Afro-Brazilian on the move. Transnationalism, commodification and place-making in Afro-Brazilian cultural heritage in Los Angeles.

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This paper is part of a research I conducted during 2015/2016 in the city of Los Angeles. I concentrated on Brazilians and non-Brazilians engaged in teaching and performing activities characterized as being representative of Brazilian culture. The Brazilians I met are first generation migrants who are carving new economic niches in the cultural market.

I will focus on cases that present singular developments in movement and transformation of diasporic heritage, conveying specific transnational politics of place-making (Brickell & Datta, 2011). I will refer to groups dedicated to Afro-Brazilian arts, which have created strategies of transnational circulation of people, goods and beliefs from Brazil to L.A. and back. On one hand, these groups seek to insert themselves in global African diasporic discourses that strongly appeals to African Americans. They approximate their identity to other countries with a history of African slavery, specifically through religion. On the other hand, they restlessly reinforce the singularities of the Afro-Brazilian syncretism and cultural heritage in order to differentiate themselves from other cultural expressions. The latter is primarily a strategy to gain access to specific economic opportunities.

The endeavor of place-making is connected to religion and transnational ties in two ways. Firstly, by evoking places and sites (Marcus, 2011) from Brazil. What is sacred and profane is determined in specific social spaces in Brazil and extrapolated to the U.S. Secondly, the circulation of priestesses, clothes and symbols provide some individuals with the authority and authenticity to perform and teach Afro-Brazilian arts. While analyzing the dynamics of cultural commodification it was possible to identify the social criteria by which specific elements and features are chosen to define what Afro-Brazilian cultural heritage is. These are spaces of disputes and negotiation through social control in which race, national and, particularly, regional belonging are crucial.

Key words: Afro-Brazilian heritage; Brazilian migrants; place-making; transnationalism.