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Confrontations Without Escape; or Encounters and Disencounters at Ponto de Fuga (Vanishing Point)

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Cover Page Footnote

Carolina Géa de Campos Silva is an actress, art teacher, and undergraduate student at Paulista State University. She began to work on stage when she was five years old as a dancer, and later, as an actress. Carolina has been working as a performer for nine years, adventuring at the crossroads between literature and playwriting. She also offered an artistic workshop as part of a social project in the outskirts of the North region of São Paulo, Brazil, where she currently lives.



Confrontations without Escape; or Encounters and Disencounters at *Ponto de Fuga (Vanishing Point)*

Carolina Géa de Campos Silva¹

Tradução por Maria Teresa Schaedler-Luera²

This review was originally written as a review exercise for the Latin American Theater course, offered by the Performing Arts College at Paulista University (Unesp) in 2022, and taught by professors Patricia Freitas and Paula Autran. Based on some topics presented in class, the author unravels the Brazilian play *Ponto de Fuga* in its dramaturgy and creation process, while discussing the successive erasure of the history and memory of colonized peoples, more specifically in Latin America. It also stirs up reflections on the self-identification of Brazilians as Latinos. The review aims to bring into debate the relations of oppression and dehumanization in the cultural field. It also highlights the power of memory in elucidating a multiplicity of perspectives and narratives.

¹ Carolina Géa de Campos Silva is an actress, art teacher, and undergraduate student at Paulista State University. She began to work on stage when she was five years old as a dancer, and later, as an actress. Carolina has been working as a performer for nine years, adventuring at the crossroads between literature and playwriting. She also offered an artistic workshop as part of a social project in the outskirts of the North region of São Paulo, Brazil, where she currently lives.

² Maria Teresa Schaedler-Luera is a Brazilian-born educator and artist with experience in theater, arts and literacy, and cross-cultural engagement. She studied with Augusto Boal and has taught classes that focus on Theater of the Oppressed techniques for a variety of organizations and schools. Maria has a Masters in Intercultural Relations from Lesley University. Being originally from Brazil, her multicultural and diverse lens and language skills help her act as a bridge connecting people, projects and experiences in the community. Maria moved to the United States in 2004 and since then has been engaged in working with immigrants, youth at risk, non-profits, public schools, and arts organizations. She currently designs and pilots teaching models and workshops for schools and nonprofits, focusing on culturally relevant teaching, bilingual programs, and mental health. She also serves as the co-chair for our local District ESOL Parent Leadership Council where she has the opportunity to meet with representatives from the district ESOL Program and parents of ELL students to share information, ideas and concerns of issues affecting families. Prior to transitioning to being a full-time consultant in 2019, she served as the Manager for Arts Integration at Any Given Child Sarasota where she was a part of the creation of new programs, managing and editing grants, organizing and delivering professional development, as well as responsible for their social media accounts, newsletter and website.

Prologue; or, What I Would Call "Context"

It is necessary to clarify a few points before beginning this annotated reading or account. The first point is that, perhaps, this text bears little resemblance to an academic text. The second concerns the reasons why a particular play prompted the writing of this essay.³ *Ponto de Fuga (Vanishing Point)* is a play written by Sofia Boito, a Brazilian actress, writer, and playwright. Sofia Boito and two other educators, Fernanda Machado and Luiza Romão, staged the play with a collaborative ensemble of apprentices (students), including myself, for the final assignment of a theater course they taught at the *Fábrica de Cultura de Brasilândia*⁴ (Factory of Culture of Brasilândia).⁵ They called the final project the 2016 Spectacle Project. Fernanda Machado and Luiza Romão directed the production. During the class on Latin American Theater, a course that is part of the Scenic Arts Department at the São Paulo State University Júlio de Mesquita (UNESP), I learned about some theater groups that I had never heard of before. I became familiar with authors that I had not been familiar with previously. I noticed a kind of "new world" that had always been around me, but that I had not yet noticed. I found myself out of my comfort zone when I came into contact with plays written in languages other than Portuguese, for example Spanish and Quechua. I reflected on how my own history, and that of our country of Brazil, added to the history of all Latin America.

³ This essay was originally written as an exercise in annotated reading for a course titled Latin American Theater, offered in the Scenic Arts department at São Paulo State University Júlio de Mesquita (UNESP) in 2022, taught by professors Patricia Freitas and Paula Autran.

⁴ The Spectacle Project is a collective experience of artistic production in which the participants - teenagers and young people between the ages of 12 and 21, including myself - experience all aspects of putting on a show, with the guidance of educators and directors. The dramaturgy is built in a collaborative way, so that the apprentices can contribute to the script with their experiences, ideas, and worldviews. The lighting, production, set design, and costume design are carried out with the active participation and involvement of all participants. The production took place in the "*Fábricas de Cultura*" in São Paulo. The *Fábricas de Cultura* are a project of the Secretary of Culture and Creative Economy of the Government of the State of São Paulo.

⁵ Note from the editor: "*fábricas*" (lit. "factories") of culture, are publicly funded cultural buildings, where people come together to learn, create, and celebrate cultural practices.

This is where the text starts to get more personal.

The first information given in this essay, after the title, is my name: Carolina Géa de Campos Silva. It is also from this name that my story begins. One hot day, my older brother decided, while I was still in my mother's womb, that my name should be Carolina. The surnames came soon after; first came Géa - then de Campos Silva. Since you, the reader, so far only know my name, I will give you some extra information: I am the youngest daughter of a white woman with green eyes and a black man with white hair and mustache. I am a white woman with curly hair.

The history of the surname Géa, which came from my mother, I know by heart. It is a Spanish surname. It was not registered during the period of immigration to Brazil because the Géa people were fugitives. They registered as "Maia" when they arrived. After some time, they resumed their original surname, and each person registered it in their own way. As a result, in my maternal family we have Géa, Gea, Geia, Jea and Jéia.

If you ask me to tell the story of the "de Campos," I don't know for sure.

Of the Silva's? I know even less.

Remember when I commented above that my mother is white? Well, I know almost everything about the white part of my maternal family.

The rest of my history, like most of the history of Latin Americans, has been erased or under-represented. But besides the past, my story is also composed of the present and the future; and it was with the play, *Ponto de Fuga*, that I could look back to the past to understand what was then my "now."

Even when I decided to write this review of the play, I struggled with the idea. "How predictable, a Brazilian play!" I will now share with you the political reasons for my choice (I will actually do so, with no more last-name stories along the way). It is unusual for Brazilians to recognize themselves as Latin Americans. I remember that, in the first class of the Latin American Theater course, Prof. Paula Autran asked us to say what came to our minds when we thought about Latin America. Not a single reference to Brazil was uttered. I thought that, as self-affirmation, it would be important to choose to write a review of a Brazilian play. I started to think about familiar names of Brazilian plays that I liked. I also remember another moment in class when, instigated by Prof. Patricia Freitas, we discussed the meaning and the hierarchy of what counts as culture. "Culture comes from cultivation, a non-hierarchical activity. But aren't there few who can talk about culture? Who can produce it? It becomes hierarchical at that point." Rereading my notes, I reflected a little more on my choice. I wanted to highlight a play that would not corroborate the hierarchical system that has been built around culture and its derivations. I remembered when I began working in the theatrical world in 2014, at *Fábrica de Cultura of Brasilândia*.

Maybe you have heard the Brazilian funk song, "*Baile de favela*" (Slum Ball)?⁶ That is what I use as a reference when people ask me where I live: "Elisa Maria is a *baile de favela*," says the song. I live two streets up the hill from the Elisa Maria slum in the North Zone of São Paulo, very close to where the *Fábrica de Cultura da Brasilândia* is located. The Factory of Culture is a place that offers free courses in several areas that make up the artistic environment, and also where great cultural attractions are concentrated. Unfortunately, it was one of the places affected by gradual dismantling and scrapping. In 2016, like all Brazilian public schools, the Factory suffered a major cut in funding and was threatened by the restructuring of the educational system. This resulted in mass layoffs, a halt in hiring educators and employees, a decrease in the quality of courses, and no longer offering snacks to students during breaks. It is worth noting that this

⁶ The music video of this song can be accessed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kzOkza_u3Z8. Accessed July 30, 2023.

snack, for some young people and children attending the institution, was their only daily meal. All the Factories of Culture in São Paulo tried to dialogue with the state's Secretary of Culture who was responsible for these institutions. Despite numerous protests, the students were not heard. As a last resort, students and teachers organized an occupation of several fábricas, including the Fábrica de Cultura of Brasilândia. The occupation had been going on for two days, and apprentices from all courses were organizing themselves between activities and protests, when they were surprised by a police invasion. The Military Police entered the Brasilândia Factory aggressively, without a warrant, even though the majority of the organizers were high school students. The Military Police destroyed whatever they could during the invasion, all while making arrests. They seized all the apprentices, who were taken to the police station in a bus; they also charged the adults with "corrupting the youth." The next day, the local newspapers showed pictures of the Factory of Culture in a state of disarray, with its equipment destroyed, alleging vandalism by the apprentices during the occupation. At no time was it reported that the police themselves had trashed the place. After the occupations, we apprentices were able to have some rights restored, such as snacks. However, the students who participated in the organization of the protests and the occupation were branded. We were persecuted in the Factory and the educators no longer felt safe to teach their classes with so much external interference. It was then that the three educators of the 2016 Spectacle Project, of which I was a part, decided to carry out an external action. With the authorization of the local Factory administration, and from the students' families, we started to practice our theater classes in the streets of the neighborhood around the *Fábrica de Cultura*. Doing theater every day in the streets, we were not only able to put on a show at the end of the course, but also to involve the whole community in the project. In addition to the play, we produced a feature length film and showed it alongside our play.

That said, I can conclude that *Ponto de Fuga* was the fruit of resistance, written by a theater group literally on the streets. What you are about to read is an annotated analysis of a marginalized play written

with the help of marginalized teenagers, including me, who found ourselves in the oppressive and chaotic institutions of Brazilian culture and education.

CLARIFICATIONS:

My analysis of our *Ponto de Fuga* will be divided into 3 parts, the synopsis and setting, and the two acts of the play, each part bearing the original names of the acts of the play.

***Ponto de Fuga (Vanishing Point)*⁷**

Characters:

Fixed People:

Captains

Commanders

Carriers

Sailors

Foremen

Lords

Wanderers:

Loaders (who become Mirages)

⁷ This play is unpublished, and all quotations are from the author's personal materials from the 2016 Spectacle Project.

Parallel People:

Police Officers

President

First Lady

General

Lord of the Plantation

Emperor

Priest

Slaves

Divine Entity

Synopsis:

The story takes place during the period of slavery in Brazil, and the construction of *quilombos* (Brazilian hinterland settlements founded by people of African origin) and other spaces of resistance by people of African descent. It discusses the history of blackness, racism, and addresses the contemporary process of incarceration of black and other marginalized youth. The play was based on the "poetics of reverie" found in *The Ingenious Nobleman Don Quixote of la Mancha* by Miguel de Cervantes.

In short, the plot of the play is a trajectory from Brazil's colonial past to a dreamed future. By reading it we can follow the life course of the Wanderers from the moment they were taken to a slaver/cargo ship. The play draws parallels between the past and the social reality of the year 2016 - parallels unfortunately also applicable to the years after it was written. To present the parallel between past and present, the play's characters are collective and played in a kind of rotation. Police Officers, Foremen, and Sailors, for example,

are played by the same actors. The play has specific stage directions and describes vivid images so that we, as creators, could visualize the process of performing the play and could think of ourselves as producers of culture. As a significant compositional resource for the play, these stage directions made the dramaturgy more immersive. Not only did our staging help audiences imagine the scenes being depicted, conveying their scents, sounds, and physical sensations, but it also helped connect the play to aspects of the year 2016 that drove the writing of the work.

Act 1 - Ship-Theater: The Sky Cries, the Sea Explodes

As the audience enters, they are welcomed into the first scene of the play. The audience, upon entering the theater space, is confronted with the Loaders in the hall, an allusion to enslaved peoples. At first, the Loaders are tied up. They are guarded and carried into the performance hall by Sailors. The audience settles into their seats, while on the sides of the theater-ship, the Foreman assigns each Loader a generic, Portuguese name, chosen at random. When he first enters the scene, the Foreman incessantly repeats the motion of whipping the air. He continues, even when he falls asleep. After receiving their "new names," the Loaders are thrown into the hold of the ship (over the edge of the proscenium). On the stage, we see the President, the First Lady, the General, a Priest, the Emperor, and the Lord of the Plantation in a row. They repeat the refrain of a song, sung as if they were selling products at a fair: "The cheapest meat in the market is black meat!" The stage directions read as follows:

Down there under the stage-deck some people have been thrown, bound by their feet. The hollow noise of the ship's hull echoes. The rocking of the sea. The salty taste that returns to the mouth. Below here some return the empty stomach to nothingness. [...] The sky also shines in hell. It is the lights of millions of years of explosions that continue to illuminate our dreams, like an opaque hope.

[...] On the stage-deck Sailors, who were formerly saluting, now eat comfortably at a table. They drink and laugh compulsively. The Foreman continues to whip the air. A few whispers and cries come from the hold [...]. A whisper-poem amplifies through space. Some parts of the text are also projected on the wall.

The text above is followed by a poem, delivered in the form of a prayer, that is recited by the Loaders from below the proscenium. I am enchanted by the way the sounds, smells and even tastes of the scene are described. Descriptions like this appear throughout as a main feature of the dramaturgy of the play, although they are more detailed at the beginning of the play and the descriptions shorten as the play goes on. This element made the process of imagining the world of the play much easier for audiences. Even though imagining is not a difficult task for me, the precise and poetic descriptions opened up space for my imagination to flow. After reading the play to write this review, I realized the impact that this theatrical device had on me, and I remembered something Patrícia Freitas said in one of our classes: "We gain a lot when we learn to read dramaturgy by imagining".

At one point in the play, a Loader makes the following observation:

Saudade⁸ is for those who choose. Saudade... salt... salty tears belong to Portugal. We were not given the right to cry.

As Latin Americans, we are incessantly denied the right to memory. By this I mean that our history is purposely erased or told only from a specific perspective. All of us Latinos were colonized. It is from colonization that our "official" history is told to us, completely ignoring the legacies of the original peoples. Our culture is, therefore, erected by violence and bloodbaths, as in the Benjaminian maxim: "the history of culture is the history of barbarism." This is what *Ponto de Fuga*, by rescuing the past, portrays in the first act. However, just as the play gives us a mirror to look into the past, it also gives us a spark of hope and wonder. The plot takes a turn when a rebellion of the people who are enslaved breaks out on the ship. While "the powerful" sleep above, the Loaders come out of the hold, go on deck, and throw "the powerful" into the hold. After the Loaders invade the top of the stage and throw their captors below, they become, and are referred to as, Mirages.

⁸ Translator's note: *Saudade* is a Portuguese word that does not easily translate into English. It refers to a melancholic emotional state, or a profoundly nostalgic longing.

Act 2 - Desert Street: The Search for the Quilombo-Mirage

Mirages: Here in the south of the world, the sea is vast. And deserted. Our footprints are erased with each gust of wind that moves the dunes, forming another landscape.

[...] It is still possible to see, in forgotten hours like these, the figures of these men in line. They are souls that inhabit our lands and appear in our dreams. Or nightmares. We cannot forget what happened here.

[...] Put your hands on your knees and rest. Notice the ship we left behind. In the darkness we abandoned. In a slave ship, in a basement of a police station, in a little room on the slum, in a police cruiser. Men torture other men.

In the second act, we follow what happens after the rebellion. "The powerful," former captors thrown below deck, take on the role of narrators, along with some of the newly-transformed Mirages. We follow the Mirages in their escape; some are afraid, others are hopeful. The conversation among them is interspersed with singing, and for the first time an Afro-Brazilian Entity is evoked, mentioned by name in the play: Oxum.

After a chant to the orixá, "the powerful" are again given the spotlight. They say:

They need what they want and because they want what they don't need. They got used to what they have. They will always need what they don't have. [...] Gentlemen excuse themselves to the ladies who are going to knit, talk, occupy themselves with things other than wars, weapons, death. All that stuff that has a strong smell. But that no one there can smell, because the smell of rotteness is restricted to the slaves' quarters.

Captain: Because war is only on the battlefields Foreman: Because war is everywhere!

First Lady: What war?

We continue to follow the Mirages in their reconstruction of a future, far away, free. In parallel, there is a search party looking for the people who escaped slavery. The narrators continue:

There are always two sides of the same story. Two sides of the trench. Two sides of the battlefield. There are two sides at dinner tables. Two sides of the same coin. [...] But there are people who have no coin at all. No table. No dinner. There are people who have become a bargaining chip. While on the other side, there are people with currency to spare.

As the second act draws to a close, we find two possibilities for the final resolution: the Mirages will be discovered and recaptured; or, they will win their fight for freedom. Oxum returns, no longer as a mere

mention in dialogue and in song, but this time actually enters the scene, as a kind of corporeal and material body. It seems that in *Ponto de Fuga*, Oxum personifies, at the same time, the two possible outcomes of the play, and the materialization of her presence is inspired by the material struggle for social justice and equality.

In her presence, the Mirages intone:

Our feet move forward, but we walk backward. [...] Our progress walks forward, toward the future. But the future is not ahead. It weighs on our shoulders. We walk forward, but we move backward. Our curupira⁹ walk.

Everyone starts singing to Oxum again. The actors shed their roles, making room for them to speak for themselves, as their real selves, about the meaning of the play for them. Here, the parallels between the past and the present gain even more power: the audience is no longer faced with a symbolic or representational construction, but with bodies that work at the line between reality and fiction, or even between interpretation and authorship. The actors, as their real selves, directly question the audience:

What do you dream about? Do you know what you dream about? What is this freedom you desire? What is this mirage you see? Or have we lost the ability to aim? To aim at a target and shoot, in that direction? What verb still screams? Does a verb scream? Or is it silent? [...] Voices that echo in history, in our history, in this history here. They are cries from the past that resound in the present.

The play culminates in a final scene, in which the actors, still their real selves, sing and dance, celebrating freedom.

Where Do I Come In?

During all these experiences, one question never ceased in my mind: "What is my place in this story?

Where do I come in?!"

That year, I started daydreaming about windmills, borders, and the like. I ended the year in a concrete utopia, where we witnessed that change is a dream to be dreamed, and acted upon while awake.

⁹ A *curupira* is a mythological creature whose feet are turned backward.

On stage and in the streets, during the creation process of *Ponto de Fuga*, we got to know the place where we lived, and examine it with attention and affection. Each class in the street was a piece of ourselves that we rescued. Each alley, crossed and touched by art, is another side of the story that textbooks never told us. These stories don't cancel each other out, they coexist.

As a young actress and apprentice in the year 2016, I joined the Spectacle Project with the expectation of "evolving," creating a play from scratch, and beginning my trajectory as an actress. Today, paraphrasing the great writer Leda Maria Martins, I recognize that time is not a linear evolutionary ascent. Our body is memory, and the idea of evolution continues to confine us within a system of power. Time spirals, and the spiraling daily life does not evolve. More than that, it changes.

On stage, I played the First Lady. Alienated from her reality, the First Lady would intervene with marvelous speeches that were out of tune with the daily perversity in which she found herself. I confess that, at the time, I did not understand the real intention of the role. Inexperienced both as an actress and as a person, I interpreted that the First Lady was part of the "history villains." Later, the idea that time that is not linear never made more sense.

In our rehearsals, the audience was diverse and transient. I remember presenting a performance in class where my classmates and I ended with the battle cry, "Come to the fight!" A lady crossing the long street where we played, carrying bags, watched the entire performance on her way. Upon hearing our final shout, she shouted back at us, "I really want to, but I have to go make dinner!"

In taking the theater to the streets, there was almost no separation of what was "real life" and what was the theater itself. When we returned to the stage for the final performance, the audience recognized its role beyond being passive viewers. By this, I do not mean that it was an interactive play; what I mean is that our intention was to make the audience recognize their own reality on stage, and look for their role in the

story within the fictional dramaturgy of the performance. It was then that I found the answer to my incessant question: I don't need to enter anywhere; I am already here.

Participating in *Ponto de Fuga* was an unparalleled experience. Besides rescuing memory, which I think is extremely important, the play also gives us a perspective of change: that if we commit ourselves to it, the future will be better.

It is a springboard so that we have the strength to fight against what oppresses and dehumanizes us. It gives importance to the causes that need it.

It was an invitation to look at two sides of the same story and understand to which side I belong. Where I came from and where I can go. An invitation to rebel, and to take the risk that is dreaming.