

UNDOING PERFORMANCE: MACUMBA AND THE PROLIFERATION OF THE UNCERTAIN¹

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DOSSIER WORLDS IN PERFORMANCE: 20 YEARS
NAPEDRA

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ABSTRACT

Following the productive uncertainty of performance as practice and concept, here I turn to what is undone with words, turning John Austin's classic definition of the power of the performative act upside down. The encounter in *macumba* centers in Rio de Janeiro between *entidades* (spiritual entities) and their clients is marked by the instability of language and the danger of words in the very search to unveil future paths in consultation with these *entidades*. A recent meeting with an *entidade*, in which she un-says what she had revealed to her client, led me to reflect on these consultations as a mode of putting into practice the power of the uncertain. The (anti)performative act of unsaying can be read as putting the unknown back into play, diverting both client and *entidade* from the imprisonment of certainty and into the fabulation that is at the heart of consultations with the *entidades*.

KEYWORDS:

Macumba;
Performance; Power of
the Uncertain; *Povo da
Rua*; Fabulation

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the VIII Meeting of the Portuguese Anthropology Association, Évora (2022), in the panel *Decolonizing performative forms: uncertainty, certainties and resistance*, organized by Scott Head and Paulo Raposo, to whom I am grateful for the always attentive listening. Fieldwork during 2022 had the support of the INCT Brasil Plural (CNPq/CAPES/FAPESC).

Moving through the crossroads of the anthropology of performance in Brazil, Luciana Hartmann and Jean Langdon, in a recent article, allude to the multiple concepts deployed by the various ethnographic intersections that give the field its shape: “reflexivity, noise, margin, liminality, subversion, polyphony, experience, corporeality, movement, transformation, negotiation, contextualization, among others” (Hartmann and Langdon 2020, 3), to which I would add seismology, f(r)iction, and tense description (Dawsey 2005; 2013; 2016). As Hartmann and Langdon (2020, 3, emphasis removed²) recall, such concepts rub against each other in the various approaches to the bodies, “(human and non-human, of the anthropologists and their interlocutors), in their graphic, sound, gestural, visual expressiveness – in performance”.

This conceptual and empirical effervescence, one of the driving forces of the “spiral of performative twists” (Conquergood 1989, 87) on anthropology, is at the core of the “unresolved” aspect that Schouten, Ribeiro, and Dawsey, in their call for this dossier, associate to the very concept of performance. Perhaps it is precisely the opening engendered by this unresolved-ness that sustains what Gonçalves (2009) calls the productive imprecision of the concept of performance, and perhaps it is also through such space that we can pursue the emergence of – no less productive – conceptual anxieties.

In a somewhat tortuous path, marked by encounters sometimes fortuitous, sometimes intended, with discussions about performance, as well as by the possibility of returning, at the beginning of 2022, to the shared sociality of the macumba carioca – the macumba in Rio de Janeiro, I want to pursue here the potential of performance to put into practice the power of the uncertain. I begin by first bringing forth three recent scenes of what I would call contemporary conceptual anguish, emerging in places sometimes convergent, sometimes very distinct, to then lead us on a path to an encounter with the spiritual entities of the *povo da rua* – people of the streets – in their consultation at the macumba carioca, divination rituals that take place in Afro-Brazilian religious houses in Rio de Janeiro.

2. In the original Portuguese text of the cited article, the word performance was marked in italic, here removed as I find it important to politically mark the language we use in our writings. As a current concept in anthropology in Brazil and a broad field of research, the term “performance” should no longer be considered a neologism or a foreign word.

FIRST SCENE

In late 2021, the online event “*Sismologia da Performance: Napedra 20 anos*” (Seismology of Performance, NAPEPDRÁ 20 years)³ included a roundtable discussion with Richard Schechner, mediated by John Dawsey⁴. In this conversation, Paulo Raposo asked Schechner to comment on the inversion we have been witnessing in the historical relationship between performance as an instrument of the political avant-garde to the contemporary political performance of the far right. One of the examples Paulo Raposo used to illustrate his question was the figure of the horned man, Jake Angeli, the QAnon Shaman, an activist who became the media emblem of the invaders of the Congress of the United States of America in March 2021⁵. Schechner’s response, at that moment, was that “performance” is a tool, stripped of ideology, thus it can be used in a variety of ways.

SECOND SCENE

In March 2022, the online conference “*Figurações Interartes: derivas e contágios*” (Interarts Figurations: drifts and contagions) sought to “make explicit the crossings that mark contemporary thought and artistic practices”⁶. In one of the roundtables, “*Nós aqui, entre o céu e a terra*” (We here, between heaven and earth), Andre Lepecki and Eleanora Fabião discussed her homonymous performance at the 2021 São Paulo Biennial art exhibit⁷. Andre Lepecki also addressed the relationship between the contemporary affective, physical and political conditions, and performance. Turning to a particular political ontology of performance, that of performance as ephemeral, Lepecki pointed out that it would be this very ephemerality, its capacity to disappear, that would make performance inadequate to Capital. Considering the contemporary moment of an explicit process of fascist white supremacy, or considering what Achille Mbembe’s (2018) critically conceives as a necropolitical project, such ontological ephemerality would become politically insufficient, according to Lepecki. Whereas, in the artistic practices of the 20th century, in Brazil and other “places on the margins”, the condition of the “precarious” had to be lived in its potency

3. The event, celebrating the 20nd anniversary of the group, took place between Nov. 22nd and Dec. 10th, 2021. My colleagues at the Group of Studies on Orality and Performance (GESTO), Evelyn Schuler Zea, Luciana Hartmann, Scott Head, Viviane Vedana and I presented our work on Dec. 3rd, on the panel “*Entre gestos: ruídos, rumores, rodeios ou o lado revés da performance*” (Between gestures: noises, rumors, deviations or the converse side of performance). I am grateful for the invitation and to the innumerable exchanges with John Dawsey and Napedra along the years. The event program is available on: <https://antropologia.flch.usp.br/files/eventos/211106_PDF_FINAL_programa%CC%A7a%CC%83o%20Napedra_20_Anos.pdf>. Access on 09/27/22.

4. Available on: < <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BtZg3zVZoyk&t=6080s> >. Access on 09/27/22.

5. Available on: < https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jake_Angeli >. Access on 09/27/22.

6. Summary of the Conference Interarts Figurations, UERJ, March 8th-10th, 2022

Available on: < <https://www.congressointerartes.com.br/> >. Access on 09/27/22.

7. Available on: < <http://34.bienal.org.br/artistas/7344> >. Access on 09/27/22.

and not be lamented; in the conditions of contemporary urgency, Lepecki points to the importance of a “proliferation drive” as the movement of performance – he thus calls forth another political ontology of performance corresponding to the contemporary moment, a drive for the proliferation of life in the face of fascist necrophilia.

THIRD SCENE

In a third conversation, *Spiritual Historicities*⁸, an online seminar on micro-historicities and spiritualities, our conversations revolved around another movement facing the so-called “uncertainties of the present”: in a double turn, on the one hand there is the displacement caused by nostalgic aspirations for an ahistorical past of purported greatness, as materialized by the US far-right’s quest for the redemption of a mythical “Great America”; on the other hand there is the displacement into the future, by fundamentalist movements that long for the end of this Era and the unveiling of a New Order, such as the messianism that supported Jair Bolsonaro’s re-election aspirations in Brazil (cf. Reinhardt 2021). On both polar sides of this movement, magical-religious forces would be at work to produce divine effects, be it to resume or to achieve promised forms of existence.

ON THE PATH TO THE CONSULTATIONS

Writing on the verge of the 2022 elections, at a moment when the present seemed moved by the inverted time of the countdown towards the presidential elections, and when the polls predicted yet another inversion, hopefully one into the opposite direction of that of the advent desired by such messianism, I want to ethnographically take another path. A path where other “magical-religious” forces are at play in different ways; where spiritual entities co-fabulate⁹ with clients other possibilities of existence through uncertainty; or, to conjoin what Lepecki distinguishes temporally, where the potency of the uncertain – another sense of the precarious he refers to – makes life proliferate in spite of contemporary necropolitics.

I have been writing for some time about macumba in the suburbs of Rio de Janeiro. Although macumba is part of the universe of Afro-Brazilian

8. *Spiritual historicities: exploring micro-historical practices and alternative temporal directions in contemporary religiosities*, November 4th-5th, 2021, Proyecto Etnografías de Neoliberalismo y Aspiración, PUC, organized by Diana Espírito Santo and Ruy Blanes. Available on: <<https://antropologia.uc.cl/eventos/871-conferencia-ena-2021-spiritual-historicities-2>>. Access on 09/27/22.

9. Fabulation, rather than refer to fabrication, evokes the creative practice of storying the world (Cardoso 2007; McLean 2017; Stewart 1996).

religious practices, it encompasses more than a specific religious practice or identity. It refers to a sociality marked by the presence of spiritual entities that cross the boundaries between ritual and everyday life, the sacred and the mundane, the past and the present, the private and the public. In this sense, I have been writing about macumba as a way of perceiving, imagining, and engendering daily life, a being-in-the-world imbued with the presence of these spiritual entities.

The old and persistent structuring frameworks of Brazilian racism have placed the practices of macumba outside the space of legitimation of that which is deemed to be religious, marking macumba as a paradigmatic expression of what Luiz Simas (2018) describes as the attribution to the peoples of the black diaspora of an inability to produce cosmogonies that go beyond the limits of healing practices. Meanwhile, in contemporary Brazil, macumba is, simultaneously, claimed by intellectuals as a decolonial Black epistemology (Rufino 2019; Simas and Rufino 2018) and battered with renewed racist vehemence by right-wing political fundamentalists who take it to be an expression of devil worship by Afro-Brazilian religiosities¹⁰.

Much of what I have written in these years of wandering through the macumba carioca emerges from stories and conversations with the so-called “people of the streets” (*povo da rua*) – *exus*, *pomba giras*, and *malandros* – entities that in life occupied spaces on the social margins and that in the afterlife dance, sing, drink, and smoke with the living, intervening in their paths in ways sometimes desired, sometimes feared. In my ethnographic writings, I have talked about the many stories that are told about these entities, stories about their presence in the daily life of the *macumbeiros* (macumba practitioners), stories wrapped in the tension of the potentially unpredictable. These stories evoke the quality of their movements, their power to move between spaces and times, as well as the efficacy of the entities’ powers.

A central activity in macumba practices are the consultations, where clients seek the intervention of the *povo da rua* entities in their lives. Persistent unemployment, precarious survival in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, family life transformed by excessive consumption of alcohol or

10. The simultaneity of such opposite views is matter-of-fact, but it bursts into extraordinary grotesque forms at certain points, such as in that of the closeness of the spectacular victory of the *Acadêmicos da Grande Rio* school of samba in the 2022 carnival in Rio de Janeiro with a theme that celebrated the popular spiritual entities of macumba – “*Fala Majeté! Sete Chaves de Exu*” – with the mundanity of the violence that led to the loss of eyesight by a woman who was physically assaulted by a neighbour for listening to the theme samba of that parade in her own house.


(Religious intolerance: woman is attacked and loses eyesight for listening to the Grande Rio’s samba in homage to Esu. Available at: <<https://g1.globo.com/rj/rio-de-janeiro/noticia/2022/09/16/intolerancia-religiosa-mulher-foi-agredida-e-perdeu-visao-do-olho-direito-por-escutar-o-samba-da-grande-rio-em-homenagem-a-exu.ghtml>>. Access on 09/27/22).

drugs, the threat of daily violence in the urban spaces of Rio de Janeiro, unhappiness, these are all spheres of mundane life where the joint action of forces from this world and other forces not-so-human and not-so-evident in their origin is clearly perceived. I have been following these sessions in a religious house, a *Centro*, in a suburban neighbourhood of Rio de Janeiro, rituals of consultations with Cacurucaia, a *pomba gira* entity whose fame brings her a large number of clients, some recent, some long-standing, some occasional, and others who return a number of times.

Embodied by my friend Luciana, the medium who has *worked with* (embodied) her for several decades, Cacurucaia herself *works* – carries out her doings – drinking cachaça and smoking her cigarillo. Sitting in front of her set of cowrie shells, she receives her clients in the company of a *cam-bona*, a person who helps in the ritual procedures, either by writing down lists of things to be done, keeping her cigarillo lit, or by participating in the exchange of words and glances that involve clients and *pomba gira*, thus entering the play of affects that is fundamental for the unfolding of the consultation and the *work* of the entity.

When I was able to return to Rio de Janeiro in 2022, Cacurucaia was once again offering the consultations that had been suspended at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. In contrast to some of the evangelical churches – which defended the inclusion of religious services in the lockdown exceptions, further fuelling the already intense fight by then President Jair Bolsonaro against public health policies in favor of social isolation – several public figures from Afro-Brazilian religious houses resorted on social networks to an other ontology of the sacred in order to defend the safekeeping of the body, as a locus of action for the entities. The *Centro* where Cacurucaia works closed its doors as a means of such safekeeping, restricting the practice to small and private rites seeking renewed protections for the members of the house, the *filhos de santo*, who in their majority faced the precarious life of non-remote work in times of devastation by the pandemic.

Cacurucaia finally resumed her consultations in January 2022, a long list of people anxiously awaiting her. She invited me to be her *cam-bona*, something I had done only once before, a few years past. The acting-in-the-world involved in the *work* of the consultations, the participation in the divinatory act of consultation, involves the clients in the manipulation of forces of this *pomba gira* and other entities in order to achieve the desired effects. For many years I had already been participating in the consultations in other ways, along with other *filhos de santo* (initiates of the religious house), entities and clients, whether in *correntes* (the chain of spiritual energy that gathers and flows through the people present at the ritual), chanting songs in tune to the percussion of the drums, or



in conversations while waiting for the consultation, but now Cacurucaia brought the anthropologist into yet another realm of the ritual of consultation.

Regarding the previous times I had participated in consultations with the entities, I have written elsewhere that my ethnography was *charged* by that experience, that what I wrote about the consultation rituals was contaminated by the instability and indetermination materialized in the performance of the *povo da rua*, not by the desire to reveal a certain knowledge (Cardoso 2012). In respect to that first time when I had been Cacurucaia's *cambona*, I also wrote about the danger of words, about the risk of misunderstanding involved in participating in the consultation sessions (Cardoso 2017).

When I first wrote about my one-time experience as a *cambona*, I focused in detail on one particular consultation, which involved an encounter between a new client, Cacurucaia, and myself as a *cambona* (Cardoso 2017). In that consultation, between veiled allusions, unfinished phrases, words exchanged between the client and the *pomba gira*, I could glimpse what seemed to be the problem affecting the woman that had led her to seek Cacurucaia's help, but nothing was explicitly said to really sustain the frail narrative I was haltingly assembling.

In fact, at one point during the consultation, the client herself had become exasperated with this way of talking and begged the *pomba gira* to talk straight, to help her. The *pomba gira* objected to that plea at that moment, saying that she was indeed trying to help, but that the woman herself was doing everything wrong. The woman acted as if she hadn't heard the *pomba gira*, persisted on her plea, and asked me to intervene on her behalf. To my surprise, Cacurucaia also turned to me and asked me to explain things to the client. I tried to replicate the roundabout form of speaking in what I said in response, tentatively looking for meanings that slipped between the words. The woman's frustration persisted, until Cacurucaia finally gave up on her play of words, grasped the client's hand with affection, and looking into her eyes asked the woman to trust her, to trust that she would take care of her problems. Apparently relieved, the woman left.

Cacurucaia, in turn, complained to me after the client left: "Look at this woman. She comes here to ask for the wrong thing. If I do what she wants, hell will break loose, and people will blame me!" In that consultation, Cacurucaia did not reveal to the woman her own errors, even though she did promise to take the woman under her care. Between what the woman had truly come to ask and what Cacurucaia would truly do there opens

up a zone of uncertainty as to the true effects of the entities' intervention in everyday life.

In the most recent consultations, along the year of 2022, I sometimes shared the place as *cambona* with some of the *filhos de santo*, each one of us having a unique way of participating in the unfolding of the consultations. Amongst the *cambonas*, I am the only one who does not incorporate an entity, but Cacurucaia does not consider my participation in the forces present there to be a lesser one; she tells me that my presence affects her *vision* in the *jogo* – the casting of the cowry shells – in a particular way, and even affects the play of words in each session.

These distinct forms of participation were noticeable in the interaction with the *pomba gira*. She said that her *jogo* was not just an adding up of numbers – her way of ironically referring to the combinatorial arrangement of the position of the 16 cowrie shells cast in the Ifá divination system. Her *jogo* was, according to her, a search for people's stories in the movement of the casting of the shells on her table. One of the *filhos de santo* who acted as a *cambona* with me could also see what the casting of the shells unveiled for Cacurucaia. Cacurucaia repeatedly held my hand while she cast her *jogo*, exchanging glances with me and offering through the tactile gesture the possibility of the contagion of sight. Even then I still could not see *in the movement* of the cowrie shells, so I followed attentively the weaving of the words, entering the confabulation of the stories in the narrative gestures of the *pomba gira* and her clients, pursuing other sensory encounters through touch and the exchange of our glances.

My participation in this intense exchange of words, questions, silences, touches, and looks increased along the year. In one of the recent consultations, the conversation with the client reminded me of that first one I had attended a few years ago. Not because of what this woman was asking, but because of the intense apparent mismatch between what the *pomba gira* was saying and what the client was saying. After listening to this obscure exchange for a while, after many glances from Cacurucaia that seemed to betray her incredulity at the woman's ignorance regarding what the *pomba gira* was telling her, I finally translated for the client what Cacurucaia was trying to say. Violating the poetic form of the way the *pomba gira* spins her words, I used a language of explicit meanings, introducing another force of language that broke the movement of uncertain meanings. The woman now seemed stunned not by uncertainty, but by the apparent truth that was materialized by the words now professed by my inept impatience.

Cacurucaia recoiled at the woman's reaction and quickly reverses my movement to disambiguate her speech, telling the woman to forget what she had said. "I un-say it," she affirmed. More than contradicting me, or opposing another truth to mine, Cacurucaia now moved her hands as if she were literally pulling back a thread and invites us back into the midst of the unfolding of the story. Reinstating the unknown, she resumes the fabulation with the client in the midst of the uncertain, freeing her speech from the imprisonment of certainty that my violation of her performance had produced.

After the client leaves, Cacurucaia revels in her own action of un-saying, satisfied with the efficacy of her performance in undoing the dangerous effects of an explicit give-away of what was potentially revealed in the casting of the cowrie shells and in the play of words. It may seem paradoxical that in seeking to unveil future paths in consultation with a *pomba gira*, it is precisely the uncertain that opens up through the instability of the play of language, gestures, affects, and effects. I am here thinking of the unfolding of the uncertain in relation to the power of "proliferation" that Lepecki seeks in contemporary performance.

In a slightly older text questioning how to do, watch, and write about dance in the age of neoliberal rationality and performance, Lepecki (2016, 14) reminded us that, if we are all, always, everywhere and at all times being conditioned, the rationality – or irrationality – that guides the neoliberal epoch, its (i)logic, is the governing of our conduct as if it were granting us freedom. By permeating our conduct, neoliberal conditioning points to how it has already captured our subjectivity, we are bodies fibrillating with and against the rhythms of the epoch (Lepecki 2016, 12).

However, like Stefano Harney and Fred Moten (2013), Lepecki (2016, 12) points out that "between systole and diastole, in arrhythmias" (ibid.), we discover the permeability of this very permeating, and for a moment there emerges life unconditioned from every thing that turns it into a choreography of conformity, there emerges a moment of singularity. "Singularity" emerges in Lepecki's text in a complex conceptual dance with Didi-Huberman, Deleuze, and Simondon, which gives it, as he himself stresses, a very precise conceptual meaning in his book¹¹. What interests me, in my own movement of writing through the stories of encounters with the *pomba gira* and the partaking of her *work* is both the irreducibility of the

11. According to Lepecki, "[t]hroughout this book the word "singularity" is used in a very precise manner. It is not synonymous to "unique," "particular," or "singular," much less to "individual." Rather, "singularity" is "irreducible, thus it bears strangeness," as art philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman proposes (2009, 81[...]). Being essentially coextensive to strangeness, singularities are always producers of "multiplicity» (82), "bifurcations" (81), and unexpected deviations that implicate all dimensions of the real" (Lepecki 2016, 15).

singularity to the unique, and its power as strangeness, its production of the un-anticipated and the multiplication of the possible.

Clearly, whereas Lepecki is addressing the relationship between art and life, my ethnography is more inclined toward life than art. Nonetheless, if I am dealing with practices that are certainly not contained by the realm of art – however it may be conceived – I would say that in writing about the consultation sessions what emerges in my ethnographic con-fabulation can be thought of as the art of performance of life itself lived in-between-rhythms. If, on the one hand, the lives that unfold in the consultations are lived under the necropolitical logic of neoliberalism, on the other hand, in the encounter with the pomba gira, these lives pulsate with other forces, dislocated from the logic of the ordinary world. Thus, the encounter with the uncertain in the performance of gestures and words of the pomba gira ceases to be a paradox, becoming the very condition of possibility of the search for the future.

Simas and Rufino (2018, 7) suggest that macumba would be “the land of the poets of the spell; the enchanters of bodies and words that can scourge and harass intransigent reason and propose plural ways of re-existence”. In this “land of poets,” it is through her art of fabulation that the pomba gira exceeds the (un)said and the very chronotope of the saying, carrying us along with her in the whirling of the world in performance (an imagetic figuration by John Dawsey) and allowing us to glimpse the movement toward other urgent forms of existence.

If performative forces constitute the world, we can think here of the force of (anti)performance, momentarily named by the un-saying of the pomba gira, as a force that unmakes the imprisonment, or the false enchantment by certainty, putting back into play the power of the still unknown, thus proliferating what may yet come-to-be.

Translated by the
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