



## **Black Popular Culture and Subalternity: an analysis of *Zumbi* by João das Neves**

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**ABSTRACT – Black Popular Culture and Subalternity: an analysis of *Zumbi* by João das Neves**

– This article analyzes the play *Zumbi* (2012) by João das Neves, a production inspired in *Arena conta Zumbi* (1965) by Boal and Guarnieri, presenting the aspects related to contemporaneous issues related to the slavery past and the current political scenario in Brazil, which resulted in the present moment of democratic rights restriction. Next, it develops topics such as the postcolonial condition, which permeates the relations center/periphery and cultural interchanges, as well the subaltern narratives, aimed to bring up narratives that do not agree with the official ones. Lastly, the paper seeks to develop the *Zumbi* analysis in the light of black popular culture, emphasizing the political dimension contained in the 2012 staging.

Keywords: **João das Neves. Black Popular Culture. Postcolonial. Political Theater. Arena Theater.**

**RÉSUMÉ – Culture Populaire Noire et la Subalternité: une analyse du spectacle *Zumbi* de João das Neves**

– Cet article formule une analyse de la pièce de théâtre *Zumbi* (2012) de João das Neves, oeuvre inspirée par l'*Arena conta Zumbi* (1965) de Boal et Guarnieri, en présentant les problématiques liées aux questions contemporaines en perspective au passé d'esclaves et au présent politique du Brésil, qui ont abouti au moment actuel de restriction des droits démocratiques. Ensuite, il s'est développé des thèmes comme ce de la condition post-coloniale, qui envahit les rapports centre/périphérie et des échanges culturels, et ce des narratives subalternes, qui cherchent ramener des narratives discordantes aux officielles. À la fin, on cherche travailler, de cette manière, l'analyse de *Zumbi* à la lumière des cultures populaires noires, en soulignant la dimension politique dans la mise en scène de 2012.

Mots-clés: **João das Neves. Culture Populaire Noire. Post-Colonial. Théâtre Politique. Arène Théâtre.**

**RESUMO – Cultura Popular Negra e Subalternidade: uma análise do espetáculo *Zumbi* de João das Neves**

– O presente artigo tece uma análise da peça *Zumbi* (2012) de João das Neves, obra inspirada em *Arena conta Zumbi* (1965) de Boal e Guarnieri, apresentando as problemáticas ligadas às questões contemporâneas em perspectiva ao passado escravista e ao presente político do Brasil, que desembocaram no momento atual de restrição dos direitos democráticos. Em seguida, desenvolve-se temas como o da condição pós-colonial, que permeia as relações centro/periferia e intercâmbios culturais; e o das narrativas subalternas, que procuram trazer à tona narrativas dissonantes às oficiais. Por fim, busca-se trabalhar, dessa forma, a análise de *Zumbi* à luz das culturas populares negras, ressaltando a dimensão política contida na encenação de 2012.

Palavras-chave: **João das Neves. Cultura Popular Negra. Pós-Colonial. Teatro Político. Teatro de Arena.**

*In the past, historians could be accused of wanting to know only about the 'great deeds of kings', but today this is certainly no longer true. More and more, they are turning to what their predecessors passed over in silence, discarded, or simply ignored. 'Who built Thebes of the seven gates?' – Bertolt Brecht's 'literate worker' was already asking'. The sources tell us nothing about these anonymous masons, but the question retains all its significance (Ginzburg, 2006, p. 11).*

This article analyses the play *Zumbi*, directed in 2012 by João das Neves<sup>1</sup>. *Zumbi* is inspired in the musical *Arena Conta Zumbi*<sup>2</sup> (1965), by Boal and Guarnieri, considered one of the first reactions in the cultural field to the 1964 *coup d'état* in Brazil. In his staging, João das Neves proposed a cast of black actors, shifting the focus from the political response to the 1964 military *coup d'état* to a debate, no less political, on the African-Brazilian culture, redirecting the look to a discussion on racism and social inequalities present in our society since ever. This political shift, characteristic of our current historical moment, beyond its motivations and consequences, calls our attention to how much certain claims, related to the relation of black representation on stage, were still unnoticed until the first decade of the 2000s. The movement between the current symptom and the resignification of the past times brings to us, both from the theoretical and the artistic point of view, some challenges regarding the social, cultural and economic vision that we bring from the Black people in our formation, passing through the condition of a colony based on the slave economy, to the racial concerns and conflicts that we face daily in our country. Due to the still forward-looking Brazilian political-economic context, although already into question and in transition – a situation evidenced since the demonstrations of May 2013, whose consequences and analyzes begin to emerge in our present moment (Demier; Hoeveler, 2016) – *Zumbi* presents itself as a play that brings to us fundamental questions to analyze contemporary events (Barraclough, 1983).

The beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Brazil was marked by debates and policies to promote art, such as the *Movimento Arte contra a Barbárie*<sup>3</sup> [Art against Barbarism Movement], affirmative action public policies, such as the quota policy for access to public universities<sup>4</sup>, and the opening of agencies, such as the Department of Policies for the Promotion of Racial Equality<sup>5</sup>, bringing cross-sectoral topics and realities to the context of scenic

professional productions and universities, which opened up for new debates and demands. In this sense, we understand that these have a political dimension, which can broaden the notions of class struggle and representation. Therefore, we consider *Zumbi* by João das Neves as an example for the discussion of this political dimension.

*Zumbi* is inspired in the musical *Arena Conta Zumbi*, by Boal and Guarnieri, based on the novel *Ganga Zumba*, by João Felício dos Santos (1962), and brought a narrative of the history of *Quilombo dos Palmares*. It begins with the arrival of King Zumbi to Brazil on a slave ship, and ends with the defeat of *Palmares*, but the work is not limited to such historical narrative, but above all, it meant, at the time, a response to the political *coup d'état* suffered by Brazil in 1964 (Campos, 1988).

This paper is aimed to propose an understanding of African-Brazilian culture as black popular culture, thus seeking the possibility of dialogue with a Brazilian theater tradition, while at the same time, when approaching the presence of Black people on stage, it can be perceived the claim for a new agenda to understand this culture. This shift of the political dimension resulting from the first edition of *Arena Conta Zumbi* (1965) to the 2012 *Zumbi* provides the opportunity to bring to the discussion cross-sectoral topics that greatly contribute to the understanding of our cultural and political moment. It is understood that this shift points us to a terrain still under construction, which must be carefully followed, taking into account the ruptures and continuities, revealing topics such as postcolonial condition, identity and subaltern narratives. In this sense, it is here understood that working with these topics does not mean the construction of a new narrative, but the possibility of affirming a narrative often covert.

In recent years, the Brazilian theater has expanded its range of choices and languages in distinct directions, and such construction can make emerge the idea that contemporary theater can be understood as a specific type of theatrical doing. This claim is at risk of generalizing, making the *contemporary* category a specific genre, which would already refer to a specific type of language. Likewise, asserting that the understanding of the contemporary has a mere chronological nature may also raise another risk, in the sense that looking at the theatrical production of nowadays would be to establish a linear time range separating yesterday and today in enclosed

categories; or yet to understand contemporary theater as an overcoming of modern theater. In this case, the statement becomes even more problematic, as it classifies it as a category that does not offer clear epistemological opposition to the previous period, thus running the risk of being understood as a concept that brings a historical suspension. Trying to look back at a type of theater produced in recent years, which is part of the current scenario, and emphasizing its political dimension, it is understood that in the construction of specific knowledge of the field, the contemporary theater, given the ephemeral noteworthiness of the performing arts, can be understood not as a conceptual classification, but as an investigation field in an expanded area of dialogues, ruptures, and continuations.

Agamben (2009), in *O que é o contemporâneo?* [What is the contemporary?], shows the need for an anachronism, an unfocused position before the present to better apprehend it. It is a position at the same time present and shifted, a privileged view indicating that to be contemporary, one must not be completely immersed in their time and thus glimpse their shadows and their lights: “[...] contemporary is the one who keeps the look fixed in his time, in order to perceive not the lights, but the darkness” (Agamben, 2009, p. 62). The author reveals the importance of moving away from the great consensuses, clarifying that contemporaneity is not only associated with chronology, but also with what is possible to make emerge from its time and transform it.

Speaking about the theater that is being produced in our own time creates some challenges, both methodologically and conceptually. Initially, it can be point out the difficulty of accomplishing an analysis that, although immersed in our current experience, should be free from the consensuses of time itself. This is so because, in dealing with present time, there is a danger of not perceiving the transitions and transformations of the ideological paradigms due to the insertion at their generation moment. As the English historian Geoffrey Barraclough (1983) points out, we cannot run the risk of not perceiving the contrasts:

If we want it to have some lasting value, the analysis of contemporary events requires deepness, never smaller – perhaps, in fact, a good deal greater – than any other History genre; our only hope of discerning the forces effectively at

work in the world around us is to align them firmly against the past so that the contrast will give them the right emphasis (Barraclough, 1983, p. 19).

In this often unstable field, since it is still under construction, the theater produced in the past years, in addition to offering a rich area of research into languages and structures, affirms a struggle in the field of politics in an expanded way, as we know well how much to work with theater in our times (not being less at other times) can be considered, above all, an act of political and ideological resistance. Towards the regression in the democratic field and human rights that we have been suffering in recent times, it becomes difficult to defend the argument that only the gesture of taking a shifted narrative, which brings out the previously concealed voices, can offer a new paradigm for the exploited/explorer, colonizer/colonized relationship. However, precisely because we focus on the present time, we support ourselves on the art, more specifically theater, and by preferring not the consolation of an “empathy with the past”, to talk with Walter Benjamin (1994, p. 225), we seek to follow here the lesson of Gramsci's aphorism: pessimism of the intelligence, optimism of the will.

Given the methodological and conceptual problematization of the analysis of the theater produced in our times, let us try to discuss some concepts that will guide such analysis, starting with the post-colonial one. Since the beginning of the article *Quando foi o pós-colonial?* [When was the post-colonial? Thinking at the limit, 1996], Stuart Hall (2003, p. 95) already indicates that this is “a sign of desire for some, and equally for others, a signifier of danger”. This is due to the long debate over theory, which has emerged in recent decades as a *novelty*, both theoretical and methodological, by proposing a debate on the relations created by colonization and the expansion of capitalism, raising questions such as the relations center/periphery and cultural exchange. In this perspective, what interests is the concept in its theoretical-methodological proposition, since it is committed to the *peripherals*, always with a view to the phenomenon of capitalist expansion in all spheres of the planet.

To think about our post-colonial condition, however, we need to draw some specificities within the topic, such as reflecting on how much this theory, which begins to be developed in the 1960s, can account for the whole colonial process, as it starts from the recent independence processes of

British colonies. Thus, certain universalization and homogenization must be taken into account, due to the expansion of use of the term. Hall emphasizes:

Is Latin America 'post-colonial', even though its independence struggles were fought early in the nineteenth century, long before the recent stage of 'decolonisation' to which the term more evidently refers, and were led by the descendants of Spanish settlers who had colonised their own 'native peoples'? Shohat, in her article, exploits this weakness effectively and it is clear that, in the light of this critique, those deploying the concept must attend more carefully to its discriminations and specificities and/or establish more clearly at what level of abstraction the term is operating and how this avoids a spurious 'universalisation' (Hall, 2003, p. 100).

Our specific relationship, therefore, is different from those established in Africa, India, even more in Canada, to randomly mention here a couple of examples. We are not *post-colonial* in the same sense, however; while on the one hand this differentiation serves us not to lose sight of our historical perspective, on the other the term post-colonial, in bringing this universalizing perspective, encompasses as potentiality the understanding that the colonial phenomenon affected not only the colony and, in this sense, was never something external to the societies of the metropolis, being deeply incorporated both in the culture of the colony and the metropolis, even with its specificities. In this aspect, the narratives emerging from the periphery would no longer be understood as peripheral, to take the core of a great narrative no longer divided between center and periphery, but universalized, taken as several current perspectives. This idea may sound somewhat romanticized when we take into account our political-economic reality, that does not let us lose sight of how much Brazil still establishes a relationship of neocolonial dependence with the bloc of developed countries in the capitalist world. In this reasoning, the colonial perspective is not dead; it still survives in *other ways*. Valuing the post-colonial narrative can, however, and above all, signify a political-ideological stance in the face of this irreversible framework of capitalism globalization.

In terms of periodisation, however, the 'post-colonial' retains some ambiguity because, in addition to identifying the post-decolonisation moment as critical for a shift in global relations, the term also offers – as all periodisations do – an alternative narrative, highlighting different key conjunctures to those embedded in the classical narrative of Modernity. Colonisation, from this 'post-colonial' perspective, was no local or marginal

sub-plot in some larger story (for example, the transition from feudalism to capitalism in western Europe, the latter developing ‘organically’ in the womb of the former). In the restaged narrative of the post-colonial, colonisation assumes the place and significance of a major, extended and ruptural world-historical event. By ‘colonisation’, the ‘post-colonial’ references something more than direct rule over certain areas of the world by the imperial powers. I think it is signifying the whole process of expansion, exploration, conquest, colonisation and imperial hegemonisation which constituted the ‘outer face’, the constitutive outside, of European and then Western capitalist modernity after 1492 (Hall 2003, p. 105-106).

Thinking ourselves as post-colonized, in the same way, makes emerging at present a kind of political claim that differs from that classic. It brings to the protagonist narratives that were previously understood only as the *background* of a larger process. In that sense, Florestan Fernandes (2017) warned about how much May 13 [national celebration of slavery abolition in Brazil in 1888] is a fiction.

A princess signed a Law that extinguished an institution that was already dead. However, official historiography and the ruling classes later transformed that date into a historical landmark and turned it into the symbol that slavery in Brazil had ended by the initiative of the rulers and in a ‘peaceful way’ (Fernandes, 2017, p. 77).

Thus, to look at the current staging of *Zumbi*, that is, to the *Quilombo dos Palmares* history and all the narrative from the Zumbi’s arrival to Brazil, in a slave ship, until the defeat of *Palmares*, acquires, in the black bodies on the stage a political struggle for space and representation in a forceful way rises to the stage, bringing out the possibility of accomplishing a critique from the subaltern condition, also identified here not as a paradigm shift, but as an element present in our history – both of the country and more specifically of the theater. However, as already said, it has often been covert by an *official narrative*, which tends to keep the subaltern layer *obedient* and *peaceful*, that is, playing mere supporting roles in history. In this way, we thought it fruitful to emphasize this *new* space of affirmation, to think our ballast of dialog between theater and popular culture, considering that a large part of what we call popular culture here in Brazil has a rich dialog with the African-Brazilian culture, and represents a strong historical and cultural tension in this process of acceptance and resistance to the dominant culture.

Therefore, the positioning of understanding popular culture as a subaltern culture becomes strategic when thinking of the subaltern term itself, here taken from the writings of Antonio Gramsci. According to Hall (2003, p. 276-316), Gramsci brings to the field of Marxist studies contributions that were not presented by classical Marxism, opposing a type of *economism* and leading to the discussions new historical conditions that could not be grasped or envisaged by Marx or Engels at the stage of social development in which both were:

Gramsci practices a genuinely 'open' marxism, which develops many of the insights of marxist theory in the direction of new questions and conditions. Above all, his work brings into play concepts which classical marxism did not provide but without which marxist theory *cannot* adequately explain the complex social phenomena which we encounter in the modern world. It is essential to understand these points if we are to situate Gramsci's work against the background of existing 'theoretical formulations, paradigms and interpretive schemes in the social and human sciences' (Hall, 2003, p. 277-278).

Concerning the term *class* or the expression *subaltern group* in Gramsci's work, there is no clear meaning, although some aspects can be defined, such as groups that are in a position of domination in social power relations. According to Gramsci (2002, p. 135), "The history of subaltern social groups is necessarily fragmented and episodic", and "Subaltern groups are always subject to the activity of ruling groups, even when they rebel and rise up [...]". The field of subaltern groups studies has been expanded by several scholars, notably Edward Thompson and Raymond Williams, and more recently Edward Said and Stuart Hall; here we also highlight the historiography proposed by Carlo Ginzburg. In this aspect, the use of the concept expands, starting from Gramsci's assumption, that is, from the southern Italian peasant, to approach the post-colonial perspective. Thus, addressing the popular culture as a subaltern culture searches for a line of association between Marxist and post-colonial studies, and is a pertinent delimitation from the point of view proposed here.

The historian Carlo Ginzburg (2006, p. 11-26), in the preface of *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, critiques some works that used the concept of popular culture, valuing the concept and showing possibilities of work with documents and their "more or less misshapen image. It calls attention to how relatively late the use of the



term *culture* as a set of practices and behaviors of the subaltern classes is. Borrowing from cultural anthropology, the concept of “primitive culture” was the basis for the recognition of individuals “defined in a paternalistic way as ‘lower layers of civilized people’” (Ginzburg, 2006, p. 12), owners of culture. According to the author, at least at the oral level, there was an overcoming, not only of an “old-fashioned conception of folklore as mere collection of curiosities”, but also of the place from where these ideas came, surpassing the principle that the set of beliefs and attitudes of the subaltern classes was the result of a reading of something elaborated a long time ago by the dominant culture. From this, the discussion about the relationship between dominant and subaltern culture begins, trying to identify the extent to which the latter is submitted to the former. The dominant/subaltern relationship happens by the establishment of an unequal society, which assumes the position of one class in detriment to another.

At this point we ask ourselves: concerning the subaltern culture, can it be considered as a point of resistance to class domination, since, despite the opposition of classes, it may not necessarily establish a subordination relationship? This question serves as an incentive to think about the different levels at which subaltern culture or popular culture can be understood. And it sets to the studies referring to popular culture the need of ideological and methodological positioning: ideological because we use the term *culture* coined from an aristocratic vision, always needing to deconstruct the civilizing and high idea that is its own; methodological in function of the difficulties arising from the fact that popular culture is largely oral.

Next we will examine more closely at the thematic perspectives in which the works are framed and what relations can be woven between *Arena Conta Zumbi* and *Zumbi* and popular or subaltern culture. *Arena Conta Zumbi* was conceived as a musical, the first of a series to be presented by *Teatro de Arena*<sup>6</sup>. Considered one of the first reactions to the political *coup d'état* of 1964<sup>7</sup>, it premiered on May 1, 1965. The popular is widely explored in the play and is basically linked to the African-Brazilian universe, which is done by choosing the history of the black people struggle in *Palmares*, but which can also be perceived in the figure of the northeastern

singer, participating in the structure of the piece as narrator. A large part of this bond with the African-Brazilian culture comes from music – although mostly composed by Edu Lôbo, includes a composition by Vinícius de Moraes –, adopting *sambas* and *batuques* and bringing in the lyrics the African and African-descendant universe. In addition to the songs, the play's lines bring in the speech of the black characters a type of *wrong* Portuguese, intended to reinforce the grass-roots origins of these characters; such construction of speech, according to Claudia Arruda Campos (1988), originates from one of the works used for the elaboration of the dramaturgy, the book *Ganga Zumba*, by João Felício dos Santos. It should be mentioned, in addition, another book used as reference: *O Quilombo dos Palmares* (2011)<sup>8</sup>, by Edison Carneiro, that gathers a series of documents of authors from the colonial period.

In relation to dramaturgy, the *Zumbi* adaptation made by João das Neves virtually kept the integrity of the text, that is, it was faithful to the story's script, the songs and the way of speaking of the characters, having cut only a couple of scenes, changed some words and added some lines and elements, such as, for instance, songs from the Minas Gerais state *congado*, which did not belong to the original production. Regarding the staging, however, the two instances are quite distinct and, despite the lack of video documentation of *Arena Conta Zumbi*, it is possible, by comparison of photos and reports, to identify these differences. First of all, as already highlighted, the cast of the *Zumbi* adaptation is all composed by black people and there is an atmosphere of the *quilombo*<sup>9</sup> in the construction of the visual elements of the scene, which leads to a more dramatic reading from a visual point of view. There is a strong presence of the black Minas Gerais culture, in the constitution of the instruments, the musicality and the elements of Minas Gerais *congado*. In addition to the complexity of the musical arrangements – unlike the 1965 production, which had only flute, drums and guitar –, in 2012 the arrangements acquire body with other types of percussive, melodic and harmonic instruments.

If we think of the political dimension of each staging, we can perceive the reading key for each one. The first one appropriates the history of *Quilombo dos Palmares* to bring the importance of resistance against the political framework established with the 1964 *coup d'état*; the second one

appropriates the same story to bring, however, the importance of the daily struggle of resistance to racism and social differences experienced in Brazil by a large part of the black population to this day. In both productions, the most significant value lies not on the reproduction of the story of that *quilombo*, but on the symbol of resistance contained in the narrative. In this sense, the investigation of cultural elements and the way in which this narrative is constructed is more pertinent than the investigation of the truth of historical facts, although, being a narrative that involves the reconstruction of a historical moment, the pertinent historiographical vision cannot be disregarded.

The text of *Arena Conta Zumbi* has an epic construction. Besides being a musical, including, therefore, several interventions through music, it has a non-linear narrative, with short scenes and not always interconnected by the mechanism of cause and effect. Another element that reinforces the epic nature is in the form of the staging – it is in the *Arena Conta Zumbi* staging that Boal begins to develop the *joker* system, according to which the actors can take turns in the interpretation of the characters<sup>10</sup>. As the text has its integrity almost completely kept in the *Zumbi* adaptation, which is the object of interest in this article, we have opted for the plot directed by João das Neves.

*Zumbi* begins with the arrival of King Zumbi on a slave ship. Already in the introduction, the character invites its partners to rebel against the conditions in which they are. In this context, the problems of the slavery system, the torture, violence and forced labor are presented. The narrative continues, showing the creation of the *quilombo* and the attacks it suffered on the part of the white people. These attacks were always motivated by economic interests and ideologically driven by moralism and racism, evidencing the picture in which the relation between white and black people never has any level of equality, but rather a white sovereignty, exercised by the position of power. In the play, however, it is possible to verify the strong contradiction contained in this position of power, be it in the construction of the text or the staging. In this construction, we perceive on the part of the black people a great effort to build a better society, based on the work, the mutual cooperation and the conquest of their liberation from the slavery, imposed by the white people. King Zumbi and his

successors are characterized by a shade of nobility and leadership, while the white people show comic characterization in the staging, always being represented in a burlesque way<sup>11</sup>. Their interests are linked to the defense of private property, to the morality of the family tradition and, above all, to economic interests above any other. *Palmares* is constructed and represented as a free society, built on work and solidarity. The construction of this society is not wholly approved by the white people; however, the Government, in the figure of *Dom Pedro de Almeida*, comes to the conclusion that it costs more to wage a war and to recover the black men in the *quilombo* than to bring more men from Africa. *Palmares* grows, sells its production and buys weapons for its defense. White people are divided in two groups – the sellers and the owners of *sesmarias*<sup>12</sup>. The white sellers, at first, have a good relation with the *quilombolas*<sup>13</sup>, because they negotiate with them, buying goods and selling weapons. The white owners of the *sesmarias*, however, do not agree with the existence of the *quilombo*, which they consider outrageous. Then there is the *tragic mistake* committed by the *quilombolas*, when, imbued with their faith in good relations with the white merchants and in the promise of peace and freedom, they increase the prices of their goods and stop buying weapons. At that moment, the white merchants join the white owners of the *sesmarias* against the *quilombo*. Ganga Zona, Zambi's grandson, and his wife, Gongoba, arrive in Brazil; they are separated and, on the way to the property where he would work, Ganga Zona becomes aware of the black people of *Palmares*, who will meet him to take him to the *quilombo*. The white sellers, with their interests hurt, gathered with the white owners of the *sesmarias*, begin a campaign for the conquest of public opinion, a role reserved specially for the respectable women, disseminating the ideological message that the *quilombo* was a threat to tradition and to the family. Gongoba gives birth to Ganga Zumba, Ganga Zona's son and Zambi's great-grandson. As time passes, Ganga Zumba grows up and goes to *Palmares* to take his place of leadership. Gongoba is whipped and killed, and there is a fight between white people and *quilombolas*, with deaths on both sides. The peace proposal on the part of Dom Pedro de Almeida is accepted by King Zambi. Dom Pedro de Almeida, however, is dismissed from the position of governor, to which Don Ayres is appointed promising, as we read in his character's saying, “an

energetic government [that] takes unpopular measures of protection to the Crown, not to the dissatisfied”. He appoints a field captain to “arrest, torture, punish, and kill these escaped and raised blacks.” Ganga Zona dies, and Ganga Zumba takes the throne of *Palmares*, which prepares for the fight by summoning the leaders of the entire *quilombola* territory. The government elects the São Paulo citizen Domingos Jorge Velho to command the invasion to the *quilombo*’s territory. The *quilombola* forces are defeated, but Ganga Zumba resists until the end.

In the *Arena Conta Zumbi* staging, the fable is woven to speak of the present and so there are several references to the context of 1964, being the episode of *Palmares* a metaphor for the events of that time. The proposal was one of analysis and possible response to the *coup d’etat*, which therefore justifies elements such as the power of economic interests and from the Crown, which, moreover, represented the interests of external capital; the conquest of public opinion, a mission especially granted to women, alluding to the demonstrations for the family that preceded the *coup d’etat*; the removal of the legitimate government and the replacement by an unpopular government – to name just a couple of examples, which we thought, even in 2012, at the time of João das Neves’ staging, were events kept in the historical past. However, they come to the surface in our historical present, placing the democratic state of the country in question. The proposal of the play was to bring the events of the political *coup d’etat* to assess its cause and analyze the popular defeat and then propose an attitude of resistance.

The fable materializes in the key of fight against racism and social inequality in the staging of João das Neves; and in the same way, questions such as the force of capital, the ideological work repeated by the example of the traditional Brazilian family, and governments that are violent against the people also gain strength as an argument for struggle. In the case of *Zumbi*, the presence of the black popular culture is a rich and astute tool. As we look more carefully at the elements of black popular culture inscribed in this production, we perceive some points that bring important issues to the black popular stage/history/culture relationship. Such questions are revealed in a first instance in the original text of *Arena Conta Zumbi* and expand to *Zumbi*’s production. These issues, however, do not compromise

the potential of symbolic struggle that the play holds in both the 1965 and the 2012 revival; they are important, however, for us to advance in the field of cultural resistance proposed here.

According to Stuart Hall (2003), to work with popular culture it is necessary to deconstruct the naive view that surrounds it. In this sense, popular culture can be understood as the informally conveyed traditions and practices, but also in the movement of tension that these practices establish with the dominant culture. Thus, contrary to the reductionist notion that tends to recognize popular culture as a folkloric practice or one that is linked to the market network, being the most consumed or sold, or which would be established by a specific content or a “political grass-roots program”, popular culture establishes itself in a terrain of the “power struggle” stemming from a movement of popular consent and resistance, thus bringing to its heart elements of traditional culture, mass culture, and the contemporary means of production and enjoyment (Hall, 2003, p. 231-247). In this context, working from the concept of black popular culture such as that inscribed by Hall brings the possibility of a complex reading that includes the contradictions of popular culture juxtaposed to an intricate movement of traditions dispersed in the moment of the diaspora.

Thus, Stuart Hall understands that there are no pure forms for black popular culture; on the contrary, it is the result of negotiations, experiences and traditions of black populations, being such experiences deeply marked by similarities and continuities in articulation with differentiations and ruptures. These articulations are due to the experience of the diaspora, in which the Atlantic traffic brought men and women from different cultures, communities that spoke their own languages, worshiped specific deities, brought different habits, and in contact with Western cultures created new repertoires which, in turn, “[...] led to linguistic innovations in rhetorical stylizations of the body, forms of occupying an alien social space, heightened expressions, hairstyles, ways of walking, standing, and talking, and a means of constituting and sustaining camaraderie and community” (Hall, 2003, p. 324-325).

In the specific case of Brazil, studies on the diaspora and the Atlantic traffic point to the arrival of peoples coming from a great extent of Africa, forming a range of cultures, ethnicities, languages and nations. They can be

generically classified into two major linguistic groups: the Bantu and the Sudanese. The Bantu are the peoples of the Central-South African region, comprising an area that extends from the Atlantic Ocean to the Indian Ocean, currently the region of Angola, Zaire and Mozambique. The Sudanese belongs to a more northerly region, represented today by Nigeria, Benin and Gold Coast. This classification of the Bantu and Sudanese groups, as already pointed out, is general, therefore, each group represents dozens of ethnic groups and nations<sup>14</sup>. References to the origins of these ethnic groups and nations are very difficult to establish, since the captives landed in Brazil often referred to catchment or shipping areas in Africa instead of their place of origin. In this way, arriving at the port, the individuals were designated by nations, that is, denominations used by the merchants and colonial administration in Brazil, which brought characteristics such as, besides the place of boarding, physical attributes and qualities related to the capacity of work. These transatlantic nations, on the part of the enslaved man, had affinities with the language, the world view and religions, in an identity created in relational and historical form. The most well-known nations, generically assigned to the two great linguistic groups, are the Congo-Angolans for the Bantu and the Nago-Yoruba for the Sudanese, although there are other nations linked to these groups, such as *benguelas* and *moçambiques* (Bantus) and *jejes* and *minas* (Sudanese).

This richness of cultural references is found in the staging of *Zumbi*, spread throughout the text in African expressions and words, sonorities and musicality, attesting to the visibility of black popular culture and its diversity. An example of such references may be the treatment assigned to the simultaneous worship of African and Christian deities:

*ZAMBI: Hail Mary, full of grace. Olorum is with you.*

*Blessed is the fruit of your womb.*

*Blessed is the Earth where we plant.*

*Blessed is the fruit that is harvested.*

*CHOIR: Hail Mary, blessed be*

*Hail Mary, full of grace, Olorum. [...]*

(Boal; Guarnieri; Lôbo, 1965, LP).

*Olorum* is the supreme god, the *owner of the sky* for the Yorubas, a word that refers to the presence of men originating from the Sudanese group (Evaristo, 2012). In the play, however, beginning with the treatment

given to leaders, the *gangas*, we find this word, whose origin may be in the *quimbundo nganga*, which means wizard, the *quimbundo* being a language of the Bantu group (Lopes, 1995). There is a tendency in the studies on African-Brazilian culture that has already been redrawn in academic terms, but still strong in common sense, that the Sudanese cultural traits, which we may call the Nago-Yoruba, bring more cultural authenticity; this tendency is strongly presented in studies related to the African-Brazilian religions of valorization of *candomblé* since Nina Rodrigues (1935), Edison Carneiro (1981) and Artur Ramos (1942), passing by Verger (1981; 1999) and Bastide (1974; 1978; 1989). Yeda de Castro (2001) also calls attention to the appreciation of studies of black African languages, which erroneously classified peoples who use an oral tradition as having a lower culture, valuing the Sudanese culture in relation to the Bantu.

Also as a testimony of what we state, and bearing in mind that Yoruba is the only African language that has been favored by books published in Brazil since 1958 (see *Introdução ao estudo gramatical da língua yorubá* by Edson Nunes da Silva, published by Universidade da Bahia), it suffices to check the uncountable and unrealistic attempts to discover an equivalent in the Yoruba language for the Brazilian term *candomblé* (from the Bantu *\*kandombile*, the action of praying), and the fact of placing the *Palmarinos* speaking Yoruba in a time when there is no record of the presence of Yoruba-speaking people in Brazil. This episode happened in the film produced in the 1980s by Cacá Diegues, in order to narrate the saga of the Republic of *Palmares*, and that was widely publicized abroad (Castro, 2001, p. 86).

In the same way, we noticed in *Zumbi* the presence of Yoruba words and expressions not only in the passage quoted here, but also in other parts of the text. In this sense, we look at this trend of appreciation of the Sudanese culture as a way of legitimizing the African element. Such a tendency can be understood in the original *Arena Conta Zumbi*, if we think that it was a work that, prior to the African-Brazilian historical and cultural reference, sought in the fable a metaphor for the present moment. It is possible, in fact, that the trend of appreciation of the Sudanese culture had, at the time, influenced the authors. However, in the case of the re-signification of the work, in *Zumbi's* staging the presence of the Yoruba language may open perspectives for the diversity of black popular culture. More important than the archaeological and historical reproduction of



*Palmares*, it will be the representation of power, pertinence and cultural diversity that the black presence brought to the cultural formation of our country. Thus, resuming Hall's discourse that there are no pure forms in black popular culture, we understand that it is necessary to recognize the richness of sources and possible dialogs rather than seeking what is legitimate for African or cultural sovereignty, in the constant movement of acceptance and resistance.

Another element in *Zumbi* that calls attention, as already highlighted, is the option for having a cast totally formed by black people, which, unlike in the 1965 production, when Black people was essentially the topic, actualizes their presence on stage. The presence of the black body, by itself, brings to the scene an expressive power; we know how important the body is in African-Brazilian traditions, which use it in different ways. Stuart Hall (2003, p. 324) underscores the fact that "[...] how these cultures have used the body as it if was, and it often was, the only cultural capital we had. We have worked on ourselves as the canvases of representation".

Also regarding the cultural and corporeal capital in *Zumbi*, we can also highlight the musical and choreographic treatment of the performance, which brings, in addition to black voices and bodies, a range of melodic, harmonic and percussive instruments. The instruments and sonorities from the Minas Gerais *congado* are remarkable in the play, which, besides including the sonority of a black popular culture, dialogs directly with the regional traditions of Minas Gerais – the staging happened in Belo Horizonte, capital of Minas Gerais state, with a cast formed by actors from that region. The sonority and body reactions proper of the Minas Gerais *congado* enter the play in different situations, as, for instance, in moments of prayer or preparation for the war. The significance in these situations extrapolates the cognitive readings of the scenes and brings to the performance ritual moments in which, even without directly participating in the performance of the music or the development of the choreography, the audience is involved by the power of the performances. Leda Martins (2003), in dealing with the Minas Gerais *congado*, emphasizes the ritual performance, as an operation that reorganizes and conveys African philosophical principles.

According to Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1997:139), in the African worldview,

*... those of us who are in the present are all potential mothers and fathers of those who will follow. Reverencing the ancestors means to truly revere life, its continuity and change. We are the children of those who were here before us, but we are not their identical twins, just as we will not beget beings identical with ourselves. [...] In this way, the past becomes our source of inspiration; the present, a breathing arena; and the future our collective aspiration.*

This cosmic and philosophical perception intertwines, in the same circuit of significance, time, ancestry, and death. The primacy of the ancestral movement, a source of inspiration, blends the curves of a spiraled time, in which events, undressed of a linear chronology, are in the process of perennial transformation (Martins, 2003, p. 78-79, in italics in the original).

These performances have deep cultural aspects, bringing to the show the power of the black popular culture and, as Leda continues, revealing another relationship with time, with the past, the present and the future, another relationship with history.

The visuality of the performance goes to the allusive, the actresses and actors are characterized in tribal clothing, being all at the beginning of the staging with bare chest, dressed in cloths that receive different moorings in the course of the staging. The scenography follows this tribal characterization, with hanging ropes, stumps and stakes of wood, figuring the possible space of the *quilombo*. This visuality reveals a certain idea of the setting of an idealized Africa, reinforcing a Manichean view, already existing in the text, of an ideal society formed by the Blacks. This Manichaeism does not necessarily stand as a negative element in the construction, since the message intended in the work is quite clear: identification of the enemy, struggle and resistance to it. Such a message is present both in the work of 1965 and in 2012, and the Manichean option, in this case, we believe that it serves to leave no doubt as to which side is being defended and also who it is this enemy against which we must fight and resist – in this case, it is this violent power of property, of capital and that, concerning *Zumbi*, we can still extend to a racist power, of social exclusion, supported on a work of hegemonic bases, in which the black is belittled in our society.

Such hegemonic foundations are present in our society in such a strong way that, even in places of study and reflection on these issues, we can see some implications. In analyzing, for instance, the historical view that *Arena Conta Zumbi* and *Zumbi* bring, we realize how much, despite

being an exemplary work, from the point of view of valuing the history of slavery and the presence of these men and women from the perspective of resistance – a view that shows us men and women who were not only understood as enslaved, but as kings and queens, warriors and skillful workers, capable of building a society that defied the interests of the Crown – we find in the treatment given to the constitution of the family a little positive view, as pointed out by Claudia de Arruda Campos (1988, p. 78):

Also unintentional peculiarities tie *Zumbi* at its time. Today's audience certainly would not like, for example, the treatment of ostensive sexuality in the play, linked a little to the companionship and a lot to the reproduction and strengthening of the *quilombo*, in a context that deserves the epithet 'male chauvinist'. One of the first measures of the *quilombolas* is trying to kidnap Black women: '– 20 negro women! – 40! – One for each of us!' And the victims of the abduction even sing the subjection: 'Yeah, from Mister to Mister, I prefer my Black man who is the same color as me'.

More than "the context deserving the epithet 'male chauvinist'", we are struck here by the current view in the historiography of the time in which the piece was written. Robert Slenes (2011), in the work *Na senzala uma flor*, presents a long work of research, with documentary sources from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, proposing the verification of such view. It shows that until the 1970s, the Brazilian historiography assigned little or no relevance to the family relations of slaves in Brazil. On the contrary, it portrayed the understanding of a daily life marked by promiscuity, deregulation and violence, characteristics that were associated with the annulment of the captive as historical subject. We therefore perceive how forms of social and racial exclusion are rooted in our culture, needing a daily surveillance of acts and words. And so, by putting such questions on the scene, it symbolically reveals and potentializes the existence and need of struggle in a wider way, whether in its correctness or in its misunderstandings.

Thus, in *Arena Conta Zumbi*, we perceive how not only the subject of the political *coup d'état* and the forms of democracy curtailment, such as those occurred in 1964, but also of racism and social exclusion are relevant for the debate. In 2012, when João das Neves restages it, at a time when it was not possible to glimpse the concreteness of the events that we would live in our country in 2016, which would only begin to be drawn in 2013, it was possible to expand its political dimension, emerging in the new

proposal of staging, the potential of the play linked to racism and social exclusion; even so, we defend the relevance of *Zumbi* as a potential resistance work also to the 2016 *coup*<sup>15</sup>, in its new configurations, which still remains today, since we are still trying to understand the consequences of this 2016 *coup*, far from exhausting the reflections on what we went through from 1964 to 1985.

I live in a time of war  
I live in a time with no sun  
Only the one who doesn't know anything  
Is able to laugh.  
Sad present time  
When talking about love and flowers  
is to forget that so many people are suffering a huge pain.  
Everyone says I have to eat and drink  
But how can I eat  
But how can I drink  
If I know that I am taking  
What I am going to eat and drink  
From a brother that is hungry  
From a brother that is thirsty  
From a brother.  
But even so I eat and drink.  
But even so, this is the truth.  
Old believes say that living is not fighting.  
That wise is the one that pays the evil with goodness.  
The one who forgets his own will,  
The one that accepts not having his desire  
Is seen by others as a wise person.  
That is what I always see  
And that is what I say  
No!

I know we need to win  
I know we need to fight  
I know we need to die  
I know we need to kill.  
(Boal; Guarnieri; Lôbo, 1965, LP).

We are led to believe that the struggle and resistance, in addition to demanding daily surveillance, is far from ending in our society. With a clear

reference to Brecht's poem (1986, p. 214-216) "To those who will be born after us", the play still today, paired with the historical events that we are living from the year after its debut, reminds us how much struggle and forms of oppression are repeated from time to time, and historical advances and retreats are concrete data that must be addressed in the historical movement itself. The perspective view at the *Arena Conta Zumbi* and *Zumbi* staging, contrasting 1965 and 2012, reveals to us that we need to join forces for this struggle; we live in dark times, in which we need to understand and seek more what unites us in the struggle than what distances us.

The possibilities of reading that seek, in a postcolonial view, to understand black popular culture as subaltern culture, try to inquire, by means of the analysis of subordination and resistance relations, how these categories, currently seen as identitarian, claim their representation by the society as an instrument of struggle for social transformation. In this sense, as we widen the view, in the perspective of the Marxist cultural studies to the class struggle, we can perceive the important role of the struggle of these categories in the contemporary society, in order to, based on their specific demands, aim at a broad structural transformation of that society. From this angle, the material and cultural bases, understood as praxis – organized social practices in a class society – reveal what the ruling thinking tends to conceal, that is, that we live social differences and conflicts. Despite our historic past, the knowledge of black popular cultural practices is still restricted and the social protagonism of the subaltern layers still covert, bringing to the fore the relevance of works such as *Arena conta Zumbi* and *Zumbi* in the political-cultural panorama of the theater produced in recent years in Brazil.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> João das Neves is one of those personalities that can be called a *complete artist* - he is a director, writer, actor, *lighting* designer, set designer and cultural producer. His trajectory is unparalleled, in addition to a stay of 16 years in *Grupo Teatral Opinião*; he acquired recognition for his dramaturgical production, with highlight for the text *O último carro*. As few artists of the area, during a certain period he left the cultural production center of the

Southeast, having worked and lived in the state of Acre, where he founded the *Poranga* Group. Currently, he lives in the state of Minas Gerais, in the city of Lagoa Santa, where he directs works that are highlighted at national and state level, especially the African-Brazilian Trilogy, which includes the plays *Besouro Cordão de Ouro* and *Galanga, Chico Rei*, both written by Paulo César Pinheiro, and *Zumbi*, a play based on the musical *Arena Conta Zumbi*, by Augusto Boal and Gianfrancesco Guarnieri.

- <sup>2</sup> In the course of the text, when *Arena Conta Zumbi* is mentioned, we will be referring to the work by Boal and Guarnieri, staged in 1965, and *Zumbi*, to the staging of João das Neves in 2012.
- <sup>3</sup> *Arte contra a Barbárie* was an organization movement around the class of theater artists, which occurred at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>th</sup> in the city of São Paulo. Such movement, in addition to generating in-depth discussions about the role of the artist in our society, achieved some actual results regarding the understanding and organization of theater groups, and the Law of Promotion to Theater is one of its most compelling results. To know more about the subject, please read Desgranges and Lepique (2012) and Costa (2012).
- <sup>4</sup> The Quota Act was established at the federal scope in 2008, but it had been discussed for a longer time, and since 2000, it was implemented at Universidade Estadual do Rio de Janeiro (UERJ).
- <sup>5</sup> The department of Racial Equality Promotion Policies (Seppir) was created in 2003, under President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's government, as a result of recognizing the historical struggles of the Black Movement.
- <sup>6</sup> A major theater group of São Paulo from the 1950s and the 1960s; it is considered a reference for political theater in Brazil. About this subject, please read Costa (1996) and Prado (1988).
- <sup>7</sup> The musical *Opinião*, considered the first theatrical response to the 1964 *coup d'état*, was staged in December 1964.
- <sup>8</sup> The first edition of Edison Carneiro's work dates back to 1958, by *Brasiliiana* publishing house.
- <sup>9</sup> N. T.: In English, a settlement originally founded as a refuge by fugitive slaves or their descendants.
- <sup>10</sup> For more information on the *joker* system, please see Boal (1977).

- <sup>11</sup> This characterization also occurred in the *Arena Conta Zumbi* performance.
- <sup>12</sup> N. T.: *Sesmaria* is a concession of land under the Portuguese Crown system.
- <sup>13</sup> N. T.: In English, *maroon*.
- <sup>14</sup> About this subject, please see Prandi (2000) and Slenes (1992).
- <sup>15</sup> Michael Löwy argues that what happened in 2016 with the removal of President Dilma Rousseff was a *coup d'état*, articulated through a parliamentary, media and political strategy. The author states that, since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the leftist political view has gained ground in some Latin American countries. It had distinct characteristics, some tending more to “social-liberal coalitions” (Brazil, Uruguay and Chile), others with “anti-oligarchic, anti-liberal and anti-imperialist governments” (Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador) and those in the middle of the road in relation to these two trends (Paraguay, Nicaragua, El Salvador, or Argentina). Since the beginning of the power of this new leftist political view in Latin America there have been attempts to regain power by oligarchies and many of these *coups* have been barred by widespread grass-roots mobility. In Brazil, with the clear intent of interrupting the democratic process, in a parliamentary articulation of alliance of the bloc of the rightist political view parties “[...] known as ‘the BBB bench’: from ‘Bala’ [‘Bullet’] (federal representatives linked to the Military Police, death squads and private militias), the ‘Boi’ [‘Cattle’] (large landowners, cattle ranchers) and the ‘Bíblia’ [Bible] (neo-Pentecostal fundamentalists, homophobes and misogynists)” (Löwy, 2016), the *coup d'état* dismissed the president elected with 54 million votes. The author also calls attention to the international conjuncture, of the end of the Cold War, which would differentiate the current *coups* from the “bloody dictatorships” lived from 1964 to 1990, but even so, not completely excluding the possibility of instituting violent processes. To know more about this subject, please see Singer et al. (2016) and Mattos, Bessone and Mamigonian (2016).

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