



"QUILOMBIZING" AT QUILOMBO HAIR

> *"Quilombo is a history. This word has a history. There is also a typology according to the region and the time-setting. Its relation with its territory. The Earth is my quilombo. My space is my quilombo. Whenever I am [placed], I am [placed]. Whenever I am [placed], I am [as a being]"*
>
> (Nascimento, as cited in Ratts, 2006, p. 59)

I needed to get my hair cut, as I hadn't had it cut for a good seven months and it was looking a bit shapeless. Since I was in a rush to come to Portugal, it was my wife V who booked it for me, after looking for some Afro hairdressers who would therefore be able to "treat it better" because they would have more "expertise" in cutting black people's hair, regardless of the size of their curls (or non-curls).

While she was looking for professionals and checking some reviews, V got scared and wondered if she could go along with me, because in a particular hair salon (which I can no longer remember) they mentioned "*prejudice against whites*", with reports of caucasian customers who felt discriminated against at the place in question. I reassured her that we don't know what might have happened, but that this type of situation is somewhat unusual. In the end, V chose Jeff Samambaia's Quilombo Hair, which had excellent reviews and whose Instagram profile showed great work, as well as being very popular.

Quilombo Hair is located in the Bixiga neighborhood, which was originally populated by people of African descent and then received arrived European immigrants, mainly Italians, who made the neighborhood famous as a traditionally Italian neighborhood in the city of São Paulo – even though its history is also intrinsically linked to the Afro-Brazilian population (Gonçalves, 2023; Nascimento, 2016). On the outskirts of Quilombo Hair, we can see typically Brazilian houses, with no more than two floors and whose gates lead directly onto the sidewalk, as well as a few buildings, in a region that doesn't yet appear to have undergone a major gentrification process, despite having a slightly stronger presence of Haitian and African immigrants, as well as in other neighborhoods in downtown São Paulo, a situation that has been on the rise since the mid-2010s (Fernandes, 2015; Pachi, 2020; Villen, 2015, p. 128).

Quilombo Hair presents itself as a small brown door leading into a café. The salon itself is up some stairs on the right, while at the entrance we are greeted by numerous stickers, mostly political, eliciting messages of support for anti-fascism, anti-racism, anti-homophobia, etc.







Figures 1 to 3. Quilombo Hair's Entrance and stickers
Credits: the author (2024)

After we go upstairs, I'm greeted by Jeff and the rest of the girls from the team. I take a sip of water and start to notice the space, while Chico César's "Mama África" plays. Among the customers and staff, we can see people of all shades, from very dark-skinned black people to curly white people who, inverting Brazilian logic, are an ethnic minority in the place. I noticed that this reassured my wife, who was still a little wary after the other review she had read. But that was to be expected, after all, Quilombo Hair is a quilombo, which indicates a place of communality and respect, no wonder that originally, in Brazil, it was also populated by white people (albeit in a minority), since it embraced all those marginalized by Brazilian society at the time (Reis, 1996), as thoroughly explained by Munanga (1996, p. 63):

> *"By content, the Brazilian quilombo is, without a doubt, a copy of the African quilombo reconstructed by the enslaved to oppose the slavery system. Its organization, its resistance, its life, its culture, all bear the African matrix. Its contribution [...] Mimicking the African model, they transformed these territories in some sort of fields of initiation towards resistance, fields that were open to all those oppressed by the society (negros, indigenous and whites), prefiguring a model of pluriracial democracy that Brazil is yet searching for [...] In fact, enslaved Africans and their descendants were never bound by exclusionary ideological models. Their practices and strategies were developed within the transcultural model, with the aim of forming rich and stable personal identities that could not be structured solely within the confines of their culture [...] They aimed to form open identities, produced by incessant communication with the other, and not closed identities, generated by cultural barricades that exclude the other"*

Jeff calls me and asks me what I want to do today, to which I reply "*I'm thinking of something a bit like Michael Jackson in Don't Stop 'Til You Get Enough*", Jeff thought it was a great option, but was reluctant to cut my hair, appealing that "*your hair] is too good and cool for me to cut that much off of it*", prompting the laughter from several people in the salon. I explain to him that I need to renew it and make sure it looks great because I'm going on a trip and it will take me a while to cut it again, which finally seems to convince him, and so we begin.

While I was having my hair cut, we started chatting (and getting involved in the conversation happening at the haircut next door). We were discussing the accents of Cariocas versus Paulistas, especially the act of imposing oneself on others. For us Paulistas in the salon, the Carioca accent is much more imposing and even aggressive, which was argued by the (Carioca) hairdresser next to us that it is justified because it works as a "survival mechanism", since Rio de Janeiro demands this kind of imposition. According to her, everyday life in Rio is full of people trying to take advantage of others. Therefore, it's necessary to have a "what's up, merrmiko? *What is it, Nuki?*" on the tip of your tongue. *In my reply, I note that São Paulo also requires this kind of malice. However, our "*paulista" discussions escalate gradually, whereas carioca discussions start at the end of the discussion, i.e. when everyone is already shouting at each other.

This brief interaction led to a pleasant conversation about the differences in everyday life in both cities, in which Jeff told me a little more about his life story. The son of two minerios (people from Minas Gerais), Jeff lived most of his life in Rio de Janeiro, but now feels that he is from São Paulo and "wouldn't go back to Rio de Janeiro for anything", saying that although it is also violent, the city of São Paulo is no match for Rio de Janeiro. I joke with Jeff about a saying I invented to compare the two cities: "*To live in São Paulo, you have to be as fast as a cat. To live in Rio de Janeiro, you have to be the cat itself to have 9 lives*", which brought laughter and an emphatic "you bet, that's right". Still in this discussion between life in Rio de Janeiro and life in São Paulo, Jeff confessed to me that he had a stereotyped idea of São Paulo, that is, he believed that everyone in São Paulo acted like the singer Mano Brown from Racionais MC's, or like the character "Boyz" from the comedy show "*Hermes e Renato*". Today, Jeff notes that the city of São Paulo is extremely diverse, as "there are all kinds of people, from all kinds of places"

Once the initial cut was done, it was time to wash, which was a unique experience in the life of this (still) young black man from São Paulo. For the first time in my life, ALL the courtless knots in my curls were untangled, in a process that took – I believe – around 30 minutes. It was such a cozy and careful procedure that I honestly felt like I was floating once it was finished. After shampooing, detangling and moisturizing, it was then time for the famous "*cabeção*" (big head).

The so-called "big head" is a hairdryer at the back of the salon, on a balcony surrounded by trees, where I shared the space of a few work breaks with the salon staff. My time in the "big head" continued to bring me a sense of comfort that I had felt since I first entered the salon.



Figure 4. "Cabeção" [Big Head] and Quilombo Hair's Balcony
Credits: the author (2024)

When I returned, I noticed other people getting their hair cut, in different shades of Afro-Brazilian blackness, both lighter-skinned and darker-skinned than this writer. I sat back down in Jeff Samambaia's chair and was able to take a closer look at his tools, noticing in particular a bandana/turban, an ornament closely linked to Afro-culture and which I had never seen in "ordinary" salons.

Conversations came and went, and my cut was completed. It's at this point that I share that I'm making this cut because I'm about to embark on the "adventure" of my doctorate in Portugal, therefore, unfortunately, I won't be returning any time soon. Jeff congratulates me and invites me to his cousin's salon, who is in Portugal and would be delighted to receive me, which was also a surprise.

Leaving Quilombo Hair, I took a final look around the place, with my heart already heavy with saudade. However, I hadn't yet taken a closer look at the café below, and found a sign that read: "*Our room is made up of trans women! Don't forget! The pronoun is always 'she/her'!*", alongside various decorative (and political) props, such as a picture of a guillotine, the flag of the Landless Movement (*Movimento Sem Terra*) and a speech by Fidel Castro at ECO 92, which took place in Rio de Janeiro, warning that *'human beings are in danger of survival'*.







Figures 5 to 7. Quilombo Hair's Entrance Decoration
Credits: the author (2024)

In short, I have to say that the act of visiting a quilombo, as a black person in Brazil, always carries an experience of reconnection with this very fundamental aspect of our Afro-Brazilian cultural identity – our color/race/ethnicity. It's an almost inexplicable emotion and sense of belonging. Although it is inexplicable, it is noticeable, because my wife immediately asked me: "*Doesn't coming here bring you a certain type of recognition, Lucas? Everyone here thinks your hair is beautiful and it must be nice to be around people who understand what you go through every day, right?*". I didn't even need to say anything else, as everything had already been said, so I agreed with a single "*that's exactly it*" and remembered the words of Nilma Lino Gomes (2003, p. 173) in her study on the effect of ethnic hair salons on black people:

> *"The importance [...] especially of hair, in the way black people see themselves and are seen by others, even those who achieve some kind of social ascension, is present in the various spaces and relationships in which black people socialize and educate themselves: family, friendships, affective-sexual relationships, work and school. For this subject, hair carries a strong identity mark and, in some situations, is seen as a mark of inferiority [...] However, there are other spaces in which hair is seen from a perspective of revalorization. These are: family contexts in which African ancestral memory is preserved, some spaces of political militancy, ethnic salons, among others. This revalorization goes beyond the individual and reaches the ethnic/racial group to which they belong. By reaching them, it ends up referring, sometimes consciously and sometimes not, to an African ancestry recreated in Brazil"*

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