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Traces of the (M)Other:
Deconstructing Hegemonic Historical Narrative in Teat(r)o
Oficina Uzyna Uzona’s Os Sertões

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The birth of the Sertanejo (Photo - Marcos Camargo)
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Traces of the (M)Other:

Deconstructing Hegemonic Historical Narrative in Teat(r)o Oficina

Uzyna Uzona’s Os Sertões

Dr Patrick Campbell
Traces of the (M)Other:

Deconstructing Hegemonic Historical Narrative in Teat(r)o Oficina Uzyna

Uzona’s *Os Sertões*

Abstract

This article focuses on the way in which renowned São Paulo-based theatre company Teat(r)o Oficina Uzona deconstructs hegemonic historical narrative in their 2000 - 2007 25 hour-long production of Euclides da Cunha’s seminal Brazilian novel *Os sertões* (“Rebellion in the Backlands”), an account of the War of Canudos (1896-1897), the first major act of State terrorism carried out by the nascent Brazilian Federal Government on the country’s subaltern population.

The Teat(r)o Oficina’s epic adaptation fuses events from the colonial period, the military dictatorship and contemporary 21st Century São Paulo to relate the repetitive cycles of misappropriation, oppression and resistance that have characterized the history of Brazil and its people over the centuries. However, any fatalistic view of victimhood as an essential aspect of Brazilian subjectivity is radically challenged by the vibrant, rhythmic, material impact of the theatrical super-signs underpinning the performance text.

Drawing on Julia Kristeva’s notion of the *semitotic* - the pre-linguistic, illogical, rhythmical materialism of language intimately related to a primordial relationship with the *abject mother* – I shall suggest that it is the rhythmic, libidinal force of the performance and its extensive use of the cultural manifestations of Brazil’s subaltern population that imbues *Os Sertões* with the silent presence-as-absence of the abject Brazilian (M)Other – the Black, Indigenous and Mestiza
matriarchal line whose alternative discourse is often barred from hegemonic accounts of Brazilian historiography. Her silent heritage is embodied on stage by the members of the Oficina, who reclaim an alienating national heritage for themselves by transforming the often tragic tale of Brazil’s past into a joyous celebration of tenacious vitality.

The Teat(r)o Oficina Uzyna Uzona

Founded in 1958, the Teat(r)o Oficina Uzyna Uzona is one of the longest standing and most influential theatre companies in São Paulo, having consistently attracted both critical acclaim and academic attention throughout Brazil. There have been a plethora of books\(^1\), theses, dissertations and articles published on the Oficina, written from a variety of perspectives. Over the past decade, a number of Brazilian academics have specifically researched the Oficina’s *Os Sertões*\(^2\), exploring the scenic articulation and socio-political ramifications of the performance.

The company established its reputation in the 1960s by creating challenging performances that drew on the latest in European and North American approaches to theatre-making, increasingly filtered by practical, aesthetic experimentation seeking to reflect the fragmented reality of life in 20\(^{th}\) Century São Paulo. By the 1970s, the company’s ever more anarchic stance, avant-garde performances and leftist leanings drew the wrath of the military dictatorship, leading to the imprisonment and torture of group members. After spending four years in exile in Portugal and Africa, company director José Celso Martinez Corrêa, better known as Zé Celso, returned to Brazil in 1978, and spent the 1980s creating underground performances and super-eight films, whilst reconstructing the Teat(r)o Oficina’s space.

In 1993, after a 13-year period of building work, the Teat(r)o Oficina inaugurated a radical new theatre space in central São Paulo. The opening of the company’s so-called *terreiro eletrônico*
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(electronic holy-ground) coincided with an artistic renaissance, and the culmination of this resurgence was, without a doubt, the company’s epic, 25-hour *mise-en-scène* of the classic Brazilian novel *Os sertões* (Rebellion in the Backlands), which was devised between 2000 and 2007 and went on to win several important national theatre awards, being deemed “best performance of the century” by influential Brazilian arts magazine “Bravo!”

*Os Sertões*

Known in Brazil as the “bible of Brazilian identity”, *Os sertões* the novel played a key role in what historian Durval Muniz de Albuquerque Jr has termed “the invention of the Northeast”. According to Albuquerque, rather than being an exclusively geographically or economically defined region, the Brazilian Northeast is, in fact, an imaginary *topos* which was articulated over the course of the Twentieth Century as a “repository of folkloric traditions and a base for the establishment of national culture”.

The Northeast and the arid *Sertão* have been consistently inscribed within dominant historiographic discourse in Brazil as both the subaltern “Other” of the developed Southeast and the backwards heartlands of Brazil. The region has been condemned to maintaining and reflecting an essentialist view of Brazilian culture and identity that is indelibly tainted by the country’s legacy of colonialism, slavery and State oppression.

The Teat(r)o Oficina challenge this reductive, centric view of the Brazilian Northeast (and hegemonic framings of Brazilian subjectivity) by successfully transforming author Euclides da Cunha’s original, positivist 1902 text – a geographic treaty-cum-ethnographic overview of Brazil’s arid, Northeastern hinterlands, and historic account of the Republican army’s violent
decimation of the messianic community of the town of Canudos\textsuperscript{5} - into an anthropophagic Genesis of Brazil and its people.

The company fuses this historiographic rearticulation with concurrent self-referential scenic allusions to their own contemporary struggle against their powerful neighbours, the Grupo Sílvio Santos, a media empire founded by Brazilian magnate and television personality Senor Abravanel, better known as Sílvio Santos. The Oficina’s scenic rewriting of \textit{Os Sertões} thus offers a radically different form of postmemory on stage; a ritualistic, autopoietic, bacchic performance that refracts hegemonic Brazilian historiography through the subversive filter of the company’s own ebullient theatrical aesthetic and ethos.

Marianne Hirsch has suggested that “(t)he aesthetics of postmemory [...] is a diasporic aesthetics of temporal and spatial exile that needs simultaneously to (re)build and to mourn”\textsuperscript{6}. However, one of the most striking characteristics of the Teat(r)o Oficina’s \textit{Os Sertões} is its vibrant, carnavalesque re-appropriation of Brazil’s troubled and often brutal past. Over the 25 hours of the performance, mourning is eschewed as the taboo of (post) colonial trauma is re-embodied and radically rearticulated on stage.

Any sense of disconnection, loss or exile is temporarily abated by the company’s participatory, sensorially potent and libidinally charged poetics, which fetishizes the corporeality of both actors and spectators alike. This emphasis on the immediate \textit{jouissance} of bodily presence, on the mercurial transformative nature of the live event, already characteristic of theatre as a medium, contrasts directly with the play of indexicality and absence, of “irreplaceable loss and interminable mourning”\textsuperscript{7} underpinning the photographic projections, memorials and installations privileged in Hirsch’s discussion of postmemory and the Holocaust.
The Teat(r)o Oficina’s work is indicative of what Hans-Thies Lehmann has termed “postdramatic theatre.” Heterogeneous in nature, postdramatic theatre can nevertheless be understood in general terms as

(...) not simply a new kind of text staging – and even less a new type of theatre text, but rather a type of sign usage in the theatre that turns both of these levels of theatre upside down (...) it becomes more presence than representation, more shared than communicated experience, more process than product, more manifestation than signification, more energetic impulse than information.

This description of postdramatic theatre reflects the Teat(r)o Oficina’s pulsional, non-linear and participatory performance style. Throughout Os Sertões, the company emphasizes the material impact of its theatrical signs, accentuating overt physicality and rhythmic musicality whilst ritualistically re-embodying a resolutely non-linear and subversive rearticulation of Brazilian historiography.

Whilst obviously influenced in part by tendencies in contemporary theatre, the company’s aesthetic approach also draws intrinsically on Brazil’s African, Indigenous and Mestizo popular and religious cultural manifestations. Like many of the company’s contemporary productions, Os Sertões is imbued with the impulse-laden materiality of the signifying systems underpinning popular Brazilian culture, which the company uses to great poetic effect as a basis for their deconstructive scenic remembrance of Brazil’s (post) colonial past.

**Tracing the (M)Other**

It is possible to draw parallels between the Oficina’s scenic appropriation of the rhythmic potency of popular Brazilian culture and Julia Kristeva’s concept of the *semiotic* (*le sémiotique*, not to be confused with Saussurean or Piercian Semiotics and related studies of semiosis). The
Kristeva *semiotic* represents the bodily drives as discharged through rhythm, repetitive sonority, and the material force of signification, and both precedes and pervades language acquisition and acculturation\(^\text{10}\).

Importantly, Kristeva describes the *semiotic* as a “primordial leash”, forever linking the speaking subject to the pre-linguistic, mother/child relationship\(^\text{11}\). The mother in Kristeva’s theory of the *semiotic* is the *abject phallic mother*; the imaginary representation of the omnipotent, pre-Oedipal maternal figure. And, according to Kristeva, it is a return to this archaic Other, in detriment of the castrating Oedipal Father of hegemonic psychoanalytic theory, that characterizes the poetic endeavour. She states that it is precisely through *poetic language* that one can unsettle the “thetic function” of the signifying chain, promoting a new, *processual thesis* that fluctuates between sense and nonsense, language and rhythm, signifying chain and drive; disrupting the constraints of language by recurring to the embodied *semiotic* underlying it\(^\text{12}\).

Whilst aware of Gaytri Chakravorty Spivak’s admonition of the phallogocentric framing sustaining Kristeva’s psychoanalytically-inflected *semiotic*\(^\text{13}\), and the dangers of equating the gendered subaltern subject with the abject mother\(^\text{14}\), I would nevertheless like to appropriate Kristeva’s concept whilst simultaneously deconstructing it in the light of the scenic writing of Os Sertões, by suggesting that the Teat(r)o Oficina frame the subaltern subject and the *semiotic* potency of her cultural manifestations as *M)Other*\(^\text{15}\), over the course of their 25 hour long performance.

As I have suggested elsewhere\(^\text{16}\), the Teatro Oficina’s work forces us to radically reconsider Spivak’s phonocentric framing of the speechless gendered subaltern subject\(^\text{17}\). Rather than the logocentrically-determined barred subject of *speech*, the gendered subaltern appears consistently
throughout Os Sertões as the trace always already underlying the postcolonial text. The pun on maternity and alterity at play in the deconstructive take on the English word (M)Other emphasises the way in which the subaltern woman was both inscribed and erased as mother within the colonial text through the violence of cultural (re)inscription and rape. Her social exclusion has always already been an intrinsic aspect of all discourse within Brazil, effectively making it possible. Therefore she is as omnipresent within the postcolonial script as the Eurocentric Name-of-the Father.

What’s more, if we care to look more closely, it also becomes apparent that this subaltern subject always already bares the trace of a very different, alternative writing to the hegemonic neocolonial one. She is always already written, even if she does not have access to phallogocentric speech. And it is this counterhegemonic script, encrypted in the cultural manifestations and sacred, embodied praxis of Brazil’s subaltern populace, that provides a restorative, empowering counterpoint to dominant centric discourse.

For Os Sertões reveals another scene, a radical, joyous, anthropofagic re-appropriation of hegemonic historical narrative, that draws on the subversive, counter-hegemonic scripts of African-Brazilian sacred belief, the cultural manifestations of the Northeast and the popular culture of Brazil’s contemporary subaltern masses that always already space all Brazilian subjects (whether they accept this or not). What could be pure tragedy is instead depicted as a joyous, inebriating re-writing of history.

Thus, far from a naive appropriation of the speechless gendered subaltern, the incestuous impulse pervading the performance text of Os Sertões obliges us to recognize the way in which this gendered “Other” engenders, shapes and spaces all Brazilians as essentially hybrid postcolonial subjects. This is the radical ethical dimension of Os Sertões the performance; the subaltern subject is scenically articulated as (M)Other – as the abject (non) origin of Brazil’s hybrid, Mestizo population, as the all-pervading, radical alterity always already opposing the absent, castrating colonial paternal function within the country’s palimpsestic social script. And
it is by affirming the (M)Other’s pulsional (non) presence on stage and attempting to infuse their discourse with her semiotic potency that the Teat(r)o Oficina radically deconstruct hegemonic, Eurocentric historiography, forging a subversive theatrical form of postmemory that emphasises the eternal return of the country’s Indigenous, African and Mestizo cultural heritage.

Let us now turn to Os Sertões the performance to explore the ways in which the (M)Other is delineated on stage through the différance of the Oficina’s scenic writing.

Echoes of the (M)Other – The Man I

The first scene we are going to focus on takes place towards the end of the first half of The Man I, the second installment of Os Sertões. The massacre of Canudos is condensed at this point with the genocide of the Indigenous populations of the Northeastern Brazilian hinterlands by the bandeirantes (17th Century colonial mestizo bandits from São Paulo), whose legacy of rape and pillaging led to the genesis of the multiracial, subaltern population of the Sertão.

On a superficial level, this metaphoric echo of colonial violence and oppression, linking the destruction of Canudos to the bandeirantes, would seem to suggest the continuing, inherent victimhood of Brazil’s subaltern population. However, by focusing on the rhythmic, subversive semiotic underscoring the theatrical graphemes embodied by the Teat(r)o Oficina, we will begin to see an alternative, defiant re-writing of Brazilian history taking place, filtered through the restorative and regenerative framing of Brazil’s popular subaltern cultural heritage. Let us now turn to the performance.

An actor playing the infamous Domingos Jorge Velho, one of the most brutal and successful bandeirantes, responsible for the violent oppression of several Indigenous nations in the Northeast of Brazil, enters into the space, followed by a number of other chorus members
dressed as colonial mercenaries. A chorus member dressed as the *boi-bumbá*\(^1^9\) enters swaying behind Domingos, who is waving his flag in the air, by the exit. At the same time, another *boi-bumbá* enters at the far end of the concourse. They both begin to move warily towards the centre of the concourse, stamping their way along the Rio São Francisco, which has been sketched on the floor with blue powder. A line is drawn in the middle of the course with salt. The two bulls meet there, kneeling and muzzling the salt before moving backwards.

Domingos Jorge Velho speaks the following text, whilst carrying out a vaguely ritualistic sequence of actions, which includes rolling to the ground and holding his flag phallically between his legs:

**DOMINGOS JORGE VELHO**

Vast estates,
Never-ending land
I drop Jorge Velho from my Domingos
And I re-baptize myself…
Sertão
On this illuminated soil
I found my principality
Crude feudalism
*(To his subjects)*
Humble subjects I declare you
My vassals
*(To the Tapuyos)*
Placid Tapuyos, I observe
You shall be my honorable serfs.
And I your Crude Feudal Colonial Lord.
The São Francisco Valley,
Is already populated by progressive mestizos
My descendents, stretching out over five-hundred years
It is already our exclusive colony
Paulistas

At the end of his text, the chorus members all salute him in military fashion. The actors and members of the public applaud vigorously.

At this point, Domingos’ virulent text, his phallic flag and fawning, armed entourage all point towards the depressing short circuit of colonial violence. The *Sertão* is shown to be swarming
with bandits assuming the alienating colonial discourse of rape and pillage. The Sertanejo’s origins are thus founded on the dislocated perpetuation of colonial violence, which has shifted geographical location (coast to hinterlands) and racial locus (White, European Colonial to mestizo bandits).

However, it is interesting to note that the bull – a traditional symbol of male virility and an economic sign of wealth in the agricultural regions of Brazil’s countryside – is represented on stage by the boi-bumbá – a folkloric figure whose colourful, traditional costume serves as a metonymic extension of Brazil’s traditional subaltern culture. Thus, even the traditionally masculine symbol of the bull is subverted somewhat by this appeal to the aesthetic framing of traditional Northeastern culture, with its abject connotations, and Domingos’ macho posturing is disrupted throughout by the traditional Brazilian rhythmic musical accompaniment played by the live musicians on stage, which underscores his text and endows the scene as a whole with an ebullient, carnivalesque atmosphere. There is now a decisive shift towards the scene’s potent climax:

Figure 1

A blood-soaked “Indigenous” actress walks along the concourse towards Domingos in a dream-like fashion, eyes half-closed as she covers her naked, clay-daubed body with salt, which showers down from her clenched fists. She comes to a halt, spreading her arms wide, forming a cross. Domingos kneels on the floor and places his phallic flag straight in front of himself, pointing towards the Indigenous actress, saying the following text:

DOMINGOS JORGE VELHO
Come Indian woman, I’m moved
By this ferocious embrace,
Between the winner and the loser

URL: http://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/cjla
He runs after her along the concourse and she rushes off towards the exit. Domingos roughly grabs the Indigenous woman in both arms and swings her from side to side, her passive body flailing wildly, until they reach the centre of the concourse. There, Domingos drops her to the ground and throws himself on top of her, opening her legs and miming an aggressive rape. They shift positions, and she straddles him, as if riding a bull. They reach a climax and come to a halt. An actor who played an Indigenous Shaman and the archetypal Mestizo in a previous scene walks up behind the squatting Indigenous actress, caresses her head and back, and climbs through her legs. She grasps the actor’s head once it is in parallel with Domingos’, and pulls him up until the back of his head rests on her chest, before giving the following text:

**INDIAN MOTHER**
The son of the winner and
the loser is born
Is it love?
Call it what you wish!

She moves away, lifting up the flag and rushes off with it towards the far end of the concourse, as her “son” and Domingos passionately kiss one another on the floor. They rise to a standing position. An actor near to the exit with a long cane in his hand beats the stick and the two boi-bumbás at both ends of the space collapse to the ground. The son of Domingos then appears to go into a trance, rising and falling to the floor, maintaining a stooped gait and his arms outstretched in front of his body, imitating the actions of a reveler playing the boi-bumbá.

Members of the chorus strip the boi-bumbá of his leather hide, revealing the bones of the animal and the prone body of the reveler lying underneath. The hide is given to the son of Domingos,
who now stands erect in front of the remaining *boi-bumbá*, who faces the exit on the other side of the concourse.

*Figure 2*

Domingos’ son puts on the hide – it is made up of a pair of leather chaps and a leather waistcoat. An actress presents him with leather shoes and cap. He is now wearing the traditional garb of the *Sertanejo*, the mestizo native of the *Sertão*. The chorus and Domingos’ son - the *Sertanejo* - sing the following song whilst Domingos and Indian Mother watch on from the exit: she kneeling, naked, with the flag in her hands; he standing up, watching with an aggressive, concerned look on his face.

**SERTANEJO**

I am born from this vigorous embrace
Wild and fearless
Like my father
A Bandeirante from São Paulo
Fierce and beaten like my mother,
A Northeastern Indian
But I have an advantage
I don’t live out of a knapsack
I’m fixed to my soil
The “bull” of the parched plains
The “scrubland” of the plateaus
Rivers,
Tributaries
Flow towards the West
And towards the East
Symmetric inside
Linked to the coast
And to the centre
Disparate people in fusion
In the kernel of the Great Land
In the heart

Thus the archetypal *Sertanejo* is born out of the rape of Indian Mother by the Paulista *bandeirante*. The Indigenous woman is forced to bow down to the aggressive oppression of colonial violence, losing her own voice in the process, (literally) flying the flag of the patriarchal
order. In this part of the scene, we witness the birth of the true voiceless subaltern; the Indigenous woman who, in the wake of colonial disfranchisement and genocide, is effectively alienated from her own desire ("Is this love? Call it what you wish!") through rape and conquest. The symmetrical, passionate kiss between the Sertanejo son and his bandeirante father serves as a distorted mirror image, reflecting back to the newly born son an alienating Ego-Ideal which will effectively enchain him to the Master’s discourse. Just as the bandeirantes bowed down to the hegemonic discourse of imperialistic patriarchal domination, the mestizo Sertanejos also seem fated to become links in the self-perpetuating chain of colonial oppression. Their only possible sense of identity is a fragmented one, forged by the fracturing violence of colonial rape and pillaging.

However, this fatalistic reading is also undermined somewhat by the subversively homoerotic charge to the father/son kiss – a queer undercurrent subverts this scene of phallogocentric castration, imbuing the repetitive legacy of the colonial symbolic with a taboo jouissance whilst emphasizing the incestuous impulse underscoring the performance as a whole. The mestizo Sertanejo is dressed in the garb of the boi-bumbá, literally fusing on stage with the traditional culture of the Northeast. He triumphantly asserts his problematic hybrid heritance through his spoken text, affirming his roots to the Brazilian Earth. Far from a victim, he is portrayed as a subversive cultural hero, a model of cultural resistance and struggle.

Back on stage, the Sertanejo runs to the centre of the concourse, where a bull hide has been stretched out. He lies down on top of the hide, and the “Indigenous” actress from the beginning enters and traces his outline on it with pemba, a ritual tool of great significance in Umbanda, an African-Brazilian religion which mixes elements of Candomblé, Catholicism, Kardecism and
Native beliefs. *Pemba* is essentially a large stick of chalk, normally used to draw out sacred ideograms on the floor related to the different entities embodied within the sacred context of ritual practice. The chorus members and the *Sertanejo* then begin to sing the following lyrics:

**CHORUS**

This primitive society  
Hidden in the middle of the River  
Of our unity,  
Misunderstood,  
Forgotten,  
Is the vigorous core of our nascent nationality!

Domingos comes to the centre of the space and stands over the *Sertanejo*, laying his sword and rifle over his body, “knighting” him, bequeathing him his strength and virility. Indian Mother is by his side, waving the *bandeirantes*’ flag over her son’s body. The *Sertanejo* rises and runs off. The other members of the chorus take his place one by one, lying on the bull hide, receiving Domingos and Indian Mother’s “blessing”.

![Figure 3](image-url)

The archetypal *Sertanejo* serves as a blueprint for the Brazilian nation – the *trace* of his brutal conception remains immanent, shaping generations to come. When the other chorus members lie down in the outline of his body to receive Domingos’ and Indian Mother’s blessings, their scenic action belies the tragic inheritance of colonial violence that will spawn a nation that will go onto repeat the violent discourse of the absent imperialistic paternal metaphor, represented on stage by the handing over of the phallic rifle.

However, it is also at this point that the peaceful *Sertanejo* transforms into the violent *jagunço*, the Northeastern bandit who will later become synonymous with the dissident followers of Antonio Conselheiro, the people of Canudos, who the Oficina channel as a positive role model. The use of ritual *pemba* transforms the *jagunço* into a sacred archetype, and the actors’ joyous
adoption of his destiny reaffirms the company’s identification with the multiracial, subaltern insurgent of the Brazilian Northeast.

Thus, *Os Sertões* reveals another scene, a radical, joyous, anthropofagic re-appropriation of hegemonic historical narrative, through the sheer libidinal force of the embodied performance text. In this way, the Indigenous (African and Mestizo) *(M)Other* is no longer the silent, passive victim of colonial aggression; her alternative script reverberates through the vibrant physicality and vocalization of her descendants; the multiracial Brazilian actors on stage, who reclaim an alienating national heritage for themselves by transforming a hegemonic historical narrative of loss and misappropriation into a rhythmic, libidinal, subversively embodied ritual of redemption.

We shall now move onto a second example of this scenic articulation of postmemory from within *Os Sertões*.

**Omolu Cures the Herd – The Man I**

The following scene takes place towards the end of the first act of *The Man I*. After a scene based on the “modern servitude” of the Sertanejo, depicted in Cunha’s original novel in which the submissive cowboy brands the absent master’s calves, separating one in every four for himself, in compliant obedience of the Laws of the land, the focus shifts to the absent landlady – the decadent Patroa (boss) who lives on the coast, and communicates with the Sertanejo via her two assistants; a young man and a woman.

The Patroa, dressed in a white evening dress and fur shawl, stands on the platform above the far end of the performance space, next to her male assistant, who is dressed in a camp sailor suit. As she speaks the following text to the actors on the concourse below, her assistant notes down
everything she is saying into a mobile phone, as if he were texting her message directly online to
the Sertanejo:

**PATROA**
The end of winter is nigh,
and it’s time to settle accounts.
I won’t be able to drop by,
Although I am the most interested party,
But I trust in your loyalty my country bumpkin,
I’m waiting for the fruits of my production line,
I know you’re not lazy,
Hurry up and send me my percentage of the takings.

The Sertanejo and the female assistant kneel on the concourse with a lap-top in front of them, as
if they were speaking online with the Patroa. The rest of the cast are lying on the concourse,
groaning. In the previous scene, they represented the Sertanejo’s cattle, and now appear to be ill.

Three actresses arise from the chorus of cattle, and say the following text:

**SERTANEJA 1**
Look at the cattle
They’re ill.

**SERTANEJA 2**
Dying…
The healthy ones are running off,
thundering away,
in order not to lay down and die.
The rest just sit down and stop.

**SERTANEJA 3**
Oh it’s a sad illness
These tick bites
The animals are infested, that’s for sure.

**THE THREE SERTANEJAS**
An epidemic
It’s devastated the herd.
It’s contagious.

**FEMALE ASSISTANT**
What’s your boss’ address?

During this scene, the Patroa is dressed in a green hospital gown on the platform above, strapped
to a drip and handed an oxygen mask by a member of the chorus, who takes her blood pressure.
On the concourse below, the Sertanejo rises to his feet and hands the female assistant a modern calling card belonging to his boss. She reads it out, and then begins to type the Sertanejo’s message:

**FEMALE ASSISTANT**

ladytecnospeculation
@bahiacorporation.com

**SERTANEJO**

“My boss and friend,
I would like to inform you that your herd is on its last legs
Four bulls have keeled over.
The rest have scarpered off!”

The Patroa goes wild on the platform above, pushing away her assistant and the other member of the chorus, shaking with rage whilst saying the following text in a mixture of English and Portuguese

**SPECULATOR** (on receiving the e-mail.)

What injury my Lord do Bonfim,
It’s to look after my flock
that I pay you.
Oh My God,
I’m going to smack someone in the face!
I want my profits
with interest!

The musicians suddenly begin to play the ritual percussive rhythm of the Orixá Omolu, the Yoruban deity of disease and remedy. The Sertanejo and the female assistant lower their heads to the ground in reverence. An actress enters dressed as Omolu, wearing a long costume made of raffia with two bull-horns on her head, dancing a repetitive step, her spine fluctuating outwards and inwards in time with the music. She holds a spear with a bull’s horn on the end in her right hand.

The Sertanejo rises to his feet. He places his knife and cap on the floor in front of him. He brings his hands together, palms touching, as if in prayer. The members of the chorus are filling a large
clay bowl with strands of raffia and popcorn. Another chorus member, dressed with a white cloth on his head, holds a flaming bowl up before the Orixá, head hung low. Omolu sings:

**COWBOY SORCERER OMULÚ**

I know specifically, I cure more effectively than mercury:
I pray and enter the spirit of the oxen.
(The chorus sing the response)
I don’t even need to see the sick animal.
I look in his direction, feel,
pick up on what’s heavy, pray…

The actress moves, rocking as she sings. The chorus sings the response – lying on the floor as ill cows. There is a percussive break – there are now five Sertanejas lined up, bent over doubled at the waist with the typical ritual corporeality of the Orixá Nanã, primordial goddess of creation and death, the mother of Omolu. They form a circle around Omolu and dance. Other chorus members kneeling on the floor shake as if possessed.

Omolu forms a line along the concourse, standing in front of the Sertanejo and the female assistant. The actor with the flaming bowl walks bent over, right arm bent at the elbow, with his hand resting on the small of his back, as he stretches his other arm out, holding the now smouldering bowl, blowing smoke into the audience.

Omolu twirls in circles as the Sertanejas dance wildly across the concourse. The Sertanejo kneels on the floor, arms raised, as the actor with the bowl blows smoke onto him. The Sertanejas form a circle around Omolu once again; arms outstretched, they sing the following lyrics:

**THE SERTANEJAS**

Star of illness,
Shine Shine
Burn me,
Mount me,
I want you to be mine, alone.
Illness, you are my passion!
Devour my heart…
Away with you, health,
I don’t I don’t want anyone to help me!
I don’t I don’t want anyone to help me!

Omolu dances wildly in the centre as the Sertanejas sing. The Sertanejo, kneeling, falls backwards, slowly lowering himself down to the floor over his legs, eyes closed as if in trance. Pushing his cupped hands down to his navel, he moves into a kneeling position, and convulses. The Sertanejas and Omolu all fall to the floor and begin to roll over rapidly, as if possessed.

An actor comes along throwing popcorn into the air as the percussion becomes more frenetic, turning into a rapid samba. The Sertanejo rises to a standing position, smiling. The Sertanejas begin to pull Omolu’s costume off the actress who has played him. She lies with her eyes closed, and convulses. The cattle are now on their feet, dancing wildly.

Figure 4

Popcorn pours onto the actress who played Omolu from the ceiling above. The cattle now kneel in two lines along the concourse, swaying their torsos from side to side as the actress who played Omolu dances around in circles, holding her staff like a Porta-Bandeira (a standard bearer) from a Samba School as the popcorn continues to fall on her head.

She dances along the two lines of cattle, with the same rhythmic steps of Omolu from the start of the scene, making her way down to the far end of the concourse. When she arrives there, she turns around and the music comes to a halt. The two chorus members with bowls in their hands kneel behind her. The cattle begin to crawl, mooing loudly. They have been “healed”.

This entire scene is based on a short passage in Cunha’s original novel, which is rearticulated thanks to the Oficina’s scenic fusion with the subaltern (M)Other as manifest in African-Brazilian sacred belief. According to Cunha’s text,
If the herd comes down with an epidemic of worms, they resort to a remedy that is better than mercury: prayer. They do not need to see the afflicted animal. The cowboy just turns towards the beast and intones a prayer while tracing indecipherable kabbalistic lines in the dirt. What is even more amazing is that sometimes the animal is cured.22

Reading between the lines of Cunha’s prose, the “indecipherable lines in the dirt” could seem suggestive of the pontos – the sacred hexagrams drawn on the floor during the religious rituals of Umbanda; and from an African-Brazilian epistemic perspective, the author’s brief reference to epidemics and remedies could connote Omolu, the African-Brazilian deity of sickness and healing. Hence, a short, incidental paragraph in Cunha’s original historic account is transformed by the astute members of the Oficina into a ritualistic-cum-carnivalesque extravaganza, fundamentally articulated by the sacred signifying chains of Candomblé.

The chthonic nature of Omolu, who is intrinsically linked to Nanã Buruku or Mawu-Lisa, the hermaphroditic goddess of the primeval waters (who also appears in the scene through the Sertaneja’s ritual dance steps), takes us back to the universe of the phallic (M)Other once more and to the plane of the semiotic. The sensorial potency of the scene, which uses signifiers charged with sacred significance such as popcorn, raffia, flaming bowls, ritualistic dance moves and percussive rhythms, breaks with the prior scenic action – which emphasized the castrated nature of the servile Sertanejo – displacing the audience to another universe – that of African-Brazilian religiosity as an inherently subversive, powerful counter-hegemonic text that was recognized by the subaltern of the Sertão and thus available as a covert source of knowledge and power.

Consequently, the Uzyna Uzona floods the audience’s senses with an Other discourse from an Other scene beyond the tragic repetition of the hegemonic imperialistic script. The destructive death drive underpinning the colonial symbolic pales in comparison at this point with Omolu – a
sacred embodiment of the endless cycles of death and rebirth in the real, that transcends all signification. He is the (albeit symbolically delineated) manifestation of the universal principals that transcend the *Patroa* and her relatively mundane acquisitive power, which is dependent on nature’s whims, and thus ultimately finite and restricted.

Thus the power of the subaltern, her access to a metaphorically and metonymically codified tacit knowledge that transcends the word, which can only be accessed through the ritually codified spacing of the signifier, is acknowledged by the Oficina. The sacred logic of Candomblé as counter-hegemonic writing gives incredible force to the Oficina’s subversive scenic articulation of postmemory. The incestuous impulse underlying their whole-hearted adoption of the (M)Other – embodied on stage through the potent *semiotic* layer of Brazil’s abject, embodied, sacred (and profane) cultural manifestations - is at one and the same time an aesthetic choice, a political stance and a philosophical challenge, destabilizing the tenets of phallogocentrism, revealing the way in which the (M)Other has fundamentally shaped the (post) colonial text throughout Brazilian history, subverting the very Eurocentric discourse that sought to subjugate her and erase her heritage.

We shall now move onto a third and final scenic example of this subversive play of rearticulated historiography and remembrance in *Os Sertões*.

**Libertas’ Song – *The Man II***

The following scene takes place towards the end of the first act of *The Man II*. After a scene in which the local authorities of Bahia complain about messianic leader Antonio Conselheiro’s increasing influence over the subaltern population of the Northeast, the audience members are obliged to rise to their feet by chorus members dressed in elegant evening attire. The doors to the
main entrance open, and an actress playing Princess Isabel, the heiress presumptive of the Brazilian Empire in the nineteenth century, enters in an ornate white gown, pulling in two rows of black actors shackled to one another by chains. She drags them down to the center of the performance space, rocking backwards and forwards, her eyes bleary. One of the suited “European” actors speaks the following text in Portuguese with an exaggerated English accent:

SIR JONES
13th May 1888.
She,
The Imperial Princess,
will sanction the Golden Law.

There is a pause. Isabel motions to one of the black actors chained to her, who hands her a large spliff. One of the suited “European” actors lights it for her and she takes a large toke before passing it to one of the “slaves”. An actor playing Emperor Dom Pedro II, dressed in a long black frock-coat with a fake grey beard, speaks reproachfully,

DOM PEDRO II
Isabela Cristina…!

Figure 5
The princess is handed a quill. The suited actor bends over in front of her as another smartly-dressed actor hands her the decree. She places the decree on the bent over actor’s back and speaks, holding aloft the quill pen:

PRINCESA ISABEL
I decree the abolition,
from this day forth,
of slavery in Brazil.

An actor dressed as an overseer cracks his whip on the concourse. Isabel looks upwards. She goes on to sign the decree, spelling out her name - which is incredibly long and elaborate – and
the public laughs. The slaves pull on the chains, pulling Isabel backwards. She holds onto the chains, and then suddenly lets them go. The slaves fall to the floor. The Black actors rise to their feet. The chorus sings the following anthem with booming voices, as Isabel looks around triumphantly, her right hand raised above her head in the air:

**ALL**
The shackles that they forged for us of such shrewd and vile wickedness 
There was a more powerful hand That made a mockery of them, oh Brazil… 
There was a more powerful hand There was a more powerful hand That made a mockery of them, oh Brazil…

A sensual samba begins. The Black actors all walk past Isabel, kissing her on the hand and singing. She smiles coquettishly:

**THE PRETO VÉIO** (OLD BLACK) CHORUS
(Kissing madam’s hands)
Madam is good. 
Madam is beautiful. 
Madam is an angel. 
Madam is perfumed. 
Madam is a doll...

Thus the scene begins with yet another example of the destabilizing difference articulating the Oficina’s performance text, as one of the great myths of hegemonic Brazilian historiography – the benevolent Princess Isabel signing the decree liberating the slaves of Brazil – is radically subverted by the potent image of the doped up European princess dragging in a chorus of enchained Black actors. The myth of the ‘kind madam’ is irreverently dismantled, and the departing *Preto Velhos*’ words of thanks ring hollow with cynicism, accentuating the dissimulated nature of Isabela’s empty, politically motivated gesture. Back to the performance, Dom Pedro speaks to the Overseer, who stands with his whip in the middle of the concourse:
D PEDRO II
My dear Overseer!
In honour of your service to the Empire,
I declare you Baron of Jaceguay von Marl,
And concede to you the titles of the BIXIGA estate.

The newly-appointed Baron is handed an enormous scroll by one of the suited “European” actors. The suited actors escort Isabel and Pedro off the concourse. The Baron holds the decree aloft in his hands. Rhythmic African-Brazilian drumming commences. The Black members of the cast surround him, forming a circle. An actress enters playing Libertas, the mythical founder of the Quilombo do Bixiga, an African-Brazilian maroon settlement in the heart of São Paulo which was located in the present-day neighbourhood of Bela Vista (commonly known still as o Bixiga), where the Teatro Oficina’s performance space is now situated. She stands in the middle of the concourse, facing the Baron as he rolls out the scroll on the floor. It is a map of the old colonial Bixiga. The Baron stands on the map and begins to crack his whip. Libertas squeals each time the whip cracks and walks towards him, passing her hands over her body sensually.

She approaches the Baron, grabs the end of his whip and wraps it around her waist. She twirls in to his open arms and they embrace sensually, rocking backwards and forwards. They kiss passionately. He moves away from her and begins to speak, as images of the modern-day Bixiga are projected throughout the space. They are still connected by the whip:

OVERSEER
This land,
From Here to Avenida Paulista,
I bequeath to you,
For your vertical royal palaces.

LIBERTAS
This land will be
Our eternal quilombo

OVERSEER
Libertas,
They are yours,
Liberate yourself my love
I’m not your overseer an ymore!

The Overseer pulls away his whip and Libertas falls to the floor. He moves backwards, cracking his whip. He comes to a halt, wraps the whip around his neck, and pulls the handle upwards suddenly, mimicking a suicide. Libertas screams.

African-Brazilian percussion music plays. The members of the chorus stand in two lines along the edge of the concourse dancing the traditional steps of Ogum, the warrior Orixá of iron, as Libertas is dressed in intricate golden garments and a headdress. A mirror is held in front of her and she applies lipstick. She is handed a microphone – the chorus members begin to tremble, as if possessed, arms stretched out. Libertas begins to sing as the actors repeat Ogum’s ritual step:

**LIBERTAS’ SONG**
*I am now the owner of this terreiro*
*And of the entire Bixiga*
*This is my home and my passion*
*Free land, my Nation*

The music breaks at this point, and cuts to a *techno-macumba* rhythm. The actors dance.

**LIBERTAS’ SONG**
eternal
Libertas
chains
Windows
Walls
Open
*I inaugurate present and future life*

The African-Brazilian ritual percussion music returns.

**LIBERTAS’ SONG**
*Electronic Terreiro*
*Bird flying high*

The rhythm now switches to a frenetic samba.

**LIBERTAS’ SONG**
*Vai Vai*
The rhythm switches once more to a fast soul music rhythm. Libertas runs down stage towards Antonio Conselheiro (played by director Zé Celso) who stands at the far end of the concourse and back again to the centre singing:

**LIBERTAS’ SONG**
Outside the Ghettos
The rich, poor Whites, Blacks
Come to Bixiga
Attica

The African-Brazilian ritualistic percussion begins once more. Libertas makes her way down towards the exit. Sepia images of the old-time Bixiga are projected throughout the theatre space,

**LIBERTAS’ SONG**
450 years of the Bixiga
Even if it’s late
Take a hold of your destiny
There’s still time
You liberate libertine Bixiga

Libertas has by this point danced back towards the centre. A large, metallic Star of David has been placed on the map of the old Bixiga in the centre of the concourse. The word “libertine” is sung as a guttural wail and the chorus and audience all applaud.

The lights dim. The percussive music returns louder than ever. The white actors leave the concourse. The Black actors dance frenetically, as if taken by a sudden barravento (a violent spiritual possession that sweeps non-initiates off their feet). Libertas whoops and shrieks, her voice echoing throughout the space with reverb. The map of old-time Bixiga has been taken away from the centre of the concourse and is now being hoisted up in the air above the platform by the exit, like a flag.

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An actor enters holding a burning torch, which he passes along his body. Libertas rocks her body in the middle of the concourse, standing on the metallic Star of David. One of the actors draws a circle around her on the floor with gun-powder, flowing from a bull’s horn. The actor with the torch steps into the mandala, and kneels before Libertas, his lit torch held erect between her legs, like a burning phallus. Libertas takes the torch in her hand and the male actor dances out of the circular mandala. Libertas lights the gunpowder with the torch. She is surrounded by a smoking, burning circle of exploding flames.

**Figure 6**

A line of gunpowder leads off towards the far end of the exit. Libertas dances along it, with the ritual steps of Ogum. The trapdoor centre stage opens, and Marcelo Drummond, the longest-serving actor in the Oficina’s cast alongside Zé Celso, climbs out dressed as Ham-Let, the character he played in a renowned company performance based on the Shakespearean classic, which was produced in the 1990s. He wears a leather jacket and trousers, and holds the skull of a mule in his hands. He dances off in circles and leaves the space through the doors of the main entrance as Libertas disappears at the far end of the concourse. The music comes to an abrupt halt.

Thus, the abject subaltern (M)Other appears on stage in all her potent, *semiotic* glory in this scene. Personified by Libertas - the quasi-mythical Black female founder of the Bixiga quilombo, in the heart of São Paulo, performed with aplomb by accomplished African-Brazilian actress/singer Célia Nascimento – her presence-as-absence nevertheless transcends the individualized dramatic character, infiltrating the scenic action on every level.
The abject, subaltern, phallic (M)Other is ubiquitous throughout the scene; from the vast array of different musical rhythms played (which range from African-Brazilian sacred percussion to samba and contemporary Black Brazilian music); to the choreographed movement (the dance of the Orixás and the staged *barravento*); the sonorous timbre and range of Célia Nascimento’s voice; her adorned, half-naked body, swathed in the golden colours of Oxum, the Orixá of love, fertility, richness and spring water; the exclusive presence of Black actors on the concourse; and, finally, the image of the burning phallic torch held aloft by the African-Brazilian matriarch as she sets alight a circular, womb-like gun powder-mandala around herself, transforming from woman into sacred sign. These graphemes all impregnate the scenic action with the (M)Other’s libidinal, cadenced, sensual force.

This complex, metonymic web of overlapping theatrical grammès weaves a positive, divinized scenic portrayal of subaltern femininity that contrasts tremendously with the satirical, mocking depiction of Princess Isabel as puppet of the phallogocentric order, articulated earlier on. The fact that Marcelo Drummond as the character Ham-Let is “born” out of the trap-door at the end, emphasizes the fact that the Teat(r)o Oficina Uzyna Uzona of the 1990s onwards is the “child” of this abject subaltern *semiotic*, which has held an increasing sway over the company’s aesthetic since 1992, when the company debuted their anthropophagic version of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*.

Thus the *terreiro eletrônico* is dedicated to the Chthonic (M)Other as mythical founder of the Bixiga, and contemporaneous emblem of cultural potency and resistance.

The Star of David which Libertas stands upon towards the end of the scene was rescued by the Uzyna Uzona from the ruins of a local synagogue that was demolished by the Grupo Silvio Santos during the creation of *Os Sertões*. Thus, the Oficina draw a metaphoric link between their own counter-cultural, politically-motivated activities and Libertas’ achievement as founder of a
Quilombo (a fact further accentuated by the juxtaposition between the colonial map of the Bixiga on the floor of the concourse and the recent recorded footage of the neighbourhood projected across the space). In this way, the Oficina scenically represent themselves as Libertas’ legitimate heirs, carrying on her quilombolic model of struggle in the heart of the Bixiga against the forces of neoliberalism, personified by the machinations of the Grupo Silvio Santos. Thus the Oficina fuse with the (M)Other on stage, and are reborn as fertile extensions of her rhythmic, subversive potency.

Conclusion

Over the course of Os Sertões, the Teat(r)o Oficina Uzyna Uzona’s radical aesthetic idiolect subversively articulates a decidedly different form of postmemory on stage by accentuating the lasting trace of the country’s subaltern heritage in their scenic rewriting of hegemonic historiographic discourse. The performance text consistently privileges an alternative form of knowledge; the tacit, pulsional, sacred savoir-faire of the country’s African, Indigenous and Mestizo lines which is shown to have always already permeated the hegemonic Eurocentric script with an emphatically Brazilian spacing, cadence and rhythm. In this way, the company’s anthropophagic form of theatrical remembrance eschews victimhood whilst celebrating the tenacious ways in which the subaltern has been able to stealthily make her mark on Brazilian society and culture throughout the ages.

References


Campbell, Patrick. “Narciso Ctônico: Os Sertões e a (r)evolução estética do Teat(r)o Oficina Uzyna


4 Durval Muniz de Albuquerque Jr. Inventando o Nordeste e outras artes (Sao Paulo, Editora Cortez, 1999), 54.

5 The War in Canudos took place between 1896-1897 in a climate of endemic poverty, chronic unemployment and
extreme social inequality in the rural backlands of the Brazilian Northeast. These acute socio-economic conditions contributed to the rising popularity of charismatic populist leader Antonio Conselheiro, whose mystical visions and sharp criticism of the new Republic attracted thousands of followers amongst the rural poor, who looked up to the travelling pilgrim as a messianic figure. The local oligarchy claimed that Antônio Conselheiro was a monarchist, and the Republican army was called in to quash the burgeoning community. After three failed military interventions, a fourth and final expedition comprising six brigades finally decimated the local population. In all, it is estimated that 25,000 impoverished peasants lost their lives in Canudos.


Hirsch, 5


Lehmann, 85.


Kristeva, 30

Kristeva, 136.


Spivak, 364.

The term (M)Other was coined by psychoanalyst Bruce Fink in his book The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance (1995), to describe the role of the mother in castration. Within a Lacanian paradigm, it’s a child’s growing awareness of the desire that the mother (as primordial Other) feels for the phallic metaphor that initiates the onslaught of the symbolic order (through language acquisition and socialization). I use this term in a different way over the course of this article. The (M)Other to whom I am referring has much more in common with the abject phallic mother of Julia Kristeva’s semiotic, rather than the symbolically determined maternal agent of Lacan’s writing.


Os Sertões the complete work was made up of five separate performances, each lasting from four to six hours: A Terra (The Earth: 2002); O Homem I (The Man I: 2003); O Homem II (The Man II: 2003); A Luta I (The Struggle I: 2005) and A Luta II (the Struggle II: 2006).

Bói-bumbá is a Brazilian cultural manifestation that developed in the Northeast and, later, took on grander dimensions in the Amazon region. It re-enacts the folkloric tale of the death and resurrection of a bull. The animal is represented by a participant dressed in a colourful bull costume, made from a wooden frame covered by embroidered velvet, attached to a long, colourful skirt.


Omolu is the Orixá of variola, linked to disease, medicine and the interior of the earth. He is a younger avatar of Obaluaiê, “The King of the Earth”, and is the son of Nanã Buruku. The Candomblé initiates who incorporate Omolu during ritual events wear his unique traditional costume: an elaborate cape and headdress made out of raffia, that covers their face and a large part of their body.

Cunha, 105

The Preto Velhos (Old Blacks) are entities cultivated by followers of Umbanda, and appear in the form of old African slaves who are wise, patient and tender towards the faithful. They are linked to the African ancestors of the Brazilian people, and are honoured especially on May 13, the day that the Golden Law abolishing slavery was signed by Princess Isabel in 1888.