

## Carnivalizing Carnival-Land in the Urban *Sertões* of Teatro Oficina

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Na forte noite de passagem do dia de todos os santos, para o segundo, dia dos mortos, [...] são feitos com a multidão-público ensaios das primeiras cenas da quarta expedição que se iniciam na rua Jaceguai como a rua do Ouvidor, prosseguem dentro do Oficina com as cenas da expedição de âmbito nacional [...] até terminarem com uma manifestação em frente as ruínas da sinagoga da rua da Abolição em protesto contra a demolição desse bem comum histórico da cidade de São Paulo [...] Batizamos o evento dessa travessia noturna de rito de iniciação da luta para o desmassacre.<sup>1</sup>

To the sound of carnival samba beat, hundreds of community members and actors danced their way out of the theater space and into the street, blocking the anxious São Paulo traffic. As they sang as a chorus in call and response mode, their joy was so vividly visible that it would be difficult for passersby to imagine that they were witnessing a ritual of “de-massacre.” Yet, those who stayed long enough or joined the crowd certainly comprehended the pathos that motivated this collective action. This “ritual” was a political act in which a historical massacre allegorized the destruction of an important neighborhood site — one in a series of places taken over by gentrification in the Bela Vista neighborhood, also known as Bexiga. For those who were familiar with Teatro Oficina’s carnivalesque aesthetics, the realization that this urban performance could be characterized simultaneously as transgressive, and unabashedly civic should come as no surprise. This action took place in November of 2005, on Jaceguai Street, home to the legendary Teatro Oficina

since 1958. For the members of Oficina — one of Brazil's most important experimental theatrical companies — this carnivalesque procession was also an open rehearsal of the last section of its epic theatrical project, *Os Sertões* (2002-2007).

By turning a theatrical rehearsal into a political protest Oficina highlighted the connection of the performance space to public space as well as that of performance to social agency. In fact, each of the five productions that composes *Os Sertões*' cycle transformed the stage into a participatory social space where sociopolitical criticism was not simply rehearsed but also embodied and acted out. In exploring the ways in which this theatrical cycle crossed and renegotiated spatial, corporeal and subjective limits, this essay seeks to examine the potency of transgression in performance in terms of addressing crucial social issues and embodying non-hegemonic historical narratives. Given that the current upsurge in urban and rural Brazil of social movements that utilize squatting as the main strategy to claim land and housing rights has been parallel to a resurgence in theater and performance of spatial tactics that directly or indirectly refer to these struggles, I analyze these works through the trope of "performatic<sup>2</sup> squatting." This notion encompasses interactive performances that function as collective occupations of space, and which, by enacting a corporeally active reception, probe limits between theater and street, audience and performers, as well as between stage and audience space.

Teatro Oficina takes a carnivalesque approach to "performatic squatting." Through their parade-like stage, shaped as a long corridor that connects the space to the streets, performers and audience parade an array of images that, like carnival "alegorias" or "carros alegóricos" (floats) festively allegorize current issues. While, as Maria Laura Cavalcânti suggests, carnival "alegorias" occupy central place in the spectacular visuality of Brazilian carnival parades (49-50), visuality here is complemented by better-rounded sensorial engagement, thereby destabilizing the notion of the spectacle. When calling Oficina's approach carnivalesque, I am referring both to its appropriation of carnival's aesthetics (transgressive behavior, sensorial overload, interactive rhythms, processional movements), and to its Bakhtinian connotations, in the sense that a carnivalesque performance may invert or "carnivalize" given meanings and hierarchies, temporarily disturbing hegemonic values, behaviors and narratives. More specifically, I am addressing the way in which notions of "Brazilianness" and even the very model of the Brazilian carnival parade are simultaneously represented, contested and carnivalized.

Although Oficina chose to stage a canonical text, many have argued that *Os Sertões* (1902), which is considered one of Brazil's most important literary classic, already constituted a counter narrative. Translated to English as *Rebellion in the Backlands*, this literary epic literally translates as "large-deserts," and refers to the barren backland region of northeastern Brazil – the site of a historical massacre that the book contextualizes and denounces. During the thirty hours of Oficina's multiple staging of this epic, the audience-participant inhabits various historic and contemporary scenarios, ranging from Brazil's "discovery" (1500) to the foundation of the Republic at the end of the nineteenth century (1889), to the Canudos' War (1896-1897) — a massacre of thirty thousand peasant mestizo squatters. The last section of *Os Sertões'* cycle, *A Luta II*, reenacts the fourth and final military expedition that defeated the yearlong resistance of the squatters.

Like the previous productions that constitute this ambitious seven-year long project,<sup>3</sup> *A Luta II* was developed with the frequent participation of the community through open rehearsals as the one described in the beginning of this essay. Along with hundreds of participants, members of the collective started their "Ritual de iniciação da luta para o desmassacre" in front and inside of Oficina's theater and then moved to the streets that led to the front of the ruins of the neighborhood's synagogue, which had recently been destroyed by real estate interests. In front of the synagogue's ruins, they reenacted the arrival of the military at the portal of the squatted village of Canudos, thus superimposing two geographies and two moments in the history of a country that tends to ignore its exclusionary social-spatial practices. Given the current demographic explosion of slums (not only in Brazil but across the global south), and the social movements it has generated, the staging of *Os Sertões* cycle was extremely timely.

### **Transposing the Blacklands into the Urban Stage**

The opening night of *Os Sertões* in February of 2002 also marked the centennial anniversary of the sociological/literary work by the same title, often considered "the bible of Brazilianness" or "brasilidade."<sup>4</sup> In addition, it coincided with the forty-four years of a radical theater company famous for combining political commitment with an aesthetic investment that thrives on transgression and stylistic hybridity. By the end of 2007, this popularly and critically acclaimed multiple production had premiered its final section, and the group had performed its iconoclastic interpretation of the literary classic across various Brazilian cities, twice in Germany<sup>5</sup> and finally, in Canudos

itself. Much of its success derives from the ways through which the performances carnivalized, both in terms of content and style, nineteenth-century positivism and the racist premises that fueled the writing of *Os Sertões* while highlighting its merits. As a literary, sociological and historical document, this book not only demonstrated that the tragic chapter of Brazilian history known as The Canudos' War, had been, in fact, a massacre enacted by the military, but also problematized prior notions of national identity by exposing the existence of two "Brazils," the Europeanized coast and the backward northeastern backlands.

Oficina's five-part staging, which loosely corresponds to the three parts of the epic narrative: "A Terra," "O Homem," and "A Luta," takes on an equally epic character, yet it transforms the dense and poetic language of the book into a spatially and corporeally centered carnivalesque event. Each production manipulates space, time, and bodies in a way that the usual passivity of the spectator is radically challenged. For usually four to six hours, the audience is immersed in a de-centered space, which is a site for multiple actions and narratives — many of which the audience participates in. The aesthetic core of these productions is not spoken text, but rather, choral singing and dancing, which reference numerous popular and folkloric traditions.

As Maria Teresa Vargas points out, the staging of *Os Sertões* constitutes an old dream of Oficina's mentor, a dream that goes as far back as 1969 and that rehearsed its manifestation in various smaller stage embodiments throughout the 1980s (139-142). Oficina passionately and cleverly utilized both the weight of the centennial moment and the historical validation that *Os Sertões* has received since its publication to finally birth forth a project that may be, as Mariângela Alves Lima asserts, "a obra de gestão mais longa" in the history of Brazilian theater ("*Os Sertões*, obra em andamento" 215). Most importantly, it utilized the project as point of departure for addressing related social issues, namely, the issue of rural and urban reform raised by social movements such as "Movimento do Sem Terra" and "Movimento do Sem-Teto." Oficina's critique also functions at a self-referential level, in the sense that it represents and celebrates Oficina's "luta pelo espaço (do solo e da arte)" (Vargas 139) as it allegorizes its own struggle against gentrification.<sup>6</sup>

This activist spirit has permeated Oficina's entire history. Teatro Oficina, along with Augusto Boal's Teatro de Arena, is one of the major avant-garde theater companies that engaged in the popular resistance to the dictatorship that ruled Brazil for twenty-one years.<sup>7</sup> Although they initially collaborated, Oficina (which can also translate as "workshop") soon took on a

more playful and less didactic approach to political engagement. Yet, it wasn't until the late sixties that Oficina would make this turn explicit, by becoming part of a larger artistic movement called "Tropicalismo"<sup>8</sup> whereby collage and playful confrontation became a resistance strategy to both imperialism and the censorship system of the dictatorship.<sup>9</sup> As a consequence of their political commitment and radical aesthetics, one of their most provocative pieces, *Roda Viva* (1968),<sup>10</sup> was attacked by a paramilitary group and the actors were physically harmed.<sup>11</sup> Members of the group believe that the burning down of their theater in 1966 was also the result of paramilitary repression.<sup>12</sup> After several reconfigurations, Zé Celso is the only surviving member of the original group (and director), who, after returning from exile suffered as a result of the dictatorship, continues to lead the fight for Oficina's survival. Throughout the group's history of resistance, (or "re-existence," as Zé Celso would call it) the involvement with popular traditions, as well as community outreach have often been present, but in *Os Sertões* they became central. As a kind of environmental theater created through a directed collaborative process that involves not only open rehearsals but also participation of poor children from the community,<sup>13</sup> *Os Sertões* also functioned as a community celebration and as a social service.

My interest lies in examining how these multiple productions address issues of displacement primarily through performatic squatting, that is, in how the altering of relations between audience, performers and space articulates the narrative, the imaginary and the social all at once. I want to suggest that the subversive and politically enabling character of these productions lies not only in the community engagement they promoted or on the complex web of connections between past, present and future drawn by their signs, but primarily in the articulation of these signs through phenomenological strategies that created situations for audiences to perform and/or to engage more actively with historical narratives, thereby validating embodied knowledge and potentially triggering a heightened sense of sociopolitical agency in both the audience and the performers. Prior to analyzing these strategies, it is important to take a look at the two narratives that are counter-woven into the fabric of Oficina's project.

### The Spatio-History of the Massacre

*Canudos foi massacrado pelo poder do exército da república em nome da 'Liberdade, igualdade e fraternidade.' Democracia executada através da violência, como acontece no mundo de hoje.*

— Zé Celso<sup>14</sup>

At the end of the nineteenth century, the often-ignored region known as “os sertões,” located in the isolated backlands of the northeastern area of Brazil, became, for the first time, visible and conceptually threatening to the coastal elite. In spite of being semiarid and extremely impoverished, this region had been a site for cattle ranches and sugar plantations, and was divided into large states dominated by a patriarchal oligarchy.

Fleeing drought, misery and oligarchic domination, thousands of peasants, led by a religious mystic named Antônio Conselheiro, squatted an abandoned cattle farm alongside a river, which came to be known as the village of Canudos.<sup>15</sup> Conselheiro was an itinerant preacher and adept of penitent folk Catholicism who was considered a fanatic by those in power, both in the backlands and throughout the coast, for having urged his followers not to pay the abusive taxes of the new republic and to despise the hierarchy of the church. Since Canudos challenged all institutional power structures, including church, state, and the economic control of the landowners, who were losing their cheap labor to the ever-growing community, these institutions soon demanded military action from the government. As Boris Fausto suggests, the fact that Conselheiro preached for a return of the monarchy, was deployed by “republicanos” to justify a battle that for them signified a struggle between civilization and barbarism (146).

The Canudos’ war was, according to a historiographical tradition that begins with *Os Sertões*, an extremely unequal yearlong battle between a well-armed military and the autonomous peasant village, and ultimately resulted — after four military expeditions — in the gradual massacre of the poor as a racialized Other. This battle took place in the wake of Brazil’s complex transition from monarchy to republic (1889), when social differences between the rural northeast and the urban elites of the southeast coast became intensified. The mestizo population miraculously resisted three expeditions and was only completely decimated in the fourth attack. At the time, the massacre was largely perceived as a necessary extermination of barbaric

fanatics who threatened the Republic and was translated into schoolbooks as a necessary “battle” that marked the victory of “our” civilized republican ways (Ferreira 30-35). A Marxist reading of this “chapter” of Brazilian history, which emerged in the 1970s, posits that Canudos represented a viable alternative to the semi feudal regime of the region and the growing capitalism of the coast (Moniz 295-304). From this viewpoint, Conselheiro appears as a visionary revolutionary who managed to found an egalitarian society in which private property, civil marriage, taxation, and other “civilized institutions” had absolutely no function (Moniz 30-41).

The performances by Oficina take on this perspective but are largely based on the sociological and literary work *Os Sertões*, produced only five years after the “victory,” as the first counter-historical perspective on the war.

### **A Battle between Positivism and Embodied Witnessing**

*A campanha de Canudos tem por isto a significação inegável de um primeiro assalto, em luta talvez longa. [...] Aquela campanha lembra um refluxo para o passado. E foi, na significação integral da palavra, um crime. Denunciemo-lo.*

— Euclides da Cunha (66-77).

Moved by a desire to defend his republican ideals, Euclides da Cunha, a journalist with an engineering degree and poetic aspirations, was sent to Canudos as a war correspondent during the fourth expedition. *Os Sertões*, written in 1902, weaves personal account and historical narrative with geological, anthropological and sociological language to provide a dense and tragic account of one of the most shameful events that consolidated the Brazilian Republic. The polyphonic and intertextual aspects of this book, informed by nineteenth century positivism and biological determinism addressed in an unprecedented manner the racial anxieties of the end of the century and historicized the violent encounter of the European-facing Brazilian population of the urban Atlantic coast with the rural and undernourished society of the backlands. These anxieties were due to a contradiction between positivist views of race that posited miscegenation as a degeneration of the human species and the fact that the country including the coast (although to a lesser extent and in a manner disguised by class), was largely mestizo. Euclides da Cunha’s masterpiece initially reflected the predominant view that misce-

genation was not only an index of biological degeneration but also a major obstacle to modernity and “progress.” Based on a naturalistic conception that theorized history as determined by three factors — environment, race and moment — Euclides sectioned the book into “A Terra,” “O Homem,” and “A Luta,” in such a way that the sequence denoted a certain cumulative causality. What is most fascinating about this densely rendered work is that, in the process of writing it, Euclides da Cunha contradicts his own premise, in the sense that what was supposed to be a report to the republic became an attack on its barbarism and what was a study of the degradation of the Brazilian race became an appreciation for the endurance and spirit of the “mestizo” as a symbol of Brazilian nationality. The republic, through the actions of civilized military men, who, by the way, were also racially mixed, becomes, by the end of the narrative, the real transgressor and the soldiers, the real barbarians. His discourse transformed miscegenation from a degenerative to a generative principle and depicted the northeastern mestizo as the “live rock” of our “Brazilianness.”

Still caught in essentialist notions, Euclides<sup>16</sup> perceived the extreme socio-spatial inequality as a product of the environment and located the northeastern mestizo as the synthesis — the miscegenation model from which, unfortunately, we would not be able to escape. As many have noted, although *Os Sertões* denounced the asymmetrical war between mestizo peasants and the military as a crime, it was clear that some of his prejudices remained due to his unchanging portrayal of Conselheiro as a pathological product of his environment.

Nonetheless, the subversive character of the book that denounces the anachronism of these “two Brazils” has made, as Stallybrass and White would say, “what is socially peripheral symbolically central” (5). The critical tensions that were built up and somewhat dissolved, never completely loosened their hold, and it is probably due to these tensions and ambiguities that in spite of functioning as a denouncement of the crimes of the military and as an attack on the republic, *Os Sertões* was an instant success and won Euclides da Cunha a place in the Academia Brasileira de Letras.<sup>17</sup>

### **Squatting the Spectacle**

*Os Sertões* by Oficina re-stages the Brazilian identity once problematized by Euclides, but instead of grieving over the impossibility of racial and cultural homogeneity, the performances celebrate cultural diversity, ethnic hybridity, and non-normative sexual preferences while exposing racial violence



and class inequality. In this production, a phantasmic Canudos — a historical spectacle that collective memory persists in trying to understand — becomes the stage for a kind of anti-spectacle in the urban backlands of Teatro Oficina.

In *A Terra*, Euclides da Cunha's highly visual musings upon the genesis of Brazil and the backlands are translated to the stage largely through performers' and audiences' embodiment of natural elements, all to the rhythm of musical choreo-poems, delivered and sung by all performers. As in a mix of carnival and opera, the audience receives a libretto to sing along, although most members of the participant audience prefer joining the dance and learning the songs through hearing. Live music animates long and elastic pieces of fabric that become the main form of conveying a sense of a geophysics that is constantly changing. As Mariângela Alves Lima notes, "um extraordinário esforço de transliteração dramatiza a morfologia do território abarcado pela obra, desde a forma carterpillar do veios aquáticos até o relevo, a vegetação e as variações climáticas" ("*Os Sertões*, obra em andamento" 2). Towards the end of this three-hour production, the backlander "man" is born as if from this "earth" — from the red and cracked soil that covers the performance floor. At first, this section seems to validate the autochthonous theories of Euclides da Cunha, but its festive embodiment lends a playful irony to the performance.

*O Homem I* or *O Pré-Homem* stage the colonizing encounter and miscegenation process as marked, sex and sensuality. What Euclides classified into so-called sub-races: mulatto, "cariboca" (also known as "caboclo": the offspring of interracial reproduction between a white and an indigenous person) and "cafuzo" (the offspring of an African and an indigenous person) are here reenacted as a ritual of reclaiming one's agency as a mestizo while locating the racial/class axis often obscured by the ideology of "racial democracy." This is followed by surreal episodes and interactive events that convey a sense of the formation of regional identities with an emphasis on the socio-political context of the backlander out of which Antônio Conselheiro emerges. *O Trans-Homem* or *O Homem II* narrates the life of Conselheiro from his childhood to the formation of Canudos through a kind of musical theater that takes on the most narrative approach of the productions as it utilizes certain linearity absent from the previous ones. Nonetheless, in the middle of this section, Oficina stages a play within a play that references circus and traveling theaters called "teatros mambembes" as well as the Brazilian vaudevillian tradition called "Teatro de Revista."<sup>18</sup>

*A Luta I* lasts about six hours and focuses on reenacting Euclides' description of the first three military expeditions, which failed to destroy

Canudos. *A Luta II*, of similar duration, is the final part in which the military wins through a merciless massacre, aided by European weapons. These narratives are articulated through a great “tropicalist” salad of past and present cultural forms. Though the text is largely taken verbatim from the book, Oficina draws heavily on traditional and contemporary regional musical and theatrical styles, dances, and the oral poetry tradition of the “repentistas.”<sup>19</sup> The players and participants dance to Northeastern “baião”<sup>20</sup> and “forró,”<sup>21</sup> as well as to all variations of samba and to “Rio funk.”<sup>22</sup> There are also several references to the rituals of folk Catholicism, Afro-Brazilian spirit possession religions and native South American mythology. By mixing high and low, that is, by “cannibalizing” a literary classic through popular forms, Oficina invites the audience to become co-producers of the narrative.

The performance space itself is particularly integral to this participatory strategy. The space is a long, narrow, and very tall rectangular warehouse flanked by three story scaffolds with the audience on all levels, as well on the floor. Thus, what we usually understand as the stage — although here the stage is really everywhere — is a long corridor of about 80 feet long by 15 feet wide, covered with cracked earth representing desert soil. All costume changes are done next to the participant audience. There are no assigned seats and spectators can move around freely, changing from place to place throughout the performance and often becoming part of the action.

The most important spatial aspect of the five productions is that there is never a single vantage point from which everything can be seen, so everyone has a different visual perspective and experience of the space. The inability to visually master the event is enhanced by the simultaneity of actions that often characterizes the performances. Also, the action is decentered: the performers climb up and down scaffoldings, interact with participants and present skits at various locations, often at the same time. When, at certain times, the action becomes centered, the video monitors mounted around the space show through closed circuit the different angles of the action for those who cannot see it. These mediated images instill a great contrast in a space that is constructed through excessive bodies, thus perhaps reminding the participants that presence is always somewhat mediated.

At various moments, the event becomes an immersive environment, but this is solely based on spatial relationships and not on a specular apprehension. For example, all productions are interspersed with several dance parties in which everyone can participate — and most people do. Such moments of immersion permeated the production as a whole but were particularly pre-

dominant during the section *A Terra*, as the space was completely filled by about 300 audience members and 40 performers, who were covered by a giant undulating ultramarine fabric, symbolizing the invasion of the land by the sea.

While the literary narrative takes the reader on a kind of flight over and across the country as if to watch geological formations at play as live characters, in *A Terra* the audience becomes a part of this metamorphic geology. This staged identification between the participants and natural elements disturbs the determinism of the book once “nature” becomes literally constructed through performance. And as José da Costa so well describes, limits between subject and object are blurred:

[...] esses materiais [...] evoluem por si mesmos, dançam, ocupam o espaço, [...] sopram vento em seus movimentos, já não importando e quase não sendo possível distinguir, à certa altura da ocorrência, se são os intérpretes que acionam esses movimentos dos tecidos [...] Parece, ao contrário, que são eles próprios, os atores e atrizes, é que são acionados, provocados, movidos por aqueles movimentos (aquelas ondas cinéticas) sem dono, aqueles fluxos que, uma vez instaurados, como que seguem por si em uma reprodução de intensidades libertas e já sem origem em qualquer [...] sujeito determinado. (7-8)

This sea of bodies singing, dancing and touching each other may evoke a feeling of unity where boundaries between self and other are temporally softened, suggesting notions of interdependency and equality. At a conceptual level, this spatial arrangement also conveys a famous prophecy that, according to Euclides, was made by Conselheiro and which became the most famous quote from the book: “o sertão vai virar mar e o mar vai virar sertão” (149).

The prophecy reads both as an apocalyptic vision and as a quest for distribution of resources. As the land is filled by a “sea of bodies,” what is celebrated, validated and above all, spatially experienced, is a desire to break all bounds — and given the constant reference to the Landless Movement, especially that of social inequality in regards to ownership of land.

I am not suggesting that these corporeal-spatial tactics I have called performatic squatting should be understood only in terms of what they symbolize, on the contrary, much of their signifying power comes from their celebration of sensual knowledge, which often resists rational interpretations. In terms of corporeal tactics, the Bakhtinian excess that characterize the bodies on *Os Sertões* is central: Often nude or semi-nude, these bodies roll in mud, “become” animals, represent having intercourse, mimic a communal

defecation, breastfeed each other, and merge into one group with the audience/participants, with whom they even engage in erotic physical interaction.

Given the visible willingness of the majority of the audience to participate in both times I attended the entire cycle — each almost a total of 30 hours, for five consecutive days — in addition to the productions' popular and critical acclaim, it seems that the public embraced what Zé Celso calls the aesthetics of "tragicomédiaorgia" to such a degree that they may no longer constitute a transgression. Or was this reception simply an effect of the public's voyeuristic desire? Or was it the spatial dynamics and the carnivalesque atmosphere that allowed spectators to transgress? If so, what happened in regards to social affect and political effect when boundaries were collectively crossed? What was the purpose of crossing them or what are the politics behind their aesthetics?

Oficina's corporeal politics embraces pleasure as a way of knowing — as a way of refusing to treat body as tool, container and commodity, yet refutes self-indulgent hedonist ideologies. By delighting in bodily pleasures, as Antônio Vargas and Vinicius Pereira point out, Oficina associates sexual repression with social oppression (2). And as Ericson Pires suggests, the transgressions neither are an end in themselves nor are they grounded in a romantic or escapist position:

Aqui entra a pulsão transgressora: transformar o corpo em espaço de protesto, o corpo como ruptura, como revolução, o corpo contra o Estado, a desobediência do corpo contra o controle disciplinar dos espaços e ordens. Palco não é mais palco, platéia não é mais platéia, ambos se encontram desterritorializados, ambos viabilizam-se a/na apresentação: o rito da presença [...]. (26)

Pires' musings on Oficina's tragicomédiaorgia highlight a subversive potential that transverses the political, the social, and the subjective. Yet, it is important to add that, on Oficina's stage, the interactions and intersections between stage and audience, body and space, self and other, male and female, body and technology as well as body and natural elements not only challenge structures of power and the fixity of these binaries but also articulate specific social problems. As this politics aligns itself with crucial issues of displacement and grassroots activism, it equates the reclaiming of body with the right for a place. In fact, Zé Celso named their aesthetic not solely based on the actual meaning of the genres or of the word orgy, but rather to convey how a tragic event can be narrated and deconstructed through carnivalesque humor, irony, and eroticism.

Certainly this aesthetics might be seen as part of an identificatory apparatus of “Brazilianness” that sees and projects itself as sensually freer and hyper-sexed. Yet, unlike the hyper-sexed female bodies on prime time television, the nudity that permeates *Os Sertões* is experienced by almost all performers and some participants, independent of age, race, sexual orientation, and gender.

For instance, towards the end of *O Trans-Homem*, which loosely recounts the life of Antônio Conselheiro up to the formation of The Canudos community, a nude, “young Conselheiro” comes from one end of the corridor towards the “old Conselheiro” performed by Zé Celso, also nude, under a bright light that exposes what one rarely sees within the bounds of an image culture that idealizes youth: the aging body of a 70 year old male, with all its sagging muscles, wrinkling skin, fragile bones and expressiveness, singing about how his skin is no longer afraid of death. This self-acceptance is intensified when the young self meets the old self — this, like almost everything in this social space, becomes an erotic encounter as they kiss, embrace and roll on the floor while most participants clap and sing along with the performers.

Although a playful eroticism inherent to the carnivalesque dominates the performances, it is not all fun and games: The sex scenes staged in *O Pré-Homem* that enact the encounter of the European with the natives and the black slaves is marked by a violence that looks extremely real. When a white slave owner rapes a naked black woman with a chain around her neck, her shivering wailing echoes throughout the space. The comic relief comes when the wife slaps him in action and in revenge, pulls a group of male slaves to the side by their neck chains and examines their penises. The humor vanishes again when she allows herself to be ganged raped. After this, the whole chorus announces: “mulato!” In contrast, the encounter between the black slave and the indigenous woman is playfully celebrated inside of a fountain pool as several “indigenous” women watch and play around them. As they reach the sexual climax, water is falling over their bodies and a young dark skinned man does flips in the air as the chorus announces: “cafuzo!” The juxtaposition of violence and celebration works as an ironic comment upon the utopian notion of racial democracy that still inhabits the popular imaginary. The myth, often celebrated in Carnival parades is that Brazilians are a happy mix of three races: the Indians, the white and the blacks. While miscegenation is a reality (that is more complex than this, given that other ethnicities also make up a heterogeneous nation) *it is not* an index of a society free of racism. This myth is reenacted here from a markedly irreverent and ambiguous point of

view. As performers festively represent each racial fusion, the attributes of each ethnic and sub-ethnic group, which were constructed by Euclides as fixed, are contested by a constant change between past and present.

Although Oficina's ambiguity may sometimes seem to endorse the myth (especially during moments when one can't tell irony from earnest celebration), "a peça sugere o tempo todo que a possibilidade de inverter, de recriar os sentidos do texto é, também, a possibilidade de transformar a sociedade," as theater critic Marcelo Coelho points out (12). Equally relevant is his description of how this is achieved by actors playing multiple characters, as when 17<sup>th</sup> century "bandeirantes, sanguinários caçadores de escravos" become the ancestors of the rebel peasants from Canudos, which are depicted on stage not only as strong but also as wise. Yet, the same rebel peasants, known as "jagunços," simultaneously represent "quadrilhas do crime organizado contemporâneo" (12). Such a conflation of marginalized and heroicized subalterns subjects from different historical periods, whose skin is rarely white, reveals much more than a simple analogous relation; what is embodied and what the verbal text also indicates is a contingency between past and present oppressions. Besides, scenes as these remind us that even if the marginal becomes a hero, it only occurs in retrospect. What seems at first an apparent celebration of the "happy mix," is presented with such ambiguity that problematizes the race/class axis, opening miscegenation up for re-signification.

In contrast to these representational moments for which Oficina may be (and has been) accused of overusing explicit sex, the sensual corporeality that permeates *Os Sertões*, in fact de-territorializes and de-objectifies the body by inciting immersions in an eroticized space. In this sense, "tragico-médiaorgia" simultaneously evokes the spectacle as well as its critique. But what is a "spectacle" and how can a performance that relies on carnivalesque elements subvert it? In *The Society of the Spectacle* Guy Debord did not simply articulate a critique of mass media, but also of a capitalist mode of production that radically redefined social relations. For Debord, to call our late capitalist postmodern society a "Society of the Spectacle" is to argue that images are already internalized and thus serve as mediators for interpersonal and social relations. Yet, the centrality of the visual within Western epistemology is still foundational for his theories regarding alienation at the subjective, interpersonal and political levels. I am utilizing spectacle both as something that only requires visual and auditory engagement and as a mode of relations as theorized by Debord. This intentional slippage suggests that

the first definition may perpetuate the second. My contention is that due to an emphasis on visibility as central metaphor for progressive politics within performance and social discourse, theater — already etymologically trapped as “a place for viewing,” — and more specifically, political theater, has strived to raise social consciousness primarily through visual display.

In contrast, Oficina’s carnivalesque take on performatic squatting disturbs the logic of the spectacle by staging visual pleasure while at the same time disturbing specular mastery over the event. Such strategy obscures boundaries between the tactile and the visual, subject and object, space and body — it is about indulging in a feast of bright colors, beautiful bodies, larger than life video projections, while at the same time placing great emphasis on senses of touch, hearing, smell and taste.

In other words, the focus on multi-sensorial participation may disturb voyeuristic tendencies inherent to a project that displays explicit bodies. Besides, while the ideal of a total erasure of sensorial, intersubjective and spatial boundaries within a performance space is neither possible, nor desirable, still, a temporary “softening” of these boundaries is not necessarily antithetical to critical engagement. One could argue that an organization of the performance space that excludes corporeal engagement of the audience excludes bodily knowledge from the realm of criticality. Those who view the exploration of sensual knowledge as necessarily divorced from intellectual rigor seem to depart from an anachronistic interpretation of Brecht’s theatrical paradigm, whose emphasis on framing and distance should not be taken literally. Perhaps distance, when interpreted at the physical level, is no longer politically productive in the commodified space of mediatised encounters supported by structures of late capitalism. As this analysis of *Os Sertões* suggests, a fully embodied participation in the performative action can actually achieve the defamiliarization necessary for critical engagement by disrupting the voyeuristic mode of reception. In other words, by engaging with the action the audience shifts from critical observer to critical player.

*Os Sertões* also destabilizes voyeurism through the impossibility to fully apprehend the narrative through sight. This, in turn, subverts historical narratives that seek to turn history into either a rationally comprehensible narrative or into a sublime spectacle. According to Hayden White, a utopian position must negate the notion common to both bourgeois and Marxist history; namely, that history is a process that can be fully analyzed and comprehended because it is framed as transparent. As an alternative to these models, he proposes a utopian position that departs from the realization of history as

a sublime spectacle (73). In other words, in his perspective, history can only be constructed as a spectacle and thus must exceed objectivity and rationality. Oficina's *Os Sertões* takes a hopeful perspective that doesn't rely on either of these models. They exceed objectivity while fostering an embodied sense of comprehension, which posits history as open to intersubjective reinvention and reclaiming.

Manipulation of time through rhythmic music and duration also plays an important role in "spatializing" historical narratives. Studies on the power of rhythmic music to trigger altered states of consciousness have showed that repetition of sensory input that corresponds with the heartbeat generates a sense of heightened awareness that, if intensified, can trigger a trance state.<sup>23</sup> Certainly no one falls into a trance during *Os Sertões*, but the percussive music and dance that permeate these productions definitely generate a sense of heightened awareness in which time seems temporarily "suspended" or "deeper." This "spatial time" is intercalated by moments of simultaneity in which scenes occur at different places at the same time. This tension between non-linear time and spatial (or rhythmic) time, this constant shift from immersion to distance might have a certain efficacy in terms of preparing the participant for integrating the heightened awareness experience into his/her daily lives as it creates a break for critical distance.

Besides, the sense of inclusion and agency within this participatory space, structurally and relationally speaking, conveys the complete opposite of "individual" effort, and thus, allied to the temporal tactics described, potentially turns critical apprehension into a function of a collective process. The sense of collectivity and interdependency that permeated the productions, allowed the individual a voice within the collective without making him or her the center of the action. Such a process becomes clear when, in *A Terra*, tattered long strips of fabric transform the whole space into a web, connecting the spaces in between the scaffolds and inviting people to fill into the negative spaces. What follows is a kind of domino effect or wave movement that flows in many directions, in the form of songs, dances, and gestures. A song about Canudos with the refrain that demands to "Liberate it!" is soon modified by the participants who start to substitute Canudos by several municipalities within the greater São Paulo, as well as other parts of Brazil and other developing countries, including Iraq. The sense of spontaneity within this "scene," which at first had generated certain chaos, soon triggered moments that appeared organized and even rehearsed.



What problematizes the quasi-utopian quality of this interactive space is that although all of the three hundred members of the audience have a chance to engage in the action, the access to participation is not entirely equal. In this particular instance, most of the audience was on the lower level making it a crowded space; bodies were touching and moving to a rhythm that originated in the slums of Rio de Janeiro and which is a variation on Hip hop derived music, called “Rio Funk.” Watching from above could seem to reproduce urban segregation, though instead of looking up to the “illegal city” in the hills we were looking down on the “funkeiros” (funk dancers). So clearly, participation is not an equal opportunity because the space distributes the audience into three vertical levels and participation is mostly, at least in the initial hours of the performances, prompted by invitation. One can however, move across levels and inhabit either side of scaffoldings that flank the stage. It is important to note that given the long duration of the pieces, most people, even the least prone to participation, do change their seats during the performance. However, to say everyone is free to activate any part of the space is not to say that there aren’t any power dynamics inscribed on space. In this stage, even in moments in which power relations may seem diminished, what transpires is that the process whereby they are subdued is usually preceded by their acknowledgment.

The claim that the immersive and participatory character of the productions counter and comment on the exclusionary ideologies that moved the War on Canudos and that continue to operate in the present (that is, that they invert socio-spatial exclusion by staging socio-spatial inclusion) begs the questions: Who is being included? Does the constituency of Oficina’s audience stage a different dynamic than the ones outside its theater? Though there are certainly few marginalized subjects in the audience, the low price of the ticket (less than the equivalent of \$5 U.S. dollars) allows for working class attendance. Many of the kids who are part of the cast lived in a squatted building almost next door to the theater and many homeless and squatters attend the free rehearsals, which, as we saw in the beginning of this chapter, often bleed into the street. As a company with great cultural capital, its shows also invite middle and a few upper class spectators. Thus Oficina brings together subjects from various classes — a feat only achieved by carnival and soccer events. When I talk about staging social inclusion I am also claiming that the manner through which knowledge is transferred democratizes access to otherwise inaccessible material. *Os Sertões* was viewed by the middle class as that densely poetic and “boring book” one was forced to read or at least

to know about by the end of high school, while it remained an unattainable knowledge to the majority of the Brazilians — literacy levels correspond to less than half of the population. In addition, based on the engaged participation I embodied and witnessed and on various accounts from other audience members and critics, the long duration of the pieces was rarely perceived as excessive: “Talvez você nunca tenha passado cinco horas consecutivas dentro de um teatro, assistindo a uma mesma peça — muito menos cinco horas prazerosas” hours that, as the critic Mariângela Alves Lima continues to suggest, rather than making you tired, fill you with expectation and desire to delve in the reading of the classic or to rediscover it once again, just to find out what is going to happen in the next part of the production (“O sertão virou mar” 12). In this sense, the long duration of the pieces may be seen as necessary for the counter-historical narrative to “sink in.”

Given the sheer magnitude of Oficina’s project, any relatively brief analysis must ignore certain aspects in favor of others it deems crucial to its goal. My emphasis on performative rather than textual aspects of the productions that staged *Os Sertões* sought to demonstrate that the challenges posed by the crossings of multiple spatial, corporeal and subjective boundaries produced both social affect and political effect as they activated the dialogical and strategically utopian potentialities of interactive theater.

I call this utopian potential “strategic” in the sense that as it seeks to shake off the stereotype of Brazilians as a passive nation it demonstrates unshakeable hope in the power of theater to create social change. As it stages and temporarily embodies an egalitarian society, the members of Oficina aim at the “no-place” and the “not-yet” while bringing contested historical narratives to the sensorial present and actualizing it as a social space in the here-now. Zé Celso as Antônio Conselheiro creates a parallel between the history of Oficina and the history of Canudos as strong and resistant communities moved by utopian vision.

Nonetheless, this analogy is not lost in self-referentiality. The reflection is that of a double mirror and moves in both directions; the analogy with the present de-marginalizes the past and the past “actualized,” redefines and historicizes the causes Oficina struggles for, including the present struggles for land and housing. By transforming the stage into the semi-arid soil of the backlands, Oficina taps into the “sertões” as an imaginary place that permeates every “sertão,” rural or urban, throughout the country and through transnational third worlds. This imaginary of the semi-arid land, as corporeally manifested by Oficina, becomes a fertile space in which all the richness

contained in poverty, all the quasi-super-human power that emerges from withstanding malnutrition and all the creativity that abounds in spite of lack of resources, is honored, celebrated and courageously embodied.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Transcribed from video documentation found in Teatro Oficina's website. See video clip "Rito do Desmassacre" <[http://teatroficina.uol.com.br/tv\\_uzyna](http://teatroficina.uol.com.br/tv_uzyna)>.

<sup>2</sup> "Performatic," as opposed to "performative" avoids the linguistic genealogy of the latter term, while employing a vernacular, Latin American appropriation of the term "performative."

<sup>3</sup> Research began in 2000 and the productions ran from 2002 through 2007, usually one per year until the entire cycle was presented consecutively (2006 and 2007).

<sup>4</sup> A familiar notion, found in the Brazilian Academy of Letters' website: <<http://www.academia.org.br/abl/cgi/cgilua.exe/sys/start.htm?infoid=2821&sid=424&tpl=printerview>>.

<sup>5</sup> Besides public and critical acclaim *Os Sertões* won several of the most important national prizes in theater: *A Terra* won the 2002 Shell Prize in Best Direction and Best Music. *O Homem I* won the APCA (Paulista Association of Art Critics) of best show of 2003. *A Luta I* won Bravo's First Cultural Prize in the category of best show of 2005 and also the APCA Prize of best direction, as well as the 2005 Shell Prize for best set design and scene direction. It was also nominated for best lighting and costumes.

<sup>6</sup> For over a decade, Teatro Oficina has been fighting against one of Brazil's TV moguls, who plans to build a shopping mall next to their space. The shopping center would destroy a dream and an effort of twenty years to create an open arena theater next to theirs in what is now a parking lot. It would not only obstruct their space's relation to the public space by blocking the building's glass wall that connects it to the outside space, but it would also change the entire neighborhood. Oficina's struggle is to bring more culture into the neighborhood instead of more shopping options.

<sup>7</sup> For more information on Teatro Oficina's history see Silva. For a history of resistance in Brazilian theater see Michalski.

<sup>8</sup> Tropicalismo was an artistic movement that, in the 60's, encompassed music (popularized mainly through the work of Caetano Veloso), visual art, cinema and theater. It was inspired by a 1920's literary and visual modernist movement delineated by Oswald de Andrade, who sought to find a solution for Brazilian culture's subjugation to colonialism.

<sup>9</sup> The play that epitomized the tropicalist aesthetic on the Brazilian stage was Oficina's *Rei da Vela*, written in 1937 by Oswald de Andrade as a parody of Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi*. Its staging in 1967 by Oficina became one of the most important and controversial productions in the history of Brazilian theater.

<sup>10</sup> *Roda viva*, a play written by Chico Buarque, was not officially considered a work of Teatro Oficina, but given it was directed by Zé Celso and according to him pushed Oficina's experimentation to the limits, it is often inserted in the history of Teatro Oficina itself. In the words of Zé Celso: "*O rei da vela prepara o caminho e Roda viva faz a revolução*" (*Primeiro ato*, 307). The production inaugurated a style known as "Teatro de agressão," inspired in part by Antonin Artaud's theater of cruelty and largely by the repression of the dictatorship and the zeitgeist of 1968. This was an extremely participatory work, "uma peça de platéia" as Zé Celso called it (306). According to Ana Helena Camargo de Staal, who organized *Primeiro ato*, the polemic character of the show attracted huge audiences until CCC, (Comando de caça aos comunistas), an extreme right wing paramilitary group attacked the cast twice in the year of

1968, once in São Paulo and another in Porto Alegre. Following this incident, the government seized the opportunity to censor both *Roda viva* and *O rei da vela* (331).

<sup>11</sup> In his book *Verdade Tropical*, Caetano Veloso (a major icon of the 1960's counterculture and central figure of Tropicalismo) describes how a military sergeant who was interrogating him confessed to having been part of the group who attacked *Roda Viva*. However, military involvement in the action has not been officially proven. See Veloso 383-86.

<sup>12</sup> Information gathered in conversation with Zé Celso in April of 2009.

<sup>13</sup> This community outreach program for children and youth who reside in the Bairro Bexiga is known as Bexigão. For more information see: <<http://teatroficina.uol.com.br/>>.

<sup>14</sup> See *O Homen II* program notes 2.

<sup>15</sup> The population of Canudos, in a short period of four years, grew to almost 35,000.

<sup>16</sup> I am employing the way in which he is addressed within the Brazilian academic circle.

<sup>17</sup> Inspired by the French Academy, the Brazilian Academy of Letters was founded in 1897. It awarded Euclides da Cunha membership in 1903, one year after the book's publication.

<sup>18</sup> "Teatro de Revista" developed in the 1930's Rio as a kind of vaudeville in which dramatic skits, music, burlesque dance and socio-political satire exposed inequalities of class, gender and ethnicity on the Brazilian stage for the first time. On teatro de revista see Neyde Veneziano's *Teatro de revista no Brasil: Dramaturgia e convenções*. (São Paulo: Unicamp/Pontes, 1991).

<sup>19</sup> A northeastern tradition based on improvised narratives and call and response.

<sup>20</sup> According to Leandro Expedito Silva, baião appeared in the Northeast of Brazil during the nineteenth century as a popular dance. In beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it developed as musical accompaniment for popular poets who sang their verses. It was only in the 1940's, through the entrepreneurship of the poet, singer and composer Luís Gonzaga (1912-1977) baião developed into a musical genre and became nationally known. See Silva 81.

<sup>21</sup> Forró is a northeastern musical genre but the term is also applied to the popular ball and to the respective dance style. Leandro Expedito Silva points out that there are two versions for the etymology of the term; while some argue that it is a reduction for "Forróbodó", a popular ball, in which there is no social etiquette; others claim that the term derives from the English: "For all" referring the open-invitation parties that the British offered to their railroad workers. See Silva 72.

<sup>22</sup> Rio funk is a mixture of Miami bass and rap which came out of the slums of Rio de Janeiro to become quite popular amongst middle class youth. For the social relevance of this expression within Rio's slums see Paul Sneed's "Favela Utopias: The Bailes Funk in Rio's Crisis of Social Exclusion and Violence." (*Latin American Research Review* 43.2 (2008): 57-79).

<sup>23</sup> The major study on the subject was done by Gilbert Rouget in his book *Music and Trance*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

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