



Visual Ancestralities: Insurgent Memory Work and Postcolonial Entropy in Afro-Brazilian Terreiros

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Abstract

This article examines how Afro-Brazilian Candomblé communities engage in insurgent memory work to confront what I describe as postcolonial entropy: the gradual erosion of cultural memory produced by structural inequality, environmental degradation, and archival neglect. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, interviews with priestesses and community archivists, and analysis of visual materials, the study focuses on three interconnected archival initiatives in Bahia: the ritual portrait archive at Ilê Asé Oyá Irokê, the intergenerational photographic collection maintained by Mãe Elisa at Ilê Axé Jifan Okan Onile, and the queer-inclusive memory project led by Yalorixá Thiffany Odara. Together these cases demonstrate how Afro-Brazilian women and gender-expansive leaders actively produce archives that safeguard ancestral knowledge, ritual lineages, and

community histories often excluded from state and institutional repositories. By situating these practices within Black Atlantic and diaspora scholarship, the article argues that community archives function as acts of cultural resistance and epistemic sovereignty. These visual and oral archives not only preserve memory but also shape future possibilities by empowering younger generations to inherit and reinterpret Afro-diasporic traditions. The study contributes to emerging conversations on decolonial archival practice, Black feminist knowledge production, and community-based heritage preservation.

Keywords

Afro-Brazilian archives, Candomblé, Black Atlantic memory, community archives, insurgent memory work, postcolonial entropy

Introduction

On a late humid afternoon in Salvador, a slow drip of water pierces the silence of a small back room where a religious archive has been temporarily stored for two decades. Each drop falling from a cracked urban terreiro¹ ceiling onto a wooden table holding a cardboard box of photographs, creeping towards fading images of Black women initiates in sacred white attire. Over days and years, the saltwater air spreads like a creeping amnesia across the glossy surfaces, dulling the white clothing and evanescent gazes within these snapshots of time. This scene encapsulates what I term postcolonial entropy, the slow erosion of cultural memory under postcolonial conditions. Postcolonial entropy describes the “irreversible but contested process of cultural disintegration established by colonial structures and perpetuated by ongoing racial governance” (Miles 2025). In Brazil, centuries of enslavement, state violence, and neglect created an environment in which Afro-Brazilian histories are constantly at risk of material decay and forgetting. Beyond literal infrastructure failures,

¹ A terreiro (Portuguese: "yard" or "temple") is the physical, spiritual, and social center of an Afro-Brazilian Candomblé community. It is viewed as a site of cultural resistance, Afro-diasporic memory, and an alternative social structure. The *terreiro* often functions as a matriarchal institution, providing spaces of authority and community leadership outside dominant patriarchal and colonial systems (Harding 2000; Matory 2005).

endangered community archives are emblematic of a broader systemic drip-feed of erasure that Black communities must actively resist. The purpose of my archival praxis is found in the everyday battle against this slow violence of forgetting.

Against the damp archives and fading images, I observed a powerful counterforce: multigenerational and intersectional priestesses along with young activists moving in tandem to rescue those fading photographs before they vanish completely. I call this counterforce *insurgent memory work*, the community-led practice of preservation that resists this entropy through intentional acts of remembering. If postcolonial entropy threatens to dissolve Afro-Brazilian cultural archives, insurgent memory work crystallizes them anew – repairing each photo, recording each story, and infusing new life into future sites of ritual activation and epistemic resistance.

The stakes of this work extend beyond heritage preservation. In an era of rising anti-Black violence targeting Afro-religious communities, insurgent memory work is both spiritual obligation and political strategy—a way to ensure that even if physical terreiros are destroyed, the knowledge survives. These efforts are not undertaken by outsiders or institutions, but by the very communities who have been marginalized: the mães² (priestess-matriarchs), their spiritual daughters and sons, and local youth trained as archivists. In the terreiro (temple), memory-keeping becomes a sacred obligation and a political act.

The religion's matriarchal structure, centered around the leadership of mães-de-santo, historically created rare opportunities for Black women's authority in a society otherwise dominated by patriarchal institutions. Even during slavery and its aftermath, Candomblé terreiros were independent spaces where Black women exercise leadership and preserve knowledge beyond the reach of the white elite's authority.

Today, amid endemic femicide, transphobic violence, and a surge of arson attacks on Afro-Brazilian terreiros—including the 2022 burning of Terreiro Ilê Axé Ayabá Omi (Pernambuco) and March 2025 burning of Terreiro Ilê Asé Oya Osun Nidê (Rio de Janeiro)—cultural preservation is a matter of survival. Every act of

² Mãe-de-santo (Portuguese: "mother of saint," or orixá) is the title for a high priestess and matriarchal head of a Candomblé temple. This figure holds spiritual, social, and cultural authority. Scholars such as Mae Stella de Oxóssi and J. Lorand Matory have positioned the Yalorixá (Yoruba equivalent) and mãe-de-santo as foundational to the religion's structure and central to preserving African cultural knowledge in the diaspora, often defying patriarchal and colonial expectations (Matory 2005).

safeguarding photo collections or digitally recording a song is framed as both a refusal of cultural erasure and a gesture toward sacred futurity. When Afro religious communities save their memories, carefully adapting oral traditions to a digital paradigm, they are refusing to be erased and planting seeds for their traditions' future survival.

Three cases demonstrate how insurgent memory work operates on the ground. First, at Ilê Axé Oyá Irokê terreiro, a women-led temple in Lauro de Freitas, a major municipality on the outskirts of Salvador, Bahia, Brazil a collaborative media project has produced a series of portraits and short video interviews with community elders and youth. This project, involving 60 formal portraits of terreiro members in full ritual regalia, was designed not only to celebrate the community's beauty and identity, but to preserve Afro-Brazilian religious heritage and promote the terreiro's visibility in a global context. The images and videos from Oyá Irokê will serve both as a local archive of memory and as public-facing documentation to assert the community's presence and legitimacy. The archive emerges as a primary site of theory, revealing how priestesses and community archivists themselves define preservation, visibility, and futurity.

Across conversations with priestesses, collaborators, and younger participants, three concerns recur: the urgency of cultural preservation amid rising religious violence; the insistence on representational dignity in how the community wishes to be seen; and the careful negotiation between sacred knowledge and what can be made public. These themes clarify how community members understand the archive, not simply as documentation but as an intentional strategy of survival, pedagogy, and visibility.

Second, Yalorixá Elisa Lordelo de Obaluaiê, a high priestess in Camaçari, opened her personal archive of sacred family photographs as part of an intergenerational preservation effort. In one instance, in May of 2019, Mãe Elisa entrusted me with her own photograph archive from the 1970s—delicate black-and-white prints that had survived decades of humidity. Rather than exporting these images to a distant lab, I deliberately involved Lázaro Roberto, the renowned local Afro-Brazilian photographer-archivist, in the on-site digitization process. Her insurgent memory work lies in balancing the protection of esoteric knowledge with the benefits of public visibility, ensuring that Afro-Brazilian narratives enter the historical record on the community's own terms.

Finally, the leadership of Yalorixá Thiffany Odara, a transgender Candomblé priestess, exemplifies insurgent memory work in a living, embodied form. As a young trans woman leading her own terreiro, Thiffany Odara both honors her foremothers and boldly expands their legacy. Her very presence disrupts colonial, heteropatriarchal traditions that once policed who could be a spiritual leader. In dialogue with Black feminist and queer Afro-Brazilian thought, including Dr. Jaimee Swift's theory of queer amefricanidade (Swift 2021), Thiffany's praxis enacts a continuum between past and future by claiming a space for Black trans women in the sacred lineage and thus refusing the colonial entropy that would erase LGBTQ contributions.

Taken together, these cases frame my central argument: Afro-Brazilian women's insurgent memory work is a revolutionary response to the slow violence of postcolonial entropy. By preserving photographs, oral histories, and sacred objects in women-led community contexts, Afro-Brazilian activists are continuing the legacy of Black women's storytelling epistemologies in the diaspora.

This research grows out of my doctoral dissertation fieldwork (conducted 2019-2024, degree conferred 2025) on community visual archives in Northeast Brazil, and it is now carried forward through the Atlantic Archives project, a transnational initiative to support youth from marginalized identities in memory preservation. In what follows, I situate this work in the context of postcolonial theory and Africana archival thought, before elaborating on the concepts of postcolonial entropy and insurgent memory work that emerge from these experiences. By grounding scholarly analysis in community narratives, I aim to honor the living tradition of global African women's storytelling while contributing new theoretical tools for understanding cultural survival.

Situating the Work: The Postcolonial Theoretical Turn

The concept of postcolonial entropy proposed here builds upon a rich body of literature on cultural memory, decolonization, and resistance. Scholars from Achille Mbembe to Ann Laura Stoler have examined how colonial legacies endure as active forces that disorder colonized societies. Mbembe's *On the Postcolony* shows how colonial structures create "distinctive temporalities and subjectivities" in which past violence continuously reinscribes itself in the present, while Stoler demonstrates how imperial archives operated as instruments that categorized, pathologized, and erased

Black subjects (Mbembe 2001, 14-17; Stoler 2009). These analyses help explain why Afro-diasporic communities like Afro-Brazilians face ongoing threats to their cultural existence: the colonial project did not simply exploit people in the past; it sought to annihilate or assimilate their memory and identity – a process that, left unchecked, continues as entropy. In Brazil, official archives have historically silenced Afro-Brazilian voices, treating Black histories as primitive folklore or excluding them altogether—what I term the "power of the archive" to degrade and disappear subaltern histories. In response, scholars like Rodney Carter (2006) and Michelle Caswell (2016) argue that community archives can disrupt these silences by creating alternative repositories. Such projects are inherently anti-entropic: they stem forgetting by actively recording stories and preserving evidence that would otherwise be lost, moving beyond critique to propose insurgent archival praxis as resistance.

The praxis I investigate is rooted in Afro-Brazilian feminist epistemologies. Any understanding of cultural memory work in Candomblé must center on the fact that this is a matriarchal Afro-Atlantic tradition. Anthropologist J. Lorand Matory reminds us that Afro-Brazilian religious communities were never passive keepers of African survivals, but dynamic, women-led networks that actively maintained transnational connections between Brazil and Africa through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In his study *Black Atlantic Religion*, Matory documents how Candomblé temples (especially in Bahia) functioned as women-led hubs of exchange, where priestesses preserved ritual knowledge and facilitated a dialogue across the Atlantic, constantly refreshing their practices with input from West African traditions. This challenges earlier anthropological views of Candomblé as a static folk remnant; instead, Matory shows it to be an active creation of Black women, a “diasporic dialogue” that produced new spiritual forms through ongoing interaction (Matory 2005, 13). The *mães-de-santo* emerge in this history as culture-makers and transnational agents, defying both the colonial state and the patriarchal norms of church and society.

As Lélia Gonzalez famously argued, the experience of the African diaspora in the Americas, which she termed *Amefricanidade*, cannot be adequately understood without acknowledging the centrality of Black women’s knowledge (Gonzalez 1984, 225). Gonzalez’s concept of *Amefricanidade* envisions the Americas (from the U.S. to Brazil and the Caribbean) as a single, interconnected Afro-descendant space in which Black women play key roles in sustaining culture and community. This

perspective decenters Eurocentric narratives and highlights African continuities (language, religion, aesthetic sensibilities) that survive in Latin America precisely because women carried them forward in family and community contexts.

Likewise, Beatriz Nascimento's theory of quilombismo offers a resonant framework for considering memory and resistance. Nascimento viewed Brazil's quilombos (maroon communities of escaped enslaved people) not only as historical refuges but as enduring symbols and models for Black liberation. Her idea of a "quilombismo consciousness" posits that the act of marronage was both a physical escape and an epistemological rupture—a way of knowing and being in the world outside colonial logic (Nascimento 1982). In Nascimento's formulation, the quilombo represents collective autonomy and a living memory of freedom, emphasizing territorial and community practices over individual psychological struggles. This profoundly anti-entropy view suggests that even in the harshest conditions of slavery, Afro-Brazilians generated self-sustaining cultural systems (quilombos, *terreiro* communities) that could regenerate lost ties and create new futures. The archives discussed here can be seen as contemporary quilombos of memory—spaces where historical consciousness is preserved and reimaged as a tool for survival. Conceição Evaristo's notion of *escrevivência* (a portmanteau of *escrever*—to write, and *vivência*—lived experience) further illuminates this methodological stance. Evaristo insists that writing by Black women is inherently a political act of survival and testimony, blending narrative and life until they become inseparable (Evaristo 2011). Though she speaks of literature, her insight applies to archives: when an elder Candomblé woman curates a photo album or records an oral history, she writes her life into being, challenging colonial archival traditions that excluded people like her. This article follows Evaristo's call to center lived experience as theory itself, treating Black women's memory work as both subject and method of analysis.

The South Atlantic Intervention

While drawing from these Brazilian and Afro-diasporic theorists, my approach also intervenes in broader Black Atlantic debates. Paul Gilroy's influential work *The Black Atlantic* (1993) charted a transnational space of Black culture crisscrossing the Atlantic Ocean, yet his framework centered primarily on Anglophone experiences (African American, British, and Caribbean). Brazil, the Americas' largest Black population

and a major node of the transatlantic slave trade, was conspicuously absent in Gilroy's analysis. Scholars have since critiqued this omission, suggesting that any comprehensive view of the Black Atlantic requires a South Atlantic perspective that includes Lusophone Africa and Brazil.

In line with these critiques, I join others in expanding Gilroy's model to incorporate Brazil's unique histories of race, gender, and diaspora. This South Atlantic framework acknowledges, for instance, that Brazilian Black culture evolved under a different racial regime (the myth of "racial democracy" and fluid color hierarchies) and thus produced distinct forms of resistance. Whereas Gilroy emphasized motifs like double consciousness (drawn from the U.S. experience of segregation and civil rights struggle), Afro-Brazilian thinkers highlight concepts like quilombismo and Amefricanidade, which speak to collective survival, territoriality, and hemispheric identity. Moreover, Black movements in Brazil often showed an ambivalent relationship to the nation-state—simultaneously demanding inclusion as citizens and denouncing the nation's anti-Black foundations. This contrasts Gilroy's portrayal of the Black Atlantic as inherently transnational and suspicious of nationalism. By including Brazil, we see a richer picture of diasporic strategy: one that involves working within and against the national frame.

Broadening Black Atlantic studies to encompass these realities not only corrects a geographic gap but also integrates the contributions of Black Brazilian women into our understanding of diasporic intellectual traditions. Figures like Lélia Gonzalez and Beatriz Nascimento were theorizing diaspora, feminism, and cultural memory in the 1970s–80s parallel to their Anglophone peers. Recognizing their work and the context of Brazil enriches the global narrative of Black resistance.

By reframing cultural memory work in Afro-Brazilian terreiros as a response to postcolonial entropy, I aim to bridge these theoretical streams—decolonial archival studies, Black feminist epistemologies, and Atlantic diaspora theory—into a coherent lens. This lens reveals that what might superficially appear as local heritage projects are in fact revolutionary acts in a continuum of African-descended women's resistance. Indeed, the impetus to preserve and transmit stories in these communities resonates strongly with the overarching mission of *Siyabonana: The Journal of Africana Studies* and this special issue, "The Continuation of the Revolutionary African Woman." The editors of this issue, Dr. Olaycha Nwabara and Dr. Korka Sall, highlight the question of, "Who tells the story of global African women?" and insist

on centering women's own voices, community narratives, and epistemologies. This project directly addresses that call by showing Afro-Brazilian women telling their own stories beyond the confines of colonial archives or academic gatekeepers. My hope is that situating Afro-Brazilian insurgent memory work in this theoretical context not only deepens academic understanding of postcolonial entropy and its remedies but also honors and amplifies the actual work of these revolutionary African and diasporic women who continue to build community and legacy through archiving.

This insurgent memory work also aligns with African diaspora scholarship that understands cultural preservation as a form of political resistance. Diasporic identity formation, as Ruth Simms Hamilton notes, emerges through ongoing struggles against erasure, displacement, and racial domination, producing what she describes as collective strategies through which dispersed communities sustain historical consciousness and cultural continuity (Hamilton 2007, 3–6). Read through this framework, the archives emerging in Afro-Brazilian *terreiros* become part of a broader Black Atlantic continuum in which belonging is forged through the active production of memory. This aligns with a broader body of diaspora scholarship that understands cultural preservation as a form of political resistance, where communities actively construct continuity under conditions of displacement and structural erasure (Hamilton 2007, 3–6; Gilroy 1993).

Conceptual Framework:

Defining Insurgent Memory Work as an Anti-Entropic Act

Entropy is a concept from thermodynamics describing how closed systems inexorably move toward disorder unless new energy is introduced. In physics, a classic example is the operation of a machine or engine in an isolated system: while the total energy remains constant (first law of thermodynamics), the usable energy available to do work steadily decreases as heat is dispersed and disorder increases (second law of thermodynamics). This state of unusable energy and maximum disorder is the physical end-state of entropy. Similarly, Black cultural life has often been treated as a resource to be extracted until depleted; its systems subjected to a state of neglect that mimics this entropic decline.

If a house is left abandoned, eventually dust accumulates; structures rot, and order collapses into chaos. I extend this scientific metaphor to the postcolonial

cultural sphere: absent active intervention, the social and cultural structures of colonized peoples tend toward disintegration. This is the essence of postcolonial entropy: the way colonialism's aftermath creates conditions of gradual decay in colonized communities' historical consciousness.

Entropy is contested rather than absolute; just as a homeowner can repair a leaking roof or clean a dusty room to stave off physical entropy, communities can (and do) intervene to arrest cultural entropy. Formally, I define postcolonial entropy as the ongoing disorder and instability that colonial structures set in motion, which communities must actively resist. This metaphorical use of entropy requires critical scrutiny. Unlike thermodynamic entropy—which is inevitable and irreversible—cultural processes remain contested and contingent. The metaphor risks essentializing "pure" cultural forms or implying that change equals decay. I use it strategically, however, to name a specific phenomenon: the material and epistemic violence of colonial neglect that creates conditions where cultural memory deteriorates, absent active intervention. Entropy here describes not natural decline but structural violence. It is a process marked by material and epistemic decay: documents crumbling in tropical climates, ancestral knowledge not passed on, and younger generations estranged from their heritage under the pressure of dominant (white, Western) culture. One might also frame this in Achille Mbembe's terms as a necropolitics of memory (Mbembe 2001), a power structure that decides which history lives or dies. In Brazil, the necropolitics of memory has meant that Black artifacts and stories, when not outright destroyed, have often been consigned to neglect.

The antidote to postcolonial entropy is what I call insurgent memory work. Borrowing the language of insurgency emphasizes that this is rebellion: a conscious, collective uprising against the forces of oblivion. If entropy is the tendency toward disorder, insurgent memory work is the injection of organizing energy—what physicists call negentropy (the reversal of entropy through active input of organizing energy). In the context of the Black Atlantic, insurgent memory work is the cultural and political negentropy that resists structural breakdown. In practical terms, insurgent memory work describes the myriad ways marginalized communities marshal resources to preserve, revitalize, and reinterpret their histories, defying the narrative that those histories will inevitably be lost. It is an insurgent archival

practice: the creative and self-determined preservation of memory by marginalized communities that challenge colonial and state-sanctioned histories.

Instead of passive nostalgia or rote tradition-keeping, insurgent memory work is strategic and future-oriented. It includes, for example, the strategic effort to preserve and materialize Candomblé histories in forms that oral tradition alone can no longer sustain. This means translating oral lore and ritual knowledge into photographs, videos, databases, and publications on the community's own terms. It also involves adopting newer technologies (digital photography, scanners, the cloud archive, social media) in a spirit of what one might call technological *marronage* i.e., the hacking and repurposing modern tools to serve indigenous purposes of cultural survival.

In the cases at hand, insurgent memory work often takes the form of collaborations across generations—elder priestesses providing the knowledge and authority, younger archivists contributing technical skills and labor, and both learning from each other in the process. Such collaborations transform what might be seen as mundane archival tasks into acts of care, solidarity, and resistance.

Archival Resistance in Afro-Brazilian Terreiros

Three ethnographic vignettes from Salvador and its outskirts illustrate how insurgent memory work unfolds on the ground. Each case study highlights a distinct strategy of archive-building as resistance, driven by Afro-Brazilian women (cis³ and trans) who counter the forces of postcolonial entropy with creative acts of preservation and storytelling. These community archives—whether through photographs, oral histories, or digital media—are a threat to cultural erasure and living repositories of tradition. Crucially, each initiative is anchored in the matriarchal world of Candomblé terreiros, where priestesses and their allies leverage ancestral knowledge to forge new pathways for memory. By examining the cases of Ilê Axé Oyá Irokê, Mãe Elisa Lordelo's personal archive, and Yalorixá Thiffany Odara's digital archiving efforts, we see how Afro-Brazilian women convert vulnerable memories into enduring legacies, exemplifying the article's core argument that insurgent memory work is a direct, anti-entropic response to colonial violence.

³ Cisgender (cis) refers to a person whose gender identity aligns with the sex assigned to them at birth, as distinct from transgender identity.

Ilê Axé Oyá Irokê:

Portraiture and Visibility as Anti-Entropic Action

Ilê Axé Oyá Irokê is a women-led Candomblé temple in Lauro de Freitas, Bahia that is utilizing photography as a tool of insurgent memory work. Founded in 1999 by Mãe Dilma dos Santos, the terreiro constitutes a "...remarkable sanctuary that maintains the ancient customs and legacies of the Yoruba people..." (Santos 2025). Mãe Dilma, who assumed the role of mãe de santo (high priestess) in 1999, leads the house, which traces its lineage back to the renowned Terreiro do Gantois. Her mission is to "Praticar o *Candomblé* e o culto aos orixás" [Practice Candomblé and the cult of the *orixás*] (Santos 2025), offering spiritual assistance and promoting community.

In 2025, Mãe Dilma spearheaded a collaborative media project with my community organization, Atlantic Archives. Key to this collaboration was Alex Alberto de Jesus, a member of Ilê Axé Oyá Irokê and an Atlantic Archives Fellow, who provided essential research and translation support, ensuring the project remained rooted in community knowledge and language. This initiative immediately leveraged transnational support through PICHA, a multi-country, African-based stock photo agency. PICHA brings "curated, diverse visuals that enable brands and businesses to tell richer stories that include Black communities," conceptualized as a "catalyst for changing the widely accepted one-dimensional narratives of Afrocentric communities" (PICHA 2023).

Over several months, the collaborative team—comprising terreiro members, Atlantic Archives staff produced a series of sixty formal portraits depicting initiates, elders, and youth in full ritual attire, accompanied by video interviews capturing oral histories. The process was highly participatory: community members helped stage the shots, chose regalia that reflected their orixás, and shared personal narratives on camera. This collection was created as a deliberate archival act to safeguard the terreiro's heritage. As one 70-year-old initiate explained during filming: "My mother has no photos. There isn't much which exists of her. This is the first time someone in my family will be on this record" (Santos 2025). This sense of archival urgency through documentation, both personal and collective, runs throughout the sessions.

The project unfolded against a backdrop of insecurity: arson attacks on sister-temples across Brazil terrorized the Afro-Brazilian religious community. In this context, the priestesses created digital representations of cultural memory that can survive even if physical sites or objects were harmed. These digital and visual

strategies move beyond the oral traditions and exemplify how contemporary Black women leaders understand that cultural preservation and creating ways of producing and disseminating knowledge are essential tools of resistance.



Figure 1. Portrait of a community elder from Ilê Axé Oyá Irokê in ceremonial attire.

Photographed as part of the terreiro's 2025 archival project with PICHA.

Such images, created collaboratively by the priestesses and youth, form a digital archive that celebrates Afro-Brazilian sacred heritage on the community's own terms.

Photo courtesy of the Atlantic Archives Collection.

Navigating Sacred and Secular Boundaries:

Terreiro Epistemology

Mãe Dilma approached this archive with strategic foresight and a profound sense of Terreiro epistemology. She authorized external photography of the communal areas, stating that "for me to open my mind, to accept taking external photos, that's fine." However, she insisted on protecting the core sacred knowledge, drawing a clear boundary between public representation and religious fundamentals. She stated that she "doesn't admit the sacred, the truly sacred inside" because "the fundamentals are for those who came to receive the fundamentals." This boundary has been absorbed by community members as their own epistemological commitment. As one participant put it: "There are things I will not say in front of a camera because they were not given to me to give away" (Atlantic Archives and Miles 2025). This practice of selective disclosure which records visible community

life while preserving the esoteric core, enacts a model of decolonial praxis that challenges Western archival principles. Where conventional archives prioritize access and transparency, *terreiro* epistemology insists that some knowledge must remain restricted to protect its sacred power. This tension is productive rather than contradictory: public visibility serves political goals (securing legal protection, countering racist stereotypes, asserting legitimacy), while esoteric restriction preserves spiritual integrity. Mãe Dilma's leadership demonstrates that communities can strategically navigate both registers, using the archive as a tool for recognition without compromising ritual fundamentals. The archive becomes a boundary object that is simultaneously outward-facing and inward-protecting.

The digital files of portraits and interviews are safeguarded on multiple hard drives and cloud platforms, ensuring that no single calamity could obliterate them. This multi-layered preservation is an anti-entropic measure, stemming the potential “decay” of memory by redundancy and dispersion. Moreover, the community has been careful to curate the narrative these images tell. According to the project charter, the photographs will be used to “showcase the beauty and complexity of Candomblé traditions” and to promote “community visibility and global understanding” (Atlantic Archives and Miles 2025). By disseminating affirmative images on their own terms through exhibitions linked to the PICHA network, Oyá Irokê's community asserts a proud self-image that commands respect and counters centuries of racist misrepresentation.

Mãe Dilma underscored the protective role of visibility, noting that social media helps counter the macabre vision of Candomblé because “it's not what people portray it to be, but rather a welcoming, family-centered, spiritual home where we open our doors to everyone and nurture everyone.” She explicitly connected this visibility to material consequences: “when a *terreiro* can present itself as a vibrant guardian of the customs and millenary legacies of the Yoruba people, it bolsters its claims for legal protection and public support.” She also expanded the scope of preservation beyond images to include the house's sacred ecology, listing the “Oxum rites,” “sacred leaves,” and “trees” that must be “preserved forever” because “without the leaves, we have nothing, there's no *axé*” (Santos 2025). Such insurgent memory work operates on multiple levels: emotionally, it fortifies community pride and continuity; politically, it helps secure recognition (e.g., heritage status, funding) from society at large. As a result, the project produced a publicly circulating visual archive

that community members now use for cultural education, institutional recognition, and intergenerational teaching, demonstrating how visual documentation translates directly into social and political visibility.

Mãe Elisa's Archive and the Zuela de Êre Project: Intimate Preservation as Community Memory

In a quiet suburb of Salvador, Yalorixá Elisa Lordelo de Obaluaiê, the respected high priestess of Ilê Axé Jifan Okan Onile, recognized that her lifetime of memories and sacred knowledge faced disappearance if not preserved. Mãe Elisa safeguarded a modest personal collection of family photos, ritual songs and plants, and other sacred objects, reflecting central spiritual and familial lineage. By 2020, worrying that these fragile treasures might succumb to time and tropical mold and quietly disintegrate—entropy embodied—she set in motion an insurgent archival intervention rooted in community care (Lordelo de Obaluaiê 2019).

As the matriarch of her house, Mãe Elisa reached out to preempt this loss, reserving an Atlantic Archives fellowship spot for a member of her house. She subsequently selected and mentored Adamo Dias, a young terreiro member and trainee archivist from the Atlantic Archives program, who successfully proposed and led the Zuela de Êre project (Lordelo de Obaluaiê 2019). This outward-facing educational archive was meticulously named for the child spirit Erê (signifying youthful energy and joy).

This formalized project became an immersive, community-wide preservation effort centered on children and the intergenerational transmission of knowledge. It resulted in over 100 separate archival assets for a public exhibit. The Zuela de Êre project quantified and transformed traditional, embodied terreiro epistemology into formal records, explicitly challenging the colonial notion that Candomblé knowledge is abstract. Reflecting on her motivations, Mãe Elisa was direct: “We don't live forever. The children must know the names of the leaves, the songs for each orixá. That's why I allowed Adamo to help us remember” (Lordelo de Obaluaiê 2019). This insistence on intergenerational transmission views the archive as an act of maternal care as much as cultural preservation obligation and anchors the entire project in a distinctly terreiro epistemology.

The project assets included three core catalogs built from intergenerational workshops led by Adamo (Atlantic Archives and Miles 2024):

- Sacred Leaves (*Ewê*): Documenting medicinal and spiritual plants.
- Sacred Culinary Traditions: Featuring recipes for *orixá* foods.
- Sonic Archive: Recording songs and percussion rhythms.

They grounded this educational mission in preservation, insisting that without safeguarding the ecological and ritual components the story is incomplete. Her maternal foresight drove this project, balancing innovation with tradition and centering an elder Black woman's epistemological values.

The Act of Solidarity: Lázaro, Stipends, and Canon Building

In a key moment of this partnership, Mãe Elisa entrusted delicate prints from her own personal archive, including her 1970s wedding photographs, to the project. To protect this intimate family history, I deliberately arranged for Lázaro Roberto, the renowned local Afro-Brazilian photographer-archivist of the Zumvi Archive, to handle the digitization in his historic and since renovated archival studio. This ensured the labor of preservation remained in local Black hands and honored Lázaro's specialized craft.



Figure 2. Lázaro explaining his scanning and restoration process in his former studio 2019.
Photo courtesy of the Atlantic Archives Collection.



Figure 3. Family image from Mae Elisa's collection, scanned by Lázaro in 2019.
Photo courtesy of the Atlantic Archives Collection.

Crucially, this decision was strategic: affirming Lázaro's long-unrecognized intellectual labor at the helm of the Zumvi Photographic Archive (Atlantic Archives and Miles 2024). As part of my applied archival ethnography, I provided Lázaro Roberto with a dedicated salary from my graduate fellowship stipend. This redirected academic funding served not as payment for research data, but as a reciprocal act of transnational solidarity and mutual aid. Our long-term goal was to explicitly suture his history and the Zumvi Archive into the international visual studies and diaspora studies canon as a core subject of this dissertation. This approach modeled how to translate African American concepts of grassroots support into Afro-Brazilian cultural praxis through the physical action of preservation.

Archival Sovereignty and Recognition

Mãe Elisa's spiritual authority governed all public-facing aspects of the archive. Though guarding secret rituals, she strategically approved sharing family images and historical snapshots. She rigorously practiced archival sovereignty, demanding final curatorial control to ensure nothing was exhibited without her blessing. She required

explanatory text to be co-written by her younger protégés to contextualize the photos on their own terms. This careful balancing act bridged the sacred and the secular, asserting the community's right to epistemic self-determination and inserting Afro-Brazilian narratives into the official historical record (Lordelo de Obaluaiê 2019).

The collective impact was profound. Lázaro Roberto has since moved out of his leaky studio and into a prominent building in the city's tourist center, gaining long overdue international recognition through exhibitions in Brazil and the United States. This shift represents not only improved material conditions but also the validation of decades of archival labor that had gone uncompensated and unacknowledged by mainstream institutions. This validates that this strategic, solidarity-based engagement yields transformative, reciprocal community outcomes. Furthermore, by mentoring Adamo and collaborating with Lázaro, Mãe Elisa helped strengthen a wider network of Black community archivists. This case perfectly illustrates how an elder Black woman's leadership in knowledge preservation is both revolutionary and rooted in cultural protocol.

Beyond the Binary, Queering Resistance in Afro-Atlantic Memory Work Yalorixá Thiffany Odara: Transgender Leadership and the Digital Archive of Inclusivity

Our final case pivots to Terreiro Oyá Matamba (Lauro de Freitas, Bahia), where Yalorixá Thiffany Odara develops an archive centered on inclusive narratives and queer visibility. A Black transgender mãe-de-santo, who assumed leadership of her own house in the late 2010s, after marginalization in more conservative terreiros, Thiffany's very leadership functions as insurgent memory work: her presence at the altar, crowned and presiding over ritual, re-writes collective memory to include those whom past narratives pushed to the margins. Thiffany's very position honors a revolutionary Black feminist lineage: the Terreiro Oyá Matamba was founded in 1960 by her grandmother, the priestess and community leader Dona Gildete Argolo da Silva (Iyá Detinha). Iyá Detinha established the terreiro as a quilombo of resistance against structural and religious racism (de Jesus 2025). This legacy of Black women's radical action is the foundation for Thiffany's current-day insurgency.

In a tradition historically marked by robust women's leadership, colonial heteropatriarchal pressures nevertheless sedimented exclusions targeting LGBTQ practitioners. Thiffany honors orthodox ritual transmission while expanding the

lineage to openly include trans women as rightful heirs to sacred authority (Harding 2000; Matory 2005). Thiffany's archival praxis unfolds along two tracks. First, she focuses on the recovery of erased histories. Working with collaborators, including Alex Alberto de Jesus (Atlantic Archives Fellow), she recovered and digitized the lives of earlier LGBTQ practitioners (Atlantic Archives and Miles 2024). One project traced a deceased elder travesti (transgender devotee) who played a formative role in Oyá Matamba's early years; scanning fragile prints (e.g., images of her leading ritual in the 1990s) and recording oral testimony re-inscribed her legacy into the terreiro's official story. Across these conversations, participants repeatedly emphasize how reclaiming LGBTQ elder histories, through recorded testimony, reshapes communal memory, expanding who is recognized as part of the sacred lineage.

The project culminated in the internal archive and exhibit *Trans'gressão da Memória* (Transgression of Memory), curated by Alex Alberto and blessed by Thiffany—an installation of photographs, letters, and recorded stories situating Afro-Brazilian LGBTQ elders within Candomblé's historical narrative. The exhibit converts suppressed lineage into shared memory, countering postcolonial entropy through deliberate, community-controlled description and display (Atlantic Archives and Miles 2024).

Second, Thiffany maintains a deliberately inclusive digital/public archive via the terreiro's Facebook and Instagram, where she interleaves ceremony photographs, short teachings on the orixás, and commentary on current issues. Instagram posts from a recent festival for Oxum framed participation as pan-community—"cis, trans, gay, straight"—and attested that "axé knows no binaries" (Odara 2020). These public-facing narratives serve multiple purposes: they counter entropic stereotypes that Afro-Brazilian religions are archaic or incompatible with modern values; they provide representation for Black trans and queer youth seeking spiritual kin; and they document community life in real time as an open-access extension of the archive.



Figure 4. Recovered photograph of Dona Gildete Argolo da Silva (Iyá Detinha), a founding priestess (1960) of Terreiro Oyá Matamba, who was also a midwife and Baiana de Acarajé. This image preserves the political and familial lineage that grounds Yalorixá Thiffany Odara's contemporary leadership.

Credit: Oyá Matamba Archive

Photo courtesy of Yalorixá Thiffany Odara.

This public-facing work is complemented by internal archival practices. Within the terreiro, Thiffany has initiated projects that queer the archive from within. Since 2023, an oral history program records elder LGBTQ members who previously felt compelled to mask their identities; sessions, often facilitated by younger queer archivists, capture life histories that now reside in the terreiro's digital library. One participant, recorded in 2024, captured what the project meant: “I am twenty years old and I am building a legacy that will still exist when I am an elder. I want whoever comes after me to know that we were no exceptions because there is proof that we were always part of this house of life” (Atlantic Archives and Miles 2024). Thiffany frames it as ancestor work: recognizing these elders as *Egun* (ancestors) of an expanding tradition.

Their praxis resonates with Black queer feminist and Afro-Brazilian feminist thought. Jaimee A. Swift's concept of queer amefricanidade reframes Black LGBTQ women's resistance in Brazil as a diasporic freedom practice operating across state violence and quotidian exclusions (Swift 2021). Thiffany enacts queer amefricanidade by claiming space as a Black trans mãe-de-santo; she both draws upon Afro-Atlantic ritual continuities and reshapes them through gender-expansive insurgency. In parallel, Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí's critique of projecting Western gender

logics onto Yorùbá institutions (with seniority, not binary sex, as a central organizing principle) provides a lens to read Candomblé's ritual authority as not inherently cis-heteronormative, even if colonial modernity tried to make it so (Oyěwùmí 1997).

Finally, Thiffany links archival practice to civic futurity. Public conversations in 2025 about a council run—unthinkable for an openly trans mãe-de-santo a generation ago—signal an emergent horizon of representation. As Thiffany explains, “We will not be footnotes in our own temple histories; we have been here, we have led, and our stories feed the sacred flame” (Odara 2020). Her leadership extends Black feminist insurgency into new terrain: the archive becomes embodied, networked, and inclusive, turning queerness itself into a method of insurgent memory work that resists postcolonial entropy while cultivating Black futurity.

Conclusion

Across the Atlantic world, wherever Black women, and gender-expansive people have fought to preserve their histories, they have done more than safeguard documents or images—they have transformed the trajectory of cultural survival. This study has shown how Afro-Brazilian Candomblé communities mobilize insurgent memory work to counter the slow violence of postcolonial entropy (Mbembe 2001; Miles 2025). In doing so, they reveal that community archives are not passive repositories but revolutionary sites where epistemic power is contested and remade.

Each of the cases examined demonstrates a facet of this shared insurgency. When subaltern communities narrate and preserve their own stories, they defy the gravitational pull of colonial erasure. What might appear as a simple act of scanning a photograph or recording a testimony becomes a deliberate intervention in the afterlife of empire. In the hands of Afro-Brazilian priestesses and their allies, the archive functions as an instrument of resistance and futurity—its momentum sustained by care, collaboration, and faith.

This insurgent memory work carries forward the intellectual and political lineage of Black Atlantic feminist thought. We hear in it the echo of feminist scholarship's insistence that the Americas must be read through the epistemologies of Black women (Gonzalez 1984); we see it realized in the concept of quilombismo, where memory itself forms a maroon territory of freedom (Nascimento 1982); and we feel its kinship with *escrevivência*, the practice of writing and living

simultaneously as testimony and theory (Evaristo 2011). These terreiros translate such principles into material form, merging lived experience and scholarship into a single continuum of creation.

The rise of matriarchal and queer community archives signals a profound paradigm shift in how knowledge is produced and protected. In Afro-Brazilian contexts, we witness a deliberate rejection of Western epistemic hierarchies that privilege institutional archives and academia. Here, grandmothers, priestesses, and even children become the historians, curators, and theorists. These archives of the everyday expand the geography of Black knowledge production beyond institutional walls, while simultaneously demanding accountability from those institutions. The Atlantic Archives project extends these lessons into a transnational framework: by training young people like the two fellows as community archivists, it constructs a living, cross-border network of Black knowledge producers.

The archives nurtured in these Afro-Brazilian terreiros are far more than collections of ritual photographs or videos. They are radical acts of survivance (Vizenor 1999), exceeding mere survival to overturn the material and symbolic conditions of erasure. Each image rescued, each testimony recorded, and each new voice welcomed into the historical record becomes a strike against oblivion, illuminating paths of possibility across the Black Atlantic. The interviews confirm that these archives matter not only because they preserve the past, but because community members understand them as tools for dignity, pedagogy, and survival in the present. The women of Ilê Axé Oyá Irokê; Ilê Axé Jifan Okan Onile; and Terreiro Oyá Matamba, remind us that to remember dangerously is to live freely: to remember in defiance of those forces that prefer we forget.

Their visual ancestralities converge into a revolutionary legacy that proves that cultural entropy does not need to have the final word. Through insurgent memory work, even the most precarious communities can defy the expectation of decline and insist upon Black futurity. For scholars and community members alike, the task ahead is to listen, to support, and to continue this praxis. The archive of the future is being made now in sacred spaces and ordinary moments by those who, with care and courage, continue the revolutionary work of their ancestors.

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Note: Unless otherwise indicated in the entry, translations of Portuguese-language sources are my own.

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