

Demanding the Devil Say Mass:
Black Educational Struggle in Salvador da Bahia, Brazil, 1984-1989

“It’s been 16 years and you’re still making plans for implementation?!” Daniela, a professor at the Federal University of Bahia in Salvador, exclaims as she opens the first round of discussion. It is the Summer of 2019, and I am at the regional kick-off for enforcing Federal Law 10,639/03, the mandate that schools teach African and Afro-Brazilian history and culture. The approximately 50 other participants of the Thursday morning townhall, predominately Black women, nod their heads and murmur in agreement. One after another, the people of the room expressed their frustrations. Tired of waiting for the government to provide adequate resources for their predominately Black schools, many in the room were looking for something else. In unison, the activists in the room were working together toward something not yet expressed. They did not all agree on what to do next, but in that meeting an implicit yet unanimous vote was cast: It is time to re-strategize.

Education has long been central to the work of the Brazilian Black Movement and continues to be one the most important fields for action. In a recent study, Black activists and *militantes* throughout Brazil identified the struggle for the implementation of Federal Law 10,639/03 as the second most urgent struggle of the movement, just after the fight against police violence (Pereira et al., 2020). The struggle for formal curricular representation that presents Black history and culture more fully and more accurately dates back as early as the 1930s, when the *Frente Negra Brasileira* critiqued school textbook content (Domingues, 2008). I’ve seen first-hand how the longevity of this particular battle has led to frustration for activists in Salvador da Bahia. Reflecting on this current moment of frustration and thinking back along the legacy of Black educational activism in Salvador, the words of Ana Célia da Silva¹ come to mind. In April 1988, after years of demanding curricular reform, she asks: “*estamos querendo exigir que o diabo reze missa?*”² In the Summer of 2020, I conducted research in online archives in order to get a better understanding of the educational battles fought by the Contemporary Brazilian Black Movement³ in Salvador in relation to the fight for Black education today. This project attempts to tell a story of Contemporary Black Educational Organizing in Salvador da Bahia, Brazil, namely the story of the struggle for formal curricular reform in the final decades of the 20th century.

On June 18, 1978, the *Movimento Negro Unificado* (MNU) solidified themselves as an organization when they produced their *Carta de Princípios*, the MNU’s platform, which named improving Black education as a central struggle. The MNU in Bahia was very active in the field of education since its inception. They were, in fact, one of the early chapters to propose that Afro-Brazilian curricular standards be introduced into public schools (Covin, 2006). The following passages tell that story.

In 1984, the MNU chapter in Salvador gathered the signatures of as many of the Black community organizations of Bahia as they could in support of a request made by them to the Bahia State Secretary of Education, Edivaldo Boavenura. They demanded that he include the

¹ Ana Célia da Silva was one of the founders of the MNU in Bahia, a cofounder of the Robson Silveira de Luz work group for education and political education, and a key contributor to *Nêgo*, the national journal for the *Movimento Negro Unificado*, on articles related to education.

² Are we trying to demand that the devil say mass?

³ The contemporary movement is generally thought of as beginning in the late 1970s with the consolidation of the *Movimento Negro Unificado*, the first national Black political organization of its size (Pereira, 2013)

teaching of "Introduction to African Studies" in primary and secondary school as part of the formal school curriculum. They also resurfaced and expressed support for a similar request made by the Center for Afro-Oriental Studies (CEAO) just one year prior. After much delay, on June 10, 1985, Boaventura approved the implementation of Municipal Ordinance no. 6068, which allowed for the teaching of African Studies in all state schools. To oversee this process, the Secretary's Office first created a commission, which was made up of 3 representatives of Black organizations and 3 members of CEAO. The commission met with Curriculum Management (GECIN), an organization of the Secretary of Education and the State Counsel of Education, in order to determine a path for implementation. This body came to the consensus that there would need to be a "refresher course" in order to prepare teachers to teach the content of an African Studies course. All parties agreed that this refresher course would be taught by CEAO to the formal teachers of Human Sciences, teachers of community schools, and *militantes* who work in the area of education. The content of the course would be determined according to criteria established by CEAO and Black community organizations. Shortly after these decisions were made, the Secretary's Office also created an advisory council for African Studies that was appointed by and responded to the Secretary directly. Activists were sure to remark on the fact that they were excluded from the appointment decisions and that the council was not expected to be in conversation with them. From that point on, the community organizations were dropped from the formal process of implementation.

While this specialized teacher preparation course was planned to begin in March 1985, in order for the K-12 teaching of African Studies to begin in 1986, again there was a delay. This time, the postponement was due to a lack of an institution willing to finance the course. Several months later, The State University of Bahia (UNEB) agreed to finance it, but the course would have to begin in March of 1986, one year later than initially proposed. Finally, in 1986, the Secretary in conjunction with UNEB and the Federal University of Bahia (UFBA), hosted a special course with CEAO to prepare teachers to teach African Studies. The course ran to completion in December of that same year.

In early 1987, having been cut out of the process and not having heard any news about the implementation process, the MNU once again requested a meeting with Edivaldo Boaventura to follow-up. As a result of several public hearings between the Secretary, community organizations, school leaders, and members of the advisory council, 6 high schools volunteered to implement Introduction to African Studies during the 1987 school year.

By the spring of 1988, nearly one year after the first implementation of Introduction to African Studies, a total of 9 schools had begun teaching it. Additionally, many progressive school directors throughout the state began requesting teachers to teach the course at their schools as well. However, the Secretary responded that there weren't enough specialized teachers. According to Ana Célia da Silva, in the April 1988 issue of *Nêgo*, this was untrue. Of the 35 teachers that took the 420-hour course: only 10 were actually employed in schools, 10 of them didn't belong to the specific area, and the rest simply weren't state-certified schoolteachers. She also notes that of the 5 *militantes* that took the course, only two were able to complete it. The primary reason being that it was scheduled during the day and often ran into the evening, presumably when many of them had to work. In early 1988 the MNU, expecting such a high demand from the schools, had once again requested that the Secretary order another iteration of the teacher specialization course for African Studies. In a period of waiting that felt more like neglect, da Silva in the same Spring issue of *Nêgo* wrote that "as the main stakeholders and those responsible for the [initial] implementation of the discipline, we hope that we will not be once

again removed from the process." She notes that there are plenty of *militantes* capable of teaching the discipline, but they have not attended higher education. What these *militantes* do have that many of the current official schoolteachers do not, she explains, is an understanding of race and racism in Brazil, an experiential knowledge unrecognized by the state. She recommended that these *militantes* be contracted to teach African Studies for the schools. These recommendations were ignored.

After two years of implementation in 9 different high schools, the Secretary of Education assumed new leadership under Professora Maria Augusta Rosa Hocha.⁴ It seemed as though many of the gains made during Boaventura's term were lost. Hocha failed to prioritize African Studies, and instead implemented teacher specialization courses on other topics. In her early years, she also failed to support municipalities outside of the capital that sought to incorporate African Studies into their curricula. Many of these teachers had to use their own free time outside of class or their vacation and medical leave in order to gather and train themselves without institutional support. Unfortunately, those schools that did implement African Studies faced many challenges as well. Lack of material resources, antagonistic colleagues, and no direction from school administration or the Secretary of Education were all common struggles as the program entered into its third year.

Throughout those first two years of implementation, MNU continued to hold and participate in many more public hearings between the Secretary's Office and the community. In 1988, Hocha signed an agreement to finally begin another teacher specialization course for African Studies in 1989. However, this promise went unmet. The MNU remained torn about their continued struggle for curriculum reform. In the June 1989 issue of *Nêgo*, they acknowledged that Black community organizers were prepared to engage in these struggles because they knew that "the goal of [African Studies], that of developing the self-esteem, personal identity, and the respect for differences, are in disagreement with the objectives of the ideologies of whitening and inferiorizing that the school promotes."

As a result of this continued state neglect, by 1989, five years after the initial campaign, all of the schools had abandoned the teaching of African Studies, with the exception of one school, Escola Cidade de Curitiba. This is where the story seems to run cold. This brief rise and wane for formal curricular struggle in Salvador disappears from the MNU's newspapers. It's possible that there are still more archival materials, not-yet digitized, that would expand this story. It is also likely that the story runs cold here because the MNU's efforts shifted toward national organizing after the promulgation of the new constitution in 1988. This is evidenced by the fact that by the 1990s, information about identities and ethnic relations, especially in history, began to appear in the federal curriculum standards issued by the Brazilian Ministry of Education; and in 2003, President Lula signed Federal Law 10, 639 (Pereira, 2015). This federal legislation would not have been possible without the work of the Black Movement, such as the MNU and other community organizations in Salvador. However, rather than simply highlighting historic educational struggles, my work reveals a pattern in Black educational organizing in Brazil; a pattern of promises followed by state neglect and displaced responsibility. Black activists are, and have been, caught in a tension between demanding their right to a quality education in a supposed democratic society and the knowledge that schooling serves the state's reliance on white supremacist capitalism. In this *longue durée* of antiblack schooling, we to return to the initial question: are they *still* just demanding the devil say mass?

⁴ The first woman to serve as the Secretary of Education for the State of Bahia.

Archives:

Digital Archive of Negritos (<http://negritos.com.br/acervo/sobre-o-acervo/>)
Secretary of Education

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