preservam os saberes ancestrais do trançismo, desenvolvendo seus conhecimentos conectadas ao seu tempo histórico, expressando o ativismo feminista negro interseccional ao garantir a subsistência individual e coletiva; participando de projetos de transformação social e dialogando com o seu território em diferentes instituições brasileiras.

Palavras-chave: Tranças. Trançistas. Feminismo negro. Interseccionalidade. Economia Criativa.

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INTRODUCTION

We begin this writing by emphatically stating that, despite the fact that [still] there is no professional category called “braider” in the Brazilian Classification of Occupations (CBO), braiders do exist! They are people who work creating African braids, preserving and developing the ancestral history of braiding in the diaspora through an ethical commitment to offering care actions for racial trauma¹ to the black population.

We understand the diaspora as a broad field of theoretical and methodological studies that has been consolidated in the academia since the 20th century, encompassing analyses of the various forced and traumatic migrations to which different peoples have been subjected, including populations from different regions of Africa due to the transatlantic slave trade (Silva; Xavier, 2018).

Braiding in Brazil is a legacy of ancestral knowledge originating from the African continent that, over time, has branched out in different directions through the agency of the braid. Braids have a long history. This history, in Brazil, although deliberately erased (Nascimento, 2016), continues to be told and retold through the body (Nascimento, 2021) and oraliture (Martins, 2021). As we approach the tree of braiding², we observe the diversity of braid styles and techniques being used, while many others fall out of use by different braiders. As it is an ancient practice carried out anonymously as a form of resistance, outside the academic sphere, it is not possible to attribute pioneering status to any specific process in the development of braiding. However, it is important to emphasize that the evolution of braiding takes place through the relationships among Black women, shaped by their individual and collective needs within their historical context. This reveals a creative process inherent to each braider and the imprint of time on these transformations.

This creative process has been directed toward practices that seek to meet the needs of the Black population in the present, without disconnecting from its roots in the past. Braiders project themselves into the future through braids in different ways, while preserving the elements passed down by their ancestry — by their mothers, aunts, sisters, grandmothers, great-grandmothers, and great-great-grandmothers.

In this sense, over time, Black women who maintained the tradition of braiding their own hair or that of others as a form of care, without receiving payment for it, came to be called *trançadeiras* (braiders). The term *trancistas* (professional braiders) emerged in Brazil around the 2010s, primarily within Black women’s movements, as a way of self-definition to distinguish the paid practice and professionalization of African braid-making.

1 This terminology has been used by different authors, such as Carter (2007), to specify individual subjective responses as a consequence of colonization and racism.

2 We use the term ‘tree of braiding’ as an intersectional metaphor to identify the different branches stemming from braids and the work of braiders, as well as the intergenerational and ancestral understanding embedded in this epistemology.

It is worth mentioning that, although the practice of African braiding was primarily developed among Black women, today, people from diverse social markers work as professional braiders. These individuals learn through braiders or through informal courses offered by other braiders, highlighting the diversity within this craft and the presence of multiple social markers of difference that can now be observed.

The art embodied in the work of braiders transcends the physical dimension and has been used as a way to communicate their philosophy and interests, even when transgressing morally accepted institutional logics. It establishes a language, a way of being in the world, of relating, and of communicating that constitutes Afro-Brazilian culture. In other words, it represents a fundamentally human condition that, like a web of meanings, shapes ways of being in the world (William, 2020).

The effort dedicated to this work aims to untangle the logics that uphold conceptions regarded as truths about this profession. As workers, what do braiders do? What is repeatedly heard is that braiders make “little braids,” a construct permeated by racist stereotypes that infantilize, diminish, and devalue the many facets of this profession. Along the same lines, this promotes ‘folklorization,’ as highlighted by Nascimento (2016, p. 145). The understanding of the cultural aspect of this profession, when disconnected from its meaning, function, and the scope of braiders’ work in the present, reduces braids to the status of empty folklore. It exploits folklorized braiders as mere commodities in the tourism trade, wrapped in an aura of entertainment, serving as objects of curiosity and commercialization by white consumers. These braids only receive “appreciation” and “recognition” when adapted to the concept of “Afro” or “ethnic” hairstylists, a subcategory of a profession hegemonically accepted by the dominant culture.

The meanings that have sustained this knowledge as a form of resistance for centuries have been emptied through cultural appropriation, with braids reduced to a product stripped of their intrinsic value. Thus, when braiders self-define in their uniqueness, specificity, and multiplicity of practices, they are compelled by original ethnocentrism, as Nascimento (2016) explains, to conform to classifications recognized by the dominant group. Otherwise, they are labeled as exotic, primitive, non-professional, and are overtly silenced and rendered invisible.

In light of the above, we propose to present some analyses being developed as part of a doctoral dissertation. These analyses focus on three fundamental characteristics present in the ethics of care practiced by Black women braiders as part of Brazilian intersectional Black feminist activism: ensuring the subsistence of braiders amid social oppression; the social impact of the actions of braiders; and the political and interinstitutional dialogue embedded in this craft.

INTERSECTIONAL BLACK FEMINIST ACTIVISM IN THE WORK OF BLACK WOMEN BRAIDERS

To reflect on the work of Black women braiders in Brazil, we must understand that Brazilian Black women have faced and continue to face nearly two centuries of intense injustice regarding race, gender, and other social markers of difference. According to

African-American scholar Patricia Hill Collins (2019, p. 33), oppression is the term “that describes any unjust situation in which, systematically and over a long period, one group denies another access to society’s resources,” encompassing three interdependent dimensions: the exploitation of labor, the denial of rights, and controlling images.

Historically, Brazilian Black women, through social stratification (Hasenbalg, 2005), were pushed into servile labor as a remnant of the colonial slave logic. For Brazilian Black intellectual Lélia Gonzalez (1984), the combination of racism and sexism in the country placed Black women in the role of “beasts of burden.” Performing poorly paid and exploitative work, Brazilian Black women were subjected to various forms of labor after abolition that positioned them in a subservient state of invisibility, silencing, intellectual erasure, and more. This made them prisoners of stereotypes serving capitalist economic interests, such as the roles of domestic worker, wet nurse, and mulata of Carnival.

However, among Brazilian Black women, we find various actions that highlight strategies to “escape, survive within, and/or oppose the prevailing social and economic injustice” (Collins, 2019, p. 43). Among these actions in Brazil, we observe the work of braiders.

We observe in braiders the effort to navigate the intersectional oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, and other social markers of difference, using knowledge preserved and acquired through lived experience as a valid criterion of understanding. This reveals the presence of intersectional Black feminist activism in Brazilian territory. Whether individually or collectively, braiders have developed their activism through their practices.

Our statements are based on what was formulated by Gonzalez (2020) and Collins (2019) regarding Black feminist thought in relation to lived experience, through different news articles from the mainstream media that we had access to during the course of this research, concerning the work of Black women braiders in the country; and on social media, a space that various braiders have used as a tool to promote their work and ideas. We observe, in the actions of Black women braiders, the dimension of the struggle for collective survival and the pursuit of institutional transformation, constantly expressed in their ethics of care. On a daily basis, individually or collectively, braiders face racial domination by creating spheres of influence and tools to destabilize oppressive structures.

In this sense, we will present some data that allowed us to make these statements and consider that, as workers, the braiders define themselves by disconnecting from stereotypes and images of control, promoting emancipation and racial integration through the creation of different practices and opportunities, including the economic dimension that emerges from culture.

THE GUARANTEE OF THE SUBSISTENCE OF BRAIDERS AMIDST SOCIAL OPPRESSIONS

According to the indicators from the third edition of the study *Gender Statistics: Social Indicators of Women in Brazil* (IBGE, [2024]), Black women spend

1.6 more hours on unpaid domestic work than White women, and in 2022, 11.8% of women were unemployed, with 14% of them being Black or Brown and 9.2% being White.

Considering the data collected in the field, we observe that braiders develop a set of skills that can be considered essential to the maintenance of their own lives. This strategic development happens uniquely for each individual, but generally starts from a personally lived pain, which may be linked to psychological, emotional, social, and financial dimensions, as indicated by the data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), or spiritual.

This ethical commitment initially appears as a strategy for self-care or care for others, which can unfold into a strategy for financial sustenance; as the maintenance of self-image or as psychological/emotional strengthening.

The care and self-care of Black women, as Prestes (2018, p. 171) states, is specifically in the search to “combine the discovery of new strategies with the revival of old and ancestral ways of caring in the name of well-being,” whose logic is based on the understanding of health, which is organized as a balance between community and nature in resistance to the coloniality present in society. Thus, the concept of care for Black women prioritizes the health of both their group and their environment, so that they can have health. The care and self-care present in the practices of braiders can become a way to generate income, by becoming a braider. When braiders generate income for themselves, they are creating a disruption in the feminization of poverty.

According to the *Dossier Black Women: A Portrait of the Living Conditions of Black Women in Brazil* (Marcondes et al., 2013, p. 128), poverty in the country “is much more prevalent among the Black population [...] Black women access, in a differentiated way, both the income from work and the resources to obtain it”.

Confirming this information, the Black intellectual and braider communicator Sara Mara Brisa, in an interview given to the podcast *Acessíveis Cast*, 10 years after the publication of this Dossier, in 2023, made the following statement:

In my salon, I work with social value. The work we do is very time-consuming and very labor-intensive. It's a hell of a job! So usually, people charge between six hundred and seven hundred reais for labor. In this range, four hundred and fifty. But I'm charging two hundred and twenty! [At this point, the interviewer — who was a White woman — says: raise your price, woman! Sara Mara responds:] No... Because it's not about the price, it's that... Usually, who uses this hairstyle more? It's the Black woman, who often needs it because she has curly hair. This [touching her own hair] is still curly, you know?! But this hair here isn't my hair. It's hair that I added, that was similar to yours [pointing to the interviewer's hair], that someone took and made it into this. But when it's our own hair, really curly, sometimes at work they don't accept it, you know?! Or the person has to straighten it, or tie it up, or it has to be that undefined thing that the woman will spend three more hours a day taking care of her hair [...] it's not just for aesthetics, it's for the needs of daily life. And then we know that Black women are the ones who earn the least money in the labor market. Usually, the women I work with are Black women, either single mothers, or a group that's hustling, going to college, doing internships and stuff... They're not making enough money. How can I charge this

woman four hundred and fifty reais, when her salary is twelve hundred? Then she pays eight hundred reais for rent. Will she get braids? [...] I work with this awareness [...] the question of activism, of what I can do for my people, is this!" (Acessíveis Cast, 2023, emphasis added)

Sara Mara's words point to different dimensions of Black feminist thought present in the work of the braider. Sara Mara shows the interviewer how she takes care of her own hair, explaining that, unlike other Black women, she chose to use hair extensions³. However, Sara explains that she knows how difficult the financial situation is for most Black women, and based on this awareness, as she emphasizes, Sara states that she works with 'social value,' showing the strategies she has adopted to ensure her own subsistence as a Black woman and how she promotes the survival of other women like her.

However, despite such statements, for numerous reasons that can be considered effects of social oppressions on the braider profession — such as lack of professional recognition, devaluation, difficulty in entering and staying in the market, among others — many Black women who learn to braid choose not to become braiders, remaining in the position of hair stylists, using braids to maintain their own image or that of others, without profit. And the fact that, even carrying this knowledge, they choose not to pursue this profession is also a way of ensuring their own subsistence through care, and therefore, should be understood as a fundamental characteristic of their activism.

In this sense, we agree with the statements by Prestes (2018, p. 174):

The care practiced by Black women will need to unite political struggle with self-care, and the politicization of self-recovery processes. It is a path where personal efforts are invested in self-care while maintaining a connection with a larger world of collective struggle.

Unlike hair stylists, braiders are people who are paid for the exercise of their professional activities, even though this profession has not yet been officially recognized as a professional category in Brazil. Distinguishing themselves from the work of hairdressers, braiders offer a service guided by their own ethics of care through the creation of African braids, combating the psychosocial effects produced by structural racism (Almeida, 2018) in Brazilian society, whether as a form of self-care or care provided to others. This knowledge/work, in many cases, serves as the main source of income for various families (Santos, 2013; 2022). However, we understand that ensuring individual and collective subsistence is not limited to the economic dimension. While this is a fundamental aspect of well-being, we recognize that, throughout the centuries, the braids made by braiders have played an important psychological role in survival amidst social injustices, as Nilma Lino Gomes (2020) affirms, and this must be recognized as a specific characteristic of their work.

³ It is a technique used for hair extension with human hair.

THE SOCIAL IMPACT THROUGH THE ACTIONS OF BRAIDERS

Among the data collected in the field, we observed that the actions developed by braiders impact those around them. This can be seen when their actions affect their family nucleus, either through income or employability, among others; or when they influence their community, the place where they are located, through participation or organization of events, contribution to existing projects, or the development of their own projects.

A practical movement that demonstrates the intellectuality of Black women braiders aligned with intersectional Black feminist thought can be observed through the story of the Black intellectual and braider Andreia MF, from São Paulo.

Our first contact with the braider Andreia was at the First Meeting of the Psychosocial Trauma Observatory, held on November 29, 2022, through the online platform Google Meet. As she began speaking, Andreia apologized and explained that she was in the middle of activities at her beauty salon but was listening to the discussions of the meeting while braiding and attending to clients arriving at her salon.

In her speech, visibly emotional, the braider stated that what the Black population needs is action because the reality is urgent: “We are dying. My words are a cry for help!” Amidst her narrative, Andreia paused and called over a client, a mother who had just walked through the doors of her salon, which is also Andreia MF’s home. That woman shared her story in tears, saying that if it weren’t for the work led by Andreia MF, she would be lost. Andreia thanked that mother, thanked the people at the meeting for listening to her, and said: “I learned to braid hair in prison because out here, I had no opportunities. That’s how I survived, and through braiding, I began the Mothers of the Incarcerated Movement.”

Later, in a video we found on her YouTube channel, Andreia MF says:

I created the Mothers of the Incarcerated Movement. I have been the leader of the movement for 18 years. Today, I work with 4,870 women; I support the families of prisoners. I survived incarceration; I went through prison. I’m not theoretical; I’m practical. People started coming to me, asking: ‘Andreia, what should I do? This and that happened... My son is a drug user, my son was arrested as a trafficker.’ That’s when I got to know the Public Defender’s Office, which I had already been somewhat familiar with, and I started referring cases to them. One person would tell another, and another. I introduced people to the work that not everyone knew about — the work of the Public Defender’s Office. That’s how I started presenting and demonstrating it... *Doing the work of a social worker that the State does not pay for.*” (Andreia MF, 2020, emphasis added)

As can be seen, the work developed by Andreia goes beyond the act of braiding hair. Through her work in her home-beauty salon, she has developed a social struggle project for Black women and for the benefit of the community, explicitly embodying the activism present in Black feminist thought: the fight for social justice and institutional transformation, thereby revealing her intellectuality (Collins, 2019).

However, the intellectual work of Black women braiders cannot be reduced to the act of braiding hair. Not that braiding is something minor — on the contrary.

But being a braider is not limited to mastering braiding techniques. Likewise, one should avoid generalizations that obscure the countless creative possibilities developed through this practice.

Andreia MF's movement represents one perspective of the multifaceted work of braiders. In this sense, it is important to note that there are other viewpoints through which this intellectuality can be observed. For example, it can be seen in the intellectual production created by and about braiders through academic research, their role as communicators on social media, artistic production, and other avenues (Cunha, 2010; Santos, 2013; Santos, 2017; Souza, 2021; Santos, 2022).

From the mentioned example, it is possible to understand that the work of Black women braiders fosters actions primarily connected to the territory, often occupying conflict-ridden areas marked by urban violence and the so-called 'war on drugs,' which is not a balanced power struggle but rather the genocide of Black and marginalized populations.

The development of different social projects, such as the Mothers of the Incarcerated project, aims, undeniably, to address the countless failures of the State in these territories in terms of education, health, and social assistance: necropolitics (Mbembe, 2018). However, the boundaries have been dissolving, and braiders have expanded their knowledge through experimentation, with their practices traversing different territories, sometimes even transnational.

THE POLITICAL AND INTERINSTITUTIONAL DIALOGUE

Throughout the field research, we found that the actions of braiders also engage in partnership with educational institutes and schools, religious organizations, private and public institutions, military entities, and others. At this point, we understand that this action reveals one of the pillars of intersectional Black feminism, as described by Collins (2019): the struggle for institutional transformation.

Reflecting on the annual celebration of Black Consciousness Day on November 20th, a national holiday established through the sanction of Law n. 14.759/2023, can be a good exercise to exemplify this point. In general, braiders and other professionals who work in support of the anti-racist struggle are called upon on this date, primarily to conduct workshops, lectures, courses, and other events at various institutions. Some of the institutions are truly committed to the cause, others are trying to establish a commitment to racial issues, and some merely take advantage of the date to advertise their fulfillment of social responsibility, as there are benefits that can be granted to these institutions in this regard. And the braiders know this!

The issue is that regardless of the motivations driving the invitations from these institutions to the braiders, the work developed in partnership has proven to be very powerful, as demonstrated by the event held by the Brazilian Air Force (FAB). In celebration of Black Consciousness Day on November 30, 2023, FAB organized a training session called *Workshop: Tranças Nagô* in partnership with braiders. Through press releases, FAB explained, without many details, that the Nago

braiding workshop was offered “free of charge by the Military Organization” as a training aimed at preparing personnel for “aesthetic adjustment” to the standards set by the institution’s military regulations (Officers, 2023).

The news of this workshop went viral on social media, and various comments from different people, both military and non-military, were seen about the event. Among the numerous comments, many were mocking and rejecting the institution’s stance, saying things like: “They can already open a salon...” and others asking, “Are they required to learn how to do nails too?”.

From these sexist and misogynistic comments, it was possible to perceive the intersections of race and gender that emerged through the teaching/learning of braiding in the military forces. Military institutions have always trained their personnel to perform barbering tasks within their barracks, with the primary goal of maintaining disciplinary standards. As for the hygienic and aesthetic needs of female military personnel, the regulations have undergone changes over time, highlighting, through this action, how the combination of sexism, gender inequality, and racism has been confronted by the institution.

Despite the widespread reaction on social media and news websites, to the surprise of many internet users and readers, the Brazilian Air Force (FAB) clarified that it was merely adhering to its regulations. Nago braids were already included in the 2023 Aeronautical Uniform Regulation (RUMAER).

This example reveals the strength of interinstitutional dialogue in the work of Black women braiders. The presence of their knowledge in institutions, including military ones, promotes reflections, debates, and fosters necessary changes in racial relations in Brazil.

In a post on the Instagram profile *Fala Trancistas*, a project developed by Black intellectual and braider Michele Reis, different braiders shared their perspectives by commenting on the news in question. It was clear that the news was well-received by the braiders, with most highlighting the importance of this action as an example to be followed by other institutions. In one of the comments, the fact that the workshop was free for participants was questioned. However, other braiders commented that the context was not clear in the news, such as whether the braider who offered the course was also in the military or if she was invited externally, among other issues (Reis, 2024).

It is important to try and uncover the ambiguous relationship of exploitation and empowerment that occurs in dialogue with different institutions, as there are numerous issues present in this relationship that require a critical perspective, demanding more in-depth analyses that cannot be exhausted in just a few lines.

The reality for most Brazilian braiders reveals that only a few exceptions are paid when hired to participate in a project or event, as they are not considered a professional category but rather cultural activists. And when braiders are paid after being invited by an institution, the amount received is generally far below what is paid to similar professionals. From this perspective, we can observe the dynamics of the relationship between braiders and institutions in Brazil and its effects.

METHODOLOGY

The data analyzed in this research was collected through the selection of different news articles published in mainstream media, newspapers, electronic magazines, and social networks, where the prominence of the work of Black women braiders was highlighted.

To reflect on the work carried out by Brazilian braiders, this research was structured using intersectional Black feminism as its theoretical and methodological framework (Collins, 2019; Gonzalez, 2020), and the data was organized into three distinct categories:

1. The guarantee of one's own subsistence amidst social oppressions;
2. The social impact of the work of braiders;
3. The interinstitutional political dialogue that, as Collins (2019) states, shapes the epistemology of intersectional Black feminist thought.

The data analyses in this research were developed in dialogue with scholars who theorize about the creative economy and in connection with current news regarding the recognition of the work of Black women braiders in Brazil. In this sense, this study adopts a qualitative perspective (Minayo, 2007), examining the multiple spaces and territories where the actions of Black women braiders take place, emphasizing lived experience as a valid criterion of knowledge concerning their own narratives (Collins, 2019).

ANALYSIS OF THE RESULTS: POSSIBILITIES AND IMPASSES FOR THINKING ABOUT THE WORK OF HAIR BRAIDERS

In the scope of academic-scientific terminologies, we recognize that one of the ways to understand the Black feminist activism of hair braiders can be through the concept of the creative economy, since, in economic terms, the category of hair braiders as a profession emerges from a branch of unpaid practice culturally preserved by their ancestral braiders.

The term "creative economy" seeks to address the relationship between "culture, creativity, and innovation, presenting itself as an alternative for the economic and social growth and development of countries in the early 21st century" (Watanabe; Borges; Guilherme, 2024, p. 74). According to Miguez (2007), the creative economy is one of the fastest-growing sectors globally, but it presents a challenge for less developed countries. Miguez (2007) states that, due to its complexity, the issues related to activities rooted in the creative economy sometimes go beyond economic dimensions, presenting challenges for other fields of knowledge.

Considering the work of braiders as a creative economy, from the perspective of social psychology, we observe that the self-definition (Collins, 2019) of hair braiders also emerges as a form of deliberate boundary-setting between the professional category of hairdressers. Although the practice of braiders clearly presents its own characteristics, it has been associated with the work of hairdressers over time in order to be validated in the market. This effort present in the movement of Black women braiders in Brazil brings to the forefront the specific demands of braiders,

which are often invisible when these professionals are portrayed as “Afro” or “ethnic” hairdressers, a framing permeated by a label that carries many stereotypes and prejudices.

On the other hand, regarding the power relations present in society, when these activities are named by the dominant group as cultural, there is a risk of them being encapsulated in a romanticized image of a lost past of African purity, constructed through essentialist conceptions about this identity that, in part, were also created by the gaze of the European white.

Despite the multifaceted nature of their profession — still not formally recognized —, braiders have been advocating for the right to speak in the first person about their real individual and collective needs and urgencies, without being reduced to and/or framed within formally established categories in the current paradigm exist. As we stated at the beginning of this work: braiders exist!

The fact that they exist and are claiming their rights implies a reorganization of the regulatory guidelines and theories that guide them. The opposite would be to remain in what we have seen happening: silencing, invisibilization, informality, denial of rights, illegality, ongoing cultural appropriation, devaluation of the profession, and other oppressions faced by braiders.

On July 25, 2024, in celebration of the Day of Afro-Latin American and Caribbean Women, the *17th Latinidades Festival* was held in Brasília with the theme “Come Be a Fan of Black Women.” The opening panel of the event, titled “Braiders: Cultural Heritage, Creative Economy, and Work,” featured Layla Maryzandra, a braider and researcher in the Professional Master’s in Sustainability with Traditional Peoples and Territories (MESPT) at the University of Brasília (UnB). Also participating were Leandro Grass, president of the National Institute of Historical and Artistic Heritage (IPHAN); Sergio Pereira, representative of the Social Participation and Diversity Advisory at the Ministry of Labor and Employment; Mariana Braga, advisor for social participation and diversity at the Ministry of Culture; and Cristiane Portela, historian, member of the MESPT/UnB Program, and advisor to the braider Layla (Afrolatinas, 2024).

We consider the holding of this panel to be extremely symbolic for the observations developed in this work. First, because it reveals the expressiveness of the Black women braiders’ movement today; and second, because it serves as an example for reflecting on the scope of the work of braiders and its complexities, their action in different fields, and their inter-institutional social-political mobilization. And third, so that we can observe the intersectional relationships that permeate the recognition of this category, since it has been from the space occupied by braiders in academia and their scientific publications that government bodies have mobilized to take action, despite the multiple (r)existence projects that different braiders have developed in the country through their ethics of care, as the data presented initially demonstrates.

At the event in question, the Black intellectual, braider, and researcher Layla Maryzandra opened the panel by narrating her journey, presenting the partial

results of her research, which is currently ongoing, and questioning: “Can the braids made by braiders in the 21st century serve as escape routes for constructing public policies for braiders?”. Her research has been developed in the Federal District (DF) and its main objective is to identify the practice of creating Afro-braided hairstyles as a craft, pointing out pathways for heritage recognition, as well as other public policies for Black women braiders in the DF through the construction of a sociocultural map. Maryzandra emphasizes:

This is a practice that has been growing here in the Federal District, *particularly among young Black women, especially in urban contexts, with limited opportunities to enter other professional spaces*. However, many times it lacks this historical and cultural appropriation of the craft, associating it with a trend and fashion. And *this is something that empties the narrative of us being able to understand this practice as cultural heritage*. (Afrolatinas, 2024, emphasis added)

In her speech, Layla reports that she is building different maps to locate braiders in the Federal District (DF), and explains that it was necessary to produce an ethnographic collection with visual records of the braiders in order to create a participatory inventory to present to IPHAN and the Secretariat of Culture, aiming to facilitate the heritage recognition of braiders. While showing the photos in the slides of her presentation, she explains:

This braid was made by Analice; she made this braid because she said that *in the past*, this braid was used in the weddings of the community. The braided headband, which is a simple braid that most of us use, could possibly be worn by someone in the audience... And this other set of photos shows Ana dyeing coast straw with natural spices, because *in the past*, we also used coast straw in our hair, right! We didn't start by using synthetic hair, right! (Afrolatinas, 2024, emphasis added).

Layla's speech highlights the importance of reclaiming memory and ancestral recognition in the work of braiders. However, we observe that the practice of braiders is a practice connected to the needs of the historical time in which these Black women are situated. Braiders preserve the knowledge of their ancestors and develop their practices considering their own subsistence and that of their community in the present. In this sense, we can affirm that, within the realm of beauty, there has always been, by the dominant white group, a capture of this practice, an ongoing cultural appropriation, in which braiders have been involved due to the lack of recognition of their professional category. This cultural appropriation has occurred since braiders were labeled as “ethnic hairdressers,” and from then on, there has been an assimilation of their practices, parallel to the devaluation and disregard for the ways in which braids were made by Black women braiders. Thus, cultural appropriation can be defined as:

[...] an action practiced by dominant groups and their individuals. It consists of appropriating elements from another minority or marginalized culture and using them without proper references or permission, erasing or altering their meanings, and disregarding the systemic oppression often imposed by the same dominant group. (William, 2020, p. 64)

When young Black women become braiders in an urban context, associating this practice with trends and fashion, it reveals both the strength of Black feminist activism and the intellectuality of these Black women in the face of social injustices, as well as the racism present in our society. In this sense, it is not the young Black braiders who empty the resistant cultural narrative; on the contrary, they are the keepers of this knowledge, recorded in their very bodies (Nascimento, 2021). In the power dynamics that structure racial relations in Brazil, young Black women could not empty the meanings of anything. This emptying has been occurring for a long time through the combination of racism and cultural appropriation.

As William (2020) explains, the Christian perception of colonization failed to grasp the meanings of African cultural expression in the diaspora, and as a result, it constantly alters the meanings of elements from African and Indigenous cultures for commercialization. On the other hand, Black people, witnessing the destruction of their cultural values, resist the system that devalues them by constructing more “acceptable” narratives that can guarantee their survival in the face of racism. For this reason, for so long, braiders have been labeled as “Afro” or “ethnic” hairdressers. Considering this, we can observe that these young Black women have developed survival strategies through braiding, which likely generates income for themselves and their families.

Continuing the panel discussion, the president of IPHAN, Leandro Grass, explains that at this moment, they are still discussing the heritage recognition of braiders, whether it should involve classification or registration, and he states:

“It is not just about a status or some type of prestige for that cultural heritage, or historical center, or registered asset, or way of doing things, or celebration or craft, or a place... It is more than that; it is a commitment from the Brazilian state to the well-being of the people who represent that asset, the people who are the holders, the owners of that asset. And that is where the heritage recognition plan is established. In the case of intangible heritage, it is the safeguarding plan. This is where public policy objectives are set, with a focus on what I just mentioned — reducing inequality, freeing from discrimination, among other aspects. And that is where we start working together. Therefore, the construction has already begun, *and it started with you*. It is a construction that will lead us, and is already leading us, to a commitment to investment, a commitment to the application of the budget, and a technical-political commitment from IPHAN and all the other heritage institutions that form this system, which has a great responsibility.” (Afrolatinas, 2024, emphasis added)

Leandro Grass emphasizes that academic work is of utmost importance because it is based on these works that knowledge is legitimized and recognition policies are made feasible. He explains that due to instabilities and changes in the government, some registrations that had been stalled within IPHAN were given priority in the current Lula administration (elected in 2022), including the registration of the midwives’ craft in Brazil, the Tambor de Crioula, and the Baianas do Acarajé.

Considering Grass’ speech, it is important to emphasize that most braiders move and express their activism in Brazilian society outside the academic space. The work developed by braiders in academia represents just one of the many fields they

can occupy, and it should not be viewed in a generalizing way, but rather as partial. That is, academic research can contribute to the development of the struggle for professional recognition, cultural heritage preservation, the guarantee of rights, and public policies. However, it can never be understood in a totalizing way regarding a practice that is multifaceted, such as the practice of braiders. There is much about braiders that has not been published in academic works, but it can be seen through the practice of these Black women.

In the panel in question, we can also follow the speech of Sérgio Pereira, representative of the Social Participation and Diversity Advisory at the Ministry of Labor and Employment:

In the second half of 2024, the proceedings are already moving to the Ministry of Labor, so that in 2025, we can present to a group of people who will analyze the CBO, the work done... We will even rely on the scientific work of Layla Maryzandra, who is greatly helping us in this construction, to, in 2025, try to present it to the National Congress [...] And what does that mean? It means that braiders can organize themselves as professionals, can organize their unions, can set the value of braids, can have funds for the training of braiders, and can outline a course... (Afrolatinas, 2024)

Pereira's speech demonstrated that the Ministry of Labor and Employment has an interest in formalizing the profession of braider, including the category in the CBO (Brazilian Occupation Classification). As workers, braiders constantly face difficulties in exercising their profession, often having to fit into established professions such as hairdressers, artisans, and, at times, working informally, without labor and social security rights; without access to credits and financing for their social projects; and without institutional recognition and appreciation, among other challenges.

Like Leandro Grass, Sérgio Pereira emphasized the importance of scientific work in the stages of professional regulation, highlighting the significance of the academic perspective. In the panel discussion, it was possible to perceive the representative value that the speakers, in their speeches, attributed to Maryzandra's research for the heritage preservation and professional recognition of braiders in the Brazilian Classification of Occupations (CBO). While we can understand the importance of academic research for facilitating such actions in government bodies, we question the practices of non-academic braiders: what are the professional urgencies of young Black women braiders currently working in urban centers and the peripheries? What issues arise in the heritage preservation of a profession? When it is argued that heritage preservation should precede the professional categorization of braiders, what are the implications in terms of labor rights for braiders? Will it be a profession that is cultural heritage, a cultural heritage that is a profession, or a profession that works with cultural heritage?

These and other questions arose during the analysis of the data in this research. However, we assert that, in summary, every braider can become a *trancista*, not every braider is a *trancista*, but every *trancista* will always be a braider.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

We constructed this writing to reflect on the social impact of the work of Black women braiders as creative economy and its complexities in the present day. We recognize that there are many risks when we analyze the work of braiders unilaterally, ignoring the multiple ways this work can manifest today. In acknowledging the breadth of this profession, we must be attentive to the dangers that arise in discourse, which may reinforce stereotypes, hinder the pursuit of social justice, delay the advancement of professional regulation, and complicate its recognition within the cultural realm.

In this sense, more than quick and simplistic answers to dense and complex issues, we pose the following questions: will we maintain the same paradigm that places braiders within the hegemonic Euro-Western culture? For only through a paradigmatic reformulation can we recognize that braiders are intellectuals who contribute to Brazilian intersectional Black feminist thought.

To address racial and gender inequality in the realm of work, we need to identify the continuations of labor informality, unpaid care work, precariousness, and the feminization of poverty imposed on Black Brazilian women, as well as the romanticization of individual entrepreneurship.

The issues presented in this work aim to reflect in an expanded way on the occupational formalization of braiders, understanding that such recognition in the labor market is necessary for braiders to continue developing their social justice projects fully, gain access to labor and social security rights, as well as receive state reparations and protection regarding their epistemology.

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