

**African American Roots Tourism in Brazil: Encounters in Sameness, Difference,  
Solidarity, and Inequality**

**Patricia de Santana Pinho**

African American roots tourism in Brazil can be traced back to the late 1970s when groups of black artists, intellectuals, and professionals started traveling mostly to Bahia, attracted by the state's prominent Afro-Brazilian culture and seeking out the commonalities they understood they shared with Afro-Brazilians. The 1980s witnessed the transformation of these informal trips into a structured tourism industry that has revolved around Bahia's Africanness. This paper is part of a broader ethnographic research project that has examined the African American search for African roots and diasporic heritage in Brazil, and therefore beyond the boundaries of the African homeland. More specifically, this paper analyzes how roots tourism has allowed for the construction of transnational black solidarity between African Americans and Afro-Brazilians. International tourism has often been criticized for promoting unequal encounters between privileged inhabitants of the World's centers and their disadvantaged peripheral "Others." However, new forms of travel have emerged where tourists have sought to employ their privilege, knowledge, resources, and even the status of their nationality for the benefit of the "tourees." Aware of their power as U.S. citizens and affluent consumers, African American roots tourists in Brazil have actively made use of their national identity as well as their purchasing power to

benefit Afro-Brazilians. In addition to the donations in cash and goods that they frequently make during their visits to Afro-Brazilian organizations, there has also been a growing demand on the part of African American tourists that more Afro-Brazilians benefit from the tourist dollars that they bring to the country. African American travel agencies, and/or the groups that hire them, frequently request that their tourist guides be black individuals. They have also advocated for the hiring of black hotel employees in managerial and front desk positions. In addition, they prioritize supporting black-owned businesses while in Brazil. The lobbying made by African Americans on behalf of Afro-Brazilians is certainly well intended, and it has begun to generate results. At the same time, it is frequently accompanied by a discourse that establishes the leadership role that African Americans should occupy in the “advancement” of Afro-Brazilians. This paper therefore argues that efforts of solidarity and cooperation towards those who may be deemed the “same” do not necessarily do away with processes of hierarchization, especially when the tourist-tournee relations are permeated by the notion of Western authority. The transnational encounters promoted by roots tourism allow us to study the intricate ways in which difference and inequality challenge the attempts at constructing sameness. Focusing on the intersection of racial, national, and diasporic identities, this paper thus examines whether African American roots tourism in Brazil represents a departure from the paradigm of tourism as a force that deepens global inequalities and whether it challenges the hierarchies of the black Atlantic world.