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**Bloco Pagu – Feminist, Women’s Rights, and LGBTQ+**

**Groups in the Street Carnival of São Paulo, Brazil**

Paper written for WST-512 / SOC-518 (Sociology of Gender) - Stony Brook University

## **Introduction**

In this paper, I argue that the recent presence of feminist, women's rights, and LGBTQ+ groups during Carnival festivities in Brazil's largest metropolises have been crucial in reorienting its traditional male-chauvinist domination and tendencies. Primarily through street festivities and parades, alliances and organizations of present-day urban women have opposed their absence in leading roles during Brazilian Carnival. The struggle is towards inclusion, presence, and active representation, bringing dissent and gender equality discussions to the streets as a communal celebration. While discussing the recent empowering movements led by feminist and LGBTQ+ organizations during street Carnival in Brazil, I will emphasize Bloco Pagu, one of the most renowned feminist Carnival groups in São Paulo. As a prologue, Carnival, its origins and characteristics, how it was implemented and developed in Brazil will be covered. Furthermore, I will also include the brief biography of Patricia Rehder Galvão, known as Pagu, one of the first feminists of the 20th century in Brazil, and the inspiration for the name 'Bloco Pagu.' Moreover, I will discuss her book *Industrial Park*, considered the first Brazilian literary work, blending Marxism and Feminist ideologies.

This paper overlaps the concepts discussed during the seminar WST-512/SOC-518 (Women Studies/Sociology), at Stony Brook University, with my theme of choice, blending Sociology of Gender with Ethnomusicology. The applied bibliography, archival, and ethnographic sources are divided into two parts: Part I refers to the books and articles read for WST-512/SOC-518, while Part II is exclusively devoted to Carnival, feminism in Brazil, Bloco Pagu, and Patricia Rehder Galvão.

## **Carnival<sup>i</sup>**

The origins of Carnival have been sought at the earliest celebrations of humankind. Egyptian, Greek, and Roman festivities included extensive parties with alcohol consumption and were associated with astronomical phenomena, nature cycles, the return of spring, and agricultural harvests. The word Carnival, derived from the Latin phrase "Carne Levale" ("to remove the flesh"

or “abstention from the flesh”), became known around the 11th and 12th centuries AD and is directly associated with religion and with the control of the mundane pleasures.<sup>ii</sup>

Carnival celebrations usually start on Saturday and last until Ash Wednesday. “Fat Tuesday” is officially the last day of Carnival, and Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent when the abstinence of meat formally begins. This period is characterized by a lot of recreation, entertainment, and irreverence, as people unleash their imagination in costumes, songs, and dances. The Carnival period brings people a false sense of equality and freedom, narrowing the differences between social classes and challenging society’s taboos and rules. Despite being mostly remembered as a pagan festival, Carnival is directly linked to Lent as if it were the last chance to enjoy the compulsions before the 40 days of fasting and prayer before Easter. Christians often refrain from specific foods or activities they like to practice as a penance to prepare for Easter. The Catholic countries of southern Europe, the Caribbean, and Latin America celebrate Carnival every year. The celebrations and demonstrations in each place are quite diverse, with distinct local particularities and traditions, but always with joy, fun, and partying as common denominators.

### **Carnival in Brazil**

Introduced in Brazil in 1723 by the Portuguese colonizers, Carnival was first known as Entrudo (entrance, the one who enters or invades). During this yearly period of celebration, it was customary to throw fruits, powders, and flours, as well as lots of water and other suspicious liquids on each other. The amusing but sometimes violent game was practiced among families in the manor houses or the streets and in public squares where slaves and poor free men generally gathered and enjoyed themselves. Despite the apparent equal footing situation between masters and slaves during Entrudo games, their roles were clearly defined, with slaves often being the targets of fruit, powder, and liquid throwing. Around the same period, black slaves used to play with each other early in the morning or when the masters and their families had already retired back home.<sup>iii</sup>

During the Empire years (1822-1889), the party dedicated to laughter and pleasure grew in size and popularity and became more commonly called Carnival. The urban elites were gradually abandoning the messy Entrudo games turning their eyes to the Carnivals of the most progressive cities in Europe, such as Nice, Naples, Paris, Rome, and Venice. In those European centers, the celebration of Carnival included balls, dances, songs, lights, feasts, and parades of luxurious masks and costumes through the streets. These entertaining activities were seen as a sign of progress, civilization, elegance, and cultural growth. Entrudo, with its primitive and violent form of fun, remained in practice only by slaves and the poor until the 1880s, when an intense press campaign coupled with repressive police action made Carnival celebrations more civilized for all segments of society. From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, Carnival societies emerged, formed by members of the urban elites whose members paraded masked in colorful and decorated floats. The criticism of traditions, politics, and cultural habits through laughter and humor and without personal offense was a highly valued practice during Carnival.

### **How the Brazilian Male-Chauvinist Society sees Women in Carnival – How Women Are Fighting Back**

As entertainment and a temporary deviation of reality, Carnival has the power to transform and deconstruct the rational adult into the instinctive adult in search of liberation and pleasure (Butler, 1990). Since colonial times, Brazilian society is marked by social inequality, gender inequality, and racial prejudice. Men, mostly white, have always been in control of Carnival, its organization, and its norms throughout history (Arvin, Tuck, Morrill, 2013). The absence of female representation at Carnival, except for the visual exploitation of their barely dressed bodies, has always been the tradition and accepted norm until the turn of the century, two decades ago. Also, the absence of women playing percussion instruments, conducting the music, and leading the Carnival groups, in the eye of the public or the background, has always been typical in Brazil (Romero, 2020).

During the last two decades, with the increasing awareness and feminist ideals in all sectors of Brazilian society, women are consciously fighting their previous Carnival invisibility. They are becoming samba dancers and choreographers, costume designers, composers, instrumentalists,

managers, and executive producers. These Brazilian women do not accept showing their bodies because of patriarchal, sexist imposition anymore (Lugones, 2010; Connell, 1995). Instead, some of them do so for liberation, emancipation, equality, and empowerment. They started to organize their own Blocos (Street Carnival Groups), sometimes exclusively for them, without the presence of men. Brazilian women, especially in large urban centers like São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Belo Horizonte, Salvador, and Recife, are taking gender debates to the streets as a form of protest. One of the significant transformations promoted by contemporary women in Brazilian Carnival is precisely the occupation of those spaces previously reserved only for men (Schippers, 2007).

### **Carnival Blocos in the 2000s: A Public and Free Form of Identity & Expression of Sexuality**

The progressive and avant-garde popular feminist movements in Brazil, together with the forefront LGBTQ+ organizations, propose to rescue the primordial values of Carnival, emphasizing respect and understanding of diversity as everyday necessities and obligations. They promote the freedom of expression, freedom of existence, freedom of wearing costumes as an act of performance and transformation (Butler, 1990), and the occupation of streets and public spaces with parties and celebrations of life, combined with thoughtful political-view expressions. Also, they promote the freedom to write lyrics and make music as a process of collective socio-political criticism. The presence of feminist and gender equality Blocos are increasingly becoming ubiquitous during street Carnival parties in most of the major Brazilian urban centers (. In the year 2020, there was 644 official registered Blocos in the city of São Paulo, the largest in Brazil and South America. Among those, there has been a massive presence of feminist e LGBTQ+ Blocos (Darwin, 2017; Barbee and Schrock, 2019).

### **Bloco Pagu – Origins, History, and Mission**

Bloco Pagu, founded in October 2016 by filmmaker Mariana Bastos and producer Thereza Menezes, is a collective music group that exalts women empowerment, gender equality, and women's freedom through the streets of São Paulo during Carnival. The Bloco is named after Pagu, the nickname of Patrícia Rehder Galvão, a Brazilian artist, journalist, writer, political activist, and muse of Brazilian modernism. Pagu, considered one of the first feminist women in the 20th century, was a questioning woman, ahead of her time, who made her life a struggle for

women's freedom and rights. Bloco Pagu includes the participation of percussionists ('bateria'), all women, trained and rehearsed in their percussion workshop. The musical repertoire played comprises classics of Brazilian 'MPB' (Musica Popular Brasileira) that became famous through the voices of iconic female interpreters: Carmen Miranda, Elis Regina, Marisa Monte, Gal Costa, Maria Bethania, Rita Lee, among many others. During the four years of its existence, Bloco Pagu quickly became one of the most expressive Carnival groups in São Paulo. The members pay a fee to join and receive percussion lessons; however, the organization offers scholarships to participants who cannot afford it.

Mariana Bastos, one of the founders, reinstates that Carnival is the time when women are most harassed in public. She says: "The importance of women being leaders comes from the fact that women have never been protagonists in Carnival. Men have always been protagonists in the Brazilian Carnival, while women were muses, always seen through men's eyes. At the Bloco Pagu parade, several men joined the party, dressed as women: It became something to honor. It is not an exclusive Bloco as it has the presence of men in the organization too. Within gender equality, we talk about men and women walking together, and men also have to be impacted by this discourse. Children and babies also participate in the party, sometimes wearing costumes. For the parents, the option to take them seems to have a pedagogical function. It is a differentiated Bloco with an important message. Bloco Pagu preaches not to oppression, nor machismo, but a free society." Mariana also says: "The power of our vagina is the most beautiful thing in the world" (De Beauvoir, 1952)

The participants of Bloco Pagu promote and share ideas with participants of similar feminist and LGBTQ+ blocos. The public who come to the street festivities also embraces the same principles as a collective project in fighting sexual harassment, condemning homophobia, lesbophobia, transphobia, fatphobia, and all kinds of identity and gender phobias. Many repeated phrases are heard during the parade of feminist blocos: "Não é não" (No means no), "Meu corpo, Minhas regras" (My body, my rules), "Zero Assédio" (Zero Harassment), "Samba em cima do Patriarcado" (I dance the Samba on top of Patriarchy), "Machismo é uma doença social" (Chauvinism/Machismo is a social disease), "Girl Power," "Ele não" (Not Him - Against the conservative and current misogynistic president of Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro), "Marielle presente"

(Marielle present – Evoking the presence of City Counselor and human rights activist, Marielle Franco, shot dead in a drive-by murder in Rio de Janeiro in 2018).

## **Marielle Franco**

Marielle Franco, who was 38, was a sociologist and an admired politician among the poorest segments of society and the leftist intellectual elite of Rio de Janeiro. She spent her political career fighting police violence. Her assassination has been treated as intentionally targeted. Marielle Franco was not the typical Brazilian politician: She was black, raised in the favelas (slums) in Rio, and straightforwardly feminist. She was recognized throughout Brazil for her fight for women's rights and her determined criticism of police brutality and gun violence in Rio's favelas.

## **Bloco Pagu and the 2020 Theme: Red**

For the 2020 Carnival parade in São Paulo, the founders and organizers of Bloco Pagu decided to adopt the theme Red. The purpose was to select a color that symbolized both femininity and, at the same time, violence. The combination of both created the blended identity of violence towards women and the fight against it (de Beauvoir, 1952). Mariana Bastos describes the reasons why Red has a definite meaning among Brazilian women: “Red because femicide hit a record high in 2019. Red because abortion in so many countries has not yet been understood as a public health issue. Red is because trans, cis, black, white, indigenous, and mixed-race women die every day as victims of violence. Red because gender inequality in the workplace and society has increased. At this rate, women still have to wait 257 years to achieve parity (World Economic Forum data). Red because menstruation is considered filth in Western civilizations. Red because all women connect with that color in their own universes. Red Because we still exist and redefine this violence. Together we will dye the streets with the Red we see and live with and our love, which goes beyond that color. Each person in this parade represents a drop of that red sea. Come join us; let's dance and celebrate our strength!”

## **Conclusion - Bloco Pagu – Evolution, Repercussion, Reaction and the Establishment of Feminist Carnival Standards**

Since the founding in 2016 and its short existence of only four years, Bloco Pagu quickly became the exponent and image of feminism, women empowerment, and gender equality during Carnival. The year-round open rehearsals reverberate in the media, attracting much public attention and more women wanting to participate. Bloco Pagu promotes a perennial percussion workshop, teaching the rudiments of each percussion instrument to its participants and other non-members. In 2017 there were 60 women percussionists; in 2018, there were 80; in 2019, there were 120, and in 2020 the number of participants increased to 140.

Bloco Pagu has been the inspiration and model of organization to other feminists, identity, and gender equality Carnival groups. Nowadays, there is a network of Feminist and LGBTQ+ Blocos supporting one another in many Brazilian cities. The idea of creating an all-female ‘bateria’ brings comfort to the environment of the women who participate in the bloco. In addition to playing, each year, more women want to lead and be part of Carnival’s organization in many cities of Brazil, always addressing equality, respect, and feminine/minority/gender resistance (Deutsch, 2007; Risman, 2009). Brazil has anti-harassment laws that already passed and are in effect, but they need to be enforced by the local authorities. Women want to go out together, sing and play, energize other women, fight against violence, racism, reproductive and sexual rights. Another crucial focus frequently emphasized by contemporary feminist and LGBTQ+ Carnival blocos is the importance of Afro-Brazilian culture and black leadership (Collins, 1989; Andaluza, 1997; Mohanty, 1996). Intersectionality (Collins, 2015; Crenshaw, 1991) has been addressed frequently by minority feminist and activist groups in Brazil (Zinn and Dill, 1996).

#### **APPENDIX I - Pagu – Patricia Rehder Galvão<sup>iv</sup>**

Patrícia Rehder Galvão, Pagu, was one of the most controversial female figures in the Brazilian history of the 20th century. Pagu was born in a bourgeois family, in São João da Boa Vista, the countryside of São Paulo, on June 9, 1910. Pagu moved away from her social class, dedicating her life to the struggle for equality and social justice, defending and believing in women's active participation in society and politics. Pagu had always been ahead of her time. She was a literary critic, modernist writer, poet, theater director, playwright, illustrator, journalist, translator, political



activist, and mother. Advanced by the standards of the time, she liked to smoke and to swear in public; she wore transparent blouses and very short skirts; she kept her hair at times short and messy, other times long and flowing. That behavior shocked the São Paulo society at the beginning of the 20th century, contradicting her conservative and traditional family background and distinguished herself from the other middle and upper-class women in Brazilian society. Her extravagant, irreverent, liberated, rebellious, and politicized behavior also made her the center of attention, having concomitantly many fans and critics (Butler, 1990; West, Zimmerman, 1987).

Pagu was a pioneer in several areas, later becoming a symbol of the feminist movement. Her ideas and behavior can place her also as an avant-garde feminist of her time since she was also very critical of the upper-class contemporary feminists. They had little to no connection with the struggle of the working class exploited women. She started writing while still a teenager; at the age of 15, she collaborated with *Brás Jornal* under the pseudonym of Patsy. At the age of 20, she approached the circle of bourgeois intellectuals from São Paulo, who created the Anthropophagic Modernist Movement. The movement aimed to reconfigure Brazilian literature to create something national, rather than repeating imported aesthetics. Her most significant closeness was with the married couple Oswald de Andrade (writer), and Tarsila do Amaral (painter). However, two years later, Page shocked society by marrying Oswald de Andrade.

In 1931, she joined the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB). At that time, she immersed herself in the female proletariat's life fighting the dictatorship of President Getúlio Vargas and, in the same year, during the Santos dockers' strike, in the confrontation between the police and the workers, Pagu ended up arrested for the first time. This episode that caused her arrest made her be considered the first Brazilian woman arrested for political reasons. That arrest was the first of a total of twenty-three during her lifetime. In 1933, Pagu published, under the pseudonym Mara Lobo, the novel *Parque Industrial* (Industrial Park), which was considered the first feminist-proletarian-gendered novel in Brazilian literature. She left Brazil shortly after and went on a trip to the United States, Europe, and Asia as a reporter. In France, she attended courses at Sorbonne and, in 1935, she joined the French Communist Party. The French police caught her with false documents, which guaranteed her another arrest. Pagu was released after the intervention of the Brazilian ambassador in France, Souza Dantas. During her travels, Pagu also interviewed Sigmund

Freud and participated in the coronation of the last Chinese emperor Pu-Yi. From Pu-Yi, she obtained the first soybean seeds that were brought to Brazil.

Upon returning to Brazil, Pagu separated from Oswald de Andrade (with whom she had a son, Rudá de Andrade) and resumed her journalist career. In 1935, she was arrested, tortured, and sentenced to five years in prison for her participation in the Communist Uprising, which was also known as the Communist Intentona or Red Revolt of 35. The movement was an attempted coup against the government of Getúlio Vargas, on behalf of the National Liberation Alliance, with support from the Communist Party of Brazil (PCB). After her prison release in 1940, Pagu left PCB, approaching Trotskyism and Socialism instead of Communism. She collaborated in the Vanguarda Socialista magazine, where she met journalist Geraldo Ferraz, who became her second husband and father of her second son, Geraldo Galvão Ferraz. Pagu moved to Santos at the seashore of São Paulo, where she also dedicated herself to the theater and the performing arts. In the 1950s, with the end of the Vargas dictatorship and the political openness, Pagu tried to run for state deputy but was unsuccessful. In 1962, she was diagnosed with cancer, trying to overcome it with a treatment in Paris, which was also unsuccessful. She attempted suicide three times during her lifetime (1940, 1949, and 1962) but died of cancer in that same year.

## **APPENDIX II - Parque Industrial (Industrial Park) – Not only a Proletarian, but a Intersectional-Feminist book!<sup>v</sup>**

Industrial Park is the first Brazilian literary work, albeit fictional, blending Marxism and Feminist ideologies, exposing and analyzing class and gender oppression. Pagu also brings race and sexuality to her novel to explain the system of work relations between powerful men and working-class women. Although a proletarian novel, Industrial Park is perhaps one of the first works to mention and discuss the principles of “Intersectionality” (Collins, 2015; Crenshaw, 1991). While race, as a subject of oppression, is not factually mentioned, it is known that many factory workers in Brazilian urban centers of the 1920s were black and mixed-race. The novel takes place in the São Paulo factories of the 1920s. It addresses power relations issued between men and women and their roles as dominant and working-class.vi

Because of Pagu's connections to the Communist Party, the evident subversive nature of her ideas, and the political content, *Industrial Park* was published under the pen name of Mara Lobo. There is an explicit criticism of São Paulo's bourgeoisie feminists for not being true to the broad sense of feminism in the book. Rich women are portrayed as wearing expensive clothes and going to the theater and social events. In contrast, poor women do not have alternatives other than working in factories under meager and deprived circumstances to earn minimum wage or less. Pagu first points out the non-inclusion of working-class women in the feminist discourses first adopted by women from the upper classes, then defends and advocates for their inclusion. For Pagu, that was the only real essence of feminism, when all women are included, sharing benefits equally, independent of social class. She describes working-class women of the 1920s as crucial protagonists of feminism through their struggle, arduous labor, and exploitation in São Paulo's factories. One of her main arguments in *Industrial Park* is that, due to the extended periods spent in the factories, working-class women could not dedicate any time to their children; therefore, not being proper mothers.

In addition to the labor concerns addressed, Pagu includes gender and sexuality debates all over *Industrial Park* as enhancement of its feminist substance. Among them, topics considered taboo in 1920s Brazil, including virginity, lesbianism, group sex, abortion, and infanticide. Virginity, as a patriarchal society exigence, is addressed as the most important feminist issue in the book. Pagu defends an end to the suppressed women's sexuality, demanding absolute respect by society regardless of their virginity and marital statuses. Women in Brazil during the 1920s envisioned marriage to wealthy men as social ascension and an alternative to avoid impoverishment. Since the male-controlled hypercritical society demanded single women remain virgins until marriage, their sexuality was automatically curbed when hoping to escape poverty. Furthermore, the author talks about prostitution as an option to enhance some women's economic status, once it was already proven to be almost impossible to marry someone from a different social circle or class. Additionally, *Industrial Park* exposes the exploitation suffered by working-class women in the form of rape and sexual abuse from dominant-class men, and that is never punished.

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