As part of the course requirements for a masters degree in Pan African Studies through the Department of African American Studies at Syracuse University, I travelled to Recife, Brazil in May of 2009 to conduct a research project on the incorporation of music within Afro-Brazilian social movements in the state of Pernambuco. Music has played a critical role within the resurgence of various black political and cultural movements in Brazil since the late 1970s. This integral position has been documented by various scholars, yet, surprisingly, there exists a large lacuna over both the history and activities of Afro-Brazilian social movements in Recife, as well as the city’s Afro-Brazilian musical scene. Nearly all extant research on Afro-Brazilian social movements has focused on Salvador, Rio de Janeiro, and São Paulo. This is shocking given Recife’s historical and cultural importance. My main research question initially was, Is there a connection between maracatu de nação or maracatu de baque virado and the black movements in Recife, Brazil. If so, in what ways and to what extent is it connected? If not, what are some of the divergences which contribute to maracatu not being incorporated into the movements.

Within the first weeks in Recife, I was able to identify that there is indeed a connection between maracatu and the black movement in Recife, yet this connection is very complex and extremely difficult to understand. Additionally, maracatu groups presented two major problems. First, they were less active during the months I was in Brazil, making it difficult to conduct direct observation, and secondly, they were relatively closed to foreign researchers. Moreover, maracatu was just one of many Afro-Brazilian musical styles that proved to have rich and
complex relations with the black movement in Recife. Given these realities, I quickly changed my approach and decided to not focus solely on maracatu, but rather attempt to build a larger, more general understanding of the various musics and how they interact with organized sociopolitical movements as a whole. Given such a short timeframe for research, and that sufficient relationships with maracatu nações had not yet been developed, conducting intensive ethnographic research was not viable. Therefore, I feel that the new approach was better suited to the realities of the research project. It allowed me to gain an understanding of the complexities of social movements in Recife as well as build strong ties and networks for further research.

The PLACA Summer Research Grant funding I received for conducting research during the summer of 2009 was spent on transportation. This included roundtrip airfare to Recife, Brazil, as well as ground transportation (bus, train, and taxi) in Recife and surrounding areas for a period of ten weeks. My research activities included conducting eighteen interviews with activists, musicians, students, and professors, attending lectures and conferences sponsored by various Afro-Brazilian political organizations, direct observation of numerous musical performances, as well as Portuguese language training. These activities allowed me to ascertain that there is indeed a strong black movement in Recife and that Afro-Brazilian musics have a complex and rich role within their activities. Moreover, I was able to identify several questions, problems, and issues which require further analysis. One is the ways in which music and political organizations interact. For instance, while a maracatu group might participate in a Movimento Negro Unificado (MNU) sponsored event if invited, they are not incorporated within the MNU on any administrative level. Meanwhile, afoxé groups are a required feature at the MNU’s weekly concerts. Interlocutors have expressed that this divergence may be related to the strong community focus of maracatu nações clashing with the MNU’s national agenda.
Additional issues include the culturalization of the black movements in Brazil as suggested by Michael Hanchard, the possible folklorization of Afro-Brazilian cultural manifestations, and the intersections of government, social movements, and culture. For example, all of these issues can be found within one specific space, Terça-Negra. Beginning in 2001, the MNU founded Terça-Negra, a weekly presentation of Afro-Brazilian music. With help from the Núcleo Cultural Afro-Brasileira and the Prefeitura do Recife, the MNU has moved Terça-Negra from its original location, a popular pagode samba hotspot, to the more visible Patio de São Pedro, and has sustained Terça Negra continuously for eight years. The MNU uses the space to promote Afro-Brazilian culture, the MNU itself, and to announce lectures and events concerning race and Afro-Brazilian issues in Recife.

I noticed the announcements made by MNU activists during these concerts were mostly to inform concert goers of other Afro-Brazilian musical events, references to candomblé, and only occasionally were lectures and debates concerning Afro-Brazilian issues announced. At first glance, I witnessed a lack of political commentary and questioned if the MNU was utilizing the space effectively. For example, they did not speak of daily police violence against Afro-Brazilian communities nor of MNU meetings and activities. Also, it seems that many audience members were disinterested in political commentary, an initial observation which begs to ask if Terça-Negra is simply a “festinha pela festinha.” Hanchard’s denunciation of the MNU’s use of culture as an effective means of mobilization and identity formation comes to mind, as does the question of a folklorized or accepted version of Afro-Brazilian identity and activism existing solely within predetermined and authorized political spaces. However, it seems that creating visibility for Afro-Brazilian music and culture is more important than this superficial gaze implies. One interlocutor, a veteran black activist, writer, historian, and poet, explained to me that dancing and
parties are always more than just music and good times; that these social activities are an integral part of the health and mental well being of Afro-Brazilians living in a racist society. Moreover, his decision to become an activist was largely influenced by the music and activism of the Black Soul/Black Power movement.

Another issues which demand further analysis are the role of Afro-matrix religions, such as Candomblé and Umbanda, in the black movements and tensions with protestant or catholic activists; and finally, the role of musics which are not associated with Afro-matrix religions, such as Reggae and Hip Hop. One of my interlocutors, a samba musician, uses his music to create awareness about black issues in Brazil. However, he does not participate within organized black movements because, as a Christian, he feels alienated from those organizations. He claimed "they won’t accept me, yet I fight in my own way." “I’m proud to be a black man,” he reassured me and quickly explained that “I’m not African, I’m Brazilian!” in a critique of the MNU’s heavy rhetoric and focus on African survivals in Afro-Brazilian culture. His comments raise questions about the role of Christian activists, as well as musics not associated with Afro-matrix religions, i.e. nationally popular forms of samba and pagode, reggae, and hip hop, as providing critiques and alternative models to Afro-Brazilian cultural-political activism. These are just a few initial observations of the complex social interactions in Recife which require further interpretation and analysis.

This was my first experience conducting field research outside the United States, my only previous fieldwork having been in Syracuse under the auspices of an ethnographic methods course. I recommend that students conducting similar kinds of ethnographic research remain flexible and open to altering their research designs where warranted. I had designed my research project to be flexible and I anticipated that I would find my research topic to be more complex
than I imagined in Syracuse. Not only was this true, but what I found was even more complex than I had anticipated! At times, I felt quite overwhelmed, but fortunately, I was flexible and that proved critical. I also recommend that students be opportunists: take any opportunity you have and don't be shy. I found with this approach, I received more interviews and more connections than I would have received if I had been more reserved.

The findings will be utilized extensively in my masters thesis in an effort to address the literature gap and provide a greater understanding of the role of music within social movements and questions of identity. Additionally, the work will contribute to the development of a scholarly article and presentations at conferences, such as the ASALH conference in September. Moreover, the connections and networks made will be critical to maintaining my ties with the region and preparations to explore this project in greater detail at the PhD level.