Fun, Folly or Development? Attitudes and Impacts on Women of Participation in Brazilian Samba Schools and Carnival

Cristina E. Coirolo
University of Pennsylvania

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Fun, Folly or Development? Attitudes and Impacts on Women of Participation in Brazilian Samba Schools and Carnival

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FUN, FOLLY OR DEVELOPMENT?

ATTITUDES AND IMPACTS ON WOMEN OF PARTICIPATION IN BRAZILIAN SAMBA SCHOOLS AND CARNIVAL

Cristina E. Coirolo

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Dr. Gregory Urban
Supervisor of Dissertation
Chairman, Department of Anthropology
ABSTRACT

FUN, FOLLY OR DEVELOPMENT?

ATTITUDES AND IMPACTS ON WOMEN OF PARTICIPATION IN BRAZILIAN SAMBA SCHOOLS AND CARNIVAL

Cristina E. Coirolo

Supervisor: Dr. Gregory Urban

Brazilian Carnival, especially as performed by the larger samba schools of Rio de Janeiro, is an annual ritual celebration of immense semiotic importance. Both within the country and internationally, Carnival conveys images of fun, extravagance, license and sensuality. The roots are both Afro-Brazilian and European, transformed by the respective Diasporas into a unique celebration that has become synonymous with the very notion of ‘Brazilianess’. Research on Carnival has paid little attention to gender-specific issues from the standpoint of Brazilian women. There has been relatively little change in women’s representations in Carnival; if anything women are depicted in increasingly more explicit sensual terms each year. Structured interviews were conducted with twelve Brazilian women in two categories: professionals who are engaged in social change and development through their work, and women who participate actively in the organization and performance of Carnival events. These were supplemented by in-depth interviews
with males very knowledgeable about Brazilian music and sexual culture, and by
secondary source materials. Findings suggest that women are not unaware of the gender
stereotyping in Carnival, but do not consider this especially offensive and place greater
value on other aspects: inter alia, opportunities for inversion à la Bakhtin and uncensored
expression of one's own sensuality; for experiencing feelings of community and human
interconnectedness in a society that is rapidly transitioning towards individualism and
placing special strains on women; and for the reaffirmation of cultural heritage. There is
broad agreement that Carnival could play a greater role in focusing attention on
contemporary issues of special importance to women, such as violence, provided the
treatment is not divisive, as that would threaten some of the positive, integrative aspects
of Carnival which women value highly. Finally, open and closed social networks co-
exist within the same samba schools, presenting differential opportunities for some
women to strengthen their human and social capital, accessing contact and embedded
resources which can be helpful either in moving beyond, or coping with, the increasingly
inhospitable and dangerous low-income urban neighborhoods that are home to the largest,
most famous samba schools.
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1. **Introduction**

Brazilian Carnival, especially as performed by the larger samba schools of Rio de Janeiro, is an annual ritual celebration of immense semiotic importance. Both within the country and internationally, Carnival conveys images of fun, extravagance, license and sensuality. The roots are both Afro-Brazilian and European, transformed by the respective Diasporas into a unique celebration that has become synonymous with the very notion of *Brasilieridade*, or ‘Brazilianess’. My interest in this topic began with research I conducted in 2004, on the influence of the West African Diaspora in Brazil’s samba schools, for an ethnomusicology course at the University of Pennsylvania. Although I was not focusing on gender at the time, I did notice that there is a small but growing body of academic work on male gender issues and Carnival, in particular male homosexuality, but comparatively little research on Carnival dealing with gender issues from the standpoint of women, except as a secondary theme in some interdisciplinary studies on race and class relations. For this study, I therefore decided to explore selected aspects of Carnival from the standpoint of Brazilian women.

In preliminary stages of research for my previous paper, I discovered that the range of groups involved in Carnival is immense, at one extreme including neighborhood *blocos*, and, at the other, the large and highly professional samba schools common to Rio, São Paulo and Recife, which stage annual productions that can engage up to several thousands of performers each. I originally intended to focus my research on uncovering the roles
women actually play in the decision-making, organization and performances of the samba schools. I also wanted to know if the representations of Brazilian female identity that are conveyed through Carnival processions by the female performers one sees on television and in magazines reflect a broad-based consensus view of Brazilian femininity, or if these images stem mainly from male defined ideals of female sexuality.

My initial impressions were that women hold relatively little power within the schools and that the scantily clad female performers largely reflect stereotypical, male-defined fantasies of females as purely sexual objects. However, in the course of my research, I discovered a much more nuanced story of power relations. I also learned in a more interactive way about the dangers of ethnocentric application of foreign theoretical models of analysis in cross-cultural contexts. I had spent the first several years of my life in Brazil, had several Brazilian friends and retained some familiarity with the language, but on balance my preconceptions clearly stemmed directly from my American education and socialization. I found that much of what I would consider sexist is seen differently in Brazil. I also came to appreciate that while my interview subjects, who are mostly Brazilian women, certainly recognized an element of gender stereotyping in Carnival performances, they did not consider this especially offensive and placed greater value on other aspects, which I classify in three main categories: (i) opportunities for inversion, a concept first applied by Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) to the analysis of carnival rituals and connected here with opportunities for escape from the respective tensions of upper and lower income female life, and the sense of liberation to express one’s own sensuality without stigma or censorship; (ii) opportunities to experience feelings of community and human interconnectedness in a society that is rapidly transitioning towards individualism and
concurrently placing special strains on women; and (iii) for some, the reaffirmation of cultural heritage.

In reviewing samba lyrics used in the main Carnival events, I noted that during the past 20 years the samba schools seemed to be taking on themes of contemporary national social interest with increasing frequency. In 2005, this expanded to include a subject from the global agenda, as the Portela samba school\textsuperscript{1} adopted for its central theme the 2015 Millennium Development Goals. I therefore decided to investigate the potential for the samba schools to popularize themes of particular relevance to Brazilian women and what impact, if any, women themselves thought this would have. I concluded that there is certainly scope for the schools to do more of this, but it would have to be handled in the context of inclusive messages. Finally, I realized early on in my interviews that there may be a human and social capital development process taking place within the schools that could be quite an important by-product for women who participate. This had not been part of my original research plan, but on the strength of what my female subjects and some of the literature were saying, I decided to include this topic in the study.

As it has finally taken shape, my research explores three interrelated aspects of the impacts of Carnival on Brazilian women:

- the semiotic value of Carnival for women in Brazil;
- the scope for popularization of contemporary social issues relevant to women through the medium of Carnival lyrics and performances; and
- the human and social capital impacts of Carnival on Brazilian women.

\textsuperscript{1} Portela is one of the principal samba schools in Rio de Janeiro. Further information on Portela and other samba schools referred to in this paper can be found on the website of the League of Independent Samba Schools:
In Chapter 2, I discuss the qualitative research methods I employed for this study and introduce my interview subjects. Chapter 3 provides some basic contextual information on the history of Brazilian Carnival and samba schools, and on contemporary gender issues in Brazil, which I hope will be helpful in setting the stage for the main body of the study. In Chapters 4, 5 and 6, I present my principal research findings on the three inter-related topics described above, and Chapter 7 summarizes the conclusions of my year-long quest to gain some insight into the attitudes and impacts on women of their participation in Brazil’s samba schools and Carnival.
2. Methodology and Structured Interview Subjects

My research for this study began with a general review of the literature on Brazilian Carnival and samba schools, on the role of women in Carnival, and on contemporary gender issues in Brazil. Overall, there has been a reasonable amount of scholarly research on the European and West African origins of Brazilian Carnival, although considerably less than one might have expected compared, for example, with Caribbean Carnival. That may explain why there seem to be relatively more university level ethnomusicology and Diaspora studies courses in the U.S. focusing on the Caribbean than on Brazil. Language may be another reason, since understanding the lyrics of Brazilian Carnival music requires knowledge of Portuguese, whereas Caribbean studies rely on English in addition to French.

Secondary Sources

The main secondary sources I have used for this paper include Mikhail Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World* (1984), on the subject of Carnival rituals generally; Brazilian anthropologist Roberto DaMatta’s *Carnival Rogues and Heroes* (1991); Hermano Vianna’s *The Mystery of Samba: Popular Music and National Identity in Brazil* (1999); and Thomas Skidmore’s *Brazil: Five Centuries of Change* (1999) and Daryle Williams’ *Culture Wars in Brazil* (2001), on the political appropriation of Carnival by the Vargas regime. Documentation on the samba schools themselves, in particular their leadership structure, was more difficult to come by. In the early 1980s, several of the larger schools banded together to form the League of Independent Samba Schools (LIESA), to wrest control over Rio’s Carnival from the Municipality of Rio de Janeiro and ensure that the schools would obtain a larger share of Carnival proceeds. LIESA has compiled historic information on the schools which it has placed on a website, and the main samba schools
also maintain websites with historic information to which elder members frequently contribute. Data on gender gaps in Brazil was easier to obtain: The World Bank published a comprehensive study in 2002, which draws together most basic statistical information. Several scholars, such as Sonia Alvarez (1990), Susan Besse (1996), Mala Htun (2001, 2002) and Jacqueline Pitanguy (2002), have written on women’s issues from legal and political standpoints, as well as on the history of the feminist movement in Brazil.

I discovered quite soon after beginning my research that the most difficult subject on which to find secondary sources would be the nexus of women and Carnival – roles women play in the organization of Carnival, the attitudes both of female participants and Brazilian women generally, and the impacts on women of Carnival. There is a small but growing body of literature on sexual cultures in Brazil and Carnival, but this dwells primarily on male homosexuality: Richard Parker’s *Bodies, Pleasures and Passions: Sexual Culture in Contemporary Brazil* (1991) and *Beneath the Equator: Cultures of Desire, Male Homosexuality and Emerging Gay Communities in Brazil* (1999), as well as James Green’s *Beyond Carnival: Male Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century Brazil* (1999). Literature on female gender issues in Carnival was harder to unearth, as was scholarly research generally on women in poor urban *favelas*, the home territory of Rio’s most famous samba schools. In *Laughter out of Place: Race, Class, Violence and Sexuality in a Rio Shantytown* (2003), anthropologist Donna Goldstein notes:

Women’s popular culture in Rio is not only largely oral but also predominantly inaccessible in an obviously public form...Even though close to one million out of the ten million residents of the metropolitan region of Rio de Janeiro still live in *favelas*, there have been very few ethnographic attempts to capture the tenor and context of daily life in these communities or the particular struggle of the women who form their backbone. (Goldstein 2003, 4)
Goldstein further suggests that while a fair amount of Brazilian feminist literature is produced, it is often ignored by the anthropological establishment because it is perceived by Brazilians (academics and non-academics alike) as too "sex negative" (Ibid., 233-234). In an interview for this study, James, who will be introduced along with other field respondents further on in this chapter, echoed a similar view: "Feminism in Brazil has a series of negative connotations which makes it hard for feminists to articulate their ideas in public – it does not have legitimacy in Brazil."

This made the structured interviews section of my ethnographic research all the more important, but before describing that process I would like to recognize those few authors I did find – incidentally all women – who do deal directly with female gender issues and Carnival: Nancy Scheper-Hughes’ work on "Carnival and Forgetting" (1994), based on her field work for Death without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil (1992); Maria Laura Viveiros de Castro Cavalcanti’s "Rite and the Passage of Time: The Evolution of Carnival in Rio de Janeiro" (1999), Carole Boyce Davies’ "Re-Presenting Black Female Identity in Brazil: ‘Filhas D’Oxum’ in Bahia Carnival" (1999), Myrian Sepulveda Dos Santos’ "Samba Schools: The Logic of Orgy and Blackness in Rio de Janeiro" (1999), Lisa Jesse’s "Gender and Race in the Lyrics of Samba, 1920-1945" (1996), and Alma Guillermoprieto’s Samba (1991), an account of a year she spent living with the women of the Mangueira samba school. Intriguingly enough, only two of these authors are Brazilian.

To ground my own methodology within a relevant anthropological research framework, I relied heavily on Russell Bernard’s Handbook of Methods in Cultural Anthropology (2000). Broadly speaking, the methods I employed fall into the categories of
hermeneutics and post-modernism. While some of the sub-topics I explore (e.g., the possible human and social capital development impacts on different categories of women who participate in the larger samba schools) might lend themselves to scientific survey methods, this would have required field work which was simply beyond my means to carry out for this study. The research conducted here was therefore qualitative, relying mainly on analysis of carefully designed ethnographic fieldwork and secondary sources, synthesized to achieve a meaningful articulation of theoretical implications, both my own and those following directly from the literature. Although this study is concerned with the roles of Brazilian women in Carnival, I do not consider it necessarily falls within the realm of feminist anthropology, except insofar as it encourages the researcher to “engage in helping reduce gender inequities wherever these occur” (Gailey 2000, 207). This is not to say that the main purpose of my research is advocacy, although I do offer suggestions for further research and possible action to address gender issues through the cultural medium of Carnival.

Structured Interviews

In preparing for my structured, person-centered interviews, I decided to seek out individuals who fit into one of two categories: (i) Brazilian female social scientists who might be willing to share their own personal experiences and opinions about Carnival, both as Brazilian women and as professionals engaged in some capacity with issues of social change and development in Brazil or Latin America; and (ii) Brazilian women who are actively involved in the organization of the samba schools and/or annual Carnival productions and who would agree to share their personal opinions, as well as serve as experts on this largely undocumented subject. I began to contact individuals through
email and word of mouth, explaining my project and requesting interviews. After sending
approximately 40 messages, I received positive responses from a number of people who
were willing to participate, and ended up with 15 successful interviews. My objective
was to interview women, but in the course of the research I also incorporated three male
informants who are very knowledgeable about Carnival and could serve as experts on
Brazilian music and sexual culture.

Brief biographic summaries of my 15 interview subjects are provided below. Their
principal characteristics can be summarized as follows:

Gender: 12 women, 3 men
Ages: 34-69 years
Nationalities: 14 Brazilian, 1 U.S. (a male)

Of the 12 Brazilian females, nine are social scientists/development practitioners and three
are community members/organizers of samba schools and Carnival events. Of the nine
social scientists, six live and work in Brazil and three presently live and work in the U.S.,
but have spent significant parts of their lives in Brazil, have strong family ties there and
return periodically for that reason or because of their work. Five of these women are
employed by international development organizations, one by the Brazilian Federal
Government, one by a municipal government, one works in academia and one in a
technical assistance consulting agency. Of the three female samba school/Carnival
organizers and active participants, two live in Brazil and their lives have centered around
the same communities since early childhood; one is presently living overseas (in the U.K.)
where she remains involved in dance and Carnival productions and has traveled to Brazil
for extended periods, to the local community where she was raised. The geographic areas
on which these women have expert knowledge are São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and
Recife/Olinda. Although I did not request factual information, I did ask the female interview subjects to self-classify themselves at birth and presently, according to socio-economic income level and ethnic origin. It is fair to say that they reflect the diversity of Brazil in terms of its Afro-Brazilian and Caucasian heritages; none was of Asian or indigenous background. They also represent a broad socio-economic cross-section, including lower, middle and upper incomes, with some having moved from one category to another during their lives. From the standpoint of education, they range from little or no formal education to PhD’s. I did not inquire about their personal sexual orientations.

I developed a structured questionnaire which I used as a guide during the interviews. This helped me to keep track of a core set of questions, although I employed it flexibly depending on the length of the interviews and the particular interests of the interview subjects. Topics I always tried to cover included their familiarity with Carnival in general and personal experiences participating; their views on how women are depicted in Carnival and their attitudes on the roles of women in Carnival and trends over time; regional variations both in the way women are portrayed and in their roles; the impact of tourism and commercial considerations on Carnival; their views on gender issues in Brazil; and the potential for Carnival to popularize social issues of particular relevance to women. Questionnaires for the three women who participate directly in organizing Carnival had additional items on their experiences and the issues they personally had faced; questionnaires for the three men were modified slightly to take account of the fact that they could not report first hand on women’s views, but rather only as informed observers.

Three of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, the other 12 by telephone (and in some cases, supplemented by follow-up emails). Eight were in English, two in a mixture
of English and Portuguese, and five in Portuguese for which I obtained help with
interpretation and translation. I recorded most but not all of the interviews and prepared
transcripts or interview notes for each.

In retrospect, I think the decision to focus part of the interview work on social
scientists was a good one: the women were invariably generous with their time and
willingness to reflect on and share their personal opinions, and at the same time they were
able to approach certain questions analytically because of their professional training. My
regrets are that I was not able to interview a larger number of female organizers of
Carnival, and that many of the interviews had to be conducted by telephone rather than
face-to-face. I was particularly apprehensive beforehand about the feasibility of
interviewing the female community members/organizers long distance by telephone; in the
event, their enthusiasm for their work in Carnival was so great that after an initial period of
familiarization, they opened up and were most generous with their time and opinions.
Although my study is now completed, I would love some day to be able to meet these
women personally and talk further about their life histories.

Interview Subjects

1) Patricia is 62 years old, and is from the Northeast State of Pernambuco.
She presently holds a senior management position with an international development
agency based in Brasilia and is responsible for that agency’s delivery of human
development programs to Brazil. She has a PhD in Administration of Education and
previously held senior management positions in both the State Government of Pernambuco
and the Federal Ministry of Education. Our interview took place by telephone from
Brasilia, in English, supplemented by email exchanges on specific topics.
2) **Janete** is 36 years old, married with two children. She was born and raised in São Paulo until high school, when she moved to the U.S. She currently holds a middle-level professional position with an international development agency based in Washington DC, where she works on the design and implementation of human development projects throughout Latin America and the Caribbean Region. Janete is also the gender coordinator for her department. Her undergraduate training was in economics, and she holds a multidisciplinary MA degree in Latin American Studies from a U.S. university. Our interview took place by telephone from Washington, D.C., in English, followed by several email exchanges.

3) **Antonia** is 50 years old. She was born, raised and works in the State of Pernambuco. She holds a middle-level professional position with an international development agency based in Recife and is responsible for oversight of that agency’s rural development programs in the Northeast region of Brazil. She has an undergraduate degree in urban and regional planning and previously held middle and senior management positions with the State Government of Pernambuco. Our interview took place by telephone from Recife, in English, interspersed with occasional Portuguese.

4) **Lucía** is 47 years old; she was born and raised in Rio de Janeiro, and since has traveled and lived in various countries, including England, Germany, Spain and Mexico. Her undergraduate degree is in Anthropology, and she is presently teaching anthropology and pursuing a PhD in American Studies at a U.S. university. Lucía also works with Latina immigrants and issues of identity in Washington D.C., but says there are no Brazilian women in her groups. Our interview took place by telephone, in English.
5) Carla is 50 years old, was born and raised in Rio de Janeiro. She is married, with three children, and presently holds a senior management position with an international development agency based in Washington D.C. She has worked intensively on development assistance programs across sectors in Ecuador, Paraguay and Central America, and is presently part of the human development management team dealing with all of Latin America. She has an undergraduate degree in economics and an MBA, both from U.S. universities. Our interview took place by telephone from Washington, D.C., in English and was supplemented by various email exchanges. Carla also kindly provided me with a copy of TV Globo’s coverage of the 2005 Carnival celebration in Rio de Janeiro.

6) Heloisa is 57 years old, was born in Belo Horizonte, capital of the State of Minas Gerais. She has lived in Rio de Janeiro, the U.K. and U.S., and presently lives in Brasília (of these, she considers Rio, where she lived for 35 years, to be her main home). She has an undergraduate degree in Sociology and an MA in Political Science from the University of Minas Gerais, PhDs in Sociology from both the University of London and the University of São Paulo, and completed a Post-Graduate course in Economics while she was working in the U.S. Heloisa works for an international development agency, as Lead Sociologist, based in Brasília. Our interview took place by telephone from Brasília, in English, followed by several subsequent email exchanges.

7) Tereza is 47, and was born in a small town on the outskirts of Fortaleza, capital of Ceará. She is married, with two daughters. Tereza has a BA in Social Studies from the Federal University of Mossoró in Rio Grande do Norte. She presently lives in Fortaleza, where she holds a middle-management position with the Municipality of Fortaleza, in the field of social services, specifically health services in a low-income
neighborhood of the city. Our interview took place by telephone from Fortaleza, in Portuguese, with the assistance of an interpreter.

8) **Katia** is 34, and was born in Lajedo, an interior town in the State of Pernambuco. She has a BA in Social Work from the Catholic University of Recife, Pernambuco. Katia has been working for several years for an international technical assistance firm which is contracted by the State to carry out community development and training work in rural areas. Besides Recife and her home town, she has lived in several locations in the State, on assignment for her job. Our interview took place by telephone from Palmares, in Portuguese, with the assistance of an interpreter.

9) **Vanessa** is 35 years of age. She was born in Rio de Janeiro, but presently lives in Brasilia where she holds a professional position with the Federal Ministry of Justice. Our interview took place by telephone from Brasilia, in English.

10) **Dona Da**, 69 years old, was born in Recife, Pernambuco, where she lived until her father died, at which time her mother moved the family to the neighboring city of Olinda where her own parents lived. Dona Da has remained in Olinda ever since she married and has three children. She took a technical course in accounting at school and had begun to work in an office, but when she married her husband preferred her to stay at home, and since then she has not worked outside the house. For many years Dona Da has helped organize Carnival activities in her Olinda neighborhood and was honored as 2004 Carnival citizen of the year, in an internet based contest sponsored by the local media. Our interview took place by telephone, from Olinda, in Portuguese with the assistance of an interpreter.
11) **Tia Surica** is 64, was born and has always lived in Rio de Janeiro, in the neighborhood of the Portela samba school. She is not married. Tia Surica’s earliest memories are of tagging along with her mother, at about four years of age, to join in Portela’s activities and rehearsals. At this time, she is a member of the Directorate, of the *Velha Guarda* (honorary elders who parade as a group in Carnival) and commands her own *ala* which included 86 people in the February 2005 Carnival. Our interview took place by telephone, from Rio de Janeiro, in Portuguese with the assistance of an interpreter.

12) **Maité** is in her early to mid-thirties, and was born in São Paulo. As a young child, Maité’s earliest training was in the ‘núcleo’ (community school) operated by a neighborhood samba school. Maité progressed over time to become an increasingly proficient dancer (not only samba). She eventually started teaching classes herself and became a featured performer with one of São Paulo’s main samba schools. When the school was invited to tour Europe, Maité went along and through the contacts she made was eventually able to move to the U.K., where she has been one of the founders of the Paraiso samba school in Notting Hill, London. Several years ago, Maité returned for an extended period to São Paulo where she taught dance to young girls in the ‘núcleo’ of the samba school in São Paulo, but is now residing again in the U.K. Our face-to-face interview took place in London, mainly in English interspersed with some Portuguese.

13) **Enrique** is in his early forties, was born in Rio de Janeiro, and describes his family origin as being ‘from the world of samba’. His grandmother was president of a smaller samba school, Engenho da Rainha, a director of the Mangueira samba school and the spouse of Carto’a, one of the famous founders of Mangueira. His earliest training was with ‘meninos de Mangueira’ (children of Mangueira), and he progressed over time to
become a well-known ‘passista’, both for Mangueira and Estácio de Sá. Enrique’s older brother is a well known master percussionist of Estácio de Sá. Since 1997, Enrique has been helping to establish the Paraíso school of samba in Notting Hill, London; his brother also travels to London occasionally to update the group on trends in Brazilian samba, and Enrique returns to Rio annually to perform in Carnival. Our face-to-face interview took place in London, mainly in English interspersed with some Portuguese.

14) **Tote Gira** is 44 years old, has five children and was born in Salvador, capital of the State of Bahia. He has lived in several places, mainly Salvador and more recently New York City. He is a composer, responsible for some very well-known Brazilian music, and is presently Musical Director of the most famous Brazilian dance company in the United States. Tote Gira did not study music formally, but did study for 17 years the Brazilian dance and martial arts form known as *capoeira*. Our face to face interview took place in New York, in Portuguese.

15) **James** is 54, was born in Baltimore and is presently professor of History at Brown University. He is a leading Brazilianist, having conducted a significant amount of research on sexual cultures and homosexuality in Brazil. His PhD dissertation was later published (*Beyond Carnival: Homosexuality in Twentieth Century Brazil*, 1999), and is one of the leading academic studies on the subject. He has lived and worked at various times in Brazil, starting in the late 1970s when he taught in São Paulo. James has won numerous academic awards and is a past President of the Brazilian Studies Association. Our interview took place by telephone, from Providence, RI, in English.
3. Background: Origins of Brazilian Carnival and Samba Schools, and Contemporary Gender Issues

Carnival and Samba Schools in Brazil

Contemporary Brazilian Carnival is a product of the fusions between mainly West African and European cultural and musical traditions, and an accurate review of its history demands some background on the development of Brazil. Influence from Brazil’s indigenous population on Carnival is considered minimal, as many of these early inhabitants were annihilated by European colonists, succumbed to foreign epidemic diseases, or fled to remote interior areas soon after the Nation’s “discovery” in the early 16th century (Skidmore 1999, 5). The first African slaves were imported into Brazil in 1538 to work in various coastal agricultural plantations. These groups came from West and Central Africa, mainly from what today are Nigeria, the People’s Republic of Benin, Ghana, Angola, Zaire and Mozambique (McGowan and Pessanha 1998). An estimated four to five million Africans were brought to Brazil between 1538 and 1850, the year that marked the end of the slave trade; by 1789, the African contingent in the Portuguese colony had surpassed Europeans in head count.

This made Imperial control over Brazil’s African population difficult and created a situation in which slaves managed to retain more of their cultural heritage than might otherwise have been the case if they had been a smaller minority of the growing population. This was especially true for runaway slave communities called quilombos.

None of this should be interpreted to mean that slaves had an easy time in Brazil, far from

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2 Although indigenous communities have not had a major impact on Carnival traditions, some of the samba schools have occasionally selected the Amazon region and/or indigenous peoples as a theme in one of their annual presentations.
it. As a 17th century Portuguese colloquialism puts it, Brazil at this time was “a hell for blacks, purgatory for whites, and a paradise for mulattoes” (Skidmore 1999, 22). This is in reference to the initial implementation of the strict systems of racial and gender hierarchy, that would retain power in Brazil for centuries, coalescing during slavery into a socio-political structure in which white males were dominant, with black slaves occupying the lowest rung on the social ladder, and the growing number of racially mixed mulatos somewhere in between.

Despite strict class divisions, a great deal of interracial contact occurred in Brazil among white Europeans, African slaves and native Indians. This racial mixing transformed Brazilian society from one of relative ethnic separation to one characterized by widespread national miscegenation. In artistic representation of this increasingly interracial Brazilian identity, “a famous painting by Maria Margarida entitled Tres Meninas da Mesma Rua symbolically depicts three beautiful girls representing each of the three major racial components of Brazilian society: Indian, Negro, and white” (Summ 1995, 29). As a demographic indicator of Brazil’s national heritage of racial miscegenation, Carnival reinforces reality in that it represents a highly ornamented microcosm of human diversity. This reflects Carnival’s historical trajectory, a fusion of two different carnivals, the one belonging to the European elite, and the other celebrated in the streets by the subjugated slave and subsequent poor black and mestiço populations.

Transplanted to Brazil by Portuguese colonizers in the 16th century, the medieval pre-Lenten festival known as Entrudo was a second antecedent to today’s Carnival (Vianna 1999). Complete with a healthy amount of violence, including food and garbage slinging,

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3 As noted by one field respondent, Vanesa, “If I had to choose a symbol for Carnival, it would definitely be the mulata,” the feminine embodiment of Brazilian racial mixing, or mestizagem.
early accounts paint this celebration as a hardly recognizable ancestor to contemporary
Brazilian Carnival, and its increasingly rowdy nature called for various unsuccessful bans
from the upper class during the 18th century. As slaves also began participating in the form
of street dancing, offended Europeans regarded the unwanted but increasingly popular
celebrations as primitive and over-sexualized. A precursor to Samba, the dance initially
denounced by the elite and known as Semba, a word from Angola, belonged to Kimbundu
vocabulary and referred to the "umbigada" or invitation to dance" (McGowan and
Pessanha 1998, 22). It steadily became increasingly ritualized and generally accepted by
the late 1800s, at which point drums and whistles regularly accompanied the dancers.

Moving away from Entrudo, Carnival celebrations among the Imperial elite
featured masquerade balls playing mostly European waltzes and polkas. The first of these
took place in a Rio hotel in 1840. Slaves were not granted entrance, and instead celebrated
boisterously in the streets in mostly all-male groups called cordees, early predecessors to
the contemporary samba school. Although a racially integrated guest list would have been
considered highly offensive to upper class Carnival patrons of this era, diversity was
already common in certain musical ensembles, and even as early as the 17th century, white
plantation-owners had begun enlisting slaves to play in esteemed and often lucrative
orchestras. "This mutual musical compatibility, as well as the rapidly acquired musical
literacy of slave instrumentalists and vocalists, hastened the emergence in the second half
of the eighteenth century of a national popular music that was no longer either Portuguese
or African but distinctively Brazilian," the Lundu (Fryer 2000, 2). This initiated a pattern
of cross cultural musical collaboration that would encourage synthesis of African and
European beats into uniquely Brazilian musical genres such as samba and its Carnival-oriented institutions, the samba schools.

Around the turn of the 20th century, communities of recently emancipated slaves began to form on and around the hazardous hillsides of Rio de Janeiro, and routinely gathered together in their leisure time to "make music, dance, and worship the orishas at homes of old Bahian Matriarchs respectfully called 'Tias'" (McGowan and Pessanha 1998, 22). Poor neighborhoods settled into "hillside shantytowns [favelas]." and it was in this setting, although not without the influence of outside musicians, that samba harmonized into a distinct genre. A wave of bohemian intellectualism during this time placed interested upper-class literati and musicians with the "true Brazilians" of the favelas, and in early phases of samba, "the favela dwellers and sambistas of Rio de Janeiro played a leading, but not an exclusive, role. Among those involved were blacks and whites (and, or course, mestiços), as well as a few gypsies also a Frenchman here or there...Cariocas4 and Baianos, intellectuals and politicians" (Vianna 1999, 112). In 1928, the first official escola de samba, or samba school was formed, calling itself Deixa Falar, or "let them talk," in response to conservative critique of their music, which glorified the lifestyle of the malandro.5 The group hailed from the favela, Estácio de Sá, and had become known through their instant classic, and incidentally, the first recorded samba, "Pelo Telefone," in 1917.

The 1920's witnessed international dissemination of samba and a general samba craze, supported by radio broadcasting and the adoption of samba and the escolas as

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4 Inhabitants of Rio de Janeiro

5 A malandro personifies a Brazilian romantic, (male) bohemian ideal, characterized by endearing drinking, gambling, womanizing and general debauchorous carousing.
official fixtures of Rio Carnival. In the 1930’s, under the regime of dictator Getulio Vargas and his “Estado Nóvo [New State]” (Skidmore 1999, 113), Brazil was instilled with nationalist doctrine from the ground up. The cultural programs created by Gustavo Capanema, Vargas’ Minister of Education, were in need of a vehicle through which to disseminate and cultivate their nationalist discourse. Almost simultaneously with the 1933 publication of Gilberto Freyre’s The Masters and the Slaves, offering a “positive evaluation of racial mixing as Brazil’s distinctive national characteristic,” samba music from these mixed masses became transformed overnight into “national music” (Vianna 1999, 41). This led to the adoption of the favela-based samba schools into Carnival’s official institutional infrastructure. The tradition has evolved such that each contemporary samba school, which still typically represents an urban favela neighborhood, selects an annual theme for an all-encompassing competition of musical performance, costume, content and overall theatricality. The theme is incorporated into several dozens of decorated floats and wings, or alas, each with a distinct but connected sub-theme, up to thousands of costumed performers, and the lyrics to the music, sung in unison by the entire samba school as the bateria (drumming section) provides the energetic and reverberating drumbeat.

The basic structure of any samba school comprises a few traditional sections: the Directorate; the mestre sala and porta bandeira, a couple, which includes a female waving her school’s flag and her male escort, who together introduce the samba school to the audience during the Carnival procession; the ala das baianas, an ala generally reserved for community mothers and grandmothers, who dress in intricate gowns in tribute to the female Bahian slaves who working in the kitchens on plantations in the Northeast; and the
bateria, the ala of drummers. There is also the all-important role of the Carnavalesco, the
creative director responsible for ultimate artistic decisions, including music, dance and
visuals. Today, this job, along with some others, is sometimes contracted out of the local
favela community, although many samba schools still rely mainly on internal experts and
resources. After Carnival, the music from the top ranking schools is compiled into CDs of
Carnival enredos, or themed samba music with lyrics. Due to the sheer size of the larger
Rio samba schools, a full, school-wide rehearsal is almost never possible, but rather
practices for each of the different alas occur throughout the year. These schools of samba
not only provide structure to Carnival but also function as social support organizations in
their local neighborhoods, offering various community services throughout the year. After
school programs for children and Carnival preparations consume the entire year between
pre-Lenten performances, as samba school communities develop and learn music, create
visual displays and practice for months. Fundraising is another key function, as costs
incurred by the samba schools to realize a successful Carnival performance can be
staggering. Throughout the years, support for the schools has come from diverse sources,
including illegal favela ‘animal bankers’ (gamblers) and drug dealers, to the League of
Independent Samba Schools (LIESA), and government and commercial sponsors. In
Carnival 2005, the United Nations sponsored Portela, one of the most famous of the samba
schools, to popularize the theme of the international Millennium Development Goals
(MDGs).

The samba school tradition had spread to Carnival celebrations all over Brazil by
1950, and in 1984, the municipal government of Rio built the official parade ground for the
schools, the Sambódromo, or Sambadrome. This took the procession of the largest and
most famous samba schools out of the streets, transforming Rio Carnival into more of a spectator sport. That same year, a loose coalition of the large Rio samba schools reconfigured to form LIESA, achieving an increase in the cut of Carnival revenues earned by the individual schools. The samba school mode has a strong presence in its city of birth, Rio de Janeiro, and although this model of celebration is quite widespread, there do exist significant regional differences that break with the competitive parade model. In some cities in the Northeast, such as Recife, Carnival revelers dance in the streets around giant float-operated sound systems, that blast samba, frevo and maracatu music from huge speakers. In Olinda, an old colonial city which neighbors Recife, it is difficult to navigate the steep narrow streets, and therefore smaller street blocos, bands, and local samba schools provide entertainment for a much more inclusive crowd, quite different from the highly organized performative celebration of the Rio procession. In Salvador da Bahia, Carnival is also celebrated in the street. In this city known for its Trios Eléctricos, the blocos AfroS, musical groups with strong Afro-Brazilian traditions, dominate street performances and drum processions during Bahian Carnival. Regardless of regional variations in style, Carnival is celebrated throughout much of Brazil (and internationally), and samba, as its main heartbeat, has become a symbol of Brazilian national unity.

As discussed in the Introduction and Chapter 6, relatively little research has been conducted on what I have therefore called the undocumented – but extremely important – role of women in the organization and production of Carnival events. Some historic information is available on the websites of LIESA and the larger samba schools, dating back to the establishment of each school. From this data, it is clear that official leadership

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6 An excellent presentation of street Carnival in Rio in earlier days is provided in the 1959 film Black Orpheus, directed by Marcel Camus.
of the schools (e.g., the samba school Presidencies) is male dominated. On the other hand, information from the schools suggests that women were not only present from the beginning, but extremely important. For example, in describing its own establishment, the Mangueira samba school talks of musical get togethers in the favelas:

... deserving the greatest attention were those promoted by the Bahian ladies [senhoras baianas], all known as Aunts [tias]. Tia Gracinda, Tia Sadata ... these were some of the tias, all exercising a leadership that was so strong that it was no exaggeration to say that matriarchy prevailed in the black community. One of the male samba dancers, Didi da [of] Gracinda, had that name because he was the husband of Tia Gracinda. ( )

A number of these women are also members of the Directorates (although generally not as President) and command sizeable alas, as well as generally running the community outreach programs and performing other administrative functions on behalf of the schools. One of my field respondents, Tia Surica, plays precisely that role, as did the grandmother of another, Enrique (his grandmother was Dona Zica, spouse of Cartola, one of the founders of the Mangueira samba school). However, not all women had such success. Dona Ivone Lara, who has been described as the first female samba composer, had to put out her early music under a cousin's name in the 1940s, because of the extent of prejudice against the notion of women playing such a role.

At this time, the President of one of the largest samba schools, Império Serrano, is Dona Neide Coimbra, who is discussed in Chapter 6. There is also one very successful Carnavalesca, Rosa Magalhães of the Imperatriz samba school, and a co-Carnavalesca, Marcia Lavia, of the Salgueiro school. Although not directly related to Carnival performances, one of the grand women of the Mangueira samba school until her recent death, Dona Neuma Goncalves, developed very creative community outreach activities,
What is needed is a consciousness about gender and a substantial shift over the past decade and a half... are more symbolic than substantive. Women's lives over the past decade and a half... are more symbolic than substantive shifts into concrete rights. A century of the advances in women's abstract rights into concrete rights. Why the advances in women's abstract rights into concrete rights. Why have they evolved over the past few decades? One of the most comprehensive studies...

The challenge for Brazil and for Latin American countries is in turn... considering all the other advances noted above and concludes that it does...

Sciences... While the view asks the rhetorical question whether this matters very much... of special secretaries for racial equality and women (and two state governors, political... Deputy are female, as well as four female Federal Ministers (of whom two are in charge...

As of 2003, only 3.1 percent of Brazil's Federal Senators and 9 percent of Federal... participation rates in political office of any country in the region (Alvarez 1999). Him and most extensive feminist movements in Latin America, it also has one of the lowest participation rates in political office for women (hereafter, 2002)...

In Brazil, and others have noted the fact that while Brazil has one of the oldest... average earnings of 66 percent of what men do for similar jobs. This one of the largest gender wage gaps in the Latin American Region, with women on average earning only 66 percent of what men do for similar jobs. This one of the largest gender wage gaps in the Latin American Region, with women on average earning only 66 percent of what men do for similar jobs. This one of the largest gender wage gaps in the Latin American Region, with women on average earning only 66 percent of what men do for similar jobs. This one of the largest gender wage gaps in the Latin American Region, with women on average earning only 66 percent of what men do for similar jobs.

Concomitant Gender Issues

Suggestions scope for considerable future research on the subject... words. The real that this kind of information is not available in any organized form... such as a successful literacy program that enables children to read and write by using swear...
commitment to advancing women's rights that penetrates all policy areas. (Htun 2002, 8)

My research has not been designed to focus on gender gaps. On the other hand, to the extent that it does focus on Brazilian women, this background is intended to provide some basic information which may be helpful in understanding the context within which they live. That context might best be described as one of (i) great advances over the past few years, a point noted by many of my respondents, but still (ii) one in which there remain some very serious challenges facing women, especially in the areas of health, violence and wage practices in the labor market, and also (iii) one in which constructive solutions probably lie both in the area of policy and more subtle work on gender socialization issues, in which Carnival and the samba schools may have a small but important role to play, as discussed in Chapter 5.
4. Semiotic Value of Carnival for Women in Brazil

What is the relevance of Carnival to Brazilian women, both those who engage actively through the samba schools, blocos and other groups in the production of the annual Carnival performances, as well as those who simply participate in Carnival as a once-a-year holiday event? Anthropological literature is replete with warnings regarding over-generalizing about other cultures, or about ‘all women’ as a group (Alvarez 1990, Brettel and Sargent 2001, Butler 1990, Gailey 2000, Goldstein 2003, Westfried 2002, among others). Post-modernists, including many feminist anthropologists, caution further that ‘reality’ is very much a construct of the social scientist, and this clearly poses special constraints the further afield one gets from one’s own race, class or gender. Mindful of these warnings, I have nonetheless attempted to distill some of the theoretical implications of my research on women in the Brazilian samba schools and Carnival.

One of the most interesting and under-researched questions I set out to answer in this study concerns how Brazilian women themselves feel about the increasingly more explicit sexual representations of their gender that one observes in the national and international media coverage of Carnival. Does the sexualization of the Brazilian female identity and the sale of that image as emblematic of Carnival and Brazilian culture offend female nationals, or is it an accepted feature of the annual festivities? The most extravagant examples of these images come from the large Rio samba schools. One could hypothesize that the fact that not many women are found in top leadership positions in these samba schools (e.g., presidents, carnavalecso or artistic directors) has something to
do with the way women are represented, but my interview respondents presented more complex explanations.

Although most respondents, especially the social scientists, were not sure about the specifics of samba school gender politics, they clearly recognized the element of gender stereotyping present in both samba lyrics and Carnival performances.

**Antonia:** I think it is a kind of exploitation of sexuality and like as if the woman doesn’t have another value, only the body, I don’t agree with it.

**Heloísa:** Women get their power because they fit into the stereotype about women, beautiful body – in the case of Brazil it is the *mulata*, and this gives them their day in the limelight.

**Katia:** While some women perform other roles, there are also women presenting as sexual symbols. The latter is so much the case that you do not really get to hear anything about the women themselves, just the beautiful bodies ... You definitely do hear [criticisms of this]. TV programs, some feminists, radio programs – it’s often even the men who raise the issue – lament that women are considered in Carnival as sexual symbols and it becomes a topic of discussion. But this is not all that widespread ... and then Carnival comes and everyone says how beautiful, how wonderful.

**Tereza:** There in Rio and São Paulo they are more accepting of more explicit sexuality [compared with the Northeast]. There are people with a more polluted mind. There are also people who see a beautiful woman and respect her. There are people who take advantage, others with respect.

**Vanessa:** Well obviously it [the depiction of women during Carnival] is sexist. Women are mostly portrayed as male fantasies. They wear very little clothing and are very sexual ... you can see that people are not there for their brains, for what they really are.

Lisa Jesse reviewed samba lyrics from 1920 to 1945 and identified three main stereotypical depictions of the Brazilian female identity. The first is the “Amelia”, the hardworking, supportive and ever-loyal housewife. Another is the hyper-sexualized, brown-skinned and promiscuous *mulata*, and the last is the female embodiment of Afro-Brazilian deities (Jesse 1996). The “Amelia” image is not featured very much in
contemporary Carnival,\textsuperscript{7} but the \textit{mulata} (as well as the super-tanned Caucasian version) and the \textit{baiana} representative of Afro-Brazilian traditions are constants in the celebrations.\textsuperscript{8}

In Carnival processions over the past 15-20 years, especially those put on by the Rio samba schools, there is an obvious steady progression in the amount and extent of nudity among female performers and participants. Women costumed only in a modest sprinkling of gold dust or body paint have become commonplace in Carnival celebrations. In 1988, Seu Tinguinha, a \textit{bateria} director of the Mangueira samba school complained about this trend:

> It’s a disgrace, all that nudity. It doesn’t have anything to do with us sambistas. And it’s all because of television and tourists...Any day now there’s going to be points awarded for naked women. (Guillermoprieto 1991, 229)

Although I was initially inclined to believe that a significant number of Brazilian women would share Seu Tinguinha’s sentiments, I learned that although all of my female field respondents acknowledged this aspect of Carnival and also expressed frustration with sexism in Brazil, most stated that they either did not take strong offense over the sexually explicit representations of females or, as Vanessa explained, “it’s just that that’s not really the point.” Most respondents also expressed the view that Carnival is meant to be a unifying and celebratory event, and therefore to emphasize negativity or divisiveness would defeat the main purpose, and many view the exhibitions of female nudity as a personal choice belonging individually to those women. Some of the following interview excerpts illustrate these nuanced perspectives:

\textsuperscript{7} The samba “Amélia” was, however, played in the 1941 Carnival celebration in Rio de Janeiro.

\textsuperscript{8} Carvalho (1999) also discusses some of these depictions in his study of Black identities in Brazilian popular music, although his primary focus is on race rather than gender.
Janete: ...My personal perception is not very positive. It pretty much reflects how Brazilians are. Women there are sort of like an enfeito [beauty display], but at the same time I think that women enjoy [Carnival]...I personally don’t find it offensive...I think it’s a personal choice of the women to be there and exposing their bodies and being, whether it’s a sex object or a decoration, it seems their role is very decorative, any of these women. But it’s their choice and they consider it an honor, so personally I don’t care one way or another...I love Carnival!

Vanessa: ...Its less of a problem than it sounds like [female nudity in Carnival]...things are different during Carnival....I am sensitive to sexist behavior – it really gets on my nerves, but during Carnival, it’s really, it’s more – I see it under a different light...[Carnival] is an exaggeration...as people wear costumes, it is like that...Maybe Carnival reflects how society sees women – but not really...there are exaggerations...it’s just not for real. It is more like a play...

Since sexual stereotyping is by no means an insignificant circumstance, it is important to analyze what are the semiotic dimensions of Carnival that Brazilian women seem to value so highly. All but one of my respondents professed to enjoy Carnival immensely. For Maité, Dona Da and Tia Surica, Carnival is not merely an annual festival, but rather a year-long ritual, or series of mini-rituals, in which they are almost continuously engaged, so their enthusiasm is understandable because Carnival plays such a central role in their lives. My social scientist respondents do not always have the opportunity to participate, especially those living outside of Brazil, but they invariably look forward to doing so when they can. Besides fun, Carnival seems to offer women some very important emotional returns to which they assign a much greater value. In other words, any negatives they see are far outweighed by the positives. I classify these positives into three categories:

(i) opportunities for inversion or escape from daily ritual and uncensored expression of one’s own sexuality; (ii) opportunities to experience feelings of community and human interconnectedness in a society that is rapidly transforming towards individualism that places special strains on women; and (iii) for some, the reaffirmation of cultural heritage.
Theory of Social Inversion

Diverse analytical models have been applied to the task of understanding the place and importance of popular festivals, including carnivals, for the societies that create them. What needs do these festivals fulfill? Here I will engage Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory concerning symbolism/significance of carnival in relation to overall societal functioning and its importance as a forum for satiric social inversion. His ideology corresponds to a literary tradition in which a preoccupation with the folk culture of the masses became popular among liberal Russian intellectuals and philosophers in the beginning of the twentieth century and through the era of the Russian Revolution. During this time, certain scholars (Zelenin, Trubetzkoy, Jakobson, Bogatyrev and Propp) became fascinated with examining the experiences of common man, mainly in relation to his denial of laughter and humor as imposed on him by dominant culture, a pattern reflected in the Soviet state’s censorship of literary satire.

Bakhtin, who was highly influenced by the intellectual tradition championed by the French Renaissance writer Francois Rabelais in the 16th century, contends that popular festivals function by diverting the energy of the lower masses of society, transformed from revolution into comic relief. During the socially allotted time and space of carnival, a "new mode of man’s relation to man is elaborated. One of the essential aspects of this relation is the ‘unmasking’ and disclosing of the unvarnished truth under the veil of false claims and arbitrary ranks” (Bakhtin 1984, x). This allowance provides participants with an opportunity to “blow off steam” and thus can be a crucial social mechanism for the outlet of possibly revolutionary popular energy. Bakhtin stresses “a striking peculiarity of

9 Author’s quotation.
carnival laughter, "its indissoluble and essential relation to freedom" (Ibid., 89 and xxii).

In many cases, this freedom comes from the liberating concession to behave in ways that are not considered acceptable in the realm of one's everyday social niche.

In a small Brazilian town, where "everyone knows everyone else" (Prado 1995, 78) and therefore very precise expectations become attached to individual behavior, the chance to put on a costume and break with the reality-defining boundaries of those social designations is an exhilarating relief:

Carnival... provides another opportunity to escape from the control that the city exercises over its population: the great number of masked people, clowns, men dressed as women, women dressed as men, faces covered and completely disguised...in a place like Cunha,\textsuperscript{10} where everyone knows everyone else and their activity is absolutely controlled...this seems to be a typical inversion for Carnival: to become unknown, anonymous, unrecognizable. (Ibid.)

The need for occasional social inversion seems to be no less great in the highly populated metropolitan centers, where Carnival also represents an opportunity to reverse customary class, race and gender relations. One of my field respondents offered an anecdotal description of this exact situation for a homosexual male friend of hers who came to Carnival in Recife:

\textbf{Dona Da.} They put on costumes, it's very liberal, and there are women and men, homosexuals, everything comes out. You can't imagine the number of homosexuals who participate ... I have a friend ... one year he came to parade in Elefante [a samba group in Recife]. He had a beautiful costume, of Madame Bovary, you would have thought it was the most beautiful thing in the world ... and let me tell you something else, he's a military person who works in the armed forces on top of everything else. There's his private life, with these beautiful costumes ... and he came here to parade.

\textsuperscript{10} Cunha is a small town in the state of São Paulo.
Applying Bakhtin’s theory, Carnival allows Brazilians a chance to reverse the respective circumstances of their lives. For example, in large cities such as Rio de Janeiro where the samba school tradition belongs historically to the poor favela neighborhoods, these communities achieve extreme satisfaction and pride from the reversal of their ordinary social rank, as they parade the fruits of their hard, yearlong work, with those “superior” to them not only observing and appreciating, but enthusiastically joining in the festivities.

In line with Bakhtin’s model, this need for comedic diversion is most powerful among the most powerless communities. In Brazilian favelas, one finds some of the most tragic and horrific urban slum conditions in which “there would be no need for carnival in the first place if there were not monstrous things that needed to be banished and forgotten” (Schepers-Hughes 1992, 480). In Bakhtin’s discourse, these “monstrous things” refer to institutional domination of popular masses by a cultural elite. In contemporary Brazil, this term could apply to the cruel hardships of social and economic deprivation among the urban poor in a society characterized by asymmetrical, interconnecting systems of gender, ethnic, and socio-economic hierarchy. American anthropologist Richard Parker, who researched and lived in Brazil during his doctoral project on gender and sexuality in that country, adopts a very similar definition of Carnival and asserts that it is an “essential opposition to the world of daily life, as a kind of ritual reversal or rebellion in which social life is turned on its head and time played back to front” (Parker 1991, 140). Some of my respondents highlighted the “ritual reversal” function of Carnival. One mentioned the following link between Carnival and the neighborhoods that are involved.

**Janete:** It is something that unites poor communities and it’s an outlet for all the things they are not. It’s the one event a year where their work, what they do, is the center of attention of everyone.”
Social Inversion and Women

It is clear that the social inversion model is a popular tool for carnival analysis, but what is not obvious from the aforementioned literature is the impact this "ritual reversal" in Carnival has specifically on the lives of Brazilian women. In other words, what conditions, specific to women, might create for them an intense need to "blow off steam?"

As one would expect, the answer to this question varies somewhat depending on socio-economic status. Life conditions deteriorate the lower one descends in the Brazilian class structure, and although women of all socio-economic classes have to contend with the effects of racism, sexism and domestic violence, poorer women may bear the heaviest burdens. Parker observes the following about the general female condition in Brazilian society:

The ideology of gender, which works almost relentlessly to subjugate women, has only been countered in relatively limited ways by the processes of modernization and urbanization, and feminist thought has hardly had any impact beyond a small, elite segment of society. The social, political, and economic institutions that work together to minimize the opportunities for choice and self-determination on the part of women from all walks of life in Brazil continue to function with ruthless efficacy, and the fact that some changes have begun to take place among the most privileged sectors of Brazilian society must not be allowed to obscure the degree of oppression that still characterizes the lives of the vast majority of women within a profoundly patriarchal social order. (Parker 1991, 169-70)

Although many of the same gender patterns cut across class boundaries, a closer examination of the specific manifestations and particularities of these issues as they play

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11 Here I address, for the second and final time in this study, the dangers associated with generalizing about the condition/experiences of some Brazilian women to represent the experiences of all Brazilian women. This is not what I intend, rather I will use the term "Brazilian women" as illustrative of the sample of women I have personally interviewed for the purposes of this thesis, as well as those groups of women whose lives are the central focus of the anthropologists and sociologists whose works I cite.
out in the respective lives of lower income vs. middle and upper class women in Brazil is important to a meaningful discussion of the theory of inversion.


The pattern of authority ... is patriarchal, characterized by the man’s authority over the women and the elders’ [parents’] authority over the young ... Male authority is mainly supported by a gender system that places women in a subordinate position. (Sarti 1995, 124-5)

This fact is clear not only in the literature on gender relations in Brazil, but it was also brought out in the dialogue with my field respondents. Those of my interview subjects who belong to the lower or lower-middle income brackets offered replies to my questions about what they considered to be the most serious gender issues for women in Brazil today, which varied considerably from those provided by other respondents. Concerning the gender issues that are of most impact on economically less fortunate women, the following interview excerpts reinforce secondary ethnographic research:

**Tereza:** Besides general problems of violence, violence against women is a big problem. In Ceará, many women die, in the interior there are assassinations, husbands killing wives, problems like that...violence today involves everything. It’s in the streets, it’s in the home, it involves drugs, tourism, prostitution, everything...

Upper-middle and upper class social scientist respondents, speaking about women of lesser means, mentioned the same issues.

**Carla:** Violence, I think you see a lot of it but...I think women in the lower classes probably suffer a lot more in terms of, you know, going out and getting pregnant and having kids, and the father doesn’t support them.

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12 Seven of the women I interviewed belong to upper middle/upper income classes; five are from lower/lower-middle income classes.

13 A State in Northeast Brazil.
These women consistently name issues such as domestic violence, infant mortality, and domestic and public sexual inequality as the main challenges less fortunate Brazilian women must endure. My oldest respondent (Dona Da) answered forcefully and without hesitation to my question on the main problems faced by Brazilian women today, "Respect!"

*Sexuality, Color, and Stigma among Northeast Brazilian Women* is another work that contributes to the body of literature examining the rigid, antiquated, and still predominant system of female subordination under male control and the intimidation resulting from the serious consequences faced by women who break with accepted (and often sexual) behavioral regulations associated with the roles they are assigned in accordance with class and skin color. The flagrant double standard of sexual activity in place “despite considerable social change, [perpetuates a situation in which] a woman’s reputation for propriety remains, as the aphorism has it, ‘white as milk, easily dirtied’” (Rebhun 2004, 194). Wives are to be hardworking and faithful to a painstaking extreme, where their husbands are conventionally excused (and often expected) to partake in extramarital affairs. The punishment warranted an unlucky female caught in the midst of the same activity is most often physical, severe, and considered a duty of the man in order to restore appropriate power structure to a relationship and protect his own public dignity.

Many Brazilian women are socialized into this system at a young age and must live by these strict and gendered double standards, often out of regard for personal safety. The adversities characteristic of the life of a poor Brazilian female only multiply as one moves out of the home and into the public sphere.
In 2003, anthropologist Donna Goldstein published her work *Laughter out of Place: Race, Class, Violence, and Sexuality in a Rio Shantytown* accomplishing in text that which “Cidade de Deus” does in film.\(^4\) Goldstein worked with a *favela* ironically named *Felicidade Eterna* (Eternal Happiness) to document in raw detail, a situation so dire that all that the members of the community can do in the midst of such conditions is laugh. This reminds one of the ironic lyrics of a famous 1930 samba, “se a sorte fosse igual ninguém ria neste mundo – i.e. luck were even no one would laugh in this world”, which also suggests the concept of laughter as a response to tribulation and inequity. In *Death without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Northeast Brazil*, anthropologist Nancy Schepet-Hughes writes about the stark choices poor women face in deciding which children to nurture and which to let die. She relates the tragic story of one woman who, determined to escape from grief over the loss of one child, goes off to celebrate Carnival, only to have another die while she is celebrating (Schepet-Hughes 1992). These stories illustrate Bakhtin’s and Rabelais’ notions about the role of laughter and tragedy-based comic relief in the lives of subjugated social classes. In Goldstein’s particular *favela*, women’s lives are stifled at an early age, there are few if any opportunities for community organization, and upward mobility seems all but impossible to achieve. “The women introduced here are so far removed from the economic transformation taking place in Brazil that their particular *favela* has not yet even been visited by global corporations attempting to harness cheap home labor” (Goldstein 2003, 15).

\(^4\) Known in English as “City of God,” directed by Fernando Meirelles and Kátia Lund.
Middle and Upper-Income Women. We have seen that the lives of poor Brazilian women are wrought with the dangerous and tragic obstacles that not only impede social, intellectual and financial self-determination and betterment, but also threaten mere survival. The seriousness of issues like domestic violence, gang and drug-related street violence, and infant mortality diminishes substantially as one moves up the socio-economic ladder. This might lead to the conclusion that women of more privileged social ranks do not have much to worry about, and thus, for our purposes here, do not have as much of a need to “cut loose” from the trials and tribulations of day-to-day existence through annual participation in Carnival. If this were true, we would see only lower-class individuals partaking in the annual national celebration, and indeed, this is the way that street carnival evolved in many Brazilian cities, as an activity designated for and created by the poor communities who were denied entrance to the chic masquerade balls and parties sponsored by the upper class. However, in the past few decades, Carnival has come to represent an event during which there is a tremendous mixing of people from all different races and classes. So the question becomes, what satisfaction of needs for inversion or release do socio-economically more fortunate women derive from participation in Carnival?

A 2002 study of middle-class Brazilian families offers some insight into the evolution of intra-family relations and gender roles. Alex Huxley Westfried focuses on what he calls the “democratization of the family,” a pattern by which the patriarchal foundation that informs the highly gender-defined roles of individuals within the nuclear family is steadily eroding as women achieve more and more access to professional careers. The process of legal and institutional democratization enables women to take advantage of new possibilities in terms of careers, attainment of legal share in family assets, benefits like
maternity leave and better day care options. While these are positive changes, any significant social progress will birth a new set of issues, and there is no exception here. One of these is the shift in parent-adolescent relations, a pattern by which children become less likely to obey their parents. As mothers still have the primary responsibility for childrearing, the burden falls most heavily on them (Westfried 2002). Another frustration faced by many well-educated Brazilian professional women concerns the disparity in salaries compared with those of men filling the exact same position. Women still earn approximately one-third less than do their professional male counterparts, and fewer women reach top leadership positions (World Bank 2002).

While there may be important policy and legal advances occurring (which began a few decades ago), there seems to be a lag in the shift of social attitudes that would accommodate the consequential effects in the home of having both a career mother and father. This leaves many Brazilian women struggling to balance professional and home responsibilities. There is some loosening of the influence of the time-old family structure by which “the woman is considered the ‘head of household,’ [and] the man is considered the ‘head of the family’” (Sarti 1995, 125), but the responsibilities of the household still invariably fall on the women’s shoulders. Traditional notions of familial gender roles, or what activities pertain to the feminine and masculine parties in a Brazilian household, retain a very strong influence. So it becomes a story of, yes, it is fine if she wants to get a career, so long as she can still manage to be a “legitimate woman” in terms of her responsibilities to the family.
The tensions Westfried identifies as a result of the “democratization of the family” on the one hand, and the process of sexual democratization of the workplace on the other, came out very clearly in the interviews with several of my respondents.

**Vanessa:** ...if you look at the main Brazilian companies or if you look within the Brazilian ministries or the governors and city halls, you won’t have as many women as men – that’s it...I mean I think that is a good indication of how things are not really even...you don’t have as many women as men occupying leadership positions...women earn much less for the same positions...

**Patricia:** I have a large role with the [Brazilian] education system...its not like some of the countries in Latin America where women don’t go to school, that’s not the case, we have a good balance between women and men in school. In some situations we have more women than men in school ... [but] in the labor market women still don’t have a strong place...usually there is an inequality in salaries, in opportunities, although sometimes women are much more well prepared than the men. That happens a lot in Brazil...And the men think they are being protective, but it’s very machista.

**Janete:** I think overall Brazil is still a very sexist country...even small things as me not having my husband’s last name still catches attention there...the sexism you see there is very subtle and it’s generally accepted by both male and female...it’s interesting how accepted it is after lunch or dinner that the women get up and go to the kitchen if there are no housekeepers around and the men just sit around watching TV and doing whatever it is that they do, its just very accepted...it’s very unusual for the roles to be reversed...and its so embedded in Brazil that they don’t even realize it ... You don’t see [this] breaking down ... I think I’ve seen more and more of a trend among the upper classes, of women complaining as they have joined the labor market that they’re doing both work, double duty ... but overall women still seem prepared to accept that this is the natural order of things.

**Carla:** ...it is generally the women who care for the kids...the woman’s role in Brazil, first of all, I think is in transition and if you look over time you find that more and more women are studying, going on to get advances degrees and to work outside the home, which is something that is new. In the past most women were teachers, if anything...now you start seeing more women who are lawyers, professionally, doctors. Having said that...women probably earn about 60-70 percent of what men do for the same position...While I think a lot of people already accept professional women, there’s probably still an expectation among men ...
... that household responsibilities, whether they are carried out by women or by people hired by women, like many people in a certain group do, they are still a woman's responsibility. So women have to juggle with the fact that if they are going to work and be professional, they still have to deal with all this other stuff, the kids and this and that ... Because, at least this is what I feel, there starts to be a lot of appreciation that women can be intelligent and can contribute, but they're still expected to be women, and they're still expected to be feminine, so there's that spin on it ... women are still expected to take care of the kids, the house...and that's equal, almost everyone, men and women feel the same way...

**Dona Da:** Today I'm a widow. My husband died almost 28 years ago. I was married in '59 and came to live in Olinda ... My husband was a square [quadrado – stubborn/thick headed] ... women were to have children and take care of the house .... Today you know how it is, when a young man falls in love with a girl, he asks right away, 'where do you work?' [because now he expects her to do both]

If Carnival provides a cultural space for freedom of expression, with the poor dressing up like kings and queens, and the rich like servants, it may just be that for many women this represents acting out, with humor, the way they feel about the roles they are expected to play in their everyday lives.

**Personal Expressions of Sexuality**

The discussion of inversion above focuses on negative factors, or at least challenges, which Brazilian women face in everyday life and against which there may be a strong felt need to “blow off steam”. However, it is important to recognize that many women derive a great sense of power through their sexuality and the opportunity to publicly present and own their sensual femininity during Carnival. Certainly some of my respondents, both among the social scientists and the active participant-organizers of Carnival events, seem themselves to have internalized the notion of the highly sensual Brazilian female. Donna Goldstein describes a pattern among her upper and middle class female friends by which these women “honestly enjoyed the attention of flirtatious
exchanges, and that being publicly recognized as sexually desirable is important for them.

Being ignored is considered true punishment—a fate worse than death” (Goldstein 2003, 232).

Consistent with Goldstein’s observation, some of my respondents’ expressed personal views on the role of Carnival as an un-stigmatized space in which to express their sexuality in a way that makes them feel empowered.

**Heloisa:** Women get their power [during Carnival] because they fit into the stereotype about women having a beautiful body, in the case of Brazil, it is the *mulata*, and this gives them their day in the limelight…it’s the religion of the naked, gorgeous, beautiful bodies that women have…it’s women as a kind of object, although they are very powerful during Carnival in this traditional sexual role.

**Maïté:** The women try to emulate this image of the sexy *mulata* because in Brazil, it’s a reflection of how women should be feminine, even my lesbian friends, you would not be able to tell they were lesbians as you would here [London] or in the U.S. because they adhere to the same images as heterosexual women.

Men deeply involved in the world of Carnival note the same pattern, and their observations are also valuable here:

**Enrique:** I think women are empowered in Carnival because they like to feel like they are an example of how to be a woman—and there is a very important distinction here—the women show a lot of flesh but it is because their anatomy is seen as beautiful, and they are made to feel beautiful and comfortable about it—it is not something to make them look cheap…There is an important understanding of look but do not touch—you are to appreciate the female from a distance and appreciate the act of being female. And there is a kind of duality to this image—they are beautiful but also very strong.

**James:** Regardless of the theme, you have to impose that *negra/mulata gustosa* [sensual]…Carnival really reinforces…what Brazilians think is the essence of the Brazilian woman—feminism cannot penetrate that. Freyre codified the image of the lusciousness of the black woman. Even paulistas [referring to blonde Brazilian women of European descent] need to imitate the *mulata*…because that becomes the paradigmatic beautiful woman…[even] upper-middle class women…would dress extremely
inappropriately for upper class women – they dressed as *mulatas* to conform to ideas about sexual women ... [Carnival] is a moment of...suspensing honor and propriety rules...this permits women to have power and sexuality.

In his PhD research on male homosexuality and gender issues in relation to Carnival in Rio, James describes a pattern by which homosexual men, often from the interior rural areas of Brazil, flee to large metropolitan cities such as Rio to seek refuge from the oppressive small town stigma attached to open homosexuality. These sexual refugees form tight-knit communities that thrive and secure solid bonds out of a common need for acceptance. Many who cannot permanently relocate to large urban areas try at least to take advantage of the freedom Carnival allots homosexual men in an opportunity to cross-dress and be open and public with their sexuality. He notes another interesting pattern by which it is perfectly acceptable for (presumably) heterosexual men to admire the beauty and sexuality of male cross-dressers within the context of Carnival. According to James, “...men may find drag stars to be alluring because they perform as perfect imitations of pervasive masculine stereotypes of the ideal woman.” In this sense, homosexual cross-dressers are not really expanding the milieu of sexual identities and roles that individuals can assume during Carnival, but rather, “in many ways they reinforce rather than upset the rigidly defined gender system” that is already firmly intact in Brazil (Green 1999, 5).

Although this is not along the focal trajectory of my study, since it pertains to men rather than women, I find it interesting to mention that some of my respondents believe that the sexual release Carnival offers men may be greater and more important than that which it offers women.

*Katia:* When you talk about women [and homosexuality], they normally are or they aren't. If they are lesbians, they assume it. Women assume what they are. It is more the men who do not assume. The women tend to
reveal in their day to day just who they are. So you don’t see women ‘coming out’ in Carnival because they are ‘out’ all the time, its more the men who seem to need this freedom to express what they tend to hide. Look, for male homosexuals, in the day to day they still in general have to behave like men. So Carnival is a liberating time for them. Women, no. If [a woman] is showing [lesbian tendencies] within a relationship, she’s showing it all year long.

While some women do derive a sense of liberating power from the sexuality of their Carnival time persona, that persona is an exaggeration of the sensuality Brazilian females are expected to possess year-round because they are seen to some extent as sexual beings generally by society. At the same time, social norms inhibit them from fully displaying that sensuality openly outside of Carnival. “This is the moment that [women] can have affairs ... you can have sexual relations ... women can have it with men without being a puta [prostitute] ... suspending honor and proprietary rules becomes a theme and permits women to have power and sexuality” (James interview). “The girls ... can play [brincar] and say improper things to people or flirt with the guys that they are after. They liberate themselves a little more than normal” (Parker 1991, 145). Commenting on how expectations about behavior during Carnival release women to behave in a more sexy manner, one respondent commented:

**Carla:** Granted in Rio everyone talks about the tangas [g-string bathing suit bottoms] and the bikinis ... but topless fashion never really caught on in Brazil ... The bikinis can be very small, but they have to be there ... Yet during Carnival, women show up without their tops on ... I don’t know to what extent you can say it’s that their inhibitions have gone down, and there’s some of that, but I think it’s almost the expectations. If you know that the majority of the women who you know are going to go without anything on, or in something very provocative, you don’t feel as bad ...and then Thursday, you’re back to the original bikinis on the beach.

As one might expect, there are of course dissenting opinions on the subject of whether women are anything but harmfully stereotyped as purely sexual objects for the
purposes of men through their Carnival depictions. After conducting research in the Brazilian city of Bom Jesus, anthropologist Nancy Schepers-notes that while “Carnaval is said not only to liberate the body but the female body in particular,” she had in fact observed “a carnaval largely designed for the pleasure of men and boys. The ‘female’ was liberated but only in male bodies or for the purpose of titillating male fantasies of sexual abundance and erotic abandon. The role of those women who do participate in carnaval is to undress not to cross-dress” (Schepers-Hughes 1994). On balance, however, it seems that, in the opinion of many Brazilian women, Carnival does provide an opportunity to bask in the attention of being seen as an emblem of beauty and to enjoy the greater freedom to express one’s sensuality, while for some homosexuals there is also at least a temporary shrinking of the distance they are sometimes forced to maintain between their annual public persona and their true sexual identity.

A Sense of Community

Both in discussions with respondents and in the literature, I detected an additional aspect of Carnival that may be quite important to women, which I call the opportunity to enjoy a sense of community and human interconnectedness, in the midst of a world which is becoming increasingly individualistic (v. communal). While family bonds are still very strong in Brazil, family sizes are decreasing and labor market mobility means that families are often separated as particularly the younger members move around in search of education and jobs. This shifts the social setting in which many women find themselves, compared with the times of their mothers, from one characterized by a close community of large families and long-time neighbors, to one of smaller families and therefore a reduced support system. For different reasons, having to do largely with the explosion of violence
which makes people afraid to venture out from their homes, life in poor low-income areas also seems to be characterized by a greater sense of isolation. Alvarez (1990) speaks of “the relative isolation of the domestic sphere to which women are often confined.” Perlman writes of “the ‘new sphere of fear’ [with which] comes less use of public space, less socializing among friends and relatives, decreased membership in community organizations, and less networking in general” (Perlman 2003, 17).

In the face of this growing individualism or isolation in day-to-day life, Carnival symbolizes human connections and community. Parker notes the “… emphasis on union … pressing up against other bodies in the crowd, feeling the physical contact, being pulled along by the flow of the group, the individual body merges with the collective body” (Parker 1991, 144). Dos Santos touches on the same point, describing Carnival as a “collective orgy”, which she means in a spiritual rather than sexual sense:

People are together in this festival, in their bodies and beyond them … It is this religious feeling of togetherness, wholeness, and belonging to something bigger than oneself … the rituals hold strong community links which in some way reach a wider public and explode in joy … the lack of disassociation one feels between an individual body and the collective body, exert a deep spell on the modern human beings who live within individual time. Carnival, therefore, has not lost its power of turning the world upside down. (Dos Santos 1999, 88)

As some respondents put it, “there’s a great human warmth, that’s Carnival” (Dona Da); “it was everyone together, family, friends, you have more fun when it’s a large group” (Tereza); “It’s a party in which everyone mixes together, all the races, poor and rich. So whoever is poor feels rich for the moment because he’s dancing next to rich people, and the rich experience contact with the ‘povo’ [common people]” (Katia); “Carnival is the greatest spiritual manifestation in the world … all dance with each other, all sing, all are affectionate with each other … because we are one human race” (Tote Gira).
Reaffirmation of Cultural Heritage

A requisite part in all samba school performances is played by the *alas das batanças*, or wing of the *batanças*, a group of older women from the community dressed in traditional costumes who remind audiences of the African origins of Carnival and pay homage to the female slaves who served in the Northeast plantations. However, the treatment of female cultural heritage in Bahian Carnival is somewhat more complex and it is on this subject that I focus here.

Earlier I mentioned the scarcity of literature dealing with gender issues and female roles in Brazilian Carnival. Here I will introduce one of the articles I did encounter which addresses this precise set of issues. In her article “Re-presenting Black Female Identity in Brazil: ‘Filhas d’Oxum’ in Bahian Carnival,” Carol Boyce Davies describes Carnival in Bahia as a form of Black African resistance in that Carnival becomes a time and space for oppressed groups to “invert representations of themselves [that] dominant groups produce and re-produce” (Rahier 1999, xiv). Davies identifies all-female Afro-Brazilian groups, such as the Filhas d’Oxum as a kind of gendered resistance within the overall racial resistance that characterizes many Bahian Carnival groups. A number of these groups are part of the Afro-Brazilian empowerment movement in Bahia and were born out of resistance to the exclusion Black Brazilians experienced when trying to participate in white, upper-class music groups and Carnival celebrations. In describing the origins of the well-known Afro-Brazilian group, Ilê-Ayé, one respondent explained that “they were established because of the discrimination in other blocos ... in which the only people who participated were light skinned ... Ilê Ayé [was] ... made to give opportunity so that Blacks could also enjoy and dance in Carnival in a *bloco*, since others did not want to
open” (Tote Gira). The pattern by which the Filhas de Oxum were born is very similar in that it is comprised of the women who were closely associated with the members of the exclusively male Filhos de Gandhi, a group whose purpose is to spread messages of peace. The females in the Filhos’ lives decided to create their own all-female group, once again out of resistance to exclusion, although in this instance the exclusion was gender-based.

Davies writes about the importance of participation in Carnival for these women, and also distinguishes between the Rio processions and Bahia street party models of Carnival. Pointing out some traditional stereotypical representations connected with the black Brazilian female, sexual, exotic and naked, Davies asserts that “these stereotyped representations of women and of carnival, marketed internationally, run counter to the complexity of black women’s actual participation in Rio Carnival itself as well as that of the rest of Brazil and of Salvador de Bahia in particular.” The Filhas d’Oxum perform to challenge and invert these common sexual representations by replacing them with images of “joy in femininity that emanate from the orisha Oxum” (Davies 1999, 49). Through their Carnival performances, the Filhas, and other female groups such as Banda Didá, have earned a popular space in which they can engage West African cultural heritage and transform it into a “ritual for political statements that critique dominant discourse of gender, race, and sexuality” (Ibid., 56). Since a myriad of different versions of the orisha Oxum exist, female performers have the freedom to embody any one of the several gender representations at their disposal, instead of just one or two, in this Carnival that provides women with a forum for ethnic empowerment.

Anthropologists Jacqueline Knorr and Barbara Meier, although examining Afro-Caribbean rather than Brazilian Carnival, identify similar processes of ethnic
empowerment for women in their 2000 work *Women and Migration: Anthropological Perspectives*. This study focuses on Carnival celebrations in Trinidad and Notting Hill, England. In Trinidad, much like in Salvador de Bahia, Carnival is very closely linked with West African culture, specifically Yoruba worship ritual. Knorr and Meier describe Caribbean Carnival preparation in a similar way to those who study Brazilian Carnival, in that the women are mostly in charge of organizational aspects such as costume making, a role the authors liken to the role of being in the home, the private domain. Men tend to have official control and leadership, and deal with the public aspects of carnival preparation. This model is very reminiscent of the familial gender roles in the Caribbean and Brazil. The family structure that places the woman in the private domain and men in the public seems to mirror, to a certain extent, gender relations within Brazilian samba schools, or in Caribbean Mas camps, where the preparatory stages of Carnival production take place within a community. In terms of what Carnival participation offers its female participants, Knorr and Meier recognize almost the same characteristics alive in Caribbean Carnival as Davies depicts in relation to Bahian Carnival. That is, the release offered in the form of “ethnic empowerment”. Carnival, in the Caribbean and much as in Bahia, provides women with “a platform for black social renewal, recognition, and...gender linked possibilities for creativity and ethnic empowerment...therein lies its dynamic power” (Knorr 2000, 116).
5. Carnival and the Popularization of Contemporary Social Issues

... having made significant advances in reforming the legal and policy framework [concerning gender], Brazil now [needs to] turn to changing societal gender roles and expectations so that women and men take advantage of the opportunities provided to them by the law and government policies. Different channels need to be used if gender-based societal expectations are to change, including the education system, the media, the family, peer groups, the community and cultural practices. These all play a part in socializing men and women and affect the choices they make over their lifetime. (World Bank 2002, ix)

The significance of Carnival in the lives of Brazilians is unquestionable, but what influence do the themes chosen and the presentations of the samba schools have on the way society conceptualizes race, class and gender issues? The largest Carnival celebrations in Rio include audiences of thousands who gather to watch samba school (consisting of several alas, all distinctively disseminating the same overarching theme) parade for 80 minutes each down the grand Sambódromo. Even those Brazilians who are not physically present for the parades are bombarded by local TV and print media coverage of the celebration, complete with descriptions and images of samba school themes. It is clear from an historical examination of Carnival that there have been times when the schools have explicitly chosen to popularize important social issues, ranging from race relations, current politics and pop culture, and even topics such as traffic safety. For the most part, however, the themes have not dealt with female gender issues. Almost all of my field respondents believe that annual samba school performances are not only appropriate for the popularization of contemporary issues, but also can be effective. To what extent should or could the schools introduce and disseminate themes of particular relevance to women?
An analysis of lyrics and thematic content of Carnival spanning the years between 1929 and 2005 is quite instructive, both for what is and is not said about contemporary socio-political and cultural issues. Authoritarianism and brutal dictatorship alternated with periods of liberalism and democracy throughout 1900s Brazil. Carnival received an enormous financial boost and official recognition by the federal Government in the 1930s under Getúlio Vargas, but this generosity had specific cultural management objectives (Williams 2001). “It was no accident, of course, that DIP, the agency in charge of all censorship, also handled public relations for the government...Each samba school, for example, had to clear with DIP its plans for its annual Carnival appearance” (Skidmore 1999, 118). This involved steering clear of criticisms of the regime or expressions of social discontent. Some of the most famous Carnival music of all time, such as Cidade Maravilhosa (Marvelous City, referring to Rio de Janeiro, introduced in the 1935 Carnival in Rio) reflects nothing about Brazil’s struggle in coping with the ramifications and effects of the Great Depression, industrialization, urbanization or periodic eras of sharp political conflict symptomatic of the historical moment. Vargas’ campaign to forge a sense of national identity and patriotism informed thematic decisions for Carnival organizers.

Nonetheless, over the years the lyrics of some of the greatest Carnival music have touched on, for example, the issues of poverty and inequality. During the 1930 procession in Rio, the Mangueira samba school performed “A Nossa Luta Sem Rancor [Our Fight without Bitterness]”, including lyrics such as: “Sou um triste operário, não posso bancar barão [I am a sad worker, I cannot afford to live like a baron]”... “Todo mundo acha graça de um pobre vagabundo, se a sorte fosse igual ninguém ria neste mundo, [Everyone finds amusement in a poor vagabond, if luck were equal, nobody would laugh in this world.]”
In 1960, one Carnival samba, "Favela Amarela (Yellow slum)" mocked the city authorities' decision to paint the slums dwellings yellow so that they would look better for the tourists: "Yellow slum, irony of life, paint the slum, make a watercolor of the colored misery of the favela amarela." More recently, in the February 2004 Carnival, a samba school sings plaintively that, "...eu não tenho endereço y por isso não te mereço [I don’t have an address and therefore do not deserve you]," in reference to stigmatization of life in the favelas, where shacks often have no addresses, and their inhabitants comprise the lowest echelon in the social machine. In 2004, the Acadêmicos do Grande Rio samba school picked up the theme of HIV Aids and the importance of safe sex in "Vamos Vestir a Camisinha, Meu Amor! [Let’s use a Condom, my Love!]." Reflecting global influences, in 2005, the Portela samba school selected the 2015 Millenium Development Goals (MDGs) as its theme, in cooperation with the United Nations.

Out of caution not to transform the celebration into a polarizing protest, Carnival lyrics rarely tackle controversial topics frontally. However, in 1988, the year that marked the centennial of the abolition of slavery in Brazil (May 13, 1888), samba schools from across the country expressed their dissatisfaction with racism and also took the opportunity to celebrate Afro-Brazilian heritage. This time, not only the Bahian Carnival blocos and other groups, but also some of the leading schools from Rio commented. The title of the music of the Mangueira samba school was "Cem anos de liberdade – Realidade ou ilusão, One hundred years of liberty – Reality or illusion." Another very famous school, Vila Isabel, dedicated its music to Zumbi, a famous figure in Afro-Brazilian history who led a resistance movement in the late 17th century ("Kizomba, Festa da Raça [Kizomba, Festival of the Race]").
The topics the samba schools select sometimes verge on public education. In response to alarming rates of automobile accidents and related deaths in Brazil, in 2004, the samba school Mocidade employed its 80 minutes in the limelight of the Sambódromo to address traffic safety. These are only a few examples of the potential that some samba schools are already engaging, to popularize important issues for mass consideration and consumption. Some interviewees named other entertainment media, such as the popular telenovelas (soap operas) as also having being extremely important for raising public awareness and initiating discourse on important social issues. These categories of media are powerful as educational tools precisely because of their entertainment value and hence their ability to engage and maintain popular interest. Culture, in its various forms of expression, becomes a very valuable vehicle through which to communicate with, educate, and influence large groups of people.

Music is an extremely important and individually moving cultural creation, and by virtue of this emotional power, “political and social movements [are] often expressed through song because of the license it gives [to] shape and force of molding public opinion” (Merriam 1964, 208). In The Expedience of Culture: Uses of Culture in the Global Era, George Yudice (2004) writes about this very juncture between entertainment and education, where culture lends itself constructively to the promulgation of information to the masses. The concept introduced here is that of ‘edutainment,’ defined by the American Heritage Dictionary as, “the art of learning through a medium that both educates and entertains.” Although the term is often used in relation to things like computer games designed to teach math, science and be fun for children, or programs such as Sesame Street, it has broader applicability. Many grass-roots development initiatives in
impoverished areas, in Brazil and internationally, invoke music, dance, drama and other cultural activities to further their objectives. For example, the Rio favela-based group Afro Reggae is “an NGO whose purpose is racial and class uplift through culture” (Yudice 2001.). Richard Parker also develops the idea of edutainment in his literature, illustrating to the importance of horizontal and participatory approaches to public communication and intervention, especially in relation to mass health education campaigns, such as those revolving around HIV and Aids.

While using distinct terminology, the relationship many of my interviewees described between samba school themes and societal issues, very much parallels the theoretical models of edutainment as discussed above and suggests a new forum for the popular consideration of important gender themes:

Janete: I think it brings awareness to the themes...It certainly puts [ideas] in people’s minds, some more than others. I do think that overall it does bring awareness

Tereza: ...it has a lot of impact, it’s very important, they’re themes that are important and the government thinks about them, but a lot of people aren’t focusing [but] when it becomes a Carnival theme then people pay a lot of attention.

Katia: I think the samba schools spend a great deal of time developing the ‘enredo,’ so the themes they pick, social issues or an important historical event that occurred, they are current topics which awaken something, which cause people to reflect a bit, and I think this is important. Here [in a small town in the Northeast], they sing about very local things, but the big schools pick really important current issues and the media is there and so the themes get picked up.

Lucia: For many years the themes were decided by the municipality of Rio...but for the past two decades or so, they have moved on to themes of more social importance. It opened up to issues that are much more relevant to the people – in the past they chose specific historical themes that people related to very little...now they are presenting the topics in a way that is more accessible to people’s everyday lives and concerns.
Tote Gira: Regarding themes which samba schools...select, like political, critical or any other kind, which serve to awaken the authorities to pay more attention to social questions, in my opinion, they should [do] more, and much more still. Carnival is the greatest popular manifestation that exists in the world, and our hopes, our desires, our criticisms should be seen through the arts in a manner which is very peaceful, very pretty, in a manner that awakens the authorities to pay attention to an area...the samba schools should take greater advantage of their annual activities.

Carol Boyce Davies echoes the views expressed by my field respondents in her assertion that samba schools do use Carnival to make political statements, through theme selection, music, and sometimes even costume design (Davies 1999, 49). Finally, as noted earlier, even the United Nations has come to see in Carnival an opportunity to publicize important global development issues.

Janete: I do think it does bring awareness, and as a matter of fact, that was the reason why the U.N. chose Carnival as one of the vehicles to bring awareness to the Millenium Development Goals.

With few exceptions, there has, however, been a general lack of female gender specific issues in the repertoire of Carnival themes selected by the larger samba schools. Some smaller groups have begun to adopt an edutainment-like strategy in addressing the subject of gender. For example, the Recife-based, all-female Loucas, believe that there exists rich potential for the popularization of female-specific issues through music and performance, with a very heavy reliance on humor. The Loucas comprise a group of activists, professionally linked with the International Women’s Health Coalition, who promote gender equality and spread awareness around issues critical to women’s health through creative performances in diverse settings (IWHC 2004). While the Loucas’ content is serious and can be grave, the key to their success is in their playful and uplifting representation of the issues, hence the name of their group.
This process of "lightening" the issue is hugely important in Carnival, because there is a fine and unforgiving line between successful (celebratory) presentation of an issue, and depressing the audience with negative images and music. The trick for samba schools becomes finding a meaningful and effective balance between the two. This is no easy task, but is crucial because negativity automatically contradicts the integrationist essence of Carnival and can undermine the transmission of an important message because the Carnival audience simply does not respond to gloom or divisiveness.

Vanessa: ...[through the themes] they try to give it a humorous twist because you have to remember that carnival is a celebration, it is supposed to be something happy and funny, so the people can actually get enthusiastic and dance to it.

One instance of the fate of a samba school that encroached too much on the negative is described by Alma Guillermoprieto in relaying details of the parade presentation produced by São Clemente for one Carnival, in which the theme raised the issue of abandoned children and denounced violence. Guillermoprieto describes both the school members and participants as being depressed, in the face of what they considered to be dismal lyrics and costumes. The audience did not react genially to this procession and the school received low marks. The Millenium Development Goals highlight areas of international development, such as poverty education gaps, and gender relations that are in need of serious progress in parts of the third world. This theme is potentially negative if presented as "ways in which the world is harmful to poor people," but Portela was very successful in their transformation of this theme into "8 ways to improve the world," as the following segment of the samba text indicates:

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15 In Portela’s 2005 samba, specific reference is made, for the first time in a Carnival event, to respect for women’s rights.
Portela, embraces the world today
With deep love, for fraternity
Samba delivers the message
And “we can” break the chains
Of inequality.
And see ... in the smile of the child
Hope in all hearts
And on this day of celebration
Create your prophecy, liberating your emotion ...

This positive spin made it possible to contemplate these important development issues in a celebratory way.

Patricia: I was impressed [with] the way they put it together – I heard they were going to have this theme of the MDGs, I couldn’t believe it, how were they going to prepare a samba with this theme? But they are so creative, you know, that I think it worked very well. Also it represented very well all the things that we put forth in the MDGs.

Introduction of issues such as violence against women, pay differentials and the like into Carnival’s thematic content could have a positive impact in drawing attention to them, but it clearly needs to be done craftily and in accordance with the jubilation and sense of communal unification the celebration provides its patrons. Polarization of audience members would need to be avoided at all costs, and gender-specific material needs to transform itself away from alienating the male population in order to have impact as a theme. This is perhaps the fate that much of the feminist discourse has suffered in Brazil, as acknowledged earlier by reference to Donna Goldstein’s description of Brazilian feminism as being too “sex negative” and echoed in the words of James Green. Clearly, for gender-specific themes to have legitimacy in Carnival, they must follow a distinct route and steer clear of divisive messages or transmission.
6. Human and Social Capital Impacts of Participation in Carnival

Undocumented Role of Women in Carnival

The literature on Brazilian Carnival clearly conveys an image of tremendous organizational activity and hard work for participants, with the standards of what constitutes excellence continuously on the rise. Groups involved in Carnival anywhere in Brazil try to outdo the previous year’s performance in terms of both musical and visual creativity. However, the challenge is especially demanding for the large favela-based samba schools of Rio de Janeiro. The notion of bringing off a one-time-only performance involving several thousands of people, who without the benefit of any full cast dress rehearsal need to arrive on time and have only 80 minutes to present a show in which the music, dance sequences, floats and messages are transmitted to and engage the enthusiasm of a very diverse national and international audience, is daunting to say the least.

In our conversations, my interviewees not only reinforced this general impression, but also indicated that much of this activity falls on the shoulders of women. I found myself constantly confronted with the notion that women are the undocumented heroines of Carnival. Despite their under-representation in the directorial ranks of the samba schools, women in many communities seem to dominate the organizational, behind-the-scenes work of Carnival preparation, the backbone of that which is necessary to achieve a successful performance during Carnival.

Patricia: Those that belong to the community in Portela, they work the whole year to participate and organize. I remember at the preparatory stage our ala had I guess about 150 people and we were not all experts on samba ... the woman in charge of our ala had to handle everything ... I was amazed because she was always telling us what to do, the words of the song we had to learn ... checking our costumes, where we had to go,
what we could not carry, that we should not drink [alcohol] but should drink water to hydrate ourselves ... I was amazed, and this is like a job you know, for the whole year ... they take care of the preparation and they organize and are responsible for the way the whole group behaves.

Katia: The fantasias [costumes] are generally made within the community ... and this is done by women. There are some men, but mainly women. On the organizational question, it's the women. This doesn't appear in any document, no one talks about it. If you look at the TV you will get a sense of it, but they focus on the glamour, on the costumes, they don't talk about the fact that these are made by the women in the community, what the young people are doing behind the scenes, that the instruments are often made within the community, that they are encouraging the development of a dance school within the community, all the artisan activity. There are hundreds of women for tens of men, really this isn't written in documents.

Many of these tasks, from selection of the school's theme for the year, to the music, costumes, number of wings (alas) and so on require lengthy negotiations and consensus-building within the community. As an example of the decision-making process, Dona Neide Coimbra, President of the Império Serrano samba school, explained in a 2003 press interview the task of reaching closure on music to include in a CD of her school's twenty best sambas:

I would like to do it [put out a CD very quickly] ... I would like them to give their suggestions of which are the 20 sambas they think are the best. Because if we do it, it won't please [the membership]. 'Ah! It wasn't this one!' 'That one is missing!' ... We are going to make a kind of vote. We are going to see which are the most voted sambas to choose and make the CD ... Look, it will be pretty difficult, but I can't achieve this by myself. (Coimbra, 2003)

The lack of documentation of these women's roles is telling in and of itself, and reveals a gap in ethnographic research on Brazilian society that needs filling. It is with great interest and pleasure that I make a modest attempt here to highlight possible gains these women are exposed to through their Carnival participation.
Although interviewees did not use such terminology, their observations clearly suggest that both social and human capital formation may be extremely important by-products for women who participate in the samba schools. As I indicated earlier, this hypothesis was not part of my original research plan, and to test it properly would require systematic fieldwork that is beyond the scope of this project. I will limit myself here to an analysis of the findings from my interviews and secondary research, and suggestions for further ethnographic research. I believe this would be a particularly fruitful area of research for applied anthropologists interested in issues concerning women and development, empowerment, or the gender dimensions of programs to reduce urban poverty and violence.

**Human Capital**

Since the early 1960s, social scientists have been expanding Karl Marx’ theory of ‘capital’ beyond the original idea of economic assets, investments and returns, to include also concepts of human, social and cultural capital. Nobel Laureate Theodore Schultz first launched the idea of human capital in 1961. Although the importance of education had long been accepted almost as a given, Schultz advanced the theory that financing education and training is actually a form of investment that increases an individual’s stock of capital and produces a return, usually in the form of higher earnings for the individual, greater productivity for the business, or both. It has since been generally established that the education and training in question can be either formal (in school systems) or informal (out-of-school programs), and can include activities that are either planned with educational objectives in mind or can be the unplanned by-product of other activities that
are not explicitly educational in nature. Investments can be made in cash, or they can be in the form of investment of an individual's time and other resources.

Returning to Patricia's and Dona Neide's descriptions of the work performed by some of the women in Rio's samba schools, it seems clear that to carry out these tasks requires diverse capabilities in the areas of management, administration, finance, design, communications and negotiations, in addition to the more obvious instrumental, voice and dance skills. Of course, not all women need to have such skills, some participants may not acquire any of them, and others may develop several.

Females who join the samba schools to participate occasionally in Carnival festivities and who come from outside the community may have very substantial educational qualifications, like Patricia, Heloisa and Vanessa, who all possess advanced degrees. However, looking at information on education access and quality in low income urban areas in Brazil, it seems plausible that at least some of the women who reside in the favela neighborhoods that are home to the main samba schools and who participate more regularly throughout the year in preparing the annual Carnival events, did not acquire the skills they possess today through the local education system. The incidence of poverty in Brazil is estimated at 30.5%, and education is still the main factor which determines an individual's income.

Maité is a clear example of a woman whose individual stock of human capital can be traced very directly to the samba schools, in her case in São Paulo. Not only did she obtain some of her basic education through the local samba school's community education programs, but she was also able to develop her dance skills and learned to teach, which eventually became her profession and the key to her personal upward mobility. Maité is
also a good example of the way in which some women are able to expand their social
capital and range of social networks, which I discuss further on.

Tia Surica’s mother died in 1947 when Surica was only seven, and her struggle for
survival was a very difficult one. Yet, she has been holding leadership positions in Portela
for some years, and today participates in the school’s directorate and manages an *ala* which
included 86 participants in February 2005. Her role is not merely an honorary one, but
includes responsibility for managing finances for her *ala*’s costumes and other
expenditures, which in turn suggests numeracy and business skills that she most certainly
did not acquire in the school system.

Whether these cases are exceptions or examples of a more common pattern, in
which some young girls and women are able to increase their human capital through
participation in the samba schools, mainly through considerable investment of their time, is
impossible to determine on the basis of available information. Such human capital
formation as may take place would be of a non-formal nature (because by definition it does
not take place within the formal school system), and would also have to be classified in the
category of on-the-job training, in the sense that the skills are learned through participation,
practice and growth within the samba school system. As Brazil improves access and
quality of primary and secondary education, this would become less important for some,
but not all, skills. For example, girls today may acquire better literacy and numeracy skills
through the school system than their mothers were able to do, but may through the samba
schools still be acquiring on-the-job type training in areas such as administration,
communications, negotiations and conflict resolution.
Social Capital and Social Networks

As Shultz expanded the concept of capital to cover investments and benefits from education and training, Bourdieu, Coleman, Putnam and Lin have expanded the concept to include social capital.

... social capital can be defined as resources embedded in a social structure which are accessed and/or mobilized in purposive actions ... social resources theory ... has specifically proposed that access to and use of social resources (resources embedded in social networks) can lead to better socio-economic statuses... and ... are in part determined by positions in the hierarchical structure. (Linn 1999, 35)

Research has focused on an individual’s location within one or more social networks, on measuring the volume of resources a person possesses or acquires, and on classifying networks according to how closed or open they are. Lin has sub-divided resources into network resources (which are accessible or ‘embedded’ in the network) and contact resources which help in achieving goals, or ‘purposive actions’. Purposive actions are also subdivided to include instrumental actions (the pursuit of a job or better housing) and expressive actions (physical well-being, satisfaction with life). The larger Brazilian samba schools present intriguing aspects of both network/embedded and contact resources, instrumental and expressive actions, and density and openness, within the same institutional setting. While this has interesting implications for the community at large, my focus in this paper is on implications for female participants.

The importance of associational life and social capital in urban low-income communities has been the subject of a great deal of research. Of particular interest is Perlman’s work in Rio favelas. She originally studied 750 favela residents in 1968-69, and published the findings in Myth of Marginality: Urban Politics and Poverty in Rio de Janeiro (Perlman 1976). Thirty years later she returned to study what changes had
occurred, and managed to locate 41% of her original interviewees. Among her findings: (a) the share of Rio’s population which lives in favelas has grown from 7.24% in 1950 to 18.66% in 2000; (b) a number of her original interviewees had experienced upward mobility and were materially better off (40% of those she was able to trace had moved from favelas to ‘legitimate’ neighborhoods), (c) although poverty literature generally suggests that female-headed households, both in developed and developing countries, do not do as well as male-headed households, there was no evidence of this among Perlman’s respondents; (d) there was a significant correlation of upward mobility and social capital, in the sense that 60% of those favela residents who had participated in one or more community-level association had experienced upward mobility; and (e) overall there is a trend towards decreasing social capital in the favelas, which seems to be due mainly to increasing violence which makes people more afraid to participate in voluntary associations (Perlman 2003). In this regard, Perlman is using a definition of social network which excludes drug traffic rings and other gangs (sometimes, but not always, related), although other social scientists have acknowledged that social networks can also include negative groups.

Perlman’s findings are not presented in a way which makes it possible to isolate samba schools from other civic or voluntary associations in the favelas, although there are samba school activities in some of the neighborhoods where she conducted her research. Given the historic prominence of the samba schools as one of the most important institutions operating in their home neighborhoods, it is reasonable to assume that active participation in the schools represents an important opportunity for social capital formation.
by female community members and that this, in turn, may be a contributing factor to their well-being.

On the issue of open and closed (dense) social networks, the samba schools seem to embody characteristics of both. On one level, they are certainly open: Patricia, Vanesa and Heloisa had all participated in one or more annual Carnival events, performing in ala of a large samba school and experienced no feelings of anxiety about being accepted by the communities or their ala leaders. From their side, Maité, Tia Surica and Dona Da all expressed enthusiasm and pride in the fact that outsiders (non-community members) wanted to perform in ‘their’ schools. This is not the first time that women from such different socio-economic backgrounds encounter each other: the ‘outsiders’ usually have household help at home, who tend to come from lower-income neighborhoods; and the local community women often cross the city from the North to the South zones to work in homes of wealthier women. This is, however, the first time they encounter each other on a completely different footing, where the community women are in control and the outsiders see and, based on my respondents’ observations, are incredibly impressed by the organizational abilities and talents the community women display. This should have the potential to transform individuals from being mere acquaintances into ‘contact resources’ and therefore be a source of increased social capital; whether it does or not would have to be established through more systematic field survey work.

Although there is ample evidence of the openness of the samba schools, this coexists with some closed or dense network characteristics. Myrian Sepulveda Dos Santos, one of the few anthropological researchers who has written about the Rio samba schools,
analyzed relations within four specific sections: the frontline commission, lead couple *(mestre sala* and *porta bandeira)*, the *baiana ala*, and the drummers or *bateria ala*.

... anyone who can afford the school’s costume can buy it and join the parade. But there are special sections [those mentioned above] ... that are mainly reserved for the members of the old and mostly black communities. This sort of double organization has allowed older leaderships to retain some of their privileges and social codes in spite of ... the increasing openness of the parade to a large public. (Dos Santos 1999, 88)

Making much the same point, in our interview Heloisa expressed her freedom to join any of several *alas* and the reasons she had for making her choice (too many colleagues she knew were in one particular *ala*, so she opted for another where she could be freer to have fun). At the same time, she pointed out that, had she wanted to get a costume and join the *ala das baianas*, she simply could not have done so – not because she was a woman (historically many men dressed as *baianas* at a time when it was either less acceptable or considered more dangerous for women to participate in the schools, and today men also occasionally do this out of preference if the *baiana ala* leader permits it), but because these spots are reserved for members of the community;

**Heloisa:** The *ala das baianas* pays reverence to the older women, it is a very traditional section [of the samba school], you are supposed to be elderly and belong to the community [to enter], [so] it is very hard to become a part of that *ala*, if I tried, I would not get into that one.

In summary, several networks are present within the samba schools, some closed and others open, with women having the opportunity to participate in one or more at the same time, or over time. The open network offers greater access to contact resources and, potentially, to instrumental actions (information that leads to improved benefits, better jobs, opportunities to move out of the *favela* to other neighborhoods). While the open network also offers participants varying degrees of access to embedded resources, the
closed or dense network within (Dos Santos' 'inner circle') would offer the greatest access to embedded resources of local power and status.

In considering the question of social capital, one's first line of inquiry tends to focus on the accumulation of contact resources and accomplishment of instrumental actions, essentially the line of inquiry which Perlman pursued. However, improved access to local embedded resources and expressive actions (health, security, sense of well-being) may be equally important social capital by-products for women participants in the samba schools, which would be missed if one looks only or primarily at questions of incomes, jobs and upward mobility.

Reporting on her conversations with Dona Neuma, one of the leaders of the Mangueira samba school, Dos Santos writes that:

She was not saying that there was a strong friendship among neighbors or families: she was talking about the feeling of someone who belongs to a large community whose limits were not given by nuclear or professional links. (Dos Santos 1999, 85)

Although she was not writing in particular about samba schools, Sonia Alvarez discussed the importance to low income Brazilian women of having the opportunity to participate in clubs or associations, noting that they:

... help break the relative isolation of the domestic sphere to which women are often confined ... [and] create an organizational context for networking among neighborhood women. (Alvarez 1990, 68)

Working in the Rio favela, Felicidade Eterna anthropologist Donna Goldstein (2003) describes a setting where local women do not have much access to any organizations, the implication being that if they did have such access it might be helpful.
Pathways to Accumulation of Social Capital within the Samba Schools

Dividing the female members of the samba schools into two categories, women from the community (e.g., Tia Surica) and those from outside the local community (e.g., Patricia), one can visualize the kind of social capital resources they might increase through participation in the schools, and the kinds of purposive action (Linn) which they might achieve in the following way:

| Where women originate/social network (open/closed): | 1. Community women/open network  
2. Community women/closed network  
3. ‘Outsiders’/open network |
|-------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Nature of social capital resources accumulated: | A. Contact resources  
B. Embedded resources (power, status) |
| Type of purposive action sought/achieved: | (i) Instrumental (jobs, benefits, housing)  
(ii) Expressive (life satisfaction) |

Using the above classifications of origin of women, kind of network, kind of social capital resources and kind of purposive action, I suggest several pathways which some local community women and ‘outsider’ participants in the samba schools may follow, in increasing their social capital and achieving purposive results. There are other possible combinations, and voyages along these pathways could be brief or they could be life-long trajectories.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Pathways</th>
<th>Respondent Examples</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 → A → (i)</td>
<td>Maité (&amp; Enrique)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 → A&amp;B→ (i)&amp;(ii)</td>
<td>Dona Neide, Dona Da</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 → B → (ii)</td>
<td>Tia Surica</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 → A → (i)</td>
<td>Patricia, Vanesa, Heloisa</td>
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For Maité, the openness of the samba school social network and the contact resources she was able to access beyond her neighborhood strengthened her own social capital and became the route to her personal upward mobility. The importance she attaches to this, and her recognition that skill development, or human capital formation, also matter tremendously motivated her to return for an extended period to the samba school community in São Paulo from which she came in order to help other young girls and women. A similar progression, incidentally, is true also for her male friend, Enrique, descendent of Dona Zica and Cartola, founder of Rio’s Mangueira samba school.

**Tia Surica.** Lifetime participation in Rio’s Portela school brought her a steady increase in access to embedded resources of power and status within her community, resulting in a clear sense of greater life satisfaction than she would probably have experienced in the absence of her samba school.

**Dona Da and Dona Neide** experienced some of the same social capital accumulation and similar results as did Tia Surica: Dona Da’s experience supporting the development of Carnival activities for her street neighborhood in Olinda resulted in improved access to local embedded resources of status, officially recognized in 2004 through her internet election as Olinda’s 2004 Carnival citizen of the year. In Dona Neide’s case, she became the only female samba school President at present time (of Império Serrano). In these cases, the women have both succeeded in accessing embedded resources within the dense or more closed social networks and also developed contact resources and achieved instrumental benefits.

**Heloisa, Patricia and Vanessa** benefited from the openness of the samba school social networks and expanded their range of contact resources within the neighborhoods.
This is unlikely to lead to instrumental action in the form of upward mobility – indeed their own living standards are already well above the average for samba school members. The opportunity may, however, strengthen their insights as social scientists on women's issues in the samba school neighborhoods, since it happened to be women leaders within the schools with whom they had the closest contacts. Certainly they speak with a sense of respect for the skills of their female contacts in the communities, which they obtained only through observing first hand the organizational work these women were managing. To repeat Patricia’s observation: “… I was amazed and this is like a job you know, for the whole year … “.

For Katia, Tereza and Antonia in the Northeast, and for Janete, Lucia and Carla who presently reside outside of Brazil, there is little to suggest that their participation in Carnival has had any direct social capital impact. Although they do not participate in the large samba schools like those in Rio or São Paulo, Katia, Tereza and Antonia might nonetheless have achieved some benefits similar to those of Heloisa, Patricia and Vanesa, except that their work already regularly places them in greater contact with low income rural (Katia and Antonia) and urban (Tereza) women than occasional opportunities they have to participate in regional Carnival activities.

One might ask, for which groups of women, or along which of the above pathways, would gender bias/machismo have the greatest consequences for the women concerned. I believe this would be for the third group (2 → B → (ii)), whose development of social capital depends fundamentally on their ability to access embedded resources (power, status) within the closed network. For these women, progress in eroding male domination or patriarchal features of a samba school’s hierarchy is probably the most relevant. Even if
that does not happen however, or at least does not take place quickly, they may still access some embedded resources and achieve some expressive gains just from greater opportunity to interact with and receive more emotional and other support from other women in the community, than would happen if the samba schools did not exist. The second group most affected by the machismo would be those who participate some in both the open and closed networks present in the schools (1→A&B→(i)&(ii)). Their ability to deepen their social capital through embedded resources may be difficult, but since they also operate on the level of the open network, they have additional avenues to follow. For the women in the first group (1→A→(i)), the internal gender hierarchy matters a bit less because they are developing their social capital mainly through accessing contact resources. This does not mean that accumulating contacts completely mitigates the effects of gender asymmetry within the favela communities, because the world such women are ‘contacting’ is itself a highly patriarchal one; however, one would have to conclude that these women are better off compared with those who operate only within the dense or closed network, for the simple reason that they have a broader range of possibilities for advancement. For the fourth group (3→A→(i)), it really does not matter much at all because to the extent their social capital is being enhanced, it is happening through the open features of the network and they are not really trying to access embedded resources.

I do not want to conclude this section without emphasizing that not all women who participate in the samba schools come away with improved social capital, or that the extent of capital accumulation and the resulting impact on their lives is not uniformly significant. As Goldstein reports in Felicidade Eterna, there are favela communities where women do not appear to have access to any associational activity; on the other hand, Perlman’s
findings suggest not only that social capital is present in some communities but also that it has been a significant factor explaining upward mobility.

Just as Carnival means many things to many women, so does participation in samba schools. Accumulation of social capital can take place in different ways, and with different results, because of the coexistence of open and closed social networks within the same schools. I have attempted to conceptualize how the process of social capital/resource accumulation→purposive action may take place for different categories of women, which would help to explain both why participation holds different meanings for them and why the patriarchal features of the samba schools may be more or less relevant. To assess the validity of these propositions would require field survey work that is beyond the scope of this paper, but this may be an important area for applied anthropologists to pursue further. At a time when social capital may be eroding, mainly as a consequence of the extent of violence in these neighborhoods, one could speculate that the opportunities provided women through participation in the samba schools may be all the more important.
7. Conclusions: Fun, Folly or Development?

This study has employed a combination of qualitative anthropological research methods, including both use of secondary sources and the conduct of a set of in-depth structured interviews with 15 respondents, to explore issues concerning the attitudes of and impacts on women participating in Brazilian samba schools and Carnival. To date, such research as exists on Brazilian Carnival has paid little attention to gender-specific issues from the standpoint of Brazilian women. In designing the interview component of my own research, I therefore concentrated on interviewing Brazilian women in two categories: professional social scientists who are engaged in social change and development through their work, and women who participate actively in the organization and performance of Carnival events. The social scientists were not selected because of any expertise in Carnival per se; rather, I sought to obtain their personal attitudes on the issues I was exploring, although I anticipated that their professional training would have helped to shape those attitudes. This proved to be the case, but in ways which I had not expected and which made the project all the more fascinating. My work with female respondents was supplemented by structured interviews with several males knowledgeable about Brazilian music and sexual culture.

The original focus of this study was to be on the roles women play in the decision-making, organization and performances of the samba schools, and on attitudes towards the seemingly very explicit sexual representations of Brazilian female identity presented in the annual Carnival rituals. My initial impressions were that women hold little power within the schools and that the sensually depicted female performers largely reflect male-defined
fantasies of females as purely sexual objects. In the structured interviews, female respondents clearly recognized the gender stereotyping present in samba lyrics and Carnival performances and also expressed frustration with sexism in Brazil. On the other hand, most were either not particularly offended by the sexually explicit representations of females, or simply considered it to be beside the point. Many also failed to recognize any direct personal impact, claiming that the undressed women are there because they want to be, as a voluntary matter of choice. There is also a much more nuanced story of gender roles and power relations within the samba schools, most of which is undocumented.

These findings led me to adapt my research to explore a slightly broader set of questions. First, what are the semiotic dimensions of Carnival that Brazilian women seem to value so highly? Carnival is certainly “fun”, but it also seems to offer women some very important emotional returns to which they assign much greater importance than any “folly”, or negative impacts which might stem from the gender stereotyping which takes place. These returns include opportunities for inversion à la Bakhtin and for uncensored expression of one’s sensuality, in ways that women may find difficult to exhibit outside the extravagance and license of the Carnival period. They also include the opportunity to experience feelings of community and human interconnectedness in a society that is rapidly evolving towards individualism, which places special strains on women. For some, especially Afro-Brazilian women, the reaffirmation of cultural heritage is also an important dimension.

Looking beyond the “fun” and “folly” issues, I also decided to explore two possible “development” impacts of the samba schools and Carnival. In particular, I was interested in the scope for popularization of contemporary social issues relevant to women
through the medium of Carnival lyrics and performances. Research findings suggest that Carnival and the samba schools could play a greater role in focusing attention on contemporary issues of special importance to women, provided the treatment is not divisive, as that would threaten some of the positive, integrative aspects of Carnival that are so highly valued by both Brazilian women and men. Finally, after examining more carefully the largely undocumented roles of women in bringing about the annual Carnival performances, I explored the extent to which this activity may be having unexpected by-products in terms of human and social capital development, particularly for women in the larger samba schools in Rio de Janeiro. Open and closed social networks co-exist within the same samba schools, presenting differential opportunities for some women to access contact and/or embedded resources which can be helpful either in moving beyond, or coping with, the increasingly inhospitable and dangerous low-income urban neighborhoods that are the home to the largest, most famous samba schools.

For the Brazilian women introduced in this study, Carnival seems to represent a complex, undocumented and highly rewarding combination of fun, folly and development. In this intoxicating celebration of inversion, sensuality, and pride, a nation finds emotional release and is unified in communal jubilation, as men, women, and children from all walks of life momentarily samba to the same beat.
**Sources**

**Interviews:**

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<td>James Green</td>
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16 The names of some respondents have been changed in accordance with requests for confidentiality.
References:


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17 Format here and in text of study based on *Chicago Manual of Style, 15th ed.*

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