

Interview:

Thayssa Menezes

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Tags:

Carnival, Cubango, Black narratives, samba school, education through samba, samba, communal education, Black artists, access to opportunity, belonging, Black identity, Black womanhood, gender oppression, Afro-Brazilian education, patriarchy, Black hair politics, anti-Black beauty standards, continued legacy of slavery, freedom and freedom-making, what a free world looks like

Summary:

Thayssa's interview focuses on the importance of samba, Afro-Brazilian contributions to Carnival, teaching Afro-Brazilian history, ways racism and anti-Blackness are experienced in Brazil, and the intersection of racial and gender oppressions.

- Thayssa details her relationship with Carnival, underscoring the racial and communal education she gained from her exposure to the festival. She also highlights the centrality of Black people in developing the festival into what it is today.
- Thayssa speaks about the experience of racism in Brazil, giving particular attention to the ways a sense of belonging has been stripped from Brazil's Black population.
- Thayssa talks about her relationship with Blackness and womanhood as identities. She emphasizes both the experiences of oppression (through illuminating examples of medical racism in childbirth) and affirmation that come with these identities.
- Speaking to her experience as a Black woman, Thayssa highlights her process of learning to love her aesthetic expression of Blackness, particularly with respect to her hair.
- Thayssa talks about the intellectual production of the samba school, giving particular attention to that of Black women.

Main Themes:

Racial Education Through Samba And Carnival: Thayssa illuminates the ways in which Carnival and samba speak to the Afro-Brazilian experience. In so doing, she highlights the centrality of Black artists in the development of Carnival.

Lack Of Access To Opportunity And Belonging: In highlighting the presence of slavery's memory in modern Brazilian society, Thayssa discusses the lack of access to opportunity and sense of belonging experienced by Brazil's Black population.

Black Womanhood: Thayssa talks extensively about the intersections of oppression experienced by Black women in Brazilian society, highlighting the ways in which racism and patriarchy overlap in slavery's aftermath.

Quotes From Interview:

- [~2:56] Thayssa speaks to the lack of formal education on issues of race within Brazil's education system.
 - Look, in my childhood, very little, you know—I don't have many references from these classroom debates. Rather, the memories that I have are those clippings of racism in my school life. And the few references that I had from those debates about the process of enslavement, or of works related to this ethnic-racial theme, were works developed by black teachers, teachers who placed themselves at the heart of the debate in a very, let's say so, particular way. It wasn't something that was organized, it wasn't something that was institutionalized. They thought it was important to develop certain discussions and work related to that topic, and they did so. But it wasn't something that was institutionalized in the curriculum, nor mandatory.
 - [In Portuguese] Olha, na minha infância, muito pouco, sabe—Eu não tenho muitas referências desses debates em sala de aula. Pelo contrário, as memórias que eu tenho são esses recortes do racismo na minha vida escolar. E as poucas referências que eu tive desses debates acerca do processo de escravização, ou então de trabalhos relacionados a essa temática étnico-racial, eram trabalhos desenvolvidos por professores negros, professores que se colocavam no cerne do debate de uma maneira muito, vamos dizer assim, particular. Não era algo que era organizado, não era algo que era institucionalizado, eles achavam importante desenvolverem determinadas discussões e trabalhos relacionados a essa temática, e eles assim faziam. Mas não era algo que era institucionalizado no currículo, nem obrigatório.
- [~4:57] Thayssa identifies her experience with Carnival as one defined by its racial education and communal engagement.
 - So, like this, since I was a little girl I was taught, and guided, and trained, based on this view of carnival; of this carnival that educates, of this carnival that racially lyrics the children and their communities. And also climbing the steps of Cubango, as part of the community, together with my friends and family, participating in the feijoadas, listening to the stories of the Bahian aunts. So, like

this, my life, especially as a child and adolescent, was based on the black Carnival narrative.

- [In Portuguese] Então, assim, desde pequeninha eu fui sendo ensinada, e orientada, e formada, a partir desse olhar para o carnaval; desse carnaval que educa, desse carnaval que letra racialmente as crianças e suas comunidades. E também subindo as escadarias da Cubango, enquanto parte da comunidade, junto com os meus amigos e familiares, participando das feijoadas, ouvindo as histórias das tias baianas. Então, assim, a minha vida, principalmente enquanto criança e adolescente, foi pautada a partir da narrativa preta do Carnaval.
- [~8:57] Thayssa talks about samba being able to teach issues of race and racial background in ways that formal education cannot necessarily communicate.
 - So, he always believed that the plot was a construction that should be in favor of the community, in a formative issue, in an educational issue. So, what the school is often unable to achieve, especially from a racial background, for example, the samba school succeeds, because it can access, it can communicate.
 - [In Portuguese] Então, ele sempre acreditou que o enredo era uma construção que deveria estar a favor da comunidade, numa questão formativa, numa questão educacional. Então, o que muitas das vezes a escola não consegue alcançar, principalmente de um recorte racial, por exemplo, a escola de samba consegue, porque ela consegue acessar, ela consegue comunicar.
- [~12:59] Thayssa talks about her uncle gaining recognition for his contributions to Carnival at the Cubango school. She highlights the lack of recognition Black artists have received for their development of Carnival. Towards the end of the quote, she emphasizes just how much this praise from the Cubango school meant for her uncle.
 - We talked a lot at that time in 2013. And so I remember that at the end of the Cubango fashion show, he talks about it, he gives an interview on Globo.... This interview that he gives - and he, in a very metaphorical way, using some figures of speech, he talks about that burden, right; he talks about this erasure and that difficulty, of those—of these artists, in this place Carnival. That even, let's say so, it's even difficult for us to talk about Carnival, which is a party built by the black people, the black artists who play this role of constructing knowledge, of the intellectuality of what we understand as carnival, being so diminished, being so erased, being so silenced. And then he talks about it in this interview, and he says that how do we find ourselves in this world, right—Cubango, which is a school that is well known for guiding dark plots, talking about this issue, talking about these artists, praising those artists. And he says that passing through Sapucaí in Cubango, that year, was the tumble of redemption; it was—It was the trajectory of his life in a moment of glory, of exaltation as a black artist who

always guided these narratives at Carnival. So he was very happy, and soon after, months after that fashion show, my uncle passed away; but, like that, he was very happy that year. So it was, like, a pinnacle moment in his life.

- [In Portuguese] A gente conversou muito nessa época de 2013. E eu lembro, assim, que no final do desfile da Cubango, ele fala sobre isso, ele dá uma entrevista na Globo.... Essa entrevista que ele dá - e ele, de uma maneira muito metafórica, usando algumas figuras de linguagem, ele fala sobre esse peso, né; ele fala sobre esse apagamento e dessa dificuldade, desses—desses artistas, nesse lugar Carnaval. Que inclusive até, vamos dizer assim, é até complicado a gente falar no Carnaval, que é uma festa construída pelo povo preto, os artistas negros que ficam nesse papel de construção de saber, da intelectualidade do que a gente entende como carnaval, serem tão diminuídos, serem tão apagados, serem tão silenciados. E aí ele fala sobre isso nessa entrevista, e fala que como que a gente se encontra nesse mundo, né—Cubango que é uma escola que é muito conhecida por pautar enredos negros, falando sobre essa questão, falando sobre esses artistas, exaltando esses artistas. E ele fala que passar pela Sapucaí na Cubango, naquele ano, era o tumbeiro da redenção; era—era a trajetória da vida dele num momento de glória, de exaltação enquanto artista preto que sempre pautou essas narrativas no carnaval. Então, ele estava muito feliz, e logo depois, meses depois desse desfile, meu tio veio a falecer; mas, assim, ele estava muito feliz naquele ano. Então foi, assim, um momento de auge da vida dele.
- [~17:31] Thayssa highlights the lack of sense of belonging felt by Afro-Brazilians through an illuminating first hand account of trying to help a Black co-worker set-up travel arrangements to see her family. Thayssa emphasizes that, despite it being the cheapest option, her co-worker did not feel comfortable taking an airplane because of her sense that she does not belong in an airport.
 - And she said it like this: “research everything”; I researched planes, researched buses, and brought everything to her. I said: “look, here, oddly enough, I got a ticket for—A plane ticket is cheaper than a bus ticket”, and she said: “no, but I don't feel comfortable, I don't feel comfortable; I don't know what it's like to go to an airport, it's such a place... I've never been there, I think I prefer to go by bus.” In other words, she paid the most expensive ticket she had because she didn't think that place was hers. So I think that racism, and this whole process of enslavement, is a process that affected so much—not only the economic issue, not only the issue of opportunities, public policies, access to education, access to housing, but also of an entire place of belonging, of what is mine and of what is not mine by right.
 - [In Portuguese] E ela falou assim: "pesquisa tudo"; eu pesquisei avião, pesquisei ônibus, e trouxe tudo pra ela. Falei: "olha, aqui, por incrível que pareça eu

consegui uma passagem de—passagem de avião mais barata que de ônibus", e ela falou assim: "não, mas eu não me sinto à vontade, não me sinto à vontade; eu não sei como é ir num aeroporto, é um lugar assim—Eu nunca fui lá, eu acho que eu prefiro ir de ônibus". Ou seja, ela pagou a passagem mais cara que tinha porque ela achava que aquele lugar não era dela. Então, eu acho que o racismo, e todo esse processo de escravização, é um processo que afetou tanto—não só a questão econômica, não só a questão de oportunidades, políticas públicas, de acesso à educação, de acesso à moradia, mas também de todo um lugar de pertencimento, do que é aquilo que é meu e daquilo que não é meu de direito.

- [~20:17] Depicting what it feels like to be Black in Brazil, Thayssa strikingly describes her sense that one knows that they are Black before they are born because of the medical racism experienced by Black women in childbirth.
 - Before we were born, we already know that we are black, and sometimes we don't think... I was thinking about this these days: before we were born, we already know what it is to be black. Because if we stop to think about it, there is research that guarantees, for example, that black women who are going to have black children receive different treatment during their prenatal care—during their prenatal care; black women who are going to give birth to their children receive less anesthesia than white women. So, like this, before I was born into this world, someone already says: "you're black".
 - [In Portuguese] Antes da gente nascer a gente já sabe que a gente é negro, e às vezes a gente não pensa... Eu fiquei pensando esses dias sobre isso: antes da gente nascer, a gente já sabe o que é ser negro. Porque se a gente for parar para pensar existem pesquisas que garantem, por exemplo, que mulheres negras que vão gerar crianças negras recebem tratamento diferente no seus pré-natal—no seu pré-natal; mulheres negras que vão parir seus filhos recebem menos anestesia de que mulheres brancas. Então, assim, antes de eu nascer pra esse mundo, já tem alguém dizendo: "você é negro".
- [~22:16] Thayssa highlights the particular struggles faced by Black women (due to the intersectional nature of racism and patriarchy).
 - And then, when you ask what it's like to be a black woman, it's twice as much, because that's how black women built this country; black women continue to provide for their families, they continue—If we are going to put in the data, most of this country is founded by families that are supported, managed, educated, by mothers, by black mothers. So, Brazil is a patriarchal country, so being a black woman is being a woman who is responsible for managing a society; and that is very difficult, but that is also very expensive. So, I believe that we need to say that more and more, to claim this place of blackness, and especially that place surrounded by gender issues.

- [In Portuguese] E aí, quando você pergunta o que é ser uma mulher negra, é duas vezes mais, porque, assim, as mulheres negras construíram esse país; as mulheres negras continuam a dar conta das suas famílias, continuam—Se a gente for botar nos dados, majoritariamente esse país é fundamentado por famílias mantidas, geridas, educadas, pelas mães, pelas mães negras. Então, o Brasil é um país patriarcal, então, assim, ser uma mulher negra é ser uma mulher que está responsável por gerir uma sociedade; e isso é muito difícil, mas isso também é muito caro. Então, eu acredito que a gente precisa cada vez mais dizer isso, reivindicar esse lugar da negritude, e principalmente desse lugar recortado pela questão de gênero.
- [~24:45] Thayssa talks about the process she underwent to learn to love her Blackness, particularly focusing on her hair. She also notes that, through this embracing of her hair, she has been able to inspire her students to embrace their own hair.
 - Because, like that, the Thayssa who entered UFF - a black carnival woman - was a woman who straightened her hair, she was a woman who didn't wear red in any way, she was a woman who had very low self-esteem, who was trying to get white. So, like this, Thayssa who also goes through the process of constructing racial identity - at the university, based on the research group - is a Thayssa who sees herself as beautiful, is a Thayssa who begins to see the other, who is equal, other blacks, beautiful as well. So, like this, it's a process that begins with the aesthetic part, but that also develops in other parts, right—And that's how I remember the day when I shaved my hair, cut it short, and it started to grow, that hair started to bloom. And then, when I was almost 20 years old, I went to see what my hair looked like, because until then I only knew my hair through relaxation, through straightening, so I didn't know what my hair looked like until then.... And how this also affected me as a teacher in the classroom. Because when my black students start seeing me, for example, with my natural hair and the braids that I used, and the braids, in short - because I start doing all that—vary the hair - and the kids start to: “wow, my hair is beautiful”, you know; “aunt, I also want to put on a braid, I also want to put on a colored braid”. So this is also something that affects, right—And you see that this—that this process also affects the other, that education affects. So, this process of racial literacy is also affecting my peers, and my students in the classroom.
 - [In Portuguese] Porque, assim, a Thayssa que entra na UFF - uma mulher negra do carnaval - era uma mulher que alisava o cabelo, era uma mulher que não usava vermelho de maneira nenhuma, era uma mulher que tinha uma auto estima muito baixa, que tentava se embranquecer. Então, assim, a Thayssa que passa pelo processo de construção de identidade racial também - na universidade, a partir do grupo de pesquisa - é uma Thayssa que se enxerga bonita, é uma Thayssa que passa a enxergar o outro, que é par, outros negros,

bonitos também. Então, assim, é um processo que começa pela parte estética, mas que vai também se desenvolvendo por outras partes, né—E eu lembro assim do dia que eu raspei o meu cabelo, cortei baixinho, e começou a crescer, começou a florir aquele cabelo. E aí, com quase 20 anos, eu fui ver como meu cabelo era, porque até então eu só conhecia o meu cabelo a partir do relaxamento, do alisamento, então eu não sabia como o meu cabelo era, até então.... E como isso também afetou na sala de aula, eu enquanto professora. Porque quando os meus alunos negros começam a me ver, por exemplo, com o meu cabelo natural e as tranças que eu usava, e os apliques, enfim - porque eu começo a fazer todo aquele... variar o cabelo -, e as crianças começam a: "nossa, o meu cabelo é bonito", sabe; "tia, eu também quero botar trança, também quero botar trança colorida". Então, isso também é uma coisa que afeta, né—E você vê que esse—que esse processo também afeta o outro, que a educação afeta. Então, esse processo de letramento racial também vai afetando os meus pares, e os meus alunos na sala de aula.

- [~27:58] Thayssa defines what freedom means to her
 - Freedom is you going out on the street and not being afraid of something happening to you; all of this is freedom.... And I think it's a process that we are building little by little, but we are conquering spaces. I think we're working to be free one day; we're not, but we get a little bit every hour, get a little bit of that whole thing, which is the freedom that I believe in and that I dream of.
 - [In Portuguese] Liberdade é você sair na rua e você não ter medo de acontecer alguma coisa com você; tudo isso é liberdade.... E eu acho que é um processo que a gente vai construindo aos poucos, mas a gente vai conquistando espaços. Eu acho que a gente está trabalhando para ser livre um dia; a gente não é, mas a gente cada hora consegue um pouquinho, pega um quinhão desse todo que é a liberdade que eu acredito e que eu sonho.
- [~35:18] Thayssa sings a samba that she denotes as the story of Cubango. The song, as she states, denotes Cubango as a space of ancestral connection.
 - But there is a samba that—There are two. There is one that was even a plot developed from Vinícius's research [Natal] - which is Igbá Cubango - which is a plot that, man, I think this is the story of Cubango, because his little excerpt goes like this: "At the foot of the hill I made my terreiro/ Where the patron saint wears straw on his altar/ Atotô, I hit Omolu/ There is popcorn for the Saint/ Offerings for my green and white world. Which is nothing more than: "At the foot of the hill I made my yard" - Cubango was born at the foot of the hill -; "Where the patron saint stirs straw on his altar" - where the patron, who is Obaluaê, who is at the court door, is always there, surrounded by popcorn -... "Atotô, I hit Omolu/ On this floor there's popcorn for the Saint/ Offerings for my green-white world" - and the

green-white world is our school, our Cubango. So, I think this is very beautiful, because it claims this place in Cubango as an ancestral place, an ancestral land, with a lot of foundation and a lot of respect for the story that was told and for the people who came before us.

- [In Portuguese] Mas tem um samba que—em dois. Tem um que foi, inclusive, um enredo desenvolvido da pesquisa do Vinícius [Natal] - que é o Igbá Cubango - que é um enredo que, cara, eu acho que isso é a história da Cubango, porque o trechozinho dele fala assim: "Aos pés do morro fiz o meu terreiro/ Onde o padroeiro veste palha em seu altar/ Atotô, eu bato cabeça pra Omolu/ Nesse chão tem pipoca para o santo/ Oferendas para o meu mundo verde e branco. Que nada mais é o que: "Aos pés do morro fiz o meu terreiro" - a Cubango nasceu aos pés do morro -; "Onde o padroeiro mexe palha em seu altar" - onde o padroeiro, que é Obaluaê, que está na porta da quadra, sempre fica lá, rodeado de pipocas - ... "Atotô, eu bato cabeça para Omolu/ Nesse chão tem pipoca pro santo/ Oferendas para o meu mundo verde branco" - e o mundo verde branco é a nossa escola, a nossa Cubango. Então, eu acho isso muito bonito, porque reivindica esse lugar de Cubango como um lugar ancestral, um chão ancestral, de muito fundamento e de muito respeito pela história que foi contada e pelas pessoas que vieram antes da gente.