



# Walking Poetics of the Bumba Meu Boi from Maranhão: the *brincante* scene in the feast of São Marçal

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**ABSTRACT – Walking Poetics of the Bumba Meu Boi from Maranhão: the *brincante* scene in the feast of São Marçal** – This text examines the action of walking as an inventive practice and its probable experimentation in the feast of São Marçal in São Luís, Maranhão. To do so, the research focuses on the moving poetics produced by the Bumba Meu Boi groups that present the sensitive occurrences and aesthetic specificities of the feast of São Marçal, in relation to other June festivities in the state. Additionally, it addresses the *brincante* body, considering its festive and walking expressiveness as a possible state of creation, and highlights an inventive poetics, alive and living in the spiral temporality that generates collective exchanges and walking experiments in the investigated event.

Keywords: **Bumba Meu Boi. Walk. Popular Play. Maranhão. Feast of São Marçal.**

**RÉSUMÉ – Les Marcheurs Poétiques de Bumba Meu Boi Maranhense: la scène brincante du festival de São Marçal** – Le texte examine l'acte de marcher comme pratique inventive et sa probable expérimentation au festival São Marçal à São Luís, Maranhão. Pour cela, la recherche vise la poétique émouvante, produite par les groupes de Bumba meu boi qui présente les occurrences sensibles et les spécificités esthétiques de la Festa de São Marçal, en relation avec les autres festivités de juin qui se sont déroulées dans l'État. De plus, il aborde le corps ludique, considère son expressivité festive et errante comme un état de création possible, et met en lumière une poétique inventive, vivante et vécue dans la temporalité en spirale qui produit des échanges collectifs et des expérimentations errantes dans l'événement investigué.

Mots-clés: **Bumba meu Boi. Marcher. Blague Populaire. Maranhão. Festa de São Marçal.**

**RESUMO – As Poéticas Caminhantes do Bumba Meu Boi Maranhense: a cena brincante na festa de São Marçal** – O texto examina o ato de caminhar como prática inventiva e sua provável experimentação na festa de São Marçal em São Luís, Maranhão. Para isso, a pesquisa mira nas poéticas moventes, produzidas pelos grupos de Bumba Meu Boi, que apresentam as ocorrências sensíveis e especificidades estéticas da Festa de São Marçal, no que tange às demais festividades juninas ocorridas no estado. Além disso, aborda o corpo brincante, considera sua expressividade festiva e caminhante como estado de criação possível e evidencia uma poética inventiva, viva e vivida na temporalidade espiralar que produz trocas coletivas e experimentações caminhantes no acontecimento investigado.

Palavras-chave: **Bumba Meu Boi. Caminhada. Brincadeira Popular. Maranhão. Festa de São Marçal.**

## Introduction

The feast of São Marçal is a festivity that takes place annually on June 30, in the city of São Luís, Maranhão. It is practiced as a meeting of approximately twenty-five groups of Bumba Meu Boi de Matraca, which gather in the streets of the João Paulo neighborhood. In this context, the Bois de Matraca<sup>1</sup>, especially, are relevant within the existential dynamics of the feast, above all because they have been walkers for over ninety years<sup>2</sup>. When occupying the Avenue, which bears the name of the celebrated saint, they embark on the experimentation of the street, manifested by the singing-dancing-drumming<sup>3</sup> (Ligiério, 2011), among other festive verbs – to walk, to run, to cross, to turn, to stop, to traverse – that make up the relational grammar of the *brincadeira* [playing]<sup>4</sup>.

With this in mind, this text looks at the festive field as a possibility of knowing particularities of this cultural universe; one of them concerns the walk as an inventive action from the movements practiced during the feast of São Marçal. In this research, the main intention was to discuss walking beyond its functional and utilitarian practice. Following this objective, I will seek to highlight the walking actions experienced, as well as to point out how the act of walking is potentialized and considered an indispensable element in the festive and the *brincante* dynamics of São Marçal<sup>5</sup>.

In addition, this research also proposes to discuss historical aspects of persecution and prohibitions suffered by the *brincantes* [players] of Bumba Meu Boi, in order to know and propose reflections on the reasons that make the Feast of São Marçal, a celebration of great relevance for the *brincadeira* of the Boi. It is also interesting to describe the landscapes inhabited by the *brincante* body from an understanding that highlights playing as an engine of creation and festive existence, capable of creating new relationships and sensitive and affective experiences.

Having understood this, it is worth commenting on how this writing was being constructed. The way I found to tell the feast is based on tracks and vestiges of my walking experience. Because of this, the experience of wandering through the festive landscape of São Marçal was a writing exercise, created from “a moving point of view and immersed in the dynamics of the territory” (Careri, 2017, p. 18). Such understanding, brought by the

walking researcher Francesco Careri, was only possible because I practiced walking in the feast, touching its ground, feeling its density, actions that set me adrift to devise other methodological paths. These and other significant elements deserve to be stressed, as they point to the spectacular context characteristic of the feast.

That said, the essay tone that is sometimes activated and experienced here is configured as a proposition, among several, to found a writing practice in deep correspondence with the investigated phenomenon and the developments that moved my investigative, festive and walking process. In this case, the walk movement was placed as a primordial action incorporated into the writing that proposes ways to materialize such possibilities. Under this aspect, the walk moved much of my sayings, in which each step taken was transformed into word, image and text, whose action of generating sensitive writings proved to be an important experience. Therefore, this text is an exercise in understanding, listening, writing, trying and wandering that seeks to understand the layers of the feast of São Marçal. However, this writing does not cope with the field of experience and affectation in which the feast potentially transforms itself.

### **The makers of the feast of São Marçal: the *brincantes* of Bumba Meu Boi**

From now on, aspects of the social and spatial condition of the *brincadeira* of the Boi will be presented. Such a context, I understand to be relevant to discuss because it situates poetic expressions as witnesses and evidence of the social and political constructions experienced. That said, the historical scenario of the Bois de Matraca groups will be punctuated, as a way of evidencing and reflecting parts of the collective universe, full of meanings, ancestry, knowledge and doings, mediated by the strategies and conflicts experienced in the public space of São Luís<sup>6</sup>.

With a black majority in its demographic composition, the marked presence of black men and women in the formation of Maranhão society is easily perceived by their contributions in the field of cultural expressions. Based on this understanding, the spectacular practice of Bumba Meu Boi de Matraca is carried out and maintained, for the most part, by economically vulnerable social groups. They are men and women, who work in under-employment or who are in a situation of unemployment.

Therefore, Bumba Meu Boi can be read as an expression of a singular universe, which internally brings worldviews and reveals the way the social group in question sees, understands and gives meaning to the world. In addition, it points to the *brincadeira* as a symbol of an intense process of struggle, negotiation and resistance, committed to community making, with the pleasure of being together, whose expressive need contradicts the colonial thought of exploitation and appropriation of life, which generates a monological reading of the world described, according to educator Luiz Rufino (2019), as racist/ capitalist/ Christian/ patriarchal/ modern.

To understand a little of this process, the focus of the discussion now moves towards the historical aspects of Bumba Meu Boi in Maranhão, especially the context experienced in the capital<sup>7</sup>. In one of the passages of the *Dossier* for the registration of Bumba Meu Boi as Cultural Heritage, prepared by the Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional (IPHAN, 2011, p. 23), such period is mentioned as follows:

[...] Over the course of at least two centuries, Bumba has gone through several phases. From being a victim of prejudice in the 19th century, for being considered a playing of 'arruaceiros' [troublemakers], this cultural expression currently enjoys great prestige among Maranhão society. The trajectory of Bumba Meu Boi, despite the obligation to request police authorization to go out on the streets until the 1960s and the threat of its disappearance in the 1970s, is exemplary, if we consider that the *brincadeira* has remained alive thanks to its power of re-elaboration from the elements given by the context in which it is inserted.

The IPHAN text, which I initially use as a basis, locates different moments in the history of the Maranhão Boi in the streets, alleys and lanes of São Luís. The trajectory described is made up of adverse circumstances, signaling, at first, practices of intense persecution, resulting, even, in the prohibition of the Boi to be danced in public spaces, as pointed out, for example, by Law No. 775, of July 4, 1866, which established the Code of Posture of São Luís.

From the creation of laws, licenses, ordinances and codes by police and government authorities, the prohibitions on the *brincadeira* became more intense and severe. Putting the Boi on the street was allowed only with authorization and away from the central area of the city, leaving only the rural and peripheral space of the capital to celebrate. Spatial limitations

and forms of disciplining were present in the days of Boi since the end of the 19th century, lasting throughout the 20th century.

This brief overview of the social condition of the *brincadeira* is important to describe in order to understand the processes of resignification experienced by Bumba Meu Boi. At this conjuncture, the hegemonic narratives legitimized the power relations that aimed to inferiorize the black population, the majority in the State, since the period of colonization and slavery. The thought of the time was focused on opinions, generating the most diverse stigmas, condemning the *brincadeira* on the symbolic plane and also in its ritual and ancestral body, revealing situations that the *brincantes* lived and resisted harshly in their daily lives.

As an example, I present the speech of Mr. José Costa de Jesus, known as Zé Paú<sup>8</sup>, reporting that “I once heard on Rádio Educadora<sup>9</sup> [and] they talked badly about the *brincadeira*, that it was not successful because it was done by poor, black, ugly and illiterate people” (1997, p. 168). The speech of the *brincante* illustrates the process of marginalization faced by the people of the Boi. A situation like the one described endorses the numerous reports of criminalization of the *brincadeira*, reinforcing the coloniality of knowledge and power directed at Bumba Meu Boi<sup>10</sup>.

Perhaps because of the oppression suffered, the *brincadeira* was experienced, from that period, as a possible reinvention mechanism, capable of manifesting in the narratives operated, predominantly by oral and corporal language, world comprehensions that underlie the field of struggles, in the face of situations of control, regulated by local authorities and their hegemonic narratives. According to the historian Luiz Antônio Simas (2019, p. 86), these people “daily invent ways to build in the *perrengue* [hardship] their spaces of leisure, survival and sociability”.

Not by chance, I follow the path traced by Simas (2019) as an understanding of the act of celebrating as a unique way of understanding social life, as complex, inventive and sensitive. In this sense, the purpose of this text is to learn more about the tactics (Certeau, 1994), elaborated by the *brincantes* as responses to the attempts of symbolic and physical annihilation, and dictated by the neoliberal policies of necropower (Mbembe, 2018).

Currently, Bumba Meu Boi is a highly valued manifestation in the state, elevated to the category of Maranhão cultural symbol par excellence. Such symbolic centrality stems from the change in the treatment of public and private agents over time, mainly due to the interest in transforming the manifestation into a symbolic good for mercadological and tourist purposes. Subsequently, the *brincadeira* was included, also due to other factors, in the process of safeguarding and obtaining the title of Cultural Heritage by IPHAN, which occurred in 2011; and Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) since 2019.

However, despite the apparent context of valorization of the *brincadeira*, it becomes imperative to explain, in general, that some silencing processes are still experienced by the *brincantes*, assuming new reformulations. What caught my attention is that current practices are more difficult to perceive, as they are more veiled and implicit. However, by looking closely at the symbolic, economic, political and cultural field of the *brincadeira*, the impositions take on clearer contours<sup>11</sup>.

Faced with this conjuncture, new postures are assumed by the *brincantes* as an effect of dialogues and actions with current demands. In this regard, new ways of relating are ways found by the *brincadeira* to stay alive and active in the cultural scene of Maranhão. The described conjuncture interferes, as is known, directly in the creative processes and in the aesthetic expressions of the *brincadeira*. By evidencing this relationship, the artistic character triggers the richness of the plural forms of the doings and the elaborated poetics, usually found in the arduous and challenging daily life of the *brincantes*.

For a better understanding of the artistic elements and the playful game of the Boi play, the next topic will deal with the characteristics of the elements of the *brincante* scene, whose interest is also directed to the functions of the *brincantes*, clothing and post that highlight the specificities and their inventive repertoires contained in the group. Given this, I need to say that my view is wide and does not account for the complexity that these elements assume and relate to the *brincantes*, and may manifest other meanings and uses not known and/or commented on in this investigation.

## The scenic poetics of the Boi de Matraca

In the scenic field, there is a diversity of characters that the *brincantes* assume within Bumba Meu Boi, which in the *brincadeira* also receives the name of post or function<sup>12</sup>. Such aspect shows specific compositions and ways of performing that each *brincante* has, varying according to the style adopted by the group. Allied to this and to the inventive context of the Boi, the *brincante* creates, trains<sup>13</sup> and improvises based on the common repertoire of his/her position, and then incorporates in his/her performance grimaces, gestures, intentions, movements or other creative possibilities. To present a little of the spectacular practice of Boi, I consulted the works of Tácito Borralho (2012) and Tânia Ribeiro (2011), who discuss the scenic and choreographic movements of the *brincantes* in the Bumba Meu Boi of Maranhão.



Image 1 – Marquinhos, singer of the Boi da Maioba (2019).  
Source: *Jornal Imparcial*.

At first, I present the figure of the Cantador or Amo, who is the person who simultaneously exercises the function of command and central leadership of the group. He is responsible for composing and singing the songs, called *toadas*, compositions that express ideas, verses that reflect worldviews and emerge from community life, that is, they make up the musical memory of the group, being unpublished every year.

Moving on, the ox (toy) is the main and indispensable icon of the *brincadeira*. It is considered to be the “most famous and beautiful calf on the farm” (Borralho, 2012, p. 31). It is manipulated by a person who stands under the skirt that covers it, known as the *miolo do boi* [kernel of the ox]. A peculiarity of the Boi de Matraca refers to the *miolo*'s dance, which is characterized by raising the ox high, so that the *miolo* is visible to the pub-



lic. Finally, Borralho (2012, p. 124) highlights the importance of the ox, emphasizing that “this artifact, animated object, is the central figure/character of the *brincadeira* and the theater contained in it”.



Image 2 – *Miolo* of the Bumba Meu Boi of Maiobão. Feast of São Marçal, São Luís, Maranhão (2018). Source: author’s private photographic collection.

Pai Francisco is the worker of Amo’s cattle farm, married to Catirina, who is pregnant. The characterization relies on the use of a mask and, in some cases, wigs. He is seen, in some situations, wearing a suit jacket and carries a huge machete made of cardboard or wood, some carry a hunting shotgun. According to Ribeiro (2011), Pai Francisco’s dance has singularities that are established in the game of multiple situations that exalt the comicality, irreverence and antics of Pai Francisco, directed to the ox.

Mãe Catirina is pregnant and asks her husband, Pai Francisco, for a big favor. She wants to eat the tongue of the most beloved ox on the farm. In the scenic action, Catirina and her husband surround the ox, waiting for any carelessness of its protectors, so that their will can be fulfilled.



Image 3 – Pai Francisco and Catirina of the Boi do Maiobão at the feast of São Marçal, São Luís, Maranhão (2016). Source: author’s private photographic collection.



The *índias* are described as “warriors from a tribe near the farm” (Borrvalho, 2012, p. 30). Their function is to ensure that Pai Francisco is found in the forest, after removing the tongue of the ox. They enchant with their dance and regardless of whether it is choreographed or done spontaneously, “the body expression of the *índias* is accentuated by the movement of the legs” (Ribeiro, 2011, p. 110).



Image 4 – Índias. Feast of São Marçal, São Luís do Maranhão (2019).  
Source: author’s private photographic collection.

The *vaqueiro* [cowherd] or *vaqueiro-mestre* [master cowherd], as some call him, is seen as a person trusted by the Amo, who has the function of guarding the ox against Nego Chico’s attempts. For this, he carries a spear that measures more than one meter in height, the use of the accessory is intended to keep danger away. The scenic game usually takes place between him, the ox and Pai Francisco. This triangulation produces scenes that impress with their movement, improvisation and interplay between the *brincantes*.



Image 5 – *Vaqueiro mirim* [cowherd kid] watching the ox. Feast of São Marçal, São Luís, Maranhão (2016).  
Source: author’s private photographic collection.

*Caboclo de fita* or *rajado* has the task of “establishing the limits of the circle in the presentations of the *brincadeira*, dancing and singing” (Borrvalho, 2012, p. 34). He is known as the Amo’s trusted man. His attire is rich and pompous, loaded with several colored ribbons, arranged in the hat, so that some reach the ground. Some of them carry the *maracá* to alert the Amo of any possible incident with the ox.



Image 6 –Brincante playing the *caboclo de fita* of the Boi of Sitio do Apicum. Feast of São Marçal, São Luís, Maranhão (2019). Source: author’s private photographic collection.

The *Caboclo de Pena* or *Caboclo Real* is a rank found only in the Bois de Matraca, and represents the *índios*, imposing figure of the group. He is seen as the defender and protector of the ox and is responsible for the capture of Pai Francisco. With regard to dance, his movements, according to Borrvalho (2012, p. 123), “are based on a sequence of complicated steps that start and continue a precarious balance that involves the execution of jumps, runs, spins, tap dancing, sliding and pendular swing”.



Image 7 – The dance of the *caboclo de pena* of the Boi de Panaquatira. Feast of São Marçal, São Luís, Maranhão (2018). Source: author’s private photographic collection.

Another scenic figure seen in the groups is the *burrinha*. It is considered a mask doll, as it is a kind of dress-up doll (Borrvalho, 2012). The *brincante* is also called *miolo* [kernel], *vaqueiro especial* [special cowherd] or *homem da burrinha* [man of the little donkey]. The structure of the doll has “a cavity in the back, where the saddle will be, which allows the *brincante* to enter the frame, supporting, on his shoulders, a rope suspender” (Ribeiro, 2011, p. 128).



Image 8 – Burrinha of the Boi de Juçatuba. Feast of São Marçal, São Luís, Maranhão (2019).  
Source: author’s private photographic collection.

Regarding the *boieira* scenic structure, I found in Joana Oliveira’s (2006) research on the Boi of Maranhão and the formation of the popular *brincante*, relevant considerations about the performance and functions that each one can practice in the scenic composition of the *brincadeira*. She noted that “it is very common for the *brincante* to learn to perform several functions. Thus, not a specialized *brincante* is being formed, but a *complete* one, in terms of mastering all the skills necessary for the entire *brincadeira*” (Oliveira, 2006, p. 52, author’s emphasis).

This means that the *brincantes* are open to move through the creative and poetic territories of the Boi based on their skills, desires and interests. The aesthetic production of the Bois de Matraca presented here is complex and changeable, pointing to the game and its playful, creative and solidary power among the *brincantes* and is configured as a life experience that updates their knowledge and actions every year, keeping alive the transgressive and culturally counter-hegemonic poetics of the Boi.

### The walking scene at the Feast of São Marçal

The June days in Maranhão are composed of several festivities. Each one has its own repertoire and carries unique ways of celebrating, which points to specific ritualistic aspects, as well as characteristic symbologies and behaviors. For example, the celebratory dynamics of the Feast of São Marçal

point to some of these particularities. The most visible of them concerns its spatial configuration that takes place in a procession format, where a walking way of celebrating is put to experimentation.

The displacement, despite having a straight path, characteristic of the spatial layout of the João Paulo neighborhood, presents many crossroads, curves and inventive, poetic and spectacular passages, mobilizing other expressive possibilities. The walk emerges as a field of artistic interactions, games and scene creation and “reveals itself, then, as a special style of Brazilian popular spectacularity” (Brígida, 2008, p. 2). In this ambience, the walk dictates the time of the festive experience, the durational action of the collective encounter.

Brígida (2008) highlights the poetic, aesthetic and spectacular arrangements that take place while walking. In another saying of his, highlights the “narratives in motion” (Brígida, 2008, p. 40) as actions full of inventiveness that are being reworked during the displacement of the procession, activating a spatial, bodily, symbolic and relational experience, which differs from other forms of walking. Given the changing force of the procession, the author notes that

[...] the narratives that walk, move, pass before our eyes, symbolically working time and space, build singular spectacularity [...]. We cannot forget that street narratives translate in their practices and poetics not only an aesthetic issue, but also an ethical, moral and political one, in short, a way of living in society (Brígida, 2008, p. 41).

It is expressed, therefore, the effects, interactions and developments of the festive context, rooted in the surface open to events that is the public space, capable of creating a collective body densely inhabited by spectacularities that occupy the streets of the city. In this specific case, the city, when crossed from the party, is practiced as an act contrary to the process of privatization of public spaces, which most Brazilian cities have been ‘suffering’. This perspective was opportune because it addresses collective communions, full of insubordinate bodies that defy rules and subvert order, in their festive and perennial engagements.

Another fundamental aspect is the free access to the festive space, without ropes, bars or any apparatus that prevents or hinders the entry and exit of people. In this, São Marçal Avenue takes on a format that can be perceived as an energy generator for experiences in displacement. Likewise, being an open invitation to collective experience, to movements and behaviors full of wills and desires of the walkers. In this sense, the common



sharing practiced in the festive *movência* [movement] showed itself as an intense urban experience, allowing different experiences to be generated in the street space. Such actions were moments of experiences generated from the *brincantes* bodies that touch each other, walk, vibrate, cross each other and also moveaway, expanding the types of expressive contacts practiced.

Regarding the festive structure that modifies the ambience of São Marçal Avenue, it should be noted that on the day of the feast, the avenue is interdicted by the Municipality of São Luís, through the Municipal Department of Traffic and Transport (SMTT), in order to organize the traffic order in the feast surroundings, leaving the traffic free for the *brincantes* and their walking spectacularities. The space reserved for the procession measures approximately 400 to 500 meters, starting at the roundabout of the São Marçal Avenue and continuing until Ivar Saldanha square. Generally, the feast takes place from 7am and has no set time for its closure, which can happen in the early hours of the next day.

Regarding the festive corridor, it was in this space that the walk intensified, establishing a closer contact with the various actions and inventivities to be observed, in which the game and the ritual were relevant aspects because they were present in the *brincante* body. There were, in the feast, layers impregnated with many sayings, gestures, doings, knowledges and memories. They were part of a rich repertoire settled in the *brincantes* bodies. The walking composition experienced does not express a closed conception of street use, but rather proposes to be a space of activation, of openness to the fluctuations and ongoing dynamics.



Image 9 – Festive walk. Feast of São Marçal, São Luís, Maranhão (2018).

Source: author's private photographic collection.

Celebrating São Marçal for the Bois de Matraca has a very important symbolic and political value. The respect that each group maintains for the feast stems from their close devotional relationship with the Catholic saint. It is important to say that in the devotional map of the *brincadeira* there is a diversity of religious practices, which also involve enchantment, *pajelança*, spiritual entities of the *tambor de mina* and other beliefs, worshiped in the state, yielding polysemic ways of manifesting feeling and commitment to the sacred and the profane in the festive event and also in the occupation of public space. This makes us think about a more intimate practice of celebrating with the Saint and not for him.

Given this scenario of intense collective interaction, it was important to understand the Feast of São Marçal as a way of reflecting on the city, on spectacular creation and on being together. In this, at each step taken in the immersive landscape, a sample of how the street, with its openness to the creation of new relationships and affections, activated the urban space as a place of encounters and wandering experiments.

An example of this occurs when I visualize the party more broadly. The possibility of contemplating the aerial view of São Marçal Avenue allowed me to capture the frequency of the meeting, in the same way that the festive dilation occupied the urban fabric from the minimal displacement, whose time was felt slowly. The decelerated walk, tiny due to the gathering of bodies, crowded with people, touching, at the same time, the skin of the ground slowly almost stopping, but in an intense and spectacular way. Visualizing this image has the effect of perceiving the breadth of people, as far as the eye can see, which gave the feast the confirmation that the environment was potentially enlivened by multiple avenues of presence.



Image 10 – Aerial view of the Feast of São Marçal, São Luís, Maranhão (2019).

Source: author's private photographic collection.



This reveals that walking and celebrating in São Marçal promoted a concrete connection to the act of creation. It demonstrates, from this, the social need of these bodies to move in the streets, to devour the types of experiences that touch and captivate us. It refers to the game of stimuli established and the gestures acted that triggered ruptures with the ways of living in the face of bodily numbness in the urban environment.

Following this idea, the festive walk itself has as its existential motto the production of more sensitive, active, and permeable states of contact with the traversed environment, as the walk inherently brings together the relational and exploratory dimensions. With this living and pulsating movement, the walk manages to operate in itself its reinvention. This particularity, so relevant, also brings walking as an articulator of space, creator of places and poetic actions, which gives other modulations to the flow of the city. This context resonated in the festive ground, populated by collective insurgencies and walkers of São Marçal.

With this conclusion, I move towards another path, not too far from this one, whose desire was to discuss the poetics created by the *brincante* body, also addressing the relational dynamics of the encounter, exchange and experiences in the public space. Similarly, the festive desires and other plots capable of creation within the landscape and spiraling time of João Paulo, among many other spectacular phenomena that took place there. Therefore, a proper way of presence and movement in the world was spectacularized in the festive immersion of São Marçal. A point that deserves to be emphasized because it exemplifies the bonds, possibilities and connections that are established through the poetics created, emerged and negotiated along the way. As the event unfolded, the poetics of the *brincante* body were placed as drivers of germinating acts, which meant a specific way of agitating, moving in, with and in the world.

### **Walking and celebrating: the spectacularities of the *brincante* body**

Boi groups arrive in the João Paulo neighborhood from 5am on June 30. This suggests that many *brincantes* come to São Marçal Avenue with sleep deprivation, hunger and other associated body states. They carry in their bodies marks of fatigue from the long hours of presentation by the city's *arraiais*<sup>14</sup>, causing, in many of them, tiredness and drowsiness. On the

other hand, fatigue does not seem to occupy the body of some of the *brincantes* completely. While waiting, we can see the *brincantes* walking in search of food, friends who are around the feast and also to see and follow the festive walk of the other Boi groups.

Celebrating São Marçal is a maximum test of patience, will and endurance. A fact that leads the *brincantes* to mobilize the most diverse and curious alternatives to take advantage of the waiting time, due to the large number of groups present, adding to the crowd of people on São Marçal Avenue. In this direction, the two images that follow announce the body in a complete state of presence, despite its apparent immobility. This brought to this writing the reflection on the body experience, based on the polyvalence of sensations, senses and expressions.



Image 11 – Other movements. São Marçal Feast, São Luís, Maranhão (2019).  
Source: author's private photographic collection.

In this sense, the Italian researcher Francesco Careri (2017), when talking about walking, also proposed to reflect on the pause, mainly because of the way it institutes another dynamic in the experience of knowing the landscape by the stationary action of the body. According to him, “stopping is, in fact, a great opportunity to continue acting with the same spirit as walking, but in a space of being” (Careri, 2017, p. 113).

It was from this finding, brought by Francesco Careri, that the pause was understood as a powerful image of the feast. This statement goes back to the sense of driving meaningful questions about the *brincante* body, which are not only constituted in the physical movements of this body, but in the expressions, marks, gestures and their multiple effects as a result of

the act of sticking, burying the feet, regardless of the duration, in the action of grounding on the festive ground.

These expressions revealed inventive states, crossings and gestures, created from the sensitive events and sensations experienced in the urban space. The feast is also located in this free time, gestated by a linger temporal dilation. In the context of the research, the name evoked, the *brincante* body, speaks of a powerful body, whose presence operates, among other implications, from the blurring of the contemporary time policy regime.

In this regard, I present the reflection proposed by Leda Maria Martins about spiraling time, which aligns past, present and future. With her poetic and political gaze, the author discusses how the temporal experience can be glimpsed as experiences that are “processed by the body, aligned and composed of other perceptions that in and by the body translate them” (Martins, 2021, p. 32).

Based on the quotation, I can establish, without a doubt, a proximity with the corporalities and discourses, present in the spectacular practice of Bumba Meu Boi from Maranhão. Since the body, coming from predominantly oral and gestural cultures, as is the case of the *brincadeira*, assumes an important symbolic, ritual and spectacular centrality, since it is “place and environment of memory” (Martins, 2021, p. 89), where the *brincante* body is a keeper and, at the same time, activator of collective memories.

In this way, memory is collectively lived and renewed at each Boi cycle. It engenders a whole complexity about the ways of life and acting in the world that the body operates in its relationships, moving a network of knowledge and practices. Still, according to Leda Maria Martins (2021), these cultures relate to spiraling time, which can be understood as “a time [...] that returns, restores and also transforms, and who affects everything. A time [of] synchrony of instances composed of present, past and future” (Martins, 2021, p. 63).

From these considerations, the *brincante* body in São Marçal, which walks, dances, improvises, crosses, stops, touches, leans and turns – among other remembrances of states of presence – brings in itself a moving energy, whose spiraling temporality was experienced continuously in its collective and festive exchanges. Such experience can be located in the distinct layers of movements such as haste, pause and slowness that the *brincante* body has

access to in the feast of São Marçal, making it play with the elasticity and density of time, generating other thicknesses in space, opening the pores for the permeability of encounters.

By the way, the notion of the *brincante* body, in this work, is approached from a body that is willing to play and improvise as an expression of a living poetics of presence. The term *brincante*, attracted by the word body, invites the perception of movement as a collector of steps and accumulator of urban experiences, placing the *brincante* body as a word that generates spectacularities and various invented modes. From these principles, the intention here was not to create a notion of body, because it already exists in the festive landscape, since the playing body is not homogeneous, nor does it fit into a totalizing and idealized understanding of the body in popular manifestations. It continues to resist in its displacement, moving sensitive worlds intensely in a political and poetic way.

In its festive epidermis, the *brincante* body brings together a plurality of bodies that intersect, mobilizing aesthetics of street knowledge and memories from the particular cultural context. In this state of constant creation-feast that experiences the multiple paths of generating new meanings, the *brincante* body announces the feast being in all its expressive power, creating movements and gestures as detonating elements of other walking sensibilities, resulting from the transient vibrations that began to operate other forms of physical and perceptive displacements.

Finally, it was in the festive here and now that the *brincante* body, so plural and inventive, showed its energy in the public way, a fact that left me more attentive and thoughtful about the situation experienced by them, subjects to tiredness, hunger and constant thermal discomfort. At the same time, what caught my attention the most was when I looked at them and saw the overcoming of exhaustion and physical limits as inseparable and strengthened actions through faith in the Saint and the festive will to be together. Under this aspect, it also deals with the spectacularity that feeds and reinvents itself from the composing force of the collectivity, established by the modes of sensitive agency of the *brincante* body.

### Final considerations

The São Marçal feast presents a potentially instigating immersive landscape, with numerous investigative possibilities that inhabit the curves, crossroads and porous ground in the João Paulo neighborhood. I chose to grope through some of these surfaces, in order to activate the thought about the walk and the inventive ways from the festive event, among many other spectacular phenomena that occurred there.

In this article, walking was understood as a mixture of several walks, flows and distinct intensities, producing a specific sociability that only exists because one walks, that is, I am operating, in a way, a form of walking in its relational dimension, generated from walking in, by and with the feast. In this way, the walking spectacularities highlight the festive field as a singular platform, capable of confabulating narratives, gestures and promoting poetic attacks in the public space.

The interest in the theme moved significant questions about the close relationship of the walk with the Feast of São Marçal, launching new clues, inquiries and other ways of understanding the spectacular field of Bumba Meu Boi of Maranhão. With this, I intended to contribute to the investigative practices that question new meanings of the world, especially the understanding of the festive spectacularities that occupy the street, bringing to the writing expressions, gestures and meanings that point to the transits of exchanges and their gatherings, that is, that indicate the ways of living the urban and festive experience in another way.

For this, I sought to activate research movements that would help to understand how the walk actioned the festive wills and other plots that could be created among the *brincantes* bodies, triggering the spiraling time and space of being together, with its own rhythm and cadence. From this question, the *brincante* body, in this study, was understood as an aesthetic, political and spectacular proposition, derived from a transdisciplinary perspective, which is continuously renewed and reformulated, from the June seasons and, specifically, from the Feast of São Marçal.

Finally, I consider it relevant to reiterate the fact that Bumba Meu Boi is a complex manifestation, bringing together faith, celebration, fun, ritual, game and playfulness. Other attributes can be included as characteristics of

doing and living the Boi. It is appropriate to consider that the facts described demonstrate a cut of the *brincadeira*, thus avoiding any, I suppose, totalizing and idealized view of the Boi of Maranhão. Novamente destaco o quão é múltiplo o universo da brincadeira, que a cada ano atualiza seus símbolos mais representativos, sendo um deles a Festa de São Marçal. Again, I emphasize how multiple the universe of the *brincadeira* is, which each year updates its most representative symbols, one of which is the São Marçal Feast. To conclude, I state that the history of the feast in the João Paulo neighborhood walks along with the history of the Bois de Matraca.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The Boi de Matraca, also known as Boi da Ilha, comes from the metropolitan region of São Luís, precisely, and mostly in the rural area of São Luís – Paço do Lumiar, Raposa and São José de Ribamar. Regarding those who organize and live the Bumba Meu Boi *brincadeira*, in general, they are from various parts of the metropolitan region, residing mostly in the peripheral neighborhoods, or, when not, in rural areas.
- <sup>2</sup> The first performances date back to 1929.
- <sup>3</sup> The term “batucar” is associated with Afro-Brazilian musical traditions, and refers to the action of playing percussion instruments, specifically those played with hands or drumsticks.
- <sup>4</sup> The Bumba Meu Boi cultural practice is known by some denominations, in this research I use the terms: Bumba Meu Boi, Bumba Boi, Boi and *brincadeira* as equivalents and in agreement with the people of the universe surveyed who use these expressions to name what they do. *Brincante*, then, is the one who *brinca/plays*, who participates in the *brincadeira*.
- <sup>5</sup> I emphasize that the ethnographic festive dynamics are prior to the pandemic period that started in Brazil in March 2020.
- <sup>6</sup> Still on the naming of this section, when I mention the makers of the feast, I am highlighting and referencing the Bois de Matraca groups as one of its main agents. This means, therefore, that they are not the only ones who organize and maintain the São Marçal feast. There is a complex network of other responsible producers, such as residents of the João Paulo neighborhood, state and municipal public sector, private entities and other interested parties.



- <sup>7</sup> It is not a matter of weaving a detailed analysis of the possible origins of the *brincadeira*, that is not what I seek to do here. In this case, the task is to point to a historical cut, starting from the repressive and prohibitive period suffered by the Bois groups, in order to describe and analyze the forms of oppression experienced by the black population in the capital of Maranhão.
- <sup>8</sup> The report of Zé Paú, former singer of the Bumba Boi da Madre Deus, can be found in the book *Memória de velhos*. Depoimentos: uma contribuição à memória oral da cultura popular maranhense. v. 5. São Luís: Lithograf, 1997. This volume, in particular, is intended for the testimonies of some Bumba Meu Boi leaders, tracing a panorama of the *brincadeira* in the 1940s and 1950s.
- <sup>9</sup> AM radio broadcaster, based in São Luís, Maranhão.
- <sup>10</sup> It is important to mention that these prohibitions and other impediments were not unanimous among the authorities, the press, the police and Maranhão society. Available at: [https://books.google.com.br/books/about/Mem%C3%B3ria\\_de\\_velhos\\_Aliete\\_Ribeiro\\_de\\_S%C3%A1.html?id=ChUsAAAAYAAJ&redir\\_esc=y](https://books.google.com.br/books/about/Mem%C3%B3ria_de_velhos_Aliete_Ribeiro_de_S%C3%A1.html?id=ChUsAAAAYAAJ&redir_esc=y). Accessed on: January 14, 2023.
- <sup>11</sup> One of the examples concerns the way Bois are hired to participate in the June season by the State and Municipality. In this case, the *brincadeira* needs to participate in a public selection via public notice, which is not surprising. The issue is that to enroll in the event, the Boi is required to have a CNPJ, *Cadastro Nacional da Pessoa Jurídica*, which can be translated as “National Registry of Legal Entities” – a unique identification number assigned to legal entities in Brazil, that serves as an identification for tax and administrative purposes. This factor makes it impossible for small groups of Bois to participate, as the bureaucracy required demands time and costs for the *brincadeira* to be formalized. The state and municipal governments, in turn, do not create alternatives, such as workshops and consultancies, to make the procedures easier for smaller Bois groups. Without the *cachê* paid for the presentations in the city’s *arraiais*, the *brincadeira* has no way to maintain itself. Therefore, it will not have the resources to take out and maintain a CNPJ.
- <sup>12</sup> Throughout this article, I will not use the term character because I understand that in the context of Boi’s scenic creation, the *brincante* does not represent, but plays. For this, I adopted the words function or position. The latter being the most common designation among the *brincantes* (Borrvalho, 2012).

- <sup>13</sup> In the context of the Boi of Maranhão, the word *treino* [training] is quite usual in the context investigated and refers to the moment that the *brincantes* rehearse in the period before the June season.
- <sup>14</sup> “Arraial” can be understood as a “folk festival”. An arraial is a traditional festive gathering, typically held outdoors, that involves music, dancing, food, and various entertainment activities. It is often associated with popular celebrations, such as religious festivals, folk events, or community gatherings.

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