

BLACK BRAZILIAN ANTHROPOLOGY

Ethnic-racial relations: what we can learn from the notion of the crossroads

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Abstract

This article emerges from my contemplation of a question that surfaced recurrently among black teachers and students: what role do white teachers play in studies and research on ethnic-racial relations? I propose a moment of reflection, following the lead of anthropologist Marilyn Strathern (2017) who challenges us to undertake anthropology in slow motion, taking seriously the importance of reflection without rushing to find quick and ready-made answers. In the words of philosopher Isabelle Stengers (2018), we need to slow down and pause to think. Taking up Strathern's proposal for a slow-motion anthropology, I explore ethnic-racial relations by first understanding the notion of relation. In this confluence of ideas, Nego Bispo's thought (2015) encounters Isabelle Stengers' cosmopolitical proposition, as well as the notion of the crossroads advanced by anthropologist José Carlos dos Anjos (2008) and the Pombogiras.

Keywords: Relation; Confluence; Cosmopolitics; Pombogiras; Experience.

Relações étnico-raciais: o que podemos aprender com a noção de encruzilhada

Resumo

Esse artigo surge da reflexão de uma pergunta que era muito constante entre professores negros e estudantes: qual o papel dos professores brancos para os estudos e pesquisas em relações étnico-raciais? Proponho um momento de reflexão seguindo os passos da antropóloga Marilyn Strathern (2017), que nos provoca a fazer uma antropologia em câmera lenta, levando a sério a importância da reflexão sem a pressa de encontrar respostas rápidas e prontas. Ou nas palavras da filósofa Isabelle Stengers (2018): é preciso desacelerar, e assim parar para pensar. Seguindo a proposta de fazer uma antropologia em câmera lenta da Strathern, me proponho a olhar para as relações étnico-raciais primeiro compreendendo a noção de relação. Nessa confluência, será realizado o encontro do pensamento de Nego Bispo (2015) com a proposição cosmopolítica de Isabelle Stengers, bem como com a noção de encruzilhada apresentada pelo antropólogo José Carlos dos Anjos (2008) e pelas Pombogiras.

Palavras-chave: relação; confluência; cosmopolítica; pombogiras: experiência.

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This article arose from an invitation to take part in a panel discussion at the student colloquium of a postgraduate program. My experiences of teaching undergraduate and postgraduate courses alongside white professors inspired me to reflect on the diverse perspective from which ethnic-racial relations can be explored. One question in particular was heard recurrently among black professors and students: what role do white professors play in studies and research on ethnic-racial relations? We might equally ask: what role do black professors play? And where are the indigenous professors? Reflecting on the role of researchers in ethnic-racial relations should focus on the relation itself, rather than remain limited to points taken to be static and mutually opposed.

The easiest path for reflecting on ethnic-racial relations would be to imagine that the many years dedicated to research could provide answers rooted in what has already been produced. I could remain within the dichotomy posed by the question: what is the role of white professors in the study of ethnic-racial relations? But here I allow myself a moment of reflection by following the lead of anthropologist Marilyn Strathern (2017), who urges us to undertake a slow-motion anthropology, taking seriously the importance of reflecting without rushing to find quick ready-made answers. In the words of philosopher Isabelle Stengers (2018), we need to slow down and pause to think.

Another important element in this construction is the notion advanced by anthropologist Roy Wagner (2017) in *The Invention of Culture*, where he conceives of culture as invention and inventiveness. Wagner's proposal invokes the dimensions of creation and composition, inventing the new out of the preexisting. Wagnerian invention evokes continuous metamorphosis, a world in which forces and beings are forever being created and recreated from the pre-existent (Goldman 1997: 201). This mode of thought is very familiar – albeit far from simple – for anyone studying religions of African origin, for instance, since these are religions in which everything is made and remade in composition with something that already exists.

In this work, Roy Wagner (2017) points out that our own culture only becomes visible to us through cultural shock. The encounter between different cultures compels the anthro-

pologist to invent a particular culture so that the cultures can communicate. It is necessary to place them in relation.

Culture is thus a process of invention-creation that presents itself in composition. According to Wagner, it is essential to recognise that every community elaborates its own constructions of thought and invents culture: what distinguishes these communities are their styles of creativity.

Here I also make use of the notion of confluence formulated by the quilombola intellectual Antonio Bispo dos Santos, better known as Nego Bispo, who emphasises how things come together but do not merge (2015: 89). In this confluence, Nego Bispo's thought dialogues with Isabelle Stengers's (2018) cosmopolitical proposition, as well as the notion of the crossroads advanced by the anthropologist José Carlos dos Anjos (2008) and the Pombogiras Dona Maria, Dona Mulambo, Dona Padilha and Dona Sete Saias.

To enrich the discussion, the notion of the person discussed in this text is constructed from the perspective of the Pombogiras. In so doing, the body will be displaced as a point of reference in order to foreground the movement between the spiritual and the embodied. Just as the body ceases to serve as reference, the person here is understood as a composition, reflecting how the Pombogiras construct their relationships with those who seek them out. To comprehend ethnic-racial relations, we need to comprehend the person as a composition and the relations constructed between these compositions (Santana Jr. 2021).

Thinking ethnic-racial relations involves more than evoking resistance: it means demonstrating that black resistance was not simply a reaction to an imposed colonial system but, rather, the defence of modes of existence that predated the slave regime (Santana Júnior 2019: 70). By employing the notion of resistance as the defence of an existence based on values that already existed, we can expand our reflection on what may be learned from the crossroads and from the philosophy existing in the *terreiros*.¹ Hence, this text is an attempt to enable the confluence between different reflections that converge at a crossroads. It not only seeks to make possible the construction of new paths but also aims to offer an alternative way of thinking about relations and difference.

The inspiration for this reflection was lived constantly in academic corridors, classrooms and the student colloquium Embroidering Knowledge, in the Program in Ethnic-Racial Relations (PPRER/CEFET/RJ), where some professors would pose the question to students and follow with a provocation: what is the role of white professors in studies and research on ethnic-racial relations? This is a very important question, one which I believe can be reformulated to deepen our discussion. Approaching ethnic-racial relations from static points that might sometimes touch, or seeking to separate them as a potential answer, does not seem to be the best way forward. If we understand that a clash of civilisations occurred, then it

1 TN: A *terreiro* is the ritual space of Afro-Brazilian religions, a temple or sanctuary, encompassing both the physical grounds and the religious community.

must be recognised that one civilisation attempted to impose its own culture by annihilating another, while other civilisations were able to think and act through their relation to different ways of living, thinking and existing.

Reflecting on ethnic-racial relations does not simply involve speaking about black people or indigenous peoples, still less about white people. Here a discussion could be pursued on racism and how it affects black or indigenous peoples, making use of existing reflections – which are indeed hugely important in terms of paving the way for the formulation of new reflections. Such an approach would not be problematic, *per se*, but we might risk ceasing to produce knowledge and science just to reproduce knowledge that already exists. Nego Bispo (Santos 2019) already made this provocative observation in his text on synthetic and organic kinds of knowledge. In this work, he presents a comparison between organic forms of knowledge, which are produced and full of life, and synthetic knowledge, reproduced through a colonialist mode of thought and manifesting in fragmented, segmented and diseased form (Santos 2019: 27).

I could also draw on my own numerous years of research experience using theories of ethnic-racial relations, reflecting on how this anti-black system affects us all. However, in keeping with Strathern's proposal of doing anthropology in slow motion, I propose to contemplate ethnic-racial relations first by seeking to understand the notion of relation itself.

The concept of relation is presented as a notion applicable to any form of connection. According to Marilyn Strathern (2017), the relation is based on two properties. The first property is holographic with the relation characterised as an instance of the field that the relation itself occupies. In this sense, each of its parts contains information about the whole, just as information about the whole is contained in each of its parts (Strathern 2017: 240). The second property of the relation is complementary: in other words, it requires other elements to complete it and, for this reason, we must always consider the elements between which relations are established. As Strathern points out, we not only need to see the relation between things but also see things as relations (Strathern 2017: 241-242).

In making use of Strathern's (2017) notion of relation, it is important to emphasise that she did not originally employ it for a reflection on ethnic-racial relations in the way I propose to do here. Likewise, the ethnic-racial discussion does not form part of the repertoire of reflections of anthropologist Roy Wagner (2017), yet his thought offers us the possibility of continuing to construct knowledge in composition.

The reflection pursued in this text sets out from the notion of composition, but it is essential to recall that, as Kabengele Munanga (2000) points out, racism is a belief in the existence of naturally hierarchised races. As the author proceeds to observe, in the mind of the racist, race is a social group defined by physical characteristics, cultural traits and linguistic markers. The racist believes that this other group is naturally inferior to the one to which they themselves belong. Racism creates a belief in superiority in which the white person regards themselves as superior. In racializing black people, white people appear as if

without race, since the racialised is always the other and, seen from a white perspective, the other is whoever is different from the self.

Before deepening this reflection, an understanding of the notion of relation in this context also depends on exploring notions of whiteness, a rich field that features Guerreiro Ramos as one of its major exponents, exemplified by his text ‘Social pathology of the “white” Brazilian’.² For Maria Aparecida Bento, ‘whiteness is a complex register, a theory of actors defined by a politics of difference, subject to the inconstancy of history, power and culture’ (Bento 2002: 163). Given the power relations imposed in Brazilian society, the simple fact of not having black skin already confers significant privilege. According to Sovik: ‘[...] to be white in Brazil is to have relatively light skin, functioning as a kind of visual and silent password for entering spaces of restricted access’ (Sovik 2005: 171). Examining notions of whiteness and meritocracy, we can ask whether, in fact, being white is the special ability and source of merit that guarantees access to positions of privilege?

It is important to emphasise the existence of perspectives and positionings that complicate this understanding of whiteness. Lourenço Cardoso (2010) points out that critical whiteness includes a disapproval of the privileges obtained by means of racial identity, while in acritical whiteness subjects argue for racial superiority. Cardoso goes on to argue that ‘an understanding of the multiple characteristic aspects of whiteness can result in a greater complexification of the different forms of privilege obtained by white people through, at times subtle, racist practices’ (Cardoso 2010: 616). It is important, therefore, to take the notion of whiteness into consideration when reflecting on ethnic-racial relations.

Along these lines, thinking about ethnic-racial relations involves taking seriously – and indeed extrapolating to its ultimate consequences – the notion of relation in order to comprehend and reflect on the importance of continuing to speak about black and indigenous peoples alone and, sometimes, leaving out white people. Thinking about the relation is to assume that its two properties apply to ethnic-racial relations and, beyond bodies, place modes of thought in relation. Better still, we might say that we place means of thought (*meios de pensamento*) in relation, as Marcio Goldman advocated in the closing panel of the IX Meeting of the Anthropology of Science and Technology. On this occasion, Goldman presented a reflection formulated with Vladimir Moreira Lima on the notion of means of thought, recognising that we are speaking about movements that construct thought and thus present themselves as means for comprehending and intervening in the world. Consequently, we need to reflect on ethnic-racial relations while taking into account the differences between means of thought, made evident through the clash of civilisations.

When we think in terms of modes or forms of difference, we risk falling into the trap of models and formats, or even into the ambush of reproducing opposed points constructed

2 Original title: ‘Patologia social do “branco” brasileiro’ (Ramos 1995).

through annulment of the other. So would the best option really be to follow this path of a colonialist mode of thought – fragmented and diseased (Santos 2015) – using the very same weapons still wielded to destroy difference, nature and every form of life? By contrast, the notion of means of thought can offer us the necessary parameters for understanding a living thought, a thought in movement that emerges through its relation with the life around us, the beings that compose us and the full richness of the differences that surround us. The notion of means of thought is only possible because we are speaking of forms of knowledge constructed in movement.

Thinking about difference and ethnic-racial relations leads me to formulate a series of questions: to what extent do we foreground the notion of relation in order to conceptualise ethnic-racial relations? How far does the spectre of the problem of the black person still haunt our reflections? To place something in relation is, above all, to learn how to engage with difference.

I do not propose to provide ready answers, but rather to think about ethnic-racial relations slowly, looking to construct a reflection. Here, I also make use of the cosmopolitical proposition advanced by Isabelle Stengers, who affirms that this notion

(...) only acquires meaning in concrete situations, in those places where practitioners work; and it requires practitioners who have learned to be indifferent to the pretensions of generalising theorists, those who tend to define practitioners as mere executors, responsible for ‘applying’ a theory or capturing their practice as an illustration of a theory. (Stengers 2018: 443)

Setting out from this proposal, I position myself as a practitioner of anthropology, not as an executor. Specialists present themselves as executors. In Stengers’s words: ‘The specialist is one whose practice is not threatened by the problem under discussion, and whose role will require them to present themselves, and present what they know, in a way that does not prejudice how this knowledge will be taken into account’ (Stengers 2018: 460).

As a counterpoint to the specialist, Stengers cites Deleuze’s conceptual persona of the ‘idiot’: ‘the idiot asks us not to rush, not to feel authorised to think ourselves the possessors of the meaning of what we know’ (Stengers 2018: 444). The idiot instils doubt. Here I could follow the path of an executor, relying on already produced knowledge and reaching the same answers. But, as Stengers points out, the problem resides not with the knowledge being articulated but with this knowledge not being questioned. As a practitioner of anthropology, I invite the reader to slow down and become immersed in the deeper levels that reflection can afford us.

To understand cosmopolitics in the sense invoked by Stengers is, above all, to recognise that, as the philosopher writes:

The cosmos, as it figures in this term, cosmopolitical, designates the unknown that constitutes these multiple divergent worlds, which they can become capable of articulating, against the temptation of a peace that would supposedly be final, ecumenical, in the sense that a transcendence would have the power to demand that the divergent recognise itself as simply

a particular expression of what constitutes the point of convergence of all and everything.
(Stengers 2018: 447)

The cosmos presents itself as an encounter of differences that continue to coexist, but not harmoniously, since it also presents its dangers. Thinking the cosmopolitical means encountering and being encountered by these multiple and divergent worlds, which exist with all the tension and peril that the cosmos reveals to us. Hence, the term cosmopolitical is not intended to evoke an ecumenical peace, nor a synthesis that would or could overcome existing tensions in the name of a single point of convergence.

Based on the cosmopolitical proposition, I propose to think about the question of ethnic-racial relations not through binary oppositions such as black versus white or indigenous versus white, but rather through the effective construction of relations. Moreover, as a practitioner of anthropology, I shall base these reflections on ethnographic research with the Pombogiras.

ENTERING THE CROSSROADS

In broad terms, I present an ethnographic research project conducted with the Pombogiras Dona Maria, Dona Mulambo, Dona Padilha and Dona Sete Saias. The study followed the thought of these Pombogiras, seeking to comprehend their relations with people through the notion of *acertos*. An *acerto* – literally, an arrangement or settlement – is a concept specific to this field in which the Pombogiras present us with the construction of agreements mutually established and enacted between these female spirit entities and those who seek them out for advice and help. *Acerto* belongs to the order of movement and composition. In other words, an *acerto* is a composition of movements between the embodied and the spiritual.

In speaking of the spiritual and the embodied, we are not dealing with separate worlds but with one split world that presents itself as divided into two parts. This kind of modulation is common in religions of African origin. It is also found in the work of Godfrey Lienhardt, who writes in the introduction to his book *Divinity and Experience: The Religion of the Dinka* that his aim is ‘to describe the structure of Dinka religious experience.’ In the first chapter, he describes the basic structure of the Dinka universe, which appears split by a crucial division separating the human plane from the plane of mythical and divine powers (Goldman 2016: 25). Such a schema is extremely common in many of the world’s religious mythologies, especially African. As Marcio Goldman (2016: 25) argues, it is not a matter of a separation into two worlds, much less of a distinction between the natural and the supernatural: there is just one world, even if split – hence there is just one experience, even if accounting for this lived experience demands the activation of forces that do not seem to be a direct part of the world.

For a better understanding of this split world, I invoke the Pombogiras to enrich our reflection. The Pombogira mediates the communication between divinities and humans.

She is the crossroads that makes possible the encounter of differences without excluding differences (Anjos 2006) but rather making them part of the composition. This encounter does not exclude difference, therefore, but neither should it be seen as a mere sum of sides: rather, it is a composition between the sides that form the world. Thus, the crossroads is the meeting point of different paths that do not become a unity but remain pluralities (Anjos 2008), both establishing communication and being communication itself. The crossroads is simultaneously a point of encounter and a choice of new possibilities, as well as the beginning and the continuation of the path. It is where construction occurs but also where paths may become closed. At the crossroads, good and evil are both part of the composition. In this composition, risk and tension will always be constant. Above all, the crossroads is movement.

Reflecting on this communication between the two sides of a split world, we can perceive that the experience of being in a *gira* (a ritual session in which entities are summoned) and conversing with the Pombogira involves making this encounter between different parts of the world visible to everyone. The Pombogira becomes visible at this moment, yet she is always present, even when do not see her. However, it is during the marked encounter of the *gira* that people experience their certainties being overturned, provoking them to reflect on and question their lives. She also teaches us to look beyond the body, since each person is a composition of Orixá, Caboclo, Exu and Pombogira.

Comprehending the person as a composition means displacing the body as the point of reference and grasping the split world also encountered within the body. This displacement of the body refers to a movement between the spiritual and embodied planes, not to a relation between two static points. Likewise, my proposal is to understand this movement from the perspective of the Pombogiras, but also by displacing the relation with the entity into the realm of experience. Here I follow the lead proposed by Lienhardt, who shifts from the idea of Divinity to the idea of Experience, as Marcio Goldman (2016) observes. We are dealing with a religion that does not present itself in theological form, but is constructed in experience, since the person is constituted over time through the strengthening of their composition. As a result, it is religious experience that is situated as the reference point for the constitution of the person. According to Marcio Goldman:

It is the notion of *experience* in general that enabled Lienhardt to escape the dominant thought and major currents of British social anthropology of his time. A line of flight, probably, not intentional, but one that is the condition for a work able to problematise the 'given' and help foster the emergence of new ideas. (Goldman 2016: 45-46)

As well as helping us understand the relation between the spiritual and embodied sides, the notion of experience will be used here to deepen the discussion in dialogue with cosmopolitics. My aim is to stimulate a reflection on how we might approach ethnic-racial relations so as to promote the emergence of new ideas, based on the learning of practices involving the relation of the Pombogiras with those who seek them out and become part of the com-

position of this crossroads. The notion of experience will thus encounter the cosmopolitical proposition, creating a crossroads that enables the construction of new ideas and the creation of potential new paths.

Whether open or closed, the crossroads is among the spatial notions that form part of an entire cartography in religions of African origin (Anjos 2006). The crossroads is communication itself with the Pombogiras being the materialisation of this communication. Dona Padilha asserts that she is a spirit who embodies in Doté Ricardo and that, just like her, we too are embodied spirits. In her words: “I am a spirit embodied in my *cavalo* [horse],³ just as you too are an embodied spirit. I am from the spiritual side, but I am here on this side through my *cavalo*.” Dona Padilha makes clear that although we are all embodied spirits, this does not mean that we are all embodied spirits in the same way. We are spirits who compose ourselves differently with the embodied world, since, Dona Padilha says, for her a *parede* (wall) only exists when she occupies the Doté’s body. Outside of it, she can be anywhere.

She explains that since they are spirits, they can enter anywhere and pass through any wall. Just as they traverse walls, they also move between the two sides, establishing communication. The Pombogiras move between the embodied and spiritual planes without being seen by most of the embodied. Only when she occupies the body of the *cavalo* (horse) can she be seen by everyone and in that moment she presents herself in a paradoxical form since in becoming visible in the *cavalo*’s body, she continues to communicate between both sides, yet she ceases to pass through walls since the body becomes a limit. This body, which in becoming a wall curbs movement, simultaneously enables the movement of her spirit to the embodied side. The body is a meeting point that enables the Pombogira to be seen by all those on the embodied side. It is the spirit that communicates with this embodied side, but without the body the spirit continues to move freely and can enter anywhere.

The Pombogira is a spirit that transits between the spiritual and embodied sides, the body comprising both the materialisation of communication and the limiter of her movements. The people who inhabit the embodied side are also embodied spirits but, in their case, the spirit requires the body in order to dwell on this side. While the spirit of the Pombogira is free to transit between sides and remains alive by moving, the spirits of people on the embodied side require the body as their place of dwelling. The body constitutes a limit for the Pombogira and, simultaneously, guarantees the existence of other spirits on the embodied side. Both are embodied spirits, yet while the Pombogira moves, being movement itself between the sides, the spirits of people on the embodied side live by occupying a body. The spirit of the Pombogira resides in movement and it is this movement from the spiritual side to the embodied that allows the spirit to inhabit the body of the embodied.

3 The *cavalo* (horse) is the person whose (material) body is occupied by the entity. The term Doté is the official title given to this person.

Dona Padilha affirms that everything is spiritual. We are embodied spirits who occupy different sides of this crossroads, yet this does not prevent the Pombogira from being present on both sides. What the Pombogira proposes is that we comprehend the composition of this crossroads from her own perspective. It is the encounter at the crossroads that can make visible the communication between the spiritual and the embodied. The encounter in the body of Doté Ricardo, which sets a limit on Dona Padilha, is also what makes the spirit visible to all those on the embodied side. Moreover, this means comprehending the body as a composition of Orixás, entities, Exu and Pombogira.⁴ The person is thus far more than what we can see and it is from the composition of each being that the Pombogira builds her relationship with the embodied.

‘Spirits are points of view that embody bodies’ (Anjos 2006: 119), yet they are not just present through the bodies they occupy. The Pombogiras are spirits that embody bodies, yet they are also spirits that live among us without embodying bodies, making the crossroads their dwelling. We must understand that embodying bodies is part of a composition created through movement. In this composition, we are embodied spirits who occupy the embodied side through the movement of the spirit: ‘we are not beings, we are vibrations, effects of resonance, “tonalities” of different frequencies’ (Lapoujade 2012: 11). We are vibrations in composition that make the elements belonging to this composition resonate. This understanding entails going far beyond the visible and invisible worlds: it also means going beyond the body and thereby comprehending this world as composition.

The path proposed by Dona Padilha – the idea that we are embodied spirits – resonates with the notion that spirits are points of view that embody bodies (Anjos 2006), as well as with the idea that we are vibrations of different frequencies (Lapoujade 2012). Hence, the body is displaced as the point of reference and movement takes over. The body appears as a kind of territory in confluence where communication between the spiritual and the embodied sides generates movement. In the body of Doté Ricardo, there is a confluence of his spirit with the spirit of Dona Padilha. While the body sets a limit for Dona Padilha – since it forms walls that contain her spirit – for the embodied side the body enables the Doté’s spirit to occupy this side with the movement of the spirit ensuring composition occurs.

When Dona Padilha says that everything is spiritual and we are embodied spirits, she also highlights the difference between these embodied spirits. She delineates a crossroads thought, a *pensamento em encruzilhada*, in which differences meet without excluding difference, making the crossroads a confluence between the spiritual and the embodied, since in this confluence ‘things come together but do not merge’ (Santos 2015). Confluence is a concept that evokes natural elements that join together but do not merge. The crossroads is the communication between the spiritual and embodied sides. At the crossroads, there is a

4 TN: Collectively, the Orixás are the Afro-Brazilian deities, while Exu is the Orixá of movement and communication, the messenger god.

confluence of the spiritual and the embodied where spirits meet and even occupy the same body, yet do not merge.

It is necessary for the spirit on the spiritual side to move for communication with the embodied side to be maintained. On the embodied side, it is important that the spirit not mix to the point of being confused with those who occupy the spiritual side, thereby running the risk of ceasing to inhabit the embodied side. It is important to stress that the idea that everything is spiritual does not exclude the existence of other sides or planes. However, it does mark the asymmetrical relation of forces with which we are in unceasing contact. The notion that we are embodied spirits and that the Pombogiras are also spirits embodied in bodies does not imply they are the same thing: rather, it points to a similarity of movements marked by difference between the relations.

Movement creates the composition for Dona Padilha to *come to earth*. The very expression *come to earth* already conveys the movement of the spirit that will compose the territory in confluence with the Doté. Another expression used to describe the arrival of Dona Padilha is to *turn* (*virar*). The experience of turning is marked by other words evoking action, such as *spin*, *catch*, *descend*, *give the saint*. Turning, therefore, is movement and transformation (Rabelo 2014). When the person *turns into the saint*, they divert (or turn away) from what they are (Opipari 2009) to become more than merely the support of the entity who occupies them, turning into the composition in which the territory in confluence can become visible to everyone. Those people who *turn* are called *rodantes* (literally, spinners or whirlers). The *rodantes* place the accent of turning on movement rather than on the body (Rabelo 2014). Turning into the Pombogira is turning to the side, a movement that makes the body part of the communication between spirits who occupy different sides, thereby making possible the composition of the territory in confluence.

The composition in constant motion that differentiates the Pombogiras – as displacements that move and embody within bodies, whether through persons or through an image that occupies their *assentamento* – shows us that they do not reside in any one place, except in the possibility of being present (Oro and Anjos 2009). It is displacement, movement, that ensures the Pombogiras are ever present.

The Pombogira can be among us without the need for bodies: the crossroads does not exist only when we see it in its traditional form on the road. The crossroads is communication between the spiritual side and the side we inhabit as embodied beings. It may also be present in bodies, in the terreiros, in the street, as a composition in constant movement. It is important to stress that, just as people are spiritual compositions, and it is through this notion of being that the Pombogira constructs her relation, so too the Pombogira herself is part of a composition with her *cavalo*, but also with the Orixás and the entities that compose her *cavalo*. The body presents itself as this crossroads that extends beyond what we can see. The physical crossroads renders intelligible and visible the process that creates communication

between the sides of the split world, as well as the person as composition. The crossroads resides in its own presence and this presence is the dwelling place of the Pombogiras. It is through presence that the crossroads extends beyond the road itself and materialises as communication in different bodies and at different moments, as a way of moving and transporting itself to wherever communication needs to be established.

‘LIGHT THE LANTERN TO WELCOME A FRIENDLY PERSON’

I entered the room where the *giras* take place and immediately on the wall in front of me I saw an altar with small oratories. These oratories formed a kind of lozenge, longer on the horizontal axis. On this altar, in a vertical arrangement, Oxalufã could be seen at the top; just below and in the middle were Obaluaiê and Oxum, while further down, at the base, were Pombogira and Exu, forming the centre of the composition of the pantheon with the images of the Orixás. Beneath the shelves was a large wooden bench. On the left there was another bench where I encountered some people already seated and talking in anticipation of the arrival of Dona Maria Padilha. On the right towards the back was the bathroom. Beside the door there was a barrel with a herbal bath prepared for the *filhos da casa* (children of the house). I sat down on the side bench and soon a woman, Alessandra, began to talk with me about how good Dona Padilha was and how she came every week simply to thank her and embrace her. The *filhos da casa* were already present and tending to the preparations: lighting the candles of the *assentamentos*,⁵ while others greeted those wishing to consult her. Amanda passed round an attendance list with two columns, one for the visitors, the other for those who wanted a private consultation.

Doté Ricardo issued instructions for the preparations for the arrival of the *Moça*.⁶ He went round every corner of the house to check everything was ready and greeted those present. He then sat in the chair covered with red and black cloth, located in the corner to the right of the entrance door. Near the chair there was a window. Beneath it was a table on which the jewellery box rested. Under the table was a row of three candles: one white, one red and one red and black. In front of the jewellery box were the goblets of the Pombogira.

Doté Ricardo chatted for a short while with those present, good-humoured as usual, and asked one of his *filhos* to light the candles beneath the table. He was already sensing that the *Moça* was arriving. He asked them to check whether the candles of the *assentamentos* were lit. By this time, the benches were nearly full. Some people conversed among themselves, others talked to the Doté. Gradually, the *filhos de santo* of the house took their seats, composing the room. This space was also composed of a kind of mandala with the image of Dona

5 TN: In Afro-Brazilian religions, the shrine or altar where an Orixá or entity is ‘seated,’ embodied in ritual objects and tended by followers.

6 ‘Young Woman,’ one of the ritual forms used to refer to the Pombogira.

Maria Padilha and a screen with the image of Seu Zé Pilintra by the side of the window. In one corner of the room, behind Dona Padilha's armchair, stood a piece of furniture at the height of the chair's backrest – a kind of altar – with images of Seu Zé Pilintra, Dona Maria Mulambo and Seu João Caveira. It was the corner of the street, inside the room.

In the middle of the Doté's conversation with those present, Dona Maria Padilha arrived and immediately began to dress herself. She said good evening to everyone. One of the *filhas da casa* brought the jewellery box and opened it so that Dona Padilha could choose what she wished to wear. As she selected her jewellery, Carla brought two goblets, the beer, the champagne and her cigarettes. Dona Padilha continued choosing which of her bracelets to wear and putting them on, gradually covering much of her forearm. She also chose a ring for each finger. Suddenly, she saw another ring and decided to swap. She began searching for her necklaces and selected three. She picked up her earrings to choose a pair while the *filhas da casa* looked on in admiration. Noticing this, Dona Maria Padilha said: 'Eyes off, it's mine!' and burst out laughing.

After she had finished donning her jewellery, she lit two cigarettes simultaneously and began to sing her *ponto* (chant): *If your catacomb has mystery, she is Maria Padilha of the cemetery. She is blonde with blue eyes. She is Maria Padilha, daughter of Seu Omolu.* She then turned to a woman called Andrea and asked her to sit in the chair beside her. She asked how her health was and Dona Andrea replied that she still felt some pain. Dona Maria Padilha said: 'You haven't been drinking the tea and you haven't been taking the milk bath I recommended. I know you don't like milk so that's why I prescribed the bath.' The woman replied that just thinking about milk made her feel nauseous and she sometimes forgot to drink the tea, although she had been taking it. Dona Maria Padilha replied: 'No, you haven't been taking it. The tea was meant to be drunk every day; it only works if you do so. Don't you eat every day? You have to drink the tea every day too. For you milk stinks, but do you think it's better to be sick then? Having poor health is better?' Dona Maria Padilha added that she would rather take a bath with something she disliked than be sick. And she continued: 'I counsel, but you all do as you wish.'

Dona Maria Padilha switched topic and asked how her retirement process was going. At that moment, Carla opened a beer and served it to Dona Padilha. Before the champagne was opened, the latter said: 'Don't shake it, I don't want to waste anything.' So Carla did what she requested, serving Dona Padilha. Dona Andrea explained that her retirement request had been turned down because, they said, she had filed for a widow's pension. Just then, the Doté's neighbour arrived with something in her hand and said: 'I came at the right time, you called for me, didn't you?' She showed the champagne cork that had just fallen into her house yard. This neighbour worked at the INSS (Brazil's social security institute) and, giving her opinion on Dona Andrea's case, said that they must have selected the wrong option at the time of the application. The neighbour sat with Andrea to discuss the matter and wrote

down her details to look into it. Dona Maria Padilha then began calling the Pombogira, the Cigana and the Exu of the *filhos da casa*, since the attendance list included two private consultations: when she left for these consultations, they would remain to receive the others. Dona Maria Mulambo, one of the *filhas da casa*, arrived first, followed by Seu Veludo and then Seu Marabô. Dona Padilha then went off to the private consultation.

The relation between Dona Andrea and Dona Padilha was constructed from Dona Andrea's composition, but also by establishing a relation between compositions. In bestowing her advice, Dona Padilha was already taking into consideration the entire composition that is Dona Andrea, including the spiritual side and how she composes herself on the embodied side. The Pombogira addressed her likes and dislikes, as well as her stubbornness, while treating her with the respect due to an elderly woman. Dona Padilha also demonstrated in practice the extent to which she establishes communication on the embodied side, making the champagne cork bring the neighbour to assist with Dona Andrea's retirement issue. Here she not only presented people as compositions, but also placed compositions in relation, always allowing for how each composition is constituted. Each person thus receives differential treatment such that her counsel becomes part of the encounter between these compositions.

Another evening, I arrived at the Centre for the scheduled meeting with Dona Maria Padilha. Some women were already there, seated on the benches. Slowly the *filhos da casa* began to arrive, bathing and putting on their white clothes. Two children, also *filhas da casa*, were dressed in white and talking with another child who was there with her mother, Alessandra.

Every time someone arrived who was unknown to Alessandra, she would ask whether the person already knew Dona Padilha and then tell them that she was very good, she always helped her a lot, which was why she was always in attendance. She would go on to say that she would not even ask for anything; she just came to give her a hug. Each time she did the same: she would stay for a while in the *gira*, then ask permission to leave and say goodbye with a hug. There were various *giras* in which Alessandra continued to follow this same movement.

In the middle of this conversation in which Alessandra was praising Dona Padilha, the *ekedi* Amanda arrived with a friend.⁷ Amanda went straight to bathe, but this did not prevent her *irmãos de santo* from teasing her playfully about her lateness. At around 8:40 pm, Dona Maria Padilha *veio em terra* (literally, came to earth) said good evening to everyone and then asked Ana to fetch a bell. She explained that she needed the bell because without the *atabaque* (a tall ritual drum) there was no animation, the people would not sing or clap their hands. At that point, the *ekedi* Amanda said it would be better to fetch the *atabaque*, since there was an *ogã* in the house who could play.⁸ Amanda then said, 'he is an *ogã*' and

7 *Eke*di is a ritual title and female role in Candomblé, assigned to care for the Orixás and assist the *terreiro*. Among her responsibilities is tending to and guiding the Orixá when it manifests (*veio em terra*).

8 *Ogã* is a ritual title and male role in Candomblé, assigned to protect and assist the *terreiro*. Among his responsibilities is playing the *atabaque* to call the spiritual entities.

pointed to me. Dona Padilha asked me if I could play for her and I answered that I was still learning. She then said: 'It's enough to play samba de roda. You know it well. Your land has a lot of samba de roda.' Dona Padilha began to sing her *pontos*. At first, I found it difficult to accompany her as she sang more slowly and with a cadence different from Dona Maria, another Pombogira with whom I was accustomed to play. After singing her *pontos*, she began to converse with Rita and her mother-in-law, Paula. She asked Rita how her husband was and before she even received a reply, Dona Padilha said: 'You've already solved the car problem, haven't you?' Rita replied that yes, but he had lost his mobile phone and he was unable to work as an app-based driver without it.

Dona Maria Padilha began to explain that he was going through the *ano da praga* (year of affliction). She added that it would not be easy but it is always the same when someone *faz santo* (literally, 'makes the saint': becomes initiated and receives a specific saint/Orixá). She then asked: 'Do you know why the one-year obligation is performed?' Without waiting for anyone to answer, she said: 'To tell the Orixá that you have overcome the year of affliction. Many *casas* do not explain these things, but here my *cavalo* and I explain, because otherwise knowledge is lost.' Dona Padilha reminded Rita how her own *ano da praga* had also been extremely hard. She had even lived on the street. She explained that it was faith and the strength to fight that enabled her to show the Orixá that she had overcome the year of affliction. She also made clear that, after Rita performed the one-year obligation, many good things appeared along her path. 'For him it will be no different, he only has to keep his faith and believe in his own strength and in that of the Orixá.' She then asked Rita to tell him to prepare a meal for Ogum, so as to keep opening the way.

Dona Padilha told her that, in addition to the *ano da praga*, the house that Rita's husband attended had done things with which she disagreed, explaining: 'I am not saying it's wrong, only that on this ground we don't do it that way.' She then described how it was done there at the Centre: first food is given to Exu when food is offered to the Orixá and above all during the *feitura* (literally, 'making': initiation). Exu must be the first to eat. To back up what she was saying, Dona Padilha recounted the *itan* (sacred narrative) of the creation of the world:

Olorun gave Oxalá responsibility for creating the world and entrusted him with the sack of creation. Orumilá told Oxalá to make an offering to Exu before creating the world. Oxalá went ahead without making any offering. Exu used his powers to leave Oxalá extremely thirsty. When Oxalá arrived at the place where the world was to be created, he found a palm tree and made a hole in it with his *opaxorô* [ritual staff]. He drank the wine and fell asleep beside the palm. Exu took the sack of creation and handed it to Oduduá. With Olorun's permission and after making the offerings, Oduduá executed the task of creating the world. When Oxalá awoke and saw that the world had already been created, he went to Olorun to explain what had happened. Olorun forgave him and Oxalá became the Orixá of forgiveness. Olorun then gave him the task of creating men and women. Oxalá took clay, shaped a man and a woman, and Olorun breathed life into them, animating the human beings modelled by Oxalá. Olorun then decreed that Exu must eat a portion of everything the Orixá eats and that Exu must always be the first to eat.

Dona Padilha went on to explain that, in the *casa* that Rita's husband attended, they had given food to Bará at the moment of the *feitura* (initiation). She stressed once again that, on her ground, food was only given to Bará, her individual Exu, at the three-year obligation. First, Exu, the *povo da rua* (people of the street), must be fed so that the paths are opened and the food will always be delivered to the Orixá when offered. She went on to tell Rita and her husband to keep their faith.

She then turned to Paula, Rita's mother-in-law, and said: 'You've been very worried. But don't worry, your son will be fine.' She asked Paula if she knew the power that a mother possesses and added: 'The mother is the first process of *feitura* that the child undergoes. You bled and spilled blood on him and for that reason you hold great power over his life. I have already told him to prepare the food for Oxalá and he will do so. But regardless of that, you can do the same, and he must not know. They are different requests. Offer the food and ask that Oxalá intercede for him and that Xangô enact justice as a mother asking on behalf of her son.'

Once again, Dona Padilha considered each composition as part of the process of knowing how to communicate and build relations. When she asked me to play, she asserted that I already knew: it was only a matter of playing *samba de roda*, with which I was very familiar. She referred to experiences no one else there could have known and, in referring to my composition, also made it clear that, in the land from which I came, *samba de roda* was common.

The advice given to Rita and Paula presents elements that are significant not only for comprehending the person as a composition, but also for understanding how the relation between these compositions becomes established. The advice is provided to Rita and Paula, but also to Rita's partner and Paula's son. Here, Dona Padilha is already constructing different relations between the compositions.

When Dona Padilha refers to Rita and how she can help her partner, she begins by explaining what she calls the *ano da praga* (year of affliction). This is the link she encounters between Rita's composition and that of her husband since, however much their compositions differ, it is through the experience of the *ano da feitura* (year of making/initiation) that she is able to place the couple in relation. Dona Padilha recognises that Rita endured some difficult situations but after the one-year obligation was performed, everything changed. Since Rita had already gone through the year of affliction and completed her one-year obligation, she was strengthened and could help her partner. Dona Padilha advises Rita to tell him to prepare food for Ogum, and to keep faith and strengthen his composition. The food for Ogum is to ensure that his paths remain open, using the force of the Orixá who can fight on his behalf to open the way.

When advising Dona Paula, the entire relation is constructed differently. Because she is a mother, she possesses greater force, since the two compositions share a direct bond. Dona Padilha explains that a person's first *feitura* is birth and the first blood to transmit the force of a *feitura* is that of the mother. As a result, she explains, the mother can call upon Xangô to intercede for her son as a mother beseeching the divinity on behalf of her child. While Dona

Padilha asks Paula's son to prepare food for Oxalá, his mother must direct her request to Xangô. Here we perceive the relation between compositions and the different paths presented by Dona Padilha to resolve the same situation. In accordance with each composition and the relations between compositions, the chosen paths complemented one another to form new compositions and build new ways forward. Each in their different form, they set energies in motion so that the construction of the *acerto* became possible. In this fashion, Dona Padilha made clear the importance of all three doing their part, while she continued to do her own.

During the *gira*, it was very common for Dona Padilha or Dona Mulambo to explain the importance of people making energies move: both women observed that people wanted the result but did not want to make the effort to obtain it. In their words: 'They want the miracle, but they do not say the prayer.' They emphasised that a person needs to understand that however much the Pombogiras may know what people desire, only each person by themselves can begin the work of achieving their objective. They would add that only after this work has started can they offer help, just as one can only help another person after first helping oneself.

This message may appear simple but it had to be continually reiterated because people often ended up doing things differently. Such was the case during the *gira* in which Dona Maria Padilha looked at a woman and began asking when she was going to *fazer as coisas* (do things: act), making it clear that she could not wait for her brother to sort out his life first. The woman replied that her brother did everything for their mother and, since she had recently taken on the role herself, she no longer had time to *cuidar das coisas dela* (look after her own affairs). Dona Padilha insisted that she needed to take care of her own affairs: she could not help her brother without first possessing the strength to do so. The woman needed to strengthen herself and strengthen her Orixás and entities in order truly to be able to help her brother. To help him, she first had to open her own paths.

Dona Padilha made a point of explaining that it was not the Orixá punishing the woman, but rather that the Orixá and her entities lacked the strength to protect her. Just as it is people themselves who need to know what they want and ensure that movement generates actions upon actions, so too they must feed their Orixás and entities. The Orixás and entities are the person, just as the person is a composition with the divinities and entities that accompany him or her. But for the composition to have strength, it needs to be fortified, only after which can the person think about helping whomever they wish.

This in mind, Dona Padilha explained that the woman should not worry about taking her brother out of the terreiro he attended and bringing him to hers. That would only become possible once she had done her own things (*fizesse as coisas dela*): opening her paths, strengthening herself and, consequently, acquiring the strength to help open his paths. Dona Padilha made clear that the woman could only resolve her brother's life if she began to take care of herself (*se cuidar*). She needed to understand that this was the best way to help him. The moment she opened her own paths, his would open in turn.

Once again, Dona Padilha highlighted the importance of the person strengthening their own composition: only then could another person be helped. She always said: ‘In life it has to be you first, you second and you third.’ In saying this, she also affirmed that it was not a question of selfishness: it was a matter of strengthening one’s own composition as the primary condition for assisting another. Another important element was her explanation that it was not the Orixá punishing the woman but rather her Orixá needed to be strengthened in order to help her. She had to continue fortifying her composition to remain steadfast, be protected, but also augment her strength still further.

The composition between people, Orixás and spirits is a frequent theme during the *giras*. In one of these, before Dona Padilha’s *quizila*⁹, she summoned a woman to explain to her that she needed to take care of her own things (*fazer suas coisas*) and take care of her Pombogira. The woman replied that she knew this, but did not want to work with her Pombogira, as she did not agree with the way she went about resolving things. So Dona Padilha began to explain that she needed to learn how to build a relationship with her Pombogira, since she could only gain from doing so. She recounted that her own *cavalo* ‘did indeed confront her and I have confronted him a lot, only that now I no longer do anything he does not want, because he once punished me by keeping me from coming to earth for six moons.¹⁰ He knows how to do it, so I do not do it my way.’ Dona Padilha continued: ‘Once I made a spell of binding. I did everything correctly, placed a jewel inside, and when he returned he saw the spell and undid it. He gave me back the stone and said he was not going to do it. Afterwards, he even punished me.’ In another *gira*, Dona Mulambo recounted the reason why the Doté had undone the spell: ‘the Doté told the woman that it would ruin her life and her marriage, since her husband was a spiritist and would find out. Even with the spell undone, the husband discovered it and ended the marriage.’ From this story of a spell made and undone, Dona Padilha explained to the woman concerned that she had to know how to deal with her Pombogira. But she replied that she had already suffered too much at the hands of her Pombogira and so would not even try.

In the end, Dona Padilha once again told the woman that she needed to take control, communicate and make *acertos* with her Pombogira. However, the woman insisted that she would not do what was asked of her. And so Dona Padilha did not return to the matter. When the woman left, Dona Padilha said once more that she did not challenge her *cavalo* and that the woman was afraid of her own Pombogira because she did not understand that she needed to work, become accustomed to the energy and control it. ‘Today my *cavalo* has taught me that I must always do things by making *acertos* with him. But since the woman did not want to listen, I stopped talking. If she already thinks she knows everything, how can I help her?’

9 Interdiction or rejection caused by annoyance due to inappropriate conduct.

10 Six months.

To reach agreements between the *cavalo*, the Pombogira and the other entities, it is essential to allow the encounter, create their *acertos* and learn from the composition being shared. These *acertos* are also constructed amid the constant tension inherent to relations in Candomblé and all parties must allow themselves to engage in the encounter. Initially, this may not be harmonious, but over time, dedication, faith and mutual trust will give rhythm and form to this relation.

‘WHEN YOU REACH THE CROSSROADS, DON’T FORGET TO LOOK BACK’

In attempting to understand the relation between the embodied and spiritual sides, my initial error was to act as an executor: in so doing, I was treating the relation between them as one between visible and invisible worlds. Prompted by the questioning and remarks of another practitioner of anthropology, Marcio Goldman, who pointed out that the best way to know which term to use in an ethnography was to ask one’s friends, I realised it would be necessary to ask the Pombogiras. At that moment, I ceased to be an executor and repositioned myself as a practitioner of anthropology by asking the question. Dona Padilha responded with another: ‘What is your problem with the spiritual?’ Dona Padilha’s reply presented a world in composition, in which movement is required from the spiritual side to the embodied. In this way, she emphasised movement and composition as ways of thinking the world.

The Pombogiras are spirits that move freely, like the wind, passing through walls and entering anywhere. Only when they are in the body of the priest or priestess do they encounter a limit and can no longer pass through walls. By contrast, embodied spirits require the body in order to exist.

By comprehending the relation between the embodied and the spiritual as movements that form a composition between two sides that coexist in the world, I was able to understand that this relation is, above all, movement. The relation between the spiritual and the embodied cannot be understood as two static points that touch: they are movements that encounter one another. They are relations that construct themselves. For the embodied spirit to exist, there must be movement from the spiritual to the embodied; likewise, for everyone to see the Pombogiras, this movement is required. Yet they do not cease to exist when they are not located in the body.

José Carlos dos Anjos (2006) recounts that a *mãe de santo* once rebuked him for sitting with his arms crossed, since his posture was blocking the passage of energies. This is only possible because the body presents itself as this movement from the spiritual plane to the embodied. The body is a crossroads that need to allow movement to happen. Once again, then, it is not a question of removing the body from the scene, but rather of constructing a notion of the body as composition, as movement between the spiritual and the embodied. It requires apprehending the body beyond the visual. We must displace this colonialist belief in

worldviews in order to allow ourselves to see the world as composition. In this composition, there are things we cannot see, but that does not mean they cease to be present.

The *terreiros* included both black people and white people among their *filhos* (initiates) and clients. As noted earlier, my research concerned the *acertos* that were constructed, which led me to reflect on the relations created between people and the Pombogiras. The Pombogiras explain that embodied spirits are more than a body: they are a composition of spirits, Orixás, Exus... It is through this composition that they give counsel to those who seek them out. The *acertos* are constructed not with reference to the body but rather to the spiritual composition. The body is removed from the point of reference in order to generate movement between the spiritual and embodied planes. Removing the body from the point of reference should not be confused with removing the body from the discussion. Instead, it means freeing ourselves from a construction of two static points – the body and the spirit – in order to understand the body as a composition in the movement between the spiritual and the embodied. In other words, it entails thinking of this composition as the relation per se between the spiritual side and the embodied side, which becomes visible through the body.

The Pombogiras make the crossroads their dwelling. The crossroads is the communication itself between the spiritual and the embodied, while the Pombogiras are the materialisation of this encounter. They can make themselves present anywhere and, at every crossroads, one must ask them for permission, for they will be there. The notion of the crossroads employed here draws on two ethnographic works: the research of anthropologist José Carlos dos Anjos (2006) on the Território da Linha Cruzada in Rio Grande do Sul and Humberto Santana Jr. (2021), about the thought of the Pombogiras.

As a junction, the crossroads is also a meeting point, a place where paths may open but also where they may close. Likewise, it is the place of choosing new paths and possibilities. It was through the thought of the crossroads that different African nations encountered one another and gave origin to Afro-Brazilian religions in Brazil. It is through this notion, too, that Catholic saints were incorporated into Afro-Brazilian religiosity. By including Catholic saints within their worship, the force that exists on the other side of the crossroads is recognised. In this context, Catholics saw the entities being worshipped as Catholic saints, since African divinities either did not exist or had no force (Oro and Anjos 2009). The crossroads is a counterpoint to syncretism given that syncretism entails a blockage of communication insofar as Catholics do not acknowledge the force of African divinities. By contrast, the crossroads allows practitioners of Candomblé to recognise the force and establish communication. The force is not denied: instead, it is placed in relation.

José Carlos dos Anjos (2008) presents the crossroads as a proposition of Afro-Brazilian religious philosophy in response to racism. The Pombogiras present the crossroads as communication between the spiritual and embodied worlds, an encounter that excludes neither difference nor the tension generated by the encounter.

It is this crossroads thought (*pensamento em encruzilhada*) that allowed Nego Bispo, when asked what he thought about the arrival of Evangelical churches in the quilombos, to reply that no problem exists since quilombos are polytheistic and now they will have one more weapon: in addition to the *feitço* (spell) they will also have the miracle to add to their struggle. On another occasion, when asked how white people are treated in the quilombo, he answered that in the quilombo the person needs to know how to show respect: if you do not know how, you will not be respected either, irrespective of whether you are white or black.

The Pombogiras also looked at people not by their colour, but by their spiritual composition. The crossroads continues to be important for reflecting on ethno-racial relations and on difference. The crossroads does not separate worlds: it enables their encounter and sets it in motion, creating compositions amid constant tensions. The crossroads is also the meeting point that makes possible the construction of new potential paths. It is the crux – the crucial point.

It is important to stress that tensions and risks are constant. I am not saying that the crossroads permits harmonious encounters and compositions. On the contrary, anyone familiar with Candomblé knows that equilibrium is achieved in movement: equilibrium is not static but dynamic. Clara Flaksman (2017) has already pointed out that the dynamics of Candomblé must be thought via the relation between order and disorder, since stagnant energy leads to chaos. For this reason, it is essential to remain in movement, as well as protect oneself always, since we live in a dangerous world. We need to strengthen our spiritual composition in order to face the dangers that await us.

With the Pombogiras, it became possible to understand that the encounter is a composition of misencounters and that for the encounter to happen, it is necessary to both encounter and be encountered. The encounter must be seen as a composition that is built in relation. The crossroads presents itself as a relation that utilizes difference as a form of composing forces.

In conversation with the geographer Andreilino Campos, he told me: ‘Black people are entering the territory of the university and forgetting their place.’ He went on: ‘Their affective place, the house backyard, the terreiro, the roda de samba – these are the places from which we should be drawing our concepts and values.’ Gilberto Gil once said: ‘Affirmative action is an important step towards civilising the university.’ The entry of black and indigenous academics serves precisely for our bodies and knowledge to produce new ways of thinking and make new reflections possible.

For the thought originating in the quilombos and terreiros, there is no problem in dealing with difference, since recognising difference is part of the very construction of these forms of knowledge, these lived experiences, and their importance in guaranteeing existence. It is by observing nature and life that such knowledge and their concepts are produced.

On the other hand, the academy long reproduced the kind of thought that Nego Bispo calls Euro-Christian-monotheist and cosmophobic. Audre Lorde (2019: 141) observes that Western European history teaches us ways not to know how to deal with differences. This

history conditions us to view human differences through simplistic oppositions: good/evil, dominant/subordinate, superior/inferior.

The clash of civilisations between different modes of thought and how to deal with difference offers important reflections that enrich our discussion of ethnic-racial relations. While Euro-Christian-monotheist and cosmophobic thought continues to sustain its claim to universality and imposes itself through the annulment of the different, the forms of knowledge emerging from quilombos and terreiros take difference as an essential part of their composition.

As a way of continuing to think about ethnic-racial relations via the notion of relation, I cite a lived moment from the classroom. The experience of practising anthropology while discussing ethnic-racial relations is a constant exercise in reflecting carefully, cultivating depth and avoiding the risk of quick answers. It was during a course on Afro-Brazilian religions on a Social Anthropology postgraduate program, with seven students enrolled in the class, that I witnessed a beautiful reflection from one of the students.

The class was made up of six people who attended terreiros of Afro-Brazilian religions, including a *babalorixá* (priest). Only one student, Elisângela, did not frequent a terreiro, knew virtually nothing about the subject and was Catholic. During the lessons, the entire class took great care in how they spoke and explained clearly what they were saying. Each time a term arose, everyone remembered that they needed to explain what it meant in detail, so that this one student could properly understand what was being discussed. These reactions were spontaneous, but they were not a way of confronting religious racism. They were primarily a form of attentiveness and care, ensuring that the student could feel part of the class, comprehend the issues being raised and participate in the collective construction of knowledge without excluding difference.

The classes were already stimulating reflections and practical actions on how to deal with difference respectfully and without exclusion. These were moments in which, even as we theorised about Afro-Brazilian religions and the crossroads, the practice itself was already a clear example of what we were discussing. It was a source of satisfaction for the class to see that Elisângela was able to follow the discussions and begin to understand something of the universe of Afro-Brazilian religions.

In the middle of the course, Elisângela presented us with a reflection important to understanding ethnic-racial relations, the crossroads as a philosophy of Afro-Brazilian religiosity and the lessons on how to deal with difference. Elisângela spoke about the significance of the class and the attentiveness that the group had shown to her. She emphasised that she was the only Christian in the group, everyone had made a point of checking whether she was understanding the discussion and, more than anything, she felt comfortable and welcomed. She went on to say that she knew very well how, were the situation reversed, a *candomblecista* would probably not feel the same and would not be welcomed.

Elisângela's reflection shows us the other side of the crossroads, the side accustomed to being the majority, being the only truth and the only path to be followed, facing a situation in which another religion does not impose its own way of thinking and professing faith, nor regarding her own faith and her very existence as something wrong, only as something different. I cite this example for us to think about ethnic-racial relations and the different ways of dealing with difference. The group on this course welcomed Elisângela not with the intention of excluding difference, but making use of the notion of relation through the crossroads.

To resume our discussion of the question about the role of white professors in studies and research on ethnic-racial relations, I shall turn to the example of two white women professors who research ethnic-racial relations and who belong to an institution that hosts a postgraduate program in this field. The first case concerns a white professor who researches whiteness and who always takes the opportunity to place other white professors in uncomfortable situations concerning racial relations. This professor is aware of her ability to cause discomfort and be heard because she is white. Making use of this position, she proposed that the course on Ethnic-Racial Relations be included across all undergraduate Engineering programs at the institution. The proposal was accepted and is already in the process of being implemented.

Another case arose from a situation of racism involving a male black postdoctoral researcher who had a meeting with another female white professor at the institution. Perceiving that the researcher had arrived upset and after asking what had happened, the professor suggested seeking out those responsible, eventually reaching the General Director. The conversation with the Director began with the professor insisting that it was necessary to do more than have a postgraduate program in Ethnic-Racial Relations, since its existence alone did not guarantee the implementation of anti-racist practices. Consequently, she demanded a concrete and official stance against racism. She made use of her position as a white professor, a researcher in ethnic-racial relations, and once again pressed the institution to fulfil its role in combating racism. In this specific case, the strategy had been agreed by the two researchers in advance, taking into consideration that, in addition to the professor being white – and thus likely to be heard – she had already been asking the Director to act in other situations. Here, a composition was formed between the black researcher and the white researcher so that the institution would take a stand, considering not only ethnic-racial relations but also foregrounding the very notion of relation.

When we set out to think about ethnic-racial relations on the basis of exclusion from spaces or the separation of knowledge – and even more so when we think in terms of excluding white people – are we, in fact, learning to deal with difference through what we have learned from the knowledge produced in the *terreiros* and *quilombos* and among indigenous peoples? Or are we instead learning from the colonialists and forgetting our own means of thought?

In a lecture given in the NAnSi research laboratory at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ) entitled “Thinking on the edges of disaster: from slavery to environmental

cataclysm,' José Carlos dos Anjos posed the question of how far what we, as black persons, take to be success and the path we follow does not in fact repeat a trajectory that denies blackness (*negritude*) itself. By using what metrics do black people 'at the top' claim that success has been achieved? Is it the individual speaking in the name of the collective? In the same reflection, he points out how often we, as black people, must go on denying our blackness in order to occupy certain spaces.

I had the opportunity to see Nego Bispo on a panel at the Museu Nacional (UFRJ) alongside Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Rita Segato. When asked about the role of black people in the university, he replied: *to make the colonizer's eggs rot*. The notions that Nego Bispo advances as counter-colonisation, aimed at combating colonialist thought, are not created by using Euro-Christian-monotheist thought, even as a framework for contesting it, less still by resorting to the coloniser's weapons, since it has already been proven that these arms only cause destruction.

When we speak about ethnic-racial relations, are we taking into account the notion of relation? Have we abandoned what the crossroads teaches us about dealing with difference, only to learn instead from the destructive appetite of colonialist thought? Does excluding white people solve our situation? How much of white thought is already embedded in the humiliations that black people direct at other black people? What is the effectiveness of conceiving ethnic-racial relations as a reflection among black people only? By excluding white and indigenous people from the discussion, are we not also excluding the notion of relation itself?

Here, I return to the notion of resistance introduced at the beginning of this text. If we choose to use resistance in the sense of reaction, we are once again denying the knowledge learned from African-derived philosophy, and in so doing also denying blackness itself in the name of a colonialist knowledge. By using resistance as the defence of a prior existence, instead, grounded in a philosophy that is likewise prior, we can allow ourselves to continue to learn from the crossroads.

I could have taken the path of an executor of theory and argued that the entry of Catholic saints into Candomblé occurred through the imposition of a colonialist culture and the need to conceal the worship of African divinities. But as a practitioner of anthropology, I have to understand that if there is any contradiction in having Catholic saints in Candomblé, it exists only for me, since I have not yet grasped the relation created. The Pombogiras teach that where power exists, we can use it in our favour. The entry of the Catholic saints was only possible because the very basis of this thought is its special capacity to manipulate different forms of energy. The Catholic saints entered, but they were made and prepared through the foundations, magic and spells of Candomblé. The Catholic saints were not denied: instead, a relation was constructed that respected difference and gave meaning to Candomblé. This is yet another lesson from the Afro-Brazilian religions in how to live with difference, how to construct a relation while respecting differences.

While we combat racism theoretically, Candomblé has already taught us the paths and even armed us with the richness of a philosophy that knows how to manipulate different

energies, a philosophy aware of how to put different energies into relation. In a religion where everything is made, even the divinities, what matters more than making is knowing how to make. What can we learn from this specialised knowledge that uses magic and spells to maintain a dynamic equilibrium and keep making us stronger? Magic and spells need to be freed from their ethnocentric dimension and valued as specialised knowledge that teaches us how to place different energies in relation, creating new movements, inventing compositions and giving us the possibility to create worlds where life itself is the point of reference.

The notion of relation presented by Marilyn Strathern has two properties: the holographic and the complementary. In apprehending these two properties, we perceive the need not only to see the relation between things, but also to see things as relations. If we are thinking about taking seriously the notion of ethno-racial relations, we must reflect on how far we are abandoning the philosophy and thought elaborated in the *terreiros* and *quilombos* and among indigenous peoples, unlearning how to deal with difference. Dealing with difference by annulling, excluding or destroying the other is a colonialist mode of thought. Following the path of the cosmopolitical proposition, will we continue to be mere executors within a field called ethno-racial relations, one that does not even intend to be a relation? Or can we be practitioners of a science in search of knowledge that is produced rather than reproduced?

The *Pombogiras* and the *terreiros* present ways of making life, allowing life to be lived within an anti-black system that wants us dead. It was not by defeating the other for being different that the *Pombogiras* taught us how to grow strong, but rather by strengthening our own spiritual composition. It was through the knowledge produced in the *terreiros* and presented by the *Pombogiras* that it became possible to understand the relations they constructed with different persons. Not only was it possible to comprehend the *acertos* and how our own composition is constructed, but also to see how *acertos* were continually constructed and renewed, giving rise to new compositions. For the *acertos* to be achieved, we had not only to search for the *Pombogiras* but also allow ourselves to be found.

It was the encounter with the thought of the *Pombogiras* that generated the possibility of creating reflections in dialogue with Stengers's cosmopolitical proposition. The power and efficacy of magic in enabling the construction of *acertos* led me to understand another specialised form of thought-making. And the presence of the *Pombogiras* allows us to apprehend the efficacy of the ritual of their summoning, which contains the power to develop reflections where once we saw only certainty. Here, we can perceive the equivalence between the efficacy of calling the *Pombogiras* and that of summoning the Goddess. Stengers (2018) emphasises the importance of the efficacy of the ritual of convoking the Goddess: as a presence that transforms the relations that each protagonist entertains with their own knowledge, hopes, fears and memories, and that allows the collective to bring forth what each of them alone would have been incapable of producing. It was through the encounter with the

Pombogiras that the deepest certainties were undone, giving way not to new certainties, but to new reflections. This is not a revelation, but a creation-composition achieved in presence.

We can follow this path and build our thinking on ethno-racial relations, transforming the relations we maintain with our own forms of knowledge and proposing new reflections in composition with the means of thought of the Pombogiras on difference and on persons as compositions that themselves form part of other compositions. It is thus essential to think composition itself when reflecting on ethno-racial relations.

Are we ready to abandon our certainties and allow ourselves to slow down in the name of a deeper reflection? Are we willing to take seriously the notion of relation contained in the formulation of ethno-racial relations, or will we continue to be mere executors of a colonialist mode of thought that believes it can only deal with difference through exclusion, destruction and death? What can thinking through the crossroads teach us about how to deal with difference?

LEARNING FROM THE CROSSROADS

This text is not an endpoint but the start of a reflective process that allows itself to take seriously the notion of ethno-racial relations through the encounter – with all the tensions and risks this entails. Being in relation means learning how to deal with difference. The crossroads can serve as a notion through which the encounter between different worlds becomes possible without excluding difference. Afro-Brazilian religions envisage the crossroads as a communication between the spiritual and embodied sides composing the world. It is a place of encounters, misencounters and possibilities for constructing new paths. When possibilities exist, the path to be taken is chosen and the outcome derives from that choice.

It is necessary not only to take seriously the notion of relation, but also to think of these relations as compositions. We must move beyond a static mode of thought that places two points in contact, viewing them separately, without truly establishing relations, and still less conceptualising these points themselves as relations. Another important dimension for the development of this reflection is the process of slowing down, allowing depth in the construction of scientific knowledge. The proposal here is to make scientific knowledge itself a composition between different kinds of thought via the crossroads.

The entry of Catholic saints into Candomblé, or the presence of white people in the terreiros, is not a problem for Candomblé, so long as the foundation is respected, the philosophy is respected and followed. But it is important to emphasise that the entry of both Catholic saints and white people adheres to the philosophy, foundation and black thought already present in the terreiros. So, should we abandon this way of thinking and begin to act like the colonialists? If everything in Candomblé is made – if even the saints are made in us and in our double – what advantage is there in abandoning this mode of thought and embracing the destructive thought of the colonialists? It is the destructive colonialist thought

that can destroy even the force of the Orixás, since the Orixás are forces of nature. So what advantage is there in aligning ourselves with colonialist thought? As Dona Padilha would say: *you are not obliged to do anything, but you are responsible for the consequences of what you do*. Another lesson we can learn from the Pombogiras is the need always to strengthen ourselves and be prepared for whatever may happen. By strengthening ourselves, by knowing our composition, we will be protected and able to carry on. By knowing our philosophy, the basis of the thought sustaining us, we can acquire the strength to continue.

For this text not to be the end of a discussion but rather the beginning of a reflection, we need to avoid seeing the crossroads as a static point of encounter. The crossroads already presents itself as relation, respecting the two properties presented, and it already situates time itself as relation. In this sense, we must learn from the notion of the crossroads that we need to approach ethno-racial relations not only by taking seriously the notion of relation, but also by freeing ourselves from a static and hurried gaze. It is worth emphasising that it is the crossroads that enables choice and the construction of new paths. What is required is not only to put in relation but to *be* relation, to enter into movement and allow the crossroads to provide the encounter that makes new compositions possible.

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